

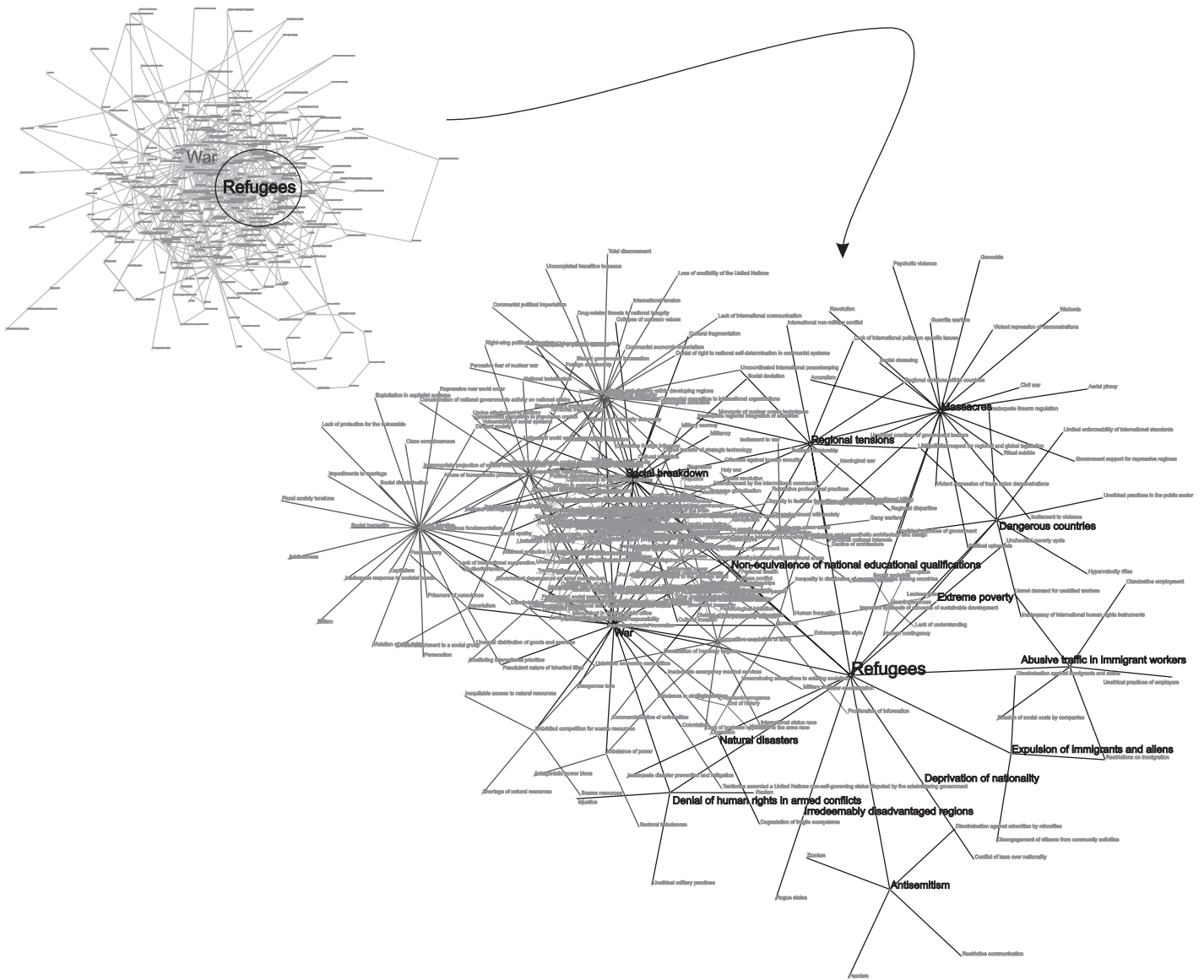
Figure 10.1.2.18. Refugees

Database: World Problems and Issues

Link type: aggravated by problems

Network nodes: 351

UIA database: <http://db.uia.org/scripts/sweb.dll/uiaf?DD=PR&DR=B0205>



Refugees have existed since humans began to raid and war. The Jews have been in a centuries old Diaspora; the Pilgrims fled to America in an attempt to flee religious persecution; and Protestant Europe in the 16th and 17th Centuries was plagued by refugees, most of whom belonged to the Protestant Church. A refugee, as defined by the UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), is any person who "owing to 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 his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or owing to such fear and for reasons other than personal convenience, is unwilling to return to it". Although there is universal agreement between countries that refugee procedures are separate from immigration, in practice to distinguish between refugees and immigrants is becoming increasingly difficult. People fleeing from war, civil disturbance and persecution are normally considered refugees while those seeking a better economic situation are not. What the difference is is frequently a matter of arbitrary choice and some immigration countries, such as Canada, blur the distinction. In marked contrast to the US' authorities handling of Cuban asylum-seekers, who may apply for permanent residence after one year, most Haitians who enter the country without visas are detained and subsequently deported. The difference is that Cubans are regarded as political refugees. It would be difficult to send them back since the USA has no formal relations with Cuba owing to its long-running feud with Fidel Castro. The European states, which do not consider themselves as immigration countries, have always maintained a distinction between "genuine refugees" and "economic migrants", people who may advance spurious claims to asylum to escape wretched conditions in the home states. Even here, the distinction between "economic" and "real" refugees is more apparent than real. As the communist regimes of eastern Europe indicate, dictatorships generate both poverty and persecution, and in practice it is the applicant who must prove his refugee status in a procedure which often has legalistic pretences rather than legal character and operates according to ever-changing criteria which are rarely made public.