



# Q & A ON THE REFUGEE CRISIS

## Just the Facts . . .

For some time now, refugees have been making headlines. As we face the worst refugee crisis since World War II,<sup>i</sup> there are some FACTS worth knowing . . .

- By the end of 2017, there were 68.5 million men, women, and children across the world forced to flee their homes because of conflict and/or persecution (up nearly 3 million from the previous year).<sup>ii</sup>
- Of these 68.5 million people:
  - 40 million were forced to relocate within the borders of their countries, referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>iii</sup>
  - 25.4 million were forced to leave their home countries as refugees.<sup>iv</sup>
  - 13,208,000 million were children (that is, 52% of these 25.4 million refugees).<sup>v</sup>
  - These numbers, which continue to rise, are breaking UN Refugee Agency records.<sup>vi</sup>
- While the greatest number of people recently driven from their homes are from the Syrian conflict, the majority of refugees, IDPs, stateless people (individuals without a country or nationality due to, for example, political persecution), and asylum seekers (individuals seeking sanctuary in another country, who are still waiting for a decision on their refugee status) still come from other countries including:
  - Across Central America
  - Afghanistan
  - Burma
  - Burundi
  - Democratic Republic of Congo
  - Iraq
  - South Sudan
  - Somalia
  - Ukraine
  - Yemen

This crisis of uprooted men, women and children continues to escalate as new conflicts break out, long running wars drag on, gang violence overwhelms government security causing people to flee, authoritarian regimes violate human rights, and state-sponsored terrorism persists.

## **How many people around the world have been forced to leave their homes?**

There are currently 7.4 billion people in the world. That means that just under 1% of all the people on Earth have had to leave behind the lives they had built due to imminent danger.

## **What happens when a person is forcibly displaced?**

Displacement can disrupt all aspects of a person's life, whether they are a refugee, IDP, stateless or seeking asylum. Displaced people often lose—or are separated from—their family members. They also may lose the ability to earn a living, go to school, live in proper housing, vote, and receive health care. These life crises are often exacerbated when they lack proper documentation. And for many, there is also long-lasting psychological or physical trauma.<sup>vii</sup> The consequences of displacement, such as interruption or the complete cessation of schooling, can last a lifetime, if not generations. (To learn more, listen to the personal stories from former refugees in videos listed among the additional resources below.)

## **What do we mean when we talk about “refugees”?**

Refugees are people who are forced to flee their homes due to targeted threats against them amid conflict, persecution or violence, and who go to live in a new country in order to escape. A person can become a refugee if he or she is persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group that has a protected status.

The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who:

*...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...*

Escaping violence more generally does not necessarily mean that someone will be considered a refugee. To qualify as a person with refugee status, the individual involved must have a rational (“well-founded”) fear that he or she will be subjected to an attack or violence because of political realities or because they belong to one of several identifying groups (religious, ethnic, etc.).<sup>viii</sup>

## **Are the people seeking to enter our country from the southern border of the U.S. refugees?**

The data suggests that many of those seeking to enter our country from the southern border are likely to be refugees.

According to a UNHCR survey in 2015, of 404 unaccompanied children from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, 58% “were forcibly displaced because they suffered or face harms that indicated a potential or actual need for international protection.”<sup>ix</sup>

## **Where do most of the world’s refugees come from?**

As of the end of 2017, the three countries from which most refugees were Syria (6.3 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million), and South Sudan (2.4 million).<sup>x</sup>

These figures reflect the number of refugees registered with a State or international body (such as the UN). It is estimated that there are significant numbers of unregistered displaced persons all over the world, including hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees.<sup>xi</sup>

## ***Where do most of the world's refugees go?***

Currently, Turkey is among the states through which the largest proportion of refugees (3.5 million) have travelled with many resettling, followed by Pakistan with 1.4 million. Often, these nations have served as an initial entry point from which refugees later travel to other jurisdictions; for example, in a recent two-year period, notwithstanding its size, 1.3 million refugees traveled through Greece as they fled persecution.<sup>xii</sup> Lebanon has the largest ratio of refugees to Lebanese citizens (i.e., the refugee to host population ratio).<sup>xiii</sup> Of all refugees worldwide, 86% of refugees are hosted in developing nations, while the world's five richest nations (U.S., China, Japan, Germany, and the U.K.) host 5%.<sup>xiv</sup>

## ***Where did most of the U.S. refugees come from last year?<sup>xv</sup>***

During the 2017 fiscal year (October 1, 2016-September 30, 2017), the United States admitted 53,716 refugees. Most came from the Democratic Republic of Congo (9,377), Iraq (6,886), and Syria (6,557).<sup>xvi</sup>

