

Migration and Terrorism in Europe: A Nexus of Two Crises

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Abstract

The migration surge into the borders of the European Union has become a major problem in Europe as it has led to several challenges to societal integration and political legitimacy. It is also a danger to cultural identity, domestic and labour market stability as well as internal security, such that a migrant is often perceived as a threat to European society. The first part of the paper attempts to throw light on this migration-security nexus in Europe and how migration has developed into a security issue. The second part discusses how the two crises of migration and terrorism have come to be intrinsically associated with each other. The refugee crisis and the terrorism threat are related in the minds of many Europeans as they believe incoming refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country. The paper argues that the political process of the securitization of migration and its association to terrorism abuse takes place within a wider politicization in which immigrants are a security threat. The concluding part of the paper examines the evolution of the European migration policy from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 up to the surge of the pandemic Covid-19 with an institutional perspective.

Keywords

Migration, Terrorism, Securitization, European Union, Non-Traditional Security, COVID-19

Introduction



Europe's migrant crisis of 2015 has fundamentally been perceived as a humanitarian disaster. There are several reasons as to why people flee from their country of origin and migrate to different locations, that range from violence at home, war, hunger, extreme poverty, issues arising from their sexual or gender orientation and even climate change. The primary cause of millions of people seeking a safer as well as prosperous life in Europe has been marked with tragedy. It was due to falling victim to diseases, robbery and assault, facing death at sea and confronting great hardship, suffering and danger as challenges, that people were pushed to take upon this cross-continental journey (Collett 2017).

This migrant influx manifested into a political and intercultural crisis with security as well as financial aspects and is ultimately derived from the fact that security at the international level is complicated where different stakeholders with varied interests desire distinct outcomes. The migration surge into the borders of the European Union rapidly became one of the largest and most critical problems that Europe is

confronting. Migration in Europe has led to several challenges to societal integration and political legitimacy and has been increasingly presented as a danger to cultural identity, domestic and labour market stability as well as internal security, such that a migrant is now often perceived as a threat to European society (Deliso 2017).

There is significant anxiety amongst the public about migration in Europe. During 2012, an estimated 1.7 million immigrants came legally to the EU-27 from countries outside Europe. Further, 40,000 asylum seekers arrived from North Africa in all of 2013, and in the first quarter of 2014, the total number of asylum applications in the EU had reached 110,000. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has estimated that more than 3,000 migrants had died in 2014 trying to reach Europe's shores by crossing the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa— which is quadruple of the estimated deaths in all of 2013. In the first quarter of 2015, the death toll went beyond 1,500, compared to 96 during the first four months of 2014 (Open Society Foundations 2015). Irregular migrants, including those who travel across Europe's land borders, also face the risk of violence and exploitation by human traffickers.

Given the civil war in Syria and the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, the crisis was a long-time coming. However, the chaotic and desperate arrival of so many had caught the European policymakers off-guard to such an extent that the collective and cohesive solidarity project of the European Union began to crumble. While the national governments of some member-states constructed makeshift centres with an intent to accommodate, there were several who treated the issue with indifference and still more did so with alarm (Quinn 2016). In many ways, the European governments have failed to rise to the challenge. On every issue, the Union has to reach a consensus among more than two dozen national governments with divergent priorities and differing domestic political constraints. Given the multitude of critical parameters, several challenges within Europe are directly and indirectly impacted by the refugee crisis, of which security remains foremost.

Securitization of the Issue of Migration

The linkage between migration and security is a stable and enduring feature of contemporary society and politics. The concept of securitization, which was first brought into the agenda of security studies by the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, has become a major topic of discussion; in the context of the implicative dynamics of securitization. The Copenhagen School is represented in the writings of Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde who responded to the Post-Cold War call to reframe security and examine its dynamics and distinctive character. In contrast to traditional understandings of security, the Copenhagen School suggests that the state is not the only referent object for security. The book *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* sets about broadening the subject of security to include, not just the military sector, but five categories: military, economic, environmental, societal, and political. It is in this context

that the notion of security is expanded away from the narrow military focus generated during the Cold War, to include other aspects of security that were not considered significant enough previously.

