

11-18-2015

US Leaders Cave to Popular Fear on Syrian Refugees

Lauren Carasik

Western New England University School of Law, Carasik@law.wne.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.law.wne.edu/media>



Part of the [Immigration Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lauren Carasik, US Leaders Cave to Popular Fear on Syrian Refugees, ALJAZEERA AMERICA (Nov. 18, 2015), <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/11/us-leaders-cave-to-popular-fear-on-syrian-refugees.html>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Digital Commons @ Western New England University School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Media Presence by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Western New England University School of Law. For more information, please contact pnewcombe@law.wne.edu.

US leaders cave to popular fear on Syrian refugees

Rather than take a stand for morality and rule of law, governors and presidential candidates appeal to base sentiments

November 18, 2015 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

The horror of last Friday's attacks in Paris that left 129 people dead and hundreds more wounded has unleashed a predictable, destructive backlash. In the United States, a parade of governors quickly lined up to express their opposition to the resettlement of Syrian refugees in their states. As of Tuesday afternoon, [26 governors](#) — all but one Republican — have said refugees are unwelcome in their states because they pose too great a threat to national security. On Monday, President Barack Obama reiterated his commitment to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees this fiscal year. "Many of these refugees are the victims of terrorism themselves — that's what they're fleeing," [Obama said](#), adding, "Slamming the door in their faces would be a betrayal of our values."

Despite their defiance, the governors [lack the legal authority](#) to override the federal government on immigration issues. Obama is authorized to accept those fleeing violence and persecution under the [Refugee Act of 1980](#). However, the State Department's muted response to the gubernatorial revolt suggests it may avoid a direct confrontation, preferring to settle refugees in less hostile environs. Since many programs rely on state cooperation, governors can complicate and deter the placement of refugees in their states by refusing to allocate funds toward resettlement.

But once refugees have been resettled in the U.S., the Constitution prohibits the restriction of their movement around the country. The reactionary posturing only serves to vilify and imperil vulnerable refugees here and abroad, undermine American security and trample the values we profess to hold dear.

An estimated 200,000 people have been killed since the Syrian war started in 2011. More than half of the country's 22 million people have fled the slaughter: 4.2 million Syrians have left the country, and another 7.6 million are internally displaced. Thousands have died seeking safe haven. Yet only 1,854 Syrian refugees have been resettled in the U.S. since 2012. In sharp contrast, Germany alone has admitted nearly 93,000 Syrian refugees during that period.

We have quickly forgotten how the lifeless body of three-year-old Alan Shenu inspired an outpouring of anguish, compassion and recognition of how desperate his family must have been to undertake such a harrowing and risky journey in the ultimately futile search for safe refuge. Millions more like them are fleeing the same indiscriminate violence that bloodied the streets of Paris.

But terror takes its intended toll. A majority of Americans oppose taking in Syrian refugees. History provides some troubling context: In a poll taken in January 1939, two thirds of Americans opposed taking in 10,000 Jewish children fleeing Nazi Germany.

There is much confusion about the issue of refugee settlement, to which many of our political leaders are only adding. For instance, the Paris attackers were not refugees. While one of the Paris terrorists may have traveled the same path through Greece as many fleeing violence, his Syrian passport was fake. The other known terrorists were French or Belgian citizens. None of them had been designated as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a prerequisite for receiving that status in the U.S.

We should stand with the millions fleeing violence and terror, not give in to the very hatred and fear ISIL hopes its brutality will engender.

With its porous borders and proximity to the Middle East, Europe is at greater risk. But for those seeking to come to the U.S., the process for screening refugees is extensive, and includes a lengthy application, interviews and biometric screening. It can take up to two years to complete, and involves

numerous domestic and international agencies. The UNHCR [estimates](#) that more than half of Syrian refugees are women and children under the age of four. But men fleeing violence deserve protection as well — they are sons, fathers and brothers, and they should not be refused protection because they share a rough demographic profile with those who intend to inflict carnage.

No screening process can eliminate all risk, but the current rigor has proven its effectiveness so far: Of the 745,000 refugees resettled in the U.S. since 9/11, only [two have been arrested on terrorism-related charges](#). None has committed acts of terror. Given the length of process and the safeguards already in place, there are far faster ways to enter the U.S. legally for those intent on doing harm. The process for obtaining a tourist visa, for instance, is far less demanding.

Turning our backs on the plight of refugees is also self-defeating, especially if more European countries jump on the bandwagon. Muslim activists in France are already decrying an [increase in Islamophobia](#) since the attacks, and marginalization within a society increases vulnerability to terrorist recruitment. Closing borders will trap and concentrate desperate refugees into squalid refugee camps in close proximity to the conflicts that necessitated them, which serve as [breeding grounds for radicalization](#): Hemming in desperate refugees is likely to sow, not choke off, terror.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) [demonizes refugees](#) who flee the caliphate, calling them [sinners](#). But if the world shuts its doors to refugees fleeing the brutality of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, it may drive them [directly into the fold of his enemy](#), ISIL. Some observers have speculated that the attackers wanted authorities to find the fake Syrian passport in order to provoke a backlash against refugees.

While all three Democratic presidential candidates are in favor of accepting more Syrian refugees, the Republican candidates are competing to adopt the most extreme anti-refugee position. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Texas Sen. Ted Cruz have suggested a [religious litmus test](#) for refugees seeking to enter the country, with a preference for Christians. Businessman Donald Trump, who had

already outlined a radical deportation plan for the nation's 11 million undocumented immigrants, said the Syrian refugees could be a [Trojan Horse](#). Not to be outdone, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie [said](#) he would not even take in a three-year-old orphan. Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul said he [planned to introduce a bill](#) to impose a moratorium on refugee visas, as well as visitor and student visas "from about 30 countries that have significant jihadist movements." It was unclear if he included France and Belgium in that list.

The attacks have made us feel less secure, which is exactly what ISIL intends. But they are also a test of our nation's character. The Paris bloodbath should unite the world against terrorism and in support of all its victims, no matter their religion. We should stand with the millions fleeing violence and terror, not give in to the very hatred and fear ISIL hopes its brutality will engender.

Lauren Carasik is a clinical professor of law and the director of the international human rights clinic at the Western New England University School of Law.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.