

New US dragnet to target Middle Eastern men for deportation

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In a move denounced by Arab-American civil rights advocates, the Justice Department has identified for deportation about 6,000 young Middle Eastern men who have allegedly ignored previous orders from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to leave the country. According to a report in Tuesday's *Washington Post*, authorities have decided to make this dragnet of men of Arab and Muslim backgrounds a priority in their nationwide intensification of deportation proceedings.

The names of these individuals will be the first to be entered into a national crime database set up last month by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to crack down on what the government calls "absconders"—more than 300,000 foreign nationals who have remained in the country after receiving deportation orders, the *Post* reports. These immigrants will be tracked down, rounded up and potentially deported through the operation of regional anti-terrorism task forces including representatives from the FBI, INS and US attorneys offices, according to sources.

The newly targeted immigrants reportedly come from countries the US alleges harbor members of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network. The government has refused to make public a list of these countries or to give any more information about those who have been included in the list. US officials claim that some have criminal backgrounds.

The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) condemned the new Justice Department deportation initiative in a statement Tuesday. ADC President Ziad Asali commented, "It is unconscionable to proceed with this effort based on a hierarchy of concern that is ethnically defined. Little by little we are systematizing in our policies the idea that young Arab

men are a special class of persons who are to be treated differently than everyone else."

James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, told the *Post* that the roundup had little to do with identifying potential terrorists: "The question is whether it's an effective use of law enforcement to go after all these absconders when the purpose is to avert terrorism. The answer is no, it's not."

This move is the latest in a series of measures that single out young men of Middle Eastern descent in the name of the government's "war on terrorism" in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Other steps have included:

- * an order to the FBI to conduct "voluntary" interviews with more than 5,000 mostly Middle Eastern men living in the US, ages 18 to 33, ostensibly to gather information concerning future terrorist attacks;

- * a new policy on visa applications affecting men, ages 16 to 45, from 25 Middle Eastern and African countries, who will face intense investigation and delays in processing their visa requests;

- * an expansion of INS authority to allow the agency to keep immigrant detainees behind bars, even after a federal immigration judge has ordered an individual released for lack of evidence.

According to the last count made public by the Justice Department, close to 1,200 people have been rounded up in the government's anti-terror dragnet, the majority of them Middle-Eastern men. The government has refused to make a full disclosure of the identities of those detained, where they are being held, the charges against them and how many are still in custody.

In some cases, people rounded up on minor immigration violations have been detained indefinitely. Some immigrants ordered deported by a judge remain in custody, despite pleas to be returned to their

countries of origin. Ahmed Alaneny, a 49-year-old Egyptian physician-turned New York cab driver, has been held since September 21 for violating his visitor's visa, but has been prohibited by the US from returning to Egypt. Alaneny's lawyer says he represents nine clients in similar situations.

Another immigrant, Rabih Haddad, 41, a Muslim community leader from Ann Arbor, Michigan, has been detained since he was arrested on December 14 on a visa violation. Haddad's visa had expired, but he filed a petition for permanent residency last April. On January 2, immigration Judge Elizabeth Hacker denied bail in Haddad's case and ordered him held without bond. Hacker cited Haddad's connection to the Islamic charity Global Relief, whose offices were raided and its assets frozen by the Bush administration for alleged links to terrorism. The judge rejected pleas by more than 4,000 supporters who had signed petitions or written letters on Haddad's behalf.

Last month, the government began adding the names of an estimated 314,000 alleged deportation evaders to the FBI's National Crime Information Center database, a list that can be accessed by more than 80,000 law enforcement agencies. With the addition of the names, local, state and federal policies authorities will now have the ability to alert the INS when they come into contact with an individual who has violated a deportation order.

While only the INS is authorized to make deportation arrests, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies can hold suspects on behalf of the agency. Local police officers could potentially stop someone for a traffic violation or other minor offense, check the FBI database, and alert INS authorities if the individual's name appears on the list.

This new coordination of police agencies has been a key feature the Bush administration's "anti-terror" initiatives since September 11. The USA Patriot Act, signed into law last October, allows the FBI to share information with the Central Intelligence Agency, giving the latter access to domestic information it has been barred from receiving in the past. FBI agents recently traveled to Afghanistan to interrogate Taliban prisoners of war as part of the "war on terrorism."

As with the many measures put into place by the Bush administration since the terror attacks, the new deportation initiative targets primarily Arab and

Muslim immigrants, but poses a threat to the civil liberties of the entire population. In a persistent assault over the past four months, the political establishment has seized on the events of September 11 to enact a rash of initiatives long sought by the extreme right, challenging democratic rights and the basic principles of the US Constitution.



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