

**Homeland Insecurity:
The Securitization of Refugee Populations in the United States**

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Abstract

This paper traces the history of securitization of refugee populations in the United States of America. Unable or unwilling to return to their homes, refugees must stake their survival in proving their persecution and after doing so must attempt to quickly acclimate to new and usually unstable environments. Using a case study of the nation and process tracing, I find that refugee populations have been heavily scrutinized by the U.S. government, leading to the securitization of a crisis which implicitly demands the opposite response. Additionally, this securitization has implications for the broader discourse surrounding immigration policies and human rights, as it reveals the complex interplay between national security concerns and international humanitarian law.

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Refugees are one of the most vulnerable populations on the planet. Forced to flee from their homes, migrants face instability at nearly every turn. Recognizing the extended crisis of displaced persons, the international community enforces numerous policies and mandates which aim to protect the rights of those displaced. However, refugees are portrayed in two opposing fashions; first as being in dire need, and second as being threats to national and international security. The latter portrayal is a result of securitization, a process by which a political issue is transformed into an issue of security, thereby allowing states to defend the use of greater power to respond to that issue (Eroukhmanoff, 2020). The securitization of the refugee crisis and of refugees themselves is present is especially salient in wealthy Western countries. The United States, despite being generally removed from the worst refugee crises, provides a profound example of this process. What factors contribute to the perception of refugees as a potential security threat in Western states, considering their historical distance from immediate conflict zones, limited presence of refugee populations within borders, and overall restrained admission of migrants and asylum seekers? I will answer this question by exploring the effects of international trends, laws, and policies concerning refugees, using the United States of America as the subject of a case study. I will use process tracing to understand the extent of the securitization of the refugee crisis and the manner in which it has evolved in tandem with global historical events.

Background

The United States is one of the most powerful, wealthy, and influential countries in the world. It experiences a relative lack of intra-state violence compared to developing states and has historically been accepting of migrants as compared to other (often less economically powerful) countries. In the last two decades however, the cap on the number of asylees and refugees to be admitted into the country has decreased drastically. In order to analyze the extent to which securitization has affected policy concerning refugee populations, I will use a case study of the United States. Given that the bulk of American refugee policy is relatively new, that the American legal system produces a wealth of legislature and statistics concerning refugee populations, and that the United States exhibits numerous political and social connections to recent and historic episodes of international conflict, I believe a case study of the nation will allow me to explore the relationship between national and international characterizations of the refugee crisis.

Under international law, a refugee is defined as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2023). Women and children make up 80% of refugee and internally displaced populations, and most refugees come from the Global South or Middle East (Ross-Sherrif, 2013; UNHCR, 2023). Often, refugees must find shelter in sprawling camps, frequently situated in proximity to the borders of nations at the epicenter of conflict or distress. Before becoming a refugee, persons displaced by or fleeing from conflict apply as asylum seekers and

must prove that they fit the United Nations definition of a person of refugee status. Wealthier and often more developed countries like the United States cap the number of migrants they allow to resettle in their country annually. Asylum seekers and refugees hoping to be resettled are faced with expensive and slow moving bureaucratic systems. The United Kingdom has reported backlogs of asylum applications into the hundreds of thousands (Tyler-Todd et al., 2023). Meeting the burden of evidence required to be legally recognized as a refugee is also an issue for migrants who face vague and changing interpretations of the standard UN definition. For example, migrants fleeing countries due to climate related disasters do not technically meet the criteria for the UN definition which centers on persecution, and so they may be turned away (d’Orsi, 2023).

Unable or unwilling to return to their homes, refugees must stake their survival in proving their persecution and after doing so must attempt to quickly acclimate to new and usually unstable environments. General access to food, water, shelter, energy, and education are all limited, and gender inequity and gender-based violence are exacerbated in refugee camps. Food insecurity is acute, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reporting “80% of the world’s displaced people are in locations suffering from acute food insecurity and malnutrition” (Nisbet et al., 2022, p. 522). In particular, women are more prone to malnutrition than men, often because of unequal access to resources like food vouchers (Donnelly & Muthiah, 2019). Over 90% of refugees living in refugee camps worldwide have no or limited access to electricity (UNHCR, 2023). The risk of violence, human trafficking, and child labour are all heightened, and mitigation and prevention tactics are slow to work and hard to enforce (Donnelly & Muthiah, 2019). Even after leaving refugee camps and successfully

settling into new home countries, refugees are faced with language and education barriers, as well as xenophobia and lack of access to stable work, food, and housing (Donnelly & Muthiah, 2019).

The most widely known and farthest reaching international mandate regarding refugees is the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Passed in July of 1958, the Convention: defines what a refugee is; designates protections for welfare and gainful employment; and encourages all Member States to work conjointly with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1958). Initially formed as a response to the exodus and then return of persons displaced by World War II, the 1966 Protocol on the same Convention expanded the geographical and temporal limits of the mandate (Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1966). 146 Member States are party to the Convention and 147 are party to the Protocol. The United States is only party to the Protocol, but has followed the majority of the policy set forth by the original convention (Fitzpatrick, 1997). The main international body which tends to the Convention and its Protocol is the UNHCR. The mandate of the UNHCR is as follows;

“The High Commissioner’s core mandate covers refugees, that is, all persons outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and who, as a result, require international protection. Given the particular character of refugees as people who lack the protection of their own countries, the High Commissioner was established as the legal entity to be able to intercede on their behalf, as best illustrated by his supervisory responsibilities in respect of international refugee instruments” (UNHCR, 2013, p. 3).

Most countries adhere to the general tenants set forth in UN statute, but there are variations in the extent to which countries accept or reject refugee populations, or even agree to host camps during and after crisis events. Domestic policy is a key factor in understanding the securitization of the refugee crisis as it reveals deviations from international norms. It is surprising, then, to learn that the vast majority of nations view refugees as threats to national security interests. It seems counter intuitive that those fleeing conflict are viewed as being carriers of violence and discord. The securitization of refugee populations is a global issue and resides mainly in the domestic interests of nation states. Large, wealthy, and populous nations like the United States mainly view refugee populations as threats to security; migrants are assumed to be terrorists before they are assumed to be legitimate refugees (Nowratesh, 2019).

The United States

The United States has a historical reputation of being a “melting pot” country, accepting all kinds of migrants from all over the world. The reality of this reputation is not unfounded but the American government has never been wholly accepting of all migrants, and often defines refugee quotas in terms of ‘acceptable’ migrant populations, like those from Europe. As early as 1921, the United States was ordering quotas for the number of migrants who could be admitted from certain countries. From 1945-1948, the government passed sweeping directives expediting the process of immigration for those displaced by World War II. A stipulation was included which stated that no migrant could replace any American worker (USCIS, 2023). In the following years, the United States would remain close to the original quota system, but passed

several specialized programs which were outside of the quota for migrants who were fleeing from what the United States deemed particularly important conflicts. Early examples include the Refugee Act of 1953 where refugees from communist countries were afforded visas over the limit of migrants for their country; 2000 Chinese migrants were approved for visas over the limit of only 105. Ad hoc programs and policies continued until 1980 when Congress passed the comprehensive Refugee Act. The act, in addition to outlining the process by which refugees were admitted into the United States and consolidating years of refugee policy, formally integrated the United Nations definition for refugees and raised the annual quota for potential migrants from 17,400 to 50,000 (Refugee Act of 1980, 1980).

The evolution of a codified national response to migrant populations and refugee crises intensified after 9/11. Following the terrorist attacks, the U.S. government established the Department of Homeland Security, a body tasked with implementing all migrant related policy (Legal Information Institute, 2023). The establishment of the DHS signified a palpable shift in the rhetoric surrounding migrant populations; indeed, it is the Department of Homeland *Security* which was tasked with migration and border policy. US Citizenship and Immigration Services specifically notes their vigilance concerning “fraud detection and national security” on their Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate webpage (USCIS, 2023).

The original quota system has stayed in place, and an “Admission and Resettlement Ceiling” is posted each fiscal year (Bruno, 2023; Mossad, 2019). Trends show this number has decreased over the course of 40 years, with significant decline following its standardized inception. Following an average of 93,000 a year, the cap was set at only 18,000 in 2020 (Monin et al., 2021). Actual admissions of refugees have varied with the quotas, sometimes close to the

actual number, and other times thousands of admissions away. The clearest departures in admissions from the projected ceilings are in the years following 2001, when the ceiling remained 70,000 from 2001 to 2007 but actual admissions only reached around 50,000 (Migration Policy Institute, n.d). These numbers represent a continuous decline in the admission of refugees to the United States, and reflect the increasing securitization of all migrant populations, including those of refugee status.

