

# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**Mass Migration in Europe: Assimilation, Integration, and Security**

**Testimony Before the Foreign Affairs Committee,  
Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats**

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## A Shared Story

The movement of people across the globe is as old as humanity itself. Whether the exodus out of Africa into Eurasia by *Homo sapiens* 230,000 years ago, or the Puritan migration of the 1600's to the New World, or the displacement caused by the partition of India, humans have always been on the move in their quest for better shelter, food, security, or all of the above. Today, we are discussing yet another chapter of that same story: The movement of mainly Arabs and Africans, mostly Muslim, into Europe. Although this development has caused understandable anxiety in some circles, it is important to place it within the broader context of global migration and to separate the real versus the imaginary.

According to the United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are over 65 million displaced people in the world, the largest number since World War II. This includes refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people. Although this number has been steadily rising, it was the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 that contributed to a 40% increase in that figure. The brutal repression by the Syrian regime, as well as extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, against civilians, is the main contributor to the displacement of Syrians, and in turn, this latest surge. According to UNHCR, Syrians are now the largest group of refugees in the world at five million and counting. Other top nationalities are Afghans, Iraq, Eritrea, and Somalia, where many are also escaping violence and persecution. In the case of Syrians in particular, most would not have contemplated making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean or on foot if they were not being barrel-bombed-out of their homes by the government of Bashar al-Assad. But such has been their fate because they dared to seek more rights and dignity from their government.

Most of these refugees, Syrians included, are currently in non-European countries. In fact, developing countries host the largest share of the world's refugees (86% by the end of 2014). The least developed countries alone provided asylum to 25% of refugees worldwide.<sup>1</sup> With neighboring countries Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey absorbing as many as they can, many Syrians have sought shelter and security elsewhere, including in Europe. Still, it was not until 2015 that this situation became a crisis, which appears to have been exasperated by the intervention of Russia in the Syrian conflict and their relentless bombing of major cities, especially Aleppo. According to Eurostat, 1.2 million first-time asylum applications were submitted in European countries in 2015, more than double that of the previous year. Four states (Germany, Hungary, Sweden and Austria) received around two-thirds of the EU's asylum applications in 2015, with Hungary, Sweden and Austria being the top recipients of asylum applications per capita.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is clear that addressing the root causes of instability in places such as Syria and elsewhere are required in order to effectively stem the flow of refugees and to potentially allow some to return home.

With this latest wave of migration, legitimate concerns regarding what impact it will have on Europe are being raised. Will these new migrants, many from conflict-prone areas, destabilize

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<sup>1</sup> "UNHCR Global Trends –Forced Displacement in 2014". UNHCR. 18 June 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Record number of over 1.2 million first time asylum seekers registered in 2015". EUROSTAT.

Europe? Will they pose a security threat given the apparent increase in terrorist attacks on European soil that coincided with their arrival? And even if these security concerns are addressed, will their very presence begin to change European society, culture, and norms?

### **Impact of Migration on European Security**

The increase in the numbers of refugees and migrants entering Europe appears at first glance to also be matched by an increase in terrorist attacks carried out on European soil. The number of successful terrorist attacks increased from 4 in 2014 to 17 in 2015 and the number of terrorism suspects arrested in EU countries between 2012 and 2016 increased from 395 to 718, according to Europol.<sup>3</sup> However, most of these attacks have been carried out by European citizens, rather than refugees or migrants. In fact, in the period between January 2016 and April 2017, only four asylum-seekers were involved in terrorist incidents, but no actual refugees.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these attacks appear to have been carried-out either by ISIL operatives or sympathizers in retaliation for European participation in the military campaign against the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (Counter-ISIL), which began in 2014. Even Turkey, a Muslim-majority country, has suffered a series of horrible attacks, including at Ataturk Airport and a night club that killed almost 300 people, by ISIL operatives.

