

G.O.P. Governors Vow to Close Doors to Syrian Refugees

Patrick Healy, Julie Bosman : 10-13 minutes : 11/16/2015

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Several Republican governors said they opposed letting Syrian refugees enter their states after the terrorist attacks in Paris on Friday. CreditCredit...Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

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Republican fury over illegal immigration and border security took on a new dimension Monday as a growing number of governors, presidential candidates and members of Congress rushed to oppose or even defy President Obama's plan to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees.

Twenty-five Republican governors vowed to block the entry of Syrian refugees into their states, arguing that the safety of Americans was at stake after the [Paris attacks](#) by terrorists including a man who entered Europe with a Syrian passport and posed as a migrant. Among the governors were those from Illinois, Massachusetts, Texas and other states that have already resettled relatively large numbers of refugees from among the 1,900 Syrians accepted by the United States in the last four years.

One Democratic governor, Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, also urged the Obama administration to stop taking in Syrians until the federal vetting procedures for all refugees are “as strong as possible.”

Echoing the political debate over immigration and border security, several governors warned that refugees could arrive without verifiable documents or slip through the screening process and that they could pose a terrorist threat once here. “I’m not interested in accepting refugees from Syria,” said Gov. Charlie Baker of Massachusetts, a Republican. “We would have to be very cautious about accepting folks without knowing a lot more about what the federal government’s plan looks like.”

The governors’ legal standing was quickly challenged by immigration groups and some Democrats, and Mr. Obama said the resettlement of refugees would go forward next year. The State Department said it had not reached a conclusion about whether states could legally refuse them.

Mr. Obama, in remarks to reporters at the G-20 summit meeting in Turkey, said the United States had a moral obligation to accept refugees, as European nations have done, and he criticized Republican candidates like Senator Ted Cruz and former Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida who have said the United States should focus on protecting Christians fleeing warfare and persecution, as opposed to Muslims.



Image

Gov. Charlie Baker of Massachusetts in January. Mr. Baker said he "was not interested in accepting refugees from Syria."Credit...Maddie Meyer/Getty Images



“We do not have religious tests for our compassion,” Mr. Obama said. “That’s not who we are.”

Mr. Obama did not cite any Republicans by name, but he mentioned that “some of these folks themselves come from other countries” — a shot at Mr. Cruz, who was born in Canada and whose father fled Cuba and settled in the United States.

Mr. Cruz, campaigning in Charleston, S.C., after Mr. Obama’s remarks, called it “absolute lunacy” to resettle large numbers of Muslims from Syria. “Who in their right mind would want to bring over tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, when we cannot determine, when the administration cannot determine, who is and isn’t a terrorist?” he asked.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Cruz said he would introduce a bill to keep Syrian refugees from entering the United States, though it was not immediately clear if the ban would apply only to Muslims or to all refugees.

Image



Gov. Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire in Manchester last month. Ms. Hassan urged the Obama administration to stop taking in Syrians until the federal vetting procedures for all refugees are “as strong as possible.” Credit...Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist for The New York Times



The intersection of the refugee crisis with the nation's immigration debate came as political leaders hastened to reckon with security concerns after the Paris attacks. Several Republican candidates and congressional leaders have been calling for enhanced border security, some of them portraying illegal border crossings as being just as much a potential terrorist threat as an immigration problem. Mr. Bush, Ben Carson and Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, among others, want to make verifiable border security a prerequisite to considering a legal status for undocumented immigrants now in the country.

Speaking on Monday evening at a Washington forum hosted by The Wall Street Journal, Mr. Rubio said he would prefer that the United States support resettling Syrian migrants in the Middle East rather than here. "Here's the problem. You allow 10,000 people in. And 9,999 of them are innocent people feeling oppression. And one of them is a well-trained ISIS fighter," he said. "What if we get one of them wrong? Just one of them wrong."

Many of the Republican-led states rebelling against the Syrian refugee program were also among 26 states, led by Texas, that brought a lawsuit against Mr. Obama's executive actions to give deportation protections to undocumented immigrants. After the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit last week upheld a district court's halt to those programs, the White House said it would appeal to the Supreme Court to try to get them restarted before the end of Mr. Obama's term.

