

# Congressional Testimony

## **Admitting Syrian Refugees: The Intelligence Void and the Escalating Homeland Security Threat**

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross  
Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies  
Chief Executive Officer, Valens Global

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1726 M Street NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20036

Chairman King, Ranking Member Higgins, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, it is an honor to appear before you to discuss the humanitarian and security issues posed by admitting Syrian refugees, and what the government can do to address this challenge.

The Syrian refugee crisis represents the tragic consequences of politics gone awry in the Middle East. Millions of Syrians have been displaced due to the fighting, which has also produced a near-complete fracturing of Syrian society. The refugee crisis must be considered with an emphasis on both humanitarian and security issues, as they are deeply linked. This testimony thus seeks to highlight the competing considerations that should inform our thinking and policies on this issue by focusing on both the deep humanitarian and geopolitical challenges associated with the Syrian refugee crisis, but also reasons why policymakers have legitimate concerns about the admission of large numbers of Syrian refugees into the United States. Even though rebel groups seem to have recently broken the stalemate with Bashar al-Assad's regime, this doesn't mean that the Syrian civil war will imminently end, and even an end of the civil war doesn't mean an end to the refugee crisis: The proliferation of jihadist groups in the country is a demonstration of just how enduring the refugee crisis may be.

The United States is now asking whether it should accept those Syrian refugees left most vulnerable by the conflict. While there may be both moral and pragmatic considerations counseling in favor of such a course of action, there are also challenges involved in doing so, and the risk exists that the United States could end up with an incoherent set of migrations policies, given its failure to admit the many Afghans and Iraqis who directly aided U.S. efforts during the major wars in both countries. *Put simply, the U.S. has not met its obligation to locals in those two countries who assisted the U.S.'s military efforts, and whose lives are endangered as a result. Thus, any discussion of admitting Syrian refugees should recognize these obligations as a part of the discussion, one that should take priority.*

My testimony begins by outlining, country by country, the impacts of the Syrian refugee crisis, detailing where refugees have ended up in the Middle East, Europe, and North America. It examines the conditions of refugee camps, as well as humanitarian efforts of host nations and international organizations. The Jordanian response will be specifically highlighted, as Jordan has been particularly challenged by the sudden influx of refugees. The testimony concludes by describing potential problems related to resettling Syrian refugees in the United States, including security concerns.

### **The Humanitarian Crisis Related to Syrian Refugees**

The Syrian refugee crisis, now entering its fourth year, presents dire humanitarian concerns. The exodus of Syrians to neighboring states has created a myriad of challenges for host countries and aid organizations alike. Syrians displaced from the conflict now number almost four million in such neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt, as well as European and North American states.

Syrian refugees have been removed from the violence that continues to plague their home country, but they remain an at-risk population in the countries to which they have fled. Conditions

in refugee camps vary, but they have created numerous humanitarian issues. Outside of the camps, displaced Syrians struggle to afford housing and find work, while host nations grapple with the implications of trying to integrate a refugee population that has become more likely to stay as the crisis continues.

*Scope of the crisis.* According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN's refugee agency, nearly 4 million registered Syrian refugees live outside of Syria.<sup>1</sup> There is also an unknown, though sizable, number of Syrian refugees who have not been registered, leaving them in legal limbo and without access to services provided by humanitarian agencies. Additionally, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that there are approximately 7.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria, making it the country with the largest population of individuals displaced by conflict and violence in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Countries bordering Syria have borne most of the burden of housing Syrian refugees. Turkey, with over 1.7 million registered refugees, holds more registered Syrian refugees than any other country. Second to Turkey is Lebanon, which houses nearly 1.2 million registered refugees, along with approximately 300,000 unregistered refugees.<sup>3</sup> Jordan houses approximately 620,000 refugees, with the majority (80 percent) residing in urban areas such as the capital, Amman.<sup>4</sup> Iraq houses around 250,000 Syrian refugees, in addition to 3 million-plus IDPs who have been displaced by the current conflict in Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

