

Interrupted lives: Reflections on The Refugee Crisis

Dr Akil N Awan | Nov 2016

With a record 60 million people fleeing conflict and persecution, the world's borders have come to symbolise the difference between war and peace; hope and despair. Dr Akil Awan from the Department of History considers what it means to be a refugee today, and how we might approach the crisis differently.

Last year I visited Jordan as part of my work on political violence. Jordan borders Syria to its north, and although Jordanians display a remarkable sense of normalcy in their everyday lives, visitors cannot really escape the fact that there is a horrific war taking place just across the border. Caught between ISIS's medieval savagery and the Syrian regime's barrel bombings on one hand, and foreign airstrikes on the other, Syrians have been forced to flee in their droves.

Jordan has taken in close to 1.6 million Syrian refugees, even though their population is merely 9.5 million. The proportion is staggering, however, what surprised me even more was the manner in which Jordanians had taken in these refugees. I couldn't help but contrast the extraordinary generosity of the Jordanian government and people in the face of what is a clear global human tragedy, with the hysterical voices heard in many parts of Europe, warning against a deluge of culturally alien migrants, or of reaching saturation point. To put limits on migration into perspective, if Britain were to take in the same proportion of Syrian refugees as Jordan, we would need to accept around 11 million people. So far we have taken in under 3,000 - a figure that Oxfam considers to fall far short of our fair share. Moreover, consider the attitudes we have witnessed towards refugees within Britain. The antipathy towards, and dehumanisation of these people, who have experienced horrific ordeals, and lost much, has been disgraceful. In the most egregious cases, refugees have been depicted as swarms of cockroaches, rats and vermin, appallingly reminiscent of anti-Semitic depictions of Jews prior to WWII. The attitude towards refugees has also hardened, after the often spurious linkage to the threat of terrorism and violence. And whilst there have been a small number of worrying cases, it would be an immense tragedy to turn our backs on those in dire need of help as a simple kneejerk reaction to the politics of fear.

If an appeal to our common humanity is not enough to shift perceptions, then let me offer two additional points: one, the refugee crisis cannot be viewed in isolation from other issues. It is no accident that most of the migrants appearing on European shores hail from conflict zones. Our conscious foreign policy choices abroad do not occur in a vacuum. Whether that involves illegal military intervention, such as the Iraq war that ultimately spawned ISIS; or indifference towards the political aspirations of others, such as the Arab spring protestors who we viewed as inimical to our interests in that part of the world, preferring the relative stability of dictators who at least guaranteed cheap oil resources; or indeed imposing limits on aid and international development while continuing arms sales to pretty nasty regimes. These deliberate foreign policy choices have real world consequences. If this is how we choose to behave in an increasingly interconnected world, then let us have the courage to deal with their respective fallout too.

Second, there is a pragmatic economic reason for welcoming migrants. With declining birth-rates, increasing life expectancy, and ageing populations in the developed world, current economic models are no longer sustainable. As I write this from a bullet train in Tokyo, Japan's demographic challenge is clear to see all around me – roughly a quarter of Japan's population is over the age of 65, and is projected to increase to 40% by 2060. While Japan is certainly the most pressing example of a nation struggling to generate sufficient tax revenues from its shrinking working-age population in order to take care of its ageing population, many others are not far behind. Most of the developed world will soon have a real need for young working age migrants.

Moreover, let us not forget the very real economic contribution migrants and their children already make to their host countries. Forced to leave with little more than the clothes on their back, migrants bring with them an immense sense

of gratitude and loyalty towards their host country. Often having lost everything, they inevitably start over, inculcating their children with the value of education and success. They also bring with them a tremendous work ethic, often doing the jobs that locals would rather not – and moreover, doing them with a quiet dignity. On the other end of the spectrum, they can also be incredibly innovative and industrious, establishing not just small businesses, but once in a while, giants like Apple. After all, it's easy to forget that Steve Jobs was just another son of a Syrian migrant to the US too.

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