

The Legacy of Michael Bloomberg's Muslim Surveillance Programme

Thousands of informants infiltrated mosques, restaurants and charities in a bid to find would-be militants. No arrests were made. Instead, a legacy of mistrust remains

By [Azad Essa](#) and [Nur Ibrahim](#)

Global Research, March 05, 2020

[Middle East Eye](#) 4 March 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

When Asad Dandia received a friend request on Facebook, he didn't think much of it.

The college student was active with a religious-based charity, so it was common for people to reach out on the social media platform and offer to donate food and money.

Dandia and the man also had several friends in common. So when he read a message requesting advice on how to become a better, practising Muslim, he willingly responded.

Over the next few months, the two became friends. Dandia even invited him to his family home, where he met his parents and ate with them.

Once, he even spent the night.

But what Dandia didn't realise was that the man hadn't reached out to better himself, make new friends or help the community. He would later confess that he was paid \$1000 a month to spy on Dandia for the New York Police Department.

The informant, it later turned out, was part of a wide network of infiltrators working at the behest of then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg's office - monitoring and surveilling the Muslim community in New York City and New Jersey.

"We were rattled and we were shaken," Dandia, now a graduate student at Columbia University, told Middle East Eye.

Bloomberg was mayor of New York City between 2002-2013, during which he presided over the much-maligned [stop-and-frisk policy](#) - which targeted African Americans and Latinos - and the surveillance of Muslims.

Like Dandia, hundreds of thousands of Muslims from New York and New Jersey are still coming to terms with Bloomberg's discriminatory practises that left a legacy of distrust between communities and contempt for the police.

Dandia subsequently received help from the City University of New York Creating Law Enforcement Accountability and Responsibility (CLEAR) project and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and he joined [a class-action suit](#) against the city for unlawful surveillance.

Bloomberg's short-lived run for the White House has left those impacted by his policies troubled, wondering how he could have even been considered as a Democratic presidential nominee.

Would-be militants

Under his direction as mayor, the NYPD's Demographics Unit – built with the help of the CIA – [secretly mapped](#) the Muslim community, [sending informants](#) to mosques to watch religious sermons, to cafes to listen in on conversations and even on white water rafting trips to look for would-be militants.

Not only did the programme that began after September 11 unlawfully target one community, it [failed to provide](#) a single criminal lead, [internal audits](#) of the NYPD have revealed.

Ayisha Irfan, a New Yorker who studied at Brooklyn College in the mid-2000s, remembers being told as an 18-year-old to “watch what you say and who you trust because there are police informants at the university”.

The fear of being watched meant that Muslim youth were forced to avoid congregating, participating in social or civic life, and inevitably, avoiding each other.

“When it all began to come out following the Associated Press expose, we found benign details of our college lives in government documents,” Irfan says.

“They even wrote down that a group of Muslims go to Dunkin Donuts after Jumah (Friday prayers).”

While Bloomberg has apologised for the stop and frisk policy that targeted mostly black and brown people, he has since [doubled down](#) on the surveillance programme, [arguing](#) “that it was just after 9/11 and everyone was petrified of another terrorist attack”.

Current New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is one of the few establishment politicians to [criticise the programme](#), recently calling it a “failure”.

“As the person who ended Bloomberg's racist and counterproductive Muslim surveillance programme, I will tell you what he won't. It actually made us less safe,” said de Blasio.

“It bred resentment and distrust, just when we most needed to bring our police and our Muslim community together.”

The legacy of surveillance

In the Astoria neighbourhood of Queens, a New York City borough with a thriving Arab and Muslim population, Zohran Mamdani says the impact of Bloomberg's surveillance policies still persist.

He recalled how the police would note down the time boys gathered at the local park to play soccer.

“We had the Demographics Unit go up and down Steinway Street surveilling Muslims, whether they were in barbershops, grocery stores, cafes, hookah bars, masjids; it doesn't

matter where we were.

“If there was even one Muslim in an area, it was considered cause for suspicion,” Mamdani, who is a candidate for New York State Assembly, told MEE.

“This is the kind of legacy the people have had to live with, [the idea] that we should not build any type of collective because the response of the state will be to both surveil and imprison us.”

Bloomberg has repeatedly downplayed the scale and impact of the surveillance policy of his administration.

In an interview with PBS in late February, Bloomberg said his office had “sent some officers into some mosques to listen to the sermon that the imam gave. The courts ruled it was exactly within the law and that’s the kind of thing we should be doing.”

He has also doubled down on justifying the singling out of the Muslim community.

“All of the people came from the same place and all that came were from a place they happened to be one religion. And if they’d been another religion, we would’ve done the same thing,” he added.

But no court has ever ruled the programme legal; several lawsuits were filed against New York City’s programme.

In the Raza v. City of New York class-action suit, which Dandia joined, the [final settlement](#) approved by the court in March 2017 “established a number of reforms designed to protect New York Muslims and others from discriminatory and unjustified surveillance”.

Farhana Khera, executive director of Muslim Advocates, a national civil rights organisation, described [Bloomberg’s assertions](#) as a “fantasy”.

“What happened in New York City was a massive civil rights breach that caused lasting harm to countless innocent American Muslims. Mayor Bloomberg needs to correct the record immediately,” Khera said.

Muslim community has failed to organise itself

In Harlem, the northern half of Manhattan, many black Muslims have had to endure both the stop and frisk policy that targeted African Americans and Latinos, as well as the surveillance of Muslims.

Imam Al-Hajj Talib Abdur-Rashid, from the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood Inc, in Harlem, says that the Muslim community failed to organise itself and exact a political consequence for Bloomberg’s policies.

“Any other group who had been treated in that way, they would have exacted a political consequence for his statements.”

Abdur-Rashid argued that as someone running for president, Bloomberg’s refusal to apologise or make amends for the surveillance programme said a lot about the place of Muslims in the imagination of presidential candidates.

“Obviously, he doesn’t see this as a liability because Muslims are still seen across the US with suspicion,” he says.

Ayiesha Irfan agrees. “Apparently a million Muslims placed on an unlawful, secret surveillance programme, and weaponising the biggest police force in the country against Muslim does not merit even an apology,” she says.

Dandia says he is not interested in a half-hearted apology. He wants reparations.

“Now that Bloomberg is out of the race, he ought to reflect over the enormous harm he has caused to communities of colour during his time as mayor of New York, and he must offer material reparations to all those he harmed.

“He is one of the richest men on the planet. He is more than capable of doing that. He should also meet with Muslims and ask them: how can I serve you?” he said.

“However, Bloomberg endorsing Biden shows that he is not committed to any structural change or reparations, and prefers the same establishment politics that he benefited from at our expense.”

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Featured image is from Flickr

The original source of this article is [Middle East Eye](#)

Copyright © [Azad Essa](#) and [Nur Ibrahim](#), [Middle East Eye](#), 2020

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Azad Essa](#) and
[Nur Ibrahim](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca