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SYRIAN REFUGEE FLOWS

SECURITY RISKS AND COUNTERTERRORISM CHALLENGES

Preliminary Findings of a House Homeland Security Committee Review



HOMELAND SECURITY
COMMITTEE

Background

Beginning in December 2014, the Majority Staff of the House Homeland Security Committee began investigating security concerns regarding the Syrian refugee crisis. This report provides preliminary findings of the review and is based on Congressional hearings; meetings with officials from multiple departments and agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the National Counterterrorism Center; national security briefings; overseas travel throughout the Middle East, Mediterranean, Balkans, and Western Europe to examine counterterrorism screening and refugee flows; meetings with foreign partners and non-governmental organizations; extensive document review; and additional outside consultations.

Summary

More than four million Syrians have fled the conflict zone in their home country, contributing to the largest global refugee crisis since World War II. According to statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than half a million of them have traveled to Europe to seek asylum or are attempting to resettle elsewhere in the West, including the United States. In response to the crisis, the Obama Administration has announced plans to “surge” admissions of Syrian refugees into the United States, including admitting at least 10,000 over the course of this fiscal year.

A review by the Majority Staff of the House Homeland Security Committee concludes that the Administration’s proposal will have a limited impact on alleviating the overall crisis but could have serious ramifications for U.S. homeland security. Additionally, widespread security gaps across Europe are increasing the terrorism risk to our allies and present long-term implications for the U.S. homeland.

Preliminary Findings

Finding 1: Islamist terrorists are determined to infiltrate refugee flows to enter the West—and appear to already have done so in Europe.

- At least one terrorist responsible for the Paris attacks is suspected of having entered Europe through refugee flows.
- In the days leading up to the Paris attacks, officials in Europe warned that ISIS was deliberately targeting these routes.¹

- Warnings have been mounting that ISIS is focused on deploying operatives to the West, especially Europe. A French citizen who returned from Syria said the war zone had become “a factory of jihadists trained to hit France and Europe in the very near future,” according to a report in recent weeks from France’s Justice Ministry.²
- Syrian refugees have also reported sporadically that they have witnessed suspected ISIS fighters in their midst.³
- An international terrorism research organization published a bulletin in September warning that there were already a number of reported cases of ISIS infiltration of refugee routes.⁴

Recent warning signs have raised concerns that ISIS and other Islamist terrorist groups have been attempting to infiltrate refugee flows:

- In October 2015, Germany was reportedly investigating 10 cases of suspected terrorists posing as Syrian refugees or committing war crimes abroad.⁵
- Hungarian police said they arrested a Syrian man suspected of being associated with Islamist extremists and starting a border riot.⁶
- German authorities are reportedly investigating whether a Syrian asylum-seeker in northeast Germany fought for ISIS in Syria.⁷
- A Turkey-based document forger interviewed as part of a British media outlet investigation said ISIS operatives are using fake identification to travel to Europe among the refugee and migrant flows.⁸
- Lebanon’s Education Minister said on September 14, 2015, he believed that ISIS is facilitating its operatives infiltration into Europe using refugee flows.⁹
- Bulgarian authorities said they arrested five Albanians suspected of ISIS links after they attempted to illegally cross the Macedonia-Bulgaria border.¹⁰
- The European Union’s top prosecutor Michele Coninsx said on July 6, 2015, she had received information indicating ISIS operatives were entering Europe via migrant boats.¹¹
- Italian counter-terrorism official Bruno Megale said on May 20, 2015, that a suspected terrorist linked to the ISIS-claimed Bardo Museum attack in Tunisia arrived in Italy via a migrant boat.¹²
- An advisor to the Libyan government said on May 17, 2015, he believed ISIS fighters were being snuck into Europe based on conversations he had with migrant smugglers in North Africa.¹³
- A Libyan ISIS propagandist reportedly discussed the prospect of funneling jihadists from Syria and Iraq to Libya and eventually into Europe via migrant boats.¹⁴
- A Turkey-based ISIS operative and two smugglers said they had helped infiltrate jihadists into Europe by smuggling them among refugees traveling by boat.¹⁵
- A German newspaper reported in October 2014 that ISIS leaders intended to smuggle operatives into Europe by exploiting refugee flows.¹⁶

Concerns in the United States

Finding 2: *While America has a proud tradition of refugee resettlement, the United States lacks the information needed to confidently screen refugees from the Syria conflict zone to identify possible terrorism connections.*

FBI Director James Comey on the challenges of screening Syrian refugees: “We can query our databases until the cows come home, but nothing will show up because we have no record of that person...You can only query what you have collected.”

