

EYE ON THE NEWS

Guarding the Faithful

The NYPD puts extraordinary resources into protecting houses of worship.

Judith Miller

March 22, 2019

New York may be tough, but its houses of worship are the softest of soft terrorist targets. Even before last Friday's mosque attacks in New Zealand, the New York Police Department and other law enforcement officials had taken steps to enhance security around the city's daunting number of religious institutions: more than 250 mosques, 2,000 churches, 4,000 informal places of Christian worship, 1,000 synagogues, many Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh temples, and major religious shrines, schools, and community centers. Moments after a lone gunman killed 50 people and wounded an equal number at two mosques during the heavily attended weekly Jumu'ah prayers last Friday in Christchurch, the NYPD mobilized to protect Muslim institutions and non-Muslim places of worship from copycat attacks and calls for revenge from al-Qaida, the Islamic State, and other extremist groups. What New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern called one of her country's "darkest days" quickly became one of the NYPD's busiest.

The NYPD's intelligence division scoured its data banks and checked with sources and its federal counterparts for possible ties between the 28-year-old Australian assailant and contacts or collaborators in the U.S. There appeared to be none. The department's cyber unit combed social-media chatter for signs of like-minded sympathizers in the tri-state area. The FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force, based in New York, where more than 100 NYPD officers and investigators work, redoubled intelligence collection efforts. Members of the department's Critical Response Command, a cadre of hand-picked officers trained and equipped to respond to terrorist and active-shooter attacks, and the Strategic Response Group, a rapid-reaction squad of nearly 800 highly trained, heavily armed officers assigned to potential trouble spots, were deployed to mosques,

synagogues, and other iconic sites throughout the city. The department's Community Affairs Bureau notified religious and community leaders of an increased presence at their places of worship. Commanders at many of the NYPD's 77 precincts dispatched their specially designated Houses of Worship squad cars to smaller mosques to answer questions and help those seeking extra protection, or just reassurance. Heavily armed police posted themselves in front of many mosques throughout the weekend.

Within hours, said Thomas Galati, the NYPD's chief of intelligence, "we were getting real-time information coming in from New Zealand." That was partly the result of what he called the NYPD's "great relationship" with the New Zealand police, whose head, Mike Bush, has visited the NYPD's counterterrorism bureau. Information also came from the NYPD's detective stationed in Sydney, Australia. He and other internationally stationed NYPD detectives—others are posted in London, Paris, Madrid, Tel Aviv, and the United Arab Emirates—work with local police and gather information about terrorism that could affect New York. Within hours of the attack, he was enroute from Sydney to New Zealand at the invitation of police there.

In such crises, said Mitch Silber, the former NYPD director of intelligence analysis, being big is a virtue. "Almost no other police department in the country can deploy as many assets to as many vulnerable sites as quickly as the NYPD," he said. Nearly 2,000 of the NYPD's 36,000 uniformed officers and 19,000 civilian employees have key counterterrorism missions, Galati says. Thanks in part to the work of its now-disbanded "demographics unit," Silber added, the NYPD knew where such assets needed to be deployed. Ironically, the department disbanded the unit under pressure in 2014 after Muslim and civil rights groups protested that it was spying on Muslims by secretly documenting where they lived, gathered, and prayed. "It turns out you can't deploy cops to protect vulnerable targets if you don't know where they are," Silber said.

Mosques, churches, and other houses of worship are hard to protect, NYPD officials and community activists acknowledge. Many are small pop-ups that tend to move with the city's shifting demography. Most are not camera-friendly. Except for special religious holidays and special events, most do not have metal detectors at their entrances. "Houses of worship, by definition, want to be open and welcoming," said David Pollock, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, who also serves as its public safety director. "But that must be balanced against the need to be safe and secure."

Pollock said that the JCRC has long worked with NYPD counterterrorism experts to improve safety at Jewish institutions. After last year's attack at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, where 11 were killed and six were wounded, including four police officers, the JCRC and the NYPD agreed that synagogues and other Jewish institutions needed to bolster security further. Financed in part by a grant from the UJA Foundation through the Paul E. Singer Foundation, synagogues and other Jewish institutions have been conducting "vulnerability" assessments of their facilities and taking steps to shore up weaknesses. "These assessments are road maps for increasing security over the next three years," Pollock said.

Pollock notes that between 2007 and 2018, the Department of Homeland Security has provided \$62.5 million to help improve security at nonprofit facilities in New York City, Long Island, and Westchester. The JCRC has also provided grant information and application training to non-Jewish institutions. Parishioners, too, need training. In coordination with the NYPD, many who volunteer to provide security at religious services have undergone "active-shooter" training. Pollock estimates that people at hundreds of different Jewish institutions in the city have already taken this training.

Mohammad Razvi, who heads COPO, the Council of Peoples Organization, a nonprofit that provides immigration counseling, a food bank, and wide-ranging services to some 15,000 Muslims in Brooklyn, called the NYPD's response to the New Zealand bombing "above and beyond" the call of duty. Getting real-time information from the department had enabled him and Brooklyn officials to hold a joint press conference early the next day after the attack to reassure the community's anxious Muslims.

Working closely with the NYPD, the JCRC, and other religious groups and institutions, he said, some mosques have already signed up for training. "Many of our religious institutions do not understand how to navigate the system to apply for security grants," he said. "We encourage them and show them how to do it."

On Friday, one week after the New Zealand rampage, Razvi and other promoters of interfaith dialogue and cooperation are standing together after Friday prayers at designated mosques in each of the five boroughs to honor those killed in the New Zealand attack and pray for peace and inter-communal solidarity.

The NYPD is there, too.