



**SEEKING REFUGE:
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

Let's Talk About Politics: Politicization of Migrants

Jeremy Adelman, Princeton University (Moderator)
Jane Bloom, International Catholic Migration Commission
Scott Cooper, Human Rights First
Salim Patel, SMILE for Charity
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The story of refugees has been experienced by some, shared by many – refugees from South Sudan and Somalia, as recounted by Professor Jeremy Adelman, to refugees from Cuba, as talked about by Jane Bloom, to Muslim refugees from New Jersey to across the world, as explained by Salim Patel and Scott Cooper. These narratives have increasingly and inexorably become politicized, and in some ways, the inextricability of politics with the refugee issue has never been more apparent. “Politicization” can entail giving a voice and avenue for engagement to refugees, but it also does not necessarily mean that rights mentioned in public discourse flow from the narratives and rhetoric directly to refugees, which points to the nuanced and perhaps highly contradictory nature of politicization. It can create difficulties for us, but it can also allow us to accomplish certain things and be a highly positive force.

Politicization goes beyond the current president, beyond Muslims, beyond a list of seven banned countries, beyond refugee resettlement, beyond front-page news. As Jane Bloom pointed out, “Migration is at the very core, heart of sovereignty... fabric of our identity.” Of course, this influx of people has engendered the politicization of fear, in the form of a security threat, an economic one, and a cultural one with regards to our lifestyle. Salim Patel notes a “sentiment shift towards welcoming refugees, with violent strains around it,” and Cooper calls out this fear as irrational, as exemplified by President Trump’s Skittles analogy. Most notably, the Muslim refugee population has been a target of xenophobia and political attacks.

However, as Patel pointed out, “Not one of the faith-based refugee resettlement services comes from the Muslim background.” We need to examine the respective needs of communities and causes for their migration and displacement, in order to build interfaith coalitions to address this primarily humanitarian issue. At the heart of this discussion lies the imperative to embed the images, religious narratives, and values circulated in and around the media into our daily lives. Still, as Dean Alison Boden admonishes based on national self-interest, we should be careful not to use corruptible values language, and even redefine our “Americanness” by “forging a new path forward,” in the words of Patel. After all, most people in the United States ascribe some value to and take pride in being ‘American,’ Cooper points out how some things can be and are “un-American” and unpatriotic, such as hateful rhetoric towards another group. As Patrick Manning, a



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discussant, posed, “What are the common values, processes, that we can appeal to, in order to form some sort of coalitions to appeal some of these divides in these countries?” And our actions need to reflect those values. Cooper After all, “America is this wonderful fiction... [and] citizenship is not a spectator sport.”

Another commonly overlooked narrative is one involving the military, as brought to light by Scott Cooper. Specifically, he reflects on how veterans can use that power - of having served in the military - to push back against the narrative of never having met a Muslim. Through Human Rights First, 2500 veterans around the country have used their power to raise their voices and meet with members of Congress. In a similar vein, Patel contends that we should all engage in more honest conversations about the expansion of our military intervention, particularly salient with Trump’s recent airstrikes in Syria.

We have historically politicized this issue; Bloom cited Obama’s shift in Cuban policy, in response to a large influx of Cubans. Immigrants are now subject to “extreme vetting” as a part of political and security measures, and the U.S.-Mexico border is less a human rights issue today and more a political one. Can we, for once, as we see these gruesome pictures circulate, recognize the humanity behind our politics?