

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

Refugees being considered for resettlement by the United States must pass through a series of security screenings aimed at ensuring they will not pose a security risk, including biographic and biometric checks. The information examined to confirm a refugee's identity is checked against law enforcement, intelligence community, and other relevant databases, including those administered by the National Counterterrorism Center, Department of Defense, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of State, and Department of Homeland Security. If there is doubt about whether an applicant poses a security threat, he or she will not be admitted to the U.S.

What is Refugee Resettlement?

Resettlement, to the U.S. or one of the other 27 resettlement countries, is the last resort durable solution for refugees who cannot return to their countries of origin and face protection risks in the country to which they fled. It presents a life-saving solution for less than one percent of the world's refugees.

REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROCESSING AND SECURITY STEPS

Information provided by U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, a Refugee Council USA member.

1) Registration & Refugee Status Determination: The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (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 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.

2) Referral to a Resettlement Country: A refugee who meets one of the criteria for resettlement can be referred to one of the 28 resettlement countries, including the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Refugees do not get to choose where they are referred. Additionally, under legislation passed by the U.S. Congress, Iraqi and Afghan nationals who have been employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government can apply directly to the USRAP without being referred by UNHCR. This process is called the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program. All referred refugees and SIV applicants undergo the same rigorous security screening process which, on average, takes 18 to 36 months.

UNHCR's Use of Biometrics

Biometric checks enhance the integrity of UNHCR registration and contributes to greater accuracy of data. The collection of biometric data helps to mitigate risks regarding identity substitution and assists UNHCR in building a sustained and credible identity of refugees over time, including those referred to the U.S. for resettlement.

More information: to.pbs.org/1YItNdW

3) Resettlement Support Center: A Resettlement Support Center (RSC), contracted by the U.S. Department of State (DOS), conducts a preparatory 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.

4) Security Screening - Consular Lookout and Support System: DOS runs the names of all refugees referred to the U.S. for resettlement through the Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS), which contains watch-list information.

5) Security Screening - Security Advisory Opinion: Certain refugees undergo additional security reviews called Security Advisory Opinions (SAOs). 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.

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 up until the applicant's travel to the U.S.

7) Security Screening - Syria Enhanced Review: Syrian refugees referred to the U.S. for resettlement are flagged for an 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.

8) **USCIS In-person Interview:** A highly trained USCIS officer will travel to an embassy or secure processing facility accessible to the refugee 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, other relevant interviews, and supporting information. Based on the interview and the information in the refugee's case file, the officer will determine whether the individual qualifies for resettlement and is otherwise admissible under U.S. 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 Screenings – Fingerprints:** 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 U.S. 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.

11) **Medical Screenings:** All applicants approved for resettlement in the U.S. are required to undergo medical screenings 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 U.S.

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 U.S that assists them upon arrival. The agency places refugees with a local office or affiliate that meets them at the airport, sets up an apartment, and assists them with integration upon arrival to the U.S.

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 U.S.

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 U.S.

Additional Resources

- **White House Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States** - 1.usa.gov/1OYqOfD
- **U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants US Refugee Resettlement Program Refugee Journey Flowchart** - bit.ly/1P7BdjB
- **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 - bit.ly/1nfv2nw
- **Letter to Congress from 20 Former National Security Officials on the security of the refugee program**, December 1, 2015 - bit.ly/1Rk3V7o
- **Rigorous Security Screening of Refugees Resettled in the United States**, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, December 2015 - bit.ly/1TALwTA