Should they stay or should they go?

Modern European narratives on refugees

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Abstract

This article explores the responses of Western countries to refugee crises. European countries have been pioneers in articulating frameworks to address the issues of refugees and migration, since World War II. On the other hand, the same European countries are articulating policies to block refugees from reaching their territory, weaponizing and securitizing them for political objectives. This article puts the European outcry for humanitarianism to the test, to display the true objectives behind actions and policies. Furthermore, this research draws on principles and goals of human security and securitization politics, asking how the refugee crisis fits within the debates of those political thoughts.

Keywords: refugees, Middle East, Ukraine, reception, policy, UK

Introduction

On 20 June 2022, a designated day for refugees by the United Nations, the UNHCR published a report, stating that for the first time a record number of more than 100 million people had been displaced worldwide (UNHCR, 2022). The Russian–Ukraine conflict has contributed hugely to the total number of displaced people. Out of 100 million displaced worldwide, more than 31 million are refugees who have escaped war, conflict, climate change, food crisis, and fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2022). Though refugees from any corner of the world are vulnerable people, the reception of refugees by host countries, especially Western countries, varies. Reception of refugees is not based on their situations, pains, sufferings, and stories, rather they are categorized by geographical region, race, culture, and religion they represent. For instance, the reaction to the influx of refugees from Ukraine due to conflict with its neighbor Russia was surprising
for many. Borders were left open for Ukrainian refugees, and welcome camps were set up to transfer them to the preferred locations. According to Stone, a Sky News correspondent, Ukrainian refugees were escorted and welcomed warmly, both by host governments and communities as holidaymakers (Stone, 2022).

Countries like the UK have been so sympathetic to Ukrainian refugees that they offered their citizens money to host them. Germany evacuated Afghan refugees, those who fought with NATO troops shoulder to shoulder against terrorism, from refugee camps in German cities, in order to replace them with Ukrainian refugees (Glinski, 2022). Furthermore, Western media, especially British tabloids which are famous for their anti-refugee rhetoric, have been very positive and sympathetic toward Ukrainian refugees, with some reporters in their live coverage describing Ukrainian refugees in the way that “they drive like us, look like us, even read the same newspapers as us” (Sharma, 2022). The narrative is quite different when it comes to refugees that come from other regions, like the Middle Eastern and North African countries, mostly Muslims. They are treated as dangerous, suspicious, criminals, and potential threats to the host state. The media narrative and government reception were negative. Instead of opening their borders to the Muslim refugees, walls and blockades were set up on the borders to block their passing. Thousands of refugees have been in camps for years now, with basic accommodation and no access to standard health and educational facilities (Smith, 2022).

Western countries divided refugees into two categories: self and others. The “self-refugees” are welcomed as civilized and deserving of protection and care; the “other refugees” are not. Western nations are becoming more and more anti-refugee, when they come from Muslim countries (Osiewiez, 2017). The rise of right-wing parties and far-right extremism is an indication of anti-migrant feelings and sentiments in almost all Western countries (Bell, Valenta, & Strabac, 2021). Right-wing parties are winning seats because of their harsh refugee rhetoric (Khader, 2016).

Numerous European politicians have come out to publicly speak against migrants, especially Middle Eastern migrants. David Cameron compared refugees to a swarm, when he said, “You have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs, it’s got a growing economy, it’s an incredible place to live” (Elgot, 2016). On a different occasion, in response to Jeremy Corbyn’s visit to Calais, France, he said “They met with a bunch of migrants in Calais, they said “They met with a bunch of migrants in Calais, they said they could all come to Britain”. Nigel Farage campaigned with a big banner showing refugees from the 2015 refugee crisis, writing with a heading, in bold letters, “BREAKING POINT”. Former Czech President Miloš Zeman once said that Muslim refugees won’t respect local laws and mores. Instead, he warned, they would seek to implement sharia law. “We’ll be deprived of women’s beauty, because they’ll be covered from head to toe … unfaithful women will be stoned and thieves will have their hands cut off”, Zeman said (Chadwick, 2015). Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Front one of France’s biggest political parties said that “Germany probably thinks its population is moribund, and it is probably seeking to lower wages and continue to recruit slaves through mass immigration”. Jarosław Kaczyński, former Polish prime minister claimed that migrants had brought diseases like cholera and dysentery to Europe, as well as “all sorts of parasites and protozoa, which … while not dangerous in the organisms of these people, could be dangerous here” (Chadwick, 2015). As for Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, he stated, “We shouldn’t forget that the people who are coming here grew up in a different religion and represent a completely different culture. Most are not Christian, but Muslim … Or is it not worrying that Europe’s Christian culture is already barely able to maintain its own set of Christian values?” Orbán won an election with a huge majority, which is a sign that people favor his policies (Chadwick, 2015).

