

Breaching America series

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reporting

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Reporting

Breaching America Part I: War refugees or terror threat?

DAMASCUS, Syria — Al Nawateer restaurant is a place where dreams are bartered and secrets are kept.

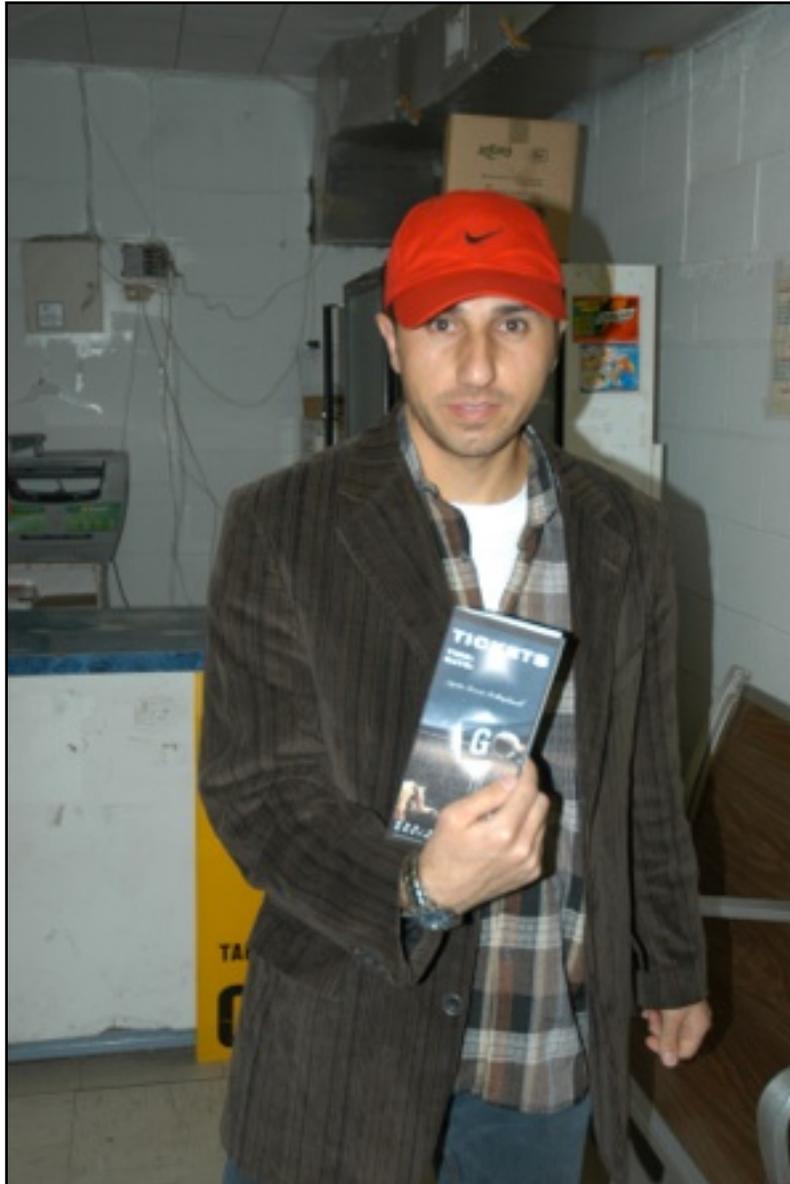
Dining areas partitioned by thickets of crawling vines and knee-high concrete fountains offer privacy from informants and agents of the Mukhabarat secret police.

The Mukhabarat try to monitor the hundreds of thousands of Iraq war refugees in this ancient city, where clandestine human smuggling rings have sprung up to help refugees move on — often to the United States.

But the young Middle Eastern men who frequent Al Nawateer, like Iraqi war refugee Aamr Bahnan Boles, are undaunted, willing to risk everything to meet a smuggler. They come to be solicited by someone who, for the right price, will help them obtain visas from the sometimes bribery-greased consulates of nations adversarial or indifferent to American security concerns.

Night after night, Boles, a lanky 24-year-old, sat alone eating grilled chicken and tabouli in shadows cast by Al Nawateer's profusion of hanging lanterns. Boles always came packing the \$5,000 stake his father had given him when he fled Iraq.

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Amr Bahnan Boles minutes after his release from federal custody, holding bus tickets to Detroit where he planned to stay with an uncle pending an application for political asylum. Photo by Todd Bensman

Boles was ordering his meal after another backbreaking day working a steam iron at one of the area's many basement-level garment shops when he noticed a Syrian man loitering near his table. The Syrian appeared to be

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listening intently. He was of average build and wearing a collared shirt. Boles guessed he was about 35 years old.

When the waiter walked away, the Syrian approached Boles, leaned over the cheap plastic table and spoke softly. He introduced himself as Abu Nabil, a common street nickname revealing nothing.

"I noticed your accent," the Syrian said politely. "Are you from Iraq?"

Boles nodded.

"I could help you if you want to leave," the Syrian said. "Just tell me when and where. I can get you wherever you want to go."

For an instant, Boles hesitated. Was the Syrian a Mukhabarat agent plotting to take his money and send him back to Iraq? Was he a con artist who would deliver nothing in return for a man's money?

"I want to go to the USA," Boles blurted.

"It can be done," said the Syrian. But it wouldn't be cheap, he warned. The cost might be as high as \$10,000.

Hedging against a con, Boles said he didn't have that kind of money.

The Syrian told him there was a bargain-basement way of getting to America. For \$750, he could get Boles a visitor's visa from the government of Guatemala in neighboring Jordan.

"After that you're on your own," the Syrian said. "But it's easy. You fly to Moscow, then Cuba and from there to Guatemala."

The implication was obvious. The Syrian would help Boles get within striking distance of the U.S. border. The rest was up to him.

Boles knew it wouldn't be easy or quick. Not until a year later, in fact, in the darkness just before dawn on April 29, 2006, would he finally swim across the Rio Grande on an inner tube and clamber up the Texas riverbank 40 miles west of Brownsville near the international bridge at Los Indios.

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Boles, in cutting his deal with the Syrian, set in motion a journey into the vortex of a little-known American strategy in the war on terror: stopping people like him from stealing over the border.

The deals cut at places like Al Nawateer could affect America. Americans from San Antonio to Detroit might find themselves living among immigrants from Islamic countries who have come to America with darker pursuits than escaping war or starting a new life.

U.S.-bound illicit travel from Islamic countries, which started long before 9-11 and includes some reputed terrorists, has gained momentum and worried counterterrorism officials as smugglers exploit 2 million Iraq war refugees.

A stark reminder of U.S. vulnerability at home came this month when six foreign-born Muslims, three of whom had entered the country illegally, were arrested and accused of plotting to attack the Army's Fort Dix in New Jersey.

What might have happened there is sure to stoke the debate in Congress, which this week will take up border security and immigration reform.

Politically, immigration can be a faceless issue. But beyond the rhetoric, the lives of real people hang in the balance. A relatively small but politically significant number are from Islamic countries, raising the specter, some officials say, of terrorists at the gate.



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A friendly resident of the Damascus neighborhood known as “Little Falluja” because tens of thousands of Iraqi war refugees have taken sanctuary here.

River of immigrants

Near the tiny Texas community of Los Indios, the Rio Grande is deep, placid and seemingly of little consequence.

But its northern bank is rigged with motion sensors that U.S. Border Patrol agents monitor closely, swarming whenever the sensors are tripped.



Here and all along the river, an abstract concept becomes real. America's border with Mexico isn't simply a political issue or security concern. It is a living body of water, surprisingly narrow, with one nation abutting its greenish-brown waters from the north and another from the south.

Since 9-11, the U.S. government has made guarding the 1,952-mile Mexican border a top priority. One million undocumented immigrants are caught each year trying to cross the southern and northern U.S. borders.

Because all but a tiny fraction of those arrested crossing the southern border are Mexican or Central

American, issues of border security get framed accordingly and cast in the image of America's neighbors to the south. Right or wrong, in this country the public face of illegal immigration has Latino features.

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But there are others coming across the Rio Grande, and many are in Boles' image.

People from 43 so-called "countries of interest" in the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa are sneaking into the United States, many by way of Texas, forming a human pipeline that exists largely outside the public consciousness but that has worried counterterrorism authorities since 9-11.

These immigrants are known as "special-interest aliens." When caught, they can be subjected to FBI interrogation, detention holds that can last for months and, in rare instances, federal prison terms.

The perceived danger is that they can evade being screened through terror-watch lists.

The 43 countries of interest are singled out because terrorist groups operate there. Special-interest immigrants are coming all the time, from countries where U.S. military personnel are battling radical Islamist movements, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and the Philippines. They come from countries where organized Islamic extremists have bombed U.S. interests, such as Kenya, Tanzania and Lebanon. They come from U.S.-designated state sponsors of terror, such as Iran, Syria and Sudan.

And they come from Saudi Arabia, the nation that spawned most of the 9-11 hijackers.

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Some routes into the U.S.

There are many ways that 'special interest migrants' get into the U.S., often via countries not attuned to American security concerns.



From South Asia

Migrants from countries such as India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have made their way southward by air and land along routes that span Africa, then by air move from South Africa on to South America.



From Africa

Migrants from countries such as Egypt, Eritrea and Somalia have moved southward to South Africa, then fly to South America for the northward march.



Through Europe

Middle Eastern migrants bent on crossing the U.S. border have made their way to Spain, where they can fly to Colombia, and to Italy, where they can fly to other South American countries.



Through Canada

Some migrants have been smuggled across America's porous northern border by first flying into South America, then flying over the United States into Canada and crossing into the U.S.

Sources: U.S. smuggling prosecution records, internal federal investigative records and immigration documents.

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

Iraq war refugees, trapped in neighboring countries with no way out, are finding their way into the pipeline.

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Zigzagging wildly across the globe on their own or more often with well-paid smugglers, their disparate routes determined by the availability of bogus travel documents and relative laxity of customs-enforcement practices, special-interest immigrants often converge in Latin America.

And, there, a northward flow begins.

Steve McCraw, director of the Texas Department of Homeland Security and a former assistant director of the FBI, said the nation's vulnerability from this human traffic is unassailable — even if not a single terrorist has ever been caught.

"This isn't a partisan issue," McCraw said. "If the good guys can come, you know, then so can the bad guys. We are at risk."

Though most who cross America's borders are economic migrants, the government has labeled some terrorists Their ranks include:

Mahmoud Kourani, convicted in Detroit as a leader of the terrorist group Hezbollah. Using a visa obtained by bribing a Mexican official in Beirut, the Lebanese national sneaked over the Mexican border in 2001 in the trunk of a car.

Nabel Al-Marahb, a reputed al-Qaida operative who was No. 27 on the FBI's most wanted terrorist list in the months after 9-11, crossed the Canadian border in the sleeper cab of a long-haul truck.

Farida Goolam Mohammed, a South African woman captured in 2004 as she carried into the McAllen airport cash and clothes still wet from the Rio Grande. Though the government characterized her merely as a border jumper, U.S. sources now say she was a smuggler who ferried people with terrorist connections. One report credits her arrest with spurring a major international terror investigation that stopped an al-Qaida attack on New York.

The government has accused other border jumpers of connections to outlawed terrorist organizations, some that help al-Qaida, including reputed

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members of the deadly Tamil Tigers caught in California after crossing the Mexican border in 2005 on their way to Canada.

One U.S.-bound Pakistani apparently captured in Mexico drew such suspicion that he ended up in front of a military tribunal at Guantanamo Bay.

"They are not all economic migrants," said attorney Janice Kephart, who served as legal counsel for the 9-11 Commission and co-wrote its final staff report. "I do get frustrated when people who live in Washington or Illinois say we don't have any evidence that terrorists are coming across. But there is evidence."

According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection apprehension numbers, agents along both borders have caught more than 5,700 special-interest immigrants between 2001 and the fall of 2007. But as many as 20,000 to 60,000 others are presumed to have slipped through during that time, based on rule-of-thumb estimates typically used by homeland security agencies.

"You'd like to think at least you're catching one out of 10," McCraw said. "But that's not good in baseball and it's certainly not good in counterterrorism."

Other federal agencies besides the Border Patrol have caught thousands more of the crossers inland after it was discovered they were in the country illegally, including 34,000 detainees from Syria, Iran, Sudan and Libya between 2001 and 2005, according to a homeland security audit last year of U.S. detention centers for immigrants. Then there is an unknown number caught by Mexico — an inveterate partner, as it turns out.

Texas accounts for a third of all the special-interest immigrants caught by the Border Patrol since 9-11, including 250 apprehended between March 2006 and February.

Efforts to stop the traffic are, in some ways, beyond U.S. control. Corrupt foreign officials and bureaucrats in Latin American consulates and in the Middle East have sold visas. Others hand them out without taking U.S. security concerns into account.

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Anti-U.S. sentiments run deep in nations across the globe, creating steppingstones to America for those whose illicit travel plans sometimes are abetted with delight.

The story of Boles' journey to America — born over a plate of tabbouleh, orchestrated by a polite smuggler and culminating with an early-morning river crossing at Los Indios — serves as a lens on the pipeline and raises legitimate questions.

If an Iraqi Christian with few resources and little more on his mind than fleeing a war for a better future in America can make his way from a designated state sponsor of terror like Syria for less than \$4,000, then why couldn't a well-financed Muslim terrorist of equal determination?

Who else besides Boles has crossed the Rio Grande, and with what intent?

The answers figure to inform public policy for years to come.

Top U.S. political leaders have repeatedly cited the prospect of terrorist infiltration to double public expenditures on the borders from \$4 billion in 2001 to more than \$10 billion now; to deploy National Guard units; and to launch nationally divisive immigration reform legislation.

Lesser-known American enforcement initiatives abroad have involved the CIA, the FBI, the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard and Drug Enforcement Administration agents.

(The FBI and Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Washington, D.C., did not reply to phoned and written requests for comment on this series.)

Many question the extent of the threat, especially opponents of various immigration-control proposals.

There is evidence, primarily a decline in traffic, that the border crackdown is discouraging illegal immigration. Would-be immigrants in Guatemala and Syria told the San Antonio Express-News they didn't want to risk getting caught and so had decided not to try crossing the border.

