**Niskanen Center Refugee Resettlement Event: Panel I**

**Joe Coon:** Good morning, and welcome. I’m a senior Vice President with the Niskanen Center. The Niskanen Center is a public policy think tank that works to advance policy and politics animated by the spirit of moderation. Which I’m sure many of you can acknowledge, given the current state of American politics, can often be a bit of a challenge. But it’s important, and at Niskanen, we are deeply committed to an open, democratic society, which requires political compromise, a respect for pluralism, and a resistance to ideological extremism. We work with policy makers and their staff to formulate clear-eyed, empirically based policy solutions that are innovative, politically sailable, and most importantly, improves the lives of real people.

I’d like to start by thanking Senator Lankford’s Office, for helping us coordinate this event. Senator Lankford has been an important Republican voice in support of refugee resettlement, and has highlighted the critical role that our refugee admissions programs play in American national security. We appreciate his leadership on this issue and hope to continue working with his office.

I’d also like to thank this event’s co-sponsors, including the National Immigration Forum, Human Rights First, the International Refugee Assistance Project, and the Conference of Catholic Bishops, Migration, and Refugee Services. Their inspiring work on behalf of refugees is essential to the people they serve, and is critical to keeping our refugee resettlement program afloat during these difficult times.

Finally, I’d like to thank the experts on today’s panels, in particular, Professor Idean Salehyan, who authored this paper, which Niskanen just recently released and is the topic of our conversation today. And of course, I would like to thank all of you for being here and joining a conversation that I am confident will give us a better understanding of the strategic imperative of the refugee resettlement process in America.

For me, this is a bit of a personal issue. More than a decade ago, I served in Iraq as a Sergeant in the U.S. national guard. Having served overseas alongside Iraqis working as interpreters and translators, and having witnessed the damage and displacement caused by war and sectarian violence, ensuring that we would provide safe haven for refugees became an issue of great importance to me.

One of my closest friends and essentially an adopted member of my family, was an Iraqi interpreter named Bandar, who I met while deployed in Iraq. His local knowledge and language skills helped to deescalate the many tense situations that evolve in war, and helped to keep both American soldiers and Iraqi civilians safe.

A few months after a left Iraq, I got a frantic call from Bandar. He was shaken, he was terrified, he received death threats. One family member had been killed and a few of his friends, who were also interpreters, had been murdered in Iraq. He needed to get out of there.

Not knowing anything about the process, we set out what would be a long and difficult process. Bandar was not a refugee in the traditional sense of the word, but he was a U.S. affiliated Iraqi with no home to safety return to in Iraq. America promised him and thousands of others protections through our immigrant visa program, but all our resettlement avenues repeatedly stalled, putting his life in jeopardy.

Ultimately, Bandar was routed through the refugee system, which was a long and burdensome process. He fled Baghdad, living off the money I could scrape together as a D.C. intern, and the generosity of my friends and family, until we finally got him a visa three years later. That was a long three years as I’m sure you can imagine.

After arriving in the United States, Bandar worked multiple jobs at once. He got himself enrolled in school, started a beautiful family, and ultimately, he returned to Iraq for two years, but this time as an American citizen, working as a translator with coalition forces to push back militant groups that were terrorizing villages, including his own village. I can tell you, you will not meet a person more proud to be an American than Bandar.

But Bandar was lucky. All obstacles notwithstanding, his circumstances would be much different if he tried to come to America now. In fact, his elderly, ailing mother was delayed at gaining entry into the U.S. even after gaining her visa due to the administration’s travel ban. It required time, money, and intervention from a congressional office to bring her here. Traditionally refugees often don’t have the benefit of these resources and connections.

As we know, the current administration has decimated our refugee program, including the related programs that try to expedite resettlement to those who serve alongside our service members, both in terms of quantity and process. They announced this week their intention to slash the refugee cap from the previous historic low of 45,000 to the new historic low of 30,000 refugees. And in justifying that action, they at least, in part, invoked national security.

Ours is a country that has historically welcomed those who faced extraordinary violence and persecution. This administration aside, refugee policy has long been a bipartisan issue. Having been on the ground, I’ve seen firsthand how important foreign allies are and how critical it is to ensure their safety. They, like so many refugees, are fleeing the very persecutors and violence we rightly condemn.

But we need to make sure our lawmakers better understand what is happening on the ground, and how it effects our national security and foreign policy more broadly. Which is why I’m happy to be here with you today, and why I believe that this paper, and this event, is a necessary corrective to the fear and cynicism that so often seeps into our politics, particularly when we are talking about immigration and refugee policy.

We need to allow more people like Bandar into this country, not just because it is the right thing to do, which I unequivocally believe it is. Not just because of the real economic benefits, and they are remarkable. But because refugees strengthen, rather than weaken national security, which is the topic of today’s discussion.

