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## The Trump Administration's Hard Line on Refugees Comes Under Fire

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In the fall of 2015, when Jeff Sessions, now the Attorney General, was still a senator from Alabama, he attended a meeting at which officials from different government agencies discussed how many refugees they planned to admit in the coming year. It was an annual gathering, mandated by the Refugee Act of 1980, and Sessions had been invited as a member of the Senate subcommittee on immigration. Roughly twenty other people were in attendance, including representatives from the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Health and Human Services. The Obama Administration had proposed accepting eighty-five thousand refugees, and the matter was set to go to Congress for a final consultation that was typically pro forma. Sessions, however, had an objection. “We are a Christian nation,” he said, according to several people who were present. “We should only be accepting Christian refugees.” A Justice Department spokesperson denied this, telling me that the comment “doesn’t sound anything like him,” but, a few weeks after the meeting, Sessions expressed a similar sentiment on the floor of the Senate. “Bringing in a large, unassimilated flow of migrants from the Muslim world creates the conditions possible for radicalization and extremism to take hold,” he said. Less than two years after he made that pronouncement, Sessions was the government’s chief lawyer; Steve Bannon described him as “the clearinghouse for policy and philosophy” in the Trump White House, and Sessions’s views on refugees and immigration are in tune with the Administration’s agenda.

The President and his Attorney General have reservations about admitting refugees from Christian nations, too. This weekend, Trump attacked the dozens of Central Americans at the U.S. border who are seeking asylum in this country, complaining that “these people pouring across are going to vote for Democrats.” But the Administration’s policy toward Muslims has, at times, seemed to be of a distinct nature. At the Supreme Court on Wednesday, a familiar question arose during the oral arguments about the Trump Administration’s third travel ban. Had an anti-Muslim animus informed, and thereby invalidated, the policy? Trump’s own statements, both as a candidate and as President, were fairly damning in this regard. In some ways, though, his rhetoric is less dramatic than are the facts of his Administration’s policies on refugees generally, and on Muslim refugees more specifically.

Since Trump took office, the number of Muslim refugees who have been admitted to the United States has fallen by ninety-one per cent. Visas issued to immigrants from majority-Muslim

countries have declined by twenty-six per cent, with temporary visas falling by about a third. (The number of Christian refugees has fallen by sixty-three per cent in the past two years.) Last fall, the Administration slashed the refugee cap to its lowest level in more than three decades—forty-five thousand. At the current pace, the government is expected to resettle fewer than half that number. Between October, 2017, and late January, 2018, only thirty-four Syrian refugees and eighty-one Iraqis were granted entry to the U.S. (During an equivalent period the previous year, those numbers were each about four thousand seven hundred.) “Refugee admissions numbers are down dramatically, across the board,” Betsy Fisher, the policy director of the International Refugee Assistance Project (*irap*), told me the other day. “Most acutely, it affects those from Muslim-majority countries.”

The Trump Administration hasn’t simply curtailed the numbers; it has made a show of doing so. “There are things you can do without raising the ire of half the world,” an Administration official told me. The refugee program is discretionary, the official explained, so there are all kinds of subtle ways for the government to drag its feet if it wants to. But, by drastically lowering the refugee cap and repeatedly pushing different versions of its travel ban, the Administration is sending a message. The official told me, “They’re doing this to make a point: ‘Don’t come here. We don’t want you.’ ”

With some twenty-two million people displaced, the world is in the midst of the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. Almost a quarter of those refugees are Syrians, a population that the President has said he wants to protect. Each iteration of his travel ban, however, has sought to block travellers trying to enter the U.S. from Syria, and to restrict refugee admissions from the country. So far this year, the United States has accepted just eleven Syrian refugees, and that seems to trouble some members of the Administration, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis. Earlier this month, Mattis told Congress, “I’ve seen refugees from Asia to Europe, Kosovo to Africa. I’ve never seen refugees as traumatized as coming out of Syria.” Two weeks ago, when Trump ordered a targeted strike on military installations in Syria, he cited President Bashar al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons on “mothers and fathers, infants and children.” An obvious way to counter Assad and to ease the continued suffering would be to provide Syrian families with a safe haven.

