

# The Mercury News

## Does Trump's new 'extreme vetting' center duplicate other efforts?

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"Extreme vetting" was a frequent campaign promise of President Trump's, and within days of taking office he ordered broad restrictions on travelers from several Muslim-majority countries, measures he deemed necessary until such a system was in place.

Trump directed Department of Homeland Security officials to effectuate his ideas, and in February the White House announced the creation of a National Vetting Center, or NVC, that would bring unprecedented rigor to screening foreigners.

Since then, however, the administration has not explained how the center will vet travelers more extremely than the array of other federal agencies already performing the task. It is also unclear whether the White House plans to lift the controversial travel restrictions once the NVC is up and running.

On Wednesday, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear arguments challenging those restrictions, alleging that the ban is a form of religious discrimination and that the president exceeded his authority in ordering it.

Trump has given security, intelligence and other agencies until August to submit proposals for how they will work with the new center and share information with it.

"The Federal Government's current vetting efforts are ad hoc, which impedes our ability to keep up with today's threats," the White House said in a Feb. 6 memo. "The NVC will better coordinate these activities in a central location, enabling officials to further leverage critical intelligence and law enforcement information to identify terrorists, criminals, and other nefarious actors trying to enter and remain within our country."

Former DHS officials and security analysts agree that this sounds like a good idea, but they note that the United States already has a unified, state-of-the-art nerve center to screen travelers and share information among federal databases: the National Targeting Center in Sterling, Va.

Established after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the center is responsible for checking U.S.-bound cargo and foreign travelers by gathering information across federal agencies and assessing security risks.

“I don’t know why you would want to duplicate something that has already been built when we already have the National Targeting Center, which does and is capable of doing serious vetting with respect to any foreign national seeking to enter the United States,” said Robert Bonner, a former U.S. attorney who led U.S. Customs and Border Protection under President George W. Bush and established the center.

The targeting center begins screening travelers as soon as they book flights to the United States. Airlines automatically forward their reservations to the center, in part to avoid having their passengers turned back if U.S. customs agents don’t admit them.

*[U.S. lifts ban on refugees from ‘high-risk’ nations but pledges tougher scrutiny]*

In response to questions about the NVC’s future role, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection official said the new center will “use and expand upon some of the physical infrastructure at CBP’s National Targeting Center” but will also use “virtual relationships” to save costs and “overcome the logistical challenges that required co-location can present.”

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because planning for the NVC is not complete, said the new center is not intended to replicate or supplant the screening efforts performed by other federal agencies.

Instead, the official said, it will “improve the connection between information about potential threats and the U.S. officials who have the authority to use that information to make their own determinations.”

The NVC will “work closely” with the National Targeting Center, the Terrorist Screening Center, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the intelligence community, the official added, “to ensure there is appropriate coordination and minimize duplication of effort.”

When Trump toured the National Targeting Center on Feb. 2 before issuing his order, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen told him it stops “70 terrorists a day” from entering the country.

Calling it “quite a facility,” Trump told the staff: “We’ve really put a lot behind [the National Targeting Center], and we’re going to be putting a lot more behind it.”

According to the limited descriptions of the NVC provided by the White House and DHS, it could play a wider role in screening foreigners already present in the United States who may be seeking to obtain residency or citizenship. The Feb. 6 White House memo said the NVC will screen those “who seek a visa, visa waiver, or an immigration benefit, or a protected status.”

Trump renewed his calls for “extreme vetting” in October after Uzbek immigrant Sayfullo Saipov allegedly plowed a rental truck into cyclists and pedestrians in a Manhattan terrorist attack that killed eight and injured 11.

Weeks later, Akayed Ullah, a Bangladeshi national, allegedly attempted to detonate a pipe bomb in a New York subway tunnel while swearing allegiance to the Islamic State.

Investigators believe both men were radicalized after arriving in the United States, a scenario no form of travel screening could have prevented. The work of tracking foreigners who develop extremist views after living in the United States is primarily the responsibility of the FBI and other law enforcement agencies.

Homeland Security officials have not outlined how those agencies will work with the NVC.

A report published this month by the libertarian Cato Institute found that U.S. security agencies already practice “extreme vetting” and have been highly successful at stopping terrorist plots and potential attacks.

“I would argue it’s quite extreme as it currently exists,” said David Bier, the report’s author. He said the only post-9/11 instance of a “vetting failure” was San Bernardino attacker Tashfeen Malik, whose extremist views went unnoticed during her visa application process.

*[The Trump administration failed to study immigration vetting. So I did.]*

“The threat to American lives as a result of vetting failure in post-9/11 America is incredibly small,” Bier said, “so the idea that we should invest a billion dollars in a new center to prevent such a small risk doesn’t make sense.”

“The more agencies that any individual has to go through to receive approval to travel to the United States, the more we delay travelers’ entry,” he continued. “They’re prevented from spending money as a tourist or being able to work in the U.S. and increase the size of the U.S. economy. Those are costs that need to be considered when talking about delaying people’s ability to travel and immigrate.”

Foreign travelers who need U.S. visas typically apply through American embassies and consulates abroad, and the State Department runs their information through terrorism watch lists and other security databases. Information considered “derogatory” is identified and could be forwarded to DHS and other U.S. agencies for additional screening to determine whether the applicant has a criminal background, potential links to extremists, or could be planning to immigrate illegally.

Travelers then submit to biometric screening and other personal data collection — all of which is forwarded to the Transportation Security Administration and centralized through the National Targeting Center.

When asked to cite specific examples of vetting deficiencies, Homeland Security officials say screeners need to do more to check the social media profiles of foreigners seeking to enter the United States or obtain residency. But skeptics of the administration’s proposals argue that such functions do not require the creation of a new screening center, and could be enhanced at existing DHS and intelligence facilities.