

US humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis

SUMMARY

In recent months, the European Union has faced an unprecedented exodus of asylum-seekers and other migrants, arriving from Syria in particular. The current humanitarian emergency is the result of a conflict-embroiled country and ongoing horrific human rights violations, resulting in one of the worst humanitarian crisis of modern times. More than 7.6 million Syrians have been internally displaced since the beginning of the conflict in 2011; approximately 12.2 million are in need of humanitarian assistance and more than 4 million are refugees in neighbouring countries and Europe.

Given its geographic proximity, the EU is severely affected by the Syrian humanitarian crisis; however the EU is not alone in supporting the Syrian population in need of international protection. Syria's neighbouring countries and the United States remain committed to assisting the Syrian population, inside and outside Syria. In the US, to address the most urgent humanitarian aspects, the Obama administration has proposed to admit an increasing number of Syrian refugees in 2016 and beyond.

This announcement has generated political debate. Some argue that the quotas announced still fall short of the global demand for resettlement of people escaping systemic violence in Syria, and call for a higher intake of Syrian refugees; while others claim that the refugee flow from Syria should be treated as a serious national security risk. In fact, any plan to bring in additional Syrians should be accompanied by a concrete and fool-proof plan to ensure that terrorists will not be able to enter the US. Currently the political dilemma in the United States appears to be how to identify ways to help the affected population, while ensuring the security and safety of the US. And in the wake of the 13 November Paris attacks, that debate has become much sharper, with many arguing against admitting any Syrian refugees to the country.



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Glossary

Refugee: A refugee is understood as 'any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality ... and who is unable or unwilling to return to and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution of, or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.'¹

Asylum-seeker: Any alien that applies for asylum 'regardless of his or her immigration status'. In order to do so, he or she has to be physically present in the country.²

Resettlement: 'Resettlement involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status.'³

Lawful permanent resident (LPR): 'means the status of having been lawfully accorded the privilege of residing permanently in the United States as an immigrant in accordance with the immigration laws, such status not having changed'.⁴ Also known as 'Resident Alien Permit Holder' and 'Green Card Holder'.

Background

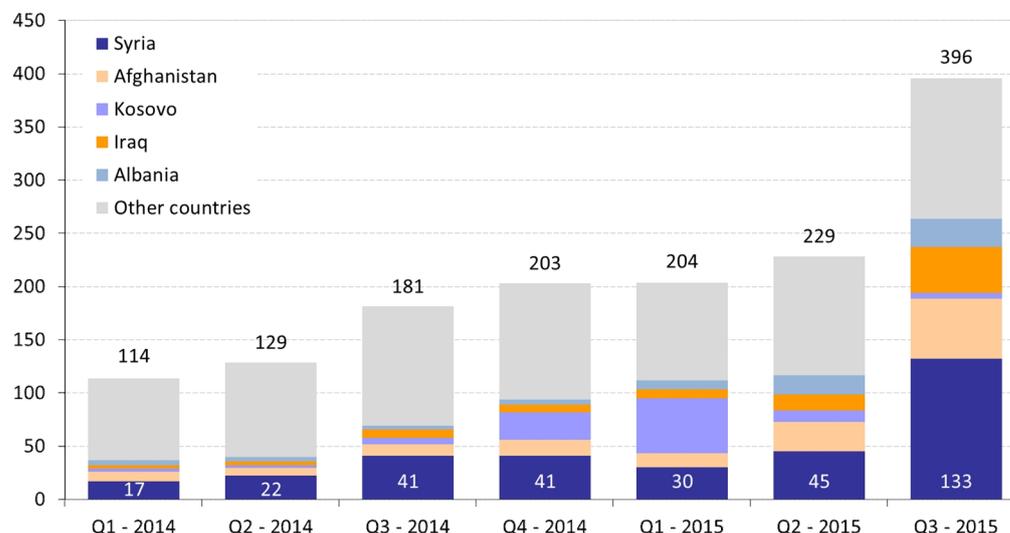
In recent months, the EU has faced an [unprecedented flow](#) of asylum-seekers and other migrants. This massive arrival, mainly due to the Syrian civil war, is not a new phenomenon, as the Syrian conflict started in 2011. In the second quarter of 2015, for instance, Syrian and Afghan were the top two citizenships of asylum-seekers, lodging around 44 000 and 27 000 applications respectively (see Figure 1). The steady escalation in the number of Syrian people seeking protection in Europe is down to [different reasons](#), such as the ongoing violence and instability in their country of origin, the deterioration of living conditions in the countries where they first sought asylum, including Jordan and Lebanon and the geopolitical changes that have closed alternative destinations, such as Libya.⁵

