



# Europe's Borders, Refugees and the Islamic-State

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**Closing Europe's borders and politicizing the attempt to admit refugees at a time when the growing humanitarian crisis poses mounting human rights challenges to the international community is fundamentally wrongheaded. These approaches only strengthen the hand of Islamic State.**

While violent extremism, terrorism, and civil wars have drawn the most attention, coming to grips with the refugee crisis—emanating mainly from Syria's civil war, but also more generally from the Middle East and North Africa's political environment (MENA) in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings—has never been more essential. The Syrian crisis has propelled a wave of migrants to the neighboring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey. The Syrian refugee population stands at approximately 4.7 million, of whom 1.7 million live in Lebanon and Jordan and even more in Turkey. It is estimated that Turkey now hosts the world's largest community of displaced Syrians.

Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL and by its Arabic acronym as Da'esh), while at the same time fulfilling the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in the Syrian situation, has presented a complex challenge to the international community. The growing threat of ISIS as shown in attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016), magnified by the increased threat of individual terrorists—the so-called “lone wolves” in San Bernardino, the United States—has stemmed a wave of nationalist, right-wing alarm, reinforcing a general concern about the influx of immigrants and asylum seekers, while underlining the shift from a regional to the international nature of both threat and risk. These security issues have also illustrated the willingness of great powers to support military reactions to ISIS in order to stem the atrocities

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perpetrated by this group, while putting the departure of the Assad regime on the back burner—at least for now. For all intents and purposes, ISIS poses a much greater threat to Europe than does the current regime in Damascus.

### **An Unavoidable Tradeoff**

Confronting and dismantling ISIS need not be achieved by stigmatizing refugees and subjecting them to religious litmus tests. Closing Europe's porous borders and politicizing the admission of refugees at a time when the growing humanitarian crisis poses mounting human rights challenges to the international community is fundamentally misguided. After all, fortifying European borders, while effective in the short term, strengthens the hands of ISIS and other terrorist groups that portray such policies and practices largely in terms of apocalyptic visions and arcane Islamic prophecies of great battles against Western imperialists.

Defeating ISIS requires strategic endurance and long-term prudent political decision-making involving internal and external actors in the MENA region. While doing so, it is important to avoid the enemy's repressive, atavistic, and brutal methods, eschewing certain tactics that could potentially play into ISIS's hands. It is important to bear in mind that the tactics that terrorist groups like ISIS employ pose mostly political and ideological challenges to the West and that the real fight will be in defeating and destroying the claims and values that these groups assert. In the end, defeating ISIS requires that its demonic ideology and tactics be confronted and exposed.

Preventing further refugee crises in the future requires that fighting ISIS be at least temporarily prioritized over the overthrow of the Assad regime. Seeking a political solution in conjunction with harnessing a multipronged strategy may in

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fact be among the most effective tools and processes of dealing with current humanitarian crises that the world faces. The possibility of working with the Russians and the Iranians in order to seek a political solution in Syria also raises questions about whether this tradeoff is justified. If the intent is to defeat ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the Levant Conquest Front (formerly known as al-Nusra Front), then this tradeoff is inevitable even as it buttresses the Assad regime in Syria for the foreseeable future. This solution is not problem-free or without significant challenges, however.

### **Competing Views**

While the military actions against ISIS are warranted and can be coordinated by both inside and outside actors, the nature of such military missions and their consequences are also subject to further debate and negotiations. The inclusion of Russia and Iran, allies of Assad, in the fight against ISIS raises concerns that their stated goal of curbing ISIS is merely a pretext to prolonging Assad's rule. Likewise, Turkish participation in air strikes in northern Syria in the war against ISIS has raised the possibility that Ankara will target the Kurds, who have successfully fought against ISIS since the beginning of the conflagration. Turkey's interest in settling political scores with the Kurds, an interest that it believes is vital to its security, imperils whatever impartiality one might have hoped for in a fight solely against ISIS.

The massive movement of migrants and refugees to Europe, coupled with the ISIS-led attacks on soft targets in Europe, has created a new urgency among Western leaders to fully confront this new global threat and seriously contemplate the possibility of cooperating with Russia in a coordinated effort. Compromises must at times be made when a multifaceted campaign that includes both countering ISIS and precipitating the removal of the Assad

regime is waged. The collapse of the Assad regime would create a significant security void that ISIS and other terrorist groups could easily exploit.

