

CSPS-Korea 2021 Knowledge in Motion Series on

Refugees: Our Unfounded Fear

Organized by
Center for Security Policy Studies-Korea at George Mason University

Date: November 24, 2021 (Wednesday), 10:00 – 14:40

Venue: Incheon Global Campus 5F Small Theater (Songdo, Incheon)

Proposal

I. Background

It has been more than three years since 500 Yemeni refugees arrived at the Jeju International Airport, who were tagged with a sign as ‘fake refugees.’ The stir of debate of whether the Yemeni refugees were ‘fake’ or ‘real’ refugees created an uproar of protests that petitioned for the abolition of the Republic of Korea (ROK) refugee law, which was legislated in 2012. Three years forward, about 400 Afghan refugees, local helpers for the ROK government, arrived at the Incheon International Airport through the military operation ‘Miracle’. Unlike how the Korean society expressed its hatred toward the Yemeni refugees three years ago, the Ministry of Justice indicated the Afghan refugees as ‘special contributors’ through the media, resulting in a rather welcoming reception as allies of the ROK.

The two incidents contrast greatly, as one group was met with animosity, and one group was taken in with a warm heart. While both groups of people are pertained to the term ‘refugees,’ the Afghan refugees were rather treated with respect under the justification that they held major roles as local helpers to the ROK government. For this reason, it is easily presumed that the ROK government only welcomes outsiders if they were supportive to the ROK, or the Yemeni refugees have done something seriously wrong that triggered a defensive stance by the government. Both assumptions underline an important aspect in tackling the refugee in issue in Korea: *fear*.

According to a major Korean public survey firm, 56% of Koreans are opposed to accepting the Yemeni refugees. The reasons to opposition are as following: the potential existence of illegal job seeking refugees, concern of crime and terrorism acts, and apprehension of a threat toward Korean pure blood customs. The public survey points out that about 70% of the young people in their 20s and 30s are the most opposed to the idea of accepting them as refugees because they see them as illegal job seekers, who are abusing the domestic law.¹ Furthermore, every year, new applicants apply for asylum and that number has increased dramatically. Yet the

¹ Jeong. H. (2018, July 24). *Report on Korean Social Perception of Yemeni Refugees – Exploring Factors Causing the Perception Gap of Yemeni Refugees*. Hankook Research. <https://hrcopinion.co.kr/archives/11777>

percentage of acceptance has maintained a dramatically low rate. According to the Korea Immigration Service under the Ministry of Justice, South Korea has accepted an incredibly low 1.125% from 1994 to 2020.²

Nonetheless, what is more astonishing and paradoxical is that the ROK annually accepts more than thousands of North Korean defectors, who are also indicated as refugees under the UNHCR which states, “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”³ The Korean society rarely takes an antagonistic stance toward our brothers and sisters from the North, as Koreans are educated from a young age about North Korea and are well aware of why they have come to the South in hope of finding a new safe home. As a result, for decades, we have welcomed more than tens of thousands of North Korea defectors and helped adjust and resettle into the South Korean society.

On the other hand, the protests in 2018 against the Yemeni refugees, which were triggered by rumors about the refugees illegally entering the country through a domestic broker, solely reflect how the media’s incorrect information can easily influence the public’s opinion and create a negative conception of the refugees. Hence, the current lens through which Koreans view refugees illustrates a restrained view of limited information and a lack of awareness and education about the refugee crisis.

II. Objective

The main objective of the Series addresses the need for the ROK government and people to begin acknowledging the fact that refugees are the greatest example of a threat to human security and human rights, as they are a people without a nation to protect them. The need for attention arises from the fact that more and more countries are either unable or unwilling to accept more refugees, causing mass refoulement, which has led to the largest humanitarian disasters in the world. It could be true that the country Koreans call ‘home’ could no longer be the ‘home’ they have perceived for decades in the near future. Without a doubt, this imminent outlook brings attention to how the future generation will approach the influx of refugees at the door of South Korea. With a high rate of youth perceiving refugees as potential job-stealers, the task of properly informing and educating the young public about the crisis is unreasonably crucial to the prosperity and security of the country.

To embark upon the importance of preparing the next generation in light of the refugee crisis, the CSPS-Korea 2021 Knowledge in Motion Series on Refugees: Our Unfounded Fear aims to tackle four questions: What is the Korean society fearing? Who are refugees? Why are we fearing refugees? Why should we overcome? The first session, “What We Fear”, presents the documentary film, *This is Home: A Refugee Story*, on Syrian refugees adapting to life in the United States to raise awareness of this completely new issue in South Korea.

In the second session, “Why We Fear”, CSPS-Korea offers a platform of discussion with relevant stakeholders from civil society, international organizations, and ROK government agencies to apply their expertise in the field of refugees and migrants and to bring to light the changes that need to be made for a welcoming Korean society.

² Ministry of Justice. (2020). *Korea Immigration Service Statistics 2020*. Korean Immigration Service. <https://www.immigration.go.kr/bbs/immigration/228/549453/artclView.do>

³ UNHCR. (2010). *Introductory Note By the UNCHR–Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

III. Documentary Summary

The documentary movie, “This Is Home: A Refugee Story,” directed by Alexandra Shiva, navigates the struggles of Syrian families adapting to their new lives in the United States as refugees. Unlike the conventional style of displaying the lives of refugees in a violent and emotional manner, the documentary rather depicts the daily lives and struggles of Syrian refugees in Baltimore, Maryland in midst Trump Administration’s hostile stance. Scenes, such as a daughter who worries about her mother who has yet to be approved with refugee status, and a woman who puts on an American flag hijab to look friendly to her neighbors and keep her safe helps viewers sense the true hardships of the refugees. In addition, with the International Rescue Committee’s (IRC) assistance over the course of eight months, the families learn self-survival skills that support their transition to their new home. Adults start from learning basic English, finding jobs, continuing their education at local universities, initiating new businesses, and accepting new cultural values. Even while children are scared of going to school and suffer from nightmares caused by war trauma, they steadily blend into American society better than their parents. Nonetheless, in the midst of their homesick despair, the small joys and laughter keep them rooted. All in all, the documentary movie, “This Is Home: A Refugee Story,” illustrates the refugee issue, a politically contentious area, through different lenses and in a warmhearted manner, and leaves viewers personally reflecting on the issue at hand.

IV. Program Schedule

Time (KST)	Program
9:30 – 10:00	Registration
10:00 – 10:20 (20 min)	Opening Ceremony <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Opening Remarks: Ms. Nahee Heo, Mason Korea Alumnus- Welcoming Remarks: Dr. Shannon N. Davis, Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs, Mason Korea- Congratulatory Remarks: Dr. Pyung Ryun Yu, CEO, Incheon Global Campus (IGC)- Concept Note Speech: Sua Oh, Research Assistant, Center for Security Policy Studies-Korea
10:20 – 12:30 (130 min)	Session I: What We Fear <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Documentary Screening: <i>This Is Home: A Refugee Story</i>- Commentary: Dr. Yasemin Ipek, Assistant Professor of Global Affairs, George Mason University
12:30 – 13:30 (60 min)	Lunch

<p>13:30 – 14:30 (60 min)</p>	<p>Session II: Why We Fear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion I: Mr. Il Lee, Attorney at Law, Advocates for Public Interest Law (APIL) - Discussion II: Dr. Seo Yeon Park, Visitng Scholar, IOM-Migration Training & Research Center (MRTC) - Q&A Session
<p>14:30 – 14:40 (10 min)</p>	<p>Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closing Speech: Dr. Ji Hye Lim, Acting Director, Center for Security Policy Studies-Korea