

PUBLICATION

The Orlando Attack – A Female American-Muslim Attorney Perspective

April 27, 2017

I first heard about the Orlando attack from an American Muslim friend who was residing in Orlando and had posted on social media to pray for the city. As that day progressed, I soon discovered that this incident would be known as the deadliest mass shooting in American history, and the worst terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11, leaving 49 people dead and 53 injured.

I remember feeling sick to my stomach on that ominous day, especially as I was fasting for the Islamic month of Ramadan. It just did not add up for me, or for many other Muslim Americans, who were observing one of the holiest times of the Islamic lunar calendar. Bad-mouthing and arguing in anger are not permissible in Islam, let alone causing harm to any being.

Yet, in the wake of this horrific attack at Pulse nightclub in downtown Orlando, the overwhelming reaction of mainstream media was to tie the attack to terrorism committed by a Muslim. As the days passed, several different articles and interviews surfaced showing that the attacker, Omar Mateen, was a disgruntled American-born licensed security guard who was a frequent attendee of Pulse himself and who had a revenge motive at the nightclub. There were many reports of his emotional instability, including from his ex-wife. Rather than being highlighted in mainstream media, this information has been diminished.

Instead, media outlets and, of course, some politicians, focused on other issues that help drive Islamophobia in this country. Every such incident leads to a striking increase in hate crimes against Muslims in the U.S. For instance, according to *The New York Times*, hate crimes against Muslim Americans and mosques tripled across the U.S. after Donald Trump's call for a ban of Muslims following the San Bernardino attack in December 2015. Victims of such assaults and murders include Americans who look like me, simply because they may dress differently than the mainstream.

In particular, there were a number of incidents of backlash against Muslims post-Orlando shooting. On June 30, 2016, a fasting Muslim woman running to catch her train in Chicago was tackled and strip-searched by five Chicago police officers. On July 2, 2016, a Muslim man was beaten in front of a mosque in Fort Pierce, Florida after the suspect allegedly said, "You Muslims need to get back to your country." Another incident occurred on July 3, 2016 when a Muslim doctor was shot on his way to a Houston mosque for morning prayers. On June 19, 2016, at the mosque in Sunrise, Florida where I attended weekend school growing up, a woman walked into the prayer hall, making threats against the mosque and bringing an alleged bomb.

The Orlando attack, just like every other incident tied to Islam by media, prompted my husband and me to have the age-old conversation about our safety. As a practicing Muslim who wears a headscarf, or hijab, in public, I am a visible target for anyone harboring anti-Muslim sentiments. Even if the rise in Islamophobia does not translate into statutory crimes, all Muslim Americans are nonetheless affected by it, experiencing racism and stereotyping to some degree in public, grade schools, universities and careers.

Unlike other attacks which are tied to Muslims, however, the shooting at Pulse had led to a plethora of dialogues regarding pressing issues aside from terrorism. I witnessed for the first time this type of incident leading to a swarm of LGBTQ American Muslims openly writing their thoughts, and being heard. Yes, there is a Muslim LGBTQ community, not only in the U.S., but around the world.

Even further, the attack at Pulse had sparked a conversation across the board about glaring domestic issues related to mental health access, gun control, voting, counterterrorism practices and first response procedures. This was unusual because most incidents labeled as terrorism invite more spotlight on foreign policy, and how to combat the "outsiders." Yet, here we are, engaging in the political process of how we can improve our domestic policies.

The morning after the Orlando attack, on June 13, 2016, I attended a hearing in Broward County Civil Court. It was not a routine day in foreclosure court. Before beginning his motion calendar, Judge Joel T. Lazarus stood and addressed the tightly-packed courtroom in remembrance of the victims, voicing domestic issues that needed to be addressed and offering a moment of silence. Tears ran down my face as he spoke. This was not about Muslims versus non-Muslims. It touched upon all of humanity.

A fellow female attorney in the Broward County courtroom noticed my state of emotions and walked toward me, patting my shoulder and softly counseling me to "hang in there." She was not the only one who had reached out to me in support after the Orlando shooting. I was approached by fellow colleagues, old and new. I was surprised at how quickly people from all walks of life came together in support and remembrance of the victims. Our Firm, Baker Donelson, has even donated to the OneOrlando Fund, encouraging its employees to donate as well.

There is hope, for a better society with more understanding and acceptance of different views. We cannot allow fear to prevent us from living and working to improve our society and policies. This small token of our efforts is the least we can do in remembrance of the Pulse victims, and countless other victims of attacks around the world.