To Whom it may concern:

My name is Chris George. For the past 17 years, I have been the executive director of IRIS, Connecticut’s largest refugee resettlement agency. In close collaboration with the US Department of State / Bureau of Population, Refugees, & Migration (PRM), IRIS has welcomed and resettled more than 10,000 refugees, including Mohammed Kamash.

On July 1, 2014, IRIS welcomed Mohamed Kamash to Connecticut. He came to the US via Turkey, where he had been taking refuge after fleeing his home country of Iraq. After a long and thorough screening process, Mr. Kamash was invited by the Department of State to resettle in the US.

The US government screening process for refugees is the most rigorous in the world. It is, by far, the hardest way for any non-US citizen to enter the US. The process usually begins with preliminary interviews by United Nations staff. These are followed by interviews by officials from the US Department of State. The purpose of the first round of interviews is to determine whether the individual meets the International Law definition of a refugee; someone who has fled his or her home country because of a well-founded fear of persecution, based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Mr. Kamash would have been asked to describe in detail the reason he fled Iraq. If he had been threatened, he would have been asked a number of times in various interviews to describe the threat in detail. His story would have been checked against other information. If a refugee passes the first round of interviews, they move to the security vetting phase.

The Department of Homeland Security handles the security vetting process. The interviews begin to feel more like interrogations. A wide range of information is asked for, including the names of all relatives and friends, their phone numbers and addresses, social media accounts and personal documents. FBI forensic experts evaluate documents, looking for forgeries. Data is shared with the CIA, FBI, all US intelligence agencies, foreign intelligence agencies, and, at times, the intelligence services of the host country, in this case Turkey. Phone numbers and other data are analyzed and compared to terrorist watch lists, international criminal databases, and intelligence gathered in the course of other interviews. Finger prints are collected.

Refugees typically undergo several long interviews, many months apart. The interviews are detailed, deeply personal and often re-traumatize refugees. In many cases, it takes two years or more to get through the security vetting process. The Department of Homeland Security does not take chances. If a story doesn’t make sense or if information is false, the individual is off the list. If a phone number matches a phone number of a known terrorist, the individual is off the list, or delayed until the issue is investigated.
In Turkey, Mohamed Kamash was an adult when he was considered for resettlement in the US, so he was treated as a separate case; separate from his family. This is not uncommon in refugee processing.

Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Chris George
Executive Director