



Revising Refugee Resettlement: Help Millions, Not a Lucky Few

By Nayla Rush

President Trump is reportedly considering an executive order on refugee resettlement that might, among other things, temporarily pause the program for reevaluation. There are a number of leads this reevaluation can follow in order to uphold the United States' humanitarian commitment to refugees while keeping Americans as safe as possible. The resettlement program does not need to end, but the way it is applied today needs to change. The United States must start implementing resettlement as it was intended — when it's the only option available to those who are in imminent danger and simply cannot stay put — and stop using it as a conscience alleviator. Playing God by choosing to resettle just a few out of millions of refugees in similar circumstances is not morally commendable. The Trump administration has the opportunity to reinvent a broken refugee system, assist those it resettles better and longer, and to help millions of refugees where they are more efficiently.

Here is a possible road map to do just that:

- Apply the program as it was intended: a protection tool *solely* available to the most vulnerable refugees who are *not* able (for fear of persecution, medical needs, etc.) to remain in the country they fled to. This will automatically reduce the numbers of resettled refugees and allow for more appropriate and longer care for this traumatized group.
- Focus on integration, not just vetting. No matter how extreme, vetting gives a glimpse of the past and present, but it does not secure the future. Integration is even more crucial because its failure can be dangerous. Successful integration and shared values are the best shields against radicalization of resettled refugees.
- Reassess the United States' total reliance on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for refugee determination, assistance, and resettlement referrals. The United States chooses the refugees it resettles solely based on referrals from UNHCR. Given the large stakes: access to U.S. citizenship and possible security threats, this blind trust must be revisited.
- Create a development-based policy to empower refugees in their region and concentrate efforts to end conflicts and secure the safe return of refugees. This can give millions of refugees autonomy and opportunity and render them better equipped to rebuild their postwar countries. Refugees do not want handouts but jobs.
- Help reform the archaic refugee system and UNHCR's strategy to fit today's refugee needs. Reinvent the help given to refugees; resettlement is not the answer. Help refugees help themselves, in their own region.

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Back to Basics: Resettlement Is for Those Who Cannot Stay in Their Country of Refuge

The [refugee resettlement program](#) was set up under the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide “resettlement to a third country in situations where it is *impossible* for a person to go back home *or remain in the host country*.” (Emphasis added.) It is to be offered to the most vulnerable refugees, such as victims of torture or extreme trauma, or those in need of special care they cannot find in their country of refuge.

The [U.S. State Department is also clear](#): “The U.S. resettlement program serves refugees who are especially vulnerable; those who fled violence or persecution and *cannot safely stay where they are or return home*.” (Emphasis added.)

Apparently, these are not who the United States is serving. The majority of refugees resettled here could have stayed in the countries they fled to. While most did, undoubtedly, suffer from unemployment, destitution, and despair in their country of first refuge, those hardships alone are not grounds for resettlement. Otherwise, most refugees, millions of them, would be eligible to be resettled into Western countries.

Also, and contrary to official UNHCR and U.S. claims, priority has *not* been given to urgent cases for traumatized groups, such as victims of torture or gender-based violence. The latest UNHCR resettlement assessment report gives us useful insight into its submission categories and priority levels (the full analysis can be read [here](#)): Only 26 percent of [UNHCR’s 2015 resettlement submissions](#) (to the United States and elsewhere) were part of the “Survivors of Violence and/or Torture” category. Other sensitive categories such as “Women and Girls at Risk” (9 percent), “Children and Adolescents at Risk” (2 percent), and “Refugees with Medical Needs (5 percent) constituted a small percentage of submissions. As for submissions priorities, 89 percent of the 2015 submissions were under the “normal” priority section while only 11 percent fell under the “urgent” priority and 0.4 percent the “emergency” priority.

Vetting (No Matter How Extreme) Is Not Enough

The refugee resettlement program poses a substantial security challenge with the absence of dependable screening measures for refugees coming from countries of national security concern. Vetting is essential and should remain a top priority. But it only gives us a glimpse of the past and present; it doesn’t secure the future.

Even if refugees themselves were to pose no threat, the risk could come later on as terrorist groups prey on vulnerable communities and recruit young people who feel somewhat estranged in their host country. Americans witnessed this past November a tragic example of such risks when a [young Somali refugee](#) drove his car into a group of students at Ohio State University and then started stabbing people. The initial screening of this Somali family was not necessarily flawed; if U.S. officials found nothing, it was probably because there was nothing to find. Radicalization came later for one of them.

