

American attitudes on refugees from the Middle East

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Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted May 20-31, 2016 with a panel consisting of a probability-based representative sample. The panel was recruited by Nielsen Scarborough from its larger probability-based national panel, which was recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households. A total of 1580 panelists completed the survey including a national sample of 845 adults, plus an oversample of 735 millennials (18-34), making for a total sample of millennials of 863. Responses were weighted by age, gender, income, education, race, and geographic region using benchmarks from the US Census. The survey was also weighted by partisan identification and millennials were down-weighted consistent with these groups' incidence rate in the U.S. Census. The margins of error for the national sample and for each subgroup is: National – 845 respondents, MoE: 3.4% Millennials – 863, MoE: 3.3%

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Note: These questions were fielded as part of a larger poll on foreign and domestic issues. Participants in this study were provided by Nielsen from Nielsen's sample of respondents

Key Findings

Support for Taking in Refugees from Middle East Conflicts:

- If the United States screens refugees for security risks, 59% of Americans support taking in refugees from the conflicts in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries, while 41% oppose. Support is stronger among Democrats (77%) and Millennials (68%). Opposition is strongest among supporters of Donald Trump (77%) and Republicans (63%).
- As for refugees from Syria specifically, 56% of Americans support taking in refugees while 43% oppose.

What are those who oppose taking in refugees most concerned about?

- Americans who oppose taking in refugees are closely divided between being concerned about terrorism (46%) and worrying about the economic burden (41%). Nine percent say they are concerned about having more Muslims in the U.S.

What do Americans think about refugees and terrorism charges?

- Although only 3 refugees have been arrested since 9/11 over terrorism charges, an overwhelming majority of Americans (84%) believe that there have been more than 5 arrests, with 28% believing that there have been 100 or more. Those who are 55 years of age or older are more likely than Millennials to think this (33% compared to 22%).
- Across party lines, Republicans are more likely to estimate that a larger number of refugees have been arrested over terrorism links.

Do Americans feel a moral obligation to help refugees from Iraq, Syria, and Libya?

- To varying degrees, Americans are divided on the issue of moral obligation to help refugees from Middle Eastern conflicts, with somewhat more obligation toward Iraqi refugees (54%), followed by Syrian refugees (51%), then Libyan refugees (49%).

- A substantial majority of Trump supporters express no obligation (69% for Iraq, 74% for Syria, 77% for Libya) while roughly two thirds of the supporters of Clinton and Sanders express obligation across the three countries.

How much of a role do Americans feel the 2003 Iraq war has had on events leading to the Syrian refugee crisis?

- Overall, 56% say the Iraq war has had a ‘significant’ role in the events leading to the Syrian refugee crisis and another 31% say a ‘small role,’ while only 11% say ‘no role.’ While there is variation across party lines, still even among Republicans, 44% say it played a ‘significant role’ and only 18% say it played ‘no role.’

How many Syrian refugees should the U.S. accept in 2017?

- Provided with information that the Obama administration aimed to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees this year, respondents were asked, in an open-ended question to say what they think the U.S. should aim for in 2017.
- The median answer was 10,000 (10,000 for Republicans) and the mean was 58,928 (35,618 for Republicans).

Preferred ways to help refugees:

- When asked if they believe the U.S. should take in more war refugees, Americans were more likely to support initiatives that passed the responsibility to non-governmental organizations, and to prefer those that dealt with refugees abroad, rather than at home. The most favorable response was sending humanitarian professionals to refugees abroad (79%), followed by American support to charities helping refugees abroad (60%). Also, 60% of respondents supported individuals and community groups sponsoring refugees in the U.S., while 47% supported the U.S. government directly taking in refugees.
- Millennials are more likely to support efforts that will bring refugees to the U.S. with 58% supporting the U.S. government taking in refugees, and 60% supporting individuals and community groups helping to assist refugees to come to the U.S.

