

The Impact of ISIS on the Homeland and Refugee Resettlement

Testimony of Eric P. Schwartz
Dean and Professor, Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Washington, DC
November 19, 2015

I am very grateful for the opportunity to testify today. I deeply appreciate the important role of this Committee in ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the agencies and departments of the U.S. government, and including and especially those related to the critical issues of national security.

The Committee has asked that witnesses discuss any vulnerabilities within the program for U.S. resettlement of Syrians “to gauge the feasibility of ISIS and other dangerous actors reaching the United States.” This is an important question, but really only relevant if, first, we believe we have a strong national interest in resettling Syrians; and second, if we are confident we are asking the right questions about vulnerabilities in the program.

What is our foreign policy interest in this refugee resettlement program?

We have a compelling national security interest in sustaining and strengthening this program., which is why I was pleased to have signed a letter to the President and Congressional leaders from 22 former U.S. officials involved in foreign policy – Republicans, Democrats and former foreign service officers (including former U.S. Ambassadors to Syria) – urging that the United States both increase substantially our levels of overseas humanitarian assistance and support a refugee admissions goal of 100,000 Syrians. (I ask that the letter be included in the written record of this hearing.)

In short, the United States of America is confronting geopolitical and humanitarian challenges of historic proportions at a critical time in world history – a time that compels our elected and appointed officials to exercise world leadership by thinking and acting boldly in the promotion of both our interests and our values.

The signs of these challenges are clear and compelling, and were tragically reflected in the grotesque attacks against civilians in Paris last Friday night. They are also reflected in ongoing conflict, and egregious abuses of international human rights and humanitarian law in Syria and throughout the region. They demonstrate the reality of a more chaotic world, made more uncertain by the emergence of dangerous non-state actors, and further complicated by an increasingly multi-polarity that will test the capacity of the United States to influence events that impact the well-being of Americans and the world community.

These new realities are also reflected in humanitarian crises of historic proportions. In recent years, we've seen a sharp increase in the numbers of individuals displaced by persecution and conflict. As of the end of last year, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that there were some 60 million people displaced worldwide, including some 20 million refugees who have left their countries of origin due to persecution or conflict, and some 40 million internally displaced persons – “internal refugees,” if you will. According to the High Commissioner, Antonio Guterres, “we are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing any seen before.” And of course, in the case of Syria, the numbers are striking: some half of the population displaced, with more than seven million internally displaced persons and more than four million refugees in neighboring countries.

Whatever one's perspective on the precise U.S. strategy for addressing the political, security and humanitarian crises in Syria, nobody disputes the critical importance of U.S. leadership. Our interests and our values are deeply implicated, whether those involve stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, supporting friends and allies, sustaining economic and commercial relationships, defeating ISIS and other forces that are seeking to export their campaigns of terror, or providing basic assistance to desperate people in dire need.

So how does refugee resettlement of Syrians help to achieve these objectives, and how do efforts to thwart the refugee resettlement program frustrate those objectives?

First, our Syrian refugee resettlement program communicates a critical commitment to burden sharing to governments in the region that are providing safe haven to Syrians. Turkey is hosting more than two million Syrian refugees; Lebanon is host to more than one million and Jordan's numbers are estimated at over 630,000. To be sure, the United States should be providing significant and substantial assistance in support of those governments as they seek to manage this burden, but for a limited number of Syrians who are among the most vulnerable, third country resettlement is a compelling priority, and the United States must be prepared to make a modest commitment to such resettlement. It is the neighboring countries that are bearing the overwhelming burden of this challenge. And if we are asking them – as we are indeed asking them – to continue to do so, and if we are expecting their support for diplomatic and other efforts we are making to reach a political settlement in Syria, it is counterproductive for us to send those governments such a negative signal by effectively shutting off our resettlement program for Syrians.

Second, we must also recognize the responsibility of burden-sharing with our allies in Europe. If we are urging our European friends and allies to implement humane policies and

procedures on protection for the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have entered Europe, then we must demonstrate a commitment to provide resettlement opportunities for Syrians in the United States. Our failure to do so will not only be perceived as an expression of hypocrisy, but also as a reflection of diminished leadership that could undermine our capacity to influence European governments on diplomatic, political and military measures we may ultimately believe are critical to addressing the conflict.

