

U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES



Refugee Security Screening Fact Sheet June 3, 2020

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Background

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is deeply committed to safeguarding the American public from threats to public safety and national security, as well as fulfilling its obligation under U.S. law and policy to assist those fleeing persecution. This fact sheet provides information about security screening and background checks required by the [U.S. Refugee Admissions Program \(USRAP\)](#).

The Department of State (DOS) manages and coordinates the USRAP with the participation of a number of federal agencies, as well as non-governmental partners both overseas and in the United States. USCIS, a component of the Department of Homeland Security, manages the adjudication for every applicant seeking refugee resettlement in the United States. This stringent process relies on information and participation from a number of federal intelligence, counterterrorism, and law enforcement agencies.

Over the past year, after extensive reviews pursuant to Executive Order 13780, *Protecting the Nation for Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States*, and Executive Order 13815, *Resuming the United States Refugee Admissions Program with Enhanced Vetting Capabilities*, the USRAP has instituted new procedures to close security gaps and is taking a risk-based approach to refugee admissions. USRAP partners have taken significant steps to make the refugee screening process—including interviews and background checks—even more rigorous. These measures, aimed at providing an additional layer of security for the American people, are based in part on evaluated intelligence and identified gaps in screening and vetting operations.

The U.S. government has increased the amount of data it collects on refugee applicants, and more refugee applicants are now subject to higher-level security vetting. DHS is working with the DOS and interagency partners from the intelligence community (IC) and law enforcement agencies to conduct these extensive checks. The U.S. government vets all available biographic and biometric information against a broad array of immigration, law enforcement, IC, and other relevant databases, including counterterrorism, to help confirm a refugee applicant's identity, check for any criminal or other derogatory information, and identify potentially relevant information. This information can inform lines of questioning during the refugee interview.

Refugee interviews are mandatory and, by regulation, USCIS must conduct them in person. The refugee interview is an in-depth interview conducted by a specially trained USCIS officer. Recent enhancements to the USRAP include providing interviewing officers with additional training on assessing credibility consistent with the REAL ID Act, as well as issues involving grounds of inadmissibility and national security indicators. USCIS Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate (FDNS) officers now accompany select USCIS refugee processing teams overseas. The FDNS officers on these trips work on fraud and national security cases in real time with interviewing officers on the ground.

USCIS has the sole discretion to approve an application for refugee status and only does so after it has obtained and cleared the results of all required security checks for the principal applicant, as well as any derivative family members included on their case. Just as DOS commonly denies visas, USCIS also routinely denies refugee cases, including for reasons of national security.

Processing Priorities

The U.S. government establishes annual processing priorities that determine which of the world's refugees are "of special humanitarian concern to the United States" and therefore eligible to be considered for resettlement in the United States. The United States may grant a refugee applicant whose characteristics are consistent with these processing priorities an opportunity to apply to the USRAP, but neither approval of the refugee's application nor his or her admission to the U.S. is assured. The priorities currently in use are:

