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Boston Public Radio Podcast

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Congressman Lynch: 72 Department of Homeland Security Employees On Terrorist Watchlist

By [TORI BEDFORD](#) (/PEOPLE/TORI-BEDFORD)



TSA screenings
Credit Flickr.com/David Prasad



Congressman Stephen Lynch on Boston Public Radio 12/01/15

Earlier this month, 47 democrats in the house of representatives defied a house veto threat by backing a GOP bill to ramp up screening requirements for Syrian and Iraqi refugees. Congressman Stephen Lynch was among them. He joined Jim Braude and Margery Eagan on Boston Public Radio to discuss the reasoning behind his vote and other congressional matters.

Questions are paraphrased, and responses are edited where noted [...].

MARGERY: Let's start with the vote on the Syrian refugees. Why were you with those 47 other democrats?

It's a very simple bill, I know that it's got subsumed within a larger discussion about immigration policy, but basically, the bill we voted on was a very short bill—four pages in length, basically, and it said that the director of national security shall review the vetting process as being conducted by both the FBI and the department of homeland security. Because of the disastrous results we've had so far with the screening process, especially the department of homeland security, I think it was a very good idea to have another set of eyeballs looking at that process.

Back in August, we did an investigation—the inspector General did—of the Department of Homeland Security, and they had 72 individuals that were on the terrorist watch list that were actually working at the Department of Homeland Security. The director had to resign because of that. Then we went further and did an eight-airport investigation. We had staffers go into eight different airports to test the department of homeland security screening process at major airports. They had a 95 percent failure rate. We had folks—this was a testing exercise, so we had folks going in there with guns on their ankles, and other weapons on their persons, and there was a 95 percent failure rate.

I have very low confidence based on empirical data that we've got on the Department of Homeland Security. I think we desperately need another set of eyeballs looking at the vetting process. That's vetting that's being done at major airports where we have a stationary person coming through a facility, and we're failing 95 percent of the time. I have even lower confidence that they can conduct the vetting process in places like Jordan, or Belize or on the Syrian border, or in Cairo, or Beirut in any better fashion, especially given the huge volume of applicants we've had seeking refugee status.

JIM: Even if you're right that the system needs strengthening, the most likely way that a terrorist would come into this country is not through an 18-24 month-long process, but through this Visa program that allows 20 million people from 38 countries to come here every single year with absolutely no prior approval at all.

We had Democratic and Republican proposals on this bill, and there wasn't a dime's worth of difference between the two of them. It became a sort of a proxy battle over immigration. You had a bunch of Republican governors who were using it politically, and saying, "we're going to stop refugees from coming into our state, which is baloney because they have no ability—zero ability—under the constitution to actually prevent refugees from coming into their state. You also had other people on the far left saying that this would stop every person from coming into the United States. In both cases, if they only took the time to read the bill, they would see that it did not do either. The democratic proposal also requires a multi-layered vetting process of refugees.

The reason the refugee issue came up and not the Visa waiver program is because in the Paris example, you had somebody go into the stream of legitimate refugees and then perpetrate acts of violence upon the civilians in Paris. That's why that example came to the forefront.

I agree with you—I think the Visa waiver program, where you've got 20 million people coming in, versus the [refugees] coming in, 10,000? perhaps? At the end of the day, obviously the Visa waiver program is the one that we should be looking at.

JIM: Governor Charlie Baker was one of those governors who hesitated about refugees coming to Massachusetts—he didn't sign the letter that Republican governors sent to the president, but he did state that he wanted a pause on the whole refugee thing. Was he grandstanding in your opinion?

I don't think he was. If you listen to his press conference, when he addressed it, I thought his remarks were very thoughtful, and I thought his remarks were very measured, compared to what you heard from some of the red state governors that were doing a lot of the chest bumping and that sort of thing. Governor Baker was asking for more information, which I think was totally appropriate.

MARGERY: You just mentioned the TSA's terrible record. You mentioned having low confidence in the Department of Homeland Security... is it every man for himself every time you get in an airplane?

I think that they... The resources are being spent, I think there are a bunch of different weaknesses in our system, I think we have very low-paid TSA and DHS workers, I think there's a huge turnover there, when you talk to the people at the airport who are actually working there. When Bush created this system, I think it was 700,000 employees, he basically stripped away their right to join a union. They're trying to use low-wage employees there, I heard from a TSA employee last week who was leaving, and he said

there's just no room for advancement there, they're just stuck. I think morale is part of it, and the whole screening process is being revisited now after the inspector general's report.

MARGERY: If Homeland Security is so inept, but we depend on them, should we be much more scared than we are? Should the focus be to better train DHS employees?

Absolutely...we had a hearing three weeks ago where the new TSA director said that they're going back to the drawing board, and beginning again in terms of what their approach is. That's a good thing. It's a little bit late in coming, but I think because of what happened in Paris and what happened in Egypt with the airliner, what happened in Beirut... We're redoubling our efforts, but obviously the system that was initially put in place was inadequate.

To hear more from Congressman Stephen Lynch's interview with Boston Public Radio, click on the audio link above.

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The Congressional / IG investigation noted here took place quite some
time before Paris.

And this article was published before San Bernadino.

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Department of Homeland Insecurity and Incompetence.

Is that about right?

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I dunno, they seem to be real good at finding 'illegal' finger nail clippers.

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**RAW** · 2 days agoThis really proves: 1) TSA is a sham; 2) You cannot count on government
background checks to ensure safety; 3) If the government can mess anything up,
they will and they will do it doubly so; 4) ISIS is already here and in place... with
more on the way.

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TSA is subcontracted. It's a company, it's not the government. They just