Syrian refugees have also sought asylum or temporary residency in other countries in the region. According to UNHCR, there are 155,000 registered Syrian refugees in North Africa; of those, approximately 130,000 reside in Egypt, though conditions for Syrian refugees in that country have deteriorated since Mohamed Morsi's regime was overthrown in July 2013.<sup>6</sup> A growing number of Syrian refugees based in Egypt have attempted the treacherous journey to Europe by sea. A significant number of Syrian refugees also live in Libya, though most of them are unregistered. Many Syrian refugees still residing in Libya do not intend to remain, and are planning to travel to Europe via Libya's well-established human smuggling networks.<sup>7</sup>

Europe is home to a steadily growing population of Syrian refugees. Nearly 150,000 Syrians have sought asylum in Europe since 2011 and European Union (EU) member states have

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<sup>1</sup> The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syria Regional Refugee Response," May 31, 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

<sup>2</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Syria IDP Figures Analysis," December 2014, available at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/>; *Global Overview 2014: People Internally Displaced by Conflict and Violence* (Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, May 2014), p. 11, available at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/publications/2014/201405-global-overview-2014-en.pdf>. Note: The distinction between IDPs and refugees is that refugees have fled their country of citizenship, whereas IDPs have left their home but remain in their country of citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> Nour Samaha, "'I Wasn't Afraid, but Now I Am': Syrians Fear Lebanon's Visa Rules," *Al Jazeera*, January 5, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> European University Institute and Migration Policy Centre, "Syrian Refugees: A Snapshot of the Crisis—in the Middle East and Europe," August 2014, available at [http://syrianrefugees.eu/?page\\_id=87](http://syrianrefugees.eu/?page_id=87).

<sup>5</sup> Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Iraq IDP Figures Analysis," January 2015, available at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Rollins, "Syrian Refugees in Egypt Determined to Get to Europe," *Al-Monitor*, July 24, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> "What's Behind the Surge in Refugees Crossing the Mediterranean Sea," *New York Times*, May 21, 2015.

pledged to resettle another 33,000 Syrians in the coming months.<sup>8</sup> Though EU law states that refugees must register in their country of entry, many Syrian refugees evade migration officials in southern and eastern European countries, and travel to northern European countries, where they then apply for asylum. Among European states, Germany and Sweden have received the most Syrian refugees, with both countries processing over 50,000 Syrian asylum applications from 2011-2014.<sup>9</sup> Of the 33,000 refugees whom EU member states have vowed to resettle, the vast majority (30,000) will be resettled in Germany.<sup>10</sup>

The United States has admitted a small number of Syrian refugees. According to the State Department, 700 Syrian refugees have been accepted since the civil war began, and the State Department has revealed plans to accept as many as 2,000 additional refugees by the fall of 2015.<sup>11</sup> Canada has pledged to accept 11,000 refugees in the near future.

*Conditions for refugees inside and outside of refugee camps.* The massive forced migration out of Syria has necessitated a huge humanitarian response. Camps have been established in several countries to address the inflow of refugees. Yet with dwindling funds and resources, conditions are deteriorating.

There are over 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon. Camps provide food, water, electricity, cash vouchers, basic medical services, education, and shelter. The camps, and the services they provide, are jointly managed by the host governments, UNHCR, and several participating NGOs. Some camps, notably the Kilis camp in Turkey, have relatively high standards of living.<sup>12</sup> But the quality of services is not standardized across all camps; and even in a well-run camp like Kilis, the refugees want nothing more than to leave.<sup>13</sup> Many camps have seen overcrowding and major budget shortfalls, and some camps reportedly lack electricity.<sup>14</sup> Malnutrition, poverty, and disease are endemic.

But these camps represent the living situation for only 11 percent of refugees. Eight-nine percent live in communities outside the camps, among the native population. Egypt and Lebanon, both of which have accepted a large number of refugees, do not even have official camps. The sudden influx of refugees has caused tensions with local populations, in part due to rising property costs, unemployment rates, and the overburdening of public institutions such as health care and education. Indeed, conditions outside of the camps are arguably worse for Syrian refugees than conditions within the camps. A recent report by UNHCR concerning the refugees in Jordan living outside of official camps (84% of the total for that country) found that nearly half were living in bad or uninhabitable conditions, two-thirds were living at or below the poverty line, and one-sixth

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<sup>8</sup> European University Institute and Migration Policy Centre, "Syrian Refugees: A Snapshot of the Crisis."