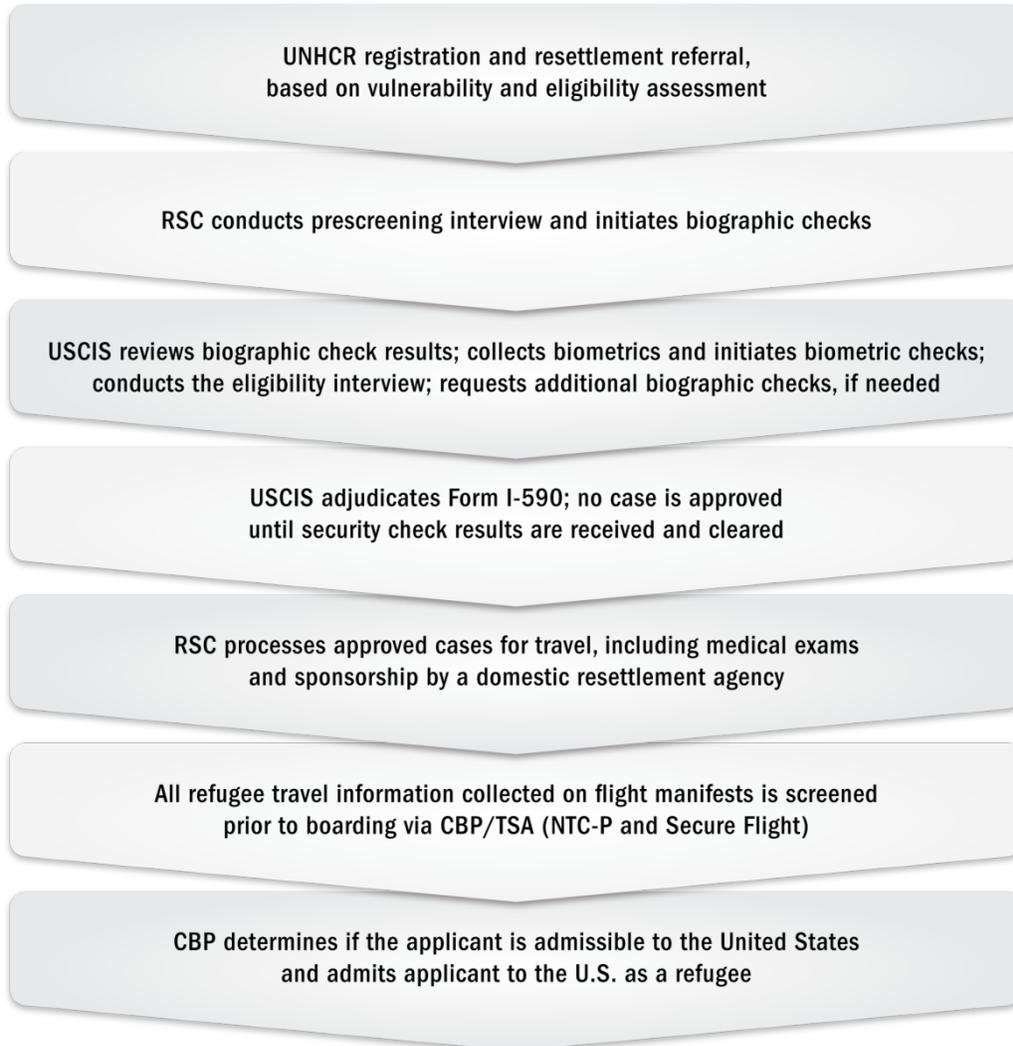
- Priority 1 (P-1): United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), U.S. Embassy, or specially-trained non-governmental organization (NGO) identified cases, including persons facing compelling security concerns, women-at-risk, victims of torture or violence, and others in need of resettlement
- Priority 2 (P-2): Groups of special humanitarian concern identified by the USRAP (such as certain Congolese in Rwanda)
- Priority 3 (P-3): Family reunification cases (spouses, unmarried children under 21, and parents of persons lawfully admitted to the U.S. as refugees or asylees or persons who are lawful permanent residents or U.S. citizens who previously had refugee or asylum status)

USCIS' security vetting of refugee applicants and adjudication of Form I-590, Registration for Classification as a Refugee, is only one part of the broader USRAP:

- DOS coordinates and manages the USRAP and has the lead in proposing admissions ceilings and processing priorities.
- While UNHCR identifies and refers certain cases for consideration by the USRAP for resettlement and provides important information about the worldwide refugee situation, neither UNHCR nor any other U.N. agency has any authority to make security determinations or to grant admission to the United States.
- The USRAP's overseas non-governmental partners are Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs), which operate under cooperative agreements with DOS and carry out administrative and processing functions, such as file preparation and storage, data collection, and out-processing activities. Neither the RSCs nor any other non-governmental partner to the USRAP has any authority to make refugee eligibility or security determinations or to grant refugee status or admission to the United States.
- USCIS is responsible for conducting in-person interviews with all refugee applicants to determine their eligibility for refugee status. This includes determining whether the principal applicant on a case meets the refugee definition, whether all applicants on a

case are admissible to the United States under U.S. law and have not persecuted others, and whether discretion should be exercised favorably to approve the application.

General Refugee Process



USRAP Screening

USRAP screening includes both biometric and biographic checks, which occur at multiple stages throughout the process, including immediately after the preliminary RSC interview, before a refugee's departure to the United States, and on arrival in the U.S. at a port of entry.

