

Syrian refugees are put through years of screening

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Detroit: Over and over, Nedal Al-Hayk and his wife traveled up to three hours by bus from their temporary home in Jordan to an office where U.S. Homeland Security officials put them in separate rooms and asked them many questions in many different ways: Where were you born? Where were your parents born? Were you part of a rebel group? Were you politically outspoken?

Finally, nearly three years after the Syrian couple fled their war-ravaged homeland, they and their two young children arrived in the Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills, ready to start a promising new life in a new country.

"I came here to succeed and have a quality of life, not to be a hindrance to the government and the citizens of America," the 28-year-old Al-Hayk said through a translator. He is working at a factory and studying English with hopes of pursuing the agricultural engineering degree he started in Syria. "Even if I need to start over, I'll start over."

As some governors, lawmakers and presidential candidates vow to block the resettlement of more Syrian refugees in the U.S. for fear that terrorists will slip into the country and carry out Paris-style attacks, those who have made it here describe an arduous screening process that they would not have undergone if they didn't want to make America their permanent home.

"They are human beings and human beings with no home," said Al-Hayk, who arrived in the U.S. seven months ago. "They ache to come to a country like America because they know the kinds of opportunities it grants to people."

The Obama administration, which has announced plans to accept about 10,000 Syrians refugees in addition to the 2,500 who have settled here since 2011, disclosed new details this week about how they are investigated.

They must undergo a screening process that can take nearly three years, during which they are fingerprinted and required to submit other biometric information, subjected to criminal and terrorist background checks and put through repeated rounds of questioning about their families, friends and political activities, authorities said.

The process takes so long that experts said it would be unlikely for an extremist group to rely on a refugee program to sneak someone into the U.S. Terrorist organizations could instead send operatives to America as students or tourists or appeal to people already living in the U.S. to carry out attacks.

Fears about refugees were triggered, in part, by a Syrian passport found near the body of one of the Paris suicide attackers, though its authenticity has not been established and officials said it might have been planted to stoke fears.

Even so, the House voted overwhelmingly Thursday to approve legislation requiring stringent new background checks that would, in effect, suspend admissions of Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

Republicans said that in dangerous times, the government must first protect its own.

"It is against the values of our nation and the values of a free society to give terrorists the opening they are looking for," said House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy.

Al-Hayk, who had friends who died at sea trying to get to Europe, said he understands the need for the intensive scrutiny he underwent. For him, seeking asylum in the U.S. was far more time-consuming but less dangerous than

attempting to go to Europe.

"To come to the U.S., you go through a very troublesome process, but it's justified because these agencies ... are doing their job and doing it very meticulously," he said, adding that he is "grateful for America, regardless of how long it took" to get here.

In Chicago, 35-year-old Hakam Subh, who underwent a roughly two-year vetting before coming to the U.S. in April, said he is happy and excited to have made it here with his wife and two young sons.

"I love it here. This is a safe country," he said. "I decided America is my country."

- AP