



Posing as refugee isn't easiest path to U.S. for an Islamic State operative

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Despite a barrage of Republican charges that President Barack Obama is endangering the homeland by welcoming 10,000 Syrian refugees into the United States, experts say that is hardly the easiest route for Islamic State terrorists to slip into the country.

Refugees seeking permanent resettlement must undergo extensive interviews and security checks, while waiting from 18 months to three years to learn their fate.

In contrast, during the decade ending on Dec. 31, 2014, the State Department granted temporary visas for 2 million visitors from 10 countries that have been breeding grounds for Islamic extremism, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Syria, a McClatchy analysis found. The wait for a visa is usually weeks or a few months.

The 39-nation Visa Waiver Program offers another option for the Islamic State. It permits people holding European passports – including all of the Islamic State-linked assailants who died in or were apprehended after last week's mass slayings in Paris – to enter the United States for up to 90 days without a visa, so long as their names aren't on a terrorism watch list. Reports to date indicate that counterterrorism authorities in France and Belgium had suspicions about only three of more than a dozen operatives.

Yet it's the refugee resettlement program that's drawing fire amid the trans-Atlantic waves of fear triggered by last week's random Paris murders and new Islamic State videos warning of imminent attacks on New York's Times Square and Washington.

Until the Paris gunmen opened fire, Obama had provoked little controversy with his early September gesture to take in 10,000 Syrian refugees in the next year. That's actually a modest figure given that the global relief community is trying to aid millions of people fleeing war-torn Syria.

But now the refugee resettlement program is at the fulcrum of a heated debate over whether a program to show compassion for the oppressed would provide access to Islamic State operatives seeking to kill and maim Americans.

In recent days, 30 of 31 Republican governors have announced their opposition to Obama's program. On Thursday, the House of Representatives passed legislation that would require U.S. screeners to certify that a refugee is not a terrorist before he or she is admitted to the country.

Texas' Republican governor, Greg Abbott, went so far as to advise Obama in a letter this week that he had directed state officials "to not participate in the resettlement of any Syrian refugees in

the state of Texas,” though states have little say over the federally funded resettlement program. Abbott told the president that “neither you nor any federal official can guarantee that Syrian refugees will not be part of any terroristic activity.”

Republican Rep. Steven Palazzo of Mississippi introduced a bill to give states the right to determine whether or not they choose to accept refugees as part of any resettlement program.

The White House said Obama would veto legislation that blocks the acceptance of “some of the most vulnerable people in the world,” and the House bill overwhelmingly passed on Thursday heightens scrutiny on refugees from Syria and Iraq. Of 2,174 Syrian refugees who’ve been admitted since Sept. 11, 2001, none has been arrested or deported for terrorist activities, the White House said.

Kathleen Newlund, a senior fellow and co-founder of the Migration Policy Institute, said that by her count, just three of 784,000 refugees worldwide who have resettled in the United States since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, have been convicted of terrorism-related charges.

They include an Uzbeki refugee who was convicted by a federal court jury in Boise, Idaho, last August of conspiracy and two other terrorism-related charges, and two Iraqi nationals who had planted bombs that killed and harmed U.S. troops in Iraq and then, while living in Bowling Green, Ky., sought to send weapons and money to al Qaida in Iraq, the precursor of the Islamic State.

1. terrorism conviction for a refugee for every 286,543 who have been admitted to the United States, according to Alex Nowrasteh, immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

But former Michigan Rep. Peter Hoekstra, a Republican who chaired the House Intelligence Committee, said he believes Obama’s Syrian refugee commitment is “a reason for concern.” The Islamic State, he noted, has made clear it considers the flow of Syrian refugees “an opportunity to get people who are sympathetic to their cause into Europe and if possible, into the United States.”

Hoekstra, now a senior fellow at the Washington-based Investigative Project on Terrorism, cited the difficulty in tracing the backgrounds of displaced Syrians without help from a “central functioning government.”

“Who knows where they’re coming from?” he said in a phone interview. “They may be coming from Iraq. They may be coming from Syria. There are reports a certain percentage of them are coming from Afghanistan . . . all basically ungoverned states” with territories controlled by Islamic radicals.

AS THEY WATCH THE WORLD RESPOND TO WHAT HAPPENED WITH PARIS, I THINK THEY WOULD BE FULLY SATISFIED IF THEY COULD PULL OFF THE SAME THING IN THE UNITED STATES WITH SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 100 AND 200 (MURDER VICTIMS). Former Michigan Rep. Peter Hoekstra, who chaired the House Intelligence Committee

Last month, FBI Director James Comey told Congress that the bureau’s database contains scant information about Syrian refugees, in part because the U.S. military hasn’t had its boots on the ground there as it did for a decade in Iraq.

“If someone has never made a ripple in the pond in Syria in a way that would get their identity or their interest reflected in our database,” Comey said, “we can query our database until the cows come home, but there’ll be nothing that will show up.”

However, Newlund of the Migration Policy Institute said that most Syrian refugees wouldn’t be suspected of ties with the Islamic State, because they are Shiite Muslims who have been victimized by the Islamic State’s Sunni Muslim terrorists occupying a large swath of their country.

“I understand the concerns that people in this country have in the wake of the terrorist attacks,” she said in a phone interview, “but I think that focusing on the refugee resettlement program is a misdirected response.”

For Republican governors “to question the government’s abilities to vet people that it lets into this country suggests that they don’t trust the CIA, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security,” said Rochelle Davis, who directs a graduate program in Arab studies at Georgetown University and has focused her research on Syria.

“I am aghast. I think it’s a really stupid reaction,” she said. “They clearly don’t understand either American governmental policy or the refugee resettlement policy.”