

Investigating the Causes of the Refugee Crisis

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There is arguably not a more famous emblem of freedom than the Statue of Liberty. Engraved on the landmark is a poem that reads “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” [1]. This poem has since become a siren song for refugees worldwide. The refugee crisis has dominated geopolitical conversations for decades and the issue only seems to be escalating. In 2019, the United Nations reported that 26 million people were categorized as refugees [2]. Moreover, some of the main contributing factors to the on-going refugee crisis across countries include war, climate change, persecution, political unrest, and lack of basic goods.

One of the leading causes of the refugee crisis is war. A prime example is the Syrian refugee crisis. The tentative starting point is deemed March of 2011 when the government took violent action against anti-government riots [3]. Since then, the conflict has risen leading to civil wars. Furthermore, the constant conflict in the region produced systemic unemployment and widespread poverty [3,4]. Therefore, many Syrians were forced to leave the country because they could not afford necessities, such as food and water [3,5]. It is important to highlight how the actors involved in war create a perpetual cycle of displacement. Yemen, for instance, has been riddled with conflict since 2015 [6]. The United Arab Emirates has been the opposing force instigating conflict in the region. The Saudi-led coalition has been supported by the United States (U.S.) and many European nations through the sale of weapons [6]. This continued support has exacerbated the uninhabitable condition

within the country and has led to an increase in refugees. Yet, many of these countries also provide humanitarian aid. Thus, an underlying issue in the refugee crisis is self-interest expressed by countries. Nations can profit from weapons sales, but also provide support to the very population they negatively impact [6]. The cycle will have to be broken if a change is to be made.

Recently, climate change has been identified as a reason for the refugee crisis [7,8]. This is understandable as many refugees descend from developing nations that rely on agriculture as a foundation for their economy [9,10]. Reports have indicated that climate change can negatively impact agriculture as it can lead to heat stress on livestock, increase pest volumes, and cause changes in weather patterns [9]. Additionally, developing countries lack resources to provide government assistance to rectify these systemic issues. Therefore, because of the lack of economic stability and financial opportunities, individuals are once again forced to search for security elsewhere. This can be seen in Somalia as droughts have left around 2.2 million people displaced [11].

Another major issue that pertains to the refugee crisis is persecution [12]. This can include religious, social, racial, and political oppression that forces individuals to leave a country in search of another. An example is the current religious persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. More than 900,000 Rohingya Muslims had to flee Myanmar because of purposeful violence carried out by nationalistic militias who disapprove of their

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religious views [11]. A commonality between refugee issues that spark because of persecution is overall instability within the nation itself. Once again, many of these countries face economic turmoil, and government leaders use various groups as scapegoats rather than addressing the underlying factors that are at play [12]. This creates tensions and ultimately forces many to move to neighboring countries. The cycle often repeats itself, as neighboring countries start to face additional burdens. This can lead to local citizens resenting refugees and re-establishing the process of persecution once again.

In particular, the two major refugee disasters that have captured worldwide attention are the crises in Venezuela and Afghanistan. Furthermore, the refugee disaster in Venezuela is unique as it was mainly caused by internal economic downfall [13,14]. Moreover, Venezuela housed the world's largest oil reserves; yet, because of the mismanagement of resources, the country fell into severe economic pitfalls. Additionally, because of the various economic decisions made by the government, the currency in the country devalued, and this led to hyperinflation, a lack of food and basic goods, and limited access to medicines [13,14]. To this day, many Venezuelans are unemployed and only have access to one meal a day [13]. Although large numbers of Venezuelans left to seek refuge in neighboring countries, many still faced economic instability because of existing situations in surrounding countries and were often met with xenophobia. Although Afghanistan did not face the specific economic challenges that Venezuela did, the majority of the refugees also left the country due to food insecurity and lack of access to necessities [15,16]. The reason for economic instability was tied to environmental disasters disrupting the agri-business sector which is core to the economy [15]. Due to the limited resources,

environmental investments were unable to occur leading the country to become more susceptible to natural disasters, such as droughts [15,16].

Furthermore, one of the major underlying reasons for the extenuating circumstances was the refusal of government leaders to adapt their principles and forfeit pursuing their political agenda for the greater good of the country. For example, both Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro, leaders of Venezuela during the economic crisis, desired to hold positions of power rather than focus on strategies to mediate the economic downturn [13,14]. They were able to focus the country's conversation solely on political issues rather than the systemic poverty crisis. This can also be seen in Afghanistan as government leaders focused on territorial disputes and religious agendas rather than on the more serious issues facing citizens (i.e., poverty, hunger, and access to medical services). Also, the political leaders in both countries often promised citizens a future that was bright and near economic surges. Yet, these talking points were never met with productive policy. Moreover, political leaders in both countries were hyper-fixated on personal agendas, which resulted in poor infrastructure and major instability [13,14,15].

Specifically, the Afghan refugee crisis is also rooted in decades-long invasion and war. Thus, twenty years ago the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, which led to political instability and the rise of radical groups [17]. More recently, the U.S. withdrawal of troops from the country made way for the Taliban to gain full control of the government and resulted in another large influx of refugees [17]. Many individuals were motivated to leave because they feared the repercussions and possible societal changes. It's also important to mention that because of the ongoing conflict, many nations' citizens have curated prejudices against Afghan

refugees and support policies that limit the number of refugees that can be admitted, therefore prolonging the problem. In contrast, international war and decades-long conflict are not a cause of the refugee crisis in Venezuela.

Overall, there are numerous reasons and issues that surround the refugee crisis in the 21st century. Some of these include climate change, political instability, persecution, the trickle-down effect of war, and lack of access to necessities. Often these causes are interrelated. Two current situations that were highlighted were the disasters in Venezuela and Afghanistan, which shared both similarities and differences. This topic contains many intricacies and going forward the global community should focus on supporting systemic changes to prevent further escalation of the crisis. For example, countries should be held more accountable regarding their climate goals to prevent the propagation of the consequences that fuel the crisis. Neighboring countries should strengthen their collaboration efforts on reducing climate-altering actions, such as creating coalitions to tackle cross-border landfill waste, air pollution concerns, and fossil fuel waste to name a few. Additionally, countries should incorporate the recommendations made by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 13: Climate action), which emphasizes the need for green-forward energy companies and integration of climate-focused policies [18]. Individuals within communities can also contribute to these goals by volunteering their time to climate change efforts and utilizing environmentally friendly practices in their everyday lives.

Unfortunately, war and political unrest are phenomena that are not easily controlled. Therefore, it is more difficult to address such concerns because of the deep-seated context. On a global level, there should be a focus on

helping re-establish structures in countries that face the consequence of previous instability and a commitment to a reduction in terror going forward.

Overall, to prevent further escalation in the refugee crisis, the global community should commit to a serious effort in combating climate change and collaborate to prevent excess instability and lack of basic human necessities. In the short term, developed countries should provide refugees with re-settlement options and individuals within communities should take action to assist with systemic change through volunteering or personal efforts of activism.

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