



Investigating the Phenomenon of Terrorist Attacks on Mosques in Western Societies

Dr. Salim Alwan

Secretary General of Darulfatwa, Australia

While the Christchurch shooting in New Zealand stands out as an exceptionally brutal and violent attack, it is not an isolated incident targeting mosques in Western countries. Such attacks have been on the rise since the events of 9/11 in 2001, signifying a disturbing trend of growing Islamophobia, hatred, and intolerance towards Muslims, which frequently escalate into acts of violence. The principles of peaceful coexistence and integration between local communities and Muslim expatriates are seriously threatened by this violence.

Frequent Attacks

Some attacks on mosques in Western countries in the second decade of the 21st century reveal the extent of hatred and bigotry harbored by the assailants. These attacks have varied from pelting stones to car ramming, throwing Molotov cocktails, setting buildings on fire, and firing live ammunition at worshippers. Additionally, anti-Muslim expressions and slogans are clandestinely written on the walls of mosques. Verbal and physical harassment of mosquegoers, as well as indirect attacks through intimidating emails, aimed at instilling a state of terror among Muslims, are also prevalent.

In mid-March 2019, the most brutal and atrocious incident occurred when an armed assailant carried out a horrifying terrorist attack inside the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Center in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand. The attack resulted in the tragic deaths of approximately 50 individuals and injured 50 others while they were waiting for Friday prayers.

On January 29, 2017, six individuals were killed and eight others injured when three gunmen opened fire on approximately forty people who were performing the evening prayers at the "Grand Mosque of Quebec" inside the Islamic Cultural Center in the

Canadian city of Quebec. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau described the attack as a terrorist assault on peaceful Muslims.

On October 16, 2016, unidentified attackers threw stones at Ranchlands Musallah of the Islamic Association of North West Calgary (IANWC), Canadian province of Alberta, breaking its windows. The attack was a week after a similar one on the Calgary Islamic Center SW Masjid (CICSW), where windows were shattered, a copy of the Quran was burned, and a hate message was left behind .

On June 10, 2016, the US authorities arrested a major, who was indicted on charges of ethnic intimidation for throwing pork near a mosque in North Carolina accompanied by death threats while Muslims were preparing for prayers in Ramadan .

In 2015, demonstrators attacked and destroyed a Muslim prayer hall in a popular neighborhood in Ajaccio on the island of Corsica, South France, burning copies of the Quran, and writing anti-Arab and Muslims slogans on walls. French Prime Minister Manuel Valls said the attack was “an unacceptable desecration .”

On March 12, 2012, Molotov cocktails were thrown at a mosque in the Anderlecht neighborhood of Brussels, Belgium, where the imam died trying to extinguish the flames and a large part of the mosque was destroyed.

The investigations conducted following these incidents and numerous others have revealed several possible implications behind the targeting of mosques in Western countries through acts of terrorism, including the following:

Hatred and Racism: Such incidents reflect hatred and racism towards Muslims. There has been a discourse of hatred in Western countries against foreigners in general and Muslims in particular, who are perceived as invaders threatening the homogeneity and culture of Western society. Such a discourse blames them for all social problems. It grew stronger with the political rise of the far right following the terrorist attacks of al-Qaeda and Daesh, so much that it often attracts many voters .

The media also plays a significant role in inciting hate against Muslims via news, programs, dramas, movies, and documentaries, as well as novels and historical writings aiming to misrepresent Islam by denigrating it as inspiring terrorism. It promotes the idea that Muslim communities in Europe are a threat to the national identity and that Muslim culture does not align with human rights and democracy .

In addition, there are funded networks that operate as non-profit organizations disseminating misinformation regarding Muslim communities and motivating the Western Community to perceive Muslims as violent, intolerant, and terrorist individuals. Moreover, supporters of far-right parties in Germany attempted to fuel anti-Muslim sentiment following the December 19, 2016, Berlin attack that killed 12 people to gain support from anti-immigration campaigners. They also staged a protest at the attack site near the Memorial Church, shouting anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim slogans, blaming them for the attack .

According to a Pew Research Centre study released in June 2016, a sizable portion of European communities believe that the influx of immigrants into European countries will increase the risk of terrorist attacks as well as have a negative effect on socioeconomic conditions by displacing European citizens from positions of power and privilege.