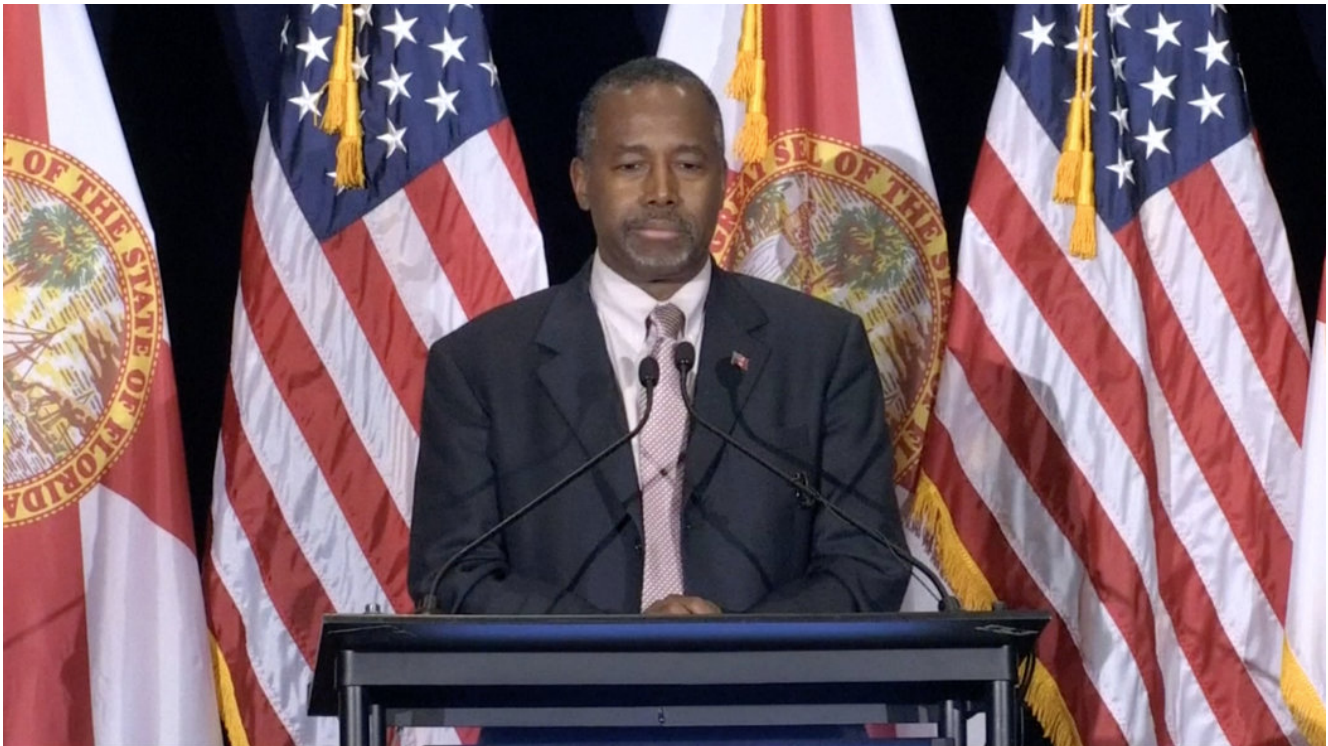
Border enforcement and vetting systems were repeatedly cited by Republican politicians opposed to admitting more Syrian refugees into the country. Some Republican voters have made a link between the two as well,

expressing fear about shadowy foreigners entering the country for uncertain purposes.

Some of the fiercest opposition to the refugees came from the Republican presidential candidates who are the sharpest critics of Mr. Obama's immigration policies. Donald J. Trump, who elevated immigration as a campaign issue with his proposal to build a wall on the border with Mexico, on Monday called for deporting refugees who have already been accepted into the United States and said that federal counterterrorism agents should consider [closing some mosques](#) if evidence of "absolute hatred" for Westerners was found.

Mr. Carson sent a letter to House Speaker Paul D. Ryan on Monday urging legislation to cut off any money to resettle refugees and migrants from Syria. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky introduced a bill to halt issuing visas for refugees fleeing Islamic State militants. And two Republican governors running for president, John R. Kasich of Ohio and Chris Christie of New Jersey, said the United States should stop accepting Syrians because of safety and vetting concerns.

Video



Hillary Rodham Clinton, Ben Carson and Donald J. Trump, Republican and Democratic presidential candidates, addressed the idea of fighting the Islamic State, and taking in Syrian refugees after attacks in Paris on Friday.

The three Democratic candidates for president support resettling Syrians, with Hillary Rodham Clinton and Martin O'Malley both saying they supported accepting 65,000. The third candidate, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, has said he would accept more refugees but has not specified how many. No other Democratic governor has come out against accepting Syrian refugees besides Ms. Hassan, who is in a highly competitive Senate race against a Republican incumbent, Kelly Ayotte. The Democratic candidate for governor of Louisiana, State Representative John Bel Edwards, who faces a runoff election on Saturday, also called for a "pause" on the influx of refugees there.

Mark Dayton, the Democratic governor of Minnesota, where nine Syrian refugees have settled, said the White House had assured him “that all refugees are subject to the highest level of security checks of any category of traveler to the United States.”

But many Republican governors, who have been frustrated for years about porous borders and the financial consequences of illegal immigration, said they did not want the added burden of monitoring Syrian refugees for signs of terrorist activity. Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas released a letter to Mr. Obama on Monday saying that Texas “will not accept any refugees from Syria” because of security concerns. In Indiana, Gov. Mike Pence said that while his state “has a long tradition of opening our arms and homes to refugees from around the world,” his “first responsibility is to ensure the safety and security of all Hoosiers.”

Opposition to the refugee plan intensified as governors and congressional Republicans issued statements by the hour. Gov. Terry E. Branstad of Iowa took conflicting positions hours apart: In the morning he had only urged the president to exercise caution in vetting refugees, but by the evening he had cited the safety of Iowans in saying that no Syrians should be resettled there.

Speaking in the Senate on Monday, Senator Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa and chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said Mr. Obama should call a “timeout” on his plans to admit Syrian refugees. “We need to figure out how we can better screen these refugees and ensure that terrorists among them are not evading proper screenings,” Mr. Grassley said.

A State Department spokesman, Mark Toner, said the administration was “steadfastly committed” to accepting 10,000 Syrians but had not reached a conclusion about the legality of the states’ position.

Governors can ask the State Department, the primary agency managing the refugee program, not to send Syrians to their states. But some legal scholars were adamant that the governors’ efforts to bar Syrians on their own were unconstitutional.

“This is an exclusively federal issue,” said Laurence H. Tribe, a professor of constitutional law at Harvard University. “Under our Constitution, we sink or swim together,” he said.

Yet many Republicans cited language in their state constitutions that they said justified blocking refugees, while others challenged Mr. Obama’s motives.

Representative Steve King of Iowa, a fierce critic of the nation’s immigration system, used his endorsement of Mr. Cruz on Monday to draw a connection between Mr. Obama’s refugee plan and his executive orders to block the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Both actions, he said, were intended to counter low fertility rates of native-born citizens and “fill America up in a fashion that has kicked sideways this thing that we’ve embraced for my lifetime, which is called assimilation into the American dream, the American civilization.”

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