While many of these conditions are not new, they have intensified over time. At the same time, host countries are now facing political and economic struggles, as the longer people remain displaced, the lower their prospect of return. Against this background, countries in Europe and across the Atlantic are seeking solutions to better uphold their responsibilities for protection and welfare. For example, the European Union has recently adopted [urgent measures to relocate](#) 160 000 asylum-seekers from the frontline Member States to other Member States. Despite the geographical distance the debate on the Syrian humanitarian exodus has gained traction in the United States too. Indeed, the US is assisting the Syrian population displaced inside the country and sheltering in neighbouring states. Syrians receive support from the US in the country to which they escaped until they can safely and voluntarily return home. Often, however, opportunities to return remain elusive, thus leading to the necessity to seek alternative solutions such as resettlement in third countries.

According to the [PEW Research Center](#), the US ranks 14th worldwide for the number of refugees. Last year it hosted 267 174, though that represents less than 1% of the nation's population. As regards the Syrian refugee crisis, American public opinion overall is shaped around two main issues, namely immigration and terrorism. A recent [PEW survey](#) found that by a narrow margin more approve than disapprove (51%-45%) the President's announcement to increase the number of refugees that the US would accept in FY 2016 and beyond. Overall, opinion on the US response to the Syrian crisis is

divided along partisan lines; with 69% of Democrats approving the President's decision, while Republicans oppose it by a similar margin. It is worth noting that, according to the same survey, supporters of both parties seem to agree on the causes of the crisis; they both believe that the US bears some responsibility for the crisis.

Figure 1: Asylum applications in the EU by country of origin (in thousands)



Data source: Eurostat, 30 November 2015

US humanitarian assistance to Syrians

The US is the largest single humanitarian aid donor for those affected by the Syrian conflict. Since the beginning of the conflict in 2011, total humanitarian assistance amounts to over US\$4.5 billion, benefitting both the Syrian population displaced inside the country and those in the [neighbouring region](#) – primarily in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, (with 2 072 290 individuals in Turkey, 1 078 338 individuals in Lebanon, and 629 627 individuals in Jordan (data from October 2015). The most recent data estimate that Lebanon hosts, per capita, more refugees than any other country in the world; with a total population of approximately 4.7 million people, 1 in 4 persons in Lebanon is a registered refugee. Given the unceasing deterioration of living conditions in Lebanon, food security is one of the primary concerns. It is estimated that 70% of refugee households in the country are below the poverty line of US\$3.84 per day. The situation is similar though less dramatic in Jordan and Turkey. However, the escalating crisis in Syria resulted in [Turkey](#) becoming the world’s largest refugee hosting country, in absolute numbers, in 2014.

Table 2: US federal aid to Syrians (in US\$ millions)

Country	2015 announcement	Total since FY 2012
Inside Syria	242	Nearly 2 300
Lebanon	75.5	Nearly 965
Jordan	44	Nearly 668
Turkey	29	Over 325
Iraq	22	Nearly 205
Egypt	4	Over 89
Regional	2.5	10
TOTAL	419	Over 4 500

Source: US Department of State, 21 September 2015.

Overall, the impact on hosting communities in the country of first asylum is overwhelming. US assistance consists of providing shelter, water, medical care, food and protection (among other things, in the form of registration, child protection, gender-based violence prevention and psycho-social support) to the population. The funding also supports the activity of different international organisations, notably the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In particular the

UN Children's Fund (Unicef) plays an important role: inside Syria almost 2 million children are not attending school, and one in five schools has been severely damaged.⁶

Access to the United States

When safe return to their country of origin is impossible, in particular for the most vulnerable refugees, resettlement in a third country may be a temporary or permanent solution. Overall, since the introduction of the [Refugee Act in 1980](#), 3 million refugees from more than 70 countries have found safe haven in the US.

The selection of refugees eligible for resettlement in the United States is based on two dimensions, namely personal criteria and a quota system.

Personal criteria refer to the situation of the individual and are specified in Section 101 of the [Immigration and Nationality Act](#) (INA). According to the INA, a person can be resettled if he or she meets the [United Nations'](#) definition of a refugee by, as well as that of the United States, which also includes physical location and the inability to help themselves.⁷ He or she has to be member of a group that was identified as especially relevant for humanitarian concerns, and may not be already 'firmly resettled'⁸ in a country other than the US. Based on personal criteria, there are three main priorities:

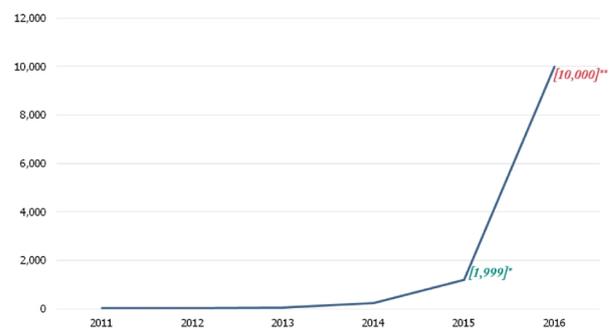
1. Priority one includes individual cases by virtue of their circumstances: people who are seen to be especially vulnerable or not safe from further prosecution even after fleeing to another country.
2. Priority two refers to persons who are especially vulnerable because of their membership of a certain social group (e.g. religious minorities).
3. Priority three includes individual cases from designated nationalities⁹ that may be granted access for the purpose of family reunification.

The second dimension, the regional quota, is determined by the US government.

The INA, Section 207(d)(1) states that 'the President determines, before the beginning of the fiscal year and after appropriate consultation (as defined in subsection (e)), the admission of a specific number of refugees'. Subsection (e) requires 'discussions in person by designated Cabinet-level representatives of the President with members of the Committees on the Judiciary of the Senate and of the House of Representatives to review the refugee situation or emergency refugee situation, to project the extent of possible participation of the United States therein, to discuss the reasons for or believing that the proposed admission of refugees is justified by humanitarian concerns or grave humanitarian concerns or is otherwise in the national interest'.

The submission should include, inter alia, the allocation according to world region; a justification for the number based on the refugee situation in various parts of the world; and the anticipated social, economic and demographic impacts.

Figure 3: Syrian refugees admitted to the US



*Based on preliminary State Department 2015 data

**Figure stated by Obama administration

Source: [Bipartisan Policy Center](#), 1 October 2015.

The proposed number (including an 'unallocated reserve') is termed the 'refugee ceiling'. The allocation by world region depends on the current situation of refugees worldwide. Higher quotas are given to regions with severe conflicts or urgent refugee crises. The unallocated reserve can be used for additional refugee admissions from any region, after notification to Congress.

In response to the situation faced by refugees escaping both Syria and the broader Middle Eastern crisis, the US administration announced its intention to increase the annual quota of refugees from 70 000 to 85 000 in the next fiscal year and to 100 000 in 2017. This increase is largely due to the planned intake of 10 000 Syrian refugees (in contrast to approximately 2 000 Syrian refugees in 2015).

Table 4: Absolute numbers and regional allocation requested by the US government for FY2016

Region	FY 2015 Ceiling	FY2015 Projected arrivals	FY 2016 proposed ceiling
Africa	20 400	22 600	25 000
East Asia	17 300	18 200	13 000
Europe and Central Asia	2 300	2 350	4 000
Latin America/Caribbean	2 300	2 050	3 000
Near East/South Asia	27 700	24 800	34 000
Regional Subtotal	70 000	70 000	79 000
Unallocated Reserve	2 000		6 000
Total	70 000	70 000	85 000

Source: [Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2016](#) Report to the Congress, October 2015.

Processing of refugee applications

The US works with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the resettlement process. Once the United Nations, eligible NGOs or US embassies refer refugee cases for resettlement consideration, US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officers conduct individual, in-depth, on-site interviews to determine whether or not the applicant is eligible. The interviews aim at assessing the credibility of the request and at double checking the testimony with the conditions in their country. To professionalise and speed up the process, a specially trained corps (Refugee Corps) of officers dedicated to handling requests for refugee status overseas was created in 2005.

Strict security screening and safety checks are fundamental steps toward the final decision. These are a shared responsibility between the US State Department and the [Department of Homeland Security](#) (DHS).

