

Saudi Crown Prince says will develop nuclear bomb if Iran does

A rise in right wing nationalism across the European Union has resulted in increased hardship for many Syrian refugees. Seven years after fleeing war in Syria many struggle to build their lives in a hostile anti-Muslim environment.

March 15 marks seven years since the beginning of the Syrian war. Few words can convey the atrocities that the Syrian people continue to endure, in particular those unable to flee the war.

In the summer of 2015, the influx of refugees trying to reach Europe peaked when more than a million asylum seekers, mostly from Syria, arrived by land and sea in search of a better life.

Since then the number of asylum seekers has decreased drastically due to the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, and now only a trickle make it through.

The European Union's response to dealing with the humanitarian crisis has divided and created tensions among its members, leaving refugees to face legal and social challenges. This has also manifested itself in the rise of anti-refugee and far-right sentiments across Europe.

Divided European Union

The European Union's way of dealing with the influx of refugees is based on the Dublin Regulation, which dictates that individuals who petition for asylum must do so in the country where they first enter the EU.

Greece, Italy and Spain, as the primary entry points, have had to disproportionately deal with the processing and hosting of refugees. In addition to these countries, Germany bypassed the Dublin Regulation and opened its borders, giving refugee status to 250,000 asylum seekers in 2016 despite facing opposition from several other EU members.

In 2015, the EU's response to the unequal distribution of refugees among its members was to establish quotas for each EU member, which was aimed at relocating 120,000 refugees by 2017. EU members, however, failed to meet this

goal, as exemplified by Hungary and Poland's refusal to accept any refugees and the Czech Republic accepting only 12 since 2015. They claimed that refugees posed a threat towards their security and cultural integrity.

These three countries have been referred to the EU Court of Justice for failing to comply with EU laws. Ongoing negotiations could result in reform of the Dublin Regulation, as well as getting rid of refugee quotas altogether.

The precarious life of refugees and asylum applicants has created a pool of vulnerable people – in particular women and children – who face falling prey to forced labour, sexual trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.

Navigating restrictive refugee policies

Most refugees want to go to the UK, Germany or Scandinavian countries where socio-economic conditions and refugees are treated better than in other EU member states. However, for many refugees seeking to leave camps and detention centres they need to navigate a complex bureaucratic system with ever-tightening asylum policies.

Greece, one of the poorest countries in the EU and in the midst of a financial crises has shouldered significant social and economic costs in hosting thousands of refugees.

According to the UNHCR there are more than 48,500 refugees, of which 14,500 are stuck in various Greek islands, waiting for their asylum petitions to be processed.

Those refugees whose goal is to reach the UK face strict domestic obstacles. According to the Dublin Regulations, refugees have the right to be reunified with their extended family members; however, the UK's domestic law only allows reunification between children and parents.

The UK also promised to accept 3,000 unaccompanied minors after 'the Jungle' refugee camp in Calais, France was violently shut down. The UK eventually accepted 350 before the programme was shut down last year.

Whereas Germany, despite accepting thousands of refugees, has also restricted its immigration and refugee policies. In 2017, parliament passed stricter laws related to the monitoring, deportation and access to personal information of

asylum seekers – which includes accessing their smartphones for security checks.

These laws have also led to the rejection of many asylum applications and hastened the deportation process.

Germany has faced criticism for offering to pay Afghan refugees to return to their own country despite the fact that Afghanistan is still a country at war.

Similarly, Scandinavian countries – particularly Norway, Sweden and Finland – which rank among the top five European countries to receive the highest number of refugees proportional to their population – have been a hopeful destination for asylum seekers because of their generous refugee policies and a social welfare provisions.

Since 2015, however, these countries have also tightened their asylum policies by restricting family reunification, duration of stay and cutting benefits. Additionally, in December 2016, Denmark passed a controversial law, which authorised the police to seize assets from refugees worth more than \$436 in return for the housing facilities they're provided with.

Right-wing populism across Europe

The increasing influence of far-right parties in several European countries has further complicated the settlement of the refugees.

The arrival of a large number of refugees has helped far-right parties to increase their electoral base through anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim and populist rhetoric, catapulting otherwise fringe groups into parliaments across the EU.

Seeking to fighting fire with fire, many centrist parties have adopted the rhetoric of the far right and sought to cultivate a similar language to the extremist groups.

Populist leaders like Marine Le Pen of France's National Front and Geert Wilders of Freedom Party in the Netherlands may not have won elections, but their anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric has moved the centre ground to the right. As a result governments have tightened their immigration policies.

In December last year, the leader of the Austrian People's Party and current Austrian chancellor Sebastian Kurz formed a coalition with Heinz-Christian Strache's anti-immigrant Freedom Party. Both parties have been vocal against the

refugee influx in 2015 when Austria received 90,000 refugees. While the Freedom Party openly campaigned against Muslims and immigrants during the 2017 elections, Sebastian Kurtz subtly promoted anti-immigrant rhetoric and cutting benefits for asylum seekers.

A similar scenario exists in Germany with the entry of Alternative for Germany (AfD), a far-right party, into the German parliament. AfD's gaining of seats has been considered as a reaction to Angela Merkel's open-border policy of *Willkommenspolitik*. The immigration quota was a central topic in the coalition talks that lasted over four months.

Whereas in Poland last year 60,000 white supremacists and radical Islamophobes marched in the streets of Warsaw chanting "Pure Poland, white Poland!" and "Refugees get out."

The march, organised on the eve of Poland's Independence Day, reflects how racism and hatred are openly expressed and are gradually becoming the new normal.

Finally, the results of Italy's elections this month is further proof that the wave of far-right populist parties continues to grow. The far-right, populist, and anti-establishment Five Star Movement came out on top by capturing more than 30 percent of the vote. Regardless of the parties that will form Italy's next government, the success of right-wing populist parties in the election is likely to result in a greater demand to tighten and reform the country's immigration and refugee policies.

An uncertain future

Refugees risk their lives by embarking on dangerous journeys to reach Europe, but once they arrive, they are greeted with a new set of hardships. Refugees are forced to live in inhumane conditions in unsanitary and overcrowded camps in various European countries. To escape such conditions, they have to navigate the complicated bureaucratic labyrinth of the refugee centres and restrictive asylum policies.

In addition, they have to face the changing social context of Europe where far-right parties are increasingly mobilising anti-refugee sentiment for political gains, while some central European leaders are openly rejecting the idea of

accommodating refugees.

As the political divisions continue deepen, refugees are stuck in limbo, uncertain of what the future holds.

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