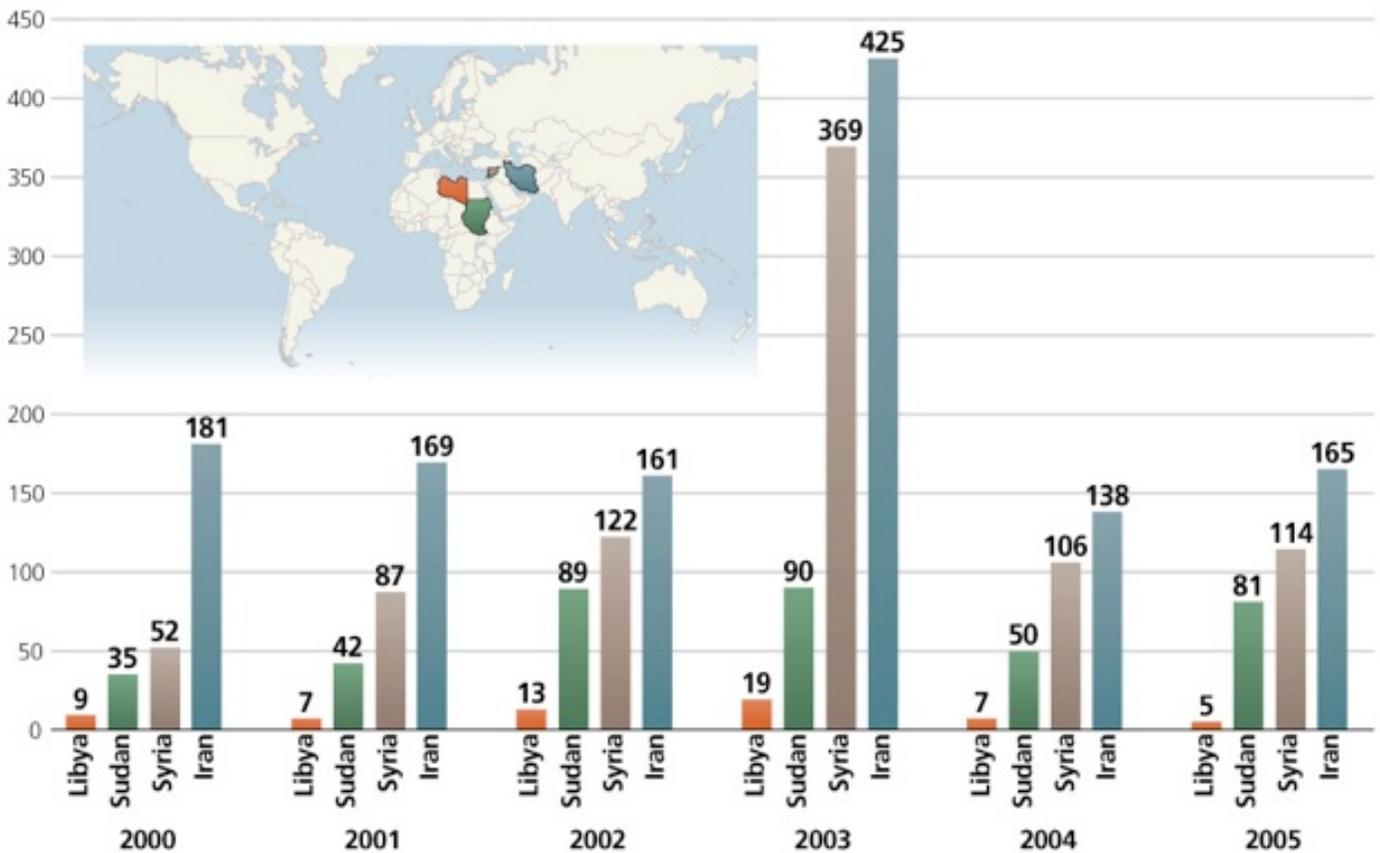
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For a terrorist who wants to infiltrate, "It is high risk, being smuggled in, because there is an active effort to clamp down," said Laura Ingersoll, an assistant U.S. attorney in Washington who has prosecuted many smuggling rings.

A newly declassified Homeland Security Department survey of 100 captured Iraqi, Somali and Eritrean migrants cites intelligence that al-Qaida planners view border infiltrations as a "secondary" alternative to entering legally with official documents.

High-interest immigrants

State "Sponsors of terror" migrants found deportable by U.S. homeland security agencies



Notes: Government fiscal year begins October 1 of previous year;
Libya was delisted as a state sponsor of terrorism in 2005

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

MARK BLACKWELL/STAFF

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Though the Texas Legislature this month passed Gov. Rick Perry's \$100 million border-security proposal, some lawmakers have belittled the idea that terrorists might blend in as a politically expedient cover for a racist anti-Mexican agenda.

Texas Rep. Rick Noriega, D-Houston, who commanded a National Guard unit in the Laredo area, said Middle Eastern immigrants don't worry him because they only come across in "onesies and twosies."

"Is it possible that someone could cross our border and come into Texas and do bad things? Absolutely." Noriega said. "But then you have to deal with probability. I'm extremely skeptical of painting the picture that the reason we're doing border security is so terrorists don't come across. I don't think you scare the public using 9-11. That's a little old."

The strangers within

Noriega's reservations notwithstanding, few in America question whether U.S. policymakers and counterterrorism officials should react somehow to the influx of immigrants from Islamic countries. As the Fort Dix case suggests, there are strangers among us whose hearts may ultimately be unknowable.

Uncertainty about the allegiance of immigrants is illustrated by the Boles case.

Who or what is he and why did he come to America? How can his story be vetted, his mind and motives plumbed?

Boles told U.S. authorities that he is a Chaldean Christian from the Iraqi town of Bartella, near Mosul — a persecuted ethnic minority with origins in the Eastern Christian tradition but with long ties to the Roman Catholic Church.

A federal prosecutor in South Texas would test Boles' religious beliefs by grilling him about the Bible, Jesus and Christian practices such as communion.

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Here's the story of Boles' life as he tells it.

Before the Iraq war, he, his parents, two sisters and brother scraped by on what was left of a once-productive farm that had been mostly confiscated by the regime of Saddam Hussein and distributed to Sunni Arab Muslim herders.

His father and brother ran a taxi service to bring in extra cash.

After the war started, Islamic extremists began preying on Iraqi Christians, uprooting them from schools, jobs and businesses, often on the charge that they were "infidels" collaborating with U.S. forces. The extremists kidnapped some Christians and killed others, focusing on the men.

As Boles later would say, "The Muslims would decapitate me for belonging to Christianity."

In January 2004, Boles' father sent him to Syria with a large portion of the family's savings: \$5,000. It was enough, perhaps, to buy passage to America, where he would be safer.

Six months later, Boles' brother died in a car crash and his father ordered him not to return, lest he lose his only remaining son. A kidnapped uncle was murdered even though the ransom was paid.

Boles never had given much thought to living in America, though he had an uncle in Sterling Heights, Mich. And it wouldn't be easy leaving Syria; the heavily fortified U.S. embassy in Damascus, which has been the target of suicide bombing attempts that ended in gunbattles, wasn't giving out many visas.

Boles was trapped.

As did hundreds of thousands of others who fled to Damascus when sectarian violence in Iraq broke out, he had settled in among the tiny tenement apartments in a suburb known as Jaramana.

Locals today call the neighborhood "Little Fallujah" because of the influx of Iraqis. Small Iraqi-run bakeries, Internet cafes, hair salons and laundry

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cleaners had sprung up all over town, many of them bearing the Iraqi national flag painted on their windows.



An Iraqi Christian refugee sits outside a small shop in the Little Fallujah neighborhood of Damascus. Behind him a sign advertises a coming Easter celebration event. Photo by Todd Bensman

Boles lived on the sixth floor of a building that housed a garment shop where he worked 12-hour days ironing clothing bound for the big markets, or souks, of Damascus. Even though such shops are all over Little Fallujah, Boles was lucky to find a job in one. Steady-paying jobs anywhere in Syria are hard to come by and jealously guarded by working-class Syrians.

For most refugees, returning to Iraq was, then as now, out of the question. So was staying in Syria and Jordan, where local economies couldn't absorb them. But almost every other country in the world, including the United States, was handing out legal visas only grudgingly.

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Not surprisingly, smugglers had picked up the slack.



Boles worked in an ironing sweat shop just like this one in the same neighborhood where he took refuge. Photo: Bensman

The smuggling business in Damascus and Amman was deep underground. Smugglers and their agents hovered in the shadows of places like Al

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Nawateer, at the Iraqi bakery just up the street and at the brothels where Iraqi women catered to Iraqi men.

Refugees tell of well-oiled Arab mafias, based in South Africa; of an Iraqi Kurdish group living in Sweden that fields recruiters in Jordan; and of local Syrian groups that specialize in guiding paying clients into Turkey and Greece, which are considered launching pads for illegal passage to any other country in the world.

Refugees with little or no means are left to register with the United Nations, apply for visas and resign themselves to the real possibility of never leaving. But for those who have enough money, there are many ways to escape.

"They're here. They're everywhere," said Joseph Dauvod, an elderly Iraqi refugee who once paid a smuggler to get him to the U.S. but got caught crossing the Turkish border. "It's just that no one knows who they are until they approach you. I know so many people who have left that way from here."

Ahmad Ali, a 21-year-old Iraqi Sunni Muslim living in Amman, has made several attempts to get himself and his mother to Sweden, whose lenient asylum laws and immigration regulations have made it the most popular destination in Europe for Iraqi refugees.

Ali said he paid a local smuggler \$4,000 last year to get him into Sweden, but border guards arrested everyone in his group.

In March, he said, he and his mother traveled on legal visas to Turkey to try again. In Istanbul, he connected with an Arab smuggling group based in South Africa. His mother paid \$16,000 for her own passage to Stockholm.

"It was all-inclusive, hotel, food, plane tickets to Stockholm," Ali said.

The group delivered, as part of the package, Ali said, "a legal, original Venezuelan passport," which his mother used to board a plane from Turkey to Stockholm. When she landed in Stockholm, she destroyed the passport, claimed political asylum and is laying plans to get her last son, Ali, to Sweden.

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Such stories abound in the streets and coffee shops of Syria and Jordan. Those who are actively in the market know the price lists well enough to recite them by heart.

"If you are an Iraqi and you stand by the corner of the Grand Mosque (in the Old City of Damascus), they'll come right up to you and say, 'When do you want to go?'" said Omar Emad, an Iraqi refugee who has been unable to save enough money to pay a smuggler.

"All you have to do is stand there."



Shoppers from nearby souks wander around the Grand Mosque in Damascus. Photo: Bensman

Smugglers are known to offer discounts to persuade travelers to cross at the Texas border instead of California. The Texas border, at least in recent times, was considered more porous and the journey through Mexico less risky.

Smugglers also offer needy clients sliding pay scales. American court records from a half-dozen smuggling prosecutions show that well-heeled Middle

Eastern travelers have paid upward of \$25,000 a person for illegal passage through Latin America to get over U.S. borders. Often, they have entered

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through Canada — after first arriving in Latin America, like Venezuela, Ecuador and Colombia.

Many routinely paid smugglers \$8,000 to \$10,000 a person. Whatever the cost, many of the trips can't be done for anyone — rich or poor — without the vital enabling role of foreign embassies or consulate offices, often those of Latin American nations that are based in the Middle East.

Boles, who earned about \$180 a month at his steam iron, worked for only one reason: to protect his precious bundle of U.S. dollars that he knew was the key to America's back door.

And they disappear

The man who would help Boles leave Syria probably was a small independent operator or a recruiter for larger organizations that paid commissions.

They met at Al Nawateer, a restaurant popular with young lovers and businessmen as well as refugees.

The smuggler, who said his name was Abu Nabil, offered to take Boles' Iraqi passport to Jordan and get it stamped at a Guatemalan consulate office. The two men would meet again, they resolved, when the smuggler returned to Damascus, with Boles forking over \$750 for his stamped passport



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The Amman, Jordan office of Guatemala's Honorary Consul Haithem Khouri, where travel visas are routinely obtained by Middle Easterners. Boles' claims his smuggler bought him a tourist visa here for \$750. Photo by E-N staff photographer Jerry Lara.

They agreed to the deal and parted ways — each leaving Al Nawateer, Boles probably forever.

Al Nawateer's friendly, backslapping manager, Haithem Khouri, remembers Boles and how he vanished. It's not unusual. Table 75, for instance, is a gathering place for larger groups from which patrons simply disappear.

"They come in every day to eat, drink and then, one day, they're just missing and I ask, 'What happened?'" Khouri said.

But he knows, or has a pretty good idea. Those who vanished went to America. Or Europe. Refugees themselves tell of friends and whole families

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happily reporting back from new homes half a globe away. Those who leave almost invariably do so without saying goodbye because advertising their illegal travel plans would imperil smuggler and refugee alike.

Boles did not see Abu Nabil again for two months. Then one day the smuggler rang his cell phone. When the call came, Boles was resting in his small dormitory-style apartment. The walls were bare, and there was a radio.

"I have your passport," the smuggler said. "Where do you want to meet?"

They met outside Al Nawateer. It was dark. Boles opened his passport under a streetlight and saw that it was indeed stamped with a three-month visa to Guatemala. It looked official, but he wondered aloud if it was real.

"It's real," the man assured Boles. "And no one will ask any questions in Guatemala."

Boles handed the smuggler \$750 and the two went their separate ways.

Boles had known better than to ask the question that had been on his mind for weeks. Why would Guatemala, of all countries, keep a consulate office in the Middle East that was willing to hand out visas to Iraqis when few others would?

The answer is that some foreign embassies and consulate offices based in the Middle East have no qualms about providing Iraqis and local citizens with visas that enable them to get within striking distance of a U.S. border. One of them is the Guatemala consulate office in Jordan.

The consulate is about 150 miles southeast of Damascus, in Amman. A blue and white national flag of Guatemala snaps atop a 20-foot flagpole on a busy street in the financial district. The flag advertises the presence in a strip shopping center of Guatemala's "Honorary Consul" in the Kingdom of Jordan: Patricia Nadim Khoury, who represents Guatemala's foreign affairs from a home-furnishings shop catering to Amman's wealthy.

This is the only place that Boles' smuggler could have secured a real Guatemala tourist visa.

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One day recently, Khoury, a petite auburn-haired woman who appears to be in her mid-30s, sat behind a heavy oak desk as workers finished renovating the store.

She wore a blue denim jacket with slacks and a red sweater tied around her waist.

After agreeing to a brief interview, Khoury said she was born in Guatemala and took over honorary consul duties from her father when he died seven years ago. Most people who apply for visitor's visas, she said, are Jordanians, Syrians and a few Iraqis.

Several thousand Palestinians, Jordanians and other Arabs, as well as their descendants, have lived in Guatemala City for decades.

The country's rules for acquiring tourist visas require applicants to show bank statements for three months and demonstrate that they have credit cards. Citizens of the U.S. and most European countries can apply by mail.

Although it's unclear whether Iraqis and other Middle Easterners are required to personally appear to apply, Khoury said she interviews every applicant before issuing a visa, in part to determine whether they are trying to cross illegally into the U.S.

"I don't give visas to people who don't come personally here." Khoury also said she requires bank statements and other documents from applicants in addition to the personal interviews.

When asked how Boles and several other Iraqis might have obtained Guatemala visitor's visas from her office without showing up, Khoury offered, "Maybe it's not a legal visa."

Khoury said she would not accept payment in exchange for issuing visas to an unqualified applicant and that no one ever offers.

"If someone came and asked, I would kick him out," she said. "I can maybe get the police."

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A mile away, another honorary consul spoke freely of how money makes things happen in a society where bribes are an accepted means of doing business.

"I've been offered lots of money — thousands of dollars," said Raouf N. El-Far, a Jordanian businessman who was appointed Mexico's consul to Jordan in 2004.



Raouf N. El Far, Mexico's honorary consul in Jordan is routinely offered thousands in bribes for travel visas to Mexico. Photo: Bensman

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The bribe offers come from Iraqis, Syrians and Jordanians, many of whom openly disclose plans to get themselves smuggled over the U.S. border once in Mexico, El-Far said. One man recently offered to pay him \$10,000 to secure a tourist visa for an Iraqi. If all went well, the man said, he would bring El-Far 10 Iraqis a month at the same price, a pipeline amounting to \$100,000 in bribes every 30 days.

Is he tempted by such offers?

El-Far chuckled. "Yes, I am," he said.

But, then, turning serious, he said he does not take bribe money "because it's against my principles."

Under U.S. pressure after 9-11, El-Far said, Mexican intelligence services for the first time conducted a background investigation on a Jordanian consul. The check, he said, was so thorough "they wanted to know how many times I kissed my wife before I go to bed."

Khoury and El-Far acknowledged granting visas on a regular basis to Middle Easterners who meet the requirements for documentation. But they said they can't thoroughly check the veracity of the papers and the travelers' stated plans.

"It's not my business to guard against this," Khoury said.

The U.S. Justice Department has prosecuted nearly a dozen major smuggling rings that specialized in moving Middle Eastern clients since 9-11.

The majority of the smugglers planned to bring their clientele into South American countries, such as Ecuador, Peru and Colombia, and Guatemala, to prepare them for the final trip north.

Smugglers could simply buy visas outright from corrupt consular or embassy officials, according to these court records. For example, before U.S. and Mexican authorities shut his organization down, Salim Boughader-Mucharrafille, a Mexican national of Lebanese descent, smuggled hundreds

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of fellow countrymen from Tijuana into California. The scheme involved bribing Mexican consular officials.

Venezuela is another jumping-off point to the American border, according to court records of smuggling cases.

