

Suspect in deadly Canadian mosque shooting charged with six counts of murder

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QUEBEC CITY — Authorities charged a 27-year-old Canadian man with murder and attempted murder with a firearm Monday following a deadly attack on a suburban Quebec City mosque. The shooting, which was quickly labeled an act of terrorism, left six people dead and numerous others wounded.

Alexandre Bissonnette was charged with six counts of murder and five counts of attempted murder, according to officials.

The Sûreté du Québec, the Quebec provincial police, said two men were arrested Sunday night, [though authorities said Monday](#) that only one of the men is now a suspect in the mass shooting at the Quebec Islamic Cultural Center.

Police provided no possible motive as they began their investigation of the attack in one of Canada's safest cities.

But government officials wasted no time in calling it terrorism.

"This was a group of innocents targeted for practicing their faith," Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in an address at the House of Commons, hours after [condemning the attack in a statement](#). "Make no mistake: This was a terrorist attack."

"These were people of faith and of community," Trudeau added, "and in the blink of an eye, they were robbed of their lives in an act of brutal violence."

Five victims remained hospitalized Monday morning, [hospital officials said](#), noting that 14 others had been treated and released from area hospitals.

Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard also called the shooting a "terrorist act," saying at an overnight news conference that he reacted with "horror and incredulity" when he learned about the attack. He promised increased police protection for mosques and Islamic centers across the province of Quebec.

“We are with you,” Couillard said, addressing the province’s Muslim community. “You are at home. You are Quebecois.”

At a subsequent news conference with Muslim leaders, Couillard said he could not theorize why members of the mosque were gunned down — but he acknowledged that they were the targets.

“This community was targeted, that’s true,” he told reporters. “The individuals who were attacked were attacked because they were part of this community.”

But, he added: “All Quebecers have been the victims of this attack.”

While mosques in Canada and the United States have been the targets of numerous acts of vandalism and other hate crimes in recent years, the Quebec City attack appears to be one of the first mass shootings at an Islamic house of worship in North America.

Witnesses said a gunman in a hood or ski mask opened fire on congregants at the mosque shortly before 8 p.m.

Police said the six people killed were between 35 and 60 years old, all men. Mosque officials said the victims were all Canadian citizens, and included men of Tunisian, Moroccan and Algerian descent.

One man was arrested close to the mosque, according to police.

A second man called 911 about 20 minutes later, police said, and told a dispatcher that he wanted to talk. That person gave the dispatcher his location and waited for police about 14 miles east of the mosque along the shore of the St. Lawrence River on the approach to a bridge leading to the Island of Orleans. He surrendered without incident and has been cooperating with investigators, police said.

Authorities have not publicly identified either of the two men who were arrested — and police said midday Monday that one of them is now considered a witness, not a suspect.

Authorities have not described the ethnicity or religious identity of the perpetrator. Neither of the two men who were detained was previously known to police, authorities said.

Charges are still being sorted out, police said at the news conference Monday morning. Authorities did not provide information about the type of firearms used in the attack.

Mohamed Belkhadir, a 29-year-old man who had been identified by local news sources first as a suspect and then merely as a witness, told La Presse that he was at the scene of the shooting Sunday night trying to help a friend who had been injured when he saw someone with a firearm. He said he assumed it was a gunman returning to shoot more people so he ran away. But it was a police officer, and Belkhadir was arrested when he fled from the area, he said.

“I understand; I respect that they caught me,” Belkhadir told the Canadian newspaper, in French. “They saw me flee. They thought I was suspicious. That’s normal. For them, someone who flees is a suspect.”

Bissonnette, the suspect, was charged early Monday evening.

Officials at the mosque urged followers not to spread rumors about Sunday’s mass shooting.

Still, the context of the attack was inescapable, coming after a rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric, behavior and vandalism in the United States and Canada, amid a heated debate about President Trump’s executive order temporarily shutting U.S. borders to refugees and migrants from seven mostly Muslim countries.

While debate has raged in the United States over whether to accept refugees from war-torn Syria and elsewhere, the Canadian government has become more open to people fleeing conflict in the Middle East. Trudeau has personally greeted some refugees who have entered the country, and on Sunday said [he welcomed](#) people who were rejected from the United States under Trump’s order.

Ahmed Hussen, Canada’s minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship, announced Sunday that he would grant temporary residence permits to people there who were affected by Trump’s travel ban.

“Canada is a country of immigrants,” Hussen said, according to the Globe and Mail. “Canadians are proud of our long history of acting with compassion and humanitarianism to those seeking refuge for themselves and their families.”

Trudeau called Canada's diversity "our strength," and noted that "religious tolerance is a value that we, as Canadians, hold dear."

Still, Muslims in both [Canada](#) and the [United States](#) have reported a surging number of hate crimes in recent years, including vandalism, assault and arson at their places of worship.

The Quebec Islamic Cultural Center, one of several mosques in the area, [was the target of an apparent hate crime](#) in June, when someone left a bloody pig's head wrapped in cellophane at the front door, along with a note reading, "Bonne appétit." The consumption of pork is banned by Islam. Concerned about that kind of incident, the mosque installed several closed-circuit cameras around the building.

"All our thoughts are with the children, whom we must tell about the death of their fathers," [the mosque said Sunday on its Facebook page](#). "May Allah give them patience and endurance."

Through tears, Mohamed Labibi of the Quebec Islamic Cultural Center called the mass shooting a "very, very big tragedy," and pleaded with reporters to "personify" those who had lost their lives — businessmen, shopkeepers and a university professor, though he did not name them.

"We cannot express our sadness," he said.

The president of Laval University confirmed Monday afternoon that Khaled Belkacemi, a professor at the school of agriculture and food sciences, was among the dead.

