

Extreme Vetting: Myths and Facts

Pres. Trump is trying to change the immigration system to exclude Muslims from the U.S. Though getting a visa already requires passing several national security checks, the State Department has begun implementing new vetting procedures to make it harder for people – mainly Muslims – to come to the U.S. On September 24, 2017, President Trump issued a proclamation that indefinitely bars almost all travel to the U.S. from six Muslim-majority countries (Chad, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen), and subjects Iraqi nationals to “additional scrutiny.” These policies are based on three major myths:

MYTH: Foreign-born persons commonly commit terrorist attacks in the U.S.

FACT: Terrorist attacks committed by foreign-born persons are exceedingly rare. A Cato Institute study found that only 0.39 percent of all murders in the U.S. from 1975-2015 were perpetrated by foreign-born terrorists; nearly all of those – 98.6 percent – happened on September 11, 2001. Over the past ten years, Americans were more than ten times as likely to die in a lightning strike than to be killed by a foreign-born terrorist on U.S. soil. Extreme vetting and travel bans are, at best, solutions in search of a problem.

MYTH: Getting a U.S. visa is easy, and vetting procedures have been lax.

FACT: The U.S. visa vetting system is one of the world’s toughest. Applicants’ biographic data, photographs, and fingerprints are collected and screened against a range of national security databases that contain millions of entries and include classified information. Applicants must prove they do not intend to stay in the U.S. permanently and that they have every incentive to return home. This evidence can include proof of income and property ownership; proof of business ownership, or assets; proof of employment; proof of immigration or visa status in the country where they are residing; and travel itinerary or other explanation of the planned trip. People from countries that are suffering from conflict often get refused visas. For example, over half of all Somalis and Syrians applying for visas were rejected last year, and so were close to half of all Libyans.

MYTH: Discriminating based on national origin or religion makes America safer.

FACTS: National security decisions based on religious prejudice do not make the U.S. safer. More than 40 national security experts from across the political spectrum have unequivocally told courts that travelers to the U.S. should not be vetted on religious or national stereotypes, but rather on specific threat information. In fact, an analysis by President Trump’s own Department of Homeland Security concluded that citizenship was an unreliable indicator of terrorism threat. Two federal appellate courts rejected the administration’s argument that a ban on travel from Muslim countries was necessary for national security. Further evidence that the national security rationale put forward for the ban is a pretext: zero people from the affected countries have murdered Americans on U.S. soil.