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The Strategic Case for Refugee Resettlement

by Professor Idean Salehyan
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THE STRATEGIC CASE FOR REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Prof. Idean Salehyan

Professor of Political Science, University of North Texas
Adjunct Fellow, Niskanen Center

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Trump administration has dramatically reduced the number of refugees resettled to the United States. For Fiscal Year 2018, the cap on the number of resettled refugees was lowered to 45,000, although the actual number of admissions is likely to be far lower.

These cuts were predicated on the notion that refugees could potentially pose a security risk to the U.S. However, these fears are misplaced, as vetting procedures for refugees are quite robust. In addition, refugee resettlement is a useful tool for achieving broader U.S. foreign policy objectives.

The United States has a long tradition of welcoming people fleeing conflict and persecution. Beyond the humanitarian impact of generous refugee admissions programs, they also help bring stability to conflict-ridden regions. Through refugee resettlement and generous overseas assistance programs, the U.S. has reduced the burden on countries of first asylum, which often have weak capacity to manage migration. Moreover, refugee resettlement helps to facilitate the cooperation of regional partners and allies as the U.S. pursues broader geostrategic objectives, including military operations.

Finally, since the refugee resettlement program was created in 1980, not a single refugee has been involved in a fatal terrorist attack on the U.S., attesting to the robustness of vetting procedures. This includes thousands of refugees resettled from Muslim nations, including Syria and Iraq, which are believed to pose the most risk.

Instead, the vast majority of refugees have successfully adapted to life in America, contributed positively to the economy, and eventually acquired citizenship. These success stories serve to foster a positive image of the United States abroad, countering extremist narratives. Therefore, cuts to the resettlement program do little to enhance national security, and indeed, run counter to that end.

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FOREWORD

There are many positive cases to make in favor of admitting refugees and asylum seekers into the United States: exercising our values as a safe harbor for people suffering danger or oppression, drawing ideological contrast between the attractiveness of our way of life compared to that of our adversaries, gaining the economic advantages of entrepreneurial and educational talent added to our nation. And 84% of refugees who have been in the U.S. for 16-25 years elect to become U.S. citizens, a far higher rate than among other immigrant groups.

While I agree with all of those arguments, I'd like instead to focus on the case against admitting refugees and asylum seekers, and why it is unfounded. The Trump administration has dramatically cut back the number of refugees it intends to admit, and the effect of related policies like the travel ban or immigrant family separation stifle applicants. President Trump justified these policies as needed to protect the U.S. from terrorism. That argument is unsubstantiated.

As this report demonstrates, since the refugee resettlement program was launched in 1980, not one American has been killed in a terrorist attack perpetrated by a refugee. Not one of the Syrian refugees admitted to the U.S.—of which 72% are women and children under 14 years old—has been involved in a terrorist attack.

The only terrorist attacks launched in the U.S. by refugees were committed by Cuban exiles in the 1970s. Of the 784,000 refugees resettled in the United States between 2001 and 2015, only three have been arrested on terrorism charges, and these were for attempting to provide assistance to groups abroad rather than plotting attacks in the U.S.

The main reason refugees to the U.S. pose so little danger is the careful and extensive screening process established by Congress and the Executive branch in the Refugee Act of 1980. Refugees are screened overseas by the State Department, U.S. Customs and Immigration Service, the Department of Homeland Security, and intelligence agencies. Only after those agencies are satisfied would the refugee be admitted to the U.S., after which Customs and Immigration make one more evaluation.

This process takes between 18 months and 3 years. No other individuals or groups seeking entry into the U.S. receive such careful scrutiny. As such, the odds of an American being killed by a refugee in a terrorist attack stands at 1 in 3.64 billion.

We have effective processes in place to protect ourselves without so radically restricting the number we admit to safety in our country.

Refugees seeking admission to our country do not pose a danger to us. Let us not act in fear where no threat exists.

*Dr. Kori Schake is the Deputy Director-General of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). She was a distinguished research fellow at the Hoover Institution and is the editor, with Jim Mattis, of the book *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military*. She has served in various policy roles including at the White House for the National Security Council; at the Department of Defense for the Office of the Secretary and Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department for the Policy Planning Staff. During the 2008 presidential election, she was Senior Policy Advisor on the McCain-Palin campaign.*

INTRODUCTION

The admission of refugees and asylum seekers reflects both the United States' concern for the human rights of vulnerable people and its geopolitical interest in bringing stability to troubled regions of the world. Since 1980, over 3 million people have come through the refugee resettlement program, rebuilt their lives, and contributed in meaningful ways to American society. While humanitarianism lies at the heart of resettlement, it also provides real benefits to the United States as it pursues its vital national security interests.

The Refugee Act of 1980 codified the long-standing tradition in the United States of admitting people fleeing conflict and persecution in their home countries. The stated objective of the Refugee Act was to “provide a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission to this country of refugees of special humanitarian concern.”¹ In it, Congress established two procedures for admitting people with a well-founded fear of persecution in their countries of origin. First, the asylum process allowed individuals already in the United States, or who present themselves to U.S. authorities, a legal hearing to establish the validity of their claims. Second, the refugee resettlement procedure established a mechanism by which refugees screened abroad and approved by the president could enter the United States and receive assistance through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

While the admission of asylum seekers and refugees is often thought of as a purely humanitarian act, strategic foreign policy priorities have often played a role in determining who is allowed entry. Arrivals from foreign adversaries, especially communist regimes during the Cold War, were often given priority as a way to embarrass rival governments for their poor human rights records, drain them of human resources, and promote the formation of opposition groups in exile. The United States has also used the resettlement program to admit

hundreds of thousands of refugees from places where it has been involved militarily or had other strategic interests, including Vietnam, Somalia, Kosovo, and Iraq.

