

Idaho Statesman

Contented and safe immigrants don't turn to terrorism

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A disturbing video making its rounds on social media comes with a warning: “Distressing themes.” That’s an understatement.

It shows the aftermath of another attack on Aleppo, Syria. In it a 2- or 3-year-old child, bleeding and dusty, sits on an examining table looking stunned. Nearby a woman, the only adult left from three families in her apartment building, wails for her dead children.

In the hallway, a teenager holds his month-old brother. The infant is dead; the teen won’t put the body down. A nurse walks past towing two youngsters whose father was last seen in the rubble, looking for their mother. The video ends before we know whether she survived.

These are Syrians who in time may be refugees. And that means we’re supposed to be afraid of them.

Our national response to the plight of the Syrians has been sort of tepid. Numbers are hard to pin down — different sources use different reporting periods — but in 2016 the U.S. probably admitted more than 13,000 Syrian refugees. That’s compared to Canada’s 25,000 and Germany’s 171,000-plus.

Still, for our size, Idaho has been welcoming. At one point last year, The New York Times reported that Boise had admitted more Syrian refugees than New York City and Los Angeles combined.

Our governor and members of Idaho’s congressional delegation want to apply the brakes. In their statement, Sens. Jim Risch and Mike Crapo and Reps. Raul Labrador and Mike Simpson want to suspend the Syrian refugee resettlement in Idaho until we have “better assurances of security.”

Well, OK. It’s a pretty long process right now — typically 18 to 24 months — and involves interviews with the U.N. refugee agency and clearance by the National Counterterrorism Center, the U.S. Department of State, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security. But we can always do more.

Still, no vetting system is infallible. After all, the CIA had Aldrich Ames, an analyst who turned out to be a KGB mole, and the FBI had Robert Hanssen, an agent who was actually a Russian spy. Presumably both men had been “cleared.”

But are Syrian refugees a problem worth braking for? Again, terrorism statistics are complicated — depends on the definition of “terrorist” and the time frame and so on — but what do they say about the risks of admitting refugees?

Last year the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based libertarian think tank, published “Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis.” Among its findings: “Foreign-born terrorists on tourist visas have killed more Americans in attacks than those on any other type of visas, followed distantly by those who entered on student visas.”

Syrian refugees don’t fit in either category. Apparently, if we really want to get at the problem, we should stop admitting tourists and students. So far no one has suggested that.

It’s easy to forget that Syrians are the victims of a civil war and that they are a small part of a planet-wide movement of people displaced by war, famine, natural disaster, religious or ethnic conflict, and other events. As one refugee said on a recent PBS “Frontline” episode, most of them just want to find a place where they can meet that most basic of human needs: safety.

All this is not to debunk the concerns of those who worry about admitting terrorists to the U.S. But suspending Syrian refugee resettlement isn’t going to solve that problem. We’d be better off welcoming and supporting war refugees so that they, too, have a stake in their new country. Contented and safe people don’t turn to terrorism.

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