



Craving for control: refugee screening in the EU and the US

[Published on 15. December 2015 by Daniela Kietz](#)

The terrorist attacks in Paris have had a deep and lasting impact on the asylum and refugee debate in the EU and the US. One of the major issues discussed is how to enhance security screenings of refugees and migrants. In the European debate, the US procedures are often cited as model for EU Member States despite their major weaknesses. They are so tight, bureaucratic and time-consuming that they do not allow swift protection of people in acute emergency situations – the very basic idea of any refugee and asylum scheme. Nevertheless, the EU in its current crisis situation can learn one thing from the US way of admitting refugees: organised resettlement programmes as such can be an orderly way to manage migration flows and for controlling who is entering EU territory.

The US practice: intense and time-consuming screenings

The often cited US procedures of screening refugees were adopted as part of the comprehensive security reforms after 9/11. Due to concerns over terrorist exploitation of refugee and asylum programmes the US government put into place comprehensive security checks for refugees under the ‘US Refugee Admission Programme’. This scheme is a so-called collective admission programme, which allows ample time for screening refugees before they enter US territory. Collective admission programmes like temporary and permanent resettlement programmes or humanitarian visa are globally coordinated and implemented by UNHCR and other refugee organisations. Working directly in the crisis areas, UNHCR pre-selects and proposes refugees to participating reception states within ceilings that these states have determined beforehand. The reception states screen these refugees and take the final decision on their admission. In the US, the process of admitting a refugee takes on average 18-24 months due to a comprehensive multi-step security vetting, which includes background checks, biometric screenings and interviews with various security agencies. Certain nationalities, which are perceived to pose a particular security threat – currently in particular Syrians and Iraqis –, undergo additional screenings, so that the process can take even longer. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, the US Congress recently adopted a law that further extends the screenings for refugees from those two countries. During the entire screening process the refugees remain outside the US – in the case of Syrian refugees, for example, mainly in the camps in Jordan, Turkey or Lebanon.

Through its Admission Programme the US takes in a sizeable number of people every year, in 2013 for example 69.909. Meanwhile the number of individual asylum claims submitted on US territory or at the US borders is much smaller, simply as the US is geographically removed from most crisis areas. Only 25.199 were admitted under the asylum procedure in 2013. Compared to the EU, the grand total of people entering the US through these channels is low.

The EU's reality: screenings hard to implement

The situation in the EU right now is entirely different: due to its geographic situation the EU is much more exposed to irregular migration flows over its external borders. Asylum applications on EU territory and at its external borders therefore remain the prime channel for people looking for protection in EU Member States. Meanwhile collective admission programmes like in the US are an exception. Germany, for example, implemented the largest collective admission programme in the EU for Syrian refugees admitting 36.000 people between 2013 and 2015. At the same time individual asylum requests from Syria exceed this number by far; in the first ten months of 2015 alone 104.000 Syrian applications were registered in Germany.

And herein lies the catch for the EU: meaningful security screenings of refugees and migrants that have already entered EU territory are extremely hard to implement – in particular in the current chaotic situation where thousands of people reach the Italian and Greek shores every day. At the migratory hubs in these countries, the EU is trying to allow for a more orderly processing of refugees and migrants by providing coordinated and reinforced support by EU agencies like Frontex and EASO and Member States' experts ('hotspot approach'). This could also include intensified security screenings by, for example, systematically checking refugees against police data bases and anti-terror lists. But such measures will take time to be implemented. At the moment Italy, Greece or Croatia still do not even (manage to) fingerprint and register refugees in a systematic manner. But even if implemented properly, these procedures would security-wise still not live up to the US screenings.

Preserving humanitarian principles

If EU Member States really wanted to put into place security checks similar to those of the US, they would have to detain refugees and migrants for many months after their arrival. Even though some European leaders like the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, have supported the idea of long-term detainments, it should go without saying that such procedures are entirely unfeasible in practice. Moreover and more importantly they contradict the humanitarian core of refugee policies, namely to provide swift protection of people in severe emergency situations. And indeed, looking more closely at the US practice, it becomes clear that it should not pose as a model in this regard: the screening and vetting is so intense and time-consuming that less than 2,200 (!) Syrian refugees have been resettled to the US since civil war broke out in 2011. From a humanitarian perspective this is a plain disaster. In comparison, EU Member States expect to grant asylum to approximately 250.000 Syrian refugees in 2015 alone. Nevertheless, the EU can learn one thing from the US: collective admission programmes like the UNHCR-coordinated resettlements as such can be a good way to manage migration flows and to have better control over who is entering EU territory. They allow for a comparatively orderly process of screening and admitting refugees. Moreover, states can explicitly decide whom they want to admit: what kind of refugees (e.g. vulnerable groups like elderly, minors or minorities), how many refugees, for how long, of which nationality, with which level of education, etc. In case of the EU, making more use of resettlement programmes and humanitarian visa would also take pressure off the EU's external borders, reduce the trafficking in people and potentially reduce the number of refugees choosing irregular and often dangerous ways to flee in direction of the EU. And when it comes to security checks of refugees in the framework of such programmes, it is simply important to find a balance between the legitimate interest of states to screen refugees and the humanitarian aim to allow for a swift admission of people in urgent need of protection.

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