To begin that discussion, I would like to turn things over to my colleague, Kristie De Pena, who is Niskanen’s Director of Immigration Policy and Senior Council. She will moderate the first panel on the strategic case for refugee resettlement.

**Kristie De Pena:** Good morning, thank you for the introduction, Joe. I wanted to dive right in here. We’re going to start today by discussing the strategic and national security case for refugee resettlement, including some important findings from our new paper. On that note, it is my pleasure to introduce our speakers on this panel.

To my immediate right, we have Linda Chavez, who is a Senior Fellow at the Niskanen Center and Director of the Becoming American Initiative. She’s a syndicated columnist whose work appears in the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New Republic*, just to name a few. She’s the author of “Out of the Barrio: Toward A New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation,” a book that discusses the timeline of Hispanic progress regarding bilingual education, voting rights, immigration, and affirmative action. Linda served in the Reagan Administration as the Director of the Office of Public Liaison, making her the highest-ranking woman in the Reagan White House. In 2000, the Library of Congress named her a living legend. She received her BA from the University of Colorado and her Masters from George Mason University.

Next to her is Scott Cooper, Director of National Security Outreach at Human Rights First, and leads the Veterans for American Ideals Project, which is a nonpartisan movement of military veterans that advocates for leadership on human rights. Prior to joining Human Rights First, Scott spent his career in the Marine Corps, serving five tours in Iraq, two in Afghanistan, one in Europe, and one in the Western Pacific. He’s a recognized expert on civil military relations, airpower, and national security issues, and has been published in a very long list of outlets as well. This year, Scott was named as one of the We are the Mighty’s, “Mighty 25 influencers supporting the military community.”

And finally, we are joined by Dr. Idean Salehyan. Professor of Political Science at the University of North Texas, and the co-director of the social conflict analysis database project. He is affiliated with the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas, the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, and the John Goodwin Tower Center at Southern Methodist University. Idean has authored a number of books and articles as well, and received his PhD from the University California, San Diego.

So, welcome, panelists. We’re very happy you could join. We will have about 30 minutes of discussion, followed by 15 minutes of Question and Answer. We invite you to tweet at the Niskanen Center and use the hashtag “Niskanen Events” and “Refugees in America.”

Okay, let’s begin. Professor, you published the research paper that the audience is leafing through. Can you give us a history of the refugee program and tell the audience about your major findings in the paper?”

**Idean Salehyan:** [Microphone Issues for the first 10 seconds]

…It’s certainly the case that the intent and the outcome of the program clearly saves lives, and that’s undeniable. However, because the President has the prerogative to set annual admissions criteria, foreign policy considerations have often crept into the admissions process. For years this was to the consternation of human rights defenders and refugee advocates who wanted a more purely humanitarian program. But this is a case in which the United States moral and humanitarian interests have aligned with its strategic foreign policy goals.

And indeed, before the 1980 Refugee Act was passed, the very definition of a refugee in U.S. law was somebody escaping communism or countries of the Middle East. And the reason why communism was the criteria for admitting people was in order to embarrass the Soviet Union for its human rights abuses, to drain them of human resources, encourage defection from key assets, people with intelligence and so on. And also to show the world that democracy and human rights rule of law were preferable to falling under the sphere of Soviet influence.

But even after the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, which eliminated the restrictive definition of refugee and brought it more in line with the international refugee regime and international law, you could still see a foreign policy bias or foreign policy prerogatives playing into the refugee admissions program. The top sources of refugees were people fleeing from communist regimes such as Vietnam or Cuba and also places where the United States had key military interests and had military operations. Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Kosovo, these were places where we were involved militarily. And as part of that military effort, we agreed to accept a share of refugees stemming from that crisis.

So, what is the case for refugee resettlement and why is it not only in our humanitarian interest and the right thing to do, but also in our national security interest?

Well first, the refugee program often provides stability to troubled regions. If you look at the refugee crises in the world, 85% of refugees go to developing countries. They’re not coming to Europe, they’re not coming to the United States and Canada. They’re remaining in the region in countries that are typically poor and have poor capacity to manage massive flows, and often have the same ethnic, sectarian rifts in their society as the country of origin. So, the United States has strategically used the refugee program as way to relieve some of the burden on those countries of first asylum in addition to providing generous humanitarian assistance packages to prevent regional destabilization. We saw that in Vietnam, we saw that in Kosovo, and it worked.

It’s also been used to help facilitate military cooperation with partners and allies in the region. It’s undeniable that when we got into places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia, there’s going to be a negative impact on countries in the region who are expected to deal with a sizable refugee flow. The United States has facilitated military cooperation from bases to logistics and other support functions by accepting a share of the burden from those countries of first asylum. And not only the countries themselves, but also ensuring cooperation of partners on the ground in those countries that are affected, such as the case with the Iraqi interpreters and contractors.

