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Muslim Refugees in Europe: An Existential Threat?

By Aida Arosoaie

Synopsis

The recent influx of refugees into Europe has been mislabeled as “immigration” and portrayed by local right-wing politicians as an existential threat. This European nationalist rhetoric could legitimise and provoke violence by Salafi-jihadis.

Commentary

REFUGEES FLEEING the wars in Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan are facing a great injustice: in the past few months, right-wing European politicians have been referring to them as ‘migrants’ and even depict them as an existential threat to Christian Europe. The justifications of European nationalist politicians for such actions are seeded in the conflation between Islam - the refugees’ religion – with Salafi-jihadi militancy.

By framing it as an existential threat, the right-wing politicians are constructing their political discourse in the same way Salafi-jihadi organisations construct theirs while at the same time, acting inconsistently with the fundamental values of the European Union. If this rhetoric persists it might result in legitimising the Salafi-jihadi discourse and make recruits of current refugees, which in turn, would increase the likelihood of attacks in Europe orchestrated by Salafi-jihadis.

Europe’s “immigration” problem

Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany referred to the Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan nationals coming into Europe as the “biggest challenge” she has experienced. The Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni argued that the current immigration crisis poses a threat to the “soul of Europe”. Viktor Orban, Hungary’s Prime Minister was more vehement as evidenced by these words he uttered:

“Those arriving have been raised in another religion, and represent a radically different culture. Most of them are not Christians, but Muslims. This is an important question, because Europe and European identity is rooted in Christianity.”

Additionally, the current European nationalist lexicon does not include the word ‘refugee’. Instead, it uses the less evocative term ‘migrant’. However, there is a substantive difference between the state of a refugee and that of a migrant. UNHCR defines refugees as persons fleeing armed conflict or

persecution and migrants as persons who choose to move, not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their living standards.

Protected under international law, the status of a refugee signals the threat to human dignity, liberty, equality and respect for human rights which represent the very fundamental values of the Constitution of the European Union. The choice of 'migrant' over 'refugee' signals an attempt to evade moral responsibility in addressing the plea of these people.

Threat of Salafi-jihadi militancy

The framing of the current "immigration" threat is in effect a securitising process that renders Islam and Muslims as existential threats to Europeans. This is problematic in two ways. Firstly, this securitisation process is based on the same Manichean divide that defines Salafi-jihadis' thinking. Secondly, this discourse is incongruous with the fundamental values of the European Union.

Nationalist European leaders and parties, such as Orban, the UK Independence Party or France's National Front, believe that Muslim refugees are an existential threat to the Christian soul of Europe because they associate Islam with Salafi-jihadi militancy. This conflation implies that the refugees, motivated by their religion, promote global "terrorism". Significantly, Orban is constructing an existential threat in the same fashion as the Salafi-jihadi groups. Take the speech by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, the spokesperson of ISIS, who denounced the West for covertly waging a war against Islam:

"O Crusaders, indeed you are weak cowards, all of you (...) because you don't dare make public the reality of your war and the fact that it is a crusade, that it is against Islam, and that it is against Sunnis".

Thus Adnani is also conflating Western politics with Christianity. Both parties construct an existential threat by conflating the Other's religion with politics: in the case of Salafi-jihadis is the conflation of Christianity with democracy and liberalism, while in the case of right-wing European leaders it is Islam with Salafi-jihadi "terrorism". Both parties project the world in binaries, each binary with its own religion and specific ideological orientations.

Legitimising the Salafi-jihadis

By constructing an existential threat based on such conflations, Orban also disregards the commitment he has to the values of the European Union. The EU was not founded on a particular religious creed, but on neutral values meant to serve humanity. In this context, Orban's behaviour is morally inconsistent, as he is acting against the very values he is supposed to represent as a leader of a European Union member state.

This could also draw the attention, and indeed ire of Salafi-jihadis who in the past, have specifically posited such moral inconsistencies as an essential trigger for their violence. In a statement on 1 November 2004, Osama bin Laden implied that Al-Qaeda would not strike Sweden, for example, because the Swedish government never acted in inconsistent terms. It bears noting that Sweden is the country that has been taking in more asylum seekers per capita in comparison to any other European country without questioning their religion.

By portraying the current refugee crisis in existential terms and by disregarding the fundamental values of the European Union, right-wing European leaders might end up legitimising the Salafi-jihadis amongst the refugees. Potential consequences could be the emergence of a recruitment pool for Salafi-jihadi groups and a surge of Salafi-jihadi-orchestrated attacks across Europe.

Instead, if right-wing European leaders and parties moderate their rhetoric and re-pond to the refugee crisis in ways that are morally consistent and in conformity with the European values, they might end up legitimising their own political values amongst the refugees. If so they would assist a potential post-war reconstruction of Syria where the West could be looked at more favourably as opposed to the contemporary neo-colonial and neo-imperialist lenses.

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