

As the United States Resettles Fewer Refugees, Some Countries and Religions Face Bigger Hits than Others

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Refugee & Asylum Policy | Refugees & Resettlement



Mark Garten/UN

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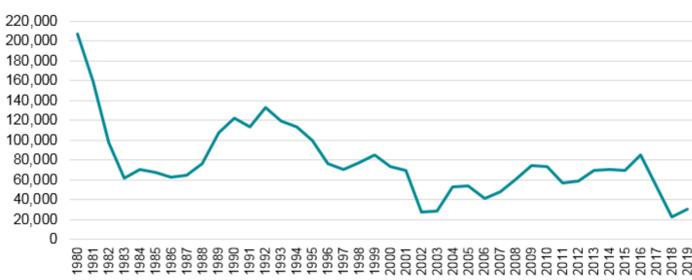
Over the last three years, under President Trump's administration, refugee admissions to the United States have dropped sharply, with 30,000 refugees resettled during fiscal year (FY) 2019—a near-record low. Further cuts are ahead, with the government announcing a record low resettlement ceiling of 18,000 for FY 2020. And with the administration for the first time allowing state and local governments a voice in resettlement, actual arrival numbers could be lower.

The steep decline in overall resettlement since FY 2016, the last full year of the Obama administration, has not affected all refugee populations equally. Exceptionally dramatic reductions have occurred in refugee admissions from particular countries, most notably from the Middle East, with an attendant plunge in resettlement of Muslim refugees.

Refugee Admissions Have Fallen by Two-Thirds Since 2016

In FY 2019, the United States admitted 29,818 refugees for resettlement. While this represents an increase from the FY 2018 figure of 22,491, last year marked the lowest refugee admission total since the modern refugee program was created in 1980. The declines under this administration began quickly after Trump took office. In FY 2016, the United States admitted nearly 85,000 refugees. This was the highest figure since 2000, though still well below the modern peak in FY 1980, when more than 200,000 refugees were admitted. In Trump's first year in office, the number of refugees resettled fell to 53,716.

Figure 1. Refugee Resettlement to the United States, FY 1980-2019



Source: State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, "Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System" (WRAPS), accessed October 4, 2019, www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals.

The top countries of refugee arrivals were the Democratic Republic of Congo (12,958), Burma (4,932), Ukraine (4,451), Eritrea (1,757), and Afghanistan (1,198). Ukraine was the only country with a substantial increase in the number of refugee arrivals during this administration, rising more than 1,900 from the numbers resettled in FY 2016.

Table 1. Refugee Resettlement to the United States, by Region and Top Countries, FY 2019

Region	FY 2019	
	Number	Percent
Total	30,000	100%
Africa	16,366	55%
Democratic Republic of Congo	12,958	43%
Eritrea	1,757	6%
Sudan	382	1%
All other	1,269	4%
East Asia	5,030	17%
Burma	4,932	16%
Vietnam	94	0%
All other	4	0%
Europe	4,994	17%
Ukraine	4,451	15%
Russia	184	1%
Moldova	120	0%
All other	239	1%
Latin America/ Caribbean	809	3%
El Salvador	311	1%
Colombia	298	1%
Guatemala	118	0%
All other	82	0%
Near East/ South Asia	2,801	9%
Afghanistan	1,198	4%
Syria	563	2%
Iraq	465	2%
All other	575	2%

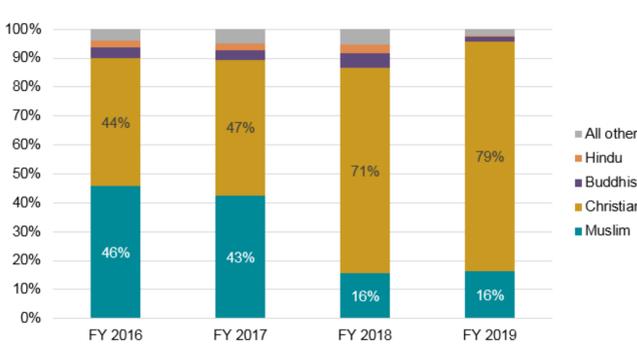
Note: Only two countries are shown for East Asia, because these were the only ones with more than one refugee arrival. Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of WRAPS data from the State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

Declining Muslim, Rising Christian Share

As a candidate, Donald Trump called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." While the shutdown has not been complete, Muslim refugee resettlement has plummeted. The number of Muslim admissions has fallen 87 percent since FY 2016—from 38,999 to 4,943. Christian admissions have also fallen over this period, by 37 percent, from 37,521 to 23,754. But, because Muslim admissions have fallen so much more, the great majority of admitted refugees are now Christian: In FY 2019, 79 percent of refugees were Christian and 16 percent Muslim—as compared to 44 percent Christian and 46 percent Muslim in 2016.

