Psychoanalytic Thoughts about the Current European Refugee Crises and Terrorist Attacks in Paris

Dr. Vamik D. Volkan

Political, social, economic, legal, cultural, religious and medical aspects of the present-day refugee crisis in Europe involve hundreds of thousands refugees, border crossing problems, settlement programs, health issues and security matters. Adding to the complexity of the situation, a Syrian passport that belonged to an asylum seeker was found near the body of one of the gunmen after the 13 November, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, connecting the Islamic State (IS) activities with the immigrants. Fear spread not only within the "host" countries in Europe but also in the United States. More than half of the US governors announced they would not accept Syrian refugees in their state. Some politicians and public figures stirred up controversy and created more anxiety by implying that all Muslims in the United States were potentially dangerous. In France, people put graffiti on the walls of mosques or "dirtied" them with pork blood, and there were random attacks in the streets on people who looked "Arab."

My studies on refugee issues from a psychoanalytic angle go back some decades. After the 1982 war in Lebanon, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) moved its headquarters to Tunisia. Chairman Yasser Arafat, important individuals of the PLO administration, many other Palestinians and 57 Palestinian orphaned children lived in Tunisia. In the spring of 1990 I spent some time with them and especially examined the children's psychology. My next study of refugees and asylum seekers took place in Germany. By the end of 1992, after the tragic events among Serbians, Croats and Bosnians, Germany accepted 235,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia. There was an eruption of much hatred and aggression against these asylum seekers at that time, but also toward other foreigners—the guest workers. In the 1950s and 1960s, West Germany had signed agreements with Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia to recruit workers for West Germany's industrial sector, and by 1973 there were more than one million guest workers in Germany. On November 1992 the German Psychoanalytic Association prepared a statement and asserted that one underlying reason for the violence in Germany "is the Federal Republic's long outmoded conception of itself as a homogenous nation." This statement called for courage and action by politicians. It reminded everyone that, "We must all become aware of our xenophobia and learn to integrate psychically that which is alien, where it is in fact in unconscious terms something of our own. Hence tolerance and humanity towards foreigners call for a constant effort of civilization and culture." The United States is a "synthetic country," to use historian/psychoanalyst Peter Loewenberg's term (1991), a place where people (except African slaves) have come voluntarily from different places with different experiences to create a synthesis of disparate influences and live together. The German Psychoanalytic Association's statement brought to our attention that Germany too was no longer homogenous and people from different origins were already settled there.
My most intense work with refugees took place in the Republic of Georgia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union wars broke out in the early 1990s between Georgians and South Ossetians and also between Georgians and Abkhazians within the legal boundary of the Republic of Georgia. From May 1998 until March 2002 I went to the Caucuses two or three times a year and worked with Georgian refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetian refugees from Georgia.

I was in Berlin when the recent terrorist attacks took place in Paris. The next day I participated in a meeting entitled "Migration – Social Trauma – Identity," sponsored by the International Psychoanalytic University of Berlin and held in a building only five to ten minutes away from where Syrian and other refugees were located. I noted that the audience that day—about 200 persons—made no reference to events in Paris. I sensed that this was not because they lacked empathy. The audience was busy with a wish to express as clearly as possible how different they were from Neo-Nazis and other Germans who were against Germany's acceptance of so many refugees. There were many references to the Holocaust and transgenerationally induced shared guilt feelings playing a role in their benevolence toward suffering immigrants. They were concerned with the polarization in Germany, and I repeatedly reminded the audience that when there is a flood of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, a "host" country's population usually becomes polarized. Already, we see severe political polarizations not only in Germany, but also in France, Belgium, the United States and elsewhere concerning refugees and asylum seekers. We are witnessing one section of society expressing hostile and even malignant prejudice against the newcomers.

In this century, there have been huge numbers of voluntary or forced immigrations, including the present refugee crises in Europe as well as in the Middle East. Combine that with the impacts of globalization, incredible advances in communication technology, fast travel, recourse limitation, and terrorism, and it is now vital to investigate and understand benign, hostile or even malignant prejudice toward the Other—those who have a different ethnic, national, religious or ideological large-group identity. I use the term "large group" to refer to hundreds of thousands or millions of individuals who share the same tribal, ethnic, religious national, or ideological sentiments, even though they will not meet each other in their lifetimes. Large-group identities are the end-result of myths and realities of common beginnings, historical continuities, geographical realities, and other shared linguistic, societal, religious, cultural, and ideological factors. Large-group identities are articulated in terms of commonality, such as: We are Apaches. We are French. We are Catholics. We are capitalists; and/or: You are Basque. You are Syrian. You are Sunni Muslim. You are communist.

