In late November 2025, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) issued a directive that immediately stopped the processing of immigration applications from nationals of 19 designated “high-risk” countries. This significant policy change affects various immigration benefits, including green card applications, citizenship petitions, asylum requests, and work authorization documents. The pause applies to both pending applications and, in certain cases, previously approved immigration benefits granted during prior administrations.

This article examines the USCIS immigration pause affecting nationals from 19 countries subject to existing travel ban measures. We will analyze which countries and immigration categories face restrictions, explore the legal framework supporting these actions, and discuss the practical implications for applicants navigating an increasingly complex immigration landscape. Understanding these developments is essential for foreign nationals with pending applications, employers sponsoring international workers, and immigration practitioners advising clients through this period of regulatory uncertainty.

Background on the USCIS Immigration Pause

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) issued a four-page policy memo on Tuesday outlining the immediate suspension of adjudication for immigration applications submitted by nationals from 19 designated countries. The memo explicitly acknowledged that processing delays would affect pending applications, stating that the agency “weighed that consequence against the urgent need” to ensure maximum vetting and screening protocols.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reinforced this position through an official statement emphasizing that “citizenship is a privilege, not a right” and affirming the administration’s commitment to admitting only thoroughly vetted individuals. This approach marks a significant departure from Biden administration immigration policies, which prioritized processing efficiency and expanded refugee admissions, particularly for Afghan nationals following the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The Triggering Incident: National Guard Shooting in Washington, D.C.

On November 26, 2025, two National Guard members were shot while on patrol near the White House in Washington, D.C. The attack resulted in the death of U.S. Army Specialist **Sarah Beckstrom** the following day, while the second victim, **Andrew Wolfe**, remained in critical condition. The suspect was formally charged with murder on Tuesday, November 28.

Authorities identified the suspect as an Afghan national who entered the United States in 2021 during the Afghanistan withdrawal under the Biden administration. The individual was subsequently granted asylum after President Trump’s second inauguration. This timeline became a focal point in subsequent policy discussions, with USCIS Director Joseph Edlow stating in a Newsmax interview that he does not believe Afghan nationals who came to the United States following the 2021 withdrawal “were properly vetted.”

The National Guard shooting served as the immediate catalyst for the USCIS policy shift. Just one day after the attack, on

November 27, USCIS issued its initial policy directive pausing immigration applications from nationals of designated high-risk countries. The agency’s memo explicitly referenced the incident as justification for implementing enhanced vetting procedures, characterizing the processing delays as “necessary and appropriate” when balanced against national security obligations. The Department of Homeland Security reinforced this position, emphasizing that “citizenship is a privilege, not a right” and that the administration would “take no chances when the future of our nation is at stake.”

The List of Affected Countries and Their Profile

The travel ban list includes **19 countries** that are currently facing pauses on immigration applications and undergoing stricter vetting procedures. These countries are categorized as follows:

Full Travel Ban (12 countries):

- Afghanistan
- Burma (Myanmar)
- Chad
- Republic of Congo
- Equatorial Guinea
- Eritrea

- Haiti
- Iran
- Libya
- Somalia
- Sudan
- Yemen

Partial Travel Restrictions (7 countries):

- Burundi
- Cuba
- Laos
- Sierra Leone
- Togo
- Turkmenistan
- Venezuela

Geographic Distribution

The geographic distribution shows a significant presence of **African and Asian nations**, with only a few countries from the Caribbean and South America represented. Out of the nineteen countries affected, thirteen are situated in Africa, five in Asia, and one in South America.

Designation as “Countries of Concern”

USCIS and DHS have classified these nations as **“countries of concern“** or **“high-risk countries”** based on various factors. The agencies assess national security aspects such as the existence of terrorist groups, political instability, and the ability of foreign governments to work together with U.S. vetting processes.

The designation also takes into account the effectiveness of information-sharing systems, document security standards, and the trustworthiness of identity verification methods within these countries. Nations experiencing ongoing conflicts, humanitarian crises, or lacking functional governmental structures are subject to increased scrutiny under this framework.

In addition to these factors, it’s important to note that many of these countries also face demographic challenges. For instance, the aging population in some regions could exacerbate existing issues such as political instability and economic hardship.

Scope and Impact on Immigration Applications

The USCIS pause affects many types of immigration benefits. It impacts individuals from the 19 designated countries who have applied for permanent residence (green card applications), naturalization (citizenship applicants), asylum (asylum applications), and various work authorizations such as employment-based visas (employment-based petitions) and humanitarian benefits.

