

Let's Welcome Syrian Refugees to the Great State of Idaho

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho (ngier006@gmail.com)

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There no doubt will be those who look upon the refugees as the enemy as a result of these [Paris] attacks, but we must resist the urge to categorize and dehumanize, for it is that very impulse that fueled the insanity and violence perpetrated this evening.

—George Takei, *Star Trek* actor who spent for four years in a Japanese internment camp

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

—Matthew 25:40

Last Saturday, an estimated 700 people participated in a “Rally for Solidarity with Refugees in Idaho” at the Statehouse. A friend who attended said that “the crowd enthusiastically cheered the speakers and a large number of donations seem to have been collected for the refugees.” About 100 counter-demonstrators tried to shout down the speakers, but they were unnerved when they were greeted with handshakes and the singing of Christmas carols.

Professor Starts “Every Campus a Refuge” Campaign

Meanwhile in Greensboro, North Carolina, English Professor Diya Abdo received permission from the Guilford College administration to welcome Syrians to her campus. So far about a dozen colleges and universities—including, Yale, Amherst and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—have expressed interest in Abdo’s “Every Campus a Refuge” idea.

As a Quaker college Guilford sheltered run-away slaves and also welcomed Japanese-American students during World War II. A daughter of Palestinian refugees, Abdo knows what it is like to be a stranger in a strange land. As a young girl she experienced the horrors of war. During the civil war in Lebanon, Abdo’s father threw himself on body of a suicide bomber and his sacrifice saved hundreds of lives.

States Cannot Stop Refugee Resettlement

North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory has joined 30 other governors who have declared that their states will close their doors to Syrian refugees. (The governors of Washington, Connecticut, and Colorado have openly welcomed them.) North Carolina representative John

Blust has called upon Guilford College to rethink its offer because of possible security threats to the state's citizens.

Immigration is a federal prerogative and President Obama has full authority to process refugees, and accept those who pass the most stringent vetting procedures in the world. "So you're an ISIS terrorist wanting to sneak into the United States," as a local Democratic politician begins, "and you decide to choose the refugee program, a two-year process involving repeated interviews, registering with the FBI, registering with Homeland Security, clearance from the CIA, and one that only admits a tiny number of military-age males." Sen. Diane Feinstein is correct to warn that terrorists in possession of a pre-cleared European passport would definitely choose to come to the U. S. visa-free for 90 days.

Three out of 785,000 U. S. Refugees Found to be Terrorists

About 785,000 refugees have come to the U. S. since the 9/11 attacks, and only three have been arrested for terrorist activities. About 750,000 refugees have poured into Europe (38 percent Syrian), and of those screened so far only nine of have been found to have terrorist connections. The Syrian passport found on one of the Paris attackers was a fake, so it does not prove that he was either a Syrian or a refugee.

With regard to the 23,000 Syrians who have applied for asylum, 7,000 were interviewed overseas, and 2,165 were accepted for entry (53 were Christians). Half of this number is children and the rest are divided almost evenly between older women and men. The *Washington Post* reports that "only two percent are single males of combat age." The Obama administration has lined up 180 localities for resettling Syrian refugees.

Syrians have already "invaded" Idaho

Rep. Heather Scott of North Idaho has called for a special session of the Legislature to stop this "invasion of our country." She is convinced that "Muslim refugees will press the Islamic agenda of domination and takeover." But, according to Jan Reeves, the director of the Idaho Office of Refugees, the "invasion" has already begun, and there is nothing that Scott and other Islamophobes can do about it.

At a recent public meeting, where most of 60 present were supportive, Reeves said that "Idaho received 35 refugees from Syria in the past six months, 20 of them children." Among the 1,062 refugees who entered Idaho in 2014, the largest number (26 percent) was from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The DRC has been a hot bed of terrorist activities with both Muslim and Christian Hutu battling each other. We should trust the United Nations and our own immigration service that these Africans have been fully vetted, a process that takes 18-24 months.

Reeves was very concerned about Rep. Scott's alarmist views: "It's disturbing that this kind of opinion exists in our Legislature. We hope that with good, accurate information and data that we can present a different perspective on refugees in our communities." He added that

accepting refugees is “a quintessentially American activity, [helping] people who are oppressed come to America. It’s really been our national story.”