Because of its antagonistic relationship with the United States, Venezuela does not cooperate on counterterrorism measures, according to the U.S. government, and shows no concerns about issuing visas to special-interest migrants.

One day recently, the Venezuelan Embassy in Damascus, its walls bedecked with large portraits of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, was packed with Syrians seeking one of nine types of visas offered.

The U.S. State Department has complained in recent years about Venezuela's cozy relationship with Syria and Iran. Earlier this year, the first nonstop flights began from Tehran, Iran, to Caracas, Venezuela — a development that some U.S. counterterrorism specialists say opens a new avenue for potential terrorists to the American border.

Some of the government's most senior Homeland Security officials have spoken of yet another source of terrorist infiltrators: the area where Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina meet, known as the "Tri-Border" region.

Tens of thousands of Arab immigrants there have been under scrutiny by American intelligence services since 9-11. The U.S. Treasury Department in December named people and organizations that "provided financial and logistical support to the Hezbollah terrorist organization."

Last year, Gen. Bantz J. Craddock, commander of the U.S. Army's Southern Command, warned the House Armed Services Committee that some of these groups "could move beyond logistical support and actually facilitate terrorist operations."

Kephart, the lawyer who served as counsel to the 9-11 Commission and co-wrote the final report, testified in March 2005 before the Senate Judiciary Committee about a classified document she'd seen while serving on the commission.

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She said the document, which since had been declassified, was a Border Patrol report about meetings in Spain between members of al-Qaida and a Colombian guerrilla group. A topic of discussion at the meeting, Kephart said, was the use of Mexican Islamist converts to infiltrate the U.S. at the Southwest border.

A journey begins

Boles may have had his Guatemala visitor's visa, but he would not be able to complete his trip from Moscow without a transit visa through Cuba.

This would prove to be no problem in Damascus, and he has plenty of company among Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Lebanese and others passing through.

Carrying his Iraqi passport, Boles took a 15-minute cab ride to the three-story whitewashed Cuban Embassy just three blocks from the American Embassy.

Inside, friendly clerical workers handed him an application. He filled it out and handed over \$70 cash with his passport and some passport-sized pictures. About a half-hour later, his passport was returned stamped, no questions asked.

Cuba's consul in Damascus said in an interview that his country happily grants visas to any Middle Easterner who asks "because America doesn't give anyone the opportunity to take refuge, especially after 9-11."

"But we work another way," said Armando Perez Suarez. "We put conditions on American people who are making war with everyone. The Arab people are the peaceful ones. We give visas to anybody who wants to visit our country."

Suarez said he is well aware that Cuba, with its economic problems and poverty, is not anyone's idea of a final destination.

"After that, if he wants to travel to any other country, the U.S., or Central America, this is not our problem," Suarez said. "It's not our burden."

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He scoffed at American concerns about terrorist infiltration.

"I'm sorry your president is from Texas," he said. "Now you're receiving your own medicine. The problem started in Texas and it's finishing in Texas."

Boles, his Cuba transit visa in hand, was almost ready to go.

Digging once more into his dwindling bundle of cash, he bought tickets from Damascus to Moscow, from Moscow to Cuba, and finally, from Cuba to Guatemala City. Total cost: \$2,100. Total travel time: about two days.

He told no one of his plans, though he asked around about Guatemala and learned that lots of Arab merchants who speak his language and might be of help to him operate businesses in Guatemala City.

In June 2005, Boles packed a single suitcase, including toiletries, a sport coat and a couple of pairs of jeans.

He had a flight to catch.

Bound for Damascus International Airport, he hailed a taxi in Jaramana and bid it farewell.

END

Breaching America Part II: The Latin Connection

GUATEMALA CITY — Banking low and hard, the Cubana Airlines jet punched below the heavy cloud cover on its final descent into La Aurora International Airport, revealing to passengers a strange jumble of urban sprawl and jutting black volcanoes.

Aamr Bahnan Boles was exhausted and drowsy from three days of international air travel and layovers, but adrenaline mixed with dread jolted him awake. He looked out the window at the alien landscape below.

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Boles was 24. The farthest he had traveled from his home near Mosul in Iraq was to Damascus, Syria, a couple hundred miles away, where he'd taken refuge in early 2004 along with hundreds of thousands of other Iraqis fleeing the war.

He was acutely aware of how alone he was.

He could speak barely a lick of Spanish.

Soon Boles would find out whether he would be thrown into some dank Guatemalan detention cell and then deported to Syria or remain free to pursue the bright dream that had driven him this far: escaping the war and starting a new life in America.

Boles has plenty of company in the human pipeline that traverses the seas, spans continents and winds its way to the U.S. boundary. Boles and other so-called "special-interest aliens" from Iraq and 42 other countries where terrorist groups operate are automatically deemed security risks when they steal across the border.

Breaching America series



A porous land border between Guatemala and Mexico where illegal migrants bound of the U.S. frequently cross. Photo: Bensman

Breaching America series

Though most are economic migrants, the prospect that their ranks might include a terrorist infiltrator preoccupies American authorities whose job it is to distinguish between the two and prevent another attack.

Boles' journey to America followed a roundabout route designed to take him through countries adversarial or indifferent to concerns about U.S. national security.

His travels — which would consume almost one year of his life, land him in jail and literally test his Christian faith — began in earnest when he paid a man in Damascus \$750 to secure a Guatemala tourist visa, supposedly from a consulate office in Amman, Jordan. Boles took a stranger's word that it was legitimate. Would Guatemalan customs officials accept an Iraqi passport and a Guatemala tourist visa without question?

Because of so much uncertainty, America was still more dream than destination for Boles on the summer day he boarded a plane at the Damascus airport.

The Syrian capital's main airport, with its Damascene-patterned exterior of interlocking eight-point stars, is dingy and small — an unlikely place, it might seem, for high hopes or dream destinations in the west. It has only 14 gates, aging interior pillars of chipped dirty tile and floors with filthy grout work. Veiled women pull luggage on wheels, and robed men swoosh toward late flights.

From here, Syrian Airlines flies to Moscow twice a week.

On a June day in 2005, Boles boarded a plane to Moscow. Then, after a short connection, he made the 13-hour flight to Havana, another common steppingstone on the road to America. There he spent a fitful night in a cheap hotel before catching a connecting flight the next day to Guatemala City.

Officials along the way waved him through without interest. But now Boles' heart pounded as he disembarked and took his place in the "foreigners" line at customs in Guatemala City.

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An officer in a light-blue uniform with epaulets on both shoulders sat behind a glass-encased station, two disinterested unarmed officers standing on either side. Jet fumes permeated the utilitarian building, hardly made more cheerful by the discolored, framed tourist posters of volcanoes and smiling Mayan villagers.

When it was Boles' turn, the humorless officer flipped through his Iraqi passport with its Arabic lettering, every page blank except for stamps from Syria and Cuba. The customs official added his stamp and waved Boles through.

Relief washed over Boles. He was on the same continent as America. If all went well, he told himself, he'd soon be eating and drinking with relatives in Sterling Heights, Mich. He didn't have much of a plan, though, and only about \$2,000 left of the \$5,000 stake his father had given him. He changed some of it to Guatemalan quetzals.

Carrying his suitcase, he let a cabdriver fish him out of the crowd and used the only Spanish he knew.

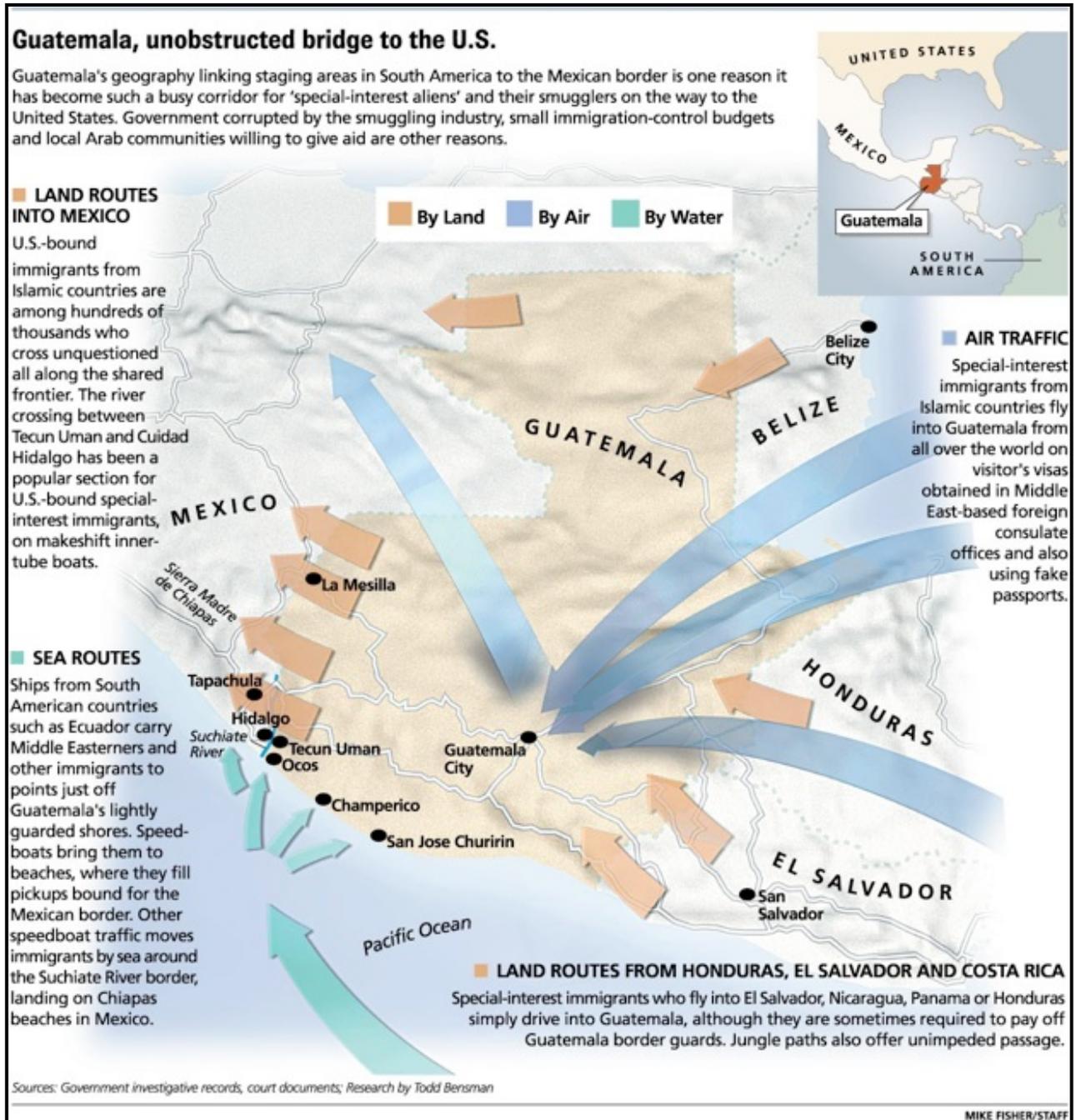
"Zona Una, por favor. Zona Una," Boles told the cabdriver. " Hotel, por favor. Hotel."

Boles had been told in Damascus that Zone 1, Guatemala City's central market district, was where he would find hundreds of Arab merchants who speak Arabic. Maybe they could help him find a smuggler.

He may not have known it at the time, but Boles would soon learn he had come to exactly the right country for that.

More than geography

Breaching America series



Guatemala is a pivotal stop along the serpentine routes where American law enforcement has tried to intercept special-interest immigrants. Immigrants from all parts of the world find it a virtually unpoliced superhighway, where local Arabs and corrupt border officials help people like Boles move under the radar, camouflaged in the multitudes.

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The U.S. State Department singles out Guatemala as one of the world's busiest transshipment nations for undocumented immigrants of every nationality, mostly South and Central Americans. Special-interest immigrants from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia blend in easily among them, moving inexorably north.

One reason is simple geography. South of Guatemala are the South American and Central American countries where many special-interest immigrants first arrive and prepare for the final push north.

To the north of Guatemala is Mexico and America's southern border. So virtually everyone on the way to the U.S. by land is eventually funneled through Guatemala. But, like other Latin American countries, Guatemala offers more than just geography.



A man simply walks across the ankle-deep Suciata River to Mexico, where he donned clothes and continued on his way unquestioned. Photo: Bensman

Assistant U.S. Attorney Laura Ingersoll has prosecuted several major smugglers who have brought hundreds of Middle Eastern clients across U.S. borders. She said Guatemala offers "relative ease of entry, a hospitable Arab immigrant community that provides safe temporary haven, and it has operating within it individuals who are tied into illegal-immigrant smuggling business."

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U.S. homeland security agencies are well aware of Guatemala's key location and have quietly sought to cripple the flow with undercover enforcement operations. But the impact on the tenacious industry, allowed to flourish by a lax central government, is questionable.

U.S.-led enforcement operations in the country began targeting smuggling rings here in the 1990s, mainly networks that trafficked in women and children, all victims of sexual exploitation, when that was a priority.

After 9-11, U.S. immigration agents in Guatemala shifted gears. In undercover operations targeting smugglers of people from Islamic countries, they have quietly logged the captures of dozens of Iraqis, Jordanians and others, according to federal officials familiar with the operations. But these apprehensions appear to have been episodic at best. The smuggling industry is vast, entrenched, flexible and politically connected.

Records from the resulting U.S. prosecutions of smugglers show they have moved hundreds, if not thousands, of special-interest immigrants over routes that snake in and out of Guatemala — by land, air and sea.

The routes are served by a nationwide infrastructure of safe houses, private residences, hotels, bus fleets and ship owners, according to investigation records. Nearly everyone along the way earns a cut, not the least local police and immigration officers with every motivation to keep the traffic — and money — flowing.

Gustavo Barreno, who served from 1997 through 2005 as a federal prosecutor in charge of enforcing his country's human trafficking laws, called smuggling "the No. 1 cash industry for government officials in Guatemala."

"The business is gigantic. You have no idea," he said. "Everyone is involved — everyone. And for Arabs to come into Guatemala it's really easy — really easy."

Barreno described the details of a long-standing joint operation between his small office of prosecutors and American authorities. The operations involved the use of American satellites, Coast Guard cutters, the U.S. Navy

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and the intelligence services of various South American governments, according to several American law enforcement sources.

Not long after 9-11, Barreno remembers, an alert arrived in his office from U.S. authorities to be on the lookout for "people with Arabic features." A stream of "wanted" posters featuring suspected terrorists began appearing after that.

Barreno's men did find Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants heading for the U.S.

"When one was discovered, I would detain them," Barreno said. "They were always turned over to the Americans."

It's not known what the American authorities did with such detainees.

Ironically, controversy over a group of Jordanians would lead to the joint program being shut down, Barreno said, which illustrates one reason American efforts in Guatemala remain an uphill slog. One day in early 2005, U.S. and Ecuadorean intelligence officers alerted Barreno to the expected arrival in Guatemala of two wanted Jordanians.

After the safe houses were uncovered and the Jordanians arrested, the investigation turned up links between senior government officials and the smuggling ring, he said. Constant interference in the case eventually led to Barreno's ouster and cancellation of the American program, he said.

His story about his departure could not be independently verified. And it's unclear what operations the U.S. is conducting in Guatemala now. Senior Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials in Washington, D.C., did not respond to queries for this report.

But today, Barreno said, ICE is no longer infiltrating smuggling operations in Guatemala, and the money and the immigrants are flowing like never before.

Agents on the take

The U.S. government apparently hasn't given up.

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Santos Cuc Morales, Guatemala's national director of migration, told a story that helps illustrate another reason Guatemala's human trafficking business seems impervious to U.S. desires.

In February, Morales said, American Embassy officials approached him and asked whether his immigration officers could stop Iraqis "because of terrorism and the situation in Iraq."

The Americans provided intelligence, including lists of stolen passport numbers, and they offered training and money to Morales' immigration agents. But Morales said he couldn't help the Americans with their war on terror.

