

# ***U.S. Seeks Thousands Of Fugitive Deportees; Middle Eastern Men Are Focus of Search***

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## **Body**

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Authorities will soon begin searching for thousands of Middle Eastern men in the United States who have disappeared after being ordered to leave the country, according to officials familiar with the operation.

The Justice Department has identified about 6,000 young men from the Middle East who have ignored deportation orders, and has decided to make the arrest and removal of them the highest priority among efforts to locate hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals who have defied such rulings, authorities said.

The men hail from nations that U.S. authorities consider havens for members of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network, and some have criminal backgrounds, authorities said. U.S. officials declined to identify the countries of origin or provide other details about the group.

The plan to give priority to a group of Arab and Muslim men over other foreign nationals has raised concerns among some Arab American and immigrant advocate groups that the Bush administration is practicing racial profiling in its war on terrorism. The vast majority of people ignoring deportation orders are Hispanics from Latin America.

Justice officials, including Attorney General John D. Ashcroft, have repeatedly denied that ethnicity plays a role in their anti-terrorism strategies.

The latest effort stems from a broader initiative by the Immigration and Naturalization Service to crack down on "absconders" -- the more than 300,000 foreign nationals who have remained in the country illegally after they were ordered deported. INS Commissioner James W. Ziglar announced the effort last month and authorities are preparing to enter the names into a national FBI crime database over the next year.

Justice officials have decided to enter the names of the Middle Eastern group first, and an undetermined number will be sought for capture and removal through regional anti-terrorism task forces that include representatives from the FBI, INS and U.S. attorney's offices, authorities said.

Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Council on Civil Rights, said men of Arab or Muslim backgrounds should not be singled out for law enforcement actions.

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"Obviously, these are highly sensitive times and nothing prevents INS from following leads to apprehend suspects, even if those leads include descriptions based on race or national origin," Henderson said. "But a dragnet approach to law enforcement -- rounding up men based on national origin rather than suspicious behavior or credible evidence -- is highly questionable."

James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, said he doubted that focusing on absconders from the Middle East would aid investigators in identifying potential terrorists. He noted that most of the Sept. 11 hijackers were in the United States legally.

"There's no question because of September 11 there's a lower tolerance level for visa overstays, and there's a hyper-sensitivity to Arab overstays," Zogby said. "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."

But several officials stressed that the absconder program is aimed at foreign nationals who should not be in the United States. Furthermore, these officials said, an initial focus on individuals from terrorist havens is a sensible public safety precaution that could provide investigators with important leads.

"We are going to continue to use our anti-terrorism task forces to pursue people . . . who may have information helpful in our investigation, and that means focusing on people from countries with active al Qaeda cells," one Justice official said.

The Justice Department is close to completing a controversial program in which more than 5,000 visitors from the Middle East were asked to submit voluntarily to questioning about their views of terrorism and radical groups. That program also targeted mostly young Arab or Muslim men -- characteristics shared by the 19 suspected hijackers who carried out the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

A nationwide dragnet since Sept. 11 has ensnared hundreds of other foreign nationals who are being detained on alleged immigration violations or non-terrorist criminal charges. Most of those detainees are Arab or Muslim men, officials have said.

In announcing the absconder initiative in December, Ziglar said it was aimed at solving a long-running immigration problem and was not part of the government's anti-terrorism effort. Ziglar declined to comment yesterday on the list of people from Middle East countries. Justice Department officials also declined to comment, citing investigative secrecy concerns.

The INS has traditionally devoted few resources to absconders, focusing instead on immigrant smugglers and other criminals among the nation's 7 million to 8 million undocumented aliens.

Most absconders skipped their deportation hearings or disappeared after receiving a final deportation notice, known colloquially as a "run letter" because it traditionally has prompted deportees to flee. But the INS has been so lax in enforcing deportation orders that many others do not even bother to hide, immigrant advocates say.

Authorities are just beginning to add an estimated 314,000 names of absconders to the FBI's National Crime Information Center database, a list of criminal records used by more than 80,000 law enforcement agencies. Adding the names will allow local, state and federal authorities to alert the INS when they have located someone who has violated a deportation order.

Officials produced the list of about 6,000 Middle Eastern men by conducting a search of the absconder database based on country, age and gender, sources said.

No arrests have been made from the list so far, authorities said. The INS is required to carry out all deportation arrests, but the FBI and other law enforcement agencies may hold suspects on behalf of the immigration service.

Justice officials are analyzing the group to determine whether the names are accurately included, and are debating what criteria should be used to identify those whom agents will actively seek, sources said. The INS and FBI do not have enough agents to mount a search for all the men on the high-priority list, one official said.

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