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## Ishaan Tharoor: Trump and the rest of the world offer little hope for Syrian refugees

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Speaking to The Washington Post last week, a senior administration official offered a concise version of President Donald Trump's ideal national-security strategy. Trump's "dream would be to have a strong military that protects our homeland," the official told my colleague Greg Jaffe. "We'd wall ourselves off and strike at our discretion and then retreat to defending our homeland."

Trump is no isolationist — instead, he often invokes an image of a muscular America bending opponents to its will around the world. But he is singularly uninterested in shouldering the burdens that come with being a global hegemon.

The White House is pursuing cuts to the State Department and international aid programs. It has downplayed rhetoric surrounding human rights, democracy and the rule of law. And even as it expresses concerns for the humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people, the Trump administration has gone out of its way to stigmatize and punish Syrian refugees.

According to new State Department figures, the United States has only admitted 44 Syrian refugees since last October. It resettled only 3,024 in all of 2017, far below the 45,000 annual cap on Syrian refugees now set by the State Department. In 2016, the last year of the Obama presidency, 15,479 Syrian refugees were resettled in the United States — a figure that a whole swath of activists and NGOs believed was insufficient. Now that seems like a golden age.

The Trump administration has cast Syrian refugees as threats to national security and stemmed the flow in the name of "extreme vetting." Yet, as a new number-crunching analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute shows, the risk posed by vetted refugees in the United States is tiny. "Since 9/11, the annual risk of death from a vetting failure was 1 in 328 million annually," noted a Cato statement. "For comparison, Americans faced a 1 in 20,000 chance of dying in a nonterrorist homicide during the same period."

Chris Murphy tweeted "Syria headlines this week: 1) a functional end to acceptance of Syrian refugees; 2) more air strikes.

"If Trump really cared about the Syrian people, America wouldn't bomb them. We would rescue them."

Administration officials also argue, with some justification, that Syrians don't want to leave their country. "Not one of the many that I talked to ever said we want to go to America," Nikki Haley, Trump's ambassador to the United Nations, said to Fox News. "They want to stay as close to Syria as they can."

She added that the United States had spent more than \$6 billion on the Syrian conflict, including significant contributions to alleviate the plight of the millions displaced by the war. "I will tell you, from a humanitarian standpoint, the U.S. has been a massive donor to this situation," Haley said. "But also when I talk to the refugees, they want to go home."

But the Syrian war is hardly about to stop, and millions of Syrians remain in limbo in cities and camps in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. The massive influx over the years of these refugees has strained resources and raised the hackles of local governments and populations. The mood in Turkey, whose leadership once championed its role in giving sanctuary and support to almost 4 million Syrian refugees, has soured.

"Local hostility to the Syrians is on the rise, and so is anti-refugee violence in major Turkish cities," reported my colleague Erin Cunningham earlier this month. "Many Turks think Syrians receive preferential access to public services and assistance. ... Ethnic and religious minorities are also worried that the influx of Syrians will upset the demographic balance and cause sectarian strife."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at one point flirted with the idea of giving Turkish citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Syrians. Now he and his government want "our refugee brothers and sisters to return to their country," as he said in February.

But to where? One potential plan would have Ankara transplanting some 350,000 Syrians to an enclave in northwestern Syria that was recently captured by Turkey and its rebel allies.

Most Syrians in Turkey want no part of such a forced relocation. Many have built livelihoods in Turkish cities and are now contributing to the nation's economy. "There are younger generations who are starting their lives here, some who were born as refugees," Gareth Jenkins, a senior fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, said to Cunningham. For them, Syria may never truly be home again.

Syria's catastrophic war unraveled its society, and stitching it back together again will be no easy feat. That challenge is compounded by the total absence of collective international action to bring the war to an end. Instead, Syria remains the chessboard of a regional great game, with foreign powers waging proxy wars across its ravaged provinces.

In its defense of the Syrian regime, Iran has deployed thousands of Shiite fighters recruited from neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. Along with detachments of Russian personnel, they form yet another foreign legion running roughshod over the war-torn country.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration now seems keen on drafting other Sunni Arab states in the Middle East to continue its mission in Syria. According to the Wall Street Journal, the White

House “is seeking to assemble an Arab force to replace the U.S. military contingent in Syria and help stabilize the northeastern part of the country after the defeat of Islamic State.”

“Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the U.A.E. have all been approached with respect to financial support and more broadly to contribute,” an administration official told the Journal, while Egypt is being cajoled to send its own troops to the country. Erik Prince, the U.S. businessman who failed to persuade the White House to let him build a mercenary army for Afghanistan, is now making a similar pitch for Syria.

“The entirety of U.S. mission in Syria can be outsourced at zero cost to the U.S. taxpayer and zero risk to American service personnel,” Prince told the Journal’s Dion Nissenbaum.

But the risks to Syrians, and the price their country continues to pay for a war with no end, remain unconscionably steep.