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TAJIKISTAN: Tajik children undergo 'Readjustment' in closed schools after attending foreign madrasahs

By [Farangis Najibullah](#) and [Mumin Ahmadi](#)



Some 3,400 Tajik students have come home from foreign madrasahs since 2010, when the president demanded parents bring their children back to prevent them from potentially becoming "terrorists."

RFE/RL (14.12.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2QJFDaI> - Tajikistan is trumpeting the repatriation of children from Bangladesh who were studying at Islamic madrasahs, as the Muslim-majority country keeps strict tabs on religious education.

But the return home for the children is not yet over as they have been put in schools for children with special needs to undergo what officials describe as an indefinite "readjustment" period.

Some 3,400 Tajik students have come home from foreign madrasahs since 2010, when President Emomali Rahmon demanded parents bring their children back to prevent them from potentially becoming "terrorists."

But one family says they haven't been allowed to contact their 13-year-old son -- a former madrasah student -- since he was taken to the boarding school in early November. "The family isn't allowed to bring him home even on weekends," says the boy's father, Mahmazarif Saidov. "We aren't even sure if our son is really studying at that boarding school or somewhere else."

"We're worried that our child's circumstances are being kept secret from us," Saidov adds. "He must be allowed to come home on weekends and tell us what he's studying, unless of course [the authorities'] aim is brainwashing."

The Education Ministry says the returnees undergo the special readjustment classes to help them adjust to the secular Tajik school system. "These children haven't been to a regular school and aren't accustomed to our way of life," ministry spokesman Ehson Khushvakht said on December 10.

Khushvakht said teachers will work with the children "to determine which grades of school the children should attend in the future" and prepare them for regular schools before sending them back to the families. "The duration of the readjustment period depends on each child's ability -- it could last three months, six months, or one year," he told RFE/RL.



Tajik President Emomali Rahmon visits a school in the Rudaki district last year. Authorities haven't publicly commented on the exact number of Tajik children studying privately in Bangladesh or the circumstances of their return.

One law enforcement official put the number of recent returnees at around 10 and said they were brought back to Tajikistan during the past eight months. The official spoke on condition of anonymity as he wasn't allowed to speak to the media.

The authorities reportedly found out about the children after one of them -- Saidov's son -- was detained during a trip to the United Arab Emirates in February and deported to Tajikistan due to his expired documents.

Under Scrutiny

As part of efforts to combat extremism, Tajikistan has banned its citizens from sending minors to religious schools abroad without hard-to-obtain, written permission from government agencies.

Authorities estimate that several hundred Tajik nationals, including minors, are currently studying in Islamic schools abroad.

A decade ago, Rahmon warned Tajik students studying in Islamic schools abroad that if they didn't quit immediately and return home, "the majority of them will turn into extremists and terrorists in five or 10 years."

"They don't only study religion there," Rahmon warned. "They will come back and create problems for the nation and the government."

The majority of the 3,694 Tajiks that were studying in religious schools in Iran, Pakistan, and Arab countries in recent years have returned to Tajikistan, authorities say.

One former madrasah student, who swiftly stopped attending his school in Egypt after Rahmon's appeal, says he is still under scrutiny by the authorities nearly a decade after his return.

Dilshod, a 33-year-old resident of the Hisor district near Dushanbe, tells RFE/RL that earlier this year police regularly summoned him and asked about his everyday life, contacts, and the whereabouts of his relatives and friends.

"They summon me every five or six months," Dilshod says. "Each time I'm required to bring a photo and a letter from the local authorities."

Three other former madrasah students who quit their religious studies in Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia offered similar accounts of being regularly questioned by Tajik police since they returned.

Shortly after returning religious students from abroad, Tajikistan also closed down all but one madrasah in the Central Asian country.

In September, Khoja Ansori, the last madrasah in the southern region of Kulob, was turned into a music school, four years after it was shut down for allegedly failing to meet license requirements.

The country of some 9 million is currently left with only one official madrasah and an Islamic University, both located in the capital, Dushanbe.

The government also prohibits minors from attending Friday Prayers.

Some Tajiks fear the state's harsh measures against the freedom to practice the Islamic faith will lead to the opening of underground schools and alienate the parents who want their children to have basic religious knowledge taught to them by qualified professionals.

Tajik officials often emphasize the threats of religious extremism and terrorism in an apparent bid to justify their strict control of religious institutions.

