

Myths and Facts About Refugee Resettlement



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

Since its founding, the United States has welcomed refugees who are fleeing conflict, persecution, and violence in their homelands. Today, the United States is able to rescue some of the world's most vulnerable victims through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, a sophisticated humanitarian program designed to help refugees to start new lives in safety and with dignity.

With over 60 million people displaced from their homes, the world is facing the worst refugee crisis since the end of World War II. The U.S. could be doing much more to help the world's refugees. Unfortunately, there has been a recent political backlash against welcoming refugees to our country, fueled by misinformation about how the refugee program actually works.

This document is intended to address some of the common misperceptions and questions about the refugee program.

Myth: We have no idea who these Syrian refugees are.

Fact: Refugees are subjected to far more scrutiny than any other group entering the United States. Unlike the millions of tourists, business people and students who enter the country each year with little advance vetting, the verification process for refugees includes multiple security screenings and detailed in-person interviews by the Department of Homeland Security. The biometric data (such as finger prints) and biographic details of every refugee are also collected and reviewed by several U.S. government agencies. All of this happens before a refugee is allowed to travel to the U.S. and the vetting process typically takes 18-24 months. It is important to note the differences between the orderly, thorough U.S. process and the current situation in Europe where refugees seeking asylum have not been vetted at all prior to their arrival.

Myth: Refugees who come to the U.S. from Syria can't be screened for security.

Fact: Every single refugee applicant is subject to extensive security checks, rechecks, and intensive interviewing. Each refugee application is vetted by the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, the State Department and the National Counterterrorism Center. The process is effective in making sure that refugees who are admitted through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program do not pose a security threat to the United States. It is so thorough, in fact, that often very vulnerable refugees who pose no threat at all to the United States are left stranded for months while these checks are in process. It's not uncommon for refugees to wait two years or more before they are cleared to come to the U.S.

Myth: We can't resettle Syrian Muslims, even those who are fleeing ISIS in search of a safe place to live, because their religion/ideology/background is too different.

Fact: Over the years, the United States has admitted millions of refugees who came from countries with governments that were ideologically opposed to the American way of life. These concerns certainly existed for Jewish refugees. In the 1930's, the United States was wary that German Jews fleeing Hitler's violence were too strongly affiliated with Germany. During the Soviet Jewry movement, the United States admitted hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Soviet Union despite concerns that the refugees would bring communism to the United States. Then as now, the refugees were not themselves terrorists or violent communist subversives. In fact, they were fleeing terror and tyranny.

The U.S. has resettled many Muslim refugees over the years, including thousands from Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Myanmar. In our experience, preserving their religious traditions has not stopped them from integrating into American society. They join a proud community of American Muslims that includes U.S. service members, business leaders, famous comedians and two sitting members of congress.

Myth: Syrian Muslims are more likely than other refugees to be terrorists in disguise.

Fact: No category of people is inherently bad or inherently criminal – that's xenophobia, which is profoundly at odds with the values of our country. Nevertheless, security is one of the central components of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. The United States has extensive security measures in place, to screen each refugee individually and make decisions based on facts, not on fear.

Myth: Most Americans oppose accepting even carefully screened Syrian refugees to the U.S.

Fact: A recent poll found that a strong plurality of voters support accepting Syrian refugee families for U.S. resettlement. Nearly half of all voters surveyed favored accepting refugee families from Syria so long as they continue to be rigorously screened. Only 33% were opposed.

Despite the fear-mongering of far too many politicians, most ordinary Americans still show compassion for refugees fleeing ISIS and a brutal civil war. A solid majority—59%—said that the U.S. should do more to help refugees or should continue to offer assistance at the current level. Americans continue to be compassionate and welcoming, despite a narrative to the contrary.

Myth: Syria’s neighbors should be able to handle this crisis on their own.

Fact: Millions of Syrians have in fact found shelter in neighboring Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon. These three Middle Eastern nations have taken on a vastly disproportionate number of Syrian refugees. Currently 1 in 4 people living in Lebanon are Syrian refugees. That’s roughly the equivalent of the U.S. hosting 80 million refugees.

However, this is not a feasible solution for everyone. Some refugees flee their homes but find they are still under threat – often, but not always, because of their gender or sexual orientation. Only the most vulnerable refugees are even considered for permanent resettlement in the United States. When refugees are referred here, it is because they are not safe in the country to which they first fled.

Myth: Jews should take care of our own people. We have no responsibility to help Syrian refugees.

Fact: Throughout history, Jews have fled persecution and sought safety in other lands. The public conversation about welcoming Syrian refugees contains powerful resonances with our own history in the United States. Many Jews arrived on these shores as refugees. Many Jews were also turned away – due to racism and misplaced fear about security concerns. We now have the ability and opportunity to apply the lessons of our own past to help today’s refugees.

Much of the Jewish community has in fact aligned in powerful support for welcoming refugees, based in our biblical tradition of “welcoming the stranger.” In November and December, major Jewish organizations including the Union of Reform Judaism, the Orthodox Union, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum issued strong statements in support of Syrian refugees, and HIAS released a letter signed by nearly 1,300 rabbis from across the country.