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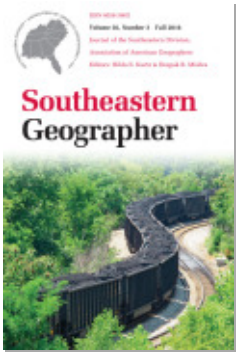

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SPECIAL FORUM ON THE GEOGRAPHIES OF THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Southern Hospitality?

Islamophobia and the Politicization of Refugees in South Carolina during the 2016 Election Season

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Hospitality has figured prominently in the regional imaginaries of the U.S. South for centuries. Yet Southern hospitality has typically been conceived, practiced, and represented in ways that exclude particular groups (Alderman and Modlin 2013). Critical accounts of Southern hospitality rightfully center on the exclusion of African Americans, but a growing body of literature has begun to focus attention on the mixed reception that immigrants have received in Southern communities (Winders 2013; Ehrkamp and Nagel 2014; Steusse and Coleman 2014). Unauthorized Latino immigrants in particular have been the target of heavy-handed law enforcement and of local laws and ordinances designed to encourage 'self-deportation' (Jamison 2016).

Until recently refugees have been relatively insulated from more strident expressions of anti-immigrant sentiment in the South partly because of their small numbers[1] and partly because of their status as authorized immigrants and 'deserving victims' (Yeh and Lama 2004). But this situation has changed dramatically since the summer of 2015 when the Obama Administration announced it would admit 10,000 Syrian refugees for resettlement. Republican opposition to the resettlement plan was immediate and gained significant momentum in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris and the mass shooting in San Bernardino, CA (neither of which involved Syrian refugees). With the start of the presidential primary season, refugee resettlement has been politicized in a manner not seen since the Salvadoran refugee crisis in the 1980s.

This brief essay will explore the rise of anti-refugee sentiment in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential elections. I begin by arguing that the federal government's efforts to depoliticize refugee resettlement since the 1990s have been overtaken by the anti-Muslim hysteria that has gripped the country since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. I then argue that anti-refugee, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant sentiment has gained particular traction among white conservative voters in the South who perceive numerous threats to the country's social, economic, and moral order. Anti-refugee sentiment certainly is not unique to the South. Yet regional expressions of

Islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiment stand out in the national political landscape because they face fewer challenges from those advocating for refugees or for religious tolerance.

THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Formal refugee policy in the U.S. developed in the decades after World War II, motivated initially by the post-war displacement crisis in Europe. Cold War imperatives subsequently became the main factor shaping refugee policy, with refugee status granted primarily to those fleeing communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Cuba and Vietnam (Gibney 2004). In the late 1970s, however, President Jimmy Carter sought to bring U.S. immigration policy in line with international humanitarian conventions. The Refugee Act of 1980 removed nationality as a criterion for refugee status and required that refugee cases be judged on their individual merits. Despite the shift to a 'neutral' humanitarian framework, Cold War politics continued to drive refugee policies through the 1980s, and the Executive branch continued to wield significant power in granting or denying refugee status based on its foreign policy objectives. The ideological nature of refugee policy was on full display in the 1980s when the Reagan Administration refused to grant refugee status to those fleeing from El Salvador, which had become a proxy in America's struggle against the Soviet Union (Macekura 2011).

Not until the end of the Cold War did the humanitarian agenda become more evident in U.S. refugee policy. This is not to say that refugee resettlement was entirely depoliticized. There was considerable debate in the 1990s, for instance, around the differential treatment of Cubans, who continued to benefit (albeit less than before) from Cold War-era policy, and Haitian 'boat people', who were considered economic migrants despite Haiti's obvious political turbulence. But for the most part refugee resettlement maintained a low profile in national political discourse—certainly when compared with the intense politicization of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe during the same period (Bloch and Schuster 2005). Refugees were mostly shielded from the vitriolic anti-immigrant politics that swept the country in the 1990s and were exempted from welfare reform provisions in 1996 that restricted legal immigrants' access to government support.

The low profile of U.S. refugee resettlement programs since the 1990s can be attributed to the federal government's increasingly tight control over every stage of the refugee resettlement process, from the setting of resettlement quotas each year,[2] to the intensive screening of refugees prior to admission to the U.S., to the imposition of strict requirements on refugees to accept (usually low-waged) employment shortly after entering the U.S. The government's control over refugees has been most evident in the dramatic decline in numbers accepted for resettlement since 1980. Whereas 207,000 refugees were admitted in 1980, by 1983 that number had been reduced by more than two-thirds to 61,000. Numbers peaked again in 1992, reaching 131,000, but thereafter continued to decline. The most remarkable dip came in 2002 after the 9/11 attacks when only 27,000 refugees were admitted (about one-third of the 2002 admission

quota) (Migration Policy Institute 2016b). In the fifteen years after 9/11, the federal government consistently failed to meet its annual quotas, despite the fact that the U.S. was engaged in major conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq that displaced millions of people. The U.S. in this respect had masterfully shifted the burden of displacement from its military engagements to Middle Eastern countries ill-equipped to deal with humanitarian crises.[3]

In short, U.S. policies have ensured that the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers admitted for resettlement have been too small to warrant much attention given the overall scale of U.S. immigration.[4] We might ask why President Obama's decision to admit just 10,000 additional refugees might create such a fuss since this figure is hardly a departure from highly restrictive quotas. The answer to this question lies in the timing of the announcement (during a contentious Presidential election cycle) and the origin of the refugees (an Arab-Islamic country). Conservative politicians have seized upon the proposed addition of a mere 10,000 Syrians in order to establish their anti-Muslim, pro-national security, pro-border control *bona fides*. To understand the appeal of this message to Southern voters requires that we consider how the region's residents tie the precariousness of their socio-economic position to the country's 'broken borders' and its vulnerability to global jihadism.

ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE U.S. SOUTH

In the decades after World War II, geographical shifts in private-sector investment and federal defense spending led to the phenomenal growth of Southern cities like Atlanta and Charlotte (O'Mara 2006). A significant share of metropolitan growth at this time came from the transplantation of whites from the Northeast and Midwest, but by the 1990s the foreign-born had also become an important contributor to metropolitan growth.[5] Coming as it did on the heels of formal desegregation, demographic growth and diversification signaled the South's convergence with mainstream, modern, urbanized America. But while economic boosters have praised the region's new diversity as the key to its global economic competitiveness, others have associated demographic shifts with government overreach, wage stagnation, cultural decline, and the loss of American sovereignty.

The notion that America is no longer the great country it once was is shared by many people in the U.S. But anxieties about the erosion of a distinctive American way of life are especially acute among middle-class whites, and even more so among white evangelical Christians, who are disproportionately represented in the South.[6] Evangelical politics have long been animated by the notion of America under threat from myriad ills—secularism, feminism, Catholicism, Darwinism, and communism, among others (Williams 2010). Islam has also featured prominently in this litany of threats. Kidd (2009) notes that as early as the 18th century, American Protestant theologians regularly invoked Islam to signify falsehood and illegitimacy, and they cast Islam as a key player in various end-times scenarios. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, American evangelicals increasingly saw Islam not only as a deviant belief system but also as a major global competitor. Their response was to establish missions in Muslim-majority countries

and to convert local populations.[7] Missionary fervor experienced a resurgence in the late 20th century, with many evangelicals supporting aggressive U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, partly as a means of opening up the '10/40 window'—the world's spiritual battleground—to evangelization.[8] Since 9/11, evangelical rhetoric has become markedly more vitriolic in its assertions of Islam's falsehoods and its inherent violence (even as interest in missionizing Muslims has increased), and evangelical leaders have condemned the cultural relativism that allows Islam to go unchallenged and unchecked in the U.S. context (Cimino 2005).[9] An important aim of evangelical politics vis-à-vis Islam, then, has been to reassert the Christian character of American public life—a politics seen in evangelical mobilization against mosque construction and against the supposed infiltration of Sharia law in U.S. courts.

Anti-Muslim sentiment clearly is not the exclusive purview of evangelical Christians. Likewise, not all evangelical Christians are antagonistic toward Muslims. Indeed, evangelical pastors are among the small group of community leaders who are currently advocating for refugee resettlement on humanitarian grounds. But it is clear that Muslim-menace narratives have particular purchase among white evangelicals. The prominence of evangelicals in Southern states, in turn, means that such narratives have come to dominate discussions about refugee resettlement. A recent state senate hearing on proposed refugee legislation in South Carolina[10] demonstrates not only the deployment of anti-Muslim narratives in public discourse, but also the weaving together of such narratives with a host of other anxieties relating to undocumented immigrants, crime, government spending, and national decline.[11] One speaker, for instance, referred to refugee resettlement as a 'racket' for

> the redistribution of middle-class America's wealth—millions of dollars—into the pockets of the United Nations' chosen refugee resettlement contractors and indirectly into the pockets of the new world order elite billionaires, making them even richer while turning the United States into another Third-World hell hole.

Another speaker, referring to 'research' she had conducted on refugee resettlement, remarked 'I have found the [refugee program] . . . to lack integrity; I have found it to be fraudulent; I have found it to incentivize criminal behavior.' At the end of her three-minute speech, this individual asked the hearing chamber for a 'minute of silence to pray for the people who have been victims of illegal immigration, for the men of Benghazi, and for the men and women on Extortion 17'[12]—seamlessly and improbably linking together refugees, criminal aliens, and various conspiracy theories implicating the Obama administration.

Several speakers also dwelled on fears about the safety of their daughters and wives. Drawing on familiar Orientalist fantasies about oversexed Muslim men, one woman stated,

> . . . I find it curious that Syrian men of fighting age have abandoned their country in a time of crisis. . . . Could it be that older wealthy male Muslims have taken for themselves a disproportionate number of wives? Perhaps

> these older polygamists are only too happy to send their young men out to take women through conquest.

Hearing this rhetoric—and witnessing the lack of robust responses to it—it is not surprising that Donald Trump, the candidate who has been most strident in his anti-Muslim rhetoric, fared so well in the February 2016 South Carolina Republican primary.[13] Exit polls indicated that South Carolina's Republican primary voters—over 70 percent of whom identified themselves as evangelical Christians—were motivated by fears of 'terrorism' even more than concerns about undocumented immigration. Indeed terrorism (almost always associated with Islam) was identified as *the* top issue facing the country. Fully 74% of voters agreed that there should be a ban on Muslims entering the U.S. (by comparison, 44% of Republican primary voters agreed with the statement that all 'illegal immigrants' should be deported) (*Washington Post* 2016).

SOUTHERN INHOSPITALITY?

It is important to reiterate that anti-Muslim sentiment (and anti-immigrant sentiment more broadly) is not limited to the South. The majority of state legislatures in the country have proposed anti-Sharia laws, and every Republican governor in the country came out against refugee resettlement in 2015. Yet the view that America faces an existential threat from jihadism seems to have gained particular traction in Southern states. Here more than in other parts of the country we see white privilege married to an unshakable conviction that America is at its core a Christian country.

To be sure, there have been efforts among some Republicans to counteract the flagrantly anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric that has become the hallmark of the Trump campaign and to offer a more inclusive message. During the South Carolina primary, the state's Indian American governor and its African American junior senator endorsed candidate Marco Rubio and attempted to present an image of the Republican Party (and of South Carolina) as diverse, open-minded, and respectful of differences. But it is telling that despite record turnout in the Republican primary (739,000 voters, 96% of them white), Rubio could garner less than a quarter of the votes. Notions of tolerance and diversity, it seems, are interpreted by many Republican voters as mere political correctness.

This level of hostility toward refugees raises questions about the future of America's refugee resettlement program. Humanitarian programs in the first instance depend on the ability of a country's citizens to view foreign Others as fully human. But Republican politicians in the South and elsewhere have proven all too willing to pander to crude stereotypes of Muslims and to treat America's humanitarian obligations as misguided and naïve. This sentiment may not lead to an end to the country's refugee resettlement program, but it seems likely that Republican opposition will drive the Office of Refugee Resettlement to further limit the resettlement of people from the Middle East. The identification of refugee worthiness, in other words, will have less to do with the level of suffering and risk refugees have endured than with refugees' ability to conform to ideas of America as a white, Christian country.