Most of his 450 agents stationed along the nation's borders and at airports and seaports are on the take from smuggling organizations, he said.

Breaching America series



A federal customs agent of the Guatemala government on duty near the Mexican frontier. Photo: Bensman

The majority of his own officers simply won't respond to his orders. Furthermore, powerful government bureaucrats Morales wouldn't name but who wield influence over his department don't want the smuggling stopped because they have stakes in the business. With a shrug, Guatemala's top immigration enforcement official said he wishes he could help the Americans avert another terrorist attack.

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"I hope that doesn't happen. It would be terrible, but it could happen because of the corruption here," Morales said. "It's the reality of things."

The overarching problem is just how entrenched and dynamic the smuggling industry here is. Smugglers have grown wealthy from the proceeds, living openly in luxurious mansions in impoverished rural towns.

When smugglers who specialize in Middle Eastern clients have been arrested, their shoes were quickly filled. Networks of smugglers who operate to the north and south of Guatemala cooperate with one another inside the country, handing off clients and cash like relay racers pass batons. And they can be creative.

Before he was arrested on a U.S. indictment in 2004, Iranian national Maher Wazzen Jarad ran one of the largest South America-based smuggling operations and used Guatemala as a bridge to the U.S. One route Jarad offered Iraqis and other Middle Easterners was by sea.

Ships in Ecuador would carry Jarad's clients north to points off the Pacific coast of Guatemala. Then, speedboats run by a local network would race out from Guatemalan beaches and pick up Jarad's clients for the land journey into Mexico. A third network in Mexico would guide them over the Texas border.

One of many Ecuadorean ships halted by American authorities in Jarad's 2003 operation was the *Esperanza*. Of 137 paying passengers found aboard, 26 were Iraqis headed for America.

Breaching America series



Members of a newly formed state of Chiapas immigration control team patrol Mexican Pacific coast beaches where smugglers of people and contraband from Guatemala are known to land. Local fishermen who live in the huts behind them say the smugglers used to land at all hours of the day but now only land their loads here at night. Photo: Bensman

Government officials say other smugglers now handle Jarad's business. The ocean route from South America is still busy.

"Like water, it will find the nooks and crannies in your roof and make its way into your house," said Ingersoll, the prosecutor who helped imprison Jarad.

But not everyone can afford the services of a smuggler. People of limited means, like Boles, for instance, must bide their time in Guatemala, save some money and shop carefully for what they can afford.

For them, an inexpensive kind of help is available, from Arab communities in Latin America. No questions asked.

Breaching America series

Lining up a smuggler

When Boles walked out of his hotel, the frenetic central marketplace of Zone 1 assaulted him. Throngs of shoppers plied the hundreds of tiny shops crammed in side by side like mismatched dominoes along broken traffic-clogged avenues. The atmosphere was tropical, not what he was used to in his arid native land.

Overcrowded red "chicken buses," ubiquitous in this country, roared by at decibels that made him flinch, spewing black clouds that bathed pedestrians and street hawkers shouting deals in Spanish. Boles had a vague notion of what he was looking for.

Within an hour, he noticed he had happened into a section of the marketplace that projected a foreign cultural flavor. Some of the shops sported names such as "Rio Jordan," "The Egyptian" and "Haifa." He went into one. The shopkeeper spoke Arabic.

Within a couple of days, Boles had a job, in a shop called Los Amigos, selling cheap electronics. His boss was a descendant of Palestinian Arab settlers named Hussein. They belonged to a community of some 3,000 Arabic-speaking Guatemalans of Jordanian, Palestinian and Syrian descent that had settled since the 1930s.

Many work as merchants in Zone 1. There are enough Muslims among them to be served by two mosques in Guatemala City. The merchants and their Arab employees do not particularly stand out as different at first glance.

Reflections of their cultural heritage, though, become evident in back offices and behind cash registers. Here, the sweet scent of tobacco smoke from traditional shisha water pipes permeates the air. Art works with Arabic lettering hang on office walls, and prayer rugs are stored.

Boles would settle in for much longer than he had anticipated. He had no choice.

Breaching America series



Arab merchants own and operate many Zone One businesses in Guatemala City, sometimes giving them place names that remind them of home. Photo: Bensman

After Boles asked around, the rest of the trip to the U.S. — a 900-mile trek over two borders — looked daunting. There were warnings of vicious machine-gun-toting gangs of bandits who preyed on the steady columns of

Breaching America series

immigrants. The bodies of their victims were turning up on both sides. Corrupt police and troops were said to be not much better. They would jail you or have you deported unless you paid them off.

Boles didn't dare cross into Mexico alone. He would need a smuggler who knew the lay of the land. Not long after his arrival, his new friends put him in touch with a number of such people. None was willing to guide him to the U.S. for less than \$5,000.



“Camerate” boat pilots ferry an unregulated traffic of people and goods back and forth across the Rio Suchiate between Guatemala and Mexico. Iraqis and other Middle Easterners have been documented crossing here on their way north to the U.S. Photo: Bensman

He would end up living in Guatemala City for the next eight months, five months past the expiration of his tourist visa. But no official would ever bother him about it. Staying worked in Boles' favor. He'd be able to preserve and add to his remaining \$2,000 and find the right smuggling connection. He'd also learn some Spanish.

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His life was austere. He lived in a small rundown apartment in Zone 7, a few miles from his job, which he could reach by riding the chicken buses.

To keep expenses down, he subsisted on common street food, which was cheap, if alien, to him: tortillas with chicken or beef, and lots of black beans. He worked at Los Amigos every day, picking up a few words of Spanish here and there. Over time, he learned some rudimentary sentences and pleasantries.

As he did in Damascus, Boles largely kept his own counsel in Guatemala City. Boles, a Chaldean Christian, which is a persecuted minority in Iraq, had no particular desire to attend church. It wouldn't have done much good anyway; he wouldn't have understood the Spanish-language services.

He made acquaintances among the mostly Muslim Arabs in Zone 1 who spoke his language. Without that connection, he would have had a rough time making it. It turns out that many immigrants like Boles find aid in Arab communities all over Latin America, some of which have spawned smuggling operations. Guatemala City was no different.

But real friendship wasn't in the cards. The cultural divide between Arab Christians and Muslims extends a long way.

On Jan. 2, 2006, Boles turned 25 — far from home, friends and family.

He had a month left in Guatemala.

Other aspiring immigrants

On a recent day inside a Zone 1 shop, amid cheap knockoff purses and watches, a young Syrian Christian man stood vigil over the merchandise, a gold cross hanging from his neck. He didn't speak Spanish, having just arrived from Damascus weeks earlier.

Ibrahim Dahang explained through a local interpreter that it had been no problem for him to fly on a Guatemala visitor's visa obtained in Jordan to Paris and then into Guatemala City, where he picked up a job in Zone 1 from a fellow Syrian. He said he left Syria because of the poor economy.

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"I would indeed love to go to America," he said, to join relatives in Detroit.

Dahang abruptly added, however, that he would never try to cross into America illegally. He refused to let his photo be taken and ended the interview.

A block and a half away, 42-year-old Imad Aorill worked in an electronics shop owned by a Jordanian man. Aorill had just arrived from Baghdad with his wife and two children, Iraqi Christians who fled Islamic extremist death threats.

In Amman, Jordan, he paid a man \$200 to get his family visas to Guatemala. Then with financial help from a cousin in Chicago, the family flew the same route Boles took — from Damascus to Moscow, then Cuba and finally Guatemala City.

Aorill said his "ultimate dream" is to get his family to America, but he said he could not afford the \$40,000 smuggling fee estimates he's been getting for having young children. Until he figures things out, he'll stay.

Amar Radi, secretary of the Arab Community of Guatemala, acknowledged the steady traffic of Middle Easterners.

"Many Arabs come here and work a while, get the money and then go to the U.S.," Radi said.

But he points out that no terrorist who is part of a well-heeled organization would do it this way. People with money, presumably including terrorists well-funded by organizations back home, leave Guatemala as soon as possible.

Still, rich and poor alike must travel the same routes over the Mexican border.

A buffet of routes

By January 2006, Boles was ready to leave the country. Through friends of friends he found a Guatemalan native assembling a load of Salvadorans and

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Nicaraguans for a run to the U.S. He agreed to cut Boles a special deal. For a mere \$250, Boles could tag along with the group as far as the Mexican border, a four- or five-hour drive away.

Then he'd be on his own in Mexico. Early one morning, Boles joined the half-dozen or so other migrants in the courtyard of a house on the outskirts of Guatemala City. They piled into two cars and headed for the border.

The boundary between Guatemala and Mexico is part undifferentiated land with few markers and part the Rio Suchiate, which empties west into the Pacific.

This border — and the smuggling channels that traverse it — are a significant concern, according to newly released U.S. State Department Country Report that assesses counterterrorism efforts in Mexico during 2006.

"The southern border, in particular, could be vulnerable to the movement of terrorists," the report states.

One of the most popular places to cross into Mexico is the Suchiate, where the uninspected movement of people and goods between the two countries is openly tolerated. Under an international bridge between the Mexican town of Ciudad Hidalgo and the Guatemalan town of Tecun Uman, traffic moves back and forth on flotillas made of giant tire inner tubes, their pilots grunting as they push their loads around using long poles.

Breaching America series



Mexican soldiers rarely ask questions about the traffic of goods and people moving across the river from Guatemala. Their only task is to be on the lookout for weapons and explosives. Photo: Bensman

Breaching America series

Boles would not cross here with his group. But other Middle Easterners have, including a dozen California-bound Iraqis in 2003. According to ICE documents, all 12 had obtained fraudulent Greek passports in Turkey with the help of a smuggler they each paid up to \$8,000, including \$1,300 for the bogus passports. Then they made their way by train or bus to Madrid, Spain, where they caught flights to Colombia.

From Colombia, the Turkish smuggler helped them use their fake passports to catch flights to Guatemala City, where the larger group split into smaller ones for a land run to Mexico. They crossed at Tecun Uman.

A typical dual-tube raft can carry 12 people and hundreds of pounds of trade goods. The camaristas, or boatmen, say they don't ask questions or pay much attention to whom they ferry across.

But camarista Teofilo Lopez said he can't help but notice some of them if it's obvious they're from a faraway country, like the "bearded Arab wearing like a blue sheet" a few days earlier who spoke not a word.

"Here we don't ask questions. We just take their money and bring them over."

The only visible authority was a few Mexican army officers posted on their side of the river, wearing full battle garb and carrying automatic weapons. They said they didn't pay much attention, either.

Officer M. Monzon, cradling his weapon in his arms, said his only orders are to look for "explosives and detonators." For hours one recent day none of the soldiers bothered to search any of the boat traffic.

On the Guatemala side of the river in Tecun Uman, Father P. Ademar Barillis directs a Catholic church-based facility with a mission to help immigrants make it safely to America. Casa del Migrante sits just 200 yards from the river.

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Father Ademar Barillis asks why anyone would be concerned about the immigrants he helps from countries on the U.S. "special interest" list. Photo: Bensman

Barillis said most of the people he helps are Central Americans but also "Africans and Middle Easterners."

He scoffed when asked whether U.S. homeland security officials should worry that those he helps might be terrorists posing as immigrants.

"It's ridiculous. It's a ludicrous idea," he said. "Terrorists would surely find easier ways to get into the U.S. The whole issue of walls being built on the border and terror threats is a political issue, not a real issue."

There are other, lesser known, water routes from Guatemala to Mexico.

At the westernmost point where Guatemala and Mexico meet is a vast watery veld of beach and river known as the Hook, where the Rio Suchiate spreads out into the Pacific. Here speedboats loaded with migrant passengers zip around from Guatemalan shores and land almost every night, locals around the beaches confirm.

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Until the state of Chiapas deployed a 92-member border police force to the area in December, the smugglers would deliver their passengers in broad daylight. Now the boats run at night.

Police and immigration officers elsewhere along the Guatemala side of the border are not exactly motivated to shut down the traffic and worry about terrorism. They're collecting cash tolls from busloads of the migrants.

Boles and his Central American compatriots would cross near the Guatemala town of La Mesilla, known as a current favorite among smugglers — and predatory police. Two bus drivers told of what happens daily to their loads of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans as they approach La Mesilla.

Ronaldo Gomez, sitting in the driver's seat of his bus, explained that Guatemalan state police pulled his bus over a few miles from La Mesilla one day recently and ordered all the foreigners to hand over 100 quetzals each, the equivalent of about \$7. Then they were allowed to continue on their bus trip to the Mexican border.

"It happens every day, every single day," Gomez said. "If you're able to pay your way, or talk your way, you can cross the border."

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Bus driver Ronaldo Gomez at the La Mesilla border crossing. Photo: Bensman

Like most Mexico-bound immigrants, Boles was driven along a dirt road that split from the main highway to town, beyond the sight of customs officers manning the port of entry.

They walked across the border. A waiting car picked up the group and drove back around to the main highway on the Mexican side of the border and headed into Ciudad Cuauhtemoc. At the bus station, Boles bought a ticket to Tapachula and got on with mostly Central Americans.

Not once during the 9,000 miles of travel — from Damascus to Moscow to Havana to Guatemala — had Boles encountered America's post-9-11 fear of terrorist infiltrators.

That was about to change.

Breaching America series

In Mexico, U.S. counterterrorism authorities have found a much more willing partner.

Within hours of boarding the bus, Boles would feel for the first time the heat of America's obsession with security.



Bensman on a street corner in Zone One.

Part III: Mexico: stuck in the middle

TAPACHULA, Mexico — The bus braked abruptly and lurched to a stop.

Aamr Bahnan Boles felt his stomach clench as the front door swung open and three uniformed officers boarded, looking none too happy. They had set up a makeshift checkpoint on the highway to this border city in Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas.

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"Documentos! Ahora!" one of the uniformed men barked. " Todo el mundo!"

Like almost every other passenger aboard the bus, Boles was a foreigner simply passing through Mexico. But in one way he stood out. An Iraqi, he was the only Middle Easterner on the bus.



Boles was just one of thousands of U.S.-bound immigrants who have journeyed from 43 mostly Islamic "countries of interest," where known terrorist groups operate and can presumably deploy infiltrators. Since 9-11, counterterrorism authorities have given this tiny group the label "special-interest aliens," which triggers a set of security measures reserved just for them. Their ranks have included a number of reputed terrorists.

Boles was a 25-year-old Iraqi war refugee who had fled to Syria, where he had tapped into a smuggling network that enabled

him to fly on his own from Damascus to Moscow and then to Guatemala on a tourist visa he'd bought for \$750.

After eight months in Guatemala, a different smuggler had gotten him over the Mexican border. In his final push to America, Boles was about to find

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out that Americans aren't the only ones who single out Middle Easterners as potential terrorists.

Boles had been traveling for more than two hours since crossing into Mexico from Guatemala. The smuggler had walked his group of mostly Central Americans over the border near the scrubby highland town of La Mesilla. He'd caught the bus on the other side, in Ciudad Cuauhtémoc.

Boles had heard horror stories, true or not, about corrupt immigration officers in both countries who prey on people moving north.

He thought of the \$3,000 he kept hidden and how it figured into his plan to hire a smuggler in Mexico. He had been guarding the little bundle with his life since leaving Syria; his entire future depended on it to get him through Mexico.

Now, having been stopped at a highway checkpoint by zealous men in uniform, he feared the worst.

The police asked those aboard the bus to produce travel documents and state their nationality. From some of the foreigners they demanded cash. Boles watched as the money disappeared into the pockets of the uniformed men.

He decided to try lying. With his dark features, Boles hoped he might pass for a Guatemalan. The officers approached.

"Dónde está sus papeles?" Where are your papers?

"I don't have any," Boles replied, using Spanish he'd picked up in Guatemala.

"What country are you from?" the officer asked, eyeing him hard now.

"Guatemala. I am a Guatemalan."

"How much money are you illegally transporting through Mexico?" the officer asked, now clearly skeptical. "Let me see it."

