

Muslim intake expected to fall as Christians rise

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FULL TEXT

IMMIGRATION

Scott Morrison's elevation as Prime Minister is expected to further reduce Muslim immigration, with the former immigration minister a prominent supporter of Australia prioritising Christian refugees ahead of Muslim asylum-seekers.

Figures obtained by The Weekend Australian show the percentage of Muslim refugees resettled in Australia in the past four years has halved from 40.5 per cent to 19 per cent of the total humanitarian program, despite Australia accepting three-quarters of its refugees from the overwhelmingly Islamic nations of Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. The trend has coincided with immigration officers declining to accept for resettlement asylum-seekers identified as most vulnerable by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and instead, allocating places according to their own criteria.

Mr Morrison made clear his support for a humanitarian program skewed away from Muslim refugees when, as social services minister, he declared a "very strong case" could be made for prioritising Christians.

Refugee Council of Australia chief Paul Power said settlement figures provided by the Department of Social Services showed the impact of this bias on Australia's humanitarian program. "Our concern is that the program should be based on need, not on considerations of religion or ethnicity," Mr Power said.

"When you look at where the need is and who is in greatest need among groups of refugees, particularly Syrians and Iraqis, it is quite clear that Australia's program is favouring people who are Christian.

"That is not to say those Christians don't need resettlement. It means many others from other faiths, particularly Islam, are being deprioritised." In 2013-14, Australia resettled 4442 refugees who identified as Muslim from a total humanitarian intake of almost 10,940. In 2016-2017, the total intake had almost doubled to 20,249 and the number of Muslim refugees had dropped to 3823.

The figures are more stark within the intake of refugees born in Iraq and Syria. In 2016-17, Australia accepted 7394 Iraqis and just more than 6000 Syrians. Of those, only 2 per cent of Iraqis and 14 per cent of Syrians were Muslim. Christians made up 74 per cent of the Iraqi intake and 77 per cent of the Syrian intake.

Although Christian minorities have been heavily persecuted in Syria and Iraq, the UNHCR estimates that Christians make up only 15 per cent of Iraqi refugees and just a tiny percentage of Syrian refugees displaced by the Syrian conflict.

UNHCR sources expressed concern at the shrinking number of places being made available for direct UNHCR referrals.

UNHCR resettlement figures show that Australia accepted more than 1000 refugees in 2014 from both Afghanistan and Syria and almost 600 Syrians referred directly by the UNHCR. So far in 2018, 43 Afghanis, 16 Syrians and a mere four Iraqis have been resettled in Australia through UNHCR referrals. Figures provided last year to Senate estimates showed that Australia's acceptance of all refugees referred by the UNHCR had dropped from 10,000 in 2012-13 to about 5000 in 2016-2017.

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