

## **Post-9/11 challenges**

### **Inquisition of Muslims in America**

January 16th is officially observed "Religious Freedom Day." It commemorates the day when Thomas Jefferson and other patriots met in Fredericksburg to draft the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. This is the first legislation in history to guarantee religious liberty for every citizen which later served as the model for the First Amendment in the U.S. Bill of Rights. Recognizing the importance of faith to our people, our founding fathers guaranteed religious freedom in the constitution.

The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom passed on January 16, 1786 is considered as one of Thomas Jefferson's three greatest accomplishments, along with writing the Declaration of Independence and founding the University of Virginia. This is an obscure day as we don't see any enthusiastic commemoration events on this day with the exception of Fredericksburg, the birthplace of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. In this historic town, the day is celebrated traditionally with a colorful Religious Freedom march.

But in the post-9/11 America, the Muslim community has little to celebrate on this day because it was under siege. Its mosques were under surveillance and its charities were being scrutinized or shut down. American Muslims attending an Islamic conference abroad were detained and fingerprinted like criminals when they return home. Its religious leaders (Imams) were kicked off from a US Airways Minneapolis-to-Phoenix flight and briefly detained on suspicion of terrorism.

In February 2003, FBI Director Robert Mueller's top aides directed chiefs of the bureau's 56 field offices to develop "demographic" profiles of their localities-including tallying the number of mosques. According to the Newsweek (Feb. 3, 2003), when FBI executive assistant director Wilson Lowery Jr. briefed congressional staffers on the project, and explained that mosque tallies would be used to help set investigative goals, "there were a lot of eyebrows that went up," said one of those present. The approach raised concerns that the FBI was engaging in a new form of religious "profiling."

In a letter to Attorney General John Ashcroft, Congressmen John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.) Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and Senator Russell D. Feingold (D-Wisc.) wrote: "We write to ask you to immediately terminate the Justice Department's new policy directing the fifty-six FBI field offices to count the number of mosques and Muslims, as well as other community groups and religious organizations, in their areas. We cannot sanction the targeting of Muslim populations and mosques, or any other community group or institution, to gather intelligence without any suspicion or cause that a specific individual or group of individuals, or a particular mosque or religious organization, is engaging in terrorist activities. We urge you to follow the constitutionally prescribed channels of investigation to ensure that the rights of American citizens are not violated..."

The FBI abandoned its plans to count the mosques but later the FBI agents who requested a meeting with the leadership of the Islamic Society of Frederick, Md., "mentioned casually" they would be asking for a list of the society's members. This sent red flags up for the Islamic Society, who immediately informed media outlets, interfaith partners and civil rights groups. Local FBI officials then said they would not press for the list local agents had requested.

On June 13, 2007, an anti-Muslim group known with the acronym SANE - the Society of Americans for National Existence - unveiled its so-called "Mapping Shari'a in America Project" devoted to spying on 2,300 Islamic institutions in the United States. "The project will collect information about America's 2,300-plus mosques and associated day schools, provide

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information to both law enforcement officials and the public, and test the proposition that Shari'a (read Islam) amounts to a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the U.S. government," the SANE project said. While launching its "Mapping Sharia Project," the SANE claimed that hundreds of Islamic centers in the United States have become a hot-bed of extremist activity and promote violence, terrorism and hatred against America. **(1)**

The SANE project seems an extension of Center for Religious Freedom's anti-Muslim project entitled "Saudi publications on hate ideology invade American mosques." The Center for Religious Freedom is an affiliate of the rightist think tank Hudson Institute which includes necon Richard Perle among its supporters. The ultimate objective of the SANE is banishing Islam from the US by making "adherence to Islam" punishable by 20 years in prison. **(2)**

In December 2005, the Muslim community was stunned to know that the U.S. government had been monitoring for suspicious radiation levels outside more than 100 predominantly Muslim-related sites in the greater Washington, D.C., area, as well as various sites in other cities. The monitoring has been taking place since the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Under the program, agents with the FBI and U.S. Department of Energy targeted a range of private Muslim institutions without court approval or warrants. Federal officials said they set up the program in Detroit and five other cities to thwart a nuclear attack from Islamic extremists, according to a U.S. News and World Report article that was confirmed by the U.S. Justice Department. **(3)**

The US News and World Report also reported that the monitoring was conducted at more than 100 Muslim sites in the Washington, D.C., area -- including Maryland and Virginia suburbs -- and at least five other cities when threat levels had risen: Chicago, Detroit, Las Vegas, New York, and Seattle. At its peak, three vehicles in Washington monitored 120 sites a day, nearly all of them Muslim targets identified by the FBI. Targets included mosques, homes, and businesses. **(4)**

### **Muslims urged to spy on fellow Muslims**

At the same time, the Bush administration had launched an operation seeking Muslim informants to spy on fellow Muslims. A Wall Street Journal report of July 11, 2006 gives an insight into the covert operation. The WSJ report titled, "A Muslim's Choice: Turn U.S Informant or Risk Losing Visa," detailed the case of Yassine Ouassif whose green card was taken away from him when he crossed the border from Canada in November 2005. Ouassif was then sent home to San Francisco and told to contact a counterterrorism agent at the FBI. The agent made him an offer: become an informant and regularly report to the FBI on what his Muslim friends in San Francisco were saying and doing. In exchange he would get back his green card." According to Ouassif, if he refused, the agent threatened to deport him back to Morocco.

