Why Is It So Difficult for Syrian Refugees to Get Into the U.S.?

Of the 4.5 million people who have fled the Syrian war, only 2,647 have been taken in by the United States.

By ELIZA GRISWOLD  JAN. 20, 2016

‘We aren’t the kind of family that sends our daughters to work,” Mahmoud al-Haj Ali told me one evening this fall. He’d just returned to the family’s dingy second-floor apartment in Aurora, Ill., from the warehouse where he and his 19-year-old daughter, Sham, sorted boxes. At work, Mahmoud tried to keep her in sight. “I saw how tired she was,” he continued. “It’s more than she can take.” Sham’s English classes provided only a shaky foundation in the language, and she struggled to negotiate basic conversations. Mahmoud also spoke little English — we were sitting with an interpreter — but he could manage the essential. Mahmoud work tomorrow, Mahmoud no work tomorrow, he said in self-parody. But he, too, was tired. He rolled up his sweatpants to reveal a swollen leg. In Syria, Mahmoud, 57, who once owned a flourishing locksmith business in the Emirates, would have already retired.

“We didn’t expect it to be so expensive,” he said of life in Aurora, an industrial river town 41 miles from Chicago, where the al-Haj Alis arrived in March. “What can we do?” The federal government and the nine nongovernmental agencies that help to relocate refugees in the United States select cities like Aurora because housing and jobs are readily available and the cost of living is relatively low. The al-Haj Alis also receive help with the rent from a local organization, the Syrian Community Network. Still, it isn’t enough. Mahmoud and his wife, Azizeh, had been counting on their son Waseem, who is 27 and trained as a psychologist, to help support the
family. His wife, Noorhan, and their two young sons were supposed to be in Aurora, too. But, at the last minute, something went wrong with their application to resettle in America. Now they were stuck in Jordan.

Mahmoud flipped through the spiral notebook in which he calculates monthly expenses: Internet, $52; garbage collection, $40; rent, $1,125; repayments on the United States government loan for the plane tickets from Amman to America, $172. Mahmoud went into his and Azizeh’s bedroom and found the bill for the family’s airfare: $6,130. “Since I used to own a business, I like to record everything,” he said.

Most nights, Mahmoud works at the warehouse until 11 before returning home with Sham. The al-Haj Alis’ sons Ahmad and Mohamed arrive home around then, too, from six-hour after-school shifts at a local supermarket. Although they’re twins, the boys, 17, dress and act as if they weren’t. Mohamed, curls stiffened with gel, favors a tie. Ahmad, an artist, is often bed-headed and prefers sweatsuits. Every day he tucks a Syrian flag into his waistband before heading to West Aurora High School, despite the occasional trouble the flag invites. At the supermarket, he mans the cash register; he likes to interact with customers, in part to show off the Syrian identity to which he clings. Mohamed, who is shyer and speaks far less about Syria, prefers to herd the stray carts in the parking lot.

Now, collapsed on the couch, the twins scrolled through homemade videos of Ahmad strolling around their new neighborhood in sunglasses and found footage showing the rubble of their hometown, 6,000 miles away. The al-Haj Ali family comes from Khirbet Ghazaleh, a town of 16,000. It is 15 miles from Daraa, where the revolution against Assad began, in 2011, after his security forces arrested and tortured a group of students for writing antigovernment slogans.

The al-Haj Ali twins were only 13 at the time. They had nothing to do with the protests. Nor did anyone else in the immediate family. Although they listened to news reports of the Assad government’s ferocious attacks on civilians, they saw little indication, at first, of the violence around them. There was the odd black helicopter in the sky. And once, when Waseem was taking Azizeh to driving school, they watched a group of protesters carrying olive branches stream out of Daraa. Only later did they realize these were people fleeing a massacre by Assad’s forces.
Then the airstrikes began. Government security forces raided the family’s home dozens of times. Their cousins, who lived next door, were imprisoned and tortured. Still, the al-Haj Alis hung on; they adapted to living in a war zone, spending evenings in the dark. Then, one morning in August 2012, they learned from a television news report that Azizeh’s brother, a high-ranking official in Assad’s military, had defected overnight to Jordan. His family would most likely be punished, with death, in his stead. He hadn’t warned them. He couldn’t: His phone was bugged, and sending a message would only have further endangered them. The al-Haj Alis never slept at home again. Within days, they left Syria for Jordan by car. Azizeh feared they’d be unable to make it across the border and was even more terrified that the names of her family members would be on a blacklist and that they would be arrested. Mahmoud handed their keys to a neighbor whose house had been flattened by airstrikes. “If we’re not back by sunset,” he told her, “you can have our house.”

