

Residents welcome Syrian refugees to Vienna during a rally in October.



PATRICK DOMINGO/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

SAFE PASSAGE

Resettling refugees in the United States takes compassion, circumspection

By Matt Alderton

A S RECENTLY AS FIVE years ago, northwest Jordan was barren and lifeless, save for scorpions stalking snakes in the scorching desert sand. Today, it's teeming with traffic from neighboring Syria, its refugees flowing over the border like water from a garden hose.

More than 4 million of them live in refugee

camps like Zaatari, established three years ago near Mafraq, Jordan, as a sanctum for those fleeing the Syrian civil war that erupted in 2011. Home to more than 79,000 Syrian refugees, it's one of dozens of camps punctuating the perimeters of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. Inside, families displaced by violence and poverty spend their days ponder-

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MAJA HITIJ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A man cries as thousands of other Syrian refugees arrive in Dortmund, Germany, in September. Germany has taken in about 100,000 refugees from Syria this year.



Migrants, including families and children, are housed at the United Nations-run Zaatari refugee camp northeast of the Jordanian capital, Amman. More than 79,000 Syrian refugees reside at the camp.

ing an unfathomable future in someplace far away and foreign.

For most of them, that place is Europe, where Germany alone has agreed to take in 500,000 Syrian refugees per year for “several years.” For others, it’s the United States, where President Obama has pledged to take in at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in the current fiscal year ending Sept. 30, 2016.

“We have received over 20,000 (refugee referrals), of which we’ve resettled almost 1,700,” said Larry Bartlett, director of the U.S. State Department’s Office of Refugee Admissions.

Syrians will be among 85,000 total refugees resettled in the U.S. in 2016 from around the world, including Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Bhutan, Burma, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The U.S. refugee resettlement process came under fire after a Syrian passport was found near one of the suicide bombers in the Nov. 13 attacks in Paris that left at least 132 dead and hundreds injured. The passport was later found to be fake.

Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., a member of the House Homeland Security Committee and an intelligence subcommittee, said Nov. 16 there is no true

vetting process because there are no government records or databases in Syria to confirm the identities of the refugees.

“We don’t know who these people are,” King said on *Fox News Sunday*.

White House Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes defended the government’s screening process on NBC’s *Meet the Press*. “We have very extensive screening procedures for all Syrian refugees who come to the United States,” he said.

Meanwhile, at least 24 governors have threatened to close their states to Syrian refugees, though legal experts say it doesn’t appear they have power to do so.

The developments after the Paris attacks illustrate the sentiment that which refugees are resettled in the U.S. is just as important as how many are allowed to relocate here.

The process for screening, receiving and integrating migrants from foreign countries therefore strikes a careful balance between solicitude and security.



AKHALIL MAZRAAWI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

THE CASE FOR RESETTLEMENT

The U.S. has been resettling refugees since at least World War II, when the country resettled approximately 85,000 displaced Jewish refugees from Europe. Its current resettlement program was established in 1975 to accommodate Indochinese fleeing Communist regimes in Southeast Asia during and after the Vietnam War. Since then, the U.S. has resettled more than 3 million refugees, with annual admissions ranging from a high of 207,000 in 1980 to a low of 27,110 in 2002.

“Because having connections with so many

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different parts of the world has helped the U.S. become a global power, there is a strong feeling that we benefit from resettling refugees in this country," said Kathleen Newland, senior fellow and co-founder of the Migration Policy Institute, a non-partisan think tank specializing in international migration issues. "As a nation of immigrants, it's part of who we are."

"These are people who fled violence ... and now they're being given an opportunity for something brand new."

— Larry Bartlett, director of the State Department's Office of Refugee Admissions

Even so, resettlement is a last resort for humanitarians.

"The majority of our support goes to refugees who are still overseas ... because refugees, frankly, want to go home," explained Bartlett, who said most U.S. funding for refugees goes toward shelter, food and services in nations where refugees initially land, called their "country of first asylum." "But in some cases — and certainly it has come to this point now in Syria — people simply can't go home. It's at that point in time that we start to look at other options."

Out of the 14.4 million refugees around the world, resettlement is deemed the best option for less than 1 percent of them. "We look for people who are still vulnerable, even in a country like Jordan or Turkey or Lebanon — they can't work, maybe they're children who can't go to school, maybe they have medical needs, maybe they are victims of torture or violence and are in need of psychological services. Those are the people we work ... to identify and bring to the United States," Bartlett continued.

Resettlement begins with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which screens refugees in their country of first asylum to identify candidates for resettlement. UNHCR refers those candidates to resettlement countries — including the United States, where the resettlement process is divided among the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services (HHS).

"The people referred to the United States for resettlement often are people who have particular ties to the U.S.," Newland said.

SYSTEMATIC SCREENING

The interagency process is long and complex and has a few main components. "First, the people proposed are checked against at least four different databases



ASHRAF SHAZLY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



BULENT KILIC/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A group of Eritrean women, top, walk through a temporary refugee camp in Kassala, Sudan, on Oct. 22. Bottom, young Turkish refugees from the Izmir province prepare to travel by raft to the Greek island of Chios on Nov. 5.

to make sure they're not a security risk," Newland said. "People have a paper review of their file, then they must have ... a one-on-one, face-to-face in-depth interview with a DHS officer to make sure they are who they say they are."

Barbara Strack, chief of the Refugee Affairs Division at DHS' U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), said refugees are "inadmissible" for resettlement if they fail to satisfy the legal definition of a refugee, have committed a serious crime in the past, are addicted to drugs or are otherwise deemed a national-security risk.

