

The Plight of Syrian Refugees in the United States: Between Indifference and Dehumanization

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Abstract

Forced or voluntary migration worldwide and the quest for a safer and better life has not always resulted from armed conflicts or any form of political, ethnic, or religious persecution. Natural disasters have often enticed waves of deprived people across sovereign national borders. The present study investigates the plight of Syrian refugees in the aftermath of the 2011 upheavals which shook the Arab World, not as much because it poses unprecedented humanitarian and political challenges, but principally because it laid bare the double standard policy pursued by certain Western governments scapegoating Arab/Muslim stocks as a lingering menace to their security. To reconfigure the boundaries of decent debate and break down taboos over such a controversial issue, the paper raises a number of questions with regard to the essence of humanitarian work and how, over the past few decades, it has been politicized by ruthless politicians and unscrupulous technocrats to determine the resettlement of displaced masses or the allocation of funds to international relief organizations based on national, religious, and even racial standards. It takes the United States as a case in point to show how, despite being the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees, it has resettled only a tiny fraction of such a group compared to poorer contiguous states. The paper posits, finally, to contribute survey-based argument to available literature which, to some degree, has not sufficiently explored the hypothetical connection between refugee flows and transnational terrorism to demonstrate, ultimately, that not every Arab/Muslim refugee is a terrorist-in-waiting.

Keywords: Syrian refugees - asylum seekers, United States, transnational terrorism, international relief organizations

1. Introduction

The forced displacement of masses across national borders is not new. Triggered by a wide range of factors, namely wars, political conflicts, and environmental disasters, it has been a universal phenomenon that took different shapes across changing international contexts. The present study focuses on the Syrian refugees crisis and the consequential challenges it poses, not only to the stakeholders in charge of displaced populations, namely international humanitarian relief agencies (UNHCR, UN Refugee Agency, International Rescue Committee, Doctors without Borders, Red Cross, etc.), faith-based charities, diaspora organizations, NGOs, etc., but also to welcoming states which, because of shifting geo-strategic configurations and internal strains, have failed to offer a coordinated international response to pouring influxes.

Specifically, the paper offers substantial argument on the demise of Western governments to develop a comprehensive policy to resettle hordes fleeing war-torn places. In addition to the contention on whether the refugees issue should be addressed on purely humanitarian grounds or perceived primarily as a political concern, it seeks to refute the prevailing rhetoric that Arab/Muslim displaced masses are the Trojan horses for terrorism, representing a real menace to the host nation's well-being and security. Actually, available literature on the supposed connection between refugees flows and transnational terrorism offers little guidance on the issue and appears to dwell rather on misguided hypotheses deployed by populist leaders for short-term political gain.

The present study which incorporates a mixed quantitative and qualitative research design comes into three main sections:

Section One situates the debate over the refugees issue into an overall historical context and provides background information on the evolution of such a phenomenon across time and place. It takes the plight of Syrian displaced masses as a case in point and shows how, as multifaceted concern, the recent refugees crisis is better addressed when placed

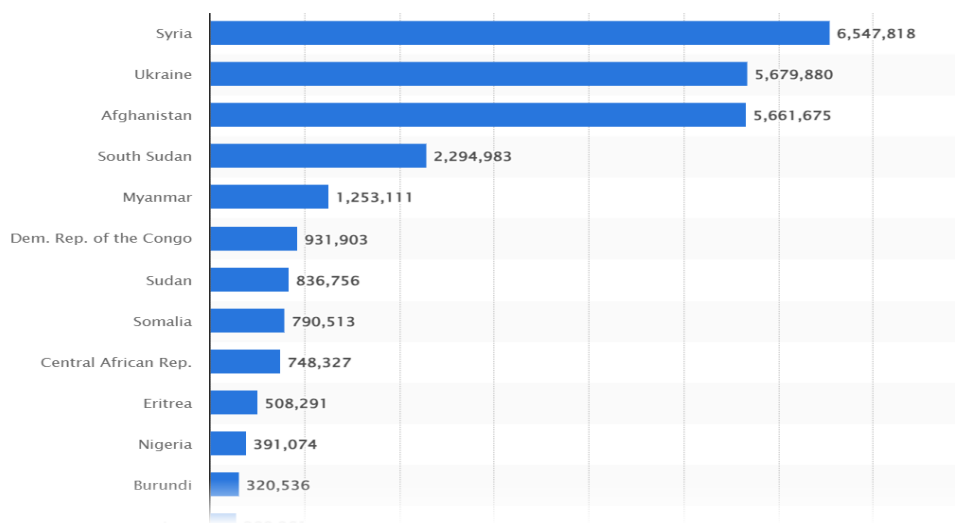
within a wider global conjuncture characterized by blatant disorder and instability, and exacerbated by the war on terror, depressing economies seeking to reduce public expenditure, the rise of extreme forms of anti-immigrant/Muslim populisms, and the belief that Western states have lost their control over their porous borders. It finally contributes exhaustive empirical literature corroborated by statistical data notably on Syrian refugees influxes and their resettlement in the United States.

