

Violating Americans' Privacy Rights: Intelligence-gathering centers across the US under cloak of secrecy

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America's Mysterious Fusion Centers Raise Alarm, Paradigm Could Unite All Americans

WASHINGTON — Intelligence-gathering centers sprouted across the US and acting under cloak secrecy are raising concerns for violating Americans' privacy rights, while Muslims complain that the mysterious centers are particularly targeting them.

"Any domestic intelligence activity poses a potential threat to American values because it involves the government secretly peeking into the private lives of people," Mike German, Policy Counselor for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and a former FBI Agent, told IslamOnline.net.

Nearly 60 so-called fusion centers have emerged in cities across the country in the dying days of the Bush administration.

Established under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), their initial purpose was serving as a communication network to aid local, state and federal authorities in gathering information on possible gang, criminal and terrorist-related conduct.

But civil rights experts fear the centers have overstepped their intended purpose to secretly collecting and disseminating information about low-abiding citizens.

"We have documented many instances of improper intelligence activities involving fusion centers on our website," German says.

Whether the government has probable cause to justify this invasion of privacy is unknown because it is done under excessive secrecy.

"The law enforcement and intelligence agencies only answer to themselves, which is inherently undemocratic," contends German.

"It's dangerous to give such a broad mission in an intelligence context because it will ultimately lead to over-collection."

The New York Times reported Thursday that the National Security Agency had engaged in "over-collection" of Americans' domestic communications on a scale that went beyond limits set by the Congress last year.

Congress authorized intelligence agencies to eavesdrop without court approval on foreign targets believed to be outside the US.

After 9/11, the Bush administration authorized a secret warrantless spying on Americans and tapping into the country's main communication networks without court warrants.

Dangerous

Imam Mahdi Bray, Executive Director of the Muslim American Society Freedom (MASF), agrees that the secrecy under which these centers operate poses a threat to civil liberties.

"Many Americans, including public officials, are not aware of these centers and the threat they pose on American society," he told IOL.

"Ironically, it might also be noted that even the Department of Homeland Security is recognizing that fusion centers represent a major problem.

Muslims rights groups complain that fusion centers are particularly eyeing their community, estimated at nearly seven million.

"Contrary to its original 'intent' of gathering information related primarily to gangs, criminals, terrorists, it is now abundantly clear that the real targets of the DHS fusion center network are members of the American Muslim community at-large," said Bray.

Muslims have become sensitized to an erosion of their civil rights since 9/11, with a prevailing belief that Bush's America was targeting their faith.

"Fusion centers collect information particularly about Muslims, generally from... Islamophobes, neo-cons and self-appointed right-wing terrorist experts," said Bray.

He regretted the data collected suggests that even activities such as Muslim boys' scouts, girls' scouts troops or voting registration should be viewed with suspicion.

Bray added that they also propagate stereotypes about mainstream US Muslim organizations, accusing them of disloyalty, being a "5th column", or a front for radical groups abroad.

"A clear example of the danger that fusion centers represent would be the information pertaining to mainstream organizations in Virginia. They've taken a youth organization like the Muslim Student Association and accused it of being a front for radical Islamic organizations," he explained.

"This is ridiculous, and would even be hilarious, if it wasn't for the fact that such inaccurate information gets filtered down to local law enforcement where it gains credibility because it came from a national government agency," lamented Bray.

"These centers are dangerous and detrimental to the civil liberties of not only Muslims but all Americans."

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