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# The State of Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada: Trends, Issues, and Impacts

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## Executive Summary

From academic, policy, and sponsors' perspectives, what is known about the private sponsorship of refugees in Canada? Since its inception in the 1970s, the federal government has enabled the private sponsorship of tens of thousands of refugees across the country. The government pledged to resettle one refugee for every privately sponsored individual when the program was introduced. Yet government plans for 2017 suggest there will be more privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) than government-assisted refugees. Based on the current wave of positive public opinion and high level of engagement in refugee sponsorship by private citizens in Canada, this brief provides a critical overview of what is known about private refugee sponsorship, identifies gaps and areas of concern, and analyzes negative impacts of policy changes to PSR processing made over the last five years.

## Recommendations<sup>1</sup>

1. Canadians have demonstrated support to sponsor refugees unprecedented in 35 years; the proportion of refugees in relation to overall immigration levels should rise to reflect this commitment. As an immigrant class, the category of refugees has been systematically shrinking over the past decade, by design; in a world that is largely closing its doors on refugees, Canada can take a leadership role to reverse this trend.
2. There is little research on the Blended Visa-Officer Referred refugees (BVORs), except for information in IRCC's (2016b) own evaluation of resettled refugees. Until the federal government's commitment to Syrians in 2015, BVOR numbers remained small. The uptake of this category by sponsorship agreement holders (SAHs) and constituent groups has been low, with the exception of Syrian refugee arrivals. Research on the rationale for and impact of the BVOR category upon the privately sponsored refugees (PSR) category is vital.
3. \* Changes in policy and/or management tools to shorten the long waits for PSR applicants, especially those from capped visa posts, are urgent to avoid reducing the

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1. IRCC's own evaluation (released in October 2016) of all categories of resettled refugees reaches many of the same conclusions as our research synthesis; we place an asterisk (\*) below beside recommendations that we arrived at and then found in the evaluation.

motivation and interest of private sponsors. SAHS have expressed resistance to the BVOR category because it prevents sponsors from naming specific refugees for sponsorship, which is often the basis of civil society engagement (Chapman 2014).

4. Resettling refugee students through World University Services of Canada's (WUSC's) private sponsorship has proven very successful, combining protection and social development and Canadian education of the individual (Kumin 2015). The federal government could consider doubling the number of resettled refugee students by either adding them to the roster of government-assisted refugees (GARs) or making them eligible as BVORs, an underutilized program in resettlement.
5. In 2013, PSRS exceeded GARs in number, an aberration of *additionality* whereby PSRS are resettled *in addition to* the government's GAR commitment to sponsor refugees (Labman 2016). IRCC planning numbers for 2017 include 7,500 GARs and 10,500 PSRS (excluding Quebec), which raises the question of whether private sponsorship is beginning to *privatize* refugee resettlement in Canada. While the special circumstances of the Syrian Refugee Initiative must be considered, planning for more PSRS than GARs goes against the principle of *additionality*. The costs associated with increasing GAR numbers to at least 10,500 for 2017 should be calculated and considered, given the December 2016 announcement that Canada's "good practice" of private refugee sponsorship is to be replicated elsewhere and discussion of increased net immigration to Canada in the coming year.
6. \* Current *limits* on the number of PSRS should be reconsidered: why are they in place? Prior to 2011 there were no limits, or rather limits were defined by the degree of civil society engagement and willingness to sponsor refugees. Policies should aim to harness and sustain the interest and engagement of Canadians in refugee sponsorship, not undermine them.
7. The removal of sub-caps on Canadian missions/visa offices abroad in December 2016 was a welcome change. Our concerns that they could spawn allegations of geographical discrimination, prejudice, or racism in the processing of PSRS have been averted. These caps on seven visa posts were selectively prejudicial to refugees from African countries.
8. SAHS were disenchanted with the ways in which limits and caps were introduced, with little consultation; more consultative policy development and formulation is welcome.
9. Continuing the application of *prima facie* refugee status currently used for Syrian private resettlement applications for other refugee nationalities would be welcome and would reduce the onerous demands for extensive documentation and history of persecution. On this note, eliminating the UNHCR referral requirement for Groups of 5 (G5) which currently limits the number of such sponsorships.
10. Further research is needed, and some is underway, to ascertain the motivation and mobilization of sponsors, as well as public opinions of refugees in Canada. It would also be productive to discover how PSRS fare in cities compared to smaller centres or rural areas.