The war scattered the al-Haj Alis across the globe. Mahmoud, his wife, the twins and Sham made it to Aurora after a 30-month stay in Amman, Jordan. Two elder daughters, Rasha and Ruba, are in the Netherlands. Rasha arrived with her husband two years ago, and this fall Ruba followed. She and her three boys fled first to Morocco, then to Spain by boat, making their way on foot to an asylum center in the Netherlands, sharing a single room with two other families. (Ruba would like to bring her sons to America, but now that they are in a safe country, there is little chance of resettlement in the United States.) A third daughter, Rana, recently gave
birth in Egypt; her 1-month-old is officially stateless. Another, Fatimah, is in Jordan. Yet the child of greatest concern to the family is their adult son, Waseem.

The al-Haj Alis worry he may never make it to Aurora. The family had been in Illinois for eight months when ISIS attacked in Paris, killing 130 people. Early reports claimed that one of the terrorists made his way to Europe by posing as a Syrian refugee. European countries imposed new border restrictions, and 31 American governors, including the governor of Illinois, Bruce Rauner, called for a moratorium on Syrian refugees. In December, when a militant couple shot up a center for the disabled in San Bernardino, Calif., killing 14 and earning accolades from ISIS, the rhetoric grew more vociferous. A store clerk was shot in Michigan, a Somali restaurant was set ablaze in North Dakota and anti-Muslim hate crimes spiked around the United States.

Azizeh wondered if she had brought her sons from Syria only to put them at risk in America, and if Waseem would ever join them now.

The al-Haj Alis are five of the 2,647 Syrian refugees who have been resettled in the United States, roughly 0.06 percent of the more than 4.5 million driven from the country since the uprising began in 2011. The scale of the crisis is such that of the 20 million refugees flooding the world today, one in four is Syrian. Although President Obama has committed to bringing at least 10,000 more Syrians to the United States by this October, that number is still a trickle compared with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s effort to resettle 25,000 in Canada; Chancellor Angela Merkel’s acceptance of nearly 93,000 in Germany last fall; and President François Hollande’s promise to bring 30,000 more Syrian refugees to France over the next two years. Why has the United States taken so few?

“It’s extremely difficult to get into the United States as a refugee — the odds of winning the Powerball are probably better,” says David Miliband, head of the International Rescue Committee, which helps place refugees from 40 countries in American cities. And Syrians are subject to an extra degree of vetting. Although all refugees are screened by the National Counterterrorism Center, the F.B.I., the Defense Department, the State Department and United States Customs and Border Protection, among other intelligence agencies, Syrians must complete what is known
as the Enhanced Syrian Review. This is an added screening by caseworkers at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in Washington, which assesses each Syrian case and selects some for processing through the Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate office. This extra step was put in place because of the difficulty of assessing the allegiances of the various rebel groups in Syria’s continuing war — what Barbara Strack, chief of the Refugee Affairs Division at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, describes as “the myriad actors and dynamic nature of the conflict.”

Until recently, Syria’s refugees were not a pressing domestic political concern. To many Americans, the war in Syria seemed remote, a problem for Syria’s neighbors. Of greater import were the 11 million immigrants who had entered the United States illegally. Then last summer, images of the Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi lying dead on the Turkish shore mobilized American sympathies in favor of refugees, and the Obama administration found itself faulted for admitting so few. Quietly, President Obama directed Denis McDonough, the White House chief of staff, to work with the State Department to find out why vetting for Syrian refugees required 18 to 24 months.

