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US: Opening the door to thousands of Syrians

President Obama says 10,000 vulnerable Syrians will be welcomed, but critics say it's far from enough.



By **James Reinl**

13 Sep 2015



New York, United States – Being gay carries a death sentence in Syria.

Amid the chaos of a brutal, multi-front war between government forces, Islamist fighters, moderates and Kurds, religious hardliners execute homosexuals by hurling them from rooftops as punishment for an ungodly lifestyle.

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Subhi Nahas, a gay 28-year-old who fled the city of Idlib, fearing for his life, got a lucky break. He is one of about 1,500 Syrian war refugees to have been accepted by a US resettlement scheme that is set to grow sharply in the coming months.

“It’s completely different from where I came from,” Nahas told Al Jazeera from his new home in San Francisco, a liberal-minded city that gave rise to the US’ gay rights movement in the 1970s.

“People are so open. You can be whoever you want to be.”

02:44



Syrian refugees' plight worsens amid UN funding crisis

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Syria's civil war has sent four million refugees fleeing across its borders; many have [headed to Europe](#). Against this backdrop, US President Barack Obama last week announced plans to resettle 10,000 Syrians in the US to ease the crisis.

His decision has been controversial. Pressure groups complain that it only represents a tiny fraction of Syria's refugees. Some US politicians warn of extremists slipping through the net and orchestrating a [Boston Marathon-style attack](#).

The 10,000 refugees are set to be admitted in the fiscal year that begins on October 1. They will number among the 70,000 refugees that the United States accepts from around the world each year at a cost of about \$16,000 per new arrival.

A state department official told Al Jazeera most Syrians will come from camps run by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, in Jordan, Turkey,

Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq. It does not matter if they can speak English or have college degrees.

They will constitute the “most vulnerable” Syrians, including gays such as Nahas, torture victims, families headed by women, people in need of medical care, and members of oppressed religious groups, added the official, speaking on the condition that she would not be named.

Persecution

Being gay in Syria has always been tough, said Nahas. It only got harder when law and order broke down during the anti-government protests of 2011 that lit the fuse on a civil war that has claimed [about 250,000 lives](#).

In one incident, government troops verbally abused him, calling him a “faggot, sissy and other profanities”, he said. When the rebel group al-Nusra Front

showed up in Idlib and tortured an “effeminate man” while promising to cleanse the newly seized town of “sodomy”, he hid.

“I was terrified,” he said. “I did not move from the house for months. I would lock the door to sleep at night. I could still hear everything from outside – gunshots, the announcements from mosques.”


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Several months later he fled to a safe house for LGBT people in Lebanon. Later, in Turkey, he campaigned for gay rights – which earned him a death threat from a self-proclaimed member of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

After a complicated vetting process, Nahas was admitted into the US refugee scheme. He arrived in the US four months ago and lives in California,

where he works for the Organization for Refuge, Asylum and Migration, [a charity](#).

03:40



Al Jazeera joins Syrian families on journey to Germany

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According to Jessica Stern, executive director of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, ISIL is a leading persecutor of gays in

Syria, and has released online videos and photos of dozens of executions.

ISIL fighters typically accuse homosexuals of “committing acts of the people of Lot [sodomy]” and condemn them to death. They are often hurled from the tops of buildings; those not killed on impact are finished off with a few well-aimed rocks.

Europe bound

As Nahas flew to the US’ west coast, his countrymen were among the hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking better lives, work and safety in Europe. Many chanced Mediterranean Sea crossings from Libya, others travelled overland through Greece.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 432,761 people have entered the 28-nation European Union (EU) via Italian or Greek

sea routes so far this year, more than double the total for the whole of 2014.

They often risk trips on rickety vessels. Some 2,748 migrants have died in the Mediterranean to date, the IOM said. They include Aylan Kurdi, a Kurdish toddler who drowned in a failed Turkey-Greece sea crossing this month.

The photo of the three-year-old's body, washed up on the Turkish shoreline, became a cause celebre of the crisis.

Refugee flows have sent shockwaves across Europe. German officials have said they could accept 500,000 asylum seekers annually. Others are more cautious. Some Eastern European countries have [rejected plans](#) for a quota system that would see migrants dispersed evenly.



Subhi Nahas, 28, from Syria [James Reinl/Al Jazeera]

“I see these people in the news, they are my people,” Nahas said. “More governments should open up their doors for everyone, not just exceptional or LGBT people, but to everyone who is coming.”

Refugee ‘terrorists’

The controversy hit the US last week with Republican Senator John McCain showing Kurdi’s photograph before Congress. Officially, the US has

increased its quota for Syrian refugees to help shoulder the burden of the crisis.

But what has been divisive in Europe has been contentious in the US.

Marco Rubio, a Republican candidate in the 2016 White House race, has [warned](#) of “terrorists” infiltrating the US as refugees. Campaign groups, including [Human Rights First](#) and the International Rescue Committee, say the US should take as many as 100,000 refugees.

Jonathan Cristol, a scholar at the World Policy Institute think-tank, disagrees.

“Critics say that 10,000 is too few, but the US scares easily and if any of them commits a crime or joins a terrorist group, the number of refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East who are admitted

to the US will plummet in the future,” he told Al Jazeera.



Even if Syria’s war ends, its war-ravaged economy will send people spilling across its borders for years to come, Cristol added.

Joshua Landis, a Syria analyst at the University of Oklahoma, warned that many Syrian refugees would struggle to reach the high bar set by the US’ anti-ter-

rorism security checks. The US has a bad track record on refugees, he added.

“Washington keeps on promising that the pathway is being greased, but it takes time for the wheels of our massive bureaucracy to process them, along with all the security vetting that comes with it,” he said.

