

NISKANEN C E N T E R

THE U.S. REFUGEE PROGRAM SERVES AMERICAN INTERESTS AT HOME AND ABROAD

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The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has served as a lifeline for millions of refugees displaced by war and political persecution. The U.S. has historically been the world's leader in the absolute number of refugees resettled and the diversity of countries of origin from which refugees have come. While often seen as a humanitarian act that protects vulnerable people from harm and allows them to seek a better life in the U.S., refugee resettlement also yields tangible foreign policy benefits and strengthens the U.S. domestically.

While the U.S. has been a haven for the persecuted since the founding of the nation, the current refugee resettlement program was crafted in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the subsequent Indochinese refugee crisis. As President Gerald Ford stated in his remarks to Congress, the U.S. had a “profound moral obligation”¹ to relocate those Vietnamese who worked with the U.S. military and were fearful of reprisals following the fall of Saigon.

Following the Vietnam War, Congress worked in a bipartisan manner to create an orderly, streamlined process for admitting refugees. The 1980 Refugee Act grants the President the authority, in consultation with Congress, to establish refugee resettlement priorities and numerical targets based on geographic regions. Refugees who are already recognized abroad can be referred for resettlement to third countries, like the U.S., if they face significant challenges such as potential persecution or medical need, in their initial host country.

For decades, the U.S. refugee resettlement system functioned effectively with wide bipartisan support. From Reagan through Obama, presidents permitted the resettlement of approximately 80,000 refugees annually. While Congress provided oversight, it generally supported presidential initiatives on resettlement. However, during the 2016 Presidential campaign, Donald Trump criticized vetting procedures for refugees and vowed to prohibit Muslim refugees from entering the United States. During his term, President Trump slashed refugee resettlement numbers to historic lows, forcing many refugee assistance organizations to lay off staff and close offices.²

1. Gerald Ford. “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on United States Foreign Policy,” The American Presidency Project, April 10, 1975. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-reporting-united-states-foreign-policy>

2. Connor Finnegan and Ben Gittleson, “Trump ‘decimated’ refugee program hampering Biden’s historic goal: Advocates,” ABC News, February 18, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-decimated-refugee-program-hampering-bidens-historic-goal/story?id=75911102>

While the Biden administration has gradually raised the numbers for refugee resettlement, bipartisan support for the program remains elusive. Given this, it's crucial to reflect on USRAP's importance and understand why it has historically enjoyed broad approval, despite often contentious debates about other immigration pathways.

The USRAP is an Important Foreign Policy Tool

The primary objective of refugee resettlement is to offer relief to those with a pressing humanitarian crisis—an initiative which the U.S. has operated as a de facto leader. Forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with over 117 million people having fled conflict and violence and over 43 million of those having crossed an international border.³ A significant portion of refugees—nearly three-quarters—are from just a few countries: Afghanistan, Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, and South Sudan.⁴ Predominantly, refugees find shelter in the global south, with Iran, Turkey, Colombia, Germany, and Pakistan being the top hosting countries. While the U.S. has a humanitarian interest in assisting these individuals, there is also a compelling foreign policy advantage in supporting refugees and the nations that host them.

The United States, while committed to assisting those in need, cannot resettle all those who seek it; thus, it has historically balanced humanitarian principles with crucial foreign policy and national security goals. In the 1980s, nearly three-quarters of all resettled refugees originated from just three countries—Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Following the U.S. military withdrawal and the rise of oppressive communist regimes in these nations, there was a significant exodus of people to neighboring Southeast Asian countries. This prompted the U.S. to acknowledge its 'profound moral obligation' and take decisive action to ensure that those most vulnerable were safely resettled.

Indochinese resettlement not only saved those who had aligned with the U.S. during the conflict but also demonstrated America's commitment to human rights and civil liberties. It played a crucial role in preserving stability in Malaysia and Thailand, where millions had fled. Therefore, this resettlement program significantly alleviated human suffering and served as a vital tool of foreign policy during the peak of the Cold War.