## ***What are the refugees' religions?<sup>xvii</sup>***

Between 2002-2017, the U.S. admitted approximately 924,000 refugees. Of these refugees, approximately 425,057 were Christian (46%), and approximately 302,559 were Muslim (33%). The rest included Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, the unaffiliated and other minorities. During the 2017 fiscal year, the U.S. admitted roughly equal numbers of Christian and Muslim refugees (47% and 43% respectively).<sup>xviii</sup>

## ***What is the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980?***

The U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 is the Congressional Act that has guided U.S. refugee policy since 1980. It established a more uniform way of providing assistance to refugees via the federal Refugee Resettlement Program, a public-private partnership that works with refugees who arrive to the U.S. to help them with economic and social integration, such as establishing a home, learning English and starting on a path to possible citizenship.

The Act also redefined the legal definition of "refugee" in U.S. law to more closely align with the definition used by the United Nation's 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and distinguished refugees from asylum seekers (those seeking admission to the U.S. while overseas, versus those seeking admission after arriving on U.S. shores). The Act also established a more systematic yet flexible framework for screening applicants to be admitted into the U.S. as refugees. The protocols and admissions cap outlined by the 1980 Act are continuously amended to make adjustments in light of world events and American politics.

Since becoming law in 1980, the U.S. has settled about 3 million refugees.<sup>xix</sup> Over the past decade, most have come from Burma (159,692) and Iraq (135,643).<sup>xx</sup>

## ***How do we Vet refugees? How long does it take?***

The U.S. vetting process generally lasts 1.5 - 2 years,<sup>xxi</sup> though at least one organization involved with refugees notes that it can be as long as 3 years<sup>xxii</sup>. During this time, the applicant must remain abroad, as

the U.S. does not allow refugees to enter until the vetting process is complete.<sup>xxiii</sup> (Note: this is different from the process in Europe).<sup>xxiv</sup>

The process in the U.S. requires rigorous interviews by at least 8 different U.S. government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, the National Counterterrorism Center/Intelligence Community and the State Department. The process also includes database research (global terrorist watch lists, Interpol information searches, etc.), health screenings, and in some cases, biometrics data (e.g. an iris scan and/or fingerprint).<sup>xxv</sup> Throughout the process, new information is sought and assessed for any problems that would require a shift in the U.S. government's assessment on whether to grant someone refugee status.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Currently, Syrians are subject to enhanced vetting under the Syria Enhanced Review process. Their case files are reviewed more intensely before interviews, and questions delve deeper.<sup>xxvii</sup>

## ***How have refugees to the U.S. changed over the last 40 years?***

The demographic composition of refugees coming to the U.S. shifts over time and reflects changing world events. For example, the U.S. received an influx of refugees from Vietnam in 1975, while nationals fled the former Soviet states and arrived in volume during the early 1980s. As noted above, today they are from Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia.

## ***Do shifting refugee demographics affect public opinion?***

Not really. Among those polled over the past 80 years, U.S. public opinion has been relatively consistent. In general, the public usually opposes proposals for significant refugee resettlement (in the thousands) regardless of the particular population. In 1938, for example, the Americans polled opposed admitting Germans, Austrians, and other political refugees fleeing European dictatorships. Examples of such public opinion opposition exist throughout U.S. history:

- in 1939, the U.S. public disapproved of admitting 10,000 refugee children from Germany,<sup>xxviii</sup>
- in 1958, Hungarians fleeing communism,
- in 1979, Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians,
- in 1980, Cubans, and
- in 1994, both Cubans and Haitians.<sup>xxix</sup>

One notable exception occurred in 1999, when 500,000 Kosovars were displaced (both internally and as refugees) during the conflict in Kosovo. Though 31% of Americans still said the U.S. should do less than the government proposed (which was to accept 20,000 Kosovar refugees), 44% of the country supported providing a safe haven to all 20,000.<sup>xxx</sup>

## ***What's the difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker?***

According to U.S. law, a refugee is a person who seeks sanctuary in the U.S. while residing abroad. An asylum seeker is a person who seeks sanctuary in the U.S. after already arriving on its shores.<sup>xxxi</sup> Differently, the UK defines a refugee as a person who has attained asylee status by the UK (legal recognition by the government that the person qualifies as a refugee and has been granted permission to stay), while an asylum seeker is a person who has applied for sanctuary but has not yet received a decision.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The processing systems for and meaning of the terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker” may vary across countries in the EU (and elsewhere). Yet, everywhere, the two terms share the requirement that the person is fleeing imminent danger due to their identity or politics.

