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Migration

# Why We Need Open Borders

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**The magnitude of the refugee crisis in Europe only strengthens the case against immigration controls. It is magnificent that [so many](#) in Germany, France, Britain, and other countries have been stirred at last into compassion for those fleeing to Europe. They are embracing refugees, raising money for them, offering accommodation, making gifts of food, clothes, and shelter, and recognizing that they are human beings who need help.**

In Britain, a petition in the Independent that urged the government to take in more refugees received more than 370,000 signatures. The people of Austria and Germany have provided an overwhelmingly generous reception. The mayor of Rosans, a small village in southeast France, has offered two public-sector flats to Syrian refugees. In Oxford, an unprecedented 2,000-person demonstration welcomed refugees.

Pope Francis, as well as government officials and voluntary associations, are proposing that religious or local communities aid the refugees; the Pope has said those who close their doors need to ask for God's forgiveness. A vast fund of goodwill toward refugees exists in many rich European countries, even though their mainstream politicians appear to believe the only way to win elections is to appease racists and claim to be [tough on immigrants](#)

Perhaps more people will now recognize that [their governments](#) and ruling elites bear a heavy responsibility for creating conditions that force people to flee.

They do so in direct and indirect ways. Not long ago, the great majority of people who claimed asylum in Britain were from four countries bombed or invaded by the US, Britain, and their allies: Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, and Somalia. Afghans and Iraqis are still fleeing in large numbers from the terrible aftermath of Western invasions.

In other cases, the connections between the policies of rich Western governments and the refugee crisis are not so direct. They have their origins in a long history of imperialism. As young Asians in West London say: "We are here, because you were there."

The now-rich countries of Western Europe have since the sixteenth century plundered the wealth of the rest of the world. They divided communities by drawing lines on maps. Nowadays, rich nations are using their economic strength, and the leverage provided by foreign aid, to impose policies that protect the rich "foreign and local" and their banks and private investors, while creating inequality and hurting the poor.

The rich countries' agencies, the World Bank and the IMF, have long imposed neoliberal policies on the countries they lent to, demanding austerity, cuts in public expenditures, and privatization, much of it to raise money to service foreign debt.

To promote their poverty-creating policies, Western countries systematically support oppressive governments. They [attack other governments](#), including elected governments that attempt to introduce reforms, redistribute wealth, and resist foreign exploitation. Often, this has meant support for right-wing coups or military intervention. The West sells arms to such regimes, or makes loans or even gifts of weapons. The arms trade has become a major industry.

These rich countries continue to exploit the wealth and resources of the rest of the world. Notoriously, their demands for oil have been one reason for interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere. The need for coltan, an ore used in mobile phones and games consoles, has fueled conflict in eastern Congo, where millions have died.

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In Senegal, European commercial fishing fleets encroach on traditional fishing waters, thus destroying much of the livelihood of Senegalese fishermen, who resort to hiring out their boats to transport refugees to the Canary Islands.

Elsewhere in Africa, small farmers are evicted from their land for corporate plantations to export vegetables for Western markets. Climate change, as a result of elite consumption in the West and the apparently irresistible pressures of the fuel lobby, is gradually increasing desertification and other problems for the survival of rural populations.

Currently, the world is experiencing what has been described as the biggest movement of refugees since World War II. For many, this is a phenomenon that must be stopped, not because of the suffering of refugees, but because of the burden they supposedly impose on host countries.

The majority of refugees currently entering, or trying to enter, Europe are Syrian. The crisis in Syria has been [exceptionally severe](#). During the last four years, nearly half of Syria's 22 million people have migrated abroad, been internally displaced, or been killed.

For its part, the West [has done much](#) to fuel the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, and of ISIS in particular, both of which have now intensified the horrors of war in Syria. Fundamentalist groups, including the founders of Al-Qaeda, have in the past received support, funds, and arms from the US and Britain, as a counterweight to perceived threats from the Left.

The denial by former Prime Minister Tony Blair that the invasion of Iraq, support for the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the racism and violence toward Muslim immigrants in Britain (including their segregation and denial of access to housing and schools) have had anything to do with the rise of fundamentalism is clearly untenable.

The view of many on the Right in British politics is that the "refugee crisis" can only be resolved by "ending the war in Syria," by which they may imply military intervention. But the lesson of military interventions by the West must be that intervention creates more problems "not merely death, disorder, and chaos, but also anger and alienation among Muslims around the world.

The further prescription of the Right for "stemming the flow of migrants at its source" is an increase in what is euphemistically called foreign aid. In West Africa, French authorities have called this co-développement; aid is conditional on African governments taking action to prevent citizens from emigrating (despite the fact that blocking emigration is barred under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). In Libya and other North African countries, governments are paid to build detention centers and otherwise prevent migrants from moving further north.

In any case, foreign aid in its traditional form has arguably [done more to create poverty](#) than alleviate it. It is used to promote the interests of foreign firms, sometimes to support projects that displace local people, and above all to force governments to cut spending to service foreign debts. Unless aid radically changes, on balance it does more harm than good.

The remittances migrants send home "money they save from usually badly paid jobs" not only exceed foreign aid by two or three times, but are also superior: they come without conditions, they go straight to those who need it, and they do not have to be repaid.

## The Solution

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If Western governments desired to reduce the number of people trying to find safety in Europe, and the suffering that results from such attempts, they would refrain from invading other countries, from impoverishing their peoples, from providing arms to repressive regimes that collaborate with the West, from requiring neoliberal policies that create inequality and poverty, and from destroying the world by their consumption of fossil fuels.

They could also abolish immigration controls. Immigration controls are explicable only by racism. Governments maintain they must be tough on immigrants to combat racism, but in reality the controls feed it. They legitimate the arguments of the racists, making it appear that the only way to win votes is by appeasing them.