McDonough, known for urging Obama to be cautious in engaging militarily in Syria, took the issue of refugees personally. As a Catholic growing up in Stillwater, Minn., the 10th of 11 children, he worked with his church to help arriving Vietnamese refugees. Now, carrying a stack of charts and graphs, he met with refugee advocates and members of Congress to learn about the pitfalls and procedural bottlenecks within the resettlement program and to study potential means of bringing Syrians more quickly to the United States without compromising on security. In closed-door National Security Council meetings last year, he advised State Department officials to lift bureaucratic hurdles. As a result, the United States has opened up refugee-processing centers in new locations that refugees can actually reach, including one in Erbil, in northern Iraq. By streamlining the process of resettling Syrian refugees, the Obama administration also hoped to demonstrate support for its European allies. “It’s important to the president’s view to show our allies overseas, who are taking a considerable influx of Syrians, that we support them and we’re doing our part,” McDonough told me recently.
Paris threatened to change everything. The Syrian passport found near the body of one militant turned out to be a fake, but at least two of the attackers had exploited the refugee routes from the Middle East to Europe. Overnight, the global good will toward refugees that had been building all but vanished. Suddenly, the images of hundreds of thousands of refugees heading north inspired not empathy but alarm. According to the Soufan Group, a New York-based company that provides security-intelligence services, between 27,000 and 31,000 foreign fighters have gone to Iraq or Syria since the start of Syria’s civil war, the vast majority to fight alongside ISIS. At least 10 percent have headed back home. What once seemed like a trickle of vulnerable civilians now looked, to some, like a potentially dangerous flood.

Republican presidential candidates seized on the Syrian refugee issue as proof that Obama wasn’t keeping Americans safe. Dr. Ben Carson conflated Syrian refugees with “rabid dogs.” Jeb Bush called for deprioritizing Muslim refugees from the Middle East in favor of Christians. Senator Ted Cruz echoed this sentiment, proclaiming that Muslims should be sent to “Muslim-majority” countries while “Christians who are being targeted for genocide, for persecution, Christians who are being beheaded or crucified, we should be providing safe haven to them.” Donald Trump upped the ante by calling for a ban on all Muslims entering the United States.

In November, Republicans and some Democrats rallied behind House Bill 4038, the American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act, introduced by Representative Michael T. McCaul of Texas to slow the arrival of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in the United States. Days before the House vote, McDonough and Jeh Johnson, secretary of homeland security, briefed members of Congress on the Syrian-refugee-resettlement program and its screening process, in an attempt to reassure them that such a measure was unnecessary. The House nonetheless voted in favor of the bill, and as 2015 drew to a close, the Syrian refugee issue was at risk of becoming part of the year-end omnibus bill amid discussions of a government shutdown.

In the face of mounting political opposition, the president, in a choreographed Trudeau-esque gesture at the National Archives in Washington, welcomed 31 people from 25 countries at their citizenship ceremony. In private, McDonough rang up supporters and opponents alike. “Every phone call I’ve had with my friends on
Capitol Hill, Republican and Democrat, and with governors around the country, I’ve underscored that we recognize the fear,” McDonough told me. He spoke of the need to “send a message” to “the Assad regime and to ISIL that the United States will continue to play the role that it has, that the world has become accustomed to it playing — mainly the role of alleviating suffering at the source and of being a refuge for the most vulnerable people.”

The Syrian crisis is often described as a crisis of migration, but that’s not how it began. “This exodus didn’t come out of nowhere,” says Dr. Zaher Sahloul, senior adviser for the Syrian American Medical Society. The war in Syria has left some 250,000 people dead and displaced millions. And Syrian-American activists often refer to it as Obama’s Rwanda. “From Day 1 of the Syrian catastrophe,” says Bassam Barabandi, co-founder of the organization People Demand Change, “the U.S. started signing checks to the U.N., but they missed the point.” The point, he said, is ending the war, not creating a welfare state made up of refugees.

“It’s not a zero-sum choice,” Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken said. Blinken, who served as Obama’s national security adviser before returning to the State Department, where he began his career, has been asked by the White House to handle the thorny refugee issue. “We’re working 36 hours a day to solve the war in Syria,” he said, “but meanwhile, what do you do about the huge immediate challenge of more than four million people displaced from their country?”

