

Seven years after 9/11, Arab Americans and the NYPD

By: Rachel Millard

For an immigrant community already hesitant towards law enforcement agencies, the aftermath of 9/11 saw a (by now well-documented) breakdown of Arab American community-police relations. While Arab Americans feared reprisals for the 9/11 attacks, they also feared speaking out to the police, and many reported harassment and unlawful arrests.

A nationwide investigation by the Vera Institute of Justice in 2006 found that Arab Americans continued to be mistrustful of law enforcement agencies, and made many suggestions to foster better relations, including improving representation of the Arab American community within police departments and education on both sides.

Where are we now? The testimonies of individuals and community leaders in the Arab American neighborhoods of NYC such as Bay Ridge, Brooklyn and Astoria, Queens show a long and unsteady march towards better relations.

A Delicate Balance of Trust

Recognizing the importance of the trust of the community to its own welfare and that of NYC as a whole, the NYPD has strengthened its community policing efforts. Through the arm of the Community Affairs Bureau (CAB) and its recently-expanded programs such as the New Immigrant Outreach Unit, the Clergy Liaison Program and the Community Partnership Policing program, members of the CAB meet and work with community leaders and local police officers to discuss any concerns and develop friendly relations.

“We go to community based organizations, businesses, Islamic schools etc. and introduce ourselves to let people know that the police are here to help,” says Detective Ahmad Nasser, who is the CAB liaison officer for the Arab and Muslim communities, a Yemeni American who immigrated to the U.S at the age of twenty. “Because I am an Arab and speak Arabic, the community finds it easier to trust me.”

As well as Det. Nasser, the Arab American community is well represented in the CAB. The person in charge of special affairs is a Lebanese-American, Deputy Inspector Amin Kosseim, (interviewed in Aramica, edition 126), who in his twenty-year NYPD career has done much to improve communication between Arab Americans and the NYPD, and the New Immigrant Outreach Unit is headed by Sergeant Rafet Awad, a Brooklyn-born Palestinian American.

Sports leagues have also been started to foster youth interaction with the police, and the final of the NYPD United Soccer League was played between two teams from the

Muslim Youth Center at Bath Avenue, Bensonhurst in June, which was attended by Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly (and reported on by Aramica).

An accusation against the NYPD from the community in the past has been that it used interactions to observe the community more than to engage it. Allegations of informants in the community and the un-forewarned appearance of the 'Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat' report suggested that the community was being held at arm's length; there to provide information, not to be genuinely involved.

"Straight after the appearance of that report, PC Raymond Kelly brought representatives from the Arab and Muslim communities together in a roundtable discussion to present their views," says Det. Nasser. "With open dialogue, relations have improved." As to whether he thinks using informants damages attempts to build trust in the community, "Let me ask you," he says, "As a citizen, if you knew there was someone willing or about to commit a crime, wouldn't you rather they were arrested before doing so?"

Towards Mutual Understanding

Part of the hesitancy of Arab Americans to approach police has been due to language barriers (a significant proportion of the community is made up of new arrivals to the U.S.), and so increasing the number of Arabic speakers in the NYPD has been a strong recommendation. Apart from that, police precincts (as with all government agencies) are required by law to provide constituents with interpretation services.

The DCPI (The Office of the Deputy Commissioner, Public Information of the NYPD) stated that the NYPD currently has 63 members who are certified speakers of Arabic (of a total 40,000 officers [0.15%]); 19 of whom are considered 'master linguists,' although there are probably more who have a working knowledge of Arabic. Certainly, DI Kosseim spoke in his prior interview with Aramica of some 200 officers of Arab descent compared to "less than you could count on your hand twenty years ago."

Individual Arab American members of the NYPD spoken to for this story said they had wanted to join the force so as to help their community. Ali Othman,* a Palestinian American who has worked part time as a police officer since 2004 said, "I wanted to improve relations between the community and the police, and I knew that because I spoke Arabic and understand the culture I could be useful in many situations."

To improve non-Arab police officers' understanding of the community 'cultural sensitivity training,' is conducted in-house and also via workshops at organizations such as the American MidEast Leadership Network (AMLN) in Astoria, Queens and the Arab American Association of New York (AAANY) in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, where officers learn for example about how to interact with a Muslim female and the role of an Imam in

* Name changed as this officer was not cleared to speak by the DCPI

the community. A handheld patrol-book insert guide which dispels some preconceptions about the community (most Arab Americans are Christian, not Muslim, for example) was produced in 2004, which also contains useful phrases in Arabic transliterated: 'Moomkin ashooof rokhsetek,' (may I see your driver's license) is one.

"It works both ways," says Det. Nasser. "I also teach Arab Americans how to communicate with the police: to cooperate and not to argue." He has also translated several leaflets containing useful citizens' information into Arabic and distributed them around the community.

Rami Nuseir, director and founder of AMLN urged for the need to continue this training. "We feel that learning about the community is no longer a priority for law enforcement," he said, explaining that while after 9/11 he was often invited by the NYPD and the FBI to conduct cultural sensitivity workshops, now less and less so. "The heat of 9/11 has gone," he said, "but prejudices still exist, and the new cadets are not receiving the same exposure as those at a higher level."

