The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Its Impact on the Security of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program
Hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security
November 19, 2015

Statement of Mark Krikorian, Executive Director, Center for Immigration Studies

A wise man once said "The supreme function of statesmanship is to provide against preventable evils." Halting refugee resettlement from the Middle East would be just such an act of statesmanship.

The starting point of any policy debate is that the government of the United States has no responsibility to anyone but the citizens of the United States. As individuals delegated by the citizenry to deal with the business of the state, the president and members of Congress must necessarily put the interests of the American people before the interests of foreigners.

This means the United States government has no responsibility to refugees; they have no claim on it and no right to demand anything of it. If, nonetheless, we decide as a matter of policy to devote resources to humanitarian refugee protection (a policy decision which I personally support), then we should base our decision-making on two principles: 1) Such policies must not pose a threat to the American people, and 2) the funds taken from the people through taxes for this purpose must be used to the maximum humanitarian effect.

Resettling Syrian refugees in the United States fails on both counts.

1. **Security**

There are two parts to the security challenge posed by refugee resettlement.

A) *Screening cannot be done adequately*.

During last weekend's debate among the Democratic presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton said that the United States should spend "whatever resources it takes" to properly screen Syrian refugees before they are resettled in the United States. This is a common-sense demand that virtually all Americans would agree with.

Officials have assured us that refugees are "are subject to more intensive security than any other type of traveler to the U.S. to protect against threats to our national security."[1] There is no reason to doubt this. The people in the departments of State and Homeland Security, and at the intelligence agencies they work with, are doing their best to protect our people from harm.

But this misses the point. The problem with trying to screen candidates for resettlement from Syria – or any other failed state, such as Somalia, Libya, Yemen, or Afghanistan – is not a lack of resources or commitment.

The problem is that it cannot be done.

Our vetting process is heavily oriented toward electronic checks of databases with biographical information and photos and fingerprints. But little information of that kind which could potentially disqualify a candidate for resettlement is available to us. DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson said last month that "one of the challenges that we'll have is that we're not going to know a whole lot about the individual refugees that come forward."[2] FBI Director James Comey confirmed this, telling a Senate panel last month, "The only thing we can query is information that we have. So, if we have no information on someone, they've never crossed our radar screen, they've never been a ripple in the pond, there will be no record of them there and so it will be challenging."

"Challenging" indeed. We sometimes imagine such information must be available for everybody abroad as it is here – birth certificates, death records, driver's licenses, school records, credit card charges, and all the other tracks we leave behind us as we navigate life in a modern, information-based society.

But such tracks are rare or nonexistent in much of the world even in the best of times. And in chaotic conditions like those of Syria – or Somali or Yemen or Libya or Afghanistan – what little existed of the information trail has gone up in smoke. As FBI Assistant Director Michael Steinbach told another committee of this House, "The concern in Syria is that we don't have systems in places on the ground to collect information to vet…You're talking about a country that is a failed state, that does not have any infrastructure, so to speak. So all of the datasets – the police, the intel services – that normally you would go to to seek information doesn't exist."

Our screening of refugees resembles the joke where a drunk searches for his lost keys under the streetlight because that's where the light is. The clearest statement of this came from Matthew Emrich, who's in charge of fraud detection at USCIS, when he told a Senate hearing that "We check everything that we are aware of within US government holdings." Because that's where the light is.

Databases are not the only tool used in such screening. Many candidates for resettlement will present documents purporting to show who they are. Mr. Emrich again: "In most cases, these individuals do have documents from Syria … Our officers are trained in fraud detection."

Given the pervasive fraud in all the immigration categories overseen by USCIS, this may seem cold comfort, but ICE's Forensic Document Laboratory really does have unparalleled expertise. But the problem with relying on documents is twofold. First, many non-threatening refugees have fake documents too, and that's no bar in itself to being accepted for resettlement. There's good reason for this – people fleeing one faction or another of Syria's war of all against all may well have to lie about

who they are to avoid capture or death. But even if we could identify every fake or altered document, how are we to distinguish the non-threatening document fraudster from the threatening one?