For millions of Syrians, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan have become vast waiting rooms. “The two biggest drivers of onward migration are lack of access to education and lack of access to work,” Blinken told me recently, at the United States Embassy in Amman. The United States frequently trumpets the fact that of the countries donating to the United Nations in support of Syrian refugees, it gives the most aid, much of it going to front-line countries. But this is in part a self-serving strategy. The United States supports Syria’s neighbors so that they can withstand the pressures of millions of additional people. Refugees place a large burden on natural resources and social services. As a result, relations between Syrians and their hosts are souring. (Jordanians, groaning under the burden of 633,000 refugees, joke darkly that they live “between Iraq and a hard place.”) Part of American strategy in the region has been to ease tensions between Syrians and their hosts. The United States
provides services (schools and hospitals) for the refugees as well as for the citizens of host countries. They also allocate money for development to keep the host country happy. In Jordan, Blinken had just attended a falafel lunch with Jordanian venture capitalists who started a fund, with United States government support, to incubate technology start-ups.

Resettlement in the United States, however, remains a political challenge. “This is where ISIL neatly joins the problem,” Blinken said. “Very few of the refugees we admit are young males without families — we focus on women, children, the sick and those vulnerable to violence. But you now have this new concern that these refugee populations will somehow be infiltrated by terrorists.” In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, European countries hardened their stance on refugees, making illegal migration more difficult by closing borders. (For the first time in 50 years, for instance, those crossing between Denmark and Sweden have to show photo ID.) Turkey is under pressure to do the same. Recently, after receiving promises of $3.25 billion in aid from the E.U., Turkey reportedly arrested 1,300 asylum seekers trying to cross the sea to Greece.

The refugees already in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan are more likely to be stuck there, which means that a humanitarian crisis is becoming an economic-development problem. Syrians, many of whom lived sophisticated lives, are often unable to access even the most basic services. “These are people who had microwaves and cars, and now they’re in tin boxes in the desert,” says Jonathan Campbell of the World Food Program. The key factor in their migration is hopelessness. This past fall, the W.F.P. sent text messages to 230,000 Syrians living in Jordan to tell them that their food benefits were going to be substantially reduced because of lack of funding and donor fatigue. (They were later restored.) Although the United States made a large pledge, other countries, facing financial crises at home, did not. As a result, 64 percent of the refugees told the W.F.P. they were going to be forced to leave the country. One family out of every four took a child out of school to work. “It’s not a pull factor that makes them move, it’s a push factor,” says Myriam Baele, head of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees’ refugee-resettlement unit in Jordan. “If there isn’t a means to survive here, they will go,” she went on. “Either to Europe or back to Syria, where they will die.”
**Waseem al-Haj Ali** and his wife, Noorhan, keep two blue suitcases packed in the apartment they once shared with their family in Amman. “It’s a nightmare,” Waseem said on a recent evening. “There’s no future here in Jordan. I can’t even get a driver’s license.” In exasperation, he raised his eyebrows, bushy like his father’s. The apartment’s peeling walls were covered in blue and purple flowers, drawn by his brother Ahmad before he left for America.

Early last spring in Amman, when the al-Haj Alis were all still together, Waseem, Noorhan and their sons, who are 4 and 2, cleared the Enhanced Syrian Review and completed four days of cultural-orientation classes — which include everything from pictures of what to pack (warm clothing and money) and what not to (weapons and illegal drugs) to the importance Americans place on such concepts as punctuality and privacy. These courses are offered only to those who are in the process of resettling in the United States. Noorhan, who had been studying in Syria to become a teacher and whose dark eyes glitter with an easy intelligence, paid special attention to the weather. “Arizona is like the gulf,” she recalled learning. “Hot, dry and full of snakes.”

Ten days before Waseem and his family were scheduled to leave, they had completed everything but their medical exams. Then they received a call from the Americans: They couldn’t go just yet. Something had come up in their security clearance, Waseem recalled being told. In retrospect, Waseem’s parents wonder if they should have waited for him. The plan had always been for Waseem to support the family: Azizeh had three ruptured disks and needed back surgery; Mahmoud had an old leg injury. But if the al-Haj Alis had delayed and lost their place in line, they might never have gotten to America. Waseem now feels guilty that he encouraged them to go ahead. He wasn’t sure his parents could make it without him. “I’m trying to be patient for my parents,” he said. “If it weren’t for them, I would’ve already left.”

“If we don’t get a call from the Americans before smuggling season begins in the spring, we’ll leave for Europe,” he went on. The last thing he and his wife wanted to do was take two toddlers over the sea. Like everyone else, they had seen the photos of Alan on the beach. Their children couldn’t swim, and neither could Noorhan. But what choice did they have?
“We think only about traveling,” he said. “All we want is to go the United States.” Day after day, he checked the news on Facebook and chatted with his mother in Aurora. “We hope to live in a simple house, with a car outside, and just to watch our kids grow up,” Noorhan said. “That’s it. We don’t want a palace or some luxury life.”

