



Refugees: the Trojan horse of terrorism?

Why are leaders in the EU and US reluctant to admit that the main terrorist threat to western countries comes from home-grown extremists?

Jeff Crisp

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In his Executive Order of 27 January 2017, US President Donald J. Trump [claimed that](#) “numerous foreign-born individuals have been convicted or implicated in terrorism-related crimes since September 11 2001... including foreign nationals who entered the United States through the refugee resettlement program.”

The notion that refugees are closely connected to terrorism has also been actively promoted by the EU law enforcement agency, Europol. According to [one of its reports](#), “a real and imminent danger is the possibility of the Syrian refugee diaspora becoming vulnerable to radicalization and being specifically targeted by Islamic extremist recruiters.” Based on this assumption, the agency has [recently announced](#) that it “will in future be able to search the EURODAC database of refugee and asylum seekers’ fingerprints, so as to detect and prevent terrorist offences.”

Authoritarian politicians such as Hungary’s Viktor Orban have exploited such statements to the maximum, [describing refugees and migrants](#) as “the Trojan horse of terrorism.” Extremist organizations have themselves been eager to perpetuate this frightening scenario, as when the Islamic State declared that 4,000 of its members had been [infiltrated into Europe](#) under the cover of the refugee influx.

When ‘no smoke without fire’ doesn’t work

Contrary to such assertions, the number of refugees who have committed terrorist acts is negligible. An [exhaustive study](#) by the Cato Institute, for example, reported that more than 3.2 million refugees had been admitted to the US between 1975 and 2015. During that period, just 20 had attempted or succeeded in carrying out terrorist attacks. Only three US citizens had been killed by ‘refugee terrorists’, and these murders were all committed by Cuban exiles in the 1970s.

While supportive of Trump’s policies in other respects, the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, concluded that the President’s bid to halt Muslim refugee resettlement on the grounds of terrorism was “a response to a phantom menace.”

Similar conclusions can be drawn from evidence gathered elsewhere. According to a [new study](#) from the European University Institute, “at present and using the best available evidence,

the main terrorist threat to Western countries does not come from recently arrived refugees, but from home-grown extremists.”

Australia’s head of intelligence concurs, stating that he has “found no evidence to suggest that there is a connection between refugees and terrorism, nor is there any evidence of their children being radicalized.”

UN Refugee Convention

One British exception to this rule can be found in the case of ‘Manchester bomber’ Salman Abedi, a UK-born British citizen whose Libyan father had been granted refugee status in the country. But there is [growing evidence to suggest](#) that Abedi was radicalized during a journey to his parents’ homeland, a visit that was allowed to proceed – and possibly assisted by – the UK’s intelligence services.

In this respect, it is important to understand that international refugee law provides states with all the provisions they need to break the potential linkage between refugees and terrorism.

The very [first article](#) of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention allows states to deny refugee status to anyone who has committed “crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity or serious non-political crimes.” Article 2 of the Convention states that every refugee has a duty to conform to the laws and regulations of their asylum country, as well as “any measures taken for the maintenance of public order.”

Article 9 permits states to detain refugees “for the purpose of national security,” while Article 32 allows for refugees to be expelled and for due process to be suspended “when compelling reasons of national security exist.”

The Refugee Convention is thus an instrument that is intended to reinforce and not to undermine the security of states and their citizens. At the same time, it provides an essential means of offering protection and long-term solutions to innocent civilians who would otherwise be at serious risk.

Rather than denigrating the institution of asylum by suggesting that it facilitates or even encourages terrorism, let us celebrate the millions of lives that it has saved, including those threatened by violent extremism. As the Danish Security and Intelligence Service [recently concluded](#), “there is little risk that terrorists are among the refugees currently entering Denmark. The majority are actually fleeing from militant Islamic movements.”