

Few share Muslims' concerns about FBI surveillance program: Undercover informants

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When a local Muslim activist told Chuck Warpehoski that the FBI was using undercover informants to collect information on people attending mosques, he knew that the issue could not be ignored. After all, Warpehoski said, his group, the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice based in Ann Arbor, Michigan, had once been the target of FBI surveillance during the Vietnam War.

So Warpehoski, a Quaker, wrote a letter earlier this year to Attorney General Eric Holder, urging him to investigate the allegations and review FBI policies on profiling and surveillance. "If there is a reason to investigate, there is a reason," he said. "But to investigate just because of religious affiliation is not sufficient."

Warpehoski said a local Muslim activist told him about the FBI surveillance program, but as he sees it, it's not an issue just for Muslim groups: if G-men can infiltrate a mosque, why not a church, synagogue or temple? "We see this as an interfaith issue. It concerns all of us," he said.

The problem, however, is that so far the program has attracted little interest, attention or concern among non-Muslim groups. Numerous religious groups at the national level either declined to comment or said they didn't know enough to comment, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Episcopalians, Lutherans, the National Council of Churches, Reform Jews and religious liberty groups like the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

FBI surveillance guidelines are covered in a 270-page manual known as the Domestic Investigations and Operations Guide. Released on December 1, 2008, the manual has come under fire from Muslim and civil liberties organizations.

Critics claim that the guidelines allow the FBI to use informants or undercover agents to conduct religious profiling through a special class of investigations, called “assessments,” on people even when they have no connection to criminal activity.

“It allows for the monitoring and the collection of data on individuals, based on their race, ethnicity, as well on what jobs they might hold,” said Farhana Khera, executive director of Muslim Advocates, a San Francisco-based advocacy group.

“There’s a specific reference to the collection of data on people who have a cultural tradition of charitable giving during a particular time of year. So while it doesn’t explicitly say Muslims, it’s hard not to read it as targeting Muslims” during the holy month of Ramadan, when charitable giving is paramount.

Moreover, critics say that while the guidelines seem to focus on Muslim groups, they also could be used abusively against any religious groups by overzealous or biased agents, such as an anti-Semite, a vindictive atheist or someone with a grudge against the Catholic Church.

“People of all faith communities should be concerned because it gives the power to the FBI to be able to infiltrate any religious community,” Khera said.

In an interview, the FBI’s general counsel, Valerie Caproni, disputed the claim that the guidelines allow profiling or lack sufficient controls to prevent abuse.

“We’ve always been able to open investigations,” she said. “What is new is formalizing it and putting in a lot more controls in terms of saying you’ve got to actually open an assessment, so there’s a paperwork trail of ‘what did you have, what did you start with, and what did you do?’ That’s all subject to review by supervisors.”

Caproni acknowledged that the FBI uses undercover informants but said its preferred tactic is to have agents develop open relationships with community figures. “We tell people you have to use the least intrusive alternative to get to whatever you’re trying to get to,” she said.

While Muslim organizations have applauded the solidarity of groups like the Interfaith Council in Ann Arbor, they say they are the exception.

“It’s understood that this is only going to target Muslims. And if it’s only going to affect Muslims, why worry about it?” said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesperson for the

Council on American-Islamic Relations in Washington.

This is not the first time the FBI has been criticized for spying on religious communities or figures. Perhaps the best-known episode is the FBI's surveillance of Martin Luther King Jr., who the agency suspected of being tied to communists. In 1944, the FBI wiretapped and spied on "the Bergson group," a protest organization founded by activist Peter Bergson that agitated for the U.S. to rescue Jews from Nazi Germany.

Warpehoski said records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that a member of his group was acting as an FBI informant between 1969 and 1972, and even attempted to entrap the group. "There was a person in the group who said nonviolence wasn't working, and that we needed to escalate," said Warpehoski. "The allegations I hear today remind me of what happened here." -*Omar Sacirbey, Religion News Service*