

Muslim groups seek answers on spying: Objections to secret surveillance of mosques

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American Muslim groups have asked U.S. government agencies to be more forthcoming about news reports disclosing widespread secret electronic surveillance and radiation monitoring of Muslim mosques.

After a *New York Times* story reported last month that the National Security Agency had eavesdropped on communications after September 11, 2001, without first seeking warrants from a special court, and President Bush defended his right to do so in the war on terrorism, Senate judiciary chairman Arlen Specter (R., Pa.) said he might call U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to testify before a committee hearing this year.

That story, and an earlier one from *U.S. News & World Report* indicating that warrants were not sought for radiation monitoring of more than 100 Muslim mosques and business and home sites in at least a half-dozen cities, stirred alarm among civil libertarians. But the revelations also disturbed U.S. Muslim-American leaders who have frequently emphasized their cooperation with government and law enforcement agencies to ferret out threats or dangers to civil safety.

“We are requesting to be informed of and included in discussions about homeland security that affect our communities across our nation,” said Salam Al-Marayati, Los Angeles-based executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. MPAC urged high-level Justice Department and FBI officials to meet with U.S. Muslim leaders.

MPAC later said it was invited to meet with FBI Deputy Director John Pistole in mid-January to address the issues raised by the two secret programs.

Meanwhile, the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) filed two Freedom of Information requests for all government records relating to

President Bush's executive orders authorizing electronic surveillance as well as records on the radiation monitoring program.

"President Bush's wiretapping policy is not only an apparent violation of existing law, it also gives carte blanche for spying, without legal oversight, on any American," said CAIR executive director Nihad Awad. He added that such unrestricted surveillance powers could be expanded and used to spy on groups and individuals who hold dissenting political views.

Of the mosque monitoring, CAIR national legal director Arsalan Iftikhar said that CAIR, which has 31 offices and chapters nationwide and in Canada, is concerned that the secret project, which reportedly found no dirty bombs or nuclear devices, created "the impression that American Muslims are considered suspect solely because of their faith."

Also filing a Freedom of Information request was the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in Washington. "If this demonstrates that Muslim sites were monitored just because they were Muslim sites, without law enforcement leads, it's going to have a chilling effect on people's free speech and hurt the war on terrorism," said Kareem Shora, the ADC legal director.

Shora said the FBI has shown in the recent past that it takes the concerns of American Muslims seriously. He cited the FBI's tracking down of perpetrators of hate crimes against Muslims after 9/11. On December 22 the FBI offered a \$15,000 reward for information about the bombing of a Cincinnati mosque two days after the incident.