The WSJ said that Ouassif's story provides a window into a largely covert front of the war on terror: the FBI's aggressive pursuit of Muslim informants. Since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the bureau has had the difficult task of penetrating a culture that few agents know anything about. It has responded with a forceful effort to conscript eyes and ears within Muslim communities. The paper said that some of the recruitment is public. FBI agents plead for community assistance in meetings at mosques and other Muslim conclaves. Agents also are under pressure to develop confidential sources. **(5)**

On May 19, 2006, the New York Times reported testimony of a Muslim informer that confirmed what many Muslims have believed since the Sept. 11 attacks: that law enforcement agencies have worked to infiltrate their community during terrorism investigations.

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A young police detective testified at the Herald Square bombing plot trial that he was recruited from the Police Academy 13 months after 9/11 to work deep undercover in the Muslim community to investigate Islamic extremists. The detective, a Muslim who came to America from Bangladesh when he was 7, testified that he was a 23-year-old college graduate when he was plucked from the academy in October 2002. He took an apartment in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where, he testified, his assignment was to be a "walking camera" among Muslims there. He said he had no regular contact with the department other than through his handler, to whom he reported by e-mail at first. During two years of living in Bay Ridge, he was involved in "numerous" investigations, he testified, and was at times shadowed by a field team to ensure his safety. The detective was the final witness at the four-week trial of Shahawar Matin Siraj, 23, a Pakistani immigrant who is charged with plotting to blow up the Herald Square subway station in 2004.

The New York Times said that the Police Intelligence Division's program to post detectives overseas has been widely publicized. But this detective's testimony in federal court in Brooklyn provided the closest look yet at how the division is using undercover investigators to penetrate mosques, bookstores and other places where Muslims gather in the city. **(6)**

In another high profile terror trial of two Pakistani Americans a Muslim informer was paid \$ 250,000 to infiltrate the large Muslim community in Lodi, California. In the trial of Hamid Hayat, 23 and his father Umer Hayat, 48, in February 2006, defense attorney Washma Mojaddidi told the court that the government case was founded on cultural ignorance that confused a wedding party for a terrorist gathering and depended heavily on the testimony of an informer who was paid \$250,000 by the FBI to infiltrate the Muslim community in Lodi.

Lodi trial was one of the show case trials that was heralded, during the debate over the renewal of the USA Patriot Act, as an important milestone in the fight against terrorism. "I was very impressed by the use of intelligence and the follow-up," President Bush said at the time of the high profile arrest of the Hayats. "And that's what the American people need to know, that when we find any hint about any possible wrongdoing or a possible cell, that we'll follow up," the president added. **(7)**

An operative of the FBI, Darren Griffin, known as the Trainer was a part-time employee for three years at KindHearts, the Toledo-based Muslim charity shut down by the government in February 2006. During the three years Darren Griffin worked a \$7-an-hour, part-time job at KindHearts, his co-workers knew him as Bilal and considered him to be a faithful Muslim and an American patriot who served in the U.S. military in Iraq. His work led to the arrests of three men on terrorism charges in February 2006. KindHearts' attorney and a board member Jihad Smaili said he believes investigators planted Griffin inside KindHearts in an effort to link the charity with terrorists. A U.S. Treasury undersecretary already has labeled KindHearts the offspring of both Global Relief and Holy Land Foundation, the two charities shut down in December 2001. **(8)**

The FBI paid almost \$56,000 to two confidential informants who were key to the case against seven men accused of being involved in a terrorist plot to blow up the Sears Tower and other targets. According to a document filed by federal prosecutors, the FBI paid one unnamed informant \$10,500 and an additional \$8,815 in expenses. They also paid a second informant \$17,000 with another \$19,570 for expenses. U.S. officials also granted the second informant a "significant public benefit" -- immigration parole so he could remain in the country. The seven men, part of a religious group headquartered in the Liberty City area of Miami-Dade County, are facing various charges in connection with attacks they allegedly planned. Much of the case hinges on the two informants, one of whom knew the men and participated in the investigation after alerting authorities. The second man posed as an al-Qaida operative at the FBI's direction, according to prosecutors. Secret recordings made by the informants are also central to the case. **(9)**

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### Muslims are repeatedly compelled to condemn terrorism

While the Islamic centers and mosques became targets of security agencies and anti-Muslim groups in the aftermath of 9/11, the Arab and Muslim Americans were compelled, time and again, to apologize for acts they did not commit, to condemn acts they never condoned and to openly profess loyalties that, for most U.S. citizens, is merely assumed. Within hours of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, every major Muslim group in the nation signed a joint statement vehemently denouncing the terrorist act. Since then American Muslims have been condemning every act of terrorism. But their denouncing is ignored and the most frequent criticism that's tossed at the American Muslim community is, 'You never denounce terrorism.' Whenever there is an act of terrorism, American Muslims and Arabs come under pressure to again and again denounce terrorism which is often ignored or played down by media.

