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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday, October 29, 2014

Citizen Of Morocco Sentenced To 2 Years In Prison For Fabricating Refugee Application To Remain In U.S.

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Deirdre M. Daly, United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, and Patricia M. Ferrick, Special Agent in Charge of the New Haven Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, announced that EL MEHDI SEMLALI FATHI, 27, a citizen of Morocco last residing in Bridgeport, was sentenced today by Chief U.S. District Judge Janet C. Hall in new Haven to 24 months of imprisonment for fabricating a refugee application to remain in the U.S.

According to court documents and statements made in court, in January 2008, FATHI was admitted to the United States after he obtained a student visa to study at Virginia International University. In February 2009, FATHI's student visa status was terminated by the university after he failed all of his classes during the Fall 2008 semester and did not register for classes for the Spring 2009 semester. After his student visa status was terminated, FATHI failed to leave the U.S.

In December 2010, FATHI was detained in immigration custody as a result of an arrest in Virginia. While he was detained, he met an individual who explained refugee relief to him. In an effort to obtain refugee relief and remain in the U.S., FATHI reviewed certain country reports relating to Morocco and then prepared and filed, under penalty of perjury, a false refugee application (I-589), which included events he learned about in the country reports. FATHI's false statements included a claim that he would be persecuted by the Kingdom of Morocco based on his membership in a particular social group and imputed political opinion, and that he was arrested twice in 2007 and persecuted by the Moroccan government.

In June 2011, an immigration judge in Virginia released FATHI on bond. FATHI then moved to Bridgeport and his immigration case was transferred to Connecticut. In September 2011, FATHI represented to an immigration judge in Hartford that all of the information on his I-589 application was accurate when he knew that all of the information in support of his refugee claim was materially false.

While his immigration proceedings were pending, FATHI traveled to California where he was arrested and subsequently placed in immigration custody. In January 2013, after his immigration proceedings were transferred to California, FATHI again falsely represented to an immigration judge in Adelanto, Calif., that his refugee application was true and accurate. In another hearing in August 2013, FATHI again committed

perjury while testifying in support of his refugee application by stating that he was arrested and savagely beaten several times by the Moroccan authorities when, in fact, he was never arrested or persecuted by the Moroccan authorities, and that he attended a university in Marrakech during which he participated in demonstrations that caused him to be arrested by the Moroccan authorities when, in fact, he never attended any university in Marrakech.

In February 2014, during an interview with a federal agent, FATHI falsely claimed that Moroccan intelligence authorities had arrested him as part of a conspiracy with all of the other members of Jamaat Ansar El-Mehdi, a Moroccan based terrorist group that was dismantled by Moroccan security forces in 2006.

FATHI has been detained since his arrest on April 7, 2014. On July 24, 2014, he waived his right to indictment and pleaded guilty to one count of perjury in an immigration matter.

FATHI has agreed to be deported at the conclusion of his prison term.

This matter was investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Joint Terrorism Task Force, which includes participants from Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) in New Haven, Internal Revenue Service – Criminal Investigation Division, Naval Criminal Investigative Service, Connecticut State Police, Bridgeport Police Department, Norwich Police Department and the New York Police Department. The HSI attaché office in Casablanca, Morocco, provided critical assistance to the investigation.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Krishna Patel and Stephen Reynolds.

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Updated March 18, 2015