

Los Angeles Times

U.S. considers taking in Syrian refugees

A resettlement plan aims to help both the hard-hit Syrian families and the Middle Eastern countries that are straining to support 1.6 million refugees.



Syrian refugees take part in a demonstration this year at the Zaatari camp in Jordan, near the border with Syria. (Khalil Mazraawi / AFP/Getty Images)

By Paul Richter, Los Angeles Times
June 9, 2013, 6:26 p.m.

WASHINGTON — Two years into a [civil war](#) that shows no signs of ending, the [Obama](#) administration is considering resettling refugees who have fled Syria, part of an international effort that could bring thousands of Syrians to American cities and towns.

A resettlement plan under discussion in Washington and other capitals is aimed at relieving pressure on Middle Eastern countries straining to support 1.6 million refugees, as well as assisting hard-hit Syrian families.

The [State Department](#) is "ready to consider the idea," an official from the department said, if the administration receives a formal request from the [United Nations](#) Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, which is the usual procedure.

The United States usually accepts about half the refugees that the U.N. agency proposes for resettlement. California has historically taken the largest share, but Illinois, Florida, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia are also popular destinations.

U.N. refugee officials, diplomats and nongovernmental relief groups plan to discuss possible resettlement schemes at a high-level meeting this week in Geneva. Germany already has committed to taking 5,000 people.

"It was probably inevitable that in this crisis, with these overwhelming numbers, governments would start moving in this direction," said Lavinia Limon, chief executive officer of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, a Virginia-based advocacy and service group. "But there will be resistance."

The Obama administration supports rebels trying to oust Syrian President [Bashar Assad](#), but is wary of deeper involvement in Syria.

The issue is politically sensitive on several levels.

[Congress](#) strongly resisted accepting Iraqi refugees, including interpreters who had worked with U.S. forces, after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. Most lawmakers share [White House](#) caution about getting more engaged in Syria and may have little appetite for a major influx.

But [Susan Rice](#), President Obama's new national security advisor, and [Samantha Power](#), Obama's nominee for U.S. ambassador to the U.N., both have been strong advocates for refugees. They may make the White House more receptive to at least a partial opening.

Homeland security officials require careful vetting of refugees, with multiple interviews and background checks before they are allowed to enter the country. Under normal circumstances, the screening process can take a year or longer.

U.S. officials are likely to be extra careful with Syrian refugees. As Islamic militants take a more prominent role in the rebel forces, officials worry about fighters with [Al Qaeda](#) ties trying to enter the country. Two resettled Iraqis were convicted of trying to send arms to Al Qaeda from their home in Bowling Green, Ky.

The refugee dilemma is more acute for countries that lie on Syria's borders.

Jordan, [Turkey](#) and [Lebanon](#), which have absorbed the bulk of the refugees, worry that a resettlement plan could actually widen the flood if Syrians see a chance for a better life in North America, Europe or Australia.

Jordan and Lebanon each have taken in about 500,000 refugees and Turkey has more than 375,000, according to the U.N. refugee agency. It predicts that the total number of refugees will double to 3.2 million by the end of the year.

Turkey already has demanded that the West take some its refugees, even proposing an airlift to fly them abroad. Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), who has faced angry protests against his government for giving refuge to so many Syrians, declared last month, "We are the first victims of the Syrian situation."

Some Middle Eastern officials worry they may get stuck housing and feeding refugees for months or years while the West does the vetting, leading to an even longer logjam and more domestic political turmoil.

"Their view is that unless this involves big numbers, it's not worth doing," said a European official, who declined to be identified because of the sensitivity of the subject. "You need to be talking about tens of thousands of people."

Western officials try to discourage poor foreigners who are seeking a more comfortable life or business opportunities in the West. They say resettlement is only for those who can't go home, and seek to dispel notions that an easy life awaits.

According to a State Department publication aimed at refugees, "Cars are not provided.... Most Americans value self-reliance and hard work. They expect newcomers to find jobs as soon as possible and to take care of themselves and their families."

Another sensitive issue is who qualifies for resettlement. Western countries often prefer intact, well-educated families with familiar religious backgrounds.

But experts say 80% of the Syrian refugees are women and children, many with war-related injuries or psychological problems that could hamper finding work or going to school.

Kirk Johnson, founder of the List Project, which has pushed for Iraqi resettlement, said it may be difficult to sell Syrian resettlement to Congress. He said it would require an advocacy effort and sympathetic lawmakers, "and I don't see either of those necessary ingredients."

Yet most refugee advocates predict that Americans will ultimately help the Syrians.

"Americans have a long tradition of welcoming refugees," said Daryl Grisgraber, a Washington-based Middle East specialist at Refugees International, which provides advocacy and services for refugees. "They'll respond here, too."

paul.richter@latimes.com

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/middleeast/la-fg-syria-refugees-20130610,0,6484601.story>