

Refugee Admissions and the Asylum Division Backlog

Contrary to White House assertions, the Department of Homeland Security can resettle refugees and evaluate asylum seekers' claims at the same time.

Recent reports indicate that the Trump Administration plans to admit an all-time low number of refugees in the coming fiscal year. Furthermore, the White House is justifying this stunning abdication of leadership during the worst refugee crisis in recorded history with a cynical and misleading argument: the administration has pointed to the growing backlog of asylum cases and argued that Refugee Corps officers should be re-assigned to deal with the backlog of asylum cases.

That move would not only be shortsighted, but unnecessary. The United States can, and has, consistently admitted both refugees and asylum seekers. The protection offered by the United States is not a zero-sum game; one program need not come at the expense of the other. Rather than rob resources from the Refugee Corps, the Trump Administration should properly fund and staff both the Refugee Corps and the Asylum Division, including by hiring officers capable of addressing the backlog for which funds are *already allocated*.

Additionally, since the asylum backlog has been exacerbated by the Trump Administration's decision to send Asylum Division personnel to the border—and away from parts of the country with the greatest need for these resources—the White House is now in a position to point at the mess it helped create as justification for limiting refugee admissions. While at first blush it might seem that a decision to prioritize processing asylum seekers—refugees already in the country—before addressing the plight of those awaiting resettlement could help manage limited

government resources, this rationale is in fact just the latest in the long list of the administration's anti-refugee efforts.

Offices in the Department of Homeland Security

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has two separate offices that deal with refugee and asylum admissions in the United States: the refugee corps and the Asylum Division.

The USCIS Refugee Corps: Refugee officers are specially trained to conduct refugee resettlement interviews overseas. There are currently 197 Refugee Corps officers and 29 supervisors. These numbers are more than enough to conduct resettlement interviews and processing for over 75,000 refugees. Last year inefficiencies in the refugee vetting system were addressed as new technology and improved systems were implemented, meaning that the capacity of the Refugee Corps should actually be greater than it has been in past years.

The USCIS Asylum Division: The Asylum Division has a corps of asylum officers who are trained to conduct asylum interviews in the United States, as well as "credible fear" interviews, which are the protection component of expedited removal processing. The Asylum Division currently has approximately 515 officers, and a large backlog of 270,000 asylum cases. This backlog was sparked by global and regional refugee crises, as well as DHS's

decision to use expanded expedited removal processing on families seeking protection along border areas. The department has already hired and is continuing to hire new asylum officers to address the backlog.

The Department of Homeland Security Has Funds to Hire More Officers

DHS already has the resources to hire more asylum officers. It has allocated, from its own budget, funding for 625 officers, the maximum number of asylum officers it can hire without requiring additional office space. The Asylum Division has proven its ability to quickly hire and train asylum officers. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, the division successfully filled over 90 percent of funded positions, adding 124 officers. In 2017, the division continues to train new officers, including a class of 112 as recently as August.

Once DHS fills its 625 currently funded positions, the Asylum Division will be well positioned to make headway on the current backlog of affirmative asylum applications. In fact, many asylum offices across the country have already seen their wait times diminished as a result of the increase in officers ([see Affirmative Asylum Scheduling Bulletin](#)).

Human Rights First continues to recommend that DHS hire additional officers to the asylum division to create a corps of eight hundred officers, which will be reduced through attrition once the backlog is eliminated. Limiting the use of expedited removal would further enhance the Asylum Division's ability to make headway on backlogged affirmative asylum applications at its current staffing levels.

Re-Assigning Officers Has Already Caused Negative Consequences

This is not the first time an administration has attempted to deal with capacity issues by reassigning officers in the Asylum Division and Refugee Corps. During the Obama Administration, DHS detailed asylum officers to the Refugee Corps. This was one of the contributing factors in the current Asylum Office backlog. Instead of learning

from the past, the Trump Administration has floated detailing refugee corps members to the Asylum Office, a move that will gut the refugee resettlement program.

Human Rights First recommends that DHS apply lessons learned from that experience to the refugee resettlement program by hiring more officers dedicated to each division, rather than creating a false choice between two vital refugee programs. The department has the resources to address the asylum backlog without shrinking the refugee resettlement program.

Consequences of Decimating the Refugee Program

The Trump Administration has one thing right: the asylum backlog needs to be dealt with. But decimating the U.S. Refugee Program is not the way to do it.

Abandoning the United States' commitment to refugees is unnecessary and counterproductive. It undermines U.S. interests in the region and makes our country less safe.

