



US Accepts Record-High Percentage of Christian Refugees

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The United States is accepting an increasingly large share of Christian refugees, primarily from Africa, while the number of total arrivals remains on track for a historic low this fiscal year, federal data show.

With three-quarters of the fiscal year over, and amid massive cuts to the U.S. refugee program under the Trump administration, nearly 68 percent of arriving refugees this fiscal year are Christian — a 16-year high, according to State Department statistics reviewed by VOA. Prior to this year, the highest proportion was in fiscal 2007, at 60 percent.

But researchers and advocates are quick to highlight that while Christian refugees hit a historic high proportionally, the number of Christians, Muslims and people of all other religions are low compared with previous years.

“I don’t know a single Christian who is in any way consoled” by that higher proportion, said Matthew Soerens, U.S. director of church mobilization for World Relief, one of nine national resettlement organizations in the U.S. “I think it’s a tragedy for Christians, Muslims and every other religion. Most every group you could look at is down at least 60 percent.”

In a conference call last week that was reported by the Christian Post, members of the Evangelical Immigration Table, a broad coalition of evangelical groups, also signaled grave concerns that acceptance of Middle Eastern Christians was nearing zero.

“These persecuted Christians have almost been entirely shut out in the past six months, during which time just 21 Christians from the Middle East have been admitted to the U.S. as refugees,” said Kathryn Freeman, the director of public policy for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. “I think it is also important to note that we feel the national slowdown in refugee resettlement is affecting refugees of all faiths.”

Since Donald Trump took office, partially on a platform of barring Muslims from coming to the United States, the share of Muslim refugee arrivals to the country has dwindled to a never-before-seen nadir, as VOA reported earlier this year. That figure currently hovers at around 15 percent, despite ongoing resettlement needs from majority-Muslim countries.

Muslim refugee flows fell 94 percent from January to November 2017, a Cato Institute report from December further noted. And refugees weren't the only travelers affected — there was also a 26 percent drop in immigrants and a 32 percent decrease in temporary visa issuances from majority-Muslim countries, according to the report.

“We have a president whose rhetoric has made it very clear [regardless of what the latest Supreme Court decision says] that Muslim populations from particular countries are not welcome in the United States,” said Maria Cristina Garcia, a Cornell University professor who has written about the history of refugees in the U.S. in the decades since the end of the Cold War.

Promises

In an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network a week after his 2017 inauguration, Trump said Christian refugees would be prioritized. The first travel ban, which would be released later that same day, carved out special allowances for Christian refugees. That part was dropped in later iterations.

In the interview, however, Trump also pointed out that the U.S. had been making it “very tough” for Syrian Christians to be resettled in the country.

“If you were a Muslim, you could come in, but if you were a Christian, it was almost impossible, and the reason that was so unfair — everybody was persecuted, in all fairness, but they were chopping off the heads of everybody, but more so the Christians. And I thought it was very, very unfair,” he said.

But the administration has not followed through. Seventeen Christian Syrians have been resettled in the U.S. since October, a number that is unlikely to budge after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Trump's travel ban this week, which bars all Syrian entries except in the case of special waivers.

Similarly, 22 Iraqi Christians have arrived since October; the country was initially included in the travel ban, but later removed. During the same period in then-President Barack Obama's last full year in office, hundreds of Iraq Christian refugees came to the U.S.

Not about faith

“Religion should be a factor in resettlement only to the extent that it determines your vulnerability,” said Soerens of World Relief. “It should never be a preference of ... one religion over another.”

The Trump administration has pushed back on allegations that refugee admissions are based on religion, or even that levels of Christians or Muslims are affected by Trump's policy decisions.

“Let me start by first noting, and really, really strongly here — our admissions has nothing to do with religion in any way, shape or form,” a senior administration official said during a media call in January, in response to a question from VOA about the drop in Muslim arrival numbers during the first months of the fiscal year.

“The slowdown in many places is a result of many different factors, including security checks and medical checks and the number of resources that [the Department of Homeland Security] is able to commit and, frankly, learning new procedures and the elements of coordinating different

parts of the bureaucracy. So I think that partially answers the question,” a State Department official said on the same call.

And there are Americans who support fewer refugee arrivals.

The Pew Research Center reported in May that while 51 percent of Americans favor accepting refugees, 43 percent of Americans oppose it. There is a noticeable shift, however, among Republicans — a year ago, about 1 in 3 said the country had a responsibility to resettle refugees; that’s now dropped to 1 in 4.

Moreover, when the fiscal year ends September 30, the U.S. is on track to welcome just under half the 45,000-refugee ceiling imposed by the president. The resettlement cuts come during an unrelenting need for resettlement, according to recent data from the United Nations.