Where does the magic number for Australia’s refugee intake come from?

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Australia commendably agreed this week to take an additional 12,000 refugees affected by the Syrian conflict. This almost doubles the humanitarian intake, from 13,750 to 25,750.

Almost all the discussion about how many refugees Australia should or could take revolve around the figure of roughly 13,000. Why? How did this number come about? Why has it become the de facto starting point for debates about Australia’s response to refugees? And why the number 12,000 for the one-off intake of refugees displaced by the Syrian conflict?

Historical evolution

The answer to how the magic number 13,000 has come about is elusive. Although Australia has been settling refugees for more than 170 years, the current co-ordinated system of refugee resettlement came into being in 1981 with the establishment of the Special Humanitarian Program.

In the early 1980s the annual intake of refugees numbered about 20,000. Then, in 1984, the annual intake was 14,207. It has fluctuated between 11,000 and 14,000 ever since, with the exception of about 20,000 humanitarian visas being issued in 2012-13.

The details of what makes up these numbers is messy, being a combination of refugee and other humanitarian visas. But whatever the rationale was for setting yearly quotas around 13,000 back in the early 1980s, it has persisted for more than 30 years.

With the additional 12,000 places, Australia will now take close to 18,000 refugees. How will these refugees be selected for resettlement? Prime Minister Tony Abbott said that Australia will work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to resettle 12,000 refugees who are in refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan. Priority will be given to women, children and families from persecuted minorities.

But the UNHCR has commented that this way of selecting UNHCR refugees is highly unusual.

The UNHCR’s role

Each year, the UNHCR sets an annual quota for submission places in its Refugee Resettlement Program. The UNHCR’s capacity to process resettlement applications largely determines actual submission places. It is estimated that, without additional resources, the UNHCR will be able to process only 53% of refugee applications in 2016. This is one reason it can fall short of its target.

Resettlement countries then set their quotas and this shapes the acceptance rates of UNHCR submissions. Finally, there are the actual resettlement departures. This happens after resettlement nations have completed all their requirements for processing those refugees they have agreed to resettle.

Sometimes this can take years. The upshot is that while resettlement under the UNHCR scheme is a critical part of the protection puzzle, it plays a very small part in finding durable solutions for refugees. Increasingly, alternative forms of admission – such as family reunification and labour mobility – are necessary to complement the traditional resettlement program.

So, in selecting refugees under this program, what is “usual” is a partnership process between member nations and the UNHCR. Member nations do not simply say what kinds of refugees they will or will not take, although they do set out their own priorities for filling their quotas within the submissions put up by the UNHCR.
Member nations do this in part through annual meetings held each year in June or July. These meetings, hosted by the UNHCR and held in Geneva, are known as the Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement. They have been held for the past 21 years. NGOs, the UNHCR and member resettlement nations come together and craft policy around resettlement. The meetings inform and are informed by a UNHCR report on projected global resettlement needs for the coming year.

The UNHCR projected resettlement needs for refugees in 2016 is 1,150,000 – an increase of 66% from the estimated needs for 2014. Much of this increase is attributed to the Syrian conflict. The 80,000 resettlement places made available by member nations in 2015-16 will fail to meet this need.

Of the 30 member resettlement nations, 28 have confirmed they will receive Syrian refugees. In the 2016 Global Resettlement Needs Report, many countries were specifically noted for their contributions to meeting this need. Some member nations – including Germany – were welcomed for introducing alternative forms of admission for Syrian refugees.

Australia was noted in the report as having had a negative impact on refugee resettlement. This is due to the change in government policy that removed the right to family reunion for those who arrived by boat.

**Raising the number**

While the traditional UNHCR refugee resettlement program is important, it is able to make only a small impact on the growing numbers of refugees in need of a permanent solution.

Resettlement needs have always been larger than resettlement submissions, which have always been larger than member nations’ acceptance rates. So, there is a persistent and large gap between resettlement needs and resettlement departures. This underlies the need for alternative forms of resettlement.

This leads back to Australia’s magic number of 13,000, which appears to act as the constraining average for debates on how many refugees Australia should and can resettle. But this number should be substantially higher than it currently is.

Australia claims it leads the world when it comes to refugee resettlement. Much of this claim is true – and this is why Australia should and can take more refugees. Australia’s first co-ordinated resettlement program – the Special Humanitarian Program – brought a significant growth in specialist refugee settlement services, including torture and trauma services.

These programs – the On Arrival Accommodation program, the Community Settlement Services Scheme, and, in 1997, the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy – built specific expertise in refugee settlement needs across the social services sector.

There is no sound reason why 13,000 should remain the benchmark number around which discussions of how many refugees Australia should take revolve. It is likely that these decisions are largely political.

And why the number 12,000 for the new intake of refugees from the Syrian conflict? It is larger than the 10,000 proposed by the Labor opposition and smaller than the 13,000 that has been the “norm” for the last 30 years. Let’s begin change by making 26,000 the new “black” and go up from there.