

## **Protection for refugees not from refugees: Somalis in exile and the securitisation of refugee policy**

(Kampala 5 October 2017) Launched today, IRRI's latest report, **Protection for refugees not from refugees: Somalis in exile and the securitisation of refugee policy**, looks at the impact that the increased securitisation of refugee policy has had on the lives of refugees.

Based on 80 interviews with Somali refugees living in Kenya, Uganda and the United States, as well as interviews with relevant NGO, UN and government actors, the findings highlight some of the realities that refugees face when governments fashion a correlation between forced migration and insecurity that is both fundamentally flawed and has serious implications for people's lives. The report suggests that existing security strategies targeting refugees neither provide security for the country nor protect refugees. Instead, they foster fear and feelings of exclusion and can act as a smokescreen for criminal activity.

Despite the fact that many Somalis are fleeing violence associated with the militant group *Al-Shabaab*, the report shows that their plight echoes a global tendency to label those who have fled "violent extremism" as extremists themselves and therefore as an implicit danger. As one interviewee said, *"I have nothing to do with terrorism. I am Somali but not a terrorist. The two are not the same."*

This was particularly evident in Kenya, where securitised narratives have led to an over-emphasis on the use of threats and visible displays of force by authorities. Combined with negative political rhetoric and associated policy consequences, refugees have been left feeling marginalised and discriminated against.

Somalis in Uganda, while coping with the same challenges that all refugees in the country face, spoke more positively about their welcome. Although a few raised concerns about police surveillance and public attitudes, Somali refugees, for the most part did, not feel singled out on security grounds. Many did, however, talk about the challenges of integration, especially language difficulties, but there was less evidence of a securitised approach influencing their daily lives in exile.

In the US, many talked about the negative implications created by President Trump's travel ban and while economic and legal integration appeared more readily accessible, refugees described discrimination in employment, in relation to policing and among some segments of the public. As a Somali man living in the US said, *"I have experienced welcome here. But the situation is just one unfortunate act away from going bad."*

*"The core message of this research, is that the essence of refugee protection needs to be recovered and maintained,"* said Dr Lucy Hovil. *"With the space for refugee protection shrinking globally, there is an urgent need to shift the narrative away from a growing emphasis on protection from refugees and back to an emphasis on protection for refugees."*

The findings, therefore, point to the reality that policies, especially restrictions on freedom of movement and the emphasis on repatriation as the only viable durable solution, leave refugees marginalised and isolated. Negative rhetoric further alienates populations and fosters negative public perceptions of these populations among the host community.

In East Africa, this has led some to opt for *tahrib* (migration through non-legal routes) despite the well-known dangers involved. Some interviewees expressed concern that these same factors have also made refugees

more vulnerable to recruitment. However, others argued the opposite: that terrorist groups were more interested in recruiting those who could bring resources to the organisation. Either way, the findings make it clear that those who might engage with extremists are a tiny minority of the refugee population.

The report highlights the need to reorient global migration debates away from overtly securitised narratives that likely benefit neither refugees, nationals nor global security, towards an emphasis on greater protection through greater inclusion that is likely to facilitate better security through community engagement and cooperation.

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Notes to Editors:

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- This report is based on 80 qualitative interviews conducted with Somalis (predominantly refugees, but also including some non-refugees) living in Kenya, Uganda and the US, and with members of local and international civil society working with refugees and UN and government officials.
- All of the interviews took place between March and June 2017. In Kenya, interviews took place in Nairobi (in various parts of the city, predominantly in Eastleigh, but also in Westlands and other areas) and Dadaab refugee camp in northern Kenya. In Uganda, interviews took place in Kisenyi, Kampala and in Nakivale refugee camp in Isingiro district in south-west Uganda; and in the US, interviews took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- A draft of the paper was sent to the governments of Kenya and Uganda for their comments. To date, neither has responded.
- Names of interviewees are withheld for security reasons.
- This research was possible due to the generous support of the [Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation](#)