

Restore the Fourth and Partners Call on the FBI to Dismantle "Don't be a Puppet" Website

FBI's Interactive 'Anti-Extremism' Website Stigmatizes Youth of Color and Deters Expression of First Amendment Protected Views

BELMONT, Mass. - April 10, 2016 - [PRLog](#) -- Restore the Fourth has joined a coalition of civil rights organizations in calling on the FBI to dismantle the agency's "Don't Be a Puppet" website and more broadly re-evaluate the FBI's strategy for countering violent extremism. In a letter addressed to FBI director James Comey, Restore the Fourth - in conjunction with the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, American Civil Liberties Union, Bill of Rights Defense Committee, and ten other advocacy groups - expressed opposition to the "Don't Be a Puppet" program's promotion of ethnic, religious, and ideological profiling.

"Don't Be a Puppet" is an interactive website that, according to the FBI, aims to "open the eyes of teens to the devastating reality and deceptive messaging of violent extremism and to help strengthen their resistance to radicalization and possible recruitment. However, instead of effectively preventing extremist violence, the website "perpetuates profiling and negative stereotypes that Arabs, Sikhs, South Asians, Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim are prone to engage in extremist violence and encourages the policing of thoughts, ideas, and beliefs."

The video game advises students to report acquaintances or friends who may be "traveling to places that sound suspicious." As our letter notes, "this warning is extremely troublesome because of the subjective and vague concept of a 'place that sounds suspicious'...there should be nothing inherently suspicious about traveling either to Saudi Arabia or Iraq, where some Muslim holy sites are located, bias could lead individuals to report innocent, constitutionally protected activity to law enforcement." The website employs similarly ambiguous language in warning online visitors that the use of "code words or unusual language" may be a warning sign of someone planning to commit violent extremism.

Moreover, by deputizing teachers to look for "warning signs" in the classroom, the program risks undermining trust between students and instructors as well as hinders the "free exchange of speech, ideas, and debate on controversial topics because students are afraid of being labeled suspect and being reported to the police." As Georgetown University Law Professor Arjun S. Sethi explains:

"Teachers in classrooms should not become an extension of law enforcement. The program is based on flawed theories of radicalization, namely that individuals radicalize in the exact same way and it's entirely discernible. But it's not, and the FBI is basically asking teachers and students to suss these things out."

The website's messaging is particularly troublesome given the chilling rise of Islamophobia in American schools. According to a California State University analysis, "hate crimes against Muslim Americans and mosques across the United States have tripled in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino." Sadly, children and adolescents have not been untouched by this spike in anti-Muslim bigotry. Last November, "a sixth-grade girl in the Bronx was reportedly attacked by three boys who tried to take off the hijab she was wearing, punched her and called her 'ISIS'."

In light of this intensifying climate of fear and suspicion, Restore the Fourth asks that Federal law enforcement not exacerbate religious and ethnic discrimination by perpetuating negative stereotypes of Arab and Muslim Americans. In addition to taking down the "Don't Be a Puppet" website, Restore the Fourth urges the FBI to take into consideration the recommendations of a May 2015 9/11 Review Commission report that found that the FBI's Countering Violent Extremism Office's "current limited budget

and fundamental law enforcement and intelligence responsibilities do not make it an appropriate vehicle for the social and prevention role in the CVE mission...such initiatives are best undertaken by other government agencies." Accordingly, Restore the Fourth asks that the FBI instead invest in evidence-based investigations that protect public safety and don't unjustly stigmatize communities of color.

Visit <http://restorethe4th.com/letter-to-the-fbi-dismantle-dont...> for additional details.

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