More recently, the Trump administration has drastically cut the number of refugees resettled in the United States. For the 2018 fiscal year, the cap on the number of refugees admitted through the resettlement program was set at 45,000, although less than half of that target is likely to be met (Kaleem 2018). This will be the smallest number of refugees the United States has resettled since the passage of the Refugee Act. Such a drastic reduction in refugee admissions is in line with other Trump administration measures to restrict the entry of both the legal and illegal entry of migrants. However, the move runs contrary to past practice, and with ongoing conflicts in areas of vital importance such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Sudan, it undermines U.S. influence abroad.

The U.S. refugee resettlement program has a long and successful history of admitting people in need. In accepting refugees from abroad, the United States has benefited economically, helped to bring stability to regions affected by conflict, and gained influence with key allies and partners. It has also bolstered its reputation as a country committed to freedom and human rights. Moreover, despite fears to the contrary, resettled refugees pose very little security risk to the United States. Therefore, draconian cuts to the refugee resettlement program run counter not only to our tradition of providing a haven to the persecuted, but also to our ability to pursue foreign policy objectives.

PART I: HISTORY OF THE U.S. RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

After the end of World War II, the United States adopted a series of measures to resettle refugees

escaping conflict and persecution. Priority was often given to refugees escaping communism, as foreign policy objectives interacted with human rights concerns. Early statutes were passed in response to the European refugee crisis and served multiple objectives, including humanitarian relief, assisting Western European allies struggling to recover from the effects of the war, and discrediting newly-established Eastern European regimes under Soviet influence. From the very beginning, refugee resettlement policies were guided by genuine concern for displaced people as well as U.S. geopolitical interests.

The Second World War

The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 allowed for the entry of 200,000 people uprooted by WWII and was renewed in 1950. In all, over 400,000 European refugees, principally from Eastern Europe, were allowed to resettle in the United States. Despite the humanitarian spirit of the bill, Congress included several provisions—against the wishes of President Harry Truman—that restricted the entry of Jewish and Catholic migrants, who faced continued discrimination.² Then, in 1953, the Refugee Relief Act provided for the admission of an additional 214,000 refugees not covered by the 1948 law, the bulk of whom fled communist-controlled nations in Eastern Europe. In signing the law, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was quick to point out “America’s traditional concern for the homeless, the persecuted, and the less fortunate,” which stood in “dramatic contrast to the drastic events taking place in East Germany and other captive nations.”³

In so doing, Eisenhower was sending a message to other nations that freedom and democracy were preferable to falling under Soviet influence. Finally, following the 1956 Hungarian uprising, which was brutally suppressed by the Soviet Union, the United States passed the Refugee-Escapee Act of 1957, which provided for the resettlement of thousands more refugees fleeing authoritarianism.

The next major refugee resettlement program was in response to the mass exodus from Vietnam, another Cold War battleground. President Gerald Ford signed the Indochinese Migration and Refugee Assistance Act in 1975. Over the next decade, several hundred thousand Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees found new homes in the United States. American administrations felt a moral obligation to assist the nation’s South Vietnamese allies, now under the control of the North. But in addition, they sought to relieve the immense burden on Southeast Asian countries—particularly Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia—that were beginning to restrict refugee arrivals, and to press other Western nations to accept a share of the refugees as well.

The 1980 Refugee Act

At a summit in Tokyo in 1979, the United States (along with Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and the U.K.), issued a joint statement declaring, “The plight of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia poses a humanitarian problem of historic proportions and constitutes a threat to the peace and stability of Southeast Asia,” and added that their governments would “substantially increase their contributions to Indochinese refugee relief and resettlement.”⁴ Thus, in responding to the refugee crisis, the United States sought to prevent regional destabilization and build trust with friendly regimes as a bulwark against the spread of communism. In a coordinated response to the migration crisis, the United States, Canada, Australia, and France became major resettlement destinations, each agreeing to take thousands of refugees. In discussing the Vietnamese exodus and U.S. response, Astri Suhrke (1998: 406) writes:

Seeking to rescue its erstwhile South Vietnamese allies, and people that refused to live under the new communist rulers, the U.S. became the principal architect of the entire resettlement system. Throwing its considerable political weight behind the programme, the U.S. government established large admissions quotas for its own part, urged other states to do likewise, or at least

contribute financially, and pressured the countries of first asylum to keep their doors open.

In part, during the Cold War, U.S. refugee resettlement was guided by geopolitical considerations. Admitting refugees from war-torn regions and countries under the grip of authoritarian rulers was consistent with America's self-image as a haven for oppressed people seeking freedom and opportunity.

But refugee policy was also part of the United States' ideological and strategic conflict with the Soviet Union and its proxies. By admitting refugees and asylum seekers from enemy regimes, the U.S. was allowing people to "vote with their feet" in favor of living in the West. Indeed, notable defectors included people such as Jozef Swiatlo, a high-ranking Polish security official; Vladimir Pasechnik, a Soviet bioweapons engineer;⁵ and Valdo Randpere, an Estonian deputy minister of justice;⁶ each of whom provided valuable intelligence. Resettlement also relieved immediate pressures on countries of first asylum, which faced enormous difficulties hosting and caring for large refugee populations and earned their goodwill.

Shortly after the Indochinese crisis, 1980 Refugee Act provided a more permanent, orderly system for admitting and caring for resettled refugees. While previous measures were ad hoc and in response to particular events, the 1980 Refugee Act created a permanent mechanism for refugee resettlement and processing asylum claims.

Each year, the president, in consultation with Congress and federal agencies, determines resettlement priorities and establishes regional quotas for admission. Refugees are then screened for resettlement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and multiple U.S. government agencies. These screenings establish bona fide refugee status, check for criminal history and security threats,

and provide a medical evaluation.⁷ Upon admission, new arrivals receive temporary assistance from the Office of Refugee Resettlement, an office within the Department of Health and Human Services, and from various nonprofit agencies, helping them move toward self-sufficiency and integration into American society.