Section Two narrows the scope to focus on the Syrian refugees crisis deemed as one of the worst humanitarian contingencies of our time. It investigates why, since the 2011 uprisings across the Arab/Muslim world, Syrian stocks have been the most heavily vetted group in the United States, despite the fact that a greater part of the burden falls upon the poorer frontline states, such as Lebanon or even Turkey. It also explores why some host nations apply a double-standard policy that openly prioritizes some refugees (e.g., Ukrainians) at the expense of others. This section finally brings to the fore two main questions: What reasons could explain the severe restrictions imposed inequitably on Syrian refugees admissions? Simply put, what kind of real or imagined threat do Syrian refugees represent to recalcitrant countries? Lastly, how, over the course of the past few decades, has the anti-immigrant/refugee backlash emerged as a highly decisive electoral issue, not only for far right populist movements and leaders, but also for traditional mainstream political parties?

Section Three, ultimately, comes as an anti-thesis to the previous one as it aims to refute misguided assertions making of Syrian refugees, who are indubitably the first victims of terrorism, potential threats to the host country's security. In the same vein, it attempts to clear the mix-up over the two labels, "refugee" and "asylum seeker," as key elements in the debate over the terror menace. What is more, taking the successful integration in the United States of former Syrian immigrants as a case in point, it posits to disavow the populist rhetoric that welfare dependent refugees would constitute a supplementary burden on depreciating economies, an argument used by certain mainstream media and policymakers as a pretext to further spark public intolerance and reinforce xenophobic and racist attitudes against Arab/Muslim groups. It, finally, hypothesizes that, due to their restricted numbers, Syrian refugees would by no means dilute the national homogeneity and culture. Quite the opposite, available data show that a sizeable number among the Syrian resettled stocks are more likely to melt into the mainstream society and strive to contribute to the progress and evolution of their local communities.

2. Facts and Figures

More often than not, individuals and communities do not abandon their homes and seek refuge in another country, unless their lives or liberty are seriously at stake. By no means an unprecedented phenomenon, the forced displacement of populations comes often as a result of internal conflicts, systemic persecution of individuals and minority groups, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of human rights infringements. In addition to the socio-political and cultural elements, natural disasters, such as the February 2023 earthquakes that took nearly 60,000 lives in Turkey and Syria, are another major factor enticing masses across sovereign national borders. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 36.4 million refugees across the globe, with Syrians (6.5 million), Ukraine (5.7 million), and Afghanistan (5.7 million) topping the list. (See Graph 1)

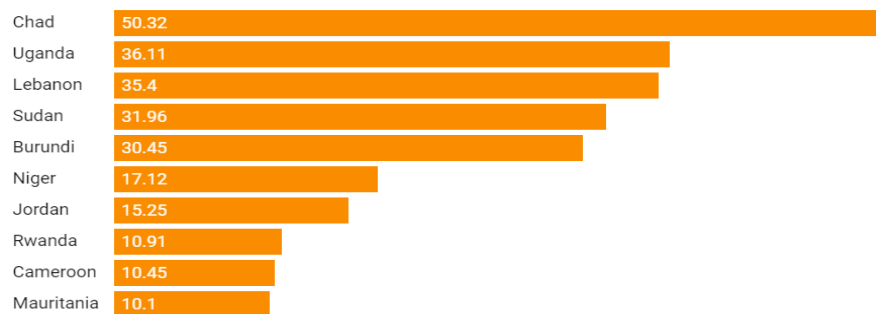


Graph 1. Ranking of the major source countries of refugees as of 2022

Source: Statista (<https://www.statista.com>)

Contrary to popular belief, the bulk of refugees (92%) flee to neighboring countries. As a matter of fact, while Ukrainians found refuge in Poland, Germany, Czechia, and Italy, Syrian displaced masses (5.3 million as of 2023) moved to Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. In the same vein and paradoxical as it might appear, upper-middle and high-income countries across the West have been the least likely to resettle dispossessed refugees on their soil, with 76% hosted in low and middle-income countries. Recent statistics provided by the UNHCR and the World Bank that measure the number of resettled individuals compared to the population size of the hosting nation as well as its GDP indicate that in a small country like Lebanon, there are today 151 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants, corresponding to a 35.4 per 1 million USD ratio. (See Graph 2)

While displaced populations within and outside of their national borders exhibit the same need for international protection, they differ as to the way they are categorized by the UNHCR. The latter not only provides ground assistance, such as shelter, access to clean water, and medical care to masses who have been forced out of their homes, but also monitors their status and negotiates their resettlement with countries willing to welcome them. Overall, several different terms have been assigned to dispossessed hordes, ranging from refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDP), onto stateless people. To the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, drafted in response to masses displaced by World War II, a refugee, according to its First Article is someone who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” (UNHCR - <https://www.unhcr.org>)