Two deadly assaults and two prison riots in Tajikistan since 2018 were claimed by Islamic State, although the group's claims can't be independently verified.

Hundreds of Tajik citizens went to the Middle East in recent years to join IS.

Critics of the government, however, say widespread corruption in state institutions, extremely high unemployment that sends hundreds of thousands abroad to find work, abject poverty, and a lack of civil liberties in Tajikistan contribute to people's discontent and pose a much bigger threat to the country's stability.

Written by Farangis Najibullah based on reporting by Mumin Ahmadi of RFE/RL's Tajik Service. Kayumars Ato of RFE/RL's Tajik Service contributed to this report

EGYPT: Is Salafism making a comeback ?

By Rami Galal

AL-MONITOR (26.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IznUqq> - Egypt's Ministry of Religious Endowments granted on Aug. 7, for the first time since 2014, Vice President of the Salafist Call Sheikh Yasser Borhami a [preaching permit](#) for Friday sermons between Aug. 1 and Aug. 31 at Al-Kholafaa Al-Rashdeen Mosque in Alexandria.

Borhami has repeatedly [sparked controversy](#) in the past with the fatwas he issues, including one barring Muslims from sending holiday greetings to Coptic Christians, another banning people from watching soccer games and one forbidding children from decorating their bedrooms with Disney character posters.

The Ministry of Religious Endowments [issued a law](#) in June 2014, according to which only imams who are graduates of [Al-Azhar University](#) are authorized to preach, and only after [passing an interview](#) with the nationwide endowments directorates affiliated with the ministry, which in turn issue the preaching permits.

The permit granted to Borhami includes seven instructions he must follow: First, he must abide by the [unified sermon](#) imposed by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, as per its July 2014 decision. Also, Borhami must abide by the [Ash'ari doctrine](#), a moderate Islamic school of thought adopted by Al-Azhar. Second, his sermon must not exceed 15-20 minutes.

Borhami must not address any political or controversial issue in his sermon and no fatwas shall be pronounced in mosques. In addition, no religious lessons shall be given other than the Friday sermon preapproved by the ministry. Borhami must abide by the instructions issued by the ministry. He is also not allowed to move from one mosque to another unless there is prior approval from the director of the endowments directorate, the director of the department of preaching permits at the ministry and the area inspector appointed by the ministry to monitor preaching across the country. Finally, the permit shall also be considered personal property and must be preserved.

The return of Borhami to preaching has raised many questions and criticism from secular citizens in Egypt, such as intellectual [Khaled Montaser](#), and from parliamentarians such as [Nadia Henry](#). This is mainly because Borhami's fatwas in the past promoted hostility toward Copts, and he has not apologized for them. Meanwhile, Samir Sabry, a prominent Egyptian lawyer, [filed a complaint](#) against Sheikh Mohammed Khashaba, undersecretary of the Ministry of Religious Endowments in Alexandria, who granted Borhami the preaching permit.

In this regard, Abdul Moneim Shahat, the spokesman of the Salafist Call, told Al-Monitor, "Borhami holds a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies from Al-Azhar University, and he applied in this capacity for the preaching permit before the Ministry of Religious Endowments, not in his capacity as deputy head of the Salafist Call. The Ministry of Religious Endowments does not deal with organizations such as the Salafist Call, but deals with each person as an individual by assessing them to ensure they meet the conditions required to obtain a preaching permit."

Shahat noted, "The new measure taken by the ministry now includes its instructions — which were repeatedly published before — in the permit. What I am not sure of is whether the ministry decided on generalizing this measure to all permits, or whether it was something specific to Sheikh Borhami. But the instructions are not new, and there are no specific instructions that were only formulated for Borhami."

He added, "The existence of a peaceful Salafist movement that rejects bloodshed and respects the tacit understandings [reached] with non-Muslims is the first guarantee to curb the spread of violence and takfiri [extremist] orientations."

The [Salafist Call](#) was founded in Egypt in 1977. At first, its activities were limited to social and preaching work, and it refused to participate in political life. Meanwhile, the security forces were lenient toward the Salafist Call, compared to other Islamist movements, because it [the Salafist Call] did not seek to reach power and its presence undermined the Muslim Brotherhood's monopolization of the Islamist current in the country.

