

Refugee Resettlement and National Security

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21 November 2015

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“We have no hope. People are thinking of going to Europe by walking or by sea. I know some people who are in the UNHCR [resettlement] system but they can’t take it anymore. They are exposing themselves to the danger of the journey to Europe.” –Iraqi refugee in Turkey

A group of Suriyani refugees from Iraq invited me to meet with them to learn more about their situation as refugees in Turkey. They were forced to flee their homes and country due to death threats from ISIS. While Turkey allows them to stay temporarily in the country, it does not offer them a long-term solution to their displacement. They receive little to no assistance from the government. They live off of the money that they brought with them. Now it is running out.

They don’t believe it will ever be safe for them to return to their homes in Iraq. They don’t have the option of settling in Turkey. Their only hope is to be resettled as refugees to another country (e.g. the US, Canada, Australia, Europe). But the process is very slow and few are ever resettled. Those that lose hope of resettlement feel they have only one remaining option – to make their way to Europe. Not only is the journey fraught with danger, it is expensive. The going price of human smugglers is presently around \$7,000.

National Security and Human Rights

The November 13th terrorist attack of ISIS in Paris has catalyzed an intense conversation concerning national security in many countries. The flow of asylum seekers into Europe and refugee resettlement programs were quickly brought into the conversation. These forcibly displaced people were framed as a serious threat to national security on the grounds that terrorists may be hiding among them as wolves in sheep’s clothing. Many politicians and governmental officials began calling for a stop in refugee resettlement programs until they could be sure that no terrorists were able to use them to successfully infiltrate their countries.

The tension is palatable when it comes to our need to protect national security interests and respect humanitarian rights.

Forces Behind the Flow of Asylum Seekers

I recently met with a group of about 20 men and women in Kakuma refugee camp (Kenya). They shared openly about their struggle with daily life.

An Ethiopian gentleman shared how he has been waiting on US authorities for many years to make a decision concerning his application for resettlement. He said he is losing heart and is considering making his way across the Sahara Desert to Libya and then head to Italy by sea. He knows that the dangers are great and that many don’t survive the journey. His response: *“It is better to die trying to reach Europe than it is to die here in the camp.”*

It’s not difficult to understand why many refugees struggle to sustain hope. The average time of displacement is 17 years.¹ 86% of the world’s refugees are hosted by developing nations that cannot absorb or integrate them.² 2014 boasted the lowest number in 30 years when it comes to refugees returning to their country of origin.³ Less than 1% of the world’s refugees are ever resettled.⁴

¹ “The forgotten millions”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 22 January 2015. See <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/forgotten-millions>.

² UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 20.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The budget of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is unable to meet the essential needs of refugees. Food rations have been cut.⁵ Medical clinics have been closed.⁶ The demand for shelter exceeds what they can provide.⁷ Refugee schools (where they exist) are overcrowded and under resourced. As a refugee told me, “*Our problems are getting worse day by day.*”

Resettlement Programs and National Security

There is a cause and effect relationship to the diminishing hope of refugees and the growing number of asylum seekers heading for Europe. Because so few refugees are ever resettled, many feel that their only choice is between losing the best years of their lives to a refugee camp or making their way to a place where they might be permitted to settle and rebuild their lives.

This means that **shutting or slowing down refugee resettlement programs will increase the pressure that causes desperate people to risk the journey to Europe, the US and other industrialized nations as asylum seekers.**

Robust Refugee Resettlement as Part of the Solution

History would tell us that the US refugee resettlement program poses next to no threat to national security. The existing US system has proven itself effective in terms of sorting out persons who may pose a threat to society. The screening process is so intense that many trustworthy and safe people have been rejected for resettlement. The White House recently released an infographic outlining the complex and comprehensive resettlement screening process for more information.

The greater risk is that potential terrorists might slip across international borders along with asylum seekers. While this has not happened in the past, it appears that this might be how some of those involved in the Paris attacks entered Europe. The escalating flow of desperate people across borders has made it possible for wolves to hide among the sheep.

The following three responses would go a long way toward the development of a comprehensive solution that strengthens national security and honors our commitment to human rights.

1. Increase the Number of Resettled Refugees

One effective way to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers without putting national security at risk or violating human rights is to significantly increase the number of refugees that are resettled annually. This would result in more refugees choosing to flee to refugee processing centers and camps as they would have reasonable hope of resettlement and no longer feel compelled to take the risks associated with the migrant trail.

This would protect national security interests as countries of resettlement would choose and vet who they would receive. It would honor human rights as desperate people would have greater opportunity to find a durable solution to their displacement.

2. Increase the Efficiency of the Resettlement Process

Raising the number of refugees qualifying for resettlement is the first step in a positive direction. It would be greatly enhanced if the efficiency of the resettlement process itself was improved so that refugees would have hope that they

⁵ “Wars, climate change, funding cuts: World Food Program battles to give hope”, The Murray Valley Standard, 14 Nov 2015. See: <http://www.murrayvalleystandard.com.au/story/3492422/wars-climate-change-funding-cuts-world-food-program-battles-to-give-hope/?cs=5>.

⁶ “UN agencies ‘broke and failing’ in face of ever growing refugee crisis”, The Guardian, 8 Sept 2015. See: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/06/refugee-crisis-un-agencies-broke-failing>.

⁷ “Thousands of refugees braced for cold winter as UN funds shortfall pushes more to Europe”, International Business Times, 5 Nov 2015. See: <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/thousands-refugees-braced-cold-winter-un-funds-shortfall-pushes-more-europe-1527397>

would not need to languish in refugee camps for more than two years while waiting for the outcome of their application for resettlement.

I know refugees who have been in the system for seven years and are still waiting to find out if they will ever be resettled. Living with such uncertainty is difficult to cope with on a daily basis. Mothers and fathers watch their children fall behind in school. Young adults are shut out of opportunities for personal development and feel that they are losing their most productive years of life. Years of living in dependency upon humanitarian aid eats away at the hope, resiliency and resourcefulness needed to succeed if/when a person is resettled.

It is in everyone's best interest for the refugee resettlement process to become more generous and efficient. Such a response is an investment in national security as it would reduce the number of asylum seekers crossing our borders. It would also give genuine refugees a chance to rebuild their lives before they've lost the critical capacity to adapt and integrate as healthy and productive members of their new society.

3. Invest in Robust Social Systems to Facilitate Integration

To be an effective solution, refugee resettlement needs to have more robust social systems designed to intentionally help resettled refugees succeed in integrating into their new host society. Failure to help integrate new arrivals will only serve to marginalize many. Such marginalization puts them at risk of being exploited, disillusioned and easy fodder for extremists.

The US refugee resettlement program is an important part of the solution to the escalating global refugee crisis. Not only can a more generous and efficient resettlement program rescue desperate refugees, it can also serve the interests of national security.

Other Articles Written by the Author:

1. [Justice and Compassion - Responding to the Refugee Crisis in Europe](#), by Thomas Albinson. September, 2015.
2. [State of the Refugee Highway \(2015\)](#), by Thomas Albinson. June 2015.
3. [A Christian Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in the Mediterranean](#), by Thomas Albinson. April, 2015.

Recommended Reading:

1. [Seven Factors Behind Movement of Syrian Refugees to Europe](#). UNHCR, 25 Sept 2015.
2. Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States, The White House, 20 Nov 2015.
See: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>.

*"For an age of unprecedented mass displacement, we need an unprecedented humanitarian response and a renewed global commitment to tolerance and protection for people fleeing conflict and persecution."*⁸

—Antonio Guterres, UNHCR

⁸ "Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase", UNHCR, 18 June 2015. See <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.