Second, the disintegration of Syria (and Libya, etc.) means that *legitimate* blank passports and other documents are circulating widely. Veteran immigration agent Dan Cadman explains: "This is because many Syrian government offices have been overrun in the chaos of war, leaving their trove of blank documents — passports, national identity cards, driver's licenses, etc. — behind for extremist groups and criminal gangs to take advantage of."[3] ICE's Forensic Document Lab has genuine blanks of almost every country's passports for comparison, but that expertise doesn't help when false identities are inserted into these legitimate documents. Cadman again: "In such circumstances, there is no one that U.S. officers can turn to in order to verify the identity of the person who presents these facially legitimate documents."

The vulnerability of documents has been highlighted in Europe this year. Because of the preference given to Syrians, thousands of non-Syrian illegal aliens headed through Turkey to Europe have discarded their real passports and claimed to be Syrian, often presenting fraudulent documents. And one of the Paris attackers appears to have used just such a phony passport.

A final tool for screening refugees is personal interviews. It's true that experienced adjudicators can often sniff out liars and cheats from personal interaction. This works best as a supplement to other forms of screening, not as a substitute. But since those other forms are necessarily ineffective in conditions like those prevailing in the Middle East, pointing to interviews as a substitute is not encouraging. And let us not forget that the State Department's consular officers interview regular visa applicants, as well; but the presence of perhaps 5 million illegal aliens who were issued visas based on their promises made during interviews that they would go home suggests the limitations of this approach.

Finally, one would imagine that a strict vetting process would result in a relatively high rate of rejections. And yet, Barbara Strack, Chief of the USCIS Refugee Affairs Division, told the Senate hearing last month that more than 90 percent of Syrian candidates for resettlement were being approved. How stringent can the vetting of Syrian refugees really be when almost all of them are accepted?

B) *The sea within which terrorist fish swim*

The broader security problem created by refugee admissions – or by large-scale immigration of any kind from societies with large numbers of terrorists – is that they establish and constantly refresh insular communities that serve as cover and incubators for terrorism. However unwittingly, such neighborhoods, and their mosques and other institutions, fit Mao's observation regarding the peasantry's role in China's war against the Japanese: "The people are like water and the army is like fish."

The Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek, for instance, seems to have been the haven where the recent atrocities in Paris were planned and organized. Its predominantly North African-origin population is certainly mostly peaceful and unthreatening, but they nonetheless served as the water for the terrorist fish.

This applies in our own country as well. Charles E. Allen, DHS's chief intelligence officer at the time, told this House's Select Committee on Intelligence in 2007, "As previous attacks indicate, overseas extremists do not operate in a vacuum and are often linked with criminal and smuggling networks – usually connected with resident populations [in the U.S.] from their countries of origin."

One example of this phenomenon was the al Qaeda cell in the Yemeni enclave in Lackawanna, N.Y., outside Buffalo, which was broken up in 2002. Five of the six members were U.S.-born but raised in the immigrant neighborhood, which the local paper described this way:

> This is a piece of ethnic America where the Arabic-speaking Al-Jazeera television station is beamed in from Qatar through satellite dishes to Yemenite-American homes; where young children answer "Salaam" when the cell phone rings, while older children travel to the Middle East to meet their future husband or wife; where soccer moms don't seem to exist, and where girls don't get to play soccer – or, as some would say, football.[4]

No one of these factors, taken on its own, is especially remarkable in our diverse society. Even taken together, the kind of enclave they describe would be of little consequence if it were inhabited by, say, Amish or Hasidim, because those groups do not serve as "resident populations from their countries of origin" for violent extremist organizations like ISIS or al Qaeda or al Shabaab. But communities made up of refugees and immigrants from the Middle East do serve that purpose, however unwittingly – and cannot do otherwise.

