

Targeting Muslim men detained under new INS rules is unjust

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Body

Allow me to put this right up front so there is no misunderstanding: I believe all people who enter and remain in this country illegally should be deported.

Unlike the President, who was toying with this idea before the Sept. 11 attacks, I do not support some sweeping amnesty that would give legal status to those who abused our law. The estimated 6-million illegal aliens living and working here have cheated the system and shouldn't be rewarded for it.

At the same time, our government's sudden interest in strict enforcement of immigration laws against one community - Muslim men - is a grave injustice and will endanger national security in the long term.

Our State Department is in the middle of an international propaganda campaign deemed necessary for our future security. We are trying to demonstrate to Arab citizens that the United States is not biased against Muslims, by sponsoring Voice of America's Radio Sawa broadcasts of pop music and Arabic news with an American slant, and by beaming commercials on Arab television of Muslims who live free and happy lives in America.

All this image-building is going on abroad while at home our government is subjecting nationals from those very countries to a form of ethnic profiling on a scale not seen since the Japanese internment.

Just ask Faramarz Farahani, a Canadian citizen and high-tech worker who found himself confined for days in an Immigration and Naturalization Service holding facility in California. Farahani, 42, was imprisoned not because he was suspected of terrorist ties, not because he was in this country illegally, but because he failed to properly register under the INS's latest program to target Muslims for universal suspicion.

A new registration and fingerprinting program requires males over 16 years of age who are here on temporary visas from the countries of Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria or Libya to register in person with the INS. Those who failed to do so are subject to arrest, fines and deportation. Men and boys from another 15 Arab and Muslim countries will have to register by certain dates in January and February.

According to Farahani's attorney, Banafsheh Akhlaghi, though born in Iran, Farahani didn't think the rules applied to him. He was a Canadian after all, working in the United States as a systems analyst under a valid visa. But when he showed up at the INS office in San Jose to register in a surfeit of caution, he was arrested because he had passed the deadline. INS spokesman in Washington, D.C., Jorge Martinez said, those with dual citizenship are subject to the rule.

This is just the kind of pointless, bureaucratic rulemaking that will make us less safe in the long run. Knowing the location of law-abiding Muslim visitors offers little added internal security. (Non-law-abiding visitors aren't likely to show up to register.) But what it does in spades, is antagonize the Muslim world. In a recent trip to Saudi Arabia, nearly everyone I spoke with mentioned this special fingerprinting requirement as evidence of American contempt

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for **Muslims**. The businessmen, students and tourists who come to the United States had been our best ambassadors of good will. That is, before we broadcast through our actions that we think they are all closet terrorists.

The first deadline of Dec. 16 was a nightmare for hundreds of Iranian and Iraqi **men** who crushed into **INS** offices. **In** California especially, **INS** workers were completely overwhelmed. At least 400 **men** who had voluntarily come to register ended up **in** holding facilities while errors **in** documents and records were being sorted out. Some were even flown to other cities where **detention** beds were available, without their relatives or attorneys being informed of their whereabouts. Akhlaghi, who represented at least 25 of the detainees, said the families of these **men** were crazy with worry.

The imprisonments were often due to dual messages coming from the **INS**. **Men** waiting for approval of their green cards were arrested for lapsed visas, even when they had been told that by paying a small fine they could stay **in** the country for the months and years it took for the paperwork to be processed.

INS ineptitude also contributed to the **men**'s woes. Any noncompliance with immigration **rules**, no matter how minor or technical, was grounds for **detention** and ultimately deportation. Yet, back **in** July, the San Diego Union Tribune told of how the agency failed to input 200,000 change of address forms, making those immigrants susceptible to arrest.

The **INS** has always been a bureaucratic quagmire. One has to wonder how adding to its paper pushing is making us safer.

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