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Muslims leery of FBI activity

Assurances that the community isn't under watch meet with skepticism.

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Marya Bangee doesn't know what to believe. The UC Irvine sophomore thinks the fact that she's Muslim is the reason she's been singled out for searches at airports and been scrutinized by police at anti-war demonstrations.

She's also distrustful of the FBI, uncertain whether the agency is telling the complete story of whether its employees are monitoring Orange County's Muslim community.

Her doubts loom a week after Muslim leaders and an FBI senior agent shook hands and patted each other on the back, concluding a meeting that addressed conflicting reports as to whether the community is being watched.

Los Angeles FBI Assistant Director Stephen Tidwell adamantly denied that his agents were monitoring Orange County's Muslim community.

"The Muslim community is not of concern to us," he told more than 200 people at the Islamic Center of Irvine.

Bangee called the meeting a "good start to a relationship."

"But I do not think we accomplished anything as yet," she said.

The issue arose May 24, when Pat Rose, head of FBI's Orange County al-Qaida squad, said during a meeting of the Pacific Club that "there are a lot of individuals of interest." Asked whether citizens should be worried about activist Muslim students at UCI, she said it was "another tough question to answer."

The FBI hasn't said who is being monitored, but Rose admitted that electronic surveillance is being used in Orange County.

Robert J. Cristiano of Newport Beach, who attended the Pacific Club meeting, said some are misinterpreting Rose's comments.

"I think it's much ado about nothing," said Cristiano, a club member who was speaking only for himself. "What I heard her say was that no community is immune. I took it as she stated it. No group is singled out. No group is immune (from surveillance)."

Bangee's skepticism of exactly what is going on may be warranted, said an Arab-American civil-rights activist and a former FBI agent. They cite several instances of agents asking people which mosque they attend and whom they visited during family vacations to the Middle East.

The Muslim community and the FBI are like two ships passing in the night, said James Wedick, a 35-year FBI agent who owns an investigations agency in a Sacramento suburb.

"The bureau has yet to honestly deal with how to communicate with the Arab and Muslim community and the Arab community distrusts them because of good reason

because of paid informants getting sent into the community for less than legitimate reasons," he said.

The FBI community is upset by Rose's statements, he said.

"She was probably being more candid than Tidwell would want you to believe," said Wedick, whose wife works for the agency. "Now they're trying to repair the damage that they've done."

Ban Al-Wardi, an activist in the Arab-American community and an immigration lawyer, said the FBI typically denies monitoring a group.

She said she's worked cases in Orange County and elsewhere in Southern California in which agents monitored board meetings and the financial transactions of Arab-American organizations. In addition, she said, agents have asked college students questions about their mosque and what the imam preaches.

She said the FBI tries to gain the community's trust on the pretext of protecting Muslims from hate crimes and backlash.

Another question is whether monitoring is legal and protected by the Patriot Act, which was enacted after 9/11 and dramatically expands the terrorism-fighting authority of U.S. law enforcement.

Wedick said agents must have reasonable suspicion of some type of criminal activity before they monitor or investigate a community or a person. Agents invited by community members can legally ask questions and visit mosques without needing reasonable suspicion, Wedick said.

"Unfortunately there are occasions when reasonable cause has been less than reasonable," he said, pointing to the case of a Lodi man and his son. They pleaded guilty to lesser charges after being accused of having connections to al-Qaida.

The four-year investigation of the Central California city's large Muslim community began after a former Lodi resident gave erroneous information to FBI agents. No evidence surfaced of any al-Qaida connections.

The FBI on Friday released a statement announcing that its agents plan to undergo training at a Los Angeles mosque to learn more about Muslim religion and culture. "The FBI is committed to ensuring that our personnel become more culturally fluent so that our investigations are more effective and respectful," the statement said.

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