



Overcoming the Three Great Fears: Responding to the Most Prevalent Fears About Syrian Refugees

The Syrian civil war, now in its seventh year, has created a humanitarian crisis of inconceivable scale. The population that has been forced to flee the country represents the largest refugee population in the world today. Despite the enormity of this crisis, the response of the international community has been inadequate in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis and public support on the issue has wavered. This report aims to: (a) Identify the fears and misconceptions that impede sensible and humane policies and favorable public opinion about Syrian refugees and (b) Respond to those fears with facts, supported by evidence-based research.

The United Nations has stated that “Syria is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time.”¹ There are now more than 5 million registered Syrian refugees.² Additionally, as the borders to neighboring countries are now closed, there are currently more than 6 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and more than 13 million people inside Syria still in need of humanitarian assistance.³ Eight million Syrian children are in immediate need of aid.⁴

The severity of the Syrian crisis demands a strong and effective response from the community of nations. The failure of governments to respond adequately to the crisis by not working towards effective solutions allows this humanitarian crisis to persist. Typically, this inaction – and even antipathy – reflects the views of an uninformed electorate that voices anti-refugee and anti-Muslim sentiments.

Today’s conflicts last an average of 37 years and refugees are displaced for an average of 17 years,⁵ expressing the need for effective, long-term solutions. As this protracted displacement becomes the “new normal,” refugees are increasingly marginalized, disenfranchised and excluded.⁶ Given this reality, the inability to respond adequately creates the fertile ground for the precise outcome we most fear: radicalization. Therefore, the promotion of morally acceptable and rational refugee policies at both the national and international levels must begin by replacing bias and misconception with

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/press/2016/3/56e6e3249/syria-conflict-5-years-biggest-refugee-displacement-crisis-time-demands.html>

² <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

³ <https://hno-syria.org/>

⁴ <https://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/child-refugees/syria-crisis>

⁵ <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/sector-system-reform-and-renewal-humanitarian-aid>

⁶ <https://www.rescue.org/report/refugee-compacts>; <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2015/02/20/idps-refugees-and-violent-extremism-from-victims-to-vectors-of-change/>



established facts. Only then can we overcome the fears that stand in the way of more effective and humane solutions to the crisis.

The report will provide a clear and concise overview of the available research relevant to Syrian refugees. The purpose of this report is to demonstrate how research and data from highly-regarded sources can be used to respond to what the Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees (MFA) has characterized as the “Three Great Fears” about Syrian refugees, namely:

1. The Fear of Negative Economic Impact: While concerns about the economic impact of refugee resettlement vary by country, 64% of respondents in an international survey were worried about the cost of hosting refugees.⁷
2. The Fear of Terrorism: In the U.S. and around the world, security concerns are cited as the primary reason for a decrease in sympathy towards refugees.⁸ This concern has been heightened by the rise of ISIS in Syria and numerous deadly terrorist attacks in recent years.
3. Islamophobia: While it is sometimes expressed blatantly, Islamophobia often subtly underlies concerns about Syrian refugees—the vast majority of whom are Muslim — that are couched in other terms. Lawmakers have called for favoring Syrian Christians in refugee resettlement.

When examined closely, these fears, often fueled by misinformation and disinformation, are found to be unwarranted. This report—taking into account the economic impact of refugees, the successes of Syrian immigrants, the comprehensiveness of the vetting procedure in the U.S. and UK, and the history of successful integration by Muslim Americans, among other factors—makes a strong and comprehensive case in favor of policies and public attitudes that are more favorable and compassionate towards Syrian refugees.

Fear of Negative Economic Impact

The Fear: Resettled Syrian refugees will have a negative economic impact on the United States, Europe and their Middle Eastern host countries. These refugees will be welfare-dependent and a financial burden.

The Facts: Refugees in the U.S. quickly integrate and positively impact local economies. Syrian refugees, in particular, benefit from the successful Syrian immigrant

⁷ https://www.tent.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Tent_GlobalReport_V6.pdf

⁸ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55462dd8e4b0a65de4f3a087/t/592230fc15d5dbdde23cbe37/1495412999000/TENT_2016_USA_TRACKER+US_V3+%281%29.pdf



community already in the U.S., who are well-positioned to support their compatriots. On a macro level, as is demonstrated by host countries in the Middle East and Europe, taking in Syrian refugees does not impede economic growth—rather, it can be a good economic investment. In Western Europe, native-born populations are not reproducing at maintenance levels. The only source of population growth in countries with aging residents is immigrants, including refugees. They comprise a needed labor pool in countries with aging populations.

U.S.

