

# Bush targets Middle Eastern immigrants in new police dragnet

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US federal agents will soon begin arresting and interrogating thousands of immigrants charged with ignoring deportation orders issued by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). An internal Justice Department memo obtained by the *Washington Post* details the agency's "Absconder Apprehension Initiative," which will begin with the apprehension of some 6,000 Middle Eastern immigrants.

Unprecedented in its scope, the plan is part of a new dragnet by the federal government to round up an estimated 314,000 foreign nationals—referred to by the government as "absconders"—who have remained in the country after receiving deportation orders. While the majority of these individuals are Latin American, the INS will initially target immigrants from countries which, according to the Bush administration, harbor members of Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network.

US officials are forming special "apprehension teams" to conduct the mass roundup, including agents from the FBI, the INS and the US Marshals Service. Starting this week, authorities will begin arresting a group of about 1,000 immigrants, mostly from the Middle East and Pakistan, whom they have identified as convicted felons.

While in the past such immigrants would have faced deportation, in this new police sweep individuals will be incarcerated, interrogated as potential terrorists and possibly charged as criminals. According to the February 8 *Post* article, the Justice Department memo "instructs federal agents to find methods of detaining some of the immigrants for possible criminal charges, rather than merely expelling them from the United States." Some could be detained indefinitely.

This new police dragnet is the latest example of how the so-called "war on terrorism" is being used to target Arab and Muslim immigrants for particularly

repressive measures, while attacking the democratic rights of the population as a whole.

Within weeks of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the government arrested more than a thousand immigrants, picking many of them up on visa violations or other minor infractions. Many of those arrested were held incommunicado and prevented from contacting their families or legal counsel. The government refuses to say how many are still being detained and what, if any, charges have been brought against them.

These mass arrests were followed by the use of intimidation and threats to compel some 5,000 Middle Eastern males to agree to "voluntary" interviews with federal agents. Such interviews have been taking place for the past two months.

Information gained from these interviews is being fed into a giant FBI National Crime Information Center database. Information gained from the Absconder Apprehension Initiative will also be downloaded into this computer database, which can be accessed by a wide array of federal, state and local police authorities. The names of people stopped for traffic violations or other minor offenses can be cross-checked against the database, and these individuals can potentially be targeted for deportation or criminal charges.

Reportedly, the names compiled so far in the FBI database are primarily those of men of Middle Eastern descent from 45 countries, including French, German and British nationals, as well as from predominantly Islamic countries such as Somalia, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

But names and other data concerning ordinary citizens will also find their way into this massive police blotter. For example, any neighbor of a person interviewed or interrogated who has shown the slightest sign of dissent from Bush's war policies or right-wing

domestic agenda could end up on an FBI file.

Information acquired as a result of the new dragnet will be used to expand this database. Michael Waslis, senior immigration policy analyst at the National Council of La Raza, a Latin American group, commented, “Anyone—Middle Easterners, Hispanics, Asians, anyone who looks foreign or ‘deportable’—is going to be checked against this database.”

Deputy Attorney General Larry Thompson described the new dragnet in the January 25 memo to anti-terrorism officials: “While there are aspects of this Initiative that are similar to the Interview Project that was recently conducted ... I want to make clear that this is a very different undertaking. Unlike the subjects of the Interview Project ... these absconders are to be apprehended and treated as criminal suspects.”

The Justice Department memo also instructs agents to use the arrests as a means of enticing detainees to provide information or become informers, with the offer of monetary rewards and a fast track to US citizenship: “Investigators conducting interviews should feel free to use all appropriate means of encouraging absconders to cooperate, including reference to reward money that is being offered and reference to the availability of an ‘S Visa’.” The “S Visa” is often referred to as the “snitch visa” by opponents of the government’s immigration policies.

The government has detained and questioned thousands of Arabs and Muslims living in America in the wake of September 11, but it has lodged criminal charges related to terrorism against only a handful of detainees. Most of these charges concern casual acquaintance with the alleged hijackers. Only one person, Zacarias Moussaoui, has been charged in direct connection to the September 11 events, and he was arrested on August 16, well before the terror attacks.

Nevertheless, Justice Department officials continue to employ inflammatory language, characterizing those they plan to arrest as “dangerous” and claiming the extensive police-sweep will prevent future terrorist plots. In fact, the vast majority of the 314,000 individuals targeted for arrest are at most guilty of overstaying their visas, an infraction that would have been considered relatively minor prior to September 11.

Bush administration officials have seized on the events of September 11 as a pretext to initiate a wholesale attack on civil liberties. The USA Patriot

Act, passed with the overwhelming support of both Democrats and Republicans, provides intelligence and police officials new electronic surveillance authority and gives police agencies the power to carry out secret searches. It also expands the time a non-citizen identified as a terror suspect can be held in detention without being charged, with provisions for some suspects to be held indefinitely.

Like many of the Bush administration’s post-September 11 initiatives—such as the order authorizing secret military tribunals to try terrorist suspects—this latest order has been put into effect by executive fiat. No public or Congressional debate preceded the Justice Department’s memo directing law enforcement agencies to round up thousands of immigrants in the Absconders Apprehension Initiative. In fact, the order was intended to be kept secret.

The Bush administration is imposing these authoritarian measures not as stop-gap procedures, but as permanent abrogations of democratic rights. While initially aimed against immigrants, these police-state methods will, sooner rather than later, be employed against broader sections of the population.



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