Graph 2. Top 10 host countries by GDP

Number of refugees per 1 million USD (GDP, ratio), as at end 2022

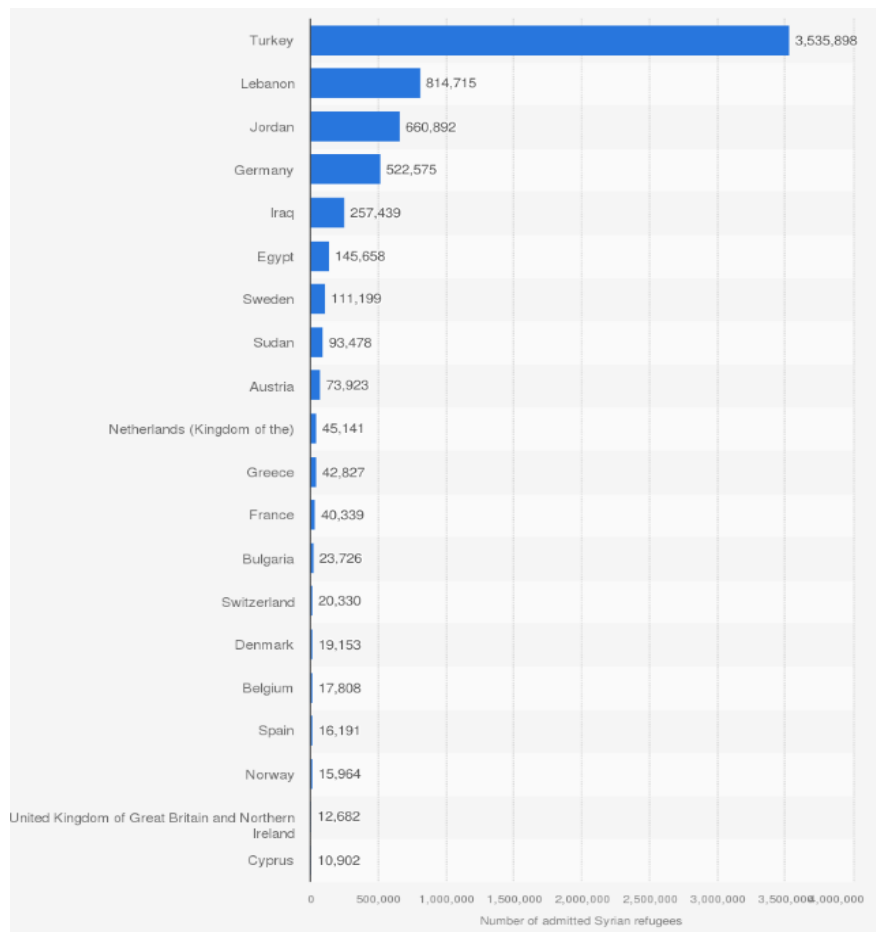
Source: United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (2022)

Contrary to ‘immigrant’ for whom there is no universal legal definition and whose status is not protected by international laws, an ‘asylum seeker’ is defined as a “*person who has fled from his or her own country due to fear or persecution and has applied for (legal and physical) protection in another country but has not yet had their claim for protection assessed.*” (Ibid.) As such and unlike a refugee who is more thoroughly vetted while still in a refugee camp or at a great distance away, an asylum seeker has to show up at the host country’s borders and provide well-founded reasons (e.g., fear of persecution due to his/her race, religion, nationality, etc.) to apply for resettlement. Often placed in a detention center while waiting for a response that may change his/her fate, he/she generally follows a different protocol than the one pursued for refugee status. (Nowrasteh, 2015)

Twelve years after the 2011 uprising, Syria remains the world’s largest ‘exporter’ of refugees, with 6.8 million who have been forced to flee and seek asylum in more than 130 countries, and 6.9 million who have been internally displaced and whose status as ‘Internally Displaced Persons’ (IDP) excludes them from any international legal or humanitarian protection. According to statistics provided by the UNHCR, the vast majority of displaced Syrians (5.2 million) found refuge in neighboring countries, on top of them Turkey (3.6 million), Lebanon (815,000), and Jordan (660,000). Overall, of the two-thirds of Syrian women and children who have been forced out of their homes, over 90 percent still live below poverty line, with limited access to basic necessities such as food, clean water, shelter, medical treatment, education, and other vital services. (UN Refugee Agency, 2022. See Graph 3)

Arguably, addressing the needs and rights of persons in forced or voluntary exile worldwide should by no means be the concern of international relief associations and NGOs only. Commitment to come to the rescue of vulnerable populations from all backgrounds, regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity, or religious beliefs should equally trigger a large-scale reaction across the prosperous West and among political stakeholders who, more than ever, should help bring emergency relief to displaced masses in a worsening global refugee crisis. As a case in point, despite the fact that it has

been a global leader in resettling refugees since the 1970s, and the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Syria (\$15.8 billion since FY 2012), the United States has so far offered home only to an insignificant fraction of Syrian refugees (roughly 28,000 as of 2022), compared to other Western nations such as Germany (523,000), Sweden (112,000), or even Austria (74,000). (See Graph 3). Based on the aforesaid data, what explains then such glaring disparities and how did the successive administrations, both Democratic and Republican, justify their double standard policy, pursuing simultaneously one of the toughest lines of action toward Syrian refugees, while adopting a tolerant policy toward their Ukrainian counterparts? To reconsider and map out the boundaries of decent debate and debunk taboos over such a controversial issue, we need first to retrace the American immigration history, a history marked by persistent vacillation between a humanitarian open-door policy and a hermetically sealed territory one, to ultimately measure the magnitude of bias in handling the refugee question.



