



NISKANEN
C E N T E R

INSIDERS' PERSPECTIVES:
**FORGOTTEN REFUGEE
RESETTLEMENT CONSENSUS
AND MOTIVATION**

by Professor Idean Salehyan

September 2019

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NISKANEN C E N T E R

Research Paper

INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVES:

Forgotten Refugee Resettlement Consensus and Motivation

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Executive Summary

The Trump administration has repeatedly cut refugee resettlement numbers, and there have been proposals to admit no refugees at all in fiscal year 2020. Doing so undermines the United States' position as a global leader in humanitarian affairs and runs contrary to a long, bipartisan tradition of welcoming those fleeing persecution and violence. Since the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has successfully admitted over 3 million refugees from around the world. These refugees have integrated well into American society, and the USRAP has had significant foreign policy benefits, as the U.S. seeks to bring stability to troubled regions of the world.

This report details the findings from interviews with 15 key experts in the refugee resettlement arena, from a variety of governmental and nongovernmental agencies. These experts served under Republican and Democratic administrations, and their collective experiences span over four decades of refugee admissions policies. As a whole, the group spoke to the unique leadership position of the United States in the management of refugee crises and the significant benefits that the USRAP provides as a component of a holistic foreign policy strategy. They overwhelmingly spoke to the negative consequences of current, deep cuts to refugee resettlement numbers.

Five key themes emerged from the interviews. On these points, there was remarkable consistency across the interviewees' responses. First, the United States has historically been a leader in refugee resettlement. To the extent that the U.S. is willing to resettle a significant number of refugees, this serves as a catalyst for getting other nations to do their part to manage refugee crises. Second, while fundamentally a humanitarian program, the USRAP provides other significant benefits for U.S. foreign policy. It facilitates cooperation with U.S. military efforts, helps to stabilize potentially volatile regions of the world, and casts a positive light on the U.S. among international audiences. Third, there had been broad, bipartisan support for the program – both across presidential administrations as well as among members of Congress. In recent years, however, this bipartisanship has dissipated to a large extent. Fourth, while there have been heightened fears about terrorists attempting to abuse the refugee resettlement program – particularly with respect to Syrian refugees – the experts believed that these fears were exaggerated. Finally, none of the experts believed that the Trump administration's decision to slash the refugee program is prudent policy. They expressed serious concerns about the long-term consequences of maintaining historically low admissions numbers.

From the very founding of the United States, it has welcomed immigrants and refugees seeking freedom and opportunity. Since passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, the United States has been the global leader in refugee resettlement – a tangible expression of these core American values. Reversing current policies and returning to a generous admissions program, is, therefore, sound policy and a reflection of the U.S. commitment to human rights, and it will save thousands of vulnerable refugees.

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Foreword, *by Sam Witten*

Recent reports of Trump administration officials considering another dramatic reduction in refugee resettlement have led me to reflect on what now seems like a distant memory: a bipartisan consensus on the importance of welcoming refugees to our shores and the responsibility of the United States to do so.

In the summer of 2007, I was asked by Secretary Condoleezza Rice to become the State Department's Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration. I had been a career lawyer at the State Department for 19 years before that, including serving as State Department Deputy Legal Adviser. I gladly took on the new responsibility.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has a proud history of helping people in distress – hundreds of thousands of displaced Vietnamese in the 1970s and Soviet Jews in the 1980s and 1990s; tens of thousands of vulnerable Burmese ethnic minorities; similar numbers of Iraqis and Syrians displaced by conflict; and so many others.

All told, over 3 million people have found refuge in the United States since 1980 and have gone on to strengthen this nation in immeasurable ways.

I joined the refugee bureau in the midst of the Iraqi refugee crisis. A million or more displaced Iraqis were fleeing the ethnic conflict that followed U.S. military action in that country, traveling to Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and other countries. The U.S. government had little history of refugee processing in the Middle East, but quickly showed that it was fully up to the task.

Despite a halting start due to the chaos in the region, the Departments of State and Homeland Security worked around the clock with the United Nations and hundreds of relief workers to screen eligible refugees and created a successful and lifesaving program. Many vetted Iraqis have now been resettled successfully and safely in the United States.

To me, one of the most remarkable aspects of our relief work was its truly bipartisan nature. Both Democratic and Republican lawmakers and staff on the Hill applauded and supported advances in our efforts to provide relief to Iraqi refugees. Congress appropriated hundreds of millions of dollars both for assistance to refugees in the region and for the resettlement program.

The bipartisan nature of providing refugee assistance was nothing new. The 1980 Refugee Act, which created the framework still used today for U.S. refugee relief, was passed with the devoted effort of House and Senate members from both political parties. Congress has always understood that accepting refugees not only strengthens the fabric of our country, it improves our relationships with the rest of the world.

I remained in my role in the refugee program well into the Obama administration. The transition was seamless. Political appointees of the Bush and Obama administrations were equally committed to making the resettlement program work, providing the program with

financial resources, and advocating for it with the Office of Management and Budget. Both parties in Congress continued to be very supportive.

Today, we face a polarized environment where so many lawmakers are spurred on by the politics of the moment and are acting without regard to the history and importance of refugees in the United States, the integrity of the Refugee Admissions Program, and the U.S. government's prior leadership in this area.

Any refugee coming into the United States has been carefully vetted. They undergo more screenings and security checks than persons seeking nonimmigrant visas to enter the United States or even the general population of applicants for immigration.

When Syria began imploding in recent years, the Departments of State and Homeland Security again collaborated, developing even more detailed and lengthy protocols for reviewing resettlement requests to ensure that only carefully vetted applicants were approved for admission.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Trump administration's dramatic reduction in refugee admissions is a calamity for the thousands of deserving refugees who would make it through our extremely rigorous security screening and who could in any other administration be safely and securely resettled in our country.

The administration's actions undermine the standing of the U.S. in international relief circles, as well as with our allies. For decades, the United States admonished other countries for not doing "their part" in helping the masses of displaced people in dire need. We were the humanitarian leaders on refugee admissions: We brought in many more refugees than any other country and helped fund and shape refugee relief worldwide.

Beyond the importance of humanitarian relief to advance U.S. ideals, resettlement operations often contribute to stability in parts of the world where it is desperately needed. Gutting this key aspect of refugee relief undermines our ability to help defuse volatile situations and assist desperate populations.

