

USA CHANGES THE VISA POLICY FOR SOME EUROPEANS



The United States began executing changes to its visa policy on January 21, which will make it more difficult for some Europeans to travel to the U.S. The aim is to prevent ISIS sympathizers from entering the country. The new rules are applicable to travelers from Australia, Europe and Japan who have visited Syria, Sudan or Iraq since 2011. Dual citizens with citizenship in any of the named countries will also be affected.

Under the new rules, **the affected individuals will only be able to travel to the U.S. after successfully applying for a visa.** They are thus excluded from the visa waiver program. The program makes it possible for travelers from 38 countries to enter the U.S. without visa for trips of less than 90 days. The waiver program includes 31 European nations, Australia, and some Asian countries. The program is used by about 20 million tourists every year.

Individuals travelling to the U.S. under the visa waiver program are screened against national intelligence database so as to check if they pose any security risks. The checks are however less restrictive than those done on people who must get a visa.

The adjustment of the visa policy was mandated and passed in November 2015 following the deadly ISIS-linked attack in Paris that injured 368 and killed 130 people. Most of the terrorists were European citizens and counter-terrorism officials and lawmakers feared that terrorists may exploit the visa waiver program to enter the U.S. and organize a similar attack. The bill was passed overwhelmingly by the House in December. Michael McCaul, the House Homeland Security Committee Chairman and a Texas Republican referred to the previous arrangement as a huge security gap that needed to be changed.

A good number of foreign fighters who join ISIS and other terrorist groups travel to Syria and Iraq and then return to the West. According to the State Department, Sudan, Iran and Syria are also marked as state supporters and sponsors of terrorism.

Although the changes are likely to affect few people, the EU Ambassador to the United States, David O'Sullivan, together with 28 ambassadors from the European Union expressed several concerns regarding the changes to the visa policy.

The politicians warned that a general restriction on individuals who have visited Iraq or Syria will adversely impact those who engage in legitimate business, humanitarian work and journalism. In addition, the dual citizens of EU countries and the given states will be affected unfairly and disproportionately.

Any traveler excluded from the visa waiver program thanks to the new adjustments is still in a position to apply for the U.S. visa, but needs to go through the usual visa application process at their consulates or embassies. However, the restrictions may be waived by the secretary of Homeland security for individuals whose travel will be beneficial to the national security of the U.S. Qualifying individuals may include people who have traveled to Iran or Iraq for legitimate business purposes as well as journalists, government officials and representatives of international and non-governmental organizations.

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