

WHAT I LEARNED IN IRAQ WAR

MITCHELL GRAY



Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

Wars create refugees. Most countries recognize the humanitarian obligation to provide at least a temporary home for victims displaced by war—especially civil wars like what has been going on for several years in Syria. Terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS have infiltrated refugee programs to insert operatives into Europe or the United States. The process of vetting refugees from Syria and Iraq is fraught with problems related to documentation, identification and authentication. War torn countries lack the civil administration and services required to verify legitimate claims. This paper discusses some of the main problems with vetting Syrian refugees and defers any discussion on the legal meaning of refugee status under international law.

I deployed to Camp Bucca, Iraq in late 2007, as a captain attached to an Oklahoma National Guard artillery battalion tasked with operations at the U.S. military's largest Theatre Internment Facility (TIF). Camp Bucca was part of Task Force 134 with the mission to provide legally proper and humanitarian detainee operations after the Abu Ghraib scandal that was a major public relations problem for the U.S. military when pictures emerged of troops humiliating Iraqi detainees. One of my duties was to vet applications by local Iraqis to enter the base in order to work—often as an Iraqi Correctional Officer. My ability to read Arabic helped me review applications in accordance with CENTCOM policies and classified intelligence.

I vetted over one thousand applications and noted disturbing trends. Unfortunately, the majority of the problems cited were ignored or minimized. The most common problem was the use of fake “jinsiyyas” which are Iraqi identification documents. According to CENTCOM policies the use of fake identity documents was grounds to deny access to the base. This was rarely enforced. I was told that “everyone uses them” and that it was not a big deal. Oh well.

Another problem was that when you evaluated the applications as a whole it was obvious that many of the applicants had been coached on how to answer the questions to alleviate security concerns. I was told that most applicants were signed up at the Basra police station and that the Shia Jaysh al-Mahdi militia had a strong presence there. If true, this could explain the similarity in the answers I observed.

For example, one of the questions on the form was: “do you attend a mosque”? The most common answer was “no.” However, an experienced security officer at Camp Bucca explained that the majority of applicants were Shia (we were in Basra Province and Basra is mainly a Shia community) who call their worship center a Husseiniyya and not a mosque. This is a good example of how knowledge of Arabic and Islamic culture would have been more helpful. The question should have stated: Where do you attend a mosque/masjid/Husseiniyya? This form of the question addresses all Islamic places of worship.

Another question asked if the applicant had ever been to Iran or if they knew any Iranians. The answers were always no. Yet the local community was not far from Iran and it seemed obvious that applicants understood this question to be a potential disqualifier. Another question asked if the applicants knew about any attacks or plans to attack coalition personnel. No one did. And all applicants had a favorable opinion of the U.S. forces in Iraq. Very good news indeed that such a fine pool of applicants was eager to gain access to a major U.S. installation! Yet on more than one occasion I read intelligence reports about applicants who had ties to the Iraq opposition. In one case I reviewed, the applicant was suspected of being part of an IED (improvised explosive device) team that sets up attacks near Mosul!

Another problem was street addresses. Most local Iraqis did not have typical street and number addresses. The applicant might simply refer to their address as “south of the market” or reference to some other area in town. This informal living arrangement makes vetting much more difficult. Americans need to realize that vetting people who live in third world countries that suffer grinding poverty and war-like conditions is extremely difficult due to the lack of civil order and communal development as exists in most western countries. Contrast this to a U.S. citizen applying for a security clearance who must provide a lengthy and uninterrupted chain of valid addresses for a large number of years that must be verified. This can rarely, if ever, be accomplished in vetting Middle East war refugee claimants.

My experiences at Camp Bucca rush forward when there is public discussion about accepting refugees from Syria and Iraq. The goal is to identify legitimate refugees while denying terrorists a surreptitious entry into the U.S. I recall the Obama administration boasting that our vetting process was superb and reliable. But what is the proof for this claim. Let us examine some facts about these matters.