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Grant, "UN Plan to Relocate Syrian Refugees in Northern Europe," *Guardian* (U.K.), March 11, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Resettlement and Other Forms of Admission for Syrian Refugees," May 13, 2015, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/52b2febafc5.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Somini Sengupta, "U.N. Calls on Western Nations to Shelter Syrian Refugees," *New York Times*, April 17, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Mac McClelland, "How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp," *New York Times*, February 13, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Michael Kimmelmann, "Refugee Camp for Syrians in Jordan Evolves as a Do-It-Yourself City," *New York Times*, July 4, 2014 (discussing the Azraq camp).

lived in abject poverty.<sup>15</sup> Refugees living outside of official camps lack many of the essential services that are at least partially provided inside the camps. This has caused even further substandard living conditions for Syrian refugees who resettle among the native population.

Conditions for refugees, both inside and outside of official camps, are likely to worsen. Only 20 percent of the \$4.5 billion funding request for UNHCR to sustain its 2015 operations assisting refugees has been fulfilled.<sup>16</sup> Food aid has already been cut, as the Associated Press explains:

The World Food Program reduced the number of Syrian refugees eligible for food vouchers from 1.9 million to 1.7 million in January to focus on the neediest. Since then, it has twice reduced benefits, most recently in May by a total of about 30 percent, and the neediest among more than 520,000 refugees living outside camps in Jordan now receive just \$21 per person per month.<sup>17</sup>

The situation can be expected to further deteriorate. Lacking money and resources, UNHCR and host governments will not be able to sustain their current efforts without more assistance from the international community.

*The case of Jordan.* The impact of Jordanian refugees on Jordan demonstrates that the current crisis is not just humanitarian, but also has real strategic implications for the region—and for the United States as well. Jordan’s current population is approximately 8 million, of which about 628,160 are Syrian refugees.<sup>18</sup> This 8.5 percent increase in population attributable to the inflow of refugees from Syria has strained the country in multiple ways.

Most Syrian refugees have settled in either Jordan’s urban centers or refugee camps, with about 80% going to urban areas. A statistical analysis my research team performed on Syrian refugees in Jordan suggests that 51.3 percent are in the northern region, while only 3.5 percent are in the south; and the distribution of Syrian refugees in Jordan is even more uneven on a governorate scale. The Mafraq governorate, which makes up most of Jordan’s border with Syria, has absorbed most of the refugees in the north, and 25% of all Syrian refugees in Jordan overall. Refugees now make up 35% of Mafraq’s population, with the two major destinations being the capital city of Mafraq and the Za’atari refugee camp.

Syrian refugees in Jordanian cities, initially welcomed with a high degree of hospitality, are encountering rising tensions with the host community. A September 2012 report showed that 80% of Jordanians in the city of Mafraq would prefer that the refugees leave the city to live in camps.<sup>19</sup> The rising population produced by the inflow of refugees has caused, among other things,

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<sup>15</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Living in the Shadows: Jordan Home Visits Report 2014* (January 2015), available at <http://www.unhcr.org/54b685079.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Data taken from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Syria Regional Refugee Response,” last updated May 31, 2015, at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>.

<sup>17</sup> “Syrian Refugees Struggle Amid Aid Cuts, Lack Labor Rights,” Associated Press, May 19, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Jordan,” May 28, 2015, at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>.

<sup>19</sup> Elena Buryan, *Analysis of Host Community-Refugee Tensions in Mafraq, Jordan*, MercyCorps, October 2012.

a drastic rise in housing prices.<sup>20</sup> Many Jordanians also fear that Syrian refugees are competing for their jobs.

