

Talking Points: The Syrian Refugee Crisis

The Syrian refugee crisis

- There are **more than four million registered Syrian refugees** — a number that is expected to rise to 4.2 million by the end of 2015. More than three million of these refugees are women and children.
- As of April 2015, 750,000 (57%) of Syrian refugee children are out of school due to the conflict.
- **In addition to the number of refugees, at least 7.6 million people have been displaced within Syria.** Without assistance, internally displaced people often become refugees. Ethnic and religious minorities are especially at risk.
- **It is illegal in Jordan, Egypt, and most host countries in the region for refugees to work. Educational opportunities are greatly limited.** While some children are able to take part in informal education and primary school programs, there are few opportunities for refugee youth to attend secondary or higher education.

Responsibility for protecting refugees

- Refugees need safety, and Europe more than ever needs to step up and coordinate the reception and registration of arriving refugees to ensure that security concerns and needs for protection are being met simultaneously.
- In parallel, the United States must do its share, even in the aftermath of the Paris attacks.
- Without a comprehensive collaborative response with burden-sharing agreements in place, Europe will not be safe from ISIS threats of infiltration.

The moral and human rights stand

- The **United States should demonstrate moral courage.** The utter disregard for human life should provide our leaders with even more impetus to help the Syrian people fleeing and so in need of international protection. The definition of moral courage is to resist allowing fear to overwhelm our humanity.
- **We must speak out to stop the rising waves of anti-Muslim and anti-Syrian refugee sentiments occurring in the United States and globally.**
- **Fomenting or exploiting anti-refugee and anti-Muslim sentiment is not the way to combat terrorism.**

Terrorism

- **Refugees are not terrorists.** We must recognize that refugees from Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Middle East have been attempting to escape extremist violence. They are not the participants and perpetrators.
- **Rejecting refugees will make us less safe.** Ignoring the plight of refugees, who can be potential allies, and denying them safe haven will drive them back to Syria. There they will face the dangerous regime of Bashar al-Assad that they fled in the first place. Some refugees, in a desperate search for any safety, will seek out ISIS as an ally against Assad.
- **The Paris attacks are an example of daily terrorist violence that also happens elsewhere.** The terrorism and violence that occurred in Paris is an example of the kind of violence being inflicted daily on innocent citizens in Syria, Yemen, and other Middle East countries.
- Traditional law enforcement and security screening processes have a proven record of handling the threat from terrorist posing as refugees. In the wake of the Paris attacks, U.S. agencies said they will deepen and tighten their refugee investigations even further.
- The Syrian civil war and the barbarism of ISIS have killed more Muslims than members of any other faith.

Halting anti-Muslim and anti-refugee sentiment

- President Obama is leading the call (uusc.org/nytimesarticle) to stop destructive anti-Muslim and anti-Syrian refugee rally cries.
- **Stay true to our values.** When tested by a terror attack, we must stay true to our core values: freedom, equality, and the right to pursue happiness. We cannot allow ourselves to succumb to the attackers by abandoning our principles.
- **Now is not the time to abandon our civil liberties.** It's the time to reaffirm them. As U.S. residents, we should reaffirm the freedom of all people to worship any religion, to assemble, to speak freely, and to not be afraid. We cannot allow these attackers to provoke a response that takes away what we most hold dear. We all have the right to hold conversations in the privacy of our homes without the government listening in on conversations.
- **We must support and defend the rights of all people, even as we grieve for Paris.** Hate crimes and threats against Muslim, Arab, and South Asian Americans are already at the highest they have been since 9/11.
- We have a responsibility to speak up and challenge rhetoric that singles others out based solely on their religion or heritage; to stand up for the rights

of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian Americans when they come under attack; and to reject those who seek to exploit this tragedy for political gain.

- There is a temptation, when struck by terror or by grief, to lash out at anyone presumed to be an enemy. But refugees seeking to escape from terrible violence should not be blamed for the actions of the murderers in Paris and our Muslim American neighbors should not be subject to prejudice and violence.

UUSC's response

- UUSC is addressing critical needs during the Syrian refugee crisis (uusc.org/refugeeresponse), working with partners throughout Europe and the Middle East to support refugees and deliver much-needed assistance.
- The best chance for preventing devastating acts of terror like those that took place in Paris is to act decisively and cooperatively as part of a community of nations within the framework of international law to root out terrorism and work for justice at home and abroad.
- As UUSC joined the world in mourning the Paris tragedy and decrying the heinous violence, it quickly called on the United States not to lessen or halt its resettlement of Syrian refugees. UUSC and its supporters are advocating strongly against congresspeople and governors stating their intentions to close doors to Syrian refugees.

Refugee resettlement

- **The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has made an appeal for resettlement of 130,000 Syrian refugees worldwide in 2014–2016.**
- **The United States has traditionally accepted at least half of all UNHCR referrals for any given population.** In order to uphold this tradition, the United States should resettle at least 65,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016.
- **As of June 2015, UNHCR has submitted 13,586 refugees to the United States for resettlement consideration.** That *does not* mean they have been accepted, processed by the United States, and resettled in U.S. communities
- **So far in 2015, the United States has resettled 909 Syrian refugees, with a cumulative total of only 1,114 since the beginning of the conflict in Syria.** This includes 236 women, 461 children under the age of 14, and 138 youth between the ages of 14 and 20.
- **Several European countries have accepted far more Syrian refugees than the United States.** Most notably, Germany has committed to accepting

35,000 refugees through a combined program of humanitarian admission and individual sponsorship, in addition to Syrian asylum seekers. In proportion to each country's population, this would be akin to the United States accepting more than 138,000 Syrian refugees.