## Introduction

Private groups of Canadian citizens have been sponsoring refugees for almost forty years. Since 1978, when private sponsorship in Canada began, more than 200,000 refugees have arrived (*Economist* 2016). Two of the major movements of refugees define private sponsorship in Canada: first, the arrival of tens of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians in the late 1970s and early 1980s; and more recently the arrival of Syrian refugees. By November 2016, over 33,723 Syrian refugees had landed in Canada, with 47.7 per cent of them privately sponsored in whole or in part (IRCC 2016b). The year 2016 could still be a record year for refugee resettlement in Canada, with some 44,800 expected, a mixture of government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees, and Blended Visa-Officer Referred refugees (Casasola 2016). In 2015, Canada resettled the second largest number (10,236) of refugees globally, ahead of Australia (5,211), and behind the United States with 52,583. As of October 21, 2016, Canada had admitted 33,723 Syrian refugees alone in less than one year, as part of the Syrian Refugee Initiative (IRCC 2016a). On a per capita basis, Canada currently leads the world on resettlement.

A major reason for the current high levels of resettlement is the federal government's election pledge to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada by the end of 2015. Yet, well before the October 2015 election, civil society groups had already stepped up to sponsor Syrian refugees through the private sponsorship stream. Sponsors of non-Syrian refugees who had completed their applications and had interviews conducted by Canadian missions abroad long before the election were waiting, in some cases for years, for the refugees they were ready to sponsor to arrive. Likewise, new Syrian refugee-focused sponsorship groups were formed, and many Canadians who were never involved with refugees before signed up to sponsor a Syrian refugee family.

The 1972 photo of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, the then child known as “napalm girl” when her village was attacked by the South Vietnamese Air Force (backed by the United States), has been named as a key factor in stopping the Vietnam war and mobilizing both government and civil society to receive refugees from Indochina in North America.<sup>2</sup> In a similar turn of events, the tragic image of toddler Alan Kurdi's lifeless body face down on a Turkish beach on September 2, 2015, haunted Canadians, especially since Alan's aunt in Vancouver had applied for refugee status in Canada for him and his family. As of September 5, 2016, 46.5 per cent of Syrian refugees were privately sponsored in some part, if one includes partially privately sponsored refugees, known as Blended Visa-Officer Referred refugees.<sup>3</sup> The federal government said it will honour its pledge to support 25,000 Syrians,

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2. She now lives in Ajax, Ontario, having sought asylum in Canada in 1992.

3. BVORS is a relatively new category of resettled refugees; refugees are partially (50 per cent) sponsored privately, with the remaining financial responsibility lying with the federal government. We revisit the BVOR category below.

so the private sponsorships have been complementary to this number, but conveniently helped the government meet its pledge to sponsor 25,000 refugees by February 29, 2016.

## Private Refugee Sponsorship: Nuggets of and Gaps in Knowledge

Since 1978, students at universities across Canada have also privately sponsored refugee students to come, mostly from the Global South, to attend Canadian universities. More than 1,400 refugee students have come through World University Service Canada, an NGO that facilitates and supports the local committees and more senior university students who welcome and guide the refugee students (Kumin 2015). In 2016, the capacity of this small but remarkable resettlement program doubled to almost 160 fully funded spaces through increased pledges, thus combining more high-quality refugee protection spots with a pathway for refugees to pursue social and economic development (WUSC 2016).

This private resettlement pathway is especially attractive because it offers refugee protection, but also an opportunity to access Canadian education and seek related work experience, all critical ingredients for economic success (Hyndman 2011). The federal government could double the number of resettled refugee students by either adding them to the roster of GARS or making them eligible as BVORS. In the latter case, private sponsors would have to be prepared to put up half of the financial support. Other supports may be available through WUSC student committees, though appropriate consultation would have to be sought.

## SAHS, Limits, and Caps: Emerging Issues

The architecture of private sponsorship in Canada emerges from the 1976 Immigration Act, subsequent regulations published in 1978, and the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) of 2001. Three sponsorship formats with roots in the 1976 Act are specified in IRPA (Groups of 5, Sponsorship Agreement Holders, Community Sponsors). Some private sponsorship groups became larger sponsorship agreement holders (SAHS) or became affiliated with SAHS, a term coined in 1997. Other “Groups of 5” sponsors remained autonomous from the SAHS, reporting directly to the federal government. A national network of SAHS was finalized in 2011; its stated aim is to provide a collective voice to private sponsors across Canada, and promote, support, and enhance private sponsorship (Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association, 2016). The national association of SAHS was, however, formed with the encouragement of and resources from the federal minister of what was then Citizenship and Immigration Canada. At this same time, the

federal government expressed concern over private sponsorship as a de facto pathway for refugees to reunite with family members left behind in camps or settlements (Denton 2016). After the establishment of the national association of SAHs in 2011, with some funding to support staffing and travel for SAH members to national meetings, the minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada at that time limited the number of PSR spaces available, and capped a few missions abroad with specific numbers. We could not find a rationale for these changes.

