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WHY DID MIKE POMPEO SLASH THE NUMBER OF REFUGEES ALLOWED IN THE UNITED STATES?

By Jonathan Blitzer September 21, 2018

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement of the new refugee cap used language reminiscent of talking points that Stephen Miller, the President's senior policy adviser, advanced last year.

Photograph by Jacquelyn Martin / AP

On August 22nd, Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State, travelled to the White House for a meeting about refugee policy. Every summer, officials from the State Department and the National Security Council lead a series of discussions to determine the annual "cap" on the number of refugees that the country can admit over the following year, and, eventually, a figure is presented to the President. Pompeo's attendance signified that the process was

nearing its conclusion. That afternoon, he was to join the other principals, including Kirstjen Nielsen, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and John Bolton, the national-security adviser, to finalize the decision. But, even at that late stage, according to three sources with knowledge of the talks, there was uncertainty. Pompeo wanted the number to be consistent with where it was for the current year, after the Trump Administration set it at forty-five thousand—the lowest level since the refugee program began, nearly forty years ago.

He was at odds with an influential figure at the White House, however: President Trump's senior policy adviser, Stephen Miller. White House officials orchestrated an informal meeting of the principals earlier in the day to gauge where everyone stood. When it became clear that Pompeo supported forty-five thousand, two former State Department officials with knowledge of the situation told me, Miller arranged to have the official meeting cancelled. It was finally held last Friday, after nearly a month of delays, and, on Monday, the Trump Administration announced its plan—it will reduce the annual refugee cap to thirty thousand. It was Pompeo who made the announcement, at a press conference in the State Department Treaty Room, but "Miller's takeover of the State Department is now complete," one of the former officials told me.

For the past four decades, the refugee program has been the province not just of policymakers with expertise in immigration but also of members of the foreign-policy and national-security establishments. Accepting large numbers of refugees has improved the United States' standing with foreign allies, and it has helped the military and intelligence communities find partners in conflict zones. (For example, translators who helped American troops on the ground could qualify for legal admission to the United States.) As a result, the leadership of the Department of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the State Department have strongly supported the program. In 1980, when Congress passed the Refugee Act, the Carter Administration chose to accept some two hundred thousand refugees; successive Administrations set the

annual cap at ninety-five thousand, on average. Just after taking office, in 2017, Trump cut the number to fifty thousand. In the year and a half since, Miller has gone even further. Late last summer, he outmaneuvered top Administration officials, suppressed government reports supportive of the refugee program, and subverted the established protocol for how the government sets the refugee cap. His push was a success by some measures—the cap fell below the recommendations of the State Department, the Defense Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Office of Management and Budget—but several former Administration officials told me that Miller smarted from the resistance he encountered. (The White House did not respond to a request for comment.)

Since then, he has consolidated his hold on the process. In March, Andrew Veprek, a White House aide, assumed a key post at the State Department, in an office staffed by experts who issue recommendations to the Secretary of State on refugee policy, called Population, Refugees, and Migration (P.R.M.). Previously, Veprek who has been described as "Miller's vehicle," was a low-level official in the Foreign Service, and played a role, last winter, in the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the United Nations' Global Compact for Migration, a non-binding plan to uphold the rights of refugees. Now "Veprek pretty much shut down the experts at P.R.M.," a former State Department official told me. "If people wanted to get information to the Secretary, they had to find another way."

The main avenue for conveying information up the State Department hierarchy has been an office known as the Policy-Planning Staff. Viewed in the past as an in-house "think tank," it took on special significance under the leadership of Pompeo's predecessor, Rex Tillerson, who treated it as a kind of corporate board that reported directly to him. In July, another Miller ally from the White House, John Zadrozny, who had worked at the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a far-right think tank, was given a job there. "It was a total clampdown," the former official told me. "That office clears on everything that goes to the Secretary."

Miller also allegedly took measures to undercut any senior Administration official who could challenge his position. Over the summer, the office of Nikki Haley, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, signalled its support for keeping the refugee cap at its current level. Miller excluded Haley and representatives from the U.S. Mission to the U.N. from the August principals' meetings. Earlier that month, after a meeting of officials from the State Department, D.H.S., and the Department of Defense, the White House issued a "summary of conclusions," which mischaracterized the positions of the Department of Defense and the State Department. Their explicit support for forty-five thousand was couched in deliberately vague terms, without reference to a specific figure, according to one person with knowledge of the document. (A spokesperson for the Department of Defense declined to comment because the document was classified.)

