



THE CASE FOR SYRIAN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN THE US

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The debate over whether or not the US should open its doors to refugees from the bloody and multisided conflict in Syria has been percolating for months. It probably peaked in the aftermath of the November 13 Paris attacks, as Republican presidential candidates and governors competed with each other to make the strongest possible anti-refugee promises. The debate has receded somewhat, but at least one major presidential candidate continues to press the issue by [promising to restrict all Muslims](#), apparently even those who hold US passports, from entering the country.

Whether or not the US should accept a significant number of Syrian refugees is a question of core American values. It is a choice between giving in to our basest fears and having faith in our national project. Refusing to accept any Syrian refugees is to allow American policy to be shaped by fear, and even midwifed by bigotry and intolerance. It places the illusion of safety over the belief that the American dream is truly universal. It is also, despite the macho bluster associated with it, a position based fundamentally on weakness and a lack of faith in the US, which ignores the reality that America has been at its best when we welcome those who face persecution and can no longer return to their war-torn countries.

In late 2015, the refugee debate became even more partisan as 27 Republican governors, and one Democratic governor, vowed not to allow Syrian refugees into their states. These positions can be variously attributed to those governors trying to generate media attention and throw some rhetorical red meat to their party's base, but the significance of their positions cannot be dismissed altogether.

These governors appear to be all too willing to discard the constitutional order for the sake of political expediency. Governors who believe that national foreign policy should be optional for their states either do not know or do not care about the differences between the US Constitution and its weak, preceding compact, the Articles of Confederation. Between about 1777

to 1788, such a state-by-state approach to the refugee crisis would have been plausible, but the founders realized this was no way to build a strong, wealthy and enduring national republic—so they created our constitution to balance state sovereignty with a stronger central government charged with, among other things, the exclusive conduct of foreign policy. The America that overcame the scourge of slavery, helped defeat Nazism, put men on the moon, and undid the sprawling Soviet empire would not have been possible without the unified, national foreign policy under our constitution.

The Syrian refugee crisis is global. Those who assert the US should not be entirely responsible for solving this problem or that the US should not be the only country taking refugees are, of course, correct. By the time the war in Syria winds down, it is certainly possible that the number of refugees could run as high 3 to 5 million. It is not reasonable to ask the US to take all of those refugees, but nobody is calling for that. However, the US—a vast land of over 315 million—could probably absorb many refugees, perhaps as many as of 250,000-500,000, and even more if we wanted. In the long run, this would likely be a political and economic boon to our country.

Given recent events in Paris, San Bernardino, Istanbul, Jakarta, and elsewhere, security issues must be considered when crafting refugee policy, but those security questions should not overwhelm the debate. Terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino were tragic and murderous, but if they turn us into a country that makes decisions based on bigotry and fear, they will have become all the more devastating.

The Security Challenge

Any policy regarding Syrian refugees must ensure the safety of the American people and the American homeland. This, however, is true of any policy, and—to the extent that security is could ever be assured—it is also virtually impossible. It is not radical or subversive to point out there is no guarantee that Americans will be kept safe here at home. History shows that threats from Islamist terrorists are just the latest in a broad ideological potpourri that have variously ranged from anarchists to white supremacists to radicals of various stripes that have, at one time or another, threatened the American people through terrorism. It is also imperative to differentiate between the threat raised by Islamist terrorists and the threat represented by Syrian refugees, most of whom are Muslim.

This latest round of discussions about Syrian refugees was touched off by the November terrorist attacks in Paris. Those attacks are relevant to the US not because they were committed by Syrian refugees, but because they demonstrate the multinational complexity of the Jihadist threat. The Paris attackers, like those who committed the atrocities against *Charlie Hebdo* and at the Kosher Market in Paris earlier last year, were mostly French citizens, many of whom had been born in France. Those people's radicalism was primarily a product of the French-Muslim experience, rather than a product of a multinational terrorist network like ISIS or Al Qaeda.

The two recent major Islamist terrorist attacks in the US, the Boston Marathon bombing and the shootings in San Bernardino on December 2, were largely perpetrated by US citizens, and not by refugees. So far, the evidence from both cases suggests that the killers were radicalized here in the US. For the most part, the US has had unique success in integrating various migrant and refugee populations. That said, homegrown radicalization represents a problem that obviously needs to be addressed as a matter of domestic policy and within America's Muslim communities—but it is not a refugee related problem.

It is theoretically possible that a Syrian refugee might arrive and try to commit a violent act of terror, but given a grueling, multi-year screening process, it would be a profoundly difficult and inefficient means of delivering terror to US shores. Islamist terrorists intent on wreaking havoc in the US would sooner activate radicalized US citizens, dispatch one of their vast ranks of European passport-carrying fighters, or simply utilize comparatively far less burdensome student, exchange, or fiancé visa categories. If Syrian refugees resettled in the US did turn to Islamist terror—which, in the history of the US refugee resettlement program, would make them a statistical near-impossibility—it will likely be from being radicalized here in the US.

