

New York City police, CIA in massive spying operation among Muslims

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The New York City Police Department, working in close collaboration with the Central Intelligence Agency, has carried out an unprecedented spying operation directed against Muslim immigrants and Muslim-Americans over the past decade. Details of the work of the NYPD's intelligence division were reported in a lengthy investigative article released by the Associated Press on August 24.

"A months-long investigation...has revealed that the NYPD operates far outside its borders and targets ethnic communities in ways that would run afoul of civil liberties rules if practiced by the federal government," the AP article states.

The FBI, partly as a result of revelations about the Cointelpro spying operations of the 1960s and 70s, has been legally banned from initiating investigations unless there is specific evidence of criminal activity.

The CIA is barred from conducting domestic law enforcement or internal security functions. Yet, it would appear that through the NYPD, it has found a new instrument for conducting illegal spying within the US itself.

The New York police department has successfully overturned earlier guidelines restricting its intelligence operations and has been engaged for some years in extensive data-gathering and surveillance in blatant violation of privacy rights and civil liberties.

The police intelligence division has sent hundreds of undercover cops into Muslim communities. They are called "rakers" because they are instructed, in the words of former officials who spoke to the AP, to "rake the coals, looking for hot spots." These plainclothes police have "monitored daily life in bookstores, bars, cafes and nightclubs." The police have also used "mosque crawlers," police informants whose job is to monitor sermons.

One of the most significant revelations in the AP report is the extent of the collaboration between the New York police and the CIA. Just as the September 11 terrorist attacks were utilized to launch invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, so they have also been employed to justify breaking down long-established barriers between foreign and domestic US

intelligence operations.

Moreover, New York City police intelligence agents have set up extra-legal operations outside of the NYPD's jurisdiction in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, without the NYPD bothering to inform either the FBI or the local police.

The transformation of the NYPD into an increasingly prominent counterintelligence and spying organization dates from billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg's appointment of David Cohen as its first civilian intelligence chief in January 2002, only four months after the attacks on the World Trade Center. Cohen had recently retired after a 35-year career at the CIA, where he held the most sensitive posts, including directing the agency's global clandestine operations as deputy director for operations. He will mark his 10th anniversary with the NYPD next January.

From his first days at New York's Police Headquarters, Cohen made it clear that he intended to vastly expand the department's intelligence operations. Within a year, he had succeeded in obtaining a court ruling overturning the Handschu agreement, an 18-year-old court order that placed some modest restrictions on New York police surveillance of political organizations. Before the Handschu agreement, the NYPD's Red Squad had been notorious for decades for its spying on political dissidents, including socialists, student radicals, Black Panthers and others.

The Handschu guidelines required evidence of criminal activity as a pre-condition for undertaking surveillance. In the eight years since these guidelines have been scrapped, the NYPD has taken full advantage of the additional leeway it secured. According to the AP story, however, it went even further, and its surveillance programs would not be possible if they fell under federal guidelines.

As the AP report explains, the intelligence division under Cohen sent Pakistani-American cops into Pakistani neighborhoods, Palestinian officers into Palestinian areas, and so on. "It's not a question of profiling," the AP quoted one retired police official, Mordecai Dzikansky, as claiming. "It's a question of going where the problem could arise.

And thank God we have the capability. We have the language capability and the ethnic officers. That's our hidden weapon."

The "hot spots" referred to above might be a beauty supply store selling chemicals that could be used to make bombs, or a broker who transfers money around the world, or an Internet café where computer browsing history could be studied. The rakers looked for bookstore customers reading "radical" literature. Restaurant patrons or bookstore customers were questioned if they behaved in a way that the police considered politically suspicious.

Cohen also turned to his former colleagues in the CIA for unprecedented assistance in setting up his New York operations. Then-CIA director George Tenet obliged by sending a veteran CIA operative, Larry Sanchez, to New York on temporary assignment. Sanchez remained on the CIA payroll while maintaining offices at both the city's police headquarters as well as the local CIA station. According to sources interviewed by the AP, the CIA official helped train and direct city police in their counterintelligence work among Muslims. Thus, while the CIA is legally banned from domestic spying operations, a high-ranking CIA official, operating under NYPD cover, is directing just such efforts.

The NYPD was concerned enough about possible legal challenges to its policies of widespread surveillance of law-abiding Muslims that it regularly shredded documents, according to the AP. Officials also feared that details of the spying operations might come out if challenged in court.

Another major effort of the police intelligence unit was the development of informants within Muslim communities. A Terrorist Interdiction Unit was dedicated to this task. Police detectives recruited shopkeepers and neighbors to keep cops up to date on local activities.

The department "also created what became known as the 'debriefing program,'" according to the AP, which essentially engages in coercion and blackmail to force immigrants and Muslim to turn informers.

"When someone is arrested who might be useful to the intelligence unit...he is singled out for extra questioning. Intelligence officials don't care about the underlying charges; they want to know more about his community and, ideally, they want to put him to work."

The New York police also reportedly promised favors to Muslim prisoners who agreed to work with them. They also sought information on New York's Pakistani taxi drivers, looking for those who might have obtained licenses illegally and could be pressured to become informers.

The NYPD-CIA spying operation under Police Commissioner Ray Kelly and Cohen has generated sharp tensions within intelligence circles. Senior FBI officials in

New York ordered their own agents not to accept reports from the so-called mosque crawlers because they did not approve of the tactic and resented the NYPD's encroachment on their turf.

While the bulk of the New York police's attention has been focused on the alleged threat from Muslims, there is plenty of evidence of broader aims. A lawsuit over the police infiltration of antiwar groups before the 2004 Republican Convention in New York City is still winding its way through the courts. Those arrested during the 2004 protests were asked about their political beliefs and activities, a modus operandi without precedent in at least the past 50 years.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Muslim-American advocacy group, has called for a federal investigation, saying that the AP report raises questions of whether the CIA collaboration with the NYPD violates the US Constitution, as well as a presidential order that bans the CIA from spying on US citizens.

The mantra of the NYPD under its commissioner Ray Kelly has been, as Kelly put it several years ago, that "we live in a different, more dangerous time..." and that the cops can be trusted to strike a balance between safety and civil liberties. The extensive details reported by the Associated Press establish that the NYPD, in collaboration with the CIA, has sought to exploit the events of 9/11 to secure support for police-state measures.

In the nearly 10 years since the expansion of the police's intelligence operations, almost every terror-related arrest has either led nowhere, or has been the result of crude entrapment techniques which are designed to manufacture nonexistent terror threats.

As the AP reports, "For Cohen, there was only one way to measure success. 'They haven't attacked us,' he said in a 2005 deposition."

By this logic, of course, the police can do no wrong. While the absence of new attacks is attributed to repression and spying, any new incident would be used to justify even more draconian attacks on civil rights and liberties. Behind these tactics is the growing preparation on the part of the ruling elite for dictatorial measures to be used against the working class as a whole.



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