

U.S. Muslims see rise in hate, kernels of hope

by [Harry Bruinius](#) in the [November 25, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* For many American Muslims, the past year has been one of the most difficult in recent memory. Some have even compared the current climate to the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

It has certainly been the most difficult for Farris Barakat, who has turned to his faith in his grief after the murder of his brother and sister-in-law and her sister in February in North Carolina.

“It’s become a very monumental time for the Muslim American narrative,” Barakat said. “But the enemy is not the individuals, the enemy is ignorance.”

According to Muslim groups and allies, the perceptions of Americans who associate Islam in general with extremist ideologies, coupled with the political intensity of a presidential election season, have contributed to an unprecedented climate of overt prejudice.

Madihha Ahussain, a staff attorney with Muslim Advocates in Oakland, California, who has tracked acts of violence and intimidation for three years, said the number of anti-Muslim incidents has risen.

“It’s more than I’ve ever seen,” Ahussain said. And among “people who’ve done this [tracking] a long time, there’s talk about how it seems even worse than after 9/11.”

In September, a Texas teenager, Ahmed Mohamed, was handcuffed and arrested after bringing a handmade clock to school.

In October, a loose-knit coalition of anti-Muslim protesters calling themselves the Global Rally for Humanity attempted to organize a nationwide series of armed, “open carry” protests in front of mosques and Islamic centers across the United States. In May, a similar event in Phoenix drew hundreds of armed protesters in front of an Islamic center.

“It’s actually a very scary time to be Muslim in America,” said Glenn Katon, legal director of Muslim Advocates in Oakland, California. “I think that it may be more true

now than any time before.”

Yet, even amid this most difficult year, Katon sees “kernels of hope.” For instance, he noted that most of the anti-Muslim rallies in October fizzled, instead inspiring counter rallies by interfaith groups supporting the mosques being protested. Other protests in Oregon, Florida, and Michigan also were sparsely attended, outnumbered by those who came to show solidarity with Muslims.

Other glimmers of hope include the groundswell of support for Ahmed, the teenager in Texas arrested when his homemade clock was mistaken for a bomb. And in October, an appeals court decided to reinstate a case brought by Muslim groups against the New York Police Department’s surveillance program instituted after 9/11. The program specifically infiltrated mosques, student groups, and Muslim businesses in New Jersey on the basis of religion.

The case had been dismissed in early 2014, but in October an appeals panel allowed the case to proceed, saying the NYPD could not target groups simply on the basis of religion or ethnicity.

“What occurs here in one guise is not new. We have been down similar roads before. Jewish-Americans during the Red Scare, African Americans during the civil rights movement, and Japanese-Americans during World War II are examples that readily spring to mind. . . . We are left to wonder why we cannot see with foresight what we see so clearly with hindsight—that loyalty is a matter of the heart and mind, not race, creed, or color,” said Katon.

An estimated 2.75 million Muslims live in the United States. They form an ethnic and socioeconomic mosaic, including Arab immigrants in poor urban enclaves, South Asian residents in sprawling suburban towns, and African Americans who have converted.

“There is this incredible diversity of perspectives, diversity of languages,” said Faiza Patel, codirector of the Brennan Center’s Liberty and National Security Program at New York University School of Law in Manhattan. “There’s no common cultural heritage.”

Nicol Ghazi, an administrator at the Muslim Family Services of Ohio, based in Columbus, said she and her husband, a London-born Pakistani physician, and their high school-aged children rarely receive negative responses.

“We don’t see a lot of local hatred or anger—though I know the climate is very different in other cities,” she said. “So there is a sense of vulnerability, a vulnerability that people are singling out the faith we love, and there is an instinct to protect our families and those in our communities.”

At the Noor Islamic Cultural Center in Columbus, where Ghazi volunteers, a group of Muslims greeted a lone Global Rally for Humanity protester who arrived with anti-Muslim signs. An online video shows how members of the center engaged the protester, hugged her, and invited her in for conversation.

For many Muslims, the execution-style killing in North Carolina of Deah Shaddy Barakat, Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha remains the most extreme example of violence against Muslims this year. The murders ostensibly occurred over a parking space dispute, but the Justice Department is still weighing whether to bring hate crime charges against the alleged killer, Craig Hicks.

Farris Barakat has started an organization called Light House—his brother’s name, Deah, means *light* in Arabic—which seeks to inform people about Islam.

“I’m trying to make sure that people know what Muslims are all about,” Farris Barakat said. “If there was anything I could have done differently, to get to Craig Hicks, or anybody who has these threatening or completely angry responses to us—I don’t know, in some sense, they’re victims, too, themselves.”

Barakat, who traveled to Mecca for the Hajj pilgrimage with his mother after his brother and sister-in-law’s deaths this year, was moved by many expressions of interfaith support. For example, Habitat for Humanity, a predominantly Christian organization, built a house in honor of his family.

“So it’s not about living in a victimized state,” he said. “We should just take a moment to celebrate the good and appreciate those who stand up to say, ‘This shouldn’t be how we live.’”

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