

PRO/CON: Stopping Syrian refugees from coming to the U.S.

By Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.17.15

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Syrian refugees wait at Marka Airport in Amman, Jordan, on Dec. 8, 2015, to complete their migration procedures to Canada, which has announced that it will take around 25,000 Syrians from Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Photo: AP/Raad Adayleh

PRO: Militants may sneak in with the refugees

President Barack Obama is once again faced with a problem of his own making. He has no one to blame but himself if some people no longer trust his assurances.

For seven years, the president has dismissed, demeaned and denounced those who have raised reasonable concerns about his policies.

When those concerns have turned out to be correct, as they often have, he ignores the evidence, insults his critics and asserts that everything is going well. Remember, for example, his assertion that Islamic State was being "contained." The attacks that followed that claim certainly proved that those who questioned him were right to be worried. Recall his promise of a post-partisan America in which Democrats and Republicans would be able to work together. Today, the country remains as divided as ever.

So when 31 governors turned their thumbs down on Obama's decision to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees and distribute them among the states, they were sending a message: "We do not trust you and your administration to tell the truth or do the due diligence necessary to vet refugees."

Benefit Of The Doubt? No!

Let us be clear: Every governor knows this is a country of immigrants with a long and cherished tradition of helping refugees.

They also know that the vast majority of the Syrian refugees would be honest and law-abiding. Most are simply fleeing a violent civil war they had nothing to do with starting. Many are fleeing the Islamic State, which had taken over parts of their war-torn country. They would be thrilled to get a chance at a new start in America.

Even a vast majority is not 100 percent, however, and that presents a safety concern which is worth taking seriously. If even a few Islamic State fighters slipped in with the refugees, that could be a huge problem.

However, Obama, true to form, dismissed the concerns and ridiculed the critics. "Apparently they (the Republicans) are scared of widows and orphans coming into the United States of America," the president said. He then claimed that the screening process would be the most careful and thorough process "conceivable."

Is that so? Remember when Obama administration officials boasted about how well the HealthCare.gov website would work right before its problem-plagued rollout? So what about refugee screening technology? Why should we assume that would work any better?

Under normal conditions, elected officials and most of the public would take the president's word. However, this president has misled the public so often that he has not earned the benefit of the doubt — and he is not getting it.

Refugees Won't Be Properly Screened

The governors resisting the refugee resettlement simply do not trust Obama's claim that all of the refugees will be checked out extremely carefully. Neither does the public. A Rasmussen poll showed some 60 percent of likely voters "oppose the settling of Syrian refugees in the state where they live." Even many elected Democrats have their doubts.

This same president keeps trying to move prisoners from Guantanamo in Cuba to the United States. He has repeatedly assured governors that the prisoners, who are all suspected militants, are not a threat. The president continues to make that claim even though more than 100 of those who have been released have rejoined militant groups.

To make matters worse, the administration has resorted to making ridiculous statements about the Syrian refugees.

For example, the State Department says that only 2 percent of Syrian refugees admitted to this country since 2011 are “military-age males.” So what? Anyone watching the news can see that young and middle-age adult males make up a good portion of those currently fleeing Syria.

Even if the State Department restricted the 10,000 refugees to “widows and orphans,” widows have brothers and orphans have uncles. Wouldn't there be a need to let other family members in, if not now, then soon, in order to help provide for the resettled women and children? And, of course, some suicide bombers have been women.

Here is the point: Those who are frustrated with the refugee stalemate need to focus their wrath on the president, not the governors. Obama entered the White House determined to prove that big government can do big things well. Instead, he has increased Americans' long-held skepticism of big government.

I, for one, hope the administration, Congress and governors can find a solution that upholds the country's long tradition as a shelter for refugees. The lack of trust in this case is not targeted so much at the Syrian refugees, but at the White House.

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CON: Don't play into fears about militant attacks

The U.S. governors refusing to accept Syrian refugees are not just morally wrong. They are also helping Islamic State.

Islamic State, also known as ISIS, is a militant group. Its members are trying to spread their own brand of Islam throughout the Middle East. They have conquered territory in Syria and Iraq, where they are now battling both Western and Arab forces.

The group's dream is to establish an Islamic state shaped after their own beliefs. They are using violence and fear to advance those ends. They see themselves as being at war not only with Arab governments, but with the West.

The first thing we need to understand is that Islamic State is actually weak. It claims responsibility for any act of violence carried out by Muslims on Western soil so that it can appear stronger than it actually is.

Most attacks have actually been the acts of do-it-yourself militants unconnected to any group. But Islamic State does not want us to know that. The group's fighters want us to believe they are everywhere. They want us to be afraid.

Setting Muslims Against The West

Islamic State fighters also want us to get angry and condemn Muslims everywhere. They want to make Muslims the enemy of the West. They believe if that happens, millions of peaceful Muslims living around the world will join them.

Their goal is quite simple. They aim to divide us. They would like nothing more than to have the Western world accept Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's idea for a Muslim database or ID patch. They want us to see the world in terms of us against them.

