



Oxfam America urges help for Syrian refugees

Lizzie Short

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Boston-based Oxfam America, an international aid group, is urging policymakers to set aside politics and let in more of those displaced by civil war in Syria.

Details of the refugee screening process – and how a bill that passed the U.S. House of Representatives last week might affect it – were spelled out by Noah Gottschalk, a senior humanitarian policy adviser for the group, on Tuesday. In an interview, he refuted some of the recent rhetoric on the issue and appealed to policymakers to stay above the politics.

“This is not a partisan issue,” Gottschalk said. “It is a common-sense issue and a distraction from real security concerns.”

The U.S. process for vetting refugees is “the most secure in the world,” Gottschalk said. He explained how those coming from Syria and Iraq are eventually resettled in the U.S.

The United Nations, which determines a person’s refugee status, selects the most vulnerable who have needs that can’t be met in temporary camps in places like Jordan, Turkey, or Lebanon, Gottschalk said. Of this group, the U.N. then selects less than 1 percent for potential U.S. resettlement. Because the world organization has been working with the U.S. for decades on refugee resettlements, U.N. officials are well acquainted with the U.S. process, Gottschalk said, and don’t select anyone about whom there is even the slightest indication of an issue

After being selected for potential U.S. resettlement, refugees go through a 20-step process in which they are screened by the State and Homeland Security departments, the FBI and other agencies. Secretary of State John Kerry outlined the process in greater detail in a recent letter to U.S. governors, including Charlie Baker in Massachusetts, who last week expressed concerns about screening methods and security. For Iraqis and Syrians fleeing Islamic State terrorists, Gottschalk says, this process typically takes between two and three years.

“What terrorist group is going to try to get one of their fighters through this three-year process?” Gottschalk asked. “This is the least likely way anyone trying to do harm to the U.S. would pursue.”

Gottschalk also cautioned against even a temporary halt in resettlements. Each segment of the 20-step screening process has a deadline, and if any of the 20,000 Syrians currently part way through the process can't complete a step before its deadline, they'll be forced to start again from the beginning. Gottschalk said halting the process would result in “an enormous waste of time and resources” and could be a matter of life and death for some refugees.

The U.S. refugee resettlement program “is a small effort to make life better for a small group of very vulnerable people who literally have no other option,” Gottschalk said.

In 2015, the U.S. accepted 0.042 percent of about 4 million registered Syrian refugees dispersed around the world, according to a study from the Cato Institute, a libertarian research organization in Washington. Another study has found that of the 3 million refugees resettled in America since 1980, not one has committed an act of terror in the U.S.

The Boston Marathon bombers were ethnic Chechens whose parents had been granted asylum in the U.S. Asylum seekers are people who have suffered persecution, or fear they will, based on race, religion, nationality, political affiliation or social group membership. They must already be in the U.S. or at a port of entry. Asylum status can be revoked if the U.S. determines the threat of persecution no longer exists.

The Republican-backed legislation that lawmakers rushed to a House vote following the Paris attacks would add layers of bureaucracy to the resettlement program that, according to Gottschalk, “every agency involved has said is unnecessary; the process in place is already the strictest in the world.” The bill, the American Security Against Foreign Enemies, or SAFE, Act would “effectively end the Syrian refugee resettlement program,” he said.

Gottschalk recounted the story of a Syrian family selected as candidates for U.S. resettlement.

“This family has five children, three of whom have serious illnesses. They are currently in a temporary refugee camp in Jordan and one of those children died yesterday. They are only on the second step of the process, and each time must drive to be interviewed at the U.S. embassy at the Jordan capital of Amman. If they miss the expiration date on their next step, they will need to start all over again.”

Displaced refugees are just one upshot of the Syrian conflict, and making their resettlement more difficult does little to respond to the threat posed by the Islamic State, according to Gottschalk. The terrorist group took responsibility for the Paris attacks that began Nov. 13.

“There is a need for a policy response after attacks in Paris and Beirut,” Gottschalk said. “This is first and foremost a national-security issue, and there need to be efforts to address the real risks the country is facing.”

“Efforts to stop Syrian refugees is not a sensible reaction,” Gottschalk said. “People are rightly horrified” by terrorist attacks, he said. But, he added, “when people act out of fear, they don’t make the right kind of decisions.”

“It’s important to remember that this started because kids were spraying pro-democracy statements on a wall” in Syria, he said. “People wanted greater freedom, greater human rights. Americans can relate to this. All people can relate to this.”