- Legal refugees within the United States can become and are urged to quickly become self-sufficient contributors to the U.S. society and economy — as working, taxpaying citizens — and to learn English and attend school.

U.S. refugee resettlement authority and process

- **U.S. refugee resettlement is under the authority of the U.S. Department of State and coordinated between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and the Administration for Children and Families.**
- **Refugees who enter the United States through its Refugee Resettlement Program (USRP) must first be referred by UNHCR or by the U.S. embassy in the country of asylum.** A family is usually referred together as a single group.
- The U.S. Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) oversees the U.S. resettlement program. The State Department develops application criteria and refugee admission ceilings, and it presents eligible cases to a division of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), for adjudication.
- Refugees who meet the USRP criteria for application are interviewed by a USCIS officer who travels to the country of asylum in which the refugees are residing. The U.S. Department of State then contracts resettlement and/or nongovernmental organizations to assist refugees who may need help preparing their extensive resettlement application forms. The USCIS officer decides whether the applicant is a refugee as defined under U.S. law.
- In this rigorous U.S. procedure, an individual's designation as a refugee by UNHCR does not guarantee admission to the U.S. refugee program.
- Refugees whose applications for U.S. resettlement receive USCIS approval are matched with a U.S. resettlement organization that will facilitate their resettlement to the United States.

U.S. states and refugee resettlement

- States cannot prevent resettlement of refugees in their states or prevent refugee migration from one state to another. The legal authority to determine

group and individual refugee resettlement and locations for refugees within the United States is under federal jurisdiction and does not reside with the states, nor their governors or legislative bodies.

- States, however, may express their wish not to accept certain refugee groups. When the United States is arranging with international bodies such as UNHCR to accept refugee groups from certain countries, states may voice their concerns and requests.
- In some instances, the nine voluntary U.S. agencies who resettle refugees and the respective local refugee resettlement affiliates or offices they work with — and under certain circumstances the U.S. entities jointly collaborating in selecting communities for particular refugee groups — may pursue the states' concerns, and the refugees will be reassigned to other, more welcoming communities in the United States.

Prevention of terrorism in U.S. refugee resettlement

- **U.S. refugees don't become terrorists.** The history of the U.S. refugee program demonstrates that the lengthy and extensive vetting that all refugees must undergo is an effective deterrent for terrorists.
- Since 1980, the United States has invited in millions of refugees, including hundreds of thousands from the Middle East. **Not one has committed an act of terrorism within the United States.**
- **Refugee status is the single most difficult way to come to the United States.** It is not a fast track way to enter. It makes no sense for a terrorist to try to use the resettlement process for an attack. Processing times for refugee resettlement average 18–24 months and can take as long as three to four years, depending on security concerns.
- **To become a refugee in the United States requires a multi-stage vetting process** — and only after receiving U.N. designation by trained officers in the field. The U.S. screens refugees prior to admission in this country, which means terrorists and those most likely to become involved in terrorism can be weeded out, accepting only the most vulnerable.
- **All refugees undergo thorough and rigorous security screenings prior to arriving in the United States.** Those include multiple biographic and identity investigations; FBI biometric checks fingerprints and photographs; in-depth, in-person interviews by specialized and well-trained Department of Homeland Security officers; medical screenings; and other checks by U.S. domestic and international intelligence agencies, including the National Counterterrorism Center.
- **If the facts presented in these screenings are problematic, refugees are referred for additional security clearance procedures.** Only after all these security and medical checks have been received and analyzed can a refugee

be admitted to the United States, therefore some individuals may be “on hold” indefinitely.

- **Mandatory supervisory reviews are in place to maintain the security of the U.S. refugee resettlement program.** Those reviews include all decisions, random case assignment, interagency national security teams, trained document experts, forensic testing of documents, and interpreter monitoring.
- **Other migration channels are easier to exploit than the U.S. refugee process.** In other words: non-refugees have carried out all terrorist attacks over the past 35 years. That means they used other means to arrive in the United States. All of the 9/11 hijackers used student or tourist visas. These visas are much easier and faster to obtain than refugee status.

Quotes from President Barack Obama

- “The people who are fleeing Syria are the most harmed by terrorism; they are the most vulnerable as a consequence of civil war and strife,” Mr. Obama said. He added: “We do not close our hearts to these victims of such violence and somehow start equating the issue of refugees with the issue of terrorism.”
- Without naming him, Mr. Obama singled out a comment by former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida, one of the Republicans seeking to succeed him, for suggesting the United States focus special attention on Christian refugees. “That’s shameful,” Mr. Obama said. “That’s not American. It’s not who we are. We don’t have religious tests to our compassion.”

UUSC thanks its fellow refugee resettlement and human rights partners and coalition members for their contributions to these talking points.