But after the January 25 Revolution the situation changed. The Salafist Call formed its political wing, the Nour Party, which won 112 out of 508 seats in parliament in the 2012 legislative elections. After June 30, 2013, the movement faced increasing calls to dissolve it under the pretext that it is a religious party despite supporting the revolution. The army, however, rejected those calls as the dissolution of the Salafist Call would have changed the balance of power among Islamist currents. And thus, although the Salafist Call still enjoys political support, it came under harsh media campaigns, and ultimately faced a setback in the 2015 parliamentary elections, winning only 12 seats out of 596.

Ahmed Karima, a professor of comparative jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University, told Al-Monitor, "I feel that Salafism is being swept out of Saudi Arabia to be settled in Egypt with the help of international parties and forces that do not want stability in Egypt. And while Al-Azhar University professors are not allowed to speak out and preach, Borhami, the author of radical fatwas and patron of Salafism in Egypt, is granted this permit."

Often professors who oppose the current regime in Egypt do not receive their preaching permits from the Ministry of Religious Endowments despite meeting the conditions.

There is a tendency today to [get rid of Salafism](#) in Saudi Arabia. Several Salafist preachers, fearing the campaigns led by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, have fled to Egypt and settled mainly in Alexandria, the stronghold of Salafism in Egypt.

Karima added, "Salafists led by Borhami consider all Muslims [Sufis and Shiites] who do not adhere to their ideology as apostates, and accuse Al-Azhar of corrupt beliefs for following Ash'ari doctrine. Salafism spread in Egypt through Gulf funds and the movement managed to create bases for extremist thought through [media] channels. For example, Sheikh Mohammed Hassan — a leading Salafist preacher — is building a [30-acre Islamic complex](#) in 6th of October City, with nurseries to teach children the principles of Salafism. Salafism is not a threat to [Al-Azhar](#), but a threat to Islam."

Secretary of the parliamentary Religious Committee Amr Hamroush told Al-Monitor, "I strongly condemn the recent decision by the Ministry of Religious Endowments to grant a preaching permit to Borhami — even if such permit was for a month or subject to restrictions — because this man did not apologize for past extremist fatwas. Borhami's thoughts have not changed, even if he pretends to abide by the provisions of the [Ministry of Religious Endowments](#) to be able to preach. Therefore, I ask the ministry to reconsider this permit and withdraw it."

HRWF Comment: The Salafist ideology, a totalitarian ideology

The Salafist movement is often divided into three categories: the purists (or quietists), the activists and the jihadists.

"Purist Salafists" focus on non-violent preaching of Islam, education, and "purification of religious beliefs and practices". They dismiss politics as "a diversion or even innovation that leads people away from Islam". They never oppose their rulers, even in autocratic regimes.

"Activist Salafists", unlike the "purists" are engaged in political processes. They advocate political reform but eschew violence. Due to numerical superiority, the movement has been referred to as the mainstream of the Salafist movement at times.

"Jihadist Salafists" began developing an interest in armed jihad during the mid-1990s. According to Mohammed M. Hafez, a specialist on foreign fighters and suicide bombers, Salafi jihadism is an "extreme form of Sunni Islamism that rejects democracy and Shia rule."

Despite some similarities, the different contemporary self-proclaimed Salafist groups often strongly disapprove of one another and deny the other's true Islamic character.

The three branches of Salafism share the same totalitarian ideology, the one implemented by ISIS and like-minded armed movements. They share the same objective: to impose a totalitarian system of governance.

See HRWF paper: "[Islamic Minorities, A New Challenge to Religious Freedom](#)" presented at the conference [Religions and Human Rights](#)" held by the University of Padua in April 2016.

Watch Aljazeera Video Debate: [What's wrong with Islam?](#)

TURKEY: Turkey's global soft-power push is built on mosques

Ankara is funding thousands of mosques out of more than just goodwill.

By John M. Beck

The Atlantic (01.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2MwXnHI> - The mosque being built in Albania's capital will be the largest in all the Balkans. Still a few months away from

opening, it already dominates a corner of Tirana, overshadowing the neighboring Parliament building from a 105,000-square-foot compound. The building's walls are clad in pale stone and topped with domes and minarets, which look nothing like any structures that have stood in the area before.

