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On refugees, the Trump administration is competent and malevolent

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At a time of widespread need, the United States is in headlong retreat from the principles and practices that for so long has made it a global beacon. It is no exaggeration to say that if current trends continue, the U.S. government will have no refugee resettlement program at the end of this administration.

In other policy domains, scholars have asked whether the Trump administration is malevolent or incompetent. In the case of refugees the answer is clear: There is animus towards this program and that is being translated into action in a highly organized and efficient manner. It is the worst of all worlds.

Since the modern U.S. resettlement program was established in 1980, an average of 95,000 refugees per year have been allowed to come and settle in the United States. This from a global refugee and asylum-seeker population that has now swelled to more than 25 million, as wars in Syria and South Sudan increase the displaced population.

But President Trump has decreed that the number of refugees to be admitted in fiscal 2018 should be 45,000 — half the historic average. Worse, it is now clear that his administration is rigging the admissions system to ensure that only around 20,000 are allowed to come here in that period.

Indeed, more Syrians were killed in the suspected chemical weapon attack on April 7 — at least 60 — than have been admitted to the United States as refugees in the six months since the fiscal year began.

Refugee entry is focused on the most vulnerable people: victims of torture, those with urgent medical needs, and needy women and children, who constitute three quarters of the total. None are safe in their home countries. All are subject to extensive vetting by at least eight U.S. government agencies, and the whole process, including interviews and biometric tests, takes 18 to 24 months. The Cato Institute has estimated the chance of an American dying in a terrorist attack caused by a refugee to be 1 in 3.64 billion per year. Refugees are victims of terrorism, not terrorists.

And they repay this country's generosity. A government report found that, over the past decade, refugees brought in \$63 billion more in government revenue than they cost. By the time refugees have been in the country at least 25 years, their median household income reaches \$67,000 — \$14,000 more than the median income of U.S. households overall.

Despite the success of this bipartisan program, it is being slowly and silently strangled. Bureaucratic means are being used to subvert an agreed interagency decision. There have been no hearings in Congress, no accounting for the result.

The shrinking refugee totals for individual countries are striking. In 2017, 6,996 refugees came from Iraq. The figure for the first half of this fiscal year is 107. Comparable figures for Iran, whose people the president has praised for their protests against the regime, are 2,577 and 31. Forty-four vulnerable Syrians have found safety here, compared with 6,557 last year (45 percent of whom were children under 14).

The fall in numbers also affects those who have put their lives on the line for the United States. Afghans and Iraqis who worked for the United States, and are a target as a result, have their own programs, called Special Immigrant Visas and P2 Direct Access. The numbers for these are also being cut. There have been 36 Iraqi P2 refugee arrivals so far, compared with 3,051 in 2017. The average monthly SIV arrivals (mainly Afghans) over the first six months of fiscal 2018 was 1,310, compared with average monthly arrivals of 1,822 in first six months of fiscal 2017.

It is not too late to arrest the decline. Congress should be calling on the administration to expedite refugee interviews to hit the 45,000 target. Homeland Security should speed up the process for vetting refugees, which already takes far too long. And there is no excuse for the shortfall in issuance of special admissions for brave Afghans and Iraqis who have put their lives on the line for the United States.

Most refugees are far away — they are trying to find havens in places such as Jordan, Bangladesh and Uganda. By offering a new life for the lucky few, the United States upholds its highest ideals, sets an example for others and stands with allies bearing the greatest load. This is no time to abandon that role.