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## Refugees, Burden or Asset

The Western world is struggling with the worst and most intense refugee crisis since World War II, as millions of people run away from violence in the Middle East, particularly from Iraq and Syria. As a result of the severe migrations and with the help of radical, anti-immigration media, some people in the United States have started to build the myth of the bad impact of those migrants on the welcoming countries. However, the fear of immigrants and refugees in the U.S. is not new. In the late 1930s, German and Austrian Jews were fleeing fascist and Nazi states in Europe due to the persecution and discrimination occurring at that time against them. The vast majority of the American people were against hosting German and Austrian refugees and responded with “We should keep them out.” There are big differences between that time and the current crisis for sure, but the growing cry to refuse the refugees leaving their countries for their lives brings back to mind the terrible consequences that led to the Holocaust and the mass killing of millions of people. With the presidential election at the door, some candidates are trying to use this myth and the misunderstanding of the people to win votes by campaigning on turning away the refugees or even kicking out the existing ones.

People in third world countries like Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt can find many reasons to think that their countries should not host refugees, such as terrible living conditions, bad economy, and lack of education or extreme poverty. Yet those countries seem to be carrying most of the refugee burden. According to Viviane Naïmy in her journal, the unemployment rate in Lebanon is 31.15%. Still, the country is hosting approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees (Naïmy, 2011). Thus, Lebanon has a serious unemployment issue, combined with political

instability at the local and national levels. But that doesn't stop the country from doing what is humane and helping its Syrian neighbors. Jordan is not in a better economic shape and it is hosting 1.1 million Syrians. So what makes some people in the first-world countries like The United States with access to high-quality life, high-quality education, and a healthy political atmosphere have such a radical views on the issue of immigrants?

It was very easy to spread the myth that refugees and migrants are going to ruin the economy. Influenced by the media and the politicians, people who believe this myth think that the refugees are a burden for their country or for the places they settle in. In the United States, there is news media that plays an essential role in producing this myth. It is also playing a hate-tactic against immigrants which says that immigrants are leeches. Media tends to show immigrants as lazy, unproductive people who come here to exploit the American people by living on welfare or even stealing from them.

Hispanic immigrants have been accused of all these things. Anti-immigrants groups think that Hispanic immigrants in general and Mexicans in particular come to the U.S., live on food stamps, take advantage of the social security system and exhaust the country's resources. This is not just offensive but also wrong. Those are hardworking people who come to the U.S. looking for a better life and a better future. They, just like any American, pay their share of tax and Social Security. A study titled "Undocumented Immigrants' State & Local Tax Contributions" by authors states that immigrants pay their fair share of taxes and even more. They say "Undocumented immigrants contribute significantly to state and local taxes, collectively paying an estimated \$11.84 billion in 2012. Undocumented immigrants' nationwide average effective state and local tax rate (the share of income they pay in state and local taxes) in 2012 is an estimated 8 percent. To put this in perspective, the top 1 percent of taxpayers pay an average

nationwide effective tax rate of just 5.4 percent” ( Gardner, Johnson and Wiehe, 2015). We should keep in mind these numbers when hearing commentators and politicians talk about “what to do” with the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.

In other cases, media goes even further in the attempt to flip the switch in people’s brains. For example, in one of its reports, Fox News played what it said is a “new video” that showed people on a subway train in Europe chanting “Allah Akbar” (God is the great) claiming that they were Muslim refugees from Syria and potential terrorists. In investigating the story, it was found that the video was uploaded on YouTube in 2010 long before the refugee crisis began so they are for sure not Syrian refugees. Emily Arrowood in her article highlights how news networks like Fox & Friends use stories to mislead people, “Thousands of men, women, and children are increasingly fleeing Iraq to escape violence from the Islamic State, joining more than four million migrants who have left Syria since the start of its civil war. [...] Yet on Fox News, the refugee crisis has been used to push fears about the religion of the refugees.” It is clear how some news media focus their reports on spreading fear of refugees based on false stories.

This kind of misleading story can convert viewers into racist and anti-immigrant audience. Combined with other factors like religion it will be easy to create people who will believe in those stories or myths. Human beings usually have a natural firewall against this kind of hatred in their brains because we were not born racists. The media however, use a persuasion tactic to try to convince us that those refugees are bad somehow. And it does that by looking at the weaknesses in that firewall and attack it just like that report.