Fact: Despite arriving in the U.S. with very few resources, resettled refugees, from all countries, quickly demonstrate great self-sufficiency. Looking across all refugee groups, the costs of refugee resettlement decrease over time, as refugees integrate, it is ultimately a net economic benefit to local economies.

- Despite the upfront costs of refugee resettlement generally, outcomes for refugees dramatically improve over time.
 - Refugees are immediately eligible for public benefits when they arrive in the U.S. However, benefits usage declines among refugees over time. Comparing refugee households that have been in the U.S. less than 5 years with those that have been in the U.S. more than 20 years, there is a steep decline in the share of households receiving food stamps (42% to 16%), cash welfare (7% to 2%) and public health coverage (24% to 13%).⁹
 - By their eighth year in the U.S., refugees, in general, pay more in taxes than they receive in welfare benefits. Over a 20-year period, refugees pay **\$21,000** more in taxes than they receive in benefits.¹⁰
 - Refugees display a very high degree of upward mobility. The median household income for newly-arrived refugees is about 40% of the overall median U.S. household income. However, statistics show remarkable improvement for refugees in the country more than 25 years, whose median household income (**\$67,000**) exceeds that of the general U.S. population.¹¹
- Refugees have a higher rate of entrepreneurship (**13%**) than other immigrant groups and the U.S.-born population. In 2015, businesses of refugees generated \$4.6 billion in income.¹²

⁹ Capps, Randy and Kathleen Newland with Susan Fratzke, Susanna Groves, Gregory Auclair, Michael Fix, and Margie McHugh. 2015. *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

¹⁰ <http://www.nber.org/papers/w23498>

¹¹ http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NAE_Refugees_V5.pdf

¹² http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NAE_Refugees_V5.pdf



- International Rescue Committee has reported that **85%** of the refugees that they resettle are employed within 180 days.¹³

Fact: Syrian immigrants in the U.S., from earlier waves of migration, are well-educated and successful.

- There are about 90,000 Syrian immigrants in the U.S., who are succeeding on a variety of metrics. They are well-positioned to provide a social and economic support network for their newly-arrived compatriots.
 - **Median income** for Syrian families is **\$62,000**, which is \$9,000 higher than other foreign-born households.¹⁴
 - **49%** of Syrian immigrants work in **high-skilled occupations**, such as management, business and science.¹⁵
 - Syrian immigrants are highly **entrepreneurial**—the rate of business ownership is **11%**, more than triple the rate of U.S. citizens by birth.¹⁶
 - **27%** of Syrian immigrant men hold an **advanced degree**, compared to about 11% for other U.S. citizens by birth.¹⁷
 - **91%** of Syrian immigrants in the U.S. more than 20 have years have become naturalized **U.S. citizens**, compared to 71% of immigrants overall.¹⁸

“We are proud Syrian-Americans. We should welcome those seeking refuge now from the terrible atrocities of the Syrian war to become proud Syrian-Americans as well.”

-F. Murray Abraham

¹³ <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/international-rescue-committee-survey-shows-sympathy-syrian-refugees-across-europe>

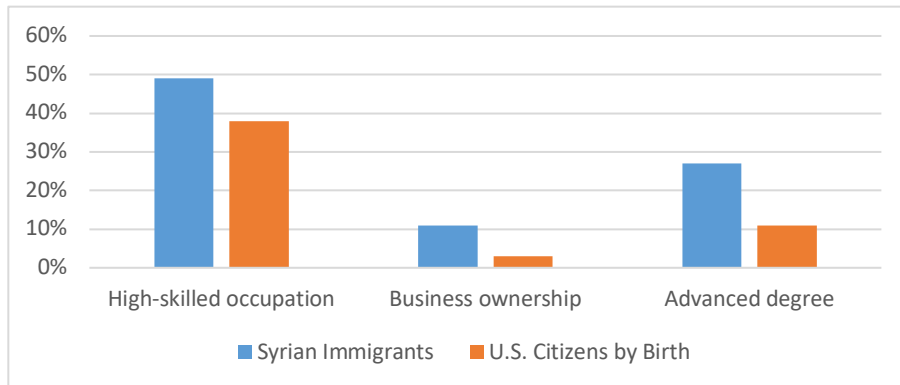
¹⁴ Zong, Jie. 2015. *Profile of Syrian Immigrants in the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

¹⁵ Zong, Jie. 2015. *Profile of Syrian Immigrants in the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

¹⁶ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2016/12/13/294851/syrian-immigrants-in-the-united-states-a-receiving-community-for-todays-refugees/>

¹⁷ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2016/12/13/294851/syrian-immigrants-in-the-united-states-a-receiving-community-for-todays-refugees/>

¹⁸ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2016/12/13/294851/syrian-immigrants-in-the-united-states-a-receiving-community-for-todays-refugees/>



Europe and the Middle East

Fact: Countries bearing the greatest burden of the Syrian refugee crisis will continue to see economic growth. With the right resources, refugees can benefit their host countries' economies.

