Let non-refugee visas skip the immigration line, save lives

David Bier

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As the Syrian civil war spiraled out of control, Syrian Americans across the United States tried to get their families out. Rep. Steve Russell (R-Okla.), a retired Army lieutenant colonel, served with one of them. His good friend tried to obtain a visa for his mother. She was eligible, so she should have been able to escape the violence, but she didn't make it out in time. "I'm certain had he been able to get her to the United States she'd still be alive," Russell **explained** last year.

His friend's case highlights how the lack of a rapid legal means to flee violence abroad can be lethal. It also reinforces the importance of improving legal immigration, outside of the formal refugee program, to better protect persecuted people with ties to the United States. Here's one way to do that: allow those who, like this Syrian mother, are already eligible for visas to bypass the arbitrary limits on the number of visas.

Because the U.S. government restricts the number of visas issued each year, nearly 5 million people are currently waiting in line. And while refugees admitted under the formal U.S. refugee program can skip these waits—which can last decades—those who qualify for visas sponsored by a U.S. family member or U.S. employer must wait behind everyone else.

No one knows how many people in line are refugees, but the backlogs of hopeful immigrants from countries which have produced many refugees in recent years have stretched into the thousands. More than 40,000 refugees from Iran, for example, where minority religions are oppressed, have found refuge in the United States since 2005. Yet another 53,000 Iranians await visas under non-refugee programs.

The United States has accepted a paltry 8,000 refugees from Syria, the epicenter of one of the worst humanitarian crises around the world. But another 6,400 or so with family- or employer-sponsored visas are stuck in line. Even if most of these backlogged visa applicants are not refugees, the visa limits will still clog the escape route for the unlikely few who are.

The point is simple: People fleeing violence and persecution shouldn't have to wait in line. We cannot risk letting those most disposed to be our allies—those with proven ties to our country—believe we are unwilling to save them from certain violence, persecution, or death. It is a mistake that could have lasting consequences for America's relations around the world.

Earlier this year, the Obama administration tried to use the refugee program to save Syrian green card applicants. But sadly, this well-meaning approach is not the answer. One big problem is that the refugee process is so slow that it is literally fast-tracking people from one line to another.

Even worse, admitting these refugees under the refugee program will take slots away from other refugees who need the program most—those without any legal way to come to the United States. This doesn't make sense. We should keep the refugee open for people who desperately need a way out, but who have no other options. Refugees with U.S. ties should simply be fast-tracked with the visas for which they are already eligible.

Of course, opponents of refugee resettlement could offer up their oft-repeated objections—"we don't know who they are," "we can't vet them," etc. But these complaints are inapplicable in this case. We do know who they are—they are the mother of a U.S. soldier, the brother of an American entrepreneur, the employee of a U.S. businessman. Unless we reform the process, these are the people who we are condemning to persecution or death.

Besides, these are people who will be immigrating here eventually either way. It adds nothing to our security to force them to stay in harm's way for a little longer. They *are* coming—let's make sure it's in economy class, not in a coffin.

David Bier is an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute.