REFUGEE COUNCIL USA

The Rigorous Process of Screening Refugees for Resettlement to the United States

Refugees under consideration for resettlement to the United States must pass through a series of security screenings that ensure they do not pose a security risk. Information gathered during this vetting process is checked against law enforcement, intelligence community, and other relevant databases, including those administered by the National Counterterrorism Center, Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of State, and Department of Homeland Security. If there is any doubt about whether an applicant poses a security threat, they will not be admitted to the US.

What is refugee resettlement?

Resettlement, to the US or one of the other resettlement countries, is the last resort for refugees who cannot return to their countries of origin and face protection risks in the country to which they have fled. It presents a life-saving solution available only to less than one percent of the world's refugees.

Refugees undergo a multi-step security vetting process to resettle to the US

1) Registration & Refugee Status Determination: The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) registers individuals and collects identifying documents, biographic information, and biometric data. UNHCR or the country of asylum interviews the applicant to determine if the individual qualifies as a refugee under international law. A refugee is someone who has fled from their home country and cannot return because they have a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

2) Referral to a Resettlement Country: A refugee who meets one of the criteria for resettlement can be referred to one of the resettlement countries, including the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Refugees do not get to choose where they are referred. Additionally, under legislation passed by the US Congress, Iraqi and Afghan nationals who have been employed by or on behalf of the US government can apply directly to the USRAP without being referred by UNHCR through the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program and the Iraqi Priority-2/Direct Access Program. All applicants undergo the same rigorous security screening process which, on average, takes 18 to 36 months.

3) Resettlement Support Center: A Resettlement Support Center (RSC), contracted by the US Department of State (DOS), conducts a preparatory interview and compiles the applicant's personal data and background information for the security clearance process and the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in-person interview.

4) Security Screening - Consular Lookout and Support System: DOS runs the names, nationality, date of birth, and place of birth of all applicants through the Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS), which contains watch-list information, refusals, immigration violations, criminal histories, terrorism concerns, and intelligence information.

5) Security Screening - Security Advisory Opinion: Certain refugees undergo additional security reviews called Security Advisory Opinions (SAOs). As of 2018, this check applies to refugees from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Republic of South Sudan, Syria, Yemen, and certain stateless Palestinians. These cases require a positive clearance from a number of US law enforcement and intelligence agencies in order to continue the resettlement process.

6) Security Screening - Inter-Agency Check: The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and National Security Agency (NSA) conduct an Inter-Agency Check (IAC) on all applicants within designated age ranges 14 through 79. DOS provides names, dates of birth, and other data to partners for recurrent vetting that runs for 2.5 years even if the applicant is admitted to the US for resettlement.

7) Security Screening - Enhanced Fraud Detection and National Security (FDNS) Review: The Enhanced FDNS Review (EFR) is for all applicants from SAO countries within designated age ranges over age 12. The USCIS Refugee, Asylum, and International Operations Directorate (RAIO) and FDNS coordinate to conduct vetting involving classified and unclassified research and screen data against publicly available social media. USCIS provides information yielded from this review for the interviewing officer to use during applicant interviews.

8) USCIS In-Person Interview: A highly trained USCIS officer conducts a detailed, in-person interview with the applicant and their accompanying family members over age 14. The officer evaluates the applicant's credibility and considers whether their testimony is consistent with country conditions, other relevant interviews, and supporting information. Based on the interview and the information in the applicant's case file, the officer will determine whether the individual qualifies for resettlement and is otherwise admissible under US law.

9) Approval: If the necessary criteria are met, the USCIS officer will conditionally approve the refugee's application for resettlement and submit it to DOS for final processing. Conditional approvals become final once the results of all security checks and the medical screening have been received and cleared.

10) Security Screening – Fingerprints: With fingerprints and photographs collected by a USCIS officer at the time of the in-person interview, USCIS vets fingerprints against FBI records in Next Generation Identification (NGI) for US and select international criminal history; against DHS records in the Office of Biometric Identity Management (OBIM)'s IDENT which includes watch-list information and data on previous immigrant encounters in the US and abroad; and against DOD records in the Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS) which includes fingerprints encountered in DOD operations, including those taken from IEDs; enemy combatants, and detainees.

11) Medical Screening: All applicants approved for resettlement in the US are required to undergo medical screenings conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or a physician designated by a US Embassy. This screening ensures that the applicant does not have any communicable diseases that could pose a public health threat, and, as such, prohibit their admission to the US.

12) Matching Refugees with a Sponsor Agency: As part of the USRAP's public-private partnership, every refugee is assigned to a resettlement agency in the US that assists them upon arrival. This agency places refugees with a local office or affiliate that receives them at the airport, provides for housing needs, and assists with integration, case management, and employment services upon arrival to the US.

13) Cultural Orientation: Refugees approved for resettlement are offered cultural orientation while waiting for final processing. This orientation prepares them for their journey to and initial resettlement in the US.

14) Admission to the United States: Upon arrival at a US airport designated as a port of entry for refugee admissions, a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer will review the refugee's documentation and conduct additional security checks against its National Targeting Center-Passenger (NTC-P) program and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA)'s Secure Flight program. CBP ensures that the arriving refugee is the same person who was screened and approved for admission to the US.

Additional Resources

White House Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States. November 20, 2015. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states.

Letter from former Secretaries of the Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano (2009-2013) and Michael Chertoff (2005-2009), on the security of the refugee program. November 19, 2015. https://www.scribd.com/document/290442757/Two-Former-Homeland-Security-Secretaries-Wrote-President-Obama-on-Safely-Welcoming-Syrian-Refugees.

Letter to Congress from 20 former national security officials on the security of the refugee resettlement program. December 1, 2015. https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/FormerNatSecOfficialsLetterRefugees.pdf.

Debunking 'Extreme Vetting': Recommendations to Build Back the U.S. Refugee Admission Program. International Refugee Assistance Project. October 2020. https://refugeerights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Vetting-Report-2020.pdf