

Reflecting on the Syrian Migration Crisis

Written by Max O. Stephenson Jr. and Yannis A. Stivachtis

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MAX O. STEPHENSON JR. AND YANNIS A. STIVACHTIS, MAY 9 2023

This is an excerpt from *Policy and Politics of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Eastern Mediterranean States*, edited by Max O. Stephenson Jr. & Yannis A. Stivachtis. You can download the book free of charge from *E-International Relations*.

Throughout the chapters of this book, several cross-cutting themes or phenomena appear to have played vital, if varying, roles in government and popular responses to the mass displacement and migration prompted by the Syrian Civil War and we emphasize those here. We first highlight the problem of alterity or othering as a central feature of these nations' reactions to the mass migration challenge represented by that conflict. Thereafter, we discuss the intersection of the human tendencies for xenophobia and fear of difference and change as a key force in producing broad popular ill-will and government opposition to assisting the displaced profiled in this volume. Finally, we suggest that these proclivities merged in each of these nations, although at varying speeds and to changing degrees during the decade of the Syrian migration, to generate calls by many individuals within them that migrants and refugees constituted a security threat to be met with demonization and removal and/or with efforts to ensure they were kept 'at bay' at all costs. We suggest that the comprehensive security approach helps analysts identify salient forces and concerns crucial to such public movements and, at least indirectly, can help government leaders marshal efforts to prevent or mitigate their worsening or recurrence.

Perhaps foremost among the phenomena revealed by these chapters is the centrality of alterity as a driver and mediator of responses to the migrants and refugees who fled Syria's conflict. Every case presented in these chapters is underlaid with popular and public policy choices shaped by fear and 'othering'. Primo Levi has described this human proclivity thoughtfully:

We [humankind] also tend to simplify history; but the patterns within which events are ordered is not always identifiable in a single unequivocal fashion. ... Nevertheless, perhaps for reasons that go back to our origins as social animals, the need to divide the field into 'we' and 'they' is so strong that this bi-partition-friend-enemy-prevails over all others. ... This Manichean tendency shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels... (Levi, 1988, 31-32).

In the present case, this human inclination has translated to vociferous claims within governments among their officials and beyond them in organized groups and parties alike in every country under discussion in this book, that those fleeing the Syrian Civil War were crass interlopers who, if permitted to remain, would usurp employment from existing citizens and would also despoil the existing supposed racial, religious, and ethnic order within those nations' borders. That is, in each country treated here, the migrants and refugees were depicted, to varying degrees in each affected nation across the period of the Syrian migration, and with the initial conspicuous exceptions of Turkey and Jordan, as especial threats because they were foreigners and despicable 'others,' because of their patent need, and because of the color of their skin. In keeping with this trope of the foreigner as racialized intruder, Syria's refugees were met in many instances in the nations investigated here with an abstractly derived hatred. In tandem with that fear and general rancor, many recipient government officials and populations met the Syrian exodus with companion claims that those comprising it were less than human and could and should therefore be treated accordingly, and with impunity. In some cases, as in Greece and Malta, as the relevant chapters here highlight, while for perhaps different reasons, that attitude was realized in public policies in a notably brutal way, as those nations' officials

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routinely violated European Union and international norms and law as they dealt with Syria's refugees.

In short, these chapters suggest that the large and sudden Syrian migration unleashed a Manichean and xenophobic reaction in many affected nations that intersected with racism, or reflected it, to result in routine violation of international standards of treatment for Syria's externally displaced population. That situation was surely only exacerbated by the sheer magnitude of that country's migrant and refugee stream. These conditions led to flagrant dehumanization claims by officials and representatives of advocacy groups, especially far-right ones, and a popular ill-will in many nations touched by the exodus that was unrelated to any factual analysis of its likely implications.

The general climate of fear and uncertainty unleashed by Syrians' mass departure provided fertile ground for those wishing to weaponize the catastrophe and scapegoat its victims as constituting a security threat to affected countries. As we noted in the introduction, securitization involves claims that a 'threat' – in this case one represented by those displaced by a war, who often espoused different religious beliefs, looked 'different,' and spoke an unfamiliar language or dialect – were depicted as trespassers undeserving of hospitality, let alone of human and civil rights. Many public leaders and advocates suggested that their presence *must* be viewed as a crisis that *must* be interdicted at all costs. In this view, these individuals should not be permitted to remain in targeted countries and if treating them with discriminatory cruelty and callousness could quicken or secure that result, such efforts should be pursued with urgency and alacrity. As we argued:

Securitization involves four components: first, a securitizing actor/agent (the entity that makes the securitizing statement); second, a proposed existential threat (the object or idea that has been identified as potentially harmful); third, a referent object (the object or idea that is purportedly under threat and needs protection); and finally, an audience (the target population that needs to be persuaded to accept the issue as a security threat) (Waever 1993; Taureck 2006).

Across these chapters, depending on the nation and time-frame on which one focuses, activist groups and political party members as well as government officials were each responsible for securitizing claims concerning displaced Syrians. Those individuals and advocates offered arguments suggesting that any entry of this population constituted an existential threat against which the resident population must be 'protected'. That citizenry merited and required that concern, according to these advocates, because of the conflation of threats the refugees and migrants represented. These actors asserted a variety of arguments aimed at demonstrating that the displaced constituted an existential crisis, including racial and religious claims and slurs of various sorts, assertions of economic and demographic displacement, and what might be dubbed as straightforward xenophobic alterity – they should be rejected out of hand precisely because they 'are not us'. Every government examined in these pages treated the migration Syrian situation as a security crisis at some point in its duration. Those moments and policies might be described as the result of a perfect storm arising from a concatenation of the factors highlighted here, but that cataclysm arose at different times in each nation.

