National Foundation for American Policy

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New Analysis: 20 Years of Improvements Provide Security and Strong Vetting Procedures for Admitting Refugees to the U.S.

Refugee Admissions the Least Likely Way for a Terrorist to Enter the U.S., According to Security Professionals

Arlington, Va. – Over the last two decades, security and law enforcement professionals at all levels have established, improved and strengthened vetting procedures for refugees to be safely admitted to the United States, according to a new National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) analysis of refugees and national security. The analysis concludes, "It is in America's national security, foreign policy and economic interests to welcome refugees and it can be done without harming national security." The study notes, "President Donald Trump advocated lower refugee admissions by arguing the U.S. government needed to improve security vetting for refugees. However, after the Trump administration increased security vetting for refugees, the administration reduced the annual refugee ceiling and admitted fewer refugees."

The analysis finds terrorism is unlikely through the U.S. Refugees Admissions Program. "A terrorist with a malicious purpose for gaining entry into the U.S. would most likely choose a different path than refugee for access to the United States because the screening and vetting process for the refugee program is more rigorous than any other method of gaining entry to the United States and the Refugee Admissions Process takes a long time," concludes the study's author Elizabeth Neumann, former Assistant Secretary for Counterterrorism and Threat Prevention at DHS, where she oversaw a variety policy and programs addressing international and domestic terrorism, security vetting and human trafficking. She has over two decades of experience in government, including serving on The White House Homeland Security Council and working in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Illustrating how long the refugee process takes, Neumann points out that in 2018 the Resettlement Support Center (RSC) conducted interviews for people that had begun the refugee process in 2009.

The report, "Refugees and Security Vetting," can be found at https://nfap.com/.

The analysis serves as a primer for understanding the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, the National Security Community's Screening and Vetting Enterprise – including continual improvements over the past 20 years and explanation of "extreme vetting" – and the current risks as understood by security professionals.

Honest conversations regarding immigration and refugee policy are still undermined by misrepresentation of the security risk posed by immigrants and security officials' capabilities to mitigate risk. The premise for limiting refugee access based on security concerns – i.e., limited resources for sufficient vetting and the risk posed by refugees – caters to narratives propagated by politics and misrepresents the national vetting process and the significant work accomplished by security and law enforcement officials. "Talking points" used against refugees have played upon domestic fears by misrepresenting the security risk, failing to honestly assess the progress made in security enhancements or refusing to address the resource gaps with proper budgetary support.

The National Vetting Center was established in 2018 as a multi-agency effort to create and maintain "tools and processes" to "enable a thorough, yet efficient review of appropriate intelligence, law enforcement, and other data….in a manner that protects both sources and methods and the privacy civil rights and civil liberties of the individuals whose information is vetted."

Beginning in March 2017, President Trump reduced the FY 2017 refugee ceiling from 110,000 to 50,000, then further reduced the FY 2018 ceiling to 45,000. These changes were made under the auspices that securing the country required more thorough vetting and therefore we could not process as many people.

By early 2019, the various agencies involved in refugee security vetting had implemented the enhancements required for "extreme vetting." While some information technology (IT) systems needed to be connected to reduce some manual and paper-based processes, officials felt confident the system worked. If a known or suspected terrorist attempted to come to the U.S. through the refugee system, they would be detected and detained. Policymakers involved in this accomplishment expected this success would unlock the restrictions placed on refugees.

However, instead of returning the refugee ceiling to traditional levels – as recommended by the Secretaries of Defense, State, and Homeland Security – the Trump administration lowered the refugee ceiling further to 30,000 in 2019 and 18,000 in 2020. When the numbers continued to be reduced, those who initially gave the Trump administration the benefit of the doubt recognized extreme vetting was not a policy designed to keep Americans safe, but rather a policy intended to keep out people.