Third, we must recognize that the battle against ISIS is a worldwide effort, in which ISIS – in its use of social media and other means of communication – offers an apocalyptic vision of conflict, and of course rejects any notion of the compatibility of Islam with other traditions. Our refugee resettlement program, which has welcomed persecuted Muslims and others from around the world, is a highly effective rebuke of that preposterous notion, and, in a world of inevitably increasing migration, offers a model of inclusion not only for other governments around the world, but for people – Muslim, Christian, Jewish and others – around the world. Conversely, imposing bars or unreasonable obstacles to the entry of particular groups of refugees risks playing into the very narrative that we are seeking to combat worldwide.

Finally, the United States has historically played a critical role in the provision of international humanitarian assistance and in support of refugee resettlement, which reflects a proud and bipartisan tradition of U.S. worldwide leadership. In terms of its focus on vulnerability of the applicant, our refugee resettlement program has served as a model for others around the world. Legislative measures that would appear to compromise that dimension of our program and either privilege or disadvantage any particular group would send an unfortunate signal about our commitments and undermine our world leadership on humanitarian issues.

What questions should we be asking about the Syrian refugee resettlement program?

This is a particularly important issue, as the wrong question can result in policy outcomes that ill-serve U.S. national interests. We should not be asking whether the Syrian refugee resettlement program – or, for that matter, any refugee resettlement or immigration program – can guarantee against admission of an individual who has ill-intent. No program can do that. To put this issue into perspective, as of 2013, there were some 41.3 million immigrants in the United States according to data gathered by the Migration Policy Institute. And between 2010 and 2013, some four million people entered our country to establish residence of one kind or another – and almost none of these individuals received anything like the scrutiny that is given to refugee applicants from Syria.

We know well why the United States is prepared to encourage the entry of large numbers of immigrants. If I may borrow from an address I offered at the Council on Foreign Relations as Assistant Secretary of State in 2010, entitled *Respecting the Dignity and Human Rights of People on the Move: International Migration Policy for the 21st Century*, let me note what you all know so well: that immigration has been absolutely critical to the economic growth and development of the United States; that it is impossible to imagine that the United States could have become the leading economic and political power it is today without the contribution made by many tens of millions of immigrants; and that immigration – including the entry of refugees who are often so determined and entrepreneurial – is a critical factor in enabling the United States to avoid many of the very troubling demographic trends that bedevil other industrialized countries less hospitable to immigrants.

So if our broad array of immigration programs, none of which has as rigorous screening as our Syrian refugee resettlement program, cannot guarantee against admission of an individual who has ill-intent, what are the issues we ought to be considering as we evaluate the security dimension of this Syrian resettlement effort?

The government witnesses you will have heard before this private panel will have described to you the procedures surrounding the security screening of Syrian refugees, so I will not describe them in detail. As I have indicated, applicants for refugee admissions are the most thoroughly vetted applicants in the U.S. immigration and refugee process. In the case of refugees, this involves reviews by federal intelligence, security and law enforcement agencies, including the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI Terrorist Screening Center and the Departments of Homeland Security, State and Defense. All applicants provide biometric and extensive biographical data, and undergo detailed interviews by officers of DHS to ensure that the applicants have *bona fide* claims and do not pose security risks. I would be pleased to discuss these procedures in greater detail with members of the Committee, but I am convinced that these and other measures provide a robust degree of safeguards that more than justify continuation of these programs, in light of the national security and humanitarian interests they serve.

Conclusion

In *Smithsonian.com* (November 18), Daniel Gross has written a compelling and poignant piece relating to the very issue of this hearing. He writes of an individual asylum claimant, Herbert Karl Friedrich Bahr, claiming to be a persecuted Jew who fled on the SS Drottingholm in 1942 to seek asylum in the United States. During what Gross describes as “a meticulous interview process that involved five separate government agencies,” the story unraveled and

Bahr was prosecuted and convicted for conspiracy and planned espionage. The tragedy of this story, of course, is that the event helped to stoke anti-refugee sentiment in the United States, and the contention that Jews could be part of a fifth column of spies serving the Nazis. This sentiment contributed to restrictive immigration policies surrounding Jews threatened by the Holocaust, as United States officials turned their backs on those in need of protection. As Gross notes, historian Deborah Lipstadt wrote in her book, *Beyond Belief, the American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust*, that *The New Republic* characterized the government as “persecuting the refugee,” and *The Nation* criticized the our government’s posture. But, as Gross writes, “these voices were drowned out in the name of national security.”

Some 75 years after that terrible inaction, we must ensure that voices in support of protecting the vulnerable are not drowned out, and we must recognize that our refugee admissions program – including resettlement of Syrians – meets both our national security interests and our values as a people.