Conditions in Jordanian refugee camps, especially the Za'atari camp—with 85,000 residents—are comparatively well-suited for a long-term stay, and the camps have appeared more permanent over time. (This is not to say that the conditions can be considered *good*.) Za'atari has a significant black market economy, but also signs of normalcy that include barber shops, paved streets, electric poles, private toilets, private gardens, a pet store, a flower shop, and an ice cream parlor. In July 2014, 3,500 businesses could be found in Za'atari.<sup>21</sup> Another indicator of the camps' potential permanence is rising levels of school attendance. One resident observed that most parents kept their children out of school initially, electing to wait and continue their education once they returned to Syria. Now, however, Za'atari residents send their children to school “because they don't have any hope to go back.”<sup>22</sup> Jordan's government has begun to acknowledge, at least implicitly, that Syrian refugees could be permanent in the country. UNHCR's external relations officer noted that the new Azraq refugee camp is designed to function like a city instead of a temporary camp.<sup>23</sup>

This refugee population has placed significant demands on Jordan's resources. The government of Jordan is currently able to satisfy the basic needs of the refugee community, but it may not be able to do so in the long run. Jordan is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world, and before refugees arrived the country's groundwater resources were on track to be depleted as early as 2060.<sup>24</sup> The government's strategy to manage water use and increase sustainability did not account for the sudden addition of large numbers of Syrian refugees to the population. Water resources could now be depleted years earlier than previously projected.

The locations hardest hit by the refugee influx have seen average daily supply of water per person plummet to 30 liters, far below the 80 liters per day necessary to satisfy basic needs. At this level, “sanitation standards decline, diseases rise, subsistence crops wither, and children go thirsty.”<sup>25</sup> In Za'atari, refugees are allocated 35 liters of water per day, compared to the 70 to 145 liters per person per day provided in pre-conflict Syria.<sup>26</sup>

The entry of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees has caused food prices to rise sharply, especially in the north. For example, in Mafraq governorate, food prices have increased by 27 percent.<sup>27</sup> A study has found that more than 60 percent of Syrian refugees in the al-Ramtha, Beni Obaid, Irbid, and al-Badiya districts and the Jarash and Ajloun governorates do not have

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kimmelman, “Refugee Camp for Syrians in Jordan Evolves as a Do-It-Yourself City.”

<sup>22</sup> Alice Speri, “‘We Don't Have Any Hope to Go Back’: Syrian Refugees' Lives Turn Permanent in Zaatari Camp,” *Vice*, May 9, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> “Tapped Out: Water Scarcity and Refugee Pressures in Jordan,” Mercy Corps, March 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Alaa Milbes, “Getting Water to Zaatari During Drought Season,” Oxfam Policy and Practice Blog, August 19, 2014, at [www.policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2014/08/getting-water-to-zaatari-during-drought-season](http://www.policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2014/08/getting-water-to-zaatari-during-drought-season).

<sup>27</sup> Food and Agricultural Organisation, “Plan of Action: Jordan, 2014-2018,” January 2014, at [www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/rne/docs/Jordan-Plan.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/rne/docs/Jordan-Plan.pdf).

adequate access to food.<sup>28</sup> Compounding this problem has been substantial cuts in food assistance to Syrian refugees, as the World Food Program reduced the number of Syrian refugees eligible for food aid in January 2015, and has further reduced benefits twice since then.<sup>29</sup>

Further, the electricity generation sector has been strained, which has been expensive for Jordan's government due to its subsidization of energy.<sup>30</sup> Compounding the problem, Jordan imports 96 percent of its oil and gas, so it is exposed to fluctuations in energy prices on the supply side, and to population changes and increased consumption on the demand side.<sup>31</sup> Pressure on Jordan's sanitation, education, and health systems is also increasing.<sup>32</sup> Many schools are running two shifts at the expense of quality to accommodate Syrian refugee children, who are perceived to be at a lower educational level than Jordanian children due to curriculum differences and their interruption in education.