- Top U.S. counterterrorism officials have been warning for months that the intelligence on the ground in Syria is insufficient to thoroughly vet individuals traveling to the United States from the conflict zone. It is difficult both to confirm that Syrian asylum-seekers are who they claim to be and to determine they do not have ties to terrorist groups.
- Recently, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services official Matthew Emrich disclosed that the government does not have access to any database in Syria that can be used to check the backgrounds of incoming refugees against criminal and terrorist records.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it was revealed that over 90% of Syrian refugee applicants get approved, despite intelligence gaps and absent the ability to thoroughly check for security risks.¹⁸
- According to former FBI assistant director Tom Fuentes, “Our human sources [in Syria] are minimal, and we don’t have a government we can partner with, and that’s a key thing.”¹⁹
- National Counterterrorism Center Director Nicholas Rasmussen explained that “the intelligence picture we’ve had of this [Syrian] conflict zone isn’t what we’d like it to be... you can only review [data] against what you have.”²⁰
- Affirming these concerns, FBI Director James Comey testified in October to the Committee that “we can only query against that [data] which we have collected. So if someone has not made a ripple in the pond in Syria in a way that would get their identity or intentions reflected in our databases, we can query our databases until the cows come home, but nothing will show up because we have no record of that person...You can only query what you have collected.”²¹
- Earlier this year, FBI Assistant Director Michael Steinbach said that “the concern in Syria is that we don’t have the systems in places on the ground to collect the information... All of the data sets, the police, the intel services that normally you would go and seek that information [from], don’t exist.”²²

Finding 3: *Despite security enhancements to the vetting process, senior officials remain concerned about the risks and acknowledge the possibility of ISIS infiltration into U.S.-bound Syrian refugee populations.*

National Intelligence Director James Clapper stated that “we don’t obviously put it past the likes of ISIL to infiltrate operatives among these refugees.”

- Departments and agencies responsible for the security of the refugee vetting process have explained that additional screening measures have been put place to ensure that Syrian refugees do not have ties to terrorism. However, after extensive briefings, Committee staff were not satisfied that these measures would meaningfully mitigate the risks associated with a lack of intelligence on the individuals being admitted.
- FBI Director James Comey explained that “there is risk associated with bringing anybody in from the outside, but especially from a conflict zone like [Syria]...My concern there is that there are certain gaps I don’t want to talk about publicly in the data available to us.”²³
- DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson added, “It is true that we are not going to know a whole lot about the Syrians that come forth in this process.”²⁵ He also explained that “organizations like ISIL might like to exploit” the Syrian refugee resettlement program into the United States.²⁴
- Similarly, James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, stated that “we don’t obviously put it past the likes of ISIL to infiltrate operatives among these refugees.”²⁵
- Retired General John Allen, the president’s recent envoy on the coalition to defeat ISIL urged similar caution. “We should be conscious of the potential that [ISIS] may attempt to embed agents within that [Syrian refugee] population.”²⁷

Finding 4: Surging admissions of Syrian refugees into the United States is likely to result in an increase in federal law enforcement’s counterterrorism caseload.

- Following the rise in admissions of Iraqi refugees into the United States, it was discovered that two al Qaeda terrorists had managed to slip through the cracks and resettle in Kentucky in 2009.²⁸ The FBI reportedly still has “dozens” of ongoing counterterrorism cases tied to these admissions.²⁹
- The Committee has been made aware that officials in multiple departments and agencies are concerned about accelerating Syrian refugee admissions and fear that the lack of caution will result in a range of new terrorism cases domestically.
- Given the current high-threat environment, agencies are stretched extremely thin in terms of their ability to monitor suspects and disrupt plots. This year the FBI has been forced to confront nearly a thousand terrorism-related cases in every single U.S. state, according to FBI Director Comey, straining law enforcement resources. “We had to surge hundreds of people from criminal cases—which are important—and move them over to the national security side,” he noted. Comey said he was unsure what the Bureau would do if there was a return to this level of operational tempo.³⁰

Concerns in Europe

Finding 5: *Europe’s open borders are a “cause célèbre” for jihadists.*

- It is no secret that refugees have found it remarkably easy to enter Europe. Border security along the European Union’s frontiers is weak, and Committee staff found that despite calls for tighter controls, some countries were still willing to “look the other way” to allow refugees to enter en masse in hopes they would pass through and seek asylum elsewhere.
- EU President Jean-Claude Juncker has warned countries to stop “waving people through” if Europe intends to get the Syrian refugee crisis under control.³¹
- Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently noted that European security weaknesses could allow ISIS to widely disperse operatives onto the continent,³² a fear that has been validated in the wake of the Paris attacks.
- Europe’s 26-country Schengen Area is ground zero for the continent’s terrorist travel woes. Members of the area have abolished border checkpoints and passport controls to allow anyone inside it to move effortlessly between the many countries. But in addition to helping tourists, the wide-open area has benefited a number of terrorists who have criss-crossed the continent freely while plotting acts of terrorism.³³

Finding 6: *European governments face substantial obstacles to information-sharing and are stymied by a lack of internal border checks in their efforts to keep track of terrorist suspects.*

- Foreign officials in Western Europe who spoke with Committee staff said that already some asylum-seekers had been identified as having potential terrorism ties but by the time they were flagged, the individuals had already left the area. Authorities in refugee “transit” countries also expressed the same concerns, as noted below.
- The absence of common European police and intelligence services magnifies the challenges in locating and monitoring such potential extremists. Indeed, extremists are crossing borders more quickly than the information needed to stop them. Individual European states face serious legal and bureaucratic barriers to intelligence information sharing.
- Jihadists are well-aware of the benefits of Europe’s permissive travel environment. An ISIS e-book published this year advises aspiring fighters about the ease of traveling undetected across the European continent. The now-deceased ISIS operative known as “Jihadi John” reportedly traveled freely through Europe despite being on a terrorist watchlist. Similarly Hayat Boumeddiene, an associate of the terrorists who attacked Charlie Hebdo and a kosher market in Paris, was known to French police but avoided detection by leaving the country, driving to Spain, and boarding a flight for Turkey. “I had no difficulty getting here,” she bragged from Syria in an ISIS- published interview.³⁴
- The assailant behind an attempted terrorist attack in August on a high-speed train from Amsterdam to Paris—Ayoub El Khazzani—reportedly traveled easily between France, Belgium, Austria, and Germany before launching his attack, despite being on several European watchlists.³⁵

Finding 7: Glaring security gaps along refugee routes into Europe—especially lax security screening of travelers—make the pathway highly susceptible to terrorist exploitation.

“There are no real controls,” one diplomat in the region explained. “[The authorities] take fingerprints, accept whatever identification they provide—if they have one—and send them on their way.”

- A large proportion of the refugees and migrants that have entered Europe this year are unregistered, and even those who have been registered upon arrival have gone through a process that is rife with security holes, the Committee’s review finds.
- While some countries are taking photographs of refugees, collecting registration forms, and taking fingerprints, this information rarely appears to be systematically vetted against counterterrorism databases.³⁶
- Officials in several refugee transit countries told Committee staff that individuals passing through were not generally being screened against national, regional, or international terrorism watchlists.³⁷
- “There are no real controls,” one diplomat in the region explained. “[The authorities] take fingerprints, accept whatever identification they provide—if they have one—and send them on their way.”³⁸
- Fraud is widespread. Refugees and economic migrants have been able to provide false documents, names, nationalities, and other information to authorities who have limited means to cross-check and validate the information given the volume of travelers and finite police resources.³⁹ While the overwhelming majority of these travelers are unlikely to have nefarious intent, the security gaps are a boon for extremists and returning foreign fighters, some of which may be on terrorist watchlists but would likely not be detected due to deficient screening.
- Border police in one country visited by Committee staff explained that they do check some individuals who seem suspicious against criminal and counterterrorism databases; however, they admitted that such individuals are usually gone by the time authorities receive information back on them.⁴⁰

Finding 8: Mediterranean and Balkan countries risk becoming a new “terrorist turnpike” into the West due to particularly poor information sharing and weak vetting systems.

One border guard told Committee staff in the days before the Paris attacks that he thought there was a “high risk that people with bad intentions would come through.”

