NYPD ahead of the curve

Brian Nussbaum, a research fellow with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland, is working on a project that studies the ways New York City and London have innovated and worked with various agencies, both citywide and internationally, to boost their counterterrorism efforts. He spent time abroad interviewing Scotland Yard officials and has sat down with officials at NYPD.

Compared to other cities in their respective countries, New York and London blow the rest out of the water when it comes to the amount of money, resources and personnel at their disposal, he concluded.

Richard Falkenrath, the NYPD’s deputy commissioner for counterterrorism, has stated that his police force has 50,000 people. If even 1 percent of them can be devoted to specialized counterterrorism training, it would still leave a large number of police officers for other duties. The number of NYPD officers who speak languages such as Farsi and Pashto and Arabic is around 870 and rivals the FBI’s specialists in New York.

Shortly after beginning his second tour of duty as police commissioner in January 2002, Ray Kelly hired well-respected, Washington-based counterterrorism experts. David Cohen, a former deputy director of the CIA’s operations wing, was picked to head the NYPD’s Intelligence Division, and Kelly hand-picked Michael Sheehan, former State Department head of counterterrorism, to run the force’s new Counter Terrorism Bureau. (Falkenrath replaced Sheehan last year.) More than 1,000 people were then assigned to those branches.

“The two of them really had these networks of contacts both in federal service and state and, particularly, Cohen overseas,” Nussbaum noted.

With financial help from the private Police Foundation, Kelly sent NYPD liaisons overseas to work with police departments in cities targeted by terrorists, including Singapore, London, Toronto, Montreal, Tel Aviv and Amman, Jordan.

After an attack—such as the Mumbai, India, train bombing on July 11, 2006, and the Beslan school siege in Russia on September 1, 2004—NYPD dispatched a liaison in a quasi-official capacity to see what lessons could be learned from local officials.

“Most of the goal of it is to sort of cut out the middle man—the middle man being the feds,” Nussbaum said. “There’s really, certainly within the United States, there’s nobody else that does the kind of stuff that they do. In the overseas thing, far and away, there’s nobody even in a similar realm.”

McCann said Kelly’s move was to simply assure New York City got unfiltered information as quickly as possible after an attack somewhere in the world, so he can mobilize his resources throughout the city, not circumvent the feds. While the relationship between the NYPD and federal agencies like the FBI were somewhat rocky shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, when Kelly began creating his miniature CIA and FBI within his department, relations now seem to be warmer, and the feds increasingly see New York as an asset, not a rival.

“I think anyone looking at the issue, they realize New York is ahead of the curve as far as what they’re doing and they’ve come to accept that, and now the relationship is vastly improved because they’re able to use each other,” McCann said. “While locally they always depended upon the federal government, now the federal government has these additional resources and they can utilize that also. So it’s a two-way street.”