

Targeting Europe's Refugees Is Not the Answer

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Brief Analysis

Refugee-baiters and their proposed policies will only further undermine future European security.

In light of Friday's terrorist attacks in Paris, the question of Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe has come into sharp focus -- and been politicized by European and U.S. politicians and commentators across the spectrum. Indeed, this past summer, an exponential increase occurred in the number of individuals making these difficult journeys. The flights were spurred in part by the Assad regime and its allies' continued assaults on civilian populations and in part by increasing territorial gains by the jihadist groups ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Many individuals living in refugee camps thus despaired that they would ever actually return home. Given that most refugees simply want a safer and better life for their children, and that current media and policy discussions are not considering this issue's many facets, clarification is essential on misconceptions related to ISIS, refugees, and potential future challenges within Europe in particular.

How ISIS Views Syrian Refugees

For those seeking to blame the Paris attacks on refugees, a look at ISIS's stance on refugees is instructive. Of particular note is how ISIS could be using these attacks to stoke tensions between European ethnic majorities and the Muslim minorities and newly arrived refugees. Equally important, the migrant flow is anathema to ISIS, undermining the group's message that its self-styled caliphate is a refuge. If it were a refuge, then hundreds of thousands of people would surely be settling in its lands instead of risking their lives on miserable journeys to Europe. The hostile reaction to refugees, therefore, only bolsters ISIS's contentions and risks spurring future, avoidable tensions.

As for ISIS's actual gestures regarding refugees, the group released twelve videos between September 16 and 19

aimed at inserting itself into a discussion highlighted by deaths at sea and, especially, the crushing image of Alan Kurdi, the child who washed up dead on a Turkish beach. These videos were released by the group's respective "provinces" in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen and aimed both at warning potential refugees of the risks and costs of traveling to Europe and urging them to take refuge in its caliphate.

For example, in its video from Wilayat Salah al-Din (Iraq), ISIS argues that Muslims should leave the infidel's lands for the lands of Islam, but not vice versa, and that happiness can only be found in the ISIS caliphate. Moreover, in a message from its Wilayat al-Janub (Iraq), ISIS declares that Muslims cannot live or seek refuge in non-Muslim lands and that doing so amounts to apostasy, in effect legitimizing the refugees' spilt blood. ISIS's Wilayat al-Furat, on the Syria-Iraq border, militates against migration on the grounds that refugees would be subject to human laws rather than sharia. As a result, according to Wilayat al-Raqqa (Syria), the migrants' children would abandon Islam -- even though Europe's Muslim population has continued growing in recent decades through various waves of migration. Another claim holds that Europe is only accepting Muslim refugees as a tactic to increase the Shiite, Druze, and Christian population to defeat ISIS in Syria. Based in northwestern Syria, ISIS's Wilayat al-Barakah notes further that accepting refugees allegedly forces Muslims to work for Europe's interests, thereby weakening Islam.

In a video from Wilayat al-Khayr (eastern Syria), ISIS offers advice to those who have already left, stating Muslims should not mix or fraternize with infidels. It likewise suggests that such Muslims will be forced to convert to Christianity in exchange for money or citizenship and that they will be forfeiting their reward in paradise. ISIS's Wilayat al-Fallujah shows video clips of refugees being beaten by police and claiming that true happiness and dignity can only be had in Muslim countries. Further, in a message from Wilayat Hadramawt (Yemen), ISIS pushes refugees to actually imagine life once they leave Syria, including exposure to drowning and human smugglers, followed by the injustices and outrages to be experienced in Europe. In a video from Wilayat Homs (Syria), ISIS warns of the threat of conversion and then pivots to describe, by contrast, how ISIS has cared for refugees from the Syrian regime. Wilayat al-Jazirah (on the Syria-Iraq border), for its part, interviews individuals who fled the Kurdish Peshmerga for ISIS territory and boasts of the good life they are now living. Similarly, Wilayat Halab (northern Syria) released a video juxtaposing foreign fighters migrating to ISIS territory with scenes of refugees being mistreated in Europe. Finally, Wilayat Dijlah (Iraq) claims without any proof that many more Syrians are migrating to its caliphate than seeking refuge in places elsewhere internally in Iraq or Syria, in refugee camps, or in Europe.

What ISIS Hopes to Gain

Having polarized society in Iraq and Syria, ISIS hopes to do the same in Europe by compelling individuals to take sides and fall back on more tribal, instinctive feelings -- or eliminating the "gray zone," as the group has previously described it. As ISIS and many others are aware, Europe has struggled to integrate many migrant communities in recent decades, leading some second- and third-generation residents to experience an identity crisis. Cognitive openings have followed, which jihadist recruiters have at times filled with a perceived new and stronger identity as well as a more black-and-white worldview. Therefore, an individual who does not feel completely Pakistani or British in Britain, Algerian or French in France, or -- possibly in the future -- Syrian or German in Germany can now identify solely as a Sunni Muslim.

As a consequence, it is essential to take steps to prevent individuals from giving in to emotional impulses that could further exacerbate Europe's security dilemma. As this relates to refugees, it is true that ISIS could exploit the crisis to insert operatives into Europe. At the same time, however, one must remember that the group already has thousands of members with European Union passports and has very good document forgers. Therefore, the sole reason for nesting additional operatives in the refugee flows would be to spark a backlash against Syrian and other refugees as well as the native Muslim populations of Europe. Even if this happens, the few jihadist operatives that slip through should not be used to tar the other 99 percent.

Therefore, the United States and Europe should continue to carefully monitor entrants at their borders but also provide the necessary support networks and assistance so that newly arrived refugees feel welcomed and part of their broader society. Without a long-term vision for integrating refugees, and by relying solely on moral imperative, European countries will likely see problems similar to those that have already plagued their migrant policies. Refugees, meanwhile, must understand the ways in which responsibilities and expectations as a resident and future citizen of a liberal democracy differ from those as a subject in an authoritarian society. None of these steps will be easy, but with mutual respect, understanding, and education, Europe can look forward to a brighter picture in the long run. Needless to say, the refugee-baiters, their rhetoric, and their proposed policies will lead to self-fulfilling ends and make everyone less safe.

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