

## REFUGEE SCREENING PROCESS

### STATE DEPARTMENT

All applicants referred to the U.S. for resettlement are screened through the Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS), which contains watch-list information

### NATIONAL COUTERTERRORISM CENTER

Applicants within a certain age range undergo an Inter-Agency Check consisting of screening a wide range of biographic data for review by the NCTC and other intelligence agencies

### FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATIONS

Applicants fingerprints are run through the Next Generation Identification System to check records pertaining to criminal and immigration history

### DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Applicant's fingerprints are screened against the Automated Biometric Identification System, including watch-list information and data on prior immigration encounters both in the U.S. and abroad

### DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Applicants within a certain age range are screened against the Automated Biometric Identification System which includes a variety of data, including fingerprint records from Iraq

The security of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is of the utmost importance. Refugees that are referred to the United States for resettlement must go through over a dozen intensive screenings.<sup>1</sup> Refugees are the most vetted population coming to the U.S. today.<sup>2</sup> Vetting responsibilities are led by the Department of State (DOS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and other government and federal law enforcement agencies play a role in screening refugee applicants as well.

### The Vetting Process for Refugees

#### UNHCR Interviews

Security screenings are aimed at ensuring that refugees will not pose a security risk to the U.S. This means that refugees' biographic and biometric data are vetted against multiple intelligence databases, including their name, address, birthday, place of birth.

After fleeing their home countries, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducts several interviews with refugee applicants. During the interviews, UNHCR determines if an individual qualifies for refugee status, and collects biographic and biometric data. Many refugees meet with a joint screening team, which consists of male and female staff, ideally with the same background as the refugee. During the interview, refugees are asked to respond to standardized questions about their backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

#### U.S. Vetting

Refugees who are selected for referral to the U.S. by UNHCR are vetted by the U.S. Departments of State and Homeland Security in a process that can take anywhere from 18-24 months.<sup>4</sup> All refugee vetting

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uscis.gov/refugeescreening>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights First (2016). Refugee Resettlement – Security Screening Information. New York.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR (2016). The 10 Point Plan in Action: 5, Mechanisms for Screening and Referral. New York.

<sup>4</sup> American Immigration Council (2018). An Overview of U.S. Refugee Law and Policy. Washington, DC.

takes place before traveling to the U.S. Throughout the process, refugees are continuously checked by each agency to ensure that no new relevant information is found. If there is any doubt about whether an applicant poses a security risk, they are denied refugee status in the U.S.

### Security Advisory Opinions

A Security Advisory Opinion (SAOs) is an additional multi-agency review that is required for refugees between the ages of 16-50 coming from one of eleven countries designated by the U.S. government or those who have had their name flagged by the Consular Lookout and Support System; received an unfavorable SAO in the past; are nationals of a country not recognized by the U.S.; or are nationals or employees of a State Sponsor of Terrorism.<sup>5</sup>

Managed by the State Department, SAOs are initiated during the earliest stages of vetting. Before moving forward in the resettlement process, refugees subject to an SAO must complete the process and receive clearance from the Department of State. Following that, if at any time during the vetting process new information becomes available, the SAO process must be initiated again and completed before moving forward.<sup>6</sup>

In January 2017, President Trump signed an Executive Order banning refugees from SAO countries for 90 days. Today, any refugee coming from one of these countries is subject to an SAO screening.

### Syria Enhanced Review

Syrian refugees referred to the United States must undergo an extra security measure called the Syria Enhanced Review. Before the U.S. arranges an interview with Syrian refugee applicants, their applications are reviewed by a Refugee Affairs Officer, and certain cases are referred to Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate (FDNS) for further review. These screenings are performed by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), DHS, FDNS, law enforcement agencies, and the intelligence community.<sup>7</sup>

### Resettling Refugees Enhances National Security

*“RESETTLEMENT INITIATIVES HELP ADVANCE U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY INTEREST BY SUPPORTING THE STABILITY OF OUR ALLIES AND PARTNERS THAT ARE STRUGGLING TO HOST LARGE NUMBERS OF REFUGEES.”*

**- National Security Experts, Letter to Congress, 2015**

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uscis.gov/refugeescreening>

<sup>6</sup> <https://refugees.org/explore-the-issues/our-work-with-refugees/security-screening/>

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights First (2016). Refugee Resettlement – Security Screening Information. New York, NY.

### National Security Experts Agree

In 2015, national security experts, including Henry Kissinger, David Patraeus, Michael Hayden, Brent Snowcroft, Steven Hadley, George Shultz, Michael Chertoff, General James Jones, George Casey, Richard Myers, James Stavridis, John Vessey sent a letter to Congress arguing for the importance of the resettlement program from a national security perspective.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in a 2017 article, the former head of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), Leon Rodriguez, said that based on his experience, the vetting procedures in place for USRAP are “*strong enough to identify any problematic history of an applicant.*”<sup>9</sup>

### Supporting our Allies

Accepting more refugees supports the stability of U.S. allies. Failing to support front-line refugee-hosting states contributes to the destabilization of valuable U.S. allies. Countries that are shouldering most of the refugee flow - like Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon - struggle to accommodate them.<sup>10</sup> Accepting more refugees to the U.S. would help these countries to ease the strain on their systems, allowing them to continue thriving and partnering with the U.S. Refugee resettlement is a concrete way for the U.S. to stand with the international community by sharing the responsibility of helping individuals seeking safety in response to the global refugee crisis.

Currently, 84% of refugees live in developing countries, which can harm struggling economies with already scarce resources.<sup>11</sup> Resettling and helping refugees signals that we stand with and want to support them, advancing our own national security interests by enshrining the U.S. as a partner in the eyes of the global community, instead of a global power turning our backs on those in need.

### The U.S. as an Example

The U.S. has historically been the global leader on refugee resettlement. Reductions in the number of refugees accepted into the U.S. has harmed our diplomatic credibility, making it challenging for the U.S. to pressure other countries to initiate or increase the size of their resettlement efforts. The U.S. should also take asylum seekers arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border as an opportunity to lead by example. By upholding legal and human rights protections, the U.S. illustrates the importance of upholding international law - a strong tool for promoting the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in other countries all over the world.

*Founded in the 1880s to help resettle Jews fleeing persecution, HIAS is the world's oldest refugee agency. Today, guided by our Jewish values and history, we bring more than 130 years of expertise to our work providing services to all refugees in need of assistance, regardless of their national, ethnic, or religious background. To learn more about our work visit us at [HIAS.org](https://www.hias.org)*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/FormerNatSecOfficialsLetterRefugees.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/vetting-refugees-trump/544430/>

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights First (2017). Refugees and U.S. National Security. New York, NY.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/eighty-four-percent-of-refugees-live-in-developing-countries/>