Within the debate of the implications for securitization of migration, politics and fear have played an important role in the process of categorizing migrants as a potential security threat. Securitization of migration is seen to reinforce a politics of fear. The correlation between the politics of fear and the securitization of migration generates another important dimension in the process of categorizing migrants as a potential security threat, namely racism. Importance of racism in the process of securitizing migrants and how the securitization of migration reinforces a racist discourse.

Since the 1980s, Europe as a continent has been marked by dramatic changes led by the development of globalization, the fragmentation of major states such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the construction of the European Union as well as the Schengen area. As the geopolitical context has changed, migration has become increasingly politicized at the European Union level. Such a political construction of migration has increasingly referred to the destabilizing effects of migration and to the dangers it has implied for the public order.

It has been observed that the securitization of migration emerged first and foremost within the context of the European Union, and they should have a greater understanding of the complexities and all it entails (Huysmans 2000; Ceyhan & Tsoukala 2002; Karyotis 2007). However, the United States of America has also always been viewed as a country of immigrants, thus the issue of migration was never deemed or constructed as a threat to national identity, as in the case of the European Union. Yet in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 at the Pentagon, the concept of migration as a security threat in the United States became of prime importance.

American political theorist John Tirman describes how the conception of migration has changed since 9/11 by examining that before the 9/11 attacks, there had always been a correlation between migration and security in the United States. However, it was mainly considered to be a threat to social security, such as jobs and general welfare. It was in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, terrorism has relatively become the basis for framing the groundwork for discourse and practices relative to migration.

In the case of the Union, the discourse that links migration to security has been reinforced in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11, where migration appeared in the discussion of the campaign in combatting terrorism (Karyotis 2007). However, the main driving factor for securitizing migrants within the borders of the Union was the protection of European identity and culture, by the conception of “Fortress Europe”, which is based on the one hand on free mobility and open borders and the elimination of internal borders and, on the other hand, on restrictive external borders, focusing on exclusion as well as border management. Many scholars are of the view that immigrants also have the potential to threaten the

Union's economy, served as a legitimizing factor for the development of a restrictive migration policy which has further led to migrants being seen as a security issue. Huysmans has described this development as a transformation of an "economic project of the internal market into an internal security project" (Huysmans 2000).

The rise of irregular migration in the context of a new security threat, where countering threats such as terrorism and organized crime was a top priority, has led to stricter public policies, new and enhanced surveillance and control devices, and tighter external border controls despite discourses about globalization, porous borders and open markets. Political theorist John Tirman points out that the securitization of migration makes it "much more difficult for migrants to cross borders, even as the world economy demands such movement" (Tirman 2006). The politics of fear which developed specifically in the context of the European Union led to the production of a discourse of fear and proliferation of dangers concerning the scenarios of chaos and disorder and can also become a governmental instrument that can be used to regulate perceptions, attitudes as well as actions of citizens towards migrants.

Viewing migration as a security threat, its political construction is likely to be embedded in the politics of belonging. To provide and ensure security for their citizens, nations develop a system of rights, justice and rule of law. Immigrants from different cultural backgrounds are often seen as an imbalance to the nation and subsequently as a security threat. It is thus viewed as a rationale to preserve their own culture through the exclusion of the other cultural groups, further perpetuating xenophobic tendencies towards the migrants (Ibrahim 2005).

Nexus of Migration and Terrorism

The causal connection between illegal migration and terrorism has been in the focal point of security dilemmas since the beginning of the flow of migration and has come to the forefront since the terrorist attacks in Paris in particular. Although Europe has been confronted with terrorism since the early 1970s, the growing terrorist attacks on European soil in the past two decades has raised several questions and have transformed Europe's migration crisis into a security debate. This has further accentuated the calls on a clamp-down on free movement across borders and has put the proponents of an open door for refugees on the defensive (Nussio and Bove 2019).