Further reducing refugee admissions is flatly inconsistent with U.S. values and interests. This is not who we are as a nation.

It is not too late to try to reverse the damage done so far by this administration on these crucial issues. People of compassion and vision from both political parties should step up and say "no" to the administration's misguided policy. Our nation deserves better.

Samuel Witten was a lawyer and policy official with the U.S. Department of State for 22 years. From 2007-2010 he was the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration. He is currently with the law firm Arnold & Porter

Introduction

While the United States has long been viewed as a country that is welcoming of those uprooted by war and persecution, the refugee admissions program – the hallmark of that great tradition – is being threatened like never before. Under the Trump administration, the annual number of refugees admitted from overseas has been repeatedly slashed, and there have been calls for admitting no refugees at all in fiscal year 2020 (Hesson 2019). At the same time, changes to asylum procedures at ports of entry have made it more difficult for those fleeing danger to have their cases heard in immigration courts (Aguilera 2019). With over 65 million people forcibly displaced from their homes worldwide, the failure to protect vulnerable populations by admitting even modest numbers of refugees represents an abdication of U.S. leadership on humanitarian issues and negatively impacts other foreign policy goals (Salehyan 2018).

Since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, there had been broad, bipartisan consensus about the value of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), even as other immigration policies were hotly debated. The current refugee resettlement system, which was adopted in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, has successfully brought over 3 million people from various nations to the United States. Republican and Democratic administrations from Reagan to Obama, along with members of Congress from both sides of the aisle, appreciated the importance of the program from a humanitarian perspective, along with its role as a tool of foreign policy. As such, the United States has been the world's leader in providing resettlement opportunities to the most vulnerable refugees and, until 2017, resettled more refugees than the rest of the world combined (Connor and Krogstad 2018).

Yet, a confluence of factors has led the USRAP to become highly politicized. Islamist terrorist attacks – most notably in Paris in 2015 – led to heightened, if overblown, fears of security threats stemming from Muslim refugees. Several state governors, all Republicans with the sole exception of Democratic Gov. Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, called for a halt to Syrian refugee resettlement (Bialik 2015). Then, presidential candidate Donald Trump made refugee resettlement a campaign issue, and since assuming office, he has made restricting all forms of immigration a priority, including refugee and asylum admissions (Pierce, Bolter, and Selee 2018). Thus, a program that once benefited from the support of both human rights advocates and foreign policy hawks has now become a partisan issue, to the detriment of vulnerable refugee populations.

In order to better understand the rationale behind the refugee resettlement program and its significance for the national interests of the United States, this report presents the voices of several key experts who were directly involved in the refugee resettlement program over the last four decades, serving under Republican and Democratic administrations alike. The interviews included former officials at the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (Department of State); the Office of Refugee Resettlement (Department of Health and Human Services); the National Security Council; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (Department of Homeland Security); and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, among others. During the months of May, June, and July of 2019, 15 officials were

interviewed¹, in discussions lasting approximately one hour. These semi-structured interviews delved into topics such as the prioritization of refugees for resettlement, how refugee resettlement plays a role in U.S. foreign policy, the involvement of Congress in the refugee program, the security screening process, and the current climate for refugees in the United States.

On a number of points, there was remarkable consistency across the responses. The sections below present five major themes that emerged from the interviews: 1) the importance of U.S. humanitarian leadership in the management of refugee crises; 2) the significance of the refugee resettlement program in pursuing other foreign policy objectives; 3) the bipartisan consensus on the refugee resettlement program under previous administrations, which has all but collapsed; 4) the adequacy of the existing vetting procedures for refugees; and 5) the negative consequences of maintaining historically low refugee admissions numbers in the Trump era. These interviews overwhelmingly speak to the unique leadership position of the United States in responding to global refugee crises and the positive impact of refugee admissions for a holistic foreign policy strategy.

Theme #1: U.S. Humanitarian Leadership

Many of the former officials interviewed for this project emphasized the importance of the refugee resettlement program from a purely humanitarian perspective. The U.S. commitment to refugee resettlement has helped to persuade other states to do their part in responding to the global challenge of forced migration. The stated objective, and defining feature, of the 1980 Refugee Act is that “Congress declares that it is the historic policy of the United States to respond to the urgent needs of persons subject to persecution in their homelands...” (Refugee Act 1980, Section 101(a)). Since the founding of the United States, it has welcomed those fleeing oppression for religious, ethnic, or political reasons. Accepting refugees, therefore, is part of the national character and is a tangible expression of American values. As Maunica Sthanki, former counsel for the immigration subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee, stated:

The sentiments and values that [refugees] bring, not just their moral and ethical values, but their ethos, is really at the heart of this country, and is really at the heart of the founding of our country. [The refugee resettlement program] is a way to communicate American ideals, American values, and the American ethos to the world in a way that's critically important.

The United States works in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to identify candidates for resettlement based on the humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable populations. The vast majority of the world's refugees will not be selected for

¹ One of the experts asked not to be identified. Therefore, while their comments informed the development of the project and the identification of key themes, direct quotes from the interviewee do not appear below, nor is their name listed in this report.

resettlement; however, for those with special circumstances, resettlement to the United States may become a viable option. These conditions include medical needs that cannot be met in the initial host country; the risk of renewed persecution in the host country for certain subpopulations (e.g., the LGBTQ community or certain religious minorities); or safety threats in refugee camps, which particularly affect women and young children. Therefore, in providing resettlement slots, the United States offers a form of assistance that is fundamentally different than financial contributions to host governments or international agencies, as important as these are. Providing opportunities to move to the United States, moreover, comports with a national tradition of welcoming migrants, which relatively few countries can claim. As Larry Yungk, former senior resettlement officer at the UNHCR, indicated:

Most countries have an overall humanitarian set of policies, approaches, and ways that they respond to needs around the world. And for a limited number of countries compared to, let's say, those who provide funding, providing resettlement places is one of the humanitarian responses. And you know, the U.S. resettled refugees before there was a UNHCR. So that's always been kind of a humanitarian thing the U.S. has put out there to say, after World War II, "We want to help refugees, and we will take some."