Family-oriented resettlement (just like thorough screening) is not a safeguard either. State Department officials — in an obvious attempt to reassure the American public — often stress the fact that refugees admitted here are mostly families, women, and children. It is true that these groups are different from migrant flows that recently made it to Europe and were disproportionately young, unmarried, unaccompanied, and male. But this doesn’t mean that families pose no threat. Again, the Somali refugee responsible for the terrorist attack in Ohio came to the United States as a teenager with his mother and six siblings. No “unaccompanied man” joined in, not even the father. Terror ultimately came from one of the seven children. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, but terrorists have families too.

Successful Integration, Shared Values Are the Best Shields Against Radicalization

Integration is key for migrants in general but more so for refugees who suffered great losses. Failed integration can lead to alienation, resentment, and in extreme cases, radicalization. Real (or even perceived) insurmountable differences in values, culture, and beliefs are perfect elements for a time bomb. The bomb could be triggered or simply inspired by terrorist groups like ISIS who prey on the weak and the frustrated.

Resettlement organizations that ease the transition of refugees who come here do provide valuable help, but only for the first few months. How can we expect refugees to successfully integrate (economically, socially, and culturally) into American society and become “self-sufficient” in such a short period of time, especially those who are physically and psychologically weakened?

The notion that all refugees can easily integrate into Western societies and live happily ever after is an illusion. Advocates of admitting increasing numbers of refugees into the United States often revert to story-telling to support their cause. Stories of famous people like Steve Jobs, Madeleine Albright, Albert Einstein, et al. are displayed as proof of the extraordinary integration capacity of refugees. While these success stories are certainly admirable, they remain the exception rather than the rule. Most refugees resettled in the United States (especially with recent flows from the Middle East) are likely to struggle with language, educational, and professional barriers. Beyond the initial help they receive, a large share rely on some type of state and/or government aid. (See details on refugee use of taxpayer-funded government services [here](#).) The risk of failed integration is real and resentment, around the corner.

Pope Francis himself underlined the importance of integration, inviting European leaders to [exercise prudence](#) when deciding to accept refugees: “because we shouldn’t just receive refugees, we need also to integrate them.” If not, states will “pay a political price for an imprudent calculation in welcoming more refugees than they can integrate,” since non-integrated refugees will then form “ghettos”. When integration fails and the refugee’s culture develops *against* that of the host culture, it is, in the Pope’s own words, “very dangerous”.

Successful integration is even more crucial in this particular context as refugee resettlement is one of UNHCR’s [“durable solutions”](#): it is “the transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought asylum to another State that has agreed to admit them as refugees and to grant them permanent settlement and the opportunity for eventual citizenship.” According to [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services \(USCIS\)](#), resettled refugees “are required by law to apply for a green card (permanent residence) in the United States one year after being admitted as a refugee.” They can apply for citizenship four years later (not five, as the five-year count for refugees starts on the day of arrival). From this perspective, a resettlement card gives access to a citizenship — for the resettled refugees and later their families, since family reunification is implied here.

With that in mind, thorough background checks are indeed crucial in keeping out people who shouldn’t come here. But such checks should also include making sure those who are admitted are able and *willing* to integrate. Refugees are not just parachuted from and into a void. The baggage they carry (educational, cultural, religious, etc.) can be incompatible with American rules and values. Simply put, one must love and respect America and every value it stands for to be able to come to America.

Reconsider Near-Total Reliance on UNHCR for Refugee Determination and Resettlement Referrals

The U.S. government not only provides funds to UNHCR (\$5.6 billion for the Syrian crisis alone) and relies on its staff to properly assist refugees in their region (through cash grants, shelter, access to health and education, etc.), it is also depending on them for refugee status determinations and resettlement referrals.

The United States chooses the refugees it resettles solely based on referrals from UNHCR. It entrusts this UN agency staff with the entire selection and pre-screening process of refugees eligible for resettlement in the United States.

We know very little about this selection process except that it is based on a [benefit-of-the-doubt policy](#) and can be somewhat subjective. It follows the [assumption](#) that “[i]t is hardly possible for a refugee to ‘prove’ every part of his case and, indeed, if this were a requirement the majority of refugees would not be recognized. It is therefore frequently necessary to give the applicant the benefit of the doubt.” That is understandable since UNHCR is first and foremost a humanitarian agency whose mission is to help refugees no matter what.

