



Keeping Refugees Out Makes the United States Less Safe

David Kampf

September 13, 2019

The United States' refugee policy is self-defeating. As the number of refugees around the world continues to rise, U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is drastically cutting how many are allowed into the country, and, citing security concerns, it has said that it may even prevent new admissions next year. But zeroing out refugee admissions won't make Americans safer. The opposite is true.

Reducing the number of refugees in the United States will paradoxically increase the long-term security threat posed by forced migration. Refugees settled in the country do not heighten the risk of violent crime or terrorism—in fact, homegrown white nationalists are a much more pressing concern. But a failure to reduce global numbers of displaced people by refusing to resettle them harms long-term U.S. national security by prolonging conflicts, destabilizing strategically and economically important regions, and weakening allied nations. If the Trump administration wants to protect Americans, it would resettle more refugees, not fewer.

There are more refugees—totaling some 25.9 million—in the world today than at any time since World War II. Unprecedented numbers of people have been left with no choice but to flee across national borders in search of safety, even though that often means living precariously abroad.

Three reasons explain the surge in human displacement. First, once a person is displaced abroad, they often don't return home for years (on average, more than 25), which means that the total naturally rises as long as new refugees are created.

Second, the last several years have been particularly bad, with new conflicts and crackdowns causing mass exoduses. After a long decline in the number of civil wars following the end of the Cold War, over 10 million new people have been displaced abroad since 2012. Half of Syria's prewar population has been pushed out of their homes by fighting. South Sudan quickly descended into civil war after gaining independence. And the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims compelled hundreds of thousands to hurriedly escape Myanmar in fear.

Third, the current crop of civil wars is notorious for displacing even higher numbers of people than earlier ones. On average, twice as many people are displaced by a civil war each year compared to the 1990s. And that was a decade that included the massive human outflows from the wars in the Balkans and the Rwandan genocide. Fighting is now common in more populated and urban areas, globalization eases travel, and the nature of war is changing with increasingly fluid battlefields and greater numbers of participating groups, including both local and outside forces.

Put simply, refugee numbers keep going up because old wars go unresolved, new wars are breaking out, and today's wars are incredibly volatile affairs. Contrary to what Trump has implied, the numbers aren't rising because more people want to live the American dream—they are going up because people are forced to leave their homes. It's not a choice. Indeed, cutting refugee admissions into the United States would do absolutely nothing to address the real reasons global refugee numbers are climbing.

Despite the rising numbers around the world, the United States is not inundated by refugees. That's for the simple reason that there is an ocean between it and the world's worst refugee crises. And so the United States has not faced the same influx as Europe did in recent years and nowhere near the flood of refugees that its bordering states have endured. The relatively small numbers and America's proven ability to handle new arrivals mean refugees themselves do not present a direct threat inside the U.S. homeland.

Even given the low numbers, the number of refugees resettled under Trump is dropping precipitously—falling by more than 70 percent in the last two years—and reports indicate that refugee admissions could be further slashed or abolished soon.

Bashar al-Assad is on the verge of victory after massacring his population with Russian help. But the EU's fear of yet another refugee influx could spur action to stop the carnage.

Kenya has found a way to make refugee camps benefit host communities. Other countries should follow its lead.

Voters across the political spectrum have become hostile toward the millions of people who fled Bashar al-Assad's regime. Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his opponents are now responding with tough talk on repatriation.

But the administration is forgetting the successful history of resettlement in the United States. The country has officially resettled (as opposed to accepted in during crises) more refugees than the rest of the world combined since 1980 without harming U.S. security. Refugees are thoroughly vetted before they are allowed in, minimizing any potential security risks. And research indicates that refugees improve the economy and increase tax revenues.

Meanwhile, New America has been tracking terrorism in the United States since 9/11, and the think tank has concluded that the jihadi threat is not foreign, but "American as apple pie." That is, most terrorism is homegrown. A study from the Cato Institute finds that the chance of an American being murdered by a refugee in a terrorist attack on U.S. soil is one in 3.86 billion per year. (Yes, you have a better chance of winning the lottery, and you should probably worry more about things like lightning, bees, or maybe even asteroids.) No refugees admitted since 1980 have killed an American in a terrorist attack; white nationalists have killed hundreds of people in extremist violence.

To be sure, the backlash against immigration is a serious concern. Nationalist and nativist candidates have taken advantage of real fears, enflaming political tensions and polarizing society. They'll continue to do so until a sustainable solution is found.

All this is not to say that refugees pose no security threat to the United States. They do, and the dangers will only increase with time. Refugees extend domestic insecurity and civil wars beyond national borders. The displacement of large numbers of people can facilitate the spread of rebels,

arms, drugs, and diseases, destabilizing neighboring communities and entire regions. It's not the individuals themselves that are a cause for concern—it's the massive numbers in places that struggle to respond to the influx.

Large refugee camps are filled with vulnerable populations, and there are occasionally concerns of refugees becoming radicalized and militarized. The most glaring example is when the perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide regrouped in Zaire and operated out of refugee camps, which ultimately contributed to the deadly Congo wars of the 1990s and 2000s. Young men, in particular, may be susceptible to the recruitment of nonstate armed groups—including terrorists—without other viable options to ensure their own safety and earn enough cash to survive.

Resentment among local communities can slowly build. Developing countries with limited financial resources host the majority of the world's refugees. Competition over jobs and between ethnic groups can aggravate tensions and spark violence. Research indicates that refugees increase the risk of civil wars in neighboring states and even wars between states.

Perhaps one of the biggest problems is that sizable refugee populations make it that much harder to conclusively end wars. Unresolved problems tend to fester. After decades, Palestinian refugees still complicate the peace process with Israel. And the huge numbers of Syrian refugees are likely to delay that war's end and undermine the region's stability for years—possibly decades—to come. If large refugee populations are convinced to return prematurely, they can also derail fragile recoveries and trigger a new round of fighting.

To protect Americans and defend U.S. interests, the United States needs to focus on stemming the rise in refugee numbers around the world rather than on preventing their entry into the country. The administration should redouble efforts to resolve old conflicts, prevent new wars from breaking out, and resettle refugees.

Given the mistrust and partisanship in Washington, it is likely politically infeasible to drastically increase the numbers of refugees resettled in the United States today. But a return to levels under the Obama administration (or, better yet, slightly higher) will help restore Washington's credibility on the issue and encourage other rich countries to share the burden.

Further cutting U.S. refugee admissions will just make matters worse. It does nothing to diminish the dangers to national security, and it constrains America's ability to lead global efforts to decrease refugee numbers. Resettling refugees reduces the threat.