The Paris attacks led France's firm believers to agree upon that the Islamic State militants planned the attacks with the possibility that one of the terrorists could be of Syrian refugee origin. This propelled the debate within policymakers on whether Europe is doing enough to protect itself from terrorists who might infiltrate the thousands of migrants arriving daily from the Middle East and elsewhere. The evidence that some of the attackers have crossed internal European Union boundaries to get to Paris has also brought about more demands from the EU-skeptic politicians to alter and even abolish the continent's

system of open and porous borders. Free movement of people and resources within the Union has always made Europe more susceptible to terrorism and other security threats, traditional as well as non-traditional. To those in favour of European integration, the attacks highlight the need for more EU cooperation on security and better joint protection by the member states of the EU's external frontier.

However, the direct connection between illegal migration and terrorism has often been critically analysed as a strategic mistake. Neither the refugees nor those who are seeking a better life are terrorists. The refugees tend to look for protection against persecution which is often perpetrated by terrorists. At the same time, it should be taken into consideration that the terrorist organizations have access to use illegal migration to send operatives into the target countries. Contemporary terrorist organizations seek for finding assailants in the Western countries having citizenship, with no connection to a religious organization, possibly without name or file by the security services of the host country (Kis-Benedek 2016).

The experiences of terrorist attacks in London, Madrid and other locations on European soil have shown this assertion. However, the risk that the Islamic State or other terrorist organizations could smuggle militants into Europe under the cover of a huge wave of migrants is much smaller than what various policymakers and stakeholders may suggest. Another reason why Islamic State does not necessarily require to care about smuggling people into Europe follows from the fact that there is no shortage of 'lone wolf' militants already in place within the continent. From Brussels and Paris to Copenhagen, deadly attacks have been committed for a few years now by people already residing in Europe from before the migrant refugee crisis and those who can travel freely across the continent due to the Schengen borders (Nail 2016).

At this point, it is interesting to note that there is a vast difference between the European and American refugee's admission systems. On one hand, the EU member states took a major step in 2015 in letting enter thousands of illegal migrants without much control, on the other hand, their defence of external Schengen borders regulation was not taken very seriously by most of the national governments. This resulted in great difficulty in maintaining a system of checks and balances concerning the refugees after entering the respective countries. A basic difference between the European and American practices is that the Europeans first let the foreigners enter and thereafter try to check them.

The American method is to check first and let them enter after a comprehensive control. In this context, the European authorities have often not been able to stop them. Many migrants were refused the registration as they wanted to be registered in Germany or later in Sweden. Many of them were even exempted from having to present their passport or other paper for identification. In many cases, they refused to take photos or fingerprints as well. Terrorist organizations would have certainly realized this loophole and profited from this great possibility to send their people to the continent (Nails 2016).

It is worth seeing the American method of admitting refugees and the connection between terrorism and refugees. “From the 859,629 refugees admitted in the USA from 2001 onwards, only three have been convicted of planning terrorist attacks on targets outside of the United States and none was successfully carried out” (Nowrasteh 2015). That is one terrorism-planning conviction for every 286, 543 refugees that have been admitted. Further, the terrorist threat from Syrian refugees in the United States is exaggerated and they have very little to fear from them because the refugee vetting system is so thorough. There is a major difference between Europe’s vetting of asylum seekers from Syria and how the United States screens refugees. Another major factor in play is the geographic distance between the United States and Syria, which allows the US government to better control the migrants, while large numbers of Syrian who try to go to Europe are less carefully checked.

It is important to note the difference between refugees and asylum seekers as well. On one hand, the asylum seekers show up at national borders and ask to stay and they must show they have a well-founded fear of persecution due to their nationality, religion, race, membership in any particular social group, or their political opinion if they return to their country of origin. There is an active application and investigation process, and governments often detain the asylum seeker during that process. But the investigation and vetting of the asylum seeker usually take place while the seeker is allowed inside the host country. Many of the Syrians and others who have entered Europe are asylum seekers who are vetted through similar, less stringent security screens, but due to the huge number of refugees and the unpreparedness of the authorities, it is likely many times that unregistered, unknown people from different crisis areas moved across countries.

