



LGBT

LGBT Refugees' Lives Depend on the U.S. Resettlement Program

By [Sharita Gruberg](#) | Posted on January 30, 2017, 9:25 am



(AP/Evan Vucci)

President Donald Trump walks from the Oval Office to board Marine One on the South Lawn of the White House in

On Friday, President Donald Trump [issued an executive order](#) suspending refugee resettlement in the United States for 120 days and indefinitely suspending it for Syrian

refugees—except on a case-by-case basis for people whose admission “is in the national interest,” particularly those fleeing religious-based persecution. In the executive order, he also proclaimed that the United States should not admit those who “engage in acts of bigotry and hatred” or “those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation.” This prohibition is already well-founded in U.S. [immigration laws](#). Reiterating the need to protect Americans from persecution because of their sexual orientation in the same order that yanks the welcome mat out from under LGBT refugees fleeing the Islamic State and militias is hypocritical.

The executive order will prevent refugees such as [Sham Hasan](#), an Iraqi LGBT and refugee rights advocate who risked his life as a linguist for U.S. troops in Iraq, from coming to the United States. In an interview with the author, Hasan expressed fear that without the hope of resettlement in the United States, some LGBT refugees may see suicide as their only option. He said that “if my country shuts the door in my face and America shuts the door in my face as well, that would cause me to break down. I would have no hope to live again.”

U.S. resettlement is the only option for many LGBT refugees

In Syria and Iraq, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, people are facing persecution on all sides. Reports of [targeted attacks](#), [kidnappings](#), [beatings](#), [murder](#), and [torture](#) are all too common. Beyond persecution from the Islamic State and militias, LGBT people often face abuse and harassment from members of their own families or communities. LGBT refugees fleeing Syria have severely limited options. For many, the only escape is to travel to a neighboring country. This does not mean safety, however, as they are [surrounded](#) by countries that also criminalize LGBT identities. Last summer, a [gay Syrian man](#) seeking safety in Turkey was abducted, beaten, and beheaded. After reaching the relative safety of a neighboring country, without the ability to work and without support from family, many LGBT refugees are forced to live on the streets.

The International Refugee Assistance Project, or [IRAP](#), provides free legal assistance to refugees seeking safety from their home countries. IRAP focuses on the most vulnerable refugees, including LGBT refugees, throughout the Middle East and is one of the only

organizations providing direct legal assistance to LGBT refugees in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. In an interview with the author, Lara Finkbeiner, IRAP's deputy legal director, said, "The U.S. is really their only hope. Shutting off their pipeline to safety is devastating." Even before President Trump's [arbitrary visa restrictions](#), she said, LGBT refugees were frequently ineligible for a visa because of their lack of employment and family ties and low homeownership rates.

Refugees seeking resettlement in the United States must undergo an extensive security screening [process](#). Since this process averages 18 months to 24 months, IRAP has clients in every stage of the resettlement process. For LGBT clients already in line, the halt to the U.S. refugee resettlement program leaves them with no options other than to remain in hiding and hope for the best. Although refugees registered with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, could be referred to another country for resettlement, the United States historically resettles more refugees than all other resettlement countries [combined](#).

IRAP has already received concerns from former clients resettled in the United States about the fate of other LGBT refugees. One told Finkbeiner that their nightmare of being trapped in a country neighboring Iraq with no way out was becoming true for other people. Others still have family members in the resettlement process; although they themselves are safe, they are terrified for the safety of their loved ones. Rather than forcing extremely vulnerable people—who have already waited years for safety—to go back into hiding, the United States should uphold its existing commitments to resettling refugees.

When asked about the refugee program's suspension, Finkbeiner said, "I hope that people understand a ban or suspension of the resettlement program is an LGBT issue, it's also an issue of basic human dignity." When asked what coming to America felt like after three years spent hiding in Iraq, Hasan said, "The moment I arrived in the U.S., it was like salvation. I was reborn again. Freedom tasted so good. Why not share it with others?" President Trump's recent executive order threatens to undermine not only this dignity but also the conscience of our nation.

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