The influx of refugees also places significant strains on Jordan's economy. A January 2014 USAID study estimated that the direct and indirect costs of managing the Syrian refugee population amounted to 2.4 percent of Jordan's GDP.<sup>33</sup> The study found that growing government expenditures on refugees caused a decline in Jordan's ability to provide services and security to the general population.<sup>34</sup> A separate study by the UN Development Programme found that the cost of hosting refugees in Jordan totaled \$5.3 billion for 2013-2014, and most of these costs were covered by Jordan's government.<sup>35</sup> And refugee-related economic costs extend to several other sectors of Jordan's economy. As previously noted, rental prices have increased as Syrian refugees drive up demand for rental units.<sup>36</sup> The uptick in rental prices, along with other factors related to the refugee population, has contributed to a rise in inflation. Jordan's informal economy has also expanded as Syrian refugees look for jobs in informal industries.

All of this has fueled resentment among native Jordanians, who have consistently opposed opening their border to Syrian refugees. In a survey conducted in 2013, 71 percent of Jordanians opposed allowing more Syrian refugees into the country, while 58 percent said that the quality of service had declined in neighborhoods where Syrian refugees lived.<sup>37</sup> Resentment and opposition to the refugee presence has only grown over time.

Jordan has been forced to adapt its policies to deal with the growing number of Syrian refugees residing within its borders. Jordan initially welcomed Syrian refugees with what can be termed an "open-border policy" at the start of the conflict in 2011. But as the Syria crisis intensified

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Karin Laub, "Syrian Refugees Struggle Amid Aid Cuts, Lack of Labor Rights," Associated Press, May 19, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Khalid Al Wazani, *The Socio-Economic Implications of Syrian Refugees on Jordan: A Cost-Benefit Framework* (Amman: Issnaad Consulting, 2014), available at [www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_37808-1522-2-30.pdf?140522145513](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_37808-1522-2-30.pdf?140522145513).

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Commercial Service, U.S. Department of Commerce, "Jordan: Renewable Energy Market," 2011, available at [http://export.gov/jordan/static/Jordan%20Renewable%20Energy%20Market\\_Latest\\_eg\\_jo\\_034925.doc](http://export.gov/jordan/static/Jordan%20Renewable%20Energy%20Market_Latest_eg_jo_034925.doc).

<sup>32</sup> Wazani, *The Socio-Economic Implications of Syrian Refugees on Jordan*.

<sup>33</sup> USAID, *The Fiscal Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on Jordan* (January 2014), p. xi.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Municipal Needs Assessment Report: Mitigating the Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on Jordanian Vulnerable Host Communities* (2014), p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Yasser Abdih, Andrea Gamba and Rafik Selma, *Jordan: Selected Issues* (Washington DC: International Monetary Fund, April 2014), p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Khaled Neimat, "Majority of Jordanians Call for End to Syrian Refugee Influx," *Jordan Times*, April 15, 2013.

and became more protracted, Jordan has adjusted its control over the Jordan-Syria border, its management of refugee camps, and its legal framework concerning Syrian refugees. In September and October of 2014, for example, the border was closed to refugees, though the government's official stance remained that it was open to women, children, and injured refugees.<sup>38</sup> In November, Human Rights Watch found that Syrian refugees attempting to cross into Jordan were being forcibly returned.<sup>39</sup> Jordan again closed its border with Syria at the beginning of April 2015 due to the nearby outbreak of violence.<sup>40</sup> Jordan also began restricting the movement of Syrian refugees to urban areas by impeding their ability to exit camps and move around the country in 2014.

For these reasons, the Syrian refugee crisis is not just a humanitarian concern, but a strategic concern for one of the key U.S. allies in the region.

### **Concerns Related to Accepting More Syrian Refugees into the United States**

The biggest concern related to the U.S. admitting greater numbers of Syrian refugees is that it has failed to meet its basic obligations to foreign nationals who assisted U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Only a fraction of the Afghans who served U.S. military efforts, including as interpreters or contractors, have been admitted into the United States.<sup>41</sup> Emerson Brooking and Janine Davidson note that “when American servicemen rotate away,” their “translators remain—often becoming top-priority targets for reprisal attacks.”<sup>42</sup>

The United States has a fundamental obligation to the men and women who worked with us in Iraq and Afghanistan, risking their lives and their families' lives. The situation for refugees from Syria is tragic, and is important for many reasons. But as we focus on the current crisis, let us not forget those to whom we owe a direct debt: There are both moral and also pragmatic reasons that we should put them at the top of our migration priorities. Further, one concern policymakers have about admitting Syrian refugees is whether some militants might be in their midst, and the Afghans and Iraqis who helped the United States should present a lower vetting burden.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond the concern that the United States should ensure that Afghans and Iraqis who assisted U.S. efforts should not be left home to die, there are pragmatic concerns related to increasing our admission of Syrian refugees. The first one this testimony will discuss is terrorism and lawlessness concerns.