Despite losing most of their territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIL (and other radical organizations) may continue to plan attacks against European targets either directly or by inspiring others to act in their name. It is this latter scenario, or what is referred to as the “lone wolf” phenomenon, that requires close cooperation between European law enforcement agencies and local communities in order to intervene before it is too late. Moreover, both law enforcement agencies and local communities must work together to tackle the challenge of returning foreign fighter as well as women and children who may have accompanied them abroad. Of the 5,600 foreign fighters who have returned globally, 1,200 have returned to Europe, although none have been reported to have carried out any attacks since their return.<sup>5</sup>

Muslim communities in the West have cooperated with law enforcement agencies in an effort to prevent possible attacks. University of North Carolina sociologist Charles Kurzman looked at post 9/11 cases where the police had identified a Muslim American as a suspected terrorist while sharing where the tip came from. The research revealed that of the 188 cases reviewed, 54 of the individuals were brought to the government’s attention by members of the Muslim American community. Although Muslims should not be expected to answer for the actions of others who may share the same faith (just as Christians do not have to answer for the crimes of extremists among them) Muslim Americans were the single largest source of tips identified in Kurzman's study.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, more needs to be done in term of cooperation, but this requires more trust-building with communities of color, rather than continued accusations that they are not

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<sup>3</sup> "EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2017". EU Terrorism Situation & Trend Report. Europol: 22–28. 2017.

<sup>4</sup> “Europe’s Refugee Crisis and the Threat of Terrorism: An Extraordinary Threat?” Danish Institute for International Studies. May, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Meko, Now that the Islamic State has fallen in Iraq and Syria, where are all its fighters going? Washington Post. Feb 22, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Kurzman, “Muslim-American Terrorism in 2013”. Feb 5, 2014.

cooperating, or even enabling terrorist attacks. These accusations are more likely to have the opposite effect by forcing communities to become more isolated, and therefore, less likely to report suspicious activities.

Another area of concern are single men who have recently migrated. Many of the Syrian men, for example, have traveled to Germany alone and indeed some have struggled to recreate lives let alone attain the same status they once enjoyed. Languishing in refugee camps, detention centers, or on the margins of society does make some vulnerable to crime or radicalization. The answer is not to further demonize them, but rather, to help them find employment, community, and build new lives.

### **Integration and Social Cohesion**

Beyond the security dimension, the arrival of new Muslim migrants and refugees has heightened concerns regarding the impact this would have on liberal European norms and values. Right-wing politicians and media personalities have gone further by warning of the “Islamization” of Europe and “no-go” zones in the UK, where Muslim fundamentalists are threatening the European way of life. But do the facts support such claims?

First, it is perhaps important to address a misconception about Islam—that somehow it is fundamentally incompatible with the Judeo-Christian values of the West. For anyone who has taken an even cursory look at the three Abrahamic religions, it becomes quickly clear that there are no Judeo-Christian values without Muslim values because all three religions are intimately linked in their belief in God and the prophets.

Second, it is important to note that each European country and the experience of Muslims living in that country are different. Still there are important trends that are worth considering. Muslims are a small minority in Europe, accounting for roughly 5% of the population, although that number is projected to increase to between 7% and 14% (depending on the model) by 2050.<sup>7</sup> According to the same report, European Muslims are also young. In 2016, the median age of Muslims in Europe was 30.4 and half of all European Muslims was under the age of 30. A younger population means a demographic that is more likely to integrate and embrace a European identity that is not necessarily at odds with its Muslim one. According to a Bertelsmann Foundation study that looked at the Muslim populations of five countries (UK, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and France), 76% of second-generation Muslims were speaking the local European language as their native language. The same study also found that 75 percent of European Muslims regularly intermingle with non-Muslims and that interreligious contact as well as identification with the host country increases with each generation. Even more telling, 94% of all those surveyed said that they felt connected to the country where they lived.<sup>8</sup> The likelihood of integration over time is also backed by another study by a lecturer at the University of Manchester who has researched ethnic communities in the UK. According to Maria

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<sup>7</sup> “Europe’s Growing Muslim Population”. Pew Research. Nov 29, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> “Muslims in Europe: Integrated but not Accepted?” Bertelsmann Foundation. Aug 2017.

Sobolewska, immigrants are assimilating over time and those who have been in the country for more than seven years are more trusting of political institutions than those who are white.<sup>9</sup>

Another interesting data point worth considering is the lack of a correlation between fear of Muslim refugees and the increase of refugee inflow into European countries. In Germany, which has received more Iraqi and Syrian refugees than any other European country, the perceived threat of refugees is one of the lowest of all other European countries.<sup>10</sup> This could be attributed to the strong position the German government has taken in welcoming refugees and explaining to the public why and how it is implementing the policy. Despite inherent challenges and political risks in welcoming close to a million Syrians, Chancellor Merkel was nevertheless elected to a fourth term.