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"I have nothing," Boles said. "Banditos robbed me at the border. They beat me and took my money."

"Get out!" the officer ordered, grabbing his arm and pulling.

Outside, two more officers joined the mix.

"You don't sound like you're from Guatemala," the first said to Boles, who now stood surrounded. "I'll ask you one last time: Where are you from?"

Boles saw no way out.

"OK, OK," he said. "I am an Arab from Iraq. I'm an Iraqi."

The confession had an almost miraculous effect. All hostility suddenly melted away. The officers escorted Boles to a spot away from the other offloaded immigrants. The officers huddled among themselves, talking. Occasionally they glanced over at Boles.

A few minutes later, one of them politely escorted him to a black pickup and instructed him to climb in the back. The officer then drove him into Tapachula and delivered him to a detention center run by Mexico's National Institute of Migration.

The detention center, a few miles from the city's center, is gleaming new construction, painted an unthreatening mauve and white, with no sign of barbed wire. It's surrounded by high walls and 10-foot-tall metal gates. Large air-conditioned buses rumble in and out delivering or picking up human payloads.

Most of those inside are from Latin America, especially Ecuadoreans, Cubans and Peruvians who live too far away to be easily deported.

But Boles was taken past them to a special block. He was stunned. All of his new cellmates were travel-weary Yemenis, Tunisians, Pakistanis and Iraqis.

He had become ensnared in the outer edge of a largely unknown American security net, spun out of fear and perhaps a necessary presumption that Boles and his new cellmates might well be terrorists bent on infiltrating the U.S.

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Aamr Boles' route through Mexico



- 1. February 2006:** Travels across the Guatemala border into the Mexico border town of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc.
- 2.** Officials of Mexico's National Institute of Migration board bus near Tapachula and detain Boles.
- 3.** Transferred to Mexico City detention facility where he befriends two other Iraqi men.
- 4. April 27, 2006:** Released. Smuggler drives Boles and his two friends to Monterrey in a long-haul truck.

- 5.** The group switches trucks and is driven to Matamoros.
- 6. April 29, 2006:** Boles and his two friends are taken to the Rio Grande. They cross near Los Indios and are immediately picked up by U.S. Border Patrol.
- 7. May 5, 2006:** Boles and the other Iraqis plead guilty to a misdemeanor charge of illegal entry and are given a rare maximum sentence of six months in federal prison.

Sources: Border Patrol records, court documents and Aamr Bahnan Boles Interviews; compiled by News Researcher Julie Domel

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

But Boles also was in the clutches of another country's rarely discussed security preoccupation. Mexico's fear that an attack on the U.S. might

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originate on its soil had elevated counterterrorism to a top Mexico priority and produced one of the most closely intertwined partnerships in the American war on terror, particularly on the question of special-interest immigrants.

Within a week, Boles and his cellmates would be transported to a bigger detention center in Mexico City, their van flanked by a Mexican security detail, including intelligence officers.

One day, three well-dressed visitors, two women and a man, were let inside to see Boles. He was told they were Americans from the U.S. Embassy, and the Mexican government had allowed them inside to question him.

Mexico's most unwanted

After 9-11, the U.S. government immediately began urging Mexico to help stop so-called "special-interest aliens" who had moved virtually unmolested through its territory.

Despite public disagreements over illegal immigration by Mexico's own citizens, the U.S. found a more than eager partner in efforts to stop this one category of migrants from getting to the U.S. border. The main motivation: keeping the billions coming from Mexicans working in the U.S.

Before and after 9-11, top Mexican officials were quoted as saying they believe terror networks had long operated inside Mexico. For example, in May 2001, Mexican national security adviser Adolfo Aguilar Zinser told the BBC that "Spanish and Islamic terrorist groups are using Mexico as a refuge. ... In light of this situation, there are continuing investigations aimed at dismantling these groups so that they may not cause problems in the country."

In January 2002, the Monterrey-based El Norte newspaper quoted National Institute of Migration official Felipe Urbiola Ledezma as saying that "six or seven" known terrorist organizations were operating inside Mexico.

"We have in Mexico people linked to terrorism and we are constantly observing unusual immigration flows ... people connected to ETA, Hezbollah and even some with links to Osama Bin Laden," he told reporters.

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Mexican officials have since toned down such talk. In the years since 9-11, Mexico has steadily escalated its cooperation with American authorities on terrorism-related programs. The country has prosecuted smugglers who specialized in moving Middle Easterners, taken steps to guard against corruption in its Middle East-based consulate offices, opened its own terrorism investigations, and passed laws cracking down on suspected terrorist money-laundering operations.

A newly released U.S. State Department Country Report on Mexico's level of counterterrorism cooperation during 2006, effusive with praise, makes special note of the country's work diminishing the primary perceived threat there: "terrorist transit and the smuggling of aliens who may raise terrorism concerns."

"Our bilateral efforts focused squarely on minimizing that threat," the report stated.

Mexico's ambassador to the U.S., Arturo Sarukhan, described what Mexico's interest is: The presumed American reaction to any terror attack from Mexican territory would be abrupt and radical border restrictions, which could catastrophically disrupt the \$25 billion in annual remittances that Mexican workers in the U.S. send home and upon which Mexico's struggling economy has come to depend.

"The day that happens," Sarukhan said of a terrorist infiltrator who attacks from Mexican soil, "this relationship is over as we know it. Everything. So it behooves my country to ensure that that border is not used as a potential staging ground for terrorist penetration or attack to U.S. soil. Mechanisms put in place by agencies on both sides of the border are providing the results."

One mechanism, according to government sources in both countries, is a discreet system by which immigration enforcement agencies throughout Mexico, especially at airports, target special-interest immigrants for detention and investigation.

Two American agents with Mexico experience said the U.S. provides the Mexican military with resources for soldiers to set up roadblocks along

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established land routes close to the American southern border and pluck Middle Eastern immigrants out of the flow.

"Mexico is busting their ass to cooperate on this," said one federal agent knowledgeable about the programs. "It's a big deal."

One particular practice helps illustrate just how close the cooperation is.

Mexico, for the past several years, has allowed American interrogators into its detention facilities to directly question special-interest detainees.

The "threat assessment" interviews, typically conducted by Mexico City-stationed U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agents, occur in the presence of their Mexican counterparts, according to two federal sources familiar with the procedure.

The Americans do not interview every captured special-interest immigrant; they don't have the personnel, according to one of them.

Instead, the agreement is for Mexican intelligence officers from the National Security and Investigation Center to conduct as many interviews as possible while American agents check terror watch lists and fingerprint databases for them.

American agents can later pick and choose whom they want to investigate themselves, but far from all are.

Sarukhan, not commenting specifically on any particular joint practice, acknowledged that his country routinely relies on the American counterterrorism apparatus in its own ongoing effort to ensure the U.S. is not attacked from Mexico.

"We are obviously receiving intelligence. Mexico is not a player on its own," he said. "We need that information provided to us by other nations that are monitoring the activities of some of these groups in other parts of the world."

In Tapachula, a ranking member of the National Institute of Migration, or INM, in the state of Chiapas, who spoke on condition of anonymity because

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he was not authorized to grant media interviews, said most Arab immigrants, once they cross from Guatemala by land, typically fly rather than cover the dangerous 1,000-mile journey to America by land or rail.

"You'll almost never find an Arab person walking," the official said.

That makes things easier for the INM. Many Arab immigrants arrive with money for air passage north. The INM looks for them and regularly catches Jordanians, Egyptians and North Africans at airports in Tapachula and Tuxtla, the INM official said.

He said his country's intelligence agency "checks on them to see if they're dangerous." Asked if he'd heard whether any were, he responded: "That information is confidential."

Not all who have used Mexico to cross into the U.S. have been economic migrants. One of them was Detroit resident Mahmoud Youssef Kourani, a Lebanese national later convicted in Michigan of raising money and recruiting for the terror group Hezbollah.

Federal court records say Kourani was a ranking Hezbollah insider who received "specialized training in radical Shiite fundamentalism, weaponry, spy craft and counterintelligence in Lebanon and Iran." The government described his brother as "Hezbollah's Chief of Military Security for Southern Lebanon" who sent Kourani to infiltrate the U.S.

American prosecutors say he got into Mexico in 2001 by obtaining a Mexican visa by paying a \$3,000 bribe at the Mexican Consulate in Beirut, then was smuggled over the California border in the trunk of a smuggler's car.

But Kourani was never caught in Mexico.

American agents familiar with the joint system of vetting special-interest immigrants who are caught in Mexico concede the system is far from foolproof in discerning a terrorist from an economic migrant.

One reason is the FBI has fielded fewer than a dozen full-time agents to Mexico City, and they cannot possibly interview every special-interest

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immigrant captured there, an official said. Also, the right interpreters are in short supply.

Another problem is that many of those captured have fake papers or no identification, and the names they provide with no verification get run through terror watch lists.

"The bottom line is just because you don't get a hit doesn't mean he's not a terrorist," the federal agent with Mexico experience said. "You still could be. Fake names are a big problem. I think one of these days something bad is going to happen, and it's going to have a Mexican signature."

Senior FBI officials in Washington, D.C., did not respond to phone and e-mail requests to comment about this series.

After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, as an insurgency against American troops was gaining traction, American agents in Mexico stamped the highest priority on investigating all captured Iraqi immigrants, two sources said.

It was against the backdrop of the war in Iraq and the broad cooperative counterterrorism effort in Mexico that American agents found their way to interview Boles.

Boles is interrogated

Before the Americans got to him, Mexican agents of the National Security and Investigation Center paid Boles a visit in Tapachula first.

The Mexican intelligence officers wanted to know all about Boles. He explained that he was an Iraqi Christian who had fled religious persecution by first going to Syria, and that he was on his way to America to join relatives in Detroit.

The Mexican agents seemed particularly interested in knowing if he did any fighting in the Iraq war and about his time in Syria. The interview was brief.

But Boles was not finished answering questions.

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Some days later, Boles was placed in a van with some other Middle Easterners for what would be a road trip lasting nearly 20 hours to Mexico City and another detention facility there. Again his cellmates were Jordanians, Pakistanis and Tunisians.

Not long after, the guards came for him again.

Boles was taken to a well-lit interrogation room fitted with a table, some chairs and a telephone. He faced three interrogators. To the side, a Mexican agent stood throughout the proceedings, observing but not participating.

The telephone was off its hook, its loudspeaker function on. A female Arabic-speaking interpreter was holding. The Americans were polite.

They explained that they had come only to help him and that, essentially, the truth would set him free. He explained once again that his Christian family had been victims of persecution by Muslim extremists.

They asked Boles why he had come to Mexico, how he had gotten there and where he wanted to go.

"I want to go to America. I have an uncle in Detroit. All I want to do is go to America."

As the hours ticked by, the questions got more specific about names, places and dates related to his time in Iraq and Syria. The Americans scribbled in their notebooks.

Had he served in the Iraqi military? Boles said he had served a compulsory stint. What weapons training had Boles received? Boles said he received the usual but was certainly no fighter. The Americans took more notes.

The questioning then turned again to Syria.

They asked Boles point-blank if he was a member of a terrorist organization that ran a training camp in the Syrian port town of Latakia. According to some press reports, the reputed camp processes foreign fighters on their way to combat American troops in Iraq.

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Had Boles ever been to Latakia? What did he know about the terrorist organization that ran it?

Boles insisted he knew nothing about any training camp in Latakia.

After about three hours, the Americans seemed satisfied. But Boles had no travel documents or any other direct evidence of the story he'd given. The Mexicans would hang on to Boles for nearly three more months, possibly to buy the Americans more time to check the story.

Not all of Boles' cellmates had to wait that long.

One goes to Guantanamo

A variety of fates await special-interest immigrants in Mexico, following investigations of them, often based on recommendations from American agents.

According to Mexican and American sources familiar with the process, those who arouse suspicion are simply deported to their home countries. Boles noticed this as, one by one, his cellmates disappeared.

Information is sketchy about what happens when a special-interest immigrant caught in Mexico arouses greater suspicion.

But at least one U.S.-bound Pakistani captured in Mexico apparently ended up testifying before a military tribunal at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The partial story of the Pakistani is revealed in a heavily redacted hearing transcript that was one of thousands the government was forced to release on a Web site after an Associated Press Freedom of Information lawsuit in May 2005.

One of the government's allegations was that the Pakistani had close business ties to "an individual known to help coordinate smuggling operations for members of Hezbollah and al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya," an Egypt-based group.

The prisoner denied knowing about any such smuggling operations and insisted he was merely an economic migrant.

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"Yes, I did try to be smuggled into the United States. I was going to find a job to make some money," the prisoner told the tribunal.

The Pakistani detainee testified that he had taken a plane from Pakistan to Guatemala, and "from there I traveled by foot and vehicle to Mexico." He recalled crossing some rivers but not much more.

He acknowledged a smuggler helped arrange the journey from Pakistan eight months before his capture on a promise to pay about \$18,000 worth of rupees.

"This would get paid when I got to the United States. My father owns a tanker (oil truck), which he would sell to make the payment."

It's unknown whether the man remains in detention.

When a detainee arouses deep suspicions, questioning is taken to another level.

A federal source said that at times the Americans have arranged to fly such detainees to their home countries, if cooperative, for intelligence services there to interrogate them. The results get reported back to the United States.

These situations fall short of "rendition," a recently criticized practice in which American intelligence agents have flown suspects to third countries where they could conduct the interrogations themselves with little accountability, the agent cautioned.

The San Antonio Express-News has been unable to independently corroborate the practice. The FBI did not respond to a query about it.

Some special-interest immigrants who raise no red flags while in Mexican custody are simply released with papers instructing them to leave the country within two weeks.

Boles and two fellow Iraqis he befriended while in jail evidently fell into this category.

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After 90 days in detention, Boles and his two compatriots were only too happy to leave the country as ordered. They headed for the Rio Grande and, just beyond its placid brownish-green waters, the Promised Land.

But the long journey of Aamr Bahnan Boles was far from over.

Breaching America Part IV: 'Made it to America!'

BROWNSVILLE — The human smuggler offering to help Aamr Bahnan Boles and his two friends cross the border into America was tall, dark and pricey.

"I can get you to Texas, no problem," he told them. "For a thousand dollars each."

Boles and the others had just walked out of the detention center for immigrants in Mexico City. The guards, knowing the three were about to be freed after three months in custody, had arranged the rendezvous with a smuggler.

Boles would recall later how the smuggler — in street parlance a coyote, or someone who makes a living helping undocumented immigrants cross the border — was leaning against a tractor-trailer rig outside the jail gates.

He said his name was Antonio.

"Where are you from and where do you want to go?" the smuggler asked.

"We are Iraqis," Boles said in halting Spanish, "and we want to go to America."

Boles, a Chaldean Christian determined to escape the Iraq war, is categorized by the U.S. government as a "special-interest alien," those from 43 countries where terror groups are known to operate. As such, they can be subjected to extra screening and harsher treatment than other immigrants when caught crossing illegally.

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Residents along the U.S.-Mexico border have expressed alarm in recent years over finding articles like this Pharsi language diary left along smuggling trails, indicating the passage of people from state sponsors of terror. This diary was discovered at the border in Arizona, sparking a frantic FBI investigation that soon determined that the author was a love-struck Iranian who'd just left a Mexican woman behind to seek his fortune in America. Photo courtesy of Bill Hess, Sierra Vista Herald.

Near the end of his journey to America — born in the shadows of a Damascus, Syria, restaurant and culminating nearly a year later with the final push into Texas — Boles ran smack into this post-9-11 security net.

But the system is fallible, and just as likely to punish the benevolent as to release the dangerous.

On the U.S. side, authorities are feeling their way sometimes blind and scared. Once over the Texas border, Boles would encounter various jail cells, a skeptical magistrate, a distrusting government lawyer and a bizarre

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courtroom quiz about his biblical knowledge where his very freedom hinged on the right answers.

