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Administration considers new refugee ceiling as admissions plummet to lowest in decades

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It began with a bullet inside a sinister note that forced them to flee their home.

Like many Iraqis, they shrunk into lives behind locked doors punctuated with terror. Gunmen on the roof, too-close explosions. After Sarah Ismaeil's sister began working for the U.S. Army as an engineer, the attacks escalated. Armed men trailed them and tried to kidnap her sister's infant on the street.

The family applied for refugee status and, in 2016, were approved — but their elderly parents' application inexplicably stalled. Ismaeil and her siblings resettled in Houston, thinking their parents would soon join.

Then President Donald Trump took office, issuing an executive order that halted refugee arrivals and temporarily barred those from several Muslim-majority countries, including Iraq, from entering the United States.

Today Ismaeil's family is still waiting for her parents and the number of refugees coming to the United States has plummeted to the lowest since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980. Just several hundred from the 11 countries impacted by the so-called Muslim and travel bans have arrived, and Iraqi and Afghan translators who worked with the U.S. government are stuck in dangerous limbo.

As the administration considers an even lower refugee ceiling for the new fiscal year in October, experts said the system has been reshaped to slow decades of resettlement to a trickle. In Houston, which has led the nation in sheltering refugees, about 360 have arrived so far this year compared to more than 1,300 in 2017.

“There has never been an intent to limit access to this life-saving program like we are seeing now,” said Erol Kekic, executive director of the refugee program at Church World Service, one of the nation’s nine resettlement agencies.

Like much of the administration’s most consequential actions on immigration, the changes are playing out not through congressional moves or public announcement, but in policy tweaks or guidelines that together, are a significant overhaul. Along with the White House’s changes making it tougher to obtain asylum, fewer are able now to seek safety here, and the numbers are expected to fall even further.

“It is just another set of steps to reduce, reduce, reduce the number of people fleeing here for safety,” said Anne Richard, assistant secretary of state for Population, Refugees and Migration under former President Barack Obama. “They’re dismantling a program that has worked to bring more than 3 million people to the United States since the Vietnam era and given people a great start.”

Trump, who campaigned on limiting immigration and refugees, compared the program to a “Trojan horse” amid hysteria over a wave of migrants streaming into Europe. He has since slashed the ceiling of refugees allowed from 110,000 during Obama’s final year in office to 50,000 in 2017. Last September, Trump’s White House lowered that cap further to 45,000 for this fiscal year, but only about 19,890 refugees have arrived, about 1,500 coming to Texas, according to the State Department.

Only about 540 were from the 11 countries impacted by the various iterations of the Muslim ban and the number of Muslim refugees coming here overall declined by about 90 percent to 2,722 through the first 10 months of the fiscal year, according to an analysis of government data by Human Rights First, a national advocacy group.

Only about 60 refugees from Syria were admitted, compared to nearly 6,500 in 2017, even as Trump ordered a targeted strike on Syrian military installations this spring, citing the regime’s “despicable attack” of chemical weapons that left “mothers and fathers, infants and children, thrashing in pain and gasping for air.”

Similarly, slightly more than 120 Iraqi refugees arrived, compared with more than 6,600 in 2017, and only about four dozen were admitted through a program Congress created for Iraqis employed with the U.S. government or American contractors. More than 3,000 came last year.

About another 9,700 Iraqis and Afghans and their family members who qualified for special immigrant visas because they worked with the U.S. military arrived in 2018, half of those that came through that program in 2017.

“It’s a pretty cataclysmic drop-off,” said Betsy Fisher, policy director for the International Refugee Assistance Project, an advocacy group in New York that has represented Iraqis. “It’s purely administrative changes that are being used to stifle the success of the program, even within the authorized numbers.”

The administration has wide latitude in speeding up refugee admissions — as Obama did in 2015 when Syria exploded into a humanitarian crisis — or slow them to almost nothing.

It can also cut funding for related programs abroad. The administration on Friday said it would end support for a United Nations agency focused on helping Palestinian refugees and reportedly call for a reduction in the number considered to be refugees.

“There’s myriad ways, in small and large decisions, to result in what we have now,” said Kay Bellor, vice president with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, a resettlement agency.

Whatever ceiling the administration sets is irrelevant if there is no attempt to reach it.

“No matter what the number is, it almost doesn’t matter, because right now there’s no real push to meet it,” she said.

Two developments in particular have contributed to the slowdown of refugees coming to the United States. Barbara Strack, a career official and chief of the Refugee Affairs Division at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services who retired in January, said the agency ramped up hiring officers to interview refugees and meet Obama’s higher ceiling. When Trump halted resettlement, many were reassigned to interview asylum seekers who had crossed the southern border, where there is a record backlog of more than 300,000 cases.