Graph 3. Ranking of the largest Syrian refugee-hosting countries in 2022

Source: Statista (<https://www.statista.com>)

Paradoxical as it might seem, while the world is witnessing today the largest refugee crisis ever since WWII, a vocal subset of key actors on the American political scene are even pressuring for drastic restrictions in the number of refugees applying from war-torn zones in the Middle East, with some even calling for an outright suspension of the U.S. resettlement program. While this is by no means a precedent in an American history especially fraught with racial frictions, the ongoing anti-immigration/refugee backlash in the United States is hardly a surprise. As recently showcased by the American government tough immigration policy, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, targeting specifically Eastern European and Jewish groups seeking refuge in the 'Land of the Free.' (Barlow, 2022)

Yet, according to ground relief actors, the fluctuating levels of refugee admissions, often dictated by shifting geo-strategic priorities, should by no means overshadow the prominent role played by the United States in welcoming and relocating masses of dispossessed individuals and groups. In the wake of WWII, the country passed its first refugee legislation to resettle some 650,000 displaced Europeans fleeing Communist harassment and persecution, and, in line

with the United Nations Protocol, it adopted the Refugee Act of 1980 which gave way to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) that, amongst others, established permanent vetting procedures. (Klobucista, 2023) As clearly asserted in the above-cited study, “*Until recently, the United States was the world’s top country for refugee admissions. From taking in hundreds of thousands of Europeans displaced by World War Two to welcoming those escaping from Communist regimes in Europe and Asia during the Cold War, the U.S. has helped define protections under international humanitarian law.*” (Ibid.)

3. The Security Debate

An immense challenge dictated by new upheavals reverberating across the world, the Syrian refugee crisis has become a major global conundrum, not only for policymakers who found themselves caught in the midst of a sweeping anti-immigrant rhetoric, but also for humanitarian activists who, in addition to providing on-ground relief to displaced populations, have also to negotiate their relocation with countries willing to host them. Actually, since the 9/11 attacks, and based upon a hypothetical link between Arab/Muslim refugees and transnational terrorism, a number of Western nations grew unflinching about opening their doors to individuals and groups fleeing high-risk zones. As a case in point, the United States set up one of the most stringent vetting systems to drastically reduce the number of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, perceived as threats to its national security.

Interestingly, targeting Syrian refugees as scapegoats for international terrorism, while simultaneously prioritizing their Ukrainian peers who have received more solicitude in one year than Syrians in twelve years (Hanania, 2022), has been the openly stated goal of the successive American administrations since the Arab Spring in 2011. Much of the confusion over the security threat which, to certain American leaders, justify their double standard immigration policy, has been based on the assumption that such groups could represent a source of danger and therefore a real menace to the well-being of their fellow citizens. In the same vein, to highlight the supposed refugee-security nexus, already reinforced by prevalent racial and religious prejudices and overstated in mainstream media, they feature the rhetoric that terrorists could infiltrate while hiding under the status of refugees/asylum seekers to perpetrate attacks in their host countries.

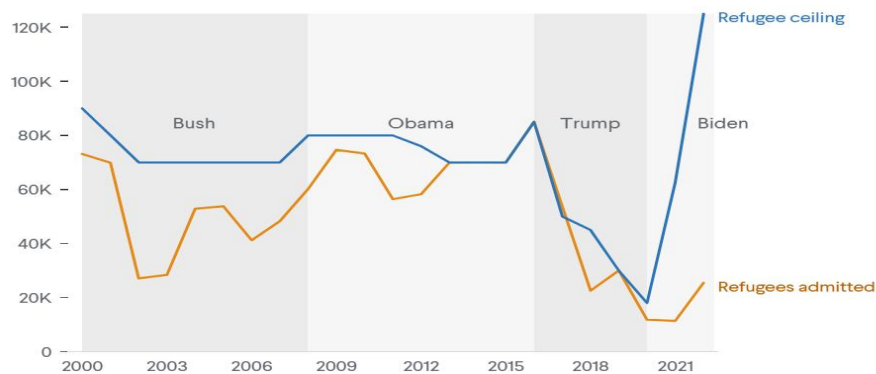
Besides concerns over the likelihood that refugee flows increase the terrorist menace in states to which they flee, the debate over the security quandary has risen to prominence over the past few decades to become a top priority issue in electoral politics. As a result, campaigning on an explicit anti-immigrant/refugee platform for short-term political victories has become the norm, not only for populist leaders and extreme right-wing political parties across the West, but also for their mainstream compeers who seized on the anti-terrorist discourse to stigmatize Arab/Muslim applicants and hence maximize their own chances for (re-)election.

Arguably, even though committed to perpetuate its longstanding tradition as the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’ and a safe haven for the persecuted, the United States has not always honored that moral engagement. Since the 9/11 tragic attacks and to counteract terrorism, American policymakers have, to varying degrees, sought to toughen immigration laws in a bid to curb the influx of arrivals from suspected countries. Exacerbated by the lingering terrorist menace, they at times went so far as to imperil the universal right of refugees to seek asylum, jeopardizing thereby the core spirit of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention that outlines the legal protection and assistance displaced populations are entitled to receive. (www.unhcr.org)

Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011 and the ensuing uprooting of millions of disempowered civilians, subsequent American governments have demonstrated inconsequential divergence on how to handle the Syrian refugees crisis. By adopting a tough line of action meant to deter potential terrorist abuse, they reinforced the hypothesis that a certain category of refugees/asylum seekers were more likely than others to pose security risks to their country. (See Graph 4) As matter of fact, even if he described the plight of Syrian refugees as ‘unacceptable’ and necessitated collective effort that transcends partisan clivages, President Barack Obama (2008-2016) did not take immediate action to come to the rescue of displaced Syrian populations. Contrary to President Joe Biden (2020-2024) who, in the first year of war in Ukraine in 2022 promised to welcome 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, it took five years for Obama to authorize in 2016 the resettlement of 10,000 Syrian refugees. In September of the same year, he convened a ‘Leaders’ Summit on Refugees’ at the United Nations where, to bridge the gap between rhetoric and action, he declared, “*I called this summit because the crisis is one of the most urgent tests of our time [...] Just as failure to act in the past - for example, by turning away Jews fleeing Nazi Germany - is a stain on our collective conscience, I believe history will judge us harshly if we do not rise to this moment.*” (Koran, 2015)

Unsurprisingly, the anti-immigration/refugee backlash reached its peak during Donald Trump’s presidency (2016-2020). Triggered by a fierce campaign targeting Arabs/Muslim immigrants as the source of all the social ills affecting the American society, such groups, according to him, did not stand for a security risk only, they equally represented a serious menace to national homogeneity and culture, and would be a drain on the American economy. As expressed by Hiba Gowayed, Professor of Sociology at Boston University and author of best-seller *Refuge* (2022),

“[t]he Trump administration gutted the resettlement program on the basis of racism and xenophobia, saying that Syrians are Trojan horses for terrorism. There have been no cases [of terrorism by refugees], but more than that, we don’t hold white people accountable for Dylann Roof [the white man who murdered nine Black churchgoers in 2015], for white supremacist terrorist attacks.” (Cited in Barlow, 2022)



Graph 4. Refugee admissions under Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden (2000-2021)

Source: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, U.S. Department of State, Migration Policy Institute

On March 6, 2017, joining campaign rhetoric to action, Trump signed Executive Order 13769, banning people from six Muslim-majority countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen), and halting U.S. refugee resettlement program for 120 days. Titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” the Trump Muslim travel ban, as it came to be known, triggered not only widespread condemnation based on its racist and Islamophobic nature, but also raised serious legal concerns as to its conformity with the American Constitution. After being challenged on several occasions by U.S. federal appeals courts, it was finally upheld by the Supreme Court on June 16, 2018. On January 20, 2021, it was ultimately revoked by President Joe Biden. (Boyer, 2017)

Trump’s anti-immigrant policy reached a record-low in FY 2021, resettling only 1,246 Syrian refugees, the lowest number since U.S. Congress passed the 1980 Refugee Act (Korhonen, 2023). Even though, as a candidate for the 2020 election, Joe Biden promised to remove all discriminatory hurdles set up by his predecessor and welcome 125,000 refugees during his first year in office, the President-elect has (up to this writing) not taken the least official step to fulfil that promise, and according to the International Rescue Organization (IRO), “instead of rebuilding the historically bipartisan program, the new president is on track to welcome the lowest number of refugees since the creation of the modern-day refugee resettlement program in 1980.” (IRC, 2021). Even if he appeared to prioritize Ukrainian refugees, Biden did not single out their Syrian counterparts as a group that urgently needed special attention on the basis of their large number and the precarious conditions in which they were living across dismal and insecure refugee camps. In a statement delivered on May 3, 2021, he declared, “The United States Refugee Admissions Program embodies America’s commitment to protect the most vulnerable, and to stand as a beacon of liberty and refuge to the world. It’s a statement about who we are, and who we want to be. So we are going to rebuild what has been broken and push hard to complete the rigorous screening process for those refugees already in the pipeline for admission.” (WH.GOV, 2021)

In a similar vein, while he defended American longstanding values of freedom, openness, and tolerance toward the persecuted across the world, promising to promote the humanity of those among them seeking refuge in the United States, President Biden did nothing to smoothen the excessive border security and enforcement, especially to reduce what Mark Toner (Deputy State Department spokesman) considered as “the most stringent security process for anyone entering the United States.” (Nowrasteh, 2015) Actually, for a Syrian refugee to be resettled in the United States, he/she still has to go through a multilayered, dynamic, and disheartening vetting process. No doubt boosted by heightened concerns over security issues, the screening of refugees applying especially from host countries neighboring Syria takes thoroughly two to three years. Refugees are first identified by the UNHCR in a refugee camp outside of Syria. Those selected among the most vulnerable (namely women and children) are then referred to the U.S. law enforcement authorities for further checks. Their application files have to transit through the National Counterterrorism Center, the Terrorist Screening Center, the Department of Defense, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, and the State Department to collect their biometric and biographical information and schedule interviews with them while still in camp. (Ibid.)