Boles managed to cling to his last couple thousand dollars after Mexican immigration agents plucked him off a bus from Guatemala, where he had arrived eight months earlier after an air trip from Damascus to Moscow and through Cuba. His new traveling companions, Ammar Habib Zaya and Remon Manssor Piuz, also had money.

Zaya and Piuz, like Boles and many Iraqis caught traveling through Mexico, said they were members of a Christian minority who had fled their homes in Iraq after Islamic extremists began killing and kidnapping men in their community. Zaya said he had worked on an American military base in Iraq, doing laundry for the troops.

The United States was giving few visas to Iraqi refugees, so they'd struck out for America and were caught by Mexican immigration. Mexican and U.S. intelligence agents interviewed them in custody as part of a secret counterterrorism program aimed at capturing immigrants from places such as the Middle East.

While other Middle Easterners who provoke some level of suspicion get deported to their homelands, Boles and his two new friends eventually were released with papers ordering them to either leave the country or apply for Mexican residency within two weeks.

The choice was clear.

It made sense that the three young men would band together for the final leg of their journey. There was safety in numbers, but they also had much in common. They were from the same Iraqi province of Mosul and all in their early to mid-20s. All had fled the war.

In the Mexican jail, Zaya and Piuz incorrectly told Boles about a surefire way to get legal status after they crossed into America. All they'd have to do was plant their feet on U.S. soil, find a government representative and claim political asylum. The Americans would have to give them a fair hearing on claims of religious persecution in Iraq, and maybe they could get permanent residency and a path to citizenship.

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Before the end of their first day of freedom in Mexico, Boles and his compatriots sat crowded together in the sleeper compartment of Antonio's tractor-trailer cab. The truck was barreling northeast from Mexico City toward the northern industrial city of Monterrey, nearly 600 miles away.

In Monterrey, the men transferred with Antonio to a different truck, this one bound for Matamoros, another 200 miles north and just across the border from Brownsville.

Nearly a full year after flying out of Damascus, Boles was almost to his goal now.

His excitement and apprehension grew.

In Matamoros, Antonio handed the travelers over to another man. They were driven by car over dirt roads that wound through farmland and came to a stop a half-mile from the Rio Grande. It still was dark. Boles and his two companions followed the coyote over dirt trails.

The smuggler told them not to talk; Border Patrol agents could be just over the other side. They stripped to their shoes, bundled their clothes and shuffled down the riverbank to the neck-deep, fast-moving green water of the Rio Grande. At 5:20 a.m. April 29, 2006, they waded across to Texas one at a time using an inner tube.

The men scrambled back into their clothes. They were about 6 miles east of the rural town of Los Indios.

"America!" Boles thought as he faced towering sugar cane fields. "I'm finally here. I've made it to America."

His joy would be short-lived.

Boles' small group triggered a motion detector while hiking up a dirt road toward U.S. 281. U.S. Border Patrol agents in three SUVs rumbled out of their hiding places to check the area.

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Boles and his companions were hiding in brush when they saw the green and white vehicles coming toward them. They leapt out with hands raised and ran toward what they thought was salvation.

"Iraqi Christians! Iraqi Christians! Iraqi Christians!" they shouted over and over, jumping up and down. "Political asylum! Political asylum!"

None of them could have known they already were marked men.

A flawed system

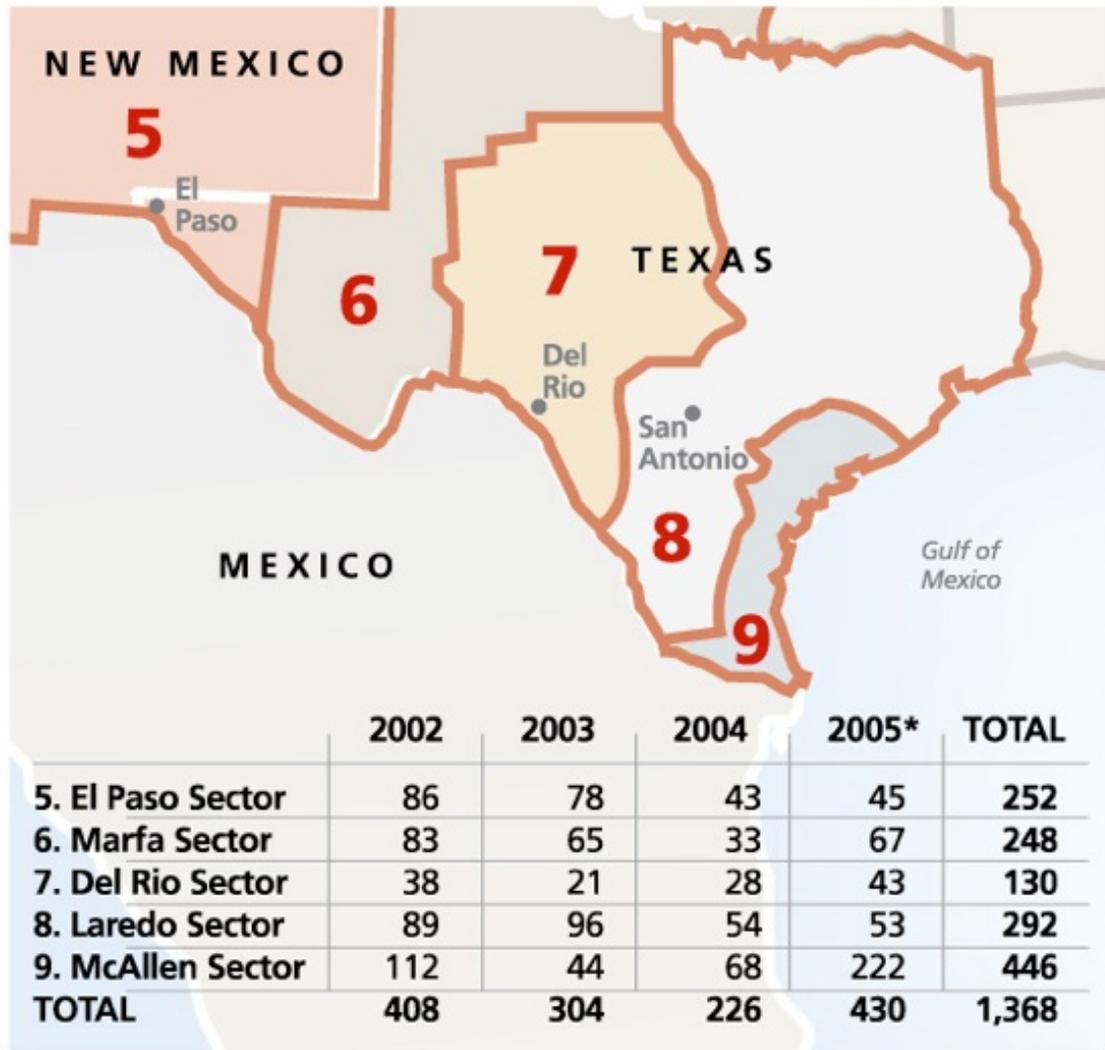
Federal agents from Texas to California and from Maine to Washington go on red alert whenever a special-interest immigrant gets caught crossing the border — or at least they are supposed to.

The goal is to put everyone captured, regardless of nationality, into deportation proceedings or immediately send them back. The routine is to run the fingerprints and names of apprehended border crossers through interlocking government databases that look for criminal history, outstanding warrants or past immigration violations.

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Captures of 'special-interest aliens' in Texas

Texas accounts for more than half of all immigrants from countries of interest who have been caught crossing the southern border since 9-11, according to Border Patrol apprehension data. Here is a breakdown of data from 2002-2005:



From February 2006 through March of this year:

- 250 captures were logged in Texas.
- Includes 11 Saudi Arabians, 30 Iranians, 11 Afghans, about 30 Iraqis
- Most common, however, were immigrants from the Philippines, India and Pakistan, countries where violent Muslim terrorist groups operate.

* Most recent year data is available

Sources: Customs and Border Protection, DHS; compiled by News Researcher Julie Domel

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But apprehensions of border jumpers hailing from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia trigger under-the-radar procedures that go well beyond these first rudimentary checks.

Border Patrol agents are supposed to run these names through the agency's National Targeting Center database, which looks for any link to terrorism or flags when other agencies have an investigative interest in the name.

The next step is to notify the nearest FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force, which has its own more extensive databases and access to counterterrorism and intelligence resources. The Border Patrol has logged hundreds of such referrals to the FBI each year since 9-11.

Border Patrol agents made 644 referrals in 2004, 647 in 2005 and 563 in 2006, according to agency data requested by the San Antonio Express-News. If sufficient suspicions are aroused, the FBI can place a national security "hold" on an immigrant to keep him in custody while agents investigate further.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Ralph Diaz, who oversees bureau activities in South Texas from his San Antonio headquarters, said an effort then is made to interview every special-interest immigrant in person.

"They're not all necessarily a threat," Diaz said. "But we don't have the luxury of presuming that. The flag goes up and we say, 'Let's take a look at this.'"

The workload is not insubstantial. More than 1,500 special-interest immigrants have been captured in Texas since 9-11, including nearly 300 between March 2006 and April, among them Boles and his two companions, along with Iranians, Yemenis and Afghans. Diaz and other FBI officials familiar with special-interest immigrant assessments said the vast majority are determined to be economic refugees or people fleeing wars and political persecution.

"It's not reached a level where we've had a threat to national security in the San Antonio district," said Diaz, who has been on the job about a year.

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Other federal counterterrorism authorities, however, say they have connected some border jumpers to terrorism. Among them was a South African woman of Middle Eastern descent whose July 2004 arrest at the McAllen airport with wet clothes, thousands in cash and a mutilated passport made international headlines.

Farida Goolam Ahmed eventually was charged with a simple illegal entry offense and quietly deported, but key documents remain sealed. A Dec. 9, 2004, U.S. Border and Transportation Security intelligence summary, accidentally released on the Internet, states that Ahmed was "linked to specific terrorist activities."

Government officials familiar with the case now confirm Ahmed was a smuggler based in Johannesburg, South Africa, who specialized in moving special-interest immigrants into the United States along a United Arab Emirates-London-Mexico City-McAllen pipeline.

Houston-based federal prosecutor Abe Martinez, chief of the Southern District of Texas national security section in the U.S. attorney's office, was asked if Ahmed or anyone she smuggled might have been involved in terrorism.

"Were they linked to any terrorism organizations?" Martinez said. "I would have to say yes."

Martinez and a number of Texas-based FBI officials declined to elaborate. But an August 2004 report that appeared in the Washington-based Homeland Security Today quoted several unnamed government counterterrorism officials as saying Ahmed also was found to be ferrying "instructions" from a Mexico al-Qaida cell to another cell in New York.

The article reported Ahmed's arrest led the CIA to capture two al-Qaida members in Mexico and several Pakistani al-Qaida members in Pakistan and in Britain who all were part of the plot to attack targets in New York.

The Express-News couldn't independently corroborate the Homeland Security Today report.

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Other immigrants who have prompted some level of uncertainty or suspicion end up deported to their home countries.

Kyle Brown, an immigration attorney in McAllen, said two Afghans he represented had their asylum applications denied and were deported after the FBI discovered "a series of telephone numbers" in their possession.

"One of them (telephone numbers) led back to a link to terrorism," Brown said.

But FBI officials, including San Antonio's Diaz, acknowledge the bureau's current system of assessing whether someone is a terrorist is far from error-free.

Often, immigrants show up with no documents or with fakes. FBI agents could have little to run through terror watch list databases, or, when a name is real, it might not be entered.

"You interview them, run every database possible, fingerprints, watch lists, check their stories. You get some sort of a feel of their sophistication," said an FBI official who works along the Southwest border. "Could we be fooled? Of course."

Last year, a Homeland Security Department audit cited weaknesses in the government's ability to differentiate between persecuted political asylum seekers and terrorists.

"The effectiveness of these background checks is uncertain due to the difficulty verifying the identity, country of origin, terrorist or criminal affiliation of aliens in general," the audit report stated. "Therefore, the release of these (migrants) poses particular risks."

FBI and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents concede they can't get around to interviewing every captured special-interest immigrant. Until thousands of new detention beds were ready last year, Border Patrol and ICE routinely released special-interest immigrants on their own recognizance, usually never to reappear, simply because there was nowhere to keep them.

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New detention space lets the government hold more undocumented immigrants for deportation proceedings. But even then, some are let go and not fully investigated, according to a review of hundreds of intelligence summary reports showing law enforcement activity along the Texas-Mexico border.

The reports suggest the FBI is not always getting referrals, and full investigations aren't being conducted.

One of many such examples occurred Dec. 1, according to an intelligence summary report from that day. "Sudanese detained at Carrizo Springs station. Released." The State Department lists Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Three days later, agents picked up a Pakistani at a checkpoint in Val Verde. "No derogatory," the report stated, referring to a watch-list check. "Released." Two days after that, Border Patrol agents picked up an Iraqi and had a watch-list check run on his name, too. "No derogatory info. Released."

Sometimes Border Patrol agents exercise a new authority provided by Congress to simply expel undocumented immigrants back to Mexico without court oversight, a process known as "expedited removal."

While helping to reduce congestion in detention centers and courtrooms, expedited removal also loses opportunities to investigate the immigrants and their smugglers.

In a typical such instance, on June 20, Border Patrol agents arrested an Eritrean national in McAllen.

"Subject stated that he flew from Sudan to Mexico City using a photo-substituted French passport," the report stated. "He was processed for expedited removal."

The Lord's Prayer

To American agents, Boles and his two fellow Iraqi travelers were big question marks. Like many special-interest immigrants, they were captured with no identification or documents, just a story about being persecuted

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Christians in need of safe harbor. Their inability to back their story with evidence — even to prove the validity of their given names — would bode ill.

Border Patrol officers who caught Boles transported him to one of their facilities in Brownsville, where his name once again was run through the databases. Those checks came out clean. The FBI was notified that Iraqis had been caught at the river. But still no one could say for sure who they were.

Before Boles' first day in American custody was over, immigration authorities in Brownsville charged him and his two compatriots with the federal misdemeanor of illegal entry, which carries a maximum punishment of six months in prison.

Boles' appointed attorney, Humberto Yzaguirre Jr., recalls assuring his three clients that the charge was routine and they would serve no time. They would plead guilty, be given time served and then get out on bond to pursue political asylum claims — assuming the FBI quickly cleared them.

Yzaguirre had seen it happen this way a thousand times, he told them.

But it wasn't to be.

No one in the Brownsville federal court system was ready to believe that Boles, Zaya and Piuz were Christians.

All three Iraqis had pleaded guilty and were awaiting their sentencing before U.S. Magistrate Court Judge Felix Recio, scheduled for May 5, 2006.

In the meantime, the court had ordered probation officers to interview the three Iraqis to collect their stories and make recommendations to the judge.

Attorney Paul Hajjar, a Lebanese American hired as a defense interpreter for the proceedings, recalled overhearing the Iraqis talking among themselves in a dialect that was not Arabic. He recognized it as a contemporary derivative of the ancient Aramaic language dating to the days of Jesus Christ. It is spoken only by Middle East Christians.

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Hajjar asked Piuz about the language. Just then, the Iraqi broke out with a heartfelt rendition of the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic, loudly enough for all to hear.

Piuz closed his eyes as he continued slowly, bowed his head and spoke the words of the prayer with what appeared to be deeply felt angst, Yzaguirre recalled, as though he hoped God could help him out of the situation. When he finished, Hajjar turned to the probation officers. These men, he said, could not be Muslims.

"See? They are exactly who they say they are," he said. "I don't see Muslims saying the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. A Muslim wouldn't speak Aramaic to begin with, and they certainly wouldn't know the Lord's Prayer."

The display wouldn't help the group. It wasn't included in the report that would go to the judge. And the FBI still hadn't shown up.

Taking no chances

Magistrate Judge Recio already had decided he wasn't taking any chances with Iraqis.

"Mr. Boles," the judge said at their sentencing hearing, "good morning. Do you have anything you wish to say to the court?"

