

San Bernardino: Another Mass Killing, More Hate directed against Muslims

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Just as there are so many unanswered questions about why Syed Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, massacred 14 people at an office party in San Bernardino, California, there is so much that is tragically clear.

In the first place, 14 innocent people are dead, 17 wounded and hundreds of family members and friends have now had their lives cruelly upended by a heinous crime.

The magnitude of this horror will be felt for a lifetime by those who have been denied the love and companionship of fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, or dear friends who have been taken from them.

But the shock of these murders has reverberated far beyond the “inland empire”. An entire nation followed this nightmare in real time and while those who sat glued to their television sets may not have known the victims, they felt the pain and experienced, from afar, the loss and insecurity that accompanied the seeming randomness of the crime that was committed.

The president struck the right note when he commented on the frequency with which we have had to endure these acts of terror and the fact that we simply cannot allow these mass murders to become “the new normal” that have come to define our daily lives.

There are, as I have noted in an earlier article after the killings in Charleston, more than one mass shooting per day in the United States and all too often these horrific acts are committed by mentally disturbed individuals with access to lethal weapons.

Some are crimes of passion while others have political intent. In the latter case, whether at a church in South Carolina, a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado, or an office party in California, there have been too many instances where insane people armed with sophisticated weaponry acted out their ideological fantasies taking the lives of plain folks who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Whether motivated by delusions of white supremacy, lies about the content of a video purporting to sell foetus body parts or gross distortions of religion, these crimes are the same, the victims are the same, and the shock and loss of security experienced by the rest of us are the same.

There is one important difference, and that is that when the perpetrator is a Muslim, the crime spills over to inflict damage on an entire community.

After Charleston, there were efforts to have the Confederate flag removed from the State Capitol. But white southerners who claim that this flag is their heritage were not victimised by hate crimes.

After the attack on Planned Parenthood, anti-abortion activists and their organisations did not receive a wave of death threats nor were their offices vandalised.

But after San Bernardino, innocent American Muslims once again were forced to endure taunts and hate.

Mosques have been vandalised since Farook and Malik committed their acts of terror and innocent Muslims have experienced scores of terrifying hate crimes.

The pain of this hit my office in a personal way. One young woman who works for me came to work with a cap on her head because her mother was afraid to have her leave the house with her hijab.

The 16-year-old sister of another woman in my office received death threats at her high school.

Their co-workers have been supportive, and are bewildered and in shock at these displays of intolerance.

I am no stranger to death threats and hate. And so I understand what they are going through.

After September 11, three men threatened my life, one even threatening to murder my children.

My daughter, then a freshman in college, received a death threat on the phone in her dorm room.

I recall that what bothered me most during this frightening period was that, like the rest of my fellow Americans, I was angry at the murderers who abused the hospitality of my country to kill my countrymen.

And I, too, was mourning the loss of life and the unspeakable sadness of so many whose loved ones had been taken from them.

What the hate crimes did was to deny me and my family our mourning and our shared sense of grief, as Americans, because we were forced to look over our shoulders in fear of those whose misdirected hate had targeted us.

Thankfully the story did not end there. The DC police provided us with protection and the FBI caught, charged and convicted the culprits.

And there were countless acts of kindness from individuals I knew and those I did not know who called or wrote and offered support.

It was truly marvelous and it was America at its best. But it would not have been necessary if haters had not taken our attention away from crime of September 11 and the 19 terrorists who committed those heinous acts of murder.

Law enforcement has now determined that the San Bernardino murders were an act of terror and are now working to see why. They will, no doubt, before long, learn what factors set Farook and Malik on their murderous path.

Their investigation may provide answers, but it will not give closure to the families of those who died. Nothing will heal those wounds.

There are those who will focus exclusively on this act and these actors who, it now appears, may have attempted to justify their murders with religion.

But this should not distract us from the larger problems of guns, mental health and mass violence.

Certainly we must address the lure of violent extremist ideologies (whether based on religion, or anti-government or race hatred) and what draws sick individuals to embrace them.

But there are other issues we must address, as well: the accessibility to powerful weapons that make these mass shootings, of all sorts, possible, the failure of our mental health system that allows so many to fall through the cracks and the culture of violence that has fostered the epidemic of mass shootings.

At the same time, we must tone down the rhetoric of hate and intolerance and not allow the haters to make new victims of this horror by indiscriminately targeting innocent American Muslims.

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