When the rest of his family left in March, Waseem thought he would have to wait for about a month at the most. One month was now eight. As it grew colder, he stopped walking along the highway looking for illegal construction jobs. The market for day laborers was drying up. He didn’t dare ask for work in the strip of neon-lit shawarma stands downtown, even though many were staffed by fellow refugees. If he was caught working, Waseem could be imprisoned, transferred to the refugee camps, where only the poorest of the poor live, or sent back to Syria. Still, he had to find a way to pay the $247 rent on the apartment he once shared with his parents. He and Noorhan relied increasingly on whatever Mahmoud could send back from America. Instead of helping to support his parents, he was taking from them. “My father used to be a wealthy man,” Waseem said, recalling Mahmoud’s locksmith business in Abu Dhabi. Once the war began, Mahmoud sold the business for $120,000. For nearly five years, that money supported more than a dozen family members in five different countries. Now the money was gone.

Among Syrian refugees, “on hold” is the most dreaded category. It is extremely difficult to get clear answers about why the hold has been applied or when it will be lifted. To try to learn more, Waseem designated The New York Times as a third party with the legal right to inquire about his case. In response to an email from The Times in November, the International Organization for Migration would say only that Waseem’s case “is currently on hold pending further review by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.”

Officials cannot comment on individual cases, but when briefed on the case as a hypothetical, immigration officers and resettlement experts offered several possible explanations: It could be as simple as an applicant’s security clearance having expired while a family member waited to be vetted. Or maybe Waseem’s name sounds like a name on a terrorist watch-list. Or maybe, at the very last minute, “recurrent vetting” raised a red flag. Recurrent vetting, which began in 2015, checks
names through a series of databases right up to when the flight lands in the United States. As a senior intelligence officer with the National Counterterrorism Center described it: “If you have an 800 credit score and you’re good for a new Visa card, and two weeks from now they find out that, hey, two years ago, you changed your name to cover up a prior bankruptcy, then they can take away that card.”

Or maybe it was Azizeh’s brother. As a former military member of the Assad regime, he might still count as a black mark. Even though he defected early on, he could, by some bureaucratic oversight, still be designated a security risk to the United States. When reached in Qatar this fall, via Skype, he expressed relief that all of his family had made it out of Syria alive. He, too, was searching for a new country. “I’m not looking for beauty or history,” he said. “I’m looking for a country with human rights and freedom.” Other family members described specific questions regarding Azizeh’s brother posed to them by American immigration officers in Jordan. For example, did they serve him coffee or tea when he was in their homes? This was most likely a question to determine whether the family had provided material support — which could include a cup of coffee, a glass of water, a ride — to someone designated to be an enemy of the United States.

As months passed with no answers, Waseem turned over the strange questions he was asked during his final interview. Could these hold the key to the predicament in which he now found himself? Did he intend to commit terrorism in the United States? No. Did he intend to visit a prostitute in the United States? No. Refugees often refer to questions like the last one as “the crazy questions,” a senior immigration official told me: queries that, by law, immigration officials must ask to determine grounds of inadmissibility, even though they’re anachronistic. Others include Are you a member of the Nazi Party? and Are you a habitual drunkard?

The system of vetting refugees was first overhauled after Sept. 11. Since then, America’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and conflicts in Africa and Asia have led to further refinements in how the United States evaluates refugees. Since 2007, for instance, the Defense Department has worked with the Homeland Security Department to share its intelligence on Iraqis, who represent one of the largest influxes of refugees to the United States in the last decade (more than 85,000 since 2008). Many won the right to apply for admission to the United States after risking
their lives to aid American soldiers. Yet, as these Iraqis began to arrive, opposition to resettling them was swift. It began, for the most part, with fringe groups. Ann Corcoran, a conservative from rural Maryland, started a blog called Refugee Resettlement Watch, in which she chronicles news related to Muslims and others arriving in the United States. She warns that Muslims are coming to build “cities within cities” and to establish Shariah law in America. Corcoran told me that in Iowa last spring, she handed her book, “Refugee Resettlement and Hijra to America,” directly to Donald Trump.