And finally, the Refugee Admissions Program serves to promote a positive image of the United states as a welcoming, multicultural society. It’s committed to human rights, its committed to Democracy and the rule of law and is a better alternative to living in societies that are closed, authoritarian, and run by extremists. And that message, that the United States is not only championing democracy and human rights rhetorically, but is also willing to put resources on the table when needed, counters extremist narratives that the United States is an unwelcoming, hostile place.

So, recent dramatic cuts to the refugee resettlement program have been predicated on this notion that refugees pose an undue risk to the United States, that vetting procedures do not work. But all of the evidence suggests that this claim is unfounded since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act. This is almost 40 years of history here, not a single refugee has been involved in fatal terrorist attack on the United States. And that includes the tens of thousands of refugees that we settled from Syria and Iraq, which are often thought to pose the most risk. Indeed, over 70 percent of the Syrian refugees, a very small number relative to the 6 million that have been displaced, about 20 thousand Syrian refugees have come, 72 percent are women and children under the age of 14. Not a single one has been involved in a terrorist attack.

Slashing the program does not only run contrary to American values and American commitment to human rights and democracy, but it’s also counter to our national security interests. It makes it harder to gain the cooperation of regional partners and allies who we need in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts. It also helps fuel the idea that the United States is a hostile and unwelcoming place, which promotes the extremist narrative that the United States is hostile to Islam and hostile to people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds coming here. We would not only do well to raise the cap to historical norms, but to increase our commitment both here and overseas to protecting refugees.

**Kristie De Pena:** One of the things you mentioned that I think is important to confront head on and in a little bit more detail is this very pervasive idea that refugees pose a serious risk to Americans in the form of terrorism, despite the fact that we know they are vetted more thoroughly than any other immigrant that comes to the United States. But that’s not to say that there is no risk. So, I ask the panel, what makes the national security community so confident in our vetting system, and are refugees the population that we really need to worry about with regard to terrorism?

**Scott Cooper:** First, let me just say what an honor it is to join these panelists here today and thanks for having me. You might imagine that my politics are on the far left having spent 20 years in the marine corps.

Approaching this challenge that we have, which is how do we keep the country safe, you can't eliminate risk. Every time we went on patrol in Iraq and Afghanistan we would look for IED’s and determine what the risk was. There was not a choice of whether or not we were going to go on that patrol. Eliminating risk is something you can't do. It's among the challenges that you face as a national security expert in every military operation.

So, we established a system, an incredible system, of how we vet these people. And the notion that they are a threat is just completely false. I’ll give an example. I was in Jordan last year on a visit with UNHCR to look at the vetting system there. It's extraordinary. The notion that we don't know who these people are is just a complete falsehood. First of all, it’s a police state. And one of the things that a police state does very well is keep track of people. Since that day, they were trying to filter 300 refugees that they were to nominate to a country. They could vet them by almost every category. You can have a blonde haired blue-eyed hazel hair refugee. Or you name the category. You know every address that they lived at for the last ten years and all of those things

And that's just the UN system. Once they nominate people to come to America, those refugees are vetted by our own intelligence agencies. There is no more vetted traveler than a would-be refugee coming to the United States.

Let me also talk about a strategic point, if I may, about what the value of this. In the cold war, we welcomed refugees in large measure to embarrass the USSR. One of my close friends came here as a refugee with his mother as a seven-year-old. He went on to be a Rhodes Scholar, he teaches at Hunter College. That is the success story. I have dozens and dozens of stories like that. These are not people that would wish to do harm. They are the kinds of people who display courage that I actually want on my team. What better way to counter the narrative of an organization like ISIS or the regime in Syria than to say we are welcoming the victims of the conflict you started.

**Kristie De Pena:** On the question about whether refugees are really the population of people in the United States that we need to worry about with regard to terrorism. Do you guys have any thoughts? With regard to refugees, is that the population of people in the United States that we really need to worry about committing terrorist attacks, given that we haven’t seen a refugee commit a terrorist attack in forty years?

**Idean Salehyan:** Absolutely not. There are two different procedures through which someone with a well-founded fear of persecution could come to the United States. The first is through the asylum process. That’s someone who appears at a point of entry, an airport, a border crossing facility and presents themselves to authorities. Or someone who is already in the United States, perhaps on a different visa, who now fears going back home.

At that point, while they are here in the United States, their claims are vetted and we make sure they are who they say they are and make sure they have a legitimate claim to asylum. Europe is receiving tens of thousands of asylum seekers. People that are entering European Union territory, only then having their claims processed. For Europe and for the asylum procedure, sometimes it is tricky to know who is who and to make sure that bad actors are screened out, although I would argue that the Europeans are doing a good a good job of it, and historically we have done a good job of that. These people are screened overseas. It takes 18 months to three years to pass through all of the background checks, multiple security agencies, health checks, and it's no guarantee of entry.

