



Lessons for Integrating Syrian Refugees

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President Obama's plan to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees this year overcame its last obstacle as U.S. District Judge David Godbey rejected Texas' plea to block it. Judge Godbey described the evidence that these refugees pose a threat as "largely speculative hearsay." Now that the plan is moving forward, there are several things we can do to make sure it succeeds.

The first is to help refugees become economically self-sufficient as fast as possible — as current U.S. policy emphasizes. Economist Kalena Cortes found that refugees to the United States worked more hours and learned English quicker than economic migrants, probably because they couldn't return to their home countries. They also invested more in education, with spouses alternatively working and acquiring skills.

Unfortunately, many European countries fail to encourage economic self-sufficiency for refugees and asylum seekers. Germany prohibits work for the first three months, Italy for six, France for nine, and the United Kingdom for an entire year. Even when there are no such restrictions, labor-market regulations and welfare policies disincentivize economic integration. As Swedish researcher Nima Sanandaji has noted, even if there are no outright restrictions, pro-union policies compress the wage structure, squeezing out entry-level jobs that refugees need to gain experience.

Sanandaji also notes that Swedish welfare benefits, equal to 74 percent of average wages in 2012, diminish refugee employment. The result is that educated Iranian refugees fare almost as poorly as uneducated Somalis — in stark contrast to the United States, where Iranian refugees eventually outperform native-born Americans.

Germany let in over a million asylum seekers in 2015. The Cologne Institute for Economic Research estimates that this intake will cost the German taxpayers 15,000 euros (about \$17,000) per asylum seeker per year — an enormous sum that adds up to 50 billion through 2017. A refugee costs the U.S. government \$10,000 for the first year and less after that.

To ease this burden, existing welfare benefits that refugees receive should be curtailed and private groups should fill the gap — just as they did in the late 1980s and early 1990s when they resettled refugees from Communist countries.

Locking immigrants out of employment and onto welfare dependency has a high psychological cost. The Center for Migration Studies found that Soviet refugees to the United States who worked and lived in states with less welfare benefits were more satisfied with their lives, upwardly mobile, and hopeful about the future. Many Europeans would be less pessimistic about their future if their refugee populations earned hope through work rather than languishing in despair produced by welfare dependency and unemployment.

Another important thing to remember is that Syrians don't have to be refugees. The Gulf States are hosting over 1.2 million Syrians on work permits — over five times as many as at the beginning of the civil war. They are not refugees, but every Syrian working in the Persian Gulf is one fewer in a refugee camp or in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, or on their way to Europe.

The 600,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan have just been granted work permits. To boost job creation in Jordan, the European Union is liberalizing trade with them in the hopes that firms in Jordan will boost exports and increase employment opportunities. The United States should also loosen its trade restrictions with Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to boost job creation for refugees overseas.

The United States will admit more Syrian refugees in the near future. Emphasizing their work opportunities here and abroad by restricting welfare, loosening trade, and allowing them to come on work visas will help them integrate more quickly and thoroughly. Refugees can be traumatized. Allowing them to help themselves without costing taxpayers will help them adjust to their new lives in the West.

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