- Nearly all of the **5.3 million** Syrian refugees registered by the United Nations are in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. While these countries have been overextended by the influx of refugees, they have not experienced a decline in their overall economic growth.
 - **Turkey's** GDP growth is expected to be at about **3%** by 2018.¹⁹
 - **Jordan's** GDP growth is estimated to be at an average of **2.6%** from 2017-2019.²⁰
 - GDP growth in **Lebanon** accelerated slightly in 2016 to reach **1.8%**.²¹
- A report on a cash assistance program in Lebanon showed that for every \$1 given to a Syrian refugee, **\$2.13** circulated in the local economy.²²
- It is illegal for refugees to work in Jordan and Lebanon – except in refugee camps. In camps, such as Za'atari in Jordan, refugees have set up numerous small businesses that are generating a cash economy, providing needed goods, restoring a measure of dignity, and demonstrating the resourcefulness of Syrian refugees.
- More than 900,000 Syrians have applied for asylum in Europe.²³ The influx of refugees will add to public expenditure in the short run. However, the EU's GDP

¹⁹ <http://www.oecd.org/economy/turkey-economic-forecast-summary.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview>

²¹ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview>

²² <https://www.rescue.org/report/emergency-economies-impact-cash-assistance-lebanon>

²³ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>



is predicted to be **0.25% higher** by 2020, once refugees are integrated into the labor market.²⁴

- According to a Tent Foundation study, investing 1 euro in refugee resettlement can yield nearly **2 euros** in economic benefit after 5 years.²⁵
- An estimated **10,000** doctors have fled Syria and can provide much needed medical services to their fellow refugees, if permitted to practice. The UK has created a mentorship system to assist Syrian doctors in the relicensing process.

Fear of Terrorism

The Fear: *By bringing in Syrian refugees, the U.S. and Europe will be importing terrorism. The U.S. and UK refugee resettlement programs are unsafe Europe has no coordinated resettlement program.*

U.S.

The Facts: A stringent and comprehensive vetting process is already in place for refugees entering the U.S., and there is enhanced scrutiny for Syrian refugees. This process, all of which occurs *before refugees can enter the U.S.*, involves numerous federal agencies. Furthermore, many Syrian refugees are themselves escaping from terrorists. Those chosen for resettlement are among the most at risk. As shown by the data cited below, the odds of being harmed by a refugee are incredibly small. And no Syrian refugee resettled in the U.S. has been associated with terrorist activity in any way.

Fact: The U.S. has an extensive and comprehensive vetting procedure for all refugees that is already secure. Syrian refugees receive heightened screening.

- The U.S. admits refugees into the country only after an exhaustive screening process that takes, on average, **18-24 months** to complete and includes **eight** different U.S. federal government agencies.²⁶ If there is any doubt about whether an applicant for resettlement poses a threat, they will not be admitted to the U.S.²⁷
 - The federal agencies involved include:

²⁴ <http://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Staff-Discussion-Notes/Issues/2016/12/31/The-Refugee-Surge-in-Europe-Economic-Challenges-43609>

²⁵ <http://www.tent.org/refugees-work/>

²⁶ <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/>; <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/us-refugee-resettlement-facts.html>

²⁷ <http://refugees.org/explore-the-issues/our-work-with-refugees/security-screening/>

- Department of State (DOS)
 - National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)
 - Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
 - Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
 - Department of Defense (DOD)
 - Terrorist Screening Center (TSC)
 - Two federal intelligence agencies
- The vetting process is even more stringent for Syrian refugees, who undergo the Syrian Enhanced Review process. While details of the program are classified, it includes heightened level of scrutiny for Syrians.²⁸
 - A refugee entering the U.S. must go through each of the following steps:²⁹
 1. **UNHCR** (the UN Refugee Agency) registers and confirms refugee status.
 2. A refugee who meets the criteria for resettlement is referred by UNHCR to the U.S.
 3. Resettlement support center (contracted with the **Department of State** [DOS]) conducts interviews and compiles personal data and background information.
 4. DOS checks name against watch-list through the Consular Lookout and Support System.
 5. Certain cases require additional security review, the Security Advisory Opinion.
 6. The **National Counterterrorism Center** conducts an Inter-agency Check.
 7. Enhanced review for Syrians.
 8. **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services** (USCIS) conducts an in-person interview.
 9. Approval from USCIS and submission to DOS for final processing.
 10. USCIS coordinates three biometrics checks, with the **FBI**, the **Department of Homeland Security** and the **Department of Defense**.
 11. Medical screening conducted by the **International Organization for Migration**.
 12. Matching refugee with sponsor agency, cultural orientation and admission to the U.S.
 - Unlike in Europe, where large numbers of displaced people come to their shores without vetting seeking asylum, refugees only enter the U.S. *after* they have completed the steps outlined above.

