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LAPD defends Muslim mapping effort

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CARLOS CHAVEZ / LOS ANGELES TIMES

PRAYERS: Worshipers arrive at the King Fahd Mosque on Friday. Skeptics of the police program say U.S. Muslims are dispersed, reject extremism, are generally satisfied with their lives and have little in common with their counterparts in Europe, where low-income enclaves can breed terrorism.

BY RICHARD WINTON

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The LAPD's plan to map Muslim communities in an effort to identify potential hotbeds of extremism departs from the way law enforcement has dealt with local anti-terrorism since 9/11 and prompted widespread skepticism Friday.

In a document reviewed Friday by The Times, the LAPD's Los Angeles Police Department's counter-terrorism bureau proposed using U.S. census data and other demographic information to pinpoint various Muslim communities and then reach out to them through social service

agencies. FOR THE RECORD:

Muslim mapping: In Saturday's Section A, a photograph caption with a story about a Los Angeles Police Department program to map Muslim communities said, "Mohammed Abdul Aleem, center, with Faisal Ansari, left, and Siraz Bawa says ideas like the LAPD program push moderate Muslims toward extremism." The caption should have made clear that the statement about pushing moderate Muslims toward extremism was Aleem's alone. —

LAPD officials said that it is crucial for them to gain a better understanding of isolated parts of the Muslim community. Those groups can potentially breed violent extremism, the LAPD said in its plan.

"This is not . . . targeting or profiling," Police Chief William J. Bratton said Friday in defending the program. "It is an effort to understand communities," he said.

But the effort sparked an outcry from civil libertarians and some Muslim activists, who compared the program to religious profiling.

Others noted that the effort faces enormous practical difficulties. The U.S. Census Bureau is barred by law from asking people for their religious affiliation. As a result, there is no scientific data on the size of the nation's Muslim population, let alone its location, with estimates of the population nationwide ranging from about 1.4 million adults in a Pew Research Center study this year to the 7 million or more claimed by some community organizations.

Census data on ancestry also would not yield accurate Muslim estimates, because significant numbers of ethnic Iranians are Jewish and many ethnic Lebanese, Palestinians and Syrians are Christians.

"It's not realistic to think you are going to be able to find out where all the Muslims are," said Salam Al-Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

Hussam Ayloush of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Anaheim said the LAPD project seemed based on the European experience of isolated and often-distressed Muslim enclaves -- a model that doesn't apply to the United States, where the Muslim population is far more dispersed.

American Muslims differ from their European co-religionists in several other respects. A Pew survey of 1,050 adult American Muslims nationwide found them to be "largely assimilated, happy with their lives and moderate." Although two-thirds are immigrants, most respondents said Muslims should integrate into U.S. society rather than isolate themselves.

The survey found striking differences between American Muslims and their European counterparts, with more in the U.S. rejecting extremism and supporting coexistence with Israel. Only 2% of American Muslims were low-income, compared with rates of 18% and higher in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Spain.

The LAPD's proposal differs substantially from the way federal counter-terrorism authorities have dealt with Southern California's Muslim community.

Stung by decades of controversy over its monitoring of antiwar and civil rights groups, the FBI has been wary of post-9/11 initiatives that would draw criticism that its anti-terrorism efforts are based on racial profiling of Muslims.

As a result, its counter-terrorism efforts have been largely driven by informants, intelligence reports or specific incidents that direct attention to a particular group or community.

"We learned our lesson early on," one retired FBI counter-terrorism official said Friday.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, questioned the logic of the mapping program, reasoning that the wholesale plotting of Muslim communities -- rather than zeroing in on suspected extremists -- could drain counter-terrorism resources and alienate Muslim residents at a time when they are crucial to law enforcement efforts.

Al-Marayati and others who gathered for Friday prayer at the Islamic Center of Southern California questioned the premise of the mapping project. There were no clearly defined Muslim neighborhoods in Southern California, he said.

Some neighborhoods are known for large Middle Eastern populations, but often their residents are not Muslim. Beverly Hills, for example, has a sizable and well-known Iranian population, but many of them are Persian Jews.

Mosque member Omar Ricci, offspring of a Pakistani Muslim mother and Italian American Catholic father, said he has more Armenian Christian neighbors than Muslims on his street in Glendale.

Maher Hathout, an Egyptian native and retired physician, who is a spokesman for the Islamic Center, said his neighborhood in Arcadia is an ethnic and religious polyglot; he said he was more familiar with his Christian next-door neighbor than the Muslims who live a few doors away. The mosque is on Vermont Avenue in Koreatown.

The backlash against the program was intense enough Friday that LAPD's planned partner in

the project, USC's National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events, said it was carefully studying whether to join the endeavor.

"I realize that there are many concerns with a potential mapping project related to profiling, privacy and civil liberties," center Director Detlof von Winterfeldt said in a statement.

But LAPD leaders stood behind the proposal.

Hoping to defuse the controversy, Bratton said Friday that the LAPD's plan is in its early stages and extended an invitation to meet with critics to hear their suggestions on how to advance what he described as a "community engagement effort."

In outlining the program last week before a congressional committee, Deputy Police Chief Michael P. Downing, who heads the counter-terrorism operation, said the department's plan was designed to minimize the radicalization of Muslims in Los Angeles. Instead of relying on experts, he said, the mapping would produce a "richer picture" of the community and guide future strategies.

"While this project will lay out geographic locations of many different Muslim populations around Los Angeles, we also intend to take a deeper look at their history, demographics, language, culture, ethnic breakdown, socioeconomic status and social interactions," he said. "It is also our hope to identify communities, within the larger Muslim community which may be susceptible to violent ideologically based extremism and then use a full spectrum approach guided by intelligence-led strategy."

On Friday, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa defended the LAPD's efforts.

"Chief Downing has good intentions here," said Villaraigosa, who added that he had only learned of the new program through newspaper articles and at a short briefing.

But some Muslims fear that the police intervention in their communities could have the opposite effect from what officials intended.

"Anytime the administration talks about attacking Iran, anytime they start to float ideas like these, we are pushed more toward extremism," Mohammed Abdul Aleem, 49, of Culver City said. "Every time our president opens his mouth, there are more people joining Al Qaeda."

To Aleem, the LAPD's plan to map out the city's Muslim community will do nothing more than "fuel the fire."

"It's making it harder and harder for the moderate Muslims," he said.

Times staff writer Jean-Paul Renaud contributed to this report.

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