*Policies for screening refugees.* The U.S. has a set of layered policies in place for screening and admitting refugees. The system involves multiple checks across several agencies for medical

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<sup>38</sup> Rana Sweis, “No Syrians Are Allowed Into Jordan, Agencies Say,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Jordan: Vulnerable Refugees Forcibly Returned to Syria,” November 24, 2014, at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/23/jordan-vulnerable-refugees-forcibly-returned-syria>.

<sup>40</sup> Suleiman al-Khalidi, “Jordan Shuts Border Crossing with Syria after Fighting,” Reuters, April 1, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Cobus, “Where the Grave Isn't Free: One Afghan Interpreter's Trials of U.S. Resettlement,” *Voice of America*, April 22, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Emerson Brooking and Janine Davidson, “Why is a Comedian the Only One Talking About the Plight of Afghan Interpreters?,” Council on Foreign Relations, October 23, 2014, available at <http://blogs.cfr.org/davidson/2014/10/23/why-is-a-comedian-the-only-one-talking-about-the-plight-of-afghan-interpreters/>.

<sup>43</sup> Rusty Bradley, “Heroes Left to Die,” *War on the Rocks*, April 23, 2014.



and security concerns. Though this lessens the probability that malevolent actors will gain entrance into the United States, it fundamentally depends on the quality of U.S. intelligence about the Syrian refugee population. The biggest concern is a “clean skin,” an individual connected with a jihadist organization whose connections to the group are not known by American intelligence or law enforcement agencies. Indeed, U.S. officials have expressed concern that they might lack the assets to properly vet Syrian refugees for ties with militant groups prior to resettlement in the United States. As FBI assistant director Michael Steinbach said, “You have to have information to vet. Databases don’t [have] the information on those individuals, and that’s the concern.”<sup>44</sup>

The White House has allotted up to 70,000 refugees for permanent resettlement in fiscal year 2015, with 33,000 places reserved for refugees from the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>45</sup> Syrian refugees are now seen as of special humanitarian concern to the United States, as both UNHCR and the United States have determined that “tens of thousands of refugees living outside Syria are unlikely to ever be able to return.”<sup>46</sup> The UN’s high commissioner on refugees, Antonio Guterres, has called on industrialized countries to admit 130,000 Syrian refugees in the next two years.<sup>47</sup> Candidates for resettlement to the United States have been referred by UNHCR, and there are currently 11,000 refugees who will be screened by U.S. officials as the next step in the process.<sup>48</sup> The UN’s refugee agency has said that those on the U.S.’s list include “the most vulnerable,” such as single mothers and their children, victims of torture, and people with medical needs; and they also include Syrians who have worked with Americans, thus making them vulnerable to persecution.<sup>49</sup>

To be admissible, a candidate must pass a series of security and medical checks. A Department of State Resettlement Service Center (RSC) compiles personal data and background information for the security check process.<sup>50</sup> Some refugees go through an additional review, a Security Advisory Opinion, which is conducted by multiple law enforcement and intelligence agencies. While the methodology for additional review selection is not public, it is reasonable to assume that those who are flagged as potentially posing a more severe security threat are selected. Candidates for refugee status are also fingerprinted and interviewed in person by an officer from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. A medical screening is completed, mostly to check for infectious diseases such as tuberculosis. Finally, a second interagency security check is completed before the refugee’s departure to verify that all information remains correct, and that there are no relevant additions since the process began. Only after all these security and medical checks have been completed and analyzed can a refugee be admitted to the United States.

