



## U.S. Should Favor Most Vulnerable Religious Refugees

**Washington should act on behalf of people facing death and destruction at the hands of determined killers.**

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The Trump Administration made a second attempt to revamp U.S. visa and refugee policy. The redo was far better planned and executed than the original.

Still, the terrorist threat posed by visa holders and certified refugees is quite small. By almost any measure the most dangerous nation is Saudi Arabia, which is not mentioned by the administration. Perfect safety is impossible, and the U.S. pays a price if it increasingly walls itself off from the world—in business, education, culture, sports, politics, and more.

That Americans are tempted to do so is a good reason to rethink a policy of unnecessarily promiscuous military intervention, which creates enemies around the world. The U.S. would not feel as much pressure to hide behind a national barrier if the national government was not busy bombing, invading, and occupying other states, as well as backing repressive governments of all stripes. Washington sometimes appears determined to make as many enemies as possible.

One of the most controversial provisions in the original executive order was offering priority to refugees who faced religious persecution. This was taken as favoring Christians and thus a form of religious discrimination, and was cited in legal arguments against the measure. So the second iteration of the executive order included no similar preference.

Washington should take refugees, including Muslims, from all countries. The vast majority of those killed and displaced in Middle Eastern violence are Muslim. And while Islam is the dominant faith throughout the region, it is fractured, leaving Sunnis and Shiites as minority sects and thus extra vulnerable in different countries. The Islamic State has targeted Shia as well as non-Muslims. Mideast Christians have urged America to remain open to all.

However, religions are not equal when it comes to evaluating refugees. As activists, such as my friend Jim Jacobson, head of Christian Freedom International, as well as legislators, including my Reagan administration colleague, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA), point out, there are non-sectarian reasons to favor members of minority faiths. And not just Christians, but also Yazidis,

Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Jews, Alawites, and others. The purpose is not to discriminate against Islam, but to recognize the importance of other factors.

First, religious minorities have suffered disproportionately across the region. Last year Secretary of State John Kerry described ISIS as committing “genocide.” Whatever the appropriate technical term—it is certainly “religious cleansing”—Islamist radicals have targeted non-Muslims for especially brutal treatment. The group ADF International reported on the Islamic State’s manifold depredations: “killings, rapes, torture, kidnappings, bombings and the destruction of religious property and monuments.” Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil (Kurdistan, Iraq) said “We are an ancient people on the verge of extinction because of our commitment to faith.”

Sectarian conflict first erupted in Iraq after the counterproductive U.S. invasion and botched occupation; since then two-thirds or more of the roughly 1.5 million Christians were forced from their homes. The initial exodus was intensified by the Islamic State’s murderous military campaign across Iraq’s north. The latter also targeted other religious minorities, including Yazidis, whose monotheistic, syncretic faith is considered Satanic by ISIS: they do not receive even the barest consideration from being “People of the Book,” meaning mentioned in the Koran, as do Jews and Christians.

After Iraq’s implosion Syria became a refuge for the religiously vulnerable, especially Christians. But as the latter country collapsed into civil war they suffered a fate similar to that of Iraqi believers. Christians, Alawites, and others tended to back Bashar al-Assad’s regime as the best hope for security, which put them at risk even from “moderate” insurgents, as well as the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and its successor, and similar radical groups.

More than 60 percent of the 1.25 million Christians in Syria in 2011 have been forced to flee. Many who remained are vulnerable to the vagaries of battlefield control. What separates religious minorities from surrounding Muslim populations is that the former are *targets of oppression, not merely inadvertent victims of violence*.

Second, non-Muslims have essentially nowhere to go in the Middle East when they flee violence. One of the great tragedies of the Syrian civil war is that it threatens the role of al-Assad’s secular dictatorship as a refuge for tens of thousands of Christians fleeing sectarian conflict in Iraq. That’s also why many continue to back, or at least not oppose, the Assad regime: they’ve already seen the movie of radical Islamists taking control and they don’t like the ending.

