

Decoding Trump's Border Counterterrorism Order, Part 2

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By Todd Bensman on January 28, 2025

Remember the term of political art “extreme vetting” from the Trump 1.0 immigration agenda? It reflected the idea that U.S. government should aggressively screen (vet) all immigrant visa applicants to weed out applicants who might pose potential terrorism and public safety threats.

Or, as the Oxford Dictionary now describes its “extreme vetting” addition: “the process of checking everything about a person’s background and character to decide whether to allow them to enter the US”. The administration of Joe Biden ditched the whole idea.



But now a bigger and much more ambitious version of “extreme vetting” is on the front burner again, put there with Trump’s inauguration day executive order titled “Protecting the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats”.

Its central thrust is to restore, repair, and expand national security vetting across every agency that might touch immigration. Boiled down, it says: Let no immigrant into the United States — nor (and this is new) allow those who already got into the country under the prior administration stay — who have not been “vetted and screened to the maximum degree possible ... to protect citizens from aliens who intend to commit terrorist attacks, threaten our national security, espouse hateful ideology, or otherwise exploit the immigration laws for malevolent purposes.”

That is very tall and wide order compared to the previous iteration, especially in the repair and improvement envisioned by the executive order.

It is in the repair and improvement area that the Trump administration will find a helpful jumpstart from a Center for Immigration Studies database of vetting failures published in March 2023 and regularly updated since.

The “National Security Vetting Failures Database” is a compilation of 50 heavily analyzed vetting failure cases that identify terrorists, spies, human rights violators and other bad guys who got into the United States and did bad things despite red flags that government adjudicators should reasonably have detected beforehand using routine techniques. Each case, reverse engineered from prosecution court documents and other public information, pinpoints how government screeners in a half-dozen named agencies (U.S. State

Department's foreign consular and embassy stations the most) missed one or more glaring opportunities to short-circuit the potentially dangerous entries from 2008 through 2024.

The database's purpose is to serve as a starting point for government officials at times like right now, when policy directs high and focused interest on fixing identifiable flaws.

The Trump executive order calls for a thoughtful plan of vetting restoration with fixes dating to at least the day before the Biden administration entered office.

It calls on all the nation's top homeland security leaders, for instance, to "re-establish a uniform baseline for screening and vetting standards and procedures that existed on January 19, 2021, that will be used for any alien seeking a visa or immigration benefit of any kind ... particularly those aliens coming from regions or nations with identified security risks".

Those running U.S. visa-issuance processes will have to "evaluate and adjust" regulations, policies, procedures, and provisions of the Foreign Service Manual's "grounds for inadmissibility to ensure the continued safety and security of the American people and our constitutional republic".

But the CIS failures database shows there is probably much more repair work to be done in the U.S. national security screening wheelhouse than Trump 2.0 realizes because the egregious failures dating from 2008 to just the past year indicate deeper systemic flaws that have persisted for years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when the federal government first seriously reformed national security vetting systems. (See: ["9/11+20: America still struggles to vet entering foreigners for national interest threats"](#).)

A Roadmap to Failure

The CIS database provides a roadmap to failures and the worst vetting failure offender agencies, led by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services abroad (refugee applications) and at home (immigration change of status applications) and the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs stations abroad (most immigrant and non-immigrant visa applications). Other agencies have messed up, too, including the Department of Defense (a Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI) visa approval of a Chinese spy and a diplomatic visa to a Saudi terrorist), the Department of Homeland Security, ICE's Office of Principle Legal Advisor, and Customs and Border Protection (who let in a Russian terrorist later convicted in California).

The most common crime type in the database where vetting failures allowed entry was terrorism, with a total of 38 failures laid bare.

One of the most recent terrorist additions was an Afghan evacuee from the August 2021 fall of Kabul who now stands charged with multiple offenses that include a mass-casualty firearms suicide attack plot for Election Day 2024.

Nasir Ahmad Tawhedi, a former CIA guard back home, was allowed to enter the United States on September 9, 2021, as part of a mass Special Immigrant Visa parole program for Afghans. In October 2024, the FBI arrested the 27-year-old and another co-conspirator from Afghanistan who got in on the SIV. Biden government officials swore he'd been thoroughly vetted no less than three times before being approved and that no red flags turned up.

Then they backtracked, admitting later that no government agency had ever vetted Tawhedi at any point.

Another recent addition was an 18-year-old Egyptian student at Virginia's George Mason University who currently stands charged with multiple terrorism offenses related to a mass casualty plot on Israel's consulate in New York. Abdullah Ezzeldin Taha Mohamed Hassan entered the United States in July 2022 as a juvenile on an unspecified visa type.

But had any adjudicator bothered to check his social media, they would have found the youngster was thoroughly radicalized as an Islamic terrorist. We know this now because, according to court documents, the FBI found his social media accounts shortly after he entered the United States and were alarmed enough to interview, but not arrest, the boy. The chance to stop him was during whatever vetting had occurred overseas.

The database is chock full of Chinese spies who could have been blocked from entry, but weren't, and human rights violators who committed atrocities in other countries but were able to slip past American adjudicators to find years of refuge from justice in American neighborhoods.

With Trump's new executive order out on national security vetting, the CIS database's purpose statement should resonate now as almost eerily familiar.

"Its purpose is to serve as a constant reminder to the American public and to government employees in a position to effect remedies that they are obliged to do so as soon as practicable," reads the database explainer titled "Learning from Our Mistakes".

"Additionally, the database points America's homeland security establishment and its congressional overseers to previously unidentified fail points in the highly complex immigration security screening array so that they may more ably block future entries of foreign threat actors."

Topics: National Security