On the other hand, in the US a refugee is somebody who is identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a refugee camp. In the United States, UNHCR is designated to do the first round of security checks on the refugee according to internationally agreed treaties to which the United States of America is a party, and refers some of those who pass the initial checks to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). The referrals are then interviewed by a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officer abroad. “The refugee must be outside of the United States, be of special humanitarian concern to the government, demonstrate persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and must not be firmly resettled in another country. Refugees are processed from a great distance away and more thoroughly vetted than asylum seekers as a result. Because the refugee is abroad while the U.S. government checks their background, potential terrorist links, and their claims to refugee status, the vetting is a lot more thorough and can take up to two years for non-Syrians. The vetting can take about three years for Syrians because of the heightened concerns over security” (Nails 2016).

Asylum seekers, on the contrary face rigorous checks, but they are conducted while the asylum seeker is inside the United States and not always while he is in a detention centre. Syrians that arrive in the United States as a result of fleeing from violence are usually considered refugees, whereas many of those getting into Europe are asylum seekers. This distinction shows very well that the United States is in a far better security situation vis-a-vis Europe on any potential terrorist threat from Syria. In Europe, not only are the refugees considered as a security threat but all those who have travelled to crisis areas mainly to Syria and Iraq and have entered the ranks of ISIS or other terrorist organizations. Their return to Europe means a significant non-traditional security threat.

It was in the aftermath of the Paris attacks that a proposal to the EU to screen every single EU passport holder entering the European continent was introduced to screen the fighters returning from the Middle East. “Europol admitted that only 2,000 of the estimated 5,000 extremists who have travelled to Syria and Iraq to make jihad have been logged on an EU-wide intelligence sharing database used by Britain to disrupt plots. This implied that Britain has no way of checking the background of 3,000 suspected terrorists, even if their own country has identified them as a threat” (Besenyo 2015). One French official said that the EU’s borders were “like a sieve” such that every single migrant is checked against a terror watch list by the authorities (Holehouse 2015). According to Rob Wainwright, the director of Europol and a former intelligence officer in MI5 “the majority of the data is supplied by just a handful of states. It is a fact that the majority of the perpetrators of the Paris attacks are not refugees and have a European passport. Some were born and raised in France and Belgium before being radicalized”.

The uncontrolled flow of refugees has several other threats as well- those who cannot be integrated into the societies can be later radicalized and this radicalization further leads to terrorism. It is in this context that Samuel P. Huntington in his book *Clash of Civilisations* analyses that the “religious revival has in part involved expansion by some religions, which gained recruits in societies where they had previously not existed. To a much larger extent, however, the religious resurgence involved people returning to, reinvigorating and giving new meaning to the traditional religions of their communities” (Huntington 1997).

A direct and causal relationship cannot be drawn between the extent to which illegal migration has been connected to terrorism. After the Paris attacks of 2015, the connection has however come to the forefront. It would still be critically wrong to make an equal- mark between them. Although the EU countries may have been at fault in allowing the refugees to flow without checking people, however, finding the right balance between liberty and security has always been a challenge. Prevention, prosecution and protection must be the cornerstones of any new immigration policies adopted to combat terrorism. Immigration policies and procedures should also seek to identify, deter the entry of, and, to the extent possible, apprehend terrorists for a criminal prosecution, by the internationally recognized standards of protection

of liberties, civil and human rights. Immigration policy reforms cannot in and of themselves prevent terrorism, but they must be a key part of any comprehensive approach to combat terrorism. The activities of the Western national security services are important but not enough in finding the terrorism and preventing illegal migration.

Migration and Security in Europe: Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a far-reaching impact on all areas related to asylum and migration throughout 2020. The impact was felt particularly in terms of travel restrictions, closures on the borders and the dire need to introduce sanitary measures to try to bring the virus under control. The EU and non-EU OECD countries have adopted various contingency measures to keep systems operational and to mitigate the impacts on migrants and citizens to the extent possible.

