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The End of the Largest Resettlement Program in the World?

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Historically, the United States' role as a resettlement country has been crucial. The U.S. refugee resettlement program in its current form was established by the Refugee Act of 1980, which replaced the ad hoc system that had been in place since World War II. At its peak from 1990 to 1995, 116,000 refugees arrived in the U.S. each year on average.¹ This number plummeted in 2002 in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks, but from 2008 to 2017 an average of 67,000 refugees arrived in the U.S. each year, reaching a high in 2016 of nearly 85,000 resettled individuals. However, following President Donald Trump's inauguration, the number of refugees resettled in fiscal year 2017 fell to 53,000, followed by just 22,500 in 2018.² For the first time ever, Canada surpassed the U.S. as the world's primary resettlement country.³ For fiscal year 2020—which began on October 1, 2019—Trump set the ceiling for refugee admissions at 18,000, meaning that far fewer will actually be successfully admitted.

From start to finish, the process of refugee resettlement is extremely lengthy and complex. In order to qualify as a refugee, an individual must first be able to leave his or her country of origin and arrive in a second country, which is usually a neighboring state.⁴ In that second country, an individual can begin the process of qualifying as a refugee, usually by approaching a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) office, to

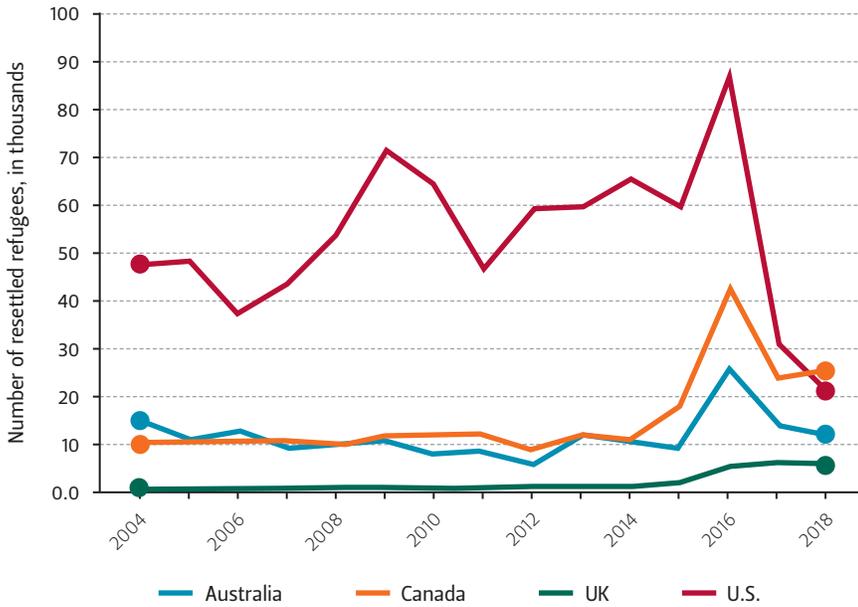
which many global south⁵ states delegate authority over refugee status determination (RSD). To begin the RSD procedure, an individual or family that has approached the UNHCR will be given an appointment date for an interview, during which they will recount their reasons for leaving their home country, allowing the UNHCR to adjudicate their claim. In order to qualify as a refugee, an individual must meet a fairly narrow set of parameters defined by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and must have fled their home state due to persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. The adjudication process itself can take a long time, but the process is often further delayed by the underfunding and understaffing of UNHCR offices in most countries of the world. For example, when conducting research in Cairo, Egypt in 2014, I met refugees who had been given RSD appointments for 2019, meaning that they would have to wait five years before even beginning the determination process.

Once an individual qualifies for refugee status, he or she can become eligible for resettlement, though qualification is by no means a guarantee of success, as less than one percent of the world's refugees are resettled to a third country like the United States. If an individual is accepted for resettlement by the U.S., he or she will go through several additional levels of intensive security screening conducted by the Department of State's Bureau



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FIGURE 1 — U.S. REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT DROPS, FALLING BELOW CANADA IN 2018



SOURCE Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., June 19, 2019, <https://pewrsr.ch/2onfQes>.