While the above indices provide a positive indicator of the integration of Muslims in Europe, more challenges remain. In France, job discrimination and a highly regulated labor market disproportionately affect communities of color, especially devout Muslims. Moreover, the ban on the headscarf, as well as other religious attire dissuades French-Muslim women from seeking careers in the public sector. As a former U.S Department of State official, I cannot imagine preventing Americans from serving their government simply because they wear a headscarf or a kippah as mandated by their faith. In the UK, Islam is considered one of the major religions of the country and as such, Muslims have been more able to observe and practice their religion without having to choose between their faith and careers. According to the same Bertelsmann report, British policy has facilitated the civic engagement of Muslims, for example allowing female police officers to wear the headscarf at work. This in turn, increases the attachment of those serving, and in turn their communities, to the state.

Here in the United States, and according to a 2017 Pew Research survey, “Muslim Americans overwhelmingly say they are proud to be Americans, believe that hard work generally brings success in this country and are satisfied with the way things are going in their own lives.”<sup>11</sup> And despite a dramatic rise in hate crimes and incidents against Muslims in America since 2014, Muslim Americans continue their embrace of the “American Dream” and the belief in the tenant of religious freedom as enshrined in our Constitution. Rather than be forced to assimilate, Muslim Americans are an integral part of the American social fabric, with over a third representing the African-American community who can trace their roots to the very founding of this nation.

### **Why the Fear, Why Now?**

The sudden surge of new migrants combined with high-profile attacks by ISIL on European soil, has been a boon for populists and fascists who have been looking for an opportunity to challenge the mainstream political systems in their countries. Combined with pre-existing social and

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<sup>9</sup> Andy Bounds & Chris Tighe. “Manchester attack brings Muslim integration into focus”. Financial Times. June 11, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> “Europe’s Growing Muslim Population”. Pew Research. Nov 29, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Likpa. “Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world”. Pew Research. Aug 20, 2017.

economic anxiety, the ingredients have been mixed to produce a truly toxic brew of xenophobia and racism. Beyond the moral imperative to counter these trends, if left unchecked, they can undermine the very foundation of European and American democracy. We now know that social media has been used to stoke sectarian and religious tensions in Europe and in the United States in an effort to divide societies and sow doubt in the hearts of citizens regarding their political and democratic processes and institutions. European countries have closed their borders and rolled-back their commitments to protecting the rights of refugees and migrants, and here at home, we have now banned people based on their religion from coming here. While there are legitimate security concerns that must be addressed, “effective counterterrorism policies respond to real threats, which in turn means responding to real intelligence about threats.” But the prohibition on entry to the United States from a number of overwhelmingly Muslim-majority countries is grounded in neither real threats nor real intelligence.” These were the words of James Clapper, former Director of National Intelligence.<sup>12</sup> Xenophobic rhetoric and policies that assign blame to entire communities achieve the opposite of their proclaimed objectives. Instead, they deepen divisions, hinder cooperation, and empower radicals.

Beyond the statistics and arguments that I have provided, perhaps the best example of how to deal with the question of immigration is my own story. I am the product of our immigration and public education system, having immigrated to the United States at the age of thirteen 30 years ago with my family from Damascus, Syria to San Jose, California. Programs such as English as a Second Language (ESL) and a tolerant and welcoming environment gave me the opportunity to learn a new language without being judged, and more importantly, to acclimate to a new culture on my own terms. I was never asked to let go of my heritage as a Syrian, or religion as a Muslim. In fact, these identities are celebrated as part of what makes America great. Our diversity and the uniqueness of each citizen of this country is what makes us great. It is the belief in the ideals of America—where we are judged by what we do rather than the color of our skin--that gave me the impetus to eventually become a public servant and work on some of our country’s most pressing national security issues.

I fear that these ideals and values are being threatened because of misconceptions as well as intentional distortion. I hope we can all work together to uphold them for the sake of our country, our European allies, and the people of the world.

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<sup>12</sup> James R. Clapper, Jr., Joshua A. Geltzer and Matthew G. Olsen. “We Worked on Stopping Terrorism. Trump's Travel Ban Fuels it.” CNN Online. April 23, 2018.

## **About Emgage Foundation**

Emgage Foundation is a non-partisan, non-for-profit 501C(3) civic education and engagement organization dedicated to increasing the civic engagement of Muslim Americans and minority communities. Emgage is 100% funded by domestic sources including private donors and foundations.