



International Refugee
Assistance Project

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IRAP REPORT REVEALS TRUMP ADMINISTRATION EXPLOITING “EXTREME VETTING” TO DECIMATE REFUGEE PROGRAM

(New York, NY) – Today, IRAP released a report on the multiple ways in which the Trump Administration exploited and expanded “extreme vetting” measures—including questionable bulk data matching techniques and social media screenings—to grind the U.S. refugee resettlement program to a virtual halt, in particular targeting Muslim refugees and their families.

The report draws from government documents that were obtained in discovery proceedings for two lawsuits: *JFS v. Trump*, which challenged the Administration’s October 2017 refugee ban targeting Muslim refugees, and *Doe v. Wolf*, which challenges the use of a bulk data matching technique in refugee vetting that has resulted in widespread delays and unprecedented increases in discretionary denials for refugees. The documents, along with testimonies, documents from Freedom of Information Act requests, and evidence from client casework, reveal the dozens of changes and expansions the Trump Administration implemented to drastically increase the backlog of refugees stuck in security checks in the resettlement process, as well as “discretionary denials” blocking refugees from ever being resettled.

As a result, thousands of highly vulnerable men, women, and children who often had already been thoroughly vetted, got rejected or stuck in processing for years with little chance of reaching the safety of the United States in the near future. In combination with reduced refugee admissions overall, the effect is devastating for individual refugees, many of whom are at-risk women and children, LGBTI individuals, and Iraqis with U.S. military affiliations.

Key findings of the report are:

- The Trump Administration took advantage of policy changes implemented in 2016 and earlier to expand vetting to the point where refugees from certain countries were virtually unable to be resettled.
- In particular, refugees from so-called “Security Advisory Opinion (SAO) countries,” most of which are majority Muslim, were subjected to new and expanded security checks, encompassing even children, and subjecting all individuals to social media screening and to arbitrary bulk data matching techniques that appear to be similar to the controversial NSA surveillance technique disclosed in 2013.



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- In addition to placing ever increasing burdens on refugee applicants, the Administration also overloaded its agencies with more work. As a result, the processing backlog grew to unprecedented proportions that will take years to undo, leaving thousands of families in despair.

From the report: “The cumulative effect of these changes is to delay the applications of tens of thousands of refugees. . . ; to deny protection on a “discretionary” basis to those who are otherwise eligible as refugees; to prolong, sometimes indefinitely, the reunification of families; to empty the pipeline of applicants for resettlement, ensuring that refugee arrivals remain low for years to come; and, by reducing refugee arrivals for the foreseeable future, to starve (and dismantle) the infrastructure for refugee resettlement.”

“Refugees have long been the most vetted immigrants to come to the United States. For the past four years, I have been disturbed to see the current Administration impose additional ‘extreme vetting’ measures against the advice of national security experts,” **said House Immigration and Citizenship Subcommittee Chair Zoe Lofgren.**

“It is now clear that the lack of transparency in our vetting system has allowed the Administration to arbitrarily shut out interpreters and translators who served alongside our troops. That’s contrary to America’s best interests. We need to conduct a top-to-bottom review of the system and introduce measures to safeguard the vetting process from abuse.”

The report concludes with **three recommendations to ensure refugee processing can continue at a humane and efficient pace and the resettlement program can be built back:**

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the existing security vetting system and make changes to ensure that the security checks are efficient, meaningful, and fair;
2. Create an oversight mechanism for current and future procedures; and
3. Ensure transparency by publicizing policy changes and processing data.

Barbara Strack, the former Chief of the Refugee Affairs Division at USCIS, stated: “This report represents a monumental effort by IRAP to assemble all of this information in one place. The overarching recommendation that a new Administration should do a deep-dive, classified review of all security checks is important. There needs to be internal government visibility and a consensus on ‘thresholds’ for returning results, rather than a zero-tolerance world. And the White House/National Security staff needs to ensure that the vetting agencies have sufficient resources, and then provide oversight to hold them accountable for results.”

Former National Security Council Director for Watchlisting & Combating Terrorist Travel, Christopher Munn, said: “IRAP is describing a critical gap in our nation’s national security resources in thorough detail. Beyond the obvious humanitarian benefits provided by the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), it remains a vital tool used in exercising multiple elements of national power to achieve our foreign policy and national security goals. A functional and thriving Refugee Program is a critical tool for our diplomatic, military, immigration, and intelligence officers to use around the world. We need to restore and rebuild it. Implementing the recommendations made by IRAP provides a pragmatic and achievable roadmap to do just that, starting on Day



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One. I urge the next Administration to dig into the details submitted through this report and prioritize its ambitions to re-establish an effective, meaningful, well-structured, more transparent, and enduring refugee admissions pipeline.”

To download the report, “Debunking ‘Extreme Vetting’: Recommendations to Build Back the U.S. Refugee Admission Program”, [click here](#).

To view the press release, [click here](#).

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