

# New York City police arrest artist who created drone satires

By Sandy English  
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Last week, The New York Police Department (NYPD) arrested Essam Attia, an artist who had designed and surreptitiously placed satirical posters dealing with the NYPD's potential use of pilotless drone aircraft.

Attia and a team posed as maintenance workers who routinely replace advertisements in plastic cases at bus stops and other public locations. The posters simulated NYPD public service announcements and depict drones firing missiles at fleeing civilians. One of the posters says, "NYPD drones: Protection when you least expect it." An NYPD logo appears at the bottom of the image.

In what amounts to a political vendetta against Attia for daring to criticize the police, the artist has been charged on 56 criminal counts, including grand larceny, possession of stolen property and a weapons charge for possession of an antique, unloaded .22 caliber handgun. The NYPD appears to have put some effort into hunting the artist down. Officers were seen dusting the poster-boxes for fingerprints in September, shortly after the posters began to appear.

In a video interview posted on [animalnewyork.com](http://animalnewyork.com) in September, Attia—his voice disguised and face hidden—said that he posted the images "to create a conversation about the deployment of drones in American airspace. We have to remember that right now, internationally, they are being used to kill people. They're armed: they shoot missiles. We're fighting an illegal war in Pakistan and no one seems to want to talk about it."

A US Army veteran who served as a geo-spatial analyst in Iraq, Attia added, "We know some [police] departments in Texas have them. It's only a matter of time before New York has them. ... Weaponized drones used to kill American citizens coming to New York City? I'm not sure I'm cool with that."

In February, Congress approved legislation that would allow 30,000 drones in American airspace by 2020. Predator drones, the same aircraft that the US military uses in Pakistan and Yemen, already patrol the US-Mexican border and were used last year by police in North Dakota. The environmental Protection Agency has reportedly been using drones to spy on cattle ranchers in Nebraska.

The sheriff's office in Alameda County, California, was recently forced to suspend the purchase of a surveillance drone after a public outcry.

In New York City, a memo released under the Freedom of Information Act earlier this year revealed discussions between the NYPD and the Federal Aviation Administration in which the NYPD stated it was "investigating the possible use of UAV's [unmanned aerial vehicles] as a law enforcement tool."

Drones can carry sophisticated surveillance equipment, including heat sensors, high-resolution cameras and advanced radar. Drones can stay in the air for up to 20 hours, much longer than manned aircraft.

The NYPD's deployment of drones would be one more escalation of a broad and sophisticated spying operation, often against groups and individuals who presented no criminal threat, especially since the terrorist attacks of 2001. Its intelligence division has thousands of members and is run by former Central Intelligence Agency deputy director for operations, David Cohen.

For the last ten years the NYPD has engaged in illegal "stop-and-frisk" actions, primarily against minority, working-class youth. It has collected information on over a million of these youth and stored it in an electronic database. Although it has been prevented from using computerized databases by law, the department continues to collect information from

those whom it stops.

Last year an investigation by the Associated Press revealed that the NYPD conducted a major surveillance operation against Muslims in the New York City area and across the east coast of the US. It placed informants in over 50 “mosques of concern,” infiltrated student clubs at several universities, and spied on businesses. A secret team called the “Demographics Unit” was dispatched to these investigations. The unit never discovered a single terrorist plot in its six-year history.

The NYPD also maintained close surveillance on Occupy Wall Street activists last year at demonstrations, including raids on activists’ residences for outstanding warrants on minor violations.

The most notorious use of drones has been that of the Bush and Obama administrations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere where they have been used not only for surveillance but to kill over 2,500 civilians as part of an effort to assassinate a smaller number of individuals that the president deems to be terrorist. Several American citizens have been killed in these operations, including Anwar al-Awaki, targeted by a CIA drone in Yemen by presidential order in September last year.

That the public should have a sharper and more critical knowledge about the use of drones in New York is undoubtedly of major concern to the NYPD, particularly since the department polices a city in which social tensions have reached a breaking point.

An video concerning Attia’s posters can be found here.

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