The vetting process includes all available biographical and biometric data, which are checked against all relevant databases to confirm identity details; to verify the existence of any criminal record and to help identify relevant questions for the interviews. In 2008, an additional layer of biographical checks was introduced for Iraqi applicants; this was later extended to all applicants, regardless of nationality.

At the same time, biometric checks are carried out using mobile fingerprint equipment and photographs, which are usually collected during the first interview. For instance fingerprints are screened through watch-list information and other immigration matches (e.g. in case of a previous visa application at a US embassy). Finally, like any other person travelling to the United States, refugee applicants are subject to checks by the US Customs and Borders prior to their into the United States.¹⁰

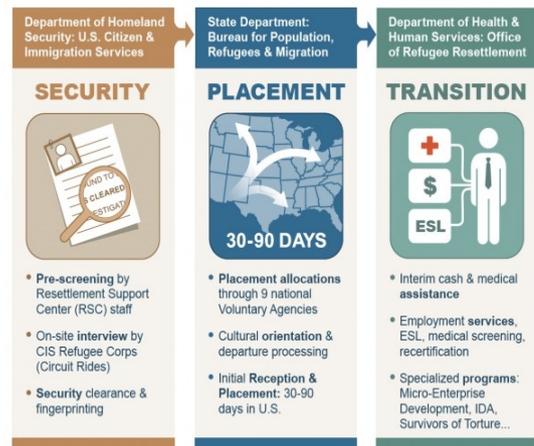
After general eligibility is confirmed, health checks are conducted as part of the vetting process. The DHS is also responsible for the health checks; however the guidelines and instructions for their content are issued by the Centres of Disease Control and

Prevention.¹¹ The screenings are conducted in two stages, namely pre- and post- entry in the US. The initial screenings are completed abroad, and consist of examination for specific diseases and in some cases also include vaccinations (e.g. measles). Then, after their arrival in the US, a set of additional health screenings are carried out for diseases that may represent a public health risk, such as tuberculosis.¹²

Resettlement of refugees in the United States

In the placement phase, the State Department works closely with nine national voluntary agencies to coordinate admissions through a network of some 250 local affiliates in 49 States plus the District of Columbia. Cooperation agreements specify the type of support that can be offered. The refugees are placed in local communities throughout the US once the local possibilities have been checked (e.g. available housing, medical care, employment offers) and refugees' specific needs are assessed (e.g. the fact of having relatives in a given community).

The [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) (ORR) was created in 1980 by the Refugee Act, with the objective of helping refugees to integrate successfully into society and become self-sufficient as quickly as possible after their arrival.



Source: [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#).

In order to help the newly arrived, various grants and services are provided on a temporary basis by states and non-profit organisations. Services include, among others, medical assistance, interim housing, cash assistance, English as second language classes, job skill development and employment services. Ad hoc services may be provided to refugees having specific needs, for instance in case of victims of torture. Once they have joined the local community, beneficiaries are supported in their administrative endeavours such as applying for a social security card, registering children in school or applying for employment. Indeed, refugees receive employment authorisation upon their arrival, since one of the main objectives of resettlement is to ensure economic independence. Refugees retain their status as such for one year, and are then required to apply for a permanent residence permit. After five years in the US they can apply for US citizenship.

To foster integration of refugees and immigrants into local communities, President Barack Obama recently created the White House Task Force of New Americans, which submitted a [strategic action plan](#). Under this plan, federal agencies are working to promote civic engagement; support skills development and entrepreneurship; and expand opportunities for linguistic integration and education.

The policy debate

The proposed refugee admission numbers for FY 2016 had an impact on both the debate in Congress and to a certain extent the [ongoing presidential campaign](#). While Congress cannot prevent the administration from fixing limits on the number of refugees it accepts into the country, it can block funding needed for staffing agencies such as the [Department of Homeland Security](#) or the [Department of Health and Human Services](#) that manage the refugees' screening and resettlement procedures.