- Republicans are more likely to oppose responses that would bring more refugees to the U.S. The percentage of Republicans who oppose the U.S. government taking in more [war] refugees (75%) is more than double that of Democrats who feel this way (34%). The same is true when asked about individuals and community groups, such as churches, sponsoring more refugees and helping them with funds and assistance to settle in the U.S. 51% of Republicans oppose this whereas only 25% of Democrats do. Looking at responses abroad, Republicans and Democrats do not vary too much in their support. For example, 78% of Republicans and 83% of Democrats support the U.S. sending professionals in humanitarianism work to help refugees in camps abroad.

Would refugees be welcomed in your community?

- Overall, 55% of Americans believe that refugees would be welcomed in their state or community. When broken down by age, 35-54 year olds are more likely to believe that refugees would be welcomed. Democrats are also more likely than Republicans and Independents to think this.

Americans acceptance of Syrian refugees:

- When reminded that American laws prohibit discriminating against people including refugees solely on the basis of their ethnic or religious background, most Americans (72%) said that this included them to feel the same way in their acceptance of Syrian refugees. Fifteen percent of Americans were inclined to be more accepting and 13% were inclined to be less accepting.

American acceptance of a refugee policy excluding single men:

- If the U.S. were to institute a refugee policy excluding single men, 28% of respondents said they would become more supportive of the U.S. accepting more refugees, while 70% said they would not.

American views of Europe's response to the migrant crisis:

- A plurality of Americans (36%) say that Europe is doing as much as can be expected in response to the migrant crisis in Europe, while 20% say it's doing too much and 17% say it's not doing enough.

- Democrats are more than twice as likely as Republicans to say that European nations should be doing more in response to the migrant crisis, with 22% and 10%, respectively. Republicans are also significantly more likely to say that European nations are doing too much as it is, with 33% compared to only 9% of Democrats and 17% of Independents.
- Americans 55 years of age and older are more likely to say that European nations are doing too much or are doing as much as can be expected with a combined 65% of responses.

Dealing with Syrian refugees already in the U.S.:

- Twenty-one percent of Americans think that the U.S. should expel the Syrian refugees who are already in the country, while 76% say the U.S. should ‘welcome them and help absorb them into American society.’ Younger Americans are less likely to want Syrian refugees expelled (16%) compared to 24% of 35-54 year olds and 23% of Americans 55 and older. Republicans are also four times more likely than Democrats to want refugees expelled with 36% compared to 9% of responses. Democrats are more likely than Republicans and Independents to say that the U.S. should welcome refugees and help absorb them into American society, with 90% of Democrats feeling this way.

Addressing the needs of refugees in the U.S.:

- More than half of all Americans would like to see charities and other non-governmental organizations take the lead in addressing the needs of refugees once they are in the United States, over federal and state governments.
- Republicans are more likely than Democrats or Independents to say that charities and other non-governmental organizations should take the lead in addressing the needs of refugees once they are in the United States. Sixty-two percent of Republicans feel this way compared to 45% of Democrats and 48% of Independents. Democrats are more than twice as likely as Republicans to say that the federal government should take the lead with 41% versus 17%. Independents fall in between these two with 26%. However, Republicans (19%) are slightly more likely to say that states should take the lead than Democrats (13%).
- Across all age groups, the most popular option for addressing the needs of refugees lies with charities and other non-governmental organizations.

Dealing with the Syrian refugees after they arrive:

- Respondents were asked to rank six different options for assisting Syrian refugees once they arrive, on a scale of 0-5, where 0 is 'not important, and 5 is 'very important.'
- English language training received the highest rate of 'very important' (64%), followed by providing K-12 education (46%). Only 16% ranked computer training programs as 'very important,' while 33% ranked job readiness and placement services, and 31% ranked resettlement services as being 'very important.'

Openness towards refugees from different regions:

- Asked to rank their openness to refugees from different regions on a scale of 0-10 (where 0 is 'not being open' and 10 is 'being very open' respondents ranked the Middle East lower than East Asia, Africa, Central America, and South America. The mean for the Middle East was 4.83 with a median of 5. When comparing this to the other four regions, they are all have a median of 6 and a mean between 5.68 and 5.96.