

SECURITY SCREENING OF REFUGEES ADMITTED TO THE UNITED STATES: A DETAILED, RIGOROUS PROCESS

Resettlement is considered a durable solution for refugees who cannot return to their countries of origin or integrate into the current countries that are hosting them. Resettlement to a country like the United States presents a life-saving alternative for a very small number of refugees around the world (less than one half of one percent). Refugees seeking resettlement in the United States must pass through a series of steps aimed at ensuring they will not pose a security risk to the United States. Biographic and biometric information is examined to help confirm a refugee's identity. The information is checked against law enforcement, intelligence community, and other relevant databases, including National Counterterrorism Center, Department of Defense, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of State, and Department of Homeland Security databases. A step-by-step overview of this process is detailed below.¹

- **STEP 1 - Registration & Refugee Status Confirmed:** The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registers individuals and collects identifying documents, biographic information, and biometric data (such as an iris scan for Syrians). In most cases, UNHCR interviews the applicant to determine if the individual qualifies as a refugee under international law. **A refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.**
- **STEP 2 - Referral to the United States:** A refugee who meets one of the criteria for resettlement in the United States is referred to the government by UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or a trained Non-Governmental Organization. Under legislation passed by Congress, Iraqi nationals who have worked for the U.S. government, a U.S. contractor, or a U.S.-based media organization or NGO, and their family members, as well as Iraqis with family members in the U.S., can apply directly to the U.S. resettlement program without being referred by UNHCR. After referral, the screening process takes 18 to 24 months.
- **STEP 3 - Resettlement Support Center:** A Resettlement Support Center (RSC), contracted by the U.S. Department of State (DOS), conducts an interview and compiles the refugee's personal data and background information for the security clearance process and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in-person interview.
- **STEP 4 - Security Screening - Consular Lookout and Support System:** DOS runs the names of all refugees referred to the United States for resettlement through the Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS), which contains watch-list information.
- **STEP 5 - Security Screening - Security Advisory Opinion:** Certain refugees undergo additional security review called a Security Advisory Opinion (SAO). These cases require a positive SAO clearance from a number of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies in order to continue the resettlement process.
- **STEP 6 - Security Screening - Inter-agency Check:** The National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) conducts an Inter-agency Check (IAC) on applicants within a designated age range. The **IAC is a "recurrent vetting" process**; thus, USCIS will be notified of any new derogatory information identified after the initial check and up until the applicant's travel to the United States.
- **STEP 7 - Security Screening - Syria Enhanced Review:** **Syrian refugees referred to the United States for resettlement are flagged for additional security screening (Syria Enhanced Review).** Before USCIS schedules an interview with the applicant abroad, Syrian applications are reviewed by a Refugee Affairs Division officer at USCIS headquarters.
 - **Fraud Detection and National Security Review:** If USCIS finds certain criteria to be met, the case is referred to the agency's Fraud Detection and National Security Division (FDNS) for further review. This review includes open-source and classified research which is compiled into a report for use by the USCIS interviewing officer.

- **STEP 8 - USCIS In-person Interview:** A highly trained USCIS officer will travel to the refugee's location overseas to conduct a detailed, face-to-face interview with the applicant as well as accompanying family over age 14. The officer evaluates the applicant's credibility and considers whether his or her testimony is consistent with country conditions. Based on the interview and the refugee's case file, the officer will determine whether the individual qualifies as a refugee and is otherwise admissible under U.S. law.
- **STEP 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 (Steps 4-7, 10) and the medical screening (Step 11) have been received and cleared.**
- **STEP 10 - Security Screenings – Fingerprint:** With fingerprints and photographs collected by a USCIS officer at the time of the in-person interview (Step 8), USCIS coordinates **three biometric checks** on the applicant.
 - **FBI Screening:** The applicant's fingerprints are run through the FBI's Next Generation Identification System.
 - **DHS Screening:** The applicant's fingerprints are screened against the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Automated Biometric Identification System, which includes watch-list information as well as data on previous immigration encounters in the United States and abroad.
 - **DOD Screening:** The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) screens fingerprints of refugees within a certain age range against its Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS). ABIS contains a variety of data, including fingerprint records from Iraq.
- **STEP 11 - Medical Screening:** All applicants approved for resettlement in the United States are required to undergo medical screening conducted by the International Organization for Migration or a physician designated by the U.S. Embassy. This screening ensures that the applicant does not have any communicable diseases that could pose a public health threat, and, as such, prohibit his or her admission to the United States.
- **STEP 12 - Matching Refugees with a Sponsor Agency:** Every refugee is assigned to a voluntary agency in the United States, such as the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). USCRI places refugees with a local partner agency or office that assists them upon arrival to the United States.
- **STEP 13 - Cultural Orientation:** In addition, 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 United States.
- **STEP 14 - Admission to the United States:** Upon arrival at a U.S. 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 program and the Transportation Security Administration's Secure Flight program. CBP ensures that the arriving refugee is the same person who was screened and approved for admission to the United States.

If there is doubt about whether an applicant poses a security threat, he or she will not be admitted to the United States.

¹ See Amy Pope, Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States, White House (Nov. 20, 2015), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>; Leon Rodriguez, Written Testimony for a Hearing on The Impact of ISIS on the Homeland and Refugee Resettlement, USCIS (Nov. 19, 2015), <http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/download/?id=67507FA7-9008-4D05-8607-744E8C4B1866>.