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The NYPD: Spies, Spooks and Lies

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The New York City Police Department has been spying on hundreds of Muslim mosques, schools, businesses, student groups, non-governmental organizations and individuals, NYPD Confidential has learned.

The spying operation has targeted virtually every level of Muslim life in New York City, from cafes to grammar schools, according to a trove of pages of Intelligence Division documents obtained by NYPD Confidential.

The documents do not specify whether the police have evidence or solid suspicious of criminality to justify their watching the Muslim groups.

The breadth and scope of the surveillance described in the documents suggest that the police have been painting with a broad brush and may have targeted subjects without specific tips about wrongdoing.

The NYPD's spying operation has compiled information on 250 mosques, 12 Islamic schools, 31 Muslim Student Associations, 263 places it calls "ethnic hotspots," such as businesses and restaurants as well as 138 "persons of interest," according to the Intel documents.

Police have singled out 53 mosques, four Islamic schools and seven Muslim student associations as institutions of "concern." They have also labeled 42 individuals as top tier "persons of interest."

At least 32 mosques have been infiltrated by either undercover officers, informants, or both, according to documents, which are dated between 2003 and 2006 and marked "secret."

The NYPD has also been monitoring Muslim Student Associations at seven local colleges: City College, Baruch, and Queens, LaGuardia and St. John's and Brooklyn College.

The department calls the two student groups at Brooklyn and Baruch colleges "of concern" and has sent undercover detectives to spy on them, the documents reveal.

The department defines Muslim Student Associations as "a university based student group, with an Islamic focus, involved with religious and political activities."

The documents reveal that an Intelligence Division Cyber Unit has monitored MSAs at Brooklyn, City and Queens colleges.

The department also lists 10 non-governmental organizations as "of concern." According to the documents, all ten organizations have been spied upon by NYPD undercovers, informants, detectives with the Joint Terrorist Task Force or what the documents describe as a "secondary." On the NYPD list of 42 top tier "persons of interest" are: a corrections officer, a former imam, an un-indicted co-conspirator in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, a lecturer at Brooklyn College and what the department describes as a "Brooklyn College MSA member [who] has expressed desire to be a suicide bomber in Palestine."

The police have spied on all these people with either an undercover officer, an informant or both, the documents say.

The NYPD has also conducted spying operations within the state prisons on prisoners and imams. It has identified seven prisons "of concern": Shawangunk, Gouverneur, Green Haven, Fishkill, Woodbourne, Attica and Great Meadow. The police have also compiled information on about 200-250 inmates from "countries of concern," identified in the documents as Algeria, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tanzania and Yemen, the documents show. They have also compiled information on the top five mosques called from prisons, the documents show.

The documents include a map of the city, which it calls a "Primary Defensive Perimeter."

There is also a pie chart with a percentage breakdown by country of origin of the city's Muslim communities.

Another map shows parts of New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania and calls this area an "Expanded Defensive Perimeter." The department has sent detectives outside the city to these four states on undercover missions, although the NYPD lacks legal jurisdiction outside New York City.

And there is the NYPD's own special language. Some "persons of interest" are described as "ideological detonators -- Those who endorse and/or plan an act of violence." Others are called "detonatees -- Those who are more likely to commit an act of violence."

One of the four Islamic schools that the department cited as a "school of concern" is the Al-Noor School in Brooklyn, which runs classes from kindergarten to high school and [describes itself](#) as "one of the largest and fastest growing Islamic schools in America. ... committed to the pursuance of excellence in Islamic and academic studies, the inculcation of Islamic values and morals and the development of a strong attachment of students to the Islamic culture."

Lamis Deek, an attorney and Palestinian activist for Arab communities, said: "The leadership of many schools, especially Al-Noor, has repeatedly reached out to invite Commissioner Kelly every year to say to the NYPD and other law enforcement agencies, 'We are here to help you.'

"They have attempted to build a relationship of trust with the NYPD but no matter what they do, they are seen as targets and as suspects. Here they are extending this trust but instead are being surveilled and betrayed and abused."

Since 2003, this column has written about the NYPD's out-of-state spying on political groups; the department's botched sting operation in New Jersey; and a connection to the CIA through Deputy Commissioner of the Intelligence Division David Cohen, a former top CIA official, and through Larry Sanchez, another former CIA official, who, until his retirement earlier this year, was listed in the police roster as an NYPD Assistant Commissioner of the Intelligence Division.

Last month, Associated Press reporters in Washington uncovered evidence that the NYPD's spying is far larger than previously reported. The AP report [stated](#) that the department had targeted ethnic communities "in ways that would run afoul of civil liberties rules if practiced by the federal government."

"These operations have benefited from unprecedented help from the CIA, a partnership that has blurred the line between foreign and domestic spying," the AP said.

The NYPD maintained to the Associated Press that no spying had occurred without a criminal lead.

"We do not employ undercovers or confidential informants unless there is information indicating the possibility of unlawful activity," police spokesman Paul Browne [said](#). Browne also denied the existence of a demographics unit.

The documents obtained by NYPD Confidential appear to belie both Browne's statements. The Demographics Unit is cited numerous times in the documents.

Browne was said to be out of town and did not answer an email from this reporter. Deputy Inspector Kim Royster, a police spokeswoman, did not return a phone call.

Articulating the department's position on its spying, Browne also told the AP that the NYPD "is doing everything it can to make sure there's not another 9/11 here... And we have nothing to apologize for in that regard."

In the past he has justified the NYPD's spying by citing a shifting number of unnamed plots supposedly foiled by the department.

One highly publicized plot involved a Pakistani immigrant, Shawahar Matin Siraj, convicted of planning an attack on the Herald Square subway station days before the Republican National Convention was to begin. Testimony at the trial in Brooklyn federal court revealed that the police department paid \$100,000 to an undercover who encouraged Siraj in the bombing plot.

Both Kelly and Cohen have cited that the department's anti-terrorism efforts as having prevented a further attack on the city after 9/11.

Neither Mayor Michael Bloomberg nor City Councilman Peter Vallone, who heads the Council's Public Safety Committee, has publicly questioned the extent of the department's spying.

"Ray Kelly briefs me privately on certain subjects that should be not be discussed in public," Vallone told the AP.

Bloomberg said in response to the AP story that the NYPD does not take religion into account in its policing, a statement that, like Browne's, appears to be belied by the documents obtained by NYPD Confidential.

It appears that no one outside the police department is monitoring the NYPD's anti-terrorism measures. A former anti-terrorism commissioner described the NYPD as "a municipal agency operating like a mini-CIA."

"What safeguards are there to ensure that the NYPD doesn't break the law?" he said. "What mechanisms are in place to ensure that the NYPD, a municipal agency, does not become a rogue organization?"

"The NYPD has decided that the Muslim community as a whole is the enemy," says defense attorney Elizabeth Fink. She is representing Ahmed Ferhani, who was indicted in Manhattan State Supreme Court in June for planning to blow up two synagogues.

The case is controversial -- the FBI refused to participate, unofficially citing doubts about the reliability of the police undercover in the case, who developed evidence against Ferhani and another suspect.

For the first time in New York, a terrorism case is being tried in state, not federal court.