PART II: FOREIGN POLICY CONSIDERATIONS & REFUGEE ADMISSIONS

Although the 1980 Refugee Act was predicated on humanitarianism, presidents have often used their prerogative to establish refugee resettlement quotas to put foreign policy considerations at the forefront of decisions to admit refugees.

Preventing destabilization in strategic areas has been an important goal. As noted by the U.S. State Department, "The foreign policy interests of the United States have been advanced by our willingness to share the burden with first asylum countries ... the prompt resettlement of politically sensitive cases has helped diffuse regional tension."⁸

Admissions numbers underscore the use of refugee policy as a tool of foreign policy. Table 1 lists the countries of origin for resettled refugees from 1996 to 1999.

Table 1. Refugee Resettlement to the United States by Country of Origin, 1996-1999

Country	1996	1997	1998	1999	Total
<i>Former Soviet Union</i>	29,536	27,072	23,349	16,962	96,919
<i>Bosnia-Herzegovina</i>	12,030	21,357	30,906	22,699	86,992
<i>Vietnam</i>	16,130	6,660	10,288	9,622	42,700
<i>Somalia</i>	6,436	4,974	2,951	4,320	18,681
<i>Yugoslavia</i>	--	--	3	14,280	14,283
<i>Cuba</i>	3,498	2,911	1,587	2,018	10,014
<i>Iraq</i>	2,528	2,679	1,407	1,955	8,569
<i>Iran</i>	1,256	1,305	1,699	1,750	6,010
<i>Sudan</i>	575	277	1,252	2,393	4,497
<i>Liberia</i>	46	231	1,494	2,495	4,266
<i>Laos</i>	2,201	—	—	—	2,201
<i>Ethiopia</i>	—	—	152	1,873	2,025
<i>Croatia</i>	—	—	—	1,660	1,660
<i>Sierra Leone</i>	—	—	176	675	851
<i>Nigeria</i>	—	—	—	625	625
<i>Afghanistan</i>	—	—	—	365	365
<i>Togo</i>	—	—	—	93	93
<i>Congo, Dem. Rep</i>	—	45	—	—	45
<i>Other</i>	555	1,762	920	1,291	4,528
Total	74,791	69,273	76,184	85,076	305,324

Source: Department of Homeland Security. *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 1996-1999*.

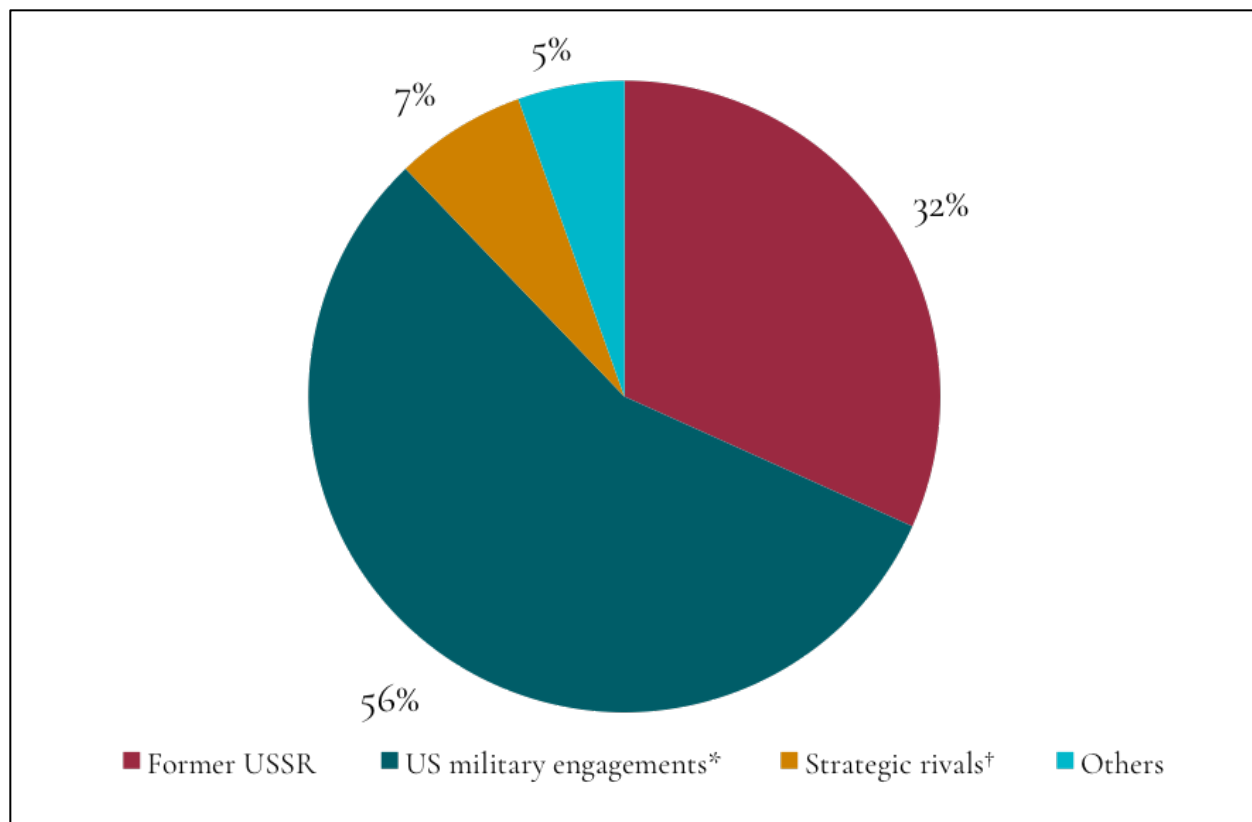
Post-Communist Countries

Throughout the 1990s, the post-Soviet countries were the leading source of resettled refugees, as the United States had a vital geopolitical interest in providing stability to Eastern Europe and Central Asia, gaining influence in the region, and helping new states transition to democracy. The former Yugoslavia — the location of the deadliest conflict in Europe since WWII — was also a major source of resettled refugees. Faced with a significant crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had the potential to destabilize the rest of Europe, the United States and its NATO allies conducted a military intervention in 1995, and as part of this

initiative, the Americans agreed to resettle tens of thousands of refugees escaping the war. Figure 1 groups these cases according to the foreign policy priorities of the United States at the time, which clearly reveals a pattern of admitting refugees from regions of strategic importance.

