



Center for a Secure Free Society
Global Dispatch



From Crisis to Response:
Assessing Canada's
Fast-Track Refugee Policy

by Candice Malcolm

Canada's policy to admit 25,000 Syrian refugees by February 29, 2016, and another 25,000 by December 31, 2016, has been the cause of both fanfare and contention. While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has received praise and encouragement from many humanitarian NGOs, the promise to fast-track large numbers of refugees has also raised concerns from immigration officials and the broader national security community, both in Canada and the United States.

This Dispatch explains the political context under which this decision was made and assesses the threats and risks associated with this plan. It outlines the primary risk of an imminent terrorist attack as well as longer-term threats, including the possibility of radicalized refugees forming homegrown terrorist cells in Canada. Ultimately, Canada and the U.S. must work together to ensure continental perimeter security is upheld while maintaining a free and open border between the world's largest trade partners.

A Political Response

In early September 2015, midway through the Canadian federal election and at a time when Justin Trudeau's centrist Liberal Party was trailing in third place behind the incumbent center-right Conservative Party and the center-left New Democrats, the Canadian election campaign took a deciding twist. Images of a lifeless three-year-old boy, Alan Kurdi, whose body had washed ashore on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey, surfaced and grabbed media attention around the world. Young Alan, his older brother, and mother had all drowned when their small boat capsized in the Aegean Sea. Like so many Syrian refugees, the Kurdi family was fleeing violence and a civil war, taking the desperate and death-defying journey from Syria towards asylum in the European Union.

As these haunting images were circulating, Canadian media erroneously reported that Alan Kurdi's parents had applied, and been rejected, for migration to Canada.¹ It turned out Alan's uncle had once submitted an incomplete application, but Alan and his parents had never applied - although, it seems that Canada was their intended final destination.²

The heart-breaking images hit a nerve with people all over the Western world. In Canada, a sense of hysteria set over the country. The plight of Syrian refugees instantly became the top issue in the federal election campaign. Many prominent Canadians openly fretted over a perception that Canada was not doing enough to help refugees from war-torn Syria.

The outcry was so loud that Canada's former Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier, the highest ranking officer in the Canadian Armed Forces and a man so hard-nosed he once said his "job is to be able to kill people," became one of the leading advocates for a massive refugee influx into Canada. General Hillier urged the leaders of all three political parties "to bring 50,000 of those frightened men, women, and children to Canada"³ by the end of the year.

Against this backdrop, Justin Trudeau made the bold humanitarian pledge to admit 25,000 Syrian refugees by year end. Trudeau's refugee pledge trumped both opposition parties⁴ and helped lift his party to new levels of popularity and support. In the October election, Trudeau won a sweeping majority government for his Liberal party. The Syrian refugee pledge was seen as a major component of the victory.

Trudeau's campaign promise clashed with reality when his government was sworn into office on November 4, 2015. The government suddenly had mere weeks to expedite the process of selecting, screening, and relocating tens of thousands

of refugees from a war zone and hotbed for radical Islam and Islamic terrorism. To add to the new Trudeau government's precarious refugee situation, Daesh⁵ terrorists committed unfathomable atrocities in Paris and San Bernardino, underscoring that the threat of terrorists infiltrating our immigration and refugee system was not only plausible, it was probable. Fortunately, the government recognized that an artificial deadline, based on a political agenda, was rash and unachievable. Rather than re-considering the entire commitment on Syrian refugees, however, the government merely gave itself a two-month extension to bring in the 25,000 refugees.

The new deadline was pushed to February 29, 2016, and the Trudeau administration doubled down and committed to another 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016.⁶

While the humanitarian nature of Trudeau's commitment is admirable and perhaps even praiseworthy, there are valid security implications and concerns associated with Canada's refugee policy. These concerns must be explored and addressed, particularly those connected to credible national security threats and long-term integration challenges.

