

the Liberator

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE LIBERAL ARTS COUNCIL
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SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY IN QUESTION: TEXAS AND ITS NEWEST CITIZENS

December 15, 2016 · by The Liberator Magazine · in Amina Amdeen, Current Staff, Political.

Written by: Amina Amdeen

While I removed my shoes at the door of a one-bedroom apartment, the scent of basmati rice and biryani spices suddenly overwhelmed me. Surrounded by the fragrances of my childhood, I felt at ease. I knew the family inside was an Iraqi family.

Since the beginning of this year, 7,802 refugees have arrived in Texas, more than any other state in the nation. Between the dozens of families that the Arab Student Association provides educational opportunities (including tutoring in English), most have only been in America for three months or less.

The six-member Zaidi family from Iraq is one of them.

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“It took us around four years to receive clearance for an American Visa after leaving Damascus. We had to pass medical exams, background checks, and many other tests. To be honest,

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~~ "The Language Issue" ~~

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I've lost count," the mother told me in Arabic.

Her point is echoed by Evan Rajthen, the director of LARA (Liberal Arts Refugee Alliance), a UT Austin organization that aims to provide services to refugee families in the area.

"They go through an average of 12 different checks by many different agencies," Rathjean stated.



Image from LARA Facebook page.

Refugees seeking resettlement into the US have to pass screenings by the National Counterterrorism Center, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, the State Department, the National Security Directorate, and the US Department of Defense, as reported by the official White House website.

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In the end, only 1% of the world's refugee population gains entrance into the United States.

The federal government aims to increase the intake of Syrian refugees for the fiscal year of 2017 to 11,000 people.

However, Governor Greg Abbott has announced that Texas will withdraw from the Federal Refugee Resettlement program, citing security concerns as a motivating factor, along with the lack of disagreement over not increasing the number of refugees entering Texas.

2016)

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"A group gathered at Woodbridge Park in Austin on Nov. 22, 2015, to protest Gov. Greg Abbott's decision not to accept refugees from Syria." Image and caption from the Texas Tribune website. Photo credit: Marjorie Karnys Cotera.

The rise in terrorist acts linked to Daa'ish (ISIS) throughout Europe and the middle east since the Syrian civil war in 2011 has caused concerns for western nations overall, and Texas is not the first to react with precautionary measures.

Though the number of refugees the United States receives every year is small compared to its size and population, many have pointed to reasons we should be concerned about Syrian refugees specifically.

When the U.S. invaded Iraq, American authorities were able to obtain registries and criminal records of Iraqi citizens from the overthrown government. Compiling such information allowed the U.S. government to confidently and thoroughly screen Iraqis seeking resettlement. No such data base is available for Syrian war refugees.

While Texas' withdrawal will not halt the arrival of refugees into the state, it will change the current aid system in place.



"A child walks in a United Nations Refugee camp in Turkey where thousands of Syrian refugees reside." Image and caption from the Texas Tribune website. Photo credit: UNHCR.

"Caritas of Austin and all other resettlement agencies provide the same core services. The main difference is that the federal funds flow through different voluntary agencies (e.g. Church World Services, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Lutheran Services and others)," reported Adelita S. Winchester, current Director of Integration Services at the Caritas of Austin.

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Though she noted that it remains unclear how the new change in legislation will affect the functioning of Caritas and other resettlement agencies, Winchester added that “the federal funding sources are committed to avoid any interruption in services.”

It is likely that federal funds will have to be routed through non-profit organizations, as opposed to state-based agencies. Multiple nonprofit and religious organizations have stepped up, formally denouncing the Governor’s decision and vowing to continue, if not increase, the services they currently provide to refugee families.

13 of the state’s nonprofit organizations came together and released a joint statement:

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“Texans are welcoming and compassionate people. We will continue to uphold those values as we help the most vulnerable among us

rebuild their lives in peace and freedom.”

“Interestingly enough, there has been an increase in people wanting to volunteer for MRC (Multicultural Refugee Coalition) and RST (Refugee Services of Texas) and groups we have been working with in the past,” Rajthen said.

Another organization, the Interfaith Action Project, has also been central in Texans efforts to extend a warm welcome to asylum seekers and victims of war abroad.

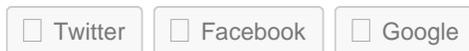
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As the state prepares to implement the changes that Abbott’s decision requires, more and more Texan residents are becoming aware of the increase in the refugee population in its cities.

Many AISD schools, with Doss Elementary as the leading example, have implemented special programs to assist the refugee children. There has also been a marked increase in Middle Eastern and African restaurants and businesses.

It’s difficult to gauge exactly what changes Texas will see in coming years due to withdrawing from the federal resettlement program. But it’s become apparent that Texans have been standing up for their fellow human beings and demonstrating just what “southern hospitality” means in our great state.

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