The BVOR program noted above was launched in 2013 and might be thought of as part of the new architecture of the national SAH association. Its stated intention was to help bolster the federal government's fulfilment of its international commitments, but it also restricted private sponsors' ability to choose whom they could sponsor (Labman 2016). BVORS were to be referred to Canadian missions by the UNHCR and then privately sponsored on a 50/50 split basis with the government. As Chapman (2014, 9) points out, "Because the majority of private sponsorships are named or family-linked cases, it's often a personal connection that compels sponsors to commit to the financial undertaking and provide the year of settlement services. In a phenomenon referred to as 'the echo effect,' there are increases in private sponsorships in regions previously prioritized for government-assisted resettlement."

The original conception of sponsorship by strangers, by groups of Canadians motivated to act on behalf of people a world away in dire situations, remains a key element of the Canadian private sponsorship program. As settled refugees establish themselves in Canada, many have sought to enact their citizenship in the Canadian polity by sponsoring others seeking asylum from their homelands, known as the "echo effect." This dimension of private sponsorship means that even when the number of government-assisted refugees remains significant, the willingness of civil society to privately sponsor refugee family members left behind may imply notably higher numbers.

In an attempt to quantify PSR demand, in October 2016, Hospitality House Refugee Ministry of Winnipeg opened its waiting list and began to accept new applications for sponsorship from Winnipeg residents. In the first week of this experiment, they received over 7,000 applications, all with family links to the refugees to be sponsored. They anticipated that this number could double within weeks. This effort in one mid-sized Canadian city demonstrates that there is likely the capacity and willingness to privately sponsor many tens of thousands of refugees to Canada. While it is crucial that the government fulfill its responsibility to directly assist refugees (GARS), removing the limits introduced only recently would facilitate significantly higher numbers of PSRs given the clear interest, if not demand, of civil society. In light of these obligations, it should be noted that Canadian civil society has reacted with consternation in face of the state's anemic targets for 2017 (7,500 PSRs, 16,000 PSRs, and 1,500 BVORS).

The emergence of the BVOR category raises questions of whether financial privatization of refugee sponsorship was an unstated government objective. In the same year as the BVOR category was introduced, the federal government reported more PSRS than GARS in its resettlement tabulations (Hiebert 2016); this was the first time PSRS exceed GARS in decades, and it was a nadir year for refugee resettlement (*ibid.*, 6, table 1).

**Table 1.** Admissions by Year and Resettlement Program, excluding Quebec (2010–2014)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2010–14
GAR	5,460	5,646	4,282	4,726	6,352	24,466
	56%	52%	54%	45%	61%	53%
PSR	4,349	5,183	3,694	5,565	3,946	22,737
	44%	48%	46%	53%	38%	46%
BVOR refu- gees	—	—	—	145	168	313
				1%	2%	1%
Total	9,809	10,829	7,976	10,436	10,466	49,516

Source: Adapted from IRCC, 2016b

There is some evidence that government resettlement costs are being privatized (i.e., PSRS exceeding GARS in number in table 1). Kumin (2015) and Denton (2016) have made the case that private refugee sponsorship is less costly to governments. As well, private sponsorships appear to be subject to greater management through federal policies limiting the number of PSRS to Canada and capping the flows from particular visa posts in certain regions. The most serious limitation, according to one sponsorship-agreement-holder representative, is the limit on the number of PSRS: “Canada’s annual ‘Levels Plan’ pie has only allowed a slice, for privately sponsored refugees, of about 6,000 persons to be landed in Canada. This year, the target number has been increased by the Trudeau government to 17,800” (Denton 2016). Until December 2016, such federal limits and caps seem to favour some refugees and regions over others. Wait times available on the IRCC’s own website reveal a distorted map of “who gets in,” whereby access to private sponsorship for refugees processed at sub-Saharan visa posts is up to nine times longer than that for refugees from Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon.<sup>4</sup>

While these are unofficial numbers from SAH sources in 2016, table 2 indicates how few spaces for refugee protection were offered to sub-Saharan missions and those receiving asylum seekers from that region. SAHS were forced to “trade” and “swap” allocated spaces

4. Screenshots from the IRCC website (on September 9, 2016) indicate that PSRS whose applications have been approved and are being processed out of Nairobi can expect to wait seventy months to arrive in Canada, whereas approved cases out of Turkey or Jordan can expect a waiting time of eight months. The surge of Syrian applications has, of course, been politicized and prioritized because of the current

so that enough spots for capped missions can be cobbled together in order to sponsor *whole* families.

**Table 2.** Caps and Limits on PSRs

2016 SAH Global Cap on PSRs (10,500)	Numbers of refugees to be shared by 102 SAHs
Non-capped missions	8,700
Sub-capped missions	1,650
Nairobi	400
Pretoria	250
Cairo	100
Islamabad	100
Rome	250
Tel Aviv	350
Dar es Salaam	200

Note: New SAHs will share 150 persons. Geographical discrimination in the inequitable distribution of protections spaces by mission is troubling. The numbers in this table raises the question, Why are some missions capped and others not?

Very little, if anything, has been published about the BVOR category in the academic literature. In practice, it is a potentially useful stream for resettlement—perhaps for refugee students to Canadian universities—but it cannot replace PSRs and should not reduce the motivation of private sponsors to name *bona fide* refugees whom they identify for sponsorship (Chapman 2014; Labman 2016). Canadian communities small and large have privately sponsored 200,000 refugees for more than thirty years. While not well-researched, the successes of these refugees-now-residents and their sponsors should be shared with the federal government that has made private refugee resettlement possible.

The challenges PSRs face and milestones they have achieved warrant further research. There is far more research on refugee settlement and integration on GARS than on PSRs (or BVORS, a little -used stream until the Syrian arrivals). In the words of one refugee settlement worker in 2016, “I can give you a gender breakdown of employment outcomes for GARS in

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government’s promise to bring 25,000 Syrians to Canada, but this does not explain the extraordinary waits for African refugees, which long preceded the election. The previous government’s limits on PSR numbers and introduction of the cap system begin to explain some of these waits. Tom Denton (2016) notes that most of the 900 PSRs who arrived at Hospitality House in Winnipeg in 2016 had waited between five and eight years since being sponsored to arrive in Canada.

our city or across the province that includes everyone, but we know almost nothing about the PSRS.” The federal government has collected its own data on PSRS (Hyndman 2011), and these demand further analysis beyond evaluation.

## Can Canada Export Its PSR Expertise?

Until recently, Canada has been the only country that offers private sponsorship to refugees in cooperation with the federal government that must coordinate screening and officially admit them. At a high-level meeting on pathways to admission of Syrian Refugees organized by UNHCR in March 2016, IRCC Minister John McCallum outlined four areas of Canada’s commitment to Syrian refugee resettlement. He pledged *first* “to work with other countries to provide training and technical support in order to expand the number of global resettlement spaces, coordinate humanitarian development and migration programming, and help host states to build their migration management capacity.” Canada is in a strong position to “export” its expertise in this area, as identified by the minister. *Second*, he underscored the important role of post-secondary education as a way of providing protection and expanding resettlement, as demonstrated by the World University Services of Canada (WUSC). *Third*, he committed to assisting refugee youth through stronger partnerships with the private sector in Canada. And *finally*, the minister promised to continue considering “Syrian refugees as *prima facie* refugees for another year until September 2017 and to reduce the administrative requirements in our Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program by waiving the regulatory requirement for UNHCR or state determination of refugee status for sponsorship of Syrians by private sponsors” (McCallum 2016). Private sponsorship of Syrian refugees remains a priority until 2017, and this administrative exceptionalism (introduced by Citizenship and Immigration Canada Minister Chris Alexander) can faster facilitate processing times and reduce the labour required. A shorter application form to register for the resettlement in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey has also streamlined the process (Casasola 2016). This pledge was reiterated by the minister at the UN Summit in New York in September 2016.

Canada’s private sponsorship efforts have been gaining attention in the past few years, with Australia piloting a program in 2012 and then making it permanent in 2015 (*Economist* 2016). Britain has run its Gateway Refugee Resettlement program for ten years (up to 750 refugees annually) and has said it will create a permanent resettlement program based on the Canadian and Australian models (Research Councils UK 2016). In July 2016, the United Kingdom’s Home Secretary Amber Rudd announced “a scheme for full community sponsorship” that will facilitate direct support from community groups for the settlement of Syrian refugees and vulnerable children from the moment of their arrival. This announcement followed a campaign by the British civil society organization called the

National Refugee Welcome Board to follow Canada's example of "creat[ing] a culture of welcome" (Howden 2016).

So is private refugee sponsorship a potential Canadian "export"? There is no single private sponsorship recipe to follow, and the conditions that make private refugee resettlement in Canada possible are unique: *the alignment of elected government leadership, skilled civil servants, Canadian public opinion, and related media messaging have shaped the political space available for the private sponsorship of refugees and the motivations of its civil society actors.* Public opinion is pivotal: at times, civil society is ahead of the federal government in initiating pro-refugee initiatives, as in the case of Syrians refugee sponsorship. At other times, the federal government takes the lead, as did Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in offering a new home to more than 6,000 Asian Ugandans in 1972. In the Syrian case, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne committed \$10 million to settling Syrian refugees in 2015 *before* the question of Syrian resettlement became a federal election issue. Kosovar refugees, fleeing then Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's attacks in 1999, were evacuated quickly from Macedonia and then screened and processed on military bases in Canada. As objects of Milosevic's wrath broadcast across global media, they were welcomed both by the Canadian government and the Canadian public (Sherrell and Hyndman 2006).

## Creating Conditions for Private Resettlement I: History Matters

Canada has a long and epic history of immigration, which has been pitched principally as an economic strategy for nation-building. Immigration rates in the early twentieth century were high, on par with rates of immigration today (Belshaw 2016).<sup>5</sup> However, immigration during this period was structured by racist government policy that discriminated against non-white immigrants, Sikh migrants a case in point (Kazimi 2012).

As Dan Hiebert (2016, 9) points out, "Canada's history of framing immigration in a positive light and as a solution to economic and demographic challenges [like low fertility in the current context]—rather than as a test of the integrity of the nation—sets it apart from other affluent countries." Asylum-seekers to Canada, he admits, are not as popular as economic immigrants, however. Yet Canada has "stepped up" during refugee crises since the Second World War, after it "fell down" before that time, doing little to help those fleeing the Holocaust (Abella and Troper 1983). Canada opened its doors to a wide range of refugees after the Second World War, admitting Hungarians and Czechoslovakians escaping Soviet rule in 1956 and 1968, Asian Ugandans fleeing Idi Amin in 1972, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotians in 1979–80, and many others. So Canada's willingness to admit immigrants

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5. Belshaw (2016, table 5.2) shows that highest immigration was in the early twentieth century, approaching 400,000 per year just prior to the First World War.

has included *a good number of refugee groups*, most of whom were not selected for their skills, knowledge, and business experience. Yet many refugees to Canada have brought just that. Toronto, Canada's largest urban centre, has been called "the world in a city" (Anisef and Lanphier 2003) and is host to many if not most of the world's diasporas. Montreal, Vancouver, Edmonton, Ottawa, and Calgary are not far behind. Tom Denton (2003) has also shown how refugee resettlement enjoys broad public support as a population-building strategy in Manitoba.

## Creating Conditions for Resettlement 2: The Luxury of Cold Ocean Geography

Canada has long had the luxury of *choosing* most of its immigrants, and refugees, due to its geography. It is surrounded by cold seas and an affluent neighbouring country with whom it has a safe third country agreement, preventing most refugee claimants from travelling to Canada from the United States to seek asylum (Hiebert 2016; Hyndman 2009). Cold ocean geography, combined with the introduction in 2004 of the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA), biometric visitor visas, and other border-management tools has granted Canada a rare status shared with few OECD countries: *it can largely manage the orderly arrival of migrants on its territory*. This "condition" makes refugee resettlement more palatable. Resettlement is always preferable to asylum for states trying to manage their borders, but cold ocean geography contributes to public confidence in orderly arrivals and creates space for government policymakers.

Boat arrivals in 1999, 2009, and 2010 have proven a vulnerable spot for Canada, but total numbers have been small (roughly 1,200 people in twenty years). Draconian legislation that dispossesses even bona fide refugees who are designated as "irregular arrivals" when they come to Canada must be revisited. It is vital that refugee protection accessed through asylum to Canada remains available, and is not closed down entirely by Canadian geography, visa regimes, and new refugee status determination architecture. *Resettlement is always a discretionary, optional program, a humanitarian obligation that Canada has long honoured. In contrast, asylum and the right to seek it is ensconced in international law to which Canada is signatory.* Such law is also integrated into the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act of 2001.

The previous government made clear that orderly, pre-selected refugees for resettlement were preferred over the "spontaneous arrivals" of asylum seekers who claimed refugee status at a Canadian port of entry. The preference for resettled refugees was (re) produced by the rhetoric of the previous government led by Prime Minister Harper (Hiebert 2016, 8–9). While attitudes towards asylum-seekers and other immigrants had steadily improved from the early 1990s until the early 2000s (Wilkes and Corrigan-Brown

2011), the introduction and repetition of “bogus refugee” began to tarnish public opinion after the 1999 boat arrivals from Fujian, China (Mountz 2010). In their controlled study of the role of the media in the dehumanization of refugees and immigrants, Esses and Lawson (2013) demonstrate a “causal” link between newspaper articles that frame refugees as queue jumpers, vectors of disease, and potential terrorists, and a deterioration of attitudes towards these groups. They further recall that negative media portrayals of Tamil asylum-seekers who arrived in Canada by ship in 2010 as bogus refugees resulted in “a substantial hardening of attitudes” towards this group and paved the way for the introduction of legislation by the Conservative government to further restrict access to asylum processes in this country (531).

### Creating Conditions for Resettlement 3: Less Costly, More Efficient?

As Judith Kumin (2015) has noted, private refugee sponsorship is less costly to governments that support refugee resettlement, but this has not been sufficient motivation for private citizens to sponsor refugees, despite the largely unused allocation of spaces for private refugee sponsorship in the United States (E. Gozdzia 2016, personal correspondence). In the authors’ opinion, the biggest obstacle to private sponsorship in the United States is the cost of health-care insurance for a refugee family, a tab that would easily add c\$15,000 (likely more) to the cost of a private sponsorship. Naomi Albiom (2016) warns that devolving sponsorship to private actors still requires some government monitoring and support, a claim she situates in her experience as a civil servant during the mass sponsorship of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Albiom adds that the interaction of refugees with Canadians in civil society is vital: “Direct personal contact between ordinary Canadians and refugees can be magical for all involved and leads to cross-cultural learning, respect, friendship and real two-way integration.”

As the United Kingdom begins to set up its first private sponsorship for Syrian refugee settlement scheme in 2016, Canada should be careful in how it broadcasts the costs of such settlement. Under private sponsorship for Syrians in Canada, a family of four can be sponsored for a guarantee of approximately c\$28,000. And yet such funds do not include in-kind government contributions to education, health care, and social assistance during and after year one of the sponsorship. *An unspoken but major reason that private refugee resettlement happens in Canada is because various levels of government are willing to pay for education, health, and social services on par with those of citizens.*

## Creating Conditions for Private Sponsorship: Management and Security

Some administrative elements of Canada's private sponsorship program that work well merit mention: using prima facie refugee status determination rather than the more onerous individual Convention refugee status or the Humanitarian protected persons abroad definition to determine eligibility for private sponsorship has made processing much easier and faster; a strong and comprehensive registration database in regions hosting refugees for resettlement has also helped.

On the security side, managing public perception of safety and high levels of security screening is critical. In "What's so Special about Canada?," Hiebert (2016, 17) identifies one critical policy element to maintaining a pro-immigration consensus in public opinion: "Build a firewall between the issues of immigration and integration on the one hand, and national security on the other." The same is true for resettlement of Syrians or others in need of asylum: separate the potential for radicalization or attacks from the refugees who seek protection in Canada and the ethical obligations this country has as part of the global community.

In Canada, the refugee resettlement file was deftly handled by Canadian politicians and civil servants after November 4, 2015, when a new government took power, pledging to resettle 25,000 Syrians by the end of the year (which was later moved to February 2016). While the brutal attacks on Paris, Beirut, and Brussels all affected Canadians, Syrian refugee resettlement was treated as a separate policy commitment and conversation. The federal government quickly reversed the decision to process final security and medical checks at military bases *in Canada*, instead opting to do all this vetting in Lebanon and Jordan before refugees arrived by plane. This helped to assuage Canadians' anxiety about the attacks in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, the recruitment of Syrian refugee families for resettlement spaces was done in a way that created "a firewall between the issues of immigration and integration on the one hand, and national security on the other," by selecting refugee families who qualified as "vulnerable" and therefore were unlikely to be seen as security risks. Men were discriminated against unless they were in family units, but this must have been seen

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6. Albiom (2016), a former federal civil servant herself during the mass Canadian sponsorship of Indochinese refugees thirty-five years ago, made an important observation about the key role of the federal civil service in Syrian resettlement:

"Trust in and respect for the civil service matters: This allows civil servants to make decisions, use discretion, and be flexible and innovative, so they can get the job done effectively ... There was very little trust in the civil service under the previous administration. Processes had become extremely complicated and rule-bound, and risk aversion was ingrained at all levels of the organization. It was difficult for some public servants to make the cultural shift necessary to meet the objectives set by the new government for the Syrian movement."

as a palatable policy decision, given public anxiety about the attacks in Paris, Beirut, and Brussels.

Another reason that the ISIS attacks abroad did not stop resettlement in Canada is that sponsorship groups had momentum and had begun organizing their support well before the government of the day was elected or the horrid attacks on Paris and Brussels took place.

## How Have Private-Sponsored Refugees to Canada Fared?

While sparse, there is a growing body of academic and grey literature that examines how privately sponsored refugees have fared in Canada. Often PSRs are compared to GARS, but such comparisons do not control for location (and access to settlement and language services), country of origin, conditions and length of displacement prior to arrival in Canada, levels of education, social capital (especially if family reunification is relevant), and official language abilities. Nonetheless, such comparisons can be useful in improving policies, services, and access.

In April 2015, a briefing note to Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Chris Alexander reported the settlement outcomes of Iraqi refugees who arrived in Canada between 2009 and 2014 (CIC, 2015). This cohort of resettled refugees differs from counterpart groups because of the preponderance of PSRs (57.1 per cent of the Iraqis were PSRs and 42.9 per cent GARS, compared to the non-Iraqi average of 37.4 per cent PSRs and 62.6 per cent for those who arrived during the same period), a variance that merits additional study. While the analysis shows that PSRs slightly outperformed GARS in employment incidence over the first three years in Canada, it also found that Iraqi refugees during this period had a lower incidence of employment and lower average earnings than non-Iraqi refugees during the same period, *despite higher educational levels, including completion of university studies prior to arrival*. Their arrival at a time of economic downturn warrants further analysis.

The partially redacted briefing note illustrated a high incidence of mental health needs and disabilities among the refugees from Iraq, though without specifying whether this was a higher level than other refugee groups. The document also reiterated previously documented integration challenges among refugees, including a lack of affordable housing as well as hardship related to paying back transportation loans (CIC 2015, 15). Furthermore, while PSRs from this group were able to secure employment faster than GARS, as a result they had less time to focus on learning one of Canada's official languages (especially noteworthy, given lower levels of facility in French or English among this group of refugees from Iraq, compared to refugees from elsewhere). Two weaknesses of this study—the particularly small sample size and the fact that it did not include interviews or focus groups

with any refugees themselves—mean that its results should be considered as preliminary. Strategic uses of resettlement are mentioned; further study could explore why Canada missed the opportunity to influence international protection policy by leveraging Canada’s willingness to resettle complex and higher medical-needs cases to encourage Syria to locally integrate remaining Iraqi refugees by granting rights to work and study (8).

In a study that compared PSRS to GARS and asylum seekers, Dhital (2015) found that PSRS earn more than the other refugee groups. PSRS were more likely to have finished high school or hold a university degree than their non-PSR counterparts. However, Dhital conflates federal government income support of GARS during their first year in Canada with social assistance, leading to a flawed comparison of job status of GARS and PSRS during their first year in Canada. Furthermore, the study fails to disaggregate nationality and location of asylum prior to arrival to Canada, thus making it difficult to assess whether differences among these groups that this author reports may be related to their pre-arrival trajectories, specifically whether they were in a refugee camp or in an urban setting prior to coming to Canada.

In a similar vein, IRCC’s (2016b) recent evaluation of refugee resettlement in Canada identified only modestly higher earnings for PSRS as compared to GARS after ten years in Canada (see figure 3). And yet PSRS were much more likely to know an official language in Canada (PSRS 38 per cent vs. GARS 26 per cent), and PSRS were much less likely to have low levels of education, measured as “nine or fewer years of education” (PSRS 48 per cent vs. GARS 61 per cent). In short, despite higher levels of education (like the Iraqis discussed above) and better language skills in English or French, PSRS did not perform substantially better in the labour market after eight to ten years in Canada. These data warrant more analysis, but there has to be an explanation for the improved GAR performance in relation to PSRS, and this might be related to their use of or access to settlement, official-language, and employment-related services. More research is needed.

Recent but somewhat dated academic research also documents the benefits and challenges of Canada’s experience with private sponsorship. In a study that tracked the resettlement experiences of refugees who arrived in Canada from Southeast Asia between 1979 and 1981 in order to examine the differences between GARS and PSRS, private sponsorship proved more likely to lead to successful integration (Beiser 2003). Beiser (2009) debunks the beliefs that refugees are likely to be a drain on Canada’s economy and to have longstanding mental health issues. Privately sponsored refugees tend to adopt constructive financial practices more quickly than government-assisted refugees (*ibid.*). While some parts of Canada such as Manitoba have experienced an unusually high focus on private sponsorship because of the longstanding culture of support and pro-immigrant public attitude, research findings also indicate that at least in some locales the work of supporting the resettlement of refugees depends excessively on a few individuals and organizations,

a situation that has led to a “start-stop” pattern of work in which capacity is regularly saturated (Denton 2003). Also, while sponsorship has been shown to make an important contribution to successful integration of refugees, this is best accomplished if sponsors themselves have support in place (Beiser 2009).

Criticisms of private sponsorship include its expense for sponsors in both time and resources; sponsors can bring an assimilationist orientation to their work; and there can be ambiguity for the refugees regarding the role of sponsors (i.e., sponsors have been accused of meddling in personal affairs of refugees; refugees have been expected to act as servants or to convert to the religious tradition of the sponsors) (Lanphier 2003). Beiser (2009) found excessive intrusiveness of sponsorship groups in the lives of refugees and proposes that this needs to be addressed in policy and practice, as does the lack of structures for the rare occasions when private sponsorship relationships fail. Other problems that make the work of sponsorship especially difficult include excruciatingly slow overseas processing times, the lack of a backup plan when sponsorship relationships fail, and the administrative burden of government requirements for application processes advanced by under-resourced groups (Denton 2003).

A study that examined the experiences of new sponsors of joint-assistant refugees (JAS) from Kosovo/Kosova to a small city in northern Alberta showed that many found the demands on time and emotional impact onerous. Refugees received insufficient information at the outset of the sponsorship, inadequate language interpretation, confusing procedures for dental and medical procedures, and a lack of employment opportunities (Derwing and Mulder 2003). From a policy perspective, ensuring access to good-quality, suitable, affordable, and safe housing should be seen as a vital element of refugee settlement and people’s well-being in general (Murdie 2008). Researchers have found, however, that refugees rely on sponsors for information regarding housing and that bad decisions about its selection and location are linked to the lack of a coordinated system of supports in contexts marked by a lack of good, affordable housing (*ibid.*; Carter and Osborne 2009).

Recommendations to improve private sponsorship in Canada include greater involvement of refugees in shaping their own resettlement, the reconceptualization of sponsorship as a partnership between newcomers and their sponsors, recognition of the importance of transnational linkages for newcomers, and the expanded use of places of worship for hosting widely used programs such as health and employment services so as to bridge community services with the languages and customs of newcomers. Additional critical research is needed that goes beyond case studies, includes comparative analysis that looks across space and time to understand how and why private sponsorship often positively affects integration over the longer term, and focuses on the perspectives of refugees themselves (Beiser 2003, 2009; Simich 2003). Moreover, further research is needed to see what has worked, where, and why for PSRS. What social, economic, cultural, and political

attributes of place are suited to which groups of refugees? While media are fond of asking, “Who integrate better: PSRS or GARS?” a more pressing question linked to the attributes of place is how PSRS fare in cities compared to smaller centres or rural areas. While some research on GAR settlement in smaller centres has been done (Belkhodja and Vatz Laaroussi 2012; Sherrell and Hyndman 2006; Vatz Laaroussi, Guilbert, and Bezzi 2010), little has been published on PSRS.

## Civil Society Engagement: What the SAHS Need

A 2014 study identified the top concerns of church-connected SAHS in relation to government refugee policy and practice:

1. Wait times and processing delays too long;
2. Cuts to the interim federal health program put pressure on sponsors;
3. Lack of government consultation on new policies and practices created frustration and more work for sponsors;
4. Lowering the age of “dependent children” from twenty-two years to eighteen years divided families;
5. Limited allocation of PSRS contributed to long waits, as did caps on visa posts (Chapman 2014; Denton, 2016).

The lack of meaningful consultation on many of the issues noted above felt especially egregious because requests for input by government were later ignored. Most SAHS felt that the limits in allocations and caps were implemented in a cumbersome and non-transparent manner that “jeopardize[d] the very engine of the PSR program” (Chapman 2014, 9).

Needless to say, this information is out of date, and SAHS would best be asked directly what they need and how policies could be improved. Certainly the expedited application forms for Syrian private resettlement could be adopted for other nationalities. Anecdotally, SAHS have said that the application process and paperwork required to apply for private sponsorship have become so onerous that even SAHS with paid staff struggle to complete them *and* do the voluntary work of assisting newcomers.

## Conclusion

While the need for additional research regarding the private sponsorship of refugees is clear, the policy implications of current knowledge cannot be underestimated. These are outlined in our Executive Summary on page 1. Mobilizing knowledge and translating it into practical changes—in policy and practice—is our goal. Knowledge and meta-analysis of it can improve the well-being of refugees and enhance their integration and that of their host communities; it can even transform the violence involved in forced migration into something

quite different (Rousseau and Kirkmayer 2010). Civil society's involvement cannot be limited to the apolitical substitution of the government's international obligations towards refugees (i.e., resettlement cannot replace asylum) or the privatization of costs. *Keeping* civil society involved in refugee sponsorship and the policy conversation that drives Canada's choices in the face of global challenges is vital. Private sponsorship is meant to be additional to government-assisted resettlement commitments, and yet this complementarity can be put at risk by over-reliance and dependence of the government on private sponsors to fulfill its international obligations (Labman 2016). Direct participation in resettlement has been the hallmark of Canada's private sponsorship program and has been, in our view, a major element of its success. No technical exporting of the Canadian model will work without this participation, conversation, and consent to equitable practices that respect family reunification and the needs of all refugee groups across the world.

The fundamental principle of additionality requires ongoing reassertion to ensure that private sponsorship continues to be a signature program for refugee resettlement in the world, and does not take a turn towards the *privatization* of refugee resettlement. It has not yet become a back door to reduce overall resettlement, though 2013 resettlement numbers in which PSRs outnumber GARS are somewhat alarming (Labman 2016). To the contrary, the federal government's most pressing task is to harness and complement this exceptionally high level of civic engagement with PSRs not seen in three decades. There are more willing sponsors than Canada has seen in a long time and plenty of refugees in need of protection and a place to call home. Harnessing this unusual consent and financial support from civil society is a unique challenge for Canada. At this rare moment when Canadians demonstrate concrete support to sponsor refugees, the proportion of refugees in relation to overall immigration numbers should rise to reflect Canadians' support for this class of immigrant. This immigrant class has been systematically shrinking over the past decade, and the time is right to reverse this trend.

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