Fears and Prejudices Persist

Fears about questioning over immigration status continue to play a part in the community's hesitancy to approach the police. The NYPD's policy of not asking about the immigration status of anyone coming forward with information, as witnesses or victims of a crime is available in Arabic on the NYPD's website. "We need the community to trust us," says Det. Nasser. "If you know something and you are afraid to come to the police, it is not good for anybody."

However, the NYPD is obligated to inform authorities of illegal status if someone commits or is suspected in a crime and that [illegal status] is learned in the course of the investigation.

In a survey Aramica conducted among some 50 Arab Americans (in Arabic and English) in the Arab American neighborhoods of Bay Ridge, Bensonhurst and Astoria, one in two answered that they feared questions about their immigration status from the police.

Mahdy,[†] an Egyptian American cab driver in Astoria said, "When the police pull you over they bring in the feds and question you about your immigration status. Then they pressure you into cooperating with them," although he said that he was not speaking from personal experience.

The same survey also revealed other varied perceptions of the NYPD.

"My friend's husband was physically abusing her," said Fadela, 22, a Yemeni American mother. "The police were called and her husband was arrested on battery charges. It was dealt with very sensitively and quickly," she added.

[†] Names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity

“I called the police on someone causing trouble in my shop,” said Sami, 34, an Iraqi American grocery store owner, continuing, “An Egyptian officer came and sorted out the situation very well.”

Others had stories of disrespect or harassment.

“I was on a bus when a man spat at me and uttered a racist comment,” declared Suha, 48, a Muslim Algerian American. “I called the police and was told by the officer that this was perfectly normal behavior.”

“The police stopped me and my uncle just to ask him questions about his tattoo, which was written in Arabic,” said Khalil, a 15-year-old Palestinian American schoolboy.

“Police officers should do more to introduce themselves to the community on a day-to-day basis by walking the streets and saying hi,” said Murat, 33, a Lebanese American orthopedic surgeon, “rather than selecting kids named ‘Mohamed’ or ‘Ali’ and interacting with them in publicized scenarios.”

Despite these negative examples, when participants were asked if they would call on the police if needed, more than 85% said ‘yes’. Those that answered no said it was because, “I would rather deal with it myself.” A similarly high percentage also answered that they felt safe in their neighborhood.

PO Othman said: “In my experience on the beat I have not seen problems with the Arab community. Sometimes, harassment is perceived; people think “I have been stopped because I am an Arab,” and you have to think, ‘no, you have been stopped because you just ran a red light’”.

Holding NYPD Officers Accountable

“The Arabic community’s mistrust of law enforcement boils down to two main reasons: fear of prejudice or harassment,” says Mr. Nuseir, for whom developing trust between hesitant Arab Americans and the police will depend on them knowing that complaints will be listened to and officers held accountable.

The independent agency which holds police officers accountable and can hand over an allegation to a criminal enquiry is the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB), where complaints can be lodged (in many languages, including Arabic), by dialing 311.

There is no category to identify Arab complainants, but complaints made about offensive language on the basis of religion have been categorized since 2001. From that date until 2007, the CCRB received 43 allegations that a police officer used language denigrating someone on the basis of their Muslim religion. Only one of these allegations was

substantiated, with conclusions based on the testimonies of both parties, of witnesses, and the officer's prior record of behavior.

The records of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York reveal cases filed by men with Arabic or Muslim names in the last few years, suing for civil rights violations against individual NYPD officers, as well as against the NYPD and NYC as a whole for responsibility of the officers' conduct. Two especially notable claims both allege unlawful arrest and physical assault, and both of which were dismissed with payments made to the plaintiff of \$16,000 in one and \$75,000 in the other.

Ms. Sarsour and Mr. Nuseir say they deal with many members of the community claiming mistreatment at the hands of the police, which still might go underreported. "We encourage members of the community who come to see us with a complaint to use their legal rights," said Mr. Nuseir, but "sometimes clients drop the charges." Ms. Sarsour said that she refers some cases to specific advocacy groups such as the CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations) or the ADC (American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee).

Local governors are providing a channel for communication. New York State Assemblywoman Janele-Hyer Spencer (Democrat, East Shore Staten Island and Bay Ridge) now employs a liaison to the Arabic community, a Muslim woman named Fatima Kandall.

A Desire for Cooperation

The efforts of some precincts and officers to foster better relations have been recognized and appreciated by community leaders. Ms. Sarsour spoke of AAANY's "very good relationship with the 68th precinct, which has been cultivated over many years during which they have been extremely responsive to our concerns and have kept doors of communication wide open."

Others also recognized that the onus falls equally on the Arab American community not to shut itself off. "Many individuals within the NYPD are making a huge effort to reach out to the Arab American community, and we as a community need to respond," said Mr. Nuseir.

Egyptian American Imam Mohammad al-Bukhari at an Islamic center in Bay Ridge said, "I see police visiting local mosques and schools to see if there are any problems and I think this is a good thing." He went on to say that the FBI has visited him at his home roughly once a year since 2003. "I am happy to answer the officers' questions," he says, explaining, "It is important to protect the country. We are living together here like in a big boat. I have three children here. If something happens to the country, it happens to all of us."

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