

Ranking Member Brian Higgins Opening Statement

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

“Admitting Syrian Refugees: The Intelligence Void and the Emerging Homeland Security Threat”

Wednesday, June 24, 2015

I would like to thank you for holding this hearing to examine the homeland security threat posed by terrorist groups trying to exploit the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in order to plan or execute terrorist attacks in the U.S. and abroad. Today, I know we will hear from those who believe this threat is significantly amplified by the influx of Syrian refugees who are expected to be admitted into the United States over the next few years.

While I acknowledge that there have been cases where terrorists, their associates, or foreign nationals have attempted to use the U.S. refugee process as a gateway to facilitate terrorist planning and attacks. However, I would offer that the attempted fraud associated U.S. Refugee program is no more or less than the attempted fraud that exists within other programs. To prevent exploitation, the refugee vetting process has been publicly characterized by a State Department official as “intensive, “slow,” and “rigorous.”

Such a process exposes refugees to a great deal of scrutiny from U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Along with the systems and processes in place, the deliberateness of the process may inherently complicate the timing and ability of terrorists’ plans. Throughout our history, the United States has been a haven for refugees fleeing persecution and those who would play on our fears should not derail that proud legacy.

The United States should commit to resettling more of the refugees identified by the UN Refugee Agency as needing resettlement. Under our current resettlement plans, the United States is projected to rescue less than 1% of the refugees from Syria. This will not relieve the burden on the other resettlement countries that are hosting millions of refugees and spending billions of dollars on their care.

But it is a first step. I encourage us to find a balance. We must continue to carefully screen refugee applicants for all national security and terrorism concerns. I would urge both my Democratic and Republican colleagues to ensure that sufficient resources and staff are in place and available to ensure that the security vetting process is thorough without hindering resettlement for legitimate refugees.

Prohibiting Syrian refugees from resettlement or lowering the already minimal number of refugees in the United States now, when there is no real evidence that they are a terror threat, would be to actively and explicitly discriminate against them.

Again, I thank Chairman King for his leadership and focusing our oversight on this hearing. However, I would warn us against overstating fears and creating a level of suspicion on an already vulnerable population.