Several interviewees noted the importance of U.S. humanitarian leadership in persuading other countries to provide refugee assistance as well. At various times, potential countries of first asylum threatened to shut their borders to refugee arrivals, fearing negative political, economic, or demographic consequences. In addition, potential resettlement countries have sometimes been reluctant to offer significant numbers of admissions slots. The logic of what is sometimes referred to as 'burden-sharing' or 'responsibility-sharing' (Suhrke 1998; Türk 2016) indicates that through concerted cooperation, refugee emergencies can be better managed by the international community agreeing to shoulder some of the cost of humanitarian assistance. American leadership has often been critical to this international coordination, as efforts to persuade other states to help have been bolstered by the United States' own commitment to resettle refugees.

Nazanin Ash, former deputy assistant secretary for the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, commented on the necessity of sharing the responsibility for refugee protection:

The resettlement program by design, and really the international architecture around refugee protection, envisioned a negotiation among countries for how to share responsibility for refugees. The financial support to those countries is critical for that, and a robust resettlement program is another critical pillar of what has typically been a negotiated outcome to sharing responsibility for refugees.

United States leadership has been instrumental in preserving that architecture. When the U.S. acts, other countries are more inclined to help as well. As Gene Dewey, former assistant

secretary for the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) stated:

We found that if the United States was aggressive, and leveraged its tremendous efforts in resettling refugees in the United States, that was the best motivator of getting the eight or nine other resettlement countries to hold up their side of the responsibility.

Such robust international partnership was key to resolving one of the most significant refugee flows of the 20th century – the Indochinese refugee crisis. Indeed, the 1980 Refugee Act was enacted, in part, to respond to the exodus of thousands of Vietnamese after the war, whom the U.S. felt a special obligation to protect due to its long military engagement there. The U.S. was also able to persuade other countries to keep their doors open or resettle a share of the refugees. As James Purcell, former director of the Bureau for Refugee Programs (the precursor to PRM) under President Reagan, commented in his interview:

But every year, I had to then follow up with discussions with the Thai officials, the Malaysians, the Indonesians, the Philippines, we had to talk about what they were going to do, what we were going to do and what the other governments, how they were going to help. But there was great pressure from the first asylum governments, they felt in large measure that they were being left with the problem, and I had to convince them that we were going to be their partners and resolve it.

These sentiments were echoed by Mary Giovagnoli, former deputy assistant secretary for immigration policy at the Department of Homeland Security:

The U.S. has been a leader in refugee resettlement from the beginning. The numbers that we've admitted, in the grand scheme of things, have been low, but they've been much higher than the rest of the world, and as it should be, because the U.S. is a global powerhouse ... and our leadership on humanitarian issues does and should matter.

Yet, the leadership position of the United States has weakened under the current administration. Interviewees worried that if the U.S. retreats from its commitment to refugees, then other countries around the world will also take steps to limit refugee rights and opportunities. This jeopardizes the foundations of the global refugee protection regime. Responding to the recent (FY 2017 and 2018) cuts to the resettlement ceiling – the maximum number of refugees that can be admitted – Eric Schwartz, a former assistant secretary for PRM, asked:

And how can we expect governments like the government of Jordan, Turkey, [and] Uganda to increase the rights that they're prepared to provide to refugees who they're hosting, when we're [the U.S.] not even prepared to resettle a far more modest number?

Dewey shared similar concerns. He noted that other countries do not respond to U.S. cuts in refugee assistance by filling the gap; rather, the failure of U.S. humanitarian leadership provides cover for other states to do less as well. He commented:

The assumption that the [Trump] administration makes is that if the United States does less, then the other donor countries will do more ... It doesn't work that way in humanitarian programs. As I've said before, if we reduce our financial contributions to the United Nations, other countries tend to breathe a sigh of relief. Because it takes the pressure off them, from the United States, to leverage as we've done. We've done burden-sharing for all of my life, in humanitarian affairs.

Therefore, retreating from the United States' long commitment to resettle refugees threatens the responsibility-sharing regime that has been carefully built since the Second World War. With the number of refugees around the world at historic highs, the U.S. failure to take even modest numbers negatively affects other nations' willingness to provide their own forms of assistance. This leaves millions of lives in peril. Global leadership on refugee affairs, moreover, is key to ensuring that refugee crises do not threaten global order and stability (Salehyan 2018; Suhrke 1998), which the experts also stressed in their interviews, a theme that is explored below.

Theme #2: Importance of Refugee Resettlement as a Tool of Foreign Policy

A second major theme that emerged from the interviews considers the relationship between refugee policy and the strategic interests of the United States. While the primary purpose of the USRAP is to provide humanitarian relief to vulnerable populations, there are also clear foreign policy benefits to doing so. A significant share of resettled refugees come from places where the U.S. has had military engagements, including Vietnam, Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The U.S. resettled over 160,000 Iraqis and Afghans following recent wars there, while over 450,000 Vietnamese were resettled under the United Nations' Orderly Departure Program from 1980-1997.²

As such, the U.S. has felt a special obligation to care for those affected by violence. Resettlement policy has prioritized individuals who worked directly with the United States in these contexts and, owing to such ties, faced risks to their safety. The Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program for Iraqis and Afghans, for instance, was designed with such intentions, although under the Trump administration, the number allowed to enter under this designation has dwindled (Alvarez 2018a).

² This does not include the more than 200,000 Vietnamese resettled immediately after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

In addition, the U.S. used the refugee resettlement program to avert regional instability in cases where countries of first asylum faced significant economic, demographic, and security challenges in accommodating large inflows of people. This was often done, as in the case of the Kosovo refugee crisis in 1999, in cooperation with countries in the immediate region and other resettlement destinations (Barutciski and Suhrke 2001). Finally, and no less important, providing generous humanitarian protection to people fleeing war and authoritarianism casts a positive light on the United States and its commitment to human rights. Although this benefit is less tangible, the experts asserted that a positive international image – particularly when contrasted with the poor human rights record of key foreign rivals – helps to advance U.S. interests abroad.

Georgetown University Professor Susan Martin, who served as the executive director for the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform in the 1990s, noted the importance of refugee resettlement following the end of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, particularly as allied forces on the ground faced the reality of a communist takeover:

Certainly, the first wave of refugee resettlement from Vietnam was mostly pushed by the State Department and [Department of] Defense people who were concerned about what would happen when the U.S. embassy was evacuated, what would happen to all the people who had been working for the U.S. government. There were airlifts to get those people out as well.