Resetting refugees isn’t a perfect process. “No immigration program is completely without risk,” a senior intelligence officer says. Yet over more than a decade, the United States agencies involved in the program have learned to communicate more effectively. “We got a lot smarter and developed additional relationships with the intelligence community beginning with the large-scale Iraqi processing in 2007,” Strack, of U.S.C.I.S., says. She adds, “We are the opposite of stove-piped — we’re incredibly networked.”

One common misconception about how a Syrian refugee comes to America is that she simply approaches the United States Embassy in Jordan or Turkey or wherever she first lands. This is not how resettlement works. To be legally designated a refugee, she must first apply to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. U.N.H.C.R. takes a photograph and scans her iris. Verification can take anywhere from a couple of months to a few years before she’s interviewed in person. Although these interviews aren’t considered security vetting, caseworkers are trained to eliminate those who may be lying, as well as those who have persecuted others or may be war criminals.

In addition to collecting biometric data like iris scans and photographs, U.N.H.C.R. case officers are trained in basic facial recognition and have 2-D screening capabilities to detect fake passports. The goal is to make sure people meet the criteria of the refugee convention, established after World War II. They’re also experts in country-of-origin information. “Listen, I know where your school is, I know the colors of its walls,” one U.N.H.C.R. officer says. “We detect lies based on what’s happened in the country of origin. It’s not just hour-by-hour events; it’s
ethnicity, region, family. We know the custom — we know what their dresses look like."

U.N.H.C.R. then advocates for the most vulnerable 10 percent; the other 90 percent will have to make a new life as best they can. Of the 20 million refugees worldwide, less than 1 percent will be officially resettled, and of those, the United States takes about half. Resettlement is only one of three options. The others are returning home (which, for most Syrians, is impossible) or remaining in the host country (which, given the pressures Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon are under, is becoming increasingly difficult). Those either barred or “deprioritized” include individuals with certain military ties, as well as families with missing members. This is to guard against the possibility that the missing member may be fighting alongside an anti-American group like ISIS and later try to rejoin his family.

Syrians, like other refugees, don’t choose the country they end up in. U.N.H.C.R. selects the best option based on various criteria specified by host countries, like those from the most vulnerable groups or victims of torture. But there are limits to the requests countries can make. “We’re not a labor department,” a senior U.N.H.C.R. official said. “If countries come to us asking for a particular religion, we don’t encourage that.”

All of this takes place before U.N.H.C.R. refers the case to any one country. Once U.N.H.C.R. provides a complete file to the United States, then the applicant’s entire family visits the State Department’s Resettlement Support Center for a prescreening interview. At this point, each individual is run through several databases, including ones at the Department of Homeland Security, the National Counterterrorism Center, the F.B.I. and the Department of Defense, and entered into the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System, which warehouses the data and facilitates interagency screening checks. A pilot program will soon include iris scans, which are currently used by U.N.H.C.R. only for identification, not security purposes.

This fall, in several closed-door classified briefings before Congress and in public hearings, Anne C. Richard, the assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, defended the rigorous vetting process. Of the more than
784,000 refugees who have been admitted to the United States in the last 14 years, five have been arrested on terrorism-related charges: One was an Uzbek man arrested in Idaho; the other four were refugees from Iraq. Such mistakes have provided fodder for those who worry that the country is exposing itself to needless risk. “ISIS has vowed to send its operatives into the West posing as refugees,” says McCaul, chairman of the Homeland Security Committee. “The threat is real.” Advocates say that the threat of a refugee being a terrorist is statistically negligible. “We don’t leave holes, and we don’t take chances,” Richard told me. “If there’s any doubt about someone, they don’t come.” Indeed, as León Rodríguez, director of U.S.C.I.S., recently testified in Congress, the United States has barred 30 individuals from entering “based on their showing up in the databases.” (When queried, a senior intelligence official would say only that there were individuals of “national security concern.”) Emily Gray, the executive director in Aurora of World Relief, a branch of the agency assigned by the United States government to help resettle the al-Haj Ali family, says, “You’d have to be a really stupid terrorist to come this way.”

