

# NYPD MUSLIM SURVEILLANCE AND MAPPING PROGRAM

**IMPACT:** The New York Police Department's (NYPD) Muslim Surveillance and Mapping Program began under Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2001 and monitored Muslim communities in New York City and nearby states until 2014. A secret unit within the program called the Demographics Unit sent informants into mosques, Muslim student groups, and Muslim-owned businesses to gather information on 28 "ancestries of interest." The program never generated a lead for law enforcement, faced repeated challenges in court, and was met with accusations of religious and racial profiling. The program also sowed anxiety, suspicion, and distrust of law enforcement within Muslim communities.

- Following the attacks of 9/11, the NYPD Intelligence Division developed a surveillance program that **mapped, monitored, and profiled Muslim communities in New York City and nearby states.** In August 2011, the extent of the covert program was disclosed in a series of Pulitzer-Prize winning investigative reports by the *Associated Press* (AP). The reports revealed that the NYPD was spying on mosques as well as Muslim student groups, businesses, and community organizations, **undercutting claims that "its officers only follow leads when investigating terrorism."**
- The NYPD surveillance program began under Michael Bloomberg, who was elected mayor of New York City in 2001 and served until 2013. In a February 2020 interview on *PBS NewsHour*, Bloomberg defended the program stating that "we had every intention of going every place we could legally to get as much information to protect this country" and that "it's okay to go where you think there might be information that would be useful in keeping us safe." According to reporting by the AP, **the program "never generated a lead or triggered a terrorism investigation."**
- Under the surveillance program, the NYPD **"mapped out every mosque within 100 miles of New York" and initially studied "more than 250 mosques in New York and New Jersey."** By 2006, the NYPD had also identified 31 Muslim student associations and labeled seven of them 'MSAs of concern.' In New Jersey, surveillance "extended across at least 20 mosques, 14 restaurants, 11 shops, two schools and two Muslim student groups."
- A key component of the surveillance program was the Demographics Unit, which **mapped and monitored the daily life of 28 "ancestries of interest," including "almost every Muslim-majority country in the world, along with 'American Black Muslims.'** The unit consisted of undercover officers, known as "rakers," who would frequent "hot spots" such as mosques, hookah bars, bookstores, and restaurants to document information and report back to the unit. According to the AP, the NYPD identified 263 "hot spots." The rakers, who were matched to communities based on their "ethnic and linguistic backgrounds," recorded what they had experienced and heard in daily activity reports.
- The Demographics Unit was also composed of informants called "mosque crawlers," who would **"report on sermons, provide names of attendees, and take pictures inside of the mosques."** To pinpoint potential informants, the unit created a "debriefing program." Under the program, an individual who faced arrest would be subject to extra questioning to find out more about their community and if they could be used to obtain intelligence. Muslim inmates were also offered "better living conditions and help or money on the outside" if they served as informants.
- The Demographics Unit worked closely with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to construct and carry out its operations, although the CIA is restricted "in the collection of intelligence information directed against US citizens... [unless] there is a reason to believe that an individual is involved in espionage or international terrorist activities."
- In January 2002, David Cohen, a 35-year CIA veteran, became the NYPD's first civilian intelligence chief. Cohen, who served as Deputy Director of Operations from 1995 to 1997, **"wanted New York to have its own version of the CIA"** and requested help from his connections at the CIA "so the NYPD wouldn't have to rely on the FBI to dole out information." In collaboration with Larry Sanchez, a former CIA representative to the United Nations, Cohen developed the unit's network of informants and contributed to **"[blurring] the line between foreign and domestic spying."**

