

Liberal democracies claim to uphold human rights, yet they manipulate asylum laws to serve political interests. Governments frame asylum as a security or economic burden, but these concerns are often exaggerated to evade moral obligations. While no country should bear an unsustainable burden alone, refugee protection must not be dictated by geopolitical strategy or public sentiment. Instead, it must follow clear and enforceable principles. For this discussion, I define a refugee according to the 1951 Refugee Convention: “A refugee is someone who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country.”

In this essay, I will argue that liberal democracies have a significant moral obligation to provide asylum, but this duty must be governed by clear principles. States that contribute to displacement must bear greater responsibility for resettlement. Additionally, to prevent asylum policy from being manipulated for political convenience, refugee protections must be enforced through an independent global mechanism to ensure fair burden-sharing. Without such reforms, refugee policy will continue to be dictated by national interest rather than a true commitment to human rights.

The extent of a state's moral obligation to refugees must be determined by more than political expediency—it must be based on clear ethical principles. Just as nations that have contributed most to environmental degradation bear greater responsibility for addressing climate change, states that have played a direct role in causing displacement—through war, economic policies, or political interventions—should bear a proportionate share of the responsibility for refugee resettlement. A refugee policy that ignores these causal relationships not only undermines the very idea of international accountability but also places an unjust burden on nations that have had little involvement in creating refugee crises.

Michael Walzer argues that sovereignty is fundamentally tied to a state's right to control membership, stating, “Admission and exclusion are at the core of communal independence. Without them, there is no community” (Walzer, 1983, p. 33). But can sovereignty be used as a justification for

evading responsibility—particularly when a state has played a direct role in creating displacement? Walzer himself acknowledges that a heightened moral obligation exists for states that contribute to refugee crises, writing, “This is obviously the case with regard to any group of people whom we have helped turn into refugees. The injury we have done them makes for an affinity between us: thus Vietnamese refugees had, in a moral sense, been effectively Americanized even before they arrived on these shores.” However, he emphasises that states cannot open their borders to every person seeking refuge. A balance must be struck between moral responsibility and maintaining political order. (Walzer, 1983, p. 49).

If we take Walzers argument seriously, then the United States, for example, failed to meet its obligations after the Iraq War. While Jordan and Syria absorbed over 1.2 million Iraqi refugees, the U.S., which played a central role in destabilizing Iraq, accepted fewer than 20,000 (International Migration and Citizenship Today, p. 76). This selective application of responsibility contradicts Walzer’s principle that states owe an “affinity” to those they help displace. Instead, it highlights how powerful nations often shift the burden of displacement onto neighboring states with fewer resources, rather than taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

To justify these imbalances, governments frequently justify restrictive refugee policies by claiming they are overwhelmed, portraying asylum as a crisis of capacity rather than responsibility. Walzer reinforces this concern, stating, "If we offered a refuge to everyone in the world who could plausibly say that he needed it, we might be overwhelmed." However, this misrepresents the reality of global refugee responsibility. No single country is expected to absorb all refugees. Just as climate change mitigation demands collective responsibility, so too does refugee protection. The real issue is not capacity, but the failure of wealthier nations to create an equitable system of burden-sharing. This imbalance is not a crisis of resources but of political will. If wealthier nations recognize differentiated responsibility in climate change policy, then the same principle must apply to refugee resettlement.

It is evident that such inconsistencies persist because refugee policy is frequently determined by national interest rather than consistent moral principles. This is highlighted by Cold War-era

asylum policies, in which Western democracies welcomed refugees from communist regimes—whether from the Soviet Union, East Germany, or Vietnam—not only because they were persecuted but because their resettlement served an ideological purpose, reinforcing the notion that communism was oppressive and that democracy was superior (International Migration and Citizenship Today, p. 64). By accepting these refugees, Western states presented themselves as defenders of freedom while simultaneously using asylum as a geopolitical tool. However, after the Cold War, when the ideological divide between democracy and authoritarianism became less clear, policymakers struggled to categorize refugees in a way that aligned with national interest. This exposed a fundamental flaw in the refugee policies of liberal democracies: they are structured around political convenience, while the existence of refugees is not. Refugees do not emerge based on strategic calculations but as a result of persecution, violence, and displacement—realities that persist regardless of whether they align with a state's political agenda. If liberal democracies genuinely uphold human rights, refugee protection cannot be contingent on political convenience. A just system must ensure that asylum is granted based on need, rather than on whether a refugee's oppression aligns with ideological or strategic objectives.

Yet, as Gibney highlights, rather than confronting this inconsistency, states systematically evade responsibility by exploiting legal loopholes within the international framework. One of the most significant of these is the ambiguous application of the principle of non-refoulement, which asserts that no refugee should be returned to a country where they face persecution. While non-refoulement prohibits deportation into danger, it does not legally require states to grant asylum. This technical distinction allows governments to acknowledge the legitimacy of a refugee's claim while simultaneously denying them entry, leaving them in a state of legal limbo, neither granted protection nor forcibly returned (Gibney, 2004, p. 140). Instead of fulfilling their humanitarian obligations, states deliberately manipulate asylum procedures: prolonging application processes, imposing indefinite detention, or severely restricting access to employment and social services. These tactics are not accidental but calculated strategies to deter asylum-seekers—a direct contradiction to the human rights commitments liberal democracies claim to uphold.

However, legal loopholes alone do not fully explain the persistence of restrictive refugee policies. Public perception plays a crucial role in justifying state inaction, and governments actively shape these perceptions to legitimize exclusionary policies. Asylum-seekers are not only denied protection but are often portrayed as threats to national security, economic stability, or social cohesion. One of the most striking examples of this is Australia's 2001 "Children Overboard" scandal, in which asylum-seekers traveling from Indonesia were falsely accused of throwing their children into the ocean to coerce the Australian coast guard into rescuing them (Gibney, 2004, p. 132). This case exemplifies how states construct deliberate narratives of refugee misconduct to erode public support for asylum. By portraying asylum-seekers as threats or manipulators, governments create an environment in which detainment, deportation, and exclusionary measures appear both necessary and justified.

This underscores the urgent need for an independent global enforcement mechanism to ensure that refugee protections are applied consistently, rather than dictated by political expediency. A mandatory refugee quota system must be implemented to equitably distribute resettlement obligations, preventing powerful states from shifting responsibility onto poorer nations while evading their own moral and legal duties. The European Union's attempt to introduce a burden-sharing system for refugee resettlement, though met with resistance, demonstrates that coordinated asylum efforts are both feasible and necessary. Without such a system, asylum policies will continue to be manipulated for national interest rather than upheld as a fundamental human right.

Some may argue that a global enforcement mechanism would infringe on state sovereignty, but this concern ignores a fundamental truth: refugee protection is not a unilateral choice, but a shared global responsibility. No single nation can opt out of the consequences of forced displacement. A refusal to participate does not eliminate the crisis; it merely shifts the burden onto other states, further destabilizing regions and creating long-term geopolitical insecurity. A structured and enforceable system does not undermine sovereignty; it reinforces collective accountability in an interconnected world. Without these structural reforms, refugee policy will remain a tool of political expediency rather than a meaningful commitment to human rights. A just and enforceable asylum system is not

merely a moral imperative—it is an essential foundation for long-term geopolitical security, global stability, and the credibility of liberal democracies as defenders of human rights.

Sources:

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