

After attacks, Muslims in Paris fear being targeted anew

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PARIS (RNS) Shortly after the string of deadly, near-simultaneous attacks around the French capital, Faical Ouertani got a call from distraught friends in Tunisia.

Two of their grandchildren were in a restaurant celebrating a birthday when some of the assailants shot them, said Ouertani, who is a French Muslim, like his friends' grandchildren.

“They were probably among the first victims,” he said. “Today, one is in the hospital; the other one is dead.”

Friday’s terrorist attacks amount to a personal tragedy for Ouertani, as they do for many others in Paris. As flags flew at half-staff around the country on Monday (November 16), he joined a crowd of mourners at the Place de la Republique in central Paris to mark a moment of silence for the victims.

At least 129 people died in a spate of horrific shootings and suicide bombings at Paris nightspots and at a soccer stadium where a match was playing. The Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for the attacks, and on Monday, President Francois Hollande announced France was “at war” with the jihadist group.

Now, as police in France and Belgium continue to hunt for another suspect and accomplices linked to the attacks, Ouertani feels a double burden: the grief of loss and the fear of being stigmatized.

“As a French Muslim, it’s really important to be here,” Ouertani said, as Parisians placed candles and flowers before makeshift shrines for the victims. “It’s important to show we’re not all terrorists, we’re not all killers.”

Violence against Muslims soared after terrorist attacks in the French capital in January, rights groups say. According to the National Observatory Against Islamophobia, linked to a prominent Muslim umbrella group (the French Council for the Muslim Faith), the numbers of Islamophobic acts jumped 200 percent over the first three quarters of the year, compared with the same period last year. An estimated 5 million Muslims live in France.

“The Muslims in France are in a terrible situation,” said French sociologist Michel Wieviorka. “With these attacks, all the French are targeted. So the feeling among French is much wider and much stronger,” suggesting that the anti-Muslim fallout also may be more intense.

Scattered anti-Muslim acts—graffiti painted on mosques, stones thrown at a kebab restaurant, “death to Muslims” scrawled on a wall of a Normandy town—have already been reported since Friday’s attacks.

“I’m hearing now about politicians who don’t want women wearing the veil in France,” said Nizarr Bouchada, vice president of the Union of French Muslim Democrats, a small party campaigning for regional elections next month. “They’re heading in the same direction as those who committed the acts—they want France to be divided.”

Political rhetoric is indeed sharpening, including against Syrian refugees. Far right leader Marine Le Pen warned Monday that France would be “submerged” by migrants, after the discovery of what appeared to be a Syrian passport near the body of one of the suicide bombers.

Turkish tourist Mustafa Etkaturk, a Muslim, said he felt uncomfortable walking around Paris since the attacks. “I get the question ‘where are you from,’” he said. “The second question is ‘are you a Muslim?’”

Still, among the crowds gathered to mourn the victims on Monday, a sense of solidarity prevailed.

“I feel as if it were my own children who have died,” said a 70-year-old Algerian woman wearing a white headscarf, who would only give her first name, Fatiha. “I’ve worked here for 40 years, I’ve paid my taxes, and I’m incensed when people mix up those extremists with us.”

An elderly French man took her hand. "Not all French do that, madame," he said.
"Today, we're all together."