But even with those reassignments and various forms of refugee restrictions that remained in litigation for much of the year, Strack said her office projected last September that they would be able to accommodate about 43,000 refugees in 2018.

What they didn’t anticipate, she said, was the additional 90-day review period for certain mostly Muslim refugees from October through January and the stalling of FBI security checks for refugees. All applicants undergo extensive multiagency screening, but several countries have additional checks known as a Security Advisory Opinion.

“That process has just slowed down very, very dramatically, and that seems to be a very significant factor” in the decline of admissions, Strack said. “It is a policy decision of this administration, and it is not a failure of the operational capacity of USCIS and the State Department.”

Michael Bars, a spokesman for USCIS, said in a statement that the agency adjudicates all petitions “fairly, efficiently and effectively.” But he said diverting refugee officers to interview asylum seekers from the border “compromises the ability for officers to conduct interviews abroad” for refugee applicants. He later retracted that portion of the statement, though other media had already published it.

The State Department said in a statement that it would continue resettling refugees “while prioritizing the safety and security of the American people.” It acknowledged “temporary challenges” in issuing special immigrant visas for Iraqi and Afghan translators and their families, but declined to provide additional details and said it was working to resolve the matter.

The FBI would not release the number of applications it has reviewed or explain the stall in security checks.

Katie Waldman, a Department of Homeland Security spokeswoman, said the additional screenings “undoubtedly makes Americans safer,” noting that under those, the agency believes Omar Ameen, a suspected Islamic State fighter who entered as an Iraqi refugee and was arrested last month for killing a police officer in Iraq, would not have been admitted.

A multitude of studies show that the danger posed by refugees who enter the United States has been vastly exaggerated. A 2018 study by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington D.C., also found that the vetting system in place since Sept. 11 flagged most potential terrorists. Since 2001, 13 immigrants who entered the United States went on to commit a terrorism offense, including in attacks abroad. Just one resulted in a deadly attack, the 2015 San Bernardino, Calif., shooting that left 14 dead.

“The U.S. vetting system is already ‘extreme’ enough to handle the challenge of foreign terrorist infiltration,” the analysis found.

The president last year argued more vetting was necessary, and since his Muslim ban in January 2017, the number of Americans who believe the U.S. has a responsibility to accept refugees has dropped five percentage points to 51 percent, according to the Pew Research Center, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

The sharp swing from decades of bipartisan support is led by Republicans, of whom just 26 percent believe in the nation’s duty to refugees compared to 35 percent in February 2017.

Elizabeth Holtzman, a former Democratic congresswoman in New York who co-authored the 1980 Refugee Act, said the shift in the tide of public opinion against refugees is startling.

“What astonishes me most is how uncontroversial it was taking hundreds and hundreds of Vietnamese refugees in then, and how controversial it is today,” said Holtzman, who resigned from the president’s Homeland Security Advisory Council this summer saying the agency had transformed into “making war on immigrants and refugees.”

Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C., group that supports reducing immigration, said Vietnam was a different geopolitical situation because the U.S. had lost its war, endangering its allies. By contrast, Iraq and Afghanistan are headed by U.S. allies. He supports greater funding for resettling refugees closer to their countries of origin.

“We could quintuple the number of refugees we resettle without making a dent in the number of refugees abroad,” he said. “Our refugee policy has changed over the years, and it needs to change again, given the enormous number of displaced people abroad.”

Trump has nominated Ronald Mortensen, a fellow at the center, immigration hard-liner, and retired foreign service officer, to serve as assistant secretary of state over refugees, though the choice has been slammed by Democrats.

Richard, who previously held that position, said most refugees are already in neighboring countries. Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, for example, host about 5 million refugees alone.

The administration is “not looking broadly at what can we do to help refugees, when in the past many Americans would have asked that,” Richard said. “This current White House is really very different from Republican administrations in the past.”

The highest refugee ceiling was 140,000 under President Ronald Reagan and President George W. Bush maintained an annual cap of 70,000 even after 9/11.

Last year, the number of refugees resettled in the United States decreased more than in any other country for the first time since 1980, according to the Pew Research Center. Though the country still leads the world in resettlement, Canada is a close second.

“We are the lucky ones,” said Assim Aldhahi, an Iraqi translator who resettled in Houston in 2016. “We got out of there in time.”

For Ismaeil’s family, the wait continues. Her parents were approved in December, but have yet to receive their travel authorization. She calls their YMCA case worker every few weeks, but still no update.

“We are worried,” Ismaeil said. “Even people who didn’t know my sister worked with the military before, now that we’ve left, they know.”

Ismaeil, a doctor, is studying for her U.S. medical license. Her sister, Dhuha Ameri, has passed most of her pharmaceutical exams to practice here.

“Of course there are bad people in Iraq, that is why we are here,” Ameri said. “But not all the people are the same.”