



Welcoming refugees should be a settled question

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Many Americans, and the American government itself, have expressed shock at the treatment of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. The Trump administration has also said it is concerned about persecuted religious minorities in the Middle East. For his part, the president has said he wants to defend the rights of the Castro regime's opponents in Cuba.

Yet all these protestations will be for nothing if, as the deadline approaches for the White House to make its determination about the number of refugees to be admitted next year, the administration decides to decimate the United States refugee resettlement programme. At stake are not just the lives of tens of thousands of victims of war and persecution who dream of starting a new life in America; at risk also are American values, the US' reputation and American interests around the world.

Every year, the president decides a refugee admission number. Since the 1980 Refugee Act, the average annual admissions ceiling under both Republican and Democratic presidents has exceeded 95,000. For the fiscal year 2017, then President Barack Obama decided the number should be 110,000, against the backdrop of a global refugee population that numbers some 22.5 million. President Donald Trump's two "travel ban" executive orders already intended to cut the 2017 number by more than 50 per cent.

Now a decision is expected on the number for fiscal year 2018. Inside the administration, there is a debate between fact and fiction.

The facts are that the vetting for entry to the US as a refugee is tougher than for any other means of arrival. Not one of the three million refugees to the US since 1980 has committed a lethal act

of terror on American soil. The Cato Institute has calculated that a US resident has a 1 in 3.64 billion chance of being killed by a refugee.

Meanwhile, some 60,000 Iraqis who have supported the American military and diplomatic effort in Iraq — as, for example, interpreters — are waiting to know if the promise of safe passage to the United States is to be honoured.

To put the reduced number of admissions the Trump administration will permit for 2018 in a larger context, the Jordan's King Abdullah, an American ally, has said that his country of some 9.5 million inhabitants is at a breaking point, with 650,000 registered refugees and, by some estimates, as many more unregistered. Last year, the US helped resettle more than 19,000 of those most vulnerable Syrians from Jordan. Besides relieving pressure there, this crucially countered Daesh's narrative that America will never offer dignity to Muslims.

Some more facts. Providing sanctuary is not charity: Researchers have found that over a 20-year period, those who were admitted to the United States as refugees between the ages of 18 and 45 (and more than half of refugees are under 18) will pay \$21,000 (Dh77,070) more in taxes than they will receive in benefits.

Retreating from commitments

American leadership is a vital part of the story. This time last year, the Obama administration's response to the refugee crises led to a doubling of refugee admissions pledges by wealthy nations. This year, America's retreat from its commitments has contributed to a nearly 60 per cent fall in the global resettlement total so far this year.

The question is whether the Trump administration cares about the facts. Because fiction has its backers. The fiction that the vetting is done by the United Nations, not the US. That refugees are economic migrants in disguise. That America bears an unfair share of the global burden.

The reverse is true: According to Amnesty International, the world's top 10 refugee-hosting countries, places like Uganda, account for only 2.5 per cent of global income. Uganda has received more than 600,000 refugees alone from the war in South Sudan since 2016. When I asked its leaders in June if they were going to put up the shutters, their answer was simple: "It could have been us. These are our fellow human beings. We cannot turn them away."

If Uganda can welcome refugees, a country like the US has no reason to upend a great national tradition. From among its refugee population, America has benefited from entrepreneurs like Andrew Grove and Sergey Brin, entertainers like Gloria Estefan and public servants like Madeleine Albright.

The people waiting to know their fate are from every walk of life and every station in society: students, factory workers, accountants, widows. What they have in common is that they have lost everything, including in some cases their husbands or wives, sons or daughters. They have heard the professions of concern and looked to the US as a beacon of hope. Now they want to know if the words mean anything.

The test for this administration is simple. Set a refugee resettlement number around the past level of multiple administrations of 75,000, and this will show that the White House has a head as well as a heart. Gut the refugee programme, which the Senate, in the last week, again funded, and the administration will lose any claim to strategy or to humanity.

Crocodile tears are the worst aspect of diplomacy. Real lives depend on this fateful decision.