This concern for locals who worked with the U.S. government extends to more recent conflicts. Thousands of Afghans and Iraqis risked their lives to support American forces, and their active cooperation was critical for successful military operations. When they faced retribution against themselves and their families, the U.S. took steps to protect them by allowing access to its borders. Kori Schake, former director for defense strategy on the National Security Council, explained that:

American military folks felt ... an enormous sense of obligation to Iraqis and Afghans who were interpreters or worked with the American military. In a lot of individual instances I know, those American military folks went to extraordinary lengths to try and make sure that the American government honored the promises that those military folks made to their interpreters and to people who had been assisting our war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Failing to protect people who work with the U.S. can have disastrous consequences for future operations because setting a precedent of abandoning allies on the ground would make it more difficult to secure cooperation down the road, some interviewees attested. This has a long term, tangible effect on the U.S.' ability to conduct foreign policy.

Academic research has found that large refugee flows can have destabilizing effects on a region, particularly if host governments have poor capacity to integrate the newcomers, are

struggling economically, or face ethnic/sectarian divisions that are exacerbated by large numbers of new arrivals (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Rügger 2019; Tumen 2016). The officials interviewed for this project confirm that refugee resettlement priorities and humanitarian assistance packages were often designed to respond to the needs of regional partners and allies, thereby ensuring their continued cooperation with the U.S. government. As Dewey explained:

We are assisting the refugee populations coming from places like the Middle East, where you have countries like Jordan and Lebanon that are hosting large numbers of refugees. They need our help, and so, it's a huge force for stability. The [refugee] admissions program is part of that.

Nazanin Ash agreed with this sentiment:

We see a very thorough thread that is based on the scale of need, the vulnerability of the populations, and its geostrategic importance with respect to maintaining regional stability and supporting partners who are carrying a large responsibility for refugees.

Ash, who served in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, elaborated on these challenges with respect to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. With over 1 million Syrians currently residing in Lebanon (out of a population of 6 million), the change to the demographic balance between Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, and Christians – a continued source of tension – is concerning. Recently, as anti-immigrant sentiments have gathered steam, Lebanese authorities have been pressuring Syrians to return home to potentially unsafe conditions, including by imposing restrictions on their employment, movement, and educational opportunities (El Deeb 2019). Ash notes that:

It was very much recognized that it was really important for Syrian refugees to be able to be allowed access to safety over borders. There was very strong recognition that countries [in the region] would need significant additional support to do so. Then, there were sub-negotiations below those two umbrellas that were about... other protection needs for refugees, like allowing them freedom of movement, education programs, and access to jobs, and a lot of that came later.

While the number of Syrians resettled was quite modest – in part due to the backlash against the program (discussed below) – resettlement slots, in conjunction with humanitarian aid on the ground, were part of U.S. negotiations with regional partners and European allies, who were faced with staggering numbers of refugees. Indeed, late in the Obama administration (September 2016), the Leaders' Summit on Refugees attempted to bring resolution to the Syrian refugee crisis through determined multilateral cooperation and U.S. leadership, including through substantially increasing resettlement slots.

At that summit, President Obama remarked, “When nations with their own internal difficulties find themselves hosting massive refugee populations for years on end, it can risk more instability.”³

This multilateral approach to resolving refugee situations has a proven track record. Resettlement has contributed to preventing further destabilization in the Balkans, among other regions. In the late 1990s, the displacement of Kosovo Albanians generated concerns about regional spillover effects in Macedonia, which has its own Albanian minority. Shared international responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance and resettlement opportunities was key to ensuring Macedonia’s continued cooperation with NATO efforts (Barutciski and Suhrke 2001). Susan Martin explains that:

When the Kosovars were moving into Albania and Macedonia, the Macedonians tried to stop the entry, and people were caught in the no man’s land between Kosovo and Macedonia in ‘98 ... that eventually pushed the governments to respond, at least having a temporary evacuation of some number of the Kosovars to other countries to reduce the burden on Macedonia.

In 1999, as the U.S. launched airstrikes against the Serbian government, it resettled over 14,000 people from Kosovo to ease the pressure on Macedonia, and other countries responded in kind (Barutciski and Suhrke 2001). In addition to the Kosovo Albanians, over 130,000 refugees from Bosnia were brought to the United States following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia for similar reasons. While the humanitarian needs of refugees were paramount, containing conflict spillover in a geostrategically important region of Europe was a clear consequence of the refugee resettlement program.

No less important is the reputational effect that a generous, robust refugee resettlement program has had on the United States. A number of the interviewees commented on how refugee resettlement fosters a positive image of the U.S. as a welcoming, tolerant place that values human rights and human dignity. This logic was often acknowledged during the Cold War, as accepting refugees and asylum seekers fleeing communist dictatorships served to discredit such regimes while presenting the United States as place where people fled to in search of freedom (Moorthy and Braithwaite 2019; Rosenblum and Salehyan 2004). Fostering a favorable global image remains important to this day, experts noted. Though perhaps less tangible, this good standing in the international community has positive repercussions for other foreign policy goals.

³ “Remarks by President Obama at Leaders Summit on Refugees.” United Nations: New York. September 20, 2016. Accessed online at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/remarks-president-obama-leaders-summit-refugees> (access date, August 14, 2019).

As Kori Schake observed:

We have traditionally been seen as a place welcoming to refugees, it gives us the benefit of the doubt and lowers the cost of everything we try and do on a national security front, because there is a general perception that we are better than the adversaries we are working against or fighting against. That's a direct national security benefit to the United States.

Eric Schwartz agreed:

Our capacity to exercise what people have called smart power, to exercise moral leadership, to be seen as an international good citizen, is a tremendous source of continued influence at a time when other measurements of influence and power are ebbing.

In fact, while the 1980 Refugee Act was clearly designed to be a humanitarian program, it also acknowledges “the impact of participation of the United States in the resettlement of such refugees on the foreign policy interests of the United States” (Refugee Act of 1980, Section 207). Previous administrations have therefore used the USRAP to assist the most vulnerable refugees while also paying attention to implications for national security, international stability, and the United States’ global reputation. Therefore, the benefit of the admissions program is not only for refugees themselves, but also for the interests of the United States in the global arena.

