

Guards and good neighbors: mosques protect members amid attacks

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December 14, 2015

(The Christian Science Monitor) When members arrived at the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Baitus-Salaam Mosque in Hawthorne, California, on Sunday, they saw that the building had been vandalized: a spray-painted "Jesus" covered the front gate along a busy six-lane road, similar to the "Jesus is the way" graffiti that had appeared on the Islamic Center of Hawthorne, a few minutes away.

Then they saw the hand grenade.

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department bomb squad determined that the grenade was fake. But 24 hours after police arrested a 23-year-old man for setting fire to another Southern California mosque in Coachella Valley, the incident added to Muslim Americans' worries that a toxic combination of public fear and anti-Muslim political rhetoric is setting the scene for a record number of attacks on individuals and their houses of worship, leaving some members afraid to attend services.

"Anecdotally, there is no question that we have had something of a flood of anti-Muslim hatred and hate crimes," Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center's told Reuters.

Those crimes range from leaving pigs' head and feces at mosque doors to physically attacking people, including a northern Californian man who was hit and splashed with coffee by a state employee while praying in a park.

But mosques' leaders attempting to protect their congregations have allies: local police, and, in at least two cases, the Department of Homeland Security. And they'd like more: although more mosques are turning to armed guards for protection, many continue to offer outreach opportunities to the greater community, hoping to break down misconceptions about American Muslims.

According to Reuters, the Homeland Security has helped Muslim centers in Arizona and Virginia to double-check their safety plans. Other mosques are relying on local

forces to keep out would-be lone wolf attackers, as well as beefing up measures like alarms.

In 2013, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, which has also faced threats, issued guidelines for mosques looking to step up their security routines. While police presence is the first step, CAIR also urges mosque leaders to help members keep calm and recruit non-Muslim allies, from interfaith leaders to local politicians, to show support.

Police were on hand in Irving, Texas, this fall, when a group of armed protestors toting signs like "Stop the Islamization of America" demonstrated outside the city's Islamic Center.

"I had no idea Muslims could be nice to me, even after I stood out there with those signs. Sorry," one Ohio woman wrote on Facebook, after her participation in an anti-Islam protest came to a surprising end: an invite inside the mosque, where she talked with members and left with a hug and a Qur'an.

After a Main Street mosque in Meriden, Connecticut, was shot at last month, hours after ISIS's attacks in Paris, the community decided to hold an open house the next day.

"The person who fired at our mosque didn't know us," Mahmood Qureshi, the president of the Ahamadiyya Muslim Community of Connecticut, told CNN. "We have to do a better job of reaching out to people. But we are resilient."

According to the Council, there have been at least 63 attacks on Muslim centers this year, the highest number reported since they began tracking such crimes in 2009.

"Muslim Americans are feeling that they will never be able to say that this is in the past, that we will be accepted again into the fabric of America," Lori Peek, a Colorado State University sociologist, told CNN.

But others put their faith in interfaith work and outreach, whether in-person or online. A Muslim fundraising site's campaign to raise money for the families of San Bernardino victims has far surpassed its original goal, raising more than \$209,000.

"We wish to respond to evil with good, as our faith instructs us, and send a powerful message of compassion through action," the Web page explains. "No amount of money will bring back their loved ones, but we do hope to lessen their burden in

some way."

According to a YouGov/HuffPost poll released last week, 58 percent of Americans surveyed have at least a negative impression of Islam.

Only 36 percent say they're open to learning more about it, however, and 67 percent can't think of a Muslim friend.

"The bottom line is, too many Americans have never even (consciously) met a Muslim person," HuffPost editor Antonia Blumberg told reporter Jaweed Kaleem, talking about her "Muslim Life in America" series. "They have no context for understanding the faith outside of what's in the news. ... When you realize the incredible diversity of the Muslim American community, stereotypes just won't make sense anymore."