

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE **ONLY \$1 PER WEEK**

**ALL DIGITAL ACCESS**

HOUSTONCHRONICLE.COM | eEDITION | IPAD APP

**LIMITED TIME**

# Were Syrians "caught" at Texas border, as gov said?

By **Dylan Baddour** | November 21, 2015 | Updated: November 21, 2015 12:50pm

10



Gov. Greg Abbott, at the **forefront of a push-back** by more than half

Photo: Nathan Lambrecht, MBO

the nation's governors against the U.S. admitting Syrian refugees, declared that fresh apprehensions at the Texas-Mexico border **illuminate his concerns**.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (Nathan Lambrecht/The Monitor via AP)



In a Nov. 18, 2015, **Twitter post**, the Texas Republican said: "THIS is why Texas is vigilant about Syrian refugees." His tweet pointed to a headline on a story posted that night by the conservative Breitbart.com: "8 Syrians caught at Texas border in Laredo."

Refugees from Syria -- where four years of civil war has displaced millions of people, according to the United Nations -- have been a hot topic of late. On Nov. 16, 2015, Abbott was **among** what proved to be 31 of the nation's governors declaring refusals to admit Syrian refugees to their states, for fear militants would mix in.



That followed unsubstantiated reports that Syrians were involved in the Paris massacre that killed more than 130 people in Paris Nov. 13, 2015. Such reports were based on the discovery of a Syrian passport near the body of an attacker, which The Washington Post **reported** Nov. 17, 2015 was not authentic.

Worth noting too, Republican officials in Texas have occasionally expressed concern that ISIS -- the terrorist militia waging war in Syria and Iraq -- could send members over the Texas border to attack the United States. When we checked, those fears were based on false assertions, like that **ISIS was operating a base in Mexico**, **Border Patrol caught ISIS members**, or that **Muslim prayer rugs were found on the Texas border**.

But the morning after Abbott weighed in, the Republican chairman of the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee, Rep. Mike McCaul of Texas, took to TV to say there was no need for worry.

Still, we wondered: Could it be that Syrian insurgents were snagged at the Rio Grande?

Abbott's source

Abbott spokesman John Wittman declined to comment when asked about how the governor reached his conclusion or if the governor believed the described Syrians posed a security threat. Wittman also didn't say if Abbott had relied on sources aside from the Breitbart story he noted in his tweet.

Breitbart's story, headlined "**Exclusive-- Confirmed: 8 Syrians caught at Texas border in Laredo,**" cited two individuals described as federal agents but not identified in the story who reportedly advised that "eight Syrian illegal aliens attempted to enter Texas from Mexico in the Laredo sector" on Monday, Nov. 16, 2015, two days before Abbott posted his tweet.

The story further quoted Hector Garza, a Border Patrol agent and president of a South Texas chapter of the **National Border Patrol Council**, the union representing Border Patrol personnel. According to the post, Garza said agents in the Laredo area were "concerned" because they had "heard about Syrians being apprehended in the area from other federal agents," although he also said he couldn't confirm that Syrians had lately been apprehended.

By email Nov. 20, 2015, Garza told us he couldn't comment because he was on patrol.

In an email, Brandon Darby, editor of Breitbart Texas and the lead reporter on the story, said his sources used the word "caught" because they said the Syrians "only acknowledged being Syrian after they were called out." Darby also noted that "caught" has a "plethora of acceptable definitions," which he supplied via email, though he declined to specify which he had intended to convey.

## US & WORLD



**US appeals court reconsiders decision on ex-bin Laden aide**

**US victim laments attacks on free speech in Bangladesh**



**Planned Parenthood shooting renews focus on domestic terror**

**In slap at Obama, GOP-led House moves to block climate rule**



**Cybersecurity bill would add secrecy to public records laws**

## Federal narrative

We asked key federal agencies for their takes on the reported detentions.

In an emailed statement responding to our query, the Department of Homeland Security, the umbrella agency for Border Patrol, said two Syrian families presented themselves at the Laredo port of entry and were taken into custody for further processing.

"Please emphasize that they PRESENTED themselves," the statement said.

We also touched base with the Texas Department of Public Safety, which previously [doused speculation](#) about terrorists crossing the border in October 2014. Spokesman Tom Vinger, by email, referred us to the Border Patrol.