In fact, when the Administration lowered the refugee cap, some of the strongest objections came from the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and members of the intelligence community. One way that the U.S. military strengthens international alliances is by helping to address humanitarian needs in and around crisis zones. That means honoring agreements to protect foreigners who have risked their lives to support American troops, in places like Iraq. There is currently a backlog of fifty-eight thousand Iraqis who have helped U.S. ground forces in some fashion and remain at risk of being targeted as a result. In the first half of the current fiscal year, only a hundred and six Iraqis have been resettled in this country.

American allies that have shouldered the burden of resettling Syrian refugees have also had reason to question the U.S.’s commitment to humanitarianism. The Jordanian government has accepted more than a million Syrian refugees, and European nations, including Germany, have accepted hundreds of thousands. In December, the United States withdrew from the U.N. Global

Compact on Migration, a nonbinding declaration—passed unanimously in the General Assembly the previous year—that reaffirms the world’s commitment to protecting the rights of refugees and migrants. “No country has done more than the United States,” Nikki Haley, the U.N. Ambassador, said at the time. “But our decisions on immigration policies must always be made by Americans and Americans alone.” The Administration official told me, “This all makes Mattis look like an ass. Allies are asking him lots of questions he didn’t get before.”

Meanwhile, last October, in a memorandum to the President, officials from the State Department, D.H.S., and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence called for modifying the refugee program to include “enhanced vetting” of refugees from eleven countries, almost all of them majority Muslim. (Earlier versions of the travel ban had temporarily suspended the program and called for a review of vetting protocol.) “We will conduct a detailed threat analysis and review for nationals of these high risk countries,” they wrote. Until they completed the analysis, they went on, “the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Homeland Security will temporarily prioritize refugee applications from other . . . countries.” Six months later, the government hasn’t explained the results of its analysis. “There’s a lot that’s opaque behind the scenes,” Fisher, from *irap*, told me. “But whatever they’re doing behind closed doors is working.” Many refugees who were already vetted and who, in some cases, had travel dates to come to the U.S. are being held up; they’re being screened again, in accordance with new guidelines for “extreme vetting” instituted by the State Department last year.

The Administration invokes national security as its rationale for overhauling vetting procedures, but there appears to be no evidence of either a new security threat or a problem with past practice. One former national-intelligence official told me, “The fact is, since 9/11, the U.S. has implemented what is by far the most comprehensive and sophisticated vetting system in the world.” The Administration official I spoke with, who has knowledge of the vetting process, agreed, saying, “None of these threats the President keeps talking about exist. Have there been mistakes? A few, maybe, but this is going back decades.” According to David Bier, an immigration-policy expert at the Cato Institute, there was only one fatal vetting failure since 9/11: the admission, in 2014, of the Pakistani national Tashfeen Malik, who was responsible for the shooting deaths of fourteen people in San Bernardino, California, in 2015. (Trump frequently mentions an Uzbek national named Sayfullo Saipov, who came to the United States in 2010, and killed eight people in a terrorist attack in New York last year. But security experts argue that Saipov became radicalized only after he arrived here, and that the Administration’s enhanced vetting protocols would not have prevented him from entering the country.) By Bier’s calculations, that put the chance of a U.S. resident being killed in a terrorist attack as a result of a vetting failure at one in three hundred and twenty-eight million.

When Supreme Court Justices rule on the constitutionality of the travel ban, they will be weighing the legal question of whether the President has the authority to make a unilateral judgment about national security. Whatever Trump’s constitutional prerogatives, there’s little doubt that he is using national security as a cover to reshape who comes to the U.S. as immigrants. As the Administration official told me, “This is about making sure the ‘wrong refugees’ don’t get admitted.”