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Migrant crisis: Refugees must be prioritised on their beliefs

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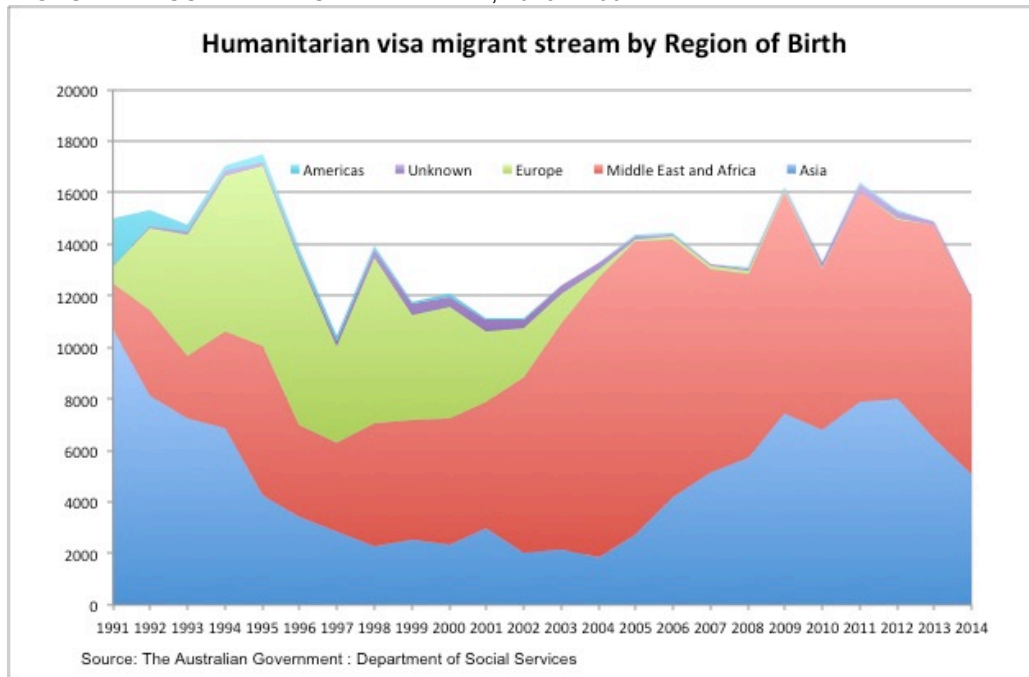


Illustration: Eric Lobbecke Source: Supplied

Just as the government, in allocating the 12,000 places it has added to the humanitarian intake, has every right to screen out security threats, so it has every right to test whether applicants are capable of integrating peacefully and effectively into the community.

And like it or not, religion is a crucial factor in that respect, all the more so with refugees from the greater Middle East.

It is therefore entirely proper for Australians to be concerned about the religious composition of the expanded intake the government has announced.

To say that is not to deny that many Muslims are at grave risk in the region's conflicts. On the contrary, data from the Association of Religion Data Archives shows that in 70 per cent of Muslim-majority countries, Muslim governments persecute other Muslims, typically from minority sects, and increasingly with deadly results.

But that persecution merely betrays an underlying streak of fanaticism in Islam which continually breathes fresh life into centuries-old doctrinal disputes.

Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland may fight, but their quarrels never invoke 16th-century differences on transubstantiation. Every day, however, Sunnis and Shi'ites butcher each other over who, in AD632, was the rightful successor to the Prophet

Mohammed.

In turn, that fanaticism breeds a broader demonisation of enemies that promotes religiously inspired violence. Muslim-majority countries have a low incidence of conventional homicide; but even excluding the conflict in Chechnya, Muslims are responsible for some 70 per cent of all high-casualty terrorist bombings since 1999.

As Muslims comprise less than a quarter of the world's population, the thesis Montesquieu advanced 250 years ago — that “the Mohammedan religion, which speaks only through the sword, continues to act on men with the destructive spirit which founded it” — retains its element of truth.

That truth is being felt by what little remains of the Middle East's Christian communities. According to the just-released Yearbook of International Religious Demography, while 13.6 per cent of the region's population was Christian in 1901, that share is now down to 4.2 per cent, with the Christian communities in Israel being the only ones that are expanding.

And that grim outcome seems a mere way-station to a future in which, with the possible but uncertain exception of the Copts, there will be no Christians left in the Arab lands.

But the fate of the Christians pales compared to that of the Jews. By virtue of their opposition to Mohammed in Medina, the Jews were, in the phrase of Yale's Michael Cook, always Islam's “intimate enemies”; however, under the influence of Arab nationalism, a religious objection to Judaism has been transformed into racial hatred.

That racial hatred is now deeply entrenched throughout the greater Middle East; indeed, it is central to education and daily propaganda. Saddam Hussein's major contribution to Baathist theory, for example, characterised Jews and flies as the “creatures God should not have made”; and its blood-curdling finale — “for each insect, there is an insecticide” — was endlessly repeated on state media, along with photos of Baghdad crowds celebrating the public hanging, on January 27, 1969, of nine alleged Jewish spies.

As for Bashar al-Assad's Syria, a Friday religious broadcast proclaiming that “we are a nation that drinks blood, and no blood is better than the blood of Jews” still sets the typical standard.

Unfortunately, those hatreds have not remained in the Middle East: rather, there is compelling evidence that we have imported them with earlier waves of Muslim refugees.

For instance, a 2009 survey of Muslim children in Australian schools concluded that 73 per cent believe Jews are “selfish” and “have no morals”, while 93 per cent believe “Jews dislike people from other groups”.

More recently, a study by the University of Sydney's Suzanne Rutland of Muslim students in western Sydney's public high schools found pervasive anti-Semitism, including the belief that the September 11 attacks were a Jewish plot (with Jews in New York supposedly “phoning each other to stay at home”). And bad as things are in the public schools, in the Muslim schools they are surely worse.

All that has persisted despite myriad government programs aimed at promoting “harmony”. Those programs' failure is unsurprising, since racist beliefs are reproduced, day after day, in

the home and in the bile distributed, with complete impunity, through mosques and social networks.

More importantly, intolerance is increasingly at the heart of religious Islam itself; and with successive governments' attempts at reaching out to "moderate" clerics, giving the Muslim religious establishment greater legitimacy, the racist hatreds researchers find in our Islamic communities are even more widely held than a decade ago.

No doubt, the difficulties Middle Eastern refugees have had in integrating into Australia's economy and society aggravate the situation.

Not only are 56 per cent of Australia's working-age Muslims either unemployed or not in the labour force, but participation rates for Australian-born children of refugees are more than 20 percentage points below those for the Australian-born population as a whole, entrenching welfare dependence and a grievance mentality that helps hatreds persist. And with poor educational outcomes, all the problems are set to endure.

The case for caution in allocating places in the humanitarian program is therefore overwhelming. As well as rigorous scrutiny of applicants' religious beliefs, not least for signs of anti-Semitism, the government should unashamedly give priority to those religious and ethnic groups that are most likely to respect our institutions and way of life.

If that curtails the Muslim share of the program, it is a price worth paying for peace and security. After all, the government's highest responsibility is to protect Australia and Australians, including — let us say it — Jewish Australians; far being from an act of humanity, responding to the carnage hatred has created by allowing it on to our shores would be a dereliction of duty.