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- Cohen was instrumental in gaining approval for more lenient investigative guidelines for the NYPD. The Handschu Consent Decree of 1985 prohibited the NYPD “from investigating political and religious organizations and groups unless there was ‘specific information’ that the group was linked to a crime that had been committed or was about to be committed.” The agreement was established in response to “decades of covert NYPD infiltration of activist groups” and “restricted the department's powers to monitor political groups.”
- In 2003, after taking into account an affidavit from Cohen that “contended that American mosques were largely radicalized and that there was no way under Handschu to follow the activities of Muslims who might be planning attacks,” the District Court passed “a modification of the decree.” Under the new modified decree, the NYPD was free to use new guidelines so long as they were “consistent with those developed by the U.S. Department of Justice for investigations conducted by the F.B.I.”
- In the aftermath of AP’s reports on the surveillance program, two major lawsuits were filed against the City of New York. In Hassan v. City of New York (2012), Muslim Advocates and the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) requested that the courts declare the surveillance program unconstitutional and order the NYPD to “immediately stop spying on [their] clients.” In April 2018, a settlement was reached under which the NYPD “confirmed that it will reform its discriminatory and unlawful practices by agreeing to no longer engage in suspicionless surveillance on the basis of religion or ethnicity, create the first-ever NYPD Policy Guide ... and pay damages for income lost as a result of being unfairly targeted by the NYPD.”
- In Raza v. City of New York (2013), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and several other organizations filed a lawsuit against Bloomberg, Cohen, and police commissioner Raymond Kelly asserting “that the [NYPD] surveillance stigmatized and discriminated against Muslims in violation of the U.S. and New York State Constitutions.” In the case’s complaint, the six plaintiffs requested “a declaration that the NYPD’s policy and practice of subjecting them to suspicionless surveillance because of their Muslim faith violates their fundamental rights to equal protection and free exercise of religion.”
- **Among the plaintiffs of the lawsuit was Asad Dandia, a Muslim student who was unknowingly befriended by an NYPD informant at 19-years-old.** In March 2012, Dandia received a Facebook message from a young man who “wanted to become a better Muslim.” He was subsequently welcomed into Dandia’s community, participated in his charity, and was invited to his house, “even spending the night once.” The young man later revealed himself as an informant on Facebook. In February 2020, Dandia wrote in the Washington Post that **“our sacred spaces had been violated ... [and] we didn’t know who to trust, or where we could turn for help.”**
- In March 2017, a settlement for Raza was reached which revised the Handschu Guidelines and “established a number of reforms designed to protect New York Muslims and others from discriminatory and unjustified surveillance.” The NYPD also agreed to remove the “discredited and unscientific” Radicalization in the West report from its website and prohibit its use in opening or prolonging investigations.
- The stipulations of the settlements of both Raza V. City of New York and Hassan V. City of New York excused the NYPD from any admission “that it has in any manner or way violated the rights of Plaintiffs or the rights of any other person or entity” and excused the plaintiffs from any admission of an “absence of any such fault, wrongdoing, culpability, or liability on Defendant’s part.”
- The Demographics Unit was formally discontinued in 2014. According to reporting in the New York Times, William J. Bratton, who served as Police Commissioner from 2014 to 2016, has claimed that he intended to “try to heal rifts between the Police Department and minority communities that have felt alienated as a result of policies pursued during the Bloomberg administration.”
- The Mapping Muslims: NYPD Spying and its Impact on American Muslims report from The Muslim American Civil Liberties Coalition (MACLC), The Creating Law Enforcement Accountability & Responsibility (CLEAR), and The Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) found that **the surveillance program suppressed practice of religion, stifled speech and association, sowed suspicion between community members, severed trust with law enforcement, and disrupted college safe spaces.** The Anti-Surveillance

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Project further claims that **“government surveillance leads to heightened levels of stress, fatigue and anxiety, fosters distrust, and reduces [one’s] sense of personal control.”**

- The NYPD has previously been accused of racial profiling in its policy of stop-and-frisk. The policing tactic, which disproportionately affected black and Latino individuals, was rejected by a federal judge for “[violating] the constitutional rights of minorities in the city” in 2013. **In the same year, the Equal Justice Initiative reported that “nearly 90 percent of those stopped were completely innocent.”**
- During Bloomberg’s 2020 presidential campaign, his support of the NYPD surveillance program and stop-and-frisk resurfaced. **Under his tenure as mayor, stop-and-frisk increased by 600%.** In November 2019, Bloomberg issued an apology for stop-and-frisk and “acknowledged it often led to the detention of blacks and Latinos.” However, he continued to defend the NYPD’s Muslim Surveillance and Mapping program.
- In a March 2012 interview on *Fox and Friends*, Zuhdi Jasser, founder of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD) and co-founder of the Muslim Reform Movement (MRM), argued that the NYPD surveillance program was “just datamining ... [and] no different than good police work.” In the same month, AIFD sponsored a rally with Congressman Peter King praising “how the NYPD conducts surveillance as part of its anti-terrorism operations.”
- In March 2014, King called for increased surveillance in Muslim communities and castigated the *New York Times*, *AP*, and ACLU for criticizing the NYPD surveillance program. After a meeting with then-president-elect Donald Trump in 2016, King further claimed that the surveillance program under Commissioner Kelly was **“aggressive and forward-leaning” and “should be a model for the country.”**
- In a November 2015 radio interview with Steve Bannon on *Breitbart News Daily*, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump claimed that Mayor Bill de Blasio’s disbandment of the Demographics Unit was “a terrible mistake” and argued that it should be reinstated.
- **In March 2016, Republican Senator and then-presidential candidate Ted Cruz called for increased law enforcement to “patrol and secure” Muslim neighborhoods and praised the surveillance program.** During an interview with CBS, Cruz criticized de Blasio for disbanding the program and deciding “political correctness mattered more than keeping people safe.”
- The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) attempted to develop its own Muslim mapping project in 2007. In a November 2007 interview with *NPR*, Deputy Police Chief Michael Downing claimed the program was “a community engagement plan to help us identify the 500 to 700,000 Muslims throughout this region.” Ramona Ripston, then-executive director of the ACLU of Southern California, rejected the program and claimed that “the LAPD should not be in the business of tagging Muslims or any community of faith as terrorists, because that’s discriminatory and divisive.” In a critical letter addressed to Downing, the ACLU of Southern California and several other organizations claimed that **“singling out individuals for investigation, surveillance, and data-gathering based on their religion constitutes religious profiling that is just as unlawful, ill-advised and deeply offensive as racial profiling.”**
- The program was scrapped in late November 2007, and then-Police Chief William Bratton “expressed regret that the plan might have added to any suspicions about the police harbored by Muslims.” In July 2018, Muslim Advocates found that the LAPD **“misrepresented the origins, intent, and lifespan of its Muslim community mapping program”** after official documents on the program were released.