Instead, the building echoes classic Ottoman architecture, and for good reason—it is being funded by Turkey. It's among a series of new mega-mosques constructed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government at home and abroad. One in Accra, Ghana, is the largest in West Africa. Another in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, is the largest in Central Asia. A complex in Maryland is said to be the largest of its kind in the entire Western Hemisphere. There are at least 2,000 others of various sizes that are funded by Ankara, and still more have been planned or discussed in places such as Venezuela, where Erdoğan is bolstering Nicolás Maduro's beleaguered government, and Cuba, which Erdoğan claimed Muslim sailors reached before Christopher Columbus. Once completed, many of these mosques remain controlled by Ankara, and—in areas with large Turkish diasporas—deliver the same state-mandated weekly sermon heard in every city, town, and village back in Turkey.

Erdoğan has faced criticism from Western powers in recent years for actions seen as anti-democratic and illiberal: Perceived domestic enemies have been purged and jailed; Kurdish armed groups have been attacked in both Syria and Iraq; banks and foreign powers have been harangued for Turkey's own financial woes. At the same time, his government has progressively expanded a global soft-power campaign, and mosques are only the most obvious result. It also supports religious schooling, a program for restoring Ottoman-era buildings, and extensive social and aid operations. Most beneficiaries have so far welcomed the assistance, but a few, notably in Germany, now worry that Turkish influence could deepen their own communal divides or even be a vehicle for espionage.

Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, aspire for Turkey "to be more than a normal country, to be something greater," Selim Koru, an analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, told me. "And they express that very often." Religion, he added, can prove a more potent tool than conventional cultural outreach or force projection.

Turkey's mosques are controlled by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, or Diyanet, a state body that employs imams, writes sermons, and issues fatwas. It was founded in 1924, but grew rapidly under the AKP to become a more overtly political organ with an ambitious global remit. With well over 100,000 people now on its payroll, its budget has expanded more than fourfold since 2006, during Erdoğan's first term as prime minister, to 12.5 billion lira (\$2 billion) this year. That figure is orders of magnitude larger than many government ministries, and even the national intelligence agency. Diyanet spokespeople did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

The Diyanet often fills funding gaps in recipient countries, as it has done in Albania. In 1967, when Albania's then-dictator, Enver Hoxha, mandated state atheism, the public practice of religion was outlawed, and places of worship were demolished or repurposed. After his downfall, the population, which identified as 57 percent Muslim, 10 percent Catholic, and 7 percent Orthodox, found itself without mosques or churches and lacked the means to build them. Foreign money began pouring in: Pope John Paul II laid the cornerstone for a Roman Catholic cathedral in 1993; a few years later, the Greek Orthodox Church began work on its own, one of the largest of its kind in Europe.

For a while, Tirana's Muslim majority lost out. In the center of the capital, only Et'hem Bey Mosque had survived the Hoxha era, and it has room for just a few dozen at prayer time. Come festivals and holy days, worshippers had to gather outside, in Skanderbeg Square. So in 2010, the city's mayor, Edi Rama, approved the construction of a new mosque, funded by the Diyanet. Erdoğan attended the groundbreaking ceremony five years later and thanked Rama, who by then was prime minister.

There have been gripes about Turkish involvement, and about the architectural style of the building, which will be called the Great Mosque of Tirana, but its construction is seen by many as only the latest foreign power to take an interest in their country, the Albanian historian Auron Tare told me. "There's a religious competitiveness," he said. "You have these different countries, these different sorts of religious bodies who are all converging here."

Turkish money has also reached Albania through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), which distributes most of the country's development assistance and which has carried out more than 200 projects there, according to Erdoğan's office, including restoring Ottoman mosques. The agency is also funding various other programs in Tirana, such as park development and the construction of university dorms, the city's current mayor, Erion Veliaj, told me. Albania is still one of the poorest countries in Europe, and he's happy to spare his own budget. However, a TİKA spokesman told me the organization had no relevant restoration projects in Albania, despite listing a number on its website, and did not reply to further requests for comment.

Seeing the new mosque close to the Catholic and Orthodox cathedrals, Veliaj said, gives him "immense pleasure." He's confident, too, that Albania's relaxed variety of Islam will remain unaffected by Turkish influence, partly due to an extensive intermingling of once-distinct religious groups during the atheist years. No one, he said, wants to start a fight at the dinner table. Besides, Turkey's Hanafi interpretation of the Sunni branch of Islam, Veliaj added, far more tolerant than that propagated by "other countries"—a thinly veiled reference to more doctrinaire strains of Islam promoted by Saudi Arabia and others in Albania after Hoxha's fall. "As a mayor," Veliaj said, "I'm happy to see that assistance come from Turkey than from some other place."

