

Bush administration to track Iraqis living in the US

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The Bush administration has begun to monitor thousands of people of Iraqi descent in the US. Government officials have disclosed that the intelligence program involves tracking both Iraqi citizens and Iraqi-Americans with dual citizenship who are attending American universities or working in the private sector.

Unnamed senior government officials claim the individuals are being targeted because they might pose a risk in the event of US war against Iraq. Some are being electronically monitored on the basis of national security warrants, while others are being sought out to work as informants against the Iraqi regime.

In the event of a US attack on Iraq, the government plans to further escalate the operation through arrests and detentions of Iraqis and Iraqi-Americans they suspect of planning terrorist operations. As with the dragnet of Arab and Muslim men in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks, government agents will not be required to present evidence that any criminal activity is under way in order to obtain warrants, but only their suspicion that the individuals may be involved in terrorism.

The operation involves a wide array of government agencies, including the Pentagon, the FBI, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the State Department and the National Security Agency. These agencies will be allowed to share amongst themselves any evidence gained during their spying operations, which could then be used in potential criminal investigations.

In May 2001, Attorney General John Ashcroft granted the FBI sweeping new powers to carry out domestic spying against political organizations, religious groups and individuals. On the basis of these new measures, which were declared by executive edict

and without Congressional approval, individuals and groups can be placed under surveillance simply because they have been designated as “subversive” by the government.

Citizens and non-citizens alike can be targeted for their political beliefs. Under the government’s new plan to track Iraqis living in the US, individuals are being selected solely because of their nationality, in violation of Constitutional protections against discrimination on the basis of national origin.

This month, federal authorities plan to begin interviewing residents of Iraqi descent, asking them to report any “suspicious” activity related to Iraq. As with previous interviews of Arab-Americans, the government contends that they are completely “voluntary.” However, civil rights and Arab-American advocates say that often these “interviews” begin with federal agents knocking on the door of the person to be questioned. Although legally an individual has the right to have an attorney present, and can refuse to answer any and all questions, many lack the financial resources or the legal knowledge to assert these rights.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) reports that since September 11, 2001 more than 8,000 people have been interviewed by federal agents, and state and local officers working under their authority. As of last July, the most recent accounting provided by the Justice Department, 611 people picked up after the hijack-bombings were still in detention. The government has refused to provide the names or whereabouts of the detainees and reveal the charges, if any, that have been levied against them. The vast majority have been deported on immigration-related charges and to date none have been charged in connection with the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War the FBI and the

INS conducted thousands of interviews with Arab-Americans in the US, as well as with Iraqis who had entered the US and failed to leave when their visitors' visas expired. It is significant that this time government authorities plan to include American citizens of Iraqi descent. These could include individuals holding dual citizenship who were born in the US.

This past July, Peter Kirsanow, a Bush-appointed member of the US Civil Rights Commission, cited the mass detentions of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and warned that such camps could be set up for Arab-Americans in the event of another terrorist attack on the US. He told a meeting in Detroit that following such an attack "you can forget about civil rights."

While the Bush administration has cast a wide net of suspicion over Iraqis residing in the US, it wants to offer a fast track to American citizenship for Iraqi scientists who are willing to provide information—real or fabricated—on Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction. Under the Iraqi Scientists Immigration Act of 2002, currently working its way through Congress, up to 500 scientists could be given green cards for providing the government with this information.



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