Refugees not a security risk

Graham F. West

September 29, 2017

Every year since the Refugee Act of 1980, the presidential administration in power has announced its cap number for refugee admissions in the coming fiscal year. On Wednesday, the Trump Administration followed suit, with a notable departure from tradition: Their cap, at 45,000 individuals to be admitted for FY2018, is the lowest such number in the history of this process.

That may sound like a lot of people, especially amid reports that some White House officials were looking to go as low as 15,000. Set against America's legacy of leadership and the historic refugee crisis the world faces today, however, it's hardly a drop in the bucket.

There are many good reasons to welcome refugees to the United States. For one, they are a net economic benefit — just ask the Trump Administration, as they recently suppressed a Department of Health and Human Services study showing as much. There's also a very obvious moral good in helping people, the majority of whom are women and children, flee from extreme violence.

What we don't often hear is a positive argument for refugees in terms of national security. President Trump talks often about the security risk of refugees, often calling them a "Trojan Horse." Beyond this fear-mongering though, images of boats of desperate people washing up on European shores unmonitored can give anyone pause in wondering what refugee admission to the United States actually looks like.

Thankfully, the notions that we don't know who is coming into our country as a refugee — or that they would be likely to attack us once here — are both far from true.

Our extensive, 18- to 24-month-long vetting process starts at the United Nations, where every refugee applying for resettlement is interviewed and has their biometric data logged and their background checked. The U.N. doesn't pick who comes to our country, though; the United States chooses candidates from among those recommended, who are then subject to overlapping investigations (more interviews, biometric cataloging, background checks) by agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

In other words, it would be ludicrous for an ISIS commander to train an operative and send them to attack the United States as a refugee. The operative would have no control over whether they would be referred to the United States; they would need background documents, biometric data, and a fake life story all as good as the real things; and at the end of a months or years-long process, they wouldn't even get to pick where they finally landed for resettlement.

The fact is that we can stay safe while welcoming refugees, and the data bear that out. According to an exhaustive study by the libertarian Cato Institute, there have been exactly zero fatal terrorist attacks in the United States by refugees since the Refugee Act of 1980 started this vetting process.

But there's one more way refugees and security are intertwined. Extremists in places like Iraq and Syria give people a simple, brutal choice when they invade their towns and cities: submit or die. When the United States shuts our doors to all but a trickle of people facing that choice, we're agreeing with the bad guys that coexistence between Muslims and "the West" is so impossible that misery or death are better choices.

The Trump Administration must revise this historically low number to a goal more becoming of our nation's values and capabilities. If they don't, history will judge us harshly — and appropriately so.