



HUMAN RIGHTS FIRST
Written Statement for
Senate Committee on the Judiciary

**Oversight of the Administration's FY 2016 Refugee Resettlement Program:
Fiscal and Security Implications**
October 1, 2015

We are pleased to submit this statement on behalf of Human Rights First. Human Rights First works in the United States and abroad to promote a secure and humane world by advancing justice, human dignity, and respect for the rule of law. Human Rights First is an independent advocacy organization that challenges America to live up to its ideals. We are a non-profit, nonpartisan international human rights organization with offices in New York, Washington D.C., and Houston, Texas.

For over 30 years, we've built bipartisan coalitions and teamed up with frontline activists and lawyers to tackle issues that demand American leadership, including the protection of the rights of refugees who flee persecution. Protecting the persecuted is a core American value. Reflecting this country's deep-seated commitment to liberty and human dignity, as well as its pledge under the 1951 Refugee Convention's Protocol, the United States has long led efforts to protect those who flee from political, religious, and other persecution.

The world is facing the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Globally, about 60 million people have been forced to flee their homes. Over 4 million Syrians have fled their country, and many have been stranded for years in neighboring countries where they can't work, cannot support their families, have little access to education, and face shortages in food and other assistance due to massive underfunding of UN humanitarian aid appeals. Syria's neighbors, faced with overwhelming refugee numbers and inadequate international support, have made it more difficult for refugees to enter to seek protection or extend their stays. Meanwhile, the fighting and violence within Syria has intensified, leaving refugees with little hope that they will be able to safely return.

Many are turning to dangerous routes to reach places of safety where they can rebuild their lives. Thousands have embarked on risky journeys in an attempt to reach Europe.

This is a defining moment for the world, and the United States. Faced with the largest refugee crisis since World War II, how will the United States respond? Will it exercise leadership by truly sharing in the responsibility of hosting more of Syria's refugees or will it provide refuge to only a token or minimal number?

How the United States addresses this refugee crisis will be a critical test for U.S. leadership. The United States has played a leading role in providing humanitarian assistance, giving over \$4 billion to relief efforts both within Syria and in neighboring countries. This is consistent both with U.S. leadership on humanitarian relief and its strategic interest in preventing further destabilization of the region. But the U.S. government can and should do more, including by using its unique position as a global leader to champion the protection of refugees trying to flee from Syria and to launch a meaningful resettlement initiative. The United States has not launched a significant resettlement initiative that would demonstrate to Syria's neighbors a real commitment to share in hosting a meaningful number of Syria's refugees and would encourage other resettlement states to follow suit. A meaningful resettlement initiative, in addition to providing a future to the individual refugees and families it would directly assist, should be seen as part of a broader effort to increase the protection space available to Syrian refugees in the region and globally.

The United States has long been a leader in protecting refugees and has typically resettled about half of the refugees identified as in need of resettlement each year. The United States had only resettled about 1,300 Syrian refugees in fiscal year 2015 through August 31, and has only committed so far to resettle at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in fiscal year 2016. Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon are hosting about 4 million Syrian refugees. Meanwhile, Germany has announced it can host 800,000. This level of U.S. response falls far short of global leadership, and our resettlement process is much too slow, often taking two years or longer.

The United States must lead, and lead by example. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it is strategically smart. In addition to supporting Europe, a stronger refugee response will promote the stability of states bordering Syria including key U.S. allies in the region, such as Jordan.

In light of this global emergency situation, we urge the United States to lead a comprehensive global initiative in partnership with European and other states to improve access to protection for refugees. We urge the United States government, led by the President and the Secretary of State to:

1. **Increase resettlement and other routes to protection.** The United States should lead a global initiative that includes many countries to resettle or provide other admission to 1 to 1.5 million Syrian refugees. The U.S. should press other countries to sharply increase resettlement or other admission routes, and call on the European Union to create safe and legal ways for refugees to reach Europe. The United States should lead by example by increasing its own resettlement commitment to 100,000 Syrian refugees for fiscal year 2016 and increase the overall refugee ceiling (for refugees from all countries) to 200,000. The United States should also implement more expeditious routes to protection for Syrian refugees with family in the United States and other at-risk refugees, utilizing various priority processing mechanisms and other tools. In the next month, the administration should appoint a high-level coordinator in the White House to oversee the refugee response and improve inter-agency collaboration to improve the pace of resettlement, as well as high-level refugee coordinators at the Departments of State and Homeland Security, who can focus – full time – on addressing resettlement processing delays and logjams.
2. **Ensure sufficient vetting resources.** The resettlement process includes the execution of multiple security checks. In fact, refugees are much more thoroughly vetted than other categories of individuals who come to the United States. The President should direct the FBI and other security vetting agencies to increase their focus on, and devote additional and sufficient staff time and resources to the conduct and completion of such checks, including all follow up reviews. Improving the timeliness and efficiency of the security clearance process would enhance security and would also eliminate some delays and save government resources which are now wasted when parts of the process have to be redone due to these delays.

3. **Finally reform the resettlement process.** Over the next six months, the administration should review and reform the delay-plagued resettlement process to be more timely and effective without compromising security. This is not the first time the system has failed to respond adequately. Many Iraqis who worked with the U.S. military or U.S. entities were left stranded for years waiting to be brought to safety in the United States. Some suffered attacks while waiting for our slow resettlement process to move forward.
4. **Meet humanitarian assistance goal.** The United States should lead a global push to secure 100% funding of the UN's humanitarian appeal for the Syria crisis, set a strong example by further stepping up its contribution to cover a higher percentage of the appeal, significantly increase development funding for refugee-hosting countries, press wealthy states to increase contributions and develop longer term strategies for meeting the front-line needs of refugees and hosting communities.
5. **Champion protection for refugees.** The United States should encourage states in the region neighboring Syria – and in Europe and beyond – to respect the human rights of refugees and migrants, including to allow refugees to work to support their families, to educate children, to facilitate access to higher education, and to respect obligations to protect people from arbitrary detention and return to persecution.
6. **Redouble efforts to find effective multilateral solutions to the political and security crisis** in Syria and to address the human rights abuses causing so many people to flee in search of protection.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, leading Jewish groups, major faith-based groups, and even the [Pope](#) have called on the United States to respond to this refugee crisis. Human Rights First and other leading organizations focused on refugee protection and refugee resettlement have called on the administration to resettle at least 100,000 Syrian refugees in fiscal year 2016. [Various former government officials](#) including national security experts who served in both democratic and republican administrations have called on the United States to lead by example to commit to resettling 100,000 refugees.

The United States has always led in times of international crisis. This country should continue to be a beacon on human rights. Human Rights First believes that America is strongest when our policies and values match our actions.