The refugee debate has been clouded by punditry, a media that likes to use analogies, and exacerbated by a social media that traffics in 140-character tweets and quick images. But some of these analogies are not relevant. The fact that Albert Einstein was a refugee, for example, is a distraction and a pretty unsophisticated argument in favor of refugees. There are, however, other examples from history that are relevant.

The American contribution to the allied victory in World War II represents one of our greatest and most important accomplishments. Playing an integral role in destroying the uniquely murderous and brutal Nazi German regime and its allies is something for which all American can be proud. We should be proud of the Americans who fought for this cause overseas, as

well as those who remained home to work in war related industries or kept the country functioning during those war years. We should be proud that our military and industrial might played such a positive role at such a crucial point in world history.

When we look back on those years, however, two policies engender less pride. One of those, the refusal to accept more Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, has stark parallels to the current situation. At the time, Jews, seen as bearing alien and threatening ideologies like communism, were regarded by many Americans as not quite fit for democracy. Those events were now more than 70 years ago, but few Americans today would likely believe our country would have been weaker or more vulnerable if we had accepted more Jewish refugees. On the contrary, had thousands more Jews entered the country during the Holocaust, the US would almost certainly be a stronger country today—politically, economically, and morally. The internment of Japanese Americans, although not exactly refugee related, is the other example of the US giving into its basest fears during World War II, and also stands out as a clear mistake and a dark stain on American history.

According to the arguments against accepting refugees, Muslim refugees fleeing Syria are a particular threat because they are uniquely susceptible to radical ideology and terrorism as a means of furthering that ideology. However, that analysis ignores the most obvious and relevant (but almost entirely overlooked) analogy. Few today, or at any time during the middle two-thirds of the twentieth century, wanted to stop Catholic immigration or bar Catholic immigrants despite IRA terrorism in the UK and support for that terrorism by some American Catholics, particularly Irish Americans. Not all Catholics, or even Irish American Catholics, supported the IRA during these years, but that is precisely the point. The US government did not adopt a discriminatory policy, nor did it tar all Catholics with the same brush. Instead, it addressed the possibility of support for IRA terrorism largely as the law enforcement problem that it was.

The System Works

After initial reports linking the Paris attackers to Syrian refugee flows were found to be false, the predominant justification given by US opponents of Syrian refugee resettlement has been based on the supposed frailties of the refugee screening process. While some consternation has been leveled at the US Department of Homeland Security's practice of only infrequently monitoring social media accounts (an extremely difficult task made more so, ironically, by social media services' tendency to ban extremist users, or the surprisingly expansive Federal restrictions on monitoring US persons), the heart of these complaints appear to be tactical rather than technical. Rather than pointing to specific problematic aspects of the resettlement process, one of the more resonant arguments against refugee resettlement has been the call for a "pause" while the refugee security screening and resettlement process is reviewed. Shortly after the Paris attacks, House Speaker Paul Ryan [called for the creation](#) of a task force to offer legislation to this end as a matter of prudence.

Yet the knee-jerk calls to pause, halt, or limit Syrian refugee resettlement in the name of security largely ignores that the system [already employs](#) a comprehensive, multi-year screening process punctuated by a bevy of in-person interviews, security clearance processes, and orientations. Refugee screening appears to be at least a far more exacting labyrinth than the famously byzantine green card application process and likely even, as many Federal employees and contractors might recognize, all but the highest security clearance levels. Calls for even a "pause" look like a cynical attempt to achieve a political outcome—blocking refugee resettlement—by utilizing the language of due diligence.

Almost by definition, Syrian refugee resettlement to the US would be virtually indistinguishable from the refugee crisis that European countries are facing. In Europe, masses of refugees are transiting through Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and across the Mediterranean where they are crossing—sometimes with legal sanction, sometimes utilizing vast smuggling networks—into European Union states and utilizing the freedom of movement afforded by the Schengen Zone to transit from one state to the next. Registration is spotty, and monitoring is virtually nonexistent by virtue of the sheer scale of the refugee flows. Admittedly, the chaotic situation on the ground makes refugee movements a tempting vector for violent Islamist extremists to follow; in many respects, it is astonishing that Islamist militants have not taken advantage of refugee routes even more often, and to greater effect, than they have.

Yet the situation in Europe has no parallel to the system in the US, which is targeted, process-oriented, and even painfully deliberative in comparison. The only Syrian refugees that would be eligible for US resettlement would be those that have already been registered and received a preliminary screening by international authorities. Only then would they begin, in earnest, the extensive screening process that would result in non-acceptance for all but the very best vetted and most desperate. In effect, the US government will have the ability to screen and choose a tiny percentage of refugees to accept.

Allegations that some refugees—or at least those claiming refugee status—engage in anti-social or militant activity after entering Europe have been held up as warnings against overly permissive refugee policies. For example, Turkish authorities claim that the perpetrator of a January 2016 bombing in Istanbul came to Turkey [claiming to be a refugee](#). And in Germany, sexual assaults apparently [perpetrated by refugees](#) against German women in Cologne during New Year's celebrations have elicited a severe public backlash. Germany, which has taken in [over a million refugees](#), is often rightly held up as an example of a wealthy Western country that has liberally opened its doors to Middle Eastern refugees. Turkey has taken in many more. Yet, as laudable as Turkey and Germany's policies have been in theory—or however concerning their effects may seem to have been in practice—those countries' experiences with asylum seekers is largely incomparable to the US refugee discussion. Both countries have welcomed hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers who have had little to no vetting. By contrast, the US has the luxury of time and distance to be far more deliberative.