The Somali community in Minneapolis is a prime example. Established through refugee resettlement, and continually expanded and refreshed by more resettlement (nearly 9,000 Somali refugees were admitted last year) as well as follow-on chain migration, it has been the source of dozens of recruits for al Shabaab and ISIS, and dozens more supporters. Just this summer, a Somali graduate of a Minnesota high school died fighting for ISIS in Syria. As the *Washington Times* noted, the refugee resettlement program "is having the unintended consequence of creating an enclave of immigrants with high unemployment that is both stressing the state's safety net and creating a rich pool of potential recruiting targets for Islamist terror groups."[5]

The combination of these two security vulnerabilities – the impossibility of vetting candidates for resettlement, plus the growth of domestic breeding grounds – is a big part of why the FBI has some 900 active investigations into domestic extremists, the vast majority related to ISIS.[6]

These investigations come in the wake of many examples of terrorism-related activities by refugees. (All parts of the immigration system have been exploited by terrorists, not just the refugee

program; see, for instance, "How Militant Islamic Terrorists Entered and Remained in the United States, 1993-2001".[7]) For instance, two al Qaeda bomb makers were arrested in Kentucky after having been resettled as refugees. Nor are they likely the only ones; ABC News reported in 2013:

> Several dozen suspected terrorist bombmakers, including some believed to have targeted American troops, may have mistakenly been allowed to move to the United States as war refugees, according to FBI agents investigating the remnants of roadside bombs recovered from Iraq and Afghanistan.[8]

Other examples: An Uzbek refugee, who presumably underwent the stringent screening that the administration boasts of, was convicted in Idaho earlier this year on terrorism charges.[9] A number of Bosnian refugees, presumably also screened, were charged this year with sending money and weapons to Islamist groups in Syrian and Iraq.[10]

Some have suggested resettling only Christians and other religious minorities from Syria, because we could be fairly certain they would not be affiliated with ISIS or al Qaeda. And indeed, there currently appears to be a policy of discrimination *against* Christian refugees; Muslims are overrepresented among the Syrians whom we have resettled, perhaps in part because the UN selects the refugees for us from its camps, and Christian refugees fear going to the camps, lest the Muslim refugees kill them, as happened this spring when Muslim passengers on a smuggling boat in the Mediterranean threw 12 people overboard to their deaths because they were Christians.

There are two problems with this approach. First, how would we know if those claiming to be Christians really are? The church records of baptism and marriage that might be useful in that regard are likely either destroyed or inaccessible, and there's nothing to stop jihadists – or even non-terrorist Muslims – from studying up on enough of the high points of Christianity to pass muster. Many Chinese illegal aliens in the United States have successfully gotten asylum by pretending to be members of China's underground Catholic or Protestant churches. How much more successful would Syrian Muslims be in such a fraud, since they are probably already familiar with many of the outward manifestations of Christian practice, given the relatively large number of Christians living there before the civil war?

The second problem with admitting only religious minorities is that resettlement of refugees of any faith is a highly inefficient means of protecting refugees. That issue of effectiveness is subject of the next section.

2. **Efficacy**

In addition to the security threats that refugee resettlement poses, any effort to extend humanitarian assistance to refugees must consider how effective it will be. This question also has two facets.

A) *More can be helped abroad*

Bringing refugees into our country makes us feel good about ourselves. Newspapers run heart-warming stories of overcoming adversity; churches embrace the objects of their charity; politicians wax nostalgic about their grandparents.

But the goal of refugee assistance is not to make us feel good. It is to assist as many people as possible with the resources available. And resettling a relative handful of them here to help us bask in our own righteousness means we are sacrificing the much larger number who could have been helped with the same resources.

The difference in cost is enormous. The Center for Immigration Studies has calculated that it costs twelve times as much to resettle a refugee in the United States as it does to care for the same refugee in the neighboring countries of first asylum, namely Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.[11] The five-year cost to American taxpayers of resettling a single Middle Eastern refugee in the United States is conservatively estimated to be more than $64,000, compared with U.N. figures that indicate it costs about $5,300 to provide for that same refugee for five years in his native region.

In other words, each refugee we bring to the United States means that eleven others are not being helped with that money. Faced with twelve drowning people, only a monster would send them a luxurious one-man boat rather than 12 life jackets. And yet, with the best of intentions, that is exactly what we are doing when we choose one lucky winner to resettle here.

