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Trump blocks more refugees, abdicates once proud U.S. role

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In all the words he has uttered about the need to build a “beautiful wall” and restrict the number of foreigners entering the country, perhaps none better summarize President Trump’s “America First” agenda than those he used, in the form of a question, on July 17 in the Oval Office:

“Where are they now?”

Standing next to the seated president was a young woman, Nadia Murad. She had survived torture and sexual slavery during the ISIS genocide of the Yazidi people, an ethnic and religious minority that the Islamic militants vowed to eliminate from northern Iraq. Ms. Murad received the **2018 Nobel Peace Prize** for her courageous effort “to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war.” At the White House, **surrounded by others who had suffered religious persecution**, Ms. Murad described the plight of thousands of displaced Yazidis. She twice mentioned the horror that ISIS inflicted on her family, the second time with these words: “They killed my mom, my six brothers.”

“Where are they now?” Mr. Trump asked.

“They are in the mass graves in Sinjar,” Ms. Murad answered.

That enormously awkward moment reflected, at best, Mr. Trump’s short attention span, at worst, his indifference to the suffering of refugees. We are inclined to think the worst because Mr. Trump has given us every reason to. He has displayed little empathy for people who find themselves tossed upon the rivers of refugees fleeing war, gang violence and natural disaster. He has portrayed the thousands seeking asylum at our southwestern border as an “invasion.” His administration has employed draconian measures to discourage families from trying to emigrate to the United States, and last week pushed even harder against the nation’s door, making it more difficult for people like Nadia Murad to enter the country.

In the midst of the worst refugee crisis since World War II, the **State Department is slashing our once-generous resettlement program again**, declaring that the nation will accept just 18,000 refugees during the coming year. That will mark an historic low — the limit was five to six times that in the final year of the Obama administration — and sound an official retreat from one of the country’s proudest roles in the global community. **Canada, and not the U.S., now leads in accepting people fleeing strife or persecution**, according to the United Nations.

In a new twist, the State Department announced that refugees will only be resettled “in jurisdictions where both state and local governments consent to receive them,” raising the possibility of rancorous resistance in places where Trump-stoked opposition to foreigners runs high.

In slashing the refugee program, the White House claimed that the roughly \$10 billion spent on it annually “could be invested in our citizens here at home” and claimed that “a number” of alleged terrorists passed through the refugee program in recent years. There’s a reason why that latter claim was vague: It’s a red herring. In fact, **a study by the Cato Institute** of terrorist attacks between 1975 and 2017 concluded that “the chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack by a refugee is about 1 in 3.86 billion per year.”

The White House claims the immigration system is so overwhelmed with vetting demands for asylum at the southwestern border that it must reduce the number of refugees we accept elsewhere. But that conflates two programs and ignores a key difference: Most refugees are already rigorously screened in a lengthy process before they arrive here.

“America has always been able to accept refugees fleeing the most heinous circumstances around the world while we’ve adjudicated and accepted asylum seekers,” says **Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Baltimore-based Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service**. “It’s particularly disingenuous to pit vulnerable asylum-seeking and refugee families against each other at a time when we’re seeing record low admissions.”

Combined, the recent changes to the asylum process and cuts to the refugee cap “amount to a near-total ban on people seeking safety,” says Jenny Yang, vice-president for advocacy and policy at **World Relief**, also based in Baltimore.

We suspect the Trump administration’s policies are more about stoking fear and hostility, playing to the president’s political base, than they are about economics or national security. But there are evangelicals in the president’s base who believe fervently in religious freedom, and they embrace the moral, even Biblical, imperative to offer sanctuary to the oppressed and persecuted.

Where are those people? Where are they now?