The Economic Case for Refugees

While there is a worthy moral case for bringing in Syrian refugees, there is also an economic dimension as well. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, there is [ample evidence](#) that immigration has a positive effect on economic growth in both the US and Europe. Indeed, there is a powerful consensus across the political spectrum—the [Cato Institute](#), the [Brookings Institution](#), the [Federal Reserve Bank](#), and the [Obama White House](#)—that immigration is a net positive for the US economy, the US consumer, and the US worker. An appreciable influx of Syrian refugees is a national economic opportunity.

The direct economic impact of migrants themselves is only one dimension of the economic argument, however. There is also convincing evidence that a large part of the US' enviable economic performance in recent years is due to relatively [favorable demographics](#)—at least as compared to Europe. And positive fertility rates appear directly linked to healthy rates of immigration.

Absent [robust immigration](#), US fertility rates are comparable to flagging levels in continental Europe, where economic growth largely remains sclerotic. However, Latin American immigration to the US, a traditional source of population inflows over the last several decades, is noticeably slowing. For example, according to Pew Research Center, there was [a net loss](#) of 140,000 Mexicans between 2009 and 2014. Mexicans are the largest single group of Latin American migrants in the US. While some of the immigration slowdown is attributable to the 2008 Great Recession or attendant labor market dislocations or shifts, Mexico's [own economic development](#) is playing a role, possibly marking the end of the wave of major Mexican immigration to the US. The macro effects—on labor markets, productivity, and demography—of slowing Latin American immigration could pose economic headwinds that will be difficult for the US to overcome. However, facilitating the entry of Syrian refugees could help ameliorate, if not replace, the fallout from reduced economic immigration.

This issue is even more pronounced on the local level. In some of the most distressed US economic regions, the effects of depopulation and an absent workforce have been major barriers to economic revitalization. In Detroit, severe decline has left vast spaces and entire neighborhoods virtually abandoned. Recognizing the role that re-populating the region will play in Detroit's long-term economic and fiscal health, the City of Detroit is coordinating with various agencies and non-profit organizations to [bring in immigrants](#) to fill many of the city's vacant tracts. Other cities suffering from deindustrialization and depopulation are also eyeing immigration as a way to buoy their economies. One potential solution that has been floated by academics and seized upon by some local leaders is the idea of "[place-based immigration](#)," which would facilitate and potentially accelerate immigration into states or localities that wanted increased immigration. The idea, which has support on [both the right and the left](#), has the potential to match need to demand while largely avoiding the political pitfalls that have traditionally accompanied conventional immigration proposals.

Place-based immigration is relevant to the refugee discussion because similar principles could theoretically apply to resettlement. In the past, refugee resettlement has essentially anchored large immigrant populations to one or two major regions, such as Hmong in Minneapolis-Saint Paul and Bosnians in St. Louis, to name a couple. In [both places](#), refugee populations have become a part of the fabric of those cities and have contributed to their region's economic development. Similarly, refugees that are resettled in the US could be distributed in states or regions that specifically sought them out. Rust belt cities, for example, seeking the influx of immigrants could appeal for large numbers of refugees. Rural counties looking to reverse years of population decline could invite smaller groups. Potentially, competition between regions for refugee resettlement could even mean that most newcomers are only placed in areas where they are actively wanted.

Bring Them In

The US should not only continue allowing refugee resettlement, but we can and should expand the total number well above the meager 10,000 refugees that current plans call for. Our neighbors in Canada have already taken in [over 10,000 refugees](#) and have plans for 25,000 by March, despite the country's smaller population, smaller economy, and the majority of its citizens squeezed along the comparatively temperate belt along the US border. The US—given our size, wealth, and population—could comfortably bring in many times the proposed 10,000 number.

While there is always room for improvement in our vetting (for thoroughness as well as efficiency), the US is already well positioned to welcome large numbers of refugees. And despite trepidation from some quarters of the US population about the efficacy of integrating immigrants and refugees, this country actually has a strong track record of integrating and absorbing newcomers from an array of backgrounds. This is true of [Mexican](#) as well as [Muslim immigrants](#). Economically, a number of US regions—and the country as a whole—would benefit from an influx of refugees, and resettlement patterns could be based on a marriage of supply (of refugees) and demand (from regions and localities), which need not necessarily force certain areas of the country to take in large numbers of refugees without demonstrating need.

This debate over refugees, however, is more than economics. It is about who we are as a country, and whether we are prepared to jettison the very principles that makes this country great—a civic nationalism, based on ideals and not ethnicity, race, creed, or orientation—out of a sense of fear or political opportunism. Fortunately, this is the kind of opportunity for the US to do the right thing not only for the sake of its principles, but for the long-term benefit of the US economy.

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