Crisis struck again in the Balkans later in the 1990s. The 14,000-plus refugee arrivals from the former Yugoslavia in 1999 were principally from Kosovo, where a Serb assault on the ethnic Albanian population prompted a coordinated humanitarian and military response. Resettlement was in part motivated by the desire to ensure that neighboring countries — particularly Macedonia

Figure 1. Refugee Resettlement and Foreign Policy Priorities, 1996–1999



*Former Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Somalia, Iraq

†Cuba, Iran, Sudan

Source: Department of Homeland Security. *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 1996–1999*.

— would not experience contagion from the Kosovo War (Barutciski and Suhrke 2001; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006).

With its own ethnic Albanian minority, Macedonia initially resisted allowing refugees from Kosovo access to its territory. Under the provisions of a comprehensive deal, Macedonia agreed to cooperate with NATO military efforts and open its borders to refugees in exchange for a major evacuation of Kosovo Albanian arrivals to Western Europe and the United States.⁹ In all, 90,000 Kosovo Albanians were sent to third countries for resettlement, and U.S. leadership on this issue was essential to both the military and humanitarian efforts.

As President Bill Clinton remarked at a press conference, “Neighboring democracies, as you see, would be overwhelmed by permanent refugees

and demoralized by the failure of democracy's alliance. The Kosovar Albanians would become a people without a homeland, a burden to host countries, a magnet for radical ideologies, a breeding ground for unending warfare in the Balkans.”¹⁰ The generous response to the Kosovo refugee crisis — including financial contributions and resettlement — thus helped to prevent conflict from spreading throughout the region.

U.S. Military Engagements and Strategic Rivals

The next two top sources of refugees, Vietnam and Somalia, were also countries where the United States had major military engagements and important interests in the broader region. Continued arrivals from Vietnam were a legacy of the war and included many family reunifications. Refugee admissions from Somalia followed in the

wake of the failed U.S. intervention there in the early 1990s and were partly motivated by the desire to retain influence in the Horn of Africa. U.S. partners in East Africa, including Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti (now the location of a U.S. naval base), struggled to manage large refugee inflows and secure their borders against militants attempting to infiltrate refugee camps to find supplies and recruits. These countries have continued to be important counterterrorism partners in the region.

Finally, while this pool of admissions is smaller, the United States has also traditionally accepted refugees from adversarial regimes—such as Iran and Cuba—as part of an overall strategy of discrediting such nations for their human rights abuses while at the same time bolstering its international reputation as a beacon for freedom and liberty.

Accepting these dissidents has had the additional effects of draining these countries of skilled and talented individuals¹¹ and promoting the formation of opposition groups in the diaspora (Eckstein 2009).

Post-9/11

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought renewed attention to various sources of immigration to the United States, and the refugee program was no exception (Givens, Freeman, and Leal 2009). Federal agencies dealing with immigration — particularly the Immigration and Naturalization Service — underwent a major overhaul and reorganization.

Understandably, the U.S. government placed increased emphasis on making sure that foreign arrivals did not have links to anti-American militants and followed relevant immigration laws. Immediately after 9/11, the number of resettled refugees plummeted—from over 73,000 in 2000 to less than 30,000 in fiscal years 2002 and 2003 (see Figure 2)—as the Bush administration developed more stringent security screening protocols.

Subsequently, from 2004-2017 — and with new safeguards in place — the number of refugees granted admission rose to an average of 62,000 per year.

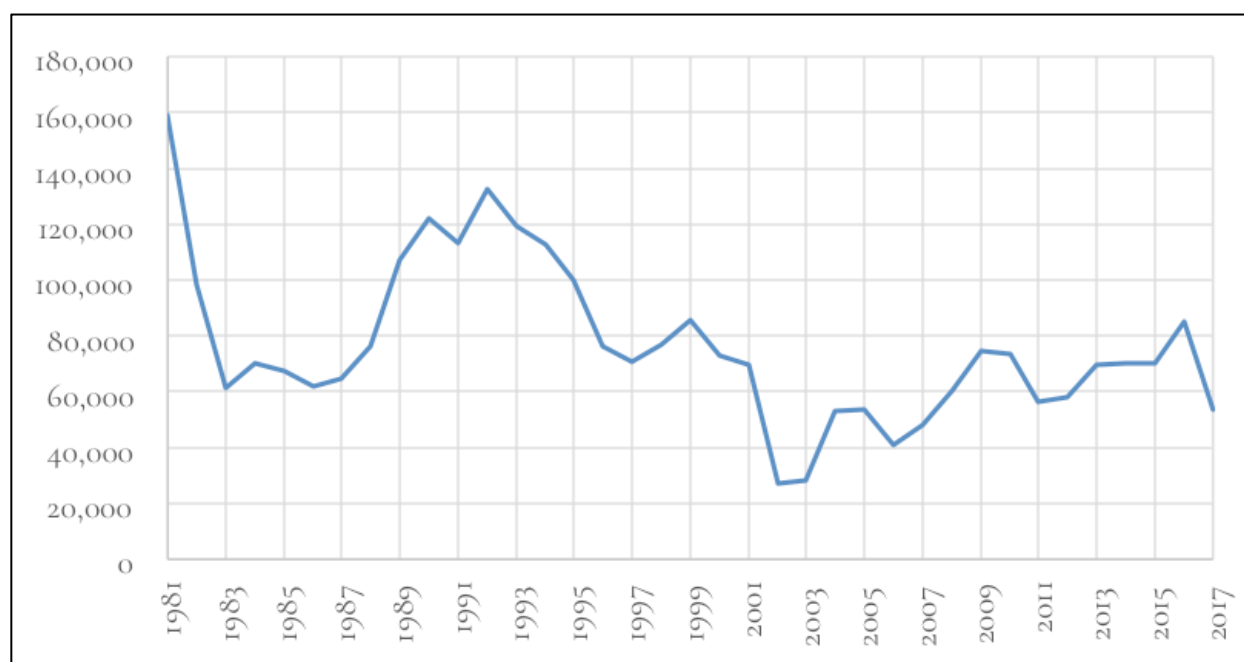
After 9/11, refugee admissions continued to reflect both humanitarian motivations and the strategic priorities of the president. For example, from 2007 to 2013, the United States welcomed 85,000 Iraqi refugees, many of whom cooperated with U.S. forces as interpreters or contractors.¹² Iraq's refugee crisis also threatened to destabilize the region and the fragile new state, with over 2 million refugees in neighboring countries and a similar number internally displaced (Sassoon 2009).

