

So Far: Syrian Refugees in U.S. Include 2,098 Muslims, 53 Christians



Holding crosses painted in the colors of the Syrian opposition flag, Syrian Christians protest persecution in their homeland (Photo: Shaam News Network)

(CNSNews.com) – President Obama said Monday that calls from some quarters for the U.S. to admit only Christian refugees from Syria were “shameful,” yet the reality is that today’s refugee system discriminates, not against Syrian Muslims, but against Christians and other non-Muslim minorities.

Critics say this is because the federal government relies on the United Nations in the refugee application process – and since Syrian Christians are often afraid to register with the U.N., they and other non-Muslims are left out.

Fleeing persecution at the hands of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other jihadist groups, Syrian Christians generally avoid U.N. refugee camps because they are targeted there too.

Most refugees considered for resettlement in the U.S. are referred by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Applications are then handled by one of nine State Department-managed resettlement support centers around the world, a process that includes vetting and interviews by the Department of Homeland Security’s U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and takes an average of 18-24 months. There are occasions when a process can begin without UNHCR referral, but this usually applies in cases of close relatives of refugees already in the U.S.

Of 2,184 Syrian refugees admitted into the U.S. since the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011, only 53 (2.4 percent) have been Christians while 2098 (or 96 percent) have been Muslims, [according to State Department statistics updated on Monday](#).

The remaining 33 include 1 Yazidi, 8 Jehovah Witnesses, 2 Baha'i, 6 Zoroastrians, 6 of "other religion," 7 of "no religion," and 3 atheists.

Religion	CY 2011	CY 2012	CY 2013	CY 2014	CY 2015	Total
Syria	20	41	45	249	1,829	2,184
Atheist	1	0	0	0	2	3
Bahai	0	0	0	0	2	2
Catholic	0	0	0	1	3	4
Christian	0	1	6	12	25	44
Jehovah Witness	0	5	1	2	0	8
Moslem	0	1	2	10	47	60
Moslem Shiite	0	2	0	6	5	13
Moslem Suni	15	31	36	208	1,735	2,025
No Religion	4	0	0	2	1	7
Orthodox	0	0	0	3	2	5
Other Religion	0	0	0	5	1	6
Yazidi	0	1	0	0	0	1
Zoroastrian	0	0	0	0	6	6
Total	20	41	45	249	1,829	2,184

Updated figures of Syrian refugees admitted into the U.S. since the Syrian civil war began. Only 53, or 2.4 percent, of the 2,194 total are Christians. (Data: State Department Refugee Processing Center)

By comparison, Syria's population breakdown in early 2011, before the civil war's death toll and refugee exodus roiled the demographics, was 90 percent Muslim (including Sunnis, Shia, Alawites and Druze) and 10 percent Christian, according to the CIA World Factbook.

In the wake of the Paris terror attacks, some Republican presidential candidates and governors are calling on the administration to reconsider a plan to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees in the current fiscal year.

On Monday, Arkansas Republican Sens. Tom Cotton and John Boozman also called for a temporary moratorium, but as part of a broader new policy on Syrian refugees that also deals with the U.N. referral problem.

"The United States' reliance on the United Nations for referrals of Syrian refugees should also be re-evaluated," [they said](#). "That reliance unintentionally discriminates against Syrian Christians and other religious minorities who are reluctant to register as refugees with the United Nations for fear of political and sectarian retribution."

According to Patrick Sookhdeo, international director of Barnabas Fund, a charity campaigning to [help rescue Christians from Syria](#), Christians fleeing ISIS "seldom go to the main refugee camps in neighboring countries because they are marginalized, abused, and at serious risk of violence in these Muslim-majority shelters."

Sookhdeo says Western governments "must understand that vulnerable Christians are being overlooked in rescue program that take only those in the camps to safety. Fully aware of the victimization that is likely to

await them in refugee camps, Iraqi and Syrian believers are mainly taking shelter in schools, churches, and apartments, or with relatives where possible.”

As a result, some refugee advocates say Western diplomatic missions should work through churches in urban areas in the countries neighboring Syria, to offer refuge for vulnerable Christians.

Prioritize the ‘most victimized’

In September Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Texas), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, [introduced a bill](#) that would give Congress an up-or-down vote on Obama’s plan to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees – and would also require the administration, when considering applicants from Syria and Iraq, to prioritize the resettlement of “persecuted” religious minorities.

On Sunday, GOP presidential candidate Jeb Bush said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” that U.S. efforts to help Syrian refugees should focus on Christians, “who have no place in Syria anymore. They’re being beheaded, they’re being executed by both sides. And I think we have a responsibility to help.”

Obama, speaking in Turkey, said calls to admit Syrian Christians but not Muslims were “[shameful](#)” and “not American.”

Other Western countries are also grappling with the controversial issue.

Last September George Carey, a former leader of the world’s Anglicans, urged the British government to prioritize Christians among the Syrian refugees “because they are a particularly vulnerable group.”

Carey said in an [op-ed](#) a government plan to admit thousands more Syrians by way of refugee camps located in the region “inadvertently discriminates against the very Christian communities most victimized by the inhuman butchers of the so-called Islamic State.”

“Christians are not to be found in the U.N. camps, because they have been attacked and targeted by Islamists and driven from them,” he said.

Carey also tackled the sensitive Christian versus Muslim issue.

“Some will not like me saying this, but in recent years, there has been too much Muslim mass immigration to Europe,” he wrote. “This has resulted in ghettos of Muslim communities living parallel lives to mainstream society, following their own customs and even their own laws.”

“Isn’t it high-time instead for the oil-rich Gulf States to open their doors to the many Muslims who are fleeing conflict?” Carey asked. “Surely if they are concerned for fellow Muslims who prefer to live in Muslim-majority countries, then they have a moral responsibility to intervene.”

In Australia, Muslim groups accused the government of bigotry for [announcing](#) in September that a plan to admit an additional 12,000 refugees from the conflict will prioritize “those most in need – the women, children and families of persecuted minorities.”

The Islamic Council of Victoria spokesman said it would be discriminatory to reject desperate Syrians, “based on their adherence to Islam.”

The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils said then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott must “take the high moral ground and stop bigots in his party from dividing the Australian community” by wanting to screen

refugees on religious grounds.

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