



Case study: Mapping Muslim Neighborhoods

A GIS Professional employed as director of a research laboratory called the Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events at a private university in southern California receives an inquiry from a senior officer of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD).

The officer seeks the laboratory's assistance in a "community mapping" project whose purpose is to "lay out the geographic locations of the many different Muslim population groups around Los Angeles," and to "take a deeper look at their history, demographics, language, culture, ethnic breakdown, socio-economic status, and social interactions." The community mapping project is to be one component of a counter-terrorism initiative that aims to "identify communities, within the larger Muslim community, which may be susceptible to violent ideologically-based extremism..." (Downing 2007, p. 7). The director invites the officer to send the laboratory a Request for Proposal (RFP).

Soon after the telephone contact, the police officer is invited to Washington DC to explain the LAPD plan to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. The Committee chairperson cites it, among other similar projects, as an example of effective local-level counter-terrorism strategy.

News of the Senate Hearing and the LAPD plan is reported by the major media outlets including the New York Times, KNBC Los Angeles, and National Public Radio. Within days, representatives of three local Muslim groups along with the American Civil Liberties Union sent a letter to the officer expressing "grave concerns about efforts by the Los Angeles Police Department ("LAPD") to map Muslim communities in the Los Angeles area as part of its counter-terrorism program." The signatories argued that the community mapping project

...seems to be premised on the faulty notion that Muslims are more likely to commit violent acts than people of other faiths. Singling out individuals for investigation, surveillance, and data-gathering based on their religion constitutes religious profiling that is just as unlawful, ill-advised, and deeply offensive as racial profiling (Natarajan et al 2007, p. 1).

Meanwhile, the LAPD's RFP arrives at the University lab. The well-funded project will involve considerable GIS work, involving support for both student interns and professional staff. The potential project's stated purposes align with the Center's mission, which is to "to improve our Nation's security through the development of advanced models and tools for the evaluation of the risks, costs and consequences of terrorism." However, the associate director worries about the unfavorable publicity and possible legal action that might attend the project, particularly since the University describes itself as "pluralistic, welcoming outstanding men and women of every race, creed and background" in its mission statement. How should the director respond to the RFP?

References

Downing, Michael P. (2007). Statement before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, United States Senate. Washington DC, October 30. Retrieved 12 June 2008 from

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KNBC (2007a) LAPD Plan to Map Muslim Communities Angers Some Groups. 9 November. Retrieved 12 June 2008 from <http://www.knbc.com/news/14551575/detail.html>

Lieberman, Joseph (2007). Opening Statement, Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee Hearing "The Role of Law Enforcement in Countering Violent Islamic Extremism" Washington DC, October 30. Retrieved 12 June 2008 from http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/103007JILOpen.pdf

Natarajan, Ranjana, and five others (2007) Letter to Commander Downing, LAPD. Retrieved 12 June 2008 from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16162012>

Resources for educators

Suggested discussion points, relevant GISCI Rules of Conduct, and further resources related to this case study are available on request. Send request to David DiBiase (dibiase@psu.edu) along with contact information (including your position and affiliation) and a brief description of how you plan to use the case.

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