Among the findings and information in this analysis:

- Jennifer Arangio, who served on the Trump campaign before becoming a National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director with responsibilities for facilitating the refugee ceiling discussion, said, "I did used to think that the refugee program was vulnerable to terrorist infiltration. But then I got here and made it my business to learn the facts about the program, and now I know that refugees are the most vetted category of any immigrant. *You'd be crazy to come if you were a terrorist. This is the last way you would try to get into this country.*"

- The vetting process seeks to answer three key questions before someone can enter the United States: 1) Is the applicant who they claim to be?; 2) Is the applicant eligible for the immigration benefit they seek?; 3) Do they pose a national security or public safety threat to the United States? In the context of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, each question is asked multiple times, by a variety of agencies, throughout the process. USCIS Refugee Officers play a primary role in the vetting process, conducting in-depth interviews evaluating each applicant against the questions discussed above.

- When a refugee has been referred to the United States for resettlement, the Resettlement Support Center (RSC) leverages the information collected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), undertakes pre-screening interviews and starts biographic checks. USCIS then facilitates a number of biometric and biographic checks comparing the applicant's information against U.S. government data. The USCIS Refugee Officer utilizes the information from these checks to structure interviews designed to determine if the individual is telling the truth about their identity, determine eligibility, and discern if any nefarious intent is present.

- USCIS Refugee Officers receive in-depth training to prepare them for their vetting duties. USCIS Refugee Officers receive five additional weeks of "specialized training that includes comprehensive instruction on all aspects of the job, including refugee law, grounds of inadmissibility, fraud detection and prevention, security protocols, interviewing techniques, credibility analysis, and country conditions research." Before deploying

overseas for interviews, officers learn to develop "lines of questioning to elicit information" regarding eligibility and potential security concerns relevant to the applicant's home country. Preparation includes briefings from "outside experts from the intelligence, policy, and academic communities," and deep investigations into timelines, country conditions and details of events that occurred in the applicant's home country.

- If approved by USCIS, the State Department facilitates travel and additional biographic and biometrics checks are conducted by the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to board the flight and at the Port of Entry. After all of these steps, they can be admitted as a refugee.

- We should continue to strengthen and review vetting procedures and the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Government programs are designed and executed by well-intentioned but imperfect individuals, usually woefully under-resourced. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) should complete the technological overhaul currently underway and move from a paper-based system to an electronic system seamlessly interconnected with the vetting process.

- The National Vetting Center needs to be properly funded, the National Vetting Enterprise fully staffed and implementation expedited. The National Counterterrorism Center needs additional resources to keep up with the expanding volume of data discovered about known and suspected terrorists. All of these require resources – time, funding, and personnel – and advocacy and accountability from all sides to ensure success.

- A number of studies demonstrate admitting refugees does not increase the likelihood of terrorist attacks. A study published by the University of Chicago's *The Journal of Politics*, concluded that "in developed countries, refugee stocks do not constitute a Trojan horse that imports terrorism, nor do they boost homegrown terrorism."

- A study published in 2019 by the Cato Institute examined terrorists who conducted attacks in the United States from 1975-2017 by immigration status and nationality and found the chance of a person perishing in a terrorist attack on U.S. soil committed by a refugee was 1 in 2.86 billion per year.

- Evaluation and discussion of refugee policies cannot be predicated on zero-risk expectations or tolerance. If the goal of policymakers is to reduce the threat of terrorism, the data indicate we should be more focused on strengthening the vetting of tourists and business visitors.

Welcoming refugees is a small but critical part in addressing the broader set of factors underlying the global migration challenge. We need to have conversations about how to address the growing number of displaced persons in the world.

As studies demonstrate and national security professionals have testified, refugees can be admitted safely. It is time to shift the policy discussion to develop solutions to the remaining complex challenges. This requires honest dialogue, constructive conversations and sound policy crafted by principled arbitrators from all sides.

The security-based arguments against refugee admissions have not been made in good faith to improve policy. Policy conversation must focus on the actual security challenges. Thoughtful leadership requires professionals and policymakers willing to assess risk, mitigate security concerns and care for humanity.

About the National Foundation for American Policy

Established in 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan public policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia focusing on trade, immigration and related issues. The Advisory Board members include Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati, Ohio University economist Richard Vedder, Cornell Law School professor Stephen W. Yale-Loehr and former INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar. Over the past 24 months, NFAP's research has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major media outlets. The organization's reports can be found at www.nfap.com. Twitter: **@NFAPResearch**

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