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How could a refugee from Iraq with ties to ISIS slip through to U.S.?

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When he applied for refugee status in the United States, Omar Abdulsattar Ameen told officials he was fleeing persecution in his native Iraq. He was cleared by federal officials to immigrate in 2014 and eventually settled in Sacramento, where he worked as an auto mechanic to make ends meet. But authorities say Ameen's dramatic arrest Wednesday revealed an uglier truth: He was the persecutor.

The 45-year-old was arrested at an apartment complex on suspicion of killing a police officer in Iraq in 2014 and is accused of having deep ties to the Islamic State and al Qaeda terrorist groups, according to the Department of Justice. His arrest has stirred up disturbing questions about the country's refugee vetting process, which resettlement agencies and federal officials have insisted is air tight.

But those same agencies have declined to explain how exactly Ameen slipped through the system, and — in the minds of many — their silence has reinforced President Donald Trump's harsh criticisms of the country's refugee program — which sparked a historic debate that landed in the Supreme Court. But experts say that while the case is one of the most alarming national security breaches involving refugees, it's extremely rare.

"This is one of the more major screening failures that we've seen," said David Sterman, a policy analyst for the nonpartisan think tank New America's international security program. "He should've been picked up in the screening process."

Ameen arrived in Turkey in 2012, where he began the process of applying for refugee status, federal court documents show. He lied repeatedly about the circumstances that led to his departure from Iraq and hid his ties to al Qaeda and ISIS, according to the Justice Department. Ameen feared persecution in Iraq, he said, falsely claiming his brother was kidnapped from the family home and that his father — who actually died of a cerebral clot — was killed for his involvement in the Iraqi military.

But could it have been as easy as that?

All of the federal agencies involved in the refugee vetting process — which fall largely within the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security — deferred to the Department of Justice or declined to comment. The DOJ didn't respond to requests for comment, and it's unclear what part of the vetting process failed to detect Ameen's terrorist ties.

Interviews and database searches conducted during the government's multi-step vetting process — which can take up to two years to complete — should've pulled up terrorist ties, experts say.

In 2014 Ameen was cleared in Turkey to travel to the U.S. but first went back to his village in Iraq and killed a police officer during an ambush in the man's home, investigators now say. Witnesses told the FBI they saw Ameen pass by as part of an armed convey during the time of the murder, dressed in recognizable ISIS clothing, according to the criminal indictment.

He arrived in the U.S. in November of 2014 as a refugee and later attempted to become a legal resident, though his application eventually stalled as the FBI received word about his involvement in the killing and then launched its criminal investigation. That probe revealed that Ameen, who faces extradition to Iraq to face trial, was a known terrorist in his native Rawah, where his family allegedly helped establish the installation of al-Qaeda, according to the Department of Justice.

Though the circumstances of his case are alarming, the vast majority of terrorism-related cases since 9/11 have been homegrown, according to Sterman.

"It's necessary to remember that hundreds of thousands of people (who never committed a crime) have come in through these programs or similar ones," he said.

Ameen entered the country during the Obama administration and before President Trump last year signed an executive order that "identified and implemented additional security screening procedures ... with additional vetting for certain nationals of certain high-risk countries," a spokeswoman said in a statement.

"Refugee applicants are among the most carefully vetted of all travelers to the United States," she continued.

Iraq is among 11 "high-security" nations that require extra vetting by federal immigration officials. Along with Chad and Sudan, it was removed from Trump's latest policy banning travel from several Muslim-majority countries.

The Supreme Court upheld Trump's travel ban in June, which restricts travel from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, North Korea and Venezuela.

But critics insist there are holes in the process.

Ameen's case "just points out how extraordinarily difficult it is to do the kind of vetting necessary, especially for people coming from countries in disarray and with no functioning government," said Ira Mehlman, spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which favors strict immigration enforcement.

Under Trump, the number of refugees settling in the U.S. has dropped to historic lows — about 383 refugees were resettled in California between October 2017 and January, compared with 3,200 during the same period in the previous year, according to the most recent data from the state's Department of Social Services.

The U.S. resettled only 33,000 refugees last year, the country's lowest total since the years following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and a drastic drop from 2016, when it resettled about 97,000, according to an analysis by the Pew Research Center.

The United Nations starts the refugee resettlement process by referring applications to Resettlement Support Centers, which are part of the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. The support centers — of which there are nine around the world — prepare eligible refugee applications for consideration.

They collect biographic and other information from applicants to prepare for an in-person interview and security screening. Screening is done by the Department of State and Department of Homeland Security and includes multiple government security agencies such as the National Counterterrorism Center, FBI and Department of Defense.

From there, officers from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or USCIS, review the information collected by Resettlement Support Centers and conduct an in-person interview with each refugee applicant before deciding whether to approve them for resettlement.

All refugees approved for clearance by USCIS undergo a health screening. The support center then requests a "sponsorship assurance" from a U.S.-based resettlement agency that is experienced in providing assistance to newly arrived refugees.

Breaches like Ameen's are extremely rare, according to Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C.

"The refugee vetting system is not perfect, no security system is," Nowrasteh said in an email. "It's worth pointing out that since 1975, the U.S. has admitted more than 3 million refugees and they have only killed 3 people in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil since then."

But all it takes is one person to do "extraordinary damages," Mehlman said.

"We discovered that on 9/11," he said. "There may be others and we just don't know about them yet."