Meantime, Rick Pauza, a Border Patrol spokesman at the Laredo point of entry, said by phone the eight Syrians described in the Breitbart report "identified themselves truthfully" and did not evade agents.

Darby, informed of this response, told us by email, "CBP, unfortunately, has a history of being deceptive with the public." He also pointed out a June 2014 article he authored for Breitbart titled "[Customs and Border Protection agency caught lying to public.](#)"

The morning after Abbott posted his tweet, McCaul discussed reports of the Syrians in Laredo on [MSNBC's Andrea Mitchell Reports](#). "It was a Syrian refugee family that went to the Laredo port of entry in my state and basically turned themselves in for political asylum," McCaul said, meaning they were seeking shelter from imminent harm in their home country. "They were not infiltrating to conduct terrorist operations."

## Appropriate border crossing procedures

If Syrians were looking for asylum, was walking to the border a reasonable way to do it?

Mana Yegani, a Houston immigration lawyer, told us by phone that one way of seeking asylum is to appear at a port of entry. "This is very common," Yegani said. "That's the way you seek refuge. You cross the border and walk to a border patrol agent."

Typically, she said, after asylum-seekers present themselves to agents, they are sent to detention centers and interviewed by federal asylum officers, who evaluate their cases for admittance to the United States. The process usually takes three to six months, she said.

The [website](#) for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services directs asylum seekers on how to proceed.

"STEP ONE: Arrive in the U.S.," it says.

We asked Homeland Security if any Syrians had sought asylum in the U.S. before. A spokesperson pointed us to [fiscal year 2013 data](#) -- the most recent available -- which showed that 811 Syrians were granted asylum during that period, up from 364 in 2012 and 60 in 2011, the year the Syrian civil war began.

In all, 3.2 percent of the 25,199 asylum-seekers welcomed by the United States were Syrian in 2013.

It's rare for a Syrian to cross the border lacking required papers, other statistics suggest. According to a [September 2014 report](#) by Homeland Security, 72 of the 662,483 "aliens apprehended" by the government in the fiscal year through September 2013 were Syrian citizens--up from 57 the year before, down from 114 two years earlier.

In the fiscal year through September 2014, U.S. Immigration & Customs Enforcement [reported](#) removing nine Syrians from the U.S.--compared to, say, nearly 177,000 people from Mexico and more than 120,000 individuals from Central America.

### Possible factors

So there might not be many Syrians approaching Laredo. We wondered why Syrians would try to enter that way regardless.

Joshua Landis, president of the Syrian Studies Association and director of the Center for Middle East Studies, said by phone there was no reason to be surprised by Syrian asylum seekers.

"The amount of destruction in their country is just stupefying," he said.

A four-year-long civil war between government forces and various rebel groups, including ISIS, has intensified in recent months with bombing campaigns by the United States, Russia, Jordan, France, Saudi Arabia and others, leaving much of the country in shambles. According to an Oct. 27, 2015, [report](#) by the United Nations, the conflict has left 13.5 million people, including 6 million children, in need of protection and aid. Landis said half the homes in Syria had been destroyed, while 30 percent of schools remain operational and electricity and clean water are scarce commodities.

## Our ruling

Abbott tweeted that Syrians were "caught" by federal agents at the border in Laredo which, he said, explains why "Texas is vigilant about Syrian refugees."

His implication was that the potential terrorists were trying to infiltrate Texas, giving fuel to his decision to tell the federal government the state intended not to accept Syrian refugees.

Eight Syrians were taken into custody at the port of Laredo, we confirmed. But Homeland Security officials said the Syrians had turned themselves in to a Border Patrol agent, seeking asylum.

So, Abbott's statement has an element of truth -- Syrians landed in U.S. custody -- but it leaves an incorrect implication of how and why they got there.

We rate the claim **Mostly False**.

***MOSTLY FALSE*** – *The statement contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression.*

To see sources used in this fact-check, click [here](#).

Click [here](#) for more on the six PolitiFact ratings and how we select facts to check.

**Dylan Baddour**

Reporter

**HEARST** *newspapers*

© 2013 Hearst Newspapers, LLC.