The source and the primary creator of the current myth are politicians. Politicians are the providers of the anti-immigrant rhetoric along with the press. They work in cooperation with the media to spread anti-immigration narratives. Powerful politicians often use the media as a

weapon to try to make people believe what they want them to believe so they can legitimize their political actions, which come with severe consequences for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. John Grayson argues in his article “The Shameful “Go Home” Campaign” that both the politicians and the press have worked on creating the racist population that exists today which they need to win an election. He says “Political parties at election times have systematically poisoned debates around asylum, immigration, terrorism and law and order with euphemisms and trigger phrases which allegedly appeal to the perceived racist views of key sections of the electorate.” (Grayson, 2013) Thus, those politicians in their talks often put the blame on the immigrants for every critical issue in the country and promise that they can solve these problems by eliminating immigration.

A good example of a powerful anti-immigrant person is the billionaire businessman and the 2016 Republican candidate for the president of the United States, Donald Trump. Trump’s campaign relies heavily on racist and anti-immigrant points. A core principle of his immigration reform is that America should not leave its borders “exposed.” He wants to build a wall across the southern border to prevent people from coming illegally. The idea of controlling borders sounds fair and reasonable. However, the way Mr. Trump talks about it is intended to win people’s emotions and make them concerned, thus having their support to win the election. He has worked on establishing racism in The United States’ politics and society. Trump often uses words like “criminals, rapists” and “gangs” to describe the immigrants. His anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobic campaign along with his hate speeches are causing aggressions against immigrants.

Olivia Stocks in her research study indicates that words used in street harassments and racist attacks on immigrants mirrored a specific speech pattern in the newspapers and politicians’

speeches. She says “immigrants see mass media as the main cause of creating racist ideologies among citizens and as being ‘capable of providing frames of reference or perspective within which people become able to make sense of events and of their experience’” (Stocks, 2014). Thus, using words like “rapists” and “criminals” describing the immigrants starts as an opinion and turns into a belief that finds its way easily into people’s minds. On August 19th 2015, two men in Boston brutally attacked a homeless Hispanic man sleeping on the street, breaking his nose and peeing on him. One of the attackers told the police after he was arrested “Donald Trump was right, all these illegals need to be deported.” This is one example of many devastating consequences of the anti-immigrant rhetoric. While people are desperate for a solution to their country’s problem, they seem to believe the rhetoric and support it.

A myth by definition is a widely held but false belief, traditional story or idea. Myths don’t change over time. As the U.S. fears to let Syrian refugees in because they could be ISIS fighters, it feared that the German Jews refugees back in late 1930s could be Nazi agents and spies. The U.S. then turned away the German refugees forcing them to return to Europe. Some of those were eventually killed in the Holocaust. Now, about 31 states say “Syrian refugees not welcome.” But there is no Holocaust yet. The problem of accepting refugees has always been politicized. The same endless debate over the danger of refugees and the economic concerns was going on back then at the beginning of World War II. Franklin D. Roosevelt, America’s president back then, warned that some Nazi spies could be among the refugees, spreading the fear of hosting immigrants, creating a myth similar to what we have today. Authors in their journal say “Myths are created in a particular culture from its repertoire of images, symbols, characters and modes of action. Thus, new versions may be created over time, but they represent continuing familiar themes. Through stories of this mythical kind belief systems are given life

and transmitted from one generation to the next” (Neufville and Barton, 1987). We can see the same circumstances the myth was created under, by the same group of people, with the help of the same organizations (media).

Finally, I am an immigrant from Syria. I moved to the U.S. looking for a safe refuge, after the devastating war that caused the destruction of most of my country. I am a typical 22-year-old college student who wants to continue his education, pursue a successful career and live happily. It is my moral responsibility to correct the wrong image some people have of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Donald Trump in his latest speech talked about the deportation of Syrians if he wins. I would like to say to Mr. Trump that I am not a terrorist nor a lazy man. I did not come here to live on food stamps and welfare. It breaks my heart to see that so many people believe what some media and politicians say about us. We are not a burden, and we can manage to make it here without any help. I urge people to think again about this myth.

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