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U.S. History With Iraqi and Afghan War Refugees Hints at Delays for Syrians

By David Francis

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The United States says it is willing to resettle 10,000 Syrians to help refugees fleeing their nation's four-year civil war and the threat of the Islamic State. But first, they must pass onerous background checks as part of a State Department program that has already refused entry to more

than twice as many refugees from Iraq, which has suffered under the Islamic State and its extremist predecessors for more than a decade.

According to the State Department, more than 230,300 Iraqis were referred for resettlement to the United States during a seven-year period in the last decade. Of those, 142,670 were interviewed for asylum under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Ultimately, 119,202 were approved, and 84,902 arrived in the United States — meaning 23,468 Iraqis were denied.

Given that nearly 4 million Syrians have been forced from their homes, it's likely that far more than 10,000 will be seeking shelter in the United States. And that number is "incomprehensible," said Samuel "Sandy" Berger, former President Bill Clinton's national security advisor.

State Department spokesperson Kathryn Bondy confirmed that the refugees would be processed by the Refugee Admissions Program. President Barack Obama "has said that we will admit at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in FY2016. As to the overall number, we cannot confirm that," she told Foreign Policy in an email.

Moreover, there's a key difference between Iraqis who came to the United States and the Syrians who want to — and one that further casts doubt on Syrian refugees' success in quickly resettling. Even with its 16 percent denial rate, the United States was able to draw on Iraqi applicants' criminal records and other background information supplied by Baghdad, an ally, when vetting refugees. That's not the case in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad has had a frosty relationship with the United States for more than a decade.

"When you invade a country, you get a lot of information that you can use as a basis for a background check," said Becca Heller, director of the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project at the Urban Justice Center, referring to the U.S. invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003. "We're missing a lot of that information for Syria. The precedent of Iraq has made the various entities involved in the background checks reticent to proceed."

And that's not even counting the dismal acceptance rate for Iraqi and Afghan refugees who were allowed to resettle specifically because they helped the U.S. war effort — as either translators or advisors — in their two countries since the early 2000s. Under that program, which earmarked special immigrant visas for Iraqis and Afghans, only 11,599 refugees have been settled since 2008. An estimated 12,000 applications just for Afghan linguists were still pending as of January 2015.

Thousands of visas that could have been awarded under that program between 2009 and 2013 were not. According to McClatchy, about 6,500 visas for Afghans and about 19,000 for Iraqis were not issued. The number actually issued is far less than the resettlement pledges the government made to refugees under the 2008 Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act and the 2009 Afghan Allies Protection Act, said Heller.

"You can pledge to take in how many people you want, but if you don't have the systems in place to process them expeditiously, your pledge is empty," she told Foreign Policy.

When Congress created the refugee program, it did not provide enough resources to quickly move Iraqis through a vetting process, Heller said. That created a huge backlog — which was wiped out in a six-week period only after Congress decided to prioritize the program, she said.

Part of the problem is the slow pace at which requests for visas are processed, said Eleanor Acer, director of refugee protection for the Washington-based nonprofit Human Rights First. “The U.S. resettlement process has needed to be reformed for years,” she said. “This crisis could shine a light on it.”

Yet speeding up the process takes political will. And so far, lawmakers appear skeptical of the idea of allowing Syrians — many of whom lived in close proximity to the Islamic State and other radical Islamic groups — to live in the United States. Mike Huckabee, the former Republican Arkansas governor who is running for president, this week asked, “Are they really escaping tyranny, are they escaping poverty, or are they really just coming because we’ve got cable TV?”

“I don’t mean to be trite,” he added. “I’m just saying: We don’t know.”

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), another Republican presidential hopeful, argues for extreme caution before allowing refugees to come to the United States, citing the case of two Iraqis in Kentucky who pleaded guilty to helping terrorists. Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas is also against resettlement. Ben Carson, the surgeon who is running second to Donald Trump, said some Syrians should be allowed to come, but only after a special vetting.

In recent U.S. history, not all refugee groups got this kind of intense scrutiny, according to Silvia Pedraza, a sociology professor at the University of Michigan. Hundreds of thousands of Cubans were able to easily enter the United States during Fidel Castro’s regime, she said in an interview with FP — most of whom were successfully integrated into American society.

“The United States has inherited about 20 percent of the Cuban population over the course of 54 years,” Pedraza said.

After the Vietnam War, the United Nations helped people fleeing the communist regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, she said. Between 1979 and 1982, over 20 countries, led by the United States, France, Australia, and Canada, resettled 623,800 Indochinese refugees, according to the United Nations.

In neither the cases of Cuban nor Vietnamese refugees, however, were there questions about whether those coming to the United States had ties to terrorism. Still, Pedraza said she thinks Syrian refugees meet the standard the United States uses when considering whether to grant asylum to immigrants: Is this person fleeing persecution?

“Using that criteria, these people do qualify. There’s so much suffering that’s taking place,” she said.

Berger said refusing Syria's refugees could become a question of American security: If they aren't given safe haven, he said, they could be radicalized down the line.

"We have to deal with this in a much more forward-leaning posture, or we're going to be dealing with this militarily in three or four years," said Berger, who is now co-chair at the Albright Stonebridge Group consultancy.

"We're simply letting this pot boil without any kind of safety valve," Berger added. "We have to fix this. It's not going to get better. It's going to get worse."