Syrian refugees in America: separating fact from fiction in the debate

Obama has condemned more than half of the US’s governors as ‘un-American’ for saying they will no longer provide placement for Syrian refugees. Who is right?

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Congressional Republicans voted on Thursday to [make it more difficult for refugees from Syria and Iraq to come to the US](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/19/house-passes-bill-adding-barriers-for-syrian-and-iraqi-refugees-to-us) as the fallout from last Friday’s Isis terrorist attacks in Paris continues.

In addition, more than half of the US’s governors have said they will no longer provide placement for Syrian refugees, arguing that they pose too great a risk to national security.

New Jersey governor and Republican presidential candidate Chris Christie has[said](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqAmDX5fGTU) his state will not take in any refugees – “not even orphans under the age of five”.

Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal has said he has directed state police to “[track](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/11/17/bobby-jindal-suspends-2016-presidential-campaign/)” the Syrian refugees in his state, [something his state police have played down](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/18/louisiana-police-deny-bobby-jindal-syria-refugees).

GOP presidential hopefuls Ted Cruz and Jeb Bush have [suggested](http://www.thenation.com/article/republicans-want-to-use-religious-tests-to-bar-refugees-from-the-us/) the US government prioritize Christian refugees.

[Barack Obama](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/barack-obama) has pledged to veto the legislation, and has condemned the anti-refugee comments as “un-American”, but experts worry the backlash could have dangerous consequences if these claims go unchecked.

“Sowing fear of refugees is exactly the kind of response groups like Isis are seeking,” said Iain Levine, deputy executive director for program at Human Rights Watch, on Thursday. “Yes, governments need to bring order to refugee processing and weed out militant extremists, but now more than ever they also need to stand with people uprooted from their homes by ideologies of hatred and help them find real protection.”

Here we try to separate fact from fiction in the US debate over Syrian refugees.

**Could dangerous refugees come to the US and carry out a Paris-style attack?**

The American backlash against refugees is based largely on the fear that a Paris-style attack could be replicated in America if the US began to shoulder its burden of the refugee crisis.

But [such a fear is misguided](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/18/should-americans-fear-an-attack-like-what-happened-in-paris) because the process of relocating refugees to America is very different from the way that refugees currently arrive in Europe. Syrians flown to the US will be the most heavily vetted group of people currently allowed into the US, [according to the State Department](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/249613.htm).

Each candidate is vetted first by the UN’s refugee agency, and then separately by officials from the State Department, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the Defense Department. The process takes between 18 months and two years.

By contrast, a refugee hoping to reach [Europe](http://www.theguardian.com/world/europe-news) can pay a smuggler approximately $1,000 (£660) to take them in a dinghy across the six-mile-wide strait between Turkey and the Greek islands.

Upon arrival, a refugee is fingerprinted and then allowed to reach the European mainland even if they do not have identification documents. They are then transported through a succession of European countries until they reach more welcoming countries, such as Germany, Austria and Sweden, where many of them claim asylum. Due to Europe’s Schengen system, which allows anyone to pass between most of the countries in the EU without having to show their passport, a migrant could then easily reach [Paris](http://www.theguardian.com/world/paris) without ever being given a background check by any government official.

**Is the US taking in large numbers of Syrian refugees?**

Despite fears that an influx of Syrian refugees would overrun the country, so far, the US has welcomed just a fraction of the millions of refugees who have fled Syria. Since 2012, the US has accepted [2,174](https://twitter.com/Psaki44/status/666734582750838784) Syrian refugees – roughly 0.0007% of America’s total population.

The refugees the US takes in are among the most vulnerable in the Syrian conflict: many are women and their children, while others are religious minorities and victims of violence or torture.

Obama has committed to [taking 10,000 Syrian refugees](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/10/syrian-refugees-obama-us-admit-more-fiscal-2016) in the coming year, five times the number the US has taken in the past four years. Were the country to take in an additional 10,000 Syrians, they would still only represent approximately 0.004% of its existing population. This ratio stands in marked contrast with the much poorer and much smaller countries bearing the biggest burden of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Lebanon, whose population was previously an estimated 4.5 million, now has a Syrian refugee population of roughly 1.2 million – meaning that around one in five Lebanese residents is a Syrian refugee. Turkey, which houses more Syrian refugees than any other country, has welcomed 2 million, or 2.67% of its total population of 75 million.

