

November 23, 2015

Re: U.S. Resettlement of Syrian and Iraqi refugees

Dear Senator:

We write to urge you to oppose proposals that would undermine the effectiveness of the U.S. refugee resettlement system and diminish America's commitment to protecting vulnerable refugees. The U.S. resettlement system includes the most rigorous vetting process applied to any population coming to this country.

We served as Commissioners of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), one of us under the administration of President Bill Clinton, the other under the administration of President George W. Bush. As such, our responsibilities included oversight of the U.S. refugee resettlement interview and vetting processes for refugees.

The commitment to protecting refugees who have fled political, religious and other forms of persecution reflects this nation's core values. It is a commitment that has been honored by both Republican and Democratic administrations. The United States has provided safety and new lives to refugees from Burma, Cuba, Vietnam, Sudan and many other places where people are targeted for persecution because of who they are or what they believe. Not only does refugee resettlement reflect this country's commitment to protecting the persecuted, it also provides vital support to refugee-hosting states struggling under the strain of providing asylum to large numbers of refugees. By supporting the stability of key states like Jordan, the United States advances its own foreign policy and national security interests abroad.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris, some have asked whether our refugee admissions processes are strong and secure. Some political figures have urged that America block resettlement of vulnerable Syrian refugees or admit Christian refugees only.

Recently, the House of Representatives passed a bill that would divert the time of the nation's top national security officials by requiring personal certifications to 12 congressional committees that each individual refugee is not a threat to security even though the cases already have been fully vetted. This approach would bring the resettlement system, which already moves at a slow pace, to a halt. We urge you to oppose this bill, which is likely to result in long delays that could dramatically limit the number of Syrian and Iraqi refugees accepted for resettlement to the United States. While cases awaited such certification, medical and other processing clearances would expire, throwing the entire system into disarray. This bill also would apply to Iraqis who worked with the U.S. military, U.S. government contractors, or other U.S. organizations, and already have been waiting years to be brought to safety. Other existing resettlement-related processes that require signoff and consensus by top-level officials, from multiple agencies with other pressing priorities, over the years have resulted in extensive delays and backlogs in resettlement processing.

In a November 19, 2015 letter to the President, former Homeland Security Secretaries Michael Chertoff and Janet Napolitano, who served Republican and Democratic administrations respectively, outlined many of the safeguards and security clearance steps embedded in the U.S. resettlement process. They affirmed that the U.S. vetting process currently in place for refugee resettlement is “thorough and robust” and “will allow us to safely admit the most vulnerable refugees while protecting the American people.” Indeed, each refugee is interviewed by an officer of DHS’ refugee corps, an expert DHS official who is part of a staff specially trained and assigned to conducting the selection and vetting of refugees. Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson has testified that the vetting process for refugee resettlement is the most rigorous vetting conducted for any population that comes to the United States.

Over the last week, Americans have had a chance to learn much more about the many steps and safeguards in our resettlement process. We firmly believe that the United States can protect vulnerable refugees while also keeping Americans safe.

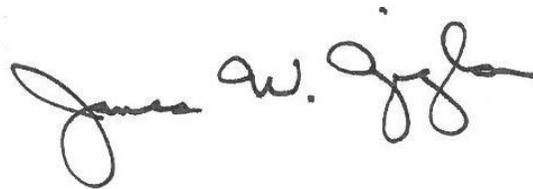
Protecting the persecuted and resettling vulnerable refugees are areas that have long enjoyed bipartisan support because they reflect this nation’s core values. We urge you to support these American values and ensure that the country’s bipartisan commitment to protecting the persecuted is not abandoned. The United States has the opportunity to demonstrate its core values, to continue to welcome the persecuted and celebrate the rich diversity of religious, racial, ethnic and other backgrounds that makes this country so strong.

We thank you for your attention to these issues and wish you the best for this holiday season.

Sincerely,



Doris Meissner
Commissioner
Immigration and Naturalization Service
(1993-2000)



James W. Ziglar
Commissioner
Immigration and Naturalization Service
(2001-2002)