The media and political elites rarely refer to what has caused the refugee crisis. When they do, they put the responsibility on the leaders of the countries the refugees
come from. In the Ukrainian crisis, the media narrative is different. Almost all Western media portray a very dire situation and blame the Russian soldiers on Ukrainian land as invaders, warmongers, and the real cause of the crisis; on the other hand, where no Western country is blamed for having soldiers on the ground miles away from their borders, or striking from the air, or supplying weapons to dictators in the Middle East and Africa.

A recent report by the Cost of War Project found that 37 million people have been displaced due to the war on terror campaign led by the US and other European countries. 5.3 million are only displaced from Afghanistan (Vine, 2020).

There is a blatant accusation of refugees as sources of insecurity, disease, job stealing, and many more, but rarely any criticism of warmonger policies which are the real causes of the refugee crisis and civilian deaths (Trilling, 2018). After the US and NATO allies, including Great Britain, signed an infamous agreement with the terrorist government in Afghanistan (the Taliban), there followed a refugee crisis. Millions crossed the Afghan border to seek refuge in neighboring countries, while others managed to reach countries in Europe.

This article examines the Western narratives on refugees, evaluates Britain’s reception of refugees and integration challenges, and concludes by exploring ways to foster a more inclusive and multicultural society.

Refugees

The term refugee has historically referred to fleeing people, especially those fleeing from religious persecution. The influx of Jewish refugees in the 20th century, due to Nazi threats and Russian Empire pogroms, led to refugee concepts being framed by European definitions and being limited to specific geographic locations (Goldenziel, 2016). In July 1950, The New York Times editorial page reported that the dreadful fact remained that several million uprooted human beings still existed in Europe without homes and even, in all too many cases, without hope. In the same period, an unimaginable refugee crisis was occurring in South Asia, due to the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and Middle Eastern countries as well (Goldenziel, 2016). As the Cold War was intensifying and more refugees were moving from east to west, in 1951, the UNHCR, a highly Europe-centric body emerged to shape and define refugees as per the interests of Western political allies.

The 1951 Refugee Convention is the mother document in providing the definition and criteria regarding a refugee. A refugee, according to Article 1 of the Convention, is someone unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, and membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2020). Furthermore, this convention highlights its right-based approach, which is underpinned by several fundamental principles, most notably non-discrimination, non-penalization, and non-refoulement of refugees (UNHCR, 2020). According to the 1951 Convention, refugees are associated with statelessness, vulnerability, and despair, which need aid, sympathy, empathy, and the right to be accepted and treated equally in the new state where they ask for asylum. In reality, the whole refugee concept is a Western and European-born phenomenon, so it is predictable that there are good refugees –the white – and bad refugees – the non-white, non-Christian (Kotilainen & Pellander, 2021). The good refugees look like us, they are professionals, educated and healthy. States, media and societies welcomed them as deserving of being counted as refugees. On the other hand, the other class of refugees, the other/bad refugees, are treated as criminals and undeserving. They are mediatized, politicized, and weaponized as sources of insecurity, fear, terrorism and criminality in the host countries (Trilling, 2018). Moreover, they are treated as a reflection of the undemocratic, illiberal and backward political systems of the home countries they are fleeing.
This category links those who seek refuge and flee from terror and war with those who perpetuate terror and horror, to create a rhetoric of fear and insecurity among host communities (Hodson, 2020). Meanwhile, right-wing political parties across Western countries spread this narrative, to create fear and panic that by helping (bad) refugees, especially Muslims, terror and insecurities will be brought to the homeland (Hodson, 2020).

