

Muslims and ACLU sue FBI over mosque surveillance

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(RNS) Is sending a secret informant into a mosque in search of terrorists proactive policing, or a violation of worshippers' civil rights?

That's the question a federal judge will have to answer after the American Civil Liberties Union and the Council of American-Islamic Relations filed a lawsuit Tuesday (Feb. 22) in Los Angeles against the FBI.

The suit charges the nation's top law enforcement agency targeted Muslims for surveillance based solely on their religious affiliation, violating their constitutional rights.

FBI spokeswoman Laura Eimiller declined to comment on the lawsuit. In a statement, the agency rejected allegations of religious profiling.

"The FBI investigates allegations of crimes, not constitutionally protected activities, including the exercise of religious freedom," the statement said. "The FBI does not investigate houses of worship or religious groups, but individuals who are alleged to be a threat to national security or involved in criminal activity."

Filed on behalf of three plaintiffs, the lawsuit says the FBI's Los

Angeles office paid Craig Monteilh, an Irvine, Calif. resident who had been imprisoned for forgery, to "indiscriminately collect" phone numbers, e-mail addresses and other personal information on hundreds or even thousands of Muslims in Southern California.

Using the alias Farouk al-Aziz, Monteilh worked undercover for 14 months between 2006-2007, the lawsuit alleges, and was paid between \$6,000 and \$11,200 per month. He did most of his surveillance at the Islamic Center of Irvine but targeted other Southern California mosques as well, according to the suit. The suit also said Monteilh taped conversations he had with Muslims in their homes and videotaped mosques.

Information collected by Monteilh helped the FBI start a case against one Irvine mosque member, but that case collapsed. Monteilh went public with his informant status in 2009, and filed his own lawsuit against the FBI last year alleging civil rights violations.

"Ironically, the operation ended when members of the Muslim communities of Southern California reported the informant to the police because of his violent rhetoric and ultimately obtained a restraining order against him," said the lawsuit.

Muslim Americans and even some law enforcement officials contend such clandestine surveillance can lead to abuses by informants, and alienate Muslim communities.