



We need US companies to hire Syrian refugees

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A man carries two children as he walks with other migrants near the southern Serbian village of Miratovac, travelling on foot from Macedonia to Presevo in Serbia, on August 25, 2015. At least 2,000 more migrants flooded overnight into Serbia in a desperate journey to try and go on to Hungary, the door into the European Union, a UN official said on August 24. More than 9,000 people, mostly Syrian refugees, have arrived to Serbia those last three days.

Seven countries in 25 days with a 16-month child. That was the harrowing journey over land and sea to escape Syria's brutal civil war that one young couple shared with me last month at a refugee center in Berlin. Their child, no older than my own, lay asleep behind them in a small and sparse room. The man was a mechanic in Syria; all he wanted now was to get a job.

Through such interactions, as the Department of State's Special Representative for Commercial and Business Affairs, I have become convinced of the crucial role that the private sector can play in tackling the global refugee crisis. That is why instead of sitting down again in a refugee center on World Refugee Day last week, I sat down in a boardroom to hear firsthand from U.S. companies that are hiring refugees and from refugees who are pooling their talents into our economy on the challenges and the opportunities that they have encountered.

I am not the only one who sees a clear role for the private sector.

The White House this week issued a formal [Call to Action](#) for U.S. firms to make "new, measurable, and significant commitments that will have a long-term, sustainable impact on refugees residing in countries on the frontlines of this crisis and in countries of resettlement, like the United States." The Call to Action flows from the Obama administration's [ongoing leadership](#) in response to the human tragedy of [20 million refugees](#) being scattered across the globe today. Since the start of the Syrian conflict that has displaced 4.5 million people, the administration has provided over \$5 billion in humanitarian aid. On Sept. 20, [President Obama](#) will host a summit of world leaders on the refugee crisis to secure increased pledges for aid; measures to help refugees become contributing members of their host communities, including getting one million adults the legal right to work; and a greater intake of refugees through resettlement and work programs.

A crisis of this scale simply cannot be solved by one or many governments alone. The private sector has a crucial role to play — driven not just by beneficence but by dividends. That is because many refugees like the mechanic I met have hard skills and can have a significant positive impact once they are economically integrated in their host economies. According to Upwardly Global — an organization focused on helping refugees build careers — approximately half of the adult refugees arriving in the United States have a college education; many others have technical skills and expertise. Some companies in the United States are already actively tapping this potential. Nearly 30 percent of the workforce of Chobani, a leading yogurt company, consists of refugees resettled in the United States.

Yet the hiring process can be fraught and risks, in the words of one refugee, considerable "brain waste." During the roundtable I participated in on World Refugee Day, I heard firsthand from individuals who had been accountants, journalists, and engineers in their home countries and who struggled against the odds to have their skills and potential ultimately recognized by U.S. employers to mutual benefit.

For one accountant from Ethiopia, the challenge was to get U.S. companies to recognize his foreign degree. After submitting over 1,000 resumes, he enrolled in Strayer University to obtain key certifications and was hired by an insurance company. For a financial analyst from Sudan, the question was, quite simply, should she settle. Fortuitously, when her resume was sent to an employer at the World Bank for consideration as a nanny, the employer focused instead on her hard skills and potential and hired her as an analyst after a competitive selection process. For a journalist from Iraq, his inability to get short-term apprenticeships to gain U.S. work experience compelled him to pay employers for such an opportunity. He now works at a foundation dedicated to countering ISIS's narrative of extremism online.

The experiences of these individuals indicates the potential for U.S. companies to reap real talent — to do well and to do good by taking a broader view of employing refugees. As the White House Call to Action outlines, there are a variety of avenues through which companies can engage beyond hiring refugees. These span providing vocational training and apprenticeships to extending technical assistance and seed funding to refugees to allow them to start new businesses; prioritizing the procurement of goods and services from refugee-run businesses to enabling access to key financial services. As part of the Call to Action, Accenture has also set up an [online platform](#) that can serve as a key resource and clearinghouse for U.S. firms that are interested in engaging further.

In short, U.S. firms can be important enablers for refugees to create value at home, and abroad. During my visit to the refugee center in Germany, for example, I was struck by the number of children with smart phones and tablets in their hands and their access to internet-enabled desktops — desktops donated by [Microsoft](#). Tremendous potential exists to connect this younger generation to the digital economy, providing an independent livelihood and relieving some of the stresses that surround local labor markets.

To be sure, a conceptual shift is required in thinking of refugees as economic contributors and not just in need of assistance and counsel. It is a shift I know well and recently [attested to in a video](#) released by the Department of State on World Refugee Day. Given my family's experience fleeing mob violence during the bloody partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, I have felt a responsibility to work for refugees and asylum seekers as an interpreter and attorney. Yet it was only on being asked to counsel a bright young Ethiopian female lawyer through a resettlement program of the International Rescue Committee that my lens expanded beyond what a refugee needed to what he or she could offer.

Similarly, during my time at the State Department, I have met with executives from many companies and have been impressed by the breadth of their efforts to support refugees and incorporate them in their firms. In recognition of the clear economic and social value of such efforts, the [2016 Awards for Corporate Excellence](#) that will be given by U.S. Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) later this year will include a new category on inclusive hiring practices, notably the hiring of refugees.

On World Refugee Day, I had the opportunity to meet with some of these visionary employers. In the wake of the White House Call to Action, I hope even more will consider joining the ranks.

There is at least one father, husband, and mechanic out there who is counting on it.

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