Beat: Travel

U.S. OFFICIALS BACKGROUND BRIEFING ON SYRIAN REFUGEES SCREENING AND ADMISSIONS

November 17, 2015 - VIA TELECONFERENCE

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USPA NEWS - Was held, on November 17, 2015, a Special Briefing with the Office of the Spokesperson, via Teleconference,. The concern was mainly about Syrian Refugees Screening and Admissions inside the United States of America. The transcription was given by the U.S. Department of State. It was in presence...

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MODERATOR: Good morning, everyone. Thanks for joining us. Just given that the issue of refugee resettlement has been a matter of debate and discussion over the past several days, certainly after the recent attacks in Paris as well as Beirut and Turkey, we felt it was important to bring together some of our subject matter experts to go over and outline our refugee admission process to give you all a better understanding of how it works

So we have "" just first of all, the ground rules. This is an on-background briefing, so folks will be referred to as senior Administration officials. One other essential ground rule is that, while I´m sure you all want to ask about the news of the day, we´re not really going to be talking about specific threats or answering questions about specific "" or specific to the ongoing investigation into the recent attacks in France. Again, this is to give you all an overview about how our refugee resettlement process works writ large.

So just to go over our speakers this morning, I´ll give you their names now for you information. First we have [Senior Administration Official One]. Second, we have [Senior Administration Official Two]. And then thirdly, we have [Senior Administration Three]. Henceforth, they´ll be known as Senior Administration Officials One, Two, and Three.

So with all that, we´ll hand it over to Senior Administration Official One, and then we´ll get to your questions in a bit.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Hi, everybody. This is Senior Administration Official One speaking. Thank you for your attention today to our program that admits refugees to the United States. It´s been a successful program that has been running since the mid-1970s, the post-Vietnam War era. Over that time, 3 million refugees have come and successfully resettled in the United States.

In recent days, there have been a lot of questions about the program. We´re happy to answer your questions today. Some of the questions now are focusing in specifically on the security aspects and features of the program. As the President said, his first priority is the safety of the American people. That´s why, even as the United States accepts more refugees, including Syrians, we do so only after subjecting them to the most rigorous screening and security vetting of any category of traveler to the United States.

We also have to remember that many of these refugees are fleeing precisely the same type of senseless violence that occurred in Paris. Slamming the door in their face would be a betrayal of our values. Our nation can welcome refugees desperately seeking safety and ensure our own security. We can and must do both.

So I want to reassure you all that all refugees of all nationalities considered for admission to the United States undergo intensive security screening, and this involves multiple federal intelligence, security, and law enforcement agencies. And we do this to ensure that those admitted are not known to pose a threat to our country.

The safeguards that are used include biometrics, or fingerprint and biographic checks, and a lengthy in-person overseas interview that is carried out by specially trained DHS "" Department of Homeland Security "" officers, who scrutinize the applicant´s explanation of individual circumstances to ensure the applicant is a bona fide refugee and is not known to present security concerns to the United

States.

Mindful of the particular conditions of the Syria crisis, Syrian refugees go through additional forms of security screening. And we continue to examine options for further enhancement for screening refugees, the details of which are classified. But the classified details are regularly shared with relevant congressional committees.

So I am happy to have colleagues on the line who know more about the specifics of the security screening, but I want to tell you that I personally think of this program as a proud American tradition that not only rescues lives and gives people a new start in life, but it also enriches our country and our nation.

And one of the things that makes my job easier is that I know all of my bosses agree with that concept. So even as we take a lot of questions now and from the Hill and from the public, we are talking about a program that is in the best American traditions and that reflects our values.

MODERATOR: Great. Perhaps Senior Administration Official Number Two can now say a few words.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Sure. Thank you. Hi, this is Senior Official Number Two with [title withheld]. I´m going to talk a little bit more in detail about the security checks that have already been mentioned and talk in "" about certain checks that refugee applicants of all nationalities go through, and then some particular enhancements with regard to Syrian refugee applicants.

Again, this is a part of our program that is extremely interdisciplinary. It´s a lot of different federal agencies. So on the operational front, while the State Department and USCIS take the lead overseas, when it comes to doing the security vetting we have law enforcement and intelligence community colleagues who are really integral parts of the program.

I should also mention that these security checks have been enhanced over the years and we expect that they´ll continue to be enhanced as we´re able to identify new opportunities. But to a large extent, I would say that with the Syrian program, we´ve benefited from our years of experience in vetting Iraqi refugee applicants. And so the partnerships we have today and the security checks we have today really are more robust because of the experience that we´ve had since the beginning of large-scale Iraqi processing in 2007.

