

How to Respond to the Paris Attacks and Syrian Refugees



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As members of Congress prepare to vote on legislation to address the flow of Syrian refugees in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris, we offer the following guidance in structuring and debating the issue. We believe that members must address first the heart, then the head, and finally our values in their statements:

- First, address the **fear** that the public feels after the attacks in Paris and the risk that terrorists might try to hide among the refugees.
- Second, appeal to the public's **heads** by emphasizing the strength of our current counterterrorism efforts and the improbability that terrorists would be successful striking the US by posing as a Syrian refugee.
- Finally, highlight American **values** by talking about our nation's history as a refuge and highlighting some of the more absurd statements made by Republicans in arguing against admitting refugees.

1. Acknowledge the justifiable fear of future terrorist attacks.

Americans are worried about future attacks on the United States. The Paris attacks show that a relatively small number of terrorists can cause tremendous harm, paralyzing a city. Americans must know their elected officials are committed to keeping them safe and will act to keep terrorists out.

2. Reassure citizens of the unrivaled U.S. counter-terrorism system.

The United States is the best at counterterrorism. Our nation has global surveillance capabilities, robust screening databases, effective law enforcement, and compared to our European allies, strict border controls. Our Special Operations Forces and Air Force relentlessly target and eliminate terrorists in the region.

The overwhelming majority of refugees are not terrorists. Since September 11, 2001, the United States has resettled over 780,000 refugees fleeing violence and oppression—and only three have been charged with a terrorist offense for plotting attacks in Muslim countries.¹ More specifically, from 2007 to 2013 the United States admitted over 133,500 refugees from conflict zones where terrorist groups are active, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan.² Since 2011, the United States has admitted more than 1,500 war refugees from Syria.³ Further, ISIS is unlikely to utilize the current refugee process, which takes 12–18 months to vet and admit an individual. Any efforts at increased vetting should focus on the greatest threat—military-aged males—not widows and children.

An overbroad approach to certification could undermine our security. Our government should and does robustly vet refugees before they enter the country. But poorly-crafted certification requirements could overwhelm counterterrorism analysts who are identifying and disrupting terrorist attacks. At the same time, if the certifications bring the vetting to a

halt, it would further endanger the lives of those who reject ISIS and are fleeing its atrocities.

3. Reject extreme statements while asserting American values and history.

Republican leaders are taking extreme, simplistic positions on refugees that are not only intolerant, but which play directly into the hands of ISIS, fueling its narrative of religious war and driving recruits to its cause.

“The fact is that we need appropriate vetting, and I don't think orphans under five are being, you know, should be admitted into the United States at this point.” Gov. Chris Christie, 11/17/15. ⁴

“We need to be working to provide a safe haven for those Christians who are being persecuted and facing genocide, and at the same time we shouldn't be letting terrorists into America.” Sen. Ted Cruz, 11/15/15. ⁵

“You're a Christian—I mean, you can prove you're a Christian . . . You can't prove it, then you know, you err on the side of caution.” Jeb Bush, 11/17/15. ⁶

This kind of harsh rhetoric stands in stark contrast to America's history as a refuge for those fleeing atrocities. The United States admitted over 200,000 refugees fleeing communist states in the Cold War, despite concerns of a communist fifth column. ⁷ Since 2007, it has admitted more than 100,000 Iraqi refugees, including those who risked their lives to assist our military. We therefore recommend that you tell your constituents that, while people have legitimate concerns about the refugee resettlement program, the United States can remain a haven for victims of war and stay true to its historical values without undermining national security.

END NOTES

1. In 2011, two Iraqi refugees were indicted for attempting to support Iraqi insurgents abroad after a sting by federal agents. United States, Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Former Iraqi Terrorists Living in Kentucky Sentenced for Terrorist Activities," January 19, 2013. Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://archive.courier-journal.com/article/20110531/NEWS01/305310071/2-Iraqi-refugees-indicted-terrorism-charges-Kentucky>. One Uzbek man was recently convicted of conspiring to provide material support to a terrorist group in Uzbekistan. United States, Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, "Federal Jury Convicts Kurbanov on Terrorism Charges," August 12, 2015. Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-jury-convicts-kurbanov-terrorism-charges>. See also Kathleen Newland, "The U.S. Record Shows Refugees Are Not a Threat," Migration Policy Institute, October 7, 2015. Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/us-record-shows-refugees-are-not-threat>.
2. United States, Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, "Refugee Admissions Statistics." Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/statistics/>.
3. Ashley Fantz and Ben Brumfield, "More than half the nation's governors say Syrian refugees not welcome," CNN, November 17, 2015. Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/16/world/paris-attacks-syrian-refugees-backlash/>.

- 4.** Gregory Krieg, "Christie on refugees: Not even 5-year-old orphans," *CNN*, November 17, 2015. Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/17/politics/chris-christie-paris-attacks-refugee-orphans/>.
- 5.** Katie Zezima, "Cruz: 'No meaningful risk' of Christians committing terrorism," *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2015. Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/11/15/cruz-no-meaningful-risk-of-christians-committing-terrorism/>.
- 6.** Ashley Parker, "Jeb Bush Urges Caution on Accepting Syrian Refugees," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2015. Accessed November 18, 2015. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/11/17/jeb-bush-urges-caution-on-accepting-syrian-refugees/>.
- 7.** Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*, Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 580, Print.