



## **Refugee resettlement: The smart way to defeat ISIS**

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Two months ago, these are the headlines that galvanized Western politicians and their voters: “Shocking images of drowned Syrian boy show tragic plight of refugees.” “Image of Drowned Syrian Boy Echoes Around World.” “The Aunt of Drowned Syrian Boy Says It Is Not Too Late To Save Other Refugees.” Although the overall Western response to the refugee crisis created by the savagery of ISIS was somewhat uneven, it was, slowly, moving in the right direction.

And then came a Friday the 13th that none of us will likely ever forget.

Multiple ISIS attacks throughout Paris that day not only took the lives of 129 innocent people and wounded hundreds more, they sparked an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim backlash on both sides of the Atlantic.

French teenager Latetia Syed told the New York Times that in the wake of the attacks “There was a flood of violent language on Facebook to kill Muslims.” Just hours after the attacks and over 3500 miles away in Meriden, Connecticut, gunshots were allegedly fired at the Baitul Aman mosque, one of many potential hate crimes committed against Muslim houses of worship in the hours and days after ISIS attacks in Paris.

Latetia Syed and the congregants of the Baitul Aman mosque played no role in the killings in Paris. Neither did the remaining family of Aylan Kurdi, the little Syrian boy who drowned fleeing the butchers of ISIS. Here at home, in addition to facing renewed threats of violence and vandalism after the Paris attacks, Arab and Muslim Americans are being singled out for intensified government scrutiny under the euphemism of “countering violent extremism.” The attempts of 31 governors and the U.S. Congress to prohibit Syrian refugees from reaching the safety of America is the flip-side of the same short-sighted, exclusionary policy.

As Stephen Legomsky, for chief counsel of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service recently noted, refugees “...are personally intensely interviewed and thorough background

checks are performed by Homeland Security and the FBI. No competent terrorist would choose the U.S. refugee process as a preferred strategy for gaining entry into the U.S.”

Indeed, for all the talk about creating a counter narrative to ISIS propaganda, the greatest tool for doing so—the stories and talents of Syrian refugees—is being squandered. Four days before the Paris attacks, ISIS massacred over 200 children. The internet is filled with videos showing their barbarity, but many of the refugees bear the physical marks of torture and mutilation at the hands of ISIS. They represent living testimonials that no video or print story can rival.

And they are also the single best source of information on life inside ISIS controlled territory.

Welcoming and working alongside these refugees would provide Western governments with exactly the kind of information they are seeking: the names, photographs, and other personally identifying information on ISIS militants who attacked them and drove them from their homes. In other words, the very kinds of information that can lead to attacks being prevented.

Safely processing, welcoming and offering these refugees an opportunity to work with intelligence agencies is a task that is well within the capabilities of Western governments. Calls from governors to prevent Syrian refugees from being resettled in their states and legislation to end or place the resettlement of Syrian refugees on hold are entirely out of step with our counterterrorism interests.

Indeed, we need to see these refugees for what they truly are: defectors.

During the Cold War, the American government recognized the importance of Soviet and East bloc defectors. Our government frequently profited from the information they provided. The same kind of opportunity exists right now with Syrian refugees. Even as we mourn those killed in Paris, we must have the wisdom to see the Syrian refugees for what they are: one of our best opportunities for defeating ISIS.

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