

REFUGEES & MIGRATION

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ISSUES

- Since entering office, President Joe Biden has signed a series of executive orders that reversed the policies of the Trump administration on immigration and refugees. Overturning the travel ban, raising the ceiling for refugee resettlement, and reforming the asylum system are important steps forward, but there is still more that Biden can accomplish over the next four years.
- In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 witnessed a significant decline in the number of refugees that could be resettled in other countries. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only 22,770 refugees were resettled out of 1.44 million refugees worldwide that submitted requests. Of the total eligible for resettlement, approximately 250,000 refugees are from the Middle East and North Africa and more than 18,000 resettlement applications were submitted by Syrian refugees registered in Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon.
- Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan are currently sheltering 6.6 million Syrian refugees. Both Lebanon and Jordan host Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees. In addition, there are 2.7 million Afghan refugees and roughly half are sheltered in neighboring Pakistan.

US INTERESTS

- After four years of antagonism toward refugees and asylum seekers, Biden has promised a return to normalcy. But the Global War on Terror is nearly two decades old and more than simply managing the refugee problem is needed.
- Washington must step up to help resolve a problem it has had a hand in creating. It is seen as contributing to the refugee crisis with the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and it has also participated directly in the Yemeni and Syrian conflicts.

Meanwhile, Lebanon is experiencing an unprecedented financial and political crisis that is exacerbated by U.S. sanctions against Beirut and Damascus.

- In addition to reflecting American values, refugee resettlement also advances U.S. national security interests, providing an example of U.S. leadership to allies abroad, and benefits the U.S. economy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Biden administration should prioritize resettlement of refugees from Syria and Yemen. Refugees from these countries were targeted by the Trump administration as an extension of U.S. policy toward the civil wars in both countries.
- Increasing the refugee ceiling must be accompanied by structural improvements to streamline and improve the resettlement process. Under the Trump administration, the resettlement program was starved for funding and personnel. Rebuilding this capacity will not be quick or easy. In addition, greater coordination with and funding for non-governmental organizations that work with refugees in the U.S. and Middle East and North Africa will be needed.
- As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, increased funding to UNHCR and restored funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency is essential.
- Ameliorating the situation of refugees in the Middle East and North Africa requires a more engaged diplomatic effort whose goal is conflict resolution and not conflict management. Where possible, political solutions should be sought and military interventions avoided.