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MAKE-BELIEVE

Surprise! A well-known terrorist winds up in the U.S. as a refugee

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Eight years ago, in “[Doing Nothing, Redux](#)” we wrote about [Umar Abdulmutallab](#), a rich kid from Nigeria who tried to set off the bomb he was wearing as his flight from Amsterdam approached Detroit. It’s not that Umar’s connection with Al Qaeda was any big secret. After all, his father, a former Nigerian government minister, had personally warned the State Department and CIA about his son. Well, the CIA never told the FBI. Neither did the NSA pass on advance information they had about the plot. And so on. Umar got a visa, his plastic explosives cleared screening, and he took his seat.

And now we’re writing about Omar Ameen, a middle-aged Iraqi fellow who immigrated to the U.S. in November 2014. His terrorist connections were also no secret at home. Ameen was in fact raised in a prominent Al Qaeda-linked family and reportedly participated in many terrorist acts over the years. But Americans didn’t know that. Instead, in his application Ameen “inverted the narrative, claiming to be a victim of violence.” He reported that his brother had been kidnapped by terrorists, and that he feared being next. In fact he and his brothers *were* the terrorists and had warrants out for their arrest since December 2010. Check out a [brand-new DOJ filing](#) that seeks Ameen’s extradition to Iraq for killing a cop shortly before coming to America:

Evidence from both the Iraq National Security Service...as well as the FBI... indicates since at least 2004, Ameen has been a member of first AQI, then ISIS in Iraq...Ameen has reportedly undertaken numerous acts of violence on behalf of these terrorist organizations, ranging from planting improvised explosive devices (“IEDs”) to the murder that is the subject of this extradition...According to witnesses, it is common knowledge in Rawah, Iraq, that Ameen was a main local figure of AQI and ISIS. The Ameen family is alleged to be one of five native Rawah families that founded AQI in the region.

Once Ameen had lived in the U.S. for two years the FBI apparently discovered that something was amiss. It took another two years for the Feds to make their move. DOJ’s filing doesn’t explain the delay. Maybe the FBI tried to mount a counterintelligence op. In any event, Ameen’s detention [was just formally announced](#). As one might expect, there’s been blowback. Here’s an extract from an otherwise bland piece in the [New York Times](#):

Seamus Hughes, the deputy director of the George Washington University Program on Extremism, said the case was likely to put a further spotlight on the already red-hot issue of refugees. “This is not the first case of a failure in the refugee screening process, but one of the most serious I have seen.”

Without doubt, the Ameen imbroglio will feed the raucous debate about whom to admit, and why. President Trump ramped things up in January 2017 with [Executive Order 13769](#), “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.” His move capped yearly refugees at 50,000, suspended the admission of applicants from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, and barred the entry of those from Syria. As one might expect, these actions were praised by the “Reds” and roundly condemned by the “Blues.” For example, the *New York Times*’ august Editorial Board entitled its critique “[Donald Trump’s Muslim Ban Is Cowardly and Dangerous.](#)”

President Trump issued a new version of the order in September 2017. [Proclamation 9645](#) states that properly vetting refugees requires accurate information about two things: their identity, and any involvement in crime and terrorism. Getting there inevitably requires assistance from their country of origin. Seven nations were now deemed not up to the task: Chad, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen. Accordingly, refugee applications from their residents were suspended or severely restricted.

Legal challenges and the like kept things mostly in limbo until this June. That’s when the Supremes (meaning the judges, not the vocalists) ruled 5-4 in *Trump v. Hawaii* that the Proclamation, which the Blues had [condemned for anti-Muslim bias](#), was in fact a lawful exercise of his powers. Here’s an extract from the decision:

The Proclamation is expressly premised on legitimate purposes: preventing entry of nationals who cannot be adequately vetted and inducing other nations to improve their practices...Plaintiffs and the dissent nonetheless emphasize that five of the seven nations currently included in the Proclamation have Muslim-majority populations. Yet that fact alone does not support an inference of religious hostility, given that the policy covers just 8% of the world’s Muslim population and is limited to countries that were previously designated by Congress or prior administrations as posing national security risks.

Note that Ameen’s country of origin, Iraq, was not on this exclusion list. It was actually taken off the first list within two months, in March 2017. By then Ameen’s goose was already well cooked:

Since 2016, the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force has investigated Ameen for suspected violations of 18 U.S.C. § 1546 (Fraud and misuse of visas, permits, and other documents), among other suspected violations. As part of this investigation, the FBI has interviewed at least eight witnesses, and received documents from Iraq, which corroborate Ameen's involvement with AQI and ISIS, including the murder that is alleged in the extradition request.

Why did Iraq get a break? [According to administration officials](#), its willingness to tighten up refugee vetting and key role in the fight against terrorism made all the difference. Reading between the lines, it's obvious that Iraq balked at being on the list in the first place. Badly needing a friend in the region, we quickly restored its privilege.

It's simple to check out someone's bonafides in America. Get a fingerprint, run it through the FBI, and wait for information to pour in. As we said in "[Flying Under the Radar](#)," vetting immigrants is an altogether different beast. And when it comes to refugees, the sheer numbers are overwhelming. During 2014-2016 [the U.S. admitted 224,884 refugees](#). Nearly one in five (42,325, 18.8%) came from...Iraq. It was narrowly beaten out for first place by Burma (45,331), a land besieged by vicious religious and ethnic struggles. Third through fifth place were occupied by Congo (28,786), Somalia (26,878) and Bhutan (20,026). And despite its pariah status, its many admissions in 2016 earned Syria a solid sixth (14,374).

Now let's talk the practicalities of vetting. U.S. consular offices are few and thinly staffed. Usually all they can do is to conduct a perfunctory record check and make a couple of phone calls. Even when the will exists, safety concerns often preclude sending employees across country on missions to get the "real scoop." Lapses in recordkeeping and endemic corruption are also constant problems.

Given legal and political constraints, imposing substantial caps on refugee admissions is out of reach. Thoroughly investigating applicants is also impossible, if for their numbers alone. About the only option left is to bar refugees from countries that don't help with the vetting process. While this may be unfair to individuals, eliminating inherently high-risk pools seems reasonable. That's what the President did, and what the Court endorsed.

Using [Wikipedia](#) and other online sources we gathered basic information about the perpetrators of forty-four alleged terrorist events in the U.S. between 2010 and the present. There were forty-six named suspects. Fourteen were foreign-born: four in Pakistan, two in Chechnya, two in Iraq, and one each in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kuwait, Somalia and Uzbekistan. Three were from countries on the original exclusion list (Iraq and Somalia). None were from lands on the current list.

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So, is the President's approach effective? Or does it seem, as our title suggests, like a bit of snake oil? Well, your blogger once had a Top Secret, and he'd be sad for it to be publicly stripped. So *you* be the judge.