

November 8, 2007

Commander Michael P. Downing
Counter-Terrorism/Criminal Intelligence Bureau
Los Angeles Police Department
150 N. Los Angeles St., Rm. 630
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Commander Downing,

We write to express our grave concerns about efforts by the Los Angeles Police Department (“LAPD”) to map Muslim communities in the Los Angeles area as part of its counter-terrorism program. You recently described this mapping project in your testimony regarding LAPD’s “efforts to identify and counter violent extremism.”¹ The nature and scope of the program is unclear from your testimony, and we request a meeting to discuss our concerns in greater detail and learn more about the program’s parameters.

The mapping of Muslim communities as part of counter-terrorism efforts seems premised on the faulty notion that Muslims are more likely to commit violent acts than people of other faiths. Singling out individuals for investigation, surveillance, and data-gathering based on their religion constitutes religious profiling that is just as unlawful, ill-advised, and deeply offensive as racial profiling. In addition to constitutional concerns that such a practice would violate equal protection and burden the free exercise of religion, religious profiling engenders fear and distrust in the community that hampers law enforcement efforts. A mapping project that aims only to gather intelligence and identify “risk factors” unfairly targets members of the Muslim community based on their religion and ethnicity, and also increases the inaccurate perception among the larger community that Muslims are doing something suspicious that merits investigation.

Your testimony regarding risk factors describes other assumptions about the Muslim community that are troubling in their breadth and questionable accuracy. For example, mere exposure to Wahhabi-Salafi teachings, unemployment, or instability in a country of origin or ancestry may not be suitable “risk factors” that accurately distinguish the majority of peaceful residents of Los Angeles from any potential criminal threats. Although Americans of all backgrounds and religions maintain ties to family or organizations in other countries, you suggest that for a Muslim, such ties make the individual a likely terrorist. Similarly, use of non-mainstream media by Muslim Americans — as by any other Americans — cannot possibly be counted as an indicator of extremist ideology or inclinations. We are deeply concerned if any part of LAPD’s efforts targets community members based on their First Amendment rights to access news or opinions from whatever source they choose.

¹ Testimony of Michael P. Downing before the Senate Comm. on Homeland Security and Govt’l Affairs (Oct. 30, 2007).

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While preventing violence and terrorism is a goal we all share, it must be pursued in a manner respectful of the rights of the hundreds of thousands of Muslim Americans living in the Los Angeles area. We recognize that the LAPD is striving to embrace a community policing model that includes openness, transparency, and engagement with the community. "Outreach and grassroots dialogue" with all communities affected by law enforcement efforts are the foundations of a community-based policing model that we certainly endorse. We also agree that the public safety of all citizens is best served by an approach that relies on engagement and services rather than just suppression. We cannot agree, however, that the mapping project as it has been described furthers any of these worthy goals.

In that spirit of transparency and dialogue, we would like to meet with you to discuss our concerns about this program and to engage on these important public safety and civil liberties issues. You can contact us through Ranjana Natarajan or Peter Bibring at 213-977-9500 x.236 or x.295, respectively. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



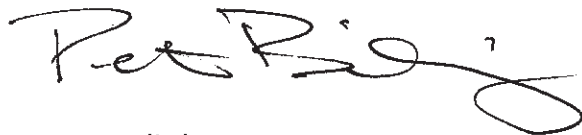
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Council on American Islamic Relations



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cc: Police Chief William Bratton
Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa
Councilmember Jack Weiss