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5 Questions with Tom Leonard: The Syrian refugee crisis

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1. While the number of Syrian refugees has climbed to over four million, [approximately 220,000 people have been killed and nearly 13 million are in need of humanitarian assistance](#). How did this situation develop, and how has it gotten so dire in 2015?

The core issue here is the different factions that are fighting each other in Syria. The predominant adversaries in Syria are Assad's government, the rebels, ISIS, and the Kurds, although the Kurds are mainly focused on claiming Rojava in northeastern Syria as part of an autonomous Kurdish region. Adding in the external actors supporting Assad (Russia, Iran, Iraq, North Korea and Hezbollah), and the rebels (U.S., Turkey, Western Europe) makes for an extremely unsafe place for anyone. Additionally, ISIS has expanded its reach deep into Iraq and has major influence in North Africa and the rest of the Arabian Peninsula. The bottom line is that everybody is fighting someone in Syria. If the average Syrian isn't part of the fight, then they are a refugee. There isn't a lot of middle ground in Syria. There is only one place to go—out.

2. What threats have this refugee crisis caused for the region and for Europe?

I think the events in Paris and Brussels speak for themselves. Putting aside even the terrorist acts, the simple influx of such a large number of refugees from a different culture, with different social needs and customs, puts a huge burden on the host society. Again, putting aside specific terrorist acts, a large, disaffected body of refugees from a war zone is a breeding ground for violence and discontent—even if just out of frustration over their situation. This will lead to increased police engagements which can immediately escalate. If the host



communities start to see adverse impact on their environment (noise, trash, crime) there is a likelihood of retribution against the pre-existing foreign population, no matter how long that population has been part of the community. Additionally, there is the government's cost of refugee operations. The economies of many European nations simply can't absorb that many refugees needing welfare support all at once.

3. The U.S. is [making preparations to accept at least 10,000 refugees in 2016](#). What threat does this pose to our

homeland security?

That threat is too hard to quantify. Making an assumption that all 10,000 will be properly investigated and deemed clear to enter the U.S., the demographics of the group will play a part. If the group is a majority of older men and women, and young children, the threat might not be as high (although there are examples of those categories of individuals committing terrorist acts). If the majority are military age males (15-50 years old) the dynamic changes. As an example, Canada's newly-elected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated that Canada would only accept women, children, and families—no single males. The basic fact is that there is no way to properly “vet” most of the refugees. Middle Eastern countries (with a few exceptions) generally don't have the identification verification capabilities that Western nations do. The tribal nature of many communities and family naming conventions makes it exceptionally difficult to specifically identify an individual without literally going back to the person's neighborhood and doing interviews. Obviously, many of those neighborhoods have been destroyed and the neighbors have been killed or are refugees themselves.

4. What are Homeland Security agencies doing to address the influx of Syrian refugees? What will the processes be to accept and monitor these individuals and are we adequately prepared?

The security agencies are scrambling to come up with a comprehensive plan. The Department of Homeland Security, in conjunction with the Department of State, must establish a process to screen refugees before they come to the U.S. This is a significantly more difficult task than what the Department of Homeland Security does with illegal immigrants coming across our southern border. Refugee status is a legal status that can only be conferred on an individual outside of the U.S. That status also comes with additional benefits such as the immediate right to work. The refugee process is slightly different than the asylum process in this regard, and that asylees can apply for that status even if they came to the U.S. illegally. Monitoring the refugees presents a number of issues. There are not enough law enforcement resources to monitor all of the illegal immigrants currently in the U.S., and the addition of another 10,000 individuals with potentially unverifiable backgrounds creates a problem. And it's not like we can treat them as parolees from prison and force them to check in with law enforcement or immigration once a week. They haven't committed crimes (that we know of). That being said, one option that has not been discussed is using the facility at Guantanamo Bay, which is specifically designed for a mass Caribbean migration caused by natural disaster or political conflict in the region. This is not the infamous “Gitmo” facility housing terrorists—that facility is on the opposite side of the bay. The refugee

relief facility was used in the 1990's to house some 45,000 Cuban and Haitian refugees rescued at sea during the last mass migration. Homeland Security Presidential Directive Number five directed the Department of Homeland Security to establish a plan, known as Operation Vigilant Sentry, to address the requirements of a mass maritime migration in the Caribbean region. The plan includes processing and supporting refugees at the Guantanamo Bay refugee facility until the refugees can be repatriated or relocated in accordance with the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) policies.

5. Do you foresee the U.S. taking in more refugees, in addition to the initial 10,000? What are the arguments for and against this?

The UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) typically tries to return refugees to their home country when safe to do so, conduct local integration into the first country to "take in" the refugee, or, lastly, utilize third-country resettlement. Most, if not all of the refugees that are coming to the US have already traveled through other countries; they are not coming directly here from Syria. That begs the question as to their status—refugee or immigrant? Seeking refuge from economic conflict or strife is not a criteria for legitimate refugee status. The focal point for refugee status is that refugees ultimately are expected to return to their home nation as security develops. I think the U.S. will take in more refugees. Doing so supports our foreign policy statements and goals, but also has great intelligence potential as we interview individual refugees. The security risk, however, is undeniable. While it is not necessarily easy to get to the U.S. as a refugee, once here, it is easy to move about undetected, especially if the radicalized refugee appears to be "normal." Senator Jeff Sessions just released a report on refugees highlighting those that have come to the U.S. from Somalia, Bosnia, and the Middle East that have become radicalized and either conducted attacks against the U.S. (Boston Marathon Bombers) or attempted to do so and have been prosecuted. Regardless of religious background or motivation, there is proof that a small percentage of refugees have and will attack the U.S. and its interests. From a security standpoint, the good guys have to be right every single time; the bad guys only have to be right once.

Tom Leonard is an associate faculty member in [Post University's Emergency Management and Homeland Security program](#). Leonard is also a Senior Fellow with George Washington University's Center for Cyber and Homeland Security. Previously, he served as the Senior Advisor for Border and Maritime Security to the Chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security. Leonard has also served in the U.S. State Department, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the FBI Counterterrorism Division, among other government positions. Leonard retired from the U.S. Army after 28 years of service.

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