Whereas Turkish efforts in Tirana, Accra, and elsewhere appear to point to a soft-power push in countries with relatively small Turkish diasporas, Ankara has also plowed money into countries where large numbers of Turks live, such as Germany. When Turkish guest workers began arriving in the 1960s, lawmakers there were also happy to have Diyanet assistance. The Turkish organization built mosques, provided social services, and significantly tamped down any risk of extremism. As time has gone on, though, Germany has become home to more than 3 million people of Turkish origin or descent, and lawmakers are beginning to have misgivings over Ankara's continued influence, particularly as Erdoğan's rule grows more and more polarizing.

The Diyanet, through the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB), another Turkish government body, runs 900 of Germany's 2,400 mosques. It describes itself as politically neutral, but has been the subject of multiple controversies. Last year, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that some DİTİB imams led prayers supporting Turkey's military incursion into Syria's Afrin region. Another DİTİB-run mosque held a performance to mark the Battle of Gallipoli that involved children dressed in fatigues lying as fallen soldiers under a large Turkish flag, *Stern*, a weekly, said. In 2017, German authorities investigated a number of imams on suspicion

that they had spied on followers of Fethullah Gülen, the Pennsylvania-based preacher whom Ankara blames for an attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2016. At the time, Germany's domestic intelligence agency was reported to be considering placing DİTİB under official surveillance.

Markus Kerber, a senior civil servant in the German interior ministry, told me that it was now time to reduce the links between Ankara and his country's Islamic community. The Turkish diaspora in western Europe is seen as an important strategic asset for the AKP, he said, but Germany aims to have domestically educated imams and domestically funded mosques in the future.

DİTİB did not respond to requests for comment. After the appointment of a new board chairman in January, however, the organization seemed determined not to be sidelined. "DİTİB remains, and will continue to be, the strongest and most important guarantor of a resource and reason-based interpretation of moderate Islam for all Muslims," it said in a statement.

At a recent meeting in Ankara with the Diyanet president and some of Erdoğan's advisers, Kerber said he told his counterparts that "your Turks are now our Turks." Their immediate reaction, he added, was bewilderment.

SRI LANKA: Sri Lanka bans face coverings as it scrambles to respond to Easter attacks

By Billy Perrigo

TIME (02.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GuOAAAD> - Eight days after the April 21 bombings in Sri Lanka left at least 253 dead, the government announced that all face coverings would be banned in public, saying the move would help the search for those involved. The bombings, carried out by alleged Islamist militants who targeted churches and high-end hotels, were the most fatal violence the country has suffered since its civil war ended in 2009. Although the ban did not specifically mention Islamic veils, critics have denounced the measure for stirring suspicions against Muslims, who make up 9.7% of Sri Lanka's diverse population.

After ISIS on April 23 claimed responsibility for the attacks, there were reports of mobs roaming the streets and beatings of Muslim residents. Nearly 1,000 mostly Muslim refugees fled or were forced out of their homes in the week following the bombings, according to Human Rights Watch. No deaths have so far been reported, but in that climate, Muslim community leaders say, the ban on face coverings was ill-conceived—especially given that they had already agreed to a voluntary suspension of veil wearing.

The face-covering ban hasn't been the only decision to draw scrutiny of Sri Lanka's response to the Easter Sunday attacks. For nine days after the attacks, the government blocked social-media services including Facebook and WhatsApp in an attempt to stop the spread of misinformation; it's unclear whether that made a difference. Meanwhile, some of those behind the plot are still believed to be at large. A shoot-out on April 26 left 15 people dead, including three suspected suicide bombers and six children, according to authorities.

The Sri Lankan government has been heavily criticized for its failure to prevent the attacks despite receiving advance warnings from Indian intelligence agencies. The country has a long history of ethnic tension, and in recent years Buddhist nationalists (who are part of the Sinhalese majority) have attacked both Muslims and Christians. With presidential elections due to be held by the end of 2019, whether their government can protect the country from future violence—without widening religious fault lines—is on the minds of many Sri Lankans.

NEW ZEALAND: Far-right terrorist attack against two mosques that killed 50 is not the first of its kind

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (18.03.2019) - Far-right terrorism has a history of promoting anti-Muslim sentiments and perpetrators must face maximum consequences.

