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Responding to the Refugee Crisis

After Paris Attacks, Vilifying Refugees

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By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Battening down the hatches is often an impulsive and politically expedient response to terrorism attacks. Predictably, the harrowing scenes of carnage in Paris on Friday are fueling calls to shut down borders and halt the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Western nations.

Senator Marco Rubio, a leading Republican presidential candidate, said the United States should stop taking in Syrian refugees. Jeb Bush, another Republican candidate, suggested, idiotically, that it might be O.K. to admit only Christians. Several governors announced that their states would not accept Syrian refugees. Republicans on Capitol Hill are expected this week to push for legislation that would block President Obama's initiative to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees next year.

In Europe, officials from Poland's new conservative government used the attacks as a pretext to reject the European Union's plan to distribute refugees more equitably among member states. Even before the attacks, several governments in Europe were taking steps to tighten borders and divert the flow of refugees elsewhere.

These responses are wrong. Confusing refugees with terrorists is morally unacceptable and, as a matter of strategy, misguided. Stemming the exodus of refugees from Syria must be an important part of any comprehensive plan to end the Syrian war. Building new barriers to keep them out with the absurd argument that Muslims are inherently dangerous could provide propaganda benefits to the Islamic State. The group, also known as ISIS, has drawn recruits around the globe by offering a cause and a home to Muslims who feel marginalized and scorned.

Mr. Obama hit just the right note at the Group of 20 summit meeting in Antalya, Turkey, on Monday. “Many of these refugees are the victims of terrorism themselves, that’s what they’re fleeing,” he said. “Slamming the door in their faces would be a betrayal of our values. Our nations can welcome refugees who are desperately seeking safety and ensure our own security. We can and must do both.”

He said that Syria’s neighbors Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which have absorbed the bulk of Syrian refugees in recent years, deserve more help. The Obama administration has offered to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees during the 2016 fiscal year, which would represent a modest, but important, move to aid the hundreds of thousands who have fled the war.

The international community’s obligation to protect civilians fleeing war and persecution is enshrined in human rights law and principles that the United States and European nations have championed over the past century. The Syrian war has sorely tested those commitments, but world leaders should not allow the conflict to render them moot. President Jean-Claude Juncker of the European Commission was right when he said on Sunday that the Paris attacks should not be used as a reason to revise the European Union’s entire refugee policy.

Surely America can offer a smarter and more generous response than Mr. Rubio’s fearmongering. In a televised interview over the weekend, he warned, darkly, that “you can have 1,000 people come in and 999 of them are just poor people fleeing oppression and violence, but one of them is an ISIS fighter.” That’s nonsense. America last year admitted 1,682 Syrian refugees — an embarrassingly small number for the largest refugee crisis since World War II.

Resettling Syrian refugees will take years and entail significant costs. But the prosperous nations of the world must share the burden of doing so and resist the temptation to simply say, No, not here.