"Once all required check results are received back, and they are clear, then DHS makes the decision to finally approve or not approve the case," she said.

Approved refugees are also subject to medical screening to ensure they don't import communicable diseases to the U.S.

"It's not for the purpose of exclusion, but to make sure they get proper treatment," noted Newland, who said the entire process is long — 18 months to 24 months — but effective. "Since 9/11, the U.S. resettlement program has brought in about 784,000 refugees. In that time, there have been three resettled refugees arrested on terrorism-related charges. That's a pretty good record."

Indeed, refugees are the most vetted of

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A REFUGEE'S STORY

RESETTLEMENT IS A LIFELINE FOR MANY

By Matt Alderton

Soua Yang was just 16 years old when he made the treacherous trek across the Mekong River into Thailand from his native Laos in 1979. Although many before him died making the same journey — shot by Communist forces mere feet from salvation — he trudged over mud, mountains and misgivings because there was hope on only one side of the river. And it wasn't his side.

"It was terrifying," recalled Yang, whose people, the Hmong, aligned themselves with the United States during the Laotian civil war as part of the "Secret Army," a native force recruited and trained by the CIA to fight the Communist North Vietnamese Army when it invaded Laos during the Vietnam War. When the North Vietnamese overthrew the Laotian government in 1975, the Hmong became targets for retribution and genocide. Their subsequent exodus gave birth to the modern U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program.

"The country was torn apart," continued Yang, whose older brother died fighting in the Secret Army. "You could either go or stay, and if you stayed you might not live long anyway."

Accompanied by friends and neighbors — he left his parents behind — Yang crossed the Mekong by boat under the cover of darkness. On the other side of the river, he was ushered into a refugee camp, where he spent several months before being resettled in the United States along with his sister and brother-in-law.

"We had no idea about America," said Yang, now 52 and the father of four children, ages 16 to 23. "But we saw a lot of people go, and we knew that to have a better life we had to move on."

It was December when Yang first arrived in Providence, R.I. Except for a few miscellaneous words learned in the refugee camp, he spoke no English, and had never experienced winter. Or the Fourth of July, for that matter, which gave him a shock during his first American summer. Quickly, however, he adapted, completing high school, then college, where he studied electrical engineering before commencing an 11-year career at Motorola.

Yang's parents finally joined him in the United States in 1988, and in 1997 he moved with his wife, also a Hmong refugee, to Wausau, Wis.,



COURTESY OF SOUA YANG

Soua Yang, left, and his wife, Kabtau, are former Hmong refugees who now operate a fresh meat store in Wausau, Wis.

MEKONG RIVER

LAOS

THAILAND

where they established Mekong Fresh Meat, whose 28 employees supply fresh meat to Hmong families and businesses whose broken English makes it difficult to communicate with traditional purveyors.

"One of my cousins had opened a similar business in St. Paul and thought maybe we could open one in Wisconsin, since we have a lot of Hmong people here," explained Yang, who in many ways embodies the American dream — in spite of the fact that he was born outside the U.S. Or, perhaps, because of it. "It was challenging for me at first, but I think we're doing OK. We're not rich people, but we're not poor people, either. We're average. And we're happy with that."

Yang's story is typical of many refugees, according to May yer Thao, director of the Hmong Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce. "Refugees can be — and are — great contributors to this country," she said. "Refugees are not immigrants. They came here because they had no other choice. It was a matter of life and death. As a result, they have a sense of loyalty to the U.S. for giving them a new life; they give back 10 times what they received because of it."



KAY NIETFELD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A young Syrian refugee gets a vaccination from Dr. Susanne Eipper at a health facility in Berlin on Oct. 1.

any U.S. arrivals, according to Strack, who calls the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program "the most robust set of checks (applied to) any category of traveler to the United States." "Resettlement itself is such an unbelievably scarce resource ... so we're really committed to making sure as much as we can that it goes to people who are truly eligible and who don't present a risk to the United States," she said.

WARM WELCOME

Refugees approved for resettlement are referred to one of nine national agencies that help them acclimate to life in the U.S. Following three days of cultural orientation that prepares them for their arrival, they are flown to a U.S. city where there are deemed to be sufficient jobs, schools and housing to absorb incoming refugees. There, they're met at the airport by a caseworker from their sponsoring agency.

"A number of things happen when refugees arrive: They have initial housing set up for them with basic furnishings, they have a culturally appropriate meal ready for them when they first arrive, then the process starts of applying for a Social Security card, enrolling children for school and following up with any medical conditions they might have. We refer them to English-language classes, provide them with cultural orientation classes and job readiness training, and work to get them employed," said Robin Dunn Marcos, senior director of resettlement and processing at the International Rescue Committee (IRC), an agency that sponsors refugees in the U.S.

"The ultimate goal is to help refugees become economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible after arrival. Everything we do is geared towards that."

Refugees receive financial and medical support from the federal government for up to eight months and retain their refugee status for a year, at which point they're required to apply for permanent residency. After approximately five years, they're eligible to apply for full citizenship.

"These are people who fled violence ... and now they're being given an opportunity for something brand new," said Bartlett. "I don't think any refugee would tell you that their experience making this transition has been easy, but I think the large, large majority will tell you that they are extremely grateful for what our country has offered them, and that they're going to do their best to take every advantage of it." ●

Contributing: Erin Kelly and Jane Onyanga-Omara