EU member states agreed in September to relocate 160,000 people in “clear need of international protection” through a scheme set up to relocate Syrian, Eritrean and Iraqi refugees from the most affected EU states – such as Greece and Italy – to others.

So far only 158 refugees have been relocated. However, the relocation scheme is only one facet of how Europe is dealing with the wider refugee crisis. Some 880,000 asylum applications have been lodged across the EU’s 28 member states so far this year, compared with 625,920 in all of 2014 and 431,090 in 2013. This year’s figures have been the highest on record.

More than 230,000 Syrians have applied for asylum across the EU this year, and nearly 45% of these applications have been lodged in Germany alone.

Nearly 80,000 Syrians have been granted asylum in the EU so far this year. But the figure for migrants granted asylum does not reveal the full scale of the number of people that some European countries are welcoming. Filing and processing paperwork takes time.

For example, between January and October, Germany registered the arrival of 243,721 asylum seekers from [Syria](http://www.theguardian.com/world/syria). The country expects to receive more than a million asylum seekers this year.

Canada resettled 3,089 Syrian refugees between 1 January 2014 and 3 November 2015. However, recently elected prime minister [Justin Trudeau has committed to resettling 25,000 Syrians by the end of the year](http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?crtr.sj1D=&crtr.mnthndVl=12&mthd=advSrch&crtr.dpt1D=6664&nid=1019909&crtr.lc1D=&crtr.tp1D=1&crtr.yrStrtVl=2014&crtr.kw=&crtr.dyStrtVl=1&crtr.aud1D=&crtr.mnthStrtVl=1&crtr.page=1&crtr.yrndVl=2015&crtr.dyndVl=31).

**Are Syrian refugees likely to be Isis sympathizers?**

Syrian refugees are generally afraid of exactly the same thing that Americans are: Islamist terrorism. Many are fleeing areas held by the [Islamic State](http://www.theguardian.com/world/isis), and they are doing so in contravention of Isis edicts. On a dozen occasions, Isis has condemned refugees for fleeing Isis areas.

“For those who want to blame the attacks on Paris on refugees, you might want to get your facts straight,” wrote Aaron Zelin, an analyst of jihadis, [in a blogpost](http://jihadology.net/2015/11/14/the-islamic-state-on-refugees-leaving-syria/). “The reality is, [Isis] loathes that individuals are fleeing Syria for Europe. It undermines [Isis’s] message that its self-styled Caliphate is a refuge.”

By rejecting Syrian refugees, American governors are in fact helping Isis, because they are proving Isis’s argument that the west does not want to assist Syrian Muslims, and that their only salvation lies in Isis.

“Syrian and Iraqi refugees are the victims of terrorism, fleeing the same type of atrocities that we’ve recently witnessed,” said Shelly Pitterman, of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for [Refugees](http://www.theguardian.com/world/refugees) (UNHCR) on Wednesday. “They’ve rejected the ideology of extremism and share the values of freedom and tolerance.”

**Are governors able to ban Syrian refugees?**

More than half of the US’s governors have said they will not relocate refugees in their state, even though it is not within their power to do so. The US government has sole authority over whether immigrants and refugees of any nationality enter the US.

Yet because of the way the government works with states to resettle refugees, there are actions states could take to disrupt the process. States can wield the power they do have to block funding from funneling through to programs that serve refugees, such as English language classes and job training programs designed to help them integrate into society.

“There is some soft power being exerted by the states here even if there’s not hard legal ground for the state to stand on,” said Pratheepan Gulasekaram, an associate professor of law at Santa Clara University. “If this becomes a trend, I think it sets an extremely dangerous precedent.”

To distinguish which refugees will or will not be resettled based on their religion or national origin raises constitutional and legal problems, Gulasekaram said, adding: “States can’t pick and choose amongst refugees.”

“Accepting refugees into the United States is one of our grandest traditions. And we’ve been doing it since the beginning even before we were a nation,” said Lee Williams, vice-president and chief financial officer of [US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants](http://www.refugees.org/), one of the nine [nine national agencies](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/voluntary-agencies) that handle refugee resettlement in the US.

“It would be a real black mark on the United States’s reputation were we to stop this process, though I hope we won’t get to that point.”

* This article was amended on 19 November 2015 to correct the percentage difference were the US to take in an additional 10,000 Syrians per year.