



## **Background: Visa Waiver Program and Existing Security Gaps**

**The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) is important for U.S. security and commerce.**

- Citizens of all 38 VWP countries can travel more easily to the United States than travelers from other countries. Instead of going to a U.S. consulate to obtain a visa, citizens of VWP countries must provide detailed background information through an online form that is screened against U.S. security systems. VWP applicants are approved or denied for travel to the U.S. more quickly than citizens from non-VWP countries.
- The program helps enhance U.S. security because, in order to participate, VWP countries must agree to strengthen their own security screening measures and to share crucial counterterrorism and law enforcement information with the United States.
- VWP also brings substantial economic benefit to America through increased travel and tourism.

**But in light of the high terror threat environment, we need to urgently close VWP security gaps.**

- Around 5,000 Europeans are estimated to have traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with terrorist groups like ISIS—and many are from VWP countries. This makes it easier for them to get to the United States if they are not in our security databases.
- Additional VWP-country citizens who have traveled to terrorist hotspots may also pose an increased risk to the United States and should be required to undergo more stringent screening through the regular visa process.
- The Secretary of Homeland Security does not have the explicit authority to suspend a country from VWP if the country fails to sufficiently share critical counterterrorism information with the United States.
- Many VWP countries do not screen travelers against important security databases—like those maintained by INTERPOL—missing out on a crucial opportunity to stop suspected terrorists, foreign fighters, and other criminals or identify passengers traveling on lost or stolen documents.
- Other countries have failed to regularly check travel documents for fraud. While INTERPOL maintains a global database of lost and stolen passports, many VWP countries do not check passports against the database in real-time—while others fail to report when their citizens' passports go missing. These security gaps make it easier for extremists and criminals to use fraudulent documents to cross borders undetected.
- Not all VWP travelers possess fraud-resistant “e-passports,” which are more secure than regular passports because they contain identifying biometric information for the passport holder. In addition, many VWP countries also do not have the ability to validate these passports when they screen the passports at their borders.

# **H.R. 158 Bill Summary: Visa Waiver Program Improvement & Terrorist Travel Prevention Act**

## **H.R. 158 closes VWP gaps and adds additional layers of protection by:**

### **Denying VWP status to individuals who have connections to terrorist hotspots**

- VWP country citizens with ties to terrorist hotspots such as Iraq and Syria pose an increased risk if allowed to enter the United States. H.R. 158 denies VWP travel to travelers who are nationals of—or have visited during the past five years—Iraq, Syria, and other countries with significant terrorist activity. Instead, these travelers are required to seek a visa for entry into the United States through a more stringent process.

### **Demanding strong intelligence and law enforcement information sharing**

- When VWP countries fail to share counterterrorism information with the United States, it puts our security at risk. H.R. 158 requires the Secretary of Homeland Security to terminate a country from the program if the country does not share such data—and doesn't allow the country back into the VWP until it complies with the program requirements. Such authority will improve information sharing and help the U.S. better identify potential terrorists and foreign fighters.

### **Enhancing screening of all travelers in VWP countries**

- We must make sure all travelers are thoroughly screened well before they attempt to travel the U.S. H.R. 158 requires all VWP countries to check travelers against INTERPOL databases, in order to determine whether the traveler is wanted by law enforcement agencies based on ties to terrorism or criminal activity. Better screening against INTERPOL databases will close a glaring gap in the global travel system.

### **Preventing extremists from using fraudulent documents to evade detection**

- Secure documents make it harder for extremists to falsify their identities. H.R. 158 requires all VWP countries to issue to their citizens fraud-resistant “e-passports,” containing biometric information and requires countries to be able to confirm that such documents are legitimate when they are scanned.
- Terrorists have used lost and stolen travel documents to cross international borders. H.R. 158 forces all VWP countries to submit lost and stolen passport information to INTERPOL's “stolen and lost travel document” database and to notify INTERPOL within 24 hours when their citizens' passports go missing.

### **Increasing threat monitoring of VWP countries**

- The threat environment can change quickly, which is why we need regular reviews of security in VWP countries. H.R. 158 requires top U.S. security agencies to conduct more frequent intelligence and threat assessments of VWP countries to determine whether they pose a high risk to the national security of United States. If a VWP country is designated as “high risk,” they can be suspended from the program.

### **Taking steps to ensure VWP travelers do not falsify their background information**

- Background checks on VWP travelers are important, which is why we must ensure the information they provide is accurate. H.R. 158 requires DHS to take steps to better detect false information, improve the validation of data supplied by travelers, and add new data fields to enhance checks on each traveler.