

New York City joins Strong Cities “anti-terror” network, stepping up police surveillance

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New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced at the United Nations on September 29 that the city would be joining the Strong Cities Network (SCN), an international coalition of municipalities dedicated to “countering extremism.” The announcement drew immediate criticism from civil liberties and Muslim community organizations on grounds that the program will unfairly target Muslims.

The SCN consists of roughly 25 municipalities on five continents, including major cities like London, Paris, Atlanta and Minneapolis, with the stated tasks of sharing information, providing training to government officials, and a platform for municipalities to make statements. The SCN’s International Advisory Board is run by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a London based think-tank with ties to the defense ministries of Britain, Germany, and France.

Despite claims by de Blasio that the program will not target any religious or ethnic group, the decision to join the SCN is in line with the city’s policy of spying on a wide range of targeted political and minority groups, including anti-police violence activists and other protesters. In the case of Muslims, even after the de Blasio administration decided to disband the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) notorious Demographics Unit—a special unit of plainclothes officers tasked with collecting information on Muslims in New York City, New Jersey, and Long Island—police have continued to gather similar data through the use of informants.

Prior to de Blasio’s announcement, various civil liberties and advocacy organizations, including the New York Civil Liberties Union, the Center for Constitutional Rights and the Arab-American Association of New York, sent a letter to the mayor’s

office expressing “grave concerns” about New York’s participation in SCN. The letter notes that similar programs have had “adverse consequences, including stigmatizing Muslim communities as suspicious and in need of special monitoring.”

The SCN is a part of a broader effort going under the name of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), developed by the Department of Homeland Security. It is based on an earlier document issued by the Obama administration urging that, “local officials continue to build relationships within their communities through established community policing and community outreach mechanisms,” that is, though the cultivation of local informants, itself a mainstay of the “community policing” programs now underway in New York and other cities.

Earlier this year, the White House sponsored a three-day summit on CVE, which sought in part to “explore further collaboration between the government and municipalities...on empowering moderate voices” on social media, where they can “weaken the legitimacy and resonance of violent extremist messaging and narratives.”

For both federal and local governments “extremism” is a highly elastic term that has been applied to a wide range of opposition to the policies of the US government.

The letter from the New York groups addresses pilot programs around the US devoted to CVE, which have specifically targeted Muslims. It points out the CVE outreach programs have frequently been used to gather information on Muslims that was later passed on to federal authorities.

It also noted that CVE programs included “asking

teachers and social workers to identify students who they believe are at risk of violent extremism,” and that this will “result in the targeting of children for suspicion without any basis.”

In a section on “Securitizing Relationships with Schools and Social Services Providers,” the letter from the ACLU and the other groups points particularly to the case Ahmed Mohamed, a 14-year-old Muslim high school student in Texas who was arrested earlier this year for bringing a homemade clock to school. This “illustrates how high levels of suspicion about Muslims can lead to shocking outcomes.”

Disregarding these criticisms, de Blasio claimed that the SCN program would only target intolerance. He cited his administration’s decision to add Muslim holidays to the public school calendar, and the reduction of stop-and-frisk—the policy in which police regularly and repeatedly searched working class youth without cause, particularly in predominantly Black and Hispanic communities—as proof that he was interested in encouraging acceptance of religious and ethnic minorities and respecting civil liberties.

In fact, since de Blasio took office last year, he has, while attempting to maintain a “progressive” veneer, repeatedly backed attacks on democratic rights.

Following the decision to disbanding the NYPD’s Demographics Unit, for instance, his administration defended the decision to dismiss a 2012 lawsuit filed by six Muslim men and women against the NYPD for violating their Constitutional rights.

After Staten Island resident Eric Garner died as a result of being placed in a chokehold by police, de Blasio vowed to veto a law that would prosecute officers that used the chokehold.

The administration also announced earlier this year that it would hire 1,300 more cops, 300 of whom would be part of a special, heavily armed counterterrorism team. At the time, NYPD Commissioner William Bratton let slip that the purpose of this unit would be to deal with situations such as the protests that swept the city in the aftermath of Garner’s killing.

To keep up the pretense that the administration is an opponent of police brutality, Bratton announced on October 1 that a record of every use of force by the police would henceforth be kept. This was clearly a response to a report by the city’s Department of Investigation Inspector General for the NYPD, which

was issued on the same day.

The report specifically pointed out that the NYPD has no clear definition of the terms “force” or “excessive force,” and that “officers frequently use generic language that fails to capture the specifics of an encounter” when they fill out reports. It further noted that, in several of the 179 cases looked at by the inspector general, officers frequently escalated situations, and other cops do not intervene when they witness a colleague using excessive force.

Under the new regulations, the NYPD will have to record any incident when police strike, tackle or pepper-spray someone. Officers still will not be required to report other acts of intimidation and force, such as placing someone against a wall, or pointing a gun or other weapon at anyone.

These reforms, however, are completely dependent on cops reporting on themselves. The NYPD has routinely circumvented regulations, as in the case of chokeholds, which are still frequently used, despite the ban on this technique by the NYPD’s patrol manual.

De Blasio and the NYPD have every intention of using all the police-state “tools” available to them to protect the city’s wealthy elite from the increasingly impoverished and restless working population, and from opponents of the war drive of American imperialism.



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