Shamefully Low Number Iraqi Refugees Accepted

The second largest number of refugees coming to Idaho were from Iraq. Considering the fact that Bush II’s invasion of Iraq is the primary cause of the rise of Al Qaeda and ISIS, it is absolutely shameful to learn about the small number of Iraqis who have been allowed to come to our shores. Our decision to depose Assad in Syria intensified the civil war there and led to thousands of refugees fleeing that country.

From 2003 to the end of 2014, the U. S. has accepted only 115,000 Iraqis. In stark contrast, Sweden with a population of 9.6 million had already allowed 30,000 from 2003 to the end of 2010. For a country with very low church attendance, it is significant that a large majority of these Iraqis are Assyrian Christians. These people lived peacefully with their Muslim neighbors until the American invasion, which fueled the Sunni militancy that is so vicious and destructive in the Middle East and South Asia today.

There has been backlash from anti-immigrant forces in Sweden, and the government is now screening newcomers at the Danish-Swedish border. In the most recent election in Denmark, the Danish People’s Party, which is anti-immigration and anti-European Union, became the second largest party after the Social Democrats. The increase in crime among disaffected immigrant youth has stoked anti-foreigner fears all over Europe.

Mayors in 18 Cities have Opened their Doors

Across the nation 18 mayors have declared their cities open to Syrian refugees. (Dallas mayor Mike Rawlings says that he is more afraid of domestic rather than Muslim terrorists, and since 9/11 they have killed more people than Islamic militants.) In setting up the Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs, Baltimore’s Stephanie Rawlings-Blake has been especially proactive. This office helps immigrants get through bureaucratic red tape and makes sure that they get their \$288 monthly state benefits. These last only eight months so the city has a jobs training program for them to ease their transition.

Mayor Rawlings-Blake likes to boast about the success stories. One is Adote Akwei, who, as *The Economist* describes him, “After years of driving a taxi he is writing children’s books, working for a program that teaches immigrants about recycling rubbish, and setting up a community group to improve relations between black Americans and African incomers.”

Rawlings-Blake would certainly agree with *Game of Thrones* creator R. R. Martin who recently blogged: “Immigrants revitalize a society, and create much more than they take. The Irish, the Italians, the Germans, the Polish, the Chinese, and many other immigrant groups have vastly enriched the culture of America. I have no doubt that the same will prove true of the Syrians.”

The 9/11 and Paris Attackers Were Not Refugees

It is significant to note that the Paris terrorists were not refugees; rather, they were Belgian and French citizens who had lived in Europe for some time. One was gainfully employed but the others had extensive arrest records. One terrorist expert interviewed on CNN believed that they were drawn to radical jihadism by the promise that their spiritual laxity would be forgiven. One will recall that some of the 9/11 conspirators, none of them refugees, were drinking (forbidden for devout Muslims) the night before the attack.

The recent bill passed by the House placing even stricter requirements on refugees will most certainly be vetoed by President Obama. A much effective strategy, found in a bipartisan bill sponsored by Sen. Diane Feinstein and Sen. Jack Slack, would tighten visa requirements. The 9/11 hijackers came to the U. S. on student visas, and Sen. Feinstein believes that a visa waiver policy that allows citizens from select countries (France is one of them) to travel visa-free in the U. S. for 90 days is the “Achilles Heel of America.” The Feinstein/Slack bill would put strict limits on this program.

The Statue of Liberty and the Good Samaritan

I have written UI President Chuck Staben and asked him if it is possible that our campus can join Professor Abdo’s campaign “Every Campus a Refuge.” At press time there was no response. I urge all Idahoans to take the words written on the Statue of Liberty to heart and to remember former Governor’s John Evans’ motto “Idaho is Too Great for Hate.”

Our detractors on the right will call us naïve and bleeding heart liberals, but the most famous bleeding heart said that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40). During the 2008 election campaign, when critics belittled Obama for his work on the streets of Chicago, one Obama supporter reminded voters that Jesus was also a community organizer.

Jesus also told the story about a poor man attacked by robbers, who “stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead” (Luke 10:30). A priest passed him by and a Levite also ignored him. A Samaritan, people despised by the Jews, washed his wounds and took him to an inn for the night. Let us not be self-righteous, fearful priests, but let us all follow the example of the Good Samaritan.

Nick Gier of Moscow taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. He is author of *The Origins of Religious Violence: An Asian Perspective* (Lexington Books, 2014). Read all of his columns on Islam at <http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/IslamPage.htm>