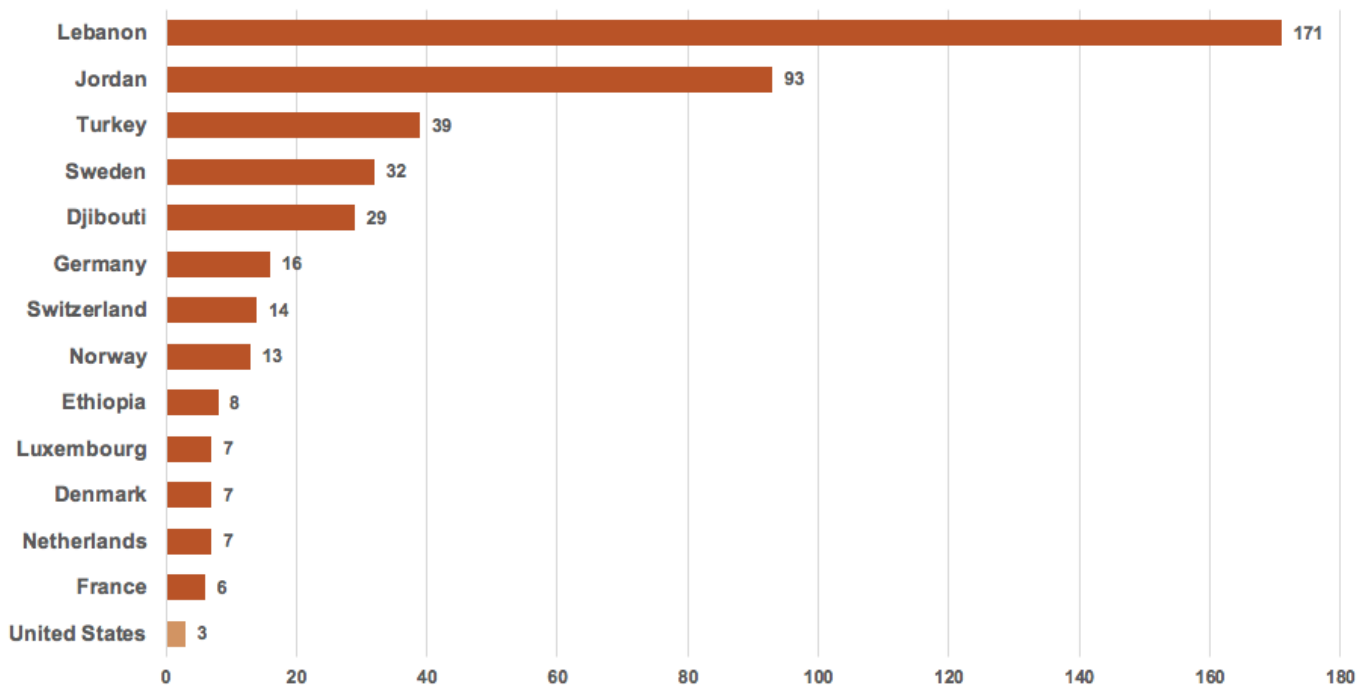
Over the past year we've already seen the dire consequences of the decline in U.S. refugee resettlement. When the United States signals to the world that protecting vulnerable individuals should not be a priority, the world takes notice. Refugee resettlement has already seen a [drastic decline](#) globally, impacting front-line countries that host the overwhelming majority of the world's refugees.

United States Lagging Behind World in Refugee Resettlement

Even if one were to combine the number of asylum seekers in the asylum backlog with number of refugees proposed by the administration—a

staggeringly-low 50,000 individuals—the United States' overall refugee acceptance per capita would *still* pale in comparison to the numbers of those being hosted in front line states and other countries around the world.

Number of Refugees and Asylum Seekers Per 1,000 Capita



Protecting the Vulnerable is Not a Zero-Sum Game

The United States' refugee admissions program is not a zero-sum game. We are more than capable of providing safety to those fleeing violence and persecution around the world.

At times of greater demand on the department, one agency should not be ordered to forgo its mission and responsibilities to complete the duties of another. For example, when Customs and Border Protection (CBP) needs increased capacity, staff is not taken from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE); rather, DHS requests funding to hire additional CBP officers or agents and vice versa. When the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) needs more people to screen

airline passengers, it hires them; it doesn't declare that Reagan National Airport will close and that the only way to fly out of Washington, D.C. is via Dulles. There is no reason the process should be any different for the Refugee Corps and Asylum Office (except that, in this case, the office *already has* much of the funding it needs to increase capacity).

It is reprehensible for this administration to pit vulnerable individuals against each other, as though there should be a limit to our humanity.