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Rand Paul's Hard Line On Refugees Rankles Libertarians

Paul raised hopes in the latest GOP debate that he was returning to his libertarian roots. Maybe not.

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Sen. Rand Paul's (R-Ky.) tough proposals aimed at limiting the admission of refugees in the wake of the Paris terror attacks are disappointing libertarian opinion leaders, days after a presidential debate performance in which he appeared to return to his independent roots.

Paul said on Saturday that the United States and Europe "have to be very careful about bringing refugees to our country that might attack us." He introduced a bill on Thursday that would, among other things, put a moratorium on resettlement of refugees from 34 "high-risk" countries. The list includes predominantly Muslim countries, Russia and North Korea.

Paul also introduced an amendment to a housing and transportation funding bill this week that would bar federally-funded social welfare assistance for refugees from those "high-risk" nations. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) canceled a planned vote on the omnibus bill on Thursday after Paul insisted that his amendment receive a vote.

Libertarians, who have looked to Paul as a rare kindred spirit in Congress and the Republican presidential field, are not generally fans of federal assistance to U.S. citizens, let alone refugees and other immigrants. But two leading libertarian policy experts told The Huffington Post they oppose reforms to the welfare state that would discriminate against people from certain countries.

"It would be wrong to establish national origin-based criteria for deciding who gets access to what benefits," said David Bier, director of immigration policy at the libertarian Niskanen Center. "That is not really in accord with the libertarian ideal of equality under the law."

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, co-authored a 2013 paper calling for an end to all means-tested assistance programs, which would "build a wall

around the welfare state, not the country.” Paul expressed similar sentiments during the debate over the comprehensive immigration bill that passed the Senate in 2013.

But Nowrasteh said he objects to Paul’s new amendment selectively restricting benefits, noting that the legislation fuels an inaccurate narrative that refugees are seeking entry to the U.S. primarily to take advantage of government benefits.

“The reason Syrians and other refugees from the Middle East are coming here is not because food stamps ran out in their home countries, it is primarily because they are fleeing violence,” Nowrasteh said. “We have a huge problem with the welfare state in this country, but refugee and immigrant abuse of it is a very minor, microscopic part of the problem. To focus on that detracts from the real problem we face.”

Bier said that Paul’s amendment restricting welfare payments is especially troubling in light of his proposed restrictions on refugee intake from those same countries.

“What we’ve suggested is that individuals in the U.S. should be able to privately sponsor refugees, agreeing to cover the costs of bringing them over and providing those benefits to individuals” once they arrive, Bier said. “Our problem with the Paul’s proposal is that he is not offering an alternative to the federal government sponsored initiative.”

Bier noted that private refugee sponsorship and funding has been permitted in the past. He wrote earlier this month that it was a policy favored by former President Ronald Reagan.

Syrian refugees Hiam Alawad, left, 4, and Dana Alawad, 2, sit by a bed backboard in their new home in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan on Nov. 16, 2015.

Nowrasteh said he would be open to a more restrictive admission process if the current system was failing to address the threat posed by hypothetical refugee infiltration, but he doesn't believe that's the case.

“There is definitely a threat, but it is very minor, especially through the refugee system,” Nowrasteh said. “This type of drastic measure is an overreaction to the tragic terrorist attacks.”

Liz Mair, president of the communications firm Mair Strategies and a former online communications strategist for Paul, noted that Paul is not an orthodox libertarian.

"With regard to the limiting of [refugee] admissions, this might be an area where Rand is leaning more towards 'conservative' than 'libertarian,'" Mair, a self-described libertarian Republican, said. "But then again, he is a libertarian conservative, or a conservative libertarian. He's not a purist."

Paul's Senate office provided details about the legislation, but wouldn't respond to the criticism. "What's happening requires a careful balance of libertarian principles: between the job of the government to ensure the protection of American citizens and the purpose of the United States to

be an exceptional nation of freedom in a world filled with tyranny," a spokesperson for Paul's campaign told HuffPost in a statement. "Paul's plan is the best way to balance those principles. Unlike many of his Republican counterparts, the senator has not called for an end to Syrian immigration, but instead -- as smart leaders do -- he has called for a suspension of the program until we can ensure that it does not pose a threat the American citizens."

Paul is not the only Republican presidential candidate to embrace tighter refugee admission standards after the Nov. 13 Paris attacks. Most of them have proposed curbing re-settlement of Syrian refugees to the U.S. in one form or another.

What makes Paul's hard-line stance unique is his typically more moderate approach to national security-related matters, and his attempt to appeal to libertarian-leaning Republican voters.

Paul's proposals follow an acclaimed Nov. 10 Republican presidential debate performance in which he emphasized his libertarian-leaning positions, expressing opposition to increased U.S. military intervention in Syria and rapping rival Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) for proposing an increase in defense spending.

Bier said he's not surprised by Paul's pivot, but the contrast between the candidate's debate performance and his legislative proposals this week heightens the disappointment.

"As a libertarian, I felt like he was definitely speaking to more of [our] concerns than we had seen in prior debates," Bier said.

Paul has struggled to gain support in the crowded Republican presidential primary field. He currently has the support of 2.8 percent of likely GOP primary voters, according to HuffPost Pollster's polling average.

Mair said she rejects the notion that Paul is pandering to conservative elements of the Republican base to gain ground in the presidential primary. She said Paul should be taken at face value when he says he was influenced by the 2011 capture of two Iraqi refugees in his hometown of Bowling Green, Kentucky, trying to buy weapons for al Qaeda in Iraq. (Anne Richard, the assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, testified at a House hearing on Thursday that screening improvements since then would have prevented the men from being admitted to the U.S.)

"People, even political leaders who we sort of expect to view everything objectively and dispassionately, are often colored by events in their local communities," Mair said.

Bier, however, characterized Paul's hard-line stance on refugees as a misguided political gambit.

"Every time he has made a jerk to the right to appeal to more conservative issues, he loses what distinguishes him from the rest of the field," Bier said. "He has made such an incredible effort to appeal to minorities and expand the appeal of the Republican Party that it just seems at odds with

his general pitch to put forward legislation that would create this type of two-tiered system for certain nationalities.”