Although U.S. resettlement numbers were small, the American willingness to accept a share of the refugees sent a signal to the people of the Middle East that the United States would fulfill its moral obligation to help those displaced by the 2003 invasion and subsequent insurgency and stand beside its partners in the region.

Despite this policy of relative openness to refugees, the general public has often been wary of accepting new arrivals. Historical polls suggest that a large majority of Americans were opposed to admitting refugees from Nazi Germany, Hungary, Cuba, Haiti, and Vietnam (Desilver 2015). Hostile narratives often cast refugees as too culturally different to integrate into the American polity, as economic burdens, or as security threats. Time and time again, these fears have proven to be unfounded, as refugee communities have successfully integrated into American society, gained citizenship, and contributed to the economy (see below).

The president has typically resisted nativist voices, understanding that accepting refugees is both a moral obligation and in line with our national security interests. As Ronald Reagan eloquently stated in his farewell address, the United States is “a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.”¹³

Figure 2: U.S. Refugee Admissions, 1981-2017



In that spirit, most Republican and Democratic leaders alike — from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama — have understood the importance of admitting refugees from troubled regions of the world.

PART III: WHAT ABOUT RISKS TO THE UNITED STATES?

The Trump administration, bucking the generous stance of previous administrations, has dramatically curtailed the number of refugees resettled to the United States. Critics of the resettlement program often claim that admitting refugees poses a security risk to the United States.

In particular, critics fear that those fleeing countries with a history of Islamic-extremist violence, such as Syria and Iraq, could potentially launch attacks here in the United States. In addition, skeptics argue that refugees can impose a fiscal and economic burden on the United States through their receipt of benefits and negative labor-market impacts. While these arguments may

sound convincing on the surface, upon deeper investigation they prove to be unfounded.

Terrorism and Refugees

In terms of security threats, the risk posed by refugees is virtually nonexistent. Statistical evidence shows that while refugees may cause conflict diffusion to neighboring countries, those that make it to more distant countries do not increase the risk of conflict (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006).

The security risk from refugees fleeing a given country is largely confined to immediate neighbors, who face the most substantial numbers, have difficulties in separating refugees from militants, and often contain populations that resemble (in terms of ethnicity, language, or religion) those in the sending country. As discussed in the next section, these neighbors are often developing countries, where the means to care for refugees are lacking.

Additionally, unlike individuals who flee war zones in search of safety across a neighboring border or travel more distant routes seeking asylum, resettled refugees are screened and

selected prior to entry. The refugee crisis in Europe, in which thousands of individuals from countries including Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq have arrived in large numbers, is therefore not comparable to the U.S. resettlement program. Many of these refugees followed clandestine migrant-smuggling routes and entered countries of asylum before receiving a proper hearing to determine their status. In other words, most of these migrants entered EU member states first and only then had their claims adjudicated to determine if they were legitimate refugees or posed a security risk.

By contrast, the process for refugee resettlement works the other way around. Refugees first have their claims heard overseas, and only then are they granted admission to the United States. The screening and selection process, moreover, is quite rigorous and would dissuade any potential terrorist from attempting to enter through this channel (De Peña 2017).

Typically, a refugee is first screened by the UNHCR, which makes an initial determination of refugee status and may refer the case to a U.S. Resettlement Support Center. Then, the individual goes through a series of background checks, screenings, and interviews. The State Department, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Department of Homeland Security, and various intelligence agencies review the file. DHS conducts an in-person interview with the applicant and administers a health screening. Refugees are also given a cultural orientation course. Then, they are assigned to a resettlement location in the United States and paired with a resettlement agency. After arrival to the United States, Customs and Border Protection does a final check to verify the identity of the refugee. Refugees from Syria must undergo an additional layer of background checks.

The process can take anywhere from 18 months to 3 years and is no guarantee of entry. As Doris Meissner and James Ziglar (former commissioners of U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service) wrote, “Refugees proposed for resettlement in the United States face the most rigorous vetting

of any individuals or groups that come to the United States.”¹⁴

The record shows that resettled refugees pose little risk to the United States. In one 2016 incident, a Somali refugee drove a car into a crowd and proceeded to stab students at Ohio State University, leading to several injuries but no fatalities. However, this was an exceptionally rare event.