So, if someone who is willing or seeking to do the United States harm, the process that takes 18 months to three years to go through and has no guarantee of entry is not the way to get in. Instead, this has helped people that are innocent civilians fleeing brutal conflict, people that the United States has an interest in resettling, people who have cooperated with military efforts, or bring some other benefits to the United States. The screening procedure is extremely robust. The fact that not a single fatal terrorist attack has been committed by a refugee since the passage of the 1980 law is testament to that. There have been isolated cases where there have been dangerous plots. But when you look at the costs versus the benefits, the benefits are enormous in terms of our economy, our national security, and our image around the world. And while the risks are there and have to be acknowledged, they are negligible. As I pointed out in the paper, and this is data from the Cato Institute report, your odds of being killed by a refugee terrorist is one in over 3 billion. Your odds of being struck by lightning twice are higher than being killed by a refugee.

**Kristie De Pena:** I am glad you brought up the difference between what is happening in Europe with regard to refugees and what happens in America. There are some differences on a number of different fronts. And one of the other pervasive undercurrents is that once refugees are in America they don't assimilate, when in fact, we’re actually were seeing the opposite. Linda, you've always been a strong proponent of assimilation. Can you talk a little bit about why assimilation is different in America and perhaps than in Europe, with respect to both refugees and immigrants more broadly?

**Linda Chavez:** Sure, it's a very interesting to position to be in today because I had been an advocate for immigration and assimilation all of my professional career going back forty years or so. I do believe that the United States has almost a unique position in history. There are a handful of other countries that have similar histories, but we are the biggest country that has essentially been formed around an idea, around principles, and not on the basis of history, or blood or soil. Who we are as a nation is different than most countries.

What I see happening right now is a real identity crisis going on in America. This notion that somehow, we can protect ourselves against all threats is a kind of crazy idea when you think about it. None of us would be in this room today if we lived our lives that way. Simply getting up in the morning and stepping foot house, or even staying in our houses, does not protect us from risk.

But the important thing about the American idea is that we have a history of bringing people here from all parts of the world. The fact that we only really had a formal refugee program starting in 1980 does not mean that we haven't always been a refugee nation because we were founded, in part, as a refugee nation. People fled to what was then the English colonies, that later became the United States, because they were fleeing religious persecution. And the ability to help people become part of our society has been very aggressive and has worked very well. Better than, for example, Europe. My old boss, Ronald Reagan, used to like to say, “You can move to France or Germany and you could live there all your life but you're not necessarily going to become a Frenchman or a German. That is not true of America.

You move to America and you become American. Some of it has been because of policy, but I think a great deal more has had to do with culture. And with the idea that we are a culture that encourages people to become part of the whole. Our very motto that dates back to our founding, E pluribus Unum, out of many one, has been our goal. And we are very successful at assimilating people who were born elsewhere. That is certainly true of immigrants and it is as true today of the immigrants who are coming from Asia and Latin America as it was the immigrants who came from Europe in the early 20th and 19th centuries. We do in fact turn people who had previous allegiances in different cultures into Americans over a period of time.

And it is certainly true with refugees. If you look at refugees and how they progress in society they’re actually quicker to learn English. Some of that is because of what Idean described in terms of the process of becoming a refugee to the United States. A lot of refugees start learning English that they don't learn in their home country in refugee camps. It's a big deal to take English classes and to prepare yourself. To be able to migrate. So they learn English at a more rapid rate. They actually have higher education levels as adults than the native-born population. They move into the economic mainstream, have higher rates of entrepreneurship. homeownership, and other indicators of social and economic integration than other groups do. They do in fact become American.

I want to make one reference to an article that’s in the *Washington Post* today. It’s an absolutely beautiful op-ed. It’s by a woman named Roya Hakakian. The title of it is “I came to America as a refugee. You took me just as I was.” And she talks about the experience of being a refugee, where unlike being an immigrant where you may have had a lot of planning and foresight, you may have actually tried to put together money and you knew what your path was and how to get there. And being a refugee where you’re uprooted. You don't have anything to say about whether or not you can be forced to leave your country. Sometimes you end up fleeing with only the clothes on your back.

The interesting thing about a refugee is that they come here with nothing, yet they succeed. We give help to refugees. We give help to refugees more than other immigrants because we understand that they didn't have the process of being able to plan ahead and save for their future. But the fact is this woman describes how it was that she came as a refugee from Iran, had been versed in “death to America,” had to recite that in class every morning in her school. She ended up here as a late teenager with very distorted views of what America was. She thought we were totally into materialism and the only thing that mattered in America was getting ahead financially. It was because of her status as a refugee with nothing that she learned the true meaning of America. I think that experience is almost universal. There have been a handful of people involved in plots. I don't think we can ever eliminate that risk. But is that risk somehow supposed to guide our entire policy and make us give up on a principle and idea that has been fundamental to who we are as a country? I think not.

