

Bush expands "voluntary interviews" of Middle Eastern immigrants

Kate Randall
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On March 20, US Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that the Justice Department is expanding its "voluntary interview" program, with plans to question 3,000 more mainly Muslim and Arab immigrants. The interviews will target men ages 18 to 33 who have entered the country since September 11 and hold passports from or have visited countries where the Bush administration says there is a significant Al Qaeda presence. Civil liberties and Arab-American groups have denounced the plan as a form of racial profiling and an attack on democratic rights.

Last October, Ashcroft ordered US attorneys across the country to locate and interview nearly 5,000 men, 18 to 33, who entered the US after January 2000 on non-immigrant visas. The new initiative indicates that, rather than being a temporary measure in response to the events of September 11, the government intends to institute this project as an ongoing operation with no end in sight.

At a press conference announcing the expansion of the program, the attorney general said that law enforcement officials were able to locate less than half, or 2,261, of the 4,793 men on the government's original list. Of these, about 680 reportedly have left the country, 785 were believed to have relocated inside the US, and the whereabouts of approximately 1,000 could not be determined. Ashcroft said the government's failure to find many of those on the list indicated "serious flaws that exist in our ability to locate visitors to our country." The Justice Department will continue to seek out those individuals who were missed in the first round of questioning.

According to the sketchy report released by the Justice Department, through the interviews the government obtained the name and address of one person with possible ties to the alleged September 11 hijackers and one man who "recalled seeing" one of the hijackers. Two of those interviewed were reportedly acquainted with individuals who had taken flight training courses. Ashcroft said no one had been charged with connections to terrorism.

The attorney general claimed the initiative was a success because it "may well have contributed to the fact that we have not suffered a substantial terrorist attack." According to his reasoning, the more repressive and sweeping the measures, the more effective they will be in "putting the terrorists on notice."

By this logic, any action—no matter how destructive of basic democratic rights—can be justified in the name of the "war on terrorism." If the interviews are warranted, why not mass round-ups, or concentration camps? Why should anyone dismiss the possibility if not the likelihood that under conditions of sharp social crisis, such measures would not be taken?

In fact, the Bush administration's "voluntary interview" operation bears an eerie resemblance to provisions of a program set up under the Reagan administration two decades ago which posed similar threats to the democratic rights of the US population, citizens and non-citizens alike. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's secret "Rex '84" operation called for the declaration of a "State of Domestic National Emergency" and the rounding up of 400,000 Central Americans and "known Communist terrorists" in the event of a war in Central America.

With the interview program—along with the rash measures assaulting basic democratic rights put into effect in the wake of September 11—precedents are being established, and procedures put into operation, which in their totality constitute the framework of a police state. Enormous pressure is being placed on individuals to submit to interrogation, despite the fact that there is no reason to suspect they have knowledge of any crime. These men are being targeted, according to Ashcroft, because they "might either wittingly or unwittingly, be in the same circles, communities or social groups as those engaged in terrorist activities."

Of those interviewed, fewer than 20 were taken into custody, mainly for immigration violations. Three were arrested on criminal charges. Ashcroft refused to elaborate on the charges, claiming security considerations, stating, "We are not going to disclose sensitive law enforcement information in a report which might compromise our ability to disrupt terrorist activities."

The fact that any interviewees at all were taken into custody debunks government claims that the interviews were part of a cooperative "fact-finding" mission. The government claimed the questioning was simply to gather information, and would be conducted on a voluntary, non-threatening basis. But those individuals in possible violation of immigration law, who presented themselves voluntarily, have been subject to arrest

and possible deportation. Failure to come forward for interrogation may also have consequences. David Leopold, an immigration lawyer who attended interviews in Detroit and Columbus, Ohio, commented, “The reality is that if someone refuses [to talk to authorities], they’re stuck with a complete unknown about what their future will be in this country.”