Since the refugee resettlement program was launched in 1980, not a single American has been killed in a terrorist incident by a refugee. A report by the Cato Institute (Nowrasteh 2016) reveals that from 1975-2015, only 20 refugees, or 0.00062 percent of all refugees admitted, were involved in terrorist plots. Of these, only three attacks were successful (killing three), and these were committed by Cuban exiles in the 1970s, prior to the Refugee Act of 1980. The odds of an American being killed by a refugee in a terrorist attack stand at 1 in 3.64 *billion* a year (Nowrasteh 2016), which is lower than the odds of being stuck by lightning *twice*.

A Migration Policy Institute report from 2015 indicates that of the 784,000 refugees resettled in the United States since 9/11, only three have been arrested on terrorism charges, and these were for attempting to aid groups abroad (Newland 2015). The terrorism risk that refugees pose — while not zero — is incredibly small, attesting to the success of the program in screening out those who would do harm.

Economic Impacts

Economically, refugees do present a short-term fiscal burden because they are eligible for services while they adjust to their new lives in the United States. Over a 20-year stay in the United States, however, the average refugee pays \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). Cortes (2004) demonstrates that in the long run, refugees outperform other migrants in terms of their labor market participation, earnings, and English proficiency.

A comprehensive study by New American Economy (2017) finds that refugees have a higher entrepreneurship rate than the U.S.-born population; reach a median household income that is \$14,000 higher than the overall median; and hold over \$1 billion in spending power, contributing significantly to the economies of several states.

Moreover, 84 percent of refugees who have been in the country for 16 to 25 years acquired U.S. citizenship—a far higher rate than other immigrant groups. The report concludes, “By rapidly growing their incomes in subsequent years — not to mention buying homes and starting businesses at high rates — refugees prove that initial short-term assistance is a smart investment” (New American Economy 2017: 24).

In short, contrary to the fears of some, refugees pose a miniscule risk in terms of violent attacks on the United States. They also contribute positively to the U.S. economy and society.

Notable refugees to the United States include former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright; Google co-founder Sergey Brin; U.S. Army Major General Viet Xuan Luong; and Iranian-American actress Shohreh Aghdashloo. Thousands more are pursuing work, education, and citizenship, seeking to give back to the country that gave them refuge and assistance. Rather than posing a problem, refugees from all corners of the world enrich and strengthen the United States.

PART IV: WHY REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IS IN OUR NATIONAL INTEREST

Resettling refugees is principally seen as a humanitarian act, but there are additional reasons why resettlement is in the national interest. First, it helps bring stability to strategically important

regions affected by conflict and displacement. Second, it helps foster a positive image of the United States, which is essential to building trust with foreign governments and undermining the radicalization efforts of extremist groups.

Averting Regional Instability

A mass influx of refugees can place enormous strains on countries of first asylum and has the potential to destabilize entire regions. U.S. refugee-resettlement efforts can help to ease the burden on such countries. Most refugees fleeing war and persecution first go to neighboring states — often developing countries with poor capacity to manage large inflows of new arrivals.

In mid-2016, the top-10 refugee hosts in the world were Turkey (2.8 million), Pakistan (1.6 million), Lebanon (1 million), Iran (978,000), Ethiopia (742,700), Jordan (691,800), Kenya (523,500), Uganda (512,600), Germany (478,000), and Chad (386,100).¹⁵ Of this list, only Germany is an industrialized nation. For small countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, the share of the refugee population relative to locals can be quite large—approximately 1 of every 6 people in Lebanon and nearly 1 in 10 in Jordan.

Unlike third countries that accept refugees in an orderly fashion, screening and selecting them prior to arrival, neighboring states often have poor capacity to provide for the needs of displaced people. New arrivals often reside in makeshift encampments; are dependent on the host country and international donors for their basic needs; and can place strains on the local economy.

A recent study shows that Syrian refugees in Jordan caused significant increases in unemployment among Jordanians and more competition for existing jobs, particularly in low-skilled sectors of the economy (Stave and Hillesund 2015). Similar negative labor market outcomes were found in regions of Turkey most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis, along with increases in housing rents (Tumen 2016). Using data from Tanzania, Maystadt and Verwimp

(2014) show that while there are some economic benefits to developing countries from accepting refugees, these benefits are unequally distributed, with poor agricultural workers facing labor-market competition and increased prices of key goods due to greater demand. In developing countries, refugees are often employed in the informal economy with few legal protections, crowding out domestic workers.

In addition to these economic effects, neighboring states also potentially face demographic challenges from major refugee inflows. In many regions, ethnic groups span national boundaries — for example, Kurds live in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria — and refugees often migrate to areas where co-ethnics reside (Rüegger and Bohnet 2018). This can shift the demographic balance in host states and cause tensions in countries with a history of interethnic violence. Rwandan Hutu refugees in the eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo exacerbated tensions between local Hutus and Tutsis; Kosovo Albanian refugees in Macedonia raised concerns about the status of the local Albanian minority; and Afghan Pashtuns in Pakistan changed ethnic power relations in that country.

The current Syrian refugee crisis is no exception. Ethnic/sectarian divisions in Syria resemble those in Lebanon, raising concerns about inflaming tensions in a country that is still recovering from its own civil war. As one observer notes, “With the influx of large numbers of mostly Sunni Syrian refugees, many fear that the delicate sectarian balance at the base of the Lebanese political system will be upset.”¹⁶ In regions of southern Turkey, new Arab and Kurdish arrivals have also changed local demographics and are likely to become a long-term fixture of society.

Given these strains on the humanitarian capacity of host states, the negative impact on segments of the local economy, and changes to the ethnic balance, in extreme cases, refugees can foster the spread of civil war to neighboring states (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). To be clear, the vast majority of refugees never participate in violence and most refugee hosts do not fall victim to civil conflict.

However, the risk of civil war spreading across borders is substantially increased after a mass migration of refugees.

This is especially true when militant actors have access to refugee communities, either through the unwillingness or lack of capacity of local hosts to ensure safe conditions (Lischer 2005). Given poor conditions in refugee camps and a sense of hopelessness, refugees are often targeted for radicalization and recruitment by militant groups (Haer and Hecker 2018). Without productive alternatives, refugees languishing in camps for years may believe joining an extremist group will improve their circumstances. Beyond outright civil war, scholars have found that refugees located in developing countries are associated with an increase in terrorist attacks; while some such attacks are committed by militant groups who hide among refugees, a larger share are attacks against refugees and the aid workers who assist them (Choi and Salehyan 2013; Milton, Spencer, and Findley 2013).

Several cases illustrate the potential risks that host states in the developing world face when refugee crises emerge on their borders. The decades-long conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was triggered by the mass migration of Hutu refugees in the mid-1990s and the formation of militant groups among them. The conflict was exacerbated by the intervention of neighbors, including Rwanda and Uganda. It has cost millions of lives and brought on war crimes including rape, looting, and the abduction and deployment of children as soldiers.

The protracted Palestinian refugee crisis led to an internal war between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Jordan in 1970, as Jordan sought to reduce tensions with Israel and prevent unauthorized PLO attacks across the border. After its expulsion to Lebanon, the PLO — based among the refugee community — became a major player in the Lebanese civil war.

Finally, Afghan refugees have been accused by the Pakistani government of harboring militant groups and terrorists, including the Pakistani

Taliban and the Haqqani network, which have been responsible for a number of deadly attacks and major security incidents. While Pakistan has welcomed Afghan refugees for decades — and has even helped organize militant groups among them — the welcome is wearing thin as the government has made recent threats to expel refugees.¹⁷

In addition to contributing to war and militancy in host states, refugee flows also have the potential to cause conflict between states (Salehyan 2008). On numerous occasions, sending countries have crossed international borders in order to attack refugees and dissidents or militants who organize in refugee camps. Such was the case in the DRC as Hutu militants associated with the Rwandan genocide began to organize in refugee camps, prompting the Rwandan government to invade.

Violations of the international boundaries can clearly provoke tensions and reprisals between states. As an example, there have been several instances of the Myanmar government attacking refugee camps across the border in Thailand, creating diplomatic tensions, and threatening regional security. Turkey has also been involved in cross border attacks on Kurdish refugee camps in Iraq and Syria, which it claims are havens for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). At times, refugee-receiving states have intervened militarily in nearby conflicts as a way to stem the flow of migrants. India, for example, intervened during Bangladesh's war for independence in 1971, partly motivated by a desire to repatriate 10 million refugees and avert a domestic crisis. Similarly, the United States intervened in Haiti in 1994-95 to restore democracy and stem the tide of refugees fleeing to Florida by boat (Dowty and Loescher 1996).

Regional conflict diffusion is not foreordained, however. Indeed, most refugee hosts, even if their humanitarian capacity is tested, do not experience a significant increase in violence. Rather, conflict and violence become more likely if the host state and the international community fail to respond with a robust plan to assist refugees, including through resettlement.

Securing borders, preventing militant access, providing adequate educational opportunities and livelihoods, and allowing for resettlement to third countries helps inoculate host countries against potential risks by providing refugees with meaningful opportunities to seek a better life (Whitaker 2003). This was exemplified by the international response to the Kosovo crisis (Barutciski and Suhrke 2001). While minor clashes occurred in Macedonia after the arrival of refugees from Kosovo, international assistance programs, refugee resettlement, and peacekeeping helped to avert a major war.

Moreover, refugees can play a positive role in the economy through the addition of human capital, assuming that appropriate policies are in place to capitalize on their skills. Yet many countries in the developing world simply lack the capacity to handle sudden, large inflows of people.

Therefore, U.S. leadership in the global refugee regime is critical. The United States, as the world's preeminent power, has economic, political, and geostrategic interests across the globe. For this reason, the United States has played a major role in funding international aid agencies such as the UNHCR, which provides humanitarian assistance and manages refugee camps.

For decades, the United States has been the single largest contributor to the UNHCR's budget. It has also worked with its partners and allies to ensure a coordinated, orderly response to mass migration. This was most apparent in Vietnam and Kosovo, in which the United States spearheaded international agreements to assist refugees.

Finally, the United States has taken a share of the burden off refugee hosts by agreeing to resettle a share of the refugees on its territory. These measures have a clear humanitarian impact and save lives. Yet beyond altruistic motivations, refugee policy has been guided by the desire to prevent regional destabilization and to ease the burden on partners and allies in the region.

Enhancing the United States' Global Image

As an additional benefit, refugee assistance — both financial contributions and resettlement — serves to promote goodwill and trust between nations. While this benefit is less concrete and tangible, building strong relationships with other countries in the past has served the United States well. The United States is in a better position to persuade governments in regions affected by war and conflict to maintain open doors toward refugees — and provide adequate assistance — if it is itself prepared to shoulder some of the cost of managing migration.

Such goodwill is particularly vital in cases where the United States itself plays a direct role in the refugee-producing conflicts. In such cases, the United States depends on regional allies to provide the base agreements, logistical support, intelligence, and other measures required to maintain the American military presence that is essential to achieving core objectives. Given the near certainty that bordering countries will end up receiving sizeable refugee flows, these partners may be reluctant to cooperate with the United States if they have to bear those costs alone. In other words, generous refugee assistance and resettlement programs can help “grease the wheels” and facilitate cooperation with regional governments in pursuit of military objectives.

