

Opening Statement of Senator Dick Durbin
“Oversight of the Administration’s FY 2016 Refugee Resettlement Program: Fiscal and Security Implications.”
Immigration Subcommittee Hearing
October 1, 2015

We are in the midst of the worst refugee crisis on record, with almost 60 million people forcibly displaced from their homes.

The conflict in Syria is the epicenter of this crisis. We all remember the heartbreaking image of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean. The truth is that an entire generation of Syrian children is at risk. More than half of Syria’s 23 million people have been forced from their homes. More than four million Syrians are registered as refugees, including almost two million children. More than ten thousand Syrian children have been killed, and thousands are unaccompanied or separated from their parents.

These are not economic migrants, as some have claimed. They are refugees who are fleeing for their lives. The poet Warsan Shire, who is herself a refugee from Somalia, put it well when she wrote, “No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.”

The Syrian refugee crisis has placed a great strain on the front-line countries that are hosting millions of Syria refugees. The tiny country of Lebanon, with a population of 4.2 million, is hosting 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees, the most refugees per capita in the world. This is almost 30 percent of Lebanon’s population, the equivalent of the United States facing an influx of 100 million refugees.

The United States has a moral obligation to help Syrian refugees, but it is also in our national interest to restore stability in this critical region. We have taken some positive steps to address the crisis. The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees. Three years ago, I pushed the Administration to grant temporary protected status to Syrians. As a result, the United States is providing safe haven to hundreds of Syrian visitors who were in the country on temporary visas. And last year, after a hearing I held on the Syrian refugee crisis, the Administration issued exemptions to the material support bar which will make it easier for Syrian refugees to obtain refugee status.

But so far we have only accepted around 1600 Syrian refugees for resettlement, a paltry number that must increase dramatically. In May, I joined with Senator Klobuchar and 13 other Senators in asking the Administration to admit at least 65,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2016. The Administration has now said that we will accept 10,000 Syrian refugees this fiscal year. That is a positive development, but we must do more. With the crisis worsening, Refugee Council USA, a nonpartisan coalition of the leading U.S. refugee organizations is now calling for the United States to resettle 200,000 refugees, including 100,000 Syrians. I agree.

This generation of Americans needs to live up to the example set by those who came before us. Our nation’s founders came to our shores to escape religious persecution, and the United States has a long tradition of providing safe haven to refugees. Following the international community’s tragic failure to shelter Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi genocide, the United States played a leadership role in establishing the international legal regime for the protection of

refugees. Since that time, the American people have generously welcomed millions of refugees fleeing war and totalitarian regimes. For example:

- After World War II, we accepted almost 400,000 Eastern Europeans.
- The Vietnam War led to us resettling almost 400,000 Vietnamese refugees.
- After Castro came to power, we accepted approximately 650,000 Cuban refugees.
- And we resettled more than 150,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia.

Just as they have during these previous crises, the American people are showing they're ready to welcome refugees into their communities. In fact, I've received several letters from Illinois residents who are prepared to host Syrian refugees in their homes.

Some who oppose refugee resettlement have argued that refugees are a fiscal burden. That's simply not true. According to a recent study by the Migration Policy Institute, refugees are more likely to be employed than the U.S. born population; and refugees' participation in public benefits programs declines sharply the longer they live in the U.S. A Texas A&M study found that it takes refugees a few years to establish themselves, but they then add more value to the economy each year than the entire original cost of resettling them. Here are some examples of refugees who have contributed to making America a stronger country: the late General John Shalikashvili; Sergey Brin, the cofounder of Google; and former Intel CEO Andrew Grove, the pioneer of the semiconductor industry. And then there's Steve Jobs, the son of a Syrian immigrant.

Unfortunately, some have engaged in scare tactics and fear mongering about refugees. One member of Congress even called the resettlement of Syrian refugees a "federally funded jihadi pipeline." That is an irresponsible and inaccurate claim. The reality is that refugees are the most carefully vetted of all travelers to the U.S., with extensive biometric, biographic, and intelligence checks involving numerous agencies.

Last month I received a classified briefing on the refugee resettlement program. I can't talk about the details of that briefing, but it gave me great confidence in our security screening. I agree with my colleague Lindsey Graham, who said, quote, "The risk of doing nothing about the Syrian refugee crisis is greater than the risk of taking vetted people."

If any member of Congress has doubts about our refugee resettlement program, they should ask for a classified briefing before making baseless allegations. And they should take the time to meet the Syrian refugees who are being resettled in our country.

Last month I met with four Syrian refugees settled in Chicago. Every one of them said they couldn't believe how welcoming the people in America are to them. That's who we are. That's what America is about.

Today, I'd like to introduce the members of this Subcommittee to Hussam Alroustom. Mr. Alroustom, please stand. Mr. Alroustom fled his home in Homs Syria in 2013 after his house was shelled by a missile from the Syrian Army. He moved into another house with 5 other families and that house was shelled and destroyed as well. He moved to another neighborhood but barrel bombs were being dropped there. Mr. Alroustom then fled Syria with his wife Suha and two children. After a long and difficult journey through the desert, Mr. Alroustom ended up

in Jordan, where he applied for refugee status. After a long process, he and his family came to the United States on June 16, 2015. Mr. Alroustom now works two jobs, as a mover during the day and a baker at night, in order to support his family.

Mr. Alroustom is not a terrorist. And he's not a fiscal drain on our country. We should feel proud that our country has welcomed Mr. Alroustom and his family. That is what our country's refugee resettlement program is all about. I'm sorry that some members of Congress don't understand that, but they will have a real fight on their hands if they break our country's historic commitment to welcoming refugees to our shores.