"No," Boles replied in Arabic, then added, "If you could just give us some consideration."

"Mr. Piuz, do you have anything you want to say to the court?"

Meekly, Piuz replied, "Just, if you could take care of us."

Next, Recio asked Yzaguirre the same thing. Yzaguirre assured the judge that no evidence had surfaced indicating that his clients were Muslims instead of Christians.

The judge then turned to the government's prosecutor, Assistant U.S. Attorney Dan Marposon, for his opinion.

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Marposon, who has declined several interview requests, said he concurred with the pre-sentence report's recommendation of minimal punishment, the usual time served.

But Recio, who didn't respond to three interview requests for this report, was about to surprise the government's prosecutor and everyone else in his courtroom.

"We know that this country is in war in Iraq," he said. "We know the problems associated with all of that, and it gives reason for this court to be cautious and to take things into consideration carefully and to apply the law to them as carefully as possible."

Recio went on to express skepticism about the Iraqis' stated motives for coming to the United States when they could have stayed in Europe or gone elsewhere much more easily. He said he doubted their story that they'd all met for the first time in Mexico when the three men came from the same province.

"It would be highly unlikely that if you're released from any Mexican prison that you would be released with any money whatsoever," the judge said. "So someone is financing you, or you're receiving funds from someplace. We have no idea where those funds are coming from."

The judge reserved special ire for the government.

"I might add the government has been very lax in coming forth with any evidence to either support or go against the claims of these individuals," he said. "Who did they check? What did they check? What did they verify? Who did they talk to? I don't know."

Recio sentenced them to six months in prison.

"We want to promote respect for the law. We want to protect the public from further crimes, and we want to provide a deterrence for other criminal conduct," he said.

The gavel came down with a crack.

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The hearing had lasted 15 minutes.

Boles, Piuz and Zaya were devastated. The U.S. marshals handcuffed them and led them away to prison.

Tougher grilling

About a week later, the FBI showed up. The experience would not be pleasant.

Two men from the bureau, an ICE agent and a Lebanese interpreter arrived at the jail where the prisoners were being held.

Boles found their questions insulting and their manner brusque and intimidating, unlike his experience with the Americans who had questioned him in Mexico.

The agents, he later recounted, demanded to know why he had come to America, and the names of the smugglers who brought him.

They began asking personal questions, like if he had sampled tequila while in Mexico and what it had felt like, knowing that practicing Muslims who don't drink alcohol wouldn't have an answer.

Agents demanded to know about his military experience. Boles believed his three-month incarceration in Mexico was the result of admitting he'd been a conscript in Saddam Hussein's army. So he lied this time.

"No, I never served in the military," Boles told the agents.

But the agents had his statements from Mexico. They pounced, hoping to break down a possible cover story.

"Don't you think we know what you said in Mexico? You're a liar!"

For the next five hours, they grilled Boles.

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They threatened to charge him with lying to federal law enforcement officers, a felony that could bring a five-year sentence, unless he told them who he really was and what he was doing sneaking into America.

They threatened to send him back and force him to join the new Iraqi army, where he would probably suffer a violent death.

At last, the agents left Boles, exhausted and feeling hostile toward the country he hoped would adopt him.

New agents would return three weeks later and interview him again about the details of his life and travels, most likely looking for inconsistencies.

That was the last he heard from the FBI and ICE.

Mixed-up feelings

Boles spent his 26th birthday behind bars.

After he completed his sentence in November 2006, he was remanded to the custody of immigration authorities and transferred to a federal detention facility near Port Isabel. Once again, Pakistanis, Jordanians and Yemenis were among his cellmates.

Most immigrants in similar situations probably would be deported at this point or be eligible to pay a bond and be freed while pursuing a political asylum claim. But the FBI still had not cleared Boles, and until it did he would remain in limbo.

Relatives in Detroit hired Harlingen immigration lawyer Thelma Garcia, and she began pushing government lawyers to secure a ruling from the FBI. Finally, toward the end of the year, the FBI notified the court that it had cleared Boles. He was not a national security risk.

But suspicion can be hard to overcome in Texas, at least when it comes to Iraqis during a war. There was still no proof of his Christian identity and his story of persecution at the hands of Muslims.

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Boles would be asked one last time to prove his credibility with a test of his religious faith.

Garcia quickly moved to get a hearing date that would allow Boles to bond out and go to Detroit.

U.S. Immigration Judge William C. Peterson presided over the hearing Jan. 3. The government's lawyer was Assistant Chief Counsel Sean Clancy.

Clancy, who some people think resembles actor Randy Quaid, is a classic Irishman. He has fair features and reddish hair. He wore a crisp suit.

Clancy put Boles through his final test, opening with a battery of questions designed to ascertain, finally, whether he was who he said he was. Garcia's notes from the proceeding chronicle this unusual courtroom exchange:

"What's a Christian?" the prosecutor asked.

Clancy was assertive without being confrontational.

"We believe in Jesus as our savior and we believe in God," Boles replied.

Clancy seemed to accept the answer, Garcia thought.

"Who is Jesus and where did he come from?" Clancy asked Boles.

"He is the son of God, son of Joseph and the son of David."

"Was he just another man?"

"No, he was the son of God."

"How often do you pray?"

"I pray every Sunday, three times a day."

"What do you do on Sunday?"

"I go to morning Mass."

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"What's Mass?"

"We pray with a Bible."

"What's Communion?"

"We take the body of Jesus Christ."

"In what form do you take Communion?"

"Bread. Wafers. The priest prays over it and then we eat it."

Clancy turned to the judge.

"That's all I have," he said. "It's up to the court, your honor."

Peterson set Boles' bond at \$1,500. Relatives paid it a couple days later and then wired money for bus fare to his lawyer in Harlingen. It was enough for a one-way trip to Detroit aboard a Greyhound.

The next night, on Jan. 6, a Border Patrol agent drove Boles to a bus station in Brownsville and let him off at 11 p.m. with all of his worldly possessions: a bag filled with a few basic toiletries, extra socks and underwear and some documents. He wore a red Nike baseball cap, a brown corduroy sport coat and a grim expression.

Boles felt bitter. He did not think the FBI and the U.S. judicial system had treated him well.

But he was ready to get on with his new life.

"My feelings about America are all mixed up," he said as he ate his first American meal as a free man, a cheeseburger and fries at the Brownsville Cafe. "We knew they'd do an investigation of us, but why did it have to be a criminal investigation? I believe it was an unfair sentence for him to send us to jail."

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But Boles, who had not had much to laugh about in a long time, couldn't contain his dry sense of humor.

Casting a sideways glance, he said with the measured delivery of a standup comic:

"I know they have to protect your country.

"But why take so long to do it?"

The long journey of Aamr Bahnan Boles from Iraq had consumed almost three years of his life. Along the way, some of his enthusiasm had been lost, the joy of second chances tempered, the burden of freedom, loneliness of secrecy and imperfections of America all driven home.

"I feel lost," he said. "It's the first time I've been free."

Boles probably will remain free, though his claim for political asylum continues wending its way through the system. Returning to a Texas courtroom, which Boles must do in August, needn't worry him, said Martinez, the prosecutor who oversaw the FBI's handling of Boles.

"His story," Martinez said, "is true."

On a Saturday morning in January, that story, a refugee's story, entered its final chapter as Boles stepped onto a Greyhound bus in Brownsville. It took him north through Harlingen into the vast expanse of Texas and then into America's heartland.

Forty-four hours and many stops later, the odyssey from Damascus to Detroit ended at another Greyhound depot, and Boles began a new life.

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Breaching America Part V: Out of Iraq: An illegal flight of Chaldean Christians to America

The journey north from Guatemala through Mexico to the Texas border lasted 17 days.

Finally, on the evening of Feb. 26, 2006, the young family of four saw the river come into view.

Weary and beaten, with the baby starting to fuss, the family was driven in a car right up to the Rio Grande.

And there, it stopped in a cloud of dust.

George and his wife, Baida, were Iraqi refugees. They fled their homeland because Muslim extremists had made two things clear: They didn't like the family's Christian faith, for one. What was worse, to the gunmen prowling the neighborhood, were the sons' names, George and Toni, which seemed to lionize President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The decision to hire a smuggler to get them to America was clinched after militants told George Sr., a milk delivery man, that he was next on the beheading list for being an "infidel Christian," and after caregivers at their children's nursery became untrustworthy.



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"People started calling him George Bush ... so we stopped sending him to school in fear of him getting kidnapped," Baida, a hair stylist, later would tell American authorities. "Same thing with my young baby, Toni; they called him Tony Blair."

The journey from Iraq to the Texas border had been expensive and risky, especially moving inconspicuously with two young children through hostile, foreign terrain. But looking at the river, the family realized this was more than just a border. It was a river. They would have to swim across. None of them knew how.

Baida refused. George, too, couldn't bring himself to do it. The Mexican laborers who waited nearby for darkness got them going. Amused, the men urged the couple on, offering to help with the children.

My God, George thought, I came all this distance and there's America, finally, just right over there. And now you just have to do it.

So, with the help of the Mexicans, George waded in, carrying his older son over his head.

The family had come too far to go back. (The San Antonio Express-News has agreed to withhold the family's full name to prevent retaliation against other relatives still in Iraq.)

They had done what hundreds of thousands of other Christian Iraqi families have since the American invasion: sold everything in the face of horrific and systematic religious persecution, and fled north to Damascus, Syria, or Amman, Jordan.

Out of options, the family joined an increasing number of such refugees who are proceeding toward America, bent on crossing the border illegally.

A flight of Christians

Alarms go off along American borders among federal law enforcement authorities whenever immigrants from certain countries in the Middle East, North Africa or South Asia are discovered crossing illegally. Thousands have since 9-11, and when caught they're automatically labeled by the

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government as "special-interest aliens" and can be subjected to FBI interrogation and investigation as potential terrorists.

Since the war in Iraq spawned aggressive insurgent activity against American troops, the alarms have grown especially shrill when the captured immigrants are Iraqis.

Those caught crossing illegally in Texas and elsewhere along the southern border, however, are more likely victims of Islamic terrorists, the Express-News found after six months examining the topic. Still, border guards and federal agents can't be certain and have to employ special screening procedures to find out.

The war has set off a massive exodus that, ironically, has driven more Iraqis to America, making counter-terrorism officials all the more strained and anxious about who is crossing the border and what they intend.

Chaldean (pronounced KAL-dee-en) Christians are an ancient ethnic minority of Catholics who made up about 4 percent of Iraq's population. More than 600,000 of them, half the Chaldean population in Iraq, are thought to have fled the war to neighboring countries.

Chaldean Christian refugees in the U.S., Syria and Jordan say the American-led war unleashed Islamic militants who have targeted them because of their religion in vicious campaigns of murder, kidnapping for ransom and forced property expropriations.

Ordinarily, religious persecution can qualify victims for U.S. resettlement visas. But the U.S. State Department hasn't issued visas to Chaldeans and won't recognize them as especially persecuted for their religion, asserting that they are among many groups amid Iraq's sectarian strife who could make the claim. So they wait.

While most are sitting out the war as refugees in Syria and Jordan, other Chaldean Christians have chosen not to.

They are coming illegally to Texas, and to other border states, sometimes getting entangled along the way, in entire families, pregnant women, single mothers and young men going it alone or in small groups.

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"They know there was nothing for them, so therefore they have to create an act of desperation like this," said Joseph Kassab, executive director of the Detroit-based Chaldean Federation of America. "Those people, most of them, were able to get some money, or sell homes before they fled Iraq, and the smugglers know about them and so they go to them and talk about smuggling them."

U.S. Customs and Border Protection figures show only about 100 Iraqis have been caught at the borders between 9-11 and the end of last year, more than 60 of them along the Southwest border and about 20 in Texas. But those relatively small numbers don't account for the months of this year when refugee outflows from Iraq have jumped.

In April, five Iraqi families with children were in detention at the federal T. Don Hutto Residential Center in Taylor after Border Patrol agents picked them up in Texas and California; a half-dozen were in custody in the San Diego, Calif., area; 11 Iraqis were caught at a Mexican airport; and Belize authorities were trying to figure out what to do with 10 U.S.-bound Iraqis abandoned by their smuggler.

Umru "Crazy Tiger" Hassan, an interpreter for the 82nd Airborne Division in Iraq until Islamists threatened to kill him, personifies the situation. Hassan, a Christian, divulged to the Express-News in Damascus that he was on his way to Texas.

Islamic militants in Iraq had threatened Hassan's life not because of his work with the U.S. military but because he had married a Muslim woman. They came around one day to let him know he'd better convert.

"It was a big problem," he said of the marriage, which is now on the rocks. "It was, 'Hey you, if you don't want to be Muslim, we're going to kill you.' But I'm not changing my religion. Why should I?"

He left his military job and went to Damascus about six months ago, where he and his sister make a subsistence living running a tiny laundry called "Iraq Cleaning." He was frustrated there with the lack of opportunity and money.

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So Hassan decided a more prudent course was to plot a route to Texas.

He said Hispanic soldiers with whom he was serving told him how easy it was to cross the Mexico-Texas border, and they offered the help of their own families in Mexico. He plans to take advantage of the offer.

"If I make it successfully in this way, I'm going to bring my family the same way," said Hassan, who has a young daughter still in Iraq.

Lobby campaign stalled

Long before 9-11 and the war in Iraq, Chaldean Christians were sneaking across the U.S. southern border, mostly hoping to join relatives among the roughly 250,000 Chaldean Christians who have settled in major cities such as San Diego and Detroit.

Many of the Iraqi Christians have the financial means and the will to immigrate. In Iraq, as in the U.S., they tend to be educators, professionals and business owners.

Several U.S. prosecutions of smuggling rings that have specialized in Middle East clientele show that Chaldean Iraqis long have been favored because they tend to be affluent, or have relatives in the States who can pay smuggling fees of \$8,000 to \$25,000.

In almost every case, Iraqi Christians declare political asylum once they make it to U.S. soil. Indeed, these days, an Iraqi Christian stands a much better chance of gaining legal residency by coming across illegally than by applying for a visa.

For the past 18 months, the Chaldean Federation has lobbied the U.S. State Department and Homeland Security Department to issue 160,000 visas for Iraqi Christians on grounds of religious persecution.

"We would like them all to be admitted, like the Vietnamese," Kassab said. "They took 135,000 Vietnamese refugees in 10 months under President Ford. We want something similar to that."

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The initiative has run headlong into a domestic political debate over Iraq war policy in which the Bush administration is not eager to acknowledge a permanent refugee problem by resettling large numbers.

Last year, the Bush administration granted about 5,500 admission visas for all of the Middle East, of which only 500 were earmarked for Iraqis, and none specifically for Chaldean Christians.

The number of visas earmarked for the Middle East next fiscal year was increased from about 7,000 to 25,000, and the Chaldeans expect some.

Officials have reportedly told Chaldean Christian leaders in the U.S. that a need to conduct thorough security background checks on all Iraqis who might be considered for resettlement has stalled the process.

"We know the big stumbling block at this time is the security check," Kassab said. "They don't want to budge on this issue. They consider all Iraqis the same. If anything, our people are victims of terrorists; they are not terrorists."

Peter Eisenhauer, spokesman for the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, cited a different reason for not resettling Chaldean Christians in large numbers.

"We weren't going to do a population like that because there are a number of different Iraqi groups that are also vulnerable and at risk," he said.

The experience of several Chaldean Christian Iraqis caught crossing the Texas border shows the security dilemma American homeland security personnel face when one is caught.

Iraqi refugee Aamr Bahnan Boles, who was profiled last week in an Express-News series, found himself detained and sentenced to six months in prison with two other men who said they are Iraqi Christians because they couldn't prove who they were.

The federation's Kassab said he's well aware that border authorities especially fear that a real terrorist from Iraq might try to pose as a Chaldean Christian. Kassab thinks he has a solution: The federation has drafted a set

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of secret answers to cultural and religious questions that could be asked of any Iraqi who claims to be a Chaldean Christian.