Numerous hate groups that support violence against people or groups based on their racial, religious, or even unique national qualities have emerged. They use a variety of strategies, including cyberspace, which offers them unprecedented access to diverse audiences .

Parallel to this, the social context in Western countries, particularly in European ones, appeared to be packed with tendencies to exclude Muslims and discriminate against them religiously, culturally, economically, and politically, as manifested in the speeches of some Western figures, institutions, and social practises.

Vengeance: The far-right terrorist attacks against Muslims are sometimes retaliations against terrorist attacks that targeted Western countries, in an attempt to operate under a delusional moral legitimacy or a fake heroism. The interconnectedness between reciprocal terrorist attacks has become apparent in multiple countries. Following the terrorist attack claimed by the extremist organization Daesh on the headquarters of the French magazine «Charlie Hebdo» in January 2015, six mosques were targeted in armed attacks by right-wing elements.

After the Manchester Arena bombing following a concert by American pop singer Ariana Grande in Britain on May 22, 2017, the rate of attacks targeting Muslims increased about fivefold from before the bombing. 139 attacks were reported compared to 25 in the week before the bombing. Thus, the attack was classified as an act of revenge against terrorist invaders who killed thousands of people on European lands.

Emblems of Muslims

Mosques are perceived unfavourably by some Europeans who think of them as emblems of Muslims and the epicentre of their cultural presence. These individuals are opposed to the construction of new mosques or the renovation of existing ones for fear of them becoming Muslim clusters. According to one study, the reason why British citizens reject the construction of new mosques is their concern of Muslim clusters forming around mosques, creating an exclusively Muslim community. They are also concerned about the rise of Islamic architecture over urban civilization and Western Christianity and about the Islamization of Europe, claiming that Islam and Muslims pose a threat to European society and that mosques serve as incubators for extremism rather than places of prayer and spirituality.

More Victims: While mosques are gathering places for Muslims in Western countries, targeting them shall lead to more casualties. In addition, successfully carrying out these attacks can inspire other racists to carry out similar attacks in different places .

Reduction of Immigration: Several far-rightists believe that Muslim immigrants to Europe are invaders threatening the Western lifestyle and undermining the social homogeneity and prevailing cultural values. Thus, they are convinced that they must curb such a massive exodus to protect the European identity. Brenton Tarrant, the right-wing extremist of New Zealand, confirmed he was just a regular white man who decided to take action to secure a better future for white Europeans and get rid of Muslim invaders. He said that he represented millions of Europeans and national populations that want to live in peace on their own land, practice their own peculiar traditions, and ensure a prosperous future for future European generations.

Overlooking Right-Wing Extremism

Many Western intelligence services, it could be argued, made a big mistake by focusing solely on terrorist threats attributed to Muslims and failing to pay enough attention to the threats posed by right-wing extremists, despite their obvious hostility as they carried out regular attacks on minorities. For example, Christchurch has long hosted far-right groups like White Power Skinheads, Neo-Nazis, and fundamentalist and nationalist organisations. These groups advocated their own terminology, such as racial purity and getting rid of immigrants, insulted Muslims, and used cyberspace to disseminate hate speech against Muslims and Islamic figures. Following the New Zealand massacre, multiple investigations criticized security services for their

emphasis on tracking and prosecuting Islamist extremists while tolerating right-wing extremism. They urged Western countries to take every necessary measure to reduce the prevalence of these crimes.

Finally, targeting mosques in Western countries cannot be viewed as an isolated incident, as it is fueled by practices that encourage hatred and prejudice against Muslims, ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and dangers posed by groups such as al-Qaeda and Daesh. Simultaneously, the ongoing threats from far-right extremists who see Muslims as invaders and intruders upon Western nations, asking for their annihilation in order to preserve an imaginary purity within these societies, contribute to this cycle of violence.

To break free from this vicious circle, it is essential to rely on moderate factions that can seek common grounds for peaceful coexistence. It is crucial to differentiate between extremism and moderation, avoiding broad generalizations that perceive others as homogenous entities. It should be asserted that terrorism is an inhuman force detached from any religion or country, and that cooperation is necessary to confront and defeat it. In handling such crimes, double standards must not be applied.