Some will object that we can do both – relocate some refugees here and care for others in their native region. But money is not infinite. Every dollar the government spends is borrowed and will have to be paid back by our grandchildren. What's more, the U.N. estimates that there are 60 million refugees and internally displaced people around the world. Clearly, whatever amount we allocate to refugee protection will provide for only a fraction of the people in need.

Given these limitations on resources, I submit that it is wrong — morally wrong — to use those resources to resettle one refugee here when we could help 12 closer to their home.

There is little we can do to minimize the costs of resettling refugees. True, the private contractors the State Department pays to oversee the process are making a good living off of refugee resettlement, but reining them in won't make much difference. Most of the costs come from social services; according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, more than 90 percent of refugees from the Middle East receive food stamps and nearly three-quarters are on Medicaid or some other taxpayer-funded health care.

This dependence on taxpayer handouts should come as no surprise. Refugees arrive destitute and often traumatized. They have little education (those from the Middle East have an average of only 10.5 years of schooling), which means that even if they find work, it will pay little. And because they're poor – almost all have incomes only slightly above the poverty line – they pay little in taxes.

Of course, we don't resettle refugees for economic reasons but for humanitarian ones. And since the goal is humanitarian, a wise steward must use his resources so that they generate the greatest humanitarian return. It's also true that refugees brought here will live better than those even in well-run refugee camps in the region. But the goal of refugee protection is to provide people adequate succor until they can return home, not maximize opportunity for a select few.

B) *Success of refugee protection means people go home when conflict ends.*

A return home is the final measure of the success of any effort at refugee protection. The civil war in Syria, like a similar civil war in the 1970s and 1980s in neighboring Lebanon, eventually will come to an end. Any scheme of refugee protection should be designed with eventual repatriation in mind.

The most successful effort at returning refugees to their homes has been in Afghanistan. The UN reports that since 2002, nearly 6 million Afghan refugees have returned home from neighboring Pakistan and Iran (though many remain).[12]

While the UN doesn't track the statistic, the likelihood that refugees who've been resettled on the other side of the world will ever move back is small. It's not just that the physical distance is greater, though that is a factor. In addition, the acclimation to developed-world standards of living and norms of behavior and the assimilation of children into a new and radically different society make it vanishingly unlikely that those brought here, as opposed to those given succor in their own region, will ever choose to go home.

3. Conclusion

Congress has before it a variety of measures to address the Syrian refugee issue, including a temporary pause, a broader change in the refugee rules, and defunding proposals. As you consider how to proceed, I would urge you to keep in mind these two points:

1) The only way to reduce the security risk of resettling Syrian refugees (or those from Somalia and other failed states) is to reduce the number we resettle.

2) The government's obligation to make the most effective use of whatever tax monies we decide to devote to refugee protection compels a shift in emphasis away from resettlement and toward protection in the region.

---

[1] http://www.cis.org/rush/hearing-syrian-refugees-reassurance-and-storytelling
[2] http://www.defenseone.com/management/2015/10/chattanoogas-wake-dhs-wants-revive-terrorism-alert-system/122748/

[3] http://cis.org/cadman/why-syrian-refugee-vetting-will-be-indisputably-fallible

[4] "A separate world", *The Buffalo News*, September 23, 2002

[5] http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/feb/24/islamist-terror-groups-target-minnesota-somali-ref/?page=all

[6] http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/10/23/fbi-comey-isil-domestic-probes/74455460/

[7] http://cis.org/911-HowMilitantIslamicTerroristsEntered

[8] http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/al-qaeda-kentucky-us-dozens-terrorists-country-refugees/story?id=20931131

[9] http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/idaho-jury-convicts-uzbek-refugee-terror-charges-article-1.2323902

[10] http://news.yahoo.com/bosnians-reject-hatred-wake-terror-financing-case-060550317.html

[11] http://cis.org/High-Cost-of-Resettling-Middle-Eastern-Refugees

[12] http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4f9016576.html