



# Why America's Refugee Reset Could Drive Away Valuable War Allies

October 25, 2020 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The National Interest*

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Iraq

The Trump administration is increasingly shutting the door on refugees who want to come to America and, even worse, shutting it on Iraqis who risked their lives to help America's military and now face the threat of deadly retribution at home.

Last year, the White House limited refugees to America to just 18,000, down dramatically from about 230,000 in 1980 when the current U.S. refugee program began and the lowest level in its forty-year history. For the fiscal year that began on Oct. 1, President Donald Trump told Congress that he plans to cut it further to 15,000.

Squeezing refugees is just one element of an immigration policy that is closing America's borders to the millions who seek to come here to escape poverty or persecution. While severely limiting refugees, the Administration is cutting legal immigration in half, denying more H-1B applications for high-skilled foreign nationals, rejecting more requests of military members to become U.S. citizens, and slowing naturalization in general.

Whatever the rationale for this policy—from the “America First” logic of Trump's populist base to administration concerns about protecting the nation from dangerous elements from abroad—it's having the effect of weakening America at home and overseas, and that harm will only grow.

Overseas, it's tarnishing our image as a beacon of hope and a safe haven for the oppressed, leaving Washington less equipped to compete for global influence with authoritarian regimes in Beijing, Moscow, and elsewhere that are promoting their governing models as alternatives to U.S.-led democracy.

At home, meanwhile, the policy is constraining the economy by leaving it short of the workers needed to spur more growth—and at a time when America's parents are having fewer children and our aging society is imposing more burdens on the workers of today and tomorrow to support the retirees of their day.

The administration's refugee policy, in particular, will jeopardize America's ability to secure the cooperation of local populations when, at some point in the future, the United States again must take military action.

The policy has become a campaign issue of major contention. Former Vice President Joe Biden has pledged to end Trump's “unrelenting assault on our values and our history as a nation of immigrants” by creating a “roadmap for citizenship” for eleven million undocumented immigrants, expanding visas, boosting naturalization, welcoming asylum seekers, and raising refugee numbers to 125,000 a year.

No matter who wins in November, the issue is ripe for a rethink. And nowhere would a course correction over immigration be more consequential than when it comes to the refugees who risked their lives for America.

Embracing such refugees was once a noncontroversial notion. Indeed, no one opposed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq more strenuously than former Sen. Ted Kennedy. And yet, in 2007, the Massachusetts Democrat worked closely with the Bush administration to expand the number of Iraqi refugees to America and give special preference to the drivers, cooks, translators, and others who helped U.S. troops.

Under America's refugee program, the president has singular authority to limit refugees and, if he chooses, shut America's doors to them. While presidents from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama admitted anywhere from 60,000 to more than 150,000 refugees in a given year, Trump has progressively shrunk that figure to 18,000.

Of that number, the administration pledged to reserve 4,000 slots for Iraqi refugees who helped America's troops. As it turned out, however, it admitted just 161 of them—and that's out of about 100,000 such Iraqis who, the International Rescue Committee reported this year, “are already in the pipeline to be resettled.” By cutting the total refugee figure to 15,000 for this year, the administration is leaving even less room to protect those same Iraqi refugees—if he ever decides to do so.

The potential long-term consequences have not gone unnoticed by those with the most at stake.

In September of last year, twenty-seven retired generals and admirals wrote to the White House to promote the refugee program, explaining that it has “served critical national security interests.”

Of the Iraqis who helped U.S. troops, retired Army General Peter W. Chiarelli told the Wall Street Journal, “The rest of the world is watching how we handle the . . . issue and our ability to get the kind of help we got in Iraq and Afghanistan will be greatly impeded because people will understand or at least believe that the Americans want your services now, but don’t count on them in the future.”

That the United States will again need such “services” from a local population at some point seems inevitable, for the world’s most powerful nation retains vital interests on virtually every continent.

?As President George W. Bush and Kennedy knew more than a decade ago—and as Chiarelli reminded us more recently—an America that turns its back on brave Iraqis will be hard-pressed to find such friends in the future.

*Lawrence J. Haas, senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, is the author of, most recently, Harry and Arthur: Truman, Vandenberg, and the Partnership That Created the Free World.*