**Kristie De Pena:** One of the things that I wanted to talk a little bit more about. The idea of the refugee as an individual. When a lot of people talk about refugees we hear these stories about someone who broke the mold and made it big. It makes it seem that the refugees as a population are just desperate people crossing borders that had lower level of skill. When in fact, that's not the case. That’s a common misconception.

In the paper are some highlighted cases of high ranking, extremely well-educated individuals that have, at least in the past, used our refugee system as a way to defect from their countries. Idean calls this “allowing people to vote with their feet” in favor of coming to the United States. So, panel, how do you think that this has impacted the areas of the world that they are leaving like the USSR? What do you think is the potential gain for the United States if we were to allow this to happen more frequently?

**Scott Cooper:** I would love to take that one on. The first thing to recognize is the number of refugees we would resettle is minuscule in comparison to the problem. The most recent United States report notes that there is 66 million displaced people, 22 million of which are refugees. If we were to resettle a hundred thousand refugees in America, three times of what the administration is asking to resettle, it would be statistically insignificant. Most refugees will return to their home countries, and that’s important to understand.

However, the narrative that what America is doing is so counter to what those other countries are doing, is something that catches on. What more powerful message to send to that regime than that we have welcomed one of the best citizens who had to flee your regime because they were threatened?

Of anyone, Ronald Reagan understood the power of narrative. You look at for instance, his final farewell address. He talked about a naval story. The USS midway that was at sea, a sailor saw a refugee boat as they put the landing craft out to rescue that boat. You have a southeast Asian refugee that waived to the sailor “Hello Mr. American, hello Mr. Freedom man.” That was his final address in 1989. The power of that I don’t think can be overestimated. And that's why I think this program is so critical and why we are shooting ourselves in the foot in the way we are approaching it.

**Kristie De Pena:** Idean, can you talk a little bit about the stories that you highlighted in your paper on voting with your feet?

**Idean Salehyan:** During the cold war, refugees were often called defectors for the very reasons Scott was mentioning. It was showing the world that was falling under the soviet sphere of influence that life in the United States, life in the west, life in a liberal democracy is better. That is a powerful message.

But at the same time, we also did gain key intelligence assets. In the paper, there are a number of stories of Polish, Czech, and Estonian officials who defected to the west and provided intelligence to the United States. At the same time, if you carry forward to today, those refugees that come, many of them are not the poor and the destitute as is often believed. Yes, they’ve become poor and disadvantaged due to a traumatic circumstance back home, but many of these refugees are people with skills. They are doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, people who come to the United States that become ambassadors of American ideals. Refugees do have a higher entrepreneurship rate, higher citizenship rate, higher homeownership rate than other migrant categories.

And at the same time, we gain cultural knowledge, language skills, things that promote our engagement with the world in the long run. Even if you look at high ranking officials in the United States government like Henry Kissinger and Madeline Albright came from refugee backgrounds. Several entrepreneurs including Sergey Brin, the founder of google, came as a refugee. We gain valuable skills and resources through this program at minuscule risk to ourselves. As you said before, it’s like shooting ourselves in the foot by slashing the numbers so significantly.

**Kristie De Pena:** In addition to shooting ourselves in the foot, I want to talk about the countries of first asylum, which we are hearing about a lot more often given the number of refugees that Scott cited earlier. A country of first asylum generally means it’s the first country a refugee arrives in that will provide them some kind of adequate protection and a durable solution under international law. Simply put, it’s usually just the neighboring country where a refugee arrives. And they usually take on very large populations of refugees. It's also where we usually see the formation of refugee camps. In many of these cases though, we are seeing these countries becoming very burdened by this influx of refugees.

So I want to talk a little bit about what the impacts of countries of first asylum are. Especially given that not only do they take on large numbers of refugees, but they do so in a fairly haphazard way, which you touched on earlier. And whether there are negative impacts to the United States when these regions are left unstable by the influx of refugees in these regions.

**Idean Salehyan**: Before proceeding I want to be absolutely clear that the vast majority of refugees never participate in political violence, either during a terrorist group or other forms of militant organizations. And the vast majority of refugee flows, countries that host refugees, don’t succumb to massive destabilization.

But there are cases where neighboring countries receive a huge influx of refugees. If you think about a small country like Jordan, a small country where now 1 in 4 residents in Jordan is a refugee. You think that many of those countries in the developing world where they have poor administrative capacity and limited financial means to take care of these refugees. And often the same ethnic, sectarian divisions in the country they are fleeing from can become a recipe for disaster. We saw this, for example, in the Kosovo refugee crisis. Hundreds of thousands of Albanian refugees from Kosovo fled into Macedonia. Macedonia has a domestic ethnic Albanian population and very limited capacity to care for such a large number of refugees. So it insisted, as part of its agreement to cooperate with U.S. and NATO military efforts, to allow a share of the refugees provided that there was adequate international assistance to care for them in an evacuation program.