Rushing to Ruin

Trudeau's expedited refugee plan was recently the subject of a congressional hearing by the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, entitled "Canada's Fast-Track Refugee Plan: Unanswered Questions and Implications for U.S. National Security."⁷ The committee heard testimony from three

broadly-respected Canadian scholars as well as an American border patrol agent. The very fact that such a hearing took place demonstrates that concern with Trudeau's policies reaches beyond the Canadian public discourse. People on both sides of the border are seeking assurance that Canada is not taking shortcuts or sacrificing security

in order to achieve its political and humanitarian objectives. There are unavoidable risks associated with resettling refugees from a war zone and obvious concerns with Canada's ability to properly screen and vet 25,000 Syrians in just four months.

The risk is amplified by direct threats coming

from Daesh, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Daesh itself has warned that it will infiltrate agents within the swarms of refugees flooding into Europe.⁸ Plain-clothed terrorists can easily be confused with refugees, especially amidst the chaos and confusion of the swelling refugee crisis. The head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency has also warned of increased attacks by Daesh, including a possible attack in the U.S. in 2016,⁹ or quite possibly an attack launched from anywhere in the North American continent.

In addition to direct warnings from terrorists, there is increased uncertainty with processing refugee applications due to the collapse of the Syrian state. While engaging in its civil war, Syria's Assad government lacks official capacity to share information on criminal backgrounds and terrorist affiliations. United Nations, American, and Canadian officials cannot reliably obtain a refugee's legal record from local officials. Juxtapose the lack of background checks

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available with the fact that there is a thriving black market for Syrian passports and official documentation. Syria has become a failed state, and can no longer control its own passport production facilities. In fact, 8 percent of Syrian passports used in Germany were found to be fake.¹⁰ It can, therefore, be assumed that anyone from the region can buy a Syrian passport, anyone can change their identity, and anyone can pose as a Syrian refugee.

Canada admits refugees through the UNHCR¹¹ and selects refugees from camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. It is of considerable concern that Lebanese cabinet minister Elias Bou Saab recently warned that approximately 2 percent of the 1.1 million Syrian refugees currently camped in Lebanon have connections to Daesh.¹² Likewise, public opinion and polling findings indicate that up to 20 percent of the Syrian population believes that Daesh has had a positive influence in their country.¹³ Furthermore, according to the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 13 percent of Syrians in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey have a positive opinion of Daesh.¹⁴ Presumably, many more have positive perceptions of other terrorist groups and agree with radical elements of their religion and ideology.

The general inability to verify and scrutinize the identities and backgrounds of would-be refugees is a cause for concern. The Trudeau government has tacitly acknowledged this threat, and is therefore prioritizing refugee applications from women and families, while explicitly not accepting single unaccompanied males.¹⁵ Recent events, however, have shown that Canada's preferred demographics are not exempt

from radicalism and Islamic terrorism.

Daesh has become a well-known destination for so-called jihadist brides, including high-profile cases such as the three British teenage girls who left London, traveled through Istanbul into Syria and handed themselves over to the Islamic State.¹⁶ The New York Times similarly profiled two teenage girls living in Raqqa who are part of the Khansaa Brigade, an all-female police force within Daesh.¹⁷ Consequently, the Trudeau govern-

ment policy may help narrow the scope of potential refugees and somewhat sanitize the selection process, but it does not completely eliminate the risk of a would-be terrorist entering Canada under the guise of a refugee.

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Homegrown Threats

Aside from the ongoing impending risk of terror attacks being carried out by Syrian refugees, there are other tangible risks that come with Canada's refugee program that may persist long after the crisis in Syria fades away. Canada's refugee resettlement agencies – the people on the ground working with refugees – have been so overwhelmed that several have asked the Trudeau government for a “pause” in admitting new refugees. These agencies are responsible for working with newcomers and ensuring that refugees¹⁸ have housing, basic needs like food and banking, and are enrolled in language training courses. They also play an incredibly important role in helping to integrate refugees and ensuring newcomers are connected with the broader com-

munity. Canada takes integration seriously and works hard to avoid the phenomenon of refugees forming isolated cultural silos, as seen in many European cities. Refugee resettlement is a serious commitment that

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requires long-term attention and resources.

