



**Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.**

Statement submitted to the Committee on the Judiciary of the U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing: “The Current State of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program”

February 27, 2020

The story of refugees in America is not a new one. It did not begin with the arrival of thousands of American allies from Southeast Asia in the 1980s, or the arrival of Cubans or Bosnians, or more American allies from Iraq and Afghanistan. It did not begin in the aftermath of WWII when the world witnessed the horror and devastation that results from closing borders to those in need, and in turn responded by ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention. The story of refugees in America starts with the earliest arrivals from other countries. Beginning with the pilgrims, English Protestants that sought freedom to practice their religion, America has represented a place of refuge and been a country where refugees have made extraordinary contributions to the United States.

HIAS, the American Jewish community’s refugee organization, is proud of the role we have played in this story. Since our founding 139 years ago on New York’s Lower East Side, providing assistance to newly arrived Jewish immigrants, HIAS has stood for welcome. We have helped more than 4.5 million people start their lives as new Americans, many of them having fled their countries because of religious persecution. Today, guided by our history and values, HIAS—along with eight other national agencies—resettles refugees regardless of religion, race, or nationality. Refugees resettled in the U.S. have a chance to rebuild their lives in freedom, dignity, and safety. In return, our communities are enriched, and oftentimes revitalized.

The necessity of a robust U.S. refugee resettlement program is perhaps now more important than ever. The world is experiencing the worst forced displacement crisis in recorded history. Over 70 million people, 25.9 million of whom are refugees, are displaced from their homes. Whenever we, as a global community, are faced with human suffering, Americans must decide how we will respond as a nation. For example, in 1981, President Ronald Reagan remarked, “More than any other country, our strength comes from our own immigration heritage and our capacity to welcome those from other lands....We shall continue America’s tradition as a land that welcomes peoples from other countries. We shall also, with other countries, continue to share in the responsibility of welcoming and resettling those who flee oppression.¹” The sentiment of President Reagan’s words still holds true today, in spite of the fact that the United States refugee resettlement program is currently shrinking, despite historical bipartisan support. There is no greater evidence of this support than the passage of the *1980 Refugee Act*, which formally established the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) 40 years ago.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/31/us/reagan-s-statement-on-immigration.html>

Since then, the U.S. has proudly resettled over three million refugees. Welcoming refugees has enhanced our local economies and communities, strengthened our foreign policy, and bolstered our standing in the world as a leader for freedom. For nearly 40 years, the refugee admissions goal (also known as the Presidential Determination, or PD) averaged 95,000 per year, with actual admissions averaging 85,000 refugees per year. Yet, in FY2018, the PD was lowered to 45,000, and we only admitted 22,491 refugees. In FY2019, the PD was set at 30,000, a goal that was reached. In spite of that, this fiscal year, the Trump administration set the admissions ceiling to an all-time historic low of 18,000. Furthermore, unless the pace of arrival numbers picks up, we will not be able to meet this year's PD, with only 5,821 refugees having arrived as we near the midpoint of the fiscal year.

The challenges confronting the USRAP are not just about the ever lowering PD. This administration has set up multiple obstacles to reduce the number of refugee arrivals to the United States, including through the issuance of a series of executive orders. For example, in January 2017, the administration issued an executive order halting refugee admissions for 120 days, reducing the number of refugees allowed to resettle to the U.S. that fiscal year from 110,000 to 50,000, and prohibiting the entry of foreign nationals from seven (later changed to six) Muslim-majority countries. In October 2017, the administration issued another refugee ban, prohibiting refugee arrivals for 90 days from some of the world's largest refugee producing countries, including Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. That particular executive order also suspended an important family reunification mechanism for refugee families, leaving families torn apart indefinitely.

In addition, at the end of last year, the administration issued the latest executive order targeting the USRAP. *Executive Order 13888* allowed governors and local elected officials to essentially veto resettlement in their states and communities. Before the implementation of the EO was put on pause due to a preliminary injunction in the case of *HIAS v. Trump*, 43 governors, including 19 Republicans, stated that they want resettlement to continue in their states.

The challenges we face today are not small, but as evidenced by the recent response to the administration's most recent executive order, all across this country, support remains strong for refugee resettlement. This support is not just rooted in the humanitarian foundation of the USRAP. Americans recognize that refugees start businesses, pay taxes, and purchase goods and services. They help to revitalize cities and create new jobs. While there is an investment to be made in resettling refugees, there is also a tremendous gain.

As a Jewish organization, HIAS is all too familiar with what can happen when the United States turns its back on refugees. In 1939, the United States refused to let the S.S. St. Louis dock in our country, sending over 900 Jewish refugees back to Europe, where many died in concentration camps. We must learn from our mistakes and make sure that we do not allow history to repeat itself. Our community, which owes its very existence to the American tradition of welcoming refugees, will continue to stand in support of the USRAP and will continue to honor the Torah's mandate to "welcome the stranger."