

# Opinion: 9/11 - Muslims have faced an increasing level of violence

Now is the time to end the hate and intolerance

BY SIKANDER HASHMI, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE    SEPTEMBER 11, 2012



The first tower of the World Trade Centre collapses after being hit by a hijacked commercial aircraft in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001.

**Photograph by:** AFP/Getty Images files

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MONTREAL - Eleven years ago today, I headed to my room after attending classes at North America's oldest Islamic seminary, in Cornwall, Ont. I switched on the radio, as I usually would, to listen to the morning news. What I heard changed my world.

It was a day of shock and bewilderment. That night, our principal unequivocally condemned the attacks, sending a clear message to students that the attacks were unacceptable according to the teachings of our faith. That Friday, he made a public prayer for peace in the world, including in Israel. Five days after 9/11, U.S. president George W. Bush remarked that "this crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take awhile." For many, the reference to "a crusade" ignited fears of a clash of civilizations, bringing to mind the Christian holy wars of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. Fully in damage-control mode, the president and British prime minister Tony Blair noted many times that Islam and ordinary Muslims were not the enemy.

To his credit, New York mayor Rudy Giuliani posted police officers outside nearly every mosque in New York for their protection.

The magnitude of the attacks, with almost 3,000 innocent lives lost, naturally caused a lot of anger, and a response was expected. While the U.S. launched the invasion of Afghanistan within weeks of the attacks, individual responses began within days.

According to the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, an umbrella group of U.S. civil rights groups, 9/11 led to a dramatic increase in attacks against innocent Muslims, Arabs and Sikhs (since the appearance of practising Sikh men, with turbans and beards, resembles the dress of some Muslim men). FBI figures show reported hate crimes against Muslims in the U.S. went from 28 incidents in 2000 to 481 in 2001.

After a subsequent steady decline in such incidents between 2002 and 2008, they went up again in 2009 and 2010. Statistics Canada figures show a similar increase in this country.

The increased scrutiny compelled many Muslims to re-examine their understanding of Islamic teachings and values, and their attitudes toward others. Many imams, community leaders and activists worked hard not only to denounce terrorism, but to promote a more compassionate, inclusive and tolerant understanding of faith. As a result, today we're seeing more emphasis on outreach and civic and community engagement within Muslim communities. There is a growing realization among Muslims that we should be paying a lot more attention to the teachings of our faith that encourage helping those in need and looking after neighbours, and that we should be internalizing the Islamic values of mercy, compassion and patience.

These positive developments should have taken place a long time ago. Like everyone else, Muslims should make positive contributions to their cities and countries.

Meanwhile, the rhetoric against Muslims has heated up. In the U.S., campaigns against mosques and conspiracy theories about a hidden Islamic agenda are not uncommon. In Canada, controversies surrounding Muslim practices, from hijabs on soccer fields to criminal acts such as the Shafia honour killings, have helped fuel ill feelings toward Muslims.

The brewing hate took a tragic turn in August when a white supremacist walked into a Sikh temple in Wisconsin and opened fire, killing six people. In the following days, during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, eight American mosques were attacked. One of them was burned to the ground.

Human beings will always disagree with each other on various issues. At times, those disagreements may lead to extreme dislike of each other's beliefs and actions, and even of each other. But we must never allow them to rob others of their fundamental human and democratic rights.

Hate and intolerance can destroy the very foundations of our society and the freedoms we all cherish. For those who value peace, respect and security, the time is now to come together in an effort to extinguish hate. Together, we can make terrorism and hate-motivated attacks a phenomenon of the past.

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