But the new and massive support for refugees in Europe shows this is not the case. Many have an exaggerated and false view, fed by both politicians and [the tabloids](#) of the number of immigrants, of their criminality, of their effect on jobs and wages. Abolishing controls, and acknowledging that they lead to suffering among fellow human beings, would be one good way of countering racism and encouraging a politics of solidarity in its place.

Ending controls would no doubt lead to some increases in migration. There might also continue to be surges in the number of refugees, and a continuing need for far greater levels of compassion than currently exist. But abolition would not mean millions would move to Europe or North America; few people choose to leave their families and communities for an uncertain future.

Migrants come because there are jobs. Refugees come because they are desperate to flee war, oppression, and poverty. Many would return if they were free to come and go, but they are trapped. In Britain, with the immigration controls of 1962, and in the US, as the Mexican border is made increasingly hard to cross, migrants must settle permanently and bring their families.

Abolishing controls should not be an economic decision, but the reality is that refugees and migrants add to a country's prosperity and public finances. Immigration suits not just corporate interests.

Most research, including the government's own, has shown that immigration leads to increased employment and higher wages. Any threat migrants may pose to the wages and jobs of natives is based on the precariousness created by immigration controls and the threat of deportation, and is in any case likely to be temporary.

Even Migration Watch in Britain, an organization with connections to the eugenics movement, recognizes that immigration increases general prosperity and incomes per head.

The problem with immigration, [Migration Watch and others say](#), is not an economic problem but a problem of "social cohesion" — the preservation of the purity of the white race, whatever that is.

Similar conclusions were officially reached before controls against immigrants from former British colonies were introduced in 1962. Official government reports referred to the "non-assimilability" of immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean, but found no economic reason for excluding them.

In any case, immigration controls work only to a limited extent. The vast apparatus of repression used to deter migrants has not stopped them from coming; it has mainly increased suffering and death. Governments spend billions on fences and walls; on detention centers and prisons; on immigration officials, police, and private security companies; on apparatuses detecting the presence of migrants and uncovering false documents, even on legal aid to asylum seekers. The money could be better spent.

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The fact that the people entering Europe are now acknowledged to be refugees, rather than merely categorized as “illegal immigrants,” as they usually have been in the past, is progress of a sort. There is virtually no “legal” way for refugees to enter Europe; increasingly effective checks on false documents have forced significantly more refugees to travel clandestinely, usually with the help of so-called traffickers.

But the outpouring of compassion for refugees, especially Syrians, is often accompanied by a distinction between refugees, who are welcome, and economic migrants, who must be treated with severity. Refugees, it is said, should be received in much greater numbers “so that their claims can be processed.”

The British government, under pressure from public campaigns, now says it will take 20,000 Syrians for humanitarian protection for as many as five years. If they fail to prove they need asylum, they will be deported, including children who have by then reached the age of eighteen. The reasons given for refusing refugee status are often ludicrous (such as, “you could not have escaped across that river, because it contains crocodiles,” which it doesn’t), and the immigration officials who make the decisions have quotas in effect for the numbers they refuse.

The German government, which has said it can take more than 500,000 asylum seekers each year, gives refugee status to 87 percent of Syrians who apply for it. What about the other 13 percent? Are they sent to Syria? And of the others who claim asylum in Germany, only 40 percent are accepted. How can authorities in Germany, Britain, and elsewhere be depended on for a fair process?

Meanwhile, [violence against refugees and migrants](#), plus the cost in human suffering and death, and in money, escalate in a largely futile attempt to stop and deter relatively small numbers of people. Around 310,000 Syrians are estimated to have crossed the Mediterranean to Europe in 2015, out of a total of 626,000 migrants.

This is a small fraction of those who could go no further than to the countries neighboring Syria. It is also a small number in relation to the European population of 503 million. In 2015, around 2,500 people are estimated to have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean in small boats. In Calais, a port near the shortest crossing between France and Britain, there are said to be 3,000 people trying to migrate to Britain.

The view among them that human rights are more respected in Britain than elsewhere is no doubt reinforced by the [appalling conditions](#) they face in Calais. These are exacerbated by the brutality of French police who, inexplicably, are cooperating with the British in preventing them from leaving France, and who tear gas and beat them, destroy their makeshift camps, and evict the squats established by supporters. The British have spent £35 million building razor-wire fences around the port and supplying equipment to detect migrants who have managed to get into, or under, lorries.

Those who have worked to support refugees and migrants for years, and who know well the suffering they experience, begin to see hope in what seems to be a real change in the attitudes of many people who, maybe for the first time, realize they share a common humanity with those who flee persecution, war, and poverty. They may also be coming to share the view of some, such as No Borders campaigners, who have, especially since the 1990s, been calling for free movement and the right of everybody to choose where they wish to live and to work.

Volunteers with Secours Catholique in Calais who try, and fail, to provide a minimum of sustenance to migrants stranded there, when asked what the solution is, say the only remedy is the abolition of frontiers. Volunteers with CIMADE, a government-funded organization that supports refugees and has official rights to visit detention centers in France, are increasingly coming to the view that the only solution is the abolition of borders.

To many, this prospect seems remote. Immigration controls seem set in stone, a matter of common sense,

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indispensable to the survival of capitalism. But they are a relatively new phenomenon.

In Britain, they were first introduced, following campaigns by far-right groups, against “aliens” in 1905 and against citizens of former British colonies in 1962. Even many mainstream politicians initially argued they were unthinkable and irrational. So they are. They should be consigned to the dustbin of history, recognized for what they are: a cruel but relatively short-lived twentieth-century aberration.

[Jacobin](#)