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Police Surveillance in Los Angeles: A Conversation with Hamid Khan

By: Hamid Khan, Rodrigo Ugarte

MOVEMENTS & MOBILIZATION

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Just Tech invited several practitioners and researchers to respond to a simple yet fundamental question: "What is just technology?" This interview was conducted by Just Tech editor Rodrigo Ugarte, who spoke with Hamid Khan, about the colonial legacy of surveillance technologies and their continuing impact in US society.

Khan is a member and founder of the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, a grassroots group in Los Angeles that fights against police surveillance in Los Angeles.

In their conversation, Khan and Ugarte discuss the work of the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition with LA's minority and marginalized communities, how police surveillance manifests through policy and on the streets, and how communities can be better informed.

Rodrigo Ugarte (RU): Thank you for making the time to speak with me. To get the ball rolling, I wanted to ask, how did you come to work with Stop LAPD Spying Coalition?

Hamid Khan (HK): I'm one of the founders of Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, but I came about this work after having been organizing in Los Angeles for about 35-plus years, both as an individual but then also in an organizational capacity. I had found the South Asian Network back in 1990 in Los Angeles, which is more of an immigrant rights organization working with the South Asian community. I'm an immigrant from Pakistan; I was born and raised there and spent a few years organizing with the taxi workers. Throughout that whole process, two things were very evident: how one becomes aware of their otherness within this broader white supremacist system. Then, the second thing is that state violence and the

national security police state also are very evident in one's life as well.

Particularly, as an immigrant from Pakistan and especially after 9/11, the existing racial profiling became heightened. Though, you understand how information moves, how data is being collected constantly, and how you're in what we call the "stalker state" now—that you're traced, tracked, and monitored by the police state. As I was transitioning out of South Asian Network in 2010, I reached out to some friends with whom we've been building a coalition in the Black community, the immigrant community, youth, queer and trans community, and low-wage workers, to start talking about how rapidly counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations and tactics were being incorporated into domestic policing.

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The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), one of the largest police departments in the country, is on the forefront of building on those tactics. In the 2000s, they were training US Marines—they were assigned to the LAPD—in their operations in poor communities in South Central Los Angeles, particularly Black and brown communities. With those operations the Marines were learning urban guerrilla warfare.

The LAPD is also known to have trained Salvadorian paramilitary squads in the 1980s. So, post-9/11, I noticed how fast technology was moving. I come from a perspective that all surveillance is analog. But, with the speed at which technology and information sharing was developing, it was just a matter of time for discussions about how data would be collected and techno solutionism to circle back as reform, while preserving and further strengthening the occupation of communities. We look at policing as counterinsurgency operations in many communities in Los Angeles. So, I reached out to folks that have been involved in antipolice brutality and antistate violence work.

Then there was this one particular program that came on the heels of *The 9/11 Commission Report*. One main premise of that report was that the events of 9/11 happened because information was not being shared amongst various agencies, local, national, federal, international. Congress then passed a bill in 2004, the Intelligence Reform Terrorism Prevention Act, which mandated the executive branch to create an umbrella information-sharing environment. One of the key programs born from this law was the Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI) and its community recruitment par is known as, "See something, say something." Behavioral surveillance and data mining were central to that.

That's what led to folks coming together and creating Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, but there were key moments to that. One was looking at national security, looking at how surveillance operates, looking at the history of surveillance. Therefore, our guiding values were, "This is not a moment in time, but a continuation of history." The other one was, "There's always a creation of the other, the enemy, the enemy face."

For us, it became critical to flip the script on the notion of national security and look at it through the lens of race, poverty, and suspect bodies. So, locating ourselves in Skid Row in Downtown Los Angeles was crucial, and from there built on. Lastly, before going public, we spent a good six to eight months on the streets or focus groups talking to unhoused folks, day laborers, youth coming out of cages, undocumented immigrants, queer and trans folks, and different segments of the community, to learn how people were thinking about surveillance, how people were thinking of being a suspect body, how people were thinking of suspicious activity.

It became evident that surveillance is a methodology to gather data and information with the intent to cause harm.

These conversations helped check the vocabulary, sort of decolonized a lot of the typical language around invasion of privacy and constitutional protections, First Amendment and Fourth Amendment-type stuff. It became evident that surveillance is a methodology to gather data and information with the intent to cause harm. It is way beyond the invasion of privacy, and privacy is a very limited aspect of our understanding.

RU: I wanted to touch on what you mentioned about your collaborative work with the unhoused, different minorities, on how policing and technology intersects with these communities in LA?

HK: Surveillance is always layered. I also refrain from using the word "technology" in general because it takes away what we know of technology at least—like through stingrays, cell phones and license plate readers, or facial recognition technologies—and all of that, I think analog has been one of the key processes of, "I'm looking at you." Whether it's neighborhood watch, it's a culture of snitching, it's through observing people's behavior, before we even get to any facial recognition or something, it's the way the NSI defined suspicion as observed behavior reasonably indicative of pre-operational planning of terrorist and/or criminal activity.

When you break it down, it's all legitimizing speculation. If somebody's taking a picture of a building, which is considered a suspicious activity, despite being constitutionally-protected, I'm observing your behavior so "reasonably indicative." There's no probable cause or reasonable suspicion, but it indicates a pre-operational planning that you're thinking of doing something wrong. Since we are located in Skid Row, we have been learning and being tutored by the Black community who talk about that just by virtue of being Black, they are a suspect—so you don't need license plate readers, stingrays, or facial recognition technologies.

