



People trying to reach Europe to seek political asylum rest near the Turkish city of Edirne, which borders European Union members Greece and Bulgaria, September 15, 2015\). They planned a sit-in protest near the border with Greece, hoping authorities would allow them to cross into Europe overland instead of them having to risk their lives by sea trying to reach Greek islands. AP Photo/Emrah Gurel

## Issue Overview: Political asylum

Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff

Some people in the world are frightened to live in their own countries. They worry about being harmed by their governments because of the things they believe. So they ask another country to let them live there. This is called political asylum.

Political asylum just might be the world's most controversial idea. Most countries offer political asylum. The United Nations (U.N.), an organization made up of different countries that works to promote cooperation, says asylum is a human right.

The number of people seeking asylum outside of their own countries has risen and is now at a record level. This has happened at the same time as there have been some wars and other conflicts in the Middle East, Afghanistan and parts of Africa.

The disagreement starts when countries try to figure out who should be given political asylum. The idea is that nations

### DEFINITIONS

#### asylum

Protection given by a government to someone who has left another country to escape being harmed

#### human rights

Basic rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to, no matter their nationality, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, or political views

#### refugees

People fleeing wars, conflict, or persecution in their countries

should protect those who may be harmed, even in other countries. The question is whether asylum can handle today's flood of refugees. Plus, there is sometimes a dislike toward outsiders in some host countries.

## **The Situation**

In his first week in office, U.S. President Donald Trump issued a ban on people fleeing war-torn Syria from coming into the United States. This ban also temporarily freezes the entry of other refugees and prohibits entry by people from seven countries for 90 days. The majority of the people in the seven countries are Muslim. Trump was elected after proposing at least a short-term "complete shutdown of Muslims entering the U.S."

Attacks in Europe and the United States linked to the extremist group the Islamic State have caused fear. Many think that terrorists are among those seeking asylum in their countries.

In 2015, the number of individuals seeking asylum or to be a refugee grew to 2.45 million. This is an increase of almost 50 percent from the year before. The largest number are from Syria. There have been tens of thousands of refugees fleeing Myanmar in Asia as well as Iraq. Additionally, the number of asylum claims made by gay, bisexual and transgender people has increased.

One country's refugee can be another country's wanted man. One example is Edward Snowden. He is the American who was granted asylum by Russia after revealing details of classified U.S. government programs. Another example is Julian Assange. He is the founder of Wikileaks, which publishes secret information. Sweden wanted Assange sent back there to face rape claims, but Assange was granted asylum by Ecuador to live in London.

## **The Background**

The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees says the idea of asylum is one of the "earliest hallmarks of civilization." There are references to it in 3,500-year-old texts.

The U.N. defines refugees as people who can show they'll be persecuted at home based on race, religion, birth country, political belief or social group.

In 2014, 626,500 asylum requests were accepted and 434,900 rejected. Asylum has been used as a political tool. Examples of this are when Americans welcomed Cubans and Vietnamese seeking refuge from their communist governments. The United States was against communism, so it wanted to welcome people who wanted to leave communist countries. Individuals have used it to avoid or delay criminal prosecution. Examples include Snowden,

Assange and Charles Taylor. Taylor is the former president of Liberia who was found guilty of war crimes. He was given short-term refuge in Nigeria.

## The Argument

More people fleeing their countries means more debate over asylum. Those against it say asylum rules have grown too lax. They say it threatens to overthrow the regular immigration process that must be followed to move to the United States

Trump says that the United States has not done a good enough job screening refugees to keep out terrorists. Defenders of the screening rules say they are thorough, but no system is perfect.

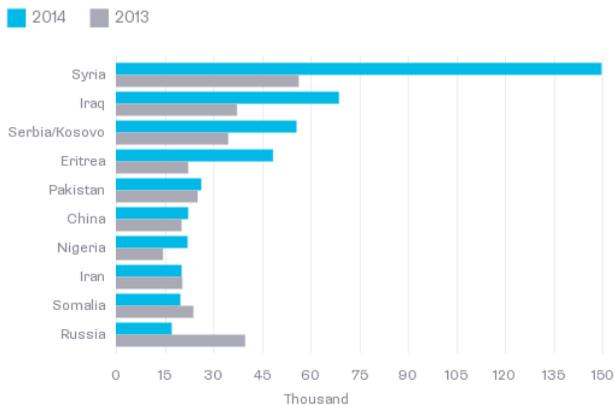
Those in favor of asylum say it is necessary as a human being to protect others who need it. They point out that many of the people Trump would keep out are fleeing the terrorism of the Islamic State.

Some say asylum should be extended to people fleeing any danger. It should not just be for those exposed to official harm from their government. They point to the unaccompanied children from Central America. They came across the U.S.-Mexico border in record numbers in 2014 to escape from gangs and some of the world's highest murder rates.

Those who find fault with U.S. asylum say it is inconsistent. And they say those who want asylum may not be truthful about their reasons. For example, there is an underground business that provides asylum seekers with exaggerated or false stories to help them get into another country.

### Where Asylum Seekers Come From

Origin of applications to 44 industrialized countries



### Where They Want to Go

Asylum applications submitted

