

## Refugee Tried to Assist Islamic State, U.S. Says

By Manny Fernandez

Jan. 8, 2016

HOUSTON — An Iraqi-born refugee charged with attempting to aid Islamic militants made his first court appearance on Friday, telling a judge that he needed a court-appointed lawyer because he could not afford one as federal prosecutors pushed to keep him detained without bond.

The refugee, Omar Faraj Saeed Al Hardan, 24, a Palestinian who has been living in a Houston apartment with his wife and child, was charged with attempting to provide material support and resources to the Islamic State, designated by the State Department as a foreign terrorist organization.

He was also accused of procuring citizenship or naturalization unlawfully and making false statements during an interview with a federal agent.

The scope of assistance Mr. Al Hardan is accused of supplying to the Islamic State was unclear, and federal prosecutors declined to say whether he was planning any acts of terrorism or whether his efforts were sophisticated or haphazard. Mr. Al Hardan had received training on using machine guns and tried to provide training and expert advice to the Islamic State, prosecutors said, but they released few other details about suspected terrorism-related activities.

“He was providing himself as part of that support,” said Kenneth Magidson, the United States attorney for the Southern District of Texas in Houston. “That means that he was prepared to take whatever action on his own behalf to assist the organization. I’m not going to go into the facts of the case or what his actions were.”

Through an interpreter, Mr. Al Hardan told the judge that he had an 11th-grade education in Jordan and asked her to explain what an indictment was. Magistrate Judge Mary Milloy reviewed with him the penalties for each charge — attempting to provide material support to terrorists, for example, carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in federal prison.

Mr. Al Hardan will remain in custody until his next court appearance, a hearing scheduled for Wednesday to determine whether he will be detained without bond before trial.

Federal prosecutors declined to comment about other possible suspects or whether Mr. Al Hardan had any connection to an Iraqi refugee arrested in California this week on terrorism-related charges.

Mr. Al Hardan entered the United States as a refugee in November 2009 and was granted legal permanent residence status in August 2011, according to federal court documents. He appeared to have started assisting the Islamic State in May 2014 while he was living in Houston. That August, he applied to become a naturalized citizen and stated on the application that he was not affiliated with a terrorist organization, the authorities said. That response led to the charge against him of procuring naturalization unlawfully.

Republican leaders in Texas seized on the arrest of Mr. Al Hardan, pointing to it as a justification for their efforts to prohibit Syrian refugees from resettling in the state. On Thursday, Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick made separate statements about the arrest before federal prosecutors in Houston had issued a formal news release.

On Friday, the governor’s office responded to news media reports that their statements had made public information that was under court seal at the time. John Wittman, a spokesman for Mr. Abbott, said the governor’s office had been briefed on the case by the Texas Department of Public Safety, but was not informed that any information was under seal.

Mr. Magidson declined to comment about the timing of the governor’s remarks.

“I’m not going to go into whatever he said, when he said it or how he said it,” Mr. Magidson said.