Because one of the things about intelligence-led policing is that behavioral surveillance and data mining are the two key elements, and they facilitate the outcomes an agency wants to achieve.

The main thrust of policing is that how our suspect bodies are policed through the white gaze, which views everybody as a suspect. That's when we can't get away from grounding ourselves within the white supremacist system, white privilege, racist violence, institutional violence, and structural violence. That's how surveillance begins, then the rest seems more like garnishing. Because one of the things about intelligence-led policing is that behavioral surveillance and data mining are the two key elements, and they facilitate the outcomes an agency wants to achieve.

For example, we have to look at various tactical operations and understand the broader landscape. Where does a license plate reader fit in into this thing? But the landscape, the ecology, already exists with the intent to cause harm. Skid Row has been a laboratory. It's where license plate readers were tested, where body cameras were tested, where facial recognition technology was tested. These locations become testing grounds for technologies. Similarly, just when I was talking about the Marines learning urban guerrilla tactical operations in South Central Los Angeles, which were then deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan, all of these tactics are going on under the guise of public safety. Whatever other pieces of technology that come into play, it just provides cover that allows police to say, "Computers don't lie, computers are not racist." For example, predictive policing is often understood as a feedback loop, racist data in, racist data out, but it's much bigger than that. There's a reason for that too, and I think this is where we have to talk about the monetization and the profit making out of this system.

Photo credit: Richy/Flickr.

RU: How can academics researching these issues as well as activists, community leaders, and members of the community, peel back all these layers you're describing and make the public more aware of these sorts of connections to community life?

HK: As you raise the issue of academics, I think there's academic complicity. Some academics come in the community and provide these solutions. Reform is one of our biggest enemies, because reform provides cover for rebranding violence under the guise of accountability, auditing, transparency, reporting, and oversight. From our vantage point, it's just a complete lie and an assault on the communities. Don't take me wrong, there's incredible academic work going on as well, but typically from people who are following the lived experiences of the community. They don't engage in top-down research.

A lot of our work is based on community-based research where we would share articles and do collective reading. We file for public records; we have weaponized public records quite a bit. For example, its complicated for me to understand what an algorithm is, but my basic understanding comes down to it's a freaking milk shaker—you throw things in, and it spits out something else, which becomes the end product, and you forget about all the rest of the stuff that has gone in. How do we bring this conversation to the community? The community, first of all, has to be in the lead to generate that conversation. From there, the design aspect and how we talk about it, the vocabulary, gets developed.

We're not the typical researchers; we are storytellers who bring the story to the community and do it collectively so everybody's able to speak.

I literally talk about the algorithm this the way, and it may not make sense to a technical expert, but in the community, people get it. Basic collective learning and collective research becomes crucial for us. I'll give you an example of our filing for public records. When we launched our project on LAPD's predictive policing program, folks came together, we kept the lawyers out of it, and we started because as organizers, we are storytellers. We're not the typical researchers; we are storytellers who bring the story to the community and do it collectively so everybody's able to speak.

This process allows people to ask questions, such as: Where is the money coming from? What's the staffing out there? How is it impacting the community? Who else is working with them? At a more fundamental level, how do you try to understand that? What is the thought process? So, we requested the grant proposal with which the LAPD applied to DOJ for funding for this program.

This process generates critical discussions and help you flip the script. You expose what's going on based on how people are understanding and learning about it. For example, why is it that Grechario Mack was murdered in Crenshaw Mall in the Crenshaw District, which is a historic Black area in South Central Los Angeles? Because the mall was considered a LASER zone. What is a LASER zone? It's an area that has been designated as a crime trigger. So, when cops arrive, they've already been told this is a high-threat area.

We wrote a report on predictive policing called *Before the Bullet Hits the Body: Dismantling Predictive Policing in Los Angeles*. It addresses the conditions on the ground created by these programs, which

escalate the situation, leading to somebody getting shot and killed. This is what's happening on the ground.

RU: It's so important to collaborate with the community to help them understand how all these systems work. Can you speak more about Watch the Watchers, which was recently in the news, and how this informs the community, and at the same time flips the script?

HK: Watch the Watchers is a project that we launched on May Day 2014. The whole idea was how do we flip the camera on the LAPD and document all different types of operations and movements. Looking at a key day when a lot of communities are out on the streets like May Day, going out there, and putting a camera in a kind of expanded version of Cop Watch with a critical eye toward surveillance. The Los Angeles Community Action Network has a long history of doing community work out in Skid Row as well. So, we all came together and launched Watch the Watchers to document that as a process of popular education. We did that again in 2015 and released a video in which some of our crew interviewed cops as well, and we even exposed an undercover cop. The video is titled *Watch the Watchers, They Lie*. In 2017, we released another video, *Watch the Watchers, They Still Lie*.

More recently, we brought it all together on a website, and that came through because LA journalist Ben Camacho had filed for public records for the photos of LAPD officers. Since he started doing this work, he had gotten photos of Santa Ana Police Department officers and released a report on the violence that they were perpetrating. Similarly, we had filed to get their rosters, salaries, height and weight, ethnicities, division, ranks, and everything else.

We have used this effectively last time there was a protest and the cops showed up. We looked up their serial number or their name and their name badge, and we opened Watch the Watchers, and we just started announcing, "Welcome, So-and-so. They've been around since then. This is what their rank is, this is what their division is. And by the way, last year they made $300,000 out of which $200,000 was overtime." I think it also empowers the community to know, because there's an unequal, intimidation-based power dynamic. It puts people at ease a little bit more.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.