

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“The Security of U.S. Visa Programs”

Tuesday, March 15, 2016

As prepared for delivery:

This hearing is the third in a series we have held to explore whether we are doing enough to address concerns that terrorists might try to exploit international travel to infiltrate our country.

In the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks, this Committee first scrutinized the process in place to screen and vet Syrian refugees escaping the carnage in the Middle East. We learned that the U.S. refugee resettlement process involves extensive security screening. Syrian refugees, we were told, undergo multiple rounds of screening over an average of 18 to 24 months, including in-person interviews by immigration analysts and counterterrorism officials trained in spotting fraud and deception.

The Committee next looked at our Visa Waiver program, which allows citizens of certain nations to travel to the United States for short visits without a visa. Once it became clear that the Paris terrorists held passports from European countries whose citizens enjoy visa waiver privileges, fears arose that this program could pose a security threat.

We learned that Visa Waiver travelers seeking to come to the United States endure nearly the same level of scrutiny and vetting as all other travelers. We also learned that when it comes to security, nothing is being ‘waived’, as the name of the program incorrectly suggests. And we learned that, in return for their entry into the Visa Waiver program, countries must share intelligence with the United States, they must open up their counter terrorism and aviation security systems to our inspectors, and they must abide by our standards for aviation and passport security.

As a result, the Visa Waiver program has now become a key counter terrorism tool.

Today we will continue this look at our screening systems for foreigners entering our country. We will examine the depth of security for all forms of visas, whether they are for students, tourists, people here on business, or those seeking to make America their permanent home. It is a daunting undertaking, given the volume of international travel to the United States. It also involves the coordination of multiple government entities, particularly the State Department and DHS, both of which are represented here today.

Since the 9/11 attacks against our country, there have been notable changes to strengthen our visa security, including recent adjustments made following the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino. For example, amid ISIS’s growing online presence, the Department of Homeland Security is exploring ways to expand its use of social media to screen travelers seeking to enter the United States.

I look forward to hearing more about these efforts, and also about the contribution of ICE's visa security program that may help identify threats posed by potential travelers early on. We need to know if this program is adding real security and, if so, how to expand its reach.

As with all of our recent hearings, I expect that we will find elements of our visa security that we can improve upon – understanding that we can never eliminate all risk and should not turn our back on the many benefits of trade, travel and immigration. Yet as we continuously improve the security of our immigration system, we must also keep our eye on perhaps the even more pressing threat of homegrown terrorism.

For all that we do to strengthen our borders and our immigration security, groups like ISIS know all too well that they may bypass our multiple layers of homeland security by using online propaganda to recruit people already inside our borders to carry out attacks against the United States. In this respect, preventing ISIS's twisted propaganda from mobilizing our young people to carry out terrorist violence may help combat the long-term terrorist threats to the homeland in ways that aviation screening and watchlist checks can never do.

I look forward to our continued work on this committee on both combatting homegrown terrorism and strengthening the security of our immigration systems. And I hope we can use today's hearing to identify some common sense improvements to the security of visas. Thank you to the witnesses for your testimony and for your service to our country.