After the U.S.C.I.S. officers in Washington conduct the enhanced review, the entire family is scheduled for another interview with a member of the Refugee Affairs Division, a team of 10 to 14 immigration officers from U.S.C.I.S. who spend six weeks on “circuit rides” — traveling up to four times a year to Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and other locations in the region, interviewing refugees being considered for resettlement in the United States.

“Just having an interview doesn’t sound so secure, but this is one heck of an interview,” Richard says. “First off, refugees are people fleeing tyrannical governments, so they may not trust people in positions of authority. They may be used to lying. They have to be prepared to have this interview, and if they’re caught lying, then they’re not going to make it, no matter how worthy.” At the end of this process, there are four possible outcomes: immediate acceptance, which is rare and can still involve waiting another 18 months, especially if there is a new marriage or birth; acceptance pending verification; denial; and the limbo into which Waseem al-Haj Ali and his family have now fallen, “on hold.”

From Jordan, one afternoon late this fall, Waseem called his mother in Chicago. “How are you?” he asked. He hadn’t anticipated her reply. She was fine, thank God,
she said, but there was something wrong at the twins’ school. The night before, she received a call from the school saying there would be police there the next day and it was fine if the boys stayed home. She wasn’t sure what that meant or if other Syrians had received the same call. Azizeh sent the boys anyway. They survived airstrikes and house-to-house raids by Assad’s security forces; they could face American high school. “Oh,” Waseem said, and hung up. He and Noorhan were taken aback. What if, after all they had endured, his parents or Sham or the twins were hurt in America? Waseem was the one who was supposed to protect them, and all he could do was sit on the couch in Amman and accept handouts from his father.

“The worst thing is this game of waiting,” Issam Smeir, a psychologist in Aurora with World Relief who has counseled the al-Haj Alis, says. “It kills your soul.”

The situation unfolding at West Aurora High wasn’t quite as Azizeh understood it. Ron Murphy, an assistant principal of operations at the high school, explained that yes, the Aurora police were called in as a precaution (Mohamed even snapped a selfie with an officer). But it had nothing to do with the boys. After a student tweeted his support for Trump and Trump’s stance on immigration, a Twitter war broke out. Even though there was no credible threat, the school took steps to reassure parents and defuse the situation. More than half of the school’s population is Hispanic.

The issue was immigration, not Islam, Murphy said. The school district models diversity remarkably; the twins were enrolled alongside Iraqis, Nepalis, Bangladeshis and immigrants from 57 countries in a curriculum for students learning English. Ahmad and Mohamed grumbled about it; these kids were uncool, and they only saw regular Americans during gym class.

Outside school, the opposition to Syrian refugees wore on: In nearby Indiana, a Syrian family had to be rerouted to Connecticut because of the governor’s opposition. In an attempt to block the arrival of another Syrian family, Texas sued the International Rescue Committee, the resettlement agency working with that family, as well as the federal government.

In Congress, as the year drew to a close, House Bill 4038, which would have barred Syrian refugees, at least for a time, never came to the floor of the Senate, nor
was it part of the omnibus — a pair of victories for McDonough and the White House. Instead, the mass shooting in San Bernardino refocused national security concerns on the visa-waiver program, which the administration had long seen as a problem.

In January 2016, even as rising tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, key players in the war in Syria, imperiled upcoming cease-fire negotiations at the U.N. The Senate stood poised to consider new legislation that would halt the arrival of Syrian refugees. “We cannot stand by while jihadists try to exploit humanitarian programs to reach our shores undetected,” Michael McCaul, who sponsored 4038, said, citing serious screening gaps. Senator Mark Kirk, a Republican from Illinois, who recently introduced a similar bill in the Senate, also supports such legislation. “Reputable media outlets are uncovering examples of how terrorists infiltrate the Iraq and Syria refugee programs in an effort to commit acts of violence against the American people and our allies,” Kirk said. “Common sense requires thoughtful measures to keep Americans safe.”

One winter afternoon, not long after the incident at the boys’ school, Azizeh nursed a cup of tea and talked bleakly of the family’s future. What if the governor had the power to keep Waseem out of Illinois? And if he couldn’t come, what would they do? Then there were the boys. “I’m worried someone will target them,” she said.

She also worried about herself and Sham. The long coats and hijabs they wore when they went out might attract the wrong kind of attention. Sham had come to America at the worst age possible. At 19, she wasn’t eligible to attend high school, and her English was too poor to pursue her dreams of becoming a lawyer. “That’s too expensive,” Sham said. “It would take too many years.”

To secure a future for her, her parents had accepted the marriage proposal of an Iraqi used-car salesman named Layth Alali, Azizeh told me. Fifteen years older than Sham, Alali came to the country on a much-coveted Special Immigrant Visa in 2010, as part of the group of Iraqis who had worked with the United States military. (In Baghdad, he was the head of a checkpoint set up by the Americans.) The whole thing
was rushed; he had asked just two weeks earlier, and the engagement ceremony was taking place immediately.

After picking Sham and Azizeh up in a BMW S.U.V., Alali drove them to a prom-dress shop in Aurora, and they had less than an hour to find a dress. Sham picked out a spangled strapless confection, but Azizeh worried it exposed too much flesh. “Problem, problem, problem,” she said, pointing to her daughter’s bare neck, arms and shoulders. In the end, she snapped a picture and sent it via WhatsApp to her daughter-in-law, Noorhan, who was, as usual, sitting idle in the apartment in Jordan. A few seconds later, Noorhan sent back a smiley-face emoji with hearts for eyes. The dress, however flawed, was a yes.

In a life marked by disappointment and compromise, Azizeh remarked, what did the dress really matter? As a married woman, Sham would be more secure, and so would her family. At least, Azizeh said, Sham would no longer have to work in the office-supply warehouse.

The family had other concerns. The boys needed hundreds of dollars of dental work that Medicaid didn’t cover. The al-Haj Alis were struggling to make the rent, and winter was coming, which meant a new bill for heating. Azizeh was trying to figure out what kind of program might help pay the gas bill. As the temperature dropped and it grew dark at 4:30 in the afternoon, Ahmad and Mohamed seemed to be slowing down; Azizeh had to prod them off the couch to get them to work at the market.

School was still a challenge. After nearly a year, neither spoke enough English to hold a conversation. Unlike their fellow refugees, who learned English by watching television and American movies, the boys preferred to spend their downtime watching Arabic-language news about Syria or YouTube videos from home.

For a long time, when they looked on Google Earth, they could see the debris of their family’s homes, which had been either burned or bombed. Now a mysterious white film obscured satellite images of the town. Was it a glitch, or a security measure on the part of the Assad regime to protect this strategic town, which now serves as a military base?
If Ahmad and Mohamed had stayed in Syria, they might be dead by now — either killed by the Assad government’s barrel bombs or fallen among the young men who have joined up with the Free Syrian Army. When one of their friends or cousins fighting with the F.S.A. is killed, the boys study the photographs of his death, often posted on Facebook in tribute, with a mixture of envy and guilt.

Issam Smeir, the World Relief counselor, met with the al-Haj Ali family to help them handle the psychological stress of Waseem’s unexpected absence. He was watching for signs of depression in the boys. “Depression in kids doesn’t look like sadness,” Smeir said. “It looks like restlessness and anger.” The biggest argument that Ahmad has had at school involved fellow Syrians who support the Assad regime. The two sides got into a fight over which flag was the true Syrian flag — the one belonging to the Assad regime, or the revolutionary flag that Ahmad tucks into his waistband.

“Students ask about what Syria was like before the war,” Ahmad said at home after work one evening. “We say it was beautiful. It’s kind of baffling how people feel that the value of those who die in France is higher than those who die in countries like Iraq or Syria.” That day at school, during their first-period English class, their reading-comprehension portion involved a lesson about Cappadocia, Turkey, where people built an underground city to protect themselves during invasions. Afterward, the teacher handed out work sheets quizzing the kids on what they had learned. Why did people in Turkey live underground? The answer was B: to hide from their enemies. But Ahmad circled C: to live.

Three days later, a text came in from Noorhan. More American politicians were opposing Syrians, and what she and Waseem had been reading on Facebook made them think the United States was shutting its borders tighter than ever. It looked as if they were going to have to take their boys over the sea. “After all the news,” she wrote, “we have no hope to travel to America.”

**Correction: February 14, 2016**

An article on Jan. 24 about Syrian refugees and United States policy referred incorrectly to the type of visa with which one of the San Bernardino attackers legally entered the United States. It was a K-1 fiancée visa; the attacker did not enter through the visa-waiver program.
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