

## Public outpouring of support 'very powerful': imam

### Discussion following Quebec City mosque attack looks at moving forward

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*Kanata Imam Sikander Hashmi and members of the Muslim community gathered Friday, Feb. 3, to offer each other support and to discuss their thoughts and ideas on how to move forward following an attack at a Quebec City mosque. - Metroland file photo*

Kanata residents and members of the Muslim community gathered Friday evening to offer each other support and to discuss their thoughts and ideas on how to move forward following the attack at a Quebec City mosque.

Kanata Imam Sikander Hashmi moderated the discussion on Feb. 3 at the Richcraft Recreation Complex Kanata, attended by about 50 people.

"It's important that we offer support to one another," he said. "(That we) talk about how we move forward – what we should do next as a community locally, a community nationally."

Six men were killed and 19 others were injured when a gunman opened fire in the Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec during evening prayer on Jan. 29. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau denounced the shooting as a terrorist attack in a statement on Jan. 30, describing it as an act of "senseless violence."

According to the Office of the Coroner of Quebec, the six men who died were Mamadou Tanou Barry, 42; Abdelkrim Hassane, 41; Khaled Belkacemi, 60; Aboubaker Thabti, 44; Azzeddine Soufiane, 57; and Ibrahima Barry, 39.

Many at the Kanata meeting, including Lila Hammouda, expressed shock that the attack happened in Canada. She said it felt as if the shooting occurred in her neighbourhood and not a neighbouring province.

"Just that possibility (of it happening) is a lot more real now because we're seeing it happen in front of our eyes," said Hashmi, who attended a funeral in Montreal for three of those killed in the shooting.

In the midst of the tragedy, others said they were floored by the outpouring of support from Canadians and non-Muslims, pointing to the vigils held throughout Canada and the public displays of solidarity – such as those where people formed human rings of protection around mosques while people were inside for prayers.

"That really says a lot that people, in the middle of the day on a Friday, will leave everything they're doing and come and stand outside in solidarity as a form of protection," said Hashmi. "That's very powerful."

Although there has been support, the amount of Islamophobic comments and hate-filled messages online had others questioning where the hate stems from and what can be done to counter the fear.

The shooter himself was a victim of such rhetoric, said Hashmi.

"This did not just happen in a vacuum," he said. "There was a process that led to this outcome and we all have to take responsibility for that."

Some suggested reaching out to their communities, interacting more with non-Muslims and having honest conversations to help dispel misunderstandings and ignorance.

Hashmi said it can be difficult for anyone – Muslim or non-Muslim – to take the first step and reach out.

"You can't control what people do but you can control what you do," he said. "If you look at one another with compassion and with some understanding, there are a lot of walls and divides that we can break."

He used the example of a time he was a "human book" for an event hosted by Ottawa Public Library where members of the public have the opportunity to have a conversation with any of the human books.

The first time he participated, Hashmi had a man sit down in front of him and “he goes off on everything you’ve heard and even more for 10 minutes,” he said. “Then one by one to everything he had said I tried to address it to the best of my abilities.”

At the end of the conversation, after both had been heard by the other, the two men hugged.

“It can be a challenge, it can be a little bit nerve-racking sometimes,” said Hashmi. “But it’s OK. You’ve got to hear people out. If we don’t listen to one another, if we don’t talk to one another, then that doesn’t help in bridging that divide.”

Hammouda said that for her, the sadness of the tragedy has been countered by the positive encounters she’s had in the days since the attack.

“Being a Hijabi lady, because I am a visible Muslim, I hadn’t had as many smiles as I ever had before in one day,” she said. “Everywhere I would walk people would intentionally look around and smile. It’s just a feeling of acceptance and a feeling of empathy, I guess, towards us ... It over(whelmed) the sadness and the negativity.”

**by [Jessica Cunha](#)**

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