

POLICY BRIEF | VISITING SCHOLAR SERIES

U.S. REFUGEE SETTLEMENT: SHOULD AMERICA ALLOW FEARS TO DISPLACE COMPASSION?

By: John Thon Majok

John Thon Majok spoke at the Tower Center & International Rescue Committee
Global Refugee Symposium September 13, 2018.

The United States refugee policy is codified in the Refugee Act of 1980, which provides an indisputable evidence of American humanitarian ideals as a welcoming nation. Established by this Act, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program bridges the gap between American values and practices. Dismantling the resettlement program because of misplaced fears would jeopardize American interests and reputation. It is in the best interest of the U.S. to continue to demonstrate global leadership without letting fear drive out its compassion and welcoming tradition.

Of the 68.5 million forcibly displaced people reported by UNHCR, 25.4 million are refugees who have fled their homes because of conflict and persecution. This unprecedented forced displacement necessitates the need for U.S. leadership to protect vulnerable refugees and advance peace. Refugees are victims of war, not perpetrators of crime or insecurity.

Evidence suggests that the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program is a net positive for America and the security risks related to it are low. A Cato Institute Risk Analysis finds that the “chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack caused by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year.” On the economy, the New American Economy study shows that refugees are positive contributors to the U.S. workforce: In 2015, refugees contributed a total income of \$77.2 billion of which \$20.9 billion was paid in federal and state taxes. The National Bureau of Economic Research calculates that “on average, the U.S. spends \$15,148 in relocation costs and \$92,217 in social benefits over an adult refugee’s first 20 years in the country. Over that same period, the average adult refugee pays \$128,659 in taxes – \$21,324 more than the benefits received.”

While integration experience differs from individual refugee to another, research shows that about 84 percent of refugees who have been in the U.S. for 16 to 25 years become American citizens and more than 57 percent own their homes. Contrary to some misconceptions, “Refugees embody the ideals of freedom, endurance, and

self-sacrifice, and their presence closes the gap between U.S. ideals and its practices.” Being welcomed by local community, getting a job, and having education skills are some of the factors that facilitate refugee integration.

Despite some legitimate concerns in refugee resettlement, The Heritage Foundation concludes that the program “does currently contribute to a stronger U.S.” Abolishing the program would feed into negative propaganda and

“Fear is such a powerful emotion for humans that when we allow it to take us over, it drives compassion right out of our hearts.” - Thomas Aquinas

ideology of terrorists, especially when policymakers overreact with fear. According to the Center for Migration Studies, “Terrorism succeeds when it provokes overreaction...exaggeration of a program’s risks can undermine security.” Policy decisions should be based on evidence, not on fears.

Refugee protection advances U.S. national interest because refugees contribute to American economic vitality, diplomatic strength, civic values, cultural diversity, and resilience. A good refugee policy addresses both the concern for sovereignty and respect for international obligations to protect refugees. The U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 and the 1951 UN Geneva Convention on Refugees have addressed these issues. Applying and complying with the existing laws would reconcile public safety with refugee protection while maintaining U.S. reputation as a welcoming nation that lives up to its ideals.

Questions? Reach out to John Thon Majok directly:

JOHNTHON.MAJOK@WILSONCENTER.ORG



SMU | John Goodwin Tower Center for Political Studies
DEDMAN COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES & SCIENCES