

## Refugees in Europe

### Exodus

Europe should welcome more refugees and economic migrants—for the sake of the world and itself

Sep 12th 2015 | From the print edition



FOR too long Europe has closed its eyes to Syria's foul and bloody civil war, and tried to keep the suffering multitudes out. Suddenly the continent's gates have been pushed open by two political forces. One is moral conscience, belatedly awakened by the image of a drowned Syrian child on a Turkish beach. The other is the political courage of Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, who told her people to set aside their fear of immigrants and show compassion to the needy.

Tens of thousands of asylum-seekers flowed towards Germany by rail, bus and on foot, chanting "Germany! Germany!", to be welcomed by cheering crowds. Germany is showing that old Europe, too, can take in the tired, the poor and the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. It says it can absorb not thousands, but hundreds of thousands of refugees. Such numbers will inevitably raise many worries: that cultures will be swamped by aliens, economies will be overburdened, social benefits will have to be curbed and even that terrorists will creep in. Anti-immigrant parties have been on the rise across Europe. In America, too, some politicians want to build walls to keep foreigners out.

Yet the impulse to see migrants as chiefly a burden is profoundly mistaken. The answer to these familiar fears is not to put up more barriers, but to manage the pressures and the risks to ensure that migration improves the lives of both immigrants and their hosts. The starting point is a sense of perspective.

#### Willkommen, bienvenue, salaam alaikum

As a wealthy and peaceful continent surrounded by large areas of poverty and chaos, Europe is a strong draw for many seeking a better life. The 4m Syrian refugees compare with 1.2m from the Balkan wars of the 1990s and 15m after the second world war. The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, counts 59.5m refugees and other forcibly displaced people worldwide. Europe cannot take everybody in. But in truth, most people prefer a decent life at home. In addition, the history of migration is a catalogue of overblown fears (see [article](#)), with countless examples of exiles forming vibrant communities that enrich their host countries: the Jews, the Armenians, the Vietnamese boat-people and the Ugandan Asians, to name but a few. Germany's *Willkommenskultur* is right morally, economically and politically. It sets an example to the world.

Policymakers need to think about three groups: refugees, economic migrants and voters at home. Start with refugees. Syrians make up the largest contingent of asylum-seekers in Europe. Oppressed by the barrel-bombs of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the jihadists of Islamic State, Syrians meet any standard for recognition as refugees with a "well-founded fear of persecution", under the terms of the UN convention on refugees of 1951. Helping Syrians is a clear moral duty.

That responsibility falls not on Europe alone, but the world as a whole. It needs a co-ordinated policy to manage the Syrian crisis along the entire chain of displacement. There must be a concerted effort to contain the war, starting with the creation of protected havens. UN agencies, buckling under the strain, must be properly funded. Syria's neighbours, which have taken in the largest share of refugees, need help to provide education and jobs, not just camps in the desert.

America, Western countries and especially the rich monarchies of the Gulf should resettle many more Syrians—just as 1.8m Indochinese refugees were resettled in the 1970s and 1980s. Transit countries need help to manage human flows and absorb at least some people. Refugees should be able to apply for asylum in Europe without risking their lives at the hands of people-smugglers; that may mean establishing processing centres in transit countries. In Europe refugees should be shared across the EU fairly (see [article](#)); other migrants denied entry should be speedily repatriated. The countries of the western Balkans (Albania, Kosovo, Serbia) should be deemed safe.

Refugees are intertwined with economic migrants. They get on the same boats and resentment of migrants erodes support for refugees. How, then, to deal with those who want a better life rather than a safer one?

Whereas states may not be able to pick who comes in search of protection, they want to choose who comes to work. A willingness to accept legal migrants gives countries more scope to turn back the illegal sort; issuing more work visas gives neighbouring countries a stake in the system and hence a reason to co-operate in curbing illegal flows. But the fundamental point is that Europe needs economic migrants. It has too few workers to pay for its citizens' retirement and to provide the services they want. Migrants are net contributors to the public purse. They inject economic dynamism. They are, almost by definition, self-starters.

Voters may not be so sanguine, though. Newcomers need housing, schools and health care. There is evidence that they depress wages for the low-paid—though barely. Where labour markets are rigid, migrants can become an underclass. Yet this strengthens the case not for fortress Europe, but for good public policy—and especially for the sort of open, flexible labour markets that Europe needs whether or not it accepts migrants.

Voters fear that immigrants will not fit in. An old idea of Christendom still lurks within modern European identity. Since the 9/11 attacks on America, and terrorist murders in Europe, relations with Muslim minorities have become strained. Yet compassion towards needy Muslims is part of the antidote to a hateful jihadist ideology. By contrast, millions of brutalised Syrians left to fester on Europe's fringe would be a source of extremism that will not respect any border.

### **Love ye the stranger**

There are surely limits to how many migrants any society will accept. But the numbers Europe proposes to receive do not begin to breach them. The boundaries of social tolerance are fuzzy. They change with time and circumstance and leadership. *Willkommenskultur* shows that the people of Europe are more welcoming than their nervous politicians assume. The politics of fear can be trumped by the politics of dignity. Mrs Merkel understood this; so should the rest of the world.

From the print edition: Leaders

<http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21664136-europe-should-welcome-more-refugees-and-economic-migrants-for-sake-world-and>

**1. Do you agree or disagree with the author's thesis (main idea)? What responsibility do you feel Europe, the US, and the world more generally have to aiding in refugee crises?**

**2. What are 3-5 questions you have regarding the refugee crisis in Syria?**