NYPD Has Used Drones to Monitor Pro-Palestine Protests, Make 239 Arrests

Zane McNeill ⋮ 5-6 minutes ⋮ 12/4/2023

"This is a local police department that increasingly acts like a national intelligence agency," one expert said.

People gather during a demonstration in support of Palestinians outside Macy's in New York City on November 24, 2023.
Yuki Iwamura / AFP via Getty Images

Since October 7, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) has used drones at least 13 times to make 239 arrests at pro-Palestine protests — including on Sunday, when police allegedly used a drone to film people protesting in solidarity with Kings Theatre staff who refused to work an event held by a Zionist organization.

According to anti-Zionist activists, the event at Kings Theatre, which took place on December 3, was organized by and for Colel Chabad, a Zionist charity organization based in Israel. Black Lives Matter organization Equality for Flatbush and other groups organized an emergency protest in solidarity with King's Theatre staff who refused to work the event.

The groups said in a statement that the event should not have been held in Flatbush, Brooklyn, a majority Black Caribbean migrant neighborhood just blocks away from multiple Islamic cultural centers and surrounded by a host of Arab and Middle Eastern-owned businesses.

"A large percentage of the Kings Theatre staff, who are Black Flatbush residents, have been very vocal to the parent company, Ambassador Theatre Group, about their opposition to a Zionist event being held in Flatbush during the current genocide being carried against the People of Palestine," the organizers of the solidarity protest said in a statement. "We the community commend the courageous workers of the Kings Theatre for taking an important political stance."

According to reporter Talia Jane, the NYPD seemed to break the police drone used to surveil the protest. "Per one witness, 'It was shaking & swerving in the sky & then it flew directly into the ground,'" Jane said on social media.

The NYPD has more than tripled its use of drones in the past year, according to *Gothamist*. Just in October, during the upsurge of pro-Palestine demonstrations, the NYPD deployed police drones 13 different times to monitor the public protests. Police allegedly handed over drone footage taken during October protests in Times Square and Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, to prosecutors to use as evidence in criminal charges being pursued against 158 demonstrators.

"This is a local police department that increasingly acts like a national intelligence agency," Albert Fox Cahn, founder and executive director of Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, told *Gothamist*.

While the NYPD has maintained that its drones are not equipped with facial recognition software, police can run drone footage through such software back at police headquarters, and use the results to pursue arrests.

"The idea that you can have a drone hovering over a protest, collecting the identities of every person there, without any oversight, without any protections? That's unbelievably chilling," Cahn said.

Since the drone program was launched five years ago, the NYPD's drone fleet has doubled in size from 13 to 30 drones. In June, the NYPD paid $87,750 for a Lemur 2 drone which has night vision and thermal sensors. The drone can also break glass to enter buildings.

New York City mayor Eric Adams has been a big proponent of drone use by the NYPD since he was Brooklyn Borough President. Last fall, Adams met with the founders of two Israeli drone companies whose drones are used by U.S. Customs and Border Protection to patrol asylum seekers at the Mexican border and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to monitor Gaza. In August, Adams visited Israel to learn more about the possibility of incorporating Israeli drone technology and police tactics in the NYPD.

During his visit, Adams praised the drones used by Israeli law enforcement, telling reporters that "the method in which [the IDF is] using them, the methods in which they are training to use them, is what caught my interest."