The government is overburdening its state-funded, privately-operated resettlement agencies, and therefore risks generating integration problems. If Syrian refugees are ignored and neglected in Canada, it may help drive members of the community – particularly the disenfranchised and uneducated youth – towards radicalization. The Boston Marathon bombers came to the United States as refugees as small children and they became radicalized while living in the West. Likewise, Hiva Alizadeh,¹⁹ a former refugee from Iran who came to Canada in 2002, was arrested in 2010 and pled guilty to terror charges in 2014. Alizadeh admitted to pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda, traveling to Afghanistan to attend a terrorist training camp, and creating a homegrown Muslim terror cell in Ottawa with the objective of making bombs and killing Canadians.²⁰ This is not an isolated incident. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) suspects that there are terror cells in every major Canadian city.²¹

Canada has thwarted several other high-profile terrorist plots by local cells, in-

cluding the 2006 arrests of the so-called Toronto 18, a terror cell made up of 18 young Muslim immigrants, refugees, or sons of immigrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Somalia. In 2013, two al-Qaeda members were charged with terrorism in a plot to derail a train traveling from New York to Toronto; both men were Muslim immigrants to Canada, a Tunisian and a Palestinian who had traveled to Canada using a fake passport in 1993. The Canadian government had previously tried to deport the Palestinian man after he was convicted of fraud and uttering threats, but were unable due to his 'stateless' status.

Unfortunately, in the intelligence business it's the failures that are well known and not the successes. Such failures occurred in October 2014, when two Muslim terrorists – both Daesh supporters and followers – attacked and killed members of Canada's Armed Forces in separate attacks in Quebec and on Parliament Hill in Ottawa.

It is incredibly important that newcomers, particularly those in the Muslim community, are engaged and welcomed, rather than ignored and left exposed to radicalization. An ongoing threat that will come out of the Syrian refugee crisis is the creation of homegrown terrorist cells throughout Europe and North America; including those not necessarily directly connected to Daesh or another Islamic terrorist group—but inspired by them.

An Alternative Path

When it comes to immigration security, Canada already uses heightened scrutiny and the same screening methods as the United States. Indeed, Canada's public safety officials are second to none in terms of their professionalism and diligence. Given the Trudeau government's

political target and timeline, however, these security and immigration officials are forced to work around the clock to screen and process refugee applications – an incredibly challenging task. In the U.S., FBI director James Comey said that the intelligence services would have trouble screening 10,000 Syrians per year.²² Canada, a country one-tenth the size of the U.S., with a fraction of the resources, will be admitting five times that amount. Given these circumstances, it

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is nearly impossible for the government to ensure with certainty that no terrorists will enter Canada disguised as refugees.

An immigration policy based on humanitarian impulses and large gestures of compassion is admirable. These impulses are undermined, however, by nefarious actors wishing to cause great harm to Western countries. Canada should not sacrifice its own safety and stability for a grand political gesture and ad hoc policies. Instead, it should ensure it takes every precaution possible – and extra time if necessary – to scrutinize and examine all incoming refugees.

Canada's historic approach to immigration and resettlement has always been to welcome large numbers of newcomers while also demanding that these newcomers adapt to Western culture and integrate into Canada's economy. This dual strategy – welcoming large numbers of immigrants and ensuring they integrate – has been in-

credibly successful at helping grow Canada's economy while maintaining a peaceful society that values individual liberties and the rule of law above all else.

It is imperative that Canada keeps a level-headed approach to migration policy, rather than adapting the unsound European approach of soft-hearted open border policies alongside official multiculturalism. The Canadian and American governments must work together to mitigate this threat, ensuring that North America remains an anchor of peace and stability in an increasingly chaotic and dangerous world.

