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Wide Net Cast For Terrorism Watch Lists

1,000 New Names Analyzed Each Day for FBI Master File

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Each day, thousands of pieces of intelligence information from around the world -- field reports, captured documents, news from foreign allies and sometimes idle gossip -- arrive in a computer-filled office in McLean, where analysts feed them into the nation's central list of terrorists and terrorism suspects.

Called TIDE, for Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment, the list is a storehouse for data about individuals that the intelligence community believes might harm the United States. It is the wellspring for watch lists distributed to airlines, law enforcement, border posts and U.S. consulates, created to close one of the key intelligence gaps revealed after Sept. 11, 2001: the failure of federal agencies to share what they knew about al-Qaeda operatives.

But in addressing one problem, TIDE has spawned others. Ballooning from fewer than 100,000 files in 2003 to about 435,000, the growing database threatens to overwhelm the people who manage it. "The single biggest worry that I have is long-term quality control," said Russ Travers, in charge of TIDE at the National Counterterrorism Center in McLean. "Where am I going to be, where is my successor going to be, five years down the road?"

TIDE has also created concerns about secrecy, errors and privacy. The list marks the first time foreigners and U.S. citizens are combined in an intelligence database. The bar for inclusion is low, and once someone is on the list, it is virtually impossible to get off it. At any stage, the process can lead to "horror stories" of mixed-up names and unconfirmed information, Travers acknowledged.

The watch lists fed by TIDE, used to monitor everyone entering the country or having even a casual encounter with federal, state and local law enforcement, have a higher bar. But they have become a source of irritation -- and potentially more serious consequences -- for many U.S. citizens and visitors.

In 2004 and 2005, misidentifications accounted for about half of the tens of thousands of times a traveler's name triggered a watch-list hit, the Government Accountability Office reported in September. Congressional committees have criticized the process, some charging that it collects too much information about Americans, others saying it is ineffective against terrorists. Civil rights and privacy groups have called for increased transparency.

"How many are on the lists, how are they compiled, how is the information used, how do they verify it?" asked Lillie Coney, associate director of the Washington-based Electronic Privacy Information Center. Such information is classified, and individuals barred from traveling are not told why.

Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) said last year that his wife had been delayed repeatedly while airlines queried whether Catherine Stevens was the watch-listed Cat Stevens. The listing referred to the Britain-based pop singer who converted to Islam and changed his name to Yusuf Islam. The reason Islam is not allowed to fly is secret.

So is the reason Maher Arar, a Syrian-born Canadian, remains on the State Department's consular watch list. Detained in New York while en route to Montreal in 2002, Arar was sent by the U.S. government to a year of imprisonment in Syria. Canada, the source of the initial information about Arar, cleared him of all terrorism allegations last September -- three years after his release -- and has since authorized \$9 million in compensation.

TIDE is a vacuum cleaner for both proven and unproven information, and its managers disclaim responsibility for how other agencies use the data. "What's the alternative?" Travers said. "I work under the assumption that we're never going to have perfect information -- fingerprints, DNA -- on 6 billion people across the planet. . . . If someone actually has a

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better idea, I'm all ears."

'Thousands of Messages'

The electronic journey a piece of terrorism data takes from an intelligence outpost to an airline counter is interrupted at several points for analysis and condensation.

President Bush ordered the intelligence community in 2003 to centralize data on terrorism suspects, and U.S. agencies at home and abroad now send everything they collect to TIDE. It arrives electronically as names to be added or as additional information about people already in the system.

The 80 TIDE analysts get "thousands of messages a day," Travers said, much of the data "fragmentary," "inconsistent" and "sometimes just flat-out wrong." Often the analysts go back to the intelligence agencies for details. "Sometimes you'll get sort of corroborating information," he said, "but many times you're not going to get much. What we use here, rightly or wrongly, is a reasonable-suspicion standard."

Each TIDE listee is given a number, and statistics are kept on nationality and ethnic and religious groups. Some files include aliases and sightings, and others are just a full or partial name, perhaps with a sketchy biography. Sunni and Shiite Muslims are the fastest-growing categories in a database whose entries include Saudi financiers and Colombian revolutionaries. U.S. citizens -- who Travers said make up less than 5 percent of listings -- are included if an "international terrorism nexus" is established. A similar exception for the administration's warrantless wiretap program came under court challenge from privacy and civil rights advocates.

Information Sharing

Every night at 10, TIDE dumps an unclassified version of that day's harvest -- names, dates of birth, countries of origin and passport information -- into a database belonging to the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center. TIDE's most sensitive information is not included. The FBI adds data about U.S. suspects with no international ties for a combined daily total of 1,000 to 1,500 new names.

Between 5 and 6 a.m., a shift of 24 analysts drawn from the agencies that use watch lists begins a new winnowing process at the center's Crystal City office. The analysts have access to case files at TIDE and the original intelligence sources, said the center's acting director, Rick Kopel.

Decisions on what to add to the Terrorist Screening Center master list are made by midafternoon. The bar is higher than TIDE's; total listings were about 235,000 names as of last fall, according to Justice Department Inspector General Glenn A. Fine. The bar is then raised again as agencies decide which names to put on their own watch lists: the Transportation Security Administration's "no-fly" and "selectee" lists for airlines; Consular Lookout and Support System at the State Department; the Interagency Border and Inspection System at the Department of Homeland Security; and the Justice Department's National Crime Information Center. The criteria each agency use are classified, Kopel said.

Some information may raise a red flag for one agency but not another. "There's a big difference between CLASS and no-fly," Kopel said, referring to State's consular list. "About the only criteria CLASS has is that you're not a U.S. person. . . . Say 'a Mohammed from Syria.' That's useless for me to watch-list here in the United States. But if I'm in Damascus processing visas . . . that might be enough for someone to . . . put a hold on the visa process."

All of the more than 30,000 individuals on the TSA's no-fly list are prohibited from entering an aircraft in the United States. People whose names appear on the longer selectee list -- those the government believes merit watching but does not bar from travel -- are supposed to be subjected to more intense scrutiny.

With little to go on beyond names, airlines find frequent matches. The screening center agent on call will check the file for markers such as sex, age and prior "encounters" with the list. The agent might ask the airlines about the passenger's eye color, height or defining marks, Kopel said. "We'll say, 'Does he have any rings on his left hand?' and they'll say, 'Uh, he doesn't have a left hand.' Okay. We know that [the listed person] lost his left hand making a bomb."

If the answers indicate a match, that "encounter" is fed back into the FBI screening center's files and ultimately to TIDE. Kopel said the agent never tells the airline whether the person trying to board is the suspect. The airlines decide whether to allow the customer to fly.

TSA receives thousands of complaints each year, such as this one released to the Electronic Privacy Information Center in 2004 under the Freedom of Information Act: "Apparently, my name is on some watch list because everytime I fly, I get delayed while the airline personnel call what they say is TSA," wrote a passenger whose name was blacked out. Noting that he was a high-level federal worker, he asked what he could do to remove his name from the list.

The answer, Kopel said, is little. A unit at the screening center responds to complaints, he said, but will not remove a name if it is shared by a terrorism suspect. Instead, people shown to not be terrorists can be issued letters instructing airline personnel to check with the TSA to verify their identity. The GAO reported that 31 names were removed in 2005.

A Process Under Fire

A recent review of the entire Terrorist Screening Center database was temporarily abandoned when it proved too much work even for the night crew, which generally handles less of a workload. But the no-fly and selectee lists are being scrubbed to emphasize "people we think are a danger to the plane, and not for some other reason they met the criteria," Kopel said.

A separate TSA system that would check every passenger name against the screening center's database has been shelved over concern that it could grow into a massive surveillance program. The Department of Homeland Security was rebuked by Congress in December for trying to develop a risk-assessment program to profile travelers entering and leaving the United States based on airline and financial data.

Kopel insisted that private information on Americans, such as credit-card records, never makes it into the screening center database and that "we rely 100 percent on government-owned information."

The center came in for ridicule last year when CBS's "60 Minutes" noted that 14 of the 19 Sept. 11 hijackers were listed -- five years after their deaths. Kopel defended the listings, saying that "we know for a fact that these people will use names that they believe we are not going to list because they're out of circulation -- either because they're dead or incarcerated. . . It's not willy-nilly. Every name on the list, there's a reason that it's on there."

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