
WESTERN MEDIA & PORTRAYAL OF REFUGEES

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● [MIGOSUR Blog](#) ●

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“We’re not talking here about Syrians... We’re talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours”

- Philippe Corbé, speaking of Ukrainian refugees, on BFM TV

On February 24th, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, sparking one of the largest refugee crises in recent European history. Millions of Ukrainians fled the conflict, seeking refuge primarily in neighboring European countries.

Unlike prior refugee waves, Europe, Canada, and the United States responded to this crisis with overwhelming solidarity. Within ten days of the invasion, the European Union (EU) activated the Temporary Protection Directive, which streamlined asylum processes for displaced Ukrainians. This response contrasted starkly with the reception Middle Eastern refugees, such as those from Syria, received during the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011.

In August 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron, referencing the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan, emphasized France’s duty to protect “those who are most at risk” while asserting the need to “protect ourselves against large irregular migration flows.” This dual stance underscored a consistent hesitation within EU nations to welcome Middle Eastern refugees. The Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer echoed this sentiment, explaining that Austria would provide refuge to Ukrainians because, “It’s different in Ukraine than in countries like Afghanistan.”

These examples illustrate a media narrative in which some refugees are deemed “like us” ([ELLISON, S. & ANDREWS, T.M. \(2022\)](#)) and therefore more deserving of protection, while others are distanced, portrayed as a potential threat or burden. The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, and by extension, national policies on refugee acceptance.



by Mir Suhail, political cartoonist from Kashmir.

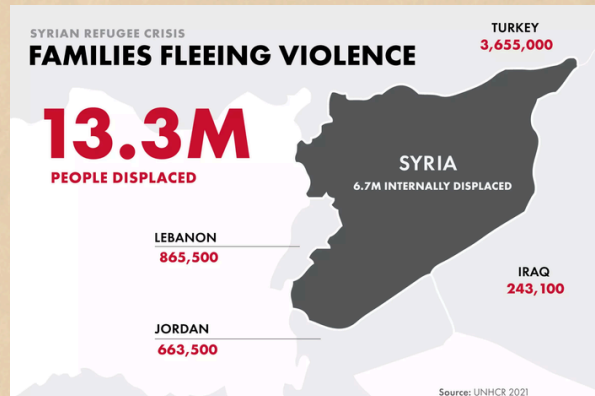
Greece is represented by the mythological figure of Medusa as she is welcoming syrian refugees with arms.

This blog explores how and why western media portrayals differ for Syrian and Ukrainian refugees, examining the implicit biases and political influences that underlie these narratives.

Context and background

The Syrian Refugee Crisis

The Syrian refugee crisis began in March 2011. The crisis was initially triggered by the arrest of teenagers in the southern town of Daraa for anti-government graffiti. Their detention sparked widespread demonstrations across Syria, and the government's violent response to these protests fueled an escalation that led to a full-scale civil war.



In Northwest Syria, a settlement for displaced people seeking shelter
©Mercy Corps

The humanitarian toll of the Syrian conflict has been immense.

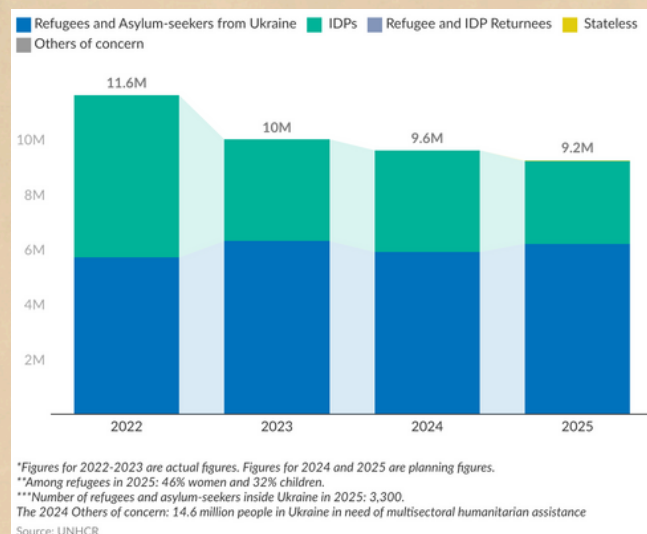
- By 2024, more than 17 million of Syrians were in need of humanitarian aid (UNCHR, 2024 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, p.6-9)
- 7.5m children required assistance (UNICEF's 2024 Humanitarian Action for Children appeal for Syria) due to ongoing violence, economic instability, and deteriorating infrastructure.
- A series of catastrophic earthquakes in February 2023 worsened the situation.

⇒ 90% of Syrian families now live in poverty, with many forced into urban slums and informal settlements. The country remains one of the world's most complex and enduring humanitarian emergencies.

The Ukrainian Refugee Crisis

The conflict in Ukraine originated in February 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea, marking the beginning of prolonged geopolitical tension.

- ⇒ February 2022: Russia launched a full-scale invasion
- ⇒ June 2024: 14.6 million Ukrainians required humanitarian assistance (UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Ukraine)
- ⇒ February 2022 to February 2024 : 6.5 million Ukrainian refugees were recorded worldwide, Europe hosting the vast majority (UNCHR)



Media Narratives and Contrasted Portrayals

Humanization and Cultural Affinity



Media coverage of Ukrainian refugees has often emphasized their similarities to Western Europeans. Philippe Corbé, a commentator for French BFM TV, noted, “We’re not talking about Syrians fleeing bombs... We’re talking about Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours to save their lives.” Similarly, British journalist Daniel Hannan wrote,

“They seem so like us. That is what makes it so shocking.”

