

HARVARD POLITICAL REVIEW

Are Syrian Refugees Really a Security Risk?

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December 11, 2015

“SUICIDE BOMBER SMUGGLED IN WITH REFUGEES”

This was the shocking headline that Americans woke up to on Sunday morning, November 15. On the 9:00 AM program *State of the Union with Jake Tapper*, CNN reported that one of the suicide bombers involved in the Paris attacks two days before had owned a fake copy of an emergency passport, a document usually issued to Syrian refugees who have been granted asylum in Europe or the United States.

Nothing has yet been confirmed and a massive investigation into the Paris attacks is still ongoing, but the mere possibility that terrorists might be posing as helpless refugees has led to a contentious debate over whether the United States should move forward with President Obama’s plan to accept 10,000 new Syrian refugees in 2016. Opponents of Obama’s plan have consistently cited the emergency passport found in Paris and the supposedly massive gaps in the American vetting process for refugees, which they claim could allow terrorist “sleeper agents” to slip through the cracks and carry out acts of terror on American soil.

And this argument seems to be winning the battle of public opinion. A recent Bloomberg Politics poll found that 53 percent of Americans oppose accepting any new Syrian refugees and an additional 11 percent only want to accept Christian refugees. Only 28 percent of Americans want to accept new refugees as planned with no religious screening. A majority of American state governors have refused to resettle any new Syrian refugees, the House of Representatives has voted to suspend the Syrian refugee resettlement program, and on November 18 Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.) even introduced an amendment that would deny federal welfare benefits to refugees from Syria and 33 other “high risk” countries.

Although compelling at first glance, the “refugee sleeper agent” theory is unrealistic and poses a real threat to the future security of the United States. The kneejerk reaction to the Paris attacks in the United States has been , such as the visa waiver-sharing program, that are far more likely to allow radical Islamic terrorists to infiltrate the United States. A lack of perspective and an excess of fear have diminished our ability to keep America safe and may severely limit our capacity to address what will be remembered as one of the worst humanitarian crises of the 21st century.

Faulty Assumptions

The basic assumption behind the anti-resettlement movement is that the United States can't possibly screen every refugee seeking resettlement in the United States. However, this ignores the fact that being resettled as a refugee is probably the hardest way to enter the United States today. According to Jana Mason, a senior adviser to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Of all the categories of persons entering the U.S., these refugees are the single most heavily screened and vetted." Once a refugee registers with the United Nations, they are considered for a referral. The U.N. refers only about one percent of refugees to the United States for resettlement. Once referred, refugees then undergo multiple background checks from the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the National Terrorism Center, and their biometric and personal data are verified against extensive Defense Department records.

The federal government also pays special attention to Syrian refugees, conducting extensive face-to-face interviews with them and fact-checking their personal stories against classified records and independently-gathered public information. Every significant detail of their personal stories is scrutinized. Do the details of their story match up with real events? Does the timeline of events provided by the refugee actually add up? Finally, the Department of Homeland Security reviews each individual case and decides whether to approve or reject it.

This vetting process has been extremely effective historically. According to a recent report by the Cato Institute, only three of the 859,629 refugees who have been resettled in the U.S. since 2001 have been convicted of planning terrorist attacks, and none of these plans ever came to fruition. The report also reiterated the fact that the U.S. is extremely selective when it comes to admitting refugees. Even if the U.S. takes in 10,000 refugees as planned next year, that amounts to only one out of every 450 Syrian refugees.

To be fair, there are legitimate security concerns surrounding the resettlement of Syrian refugees. According to a recent report from the nonpartisan Brookings Institution, "The actual security risks now are low, but the potential ones are considerable if the refugee crisis is handled poorly." For example, one 2013 study found that the de facto segregation of Muslim refugees in European cities results in a lack of opportunity and the alienation of refugees from the larger surrounding community; in such an environment, young European-born Muslims often grow up lacking a sense of belonging and purpose, and can be much more easily radicalized by groups such as ISIS. Additionally, cultural ignorance by native Europeans has the potential to lead to discrimination and even violence against Muslim refugees.

However, as the Brookings report also notes, "Concerns about terrorism and the refugees are legitimate, but the fears being voiced are usually exaggerated and the concerns raised often the wrong ones." If the U.S. accepts a large number of Syrian refugees, social and economic support and a proper degree of integration into American society could prevent such a situation from developing in the United States. In fact, according to the Department of State, social integration and economic support measures are already an integral part of the U.S. refugee resettlement policy.

A Dangerous Distraction

The current paranoia over Syrian refugees has also distracted from real security risks already facing the United States. Many lawmakers and security experts have warned that a much greater concern is the U.S. temporary visa program. As opposed to the Syrian refugee vetting process, which takes 18 to 24 months from start to finish and involves multiple background checks and face-to-face interviews with multiple agencies, a foreign citizen applying for a 90-day visa in the U.S. need only have a valid passport, register before arriving at U.S. Customs, and pass a light background check that does not include an interview. A visa waiver-sharing program which has been in place since 1986 allows visa applicants from 30 European countries to obtain a visa with even more minimal screening than is usually required. In a matter of months, a European citizen could travel to Syria, train with ISIS, travel back to Europe, and apply for an American visa. If successful, they would have 90 days to plan and carry out a terrorist attack on American soil.

To make matters worse, while the United States is able to effectively track Americans who travel to and from Syria, the U.S. has a much more limited ability to monitor Europeans who do the same due to limitations on information sharing. The threat of domestic radicalization in Europe is real: a 2015 report by the Congressional Research Service estimates that more than 4,500 Europeans have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS, although the United States' limited ability to track European citizens means that the true total is likely higher.

In fact, the security risks posed by the visa system have recently begun to recognize the very real security risks posed by the visa system. After the U.S. Senate received a closed-door briefing from Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson on November 18, Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) said that discussion of the visa system dominated the briefing. "Were I [a terrorist] in Europe already, and I wanted to go to the United States and I was not on a watch list or a no-fly list, the likelihood is I'd use the visa waiver program before I would try to pawn myself off as a refugee," said Senate Intelligence Committee Chair Richard M. Burr (R-N.C.). However, many members of Congress continue to insist that Syrian refugees pose a major threat to the United States, despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

The vetting of refugees and visa applicants will never be 100 percent effective. David Martin, a member of the Homeland Security Advisory Council and legal scholar at the University of Virginia, was one of the architects of the landmark Refugees Act of 1980. "No system is foolproof," Martin said. "If we really wanted a foolproof system, we would shut down immigration entirely. The alarm is way overblown." But the fact remains that gaping holes actually exist in the U.S. visa screening system, while the American vetting process for Syrian refugees is already among the most stringent in the world.

All of this begs the question: Why would ISIS—or any radical terrorist group—have any motivation to exploit the lengthy and stringent Syrian refugee resettlement process, when the gates have already been thrown open by the gaps in the visa application process? Why would ISIS wait *two years* just to get one of their own into the United States when a radicalized European citizen could much more easily enter the U.S. through the visa program in less than *three months*? These are the questions we need to ask ourselves if we are to keep America safe and secure in an increasingly dangerous and uncertain world, especially given the recent attacks in San Bernardino. Unfortunately, amidst the frenzy over background checks on refugees, the important questions aren't even being asked, much less answered.