



Fear of and resistance to Syrian refugees in the US

Closing the door on Syrians fleeing violence and persecution is not just pointless, it also harms security.

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It did not take long for the atrocities in Paris to prompt exaggerated responses that elevate political grandstanding over sensible responses to the terrorist threat.

In the United States, the prize for overreaching so far goes to the House of Representatives, which voted to ratchet up screening procedures for Iraqi and Syrian refugees.

The "[American Security against Foreign Enemies Act of 2015](#)", which the House passed on November 19, has no rational basis given existing safeguards, fans the flames of xenophobia, and undermines efforts to confront the dangers posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). President Barack Obama has threatened to veto the legislation should it pass the Senate.

Refugees coming to the US now face [a lengthy and detailed review process](#). They must first satisfy the United Nations High Commissioner for registration and interview process, which examines biometric data and biographic information.

Those who clear this initial hurdle must then undergo intensive review by the US Department of Homeland Security, which checks biometric information against multiple US government databases. Applicants face additional layers of scrutiny by several other agencies. The process takes on average two years to complete.

According to an [analysis](#) by the Cato Institute, the risk of a suspected terrorist slipping through this vetting process is virtually nil, making the threat from Syrian refugees "hyperbolically overexaggerated".

It is far more likely that a future terrorist would either be born in the US or attempt to enter the country on a student or tourist visa.

The proposed legislation would require the director of the FBI, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and the director of National Intelligence to certify that each applicant from Syria and Iraq does not pose a threat to the US.

This certification process adds unnecessary layers of review. It is intended not only to bog down a process that is already prolonged, but also to deter officials from approving applicants from Syria and Iraq by requiring that they personally attest that those applicants pose no threat.

The House measure is also discriminatory. It applies exclusively to refugees from Syria and Iraq, creating new barriers for those most in need of resettlement.

It encourages a rising tide of xenophobia that reflexively tars innocent civilians from these countries as terrorists. Perversely, these are the very individuals suffering daily from the violence inflicted by ISIL and others.

So far, more than two dozen Republican governors have stated they do not want Syrian refugees coming to their respective states and vowed to block their entry.

Presidential politics have proven a fertile ground for bias. Donald Trump has likened Syrian refugees to a "Trojan horse" and Jeb Bush has proposed that the US should impose a religious litmus test on refugees by concentrating on helping Christians fleeing Syria (and not Muslims).

Chris Christie, New Jersey governor and presidential candidate, has threatened to withhold all financial support and services to refugees resettled in that state.

The backlash against refugees evokes painful memories of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, a stark reminder of how the toxic combination of fear and prejudice can lead to gross abuses of individual rights.

Closing the door on Syrians fleeing violence and persecution is not just pointless, it also harms security. Exaggerated responses play into the hands of the extremist propaganda utilised by ISIL and other terrorist groups. They taint the US' reputation abroad and strengthen terrorist recruiting strategies.

France, which faces a greater immediate threat from terrorists from Syria crossing its borders than the US, has declared that it will continue to honour its commitment to accept 30,000 refugees from Syria.

The Obama administration, which in September announced that the US would take in 10,000 Syrian refugees, appears determined to stand by its commitment. Mounting resistance, however, has thrown fulfillment of that pledge into doubt.

The US has long committed to assisting those fleeing persecution. That commitment is enshrined in long-standing international agreements - the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees - and in domestic law.

Measures such as the House bill do more than undermine those commitments and the values they represent. They show how the fear of terrorism - stoked by politicians - can erode reason itself.

The House bill - along with states' opposition to resettlement - diverts attention from the real need: to develop policies that increase security in the short term and contain or eliminate ISIL and other threats in the long run.

Moreover, they perpetuate a reliance on tough-sounding but ultimately senseless measures that undermine those very goals.