So refugee applicants of all nationalities go through both biographic "" that´s name and date of birth and other biographic elements "" and also biometric security checks. So we check fingerprints for all refugee applicants. Collecting that information and coordinating those checks is a shared responsibility between the Department of State and DHS. And then, as I mentioned, the "" it´s other agencies within the federal government, including the FBI, the Department of Defense, and others, who actually vet the information of the refugee applicants against those other holdings.

So the biographic checks, typically they go through something called the CLASS system, which is the Consular Lookout System. It´s coordinated by the FBI. Some checks go through a higher "" some applicants go through a higher-level name check that we call the Security Advisory Opinion. They also go through something we call the interagency check, which checks against two different partners to see if there´s any information there. And I think our colleague number three will talk about that check in a little bit more detail.

With respect to the biometric checks, there really are sort of three partners behind the biometric checks. So we check against FBI holdings "" so if anyone had been in the United States, if a criminal record, for example, had been committed in "" been recorded in the United States, we would have that information. The DHS also coordinates another set of biometric holdings, which are not necessarily criminal, but have various types of civil information. So if a refugee applicant had applied, for example, for a visa overseas, gone to a U.S. embassy or consulate, their biometric could be captured at that time.

That´s not necessarily derogatory, but it gives us information about whether the person´s been consistent in terms of their identity, the location, their nationality, so that´s information that we´re very interested in. And then the third piece is the Department of Defense. We check against some Department of Defense biometric holdings as well.

What I´ve been describing up till now are checks that are for refugee applicants of all nationalities, but with the Syria program we also instituted an additional set of screening that we call the Syria Enhanced Review.

So for Syrian refugee applicants, all of those cases are reviewed at headquarters by refugee specialists ahead of time. And there´s a

file that´s already been created by virtue of their registration with the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, and through their first administrative contact with the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. So there´s information there about where the refugee has come from, what caused him or her to flee, what their experience was. And depending on what we see in that file, we review certain cases with national security indicators to a special part of our agency "" our Fraud Detection and National Security unit.

And they can do individualized research using classified and unclassified records and give "" prepare information back for the individual refugee adjudicator that´s individualized to that case.

So just to give a sort of example, if somebody says, 'I was at a demonstration in Aleppo and the soldiers came, or the police came, and something happened,' we can actually look back and see was that consistent with known country conditions at that time in that place, and we can follow up lines of questioning that would be appropriate under those circumstances.

The other thing I wanted to emphasize is that every refugee applicant is interviewed in person by specially trained staff. The basic training we have for refugee officers is eight weeks, which is teaching them protection law but it´s also teaching them how to elicit testimony, how to test credibility. And for applicants who are working particularly with Iraqi and Syrian refugee applicants, they receive specialized training before they interview that type of case. And we have colleagues from the law enforcement and intelligence community join us for that training. So they participate in that training of our adjudicators.

In addition, if there´s anything that we identify in the interview that we think needs some individualized follow-up, we have those relationships with the law enforcement and intelligence communities that we can circle back and talk to them if there are issues that arise in an individual interview.

So we conduct non-adversarial interviews with refugee applicants. We´re working with Syrians mainly in Amman, Jordan and in Istanbul, Turkey, to a smaller extent in Cairo; we´ll soon resume processing in Lebanon, and a smattering in other locations.

And so why don´t I conclude my opening remarks with that and then pass it on to my colleague, Official Number Three.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: This is Official Number Three from [title withheld]. A couple of points to make here on behalf of the larger intelligence community as relates to this process. The refugee vetting and screening process has really benefitted, in a lot of ways, from the lessons that we learned with respect to information sharing for CT purposes since 9/11. Over those years, we´ve managed to refine and enhance the degree to which we can compare information in the communities´ holdings, representing all the different agencies against refugee and other types of traveler data.

So the refugees as a population get the same type of attention that we apply to many other classes of traveler, only it´s more intensive on the refugee side for the very process reasons that you´ve heard outlined by the two preceding officials. So we´ve integrated a lot of the data that relates to CT and can use it to adjudicate the biographic and the biometric information that we have coming in from the adjudicating agencies.

So we are closely linked within the community, within the IC, as well as with DHS and State. We have their representatives here on site that work with us to help resolve potential hits. And it´s dynamic, to the extent that even as we provide feedback on names, if subsequently information is learned that wasn´t available at the time that we initially checked our holdings, there are means to flag that information and to get it back into the hands of DHS or State or FBI or wherever it should go.

So we´re constantly refining the process. It benefits from the lessons that we learned over the years from vetting visitor visas and other kinds of travel. And we´re constantly looking to improve the efficacy of what we are doing screening-wise with this data.

So with that, I´ll turn it back over to the moderator.

MODERATOR: Great. Thanks so much. Appreciate it. Without further ado, we can go ahead and get to your questions. Rochelle.

.....TO BE CONTINUED WITH 'SYRIAN REFUGEE ISSUE-U.S. SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS RESPOND TO THE PRESS'

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