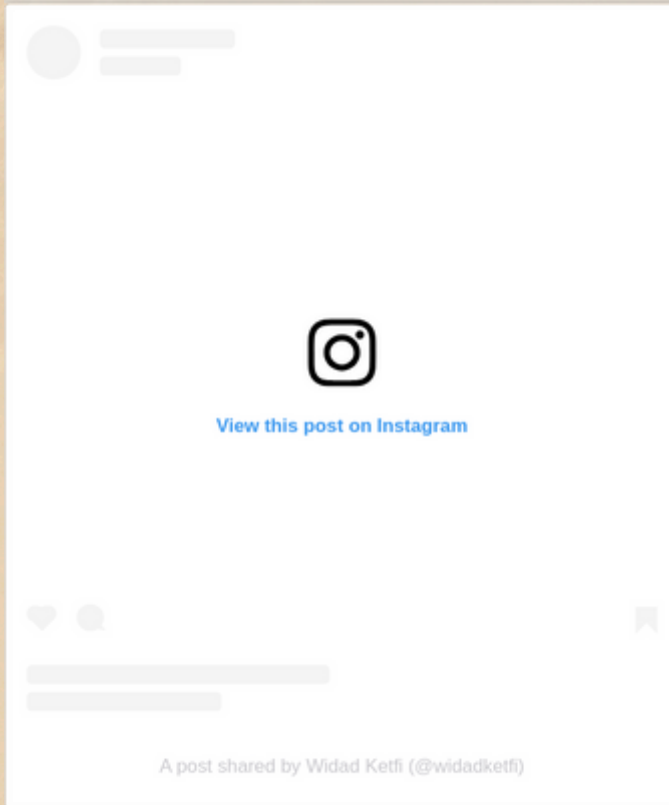
- Daniel Hannan, writing about the war in Ukraine for The Telegraph, on February 26th, 2022

These portrayals create an implicit identification between Ukrainian refugees and Western audiences, fostering empathy (BAYOUMI, M. (2022)). In contrast, coverage of Syrians tended to depict them as part of an “othered mass”, disconnected from Western experiences. Scholars argue that such media narratives imply conflict is almost natural to non-Western regions, subtly casting Ukrainian refugees in a more sympathetic light (GEORGIU, M., & ZABOROWSKI, R. (2017)).

Language and terminology

Media outlets frequently referred to Ukrainians as “refugees,” a term that aligns with humanitarian ideals. Conversely, Syrians were often labeled as “migrants” or part of a “migrant crisis,” which carries connotations of voluntary movement and frames their arrival as a border security issue. This subtle language difference influences public perception, portraying Ukrainians as deserving of aid while framing Syrian refugees as threats. The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) raised concerns about these biased narratives, calling for fairer media language. Such racialized reporting, AMEJA argued, perpetuates xenophobia and shapes public opinion, ultimately influencing policy (The Arab And Middle Eastern Journalist Association (AMEJA) Statement In Response To Coverage of the Ukraine Crisis)





The double standard in public and media discourse on refugee issues

⇒ Widad Ketfi criticizes how fundamental rights are perceived and prioritized differently based on race or origin: “We have witnessed a racial hierarchy in the right to life, the right to peace, and the right to security” highlighting inequities in humanitarian responses and protections (EBERL, J.-M. ET AL. (2018), p. 207-223)

Imagery and Visual Representation



Ukrainian refugees arrive in Medyka, at the Polish border, on February 26, 2022 ©AFP



Syrian refugees cross the border to enter Turkey from the nearby town of Kobani, in northern Syria, last year ©UNHCR

Photographs of Ukrainian refugees often depict individuals in relatable settings, fostering empathy. Close-up images capturing emotion and distress were common, encouraging audiences to connect with their plight. By contrast, images of Syrian refugees frequently highlighted large groups or overcrowded boats, emphasizing numbers over individual humanity. This framing reinforced the perception of Syrians as a homogenous mass, disconnected from Western experiences (CHOULIARAKI, L., & ZABOROSKI, R. (2017). p. 613-635).

Media framing and policy response

Hostility toward the Syrian Crisis // Cohesion in the Ukrainian Response

The security-focused portrayal of Syrian refugees in European media led to political responses marked by hesitancy and restrictive measures. Concerns over economic strain and cultural incompatibility fueled support for policies limiting refugee entry. Countries like Hungary and Serbia erected barriers to deter entry, reflecting a narrative of refugees as burdens.

While the EU provided humanitarian aid, such as €83 million to Greece (European Commission, 19th April 2016), for managing refugee populations, political actions often prioritized containment over integration.

In contrast, the European response to the Ukrainian crisis was marked by substantial support, facilitated by empathetic media portrayals. Countries like Poland and Ireland relaxed entry requirements, providing free transport and access to essential services. The EU's Temporary Protection Directive granted Ukrainian refugees rights to education, housing, and employment, bypassing traditional asylum processes (European Parliament's, July 2024)

This cohesive response exemplified the alignment between media framing and political action, reflecting a shared European commitment to supporting Ukrainian refugees.

On November 2024, the EU has earmarked more than \$66 million to the UNCHR to address the emergency situation in Ukraine. On the other hand, the EU has earmarked less than \$20 million to the UNCHR to address the emergency situation in Syria.

Conclusion

The contrasting media portrayals of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees highlight a double standard rooted in cultural, racial, and political biases. While challenges differ, the disparities in humanitarian responses underscore the influence of media framing in shaping public perception and policy.

As the Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association emphasized, addressing these biases is crucial for equitable humanitarian responses. Moving forward, media outlets and policymakers must strive for unbiased coverage that reinforces shared humanity, ensuring the right to safety transcends borders and backgrounds.

Providing refuge should not depend on race, religion, or cultural proximity but on a universal commitment to human dignity.

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