

April 5, 2016

**VIA PRIORITY MAIL**

The Honorable James B. Comey Jr.  
Director, Federal Bureau of Investigations  
935 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20535

**RE: "Don't Be a Puppet" Website**

Dear Director Comey:

The undersigned organizations write to express deep disappointment regarding the "Don't Be a Puppet" program and request that the website be dismantled. Despite attempts by some of our organizations to provide constructive and meaningful feedback, 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 "Don't Be a Puppet" website, for example, gives the false impression that there is a path to becoming a violent extremist, and that teachers and community leaders should look for "warning signs" that a person may be on what the site calls the "slippery slope of violent extremism." Studies have continuously disproven the idea that there are "indicators" that a person is likely to commit an act of extremist violence.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many of the signs referenced on the website bear no connection to criminal activity and are, in fact, protected by the First Amendment.

In addition, the website calls for individuals to report innocuous activity that bears no meaningful relation to or indication of violent extremism. For example, the website encourages individuals to "contact someone you trust if someone you know is . . . traveling to places that sound suspicious." This warning is extremely troublesome because of the subjective and vague concept of a "place that sounds suspicious." A trip to France or Germany, which are home to many far-right groups, is not likely to be considered suspicious by most teachers and community leaders. Although 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 also asks individuals to contact someone they trust if individuals are "using code words or unusual language", "using several different private cell phones and private messaging apps," or "studying or taking pictures of potential targets (like a government building)". Again, bias could easily lead individuals to conclude that speaking foreign languages, such as Arabic, amounts to using "unusual language." They may also draw improper inferences that Arabs, Muslims or South Asians who are using Internet applications, or visiting and photographing monuments or other attractions for tourism reasons, are somehow engaging in suspicious behavior.

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<sup>1</sup> Faiza Patel, *Rethinking Radicalization*, Brennan Center for Justice, 2011.

In addition, the only Arab Muslim American featured on the website is portrayed in a negative light. Unlike all of the other testimonial videos, this video focuses on the woman's interaction with the FBI instead of the impact of the hate crime. The woman states that she went to the "enemy," referring to the FBI, to report her hate crime. Her remarks conclude with, "I survived my hate crime" and "I'm not handcuffed." We are troubled this video depicts a Muslim, Arab-American as someone who (1) sees the FBI as an enemy, and (2) expresses satisfaction that the interaction with the FBI did not lead to her arrest.

Furthermore, the use of the terms "extremist" and "radical" as shorthand for "violent extremism" throughout the website improperly reinforces the idea that holding views that may be outside the mainstream equates to support for violent extremism. The website would have teachers and community leaders ("trusted adults") determine whether views are extremist or radical and report them to police, inappropriately discouraging views protected by the First Amendment.

Disturbingly, "Don't Be a Puppet" also encourages the use of the website in schools, namely social studies, civic and government classes. While the website may not lay out the curriculum of how this program is implemented, the fact that the FBI, a federal law enforcement agency, is endorsing its use in our schools is problematic. Not only will "Don't Be a Puppet" hinder 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, but it will also isolate students and possibly subject them to bullying.

In sum, this website will seriously damage trusted relationships between educators and students and cannot be described as a legitimate or credible law enforcement tool. We strongly urge you to dismantle the "Don't Be a Puppet" website.

Sincerely,

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)  
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)  
Bill of Rights Defense Committee/Defending Dissent Foundation  
Committee to Stop FBI Repression  
DRUM - Desis Rising Up & Moving  
Friends of Human Rights  
Muslim Advocates  
Muslim Legal Fund of America  
National Coalition to Protect Civil Freedoms  
Restore The Fourth  
Roots Action  
Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center  
The Sikh Coalition  
X-Lab

Cc. Brian Murphy, Federal Bureau of Investigation