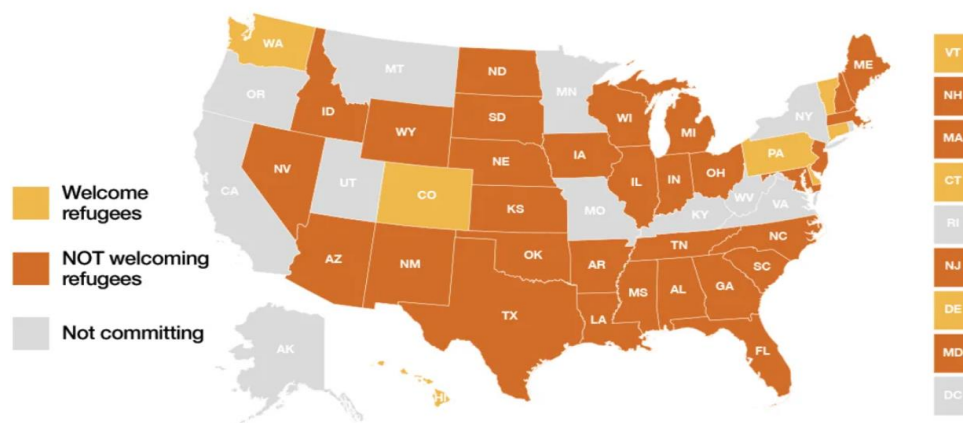
Despite the complex security clearance process they have to go through, the extremely small number of Syrian refugees admitted for relocation in the U.S. have to overcome a new range of obstacles to fully benefit from their newly granted

status, the first of which being how to survive in a social milieu plagued by a blatant anti-Arab/Muslim animus, and afflicted by the salience, in the race for the 2016 contest, of a populist discourse that openly singled them out as potential terrorists. Yet, to Bill Galston, a top Brookings Institution expert who explored the American public perception of Syrian refugees, hostility toward such a group is by no means systemic and in no way should it be understood as such. He rather situates the overall debate within a wider context that transcends the American national boundaries, and relates the prevalent anti-Arab/Muslim backlash to the recurrence of terrorist attacks across the whole West. As a matter of fact, the Paris terrorist assaults, which in November 2015 took the lives of 130 civilians, transformed the overall American empathy expressed on the eve of the 2011 uprising into serious concerns about the national security a couple of years later. Galston reported that on the eve of the Syrian uprising, three quarters of surveyed Americans demonstrated full support of Obama's initial project to welcome 10,000 Syrian refugees in 2016, and 44 percent even said he should be doing more to deal with the Syrian crisis. In 2015, following to the Paris trauma, 53 percent of polled citizens said their country should stop accepting refugees altogether, and 11 percent even suggested it should accept Christian refugees only. (McElvein, 2016)

Prompted by fear a Paris-style attack could be replicated on the American soil, and exacerbated by racial and religious prejudices, further restrictions were imposed on Syrian refugees. In 2015, following a vote in the House of Representatives (SAFE Act or American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act) to make it arduous for such a group to enter the United States, more than half of state governors (30 Republicans and one Democrat) declared they would no longer relocate them. (See Map 1) In effect, even though it is not within their prerogatives to decide about whom to admit or to turn away, as it comes to the federal government to place, in virtue of the 1980 Refugee Act, asylum status claimants anywhere across the country, individual states could nonetheless take actions to disrupt the whole process. (Frantz and Brumfield, 2015; Healy and Bosman, 2015)

To justify their decision to halt new admissions from Syria, protesting states invoked the terrorist threat, as exemplified, in their view, by the 2015 Paris attacks in which a purportedly infiltrated terrorist who identified himself as a Syrian refugee took part. As highlighted by Alabama's governor, Robert Bentley, who cautioned, "After full consideration of this weekend's attacks of terror on innocent citizens in Paris, I will oppose any attempt to relocate Syrian refugees to Alabama through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program." (Ibid.) "I stand complicit to a policy that places the citizens of Alabama in harm's way. We refuse Syrian Refugees," he added in a personal tweet (Ibid.) In the same context, reacting to the above mentioned attacks, Texas Republican governor, Greg Abbott, raised the same concerns when, in a letter to President Obama, he wrote, "American humanitarian compassion could be exploited to expose Americans to similar deadly danger." "Texas will not accept any Syrian refugee. I demand the U.S. act similarly. Security comes first," he tweeted later. (Ibid.)

Map 1: Which governors oppose new Syrian refugees?



Source: CNN World (2015)

4. Discerning Fact from Fiction

Reacting to terrorist threats by placing unduly restrictions on the resettlement of displaced populations has often proven inefficacious and to a certain degree counterintuitive. Not only draconian vetting processes have never prevented refugees and asylum seekers from crossing national borders, but, still, their advocates cannot provide convincing

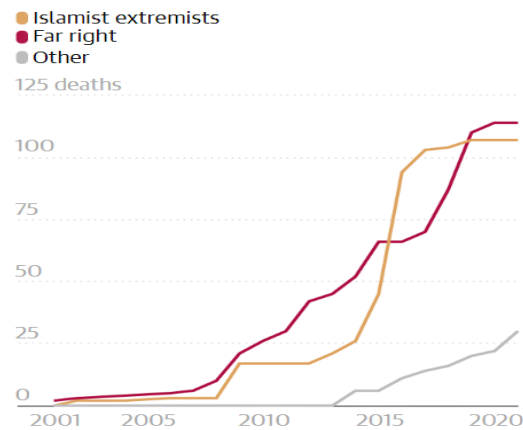
evidence that acknowledges the link between mass flows and transnational terrorism. Furthermore, even if the potential connection between displaced individuals and terrorist threat has scarcely been examined in published literature (Khan 1987; Ekey 2008), available empirical data has so far failed to justify such a link. Anti-refugee propaganda served only to instrumentalize the plight of Syrian refugees for transient electoral gain, legitimizing thereby anti-Arab/Muslim animus and bias.

