

Rauner halts Syrian refugees in Illinois, joins wave of governors



Photo gallery: Terrorist attacks in Paris on Nov. 13, 2015, killed 129 people. The deadly assaults led to mourning, global displays of support and a military response from France.

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Chicago Tribune

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Gov. Rauner puts temporary halt to accepting new Syrian refugees in Illinois

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Gov. **Bruce Rauner** on Monday joined a wave of mostly Republican governors in announcing that Illinois would temporarily stop accepting Syrian refugees following the Paris terrorist attacks, sparking sharp criticism from advocates who said the move amounted to fear-mongering and raising questions about whether states can refuse to take those fleeing the war-torn country.

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a doubled down on his commitment to take in at
at "slamming the door in their faces would be a

The move by at least 21 governors marks a turn in public opinion on the crisis, which tugged at people's heartstrings in September when a photo of a drowned Syrian toddler surfaced, but has shifted somewhat after the Paris attacks. Authorities have suggested at least one of the attackers entered Europe amid the recent influx of migrants from Syria.

Rauner, who's in his first year as governor of the nation's fifth-largest state, said a pause was needed.

"Our nation and our state have a shared history of providing safe haven for those displaced by conflict, but the news surrounding the Paris terror attacks reminds us of the all-too-real security threats facing America," Rauner said in a statement. "We must find a way to balance our tradition as a state welcoming of refugees while ensuring the safety and security of our citizens."

Rauner said his office will "consider all of our legal options" and wants a review of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's acceptance and security processes. But refugee advocates questioned how governors would enforce bans after the federal government grants entry.

"How are they going to go about doing this? Are they going to send marshals to the airport and be on the lookout for anyone who looks Syrian?" asked Lavinia Limon, president and CEO of the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigration, which helps place refugees in their new homes. "They are really reacting emotionally, and talk about stereotyping."

Under the Refugee Act of 1980, the authority for admitting refugees is granted to the president, but states are relied upon to supply support in the form of housing, medical and other assistance. Advocates say the law does not give states the ability to turn away refugees, though Rauner's office argues federal law does provide the state an ability to "evaluate and revise the extent of their involvement in these programs at any time."

Rauner's office did not respond to questions about what specific services for refugees the state may discontinue, but cautioned "this is a review only."

It can take two or more years for U.S. officials to process Middle Eastern refugees' applications for resettlement. Most applicants are referred to the U.S. and other countries that have agreed to accept them by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Each applicant undergoes medical exams, a security check and an in-person interview with immigration officers at Homeland Security.

According to the State Department, 169 Syrian refugees have relocated to Illinois since 2010, including 105 living in Chicago. The majority — 131 — have moved within the last year.

RefugeeOne, a resettlement agency, is expected to welcome two refugee families from Syria after Thanksgiving weekend, according to Kim Snoddy, assistant director of development. The group, which provides refugee families a furnished apartment and cupboards filled with culturally appropriate food, already had gathered

› look to their national partners for answers on the

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"We had received notification of their arrival and were preparing an apartment for them," Snoddy said. "Now, we're not sure if we'll have to reschedule. It's all so new and surprising."

Homeland Security spokeswoman Marsha Catron said the Obama administration "remains steadfastly committed" to plans to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees. Catron said the administration will "continue to consult with states to allay any concerns" but that the focus was on admitting the most vulnerable, including survivors of violence and torture.

Obama addressed the issue Monday at the end of a global summit in Turkey, noting many refugees are victims of terrorism themselves.

"That's what they're fleeing," Obama said. "Our nations can welcome refugees who are desperately seeking safety and ensure our own security. We can and must do both."

In addition to Rauner, governors saying they won't accept Syrian refugees include those in Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire and Texas. A dozen or so states with Democratic governors that stood by admitting Syrian refugees included California, Colorado, Missouri and Pennsylvania.

The issue is unfolding amid a presidential campaign in which Donald Trump, at or near the top in some polls, has fueled his bid for the Republican nomination by taking a hard — if controversial — line against illegal immigration based on fear of crime.

But U.S. Rep. [Randy Hultgren](#), a Republican from St. Charles, warned that terrorists are not limited to people entering the country from Syria.

"There is well-documented evidence that the [Islamic State](#) is targeting religious minorities including Yazidis and Christians for extermination in the Middle East. We have not and cannot turn a blind eye to their plight," Hultgren said in a statement.

"Gov. Rauner has temporarily suspended Illinois accepting refugees from Syria out of a necessary abundance of caution. Unfortunately, terrorists come from all over — the diversity of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay is a testament to the breadth of countries from which they originate," Hultgren added.

Republican U.S. Sens. Mark Kirk of Illinois and [Kelly Ayotte](#) of New Hampshire took the lead on a letter from concerned senators to Obama urging that his administration "ensure that no members, supporters or sympathizers" of Islamic State infiltrate Syrian refugee movements to enter the U.S. Specifically, the letter asked the administration to detail what "special or enhanced measures" will be added to screen Syrian refugees.

Meanwhile, Democratic U.S. Senate hopeful [Andrea Zopp](#) criticized the move as an "another example of Gov.

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Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who was Obama's first White House chief of staff, stopped short of directly criticizing Rauner. Instead, the mayor pointed out that the federal government performs background checks on refugees before they get here and said the U.S. has a history as a welcoming place for people fleeing trouble elsewhere in the world.

At the same time, Emanuel said he will go ahead with plans he already made to attend a Dec. 4 climate change summit in Paris. Standing alongside French Consul General Vincent Floreani, Emanuel said Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo invited him to attend the summit when the two met during his trip there this summer.

"Given recent acts, I was going to announce it a week from now, but I wanted to announce it today to make sure those who thought you could weaken or somehow sow fear, that is not the result here," Emanuel said. "In fact, if anything, it strengthens our resolve to be a sense of fraternity and camaraderie with the people of Paris at this moment."

But while the world is coming to the support of Paris, Syrian refugees face the welcome mat being pulled from beneath their feet.

Suzanne Akhras Sahloul, who moved to the Chicago area from Syria about 30 years ago and founded the nonprofit Syrian Community Network to assist the anticipated surge in refugee families, recounted one conversation with a refugee.

"She asked, 'Why are they doing this? What did we do? We just want to live,'" Akhras Sahloul said. "It's difficult for them, this sense of being unwelcome."

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