If you look at Syria today, think about the neighboring countries that are receiving the most burden from the now five plus million displaced people from that conflict. It’s Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Lebanon has the same ethnic divisions that Syria has and their politics have been closely intertwined for decades. And Turkey even though it's been relatively welcoming towards those refugees and really must be commended for taking a leadership role on the Syrian crisis, they are beginning to see tensions as those populations move from becoming temporary and transient to becoming a permanent fixture Turkish society. So you’re starting to see a tax on refugees, questions about their integration, their long-term prospects in Turkish territory. Turkey is dealing with over 3 million Syrians that arrived since 2011. It’s a significant challenge for them.

This is very clear in the State Department Annual Report to Congress about refugee priorities that part of the reason that we are accepting refugees from where we’re accepting them is to help alleviate some of that pressure on countries at first asylum. The number of refugees that we bring in is a drop in the bucket often. We’re talking 18,000 Syrian refugees out of a population of millions. That's not a whole lot. But in conjunction with other generous humanitarian assistance packages, we can make a meaningful difference in making sure that refugee camps are secure, well cared for, are not breeding grounds for militants, and that extremists don’t have access to the refugees in the recruitment efforts.

Those generous assistance programs of which resettlement is a part, can certainly help prevent the worst regional destabilization. Now, in addition to cutting the resettlement numbers, the administration has also cut funding for many of these agencies, and that must be borne in mind as well. It is not just the number of refugees that the United States is supporting here, but we’ve cut the financial contributions to refugees in camps overseas as well. And we’re leaving countries in the region that we need as partners and allies basically on their own to deal with the challenge.

**Linda Chavez:** Can I just add something to that. I know we will get into in a little bit later. But you had described as a system in which refugees fleeing their country first enter very poor countries that have no means whatsoever to give them the assistance that they need. Then when the refugees move on, particularly if they do so without a formal process or even sometimes with a formal process, they end up in places in Europe where there is a welfare state. And in my view one of the great problems with the lack of assimilation in some European countries is that they become isolated in that way too. They don't become integrated into the society because they're basically being taken care of by the state, which is not a good thing for human beings as a general rule. Becoming permanently dependent is not good for the human spirit.

One of the great things that we do in our refugee program is we bring people in and we do give them assistance, but it's limited. It’s also very focused. We decide where people are going to live by and large. We resettle them into communities where we know there is some chance of integration and jobs available. There may be some people in the community from the origin countries to provide a little bit of an enclave for the initial time where they feel comfortable. But then we expect them after they had been given the temporary assistance to move on and take care of themselves. And I think that’s been one of the key successes. Now that may not be possible to do that when you're talking about millions of people. But it’s certainly possible to do that with 100,000 or 200,000 people. Lord knows we can do it with less than 30,000, even though the administration says they have capped it at 30,000, there’s no indication they will even meet that number. What they seem to be doing across the board with all of the programs admitting people who are foreign-born to the United States is to not even meet the caps that are in place.

**Kristie De Pena:** That's a great point. It brings up something else I want to touch on with just a few minutes left. Everyone has mentioned that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mentioned the other day that the administration's proposal for the refugee cap for 2019 will be 30,000. Which is a 33% drop from the then lowest cap last year of 45,000. We have admitted just under 20,000 refugees. While the administration still needs to consult with congress about the final number, we can expect the number to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 30,000. What I want to kind of touch on with regard to that is whether we have seen or whether we can expect to see other nations responding in kind when they see our numbers continually being lowered and what type of impact that will have on the U.S. and the global response to the refugee crisis at large.

**Scott Cooper:** If we can take it from the normative to the strategic. Imagine for a minute you're having a conversation with government officials in Jordan. I think it's hard to find a closer strategic ally in that region, much less the world, than Jordan. They have over 600,000 people they have absorbed. What we’re telling them is we are reducing the number of refugees from the Middle East from 17,500 to 9,000. That is the plan this year. And we are proposing to reduce the amount of aid that we will provide in our international affairs budget.

If I’m a Jordanian, I want to say, “Are you really an ally of mine?” It’s not as though Jordan has chosen to absorb 600,000 people, that’s the strategic cost of a conflict with their neighbor. We have an interest in being a good ally and having a more stable region there, which we are not doing by our rhetoric there. That is among the great strategic cost, whether we are welcoming two refugees or 100,000. The rhetoric behind that is what is so harmful.

