

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## OP-ED

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### Europe's race to the bottom on protecting refugees from Syria

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In much of Europe, 'asylum-seeker' and 'refugee' have become dirty words. It is rare to find a politician who will express genuine concern for refugees in public; when it does happen, it's usually on a visit to a refugee camp somewhere far from Europe's borders.

At the national level, politicians either avoid the subject or link it to words like 'crime', 'invading' and 'queue-jumping'.

Last week Amnesty International [called on EU governments](#) to resettle more refugees from Syria, to lighten the immense burden borne by the main host countries, particularly Lebanon and Jordan. Some of the reactions were telling of the political climate.

Some people asked why it was Europe's problem if Muslims were killing other Muslims in Syria. Others said they did not want "terrorists" coming to their country. Some just didn't like the idea of resettlement, saying that their countries' financial contributions to the humanitarian crisis were sufficient.

It is easy to dismiss the explicitly Islamophobic responses as the views of a minority, but the reality is that much of the debate on asylum is fuelled by implicit xenophobia, racism or a combination of the two.

Decades ago, after the Second World War, Europe led the world in creating the modern international refugee protection regime. The UN Refugee Convention was born from the horrors of the war, out of a belief that protection is critically needed for those who would be persecuted because of who they are or what they believe.

But most European governments have forgotten this. The policies of most EU governments are geared towards keeping asylum-seekers out. Fortress Europe is very real. From the tacit acceptance of Greece's brutal push-back practices, to the detention of refugees in dire conditions in Bulgaria, and visa regimes designed to keep possible asylum-seekers out, there are virtually no legal ways for refugees to reach Europe.

Every year hundreds of people fleeing conflict and persecution in Syria and other places die as they take the extremely dangerous boat journey from North Africa, across the Mediterranean, to reach safety in Europe. It is difficult to imagine how desperate someone must be to take such a risk.

The EU is not doing nearly enough for one of the worst refugee crises in decades, which is unfolding in the Union's own immediate vicinity. Countries like the UK have made a substantial financial contribution to the humanitarian effort in Syria and

around its borders, but have not been willing to increase resettlement places for refugees from Syria.

Overall, the EU has made very few places available to refugees from Syria in the form of resettlement or humanitarian admission. It seems that the concern that many political leaders express for Syria's refugees ends at the EU's borders. Europe will help you as long as you don't try to come here.

There are a few exceptions. For example, in September Sweden granted permanent residency to all Syrian asylum-seekers in the country. It was a compassionate decision, but also a logical one: the conflict is showing no sign of ending and refugees won't be able to return to their country anytime soon.

Meanwhile, Germany announced that it would offer temporary residencies to 10,000 Syrian refugees from the main host countries.

Just this week, Syria broke another record: it is the subject of the UN's largest-ever humanitarian appeal for the second year running. Half of Syria's population of 22 million will need humanitarian assistance in 2014. Up to three million Syrians are refugees, 6.5 million are displaced internally and 600,000 refugee children are out of school.

Resettlement is only meant to be a solution for a small proportion of refugees from Syria, those who are the most vulnerable. The great majority – millions – will continue to be hosted in countries neighbouring Syria.

Syria is the defining refugee crisis of our generation. That EU countries are so reluctant to resettle refugees from Syria is a damning indictment of the politics of asylum in Europe. Governments and political parties have allowed, and even been complicit in, a race to the bottom on refugee protection. Many politicians of all stripes have, explicitly or implicitly, stoked xenophobia and racism towards refugees and asylum-seekers for political gain.

Refugee protection is first and foremost about protecting everyone's right to be who they are and believe in what they want without fearing for their life or freedom. It is about championing those who are persecuted by their own governments.

The existing refugee protection regime rose largely from the ashes of a horrific war fought on European soil. It is time for Europe to remember this and stop shutting out refugees from Syria and others in dire need of protection.