“It was the same with Iraq, very few refugees made it here in the early years of the conflict.”

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Others question why only Europe and the US should open their doors to Syria’s refugees when Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Gulf states – which do not

legally recognise refugees – are closer and have more space and disposable money.

“Obama’s decision is well-intended but reactionary and limited compared to what he should be doing,” Adam Whitcomb, an analyst at the Institute for Gulf Affairs think-tank, told Al Jazeera.

“He needs to pressure Gulf leaders to absorb millions of refugees and provide an immediate and effective solution to a crisis that’s overwhelming Europe.”

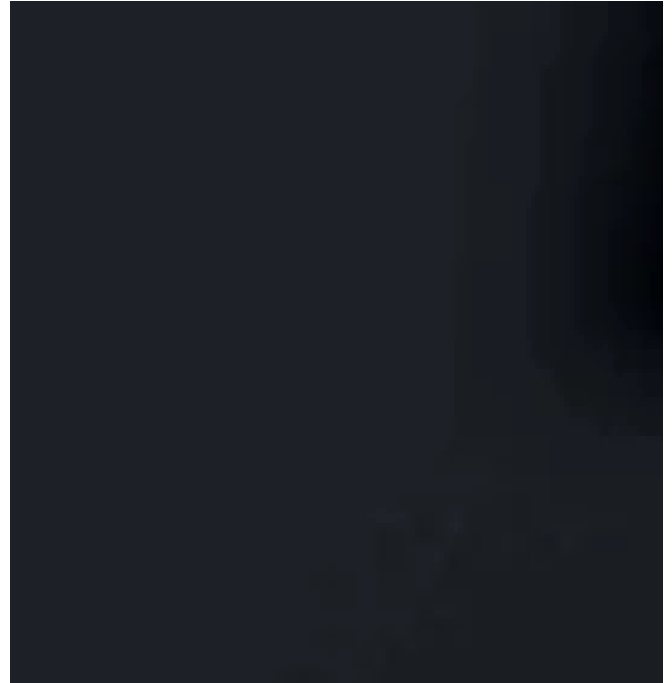
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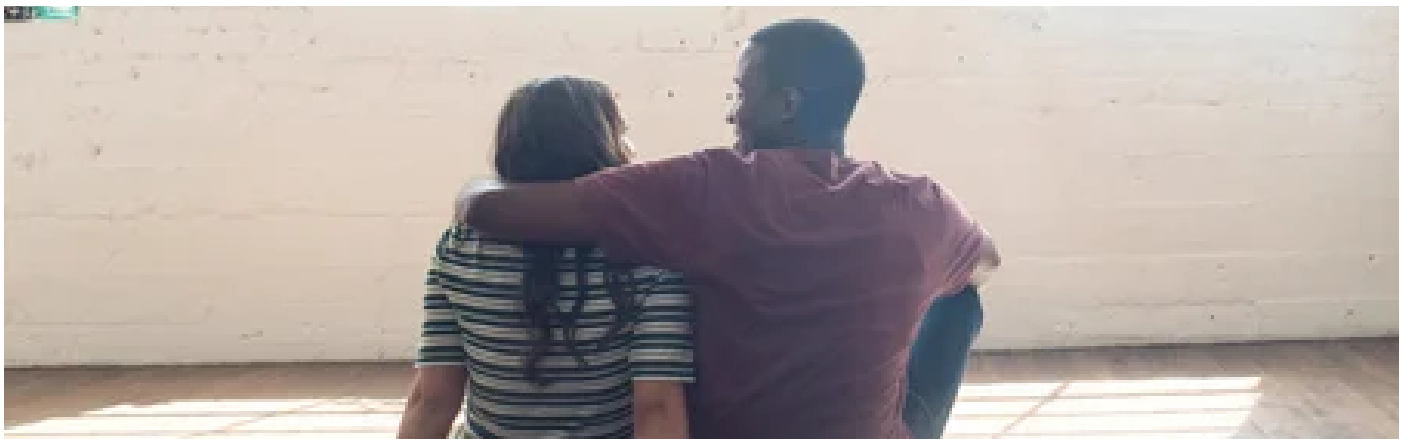


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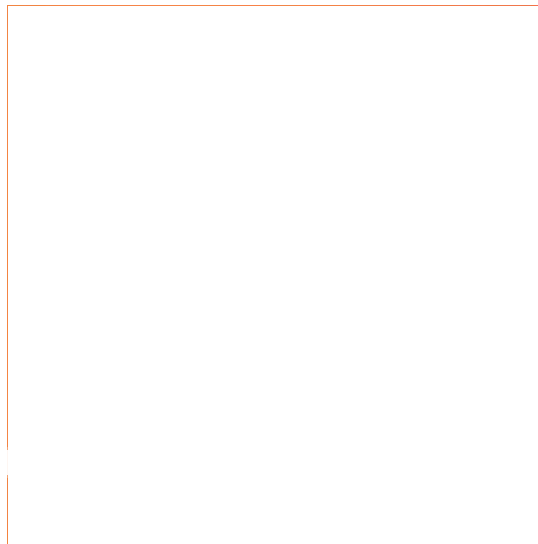
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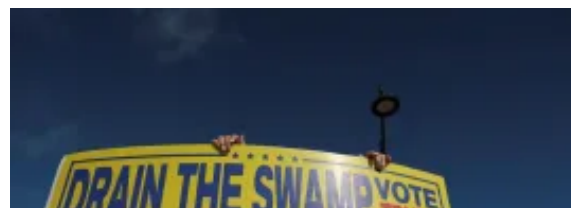


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