With Syria dissolving into violence as Iraq implodes a second time, there are few safe places left. Kurdistan, Muslim but moderate, and Lebanon, with a substantial Christian minority, have been the main options. But the former has more than a million refugees and the latter may have twice as many or more. As international agencies trim funding, neither country wants more costly dependents.

Jordan and Turkey also host millions of refugees. But both are majority Muslim. Although relatively moderate in their treatment of non-Muslims, religious minorities remain outsiders. Moreover, refugee camps in both nations are dangerous for members of other faiths. There is

little hope for Muslim residents who linger for years in such facilities. At their best such camps offer a much tougher existence for Christians and others. And it usually is worse in practice.

Patrick Kelly, whose organization, the Knights of Columbus, sponsored a report on religious persecution, reported: “We have evidence that Christians in the camps are being targeted, that ISIS and other militias are sending assassins into the camps, that there is sex slavery and kidnapping.” This experience discourages Christians from seeking refuge in camps, which in turn makes it harder for them to even register with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, necessary for referral to the U.S.

Other countries in the Mideast, despite possessing abundant oil wealth, refuse to accept those fleeing civil war and conflict. Some refugees with money have taken up residence in the Gulf, but the number remains small. And none of these nations want more non-Muslims. Indeed, Saudi Arabia bars the public practice of any faith other than Islam, making it an impossible destination for anyone holding seriously to another faith.

Finally, non-Muslims are extraordinarily unlikely to commit terrorism or other acts of violence against Americans. Those persecuted by ISIS and similar groups won't be “inspired” to kill on Islam's behalf. Moreover, while martyrdom is lauded, it is a willingness to accept hardship and death while standing for one's faith, not while murdering others. Vetting is still necessary to assess an applicant's claimed faith, though that isn't as difficult as some assume: for instance, many Middle Eastern Christians speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

The human carnage from the Iraq and Syria conflicts has been extraordinary. Washington bears an unusual share of blame for the horror, having triggered Iraq's sectarian conflict, which in turn spawned ISIS, with the Bush administration's misbegotten 2003 invasion. Hundreds of thousands have been killed and millions displaced as a result.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration cannot turn back time. And mistaken intervention in the past should not become the excuse for new rounds of Mideast war-making. Ultimately only people in the region can sort out their problems. Washington officials should focus on keeping Americans out of future conflicts.

However, the U.S. should join other nations in offering refuge to vulnerable people seeking to escape war, especially ones which Washington helped start. That doesn't mean ignoring security concerns. But Americans should be willing to accept a small risk for doing great good to those in need.

Of course, the likelihood of any particular Muslim refugee doing harm is small. In implementing the law the Trump administration should clearly state that it will not discriminate against any faith, including Islam. Americans should help people in need, irrespective of their beliefs.

However, with public concern so high, emphasizing religious minorities is one strategy to maximize the public's willingness to accept those fleeing Middle Eastern conflicts. Ignoring the difference in risk factors for refugees does Syrians and others little good if the result is to reduce the number able to come to America.

Washington should recognize the unique attributes of non-Muslims in the Mideast which simultaneously reduce security concerns for the U.S. and increase the importance of America as a refuge. Which warrants speeding the evaluation and acceptance of members of minority faiths. As Archbishop Warda observed: "I do not understand why some Americans are now upset that the many minority communities that faced a horrible genocide will finally get a degree of priority in some manner."

Indeed, federal law encouraged the emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union and today does the same for Christian, Baha'i, Jewish, and other religious minorities seeking to leave Iran. Congress should apply that principle more broadly today. In 2015 Rep. Rohrabacher introduced The Save Christians from Genocide Act to enhance the refugee status of Christians and Yazidis. Democratic Rep. Juan Vargas proposed the "Protecting Religious Minorities Persecuted by ISIS Act" to speed refugee processing for religious minorities threatened by the Islamic State.

Whatever the exact means, Washington should act on behalf of people facing death and destruction at the hands determined killers. America can't welcome everyone in need. But it can, and should, do more in the face of extraordinary tragedy. Politics should not stop the U.S. from helping the least among us.

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