Noteworthy, in addition to being at total variance with ground reality, conveyed information about a hypothetical and highly mediatized connection between Syrian refugees and terrorism has hardly been corroborated by bona fide evidence. Routinely motivated by racial and Islamophobic prejudices, it has often generated common misconceptions of the above mentioned group for the unique and simple purpose of fanning the flames of fear and nurturing anti-Arab/Muslim antagonisms. To separate fact from fiction and deflate narratives aimed to reduce the debate to an 'us' versus 'them' rhetoric, a number of counter-arguments have been crafted by field experts and human rights activists to discredit such unsubstantiated allegations. (O'Toole, 2015; Nowrasteh, 2015; Kerwin, 2016)

Among the widely propagandized anti-Syrian refugee records invoked by mainstream media has been the likelihood the Paris 2015 terrorist attacks could be replicated in the United States. In their study, "Addressing the Syrian Refugees Crisis," (December, 2016) Brookings scholars Jessica Brandt and Robert McKenzie argued that of the 860,000 resettled refugees in the United States since the 9/11, only three have been convicted on terrorism-related charges for mere plots outside their host country of which none was successful. They asserted, "*The chances of being murdered by a refugee-related terrorist attack in the United States has been 1 in 3.4 billion a year.*" (Ibid.) Fearing the new Trump administration would interrupt the nation's long-established tradition as a haven for the persecuted across the globe, they cautioned, "*the United States should neither pause nor discontinue its refugee resettlement program but instead reaffirm its commitment to it.*" (Ibid.)

To sociologist Heba Gowayed, cited previously, instead of stigmatizing Arab/Muslim refugees who are the first victims of terrorism, the American government and federal law enforcement agencies should rather focus their attention and resources on domestic terrorism instigated by far-right white supremacists. In an interview given in 2022 to Boston University review, *The Brink*, she declared, "*We're assuming that people who are displaced are more likely to join terrorist groups than people who aren't. But we know that they are fleeing that thing-violence. These are people who have taken themselves out of a violent conflict and moved.*" (Barlow, 2022) What is more, according to the Washington D.C.-based thinktank, The New America, far-right terror posed bigger threat to the United States since the 9/11 trauma than Islamist fundamentalism. (See Graph 5) In a report published in 2021, the group identified 251 killings perpetrated by U.S. domestic terrorists since the September 11 attacks, part of which has been attributed to white supremacists (115), and the other part to Muslim jihadists (114) who in their greatest majority were not 'infiltrators,' but American citizens or legal residents. (Walters and Chang, 2021)

In point of fact, two major events shook the political scene in the aftermath of Donald Trump's election in 2016, and brought to the fore the growing menace of far-right extremists: the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville with hundreds of 'alt-right' neo-fascists marching across the University of Virginia's campus, and the January 6, 2021 Washington D.C.'s insurrection to sabotage election results. To the FBI director, Christopher Wray, "*the problem of domestic terrorism has been metastasizing across the country for a number of years,*" stressing that far-right extremists comprise "*the biggest chunk of our domestic terrorism portfolio overall [and] have been responsible for the most lethal attacks over the last decade.*" (Ibid.) Highlighting, finally, a double standard policy that systematically targets Arab/Muslim groups and individuals as potential risks to the national security, Hina Shamsi, director of the American Civil Liberties Union, contended, "*It's undeniable that federal law enforcement has underplayed and misunderstood the level of white supremacist violence, and that's in part because the post-9/11 emphasis on surveillance and investigations of Muslims, immigrants, and communities of color whom law enforcement views wrongly and unfairly through a security threat lens.*" (Ibid.)



Graph 4. Since 9/11, the cumulative people killed by right-wing extremists is greater than those killed by Islamist extremists

Source: Guardian Graphic: New America (2021)

Arguably, much of the debate over the threat purportedly posed by Syrian refugees stems from a pervasive confusion over the term ‘refugee’ itself. A close examination of gathered evidence suggests that the distinction between ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ is most often overlooked when debating security issues associated with Arab/Muslim hordes seeking refuge in the West. Accordingly, American analyst of immigration policy and member of Washington DC’s-based CATO Institute thinktank, Alex Nowrasteh, highlighted an undeniable geographic advantage of the United States over its Western counterparts. Actually, contrary to asylum seekers who show up at national borders and apply for asylum status based on evidence that they are fleeing persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, or political opinion, refugees are subjected to a long and rigorous screening process while still in camps thousands of miles away from the concerned host country. He affirmed, “*Syrians fleeing violence who come to the United States will be refugees, whereas many getting into Europe are asylum seekers. This crucial distinction shows that the United States is in a far better security situation vis-à-vis Europe on any potential threat from Syria.*” (Nowrasteh, 2015)

As a case in point, Nowrasteh demonstrated that Chechen brothers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev who carried out the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15, 2013 were not refugees, but were granted the asylum status. The same applied to the February 26, 1993 terrorist attack against the World Trade Center in New York City which was perpetrated by asylum seekers and not refugees. Based on such counter-examples, Nowrasteh concluded, “*The terrorist threat from Syrian refugees in the United States is hyperbolically over-exaggerated and we have very little to fear from them because the refugee vetting system is very thorough.*” (Ibid.; Gartenstein-Ross, 2015)

The argument invoked, finally, by a wide range of American policymakers to justify the connection between Arab/Muslim refugees and terrorism on the basis that even resettled, such populations would remain susceptible to radicalization, has, according to a number of specialists, proven both fictitious and misleading. In their article, “*Radicalism of the hopeless: Refugee flows and transnational terrorism,*” (October, 2013) Daniel Milton, Megan Spencer, and Michael Findley refuted the terrorist propaganda could ever continue to resonate among relocated refugees who majoritarially yearn to turn over a new page in their lives and work for a better future for themselves and their offspring. By contrast, they argued, insecure and prison-like refugee camps are likely to present fertile ground for radicalization that could lure an already traumatized and still vulnerable population. As confirmed, in 2002, by Arthur G. Helton, senior fellow for refugee studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, “*Unless the rest of the world grasps the need of refugees for more than a fenced camp, the radicalism of the hopeless will continue to nurture terror and cause instability.*” (Ibid.)

