

FBI begins questioning of 5,000 Middle Eastern immigrants

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The Federal Bureau of Investigation and local police departments have begun questioning some 5,000 recent Middle Eastern immigrants as part of the “anti-terrorism” measures ordered by the US Justice Department.

The blatant ethnic profiling of Arabs by the Bush administration has drawn strong objections from the immigrant community and civil rights advocates. It comes in the wake of executive orders by the White House authorizing military tribunals for non-citizens suspected of terrorism and permitting the monitoring of attorney-client conversations of immigrants detained as part of the government’s roundup of Arab-Americans in the wake of the September 11 events.

The targeting of Arab immigrants has recalled the US internment of more than 100,000 Japanese immigrants and Japanese-American citizens during World War II. Indeed, the roundup of Arab immigrants carried out by the government since the terror attacks is the largest mass detention in more than 50 years.

While the Justice Department claims its interrogation of immigrants is “voluntary,” a closer examination reveals the opposite. In a memorandum sent to regional offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the agency’s executive director declared that prospective interviewees could be held without bond on immigration charges if the FBI requested it.

The questions being asked of immigrants by the FBI are detailed and intrusive, including the individual’s travel history, education, political beliefs and reaction to the terror attacks. The FBI is also requesting personal information, including the names and phone numbers of friends and family members.

In most parts of the United States, FBI and police officials plan to show up unannounced at immigrants’ homes, increasing the sense of anxiety and insecurity.

Further, such visits make it more unlikely that those to be questioned will be able to obtain proper legal advice or representation.

“These interviews are inherently coercive,” said American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Executive Director Anthony Romero. “Police are being asked to interrogate people on the basis of their ethnicity, their religious beliefs and the beliefs of their families.”

Norman Dorsen, a former director of the ACLU, commented, “Government has a right to ask questions, but people have a right not to answer questions—at least they have until now. If the INS is going to lock them up, that puts very strong pressure on people.”

Adding to these fears is the fact that immigrants who are deemed “uncooperative” or “suspicious” by the FBI could conceivably be subject to prosecution by a military tribunal as stipulated by the Bush administration.

Abe Turaani of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee said that the Justice Department order had evoked considerable trepidation in the Arab-American community, commenting, “I had one man say to me, ‘Where I come from this is the norm. Here we are taught democracy and then we see this happening. Maybe I would rather live somewhere where it’s predictable and it’s the norm.’”

The information obtained by the FBI during the interrogations will be fed into a government database. Presumably those named as associates by interviewees can expect a knock on the door by the FBI at some date in the future.

In the Detroit area some Arab immigrants not on the Justice Department’s list of recent immigrants have received a letter from the US attorney’s office requesting they set up an interview with the FBI. One man, a 33-year old Kuwaiti-born engineer, received a

letter even though he has lived in the US for 10 years and has been granted permanent resident status.

So blatantly undemocratic are the government's policies that a number of police departments—including Detroit, Michigan; Portland, Oregon; Austin, Texas; and San Francisco—have objected to participating in the questioning. The police force at the University of Michigan is also refusing to take part. A statement issued by the university said it would not send officers to question students because “none of the individuals identified for questioning are suspected of or associated with criminal activity.”

In order to deflect criticism, Attorney General John Ashcroft offered the possibility that immigrants who provide useful information about terrorism might be allowed to remain in the United States under terms of the “Responsible Cooperators” program. Civil rights activists derided this offer. Lucas Guttentag, director of the ACLU, called the promise “vague” and “completely inconsistent” with the threats by the Justice Department to arrest or deport immigrants for minor visa violations.

On December 6 the American Civil Liberties Union and 18 other organizations filed a lawsuit against the Justice Department to obtain the names and other information about the hundreds of Arab-Americans detained by the authorities in their nationwide dragnet. The US Justice Department now says that criminal charges have been brought against 110 individuals, 60 of whom are in federal custody, and that 553 others charged with immigration violations are being detained. The Justice Department is still refusing to release the names of detainees, the charges levied against them or where they are being held.

Ashcroft has justified his refusal to provide names on the absurd grounds that the information would aid Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaida network. Alternately, he has claimed revealing detainees' identities would violate their right to privacy. The Justice Department has refused to respond to a Freedom of Information Act request filed October 29 by civil right groups on behalf of detainees.

One detainee, Osama El Far, an Egyptian who worked as a mechanic for Trans States Airlines, recently launched a hunger strike to try to obtain a hearing to force a public explanation for his detention. He was picked up September 24 as part of the post-

September 11 dragnet. El Far is being held in the Mississippi County Jail in Charleston, Missouri. He has admitted overstaying his 1996 student visa but denies any connection to terrorism. El Far has complained of harassment by guards and intimidation by other inmates since his detention.



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