**Kristie De Pena:** With just a few minutes left. If each of you were a lawmaker and you were blown away by what you heard today. If you wanted to make a change in how we handle refugee resettlement. What would be your first step? What would be your first policy goal?

**Idean Salehyan:** Quite simply to restore the cap to what it was previously and actually meet the number that you set out. It’s quite striking that we’re even having this conversation. Immigration has often been a controversial issue on Capitol Hill. But this program was not a controversial program. It was considered sacrosanct. You could deal with border enforcement budgets, work visas, but Republican and Democratic administrations from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama used the refugee resettlement program to help people in critical need and further our foreign policy interests. Congress passed the numbers hardly without question. Republican congress, democratic congress, it didn’t matter. This was a program that could not be touched. This program was so important, for moral and strategic reasons.

We just need to get back to a commonsense policy that we’ve had for 40 years. There’s no magic formula for how we get this though, we just need to do what we’ve been doing before. We need to do something that was part of our national tradition since the founding of the nation and part of U.S. law since 1980. So we need to just get to where we were. The boogie man of the refugee terrorist, that narrative needs to be countered.

**Scott Cooper:** In 1980, we welcomed more than 2 million refugees. We welcomed these people because there was a crisis. And the Refugee Act of 1980 decided it was going to give power to the executive branch to decide how many refugees we would resettle. And that worked very well for our Iraqi allies because under the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act, the executive branch was able to say “no we’re going welcome even more Iraqi allies, and that’s not going to count against the refugee cap.” So, what I would if I was in charge, because we’re not seeing the executive branch do what is strategically important to the country, I’d introduce a bill where congress sets not a ceiling but a minimum number of refugees. I know that turns it on its head and requires congress to act on that, but when you have an executive branch that is not proceeding along what makes strategic sense, that’s what the first branch of government, the legislative branch should be doing.

**Linda Chavez:** The world right now is experiencing the largest refugee crisis since the end of WWII. There was conflict in the Middle East, conflicts in Africa, and different kinds of conflicts, but conflicts nonetheless in Latin America. I think we have as an obligation as Americans to live up to our ideals and to accept more refugees. I’m not sure that you could require that there be a minimum number of persons admitted, I think there might be some constitutional issues involved, so I’m not sure it would work. But certainly, the principle that we go back to our tradition of taking at least 100,000 people in seems the very bare minimum that we ought to be doing. There needs to be pushback from Republicans. I’m very happy that Senator Lankford has been involved in this, but we need to get more Republicans involved in this because this hasn’t been a partisan issue. This is not conservative versus liberal. This is about being American and about standing up for our ideals. And being the country we have always been, and helping build the greatest nation in the world. Refugees are a part of that building

**Kristie De Pena:** Thank you. We have 15 minutes for question and answer. I encourage you to come up with a brief question. I know we’ve skimmed the surface of a very complicated set of topics so we look forward to your questions.

**Audience Member:** I’m curious because you mentioned a lot about assimilation of refugees. How much do you think the fear that refugees won’t assimilate plays into the rhetoric of “We don’t want refugees to resettle?”

**Linda Chavez:** I think it’s at the heart of some of the opposition. Yes, the administration is using the fear of terrorism and somehow let in the next 9/11 actors in the United States through our refugee program, which is absolutely absurd given how vetted people are. But I think the real fear and the fear among people is the question of assimilation. It is what is driving the immigration debate as well.

But I have to say that as somebody who has written about immigration for some 40 years, this is nothing new. While we are an immigration nation, in every period where there has been large scale immigration in the United States these fears have predominated among the population. Ben Franklin was terribly worried that we were going to be Germanized and that the Germans were going to take over the new country. Alexander Hamilton, himself immigrant from the West Indies, thought that foreigners were going to foreignize America. In the 19th century there was animus towards the Irish, towards the Germans, towards people from Central Europe, towards Scandinavians. In the early 20th century towards Southern and Eastern Europeans. We like to think today that Europe is one big happy family and we’re a Eurocentric nation, but they didn’t think that towards the Italians, Jews, or some of the others who were coming.

So a lot of it is fear that people are not assimilating. But all the evidence shows that people, no matter where they come from, assimilate and assimilate quickly. And refugees seem to assimilate even more quickly than immigrants, who are already doing a pretty good job of assimilating.

**Audience Member:** Hi, I work for Senator Ed Markey. Our office is working on a bill right now that sets a minimum number and I wanted to hear your input on what that number should be.

**Scott Cooper:** I think 100,000 is a good number to start with. We’ve proved that we can do that. When we went from 25,000 to 85,000, in 2016 we did that. The key to that is what I call the three P’s. You need to put people behind that, you need to have a process, and then you have to figure out policies. And what we’re doing right now with the reductions, is we have among the nine refugee resettlement agencies that have to slash their staffs and everything else. We need a process for doing that. I think 100,000 is a good place to start, which means we have to expand, as we’ve done in 2016, for instance, by putting more circuit rights out there, because that process happens overseas.