## **What’s the difference between refugees, immigrants and migrants?**

Starting most broadly, migrants can be understood as people who have moved either within or outside their home country for a variety of reasons and not necessarily because violence has forced this upon them. Immigrants are people who leave their homes and home countries but, again, for a variety of reasons including but not limited to duress (for example, immigrants include people who move to a new country in search of improved future prospects).<sup>xxxiii</sup> As noted above, a refugee (and persons seeking asylum) are fleeing their home nations due to *personal* imminent danger from conflict or persecution.

In contrast to the broader terms “immigrant” or “migrant,” refugees possess special status under international law, and nations that signed onto the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol (see below), have particular responsibilities. For example, a hosting state cannot return refugees or asylum seekers to their home state if they’ll be subjected to persecution.

In accordance with international law, U.S. law provides more protection, an easier pathway to citizenship, and more economic and social assistance to refugees than it does to immigrants.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

## **What’s the difference between a refugee and an IDP?**

IDP stands for Internally Displaced Persons. This refers to a person who is forced to flee his or her home due to conflict or persecution<sup>xxxv</sup>, but still remains within the borders of his or her home country after fleeing. By the end of 2017, there were 40 million IDPs worldwide—twice the number of refugees—as a result of conflict and persecution (as opposed to natural disaster, which is responsible for thousands more).<sup>xxxvi</sup>

## **Which 3 countries have the largest number of IDPs?**

As of the end of 2017, the countries with the most IDPs were Colombia (7.7 million), Syria (6.2 million), and Democratic Republic of the Congo (4.4 million).<sup>xxxvii</sup>

## **What does it mean to be Stateless?**

According to international law (based on the 1954 UN Convention about Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness), a stateless person is one who lacks citizenship entirely (is not recognized as a national by any country). According to a 2015 UN estimate, 810,000<sup>xxxviii</sup> Muslim Rohingya in Burma, for example, are not legally considered citizens according to a 1982 Burmese nationality law, despite having lived in Burma for generations. Effectively, this law renders them stateless and unable to exercise many of the privileges of citizenship. For stateless Rohingya people, this has meant that they have severely restricted access to basic human rights, including education, voting, adequate health care and freedom of movement.<sup>xxxix</sup> This is often called institutionalized discrimination, in which a nation state’s actions limit or prevent one group within its borders from accessing basic rights.

## What is the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees?

The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees is a legal document ratified by 145 countries in 1951. The U.S was not a signatory to the Convention.<sup>xi</sup> It defines the term *refugee*, outlines refugee rights, and sets forth the legal obligations of signatories to protect refugees.<sup>xii</sup> When the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees reaffirmed most provisions of the Convention, and removed geographic<sup>xiii</sup> and temporal restrictions that had been in the original version, the U.S. ratified the new Protocol.<sup>xiiii</sup>

## Where can I learn more?

There is a lot of information to learn. One place to start is with the additional resources below!

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:**

[80 years apart, these two refugees have more in common than you'd think](#) (video) UNICEF

[My escape from North Korea](#) (video) Hyeonsoo Lee | TED Talks

[Kids In Camps](#) (This short documentary film follows the lives South Sudanese children living in temporary camps within South Sudan and refugee camps just across the border in Northern Uganda.) Real Stories

[The Desperate Conditions Inside a Serbian Migrant Camp](#) The New York Times

[I Went Through America's Extreme Vetting](#)

[Seeking peace, Central African refugees turn out to vote](#) UNHCR

[What does it mean to be a refugee?](#) (video) Benedetta Berti and Evelien Borgman | TEDEd

[Figures at a Glance](#) UNHCR (The UN Refugee Agency)

[Key facts about the world's refugees](#) Pew Research Center

[Key facts about refugees to the U.S.](#) Pew Research Center

[The basics of refugee processing and security screening in the U.S.](#) (video) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

[U.S. Refugees Admissions Program flow chart](#) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

[Refugee Security Screening in the U.S. fact sheet](#) U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

[A Well-Founded Fear - Human Rights Obligations and the Refugee Crisis](#) (video) New York City Bar Association

[Enough "alternative facts": Here's the truth about refugees and the travel ban](#) International Rescue Committee

[Let's Help Refugees Thrive, Not Just Survive](#) (video) Melissa Fleming | TED Talks

[A list of famous refugees](#) International Rescue Committee

[4.1 Miles](#) The New York Times: A short documentary film nominated for a 2017 Oscar that details the efforts made by ordinary Greek citizens to assist refugees sent from Turkey to Greek-islands. The New York Times.

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