Scientific observations of infants during the last few decades have taught us that an infant's mind is more active than we originally thought. We now know that there is a psychobiological potential for we-ness and bias toward our own kind. However, because the environment of an infant and very small child is restricted to family and other caregivers, the extent of "we-ness" does not include a distinct intellectual and emotional dimension of ethnicity, nationality or other types of large-group identity. Infants and very small children are *generalists* (Erikson 1956) as far as tribal affiliation, nationality, ethnicity or religion are concerned; the subjective experience and deep intellectual knowledge of belonging to a large-group identity develops later in childhood. Such sharing of sentiments applies as well to those who are members of a politically ideological group to whose ideology their parents and the important people in their childhood environment subscribed. Religious cults like Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas; guerrilla forces such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); and terrorist organizations such as Taliban or Islamic State (IS) also show us that people can be attracted, in their *adulthood*, to becoming members of a *different type* of large group. This type of large group exists as long as they have and hold on to a religious, ideological or terroristic mission to carry out.

To illustrate consequences of shared prejudice I came up with the metaphor of a big tent. Think in terms of how individuals learn to wear two main layers, like fabric, from the time they are children or, from the time they become members of a cult, guerrilla or terrorist group in their adulthood. The first layer, the individual layer, fits each of them snugly, like clothing. It is one's core personal identity that provides an inner sense of persistent sameness for the individual. The second layer is like the canvas

of a big tent, which is loose fitting, but allows a huge number of individuals to share a sense of sameness with others under the same large-group tent. We can visualize large-group identity markers, such as shared images of ancestors' historical events, which I named "chosen traumas" or "chosen glories" or a combination of both, as different colorful designs stitched on the canvas of each large group's metaphorical tent. When individuals, such as suicide bombers, consider the second garment as their primary clothes they are under the influence of large-group psychology. Then their main aim is to protect, maintain and/or bring attention to their large-group identity, even though doing so will include, from an individual psychology point of view, sadistic, masochistic, immoral and inhumane actions.

Under a huge large-group tent there are subgroups and subgroup identities, such as professional and political identities. While it is the tent pole—the political leader and the governing body—that holds the tent erect, the tent's canvas psychologically protects the leader, other persons with authority, and all members of the large group. Dissenters in a large group do not change the essential shared sentiments within the large group unless they, such as terrorist organizations, develop a huge number of followers who become an important subgroup and even a different type of new large group such as IS. From the view of individual psychology, a person may perceive the pole as a father figure and the canvas as a nurturing mother. From a large-group psychology point of view, the canvas represents the *psychological border* of large-group identity that is shared by tens, hundreds of thousands or millions of people.

We can imagine the unprecedented surge of migrants and refugees flooding into Europe as representing the Other who are threatening the stability of "host" countries' psychological borders. Many individuals in these countries are terrified that their countries' social customs and economies will be damaged, that they will not be able to support the massive influx of the newcomers. But, psychologically speaking, the main fear is the contamination of their large-group identity by the identity of the Other. Those who are able to keep their individual identities separate from the impact of large-group sentiments become willing to open the tent's gate and accept the huge number of newcomers. Those who perceive the newcomers as tearing holes in, thus damaging, the metaphorical large-group tent's canvas—the border of large-group identity—become anxious and defensively perceive the huge immigrant population as a threat. They may develop hostile, even malignant, shared prejudice. The polarization in the "host" country leads to new political and social concerns and complications.

It is beyond my expertise to examine the realistic, practical aspects of having huge numbers of "outsiders" settling in "host" countries. As an analyst, however, I also try to learn about the realistic considerations of one's external environment. Here, I simply wish to state that psychoanalysts' information about the psychology of refugees, "host" countries, shared prejudice, large-group identity issues and related topics can be helpful in efforts to prevent or at least tame future traumas that will affect newcomers as well as local people who will live next to them. To do so will require that interested psychoanalysts sometimes leave their chairs behind their couches and participate in societal activities. This will enlarge the horizon of psychoanalysis. So far there is no serious or systematic teaching of large-group psychology in its own right at psychoanalytic schools. Considering large-group psychology in its own right means making formulations as to a large groups' conscious and unconscious shared psychological experiences and motivations that initiate specific social, cultural, political or ideological processes (Volkan 2013, 2014). This is the same process psychoanalysts follow in their clinical practice when they make formulations about the internal worlds of their patients in order to summarize what their diagnoses and treatment will be.

Without making a list here, I wish to express my appreciation that in recent decades there have been more efforts by psychoanalysts to understand and deal with what is happening in the world. In 2008 I was pleased to initiate a private multidisciplinary group, the International Dialogue Initiative (IDI), comprised of psychoanalysts, diplomats, and other professionals from Germany, Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States and the West Bank (www.internationaldialogueinitiative.com). The IDI's administrative home is the Austen Riggs Center in Massachusetts, and since 2008, we have met biannually in different countries. We are investigating how world affairs can be studied from a psychoanalytic angle in a multidisciplinary, multicultural and multi-religious setting and how such studies can be utilized for understanding and reducing the obstacles to peaceful solutions to conflicts between groups that have different large-group identities.

References

Erikson, E. H. (1956). The problem of ego identity. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 4:56–121.

Loewenberg, P. (1991). Uses of anxiety. *Partisan Review*, 3:514-525.

Volkan, V. D. (2013). *Enemies on the Couch: A Psychopolitical Journey through War and Peace.* Durham, NC: Pitchstone.

Volkan, V. D. (2014). *Psychoanalysis, International Relations, and Diplomacy: A Sourcebook on Large-Group Psychology.* London: Karnac.