Ashcroft pointed to the real aim of the interviews, commenting that “the sheer volume of [police] activity ... ensured that potential terrorists hiding in our communities knew that law enforcement was on the job in their neighborhoods.” In other words, rather than preventing future terrorist attacks, the actual objective is to create an atmosphere of continual police surveillance and intimidation in immigrant communities, and among the population at large. All the information obtained through the interviews is being entered into a vast national databank, which is accessible by the Justice Department investigators, as well as other federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. The names of people picked up for minor legal infractions, such as traffic violations, can be checked against this list and these individuals could face charges for “terrorist” or other crimes.

No one knows what names and information are being compiled in this databank. While the interrogations have targeted Muslim and Arab men, information about their friends, neighbors, employers and other acquaintances—as well as their political affiliations—may be included. While the operation has primarily targeted people of Middle Eastern and Central Asian descent, it represents a fundamental assault on the civil liberties of the entire population—both immigrants and citizens.

At last Wednesday’s press conference Ashcroft stated that he was “inspired by the quiet courage of these visitors to our country, and I want to commend them for stepping forward and speaking out in the face of evil.” The reality is that their “stepping forward” has more to do with fear of reprisal, or fear that failure to appear might be construed as guilt. These individuals have far more to fear from John Ashcroft and the anti-democratic methods of the government apparatus than they do from Al Qaeda.

Added to this is the fact that the status of many immigrants is in limbo because the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has a tremendous backlog of visa applications. Many non-citizens have filed for permanent residency status under provisions of the Legal Immigration Family Equity Act (LIFE Act), enacted in December 2000, but have waited months on end for a reply from the INS.

The Life Act was touted by supporters in Congress—as well as George W. Bush—as providing amnesty for individuals awaiting action on their immigration applications. But since September 11, a number of immigrants and their families who have utilized the provisions of the Life Act have been taken into custody. One high-profile example of this is the case of Rabih Haddad, a prominent Muslim cleric from Ann Arbor, Michigan who has been imprisoned since mid-December on minor visa

violations despite applying for amnesty under the program. Many more less-publicized cases undoubtedly exist.

In addition to ethnic discrimination and intimidation, a central aim of the interview program is to build up a network of informants among the immigrant population. Ashcroft commented, “The task forces were able to develop sources of information that should give potential terrorists pause. In fact, many of those interviewed volunteered to provide information on an ongoing basis in the future, and a significant number offered to serve as interpreters in our efforts against terrorism.” Using the threat of possible arrest or deportation, the government is coercing a group of individuals to operate as snitches in immigrant communities.

The WSWS spoke to Hussein Ibish of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) in Washington, DC. He said that the organization was advising individuals to consult with an attorney before deciding whether or not to agree to be interviewed, “given the fact that any Arab or Muslim male can be incarcerated for even the most flimsy violations.” Ibish added, “I believe that what the government is doing is compiling dossiers on young Arab males. This data is being put into a database that can be used in the future.”

While decrying expansion of the program and the government’s racial profiling, the majority of Arab-American advocacy groups continue to lend credence to the interview program as a legitimate anti-terrorism effort. A press release from the ADC said that the “Arab-American community is as committed as any other segment of American society to ensuring our nation’s security,” and that the group “did indeed cooperate with the authorities to ensure that this process went as smoothly as possible.”

As an expression of the contempt with which the political establishment holds the Arab and Muslim population in the US, Ashcroft’s announcement came without notifying in advance any of the Arab-American groups who had collaborated in the first round of interviews. The Justice Department is interested in fostering relationships with such groups only to the extent that they can enlist their support in rounding up more immigrants for questioning.

Those who do come forward to be interrogated by government officials, rather than being rewarded for their efforts, face the threat of arrest, deportation or pressure from the authorities to become informants. Billed as a initiative to “fight terrorism,” it is far more likely that the expansion of the interview program—and the repression and discrimination that accompany it—will fuel anger and frustration among those it targets, which in turn could contribute to future terrorist attacks.



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