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<sup>44</sup> Justin Fishel and Mike Levine, “U.S. Officials Admit Concern over Syrian Refugee Effort,” ABC News, February 12, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Lauren Gambino, “U.S. Steps up Syrian Refugee Admissions, But Why Are Some Still Excluded?,” *Guardian* (U.K.), March 11, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Anne Gearan, “U.S. to Greatly Expand Resettlement for Syrian Refugees,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Somini Sengupta, “U.N. Calls on Western Nations to Shelter Syrian Refugees,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.* (discussing how those on the list are among the most vulnerable); Gearan, “U.S. to Greatly Expand Resettlement” (discussing the inclusion of Syrians who have worked with Americans).

<sup>50</sup> The various steps of the refugee settlement process are outlined in U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, “Security Screening of Refugees Admitted to the United States: A Detailed, Rigorous Process,” n.d., available at [www.rcusa.org/uploads/pdfs/Refugee%20resettlement%20-%20step%20by%20step%20USCRI.pdf](http://www.rcusa.org/uploads/pdfs/Refugee%20resettlement%20-%20step%20by%20step%20USCRI.pdf).

The process of resettling to the United States as a refugee can take as few as eight weeks, but on average it takes 18 to 24 months.<sup>51</sup> However, the Department of State can expedite the process if there is a need, including particular physical dangers to the refugees.

After refugees are approved for resettlement, they receive U.S. government support for moving and transitioning to life in the United States. Though refugees are not given the option to pick where they will live initially, if they have relatives in the United States, they will likely be resettled with or near them.<sup>52</sup> Otherwise, domestic resettlement agencies match the resource capabilities of around 190 available communities to refugee needs in order to find the best match. Various state and federal agencies, in conjunction with private organizations, are responsible for supporting refugees through the resettlement process. Refugees are met at the airport, taken to their new apartment, and given appliances, climate-appropriate clothing, food, and a one-time sum to help with initial expenses.<sup>53</sup> Refugees can work immediately upon arrival in the United States. With proper documentation, trips outside the country permitted, but the refugees are not allowed to return to their country of persecution.<sup>54</sup> One year after resettlement, refugees are required to apply for permanent residency, and after five years in the U.S. they can apply for citizenship.

*Security concerns.* There has been a great deal of concern related to the current influx of refugees into Europe, which is degrees of magnitude larger than the U.S.'s intake of refugees. Counterterrorism officials and even some refugees have warned that militant groups such as the Islamic State may seek to infiltrate Western Europe. One refugee in Germany warned about Italy's lax security measures: "Any ISIS terrorist could have entered Italy and traveled further into Europe without any problem. ISIS members can take their guns and hand grenades with them, because the Italians never even checked any of the luggage."<sup>55</sup> Islamic State supporters have similarly alluded to their interest in using migrant outflows to gain entry into Europe.<sup>56</sup> Though security concerns are lower for the United States, they should still be acknowledged.

There are several cases of refugees who have been involved in terrorist activities in the U.S., though the risks should not be exaggerated. In May 2011, Waad Alwan and Mohanad Hammadi, two Iraqi refugees who had been resettled in Kentucky, were arrested in a sting operation and charged with attempting to provide arms to al-Qaeda in Iraq (the group that would later become the Islamic State). In talks with an undercover informant, the men also discussed the possibility of carrying out attacks domestically. Both Alwan and Hammadi are believed to have been involved in the Sunni insurgency in Iraq before coming to the United States: Hammadi even boasted to an undercover operative involved in the sting operation that he had planted IEDs in Iraq, while Alwan told the same operative that he had killed U.S. soldiers with a sniper rifle.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Refugee Admissions Program," n.d., available at <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/>.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. Department of State, "The Reception and Placement Program," n.d., available at <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security, "Refugees," April 11, 2013, available at <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/refugees-asylum/refugees>.

<sup>55</sup> Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, "Italy Opens the Door to Disaster," *Foreign Policy*, April 13, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> See discussion in Charlie Winter, *Libya: The Strategic Gateway for the Islamic State* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015).

