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Highlights

BORDER SECURITY

Implications of Eliminating the Visa Waiver Program

Why GAO Did This Study

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. Congress, the administration, law enforcement officials, and the public have questioned the effectiveness of U.S. visa programs in protecting national security. Some have voiced concern that terrorists or other criminals may exploit one of these programs—the Visa Waiver Program—to enter the United States. The program enables citizens of 28 participating countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business for 90 days or less without first obtaining a visa. It was created, in part, to promote the effective use of government resources and to facilitate international travel without threatening U.S. security.

GAO was asked to review the Visa Waiver Program, including the process for assessing countries' eligibility to participate in the program. GAO was also asked to determine the implications—specifically those affecting national security, foreign relations, tourism, and State Department resources—of eliminating the program. GAO analysts traveled to several visa waiver countries, including Belgium, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, and Uruguay, as well as to Argentina, whose participation in the program was recently revoked.
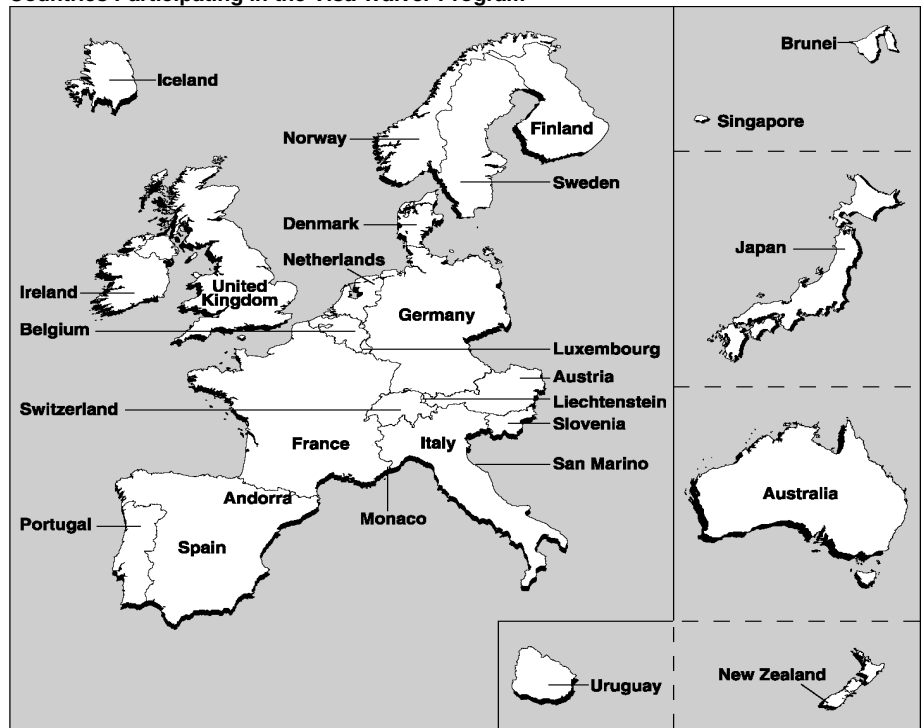
What GAO Found

To ensure that countries participating in the Visa Waiver Program pose a low risk to U.S. national interests, the Departments of Justice and State verify each country's political and economic stability and the security of its passport issuance process. However, laws passed since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, affect the processes for determining eligibility for the program. The new laws expand passport requirements for visa waiver countries and call for a system to monitor visitors' movement into and out of the United States. Whether these requirements will be implemented by the specified deadlines remains uncertain.

The implications for U.S. national security of eliminating the Visa Waiver Program are difficult to determine. It is clear, however, that eliminating the program could affect U.S. relations with other countries, U.S. tourism, and State Department resources abroad.

Although the Departments of Justice and State generally agreed with our report, Justice was concerned that GAO did not fully take into account its progress in meeting certain requirements. State questioned whether GAO considered the border inspection process when discussing the national security implications of eliminating the Visa Waiver Program.

Countries Participating in the Visa Waiver Program

Source: U.S. State Department data.

Note: Map is not drawn to scale. It is for illustrative purposes only.

United States General Accounting Office