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Wiretap mosques, Romney suggests Pushes gathering of intelligence

Author: Scott Helman, Globe Staff

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WASHINGTON -- Governor Mitt Romney raised the prospect of wiretapping mosques and conducting surveillance of foreign students in Massachusetts, as he issued a broad call yesterday for the federal government to devote far more money and attention to domestic intelligence gathering.

In remarks that caused alarm among civil libertarians and advocates for immigrants rights, Romney said in a speech to the Heritage Foundation that the United States needs to radically rethink how it guards itself against terrorism.

"How many individuals are coming to our state and going to those institutions who have come from terrorist-sponsored states?" he said, referring to foreign students who attend universities in Massachusetts. "Do we know where they are? Are we tracking them?"

"How about people who are in settings -- mosques, for instance -- that may be teaching doctrines of hate and terror," Romney continued. "Are we monitoring that? Are we wiretapping? Are we following what's going on?" As he ponders a potential run for president in 2008, Romney has positioned himself as a homeland security expert: He sits on a federal homeland security advisory council, is active on the issue with the National Governors Association, and repeatedly speaks about the lessons the country has learned from the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 and, more recently, from Hurricane Katrina.

Romney, who referred to himself yesterday as "red-state folk," has also struck more conservative postures on social issues that may alienate voters in Massachusetts but endear him to the Republican electorate nationwide; his tough talk on antiterrorism measures could also earn him support among conservatives.

His latest message is that the United States needs to shift its focus from response to prevention: Instead of spending billions on training and equipment to react to an attack, he argues, the country ought to work on stopping one.

"It is virtually impossible to have a homeland security system based upon the principles only of protecting key assets and response," he told an audience of about 100. "The key to a multilayered strategy begins with effective prevention, and, for me, prevention begins with intelligence and counterterror activity."

But that activity is deeply troubling to civil rights groups. Ali Noorani, executive director of the Massachusetts Immigrants and Refugee Advocacy Coalition, called the methods Romney suggested misguided and ineffective. Tracking people based on their ethnicity, he said, will only sow resentment among immigrant communities and prevent their cooperation with authorities.

"Blanket eavesdropping and blanket profiling only erodes the safety and security of our country," Noorani said. "People who really know what national security is and what intelligence is realize that we need to build trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities."

Elyes Yaich, president of the Islamic Society of Northeastern University, said that foreign students, especially those from Islamic countries, already face unfair scrutiny coming to the United States and that subjecting them to specialized monitoring would further invade their right to privacy.



"It's something that shouldn't happen," Yaich said. "If they're going to do surveillance, why not do it for synagogues and churches, too?"

Nancy Murray, director of education for the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, said international students are already forced to submit personal data to a federal database designed to let the government closely track them. Keeping closer tabs would only cause a greater chilling effect on scholars coming here from other countries.

"Now they're beginning to think, 'Well, why don't we just go somewhere else?' " Murray said. "We are really going to fall behind. It's very shortsighted."

Asked to respond to that criticism, Romney spokeswoman Julie Teer said last night that the governor has a "realistic view" of what it takes to fight terrorism.

"The governor believes we can strike a balance between what is necessary to protect our homeland while respecting individual freedom and liberty," Teer said.

Romney said he believes that both state and federal governments have a role in intelligence-gathering. It is the FBI's job to do wiretapping and surveillance, he said, but Massachusetts has a responsibility to collect any useful information it can.

Central to that is a facility opened last year at the State Police headquarters in Framingham designed to be the clearinghouse for a variety of intelligence gathered in the state. At the facility, which state officials call "the fusion center," analysts armed with tips and information from residents, police, water-meter readers, and others, will pore through the data, look for patterns, and contact Washington about anything noteworthy.

Romney wants to see every state have such a system, which allows it to easily send intelligence to Washington and easily get intelligence back.

"It's the state's responsibility to figure out how to gather that information and fuse it together . . . to determine where the real threats exist," Romney said.

The ACLU has been critical of the fusion center. The group has asked whether collecting loads of data, much of which is sure to prove useless, is the most effective way to prevent a terrorist attack.

"It just seems like we're getting more and more driven by the need to fight the war on terrorism in a very counterproductive way," Murray said.

Romney stressed in his address at the Heritage Foundation that the country's antiterrorism and military operations have to be "nimble, agile, and fast-moving." He said the distribution of antiterrorism money after 9/11 was haphazard and ineffective.

Cities and towns in Massachusetts and nationwide seized the opportunity to buy new fire trucks and unnecessary equipment, he said. "It was everybody grabbing money as fast as we could."

If the response to Hurricane Katrina was any indication, the extra funds did not appear to have helped, he said. Romney was one of the first high-profile Republicans to criticize the federal government's response to the hurricane, calling it "an embarrassment." But in the two weeks since, he has reserved most of his criticism for state and local governments, in particular Louisiana's Democratic governor, Kathleen Blanco.

Yesterday, Romney did not criticize Blanco by name, though he did so implicitly a few times. At one point, he said that one clear failure in the response to Katrina was a lack of "fast-moving decision-making and clear authority." He said there would be no such leadership vacuum if a disaster hit Massachusetts.



"In my state, it's me," he said. "The governor's in charge. I got it."

Answering a question yesterday about the National Guard, Romney said he believes there is no need for a military draft, calling it "totally unnecessary."

The Heritage audience was highly receptive to Romney yesterday, giving him a rousing welcome and lengthy applause as he concluded his remarks. The foundation promotes study of issues important to conservatives.

Scott Helman can be reached at shelman@globe.com. Globe correspondent Chase Davis contributed to this report.