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Guest Opinion: Megan J. Ballard: Trump's refugee rationale is a ruse

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In establishing the annual number of refugees to be resettled in the United States, the Trump administration is assigning a dollar figure to the value of a refugee's safety and welfare. A refugee's life, and the U.S. national interest, is worth more than \$3,300.

Each year, the U.S. president sets the maximum number of refugees the country will admit for the coming fiscal year. The Trump administration announced on Tuesday deep cuts to refugee admissions for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. Rather than aiming for the average admission of about 80,000 refugees, the administration will permit entry to no more than 45,000.

Federal law requires the president to justify the annual refugee admissions number by humanitarian concerns or national interest. The administration's public rationale for planning to cut admissions rests on a reported \$3,300 per capita cost of providing newly arrived refugees with support each year. Some in the administration suggest that a greater number of refugees can be helped outside of the United States for the same cost.

Reducing refugee admissions to a trickle is not justified by humanitarian concerns nor is it in the national interest. The global humanitarian crisis of record numbers of people forced from their homes by violence and persecution cannot be addressed by a small dollar amount. Similarly, the national interests in admitting refugees are far more nuanced and complex than an expense figure.

U.S. national interests are promoted by supporting allies that currently host most of the world's refugees. States bordering conflict areas – such as Jordan, Turkey, Kenya and Bangladesh – host millions more refugees than the United States has admitted for resettlement. The enormous influx of refugees into areas striving to strengthen economic and political institutions poses a potentially destabilizing element. It is within the United States' interest to help ease the burden on these states.

Moreover, the humanitarian crisis will not be alleviated by transferring money to states hosting significant refugee populations. Prolonging temporary asylum, when there is no prospect for refugees to return to countries still embroiled in conflict, does nothing to solve refugees' need for security and stability. This is particularly true given that refugees sheltering in states bordering conflict areas are often denied work authorization. While victims of conflict need humanitarian assistance, cash contributions are no substitute for the chance at a safe, new start that resettlement in the United States offers.

The International Organization for Migration reports that an average of almost 10 refugees and migrants died each day in 2016 attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Doctors Without Borders and other aid organizations report high mortality rates among those who have sought safety in refugee camps. With legal resettlement avenues blocked, more refugees desperate for long-term stability may risk their lives traveling perilous routes to safety. It is not morally defensible to deny a refugee the opportunity to resettle in the United States because of an upfront cost of \$3,300.

It is also in the U.S. interest to uphold international obligations. The United States assumed legal responsibilities when it ratified the United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Through this treaty, the United States agreed to cooperate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This body recommends resettling refugees as a durable solution to the plight of refugees. Warehousing refugees in camps near conflict zones is not a durable solution.

Nor is national security a justification. It is not rational to claim that the admission of 45,000 refugees – who are selected and thoroughly vetted by the U.S. government – makes the nation safer than the admission of twice as many refugees. As a recent Cato Institute study reveals, the chance of an American perishing in a terrorist attack at the hands of an admitted refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year.

When the global refugee population stands at 22.5 million people, protecting even 100,000 refugees in the United States is a small effort. A number less than half of this amount cannot be justified considering the grave humanitarian crisis of the escalating population of refugees, nor by any national interest.

The administration's rationales of preserving public coffers and safety not only fail to meet the justification required by law but are a ruse. President Trump made clear his hostility to refugees and other immigrants during his campaign, and by his attempt to ban refugees during his first week in office. Reducing 2018 refugee admissions is another manifestation of this hostility.

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