<sup>57</sup> Carrie Johnson, "Terrorism Case Exposes Gaps In Refugee Screening," NPR, June 8, 2011.

Both men were admitted into the United States despite having been detained in Iraq due to suspicions about their involvement in insurgent activities.<sup>58</sup>

Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the brothers responsible for the Boston Marathon bombing, arrived in the United States after their parents received refugee status in 2002.<sup>59</sup> Tamerlan was 15 and Dzhokhar was 8 at the time. They would subsequently radicalize and carry out their notorious attack.

Though distinct from the above instances due to the differences between the admission of refugees and asylum seekers, several jihadists involved in terrorist activities in the U.S. used asylum applications to remain in the country. Mir Aimal Kansi, who shot and killed two CIA employees and wounded three more in a January 1993 attack outside the agency's Langley headquarters, entered the U.S. illegally but applied for asylum, and was later allowed to stay in the country under a general immigration amnesty. Omar Abdel Rahman applied for political asylum to delay his deportation.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Ramzi Yousef, a key leader of the 1993 World Trade Center attack, "asked for asylum and was released pending a hearing," and organized the attack while his asylum application was still pending.<sup>61</sup>

*Post-traumatic stress and other vulnerabilities.* Syrian refugees have been particularly susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of their exposure to warfare, detachment from their previous life, and the privations of refugee life. They have continued to face hardships even after escaping a war zone. According to recent academic study on Syrian refugees, up to a third of Syrian refugees suffer from PTSD.<sup>62</sup> PTSD can serve as a major impediment to successful integration into society, including manifesting in adjustment issues, language barriers, unemployment, and feelings of isolation and exclusion. PTSD sufferers often experience severe anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, and erratic behavior. These symptoms can reveal themselves through difficulty in completing daily tasks, difficulty in school, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts.<sup>63</sup> Beyond PTSD, refugees' experiences with losing their home, family, friends, and livelihood can produce their own sets of problems.

## Conclusion

Thus, the Syrian refugee crisis presents a large number of challenges, both humanitarian and strategic. As I said at the outset, the United States should link its refugee policies to fulfilling our obligations to Iraqis and Afghans who assisted U.S. efforts in those countries. Fulfilling U.S.

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<sup>58</sup> James Gordon Meek, Cindy Galli and Brian Ross, "Exclusive: U.S. May Have Let 'Dozens' of Terrorists into Country As Refugees," ABC News, November 20, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Finn, Carol Leonnig and Will Englund, "Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev Were Refugees from Brutal Chechen Conflict," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Ted Conover, "The United States of Asylum," *New York Times*, September 19, 1993.

<sup>61</sup> Daryl Fears, "Bill Shifts Burden to Asylum-Seekers," *Washington Post*, May 1, 2005. Both Kansi and Yousef exploited an asylum process that, at the time, allowed any migrant who applied for asylum to receive a work permit while his claim was being investigated. Following Kansi's attack, the U.S. eliminated asylum seekers' ability to do so.

<sup>62</sup> Gotay Alpak et al, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Syrian Refugees in Turkey: A Cross-Sectional Study," *International Journal of Psychiatry in Clinical Practice* 19(1), March 2015, pp. 45-50.

<sup>63</sup> Claudia Maria Vargas, "War Trauma in Refugees: Red Flags and Clinical Principles," *Visions: BC's Mental Health and Addictions Journal* 3(3), Winter 2007.

obligations to Iraqis and Afghans who assisted U.S. war efforts should be seen as of paramount importance for both moral and pragmatic reasons.

As this testimony has demonstrated, there are a variety of considerations related to Syrian refugees, and while security considerations should not be overstated, they do exist. (Some of the specifics of the refugee population being considered for refugee status, such as the fact that it represents the most vulnerable members, may mitigate concerns about terrorism and radicalization.) In addition to considering options related to refugee resettlement, U.S. policymakers should look to crafting comprehensive policies that also address such matters as targeted investments to alleviate the economic hardship on countries with large refugee populations, measures such as improved education to enhance the quality of life for Syrian refugees, and appropriate law enforcement training for countries hosting these populations.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.