

Unless immigration rules tightened, terror in U.S. could spread

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Body

A few thoughts on terrorism right here in the good old **United States**:

First, it seems fairly clear that the people arrested so far in connection with the bombing of New York's World Trade Center last month are small fish at best. They may even be innocent dupes.

Judging from the way they were tracked down, it's safe to say they aren't professional terrorists. It's also a good bet that the real brains behind the Trade Center bombing are long gone from these shores.

WSHBOMBERS

Second, it turns out that some of the people implicated in the latest **terror** attacks - at the World Trade Center and outside CIA headquarters in Langley, Va. - were in the country illegally. Either their visas had expired or they had gotten the visa through false pretenses.

That raises the question about whether we're keeping close enough tabs on people entering this country and whether we shouldn't have quicker ways to deport those who defraud the system.

But before we get into the problems at the **Immigration** and Naturalization Service, let's consider the three people arrested as of Wednesday in connection with the World Trade Center attack.

We've all had a good laugh by now over Mohammed Salameh, the 25-year-old Palestinian who was arrested when he tried to get back his \$ 400 deposit on the rented van used to bomb the Trade Center. When you add in the fact that Salameh rented the van under his real name, you're almost forced to conclude one of three things - either he's not too bright, he's an innocent dupe or he's just plain innocent.

The same goes for Nidal Ayyad, a 25-year-old naturalized **U.S.** citizen of Palestinian origin arrested Wednesday in New Jersey. Ayyad is a chemical engineer whose business card was found on Salameh when he was arrested last week. FBI officials say Ayyad had the expertise to build a bomb and had access along with Salameh to the New Jersey storage shed where police found explosive chemicals that may have been used to make the Trade Center bomb.

You also might not put too much hope in the arrest of Ibrahim Elgabrowni, a 42-year-old Egyptian who fought with federal agents when they tried to search his New Jersey apartment last week.

My hunch about all three is that while they might have had a hand in the Trade Center blast, they certainly weren't the brains behind the operation. Any way you look at it, no experienced terrorists would have been so sloppy in covering their tracks.

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I had lunch this week with an old acquaintance who lived in Beirut for many years and who knows as much as anybody about how terrorists go about their business. His hunch was pretty much the same as mine - the real organizers of the New York attack are long gone, probably back home in Tehran, Cairo or some other Middle East capital.

Egypt comes to mind, of course, because Salameh, Elgabrowni and possibly Ayyad were followers of Omar Abdel-Rahman, an Islamic fundamentalist preacher whose followers have been trying to overthrow the government of Egypt. Rahman sneaked into this country three years ago and ever since he has been using his safe haven in New Jersey to incite more violence against the civilian authorities in Cairo.

Thinking about Rahman brings up my second subject: America's seemingly lackadaisical attitude about people who enter or stay in the country illegally.

Rahman, for instance, got his tourist visa to enter the United States under false pretenses in Sudan. U.S. authorities are partly to blame. Even though the blind preacher's name was on a watch list of terrorist suspects supposed to have been refused entry, he got in anyway.

Another terrorist suspect who apparently stayed in the country illegally was Mir Aimal Kansi, the 28-year-old Pakistani accused of killing two CIA employees outside the agency's Virginia headquarters in January.

These two men, and others, raise the obvious questions:

First, isn't there some system to keep track of when people's visas expire? Second, when we find out that somebody is in the country illegally, how come it takes years to deport them, even when they've been involved in crimes?

In answer to the first question, officials at the Immigration and Naturalization Service say they can't possibly keep track of the tens of millions of foreigners who enter the United States each year.

As for the second question, INS officials say the law on deportation procedures almost guarantees lengthy legal challenges. Until the law is changed, they say, shortcuts are impossible.

Deportation proceedings against Rahman, for example, were begun shortly after he entered the country in 1990 and there's no end in sight yet.

Back in the 1960s, the United States sometimes refused entry to rock stars such as John Lennon or George Harrison because they smoked pot overseas. These days, we can't even seem to keep out known terrorists.

If, as some predict, the World Trade Center blast is the first shot in a wave of terrorism in the United States, we're in for real trouble.

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