Kassab said he may be making headway on the issue. Recently, he said, the federation was allowed to train 25 immigration asylum officers and judges in Chicago in how to identify a Chaldean Christian with a high degree of certainty.

Pain in Detroit

Much anguish can be found in Detroit's churches, Chaldean-owned restaurants and domino parlors where men smoke shisha pipes on Sundays after Mass. The war has engulfed them with news of murdered loved ones and displaced families.

There are mixed emotions about who's to blame for what has befallen the Chaldeans. In the era of Saddam Hussein, many Christians felt protected from Arab Muslims. Some were left alone and flourished in business, academia and the professions. Top Saddam adviser Tariq Aziz was a Chaldean Christian.

Since Saddam's ouster, Arab militias have ravaged Christian communities.

Father Jacob Yasso, who has presided over the Sacred Heart Church and Chaldean Community Center on Detroit's West 7-Mile Street for more than 30 years, said he believes America owes admission to Chaldeans trapped and suffering overseas.

He remains proud of a picture of himself giving Saddam the key to Detroit's Chaldean community 30 years ago, after the dictator gave him \$1.5 million to build his church and community center.

"America owes the Chaldeans justice," he said. "Let us come. Let us come."

As the stalemate between Detroit and Washington continues, thousands of Iraqi Christians in Syria and Jordan dutifully register with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a first step to securing resettlement visas to Europe or North America, and in some cases Australia and New Zealand.

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But all too often that portends an indefinite wait that some are simply not willing to tolerate while scrabbling for a meager living in the dusty working-class tenement suburbs of Damascus and Amman.

George and Baida decided to flee to prevent this from happening to them. They raised \$32,000 by selling their house, furniture, cars and salon equipment at cut-rate prices, then fled to Damascus.

There, they found, according to Baida, that "everybody is planning to go someplace — everyone."

George said he easily found a smuggler, a Jordanian who gave no name or information. He paid the smuggler \$10,000. For that, the smuggler provided airline tickets and Guatemalan and Cuban visas for the family, as well as arranging a safe house in Guatemala City.

The family members flew to Moscow and then Cuba, where they spent three days in a hotel with no running water and buckets of water with which to flush toilets. Once in Guatemala, the family settled in for a couple of months in a Guatemala City safe house, a tidy home owned by a woman named "Maria" who charged \$100 a month rent.

She grew so attached to George and Toni that when the time came she personally arranged for the best Guatemala smuggler she could find to shepherd the family to the Texas border. The man only gave his name as "Miguel" and charged \$15,000.

"He charged me extra because of the kids," George said. "I didn't care; I just wanted to get my kids to America."

The following weeks were a blur of transferring from car to truck to van, staying in safe houses or sleeping in cars, and hiding under blankets in the backs of pickups.

Miguel never once strayed from the family's side, his word given to Maria not to, and he made sure to provide all of the family's needs.

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Through it all, the parents worried about what would happen to their children if they were caught, and even more about bandits and killers who prey on immigrants. They fed the kids chicken, tortillas, rice and cookies.

When 9-month-old Toni would start to cry at a moment when silence was necessary, Baida would breast-feed him. A candy bar kept the older boy quiet when necessary.

After they swam the Rio Grande, Miguel told them: "This is America. You're safe now." They hugged Miguel and he turned back to the river.

Once on the Texas side, not far from the rural town of Los Indios, everyone in the group scattered through the brush, leaving the family to stumble on in the dark.

Eventually, George found a convenience store and hailed a taxi, water still dripping from his clothes. He asked the cabdriver to take the family to the nearest Border Patrol station.

When they arrived at one in Brownsville, George told the clerk on duty what most Chaldean Christians are taught to say in such situations:

"I am an Iraqi Christian. I want asylum."

Unlike other Iraqi special interest immigrants, the family members were released relatively quickly after some cursory interviews and a terror watch list check.

After all, how many real terrorists bring their toddlers along?

They're now with George's brother in Muskegon, Mich., living in a small two-bedroom apartment.

They await a verdict on their asylum claim in Brownville.

In Michigan, George said he is looking forward to "a normal life in America" where he can send his two boys to good schools and no one will politicize their names.

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To show his appreciation to his new country, he pledged one of his two boys to serve in the U.S. military — when they grow up.

"They have to serve their country," George Sr. said. "This country helped us, and we have to help America."



Bensman with Express-News photographer Jerry Lara on the Rio Suchiate border between Mexico and Guatemala.

Sen. John Cornyn Discusses Breaching America series During Floor Speech

Transcript of Sen. John Cornyn's floor speech, July 2007, in support of a \$3 billion emergency border security spending bill following the failure of immigration reform legislation.

(NSP} (MR. CORNYN)

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MR. CORNYN: MR. PRESIDENT, I RISE TO JOIN MY COLLEAGUES IN SUPPORT OF THE GRAHAM AMENDMENT OF WHICH I AM PLEASED TO BE A CO COSPONSOR AND TO PROVIDE MY COLLEAGUES SOME INFORMATION THAT I FOUND PARTICULARLY REVEALING IN THE FORM OF A FOUR-PART SERIES IN MY HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER, THE SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS,

THAT WAS WRITTEN IN MAY OF THIS YEAR. THE AUTHOR OF THE SERIES, A REPORTER BY THE NAME OF TODD BENSMAN, CHRONICLES THE MOVEMENT OF AN INDIVIDUAL, AN IRAQI, FROM DAMASCUS, SYRIA, TO DETROIT, MICHIGAN, AND I THINK IT'S PARTICULARLY INSTRUCTIVE AS WE'RE CONTEMPLATING THIS AMENDMENT

AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FUNDING BORDER SECURITY MEASURES THAT THIS TYPE OF INFORMATION BE BROUGHT TO THE ATTENTION OF THE SENATE. I WOULD ASK, MR. PRESIDENT, AT THE END OF MY REMARKS THAT THE -- THAT THESE FOUR NEWSPAPER ARTICLES BE MADE PART OF THE RECORD FOLLOWING MY REMARKS.

(THE PRESIDING OFFICER): IS THERE OBJECTION?

WITHOUT OBJECTION, SO ORDERED.

[ram]{13:02:47 NSP} (MR. CORNYN)

MR. CORNYN: I THANK THE CHAIR. MR. BENSMAN IN THIS ARTICLE FOUND THESE FOLLOWING THINGS IN HIS INVESTIGATION. AND I'LL JUST SUMMARIZE. MORE THAN 5,700 ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS FROM 43 COUNTRIES WITH MAJORITY MUSLIM POPULATIONS INCLUDING STATE SPONSORS OF TERROR HAVE BEEN CAUGHT WHILE TRAVELING OVER THE CANADIAN AND MEXICAN BORDER ALONG WE WELL-ESTABLISHED, UNDERGROUND SMUGGLING ROUTES SINCE 9/11, A TRAFFIC THAT CONTINUES TODAY. MR. BENSMAN ESTIMATES BETWEEN 20 20,000 AND 60,000 OF THESE SO-CALLED SPECIAL INTEREST ALIENS, BY VIRTUE OF THEIR

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COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, BEING COUNTRIES WHERE TERRORISM IS, UNFORTUNATELY, ALIVE AND WELL OR BECAUSE THEY ARE STATE SPONSORS OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM -- BETWEEN 20,000 AND 60,000 OF THESE INDIVIDUALS HAVE GOTTEN THROUGH WITHOUT BEING CAUGHT AT OUR BORDERS SINCE 9/11.

THESE MIGRANTS, ALTHOUGH RELATIVELY SMALL IN TOTAL NUMBERS, ARE HIGH RISK BECAUSE THEY HAIL, AS I SAID, FROM COUNTRIES WHERE AMERICAN TROOPS ARE ACTIVELY BATTLING ISLAMIC INSURGENCES. THEY HAVE BOMBED U.S. INTERESTS OR MURDERED AMERICANS. UNGUARDED U.S. BORDERS ARE MOST CERTAINLY IN THE TERRORISTS' PLAYBOOKS AS A MEANS OF ENTERING THE COUNTRY. SINCE THE LATE-1990'S, AT LEAST A DOZEN, MR. BENSMAN WRITES, AT LEAST A DOZEN CONFIRMED TERRORISTS HAVE SNEAKED OVER U.S. BORDERS, INCLUDING OPERATIVES FROM HEZBOLLAH, HAMAS, TAMIL TIGERS AND ONE AL QAEDA TERRORIST, ONCE NUMBER 27 ON THE F.B.I.'S MOST WANTED TERRORIST LIST.

THE F.B.I. IS SUPPOSED TO INTERROGATE AND CONDUCT A THREAT ASSESSMENT ON EVERY SPECIAL INTEREST ALIEN. BUT THE PROCESS, MR. BENSMAN WRITES, IS SERIOUSLY FLAWED AND OPEN TO ERROR. OFTEN THE F.B.I. SIGNS OFF ON CAPTURED SPECIAL INTEREST ALIENS ALLOWING THEM ACCESS TO THE POLITICAL ASYLUM PROCESS WITHOUT CONCLUSIVELY KNOWING BHEJ THEY ARE OR ARE NOT ASSOCIATED WITH TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS. FURTHERMORE, BORDER PATROL AG AGENTS ARE SIMPLY USING EX EXPEDITED REMOVAL PROCESSES TO KICK SPECIAL INTEREST ALIENS BACK OVER INTO THE BORDER INTO NEW MEXICO WHERE THEY WILL CERTAINLY TRY TO CROSS AGAIN WITH NO INVESTIGATION.

AND NO F.B.I. REFERRAL WHATSOEVER. MR. PRESIDENT, THIS SERIES OF ARTICLES THAT MR. BENSMAN HAS WRITTEN PUBLISHED IN "THE SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS NEWS" I THINK WILL BE AN EYE OPENER FOR THE PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY.

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FRANKLY, THOSE OF US WHO ARE MEMBERS OF THE SENATE HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF HAVING CLASSIFIED BRIEFINGS FROM TIME TO TIME, AND OF COURSE WE CANNOT TALK ABOUT THAT INTELLIGENCE INFORMATION THAT WE ARE BRIEFED ON BEHIND CLOSED DOORS. BUT HERE IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN ARE THE RESULTS OF MR. BENSMAN'S INVESTIGATION IN CHILLING DETAIL, AS I SAID, CHRONICLING THE MOVEMENT OF AN INDIVIDUAL FROM DAMASCUS, SYRIA, TO DE DETROIT, MICHIGAN, VIA MOSCOW, VIA HAVANA, INTO GUATEMALA, AND THEN UP THROUGH OUR MEXICO SOUTHERN BORDER AND UP INTO THE UNITED STATES.

MR. PRESIDENT, I'M -- AS I'VE IN THE WITH BORDER PATROL AGENTS AND AS PERHAPS THE CURRENT OCCUPANT OF THE CHAIR AND OTHERS HAVE HAD THE SAME EXPERIENCE I HAVE, I ASKED THEM OUT OF THE 1. 1.1 MILLION OR 1.3 MILLION PAM THAT WE ACTUALLY DETAIN COMING ACROSS OUR SOUTHERN BORDER, FOR EVERY PERSON WE DETAIN, HOW MANY PEOPLE DO YOU THINK GET ACROSS?

AND I'VE HEARD ESTIMATES RANGING FROM THEY DETAIN MAYBE ONE OUT OF EVERY THREE TO ONE OUT OF EVERY FOUR. THE TRUTH IS, NOBODY KNOWS FOR SURE WHO GETS AWAY AND WE DO KNOW THAT PEOPLE WHO ARE DETAINED AND RETURNED ACROSS THE BORDER LIKELY TRY AGAIN. SO IT'S HARD TO GET GOOD INFORMATION.

BUT THIS IS NOT A MATTER OF SO SOLELY ECONOMIC MIGRANTS COMING FROM MEXICO OR CENTRAL OR SOUTH AMERICA INTO THE UNITED STATES. THE TRUTH IS THAT CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO ARE A LAND BRIDGE INTO THE UNITED STATES FOR ANYBODY ANYWHERE AROUND THE WORLD THAT WANTS TO COME HERE.

ANYBODY WHO'S GOT THE MONEY TO PAY THE HUMAN SMUGGLERS TO GET THEM HERE. OBVIOUSLY, THESE COULD BE INDIVIDUAL WHOSE WANT TO WORK AND WHO WANT NOTHING BUT A BETTER LIFE WHAT WE HAVE ALL AND WANT IN AMERICA. BUT IT CAN ALSO BE PEOPLE, VERY DANGER US

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WILL PEOPLE, WHO WANT TO DO US HARM. AND THAT'S THE REASON THIS FUNDING, THIS EMERGENCY FUNDING FOR BORDER SECURITY, IS SO IMPORTANT. IT'S ALSO IMPORTANT THAT WE BEGIN TO REGAIN THE LOST PUBLIC CONFIDENCE THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CAN ACTUALLY DELIVER ON ITS PROMISES.

WE'VE BEEN TELLING PEOPLE FOR A LONG TIME NOW HOW IMPORTANT IT IS IN A POST-9/11 WORLD TO KNOW WHO'S COMING INTO OUR COUNTRY AND WHY PEOPLE ARE COMING HERE, RECOGNIZING THAT IF THERE'S A WAY TO SEPARATE THE ECONOMIC MIGRANTS AND TO CREATE AN IMMIGRATION SYSTEM THAT WOULD GIVE PEOPLE AN OPPORTUNITY THROUGH LEGAL IMMIGRATION TO COME TO THE UNITED STATES ON A CONTROLLED BASIS, IT WILL THEN ALLOW LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES AN EFFORT TO TARGET THOSE WHO ARE COMMON CRIMINALS, DRUG DEALERS, OR INDEED TERRORISTS OR SPECIAL INTEREST ALIENS FROM STATE SPONSORS OF TERRORISM.

WE'VE GOT TO DO, AS THIS AMENDMENT DOES, MAKE SURE WE FUND WAYS FOR -- TO POLICE VISA OVERSTAYERS. WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT WE CONTINUE TO WORK ON THE DOCUMENT FRAUD AND IDENTITY THEFT THAT MAKE IT HARD FOR EVEN GOOD-FAITH EMPLOYERS TO DETERMINE THE LEGAL ELIGIBILITY OF PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEES TO WORK AT JOBS ACROSS AMERICA. SO THIS AMENDMENT, I THINK, IS THE FIRST BIG STEP TOWARD RE REGAINING THE PUBLIC'S CONFIDENCE AGAIN AND DEMONSTRATING THAT WE ARE ACTUALLY SERIOUS ABOUT DELIVERING ON OUR PROMISES, NOT ENGAGED ONCE AGAIN IN OVERPROMISING BUT UNDERDELIVERING, AS WE HAVE IN THE PAST. MR. PRESIDENT, I WILL BE OFFERING AT A LATER TIME SOME AMENDMENTS MYSELF, COMING AS I DO FROM A BORDER STATE WITH 1,600 MILES OF COMMON BORDER WITH MEXICO.

BY SAYING THAT THE THREAT POSED BY COMMON CRIMINALS AS A RESULT OF OUR BROKEN BORDER, TO DRUG DEALERS IS VERY REAL AND AS MR. BENSMAN'S ARTICLE POINTS OUT, THE

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ACCESS THROUGH OUR BROKEN BORDERS TO VIRTUALLY ANYBODY IN THE WORLD, THAT'S GOT ENOUGH MONEY TO PAY THE SMUGGLERS TO GET THEM IN, THAT IT'S AN OPEN DOOR TO PEOPLE WHO WE PREFER NOT COME HERE./ NAMELY PEOPLE THAT COME FROM COUNTRIES THAT ARE STATE SPONSORS OF INTERNATIONAL TAKE RISES AND PERHAPS PEOPLE WITH THE GOALS OF HARMING INNOCENT AMERICANS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE SAME BROKEN BORDERS THAT YIELD ACCESS TO ECONOMIC MIGRANTS.