



Refugees, Pandemic and Counterterrorism

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According to the annual Global Trends report released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), almost 70.8 million people are now forcibly displaced. These 70.8 million consist of refugees, asylum seekers and Internally Displaced People (IDP).

More than two-thirds of all refugees worldwide come from just five countries, with Syrian refugees accounting for almost one-third of the world's refugee population, followed by Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. Half of the refugee population worldwide are innocent children and youth below the age of 18.

Refugees and other displaced people belong to the most marginalized and vulnerable members of society and they are particularly exposed during coronavirus disease outbreak since they often have limited access to water, sanitation systems and basic health facilities.

The UNHCR has warned that it is challenging to protect the vulnerable refugee populations from COVID-19 at camps since sanitation and hygiene levels are not ideal, a large portion of the population are children, and it's hard to make them understand the need for isolation and extra handwashing. In addition, a refugee camp is a very crowded environment, and containment will be very difficult.

The recent migration of more than 4 million refugees from the war in Syria has again raised questions about whether refugee concentrations will become incubators for violent extremist groups (Sude, Stebbins & Weiland, 2015). In addition to being labelled as potential violent extremists, many refugees are also being discriminated and viewed as potential virus spreaders.

In the last decade, the world has seen the highest number of refugees' migration since World War II. This is due to a combination of events, but the main factor is political instability due to war and armed conflicts. The humanitarian crisis has become more serious with nearly a million Syrians fled to the Syrian-Turkish border since December

2019 due to heavy fighting in the Idlib region between the rebels and Syrian government forces.

Millions of people were forced to leave the comfort of their hometowns and migrated to other host countries. Turkey alone is already hosting 3.7 million Syrian refugees. Countries in the developing world including Pakistan, Turkey, Uganda, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Sudan were forced to become host to the largest numbers of refugees.

In addition to the hardship of running away from conflict zones, many refugees face discrimination and various labels, from extremists to terrorists. Although dozens of researches confirm that most refugees were simply innocent civilians; elders, women, children and ordinary civilians, trying to escape war, some media keep on portraying these refugees as the enemies; as disguised terrorists and time-bombs. Contrary to the assertion of media, migrants and refugees should not be perceived as increasing the risk of terrorism (Gafarova, 2018).

A United Nations expert on counterterrorism and human rights underscored in a 2016 report that there is no evidence that migration leads to increased terrorist activity. On the contrary, preventive and discriminatory migration policies that lead to increased covert movements of people by traffickers, “may ultimately assist terrorists and lead to increased terrorist activity” (Emmerson, 2016). Mr. Emmerson, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur in his report revealed that “while there is no evidence that migration leads to increased terrorist activity, migration policies that are restrictive or that violate human rights may in fact create conditions conducive to terrorism.” The Special Rapporteur warned that most refugees fleeing wars in the Middle East and other affected regions are simply victims of terrorism and should not be stigmatized as potential terrorists themselves. Unfortunately, most Europeans believe that the surge of refugees will lead to more terrorism (Wike, Stokes & Simmons, 2016).

The rise of right-wing extremist movements simply makes things worse. Refugees have not been seen as children, women, elders or even human beings but have been reduced into foreign threat that must be opposed at any costs. Some politicians have also capitalized on the issue of refugees by manipulating nationalistic sentiments that arise due to unemployment, economic problems and security issues by blaming it all on the refugees.

Islamophobia is another reason for the deep hatred against many refugees. The refugees have simply been shunned due to the hatred against Islam. The narrative promoted by many media, especially in some Western countries is that Muslims are intolerant, incapable of integration and are more prone to terrorism and violence. The

perceived differences of value are used by many as justification to discriminate against Muslim refugees, with some countries openly banning Muslim refugees from entering.

The alienation and discrimination against refugees are not without consequences. In many cases, terrorist attacks are motivated by a sense of grievance. These grievances provide legitimacy in the mind of the individual to carry out their terrorist attacks. There are numerous reasons behind terrorist attacks including a need for vengeance, grief, anxiety, guilt, misplaced religious belief and the hope to re-join lost loved ones (Christmann, 2012).

Researches have revealed that some of these refugees can be exploited by militant and terrorist groups. The former Defence Minister of Malaysia, Mohamad Sabu warned that the displaced refugee population are vulnerable to being recruited by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS) (*The Star* 27 August 2018). To prevent the radicalization of refugees, coordinated and collective efforts by all are necessary.

It is more efficient to carry out the de-radicalization process via existing programmes and using indirect methods. It is essential to provide social support to prevent refugees, especially youngsters from being drawn into terrorism and violent extremism. Challenges like unemployment, poverty and social exclusion need to be properly addressed.

The refugees' community must be educated on how to avoid radicalization. Some segments of the community should be fully trained to realize how others can become radicalized, recognize the signs that a person may be at risk of being radicalized and know what action to take.

To prevent radicalization, it is necessary to build refugees' resilience to radicalization and extremism by helping improve their self-esteem and self-confidence, promoting inclusivity and community cohesion. Governments, NGOs and social institutions should provide support for refugees and help them to establish themselves in society.

In this digital world, people are more connected than ever. Violent extremists are increasingly using peer-to-peer messaging to engage potential recruits on social media. Major companies including Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube have agreed that the spread of terrorism and violent extremism is a pressing global problem and a critical challenge for all of them. Governments and regulators, together with social media companies must collaborate to ensure that the digital platform is not being used for radicalization purposes. Group chats that promote radicalization must be monitored and closed.

To manage the refugees' crisis properly and to prevent them from being enticed into terrorism, a coordinated and comprehensive policy need to be taken collectively by states.

The COVID-19 pandemic has added new dimension to the matter. In the past, some politicians have played anti-refugees sentiment for narrow political purposes. In light of COVID-19, many countries will suffer heavy economic burden and people will be even more sceptical toward refugees. This mentality needs to be changed. COVID-19 is a global disease in a connected world. We are only as strong as the weakest link in the chain, and the only solution has got to be a universal solution. It is necessary to assist and provide for people across borders to defeat the pandemic, and this includes the refugees.

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