It still isn't clear what, exactly, led Pompeo to change his position, but former State Department officials told me that Miller was clearly involved. "No one wants to cross him," one said. "Pompeo probably didn't care enough about this issue to fight Miller on it. Miller has made the cost of opposition so high." In the past, officials who reportedly clashed with Miller on refugee policy—such as Larry Bartlett, at the State Department, and Jennifer Arangio, at the N.S.C.—have been sidelined or fired. (Neither could be reached for comment.)

What was perhaps most striking, the officials told me, was that a Secretary of State rarely calls a press conference to announce the new cap, and many of them interpreted Pompeo's appearance as an attempt to make it seem as if he were fully backing the new number. (A State Department spokesperson told me that the figure "was developed in consultation with all appropriate government agencies and officials," adding, "We won't comment on interagency deliberations, gossip, or fevered theories.") The language that Pompeo used to justify it was reminiscent of the talking points that Miller advanced last year: he began by adding the refugee figure to the number of people who are currently in the country seeking asylum, in an attempt to show

how benevolent American immigration policy is, even though the two programs are distinct. (Asylum seekers are interviewed by officers at D.H.S. and can eventually make their case, against steep odds, before immigration judges; refugees are vetted before coming to the country, and, if accepted, are admitted as legal residents.) He also maintained, as Miller long has, that cutting the refugee cap would allow for more resources to deal with a backlog of asylum cases, a claim that officials at D.H.S. and the Office of Management and Budget have said is exaggerated. Calling the United States the "most generous nation in the world," Pompeo went on to list recent examples of American humanitarianism, such as temporary protected status and special immigrant visas. He did not mention that the Administration has been curtailing those programs, too. "It would have made more sense for the Administration to just say that it's fulfilling its campaign promise to cut refugee admissions and reduce legal immigration," Barbara Strack, a former official at the Department of Homeland Security, told me.

In any event, the refugee cap is a discretionary matter. Administrations hardly ever meet it, but they often come close. In 2015, the Obama Administration admitted more than sixty-nine thousand (sixty-seven refugees short of the cap); in 2016, it admitted nearly eighty-five thousand (just five short). This year, the United States has resettled roughly twenty thousand refugees, less than half the cap. "We're admitting the lowest number of refugees on record," Nazanin Ash, of the International Rescue Committee, told me. "This is significantly lower than in the years immediately after 9/11, when D.H.S. was being created, and multiple bureaucratic processes were being reviewed and revised." The world is facing the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War, with, according to the United Nations, some twenty-five million refugees worldwide as a result of war, civil strife, or natural disasters. "Of the global total of twenty-five million refugees, U.N.H.C.R."—the U.N. Refugee Agency—"estimates that 1.4 million are in need of resettlement because they can't return home or remain in a country of first refuge," Ash said. "The Administration says that with twenty-five million refugees, resettlement can't be the solution. But it's really about how many of the 1.4 million, the most vulnerable, you are going to take." (Assuming the new refugee ceiling is met in the following year, it will represent just two per cent of this population.)

But the United States is also changing the complexion of those it chooses to resettle here. The admittance of Muslim refugees has declined by ninety per cent under the Trump Administration, largely because it has targeted those from Muslim-majority countries; the percentage of refugees from Europe has tripled over the past two years. According to a recent report in Reuters, the Administration has resettled three times as many Moldovans as it has Syrians, even as the current number of refugees from Syria—thirteen million—is larger than the entire population of Moldova. Each version of the President's travel ban, even after court challenges, has blocked travellers trying to enter the country from Syria, and has restricted refugee admissions from four other Muslim countries. (The latest one also applies to North Korea and Venezuela.) Unchecked by the Supreme Court, the Administration continues

to claim national security as grounds for a complete overhaul of vetting procedures, but there is no evidence of either a new security threat or problems with previous practice. Nevertheless, many refugees who have already been vetted and are awaiting resettlement are being re-screened, which can take years; others, who've been awaiting screening, face longer delays. As a current Administration official told me, this spring, "They're doing this to make a point: 'Don't come here. We don't want you.' "

Meanwhile, there are nine refugee-resettlement organizations in the United States, each of which receives federal funding based on the number of refugees that it supports. Over the past year and a half, all nine have had to either lay off staff or close offices. "We have to plan based on the number the Administration sets," Melanie Nezer, of the relief agency HIAS, recently told Priscilla Alvarez, at *The Atlantic*. "Imagine trying to run any program where you're expecting forty-five thousand [refugees] and only twenty thousand arrived." Each year that the refugee cap is lowered, it gets harder to resurrect.

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