Refugee resettlement priorities have been shaped by both geopolitical rivalries and U.S. military operations. While the Orderly Departure Program for Vietnamese was unique in its duration and scale, U.S. military involvement continued to have a significant influence on who gets resettled. Vietnamese refugees plus those from Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq make up the major countries of origin for refugees in the 1990s and well into the 2000s (see Table 1).

Alongside theaters of operation for U.S. armed forces, countries considered geopolitical rivals have topped the list of primary resettlement sources. For instance, the U.S. admitted significant numbers of refugees fleeing authoritarian governments in Myanmar, Iran, and Cuba, underscoring the universal preference for living in free, democratic societies over oppressive dictatorships. Additionally, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, President George H. Bush admitted over 350,000 refugees from Russia and other Soviet successor states, including many Soviet Jews fleeing persecution.

3. UNHCR, "Figures at a glance," UNHCR USA, June 13, 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance>

4. UNCHR, "Refugee Data Finder," UNHCR USA, October 8, 2024. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

Table 1. Top 10 Countries of Origin, 1990-2019

Rank	Country	Total Resettled
1	Soviet Union	359,054
2	Vietnam	243,719
3	Myanmar	179,834
4	Iraq	175,990
5	Somalia	144,324
6	Bosnia-Herzegovina	143,771
7	Bhutan	96,177
8	Cuba	87,034
9	Iran	77,711
10	Congo, Dem. Rep.	74,437

In addition to the moral imperative to help those fleeing violence, resettling refugees has numerous strategic benefits. For instance, it helps facilitate the cooperation of local partners when the U.S. military is deployed abroad. American troops often depend upon translation services, intelligence, logistics, etc, from locals on the ground, and ensuring a pathway to safety is essential should these individuals be targeted for their cooperation with the U.S.⁵ While the Special Immigration Visa (SIV) programs for Iraqis and Afghans were crucial in this regard, SIVs are relatively limited in their application. Refugee resettlement can be used to help the broader population. Failing to assist those who cooperate with U.S. forces can undermine trust and deter future collaboration.

As General James Mattis, former Secretary of Defense, noted in a 2018 memo to President Trump, “A failure to honor our commitments to those who have supported the U.S. in combat would undermine our military efforts abroad to protect the Homeland and support key aspects of the President’s national security strategy by making it more difficult to sustain the support for partners elsewhere.”⁶ Gen. Mattis strongly advocated for maintaining a high target for refugee resettlement, citing both moral imperatives and the role it plays in a comprehensive defense strategy.

A mass refugee exodus often has negative consequences for neighboring states, which bear the burden of sheltering and caring for new arrivals. This has caused regional destabilization, particularly when refugee arrivals disrupt the local economy or change the demographic balance of the host society. As NATO allies did with Ukrainians, U.S. refugee resettlement can ease the burden on initial hosts and ensure their cooperation with military and diplomatic efforts. Regional allies are needed for intelligence, logistics, air space, and a host of other services; those fearing a refugee influx may be reluctant to cooperate with U.S. efforts.

For example, resettling Kosovo Albanian refugees in Macedonia was critical in ensuring that Macedonia

5. Judith Teruya, “General James Mattis’ Plea to Resettle Iraqi Refugees,” Niskanen Center, September 24, 2019. <https://www.niskanencenter.org/general-james-mattis-plea-to-resettle-iraqi-refugees/>

6. James N. Mattis, “United States Refugee Assistance Program (USRAP) Ceiling,” Secretary of Defense, September 14, 2018. <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=0000016c-0709-dd54-a17d-7f8b31690002>

cooperated with the 1999 U.S. air campaign.⁷ Macedonia, which has an Albanian minority, was concerned with how a significant refugee influx would impact its domestic stability and threatened to close its borders to refugees. NATO allies, including the U.S., agreed to resettle a share of Kosovo refugees to secure Macedonian participation in the war. As such, refugee resettlement proved to be a valuable tool in averting broader instability in the Balkans.