Responding to ceaseless urgings by columnists, religious personalities and other American public figures for Arabs and Muslims to condemn terrorism and repudiate individuals and groups connected with terrorist acts, a leading Muslim civil rights group, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) in 2004 and 2005 launched an online petition and advertisement campaigns denouncing terrorism.

In May 2004, after the beheading of an American civilian, Nicholas Berg, in Iraq, CAIR launched an online petition drive designed to disassociate the faith of Islam from the violent acts of a few Muslims. The "Not in the Name of Islam" petition states: "We, the undersigned Muslims, wish to state clearly that those who commit acts of terror, murder and cruelty in the name of Islam are not only destroying innocent lives, but are also betraying the values of the faith they claim to represent. No injustice done to Muslims can ever justify the massacre of innocent people, and no act of terror will ever serve the cause of Islam. We repudiate and dissociate ourselves from any Muslim group or individual who commits such brutal and un-Islamic acts. We refuse to allow our faith to be held hostage by the criminal actions of a tiny minority acting outside the teachings of both the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him."

The CAIR also published a full-page advertisement in the Los Angeles Times titled "No to terrorism, No to bigotry." The ad read: "Over the last few weeks, Americans of all faiths have been horrified by images of violence in the Middle East. The Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal does not represent America or Christianity. The Israeli missile that killed innocent Palestinian children in Gaza does not represent Judaism. And the beheading of an innocent American man, Nicholas Berg, does not represent Islam. "Islam, Christianity and Judaism share the basic values necessary to create a world in which tolerance and peace prevail. We have an opportunity to build bridges between our faiths and to challenge those who attempt to divide humanity along religious and ethnic lines. American Muslims condemn all acts of terrorism and are as outraged as their fellow Americans by atrocities committed in the name of God and their faith...." (10)

Fourteen months later, in July 2005, after the London bombings, CAIR launched a national TV advertisement campaign repudiating terrorism in the name of Islam. The 30-second spot featured two American Muslims, a man and a woman, denouncing violence in the name of Islam and vowing to "not to allow our faith to be hijacked by criminals." The spots were distributed nationwide as public-service announcements, meaning stations could choose to air them or not. Later research showed they were seen by as many as 5 million people. The spot ran 105 times for four days on 13 cable channels in Tampa, including CNN, Fox Sports Net and the Weather Channel. Members of the Tampa CAIR chapter donated the money to get the ads on as paid commercials in prime time in the local market, at a cost of more than \$10,000. (11)

Pundits of the militant Right found in the London attacks (July 7, 2005) another opportunity to equate Islam with terrorism, to question the sincerity of the Muslim rejection of terrorism, and to incite the public against Islam and Muslims. Given the loud and extensive condemnation of

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terrorism by Muslims, particularly in North America and Europe, the militant-Right cry has shifted from “why Muslim leaders do not speak out against terrorism?” to “are Muslim leaders sincere in their condemnation of terrorism, or are they doing it to deflect anger and prevent a backlash?”

**(12)** Clearly, Muslims were genuinely appalled by the brutality of the terrorist acts, and some were going the extra mile to make sure their condemnation is made loud enough, and is repeated enough, so that they can be heard by the deafest of their critics. A Fatwa, or religious edict, issued by the Religious Council of North America, and supported by major Muslim organizations, was the latest effort in this regard. **(13)**

The Fiqh Council of North America issued a fatwa - endorsed by all major American Muslim organizations - says that Islam condemns terrorism, religious radicalism and the use of violence. "Targeting civilians' life and property through suicide bombings or any other method of attack is forbidden, and those who commit these barbaric acts are criminals, not martyrs....All acts of terrorism targeting the civilians are *haram*, forbidden in Islam. It is *haram*, forbidden, for a Muslim to cooperate or associate with any individual or group that is involved in any act of terrorism or violence." The fatwa also says it is the "civic and religious duty of Muslims to cooperate with law enforcement authorities to protect the lives of civilians." The fatwa was prompted by a similar ruling from the Muslim Council of Britain, following the July 2005 terrorist attacks in London.

The fatwa against terrorism and “Not in the Name of Islam” campaign condemning terrorism is a sad commentary about America. Neither Christians nor Jews feel compelled to take out newspaper ads declaring their faith’s innocence whenever acts of violence and extremism are carried out by individuals or groups who share their religion. And that’s simply because we are enlightened enough as a nation to know that you can’t condemn Christianity just because a few Christians committed the Oklahoma City bombing terrorism.