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Mideast's religious refugees deserve U.S. priority

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The Trump administration has made another attempt to revamp U.S. visa and refugee policy. The latest effort appears to be far better planned and executed than before. At least no one will be turned away in mid-flight.

Still, the terrorist threat posed by visa holders and certified refugees is quite small. Moreover, perfect safety is impossible, and the United States pays a price if it increasingly walls itself off from the world. Americans should rethink a policy of unnecessarily promiscuous military intervention, which creates enemies around the world.

One of the most controversial provisions in the original executive order was offering priority to Christian refugees. This was taken as a form of religious discrimination and was dropped in the latest iteration.

Washington should take refugees, including Muslims, from all countries. Mideast Christians have urged America to remain open to all.

However, religions are not equal when it comes to evaluating refugees. There are non-sectarian reasons to favor members of minority faiths.

First, religious minorities have suffered disproportionately across the region. Last year Secretary of State John Kerry described the Islamic State militant group as committing "genocide." 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 IS' murderous military campaign across Iraq's north.

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.

More than 60 percent of the 1.25 million Christians in Syria in 2011 have been forced to flee. 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. There are few safe places available.

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.

Religious minorities remain outsiders in Jordan and Turkey. Moreover, refugee camps in both nations are dangerous for members of other faiths. This experience discourages Christians from seeking refuge there.

Other countries in the Mideast, despite possessing abundant oil wealth, refuse to accept those fleeing civil war and conflict. And none of these nations want more non-Muslims.

Finally, non-Muslims are extraordinarily unlikely to commit terrorism or other acts of violence against Americans. While martyrdom is lauded, it is a willingness to accept hardship and death while standing for one's faith, not while murdering others.

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 IS.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration cannot turn back time. 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.

In implementing its new regulations 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, Washington should recognize the unique attributes of non-Muslims in the Mideast. 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, California Republican Rep. Dana Rohrabacher introduced The Save Christians from Genocide Act to enhance the refugee status of Christians and Yazidis.

Whatever the exact means, Washington should act on behalf of people facing death and destruction at the hands of determined killers. America should do more in the face of an extraordinary tragedy to help the least among us.

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