**War on Terror**

The war on terror started in response to the 9/11 attacks on the US, although the attacks were carried out by Al Qaeda, a terrorist group that the US supported and trained in the 1980s to fight against the Soviet Union (Berry, Blanco, & Moore, 2015). However, the price was paid by the suffering of millions of people with a high civilian death toll, injuries, and mass migration. The invasions and military campaigns devastated a large geographical location and populations that were blamed for the refugee crisis (Khader, 2016). For millions of people, the only alternative to migration has been death. A report in 2015, by Physicians for Social Responsibilities and its international partners, shows that an estimated 1.3 million Iraqis, Afghans, and Pakistanis have died due to the war on terror campaign (Berry, Blanco, & Moore, 2015). This is something rarely reported in the West.

Saara Pellander and Noora Kotilainen from Helsinki University have looked at the media depiction of refugees from World War II until 2021, across European tabloids. Their research shows that, as geographical focus shifts, so do the media depiction and understanding of refugees change based on how they look and who they are. Categorization of refugees along color lines has been part of the visual depiction in media narratives, intended to divide refugees based on race (Kotilainen & Pellander, 2021). During the 2015 refugee crisis, a picture of a refugee holding a smartphone became a subject of sneering across Europe to suspect that the “iPhone Men” do not look like real refugees. Other mocking headlines on European tabloids declared that those child refugees from Middle Eastern countries did not look childlike.

The Sun, an anti-refugee British tabloid, went further: “To claim asylum all one needed to do was ‘say you are gay if you want to stay in [the] UK’” (Norris, 2018). Media narratives are central in shaping audiences’ minds and understandings of refugees.

A new Pew Research Centre Survey illustrates that over 50% of European Nations are worried that refugees are going to take their jobs, although (according to the 1951 Convention definition) refugees are vulnerable communities that have the right to be protected and sheltered by host countries; European politicians and press have securitized and weaponized refugees in every sector, including the economic. A forecast by DIW Berlin shows that the influx of 2015 refugees from Middle Eastern countries has helped the German economy. According to the forecast, the long-term prediction of refugees helping the German economy is positive, filling the vacuum of shortage of labor due to the increase in the aging population in Germany (Bach, Brucker, Haan, Romiti, van Deuverden & Weber, 2017). According to a UNHCR report, more than half of Syrian refugees who reached Europe are degree holders. The most recent case of brain drain happened in Afghanistan, right after the fall of the Afghan Republic, when thousands of the most educated professionals left the country at once and its terrible effect has crippled the country.

**The UK refugee integration policy and multicultural society**

The UK government defines its integration scheme as a two-way process: the government provides language skills and community engagement with locals for refugees to integrate into the British system, while the refugees must make the effort to understand and learn English and British values (Home Office, 2019). According to government formal documents on
refugee integration and resettlement, there are two routes for refugees. First, those who enter illegally by boat or other routes, at their first arrival ask for asylum and the government will consider their application, the decision will be either accept or reject (Home Office, 2019). Besides, there is a resettlement scheme that resettles refugees from locations outside the UK, the first of its kind started with the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), which began in 2014 and aimed to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees. In 2020, it was followed by the ARAP (Afghan Relocation Assistance Policy) Scheme after the Kabul Government fell to the Taliban (Home Office, 2021). And Homes for the Ukrainian scheme, which is a recent scheme after the influx of Ukrainian refugees the government pays British homeowners to host Ukrainian refugees.

Again, with the hosting and integration scheme of refugees the dichotomy in the reception of refugees is evident in the United Kingdom. According to The Guardian, people who are held in the Home Office refugee camps are being threatened continuously that their asylum claims would be harmed in case of misbehaving, like talking to the media about the shortage of food, the bad living conditions, or going on hunger strike (Townsend, 2021). A recent report shows that refugees are dehumanized, especially those that are LGBT in refugee centers, with questions like, which toys they have used back home (Norris, 2018). In contrast, Ukrainian refugees are directly escorted to British homes without being held in any refugee center. Police and other security forces are also influenced by the political narratives of refugees as others. Since the London suicide attacks in 2005, police counter-terrorism forces have received more resources and funding to watch communities, especially Muslim Middle Eastern refugees (McLaughlin & Cummins, 2011). Police and other security forces should instead provide protection and help to the vulnerable, not look at them as criminals.