Ultimately, contrary to false assumptions alledging that once resettled, Syrian refugees would resist assimilation into their host mainstream society due to their different cultural background, available data indicate merely the reverse. A study conducted by Fiscal Policy Institute senior fellows, David D. Kallick and Cyierra Roldan, on Syrian immigrants who settled in the United States prior to the 2011 uprising revealed that a sizeable number among them fully embraced the American ideals of hard work and peaceful coexistence. It demonstrated that not only the aforementioned community “*[was] fitting into and excelling in the United States both socially and economically,*” but was also “*making a real contribution to local economies around the country.*” (Center for American Progress, 2016)

Today, most of the 90,000 Syrian immigrants who made of the United States their new home prior to the 2011 uprising are concentrated in a handful of big metropolitan cities, namely Los Angeles (20%), New York (14%), Chicago (8%), and Detroit (5%). Thanks to their high proficiency of the English language as key to upward socio-economic mobility, a significant portion among them have reached higher levels of education, with 27% holding an advanced degree (B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.), compared to 13% of all immigrants, and only 11% of Americans at large. What is more, based on the premise that high educational levels systematically translate into well-paid jobs, U.S.-based Syrians receive today a median annual wage of \$52,000, well above the \$36,000 median wage for immigrants overall, and \$45,000 median wage for native workers. Known ultimately for their sense of entrepreneurship, 11% among them are currently business owners, that is more than double the rate of immigrants overall and triple the rate of U.S.-born citizens. (Ibid.)

5. Closing Thoughts: The Way Ahead

Looking beyond the debate over the potential refugee-terrorism nexus and the reluctance of a number of Western countries to open their doors to more Syrian refugees based on the danger they may constitute to their national security, there is still much to be done to overcome common misconceptions making of such group the Trojan horses of transnational terrorism. Prompted by the 9/11 trauma and exacerbated by a growing anti-Arab/Muslim rhetoric wittingly instrumentalized by populist leaders for mere electoral gain, the ensuing backlash against Syrian refugees seems unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future, to prevent them and other displaced populations from crossing national borders.

In the same line of reasoning, to address the needs and rights of Syrian refugees already admitted to settle in the United States, and fill the void left by international relief organizations (such as the UNFCR, the United Nations Refugee Agencies, Red Cross, Doctors without Borders, etc.), or even ensure a number of welfare benefits the American government is not able/willing to provide in order to cater to their specific needs, the role played in this sense by Arab American NGOs, faith-based charity groups and other like-minded advocacy groups, appears worth highlighting. Actually, by waging a two-front campaign that aims to help Syrian refugees overcome the wounds of the lived trauma and at the same time pressure U.S. government to open the gates for more resettlements, Arab diaspora organizations envision simply to re-adjust America's ambiguous stance toward such a group, especially to denounce its double-standard policy that openly prioritizes their white Christian Ukrainian counterparts.

Based on these insights and to dovetail humanitarian work with political mobilization, a twin-track strategy has been put forward by Arab American community-led groups to help Syrians in forced exile. As a matter of fact, while the largest Michigan-based Arab American nonprofit association, the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), has been dedicated over the last few decades to ensuring emergency relief and support services such as shelter, safety, food, dignity, and psychological rehabilitation to relocated Syrian refugees and asylum seekers, Washington DC-based Arab American advocacy bodies, namely the Arab American Institute (AAI), the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) have been active mobilizing at the grassroots level to launch awareness campaigns, raise funds through tax-deductible donations, and advocate on behalf of such displaced populations. (Obenrauer, 2022; Refugee Council USA, 2016)

All in all, while it seems misguided and to a certain extent short-sighted to focus the whole debate over the Syrian refugee crisis on a cogitated connection between Syrian influxes across national borders and transnational terrorism, an unsubstantiated hypothesis that proved implausible in light of the aforementioned counter-arguments, it appears worthwhile to probe more into the causes of such flows than into their ensuing consequences. Likewise, calling for a moratorium on Syrian refugee relocation sounds unwarranted and entirely counter-productive in view of published material. Seen through the objective lens of ground experts, Western governments should better coordinate their efforts to develop a comprehensive policy to deal with the refugees issue by taking action to stem the tide of poverty, persecution, and human rights violations in their countries of origin, and not only act on the basis of unfounded presumptions. As clearly expressed by Mark Hetfield, president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), recalling the plight of the Jews fleeing Germany in the 1930s, "*To confuse the refugees with the people that they're fleeing is to make the same mistake that kept Jews out.*" (Wirtschafter, 2015)

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