

Security Screening and Background Checks – Refugees

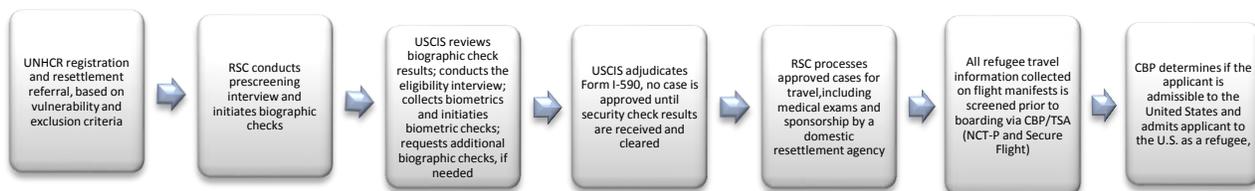
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the security screening and background checks required for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). Applicants for refugee resettlement are subject to the highest degree of security screening and background checks for any category of traveler to the United States.

All refugee applicants receive a standard suite of biographic and biometric security checks. Through close coordination with the federal law enforcement and intelligence communities, these checks are continually reviewed to identify potential enhancements and to develop approaches for specific populations that may pose particular threats. All case members must clear security checks in order for a case to be approved.

USCIS's adjudication of *Form I-590 Registration for Classification as a Refugee* by USCIS is only one part of the USRAP. Department of State (State) has overall coordination and management responsibility of the USRAP and has the lead in proposing admissions ceilings and processing priorities. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identifies and refers certain cases to the USRAP for resettlement and provides important information with regard to the worldwide refugee situation. Additionally, Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs), under cooperative agreements with State, carry out administrative and processing functions, such as file preparation and storage, data collection, and out-processing activities.

General Refugee Process



USRAP Screening

The screening of refugee applicants involves numerous biographic checks that are initiated by the RSCs and reviewed/resolved by USCIS. These include:

- ***Department of State Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS)***¹

CLASS name checks are initiated by DOS for all refugee applicants at the time of pre-screening by the DOS contractor — the Resettlement Support Center (RSC). Responses are received prior to interview and possible matches to applicants are reviewed and adjudicated by USCIS Headquarters. Evidence of the response is forwarded for inclusion in the case file. If there is a new name or alias developed or identified at the interview, USCIS requests another CLASS name check on the new name, and the case is placed on HOLD until that response is received.

Security Advisory Opinion (SAO)²

The SAO is a State-initiated biographic check conducted by the FBI National Name Check Program (NNCP). SAO name checks are initiated at the time of pre-screening by the RSC for the groups and nationalities designated by the interagency as requiring this higher level check. SAO are processed by FBI NNCP, and a response must be received prior to finalizing the decision. If there is a new name or alias developed at the interview, USCIS requests that another SAO be conducted on the new name, and the case is placed on HOLD until that response is received.

- ***Interagency Checks (IAC)***

The IAC consists of screening biographic data, including names, dates of birth, and other data points of all refugee applicants within designated age ranges. This information is captured at time of pre-screening and is provided to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and other intelligence community partners. This screening procedure was initiated in 2008 with NCTC and has expanded over time to include a broader range of holdings and applicants of all nationalities. Prior to recent changes, IAC screening was conducted at the time of initial application and again before an approved applicant's departure to the United States. Since summer 2015, the process includes recurrent IAC screening of all refugee applicants in lieu of the previously conducted pre-departure checks.

At the time of USCIS interview, USCIS staff collects fingerprints and initiates biometric checks. The biometric checks initiated by USCIS for refugee applicants include:

¹ CLASS is a State name-check database that posts use to access critical information for visa adjudication. The system contains records provided by numerous agencies and includes information on persons with visa refusals, immigration violations, criminal histories, and terrorism concerns, as well as intelligence information and child support enforcement data. In addition to containing information from DOS sources, sources for information in CLASS includes NCTC/TSC (terrorist watch lists), TECS, Interpol, DEA, HHS and FBI (extracts of the NCIC Wanted Person, Immigration Violator, Foreign Fugitive Files, VGTOF, and the Interstate Identification Index).

² The Security Advisory Opinion process was implemented after September 11, 2001, to provide a mechanism for additional scrutiny to certain high-risk categories of individuals seeking visas to enter the U.S.

- ***FBI Fingerprint Check through Next Generation Identification (NGI)***

A biometric record check pertaining to criminal history and previous immigration data.

- ***DHS Automated Biometric Identification System (IDENT - f/n/a US-VISIT)***

A biometric record check related to travel and immigration history for non-U.S. citizens as well as immigration violations, law enforcement, and national security concerns. Enrollment in IDENT also allows CBP to confirm identity at the port of entry.

- ***DoD Defense Forensics and Biometrics Agency (DFBA)'s Automated Biometric Identification System (ABIS)³***

A biometric record check of DoD holdings collected in areas of conflict (predominantly Iraq and Afghanistan). DoD screening began in 2007 for Iraqi applicants and was incrementally expanded to all nationalities by 2013. CBP's National Targeting Center-Passenger (NTC-P) conducts biographic vetting of all ABIS biometric matches (both derogatory and benign) against various classified and unclassified U.S. Government databases.

The USCIS in-person interview itself, though not a traditional system check, is also a vital part of the refugee screening process. USCIS Officers conduct extensive interviews with each refugee applicant to develop all relevant issues related to eligibility for refugee resettlement and admissibility to enter the United States. Officers develop lines of questioning to elicit information regarding any involvement in terrorist activity, criminal activity, or the persecution/torture of others, and conduct a credibility assessment on each applicant.

CBP Screening

An applicant with a USCIS approved *Form I-590 Registration for Classification as a Refugee* must be found admissible to the United States by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) before receiving refugee status. CBP receives a manifest of all subjects who have approved *Forms I-590* and have made reservations to travel to the United States by air. CBP receives this manifest eight (8) days before the scheduled travel. The agency performs initial vetting of the subjects before they arrive at a port of entry and the conducts both background additional checks and interviews of these subjects upon arrival at a U.S. Port of Entry.

Controlled Application Review and Resolution Process (CARRP)

If any of the above security and backgrounds checks, or any background check performed at any time during the adjudication of any benefit to include testimony gleaned during the interview, reveal associated national security (NS) concerns (either known or suspected terrorist (KST) or non-KST NS concerns), then the case undergoes a focused national security CARRP review.

Syria Enhanced Review

USCIS's Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate and Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate have collaborated to develop a Concept of Operations for the enhanced review of certain Syrian cases. This review involves FDNS providing intelligence-driven support to refugee adjudicators in terms of threat identification and lines of inquiry, as well as watchlisting and dissemination of intelligence information reports on those applicants determined to present a national security threat.