

Trump's new refugee limits are senseless and destructive

We already have the infrastructure to resettle far more refugees than the administration is letting in.

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The world is experiencing the greatest refugee crisis on record. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, about 30 million people have fled their home country because of persecution or violence and have good reasons to fear for their lives if they were to return. In the face of this unprecedented situation, the United States has responded—in perverse fashion. It has reduced the number of refugees it will admit to the lowest level in 40 years.

The Trump administration announced in September that it will cap the number of refugees entering the country in 2020 at 18,000, down from 30,000 in 2019, which was already a drop from the annual average of 67,000 refugees the US took in from 2008 to 2017. In the early 1980s, the US annually took in over 200,000 refugees.

Kevin McAleenan, then acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, tried to justify the low number for 2020 by saying it would allow his department to reduce the backlog in asylum applications. That argument is specious. The process for admitting refugees from abroad is separate from the process for dealing with asylum seekers who have already entered the US. McAleenan's conflation of the two makes little sense—except, of course, as part of the administration's larger policy of hostility toward newcomers of all kinds.

In contrast to McAleenan's picture of overwhelmed agencies, the infrastructure for admitting refugees is already in place and well functioning. Refugees who enter the US must be registered with the UN Refugee Agency and undergo a series of security checks that often take up to two years, even after refugees have been in camps for much longer. In resettling refugees, the US government has had a robust partnership with nine private agencies, many of them faith-based organizations, including Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, World Relief, and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. Those agencies, in turn, have worked with local communities and congregations to give some of the world's most vulnerable people a new start in life. Thanks to this partnership, the US has had one of the most organized and successful refugee resettlement programs in the world. The administration's policies threaten that infrastructure, because without refugees to assist, agencies are being dismantled.

A bill introduced in the House would amend the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 to require the president to admit an annual minimum of 95,000 refugees. Though the GRACE Act has little chance of making it into law under current political circumstances, it reflects one of the most admirable strands in American life, and what was until recently a bipartisan conviction: as the richest country in the world, with a long legacy and a deeply rooted ideal of welcoming people from all over the world, the US should be a leader in responding to those in desperate need.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Turning away refugees—for no good reason."

