

Muslims want answers on surveillance

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Many Muslim students like Hunter College senior Neghena Hamidi have returned to campus under a shroud of unease. A confluence of recent events have not only raised tensions, but have had students like her wondering: When will CUNY address revelations about the surveillance of Muslim students at Brooklyn College?

A COMPLEX AFFAIR

In March 2016, CUNY Chancellor James B. Milliken retained two outside attorneys to look into alleged incidents of anti-Semitism on CUNY campuses. After a thorough investigation, CUNY released the team's report September 9, which did not find evidence of "unchecked anti-Semitism." The report called it "a mistake" to blame a Students for Justice for Palestine chapter for "any act of anti-Semitism on any CUNY campus" as some students had alleged.

"As they also note, CUNY leaders have promptly and strongly condemned speech – even when legally protected – that is hateful, discriminatory, and anti-Semitic," wrote CUNY Chancellor James B. Milliken in a cover letter introducing the 24-page report. "And in those cases where speech and conduct violate law or University policy, the University will continue to respond with appropriate action."

As some students have pointed out, CUNY was quick to launch an investigation looking into alleged anti-Semitic incidents, but it has yet to release a public statement regarding the apparent years-long surveillance by an undercover NYPD detective of Muslim students at Brooklyn College.

As a result, many in CUNY's Muslim community feel their concerns aren't valued. And this is all happening at critical time. The *New York Times* reported late last year that cases of anti-Muslim attacks and harassment have surged in recent years.

Between the 15th anniversary of 9/11, the recent bombing in Chelsea and the constant Islamophobia coming out of Donald Trump's presidential campaign, tensions are running high for students like Hamidi. She said her parents tell her to be more cautious, more low key. They tell her not to stay out too late or cover her hair with a hat instead of a scarf, and they've advised her to tone down her political opinions on social media. Like any typical college student, she both listens and ignores her parents' concerns. "I can't keep a low profile because if all parents are telling their children to do so, then who's going to be able to represent our community...if we keep on acting out of fear?" she asked.

CUNY, like many institutions, is not immune from anti-Muslim incidents. The report on anti-Semitism also states that the University has seen its share of Islamophobia, including the defacement of a study abroad poster featuring a female

Students say CUNY should take action



Hunter College senior Neghena Hamidi, center, and College of Staten Island graduate Nerdeen Kiswani, right, talked about feeling nervous during their daily lives on campus and elsewhere.

student who was president of a Students for Justice for Palestine chapter. (The female student was wearing a hijab.) Muslim students also talk about the fear of being surveilled on campus, not knowing whom to trust or what opinions they can safely express in class or in student groups.

Last year, *Gothamist* reported on the years-long police surveillance of Muslim students at Brooklyn College. The piece detailed the work of an undercover NYPD detective who had "converted" to Islam at an Islamic Society (ISO) event on campus and went on to edge her way into the private lives of many of the female members of Brooklyn College's ISO, attending bridal showers and social trips.

After the story broke, around 500 CUNY faculty, staff, students and alumni signed a November 4, 2015 letter to Milliken, demanding that he "work to end the New York Police Department's apparent practice of sending spies to monitor Muslims at CUNY institutions." As of publication, CUNY hasn't issued a statement about the four-year surveillance of Muslim students at Brooklyn College and has not responded to *Clarion's* request for comment.

SILENCE FROM ADMINISTRATION

To Jeanne Theoharis, a distinguished professor in political science at Brooklyn College and one of the faculty members who signed the protest letter to Milliken, the lack of public condemnation over the incident from CUNY administration

is troubling. Theoharis said that there is a danger in thinking that Islamophobia is just saying "nasty" things about Muslims. In fact, she insisted, it is far more systemic and based on people's reluctance to fight intolerance.

'Islamophobia also looks like people remaining silent.'

"Islamophobia also looks like people remaining silent. To me that silence is really dangerous," Theoharis said. "You have an undercover cop on your campus for four years and the leaders of that institution do not say that did us harm. [That] sends a message that we don't care that much."

