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POLITICS

# Trump Administration Orders Tougher Screening of Visa Applicants

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By MICHAEL D. SHEAR MARCH 23, 2017

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is making it tougher for millions of visitors to enter the United States by demanding new security checks before giving visas to tourists, business travelers and relatives of American residents.

Diplomatic cables sent last week from Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson to all American embassies instructed consular officials to broadly increase scrutiny. It was the first evidence of the “extreme vetting” Mr. Trump promised during the presidential campaign.

The new rules generally do not apply to citizens of 38 countries — including most of Europe and longstanding allies like Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea — who can be speedily admitted into the United States under the visa waiver program. That program does not cover citizens from any country in the Middle East or Africa.

Even stricter security checks for people from six predominantly Muslim nations remain on hold because federal courts have temporarily blocked President Trump’s

travel ban.

But Mr. Trump and his national security team are not waiting to toughen the rules to decide who can enter the United States. Embassy officials must now scrutinize a broader pool of visa applicants to determine if they pose security risks to the United States, according to four cables sent between March 10 and March 17.

That extra scrutiny will include asking applicants detailed questions about their background and making mandatory checks of social media history if a person has ever been in territory controlled by the Islamic State.

Mr. Trump has spoken regularly of his concern about the threat of “radical Islamic terrorism” from immigrants. But it is unclear who, exactly, will be targeted for the extra scrutiny since Mr. Tillerson’s cables leave that decision up to security officers at each embassy.

Still, taken together, consular officials and immigration advocates said the administration’s moves will increase the likelihood of denial for those seeking to come to America, and will further slow down a bureaucratic approval process that can already take months or even years for those flagged for extra investigation. In 2016, the United States issued more than 10 million visas.

There are legitimate reasons someone might be targeted, such as evidence of a connection to terrorism or crime. But advocates also said they worry about people being profiled for extra scrutiny because of their name or nationality.

“This will certainly slow down the screening process and impose a substantial burden on these applicants,” said Greg Chen, the director of advocacy for the American Immigration Lawyers Association. “It will make it much harder and create substantial delays.”

The cables from Mr. Tillerson, which were reported by Reuters, make clear that the Trump administration wants a more intense focus on the potential for a serious threat when making decisions about who should receive a visa.

“Consular officers should not hesitate to refuse any case presenting security concerns,” Mr. Tillerson wrote in the cables, titled “Implementing Immediate

## Heightened Screening and Vetting of Visa Applications.”

“All visa decisions are national security decisions,” the secretary of state added.

During his presidential campaign, Mr. Trump accused the Obama administration of failing to properly screen people coming into the United States, a claim former officials in that administration reject. As a candidate, Mr. Trump vowed to ban all incoming Muslims until leaders could “figure out what the hell is going on.” Later, he backed away from a total ban on Muslims but promised “extreme vetting” of those trying to come to the United States.

The president’s first attempt to put tougher screening in place was the executive order aimed at temporarily blocking refugees and people whom Mr. Trump called “bad dudes” from predominantly Muslim countries. Courts blocked the first version of the president’s order after a chaotic rollout just days into his term. A second order was blocked this month.

But on March 6, the same day that Mr. Trump issued his revised travel ban, he also wrote a presidential memorandum ordering the secretary of state, the attorney general and the secretary of homeland security to “implement protocols and procedures” to enhance visa screening.

Administration officials said the cables from Mr. Tillerson are among the actions being taken to carry out that memorandum. Mark Toner, a State Department spokesman, said the steps aim “to more effectively identify individuals who could pose a threat to the United States.”

Most people seeking entry to the United States, for family, business or tourism reasons, must apply for a visa. Embassy officials can deny a visa for anyone suspected of being a threat, conducting fraud or planning to stay longer than allowed.

The seven-page unclassified cable that Mr. Tillerson sent on March 15, which was provided to The New York Times, makes clear that the process of securing an entry visa is about to get harder and longer at diplomatic posts around the globe.

“Consular chiefs must immediately convene post’s law enforcement and intelligence community partners” to develop what Mr. Tillerson described in the cable as “sets of post-applicant populations warranting increased scrutiny.”

People targeted for increased scrutiny, Mr. Tillerson said in his cable, may be subject to a decision made only after more rigorous screening.

The March 15 cable suggests areas of inquiry during a required interview, including: the applicant’s travel history, addresses and work history for 15 years; and all phone numbers, email addresses and social media handles used by the applicant in the past five years.

Another cable, sent two days later, indicated that consular officers should not begin asking for the 15-year travel and work histories until the State Department received authorization for those questions from the Office of Management and Budget. It is unclear why that permission had not been granted.

The State Department also urged its embassy officials to delay or reschedule interviews if an applicant was unable to provide all of the information demanded. And Mr. Tillerson acknowledged in the cables that the extra scrutiny would cause “backlogs to rise,” even as he recommended that officials should each interview no more than 120 visa applicants each day.

Mr. Chen, of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, questioned how a single interviewer who conducts 120 interviews per day — at about five minutes per interview — could improve security for the visa process.

“It’s highly unlikely they could obtain information that demonstrates whether someone is a national security threat in such a brief interview process,” he said.

In addition to the new security protocols for embassies, the four diplomatic cables sent last week offer a view into how the administration hopes to enact the travel ban if the president ever gets the chance.

The March 15 cable, which was sent before federal courts blocked the revised travel ban, increases scrutiny on people from the six countries in the president’s

executive order: Iran, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Somalia and Libya. It also includes a section calling for increased scrutiny for Iraqi nationals.

For those from the six countries covered in the ban, the cable envisions a process for potentially granting a limited number of exemptions from the ban by issuing a waiver, but only after vigorous screening. Those people would be questioned about their past 15 years of travel and occupational history, as well as whether they have visited territory controlled by the Islamic State.

A March 16 cable suspended “all enforcement” regarding the tougher scrutiny on the countries from Mr. Trump’s executive order.

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