

Amid effort to improve Muslim relations, N.Y. appoints civilian monitor of NYPD

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January 11, 2016

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) New York will appoint an independent monitor to review the police department's counterterrorism investigations and strengthen protections against the illegal surveillance of Muslims as part of a settlement in two high-profile civil rights lawsuits, lawyers said on Thursday.

The announcement of the deal formally ends the two suits alleging that the NYPD, the nation's largest police department, was illegally infiltrating mosques and spying on Muslims because of their religion.

It comes amid a larger campaign by the city to increase outreach to Muslim residents and provide government services to communities that have often felt neglected and under a cloud of suspicion in the wake of recent terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernadino, California.

"We are committed to strengthening the relationship between our administration and communities of faith so that residents of every background feel respected and protected," Mayor Bill de Blasio said in a statement.

The settlement in the two suits—one filed by civil rights groups and a second by mosques, a charity, and community leaders—adds restrictions on surveillance allowed by the court-ordered Handschu decree.

The decree, put into place in response to widespread surveillance used against protesters in the 1960s and '70s, was modified in the wake of the September 11 attacks to allow police to more easily monitor political activity in public places.

But in ensuing years, the relaxed rules allowed the police department secretly keep files on Muslim neighborhoods, recording sermons and collecting license plates of worshipers at particular mosques, the *New York Times* reports.

The department also collected the views of ordinary people on topics such as drone strikes, politics, and foreign policy.

Under the terms of the settlement, police officials say, the city does not admit any wrongdoing and it simply makes official changes that were already in place.

But civil-rights lawyers argue some tactics used by law enforcement would likely violate the Constitution if the files had been viewed by people outside the police department, the Times reports.

After the Paris attacks, the Mayor's Community Affairs Unit held a meeting between 40 community leaders—mainly from the city's Muslim community and the NYPD's Hate Crimes Unit—in a move to build trust between Muslims and the police in order to report crimes.

Representatives of the mayor's office have also spent time at mosques and community centers in a bid to improve relations with imams who could advocate for services such as free pre-kindergarten and municipal identification cards.

"This is a community that has not always had the best relationship with city government," Marco Carrion, head of the mayor's community affairs unit, told the Associated Press on December 4. "Some have never seen a helpful government and welcomed us with open arms. But other times we face real resistance and mistrust."

That day, de Blasio spoke at the Jamaica Muslim Center or Masjid Al-Mamoor, in Queens.

"For all of us this city is our common home ... we embrace all kinds of people," he said, noting the NYPD has 900 officers who are Muslim.

Pledging to protect Muslim New Yorkers from hate crimes in the wake of the attacks in Paris, he added: "We know that members of the Muslim community are deeply concerned. Innocent people, law abiding people, going about their lives, feeding their families, taking care of their community—they know that they can be victimized because of the anger and frustration that wells up in others."

But civil liberties advocates cautioned that mixing counterterrorism with outreach efforts could be damaging to many communities.

"Outreach by the city to the Muslim community is critically important, especially now," Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union told the AP in December. "But there must be clear distinctions between the outreach and anti-terrorism efforts. Otherwise, it will discourage Muslims from going to law enforcement and just breed further distrust."

The settlement announced Thursday modifies the existing Handschu guidelines to bar investigations based on race, religion, or ethnicity.

The civilian monitor will attend monthly meetings to review the NYPD's investigations and be able to report any potential civil rights issue to the mayor or the court.

"We have nothing to hide," Lawrence Byrne, the police department's deputy commissioner of legal matters told the *Times*. "And if this adds transparency and a level of public trust that we're continuing to keep the city safe, but in a lawful way, we welcome and embrace that."

*This report contains material from the Associated Press.*