

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE****Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson*****Crisis of Confidence: Preventing Terrorist Infiltration through U.S. Refugee and Visa Programs***

February 3, 2016 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “Crisis of Confidence: Preventing Terrorist Infiltration through U.S. Refugee and Visa Programs”:

“Given the evolving threat environment, it is proper for this Committee to examine both the visa security and the refugee vetting processes. Last month, in separate incidents, two Iraqi refugees accused of having ties to the Islamic State were arrested in Sacramento and Houston. In December of last year, the United States was stunned when a mass shooting and attempted bombing were perpetrated by two attackers in San Bernardino, California. The perpetrators were husband and wife, and the wife entered the United States on a K or fiancé visa.

Also, in November, it was reported that a fake Syrian passport was found with one of the terrorists who carried out the deadly Paris attacks directed by ISIL. Consequently, I understand the concern that is presented here today. However, as I have stated in previous hearings, it is important that we as Federal policymakers embrace facts, not fear.

Our refugee screening process includes the most thorough vetting any visitor or immigrant to the United States undergoes, with DHS conducting an enhanced review of Syrian refugee cases. Throughout the refugee application process, applications continue to be checked against terrorist databases to ensure no new information has come to light. If there is any doubt about whether an applicant poses a risk, that person will not be admitted. With proper vetting, we should continue to welcome vulnerable populations to this country, including Syrian refugees, in keeping with our history and values as Americans. Providing safe harbor to individuals who no longer have a home because of war and violence is the humane—and American—thing to do.

Today, I hope to hear from the Department of Homeland Security about information that the agency can publicly share about its improvements to the refugee vetting process. Advancements in technology and the evolving threat environment require continual evaluation of how the agencies use technology in the vetting and screening processes.

It has been reported that United States Citizenship and Immigration Services is piloting the use of social media in vetting refugee applications. While we understand social media can play a role in refugee vetting, we should remember it is only one part of an extensive process. Frankly, the more explicit we are about our refugee vetting process in public, particularly with respect to social media, the more valuable information we stand to lose. Users have the ability to control their social media, so we do not want to tip them off.

Additionally, while the overwhelming majority of visa holders are legitimate visitors who comply with the terms of their visas and depart in a timely fashion, some have exploited the system. In the wake of September 11th, the attempted Christmas Day 2009 attack, and other incidents, we have strengthened our visa security by pushing out our borders, conducting screening early in the process, and enhancing how we vet visa applicants.

I want to hear more from DHS and the State Department about what needs to be done and what resources are necessary to address security vetting challenges. I am particularly interested in knowing whether there is a way to improve the vetting process to identify people that seek to do us harm, but on whom we have no derogatory information, which I understand was the case with one of the San Bernardino perpetrators.

As we consider reviews of the refugee and visa security processes, we need to make sure that if there are improvements that need to be made, Congress commits to funding them. We cannot make substantial changes to these programs if they are not properly funded.

Finally, in December, the House came together and passed legislation to strengthen the Visa Waiver Program. I understand that next week the Committee will hold a hearing on the VWP, and specifically how the Administration intends to implement language included in the recently enacted Omnibus appropriations bill to prohibit individuals with citizenship in or recent travel to Iraq, Iran, Sudan, or Syria from coming to the U.S. under the VWP. Instead, such travelers would have to obtain a visa.

I strongly support giving the Secretary discretion to waive the visa requirement when doing so is in the interest of our national security, as provided for under the law, and in fact supported some discretion for certain individuals, on a case-by-case basis, who had traveled to one of the four countries for verifiable, legitimate purposes.

However, I am concerned about recent statements indicating the Departments of State and Homeland Security may attempt to exempt broad categories of travelers from the requirements of the new law. I look forward to hearing more from these agencies next week about their plans for implementing the law and their efforts to further enhance the security of the VWP generally.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION: Please contact Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978

**United States House of Representatives**  
Committee on Homeland Security  
H2-117, Ford House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515  
Phone: (202) 226-2616 | Fax: (202) 226-4499  
<http://chsdemocrats.house.gov>