Accepting a share of the world's refugees also engenders a positive image of the United States among refugees themselves and the societies of other nations. By refusing to admit refugees, and issuing travel bans for entire countries, the United States has suffered a deterioration of its image abroad. Islamic extremists such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State attempt to build a narrative that the West in general and the United States in particular are hostile to Muslims. As General Michael Hayden and Admiral James Stavridis stated, “Welcoming refugees regardless of their religion, nationality, or race exposes the falseness of terrorist propaganda and counters the warped vision of extremists.”¹⁸

Security experts have chimed in, responding to the Trump administration's ban on travel — including by refugees — from several Muslim-majority nations. Counterterrorism and intelligence officials James Clapper, Joshua Geltzer, and Matthew Olson wrote:

It would be bad enough if Trump's travel ban were simply unnecessary and unlawful. But it's also downright dangerous, especially to our country's counterterrorism efforts. The ban is so obviously, palpably, indeed explicitly anti-Muslim in nature that it has — understandably — offended (Muslim) communities around the world, including in the United States. Yet those are precisely the communities that can prove critical for identifying and responding to individuals becoming radicalized by groups like ISIS and al Qaeda. Moreover, effective counterterrorism relies heavily on robust intelligence-sharing relationships with foreign governments.¹⁹

As national security experts have repeatedly stressed, military and economic power, while important, are insufficient means for addressing many of the world's problems, including violent extremism.

Rather, the moral authority and example of the United States as a country that defends human rights, stands behind oppressed peoples of the world, and seeks to promote freedom and democracy is critical for promoting our interests abroad. Refugee resettlement plays an especially useful role in this regard.

As a case in point, a young Burmese refugee in Boston, who recently became a U.S. citizen, contrasted her life in Burma with her new home: “In the United States, they treat us equally. Here, there are people of many colors, many backgrounds. They help people from around the world, they give us a chance, they open their heart to us.”²⁰

By accepting people in need of protection from diverse countries and backgrounds, the United

States conveys a positive image of itself. Refugees themselves reinforce this positive image to their family and friends back home; they are the ambassadors of American ideals.

PART V: REAFFIRMING THE UNITED STATES’ COMMITMENT TO REFUGEES

The U.S. refugee resettlement program is under attack like never before. This year, the United States will admit the lowest number of refugees in decades, and several nonprofit resettlement agencies are closing their doors. Travel bans on several Muslim-majority nations have barred the entry of many vulnerable people. Since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, Presidents Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and Barack Obama — representing different ends of the ideological spectrum — have reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to protecting the displaced. The Trump administration’s policies contradict America’s long-standing tradition — going back to the founding of the nation — of providing safety to people uprooted by war and persecution.

With more than 5 million Syrians displaced internationally, the refugee crisis has negatively impacted Syria’s neighbors, which host the bulk of the refugees. It has also rattled Europe, as governments are struggling to find an appropriate response, one that balances the legitimate needs of thousands of people in harm’s way and concerns over domestic security. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban went so far as to say, “We don’t see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders.”²¹ Yet despite a few isolated incidents, the worst fears of anti-immigrant nativists in Europe have not materialized, as the vast majority of refugees have no links to terrorist groups (Crone, Falkentoft, and Tammikko 2017).

The United States accepted 18,000 Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2017. From January to April

2018, that number dropped to 11. Yet of the thousands of Syrians who have come so far, not one has been involved in a terrorist attack. In fact, 72 percent were women and children under 14 (Zong and Batalova 2017).

There is also little evidence that Muslim immigrants in general have failed to assimilate and lead productive lives in the United States (Neufeld 2017). Immigrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa tend to learn English at higher rates than other immigrant groups and have higher educational attainment than the native-born population, and most eventually take the oath of citizenship (Cumoletti and Batalova 2018).

The collapse of the Syrian resettlement program comes as the conflict there is still raging, leaving millions displaced with little hope for the future. Slashing refugee admissions means the United States has left its friends and allies on their own even as it tries to enlist their cooperation to resolve the Syrian crisis. As 20 senior military and foreign policy officials — including Henry Kissinger, Janet Napolitano, Leon Panetta, David Petraeus, and James Jones — wrote, “Resettlement initiatives help advance U.S. national security interests by supporting the stability of our allies and partners that are struggling to host large numbers of refugees.”²²

Rather than enhancing security, limiting refugee access makes it more difficult for the United States to respond to crises around the world. It leaves millions stranded in refugee camps for years, fueling resentment and potential recruitment by extremists. Finally, it tarnishes the United States’ reputation as a welcoming, multicultural, and tolerant champion of human rights and democracy. Of course, the United States cannot admit all of the world’s refugees, but resettlement, coupled with humanitarian assistance and cooperation with countries dealing with the greatest impact, can significantly improve lives and prospects for regional security.

CONCLUSION

The United States has long coupled refugee admissions with its geopolitical interests around the world. Refugee advocates have criticized the intertwining of strategic foreign policy goals with refugee protection, arguing that admissions policies should be driven by purely humanitarian motives. The United States, they argue, should focus on the most vulnerable and not seek to use refugee policy to further nonhumanitarian interests. Yet from a pragmatic perspective, U.S. foreign policy must balance multiple objectives, including national security, economic performance, diplomatic relations between states, and humanitarianism (Rosenblum and Salehyan 2004). For refugee advocates and security hawks alike, having a robust refugee admissions program is in the national interest, and the United States should return to its historic commitment to accepting a sizeable share of the world's refugees.

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NISKANEN C E N T E R

For more information, contact

Jerry Taylor, President, Niskanen Center
jtaylor@niskanencenter.org or

Kristie De Peña, Director of Immigration and
Senior Counsel, Niskanen Center
kdepena@niskanencenter.org

Niskanen Center
820 1st Street NE, Suite 675
Washington, D.C. 20002

www.niskanencenter.org
[@NiskanenCenter](https://twitter.com/NiskanenCenter)