“...we have a tested individualized vetting system developed and implemented by national security professionals across the government to guard the homeland, which is continually re-evaluated to ensure that it is effective.”

-Joint declaration of ten former U.S. leaders of national security, foreign policy, and intelligence

²⁸ <https://tcf.org/content/report/why-america-could-and-should-admit-more-syrian-refugees/>

²⁹ <http://refugees.org/explore-the-issues/our-work-with-refugees/security-screening/>

Fact: Statistics show that refugees in general do not pose a danger to U.S. citizens. More specifically, the threat from resettled Syrian refugees is essentially nonexistent.

- Of the over 750,000 refugees resettled in the U.S. since 9/11, only three have been arrested for planning terrorist activities.³⁰ **None of them were Syrian.**
- According to a report from the Cato Institute, the annual chance of an American killed in a terrorist attack by a refugee is **1 in 3.64 billion.**
- The annual chance of being murdered by someone other than a foreign-born terrorist is 252.9 times greater than the chance of dying in a terrorist attack committed by a foreign-born terrorist.³¹
- **72%** of the Syrian refugees admitted to the U.S. as of January 2017 were **women and children** under the age of 14.³²

UK

- Syrians arrive in the UK either as asylum seekers or as resettled refugees through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS).
- For those coming to the UK through the VPRS, UNHCR identifies Syrians in need of resettlement and potentially suitable for resettlement in the UK. It then carries out an extensive screening which includes biometrics and documentary evidence. The UK government then re-registers the biometric checks and runs further checks to identify risk factors. This all occurs prior to arrival in the UK.³³
- In the year ending March 2016, 49% (824) of those resettled under the Syrian VPRS were under 18 years old, and 49% (818) were female.³⁴

Middle East

- Despite concerns about radicalization, Syrian refugees do not pose a major security threat to neighboring host countries. However, insufficient assistance and security measures that deny refugees their dignity can open the doors for extremism.³⁵

³⁰ <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/us-record-shows-refugees-are-not-threat>

³¹ <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/terrorism-immigration-risk-analysis>

³² <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/syrian-refugees-united-states#AgeGender>

³³ McGuinness, Terry. 14 June 2017. *The UK response to the Syrian refugee crisis*. House of Commons Library.

³⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2016/asylum#resettlement>

³⁵ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/syrian-refugees-are-not-security-threat-they-are-feared-be>



Islamophobia

The Fear: Syrian refugees, the majority of whom are Muslim, will not assimilate and will change the nature of the U.S. and Europe. If we bring in any Syrian refugees, they should be Christians.

The Facts: The fear of the U.S. and Europe being overrun by Muslims is unfounded. Furthermore, Muslims have been in the U.S. and Europe for generations, contributing in a variety of ways.

U.S.

Facts:

- Muslim Americans are patriotic and share American values. They have been in the U.S. for generations. Syrian refugees – most of whom are Muslim – will become part of the fabric of America, as Muslim immigrants predominantly have.
- Muslim Americans are highly assimilated into American society. **72%** of Muslim-Americans said that most Muslims coming to the U.S. today want to adopt American customs and ways of life or add them to their own.³⁶
- According to research compiled by the Cato Institute, Muslim Americans have more liberal views on social, religious, and political subjects than Muslims elsewhere. Muslim immigrants in the United States are less likely to support terrorism, violence against civilians, and aspects of strict Islamic law.³⁷
- **82%** of American Muslims indicated that they are concerned about extremism in the name of Islam around the world. In fact, they are more likely to respond that they are “very concerned” about such extremism than the U.S. general public.³⁸
- Despite facing hostility and discrimination in the U.S., **92%** of American Muslims are proud to be American.³⁹
- The Muslim American population is more racially diverse than the population as a whole, with 30% describing themselves as white, 23% as black, 21% as Asian, 6% as Hispanic and 19% as other or mixed race.⁴⁰

³⁶ <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/muslim-americans-no-signs-of-growth-in-alienation-or-support-for-extremism/>