What is more likely is that the refugee admissions cut is part of a larger plan by the Trump administration to minimize, if not entirely end, both legal and irregular immigration to the U.S.

of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and its partner organizations.⁶ The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security then makes a final determination over any refugees recommended for admission by PRM. In theory, the United States is committed to resettling refugees according to their level of vulnerability, but it also considers other factors that may lead refugees to be considered inadmissible, including any threats to public health posed by a communicable disease or any security-related grounds. For example, if a Syrian family residing in Jordan has a member in need of urgent medical assistance, this will be weighed against any connection the family might have to a Syrian opposition group, however innocuous or distant that connection might be.

Once refugees accepted for resettlement arrive in the U.S., there is a network of nine resettlement agencies⁷ and over 200 local affiliated organizations that are responsible for assisting them in their initial three months of residence. These organizations are provided with government funding to

financially support refugees in their first 30 to 90 days, but refugees are expected to apply for mainstream social services and find gainful employment following this initial period.⁸ Despite this challenging transition, refugees resettled in the U.S., on average, manage self-sufficiency, and their dependency on social services diminishes over time.⁹

In proposing such a low ceiling for fiscal year 2020, the Trump administration has argued that it must cut refugee admissions in order to focus on the increase of asylum-seekers arriving in the U.S. In reality, the system responsible for managing and adjudicating the claims of asylum-seekers is completely separate—bureaucratically and financially—from the system managing refugee admissions. What is more likely is that the refugee admissions cut is part of a larger plan by the Trump administration to minimize, if not entirely end, both legal and irregular immigration to the U.S. Another argument against refugee resettlement relates to cost: Why fund refugees to come to the U.S. when the U.S. can instead offer aid to countries like Jordan, Turkey, or Kenya to host refugees there? Indeed, this argument already underlies the global practice of hosting most refugees in countries of the global south, which rely on financial and material support from wealthy states in the global north—the so-called “grand bargain” of refugee hosting. And yet the Trump administration’s 2020 budget proposal called for steep cuts to foreign humanitarian assistance that supports refugees residing in global south countries,¹⁰ and in 2018 the administration ended its financial support of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which provides support to Palestinian refugees in the occupied territories, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.¹¹

Realistically, we need to both maintain our resettlement program and continue to provide international aid that supports countries hosting the vast majority of refugees. If the U.S.—the wealthiest country in the world—shirks its responsibilities toward refugees by ending the world’s largest resettlement program, there is nothing to prevent other countries hosting

millions of refugees from expelling these individuals and forcibly returning them to their countries of origin where their lives are likely to be in danger. This race-to-the-bottom scenario, whereby countries of the global south respond to the lack of moral authority from states in the global north, could lead to secondary displacement for refugees already in precarious environments and would almost certainly increase regional instability in fragile governance contexts.

ENDNOTES

1. Jens Manuel Krogstad, “Key facts about refugees to the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, October 7, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/07/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/>.
2. Ibid.
3. “U.S. refugee resettlement drops, falling below Canada in 2018,” Pew Research Center, June 19, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/19/canada-now-leads-the-world-in-refugee-resettlement-surpassing-the-u-s/ft_19-06-19_refugeeresettlement_us-refugee-resettlement-drops-2/.
4. There are some exceptions to this, such as Iraqis who have an association with the United States who may be eligible for in-country processing in Iraq.
5. Global south collectively refers to developing and middle-income countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, in contrast to high income countries of the global north. While there is much heterogeneity among countries in the global south, I use this phrase to emphasize geopolitical relations of power, rather purely focusing on stages of economic development.
6. This may be a nongovernmental organization, an international organization, or a U.S. embassy contractor.
7. These organizations are the Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Episcopal Migration Ministries, HIAS, The International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, U.S. Committee for

Refugees and Immigrants, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services, and World Relief.

8. Randy Capps, Kathleen Newland, et al., “The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges,” Migration Policy Institute, June 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges>.

9. Ibid.

10. Refugees International, “The Trump Administration’s Performance on Refugee and Humanitarian Protection,” 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/506c8ea1e4b01d9450dd53f5/t/5d718ab5cd6696000188cd4c/1567722169897/Report+Card+2019+-+FINAL.pdf>.

11. Peter Beaumont and Oliver Homes, “U.S. Confirms End to Funding for UN Palestinian Refugees,” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/31/trump-to-cut-all-us-funding-for-uns-main-palestinian-refugee-programme>.

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