Categories of Applications Affected by the Pause:

- **Green card applications** through family sponsorship, employment-based petitions, and adjustment of status proceedings
- **Naturalization applications** for lawful permanent residents seeking U.S. citizenship
- **Asylum applications pending** adjudication, representing over 1.4 million cases according to USCIS data
- **Work authorization** requests, including H-1B visas, employment authorization documents (EADs), and extensions
- **Waivers** of inadmissibility and other discretionary relief applications
- **Humanitarian benefits** such as Temporary Protected Status adjustments and special immigrant classifications

The immigration application review process now requires enhanced vetting protocols for affected nationals. USCIS has implemented additional security screenings, including expanded biometrics cross-checking against federal databases and

comprehensive criminal history reviews. These measures extend processing timelines significantly beyond standard adjudication periods.

The policy also affects previously approved cases. USCIS has indicated that these cases may be re-reviewed, creating uncertainty for individuals who thought their immigration matters were settled. This re-examination applies to benefits granted during previous administrations, potentially impacting employment authorizations and residential status already conferred.

Legal Framework and Policy Updates Underlying the Pause

The legal authority for USCIS to implement nationality-based pauses comes from various parts of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), especially sections that deal with inadmissibility and national security issues. The INA gives the executive branch broad power to limit entry and change immigration processing when there are national security concerns. The **travel ban proclamation issued in June 2025** officially classified the 19 countries as high-risk, providing the legal basis for later administrative actions.

USCIS recently updated its Policy Manual to include **“country-specific factors” in immigration decisions**, requiring officers to be more careful when reviewing applications from nationals of designated countries. This update requires consideration of:

- Security conditions in the applicant’s home country
- Availability of reliable identity verification systems
- Levels of cooperation between the country and U.S. law enforcement agencies
- Historical patterns of immigration fraud or security incidents

The implementation raises significant transparency concerns. While the Policy Manual updates represent published guidance, the operational directives implementing the pause seem to come from internal memos rather than formal rulemaking processes. This difference creates potential vulnerability to **legal challenges to USCIS directives**, as affected applicants may argue that the agency exceeded its **legal authority for nationality-based pauses** without following the proper notice-and-comment procedures required under the Administrative Procedure Act. Immigration attorneys have pointed out that the INA inadmissibility clause usually applies at the entry stage, raising questions about extending these restrictions to benefit adjudications for individuals already in the United States.

Looking Forward: Potential Developments and What Applicants Should Know

The current pause represents a dynamic policy environment where changes may occur with limited advance notice. **Anticipated expansions to restricted countries list** remain a possibility as the administration continues evaluating

national security concerns. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem’s public statements suggest the administration may consider adding additional nations to the travel ban list based on ongoing security assessments.

The **timeline for lifting or modifying pauses** remains uncertain. USCIS has indicated it will issue formal **guidance updates from USCIS** to clarify processing procedures, though no specific date has been announced. Affected applicants should monitor official USCIS communications channels regularly for policy announcements.

Litigation surrounding nationality-based pauses appears likely given the precedent of legal challenges to similar policies. Multiple immigration advocacy organizations have signaled intent to examine the legal basis for these measures, which could affect implementation timelines and scope.

Practical Considerations for Affected Applicants

Individuals with pending applications from the 19 designated countries should:

1. Maintain current contact information with USCIS to receive any case-specific communications
2. Preserve all documentation related to their applications and immigration status
3. Monitor expiration dates on work authorizations and other time-sensitive benefits
4. Document any hardships resulting from processing delays for potential future relief applications
5. Avoid international travel that could complicate re-entry to the United States

Legal representation becomes particularly valuable during periods of heightened scrutiny and evolving policy directives.

Conclusion

The USCIS immigration policy update represents a significant shift in how applications from nationals of 19 high-risk countries will be processed, directly affecting green card processing times and creating substantial uncertainty for thousands of pending cases. Understanding USCIS policy on nationals from high-risk countries requires careful attention to evolving guidance and operational directives that may emerge in coming weeks.

Applicants and employers must remain vigilant in monitoring developments related to this immigration pause. The fluid nature of these policy changes means that processing timelines, vetting requirements, and application outcomes may shift without advance notice.

Given the complexity of navigating these recent USCIS policy shifts, consulting with experienced immigration counsel is essential. Legal professionals can provide case-specific guidance, help applicants understand their options during processing delays, and ensure compliance with emerging requirements that may affect their immigration status or employment authorization.