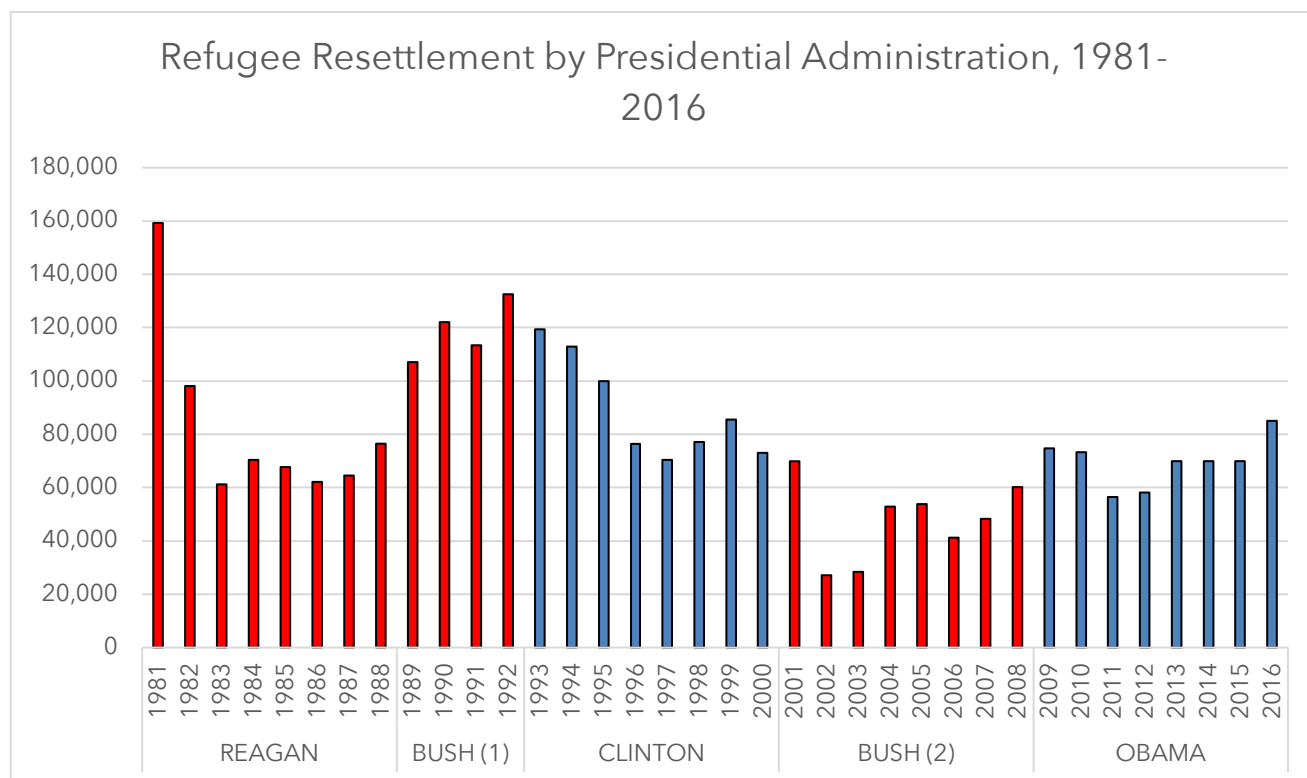
Theme #3: Bipartisan Support and its Erosion

For nearly four decades, both Republican and Democratic administrations have used the USRAP as an expression of U.S. humanitarian values and to support foreign policy initiatives. Indeed, the average number of refugees resettled annually by Democratic presidents since 1981 (Clinton and Obama) stood at approximately 79,500, while the comparable figure for Republican presidents (Reagan and both Bush administrations) was very similar: 75,800.⁴

The numbers have certainly fluctuated based on the global humanitarian situation and foreign policy priorities at the time, yet the United States consistently offered more resettlement opportunities than all other resettlement destinations. Thus, there was broad bipartisan support for admitting refugees across presidential administrations.

⁴ If one excludes the two years after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when all agencies dealing with immigration were receiving a major overhaul, Republican presidents brought in an average of 81,175 refugees per year.

Fig. 1: Refugee Resettlement by Presidential Administration, 1981-2016



Moreover, members of Congress of both parties shared a commitment to maintaining U.S. leadership on refugee resettlement, despite differences on other immigration policies. Indeed, the interviewees for this project often noted that members of Congress would frequently make strong cases for admitting *more* refugees from a particular region. Reasons for doing so included expressions of humanitarianism, solidarity with key foreign allies, concerns about religious liberty and political freedom, pressures from constituents, and support for military operations. David Martin, who served in the State Department in the Carter administration, Justice Department in the Clinton administration, and as principal deputy general counsel of the Department of Homeland Security under Obama, commented that:

[Congress] would ask some pretty pointed questions, and the staff would often be in contact, or even members might call an assistant secretary ... to say, "You should be doing more for X group." Sometimes that'd be very personal because they happen to have a lot of individuals from that ethnic group, refugees who had resettled in their home districts, and other times because of geopolitical considerations ...

Gene Dewey remarked upon the strong support that the refugee program enjoyed from Congress and the members' positive working relationship with State Department officials:

It was a very a constructive relationship that... the Bureau for Refugee Programs and the PRM had with Congress. Not always total agreement, but in the very frequent meetings we had with congressional staffers, and with the principals in there, there was an opportunity to air and put in complete detail, the reasons for our refugee numbers that we proposed each year ... [We] were able to argue the merits of it to the Congress, and generally had a very strong support of Congress [for] a substantially high number of refugee admissions to the United States.

James Purcell noted that during the 1980s, in addition to support from the Reagan administration and members of Congress, there was also significant local support for the Vietnamese refugee program, which bolstered its success:

For the most part the American public was very welcoming to this vast Vietnamese community. The biggest resettlement program since World War II and they're pretty welcoming to them ... In fact, when I left the program after about a decade, I got a lot of calls from mayors and governors and social service people; they wanted to know how we get more of these folks. They were hard workers, they were industrious, they were establishing communities.

Yet, this bipartisan consensus began to break down as the Syrian refugee crisis captured global headlines. In 2014 and 2015, thousands of asylum seekers were entering the European Union each month, mainly from Syria and other Muslim-majority nations. This contributed to a rise in populist, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment (Hangartner et al. 2019). As the Islamic State (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) made rapid gains in Syria and Iraq, the narrative about refugees and immigrants from some political leaders shifted to concerns about terrorism. Then, in November 2015, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks took place across Paris, killing 130 people, with ISIS claiming responsibility. It was reported that some of the attackers were posing as asylum seekers. Many of the interviewees for this project remarked that November 2015 was a significant turning point in discussions regarding refugee resettlement.