A good example of vetting failure is the case of Omar Ameen. Ameen was arrested in Sacramento, California in August, 2018, after he entered the U.S. as a refugee according to the U.S. Department of Justice. The court records revealed he had been a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq and was part of an ISIS execution team. His was not a case of a young, confused man who dabbled online with an ISIS recruiter, but rather he was a hardened veteran jihadist. Yet he was able to enter the U.S. as a refugee.

Iraq issued a warrant to arrest Ameen for killing a police officer in Rawa in 2014. Ameen was clearly a threat to U.S. national security and an ISIS operative. How was he vetted? Who approved his application? What criteria was used? Did he use fake documents? Was he assisted by a person, group or even a country? Did he have ties to Iraqi or Iranian intelligence? Why was he in America? How long was he here before it was determined he was a terrorist? These are just some of the questions that need to be answered.

Another problem worth mentioning goes beyond initial vetting and concerns what happens to the refugee once they enter the U.S. This aspect of counter-terrorism is rarely discussed in the media. A typical Muslim refugee or immigrant finds himself or herself in an alien culture different from their home. Often, they are alone. They naturally seek a support network of people who speak Arabic, practice Islam and understand their immediate survival needs. This is a normal thing to expect.

But within these communities are sophisticated recruitment networks who target new recruits vulnerable to their radical message. The young refugee may be vulnerable to such a message when he or she meets icy stares, racist comments or, most likely, a society that largely ignores him or her. The recruiter “grooms” their target by helping them get to appointments, with transportation, housing and other support services. Trust is built. The recruiter is not just “online.” While the use of the internet to radicalize young Muslims is well-known, counter-intelligence cannot overlook the “bricks and mortar” recruiter who meets face to face with the potential recruit.

We can learn from past examples of these terrorist recruiters. The Egyptian “Blind Sheikh,” Umar Abdel Rahman, operated out of Jersey City and Brooklyn mosques in the late 1980s and early 1990s recruiting for al-Qaeda and jihad. His group took over the mosques and were the men responsible for planning the 1993 World Trade Center attack. Sheikh Rahman was a very influential cleric in Egypt with a large following.

Yet he allegedly blessed the killing of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat for signing a peace treaty with Israel and Egyptian intelligence warned the U.S. not to “coddle” the Sheikh. Nonetheless, Sheikh Rahman openly recruited for Jihad and his hateful message resonated with dozens of Muslims frustrated with U.S. foreign policy that supported Israel and Arab despots. Some of the Sheikh’s terrorist followers were men well educated in Egypt but relegated to menial labor in the U.S.

The late Anwar Alaqi, targeted and killed by an Obama sanctioned drone in Yemen, met with 9-11 hijackers Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdar before 9-11 in San Diego and Washington D.C. Alaqi recruited in person and online for al-Qaeda and he had several email contacts with Major Nidal Hasan, who in 2009, murdered over a dozen U.S. soldiers at Fort Hood, in Texas.

My own personal experience revealed the Imam at a Norman, Oklahoma mosque in August, 2001, said to Hussein al-Attas, roommate of al-Qaeda operative Zacarias Moussaoui, “I heard you were going on jihad” when the two were arrested by the FBI while Moussaoui attended a flight school in Minneapolis. Given the fact that the Norman, Oklahoma area had hosted al-Qaeda co-founder Sheikh Abdullah Azzam and Hamas leader Khaled Mishal at major Islamic conferences in the late 1980s and the early 1990s one must ask who in Oklahoma is responsible for these activities? As late as 2014, a black convert to ISIS whose laptop was a shrine to the 9-11 attacks, beheaded a Moore, Oklahoma woman in broad daylight at work. Pictures surfaced of the man at an Oklahoma City mosque, giving the ISIS one finger salute.