Finally, refugee resettlement strengthens the United States' global reputation by showcasing its commitment to freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. Academic research shows that a positive international image helps foster cooperation with the U.S. across various domains, from trade to security.⁸ Accepting refugees from rival nations such as Iran or China portrays the U.S. as a welcoming and tolerant society, contrasting sharply with the closed, authoritarian regimes these individuals are escaping. During the Cold War, the U.S. encouraged defections from the Soviet Bloc as people 'voted with their feet' in favor of democracy. In today's increasingly contentious geopolitical environment, maintaining the goodwill of nations around the world—through measures like generous humanitarian migration programs—is a crucial foreign policy priority.

Revitalizing Communities in the U.S.

Ample evidence indicates that refugees benefit the U.S. economy in meaningful ways. One study finds that refugees enter the labor force at higher rates than natives and, over their first 20 years in the country, contribute more tax revenue than they receive in services.⁹ A report by the American Immigration Council noted that refugees obtain a median household income that is on par with the native-born, open new businesses at high rates, generate billions in income per year, and contribute significantly to state and local tax revenue.¹⁰ Regarding social integration, refugees are more likely to become U.S. citizens than other immigrant groups.¹¹

Many so-called “Rust Belt” cities—including Detroit, Columbus, and Cleveland¹²—have actively sought to resettle refugees in their communities to revitalize local industries.¹³ Refugees have reinvigorated neighborhoods plagued by poverty, crime, and neglect. Notable success stories include Bosnians in St. Louis,

7. Jef Huysmans, “Shape-shifting NATO: humanitarian action and the Kosovo refugee crisis,” *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 3 (2002): 599-618.

8. Benjamin E. Goldsmith, and Yusaku Horiuchi, “In search of soft power: Does foreign public opinion matter for US foreign policy?” *World Politics* 64, no. 3 (2012): 555-585.

9. William N. Evans and Daniel Fitzgerald, “The Economic and Social Outcomes of Refugees in the United States: Evidence from the ACS,” National Bureau of Economic Research, June, 2017. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23498>

10. American Immigration Council, “Starting Anew: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America,” American Immigration Council, June, 2023. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/05.23_refugee_report_v3_0.pdf

11. Nadwa Mossad et al., “Determinants of refugee naturalization in the United States,” PNAS, July 18, 2018. <https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.1802711115>

12. Adele Peters, “Refugees Will Revitalize The Economy—if We Let Them,” Fast Company, March 15, 2016. <https://www.fastcompany.com/3056324/refugees-will-revitalize-the-economy-if-we-let-them>

13. Matthew La Corte “Refugees are Revitalizing Some Great American Cities Facing Decline,” Niskanen Center, June 21, 2016. <https://www.niskanencenter.org/refugees-revitalizing-great-american-cities-facing-decline/>

MO;¹⁴ Burmese, Somalis, and Bosnians in Utica, NY;¹⁵ and Vietnamese refugees in Oklahoma City.¹⁶ Across the country, many local economies have experienced a resurgence due to the influx of refugees, demonstrating the profound impact they can have on their new communities.

Refugees have contributed to essential sectors of the economy, including manufacturing and health-care.¹⁷ Although many refugees initially take on low-skilled positions, a study examining Burmese, Hmong, Somali, and Bosnian refugees shows that over time, they often transition from blue-collar jobs to better-paying, professional positions.¹⁸ Refugees have filled jobs in essential industries with severe labor shortages, including food processing and healthcare.¹⁹

Finally, by injecting young workers into the economy, refugees and other immigrants can help offset the demographic challenge of an aging population. As the U.S. population grows older—altering the ratio of retirees to the working-age population—the increased use of public benefits such as Social Security²⁰ and Medicare²¹ threatens the solvency of these programs. Attracting new workers through programs such as refugee resettlement can serve as a fiscal boon to these vital services.