We should be clear. We are not arguing that the Syrian migration scenario could easily or readily have been addressed by any of the affected countries it has touched. Far from it. Nonetheless, the issue is not whether assisting those displaced was simple, but instead why in each of these nations it became, again to shifting degrees at different times, an opportunity for government actors and populations to slip into a speculative Manicheanism built on fear rather than the much more straightforward option of treating those affected with dignity and humanity, even when or if they ultimately could not be accepted for resettlement. All the populations and governments profiled here flunked this test for various periods of time and to varying degrees during the last decade. But they all failed it, and some did so with an egregious and frightening intensity of rancor and cruelty.

This contention raises a deeper question, especially for those nominally democratic governments whose actions are examined in these chapters, of whether such populations can avoid nativism, the claim that current citizenries were always dominant in a territory and any other individuals are illegitimate by definition, even when, as often is the case in historical terms, the present inhabitants are not aboriginal. It likewise prompts the question of whether political xenophobia is inevitable and perhaps even likely in nominally democratic nations in the face of potential significant economic, social, or demographic change. All the countries treated here to which Syrians sought entry experienced

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an exponential growth in othering sentiments as those fearful, those disdainful of the migrants on racial or social hierarchy grounds, and those aspiring for power reacted with cruel fright to the reality of a steady stream of displaced individuals, especially during the peak years of that flight.

In short, reflecting on the analyses offered here, we have found ourselves pondering how one may protect the rights of vulnerable populations from the phenomena these chapters highlight. We find ourselves recurring to arguments suggesting that governments must work harder to educate their citizenries concerning the inevitability and benefits of pluralism to diminish popular response to the siren calls of those willing to fearmonger and scapegoat and demonize the dispossessed on racial, economic, or other grounds linked to difference. One need not idealize Syria's migrants as angels to contend that none deserved to be treated with contempt for who they are/were or for the situation in which they found themselves. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that many were, and that fact should prompt sober and continuing consideration.

In keeping with our point that Syrian migrants should not be idealized as a class, we should also say that not everyone in the nations and populations treated here rallied to xenophobic claims and Manichean alterity. That was surely not the case across all these citizenries or within all their governments during the past decade. Indeed, Augusta Nannerini's chapter, particularly, points to the need to approach these questions with a willingness to disaggregate one's analysis as necessary and appropriate from the national level to capture the vicissitudes of government and social action and refugee experience. We think that reminder is an apt one, even as it points once more to the layered social, economic, and political complexity that resulted in national responses to the Syrian migration.

Finally, we take up the question of how the nations in the eastern and central Mediterranean security subcomplexes analyzed in this book reacted to the Syrian Civil War and the mass migration it spawned during the last decade. In comprehensive security terms, these nations saw a sudden rise in economic claims and an implicit challenge to their collective social identities. Together, these twin forces produced a xenophobic backlash among many citizens in the affected nations in this region that saw the Syrian migration recast and redefined from a crisis in which thousands were fleeing persecution and worse to, instead, the onslaught of an alien and alienating force that posed real danger to settled ways of life and understanding of social structures. Advocates and officials espousing the latter claims successfully weaponized them at an increasing pace as the exodus wore on. The result was the securitization of the Syrian immigration itself as a threat to the peoples and governments affected by it in this region.

What this result meant in practice is harsh treatment of many Syrians solely on the basis of their personhood, surely an unchangeable condition. This result was in no way ordained, even as Primo Levi warned of the depth of humanity's proclivity to it. One can readily imagine different scenarios to those that unfolded in the nations examined here. Indeed, securing that alternate outcome seems to be the critical challenge raised by these analyses. Imagining that the growing climate crisis and profound economic dislocation and inequality wrought by neoliberal globalization are unlikely to abate any time soon, how can national leaders interested in democratic realization prepare for future migration-related challenges, large and small, by ensuring that the human rights of those displaced are honored while at the same time not creating conditions that those clamoring for scapegoats and demanding an end to ambiguity and complexity can exploit to undermine their efforts?

In this regard, we are reminded of the ancient Greek myth of Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla was said to be a six-headed monster who inhabited a rock on one side of a narrow strait while Charybdis was a parlous whirlpool on the other side of that narrows. Scylla routinely seized and devoured sailors when their ships passed near her home as they sought to avoid the peril posed by Charybdis. By analogy, government officials who take democratic values and human rights seriously must somehow successfully navigate the metaphoric waters of migration without falling prey to the monster their own populations may become when aroused, fear-filled, and 'threatened,' while also avoiding the very real human crisis represented by failing to honor the rights of the displaced. This is a difficult challenge by any standard of evaluation and many of the governments treated in this volume failed to meet it to greater or lesser degree as the Syrian migration wore on. That fact should not constrain hope that those straits may not be traversed more successfully in the future, and we believe the lessons contained in these chapters will assist government officials in doing so. It is with that possibility that we conclude.

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