

Commentary: Offer safe haven to persecuted religious minorities

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Nations of the world regularly have opened their arms to those fleeing tyrants, terrorists and authoritarian governments. This openness has been a hallmark of the United States, whose response to refugees, especially in the past 40 years, befits the heritage of a nation founded by those fleeing religious persecution.

Since 1980, the United States has admitted [more than 3.1 million](#) refugees, many of whom fled persecution because of their faith.

Religious restrictions on the rise

The Pew Research Center has found [religious restrictions](#) are rising around the world. Thousands of refugees are fleeing from Myanmar, where the Rohingya people are being brutalized by their government because of their faith and ethnicity.

Many are fleeing Iran, where conversion to Christianity is [viewed](#) as an effort to undermine the government. Christians, Yezidis and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria have been targeted by ISIS.

Thousands continue to flee from China, where, according to a recent U.S. State Department [determination](#), Uyghur Muslims are victims of genocide at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party.

Refugee resettlement on the decline

In light of increasing religious restrictions, the drastic reductions since 2017 in the number of refugees admitted to the United States is alarming. In just four years, the overall number of refugees resettled to the United States declined by 86 percent, a trend only accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Religious minorities have been harmed along with those persecuted for other reasons. In fiscal year 2020, the number of Christian refugees resettled from the 50 countries on the [Open Doors World Watch List](#) of countries where Christians face persecution was down by more than 80 percent compared to fiscal year 2016. The declines among Jewish and Bahá'í refugees from Iran, Yezidis from Iraq and Syria, and Muslim refugees from Myanmar were even more stark.

This closing of America's "golden door" to the persecuted "yearning to breathe free" is shocking, which is why a [recent announcement](#) from the current administration offers hope to religious minorities fleeing persecution.

Restoring refugee resettlement

President Biden recently declared his intention to raise the annual cap on refugee families from 15,000 to 62,500 for the remainder of fiscal 2021 and to 125,000 for fiscal 2022, and to bolster the United States' refugee resettlement program.

These are not small numbers, but they need to be placed in context. On average, the United States has set the refugee ceiling at 95,000 every year. During the early 1980s, the United States resettled over 200,000 in a single year.

Both Republican and Democratic presidents have welcomed refugees in response to global events.

Currently, more than [340 million](#) Christians around the world—more people than the entire U.S. population—face persecution each day. This kind of duress is not limited to Christians.

Religious minorities from Bahá'í in Iran to Yazidis in Iraq to Muslims in China do not enjoy any of the same rights and protections we are afforded by the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, a life without the First Amendment is a frightening one for people of faith, as families, communities and livelihoods are placed in danger simply because of religious convictions.

Moreover, when families flee, it is a gut-wrenching choice. It often means separation from loved ones for years at a time, traveling through foreign lands with no guarantee of safety, and the prospect of being rejected at a border if there is not enough documentation to validate claims of persecution.

U.S. refugee resettlement policy

This is where American policy comes in. By [expanding refugee resettlement](#), we can offer a safe haven to those being rooted out by their own governments simply because of their faith. Just as the United States was a place of shelter for outsiders and religious minorities in its earliest days, it still can choose to be one now.

A move to increase the number of refugees admitted is consistent with our values, and it also is an effective means to drive a global response to the needs of persecuted minorities.

By setting an example, as we have in so many other policy arenas, the United States can encourage our diplomatic partners and fellow nations to

show greater compassion and material care for the most vulnerable people in our world. As a global leader, what we do with respect to persecuted religious minorities, and how we do it, will set the tone for the rest of the world.

Admitting more refugees matters, because it will give hope to so many who are being persecuted. [Accounts](#) of those fleeing for safety are harrowing, and the hope of a better life, in addition to their faith, often is the difference in what allows them to press on.

If the United States can provide that extra bit of hope, it will make a measurable change in the lives of so many who are fleeing from threats many of us can only imagine.

These steps will take time, which means we might not see immediate change. However, we all can urge our representatives to stand up for the many religious minorities being persecuted around the world. To speak up on behalf of those who do not enjoy the same freedoms we do in America will be a credit to our nation—and to our faith.

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