Action is Needed to Preserve the USRAP

For decades, Republican and Democratic lawmakers have understood the importance of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program for its humanitarian impact, domestic benefits, and contribution to a holistic foreign policy strategy. As President Ronald Reagan said, “We shall continue America’s tradition as a land that welcomes peoples from other countries. We shall also, with other countries, continue to share in the responsibility of welcoming and resettling those who flee oppression.”²² Subsequent presidents have continued this American tradition with Congress’s full support.

Yet, in recent years, America’s commitment to resettling refugees has been questioned. Resettlement numbers have been significantly reduced, bureaucratic obstacles have grown more daunting, and resettlement agencies have been forced to lay off staff. These isolationist tendencies in U.S. foreign policy not only leave millions in peril but also threaten America’s standing as a global leader.

14. Caleb Park, “The Story of Little Bosnia,” *The Globe*, May 16, 2022 <https://www.chsglobe.com/45489/uncategorized/the-story-of-little-bosnia/>

15. Susan Hartman, “How Refugees Transformed a Dying Rust Belt Town,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/06/03/realestate/utica-burma-refugees.html>

16. Jacob McClelland, “How Vietnamese Refugees Spent 40 Years Rejuvenating An Oklahoma City Neighborhood,” *KGOU*, December 30, 2015. <https://www.kgou.org/oklahoma-news/2015-12-30/how-vietnamese-refugees-spent-40-years-rejuvenating-an-oklahoma-city-neighborhood#stream/0>

17. National Immigration Forum, “Immigrants as Economic Contributors: Refugees Are a Fiscal Success Story for America,” *National Immigration Forum*, June 14, 2018. https://immigrationforum.org/article/immigrants-as-economic-contributors-refugees-are-a-fiscal-success-story-for-america/#_ednref46

18. David Dyssegaard Kallick and Silva Mathema, “Refugee Integration in the United States,” *Center for American Progress*, June, 2016. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/15112912/refugeeintegration.pdf>

19. New American Economy, “Refugee Workers on the Frontlines and as Essential Workers,” *New American Economy Research Fund*, July 23, 2020. <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/refugee-on-the-frontlines-covid-19/>

20. Craig Hanna et al., “Immigration and Social Security,” *American Academy of Actuaries*, November, 2020. <https://www.actuary.org/node/14008>

21. National Immigration Forum, “Immigrants as Economic Contributors.”

22. Ronald Reagan, “Statement on United States Immigration and Refugee Policy,” *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum*, July 30, 1981 <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-united-states-immigration-and-refugee-policy>

Despite the challenges, there is still widespread support among the American people for assisting refugees. Polls consistently show strong support for helping Afghan refugees,²³ as well as those from Ukraine.²⁴ The newly established Welcome Corps, which enables community groups to sponsor refugees, has seen over 100,000 Americans sign up, demonstrating the country's readiness to help those in need.²⁵

Therefore, Congress must reaffirm its commitment to a generous, orderly, and secure refugee resettlement process. This commitment will prevent future administrations from reversing America's longstanding tradition of aiding those fleeing violence and persecution. In doing so, the U.S. will not only benefit economically and socially but also continue to uphold the core American values of compassion and support for human rights.

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23. Monique Beals, "Majority in US favors refugee status for Afghans who worked with Americans: poll," The Hill, October 4, 2021. <https://the-hill.com/policy/international/575155-majority-in-us-favors-refugee-status-for-afghans-who-worked-with/>

24. Lydia Saad, "Americans Widely Favor Welcoming Ukrainian Refugees," Gallup, April 26, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/392069/americans-widely-favor-welcoming-ukrainian-refugees.aspx>

25. Mariano Sana, "Public opinion on refugee policy in the United States, 1938-2019: Increasing support for refugees and the sympathy effect," *International Migration Review* 55, no. 2 (2021): 574-604.