

GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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*The 40th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by **Lord Hylton**, who has been active in the House of Lords since 1971, and a cross-bencher since 1982. He has visited refugees and displaced people in England, France, Kosovo, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, and taken part in Immigration and Asylum Bills since 1987. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.*

The Worldwide Plight Of Refugees

Introduction

International law defines a refugee as someone who has a genuine fear of persecution, including serious discrimination, or else people who need humanitarian protection, because of acute and prolonged violence in their country of origin. In addition, they must be outside their own country. Most states distinguish between refugees who are seeking asylum and economic migrants, who move to avoid poverty and poor prospects at home, sometimes caused by climate change.

Causes

Wars and ideologies are the principal causes of flight and asylum-seeking. I can remember the flight of Jews from Nazi ideological persecution. In the Soviet empire

(paradoxically largely established by Jews) suspicion and discrimination forced many to flee, so that Russian is now a major second language in Israel. Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, the Horn of Africa and Libya have led to massive flights of population. Ideology has driven millions from their homes in Burma, Eritrea, Somalia, Iran, North Korea and some Balkan countries. Communist ideology drove many Chinese and Tibetan people to flee to India, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

USA

The response of developed and rich countries to refugee issues has been less than generous. Historically the United States built itself up by welcoming both religious and political refugees, together with economic migrants. It symbolized this openness by erecting the Statue of Liberty, with its famous inscription. More recently one can understand that fears



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of culture change have been produced by the arrival of boat-people from Cuba and Haiti. Nevertheless, President Trump's frontier wall, together with federal and state treatment of migrants, seem unduly harsh, given the amount of space and natural resources in the United States.

Australia

Australia is subject to drought and has a relatively narrow band of inhabited land along its coasts. One can understand that it does not want to be the destination for millions of hungry Asians. Yet is it justified in pushing boat-people away and confining them for indefinite periods to offshore islands, sometimes hundreds of miles away? Would it not have been better to grant interim entry, while cooperative resettlement arrangements could be set up?

Europe

Europe is full of contrasts. The Scandinavian countries have been relatively generous in accepting refugees. By contrast, Poland and Hungary, though now richer than in communist times, have found cultural reasons for rejecting refugees, even with limited quotas. Very heavy burdens have fallen on Italy and Greece, at a time when the economy of the latter had hardly recovered from the crash of 2008 and 2009. Turkey has behaved irresponsibly by alternately allowing and closing down the movements of people into Greece. Greece, instead of calling for concerted European

help, has allowed refugees to remain under deplorable conditions on its Aegean islands. Spain has serious problems at its enclaves on the coast of Morocco. There the border fences are continually besieged by migrants and refugees, while others attempt to gain entry by boat to the Canary Islands or the Spanish mainland. Germany has been most generous in the recent past and has recently given a lead to others by offering a quota for vulnerable families and children. Both Germany and France each year register far more asylum applications than the UK (each 3 times more in 2019).

The UK

This country has traditionally been generous in admitting spouses and family members, mainly from Asia. It has recently undertaken to give access to large numbers of British Overseas Nationals from Hong Kong. Many European workers have come in through EU freedom of movement (now ending), often starting families here. On the debit side, we prevent asylum applicants from working for 12 months (longer than most other countries). We oblige failed asylum applicants to subsist on payments well below the accepted poverty level. We also detain people due to be removed for indefinite periods, without a proper review system. We also try to get France to prevent irregular Channel crossing to England.

As serious, or perhaps more so, has been our failure to provide safe and legal routes to Britain, for those who have a good case



for coming here. This would prevent deaths in transit. We should remember that family reunion for refugees benefits the local community and the nation, as well as the family itself.

The EU

The European Union is committed to supra-national aims, notably freedom of movement and settlement within its members. For this reason it has tried to create a common external frontier. This means that refugees, in theory, have no right of entry, but what is supposed to happen if they have not yet reached a 'safe country'? They are obliged to resort to irregular means of gaining access. Countries such as Italy, with a long coastline, and Malta, with a small land area, have at times withheld access to ships bringing rescued boat-people.

A hypocritical policy exists in the case of Libya, most of which is clearly not a 'safe country'. The EU trains and subsidizes the so-called Libyan coast-guard to prevent and pull-back refugees and other migrants attempting to leave by boat. Once these people are again in Libya, they are liable to be held in detention. The centres provided have poor, over-crowded and insanitary conditions. Their inmates are exposed to violence by militias and traffickers, with reports even of torture, intended to extort money from relatives elsewhere. Efforts to repatriate and resettle economic migrants now in northern Africa should be greatly increased. These are people who have left home with false

hopes and expectations. We should also plan for new industries in selected sites along the coast of north Africa, powered by abundant solar energy. This could benefit the local people and migrants.

New Risks

China is at risk of causing new flows of refugees. If its repression in Tibet and Xinjiang continues and increases, many may seek to leave. Others may try to flee from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, if their present freedoms are further curtailed. China should perhaps be warned that any big exodus will have important repercussions for its overseas trade and investment.

Conclusions

The Covid pandemic clearly needs strong international cooperation to prevent and contain the disease, but also to cope with its economic consequences. In a similar way cooperation is urgently needed to prevent the existing refugee camps in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Greece from becoming permanent. Lessons should be learnt from the sad fate of so many Palestinian refugees, who left home in 1948 and 1967. Because of failed attempts at peace and through lack of international cooperation, large numbers remain stuck in sub-standard conditions in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the West Bank, despite the best efforts of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). This UN offshoot has, it seems, provided an excuse for inaction to Israel, the Arab States, and the great powers.



How might the necessary political will be generated to tackle the global issue of refugees and displaced people? It should be seen as an aspect of world-wide peace-building and indeed, as an alternative to endless and repeated new wars. Refugees are often talented, educated and qualified people. In Britain we should recall the contributions to our country made by the Norse, Normans, Flemings, Huguenots, Jews, Hungarians and East Europeans, and also Asians (some from East Africa). Other countries have benefitted as much from their 'incomers'. Refugees have the strongest incentives to make a success of their lives, once they reach a new country.

If nothing is done to help such people to find work and to support themselves in reasonable conditions, discontent and grievances will fester from generation to generation. This can only provide a seedbed and breeding ground for violent and terrorist groups. If conflicts can be resolved, some exiles may

be able to return. Others, however, will have to be resettled elsewhere, even if their own countries become peaceful. It is, therefore, in the interests of the whole world, that the difficulties facing refugees and the internally displaced be overcome. This will produce all-round benefits, whether it is done through the United Nations (to whom it might give a new target and purpose) or through other channels. Religious and spiritual people should help political leaders to approach such urgent needs in constructive ways. A greater effort is now needed than the one that cleared the camps after World War II.



Lord Hylton
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House of Lords Official Portrait



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