**Idean Salehyan:** But I would add that the number, and if there’s regional criteria to as there is now, has to be flexible and adaptable. You can pass a bill now, but you don’t know when the next crisis is coming. The president has the prerogative to exceed the cap or to alter the numbers in consultation with the state department and other agencies, but we don’t know when the next Syria is going to erupt or when the next crisis in Africa or southeast Asia is going to erupt, so the number should be flexible and adaptable to meet changing circumstances on the ground, but it should be robust.

**Scott Cooper:** As you look at that, look at what we did during Kosovo, those Kosovo Albanians resettled in New Jersey. That was a great success in the way we responded to that. We didn’t expect that would happen, but we did respond very well.

**Previous Audience Member:** There’s no statutory requirement that the president has to fill that number. We’re seeing that right now. So wouldn’t that provide enough padding for an adaptation of the number, the fact that they don’t have to fill it? If we set a minimum cap that’s one thing, but there’s no obligation for the President to meet the cap.

**Idean Salehyan:** The cap is really a guideline. There’s a maximum number and regional criteria. The president can exceed or not meet the cap. In the last fiscal year in the 5 or 6 regions that are designated, the United States did not meet the cap for any of them except Europeans, where we exceeded the cap. And you can think about what kind of message that sends. So the regional caps are not set in stone. They are guidelines that the President does have the prerogative to tinker with as circumstances arise.

**Linda Chavez:** But I would caution that we do have a Supreme Court decision that was out, that I had an amicus brief opposing, but the President’s authority on this is fairly board. Congress could pass something to put in a minimum, but whether or not you could force the administration to actually do that is going to be difficult. I think the bigger challenge is to try to make this a public issue, to get the American people on our side. To educate people about who refugees are and why they are good for the country. That’s really the best way to accomplish our goals. We can’t do it by passing a law he would obviously veto. It really requires a massive effort on the part of nonprofits and other organizations to try to get out there and change public opinion on the issue.

**Audience Member:** A lot of you talked about the importance of the narratives established by the refugee program. I’m curious how reversible the current narrative would be just by policy changes.

**Scott Cooper:** I think the policy changes are the most difficult ones to implement just based on the reality of where we are. Congress has been unable to push back with oversight on this. As Ms. Chavez said, passing a law that would be veto proof is unlikely. On the other hand, with the narrative. the holocaust memorial has a wonderful display called Americans in the holocaust. The parallels are quite scary. It talks about what we did in the 1930s in fearing refugees. In the conference of Evian, there was only one country that stood up to welcome refugees, and it was the Dominican Republic. In that narrative, telling the stories, having hearings about this and the strategic validity of having refugees. I think that’s how we change public opinion. Policy is the more difficult task.

**Audience Member:** I wanted to ask a question about one of the values that the refugee program supports. Support of people fleeing religious persecution. I wondered what comments you have about that and the impact of those individuals with the recent cuts.

**Linda Chavez:** I know we’ve heard a lot in right wing media about Syrian refugees and others in the Middle East, specifically Christians and how we’re not taking enough Christians. Nobody is suggestion we can’t take more. I think religious persecution certainly is a part. I think sometimes when we talk about the Muslim population we act as if Muslims themselves are not being persecuted and the sectarian divisions within these countries have contributed enormously to the problems we are seeing there. So the idea that we’re taking one group that are similar to our own makeup as a country and we’re going to exclude others sometimes ignores the fact that there are people who happen to be different religions than the majority of our population, but face enormous persecution. I think religion should be a factor and we should look to help those feeling religious persecution.

**Idean Salehyan:** As I noted in the paper, the act that helped hundreds of thousands of Eastern Europeans come to the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. There were provisions in that law that limited the entry of Jewish and Catholic refugees. This is after WWII. Congress included provisions in those bills that limited certain religious minorities because of animus towards those religious groups, to the consternation of President Eisenhower. Now the narrative has changed. So the new threat supposedly are Muslim refugees when those populations are fleeing extremists like ISIS. If you meet refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the vast majority of those groups don’t share the extremist worldview as those groups do and actually become ambassadors of American ideals. They show that the U.S is welcome to all religions, all faiths, all walks of life. People can come together in this country. That’s what counters the narrative of a religious or ethnic nation that groups like ISIS are trying to foster around the world.

**Kristie De Pena:** I want to thank each of you for your willingness to participate in this conversation. Like I said before, we’ve only scratched the surface, so I encourage you to read the paper and reach out with any questions. We’re going to take a 15-minute break before we return to our second panel, which will discuss the three P’s that Scott talked about, people, policy, and process regarding what resettlement looks like. I encourage you to get some coffee, take a quick break, and come back at 11:30 for our second panel. Thank you.