

Proceedings

Syrian Refugee Roundtable Discussion

January 27, 2016

Introduction

On January 27 2016, the UCCS Center for Human Security, in partnership with the Global Intercultural Research Center and Global Engagement Office, held a roundtable discussion to foster dialogue on the Syrian refugee crisis. The purpose of this gathering was to discuss the issues, concerns and opportunities associated with the potential resettlement of Syrian refugees in Colorado Springs. Participants included members from Colorado Springs' Muslim and Christian communities, government officials, small business owners, resettlement agencies, and academics. Each member provided a unique view of the technical and social hurdles associated with refugee resettlement in Colorado Springs.

Background

The ongoing Syrian conflict has displaced millions into countries in the Middle East, Europe, and North America. Colorado can expect to receive 2.5-3% of the total number (10,000) of Syrian refugees permitted to resettle in the United States. Thus far, Colorado has admitted less than 20 Syrian refugees. Despite this small number, there are widely different perspectives on resettlement. To reconcile these differences, the discussion group came to a shared agreement that there must first be an understanding of what these differences are. As succinctly put by an attending participant, "We need to put [refugee resettlement] into perspective, but we can't do that until we know what the reality is".

Issues/Concerns

The discussion first focused on addressing issues and concerns associated with refugee resettlement. **Fear and misperception**, in particular, were highlighted as influencing factors. Participants pointed to the use of "hyperbolic, populist, sensational, and overly generalized information by the US media," as well as the **inherent bias of media networks to have a particular view/constituent base**. The same problem is likewise presented in social media; a problem further compounded by the anonymity and lack of filters and controls. The potential bias in display and distribution through traditional and social media culminates into misinformation that fuels both fear and misperception of Muslims and Islam in particular.

Participants suggested that Colorado Springs' community members particularly relied on traditional and social media because they **do not know or interact with the Muslim population**. Low levels of diversity contribute to the division, but **minimal levels of community outreach by both Muslim and other (such as church) community leaders have also meant limited communication and interaction** on an organizational level. Members of the discussion agreed that these were key underlying issues that needed to be resolved to tackle more specific problems.

One of the greatest impediments proffered by participants was *whether refugees would be welcomed* - “How willing are we to stand up and say we are a welcoming community that would love to have refugees?” While the threats of terrorism, and the horrors of Muslim-on-Muslim fighting in a broad arc from Syria to Yemen, are very real, the local demonstration of anxiety and misperception contributes to Islamophobia and racism. Participants raised concerns that verbal or physical attacks on the Muslim community might not provoke a strong or rallying reaction by community members. Furthermore, with a large military presence in Colorado Springs, concerns were raised over reaction military members might have, especially those who have been deployed to the Middle East. Regarding concerns for the refugees, participants pointed out the **issue of funding**, which Colorado Springs lacks, and also the long-term effort involved in **assisting with the assimilation process**.

Opportunities/Recommendations

Participants outlined **five key components for migrants and refugees to become fully integrated into the Colorado Springs community**:

- Access to English as a Second Language (ESL) service;
- Opportunities for gainful employment;
- Access to public goods and services, including health care;
- Establishing permanent residences; and
- Encouraging an understanding of U.S. history and culture

While Colorado Springs may not have funds allocated for refugee resettlement, it does have many *existing resources*. Churches, schools, local universities, and several government offices offer ESL courses, provide assistance on obtaining health care, employment, and courses on U.S. and Colorado history, which, together, could provide a wealth of resources for refugees. These organizations and networks could also serve as bridges between communities where more accurate information could be distributed.

Participants noted that integration requires **residents and refugees alike to have a basic understanding of one another**. Throughout the discussion, participants described U.S. Muslims as well educated, with higher than average income. Likewise, many Muslim migrants achieved higher educational degrees and economic success *prior* to their displacement. It was noted that the great majority of these migrants have sought protection in majority Muslim countries, such as Jordan, Turkey, and, notably, Lebanon, which has accepted over one million refugees in a country of around 4.5 million people.

While Colorado Springs’ own Muslim population is small and, self-admittedly, lacks the capabilities and know-how to partner with other local groups, it is willing to do so; not only for refugee resettlement, but to assist in **increasing broad community resiliency**. This willingness was openly reflected among the roundtable discussants, with key connections emerging between federal and local departments, academics and practitioners, and mosques and churches. **These connections are the first steps in breaking down fear and misperception within and between Colorado Springs communities**, though there are many more steps to come.

Conclusion and Next Steps

From the outset, participants “hope[d] that this discussion would be the beginning of a deeper and broader conversation on the topic.” To set the stage for future conversation, two new questions arose from the gathering. The first considered the necessary component of getting people involved: “How do we attract the interests of those who are not in the typical circle of those who are already interested?” The second question followed from the first, as members noted “the public messaging aspect” to communicate and garner community interest. This question ultimately asked: “How do we message our intent and recommendations for maximum positive effect”? Toward this end, two examples are offered: The Islamic Society’s Arshad Yousufi’s recent *Gazette* commentary and the upcoming Colorado Springs World Affairs Council Town Hall Meeting (February 18).

Thank you again for your participation. Please provide any feedback or comments to srecca@uccs.edu.