These numbers reflect the intensity of political rhetoric and its effects on refugee policy. Even given the lack of evidence that accepting refugees is detrimental to economic or social security, there is an abundance of rhetoric which purports the opposite. Not only have claims that refugees “take jobs” and present security risks to local populations been disproven, but there are a lack of studies which even attempt to claim otherwise (Constant, 2015). The United States government has not undertaken significant sociological or economic study to understand the effects that refugee populations have on domestic security, and yet a negative rhetoric persists. Presidential policy matters quite a bit in terms of national attitudes towards refugee populations. During the Obama presidency, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in the context of the Syrian conflict, refugee admissions remained low, and ceilings were not raised. Obama was primarily concerned with assuaging the worries of American citizens and of Congress. Obama kept ceilings low and policy guarded in order to gain political favor (Kamark, 2018). The 2009-2017 presidential policy reflected a mood in Congress; any non-American person was suspect. This came to a head during the Trump presidency, wherein the president promoted outward hostility towards all migrant populations and lowered refugee ceilings and admissions

quotas significantly. Trump's refugee policy can be succinctly described in one of his most common slogans; "Build the Wall!" (National Archives and Records Administration, 2021). Refugees and asylum seekers were painted as "frauds" looking to "take advantage of American generosity." (World Politics Review, 2019). Refugee populations became securitized because of continuous rhetoric of an imagined strain on U.S. resources and general xenophobia. Biden's presidency has largely retained similar if not the same views, but with special attention to refugees fleeing from the war in Ukraine. The refugee ceiling has been raised to 125,000, but presidential policy still notes its pledge to improve border security measures; the budget of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was raised to \$25 billion (The White House, 2023).

In spite of the damning rhetoric used by many American politicians to justify their policies, refugee populations have been proven to be a net benefit to domestic interests. Local mayors from many cities in America have consistently asked the office of the president for more refugees as their presence can boost local economies (Kellog, 2021). Scholars note that accepting migrant populations might mitigate the risk of international black mail and manipulation campaigns like the actions of Belarus and Turkey towards the EU; the two countries weaponized their refugee populations as a point of "political and economic leverage" (Dhingra, 2022). Additionally, American interests including a desire for strong soft power in the international community can be improved by accepting and integrating larger numbers of refugees. Essentially, there is a serious lack of evidence that refugee populations pose a significant risk to the American government (Kuczera, 2017).

Conclusion

The securitization of refugee populations in the United States is extensive. Refugee policy is managed by the Department of Homeland Security, and updates on this policy are regularly included in national security strategy (Colome-Menendez et al., 2021). Presidential policy influences the admission ceilings for migrant populations directly, and often results from social and political pressure. American refugee policy is mainly reactive. The largest recent changes in national refugee policy have come after or during times of crisis including the 9/11 terrorist attacks and during the wars in Syria and Ukraine. In short, refugees often represent a tangible lack of security and are therefore determined to be security threats themselves. As the United States continues to respond to novel conflicts and mass migration events, many policy makers have concluded that the present and generally ad hoc responses will not be enough to maintain a sustainable international positionality. Recognizing the benefits of refugee populations and moving away from the suspicion that has marked all migration policy for the last three decades are key in the de-securitization of a population which has never posed a significant threat to American national security.

Political scientists have suggested that a key to the international problem of refugee securitization lies in the reorientation of border policy goals. By integrating refugee populations and understanding refugee protection policies to be in alignment with more general border protection policies, states may decrease the securitization measures which do not serve national or international security interests (Goldenziel, 2010). Scholars also note the successes of states like Canada which have successfully streamlined their integration processes, and which have

remained open to refugee populations even as global security declines (Kuczera, 2017). The most vulnerable population in the world should not be faced with extensive and ineffective bureaucratic measures which immediately assume guilt for nonexistent crimes. Whether a matter of humanitarian aid or political capacity, refugee populations present more opportunities for security, economic, and social upturn than anything else.

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