The pandemic has emerged in a world tightly connected by local and international population movements in an era of extensive globalisation, with more people moving for education, work, tourism, and survival than ever in the past (Skeldon 2018). Although the pandemic cannot as such be attributed to migration alone, intense population movements, in particular of tourists and business workers, has played a role of being the key facilitator of the global spread of the outbreak.

As in many other crises, migrants may be particularly vulnerable to the direct as well as indirect impacts of the pandemic. "Their ability to avoid the infection, receive adequate health care and cope with the economic, social and psychological impacts of the pandemic can be affected by a variety of factors, including their living and working conditions, lack of consideration of their cultural and linguistic diversity in service provision, xenophobia, their limited local knowledge and networks, and their access to rights and level of inclusion in host communities, often related to their migration status" (Skeldon 2018).

According to Frontex, January through August 2021 saw a 64% increase in irregular migration to the EU over the previous year. Traffic over the western Balkan route — which runs via Turkey through Balkan countries such as Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia — and in the central Mediterranean route nearly doubled. "It is safe to say that COVID has increased and will increase push and pull factors that drive irregular migration towards Europe," said Martin Hofmann, a senior adviser at the [International Center for Migration Policy Development](#) (ICMPD). Thus it is evident that while COVID-19 closures [significantly reduced flows of illegal immigration to Europe in 2020](#), those numbers are now increasing as 2021 progresses, re-emphasising it as a security concern. And not only are migrants making up for a lost time — it seems the coronavirus pandemic may become a significant factor in increasing migration within the European borders.

Conclusion

At the European Union level, migration has become increasingly securitized since the 1980s and was seen first and foremost as a threat to national identity. This securitization of migration is closely linked with the construction of the European Union and subsequently the Schengen area, as well as with the emergence of new economic agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), etc. Particular case studies along the Euro-Mediterranean border have showcased how the rise of irregular immigration in the context of a new security era, where countering organized crime and terrorism was a top priority, leads to stricter public policies, new surveillance and control devices, and tighter external border controls despite discourses about globalization and open markets.

Within the debate of the implications of securitization of the issue of migration, the role of a politics of fear in the process of categorizing migrants as a potential security threat is also noteworthy. A politics of fear which can be considered as a major factor leading to the issue of securitization of migrants can lead to a dangerous generalization, namely the determination of all migrants as a whole with extremely negative implications, often leading to their perception as a terrorist. In terms of real politics, each migrant that is “different” to the culture and identity of the host country constitutes a potential security threat with a negative perception in the mind of the host country citizens. Therefore, the main problem attributed to the process of securitization is the inability of the securitizing actor to see migrants as individual humans. Rather migrants are being merged into a general category.

The correlation between the politics of fear and the securitization of migration generates another important dimension in the process of categorizing migrants as a potential security threat; that is racism. By examining the shift in racism, from notions of biological superiority to exclusion based on cultural difference, it is possible to understand that the categorization of a migrant as a security threat reflects a racist discourse that is reinforced through the securitization of migration. The use of such categories in official discourses does have an impact not only on public perceptions of migratory phenomena but also on the real lives of migrants through the enforcement of state policies. However, the complexity, diversity and fluidity of migration make it difficult to lump into one single category, and one should be aware that categorization of migrants often symbolizes discredited top-down approaches, which fix dynamic social processes into rigid structures.

Hence, although migration is defined as an international security issue but not one that should be protected against as a threat to “socio-political cohesion” and “cultural homogeneity”. Rather migration is a security issue, because of the vulnerability of migrants and their susceptibility to exploitation and discrimination. With the rise of terrorist attacks on European soil, weak border security and migrant flooding are blamed for the attacks and there is a sharp relief deep ideological divide overviews of minority and diversity. This political process of the securitization of migration and its association to criminal and terrorist abuse does not happen in isolation but in concordance with a wider politicization and xenophobic

tendencies in which immigrants and asylum seekers are portrayed as a challenge to the protection of national identity.

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