The screening of refugee applicants involves numerous biographic checks that are initiated by the RSCs and are reviewed and resolved by U.S. government agencies. These include:

- DOS Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS)¹**
 DOS initiates CLASS name checks for all refugee applicants during pre-screening by the RSC. This includes name checks on the applicant’s primary names as well as any variations used by the applicant. The checks are complete before the USCIS interview, and USCIS reviews and resolves possible matches either at headquarters or in the field at the time of the interview. USCIS includes evidence of the name check response in the case file. If there is new biographic data requiring review at any time during the adjudication process, USCIS requests another CLASS name check and places the case on hold until that response is received.
- Security Advisory Opinion (SAO)²**
 The SAO is a DOS-initiated biographic check that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and IC partners conduct. The RSC initiates SAO biographic checks at the time of pre-screening for groups and nationalities designated by the U.S. government as requiring this higher-level check. SAO responses must be clear before USCIS completes the refugee adjudication. If new biodata is identified at any time during the adjudication process of a case requiring SAO, USCIS requests another SAO on the new information and the case is placed on hold until that response is received.
- Interagency Check (IAC)**
 The IAC screens biographic data, including names, dates of birth, and other data points of all refugee applicants within designated age ranges. The RSC captures this information at the time of pre-screening, and USCIS provides it to IC partners, including the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). This screening procedure began in 2008 and has expanded over time to include a broader range of applicants and records. This is a recurrent check.

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

- FBI Fingerprint Check through Next Generation Identification**
 Recurring biometric record checks of criminal history and previous immigration data.
- DHS Automated Biometric Identification System (IDENT – formerly known as US-VISIT)**

¹ CLASS is a DOS name-check database that U.S. government agencies use to access critical information for adjudicating immigration applications. CLASS contains records provided by numerous federal agencies and includes information on persons with previous 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 National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and Terrorism Screening Center (TSC) (terrorist watch lists), DHS/CBP’s TECS System, Interpol, DEA, HHS and FBI (extracts of the NCIC Wanted Person, Immigration Violator, Foreign Fugitive Files, VGTOF, and the Interstate Identification Index).

² The SAO process was implemented for refugees after September 11, 2001, to provide enhanced scrutiny of certain potentially higher-risk refugee nationalities and demographics.

A biometric record check of travel and immigration history for non-U.S. citizens, as well as immigration violations and law enforcement and national security concerns.

Enrollment in IDENT also allows U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to confirm identity at the port of entry.

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

A biometric record check of Department of Defense (DOD) holdings collected in areas where DOD has or has had a significant military presence. DOD screening began in 2007 for Iraqi applicants and incrementally expanded to all refugee nationalities by 2013.

Enhanced FDNS Review (EFR)

The USCIS Refugee, Asylum, and International Operations Directorate (RAIO) and FDNS work together on enhanced review of certain refugee cases. This review involves:

- Classified and unclassified research
- Screening data against publicly available social media

RAIO and FDNS synthesize this information in an assessment for the interviewing USCIS officer. It provides case-specific context, and the interviewing officer can use it to inform lines of inquiry related to the applicant's eligibility and credibility.

USCIS Interview

The USCIS refugee interview itself, though not a system check, is also a vital part of the refugee screening process. Highly trained USCIS officers conduct extensive in-person, overseas interviews with all refugee applicants on each case to elicit information about eligibility for refugee status. During the interview, the officer:

- Confirms the basic biographic data of the applicant(s);
- Verifies that the applicant(s) was/were properly given access to the USRAP;
- Determines whether the principal applicant has suffered past persecution or has a well-founded fear of future persecution on the basis of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion in his or her home country;
- Determines whether the applicant(s) is/are admissible to the United States and have not participated in persecution of others;
- Determines whether the principal applicant has been firmly resettled in another country – the finding of which would make him or her ineligible for resettlement through the USRAP; and
- Determines whether discretion should be exercised favorably to approve the application.

The officer develops lines of questioning to elicit information regarding any involvement in terrorist activity, criminal activity, or the persecution/torture of others, and conducts a credibility

assessment, consistent with the REAL ID Act, on each applicant. Before the interview, USCIS officers receive training on country-specific issues for populations they interview, including briefings from outside experts from the intelligence, policy, and academic communities.

USCIS National Security Processing

The Controlled Application Review and Resolution Process (known as CARRP) is a USCIS-wide process for handling cases with national security concerns. In general, a national security concern exists when a person or organization has been determined to have a link to past, current, or planned involvement in an activity or organization involved in terrorism, espionage, sabotage, or the illegal transfer of goods, technology, or sensitive information. USCIS trains officers to identify national security concerns in refugee applications and refer those with national security concerns for specific handling in accordance with USCIS policy and procedures.

CBP Vetting & Inspection

Even if USCIS approves an applicant for refugee status and that individual possesses the required USCIS-approved Form I-590, CBP must still find that applicant admissible to the United States. Prior to departure, individuals flying to the United States from a foreign country are subject to CBP vetting. CBP inspects applicants for admission to the United States upon their arrival at a U.S. port of entry and makes the final determination about whether to admit them into the United States.