In the days following the Paris attacks, over half of U.S. state governors – all but one of whom were Republicans – sought to bar Syrian refugees from resettling in their states, citing fears of terrorism. This despite the fact that unlike asylum seekers in Europe, who largely have their claims adjudicated in-country, candidates for U.S. refugee resettlement are screened and vetted prior to entry (discussed below). Then-Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump made refugee admissions, and immigration of Muslims in general, a campaign issue, stating that, "Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on" (Wolf 2018). Ever since, the USRAP has become a matter of partisan contention.

Barbara Strack, former chief of the refugee affairs division, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, commented on the erosion of bipartisan support:

In the earlier years, the program was, I would say, relatively popular with both Republicans and Democrats. So, in the early years we had Ted Kennedy [Democrat] and Sam Brownback [Republican] who were equally boosters of refugee resettlement. It became somewhat more polarized over the years and we had more Republicans asking pointed questions. A lot of the time, I guess, I would characterize it (as) not so much about the total ceiling itself, but rather the mix of refugees under the ceiling.

Anne Richard, former assistant secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration under President Obama, also commented on the increasingly partisan nature of the USRAP:

But in addition to governors [who opposed refugee resettlement], there was a lot of focused attention on Capitol Hill to these issues. There was a real split along partisan lines on the issues, with Democrats from big cities really defending refugee programs, and refugee resettlement, and conservatives from red states, especially majority rural areas, talking a lot in terms of national security, law enforcement, anti-terrorism. We had always benefited ... from bipartisan support for our programs. This time period in 2015, and then as the presidential campaign heated up in 2016, really led to divisiveness on these issues in a way that I thought was terrible.

From her perspective working on Capitol Hill, Maunica Sthanki noted that the anti-Muslim views expressed by President Trump also extended to members of Congress:

The overarching theme from the Republicans was ... concern over bad actors, concern about fraud. There were lots of conversations about the need for more Christian refugees. There were often fairly explicit conversations about the reduction of Muslim refugees ... More Christians, less Muslims. That was quite shocking. They said it fairly bluntly.

There are, to be sure, Republicans who continue to support a robust refugee resettlement program. Yet to the extent that many Republicans continue to support resettlement, some may be reluctant to make their positions public.

Susan Martin also commented on the lack of vocal Republican support for refugees:

And a lot of the pro-refugee Republicans have either left the Congress or they are extremely silent on this issue. You used to be able to rely on, let's say, Lindsey Graham. He was usually pretty pro-refugee. You don't hear from him on this issue anymore. There are no Republicans who are standing out and saying, "No, we really have an obligation to people who are being persecuted..."

Despite these views, there are recent, promising signs that members of Congress from both sides of the aisle are expressing support for refugees. In August 2019, a bipartisan group of senators, including nine Republicans and nine Democrats, signed a letter expressing concern over reports that some Trump administration officials have proposed eliminating all refugee resettlement for FY 2020.⁵ There have been similar bipartisan efforts in the House of Representatives.⁶ Nonetheless, as refugee admissions remain the prerogative of the executive branch, expressions of support for refugee resettlement by Congress are not likely to go far unless they have the backing of the president or until new legislation is passed.

Theme #4: Concerns Over the Safety of the Refugee Program are Exaggerated

One of the stated reasons the Trump administration put forth for reducing the number of refugees – particularly in the wake of the Paris attacks – was that the vetting procedures are inadequate. On this point, the unanimous sentiment of the experts was that these concerns are exaggerated. While no admissions program is 100 percent foolproof, the interviewees indicated that the risk of unwittingly admitting a terrorist through the USRAP is extremely low due to the safeguards already in place. These include multiple background checks by various intelligence and security agencies, in-person interviews, the collection of biometric information, and health screening – a process which lasts approximately two years.⁷

Indeed, a report by the Cato Institute finds that the risk of an American being killed by a refugee in an act of terrorism stands at 1 in 3.65 *billion* a year (Nowrasteh 2016). Since the refugee resettlement program was created in 1980, not a single refugee has launched a fatal terrorist attack in the United States. Despite this track record, during the 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump called for 'extreme vetting' of refugees, claiming that the existing security

⁵ The full text of the letter can be found on Senator James Lankford (R-OK) website at: <https://www.lankford.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senators-lankford-coons-lead-letter-on-concerns-to-eliminate-refugee-cap>

⁶ In particular, the bipartisan Congressional Refugee Caucus contains has stated opposition to proposed cuts to the refugee resettlement program: <https://neguse.house.gov/media/press-releases/congressman-neguse-leads-bipartisan-letter-oppose-trump-administration-actions>

⁷ Details on the refugee screening process can be found at: <https://refugees.org/explore-the-issues/our-work-with-refugees/security-screening/>

screening procedures were flawed. But as Robert Carey, who directed the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Obama administration and previously served as the vice president for resettlement and migration policy for the International Rescue Committee, explains:

Extreme vetting, I think, was a political catchphrase. Refugees were already the most thoroughly vetted individuals entering the United States under any immigration status, bar none.

Gene Dewey, who headed PRM in the years following 9/11, was actively involved in strengthening security screening for refugees admitted to the United States. He also rejected the notion that the vetting process was inadequate:

I think that was fearmongering. Again, I can speak with some standing on that, because I went through it after 9/11. [We] saw what we had to do with groups that might harbor terrorists, and worked out ways to do it, and not just to save our jobs, knowing that we'd be the first to lose a job if terrorists came in. [We found] common sense ways of implementing 'extreme vetting.'

Barbara Strack, who worked directly on refugee vetting procedures under President Obama as well as during the Trump administration, also commented on the adequacy of existing standards:

We really were in the forefront of working with other agencies, to try to do the best vetting that we could, both biometric and biographic ... There's no perfect system, but I felt very comfortable that we were very forward leaning and ... we were among the most secure checks for any category of traveler to the United States. And I felt confident about that.

