

America as bystander to the refugee crisis



ARMEND NIMANI/AFP/Getty Images

Migrants and refugees walk after crossing the Macedonian border into Serbia, near the village of Miratovac, on Jan. 27, 2016.

By Michael Ignatieff January 29, 2016

The Aegean Sea is cold and dark at this time of year but the refugees keep coming. Every week, somebody drowns, often a child, but the refugees risk the journey so they can reach safety in Germany. Still other desperate people, fleeing chaos in Africa, risk everything to cross from Libya to Italy. This human tide of Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Eritreans, and dozens of other nations represents the largest movement of people since World War II.

The European Union is coming apart under the strain. Efforts to share the burden and preserve border-free travel are failing. Razor wire is going up across the continent. Sweden says it won't take any more people, Austria says the same, and everyone is waiting for Angela Merkel to shut Germany's borders for good.

So what is America doing?

Let's be charitable. The United States is the largest donor to the relief agencies trying to cope with the more than four million refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Secretary of State John Kerry is trying to get peace talks started in Vienna so the war can end and refugees can go home. Nobody believes this will happen anytime soon.

What America is not doing is taking its fair share of refugees. In four years of bloody conflict, America has given refuge to scarcely 2,000 Syrians. That's less than the number who arrive in Germany every day. President Obama announced an increase in the Syrian refugee quota to 10,000 a year, but Republicans in Congress, joined by some Democrats, are trying to make it impossible to take them in, and some governors want to bar the door of their states.

In the wake of the shootings in San Bernardino, Donald Trump said he wouldn't just bar refugees, he'd bar Muslims altogether. If he has his way with public opinion, the mightiest country on earth, the one with the best record for welcoming refugees, will be saying to the world that it is too frightened to live by its own best traditions.

What a small country America has become.

A big country would take in Muslim refugees and say to the terrorists in Islamic State: You won't scare us into not doing what's right. A big country would stand by Europe and its Middle Eastern allies and help them to cope. The country we've got is a bystander.

This is a famously big-hearted country, but after San Bernardino, it wants to be sure that generosity toward refugees won't put itself at risk. In a study for the Shorenstein Center at the Kennedy School, a faculty-student research group under my guidance has developed a detailed proposal^[1] to vet refugees in the camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, airlift them to secure military installations in the United States, and complete their vetting before releasing them to the community groups who've proved they can integrate refugees successfully. This is the model the United States adopted in 1999, when it flew 4,000 refugees from Kosovo to Fort Dix, N.J., and processed them there, before releasing them to their new homes across the United States. What a big country did then, it could still do now.

Settling refugees successfully in the United States counters Islamic State messages of hate with a message of hope. It will help to reduce radicalization in the refugee camps and, when the war is over, and many of these refugees return to their country, they'll remember that America stood by them in their time of need.

Accelerating the flow of refugees to safety in the United States also sends a key message of support to European allies like Angela Merkel of Germany and Francois Hollande of France, who risk going under to a rising right-wing tide that is not just antirefugee but also anti-American.

American detachment from the European crisis is a stunning disappointment to Europeans who can remember a time, as recent as 1995, when American leadership put a stop to the Bosnian war. Europeans watch an administration pivoting to Asia and can't understand how it has forgotten that Europe remains a vital trading partner and its most important strategic ally.

By taking in more refugees, fully funding the camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, and going all out to get a cease-fire in Syria, the United States will revive the US-European alliance, stabilize friends like Angela Merkel who may lose power, and send a message that America is still prepared to defend Europe. Imagine how the refugee crisis looks to Vladimir Putin. The worse it gets in Western Europe, the easier it becomes for him to divide Ukraine in two, intimidate the Baltic states, and eat away at the order of free peoples that America built up on the ruins of the Soviet empire. Generous refugee policy, it turns out, isn't just a way to feel better. It's a way for America to maintain its leadership in a dangerous world.

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1. <http://shorensteincenter.org/united-states-syrian-refugee-crisis-plan-action/>

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