

Case 11: Syrian Refugees

The civil war in Syria, along with the emergence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State there and in Iraq, has generated a tragic diaspora. Nearly half of Syria's population of ten million have overwhelmed international refugee agencies as they seek safety and shelter elsewhere. Most have wound up in neighboring countries. Over a half-million have risked the dangerous sea passage and settled in Europe. But the United States, which prides itself as the refuge of the world's dispossessed, had accepted only 1,736 Syrians as of May, 2016, a relatively minuscule number of mostly women and children.

This refugee crisis peaked during the 2016 American Presidential campaign. Several candidates called for a total ban on any new Syrian immigrants. One reason is the fear that young Syrian men may be Islamic State fighters intent on launching terrorist attacks inside the United States.

President Obama's administration, on the other hand, was seeking to admit 10,000 Syrians by September 2016. As of May 2016, however, the US government had achieved less than 2 percent of its 2015–16 goal. According to the US State Department, the reason it was so far behind in reaching its Syrian refugee quota was that there were not enough qualified personnel to handle the processing and vetting of asylum applicants.

Opponents of the Obama administration's Syrian refugee goals in Congress and elsewhere claim that even if new, qualified State Department bureaucrats were installed, meeting the 10,000 Syrian refugee goal by September of 2016 would have been overly optimistic and, perhaps, dangerous. Meeting the goal would have required admitting almost 2,000 Syrian refugees per month leading up to September. Somewhere in those numbers could be Islamic State adherents determined to bring death and destruction to America.

At the same time, other Western countries such as Germany, which had committed to admitting almost thirty times more Syrian refugees than the United States, said the land of the free and the home of the brave should be doing more.

Case from the 2017 International Ethics Bowl on February 26, 2017 in Dallas Texas



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