Robert Carey agreed, indicating that the refugee resettlement program is a very unlikely target for terrorists or other malevolent actors seeking access to the U.S. He elaborated upon the lengthy and arduous process of applying for refugee status and passing the security clearances necessary for gaining admission:

The refugee vetting system had been continuously increased and upgraded since I was involved in the program. Certainly after 9/11, there were many additional screening processes put into place... If you were to enter the U.S. as a terrorist, I don't think it'd be the most effective way of doing so... I think one always needs to be mindful of security concerns, and that has always been a part of the refugee program. The rhetoric claiming that there was no vetting is patently false, or to say that the vetting was minimal is patently false, and anyone who knows the program would know that this is the case, that the vetting program by multiple federal agencies is extremely rigorous and includes biometric data, background checks, and checks against international databases.

Some of the respondents expressed the view that the Trump administration's stated concern about security, particularly with respect to Muslim refugees, may have been a pretext for slashing resettlement numbers overall.

Indeed, the cuts to the refugee resettlement program in FY 2017 and FY 2018 went far beyond Muslim-majority countries or those with a history of terrorist activity. Eric Schwartz explains:

And yet, the security issues so overwhelm the program, and I think especially in this administration. I think somehow that's unfortunate. Security is important and you need to work your way through those issues, but it's given this administration a pretext, essentially, to cut off resettlement from Muslim countries altogether, and that's a real tragedy.

Robert Carey also shared his view that the cuts to the refugee resettlement program may be part of a broader agenda to reduce overall immigration levels rather than being based upon a credible analysis that vetting procedures were lacking:

I think some of it's just anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia, some of it, I think, is more cynically ... politically driven. But I don't think it's based on sound analysis or policy ... I know that there are people within the administration who quite frankly don't like immigrants in any way, shape, or form.

Many interviewees felt that public concerns about the safety and security of the resettlement program were understandable but emphasized that political leaders have a responsibility to assuage these fears. In closing this section, James Purcell urges a more level-headed approach and determined leadership to alleviate apprehensions about refugees and immigrants:

Back in my day we had leaders that made it clear to people that we welcome [refugees], they're appreciated, they make contributions to our society, and we were seeing contributions that they made to American culture and economics ... We've got leaders now that tell us exactly the opposite. We have to say that we see some benefits, we can't see everyone as an enemy...

Theme #5: Negative Consequences of Current Policies

None of the experts believed that the current deep cuts to the refugee resettlement program are in the national interest. Instead, they characterized the Trump administration's policies as "discouraging," "disgraceful," "ridiculous," and an "abysmal policy decision." They expressed grave concerns about the mental and physical harm done to thousands of refugees who continue to require humanitarian assistance.

But the interviewees also feared the implications of slashing the USRAP for America's global reputation and for the long-term impact on domestic resettlement agencies. Not a single person interviewed thought that the policy shift was based upon sound, careful analysis.

Susan Martin expressed the concern that the problem extends beyond the historically low admissions numbers, but also pertains to the public narrative around refugees and asylum seekers:

Well, the biggest consequence of the Trump decisions aren't just the numbers. It's actually the way in which they're trying to change the refugee definition, and make less credible the claims of refugees overall. It's partly by setting an abnormally low number... [but also] giving this idea to our public and to other countries that there's something illegitimate about refugees.

Gene Dewey, who worked on refugee and humanitarian affairs for decades, was concerned that the very essence of the 1980 Refugee Act, and the entire architecture for refugee resettlement – which has served the U.S. well for nearly 40 years – may be collapsing:

We aren't making America great by making America selfish ... We make America great by a concern for people who didn't have a voice, in places where there wasn't any vote. And that was the definition of American exceptionalism ... So, what is happening today is just a reversal of a regime which was built up, starting in the late 1970s, and succeeded during the refugee decade of the 1980s. And it was working well in the post-9/11 period. Now, suddenly, [that] has been tossed out, for reasons that just don't make any sense at all.

Many of the experts argued that recent changes to humanitarian admissions programs – both refugee resettlement and the asylum process – have had negative global implications. As discussed above, when the U.S. retreats from humanitarian leadership, other countries will find it easier to follow suit. In addition, experts such as Anne Richard argued that anti-migrant rhetoric has contributed to narratives that feed right-wing populism and the erosion of democratic values around the world:

I feel that when the president ... says these terrible things about migrants and refugees, he's just putting fuel on the fire of these right-wing, and to some extent fascist governments in Eastern Europe; and brutal, authoritarian dictatorships say ... 'Even the Americans build walls. Even the Americans throw asylum seekers in prison.'

Larry Yungk agreed that cutting refugee admissions has led to a deterioration of the global refugee regime and increased hostility toward migrants. Other nations have taken similar measures to restrict rights and access:

So the U.S. being the largest resettlement country, you know, I just think it's an example that triggers other countries to be more hardline as well ... It's kind of a mutually-reinforcing downward spiral.

On a more general note, Kori Schake commented on the implications of the Trump administration's refugee cuts for the United States' global reputation. She argued that cuts to the refugee program not only provide justification for other countries to take similar measures, but also that anti-immigrant rhetoric affects the United States' ability to achieve other foreign policy goals. In her view, a positive global image is an invaluable resource, and anti-immigrant policies diminish that image:

We will be seen as racist, as hostile to immigrants, as bigots, and that will make harder everything the United States tries to do in the world, because we get the benefit of being seen very often as a force for good, as being different and better than our adversaries ... That benefit of the doubt not only will evaporate, [but] it is evaporating because of the bigoted choices of the Trump administration.

The need for desperate people to seek safety will not cease because of cuts to resettlement slots. Some respondents argued that, in the absence of a robust refugee resettlement program, people will attempt to enter the U.S., or other countries, through alternative channels. The current wave of Central American migrants to the Southwest border, for example, could be addressed by offering refugee resettlement and screening applicants in their home countries. James Purcell commented on the tradeoff between slashing resettlement numbers and having asylum claims heard at the border:

The problem is because we don't have a refugee resettlement program, people coming into this country... have to use other mechanisms. So what do they do? Think [of the] Central Americans. They come in as political asylum applicants, they go to the border, they [present] themselves unvetted ... Currently we've denied the possibility of refugee resettlement, so we can't set up regional camps throughout Central America and have people considered there ... so they all come flocking to the border and requesting political asylum, which in the final analysis is exactly the same as refugee status.

Another long-term consequence of cuts to the USRAP is the impact it has had on refugee resettlement agencies across the country. With fewer refugees admitted, many are laying off experienced staff and closing offices (Alvarez 2018b; LaCorte 2019). The experts indicated that this will reduce the capacity to respond to future refugee challenges should the need arise to ramp up resettlement numbers due to a foreign crisis.