On the social dimension of refugees living within local communities, there are two popular narratives. The dominant narrative is the negative one, which is the threat perception of the refugees that believe refugees would culturally clash with the locals and the chance of co-existence and acceptance is very narrow and limited. In the “threat” narrative, immigration is seen as threatening British values, culture, and living standards, public services, and security through rising extremism and criminality. These themes are considerably more heightened in discussions of non-white and more culturally distinct individuals (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017). The second narrative is a positive perception that focuses on diversity and inclusion. The positive narrative of refugees in the social layers of British society needs to be boosted. Refugees are human beings that have suffered immensely. They need empathy and acceptance. Dialogue and interchange have the power to establish tranquility, not accusations and animosity (Dempster & Hargrave, 2017).

Human security

Human security is a new political thought which was born out of the 1994 Human Development Report in the United Nations, in response to the narrow-minded narrative of security purely concentrating on the national and international interests of individual states (Persaud, 2022). Therefore, the scope of human security as a new political theory was to challenge and broaden the definition of threats that millions of individuals and communities face around the world from a narrow definition of security threats by states. According to the UNDP,

The concept of security has for too long been interpreted narrowly: as security of territory from external aggression, or as protection of national interests in foreign policy or as global security from the threat of a nuclear holocaust ... It has been related more to nation-states than to people ... Forgotten were the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who sought security in their daily lives ... In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut,
an ethnic tension that did not explode into violence, and a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity. (UNDP, 1994: 22)

The HDR 1994 not only challenged the traditional definition of security threats as obsolete but also brought up and added new concepts to the human security dialogue (Persaud, 2022). First, security is a contestable concept rather than a natural or self-evident condition as understood by states. Second, human security argues that focusing only on violent conflict among states is a narrow understanding of security which argues that protection of territorial or national interest through armed force is unnecessary, for instance, the human security thinkers believe that there is no military solution to the environmental, food insecurity or the refugee crisis. Therefore, human security points out that the fears, needs, and priorities of ordinary people are to be brought to the forefront of security considerations, which by doing so, the security and interests of states do not necessarily coincide with the security and interests of people (Persaud, 2022). Human security moves away from the hegemony of military power as a tool to guarantee the security of the state and put the people at the center of the security debate. Therefore, the shift from the state as the referent object to the individual is the core attribute of the concept of human security (Owen, 2012). This opens the door to argue that it is not the only conflict that threatens security, rather a range of injustices such as economic, political, history, gender, culture and geography threaten the security of individuals and communities.

In human security, the range of actors expands just from states to individuals, communities, and NGOs and empowers the people. In other words, human security is somehow a political theory that de-securitize politics and insists that security is a right, not a product of the might and strength of states (Owen, 2012). Human security cheers the decline of military power which has been dominant in international politics and put human at the center of achieving security from fear and freedom from want. According to human security, the scope of security must transfer from its traditional definition to cover the whole broad issues that threaten human well-being and dignity. The core values and features of human security are economic security, health security, food security, personal security, community security, political security and environmental security. Later, human dignity was also added as a core feature of human security. Therefore, human security thinkers argue that it is not just the inter-state conflict that inflicts destruction, violence, death, and migration rather there are other factors like environmental, health, ethnic violence, and food security, that are massive assault and threats to the human welfare, physical security, and human dignity (Persaud, 2022). Millions of people die from preventable diseases throughout the world like COVID-19, HIV, malaria, and Ebola and the recent one is the monkey Pox which is mostly a threat to the vulnerable community of LGBTs. Similarly, thousands of children die due to hunger and poverty, mostly in poor Asian and African countries. Furthermore, due to the outbreak of hurricanes, natural disasters, ethnic outbursts and violence, thousands die and are displaced each year, which hugely impacts human security. A displacement and refugee crisis has affected a record 100 million people (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Based on the 1994 Human Development Reports, the core features of human security have four essential characteristics: Universal, Interdependent, The imperative of prevention, and People-centered, not state-based (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2020). Subsequently, in 2000, the United Nations articulated the Millennium Development Declarations; according to this declaration, human security can be achieved by pursuing the following eight goals:

