What's Special About Special Registration?

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Recommended Citation

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: What's Special About Special Registration?
Author: Editor
Volume: 15
Issue: 12
Date: 2003-12-05
Keywords: Arab, Department of Homeland Security, Muslims, Special Registration Program

Abstract: This article discusses reasons why the Special Registration Program of the United States (US) Department of Homeland Security that required the fingerprinting, photographing, and interviewing of Muslim and Arab non-citizens within the US was problematic, evaluating the potential efficacy of the program in the process.

According to Swarns (2003), authorities of the United States (US) Department of Homeland Security have decided to stop aspects of the Special Registration Program that has required fingerprinting, photographing, and interviewing of Muslim and Arab non-citizens within the US. Stopping such activities might be warranted because they already have been successful, they have failed, they have not been effective from a utility and/or cost perspective, or they have become unappealing based on political Issues having little to do with security. Given that the program's rationale bears on limiting the threat from specific population segments to homeland security, including aviation security, an assessment of the program and its consequences merits attention.

The focus of the program on Muslim and Arab non-citizens is problematic. This focus is predicated on the assumption that non-citizens may be more of a threat than citizens and that a specific religious and ethnic background may be more of a threat among non-citizens. How qualitative and quantitative analyses of these assumptions are developed will color these assumptions' utility. For example, the base rates of behavior contraindicating good security manifested by individuals from the background in question may be so low that the very development of a security program that could demonstrate a combined false positive and false negative error rate superior to a program not registering anyone might be very difficult.

As part of the above perspective, one would need to make political decisions about whether huge numbers of people being registered would be worth the very small numbers of true positive identifications made of actual security threats. As well, one would need to assume that actual security threats would become aware of the Muslim/Arab profiling in operation and select, if possible, individuals who look like they were not Muslim/Arab. In addition, one would need to assess that the very security program—special registration—could actually engender more security threats to the US through inducing anger and resentment on the part of some Muslim/Arab individuals than would be minimized by successful identification of actual security threats.

Moreover, definitions of actual security threat might inflate or deflate accurate estimates of the program's success. For example, Swarns (2003) cites 11 Muslim/Arab individuals being linked to terrorism out of "85,000 men who went to immigration offices….as well as tens of thousands screened at airports and border crossings." Linked to terrorism might denote anything from being on the way to blow up an aircraft to having attended a religious service at a mosque frequented by an individual who himself had a tenuous terrorism linkage.

Another problematic focus might be the use to which registration data might be put. There would be two main uses. First, an individual might provide threat-related information during an interview.

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Second, photographs, fingerprints, and interview data would be matched with information from data bases. In the first case—save for bald, outright declarations of malevolent intent—relevant information might be contingent on sophisticated questions and questioning procedures. Yet at least public accounts of questions and questioning procedures belie such sophistication. In the second case, one would need to assume that data bases are comprehensive or sensitive enough to contain matching information. This assumption may be approaching some sort of reality but may also be seriously impeded by the springing forth of new security threats who have not yet and who have already come to the US and who have not yet engaged in threatening behavior even while being a threat.

The Special Registration Program—in some or all of its publicly declaimed aspects—may contribute to reassurance of the general public that something with face validity is being done to identify and counter security threats from terrorism. However, as with skin-deep beauty, the more one looks behind the face, the less one might find of lasting value. (See Byles, J.M. (2003). Psychoanalysis and War: The Superego and Projective Identification. Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society, 8, 208-213; El-Haj, T. R. Abu. (2002). Contesting the politics of culture, rewriting the boundaries of inclusion: Working for social justice with Muslim and Arab communities. Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 33, 308-316; Special registration for certain non-immigrants. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. http://www.dhs.gov; Swarns, R.L. (November 22, 2003). Special registration for Arab immigrants will reported stop. The New York Times, p. A30.)

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