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Obama Isn't Backing Down On Welcoming Refugees

Elise Foley

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The political debate over refugees is almost exclusively focused on Syrians — and whether they should be banned and vilified, or welcomed. But the U.S. refugee system goes far beyond the displaced Syrians. And, as President Barack Obama expands the refugee resettlement program next fiscal year, the number of Africans to be admitted will increase the most, for the second year in a row.

The U.S. will aim to admit up to 110,000 refugees in fiscal 2017, up from 85,000 in the current fiscal year, Obama announced on Wednesday. Administration officials proposed the figure earlier this month.

The presidential determination, the largest Obama has made as president, comes as anti-refugee sentiment is being stoked by Republican politicians and their presidential nominee, Donald Trump.

The figure is broken down by world region: 35,000 spots allocated for Africa; 12,000 for East Asia; 4,000 for Europe and Central Asia; 5,000 for Latin America and the Caribbean; and 40,000 for the Near East and South Asia, which includes the Middle East. The remaining 14,000 spots are unallocated.

The largest increase in the allotment is for refugees from Africa, with 10,000 more spots than in the 2016 fiscal year. The largest number of refugees thus far this fiscal year came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, followed by Burma, Syria, Iraq and Somalia, according to State Department figures.

The numbers are laid out by region, not by country, so there is no set figure for Syrian refugees.

But the administration's goal is to admit at least 12,000 of them, up from about 10,000 this fiscal year, Simon Henshaw, principal deputy assistant secretary of the State Department's Bureau Of Population, Refugees, And Migration, told senators earlier Wednesday.

Trump has promised to suspend refugee resettlement for Syrians entirely, along with restricting all immigration and travel for individuals from the country and others with terrorism concerns.

(He has seemingly abandoned his initial proposal to ban Muslims in favor of a slightly less overt call to block certain Muslim-majority countries and screen for ideology.)

Senate Republicans hammered Obama administration officials on Wednesday over refugee resettlement, pressing them repeatedly on whether the screening system is sufficient. Many senators, along with Trump, have argued screening barely exists at all.

Are we a country that's just terrified? Are we political leaders, are we office-holders whose job it is to give in to terrorists and tell them we're not going to live up to our values that are there on the Statue of Liberty? Or are we going to be a bigger people? Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.)

León Rodríguez, director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the Department of Homeland Security, told senators the system was continuing to improve. The extensive process includes multiple interviews and repeated screening through databases, he explained.

Rodríguez promised he would later provide senators with information on the number of former refugees convicted on terrorism charges since the 2001 terror attacks, after which the refugee screening process was strengthened. Sen. Jeff Sessions' (R-Ala.) office tallied about 40 such convictions. In January, the State Department said there had been fewer than 20 refugees arrested or removed based on terrorist concerns since 9/11. The last instances of refugees killing Americans in terrorist attacks were in the 1970s, according to a report from the conservative-leaning think tank Cato Institute.

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), raising the politics of the issue, asked for figures on terrorism convictions for the past eight years — while Obama was president, not when Republican President George W. Bush was in charge.

Cruz, who last year proposed admitting Christian refugees while excluding others, accused the Obama administration of trying to keep out Christians.

“The refugee program as administered by this administration seems to have an enormous preference for Syrian Muslim refugees and seems to actively keep out Syrian Christian refugees,” Cruz said.

Henshaw said that although Christians made up about 10 percent of the Syrian population before the war, they are only about 1 percent of Syrian refugees who have fled the country because many still reside in government-controlled areas. He said the U.S. is trying to strengthen its screening infrastructure for refugees in Lebanon, where some Syrian refugees have fled.

Sessions insinuated repeatedly that refugees were responsible for honor killings in the United States, even though a report he cited on such killings made no reference to refugees. He also

questioned why an individual's literacy, knowledge of English and job skills were not considered when the U.S. determines whom to admit as a refugee.

Henshaw told him that refugee acceptance is based on who is vulnerable.

"I see no evidence to show that refugee communities are bringing these values into the United States," Henshaw said of honor killings and anti-American acts. "What I see is they're becoming good American citizens, members of the military, members of our police, people with ... American values."

Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.), whose state has a large refugee population, said he thinks "one awful thing happening is one too many," when it comes to terrorism. But Americans, he said, must weigh their values.

"Let's talk about what kind of country we are," Franken said. "Are we a country that's just terrified? Are we political leaders, are we officeholders whose job it is to give in to terrorists and tell them we're not going to live up to our values that are there on the Statue of Liberty? Or are we going to be a bigger people?"