

“Europe’s Refugee Crisis: How Should the US, EU, and OSCE Respond?”
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
October 20, 2015

Good afternoon and welcome to everyone joining us this afternoon as we inquire into the European refugee crisis and how the US, EU, and OSCE should respond.

The Syrian displacement crisis that has consumed seven countries in the Middle East has become the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. At least 250,000 people have been killed in Syria’s civil war, many of them civilians.

The security forces of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad’s security forces have been responsible for many of these killings, targeting neighborhoods with barrel bombs and shooting civilians point-blank. ISIS has committed genocide, mass atrocities, and war crimes, against Christians and other minorities, and likewise targeted, brutalized and killed Shia and Sunni Muslims who reject its ideology and brutality.

Fleeing for safety, more than four million Syrians are refugees, the largest refugee population in the world, and another 7.6 million Syrians are displaced inside their home country.

Syria’s neighbors, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt, are hosting most of these refugees. Before the Syria crisis, these countries struggled with high rates of unemployment, strained public services, and a range of other domestic challenges. Since the conflict began, Syrians refugees have become a quarter of Lebanon’s population, and Iraq, which has been beset by ISIS and sectarian conflict, is hosting almost 250,000 refugees from Syria.

Until this past summer, few Syrian refugees went beyond countries that border their homeland. Syrian refugees and migrants from a range of countries have since come to Europe in such large numbers, and so quickly, that many European countries, especially front-line entry points like Greece, transit countries like Serbia, and destination countries like Germany, have been challenged to respond.

The UN High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR, reports that more than 635,000 refugees and migrants have arrived in Europe by sea in 2015. Fifty three percent of these people are from Syria, sixteen percent from Afghanistan, six percent from Eritrea, and five percent from Iraq. Notably, only fourteen percent of them are women, twenty percent are children, and the remaining sixty five percent are men.

The European crisis requires a response that is European, national, and international, and the United States is essential to it. There must be effective coordination and communication directly between countries as well as through and with entities like the OSCE and European Union. Individual countries also must have the flexibility to respond best to the particular circumstances in their own countries.

The response must address “push” factors, like economic challenges and aid short-falls in countries like Syria’s neighbors that have been hosting refugees. It must also address “pull” factors, like decisions individual European countries have made that have attracted refugees.

There is real human need and desperation. Refugees are entrusting themselves to smugglers and where there is human smuggling there is a higher risk of human trafficking. I am especially concerned about the risk of abuse, exploitation, and enslavement, of women and children. Already we are hearing reports that some European countries are failing to protect women and girls from sexual assault and forced prostitution. The lack of separate bathroom facilities for males and females, rooms that can be locked, and other basic measures, enable such attacks. There is no excuse for such failures and everything must be done to ensure that women and children are safe.

There is also the real threat that terrorist groups like ISIS will infiltrate these massive movements of people to kill civilians in Europe and beyond. I am deeply concerned that the screening at many European borders is inadequate and putting lives at risk. All of us must be responsive to the humanitarian needs without compromising one iota on security. European response plans should include specifics about strengthening security screening throughout the European region.

During the conflict in Kosovo, I travelled to Stenkovec refugee camp in Macedonia and was at the McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey to welcome some of the 4,400 people brought from there to the United States. A refugee – Agron Abdullahu – was apprehended and sent to jail in 2008 for supplying guns and ammunition to the “Fort Dix 5” – a group of terrorists who were also sent to prison for plotting to kill American soldiers at the Fort Dix military installation.

Given Secretary Kerry’s announcement in September that the United States intends to resettle at least 85,000 refugees in fiscal year 2016, including at least 10,000 Syrians, and at least 100,000 refugees in fiscal year 2017, the United States and Europe must be on high alert to weed out terrorists from real refugees. Because religious and ethnic minorities often have additional risks and vulnerabilities even as refugees, they should be prioritized for resettlement.

This hearing will examine the “who” is arriving, the “why” they are coming to Europe, and the “what” has been done and should be done in response. European governments, entities like the OSCE and the EU, and civil society all have critical roles to play.

The United States has been the leading donor to the humanitarian crisis inside Syria and refugee crisis in the region. We also have the largest refugee admissions program in the world. However, according to the testimony of Shelly Pitterman, Regional Representative for the UN High Commission for Refugees, who we will hear from soon, “The current inter-agency Syrian

Regional Refugee and Resilience (3RP) plan for 2015 is only 41% funded, which has meant cuts in food aid for thousands of refugees.” Globally, he warns, “The humanitarian system is financially broke. We are no longer able to meet even the absolute minimum requirements of core protection and lifesaving assistance to preserve the human dignity of the people we care for. The current funding level for the 33 UN appeals to provide humanitarian assistance to 82 million people around the world is only 42%. UNHCR expects to receive just 47% of the funding we need this year.”

This hearing will look at how the United States can best work with our allies in Europe to meet humanitarian needs and prevent security threats.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, the United States and Europe have come together to address the great challenges of our time and this is an opportunity to do so again.

Before we begin I’d like to recognize the Ambassador of Hungary, Dr. Reka Szemerkenyi, who is present in the room with us today. Thank you, Madam Ambassador.