It goes without saying that most Muslims in the U.S. are not terrorists or helping terrorists. It also is a fact that other groups commit crimes and terror attacks too. However, this does not eliminate the need to counter the radical Islamic threat. The U.S. constitution protects religious expression, but it is not a cover for terror operations. Regardless of other threats, domestic or foreign, the U.S. must remain vigilant to the threat posed by Islamic terrorists. The fact that such groups may not be interpreting the Quran properly does not minimize the threat. Whether they are or are not Muslims members of ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hizballah, Hamas, the Taliban, al-Shabab and other such groups self-identify as Muslims. Ironically, the Americans who are most vocal about denying that these terrorists are Muslims seem to be the most open minded when it comes to people self-identifying with other things such as gender or ethnicity etc.

Now is the time to develop a policy for vetting refugees and countering the recruitment threat after they have arrived. Groups such as Tablighi Jamaat have been infiltrated, according to security and intelligence experts, to recruit future terrorists. The Tablighis are a proselytizing group that preaches Islamic values. Again, not all Tablighis are terrorists but the cover of religious missions can be used for recruitment. Likewise, the “prison Imam” network can be a fertile ground for recruitment. There is no doubt that a number of violent men have found Islam in prison and returned to peaceful lives. But, so far, the credentials to be an Imam are far from standardized and we must better vet who is allowed into our prisons to preach any religion including Islam.

Time may be of the essence because waves of refugees from Syria may be coming. An article from the *Kataeb* newspaper in Lebanon, dated September 24, 2018, warns that ISIS is poised to make a comeback in Syria. The article claims that the defeat of the opposition in Syria will inure to the benefit of al-Qaeda and ISIS because the underlying issues affecting the Sunni community have not addressed.

The U.S. invasion in Iraq ushered in a Shia government and the U.S. was unable to solve Sunni grievances which remain unfulfilled. In Syria, the majority Sunni live under a regime where millions have been displaced as the Assad government is supported by Russia and Iran who are not involved in Syria to benefit the Sunni community.

The *Kataeb* article warns that a major attack in Idlib could displace over a million people. It is already known that Turkey and Jordan have closed their borders and Lebanon already has absorbed over a million Syrians and simply cannot take more. It is unlikely that U.S. president Donald Trump will open the borders to the refugees it also true that some likely will be allowed in or a change in political leadership could lead to a wholesale taking of refugees in the future.

The U.S., and Europe, should develop a method to not only better vet potential refugees but also to track and monitor refugees they allow in their countries. Experts can develop profiles of al-Qaeda and ISIS recruits so that high risk refugees can be identified for more scrutiny before and after entering the country. For example, a 72-year-old woman is not likely to be an ISIS operative nor is a five-year-old child. But a 23-year-old man may be or might become one. No system can guarantee perfection but honest assessments and pragmatic solutions can help. Likewise, counter-intelligence should identify any radical preachers of influence in their countries and work with the local communities to build trust and open the lines of communication for reporting recruiters. Keep in mind that the family of a Florida man, Moner Mohammad Abusalha, who was the first American suicide bomber in Syria, claimed their son had been radicalized and brainwashed by a terror cell in Texas.

There is no Constitutional right to enter the U.S. as a refugee. The U.S. could utilize the most current technology to track and monitor its “tier-one” refugees who represent the greatest potential risk to national security. A time limit can be placed on this monitoring to provide relief for those who follow the law and make progress towards integration into society. If you disagree with this suggestion then I would ask you: Are comfortable with Omar Ameen being hired to drive your kid’s school bus?

The majority of Syrian refugees are terrified victims of an inhuman civil war and bloody displacement policy. Many crimes have been committed by all sides. Nonetheless, just as every natural disaster creates a petri dish for fraudulent repair schemes so every major refugee crisis in the Middle East creates an opening for terror groups to enter the U.S. Now is the time for the U.S. to better develop a humane system for helping the victims but remaining ever vigilant to the attempts by groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda to enter the U.S. posing as refugees. Failure to identify the terrorists will likely have deadly consequences for Americans.