



Time to Act: The Need for Congressional Engagement on Slow Refugee Admissions

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Introduction

In September 2017, the Trump Administration set its refugee admissions level for Fiscal Year 2018 (FY18) at a historic low of just 45,000 refugees. Yet halfway through FY18, the Administration had admitted fewer than 25% of this level¹ and is currently on track to admit just 21,000 refugees this year.

A combination of increased vetting requirements and reduced U.S. Government (USG) processing capacity has caused this slowdown and left thousands of refugee stranded in limbo. A safe and secure admissions program is a goal shared by Congress and refugee implementing organizations alike, and historically new procedures to enhance the resettlement program's security have been backed with appropriate resources and a commitment to ensuring an efficient and effective system. In a departure from historical practice, resources are being diverted away from the resettlement program at a time when vetting and information collection requirements have increased. Congress has allocated the resources required to support at least the FY18 refugee admission level and must act to ensure that the policy goals of the refugee admissions program, Congressional intent—and US strategic interests—are met.

Why the slowdown in refugee arrivals?

Recent increased information and vetting requirements coupled with reduced USG processing capacity have resulted in a system overwhelmed with bureaucratic process and under-resourced to address these new systemic demands. Ultimately, DHS has massively expanded the size of the haystack within which it is searching for a needle, while reducing the capacity to screen. Examples include:

- **Reduced DHS capacity to interview refugees and process their applications.**
 - DHS has reduced its refugee corps by 100 officers, from 197 to less than half that number. The result is fewer DHS staff traveling overseas to conduct required in-person interviews. At the same time, DHS has reduced the duration of trips, and the number of countries from which they are processing refugees from 23 to 17. The result is an ever-growing backlog in certain regions.
 - The administration has made it a priority to reduce the domestic asylum backlog, including by diverting DHS refugee interviewers to interview asylum cases. However, DHS already has 515 asylum officers and the funding for 625, positions it has yet to fill.²
- **Massively increased paperwork and processing burdens on all refugees, refugee interviewers and vetting agencies.**
 - Family contact information must now be provided for a larger number of family tree members, whether or not they are seeking resettlement. Residential information must now be collected for 10 years instead of five.
 - Further, all new requirements were applied retroactively, meaning that all previously screened refugees must undergo new screening procedures. This has also resulted in delays that have led to the expiration of other screening requirements, including the medical screening, leaving families in bureaucratic limbo.
 - For the 11 countries³ designated for additional security reviews, all previous clearances were cancelled, and additional new requirements introduced. The populations to which these apply were also expanded to include not just men but also women, as well as younger populations (14 and 15 year olds).

¹ As of March 30, 2018, refugee arrivals totaled 10,584.

² For more information as of September 2017, see: <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/hrf-refugee-admissions-and-the-asylum-division-backlog.pdf>

³ The 11 countries are Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen. These requirements were put in place following a 90-day pause on resettlement for refugees from these countries beginning on October 25, 2017.

What are the consequences?

- **The US is renegeing on its commitment to leave no one behind & jeopardizing future support of its missions abroad.**
 - Last year, the US resettled over 3,000 Iraqis who supported US missions abroad and were in danger as a result. Just 36 of these Iraqis have been resettled 6 months into FY18, with roughly 50,000 waiting for their cases to be processed.
- **The US is turning its back on those fleeing a common enemy.**
 - More people were killed in the most recent chemical weapons attack that took more than 70 lives than have been resettled in the US this fiscal year. Yet, Syrian refugees are fleeing the same terrorist groups that US troops are seeking to dismantle.
 - Syrian resettlement has declined 99% compared to this time last year. No Syrian refugee requiring additional vetting has been resettled since the new procedures were put in place.
 - Not a single Yezidi from Syria has been welcomed to the US and just 5 Yezidis from Iraq, also fleeing ISIS persecution, have been resettled halfway through the fiscal year.
- **The US is turning its back on important allies who are hosting more than their fair share of refugees.**
 - Jordan's generosity has mitigated the regional and global consequences of the Syrian crisis, hosting over 685,000 refugees. 1 out of every 11 Jordanian residents is a refugee—the overwhelming majority are Syrian as the civil war has entered its eighth year, followed by Iraqis.⁴
 - When the US and other countries resettled over 19,300 refugees from Jordan in 2016, it provided critical relief to a strategic ally.
 - National security experts agree: "By doing more to host and help refugees, the United States would safeguard the stability of these nations and thereby advance its own national security interests."⁵
 - Yet halfway through FY18, the US had only resettled 44 Syrians and 106 Iraqis from all countries hosting these populations.
- **The US is risking the stability of critical regions around the world.**
 - With an unprecedented slowdown in US resettlement, major refugee-hosting nations are increasingly asking why they should continue hosting large refugee populations.
 - A major risk is in forced returns that could exacerbate instability and conflict—whether the return of Rohingya in Bangladesh, Afghans in Pakistan or Somalis in Kenya. Since early 2015, for example, over 2 million Afghans have been forced to return to a still unstable Afghanistan.
 - In 2016, for example, the Kenyan government threatened the forced return of more than 250,000 Somalis to an unstable Somalia. Part of the justification was developed nations' failure to do their fair share: "...rich, prosperous and democratic countries are turning away refugees from Syria, one of the worst war zones since World War Two."⁶

What can Congress do?

Congress must act to preserve and protect this critical program, and ensure the Administration meets its FY2018 commitment. Actions include:

- Convening the refugee vetting agencies to understand the new operational changes that are contributing to the arrivals slowdown, and any resultant resources, training, or process assistance needed.
- Requesting reports on plans for resolving processing delays; refugee and asylum corps staffing needs, plans and capacities; how new requirements are impacting refugee processing timelines; and arrival slowdown impacts on US strategic interests.
- Creating a dedicated focal point to resolve any bottlenecks in the refugee resettlement process.

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⁴ In 2016, Jordan was hosting 648,800 Syrian refugees and 33,100 Iraqis. According to the Jordanian government, it is hosting upwards of 1.3 million refugees.

⁵ Gen. Michael Hayden (retired four-star general and former director of the NSA and CIA) and Adm. James Stavridis, (retired U.S. Navy admiral) <http://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article88582362.html>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/sep/15/fear-forces-refugees-dadaab-kenya-worlds-largest-camp-return-conflict-zones-human-rights-watch-warns>