Background

Since the early stages of his candidacy in 2015, President Donald Trump has warned of the alleged dangers of Syrian refugees coming into the United States, calling them “Trojan horses” for terrorists. During the campaign he called for “extreme vetting” to be employed on incoming refugees. This fabricated fear that refugees could be infiltrated by terrorists comes from a lack of knowledge about the existing refugee vetting process.

In reality, the process for accepting refugees into the U.S. is already thorough, extensive, and effective. The multipart process, which could take over two years to complete, involves the UNHCR and three primary U.S. government agencies including the Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Health and Human Services. The UNHCR begins the vetting process with case identification based on resettlement applications. After the preliminary assessment of the need for resettlement, a supervising officer conducts a review of the application. After this assessment, preconditions must be met for resettlement consideration and the process moves forward. Once the preconditions are met, the refugee is recommended for submission and must complete the resettlement registration form. After a second review by an UNHCR officer is complete, the submission is then sent to the resettlement country (in this case, the United States). Once the case is transferred from the UNHCR to the State Department, who screen the applicant and confirm their biographical information, the refugee must then go through an in-person interview with a Department of Homeland Security agent. The interview will determine whether the refugee seeking resettlement has a justifiable fear of being persecuted based on his or her race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a specific social group. If reasonable fear is found, the refugee will then undergo several security checks through the National Counterterrorism Center and the FBI’s Terrorist Screening Center, ensuring they have no ties with any terrorist groups. Refugees must also go through medical screening tests in an effort to keep diseases and infections like tuberculosis outside of the U.S. Once they receive final approval, refugees then attend a cultural orientation, followed by a process in which NGOs help with placing refugees in one of the 180 cities designated by the U.S. government for resettlement. The cities chosen for refugee resettlement are not based on ethnic or religious concentrations but rather on factors of self-sufficiency. Resettlement organizations try to place refugees in cities that have affordable housing, available jobs, and translation services.

Further, refugees pose no cognizable threat to Americans. In 2015, data was collected to determine the actual number of refugees in the U.S. who have been involved in plotting acts of terror. Of the 784,000 refugees resettled in the U.S. since September 11, 2001, none have been implicated in a major fatal terrorist attack, including those from the seven countries singled out in the President’s Executive Orders. Also, data from the Economic Policy Institute suggests that immigrants make up 16% of the workforce despite accounting for only 13% of the population.

The Problem

Despite the realities of vulnerable populations undergoing extensive vetting who present no actual danger to the United States, President Trump’s campaign rhetoric has translated into policy attempts. He promulgated two Executive Orders in an attempt to limit immigration from six Arab countries and Iran, informally termed Muslim and Refugee Bans. While those Orders have been blocked by the judiciary, combined with his continued critical rhetoric toward all immigrants, refugee applications have dropped precipitously. Since the first Muslim Ban was signed by the President, the Department of Homeland Security has halted overseas interviews with refugee applicants and did not resume when Executive Orders were enjoined.
U.S. REFUGEE VETTING

The Administration has employed other routes to discourage newcomers into the United States. President Trump’s recent budget proposal calls for deep funding cuts into refugee processing and resettlement programs, with the certain aim of reducing the government’s ability to accept those fleeing from conflict. Further, new Visa applicants will now be required to disclose all social media accounts and provide biographical data over the past fifteen years, making the process prohibitively difficult for the millions of students and scientists who come the U.S each year.

These efforts by the Administration to either slow down or end the resettlement of refugees must be addressed.

Moving Forward

• Re-instate the Department of Homeland Security’s vital overseas interviews of refugee applicants.
• Follow the State Department’s lead in lifting artificial restrictions on the number of refugees allowed to enter the US during any given time period.
• Commit to the resettlement of 100,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees, giving priority to particularly vulnerable subsets of this group; this includes victims of torture, victims of gender-based violence, individuals at risk of religious persecution, and women and children.