



Statement for the Record of Emir Hadzic, Gunnery Sergeant, USMC (Ret.)

Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration and the National Interest

“Oversight of the Administration's FY 2017 Refugee Resettlement Program”

Wednesday, September 28, 2016

Good afternoon Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Schumer, Senator Durbin, Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the refugee resettlement program and to share my experiences with you and my fellow Americans.

My name is Gunnery Sergeant Emir Hadzic. As of last month, I am retired from the United States Marine Corps, where I served for 20 years. I am a veteran of both the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have deployed total of eight times in service to this country. I am proud of my service, having earned the title “Marine,” and grateful for an opportunity to serve.

But before I was a Marine, I was a refugee.

As a young man, my family was forced to flee our home in Sarajevo, Bosnia due to a war that gave the world a new term- “ethnic cleansing.” Our home was occupied by opposing troops, forcing us to move throughout the country, eventually escaping to Croatia. There, I learned what it was like to be a refugee: to be surrounded with children and families with no home, to feel unwanted by the world. It was there that I also learned that refugees, despite their situation, have incredible amounts of dignity and determination. It was refugee camps like Kamenjak in Pula, where I first saw what American compassion and leadership can do to change the world.

In those camps, I saw young American aid workers like Amy Weisman, Diane Brown, and Eric Greitens, barely older than I was at the time, who had volunteered to come to my native neck of the woods and to help my people. It left quite an impression on me. Later, I was astounded by the news that the International Rescue Committee had facilitated my family to come to the United States and make new lives here. We were greeted with open arms and given jobs. Above all, we were given encouragement and hope. We were given an American opportunity.

After being blessed with this opportunity, and after seeing American ideals and values put into practice, I knew I had to give back. I wanted to earn the right to say that I embodied these ideals as well, to prove that if America would fight to bring me liberty, I would fight to safeguard it and extend it to others.

But I was fortunate, as refugees go. To be resettled at all, much less to be resettled in the United States of America, is a statistical improbability for a refugee. There are over 65 million people displaced in the world due to conflict today; of those, the United Nations High Council on Refugees designates 21 million as refugees. Of these 21 million, last year the world collectively resettled just over 107,000.

I'm no math whiz any longer but, that is 0.05 percent of the total number of women, children, and families desperately seeking refuge from conflict, much like my family was so long ago. I stand before you today as a representative of that .05 percent, a grateful recipient of American liberty and opportunity, and I urge us all to continue on that path and do more.

I know that many have rightly expressed concerns about security, and I whole-heartedly agree. The security of the American people is paramount; I have made it my life's duty. But it is shortsighted to levy security concerns on our refugee resettlement program, which ensures that every individual processed is one of the most vetted entrants to ever set foot on American soil.

In fact, welcoming refugees does not weaken our collective security, it strengthens it. By opening our arms to the world's tired, poor, huddled masses, we help alleviate the strain placed on key allies and partners in the Middle East. Actual allies like Turkey, host 2.7 million refugees, our partner nation Jordan, hosts over one million. One in four people in Lebanon is a refugee. This is just in the Asia Minor. The geopolitical instability that comes as a result of the current refugee crisis is dire.

In addition, closing our borders to refugees only fuels the propaganda narratives of our enemies and global rivals. Violent Islamist extremists would have the world believe that America is at war with Islam, and is unwilling to extend its hand to outsiders, not even to the ones who need it most. The current Russian regime would have the world believe that we are unreliable allies and hypocrites. Now is our opportunity to strike back at that narrative with the truth, that America lives up to its ideals, and that it is willing to offer liberty and freedom to the most vulnerable among us.

We will not defeat our enemies' propaganda by playing into their narrative. By dismantling or not supporting our refugee resettlement program we would inadvertently provide our rivals and adversaries with an opportunity to discredit us. If we suspend our values and close our doors to those who desperately need protection, are we not losing the sight of the big picture for the sake of temporary safety?

Last week, I was honored to take part in the White House's National Welcoming Week, where I was invited to speak along with so many other refugees who have come here, put down roots, contributed, and call themselves American. As my life experience taught me, I have no doubt in my mind that refugees are some of the most patriotic and loyal citizens of this country, eager to give back to the nation that saved and invested in them.

At the White House, I sat next to a refugee whose family fled the Communist takeover of her native Czechoslovakia long ago. Now, she is, among many things, a professor and a former U.S. Secretary of State. I sat beside a Syrian woman whose husband, the father of her children, was killed in the violence there. Now, she teaches children in Idaho. I met a Burmese refugee who now owns a multi-million dollar business and gives back to his community. I met a woman from Bhutan who helps other immigrants adjust and fit in. I would submit to you that these are the stories of refugees; that the story of America's success is built upon the opportunities that they, and I, were afforded by this country and its people.

I urge you to consider their stories, and mine, and keep this nation to what President Ronald Reagan called "the Shining City on a Hill"— where America is a leader and a beacon to the world. I believe that we, the refugees of today, are every bit as committed to that vision, as were the original settlers who were refugees themselves.

I respectfully urge you to continue to support a robust refugee resettlement program in our country.

We need it.

Thank you.