Refugee Resettlement - Security Screening Information

Refugees to the United States are more stringently screened and vetted than any other group allowed to enter the country.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees first registers refugees, interviews them, takes biometric data and background information. These refugees—overwhelmingly women and children—have been living in Jordan, Turkey or other frontline refugee-hosting countries for years, struggling to survive. UNHCR has data from its regular interactions with these refugees over the years. Resettlement helps support the stability of nations that are key U.S. allies, as they are straining under the pressure of hosting so many refugees. Only those who pass the U.N. assessment are referred to the United States for resettlement. At least 18,000 have already been through the U.S. process and are awaiting U.S. government consideration and review.

The U.S. government then conducts its own extremely rigorous screening process, including health checks, repeated biometric checks, several layers of biographical and background screening, and in-person interviews by specially-trained officers. Multiple agencies are involved, including the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center, the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, the National Counterterrorism Center, the Department of Defense and U.S. intelligence agencies. DHS has added an additional country-specific layer of review for Syrian refugee applications, which includes extra screening for national security risks.

Secretary Jeh Johnson outlined this process in Congressional testimony in October 2015:

> "With regard to the current refugee crisis, the U.S. is committed to providing refuge to some of the world's most vulnerable people, while carefully screening refugees for security concerns before admitting them to the United States. The reality is that, with improvements to the process we have made over time, refugees are subject to the highest level of security checks. DHS works in concert with the Department of State, the Department of Defense, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center for the screening and vetting of refugees. The U.S. Government conducts both biographic and biometric checks on refugee applications, including security vetting that takes place at multiple junctures in the application process, and even just before arrival to account for changes in intelligence. All refugees admitted to the United States, including those from Syria, will be subject to this stringent security screening. Acting on my direction, USCIS has developed additional protocols to aid in the identification of security concerns with regard to the Syrian population, and the entire Department, along with the interagency, is committed to continual improvement of overall security vetting, as new techniques or sources of information are identified."

More specifically, the U.S. refugee vetting process for Syrian refugees includes the following elements as outlined by Department of Homeland Security officials:

- **Department of Homeland Security Interviews**: Refugees are interviewed by DHS-USCIS officers to determine whether or not they can be approved for resettlement to the United States. These interviews are conducted while refugees are still abroad.
- **Consular Lookout and Watch List Check**: Biographic checks are conducted against the State Department's Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS)—which includes watch list information.

- **Security Advisory Opinions from Intelligence and Other Agencies**: DHS seeks Security Advisory Opinions (SAOs) from law enforcement and intelligence communities for cases that meet certain criteria.
- **National Counterterrorism Center Checks with Intelligence Agency Support:** Interagency checks, known as "IAC's," are conducted with the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) for all refugee applicants within a designated age range, regardless of nationality. In addition, expanded intelligence community support was added to the IAC process in July 2010, and recurrent vetting was added in 2015 so that any intervening derogatory information that is identified after the initial check has cleared but before the applicant has traveled to the United States will be provided to DHS.
- **DHS and FBI Biometric Checks**: Fingerprints are screened against the vast biometric holdings of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Next Generation Identification system, and are screened and enrolled in DHS's Automated Biometric Identification System (IDENT). Through IDENT, the applicant's fingerprints are screened not only against watch list information, but also for previous immigration encounters in the United States and overseas—including cases in which the applicant previously applied for a visa at a U.S. embassy.
- **Department of Defense Biometric Screening**: Biometric screening is also conducted through the Department of Defense (DOD) Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS). ABIS contains a variety of records, including fingerprint records captured in Iraq. ABIS screening has been expanded to refugee applicants of all nationalities who fall within the prescribed age ranges.
- **Enhanced Review for Syrian Cases**: In addition to the many biometric and biographic checks conducted, DHS-USCIS has instituted additional review of Syrian refugee applications. Before being scheduled for interview by a DHS-USCIS officer (while the refugee is still abroad), Syrian cases are reviewed at DHS-USCIS headquarters. All cases that meet certain criteria are referred to the DHS-USCIS Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate (FDNS) for additional review and research. FDNS conducts open-source and classified research on referred cases and synthesizes an assessment for use by the interviewing officer. This information provides case-specific context relating to country conditions and regional activity, and is used by the interviewing officer to inform lines of inquiry related to the applicant's eligibility and credibility. DHS-USCIS reports that FDNS engages with law enforcement and intelligence community members for assistance with identity verification and acquisition of additional information.
- **Additional Screening Checks on Entry**: When they travel to the United States, refugees are subject to screening conducted by DHS-U.S. Customs and Border Protection's National Targeting Center-Passenger and the Transportation Security Administration's Secure Flight program prior to their admission to the United States, as is the case with all individuals traveling to the United States regardless of immigration program.

Additional Resources:

- The *Wall Street Journal* in a video outlines the steps a refugee must go through to reach the United States.
- The *New York Times* in an interactive map shows where Syrian refugees currently reside.
- David Miliband: "There are many ways to come to the United States. Comparatively the refugee resettlement program is the most difficult short of swimming the Atlantic."
- Fran Townsend: "There are no easy answers in Syria, but it's time to stop acting as if the problems there are too hard or too complicated. While we cannot right the wrong of the current policy failure, it is still possible to act now to both alleviate the consequent suffering and mitigate the potential future."
- Governor Nikki Haley: "These are people who have protected our troops, these are people who have been persecuted for being Christian ... these are people who we took in because they were unsafe where they were."
- Finally, **states cannot unilaterally block resettlement**. Governors do not have the legal authority to determine who lives in their states. When refugees are legally admitted to the United States they have the right to move freely throughout the country.