

NYPD's Muslim surveillance extended well beyond New York

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February 26, 2012

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NEWARK, N.J. (RNS) The report was stamped top secret.

Inside was a confidential dossier compiled by the New York Police Department documenting "locations of concern" in Newark -- the city's 44 mosques, Muslim-owned restaurants and businesses and Islamic schools.

In 2007, the NYPD began an undercover spy operation within New Jersey's largest city to find and document where Muslims lived, worked and prayed. Now, city officials and many of those targeted are voicing anger at the disclosures, which came in the wake of an Associated Press report showing that a secret NYPD surveillance program aimed at Muslims had extended well beyond New York City.

"I have deep concerns and I am very disturbed that this might have been surveillance that was based on no more than religious affiliation," Newark Mayor Cory Booker said.

Booker said he had been unaware of the undercover work and the Newark Police Department -- which had been contacted by the NYPD early on -- had not been involved in any joint operations.

"What we are discovering appears to be an NYPD operation in our city that involved the blanket surveillance of Newark residents and workers based solely on the religion of those individuals," he said. "If this is indeed what transpired, it is, I believe, a clear infringement on the core liberties of our citizenry."

Separately, the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey immediately demanded a further investigation by the state attorney general, calling it a

"violation of the public trust."

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the NYPD has been methodically compiling data on the region's Muslim populations, infiltrating mosques and student groups, and building profiles of local ethnic groups.

But new reports on the extent of that surveillance operation revealed the NYPD had been operating well outside its jurisdiction, cataloging Muslim communities on Long Island and New Jersey, and monitoring Muslim college students across the region.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has strongly defended his department. "The police department goes where there are allegations. And they look to see whether those allegations are true," he told reporters on Tuesday (Feb. 21). "That's what you'd expect them to do. That's what you'd want them to do. Remind yourself when you turn out the light tonight."

In Newark, the NYPD apparently cataloged every mosque and Muslim-owned business in the city -- from fried-chicken joints to houses of worship located in private homes.

There was no mention of terrorism or any criminal wrongdoing in the 60-page report, obtained by The Associated Press, which described the aim of the surveillance as compiling "the existence of population centers and business districts of communities of interest."

Most of the properties listed in the NYPD report were Islamic cultural centers, restaurants and stores where members of Newark's Muslim community went to pray, eat or shop.

The report carries the tone of a dispassionate tour guide. A page on Newark Fried Chicken said the restaurant was owned and operated by Afghans. "Location is in good location and has seating capacity for 10 to 15 customers," the report said.

An entry for Masjid Fallahee labeled it a private house where 25 to 30 worshippers of Nigerian and West African ethnicities had been seen in prayer. Inside the Islamic Cultural Center, Abdul Khabir called the NYPD investigation "unfortunate" but said it did not bother him because he had nothing to

hide. "We just want to serve Allah," Khabir said.

At the Dollar Deal store on Broad Street, 25-year-old Watas Ali struggled to understand why his business was involved in a police probe.

"They separate us from other businesses just because we're Muslim?" he asked. "It's unfair."

Abu Muhmad, a senior administrator at the Masjid Rahmah, a mosque on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, said reports of surveillance are not a revelation to him. He said FBI agents had been coming to the mosque for years. "We know for a fact agents are out there listening to what is being said at prayers," particularly on Fridays, when hundreds come to pray at the mosque, he said.

But, like several who came for prayers yesterday, Muhmad said mosque leaders accepted the scrutiny as a sign of the times, however unfortunate. "We understand the situation," he said.

One member of the mosque, however, Abdur Rahman, called the surveillance effort offensive. "It's crazy," Rahman said as the mosque's amplified call to prayer sounded outside. "It's a form of stereotyping. It's stupid." City Councilman Anibal Ramos Jr. labeled the disclosures shocking.

"Newark is a town that's made up of folks from all over the world," he said. "Every resident has a right to have their privacy protected," he said. "Unless they're targeted for a specific investigation, then I don't understand."