Mary Giovagnoli notes that:

Every time an agency closes, or has to shut down that part of the program, you lose staff, you lose people with expertise in the language, in cultural resettlement issues. You lose just basic expertise [and] institutional knowledge, and it's really sort of struck a blow, I think, to the infrastructure that exists.

Robert Carey also commented on the reduction in domestic capacity to serve refugees:

The U.S. has been the traditional leader in that work, and it's a leader not only in the numbers but in the expertise in the systems. So whether it's a social program, or economic development programs, or a host of services that were administered primarily through ORR ... When those [resettlement] offices are closed and the people who perform those services, the experts, move on to other work, that expertise goes away ... it's not as though you can easily turn on a faucet and have those people with years or decades of experience ... It's not as though there's kind of an institutional repository for a lot of that information, and a lot of it's being lost right now.

While the experts agreed that cuts to the resettlement program were bad policy, had negative repercussions for the nation's international reputation, and negatively impacted the work of resettlement agencies, the overwhelming concern was for the lives of refugees themselves. As discussed above, the refugee resettlement program offers a type of benefit that is fundamentally different than humanitarian assistance in countries of first asylum. Resettlement provides tangible benefits to vulnerable groups whose needs cannot be met elsewhere. While many refugees prefer to stay close to their origin country and hope for repatriation or local integration, resettlement is often the only viable option for a share of the world's refugees.

Susan Martin shared the example of an Iraqi refugee in Jordan whose infant daughter had a large growth on her back, which was affecting the child's ability to move her limbs. No hospital in Jordan was equipped to perform the operation that was needed to care for her daughter. There was, however, a U.S. hospital that "agreed to do the surgery pro bono if she could just get there."

After receiving refugee status and passing through all necessary clearances, she was informed that by the time the final agency had signed off on her security screening, the first agency's authorization had expired. The woman was told that she had to go through the entire process again, which could take up to two years. But in the meantime, "the child was becoming totally paralyzed." Fortunately, after Martin met with the U.S. ambassador to Jordan, she was able to persuade him to expedite the process in this case. While Martin was grateful for the ambassador's intervention, she worried about others in similar circumstances: "Multiply that by a factor of a thousand. That's what we're talking about."

Robert Carey also expressed concern for people in desperate need of help who will needlessly suffer because of cuts to the refugee program:

So, that has a whole host of implications, both in terms of U.S. reputation, but also more people will die, or are dying. People who don't have access to medical care because they're in a refugee camp, where there is none, or it's limited. Borders being closed, so people do not have an opportunity to flee. Children who don't have access to a future education.

Notwithstanding the pessimism about the Trump administration's policies, many of the respondents urged future administrations to restore the refugee resettlement program and the American humanitarian leadership position. Many were confident that the U.S. would eventually return to its historic tradition of welcoming those fleeing persecution and violence. Nazanin Ash believes that "there is an opportunity and an imperative to rescue what's been a proud and inspiring American legacy of protection for the most vulnerable." Thus, while there is no indication that the Trump administration will reverse course on refugee policy, many indicated that it will be up to future presidents to restore public confidence in the resettlement program and the benefits it brings.

Conclusion

In closing, the interviewees for this project included a diverse and distinguished group of policy experts. As a group, they served under various presidential administrations, from Carter to Trump; they included Republicans and Democrats; and they served in various governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and academic institutions. Although they had nuanced perspectives on the refugee resettlement program, there was remarkable consistency in their answers. Each believed in the significant benefits that refugee admissions offer to vulnerable migrants as well as to the United States; each believed that protecting refugees is part of an honorable national tradition; and each lamented the retreat from the U.S. historical commitment to refugee assistance.

Eskinder Negash, former director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement and current CEO of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, offered these remarks:

The [current] narrative and the discussion is very toxic... it doesn't reflect our history, who we are as a country. If we think that refugees and immigrants have been a burden to this country, we would be the poorest country in the world. That's not the case. The changing environment, the demonizing of refugees who are seeking asylum is not a good reflection of our country, that's not who we are. We are a country that is founded by refugees and immigrants.

Since the inception of the refugee resettlement program in 1980, over 3 million people have come to the United States to better their lives. The vast majority eventually become United

States citizens, contribute to the economy (New American Economy 2017), and eventually pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). The U.S. has used the refugee resettlement program to stabilize troubled regions, and the nation's international reputation as a welcoming, tolerant society provides innumerable benefits (Purcell 2019). TheUSRAP is, therefore, a win-win benefiting not only the resettled refugees but also the United States.

This legacy of humanitarian leadership has been tarnished under the current presidential administration. This has also led to the steady erosion of the international refugee regime constructed after the Second World War, as countries adopt increasingly restrictive policies to shut the door on the displaced (Fitzgerald 2019; Purcell 2019). This imperils the lives of millions of people and threatens global stability.

Yet, several of the experts were encouraged by strong, vocal expressions of public support for the refugee program. Many Americans appreciate the United States' historical reputation as a country of immigration and have been working ardently to counter anti-immigrant narratives coming from the White House and other sectors. Through participation in this project, these experts added their voices and knowledge to a growing list of prominent individuals who continue to defend the importance of the United States Refugee Admissions Program. Hopefully, their contributions to this project will help to move the discussion in a positive direction to ensure that the U.S. continues to welcome refugees and immigrants.

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List of Official Interviewed, With Former Positions

Ash, Nazanin, *Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, State Department.*

Carey, Robert, *Director, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Department of Health and Human Services.*

Dewey, Arthur Eugene, *Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, State Department.*

Giovagnoli, Mary, *Deputy Assistant Secretary for Immigration Policy, Department of Homeland Security.*

Martin, David, *Deputy General Counsel, Department of Homeland Security.*

Martin, Susan, *Executive Director, U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform.*

Negash, Eskinder, *Director, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Department of Health and Human Services.*

Purcell, James, *Director, Bureau for Refugee Programs, State Department.*

Richard, Anne, *Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, State Department.*

Schwartz, Eric, *Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration, State Department.*

Schake, Kori, *Director for Defense Strategy, National Security Council.*

Sthanki, Maunica, *Counsel, Immigration Subcommittee, House of Representatives Judiciary Committee.*

Strack, Barbara, *Chief of Refugee Affairs Division, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.*

Yungk, Larry, *Senior Resettlement Officer, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.*



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