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## The Stories We Tell about Resettlement: Refugees, Asylum and the #MuslimBan

🕒 February 18, 2017

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By: *Nadia El-Shaarawi*

As a volunteer legal advocate working with refugees who were seeking resettlement, I learned to ask detailed questions about persecution. These were the kind of questions you would never ask in polite conversation: Who kidnapped your best friend? Were they wearing uniforms? What did those uniforms look like? Where did they hit you? Did you pay a ransom for her release? How did you identify her body? Questions like these, which refugees are asked over and over as part of the **already extreme vetting** that they undergo to be granted asylum and resettlement, are personal, intimate, painful. They demand a precise and consistent command of autobiographical detail and the strength to revisit events that one might otherwise want to forget. They try to get to the heart of what happened to a person, what forced them to leave everything behind.

On a more cynical level, these questions try to catch a person in a lie, to identify those who are not “deserving” of refuge. The answers are checked and cross-checked, asked again and again across multiple agencies and organizations. In separate interviews, family members are asked the same questions. Do the answers match up? Do the dates and places make sense? Were you a victim of persecution? Are you who you say you are? While these questions and their answers shape the narrative of an individual resettlement case, there is a way in which they don't get to the heart of what happened to a person, why someone was forced to flee, cross at least one border to enter another state, and is now seeking resettlement in a third country.

Vetting, extreme or otherwise, is about inclusion and exclusion. But before someone even gets to the arduous, opaque process of being considered for resettlement in the United States, decisions are made at the executive level about who to include in a broader sense. While the Refugee Convention provides protection for any person with a “well-founded fear of persecution” on specific grounds, this has never been the full story of the US refugee program, where a presidential determination each year decides how many refugees will be resettled, and from where. Some die-hard advocates and detractors aside, refugee resettlement has historically had bipartisan support and mostly stays under the radar of public attention, except, it seems, in moments where it becomes a reflection of broader anxieties and struggles over belonging and exclusion.

The argument for extreme vetting is all about uncovering the truth about individual refugees—the presumed danger that can be discovered by interagency database searches, probing questions, and medical tests. The **counterarguments that illustrate just how rigorous the vetting is already** are both true and necessary, but they keep our rejoinders in the narrow realm set out for us by those who would argue that refugees pose a security threat. These lines of argument keep us from looking at broader relationships of obligation and mutuality that might demand a different response.

As an anthropologist who studies refugee resettlement, I'm drawn to these larger questions. What logics guide resettlement policies and programs, and how do these processes reinforce or maybe subvert the violence of migration regimes more generally? These larger critical questions get obscured in the focused myopia of the refugee adjudication process, and they are completely obliterated in rhetoric about “America First” or “taking care of our own”. But asking these questions is essential to understanding the stakes of the executive order and the violence and uncertainty it unleashed. It also helps us to understand the implications of such an order for displacement in a global sense.

Only about 1% of refugees are ever resettled—a process where people who have already sought asylum are offered residence, and often pathways to citizenship, in a third country. **In 2015, of the 21.3 million refugees worldwide, only 107,000 were resettled. 66,500 of those were resettled in the United States.** So if the United States halts resettlement, even temporarily, the global landscape of refugee protection is drastically altered.



IOM bag, Cairo airport

Unlike asylum, which is a right under international law, resettlement has been portrayed as a humanitarian gift, a benevolent act of charity. And it is true that typically only the most vulnerable of refugees are referred for resettlement: victims of torture, people with serious medical needs, unaccompanied children. Resettlement is, as it is advertised, an extra protection measure for refugees who cannot go home and cannot live safely in the country where they sought asylum. But, for the United States, resettlement is frequently also the policy equivalent of extending a hand to help someone up right after you stuck your foot out and tripped them. The Iraqi who worked with the US Armed Forces as an interpreter and was kidnapped and forced to flee as a result. The Hungarian dissident in 1956 who listened to Radio Free Europe's promise that "America will not fail you". The Degar in the jungle of Vietnam still fighting for the US cause, not yet realizing that the Americans had packed up and gone home a long time ago.

For these refugees, resettlement seems less like a humanitarian gift than a duty, a moral obligation and small recompense for having been so treacherously untrustworthy. Critics of the ban have been quick to point out these cases of duty unmet and I am sympathetic to their efforts to garner support for refugees. But, and this is a banal understatement, you did not have to work for the Americans to have your life destroyed in Iraq after 2003, and surely some moral obligation emerges from that too. A third resettlement

logic, frequently employed during the Cold War, was one of naked ideological one-upmanship—welcoming exiles from communist countries bolstered the story of the US as a haven for freedom, creativity, science. These logics of obligation—to suffering others, to allies, to the nationstate—have co-existed in the US resettlement program for years, at various points in tension with one another, and always in conversation with questions of security. Trump's insistent portrayal of refugees as a security threat, **despite all evidence to the contrary**, represents a particularly virulent populist answer to a longstanding debate about the obligations states have to their citizens and to non-citizens.

These questions of who should be admitted must be asked with at least one eye to the geopolitics that allow some countries to be “resettlement states” with the ability to choose from abroad which refugees they will admit. **How do these politics relate to European states financing camps to keep migrants from leaving Libya? To Australia's outsourcing of refugees to island detention camps for years in the name of “deterrence”?** I would argue that understanding the geopolitics of obligation and exclusion demands an attention to how these processes of inclusion and exclusion are experienced by those who are subject to them and the ways in which these politics are confirmed or resisted social interactions. It also demands that we pay attention to the **continuities** here, as well as the disjunctures.

In some ways, this travel ban is remarkable and new and remarkably outrageous. In other ways, it is part of familiar patterns of abjection—the ways that some states, nations, people are cast out or pushed down in global spatial and temporal hierarchies. Muslim bodies traveling have already been subject to **humiliation and rejection**. Airports have already been spaces of violent detention and deportation. Refugee policy and practice has already been part of a larger politics of migrant containment.

As part of my ethnographic fieldwork with Iraqi refugees in Cairo, Egypt, I spent time with families as they navigated the arduous, bureaucratic process of seeking resettlement to the United States long before the ban. I saw firsthand the toll it can take to live in uncertainty for months or years, not knowing if you will be allowed to travel and start your life in a new place. Do you buy something you need, knowing you might have to try to sell it if you travel? Do you spend precious savings to enroll your children in school, knowing you might travel before the semester is up? Do you travel back to Iraq to attend your mother's funeral, knowing that to do so might jeopardize your resettlement case?



Each time resettlement or asylum is applied for, each time it is granted or denied, geopolitical claims are being made and remade. These small moments add up to a larger picture of who we are in the world. And refugee resettlement is so much more than a simple humanitarian endeavor. It is one way that states tell the story of who they are, and their geopolitical place in the world. These stories seek to set the terms of the debate, to naturalize historical, political and economic relationships between so-called resettlement states and the refugees who seek admission, but we don't have to accept them. Attention to their fuzzy edges, their inconsistencies, and the ways they change over time create openings for action and the possibility of telling different stories.

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📖 **Blog post, Invited post**

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I am an anthropologist and historian of Tibet, and a professor at the University of Colorado. I conduct research, write, lecture, and teach. At any given time, I am probably working on one of the following projects: Tibet, British empire, and the Pangdatsang family; the CIA as an ethnographic subject; contemporary US empire; the ongoing self-immolations in Tibet; the Chushi Gangdrug resistance army; refugee citizenship in the Tibetan diaspora (Canada, India, Nepal, USA); and, anthropology as theoretical storytelling.

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