NOTES

1. Of the 109,456 cases handled by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement in FY 2012, only 204 were settled in Alabama, 196 in South Carolina, and 23 in Mississippi. Larger numbers were resettled that year in Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee (2,830, 2,389, and 1,633 respectively) but even these numbers are small relative to these states' foreign-born and overall populations (ORR 2013).

2. The 1980 Refugee Act introduced annual caps on resettlement to be negotiated between Congress and the President. These caps reflected longstanding Congressional misgivings about the desirability of refugees.

3. In 2014 over a quarter of the world's 19.5 million refugees could be found in four countries: Turkey (1.59 million), Pakistan (1.51 million), Lebanon (1.15 million), and Iran (982,000) (UNHCR 2015).

4. Between 1990 and 2013 the U.S. admitted over 24 million legal immigrants (an estimated 10–11 million unauthorized immigrants reside in the U.S. as well). In contrast only 1.8 million refugees have been admitted to the U.S. during this period.

5. Between 1990 and 2014 the foreign-born share of the population increased from 2.7% to 9.9% in Georgia, 1.7% to 7.7% in North Carolina, and 1.4% to 4.7% in South Carolina. Large metropolitan areas received a disproportionate share of the foreign born. In 2000 for instance the 7.1% of Georgia's population but 10.3% of Atlanta CMSA's population was foreign-born; likewise 5.3% of North Carolina's population but 7.2% of metro Charlotte's population and 9.2% of Raleigh-Durham's population was foreign-born (U.S. Census 2016; Migration Policy Institute 2016).

6. 'Evangelical' refers to Christians who emphasize biblical inerrancy and authority, salvation through personal conversion (being 'born again'), and proselytizing. Evangelicals are believed to constitute about a quarter of the U.S. population. In several Southern states, however, the percent of the population that is evangelical is significantly higher: 35% in North and South Carolina, 38% in Georgia, 41% in Mississippi, 49% in Alabama, and 52% in Tennessee (note that evangelicals in traditional African-American denominations are counted separately) (Pew Research Center 2016).

7. Such efforts converted only a few Muslims, and many missionaries turned their attention to Eastern Christians instead. Their experiences in the Middle East led some missionaries to reject altogether the goal of conversion and to accept the equal moral worth of Muslims. This position contributed to a major rift between 'modernists' (mostly associated with mainline traditions) and evangelicals (Sharkey 2013).

8. The term 10/40 window was coined in 1990 to refer to the territory between the 10th and 40th parallel in the Northern Hemisphere. This zone is believed to hold a majority of the world's unsaved people, and it has become an important focus of missionary activity. For a detailed discussion the 10/40 window and tensions between dispensationalist eschatology (which views Armageddon as imminent) and missionizing imperatives in the Middle East context, see Han (2010) and Gallaher (2010).

9. There are important subtleties in these arguments. Some evangelicals have criticized the cultural imperialism of their forebears and have urged greater sensitivity to Muslim practices and worldviews in order to evangelize to Muslims more effectively. Still evangelicals by definition reject Islam as a path to salvation (see Hancock 2013).

10. The proposed legislation was Senate Bill 997, which would require refugees to register with the state Department of Social Services, would hold resettlement agencies liable for refugee actions, and would prohibit any public expenditure on refugees without specific

authorization. The bill passed 39 to 6 and has been referred to the House. See http://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess121_2015-2016/bills/997.htm.

11. A video recording of the hearing can be accessed at http://www.scstatehouse.gov/video/videofeed.php

12. Extortion 17 was the call sign of a Chinook helicopter that was shot down in Afghanistan in 2011 killing 30 Americans, including 17 Navy SEALS. This event has become a symbol for right-wing conspiracy theorists of the Obama Administration's malfeasance.

13. Trump won a plurality of votes (32%).

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