Islamic State also wants us to turn away Syrian and other Muslim refugees.

Since 2011 when civil war broke out in Syria, 11 million Syrians have fled their homes for safety. Many are fleeing Islamic State's reign of terror. More than 250,000 people have died in that war.

The fighting in Syria began as an attempt to remove Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, who many see as undemocratic and oppressive. Over time, Islamic State fighters have become increasingly involved in the war.

While Islamic State also would like to see Assad gone, its goal is not greater democracy. Instead, its fighters hope to seize power themselves, in order to impose their own brand of Islam. Many Syrians have fled territories now controlled by the group's fighters, who have introduced extremely harsh laws.

The current refugee crisis is the biggest since World War II, with Syrians now making up the world's largest refugee population. Most are struggling to find new homes in Europe, and the United States needs to help.

Don't Make It "Us Against Them"

The Obama administration has pledged to take in 10,000 new Syrian refugees. They are supposed to be distributed among the states.

The government's plan has met with resistance, however. So far, 31 governors have protested the admission of Syrian refugees. They have gone as far as to say that their states will refuse to take them in.

Their fear, that Islamic State fighters will sneak in among the refugees, is not justified. The U.S. refugee-screening process is extremely difficult to get through. Most refugees stay in camps for months to years while their personal stories are evaluated and checked.

About half of these refugees are children, while another quarter are elderly. Almost all of the adults are either mothers or couples coming with children.

By refusing to take in these war-torn refugees, these U.S. governors are not only going against our ideals as a nation. They are also helping Islamic State by dividing us even further. They are helping Islamic State by showing that our leaders want to turn away these desperate families, because it is "us against them."

The 31 irresponsible governors are also sending a message to the U.S. public that fear, prejudice and even outright hate are acceptable. This ill-informed policy is not reflective of what is at the core of our national history. Every time U.S. leaders have followed similar paths in the past, their fears have been proven to be irrational. Every time similar things have happened, we as a nation have had to correct course.

Let us not forget what is inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, quite possibly America's most widely recognized symbol:

"Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Can you honestly read that and feel we should reject these victims of Islamic State?

Let us not accept this fear only to be proven wrong by history yet again. Instead, let us reject leaders, whether governors or members of Congress, who want to fan baseless fear. Let us educate ourselves about the horrors these refugees are fleeing, and the significant hurdles they must clear to be admitted. More than anything, let us light the way for a safer world by leading with an example of humanity.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Don Kusler is the executive director of Americans for Democratic Action, a national liberal advocacy organization (www.adaction.org).

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Quiz

- 1 Which of the following BEST explains the difference between the PRO and CON points of view?
- (A) The PRO author reveals a prejudice against Muslim refugees due to their religion; the CON author believes prejudice against any refugee is morally wrong.
 - (B) The PRO author sees the governors' stance as a reasonable response to Obama's presidency; the CON author sees the governors' stance as harmful to the U.S. and unfair to the refugees.
 - (C) The PRO author sees the governors' stance as a helpful step that will make the refugee screening process much safer; the CON author sees the governors' actions as an understandable, but incorrect, approach to this problem.
 - (D) The PRO author believes that the chance for terrorism is too serious to ignore and therefore no Syrian refugees should be admitted; the CON author believes the screening process will be sufficient.
- 2 Which of the following BEST explains the PRO author's primary purpose in writing his article?
- (A) to explain why Muslim refugees are a significant threat to the US
 - (B) to defend the constitutional rights of governors to act on behalf of their people
 - (C) to convince readers that they should be angry at President Obama, not the 31 governors
 - (D) to use overwhelming evidence to prove the administration's refugee screening plan will be a total failure

3 Read the excerpt from the CON article.

The U.S. governors refusing to accept Syrian refugees are not just morally wrong. They are also helping Islamic State.

Which of the following BEST supports the claim that the governors' actions help Islamic State?

- (A) They want to make Muslims the enemy of the West. They believe if that happens, millions of peaceful Muslims living around the world will join them.
- (B) The current refugee crisis is the biggest since World War II, with Syrians now making up the world's largest refugee population.
- (C) Their fear, that Islamic State fighters will sneak in among the refugees, is not justified. The U.S. refugee-screening process is extremely difficult to get through.
- (D) The 31 irresponsible governors are also sending a message to the U.S. public that fear, prejudice and even outright hate are acceptable.

4 Select a sentence from the PRO article that includes an idea on which the two authors agree.

- (A) For seven years, the president has dismissed, demeaned and denounced those who have raised reasonable concerns about his policies.
- (B) They also know that the vast majority of the Syrian refugees would be honest and law-abiding.
- (C) However, Obama, true to form, dismissed the concerns and ridiculed the critics.
- (D) Even if the State Department restricted the 10,000 refugees to "widows and orphans," widows have brothers and orphans have uncles. Wouldn't there be a need to let other family members in[?]

Answer Key

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