- To eradicate poverty and hunger
- To achieve universal primary education
- To promote gender equality and empower women
- To reduce child mortality
- To improve maternal health
• To combat HIV, malaria, and other diseases
• To ensure environmental sustainability
• To develop a global partnership for development

The emergence of human security as an international approach to security has opened the door to opposing political thoughts to stand guard and fight back. The first shot is fired by Realists, arguing that the state is the most important factor in establishing security; issues like human rights, economic depravity, or other security threats are due to the anarchic general structure of the global power. Realists argue that survival and overcoming all those challenges are only possible through self-help not promoting international institutions (Bellamy & Wheeler, 2020). Similarly, even neoliberals favor the state as a referent object and rational actor in investing and maximizing state power, instead of emptying spaces for communities and individuals (Owen, 2012). Serious criticism of human security comes from those who believe human security is a form of neo-colonialism, articulated by the liberal world and its institutions to violate the sovereignty of countries in the Global South. “Humanitarian” interventions are a major issue of debate, within which human security looks like a puppet of liberalism.

Human security has come out of the UN's womb, which itself is a liberal institution founded after World War II by the liberal winners of the war. Joining the UN was either forced on the other member states, especially in the Global South or encouraged by promises of economic incentives by the liberal world (Vietti, 2020). The Security Council is made up primarily of colonizer states. Therefore, giving a free hand to the Security Council to authorize military interventions under the banner of defending human rights violations without any supervision can be interpreted as liberal hegemony. Human security does not specify under what circumstances interventions can happen, how post-interventions are to be managed, and which bodies will supervise the intervention. Without providing any concrete answers and solutions to those questions, the action of intervention is a pure tool of domination and elimination by liberals. If the referent object has shifted from the state to the individual, then the mechanism of the state also must alter fundamentally.

So change can begin at the state level and, subsequently, the UN must be reformed. To examine the refugee crisis in a human security context, a new model of refugee admission and response is required. Human security is a failed approach, unless there is a new mechanism of both defining and implementing methods to treat refugees equally based on their universal rights. This paper recommends human security as a political thought that can provide protection and security for refugees, only if the following changes and conditions are met.

• Comprehensive reform and empowerment of the UN, especially its Security Council to shift the balance of its dominance from a few Western countries in favor of all member states. For instance, all continents must have an equal share in membership and decision-making at the Security Council. This is highly important when it comes to “humanitarian interventions”: both pre- and post-humanitarian intervention must be under the monitoring and supervision of the United Nations.

• UN member states’ commitment to formally, not just in rhetoric, choose and implement human security as their foreign policy goals and commit to achieving and fulfilling their Millennium Development Goals, must be at the top of the agenda, in order to ensure and deliver the eight, economic security, health security, food security, personal security, community security, political security, environmental security and human dignity, both within their state borders and in cooperation with other states.

• Refugees are vulnerable individuals and communities which have become deprived of their human security; therefore, member states must ensure and provide their security in the host countries.
Conclusion

The end of the Cold War was celebrated with great optimism, that the era of a major war and power rivalry was over. Francis Fukuyama called it the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992). However, the end of the Cold War did not proceed with a peace dividend, rather it arrogantly boosted the confidence of liberal hegemonism to unilaterally resort to military campaigns and adventurism around the world. The West, under the leadership of the US, invaded Afghanistan under the pretext of fighting terrorism and helping the Afghan people (McCarthy, 2022). The war on terror and its political, economic and military campaigns lasted for 20 years in Afghanistan. After two decades of war, horror and destruction, the campaigns ended with an agreement with the Taliban, the same people that the US and West invaded Afghanistan to fight. Twenty years of war were justified with promises of fighting for human rights, freedom, women and girls' rights to education, and eradicating Islamic extremism. Now a question to be asked is what happened to those promises of standing with the Afghan people, as Tony Blair, one of the architects of the invasion, once said. Since the Taliban are back in power due to an agreement with the US, millions of Afghan girls are deprived of their rights to education, women are imprisoned at home, freedoms are severely restricted, minorities are systematically targeted, the flow of refugees is rising, and millions are facing poverty and starvation. All of which the West does not want to be bothered with or is keen to warn against.

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