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Finding Refuge In The Truth About Syrian Refugees

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After the brutal Paris terrorist attacks, many American policy makers decided that the refugee flow from Syria to the U.S. must be stopped. According to these officials, it's the only way to prevent such attacks from ever happening here. But while it's true there'll always be a risk that a Syrian terrorist might get through the system, the current opposition is all out of proportion to the possible harm.

A common argument against admitting Syrian refugees is that the government screening process is ineffective. In truth, it is surprisingly good at keeping terrorists out. The process utilizes all of the government's institutional advantages, and takes three years (for Syrians, and about two years for other refugees) and 21 steps. These include interviews of the refugees and anybody they might know, biometric checks, health checks and document reviews. The refugee must be in a United Nations refugee camp throughout the process. If he fails any one of the 21 steps, his application is denied.

It's a system in which applicants are presumed guilty until proven innocent. From the point of view of a terrorist trying to infiltrate the U.S., this isn't an effective way to come here. The time investment, the low probability of success and the government checks are in fact effective deterrents. Especially when there are juicier targets closer to home.

The system isn't impenetrable, but the risk is small

That doesn't mean the system is impenetrable. A patient terrorist with low opportunity cost, no terrorist connections in his background and an extensive number of acquaintances who can support his story could make it through. Or a refugee could arrive before becoming a terrorist. The system could fail. A human mind can change. But in all cases the risk is very small.

Of the almost 900,000 refugees admitted to the U.S. since 2001, only three had been convicted of planning terrorist attacks which were on targets outside of the United States. Not one of those were carried out successfully. That's one conviction for almost every 300,000 refugees admitted.

While the ideal number would be zero, it hardly means the threat is so dire that the U.S. should deny Syrians refuge.

It's also possible that the child of an admitted refugee might grow up to be a terrorist. But then so might the child of any American citizen. As George Mason University law professor and fellow Cato Institute adjunct scholar Ilya Somin points out, the number of Americans killed by people who grew up in the United States and later become terrorists are small and the instances rare. The most infamous example is the Tsarnaev brothers who came here as the children of asylum seekers, not refugees, and committed the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.

So far in 2015, the United States has accepted 1,682 Syrians refugees. That's 0.042% of all Syrians in the refugee camps this year. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, only 0.63% of all refugees to the U.S. have been Syrians. That's a very tiny number. Partly, this is due to the multi-year vetting process that delays admissions. But fewer are also admitted because Americans are now more worried about Syrians.

A greater threat to Europe than the U.S.

Some presidential candidates, such as Jeb Bush, have recently called for Americans to focus their efforts on helping Christian refugees. But Christians are afraid of refugee camps and avoid them. Congress would have to create another path that skips the UNHCR refugee camp process. President Gerald Ford forced the issue with the Vietnamese boat people in 1975, transporting them to Guam, and daring Congress to not approve.

None of the attackers in Paris have so far been identified as Syrians. Still, the potential security threat of terrorists posing as Syrian refugees is much greater in Europe than in the United States. Asylum seekers from Syria can easily get to Europe. Once there, they can't be vetted as thoroughly because there is nowhere to put them. Unlike refugee in camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, the asylum seekers currently moving into Europe are only detained briefly and vetted mostly after they have been released into the general population.

Despite the fears trumpeted by some officials, the U.S. government can easily screen out the refugee system's real security threats. The reaction now is overblown.

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