Amid terror scare, US House passes new restrictions on visa-free visits

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In an action aimed at whipping up hysteria over terrorism and against immigrants and Muslims, the US House of Representatives voted by an overwhelming margin, 407-19, to approve legislation that would impose new restrictions and screening on visitors to the United States who had travelled to Iraq, Iran, Sudan or Syria in the last five years.

Republicans voted for the bill unanimously, 242-0, while Democrats backed it by a margin of 165-19. The Obama White House and both Republican and Democratic congressional leaders supported its passage. White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the legislation "would actually make the country safer."

The bill makes significant changes in the 30-year-old federal visa waiver program, which allows citizens of 38 countries, including Australia, Japan, South Korea and most of Europe, to enter the US as visitors for up to 90 days without a visa. Some 20 million people made use of the program last year, accounting for 60 percent of all foreign visitors to the United States.

The legislation was stampeded through the House without any serious scrutiny in the wake of the attack in San Bernardino, California that killed 14 people. The two gunmen, Syed Farook, US-born of Pakistani descent, and his wife Tashfeen Malik, a recent immigrant from Pakistan, were both Muslims said to be acting in support of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, although there are no known organizational links between ISIS and the mass killing.

Tashfeen Malik did not enter the country under the visa waiver program, although President Obama falsely implied she did in his nationally televised speech Sunday night. She came in under a separate program granting entry to the prospective spouses of US citizens, which would not be affected by the House bill. That only underscores the real purpose of the legislation, which is to further intensify the reactionary anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant political poison being pumped out by the media and both corporate-controlled political parties.

Setting the tone for this campaign is the current poll leader for the Republican presidential nomination, billionaire Donald Trump, who issued a demand Monday that the US government bar all Muslims from entering the United States for an indefinite period, while a more comprehensive strategy against ISIS is developed and implemented.

Trump defended this fascistic proposal in a series of campaign rallies and media interviews Monday and Tuesday, declaring that the entry of any Muslim into the United States—including even US Muslims who go abroad and then return home—represented a potential terrorist threat.

While most of Trump's Republican rivals condemned his proposal—with the significant exceptions of Dr. Ben Carson and Senator Ted Cruz, running second and third in most polls—none of them said they would not support Trump if he wins the Republican nomination. That alone demonstrates that their claimed opposition to his racist and fascistic views is based not on democratic principles, but short-term political calculations.

The brief debate before the near-unanimous House passage of the visa waiver bill saw both Democrats and Republicans appealing to the same fears of terrorism as Trump. Republican Speaker Paul Ryan said, "This will help neutralize the threat from foreign terrorists entering our country." Steny Hoyer, the Democratic minority whip, said the bill was "reasonable" and "measured," adding that the bill did not exclude anyone automatically, but provided "additional requirements designed to ensure that those who come in this country

are in fact not a risk to this country."

The legislation now goes to the Senate, which is working on a slightly different version of the bill, naming only Iraq and Syria, but with tougher provisions for security investigations of prospective visitors. Both bills would prove more burdensome to the 38 countries involved than to any potential terrorists, since they require the governments of these countries to supply a mass of information about their own citizens to the US military-intelligence apparatus in order to remain in the good graces of Washington.

Prospective visitors are required to notify the US government if they have travelled to any of the four banned countries, and undergo more intensive screening. The governments of the 38 countries in the visa waiver program are required to supply the travel information through encoded chips in their citizens' passports. Many EU countries have not fully implemented chip technology in passports.

The main concern cited by congressional supporters of the legislation was the number of European-born Muslims who have travelled to Syria to join ISIS and then returned to their home countries, from where they could travel to the United States without a visa. A House Republican task force issued a report recently claiming that there were 5,000 people with western passports who had fought with or were fighting with ISIS.

There was no discussion in the House debate about the fact that most Europeans who went to Syria were encouraged to do so by their governments and by the American CIA, which recruited Islamists to join the rebellion in Syria against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, an ally of both Iran and Russia.

The visa waiver bill is only the first of a series of repressive measures to be taken up by Congress and the Obama administration in the wake of the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, with the aim of exploiting these terrorist attacks to undermine fundamental democratic rights.

Other bills and amendments include restrictions on the resettlement of Syrian refugees, intensified passenger inspections and other security measures at airports, renewal of US intelligence programs where legislative authority has lapsed (or where lawsuits have placed obstacles), expanded powers for the Department of Homeland Security, and banning the purchase of

certain weapons by people who have been put on the federal no-fly watch list.

There have also been calls for a security crackdown on the Internet, in some cases from the top officials of corporations in the technology industry. Google Chairman Eric Schmidt wrote in a column published in the *New York Times* Tuesday that the industry should build "spell-checkers, but for hate and harassment," devising algorithms that could automatically detect and shut down web sites, chat rooms and other forms of communication used by ISIS and similar groups.

Schultz was responding to demands by President Obama, Democratic presidential frontrunner Hillary Clinton, and most Republican presidential hopefuls, that Silicon Valley collaborate directly with US intelligence agencies in policing the Internet, including turning over information on the clients of companies like Google when the US government demands it.