Eighty-seven percent of the decrease in resettlement of Muslim refugees has been driven by a decline in Muslim refugee arrivals from 11 countries designated as "high-risk" by the Trump administration in 2017. The countries, many but not all Muslim majority, are: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Since January 2018, applicants from these countries have been submitted to extra screening measures, reportedly including "additional interviews of applicants' family members and close scrutiny of potential ties to organized crime."

Figure 2. Refugee Resettlement to the United States by Religious Affiliation, FY 2016-19



Note: Buddhist group includes Buddhist and Hoa Hoa; Christian group includes Baptist, Catholic, Chaldean, Christian, Coptic, evangelical Christian, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah Witness, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Oriental Orthodoxy, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Protestant, Seventh Day Adventist, Ukrainian Orthodox, Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox Kyivan Patriarchate, and Uniate; Muslim group includes: Ahmadiyya, Muslim, Muslim Ismaic, Muslim Shiite, and Muslim Sunni. Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data from the State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

A Sharp Drop in Arrivals from the Middle East, Rise in European Admissions

Reductions in admission have come disproportionately from certain world regions, as a comparison of this year's admissions with those in FY 2016 makes clear. More than half of the 65 percent decline in overall resettlement during this period is attributable to falling admissions from the "Near East/South Asia" region, which includes the Middle East and Southern and Southeast Asian countries. Over this same period, admissions from Europe actually increased by 26 percent.

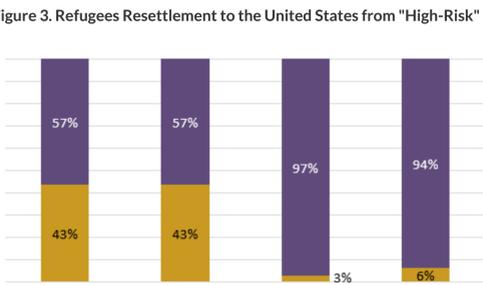
Table 2. Refugee Resettlement to the United States, by Region, FY 2016-19

Region	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	% Change FY2016-2019
Total	84,994	53,716	22,491	30,000	-65%
Africa	31,624	20,353	10,459	16,366	-48%
East Asia	12,518	5,173	3,668	5,030	-60%
Europe	3,957	5,205	3,612	4,994	26%
Latin America/Caribbean	1,340	1,688	955	809	-40%
Near East/South Asia	33,555	21,418	3,797	2,801	-92%

Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data from the State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

Overall, refugee admissions fell from most countries between FY 2016 and 2019, but the majority of the drop is attributable to three countries: Syria (from 12,587 to 563), Iraq (from 9,880 to 465), and Somalia (from 9,020 to 231), three of the countries labeled "high-risk." Taken together, admissions from these 11 designated high-risk nations have fallen by 95 percent.

Figure 3. Refugees Resettlement to the United States from "High-Risk" and Other Countries, FY 2016-19



Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data from the State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

Over this period, hundreds of thousands of Central American families and children have come to the U.S. Southwest border from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, often seeking asylum. Some members of Congress and others have called for these migrants to apply for refugee status in the United States from abroad, rather than coming to the U.S. border. But the United States resettles very few refugees from Central America, and the number admitted from El Salvador and Honduras fell over this period (in El Salvador's case, from 364 in FY 2016 to 311 in FY 2019, and for Honduras, from 84 to 74), while admissions from Guatemala grew from a mere 8 to 118.

Changing Philosophy on Refugee Resettlement

Since 2016, there has been a profound shift in both how many refugees are admitted to the United States and who is admitted. The overall decline is the reflection of a new philosophy about the role the United States should play in the global refugee system, even as ongoing conflicts around the world are leading millions of people to flee their homes in search of protection.

Much of the attention since 2016, deservedly, has been on the cuts in U.S. refugee resettlement, and their impacts on families, communities, and the long-term sustainability of the refugee program itself. But while the Trump administration has disavowed an intent to impose a Muslim ban, it has come very close to effectuating one under the cover of largely unspecified "enhanced security procedures" in the refugee program.

The administration has never detailed what the heightened vetting applied to the 11 high-risk countries involves, why it is having such a large impact on admissions, or whether the extra screening has identified security risks among its applicants. Along with the overall cap, these should be key questions for Congress to consider in its oversight of the refugee program.

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