Indeed, following the President's proposed allocation hearings took place in Congress focusing on both the fiscal and security implications.¹³

On the fiscal aspect, the estimated combined budget of the three government-departments concerned for FY 2016 is US\$1 192.8 million and thus US\$44.3 million higher than FY 2015.¹⁴

In presenting the proposed admission figures for FY 2016, the administration stressed that one of the goals of the measures remains to enable self-sufficiency of those persons who are not returning to their country of origin. So far, data show that for certain programmes 76% of the resettled refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency within three months of their arrival.¹⁵

Table 5: Budget estimates for FY 2015 and FY 2016

AGENCY	ESTIMATED FY 2015 (BY DEPARTMENT) in million US\$	ESTIMATED FY 2016 (BY DEPARTMENT) in million US\$
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY <i>United States Citizenship and Immigration Services</i>		
Refugee processing	32.3	36.5
DEPARTMENT OF STATE <i>Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration</i>		
Refugee admissions	507.1	503.7
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES <i>Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement</i>		
Refugee resettlement	609.1	652.6
TOTAL	1 148.5	1 192.8

Source: [Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2016](#) Report to the Congress, October 2015.

On the second aspect, some in Congress argued that, notwithstanding the unprecedented humanitarian crisis, the flow from Syria should be treated as a security issue. The vetting process for accepting refugees into the US and the consequent possibility that Islamic extremists could enter the country is a major concern. Overall, Republicans claim that a more muscular foreign policy on the part of the administration would have prevented the massive migrant crisis from unfolding, and that refugee resettlement is certainly not a long-term solution from a geopolitical perspective. In relation to the European Union, some Republican representatives in the Senate in particular have said that they would prefer a division of labour with the EU, in which the latter takes in and manages the flow of refugees while the US, or a US-led coalition, tackles the perceived causes of the exodus.¹⁶

Democrats seem to take a different approach. In fact, earlier this year, [14 Senate Democrats sent a letter](#) calling on the President to significantly increase the number of Syrian refugees allowed to resettle in the US, arguing that it is not only a 'national security interest in maintaining stability in this critical region' but also a moral and legal imperative for the United States 'to lead by example in addressing the world's worst refugee crisis of our time'.

However, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly (289 to 137) passed the [American SAFE Act of 2015](#) (HR 4038) to drastically tighten screening procedures on refugees from Syria and Iraq. The bill, which was also supported by 47 Democrats, would expand the screening process for those refugees attempting to enter the US. It would require that the Federal Bureau of

Investigation (FBI), the Department of Homeland Security and the Director of National Intelligence each confirm that every applicant from these two countries poses no threat. The White House has already formally stated its [opposition to the bill](#), and affirmed that if the President were presented with HR 4038, he would veto the bill.

At the same time a growing number of governors across the country have said they oppose the entry of Syrian refugees to their states.

Main references

Christopher M. Blanchard, Carla E. Humud, Mary Beth D. Nikitin, [Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. response, CRS](#), 9 October 2015.

Andorra Bruno, [Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy](#), CRS, 18 February 2015.

[Proposed Refugee Admission for Fiscal Year 2016](#), report to the Congress, submitted on behalf of the President of the United States to the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate and United States House of Representatives in fulfilment of the requirements of sections 207(d)(1) and 9e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act.

Endnotes

¹ INA, Section 101(a)(42), A.

² INA, Section 208 (a).

³ UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, Country Chapter: [United States of America](#).

⁴ INA, Section 101 (8).

⁵ Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, Susan Fratzke, Europe's Migration Crisis in Context: Why Now and What Next?, Migration Policy Institute, September 2015.

⁶ Source: US Department of State, 21 September 2015.

⁷ INA, Section 101 (a) (42).

⁸ A person is understood as not firmly resettled if he or she has no permanent access to education, the labour- or the housing market. For more details see: UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, Country Chapter: [United States of America](#).

⁹ The list of countries is available on page 13 of the [Proposed Refugee Admission for Fiscal Year 2016](#).

¹⁰ For more details on the security checks, see recent [written testimony of B. Strack](#), Chief Refugee Affairs Division, Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing of 1 October 2015.

¹¹ UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, 2011. Country Chapter United States, p. 7.

¹² Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, [Refugee Health Guidelines](#), 12 October 2015.

¹³ On 1 October, the Senate Committee on the Judiciary held a hearing of the Subcommittee on Immigration on the '[Oversight of the Administration's FY 2016 Refugee Resettlement Program](#)'.

¹⁴ [Proposed Refugee Admission for Fiscal Year 2016](#), p. 69.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁶ [Testimony to Senate Armed Services Committee on US Middle East policy, General D. Petraeus, 22 September 2015](#).

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