We also don’t know much about UNHCR’s employees, the men and women the U.S. government believes possess the good judgment and expertise needed to make refugee determinations and resettlement referrals. UNHCR staff is probably receiving the best training possible in order to undertake difficult assignments in troubled settings; but faced with the very large recent flows of refugees, in unsettled countries where citizens are already struggling, mistakes are not impossible. By UNHCR’s own admission, “Refugee status and resettlement places are valuable commodities, particularly in countries with acute poverty, where the temptation to make money by whatever means is strong. This makes the resettlement process a target for abuse.” Possibly by terrorists as well.

In humanitarian settings, when evidence cannot be relied upon, one is left with a subjective appraisal of the honesty of the person asking for help. The only choice could be, in the end, to choose to trust the applicant. Except that United States government officials are not heading a humanitarian agency, nor should they run this country on a benefit-of-the-doubt policy. Their vigilance is in order to keep Americans safe.

UNHCR is deciding not only who can move to the United States, it is also choosing who ultimately gets a chance to become American and who doesn’t. Given such high stakes, and existing safety hazards, the new U.S. administration should be encouraged to question this opaque system and reconsider its collaboration with this UN agency.

Proximity Help and a Development-Based Policy in Lieu of Resettlement

Instead of pushing for more resettlement or other admission pathways, the United States (and UNHCR) should put more emphasis on proximity help and, ultimately, return. Most refugees flee to neighboring countries close to their homes. Why bring people away from their cultural and familiar surroundings?

Oxford refugee scholar Alexander Betts and Oxford economics professor Paul Collier think there are better ways to help refugees and fix this failing refugee system. They believe more effort should be directed toward addressing the refugee crisis closer to its main source and call to [“Help refugees help themselves”](#). Collier [explains](#): “We have responsibilities towards refugees but the way to fulfill these responsibilities is *not to take a lucky few out of those contexts but to do things that work for all.*” (Emphasis added).

A [development-based policy](#) can give millions of refugees autonomy and opportunity and render them better equipped to rebuild their post-war countries. Betts believes that rather than seeing refugees “as inevitably dependent upon humanitarian assistance, we need to provide them with opportunities for human flourishing.” Refugees do not want handouts. They want to live in dignity and provide for their families as they wait to return home.

UNHCR is a humanitarian agency that does not have an economic competence and is not really equipped to meet the true needs of refugees. This would explain why 90 percent of refugees ignore it, according to Collier. Moreover, UNHCR is the only agency in charge of refugees; this monopoly has been very damaging and needs to end. Unless UNHCR is totally remanded (which is highly unlikely), economic agencies such as the World Bank, different NGOs, and businesses — which are by far better equipped to meet the needs of refugees — should step in.

The Trump administration can encourage such initiatives that empower refugees close to their homes and redirect some (if not most) of the U.S. funding for that purpose.

The Entire Refugee System Needs to Be Fixed

It is increasingly evident that the refugee system run by one single agency, UNHCR, is archaic and is due for a thorough re-evaluation. A new refugee strategy is in order for today's refugees, who are, [in the words of Collier](#), "overwhelmingly fleeing mass disorder *rather than state persecution*. They need a "haven that is *proximate*, so that it is easy to reach and from which it is easy to *return* once a conflict ends." (Emphasis added.)

The United States (alongside the international community) should be geared toward providing refugees with economic opportunities in their own region. Resettlement is not the answer, except for the very few who truly need care they cannot get in their region or require protection from imminent dangers. (By [UNHCR standards](#), "the threat must be real and direct, not accidental or collateral.")

The refugee system is broken, but we should not count on United Nations leaders to fix it. The new U.S. administration under President Trump can decide, unilaterally, how to best help refugees, away from moralizing and elitist stands. The United States has nothing to be shy about; it was praised by UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi for its [commitment to refugees](#): "The United States is the biggest donor to UNHCR + provides the largest no of resettlement places." It is time the United States reconsiders, not its commitment and humanitarian call to helping refugees, but the manner and the means by which this help is implemented.

The Trump administration does not need to put a permanent halt to the refugee resettlement program. What it can do is refuse to play God by picking a "lucky few" out of millions who are undergoing common hardships. It can instead focus its efforts toward empowering millions of refugees close to their home, and working on ending conflicts to secure their safe return. It can also provide better and longer help those who have no choice but to be resettled here, making sure successful integration is achieved and wounds (mental and physical) are fully healed.

The refugee resettlement program is necessary when it does not defeat its own purpose; it should not be randomly applied to fill in spots, raise funds, or alleviate consciences.

Help refugees help themselves. They don't want handouts, whether here or there.