

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 21, 2015

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

As the Syrian conflict enters its 5<sup>th</sup> year with no end in sight, we respectfully request that your Administration take action to significantly increase the number of Syrian refugees who are resettled in the United States. Our nation's founders came to our shores to escape religious persecution and the United States has a long tradition of providing safe haven to refugees. The United States traditionally accepts at least 50 percent of resettlement cases from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, we have accepted only approximately 700 refugees since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, an unacceptably low number.

While the United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees, we must also dramatically increase the number of Syrian refugees that we accept for resettlement. The United States has a moral obligation to assist countries that are hosting Syrian refugees, but we also have a national security interest in maintaining stability in this critical region. Moreover, at this delicate moment in relations between the United States and the Arab world, offering safe haven to more Syrian refugees will send a positive signal about our concern for the suffering of innocent Syrian civilians.

The Syrian conflict has led to the world's worst ongoing humanitarian crisis and worst refugee crisis since World War II. More than half of Syria's 23 million people have been forced from their homes. Almost four million Syrians are registered as refugees. The vast majority of these refugees are women and children, including almost two million children, hundreds of thousands of whom are under the age of five. An entire generation of Syrian children is at risk. More than ten thousand Syrian children have been killed, and half of Syrian refugee children are not attending school, more than one hundred thousand are working to support their families, and thousands are unaccompanied or separated from their parents.

The Syrian refugee crisis has placed a great strain on the front-line countries that are hosting millions of Syria refugees, including close U.S. allies like Jordan. The tiny country of Lebanon, with a population of 4.2 million, is hosting 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees, the most refugees per capita in the world – and this does not include hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have fled to Lebanon but are not registered as refugees. This is almost 30 percent of Lebanon's population, the equivalent of the United States facing an influx of 100 million refugees. As UNHCR states:

“The crisis has had enormous social and economic impacts on those countries in the region which are so generously hosting refugees from Syria. It is affecting their stability, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities, overstressing basic social services, aggravating unemployment, diminishing trade and investment, and creating competition for limited and declining resources.”

The Syrian refugee crisis is perhaps the most serious challenge to the legal obligation to protect refugees since World War II. Upon returning from a recent visit to the region, a delegation of officials from the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) said the crisis “has reached a ‘tipping point,’ in which countries in the region are no longer able to handle the flow of refugees across their borders.”

Indeed, we cannot expect countries hosting Syrian refugees to continue shouldering such a disproportionate burden if the United States and other industrialized countries do not begin resettling many more Syrian refugees. UNHCR is seeking to resettle 130,000 Syrian refugees over the next two years and has thus far submitted more than 12,000 resettlement cases to the United States for consideration. Refugee Council USA, a nonpartisan coalition of the leading U.S. refugee organizations (including Church World Service, HIAS, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, USCCB, National Association of Evangelicals’ World Relief), recently called for the United States to resettle at least 65,000 of these Syrian refugees by the end of 2016.

Following the international community’s tragic failure to shelter Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi genocide, the United States played a leadership role in establishing the international legal regime for the protection of refugees. Since that time, the American people have generously welcomed millions of refugees fleeing war and totalitarian regimes. In keeping with this history, we urge your Administration to work to accept at least 50 percent of Syrian refugees whom UNHCR is seeking to resettle, consistent with our nation’s traditional practice under both Republican and Democratic Presidents.

We also request that your Administration encourage other countries to admit more Syrian refugees. We commend those countries that have committed to accepting a significant number of Syrian refugees relative to their population, including Australia, Canada, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland. However, other countries, including the United Kingdom, France, and our Gulf Arab allies, can and should do more.

We fully support your Administration’s efforts to ensure that any potential security concerns are addressed by strengthening security checks for refugees with the latest technology and information. Refugees are the most carefully vetted of all travelers to the U.S., with extensive biometric, biographic, intelligence, and law enforcement checks involving numerous agencies. We must continue to carefully screen refugee applicants for all national security and terrorism concerns, but we urge you to devote sufficient resources and staff to ensure that this process does not hinder resettlement for legitimate refugees, many of whom are living in difficult, even life-threatening, situations.

In short, it is a moral, legal, and national security imperative for the United States to lead by example in addressing the world's worst refugee crisis of our time by greatly increasing the number of Syrian refugees who are resettled in our country. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

  
RICHARD J. DURBIN  
United States Senator

  
AMY KLOBUCHAR  
United States Senator


  
PATRICK LEAHY  
United States Senator

  
DIANNE FEINSTEIN  
United States Senator

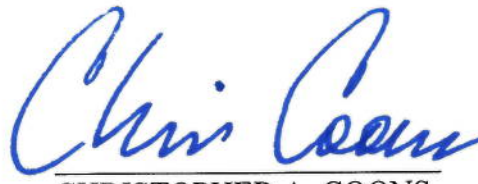
  
PATTY MURRAY  
United States Senator

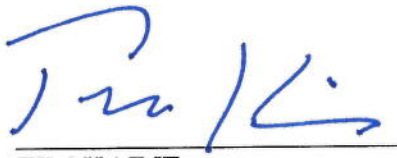
  
ROBERT MENENDEZ  
United States Senator

  
SHELDON WHITEHOUSE  
United States Senator

  
JEANNE SHAHEEN  
United States Senator

  
AL FRANKEN  
United States Senator

  
CHRISTOPHER A. COONS  
United States Senator



TIM KAINE  
United States Senator



EDWARD J. MARKEY  
United States Senator



SHERROD BROWN  
United States Senator



MAZII K. HIRONO  
United States Senator

cc: Secretary of State John Kerry  
Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson