

Conservative government intervened to halt Syrian refugees entering Canada

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Canada's Conservative government called a halt to the processing of government-assisted refugee applications in June, claiming security concerns. The order came directly from Prime Minister Stephen Harper's office, the PMO.

The move targeted United Nations selected refugees, who are some of the most vulnerable. The PMO directive stated that all UN approved refugees from Syria would first have to be vetted by the PMO. In addition, Harper ordered a review of all Syrian refugees referred by the United Nations in 2014 and 2015.

No public announcement was made at the time of the audit, and it remains unclear when the halt on application processing was finally lifted. So far this year, Canadian authorities have themselves accepted only a little more than 300 Syrian refugee applicants.

While Harper sought to deny that his officials were involved in approving applications, it is clear that his intervention was motivated by political considerations. The government has made no secret of the fact that it has intentionally directed its minuscule refugee resettlement efforts to Christians and other non-Muslims, in what amounts to a sop to its far-right, Christian fundamentalist supporters.

According to a CTV report relying on anonymous sources from within Citizenship and Immigration, the PMO implemented the audit to ensure that Christian refugees were being accepted over Shia and Sunni Muslims. Another official told the broadcaster that the Conservatives were targeting people with links to communities in Canada so that the party could win political support from these communities, and that Citizenship and Immigration was actively discouraged from accepting Muslim refugees.

A further exposé in the *Globe and Mail* Friday uncovered how the Harper government makes use of so-called areas of focus to select refugees. The areas include religion, the number of children, whether the individuals

have owned a business, and whether they speak English or French. No mention of such restrictive and blatantly discriminatory criteria has ever been made publicly.

The government is likely flouting Canadian law, according to human rights lawyer Paul Champ. "My view is that it's clearly unconstitutional," Champ told the *Globe*. "When we are choosing from that group of refugees, we need to do so in a manner that's compliant with our constitution and our charter of rights ... Why are certain ones being processed as a priority? It has to be legitimately connected to the individual being at greater risk."

Reports indicate that Harper's intervention was in part a response to US intelligence claims that refugees posed a security risk. As part of his far-right election campaign, the Conservative leader has stoked deeply reactionary Islamophobic sentiments, including the claim that there is a serious security risk posed by Jihadi terrorists entering the country as refugees.

Such claims are thoroughly disingenuous. Experts around the globe have recognized that the hundreds of thousands of refugees trying to reach Europe are ordinary people, many of them women and children, desperate to escape war and social breakdown.

The latest revelation makes a mockery of the Conservatives' attempt to pose as a party committed to aiding the millions of refugees from the Syrian civil war. The Conservatives recently announced a plan to accelerate the intake of refugees from Syria and Iraq, saying they will allow the placement of a total of 10,000—government and privately sponsored refugees—by September 2016 rather than over the coming three years.

Harper has committed to resettle another 10,000 people over the next four years. Yet even this commitment, which amounts to nothing more than a drop in the bucket, was forced out of him in the wake of a public outcry over the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi on a Turkish

beach. The anger provoked by the photograph of his corpse was strengthened still further by the revelation from a Vancouver woman that he was her nephew and that Canada was partly to blame for his fate. (See “Death of Syrian infant exposes Canadian complicity in refugee crisis”)

An *Ottawa Citizen* report published Friday revealed that by the time of Kurdi’s death, a backlog of over 7,000 Syrian refugee applications had built up, including 2,000 especially vulnerable UN-approved refugees.

Canada has accepted only 2,347 Syrian refugees since 2013, even though millions have been displaced in the civil war. Only a small minority of these have been brought in on the government-sponsored program, with the vast majority arriving via private sponsorship by a relative or voluntary organization—a process which takes up to 18 months and is often overseen by churches and other religious institutions.

From the outset of the refugee crisis, the Harper government has adopted a bellicose line, insisting that the best and only solution to help the refugees, who are fleeing their war-torn countries in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, is to broaden and intensify the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

While Harper tries to paint ISIS as the evil source of the refugee crisis, the reality is that the emergence of ISIS and the largest refugee crisis since World War II result from the drive of US imperialism to subjugate the Middle East and North Africa to its unfettered domination in pursuit of its economic and geopolitical interests.

Canadian imperialism has aligned itself with a series of US-led wars and US-regime change operations that have incited religious and sectarian conflicts while destroying entire societies, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and now Syria. Washington and its allies have manipulated religious divisions, relying openly on Islamist forces in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and in fomenting armed opposition to the Assad government in Syria. It was out of these forces that ISIS grew, only becoming a concern to the US and Canada when it came into conflict with its interests in Iraq.

Both the New Democrats (NDP) and the Liberals seized on the PMO audit to denounce the Conservatives for their failure to aid refugees. “Now, we learn it was Stephen Harper, himself, who prevented the arrival of Syrian families into Canada in the worst Syrian refugee crisis since World War II,” declared NDP leader Thomas Mulcair at an election campaign event in Toronto Thursday.

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau focused his criticism on how Harper’s audit supposedly sullied the PMO’s sterling reputation.

The NDP recently said that if in power, it would fast-track private sponsorships and respond to the United Nations’ appeal to resettle 9,000 government-sponsored refugees each year for the next four years. The Liberals declared they are aiming to accept 25,000 by next January and promised a \$200 million fund to help refugees.

The NDP and Liberals are staunch supporters of Canada’s imperialist foreign policy, having backed the bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999 and Canada’s leading role in the invasion and neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan. Both conflicts, begun by the Liberal government of Jean Chretien, produced masses of refugees as the destruction wrought by the imperialist powers laid waste to entire societies. In the current campaign, Mulcair has defended the NDP’s support for the air war in Libya, and both the NDP leader and Trudeau have embraced Harper’s aggressive stance against Russia in alliance with the US and NATO.

The Libyan conflict not only turned tens of thousands more into refugees, many of whom have subsequently risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean to Europe. It also strengthened the Islamist militias which, with CIA support, later shifted to Syria to participate in the ongoing civil war.

When Harper accused both Mulcair and Trudeau of endangering “national security” by wanting to open Canada’s doors to Syrians without proper security screening, Mulcair quickly reassured that “it’s completely false to affirm that any of the parties in Canada would want to throw open the doors to people without any regard to security.”

Successive Liberal and Conservative governments have tightened refugee regulations, with the Conservatives in 2012 moving to make it virtually impossible to apply for refugee status if an individual is deemed to have entered Canada from a “safe” third country or a “democratic” state.



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