³⁷ <https://www.cato.org/blog/muslims-rapidly-adopt-us-social-political-values>

³⁸ <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>

³⁹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/myths-and-facts-about-muslim-people-and-islam>



- **5,896** members of the U.S. military self-identify as Muslim. (Since members of the military are not required to provide their religious affiliation, the actual number of Muslims serving in the military is likely higher.)⁴¹
- In response to the argument that the U.S. should only accept Syrian refugees that are Christian: Less than 10% of the Syrian population is Christian, and they have fled at lower rates than Muslims. Human Rights First found no indication of “any efforts to limit resettlement of Christian refugees from Syria.”⁴²

Europe

- Perceptions of the size Muslim populations are often at odds with the facts. For example, French respondents to a poll thought 31% of the population is Muslim. The actual percentage is closer to 8%.⁴³
- As of 2010, Europe was home to 13 million Muslim immigrants and 44 million total Muslims— still just 6% of population. The Muslim share of the European population is steadily increasing – at a rate of approximately 1%/decade: 4% in 1990, 6% in 2010, projected 8.6% in 2030 (less than 3% of world’s Muslims).⁴⁴
- Muslim fertility rates are higher than rates for non-Muslims in Europe, partly because of younger median age. However, the fertility gap is expected to narrow.⁴⁵
- The European Muslim population is younger (median age of 32) than the non-Muslim European population (median age of 40).⁴⁶

UK

- There are approximately 3 million Muslims living in the UK.
- Negative views of Muslims are lower in the UK than in other regions in Europe. Only 28% of British people hold unfavorable views of Muslims in the UK.⁴⁷
- 73% of Muslims in the UK state their only national identity is British or another UK identity.⁴⁸

⁴¹ <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/myths-and-facts-about-muslim-people-and-islam>

⁴² <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/HRFSyrianRefCrisis.pdf>

⁴³ <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3466/Perceptions-are-not-reality-Things-the-world-gets-wrong.aspx>

⁴⁴ <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe/>

⁴⁵ <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/01/27/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-regional-europe/>

⁴⁶ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/europe/>

⁴⁷ <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/07/11/negative-views-of-minorities-refugees-common-in-eu/>

⁴⁸ https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf



Conclusion

Research demonstrates that the Three Great Fears can be overcome with the right kind of messaging. The following have been shown to move the needle of public opinion:⁴⁹

- Stories of successful integration of refugees.
- More information about what is going on in refugees' home countries.
- Seeing victims unable to escape domestic conflict.
- Seeing interviews with people caught up in the crisis.
- Knowledge that refugees do not want to be in a foreign country. They want to return home.

Furthermore, this international study representing 12 countries found that 89% of respondents expressed compassion for refugees' wellbeing and 66% of respondents said that refugees of different religions should be treated equally.⁵⁰ As such, there is a common global concern for the plight of refugees, even if there is strong disagreement over what the proper response is.

Debates in the U.S. and Europe over refugees often appear to be extremely polarized, but in fact the largest segment of the population has more moderate views. Studies in the UK and Germany have identified this segment as the “anxious middle” and the “humanitarian sceptics” respectively.⁵¹ This is the part of the population that has humanitarian impulses, but also harbors concerns about immigrants and refugees. Rather than being motivated by racial prejudice, these individuals are concerned about the economy, security and a changing culture. People in these more moderate groups can be influenced to shift their views with the right information and messaging. Providing these individuals with the facts about Syrian refugees—the harsh realities they face and their great potential to contribute—is one important step towards moving the needle on public opinion.

MFA believes in the importance of the faith-based community in responding to the Syrian humanitarian crisis. All of the world's great faiths emphasize the importance of welcoming and caring for the stranger. Religious organizations embody those messages by playing an outsized role in refugee resettlement and advocacy on behalf of refugees. Religious institutions have massive constituencies, well-developed communications vehicles, moral authority, and great mobilizing power. As such, they

⁴⁹https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55462dd8e4b0a65de4f3a087/t/5706810201dbae9366c3a7ad/1460044090846/TENT_Main+Report+JAN+2016+Re-contact.pdf

⁵⁰https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55462dd8e4b0a65de4f3a087/t/5706810201dbae9366c3a7ad/1460044090846/TENT_Main+Report+JAN+2016+Re-contact.pdf

⁵¹ <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11600.pdf>



have a unique role to play in refuting the hate speech of the far right and disseminating constructive, compassionate counter-messaging about Syrian refugees.

Help MFA continue its important work to share the facts about Syrian refugees:

www.multifaithalliance.org/donate