- By the end of this year, close to one million refugees and migrants will have arrived in Europe via Mediterranean sea routes and/or land border crossings through the Balkans.⁴¹
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- Rather than stop the flows, some of these countries are accelerating the travel of refugees toward their final destinations in places like Germany and Sweden and providing means of transport. This makes it even easier for potential extremists to make their way into the continent undetected.
- One refugee interviewed by Committee staff expressed amazement at how quickly his travel into Europe was being facilitated—aided by ease of access to ferries, a steady stream of buses, and free train rides sponsored by governments eager to move the refugees away from their territory.⁴²
- These European border states are in many cases the least well-equipped to conduct comprehensive security screening and vetting of travelers.
- In one EU location, Committee staff asked police what was done with the registration information from migrants—including whether it was shared with other European partners along the route or checked against criminal and terrorism databases. A local official responded that it was simply held in a national data repository.⁴³
- “Each country does what it wants,” explained one senior official in a Balkan country, adding that there is limited information exchanged between governments.⁴⁴
- Some countries along the refugee pathway are EU states bound by strict data privacy laws that make them wary to pass along personal information, while others or not bound by the same restrictions. In other cases, historic bilateral tensions have prevented cooperation. The result is a fragmented system of information-sharing (and lack thereof) between various security services, border police, and militaries.
- A “pass-the-buck” mentality permeates the region, with a number of transit countries arguing that it is the responsibility of the previous country to do thorough security screening and vetting of refugees.
- One border guard told Committee staff in the days before the Paris attacks that he thought there was a “high risk that people with bad intentions would come through.”⁴⁵

Finding 9: *Syrian refugee populations in Europe have already been directly targeted by extremists for recruitment, and in the long run certain communities in which they resettle are likely to become “fertile soil” for violent radicalization.*

- Officials overseas told Committee staff they have seen signs that Islamist radicals are actively working to recruit from the arriving pools of refugees and asylum seekers. In fact, one official indicated that they are seeing “quite a lot” of these cases.⁴⁶
- In one European country alone, law enforcement is aware of dozens of cases of attempted recruitment of refugees by extremists.⁴⁷
- Over the long term, government leaders across Europe are worried that these populations will fail to be integrated into society and will maintain close ties to the world’s most volatile terrorist safe haven, increasing the odds of potential radicalization.⁴⁸
- Many European countries lack the resources to establish effective assimilation programs, and even when they do, officials and non-governmental organizations have expressed concern that they often lose track of these individuals once they have declared asylum because of the ease of movement between European countries.

Finding 10: America's security is put at risk when partner countries fail to conduct adequate counterterrorism checks on refugees and are unable to cope with the radicalization challenges created by mass migration.

- When our allies overseas are unable to effectively weed out suspects with terrorist ties from refugee flows, those individuals represent a long-term danger to U.S. security.
- Similarly, asylum-seekers who are recruited by extremists or who are radicalized in part by societal exclusion also pose a potential threat to U.S. interests.
- Depending on the country, refugees in Europe are able to get Western passports within a few short years, giving them visa-free access to the United States.

Recommendations

1. Immediate action must be taken to temporarily suspend the admission of Syrian refugees into the United States until the nation's leading intelligence and law enforcement agencies can certify the refugee screening process is adequate to detect individuals with terrorist ties.

2. The Government Accountability Office should initiate an end-to-end review of the refugee screening and vetting process, with a particular focus on the integrity of the current procedures for conducting national security checks on Syrian refugees.⁵⁰

3. The President should act immediately to implement the recommendations of the bipartisan Congressional Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel to enhance America's security posture to prevent terrorist infiltration into the United States.

4. The U.S. intelligence community and law enforcement should launch a concerted effort with our European partners to review all data already collected from refugees and migrants—and to screen it against counterterrorism and intelligence databases to find any possible extremist connections.

5. U.S. government departments and agencies should ramp up efforts to assist our European partners in building the capacity to conduct robust, consistent counterterrorism vetting of refugees and migrants going forward.

6. U.S. government departments and agencies must also work with European and Middle Eastern partners to close information-sharing gaps and improve intelligence and law enforcement cooperation related to Syrian refugees.

7. Ultimately, the threat posed by terrorist exploitation of refugee routes can only be addressed at the source through decisive action to roll back and defeat ISIS, to expedite the removal of the Assad regime, and to keep Syria from remaining an Islamist terror safe haven. Accordingly, the President must work with our allies to lay out a credible strategy for victory and long-term stability in Syria.

Endnotes

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