There is no denying the fact that the Paris, Brussels, and San Bernardino terrorist attacks have heightened the securitization of the refugee threats, as the Islamic State has been using the wave of the migrant influx to infiltrate Europe and North America. The number of terrorists hiding among the refugees is small. ISIS has exploited the flood of refugees to smuggle jihadis into Europe by distributing fake passports in Greek refugee camps to allow its terrorists to travel within Europe. On April 22, 2016, The Washington Post reported that more than three dozen suspected militants who had posed as migrants have been arrested or died while planning or carrying out acts of terrorism. They included at least seven individuals who were directly linked to the bloody attacks in Paris and Brussels.

But even a few of these will be highlighted by conservative circles in all Western countries to call for the repatriation or active policing of refugee communities. Donald Trump Jr.'s notorious analogy between refugees and poisoned Skittles is a case in point. Conservatives rank the issue of terrorism much higher than do liberals in the West, the latter agreeing that one cannot stop all terrorism and that the chances of being caught in a terrorist attack are still quite small. Vigilance and the exclusion of possible threats by governments, however, is prioritized over the compassionate acceptance of refugees.

### **The Flaws of the Current Refugee Regime**

The issue remains to be discussed within the core conception of the mandate of the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Remaining at the center of the global refugee regime, UNHCR faces new challenges. Today,

for example, most refugees tend to flee from violence and flagrant human rights violations—not necessarily from the threat of persecution, which is a key requirement according to the [1951 Refugee Convention](#).

This has resulted in confusion and lack of clarity regarding who qualifies for refugee status and what are the rights to which all refugees are entitled—issues left up entirely to states to interpret. To compound matters further, in the case of Syrian refugee crisis, the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq have never ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. Now, more than ever, a robust and comprehensive discussion about the future of refugees, whose numbers will only increase with the worsening effects of climate change, is not only timely but necessary, given the tumultuous nature of international politics.

It is important to bear in mind that refugees can be a destabilizing factor, especially when displaced, alienated, and bitter persons among them are recruited into armed extremist factions. [Many studies](#) have shown that the absence of a protective and enabling environment is likely to render more young people vulnerable to racist ideologies and movements and ease the process of their recruitment into the ranks of radical groups like the Islamic State or al-Qaeda. The traditional method of relying on purely humanitarian remedies has proven counterproductive in the face of new influxes of refugees. There is a need for a new thinking that envisions relief and humanitarian aid as fundamentally linked to the granting of work permits to the refugees. To dwell solely on the conventional method of humanitarian aid, and to ignore the importance of wage-earning employment for the refugees, is to wear blinders.

### **Shifting Focus from Protection to Empowerment**

The focus of the 1951 refugee protection regime should shift to new ways of dealing with displaced persons that take into account the self-interested reasoning of host countries and the concerns of their citizens regarding competition over jobs. This shift will help to eliminate risks to refugees' personal security by reducing human smuggling and trafficking by land and sea. Some experts, such as [Alexander Betts](#) and [Paul Collier](#), have offered solutions along the line of creating “spaces of opportunity” for the refugees through “special economic zones” that provide jobs, training, and education.

Helping refugees, I would argue, should begin with technical education and vocational training, coupled with a strategy focused on creating jobs immediately in economic zones from which both host societies and displaced Syrians can benefit. The need to work is inseparable from human security and thus crucial to preserving human dignity. The refugees' right to legal employment makes good ethical and logical sense. Designing, for example, a vocational skills training program tailored to the needs of women refugees can significantly reduce the incidence of sexual trafficking and abuse. These projects offer a more plausible solution in the long term, not only because they will develop transferable skills that refugees can use in their countries of origin upon return, but also because they create monetary disincentives for refugees to emigrate to Europe in the first place.

Image by Freedom House via [Flickr](#).

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here, see **Mahmood Monshipouri, Claude Welch Jr., and Khashayar Nikazmrad**, “Protecting Human Rights in the Era of Uncertainty: How Not to Lose the War against ISIS,” *Journal of Human Rights* Online version, July 28, 2016, available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14754835.2016.1205477>.

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