



## How is the US vetting tens of thousands of Afghans evacuated from Kabul?

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WASHINGTON (SBG) — As the urgency of the evacuation from Kabul grows, the White House has sought to assure Americans that the thousands of Afghans boarding flights will be subject to sufficient national security vetting before they are granted entry to the United States, but concerns remain amid a hectic withdrawal effort.

“At these sites where they’re landing, we are conducting thorough scrutiny, security screenings for everyone who is not a U.S. citizen or a lawful permanent resident,” President Joe Biden said Sunday. “Anyone arriving in the United States will have undergone a background check.”

National security adviser Jake Sullivan offered more details Monday, telling reporters Afghan evacuees are subject to “biometric and biographic background checks” at transit centers in multiple countries before being relocated to the U.S. or a third country. He did not specify how those checks are being conducted, but biometric vetting usually involves matching data like voiceprints, palm prints, iris scans, or facial features.

“Once screened and cleared, we will welcome these Afghans, who helped us in the war effort over the last 20 years, to their new home in the United States of America,” Biden said. “Because that’s who we are. That’s what America is.”

A Department of Homeland Security spokesperson told Bloomberg multiple agencies are surging resources and staff to assist with vetting in Bahrain, Germany, Kuwait, and Qatar. U.S. officials would not say how many Afghans had been flagged as security risks in that process, but a British military official said some people on the U.K.’s no-fly list have attempted to board evacuation flights.

“It’s actually the system working,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday when asked about a report that an evacuee taken to Qatar had been flagged for possible Islamic State ties.

In theory, at least, any Afghans admitted to the airport in Kabul would be Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants who already completed initial stages of the vetting process. However, CNN reported thousands of Afghans with no documentation made it onto the airport grounds early in the evacuation, and there were no plans to kick them out.

The CNN report also cited a source stating SIV applicants were issued electronic visas without names on them, and some Afghans who were not eligible presented screenshots of those visas to access the airport. Still, Biden administration officials maintained anyone who reaches the United States after evacuating Kabul will have been thoroughly vetted either in Afghanistan or in a third country.

“Before anyone is brought to the United States, that person would undergo a rigorous vet,” State Department spokesman Ned Price said Monday. “That includes intelligence, it includes law enforcement, counterterrorism professionals, to ensure that we are being faithful to the high and rigorous security standards.”

U.S. officials have committed to evacuating as many Afghans eligible for SIVs as possible, but they only have one week left until a full military withdrawal is scheduled to be completed. The Taliban announced Tuesday it would no longer allow Afghans to leave the country, setting up a potential standoff with the Biden administration over the safety of those who helped American forces over the last 20 years.

“Our expectation, which we have also conveyed to the Taliban, is that they should be able to get to the airport,” Psaki said Tuesday.

The White House is grappling with domestic resistance, as well. Concerns of a possible political backlash reportedly contributed to a decision not to begin evacuations sooner, and many conservatives have staked out adamant opposition to granting tens of thousands of Afghans refugee status in the U.S.

“We can only imagine how many thousands of terrorists have been airlifted out of Afghanistan and into neighborhoods around the world,” former President Donald Trump said in a statement Tuesday, falsely claiming evacuees are undergoing “NO VETTING.”

Some Republican governors have welcomed a potential influx of Afghans who assisted the U.S. war effort, but others alleged the hasty evacuation of Kabul has created security risks. South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said last week she has no confidence that the Biden administration can ensure people brought to the U.S. are not on terrorist watchlists.

“This is a dangerous part of the world, we know we have a lot of dangerous people who are there that want to do the United States harm,” Noem told South Dakota Now. “We do not want them coming here unless we know they are an ally and a friend, and that they don’t want to destroy this country.”

Republicans in Congress have been similarly divided, with some backing legislation to streamline the SIV process and others tying concerns about Afghan refugees to broader complaints about Biden’s immigration agenda.

“Our national security has been deeply degraded in the months since January 20 and allowing the mass entry of foreigners from a known hotbed of terrorism will only make this situation far worse,” Rep. Tom Tiffany, R-Wis., said in a statement.

A former homeland security official who served under Trump disputed suggestions that the current administration is conducting insufficient vetting. However, the official advised the White House should be more transparent with the public about what it is doing to alleviate fears and defuse partisan rhetoric.

“That narrative is picking up,” the former official said.

Rep. Kinzinger condemns GOP lawmakers, right-wing media for refugee rhetoric

Nearly 77,000 Afghans were admitted to the U.S. through the SIV program between its creation in 2006 and May 2021, but officials also faced a backlog of 18,000 applicants and 53,000 family members after processing slowed during the Trump administration and the COVID-19 pandemic. State Department cables obtained by Politico estimated over 20,000 Afghan nationals had been flown out of Kabul since Aug. 14.

SIV applicants undergo a multistep vetting process that includes providing documentation of employment and letters of recommendation, as well as in-person interviews and medical exams. That process typically takes months or years, but the Biden administration has attempted to accelerate the program by dedicating more resources to security checks.

“What we did when we came in was move as rapidly as possible to process as many applications as possible, as fast as possible, trimming months and months and months off of that process, working with Congress to get them to actually change the law over the summer to relax the requirements so we could move people forward,” Sullivan said at a White House briefing Monday.

Congress passed legislation in July that loosened some SIV requirements, shortening the period of employment necessary, removing a requirement that some applicants prove they performed “sensitive and trusted” work, postponing medical exams until after applicants arrive in the U.S., and allowing certain spouses and children of murdered applicants to receive SIV status.

“Every indication is that the SIV vetting process – already one of the most stringent in the world – is as thorough as it has always been,” said Erol Yayboke, director of the Project on Fragility and Mobility at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Biometric and biographic checks are being done as they always have and the process starts before people even arrive at the airport, continuing multiple times during their journey.”

The former senior homeland security official said many within DHS were concerned a rapid increase in refugee admissions after Trump left office would overwhelm the capacity of vetting systems. The official has spoken to some involved in the current process, though, and has been reassured that corners are not being cut.

“We are robustly vetting,” the former official said.

Weeks before the Afghan government collapsed, the State Department announced a new category of priority resettlement for Afghan nationals who did not meet SIV requirements. The Priority-2 designation applies to Afghans who worked for the U.S. government, contractors, U.S.-funded programs, non-governmental organizations, or U.S.-based media organizations, as well as their spouses and children of any age.

Some lawmakers urged President Biden to create an additional category of humanitarian parole for female politicians, activists, and journalists who fear Taliban reprisals. The president has broad authority to temporarily allow foreigners into the U.S. “for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit,” but Biden has not acted on those requests.

Former Pence adviser: Refugee topics would be blocked in meetings

According to CBS News, administration officials confirmed Tuesday that DHS is using humanitarian parole to allow some at-risk Afghans without visas to enter the U.S., including those with pending SIV applications. Those who are granted parole will also undergo security checks in third countries before traveling to the U.S.

“As far as I know, there aren’t any unvetted Afghan refugees or SIVs coming to the United States,” said David Bier, a research fellow at the Cato Institute.

The dire circumstances under which evacuations are taking place do present some challenges, though. Vetting people fleeing a collapsing country under the control of a hostile force is complicated, and previous efforts have been imperfect.

Reuters reported earlier this year that a priority resettlement program for Iraqi refugees had been suspended indefinitely due to fraud concerns. A State Department investigation identified about 4,000 Iraqis suspected of filing fraudulent applications, and more than 500 refugees already resettled in the U.S. had been implicated in alleged fraud.

Officials stressed there was no indication of a connection to terrorism, and they argued the discovery of the fraud demonstrated the government's commitment to a secure vetting process. However, an official also acknowledged challenges in verifying employment history and other background information in an unstable country.

That program allowed Iraqis in groups of "special humanitarian concern" to resettle in the U.S. without first obtaining referrals from the United Nations refugee agency, and more than 47,500 people were accepted before applications were frozen. Rep. Jason Crow, D-Colo., told Reuters State Department officials expressed reservations to him about establishing a similar program for Afghans due to the problems with the Iraq program.

According to Yayboke, the fact that most Afghans accepted for evacuation have established working relationships with the U.S. or allied interests should mitigate some vetting difficulties. The U.S. also has significant resources in the countries where evacuees are being processed to verify their information before clearing them.

"Most of the people ultimately arriving in the U.S. worked with the U.S. military, State Department, international development contractors, or for other U.S. interests in Afghanistan over the past two decades and were thus also cleared to work in addition to the thorough vetting that they are all getting right now," he said.

Since the Refugee Act of 1980 established systems for accepting refugees, experts say there is no evidence that those resettled in the U.S. are more likely to commit crimes or terrorist acts than other populations. A 2019 Cato Institute report calculated the chance of an American being killed in a terrorist attack by a refugee was 1 in 3.86 billion per year.

A recent study published in the Journal of Politics found no causal link between hosting refugees and attacks by foreign terrorist groups in developed countries, though it did detect an increase in violence by those who perceive refugees as a threat. Authors Sara Polo and Julian Wucherpfennig concluded the backlash against refugees and migrants presented a greater danger to national security than the migrants themselves.

In a 2017 analysis, the New American Economy Research Fund analyzed crime rates in the 10 U.S. cities that received the most refugees relative to their size between 2006 and 2015, finding that nine of the 10 saw a decrease in violent crime and property crime. Another study published earlier this year found no discernible impact on crime rates after former President Trump drastically reduced U.S. refugee resettlement in 2017.

"Looking at 40 years of history on this, there hasn't been a refugee who's killed any number of people in the United States," Bier said.