August 29, 2017

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

As practitioners and scholars involved in immigration and refugee affairs, including former senior immigration and refugee officials from each of the Presidential administrations between 1989 and 2016, we write with respect to the Presidential Memorandum on immigration and refugee issues dated March 6, 2017. That Memorandum is entitled “Implementing Immediate Heightened Screening and Vetting of Applications for Visas and Other Immigration Benefits, Ensuring Enforcement of All Laws for Entry into the United States, and Increasing Transparency among Departments and Agencies of the Federal Government and for the American People.” As you know, the Memorandum requested that you prepare two reports related to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

The first report requested is an estimate of the long-term costs of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program at the federal, state, and local levels, including recommendations for how to curtail those costs. For the second report, the President requested an estimate of the number of refugees being supported in countries of first asylum for the same long-term cost as supporting refugees in the United States.

We recognize the wisdom of assessing fairly and accurately the impact of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. We write to support this effort, by describing key principles we believe should inform each of the reports requested by President Donald Trump. Our suggestions are based on the proposition that carefully designed policy assessment and analysis is critical to promoting the public good and that, conversely, poorly designed studies result in policy that misallocates scarce resources and risks unintended negative impacts.

With respect to the first study you are preparing, we believe that an assessment of the long-term costs of the Refugee Admissions Program must also gauge the long-term economic and social benefits of the Program, and that failure to do so will paint a misleading picture of the Program’s value to the United States. Because of the initial needs experienced by resettled refugees in the United States, many will use federal, state, and local benefits and other resources to ease their transition upon arrival. At the same time, resettled refugees also enter the workforce in large numbers, pay taxes, start businesses that expand local employment, and help to revitalize struggling communities. Focusing on the costs of refugee resettlement without also making a serious effort to measure these benefits will create an unfairly skewed perspective of what the Refugee Admissions Program is worth to the United States. Similarly, seeking recommendations for how to reduce the costs of refugee resettlement will have limited value without simultaneously considering how proposed cuts will affect the Program’s benefits. Finally,
though not easily quantifiable, some consideration of the foreign policy benefits of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program ought to be part of any fair assessment of the Program’s value.

The request you have received for the second study is particularly problematic. Estimating the number of refugees being supported in countries of first asylum for the same long-term cost as supporting refugees resettled in the United States, in and of itself, is a flawed exercise because it treats the two measures as comparable solutions to what are very different challenges. Admitting refugees into a country of first asylum is normally a measure designed to provide temporary protection. In contrast, third country resettlement of refugees, including resettlement in the United States, is one of three durable solutions for refugees (the others being return to a country of origin when conditions permit or permanent local integration in countries of first asylum). Comparing the provision of first asylum on a temporary basis to the permanent durable solution of refugee resettlement will result in the unremarkable finding that, on a per capita basis, the former is cheaper in terms of budgetary outlays (at least over a fixed period of time). But that would be a meaningless and potentially misleading finding.

We do, however, believe this second study could be made useful, if, for example, it also considered 1) long-term economic, fiscal, and social benefits of refugee resettlement; 2) the role that U.S. resettlement has played in advancing other U.S. national security objectives (e.g., in the case of resettlement of Kosovars and Kurds); 3) the impact of a modest resettlement program on U.S. capacity to encourage other governments to resettle refugees; and 4) the role of U.S. resettlement in supporting and strengthening U.S. efforts to encourage first asylum countries to consider local integration of refugee populations.

This study might also benefit from an analysis of the human and other costs of protracted refugee situations in countries of first asylum, such as that of some 100,000 Bhutanese refugees who languished for 16 years in camps in Nepal before the United States initiated a resettlement program that freed nearly all of them to lead productive lives. While the budgetary costs of continuing to pour humanitarian assistance funds into the deep hole of maintaining first asylum camps year after year might in some instances be less than the budgetary costs of resettlement, it can also reflect the difference between stagnation leading to higher human costs and an actual solution that empowers people and enables them to become productive citizens. The cost of a fish might be less than that of a fishing pole, but only the latter will free the beneficiary from dependency into the future.

To be sure, we have no objection to a study on this issue, including a description of budgetary costs. However, funding to support refugees in countries of first asylum and funding for refugee resettlement are not interchangeable, and a study focusing on that question, again, would be meaningless and misleading. By including the elements we describe, we believe you could offer valuable insights while still meeting the presidential request you have received.

In conclusion, we believe that assessing whether the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program fulfills humanitarian and foreign policy goals in a fiscally responsible manner is very important. Such studies will be most useful if you assess both the costs and benefits of the Program, consider how refugees living in countries of first asylum are distinct from resettled refugees, and evaluate
fairly the full range of rationales for a program of refugee resettlement and the long-term costs of its alternatives.

We appreciate your consideration of our views. Any or all of us would be happy to discuss these issues with you at your convenience.

Sincerely,

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