There are more than 1 million Muslims in Canada. About 6,000 live in Quebec City, [according to Canada's 2011 National Household Survey](#).

Addressing the nation's Muslims, Trudeau said in his televised House of Commons speech: "I want to say directly: We are with you. Thirty-six million hearts are breaking with yours. And know that we value you. You enrich our country in immeasurable ways. It is your home.

"Last night's horrible crime against the Muslim community was an act of terror committed against Canada and against all Canadians. We will grieve with you, we will defend you, we will love you and we will stand with you."

Interim Conservative Leader Rona Ambrose called the attack “a sad reminder that our country is not immune to terrorism” and said it violated one of the country’s most cherished freedoms: “to worship without fear.”

Imam Sikander Hashmi, of Ottawa, said there has been a rise in the number of reported anti-Muslim hate crimes in Canada, which the National Council of Canadian Muslims [has documented](#).

“Unfortunately,” Hashmi said in an interview with The Washington Post, “it has come to this — to what we saw last night.”

The imam, who said he grew up in Canada, said the idea that an attack such as this could occur in Canada has crossed his mind, but the chances seemed slim to him.

In recent years, however, he said Muslims in Canada have been paying close attention to the political climate both in Canada and the United States. Specifically, he said, many were concerned about Quebec’s proposed “Charter of Values” bill that would have prohibited government employees from wearing religious symbols, such as head coverings. He said Muslims in Canada watched the U.S. presidential campaign, Trump’s inauguration and the controversial executive orders that the president pushed during his first few days in office.

“Muslims — we live in a global village,” Hashmi said.

The imam said that although he cannot say whether there is a link between the current political climate and the attack Sunday night in Quebec City, many Muslims might make that connection.

“Canadians and people around the world won’t be seeing this in isolation,” he said. “They’ll be seeing it in this context.”

But, he said, the Muslim community will stand firm.

“We’re going to get through this together, and stand against anyone who tries to spread hatred and fear,” Hashmi said.

Couillard, the Quebec premier, told reporters: “We are obviously in a world where people tend to divide themselves rather than unite themselves. This is why our country ... has to remain a beacon, a landmark of tolerance and openness in this troubled world.”

Police said a joint task force of terrorist specialists from the Quebec provincial police, the City of Montreal Police and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was deployed to the site, with explosives experts and canine teams among them.

The Quebec Islamic Cultural Center is located near Laval University, which has a large community of international students, many from French-speaking Africa and the Maghreb.

The mass shooting was a particular shock for Quebec City, a quiet white-collar community that has one of the lowest violent crime rates in Canada. The city, whose metropolitan area is home to about 806,000 people, reported just two killings in all of 2015.

Samer Majzoub, the president of the Canadian Muslim Forum, a Muslim advocacy group in Quebec, said that he knows people who attend the Quebec City mosque, but that he and other area Muslim leaders were still trying frantically to find out who had been shot.

“People that we know, we are not sure if they’re alive right now,” he told The Post. “It is shocking. It never came to our mind that we’d have a terrorist act as such, especially in Canada.”

“This act of wanton murder must be punished to the fullest extent of the law,” Ihsaan Gardee, director of the National Council of Canadian Muslims, [said in a statement](#).

“We are heartened by the overwhelming support from fellow Canadians in this time of deep crisis,” he added. “We must unite together against divisive forces that seek to harm our communities.”

Majzoub, Canadian Muslim Forum president, said Canada has seen increasing anti-Muslim hostility over the past year, but still nowhere near the level witnessed in the United States and Europe. He said the area near the mosque has appeared to be particularly prone to anti-Muslim sentiments.

“This masjid has witnessed a lot of issues before — threats and vandalism, and some Islamophobic graffiti,” he said, using the Arabic word for mosque. “It’s not the first time.”

Majzoub said the mosque has a small congregation of about a hundred people and attracts a lot of students because it’s near a university. He said many of its attendees are of North African descent.

“We never thought it could happen,” he said. “It was a slaughter.”



Jim Watson

@JimWatsonOttawa

We stand with our Muslim Community. Our flag has been lowered in solidarity. / Drapeau en berne en solidarité avec la communauté musulmane.



189 12:27 PM - Jan 30, 2017

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Trump called Trudeau to express his condolences, according to the prime minister's office — the first condolence call Trump has made for a terror attack since taking office on Jan. 20. In an afternoon news briefing, White House spokesman Sean Spicer confirmed that the president had offered his support to the Canadian prime minister.

“This is another senseless act of violence that can not be tolerated,” Spicer told reporters.

Spicer called the attack “a terrible reminder of why we must remain vigilant, and why the president is taking steps to be proactive rather than reactive when it comes to our nation's safety and security.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin offered his condolences, as well, sending a telegram to Trudeau.

“This murder of people who had gathered at a mosque to pray is staggering in its cruelty and cynicism,” Putin said, [according to the Kremlin](#).

French President François Hollande [denounced the attack](#), and Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo [announced Monday](#) that the lights on the Eiffel Tower will be turned off to send a message of solidarity.



Paris
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Paris est avec [@villequebec](#).

En hommage aux victimes de l'attentat survenu cette nuit,
[@LaTourEiffel](#) sera éteinte à partir de minuit.



941 9:12 AM - Jan 30, 2017

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Pope Francis met Monday with Quebec Archbishop Cardinal Gerald Cyprien Lacroix and said he was praying for the victims and their families, explaining “the importance of remaining united in prayer, Christians and Muslims,” [according to the Vatican](#).

Said Couillard, the premier: “Today if you see someone from the Islam community, stop and say hello.”

Bever and Hawkins reported from Washington. Marissa Miller in Quebec City, David Filipov in Moscow and Ben Guarino, Abigail Hauslohner and Bastien Inzaurrealde in Washington contributed to this report, which has been updated numerous times.