Theoharis, who taught some of the students who knew the undercover cop, said students felt more vulnerable after news of the surveillance broke. In an article for the online news site *The Intercept*, Theoharis wrote, "[Students] report repeated panic attacks, pervasive apprehension and trouble concentrating." The constant surveillance, one student told Theoharis, sent the message that "you will never belong, my children will never belong."

News about spying on Muslim students is nothing new. The Associated Press published a series of reports in 2011 documenting NYPD spying in Muslim communities, for which the wire service won a Pulitzer Prize. The reports documented surveillance at many colleges in the Northeast, including six CUNY campuses. Ramzi Kassem, a CUNY Law associate professor, told the Associated Press in 2011 that undercover officers may have violated a 1992 memorandum of understand-

ing between CUNY and the NYPD, which states that in non-emergency situations police "shall enter upon CUNY campuses, buildings and other property only upon the request or approval of a CUNY official."

The surveillance ramps up Muslim students' anxieties, says Moustafa Bayoumi, a professor of English at Brooklyn College who has written extensively about the Muslim American experience in the wake of 9/11.

"It's quite evident that [some Muslim students] feel like their abilities to think through controversial questions publicly, which is what you do on a university campus, were being hampered by the questions of surveillance around them solely because of their Muslim-ness hovering over their bodies," he said.

FREE SPEECH ISSUE

Several Muslim students told *Clarion* that they are careful about what they say and who they say it to. They start questioning their friends and mistrusting newcomers. They've seen the Muslim student organizations on their campuses shy away from talking about politics.

"Every time this stuff happens, I feel like it sets us back years," Nerdeen Kiswani, a recent graduate of the College of Staten Island told *Clarion*.

Kiswani, a Muslim student who was active in Students for Justice for Palestine, says the surveillance deters students from joining groups, including the Muslim Student Association and Students for the Justice for Palestine. "We don't want people to be afraid to say what they believe in and to exercise their First Amendment free speech rights," she said.

Larry Morgan, welfare director, retiring

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

In his more than four-decade-long career with the city's biggest unions, Larry Morgan, the soon-to-be-retiring executive director of the PSC-CUNY Welfare Fund, built big things around health administration for tens of thousands of union members. He helped set up the first prepaid group practice at a city hospital, where thousands of unionized city workers could go for their medical and surgical needs. For home care workers, he ran health education programs on medical issues facing union members. And during his 12-year tenure at the PSC-CUNY Welfare Fund, Morgan managed the fund that provides dental, prescription, optical benefits and other supplemental health benefits to more than 36,000 members, including PSC members and CUNY managers.

WELCOME, COSTA

Morgan is retiring at the end of the September. After a nationwide search for Morgan's replacement, the PSC-CUNY Welfare Fund Board of Trustees recently approved his successor, Donna Costa, the fund's current associate director. She will assume her new role in October.

"Donna is dedicated, talented and proactive," Morgan said, adding that he was happy that the board recognized Costa's work. "She appreciates the complexity of health benefits and has a commitment toward membership services."

A BIG PICTURE APPROACH

Morgan, who began directing the fund in 2004, has always taken a whole-picture approach to his job, which has meant both assessing the fine details of benefit plans and evaluating if a provider is the best possible option for the whole group. His number one goal, he said, is "to enhance the health of our membership." For Morgan, who has a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering from Cornell University, getting the job done meant creating internal and external structures to best streamline the fund's ability to serve its members. Over the years, he recruited a dedicated staff with the necessary skills and a commitment to member services. Under his leadership, the fund began holding annual conferences with benefits officers at all 24 CUNY campuses in order to see what kinds of issues members were encountering. Under his watch, the fund created a website where members can quickly view their benefits details.

On the financial end, the fund monitors its relationships with providers on a regular basis, so it can do budget projections. This forward-looking approach means that the fund can alert members of changes and assess what's best for most members.

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