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Donald Trump, Meet a Syrian Refugee Named Heba

A Syrian refugee woman disembarks at a beach in the Greek island of Lesbos. Credit Yannis Behrakis/Reuters

LESBOS, Greece — Ben Carson has compared Syrian refugees to rabid dogs. Donald Trump says that he would send them back.

Who are these Syrian refugee monsters who terrify American politicians?

Meet Heba, a frightened, desperate 20-year-old woman who dreams of being an artist and has just made a perilous escape from territory controlled by the Islamic State in northern Syria.

She was detained two months ago with her sister by Islamic State enforcers because her sister's baby girl had too short a skirt — even though the baby was just 3 months old.

“That was crazy,” Heba said, shaking her head. “This was an infant!”

Heba says she and her sister argued that infant girls should have a little leeway in showing skin, and eventually the family was let off with a warning.

But Heba, strong-willed and self-confident, perhaps had been too outspoken or too sarcastic, and the police then cast a critical eye on her clothing. She was covering even her hands and face, but the authorities complained that her abaya cloak wasn't loose enough to turn her into a black puff that concealed her form. The police detained her for hours until her family bailed her out by paying a \$10 fine.

Heba was lucky, for other women have been flogged for violating clothing rules. Her sister saw a woman stoned to death after being accused of adultery.

“If I were wearing this,” Heba told me, pointing down at the tight jeans she was wearing as we spoke, “my head would come off.” She offered a hollow laugh.

I spoke to her after she left her mother and siblings behind in Syria (her father died years ago of natural causes) and fled with a handful of relatives on a perilous journey to Turkey, then on a dangerously overcrowded boat to this Greek island. I took Heba and her relatives to a dinner of pizza — Western food is banned by the Islamic State — and as we walked to the pizzeria she made a game of pointing out all the passers-by who would be decapitated by ISIS for improper dress, consorting with the opposite sex or sundry other offenses.

“It’s a million percent difference,” she exulted of life in the West. “Once you leave that area, you feel so good. Your whole body relaxes.”

Americans are understandably afraid of terrorism after the Paris attacks, and that fear is channeled at Syrian refugees. So pandering politicians portray the refugees as menaces whom the vetting process is unable to screen out, and Americans by nearly two to one oppose President Obama’s plan to admit 10,000 Syrians over a year.

In fact, despite the impressions left by American politicians and by the Islamic State, Syrians are in general more educated and middle class than many other people in the region, and the women more empowered. Heba’s aspirations to be an artist aren’t unusual.

Security concerns are legitimate, but the refugee screening is a rigorous two-year process. It would be far simpler for the Islamic State to infiltrate the U.S. by dispatching European passport holders (like those who carried out the Paris attacks) on tourist visas, or just use supporters who are already American citizens.

The anti-refugee legislation that overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives would effectively end the intake even of Christians and Yazidis who have been particularly targeted by the extremists.

In person, Syrian refugees are less scary than scared. Heba wouldn’t allow me to use her last name or publish her photo for fear of getting her family in trouble, and she cannot contact her mother for the same reason. (I’m not mentioning the town she lived in because she’s terrified that the Islamic State might try to identify and punish her family for her escape and for her candor to a Western journalist.)

Really, Ben Carson, you want to compare this freedom-loving woman to a rabid dog?

Donald Trump, when you said of Syrian refugees, “If I win, they’re going back,” do you really intend to deport Heba back to the Islamic State to be flogged or decapitated?

Heba is fed up with violence and extremism — but now in the West she encounters a new kind of political extremism that targets refugees like her. These Syrian refugees find themselves accused of potentially being the terrorists they flee.

“We have no connection to terrorism,” she told me, mystified that anyone could fear her. “We’re running away from all that.”

Heba showed me her abaya, which she keeps in her backpack. She says she never wants to wear it again, so I asked why she doesn’t discard it.

“I’m scared,” she admitted. “If they send us back, I will need it.”

Ben Carson and Donald Trump, Heba is neither a rabid dog nor a crazed terrorist, but a desperate young woman whose life is on the line. Let’s drop the fearmongering and let Heba cast away that abaya forever.

Gail Collins is off today.

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