Notes

- ¹ Alan Kurdi drowned off the shores of Turkey. His family was trying to reach Canada, National Post, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/drowned-boys-family-sought-refuge-in-canada>
- ² Government says it never got refugee application from family of drowned Syrian boys. The Canadian Press/Ottawa Citizen, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/relatives-of-dead-boys-assail-canada-for-inaction>
- ³ Rick Hillier wants Canada to accept 50,000 refugees by the end of year. Ottawa Citizen, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/the-gargoyle-hillier-wants-canada-to-accept-50000-refugees-by-end-of-year>
- ⁴ The Conservatives pledged 10,000 refugees over four years on top of the 11,000 they had already committed to while the New Democrats promised to admit 10,000 in 2015. See more about the various commitments in Election Party Platform Comparisons. Globe and Mail, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/elections/party-platform-comparison/article26758784>
- ⁵ “Daesh” is an acronym for the Arabic phrase Dawlat al-Islamiyah f’al-Iraq w Belaad al-Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) and resembles the Arabic word Daes meaning “trample down” or “crush,” or Dahes meaning “one sowing discord.” The term is considered derogatory by the ISIS militants, but used widely in the Middle East for just that reason.
- ⁶ Up to 50,000 Syrian refugees may enter Canada by the end of next year. Globe and Mail, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-fears-possible-backlash-against-syrian-refugees/article27543438>
- ⁷ US Senate Hearing: <http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/canadas-fast-track-refugee-plan-unanswered-questions-and-implications-for-us-national-security>
- ⁸ ISIS Operative: This is how we send jihadist to Europe. BuzzFeed, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/isis-operative-this-is-how-we-send-jihadis-to-europe#.ioz4GZ4pqb>
- ⁹ U.S. defense intelligence chief predicts increased ISIS attacks. Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-islamic-state-idUSKCN0VH1Y5>
- ¹⁰ Germany: 8 percent of Syrian passports are fake. Politico Europe, <http://www.politico.eu/article/germany-eight-percent-of-syrian-refugees-passports-are-fake>
- ¹¹ United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR)
- ¹² Officials warn 20,000 ISIS jihadist ‘have infiltrated Syrian refugee camps.’ Daily Mirror, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/officials-warn-20000-isis-jihadis-6443516>
- ¹³ One in five Syrians say Islamic State is a good thing, poll says. Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/15/one-in-five-syrians-say-islamic-state-is-a-good-thing-poll-says>
- ¹⁴ 13 Percent of Syrian Refugees Support ISIS: Poll, clarionproject.org, http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/13-percent-syrian-refugees-support-isispoll?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter
- ¹⁵ Canada’s Syrian refugee plan limited to women, children and families: Unaccompanied men not included because of ongoing security concerns. CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-refugee-plan-women-children-families-1.3330185>
- ¹⁶ Jihad and Girl Power: How ISIS Lured 3 London Girls, New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/18/world/europe/jihad-and-girl-power-how-isis-lured-3-london-teenagers.html?_r=0
- ¹⁷ ISIS Women and Enforcers in Syria Recount Collaboration, Anguish and Escape, New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/world/middleeast/isis-wives-and-enforcers-in-syria-recount-collaboration-anguish-and-escape.html?_r=0
- ¹⁸ Another Canadian city requests a pause in refugee flow. Global News, <http://globalnews.ca/news/2465460/more-canadian-cities-request-pause-in-refugee-flow>
- ¹⁹ Minister Blaney Issues a Statement on Guilty Plea and Sentence on Terrorist Charges. Government of Canada (Archived), <http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?nid=88521>
- ²⁰ Details on terror plot emerge after Ottawa man’s guilty plea. Globe and Mail, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/details-of-terror-plot-emerge-after-ottawa-mans-guilty-plea/article20652171>
- ²¹ Terror cells suspected in Canada, Toronto Sun, <http://www.torontosun.com/news/canada/2011/01/22/16990841.html>
- ²² FBI Director Admits U.S. Can’t Vet All Syrian Refugees for Terror Ties, The Daily Caller, [http://dailycaller.com/2015/10/21/fbi-director-admits-us-cant-vet-all-syrian-refugees-for-terror-ties-video; James B. Comey, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?328793-1/fbi-director-james-comey-oversight-hearing-testimony> \(Oct, 21, 2015\)](http://dailycaller.com/2015/10/21/fbi-director-admits-us-cant-vet-all-syrian-refugees-for-terror-ties-video; James B. Comey, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, http://www.c-span.org/video/?328793-1/fbi-director-james-comey-oversight-hearing-testimony (Oct, 21, 2015))



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