On Friday 15 March, 50 people were killed and as many seriously injured in mass shootings at two mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch.

Footage of the massacre was live-streamed online, and a rambling manifesto laced with white supremacist references was published just before the shootings took place.

This terrorist attack is all the more heinous because it targeted places of worship during Friday prayers.

The list of victims includes people from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Jordan, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

Three people were arrested in connection with the shootings: Australian national Brenton Harrison Tarrant (28), a white supremacist, was charged with murder. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison described the suspect as an "extremist, right-wing, violent terrorist". The court charged a second shooter, 18, with "intent to excite hostility or ill-will."

Far-right terrorism

Brenton Harrison Tarrant said he was "inspired" by mass killer Anders Behring Breivik, a far-right terrorist who killed seventy-seven people in Norway in 2011. Breivik first killed eight people by detonating a van bomb amid Regjeringskvartalet in Oslo. Then, he shot and killed sixty-nine youth who were participating in a summer camp of the Workers' Youth League, affiliated with the Norwegian Labor Party, on the island of Utøya. Although he was anti-Muslim, his terrorist attack was not targeting Muslims. In July 2012, he was convicted of mass murder, causing a fatal explosion, and terrorism. He was sentenced to twenty-one years in prison - particularly preventive detention, which requires a minimum of ten years sentence - with the possibility of one or more extensions for as long as he is deemed a danger to society. This is the maximum penalty in Norway.

On 29 January 2017, anti-Muslim fanatic Alexandre Bissonnette killed six men at a mosque in Quebec City, Canada. He was sentenced to life in prison.

On 19 June 2017, far-right terrorist Darren Osborne killed one person in north London after he plowed a van into a group of Muslims near the Finsbury Park Mosque.

On 5 August 2017, a bomb went off in a mosque in Bloomington (Minnesota) as the faithful were gathering to pray. Luckily, no one was killed. One of the three suspects told authorities he bombed the mosque to "scare" Muslims "out of the country."

In 2018, three men planned to detonate four vehicles filled with explosives to level an apartment complex in Garden City, Kansas, that also accommodated a mosque. The complex was home to many Somali refugees, and the three men not only expressed hatred for them, but also for all "Muslims in general. The three men were sentenced earlier this year to at least twenty-five years in prison.

Far-right ideologies are a plague in society, which we must seriously seek remedies for.

Human Rights Without Frontiers maintains that perpetrators of acts of violence or terrorism targeting religious groups and individuals must face the maximum consequences.



The suspect flashed an upside-down 'OK' signal, a symbol used by white power groups across the globe, in court Saturday

NEW ZEALAND: Christchurch terror attacks: What you need to know

DW (15.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2JjlaZS> - Two mass shootings at mosques in the New Zealand city have left 50 dead and stunned the world. DW brings you up to speed on the tragic events as details emerge about the right-wing extremist charged in the attacks.

A 28-year-old man suspected of being behind Friday's deadly terror attacks against the Muslim community in Christchurch appeared briefly in court on Saturday, where he faced one charge of murder, with the expectation of more similar charges to come.

The [shooting attacks at two mosques in Christchurch on Friday](#) killed 50 people and injured at least 47, making it the deadliest attack in New Zealand's modern history. It sparked horror and dismay around the world and prompted [international leaders to denounce the Islamophobic violence](#).

What happened

- On Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, a shooter entered the Al Noor Mosque and opened fire with multiple weapons, killing 41 people.
- Around the same time a shooter or shooters also opened fire at the nearby Linwood Mosque, killing seven others. One other died later in hospital, while a 50 victim was found at the first mosque a day later.
- Shortly afterward a livestream video of the attack spread around the world through social media, as Facebook and Twitter worked to remove the video from their platforms.
- Police arrested four individuals in the attacks' immediate aftermath. One was eventually released, one has been charged with murder, and two remain in custody.
- Police also said they had found explosive devices at one mosque, which they secured and detonated.
- They warned people not to go anywhere near mosques in the country.

Suspect details emerge

- Brenton Tarrant, the 28-year-old suspect, has been charged with murder.
- Before the attacks, Tarrant posted a 74-page manifesto on social media. In it, he identified himself as a white supremacist and a fascist and said he wanted to avenge attacks in Europe perpetrated by Muslims.
- Tarrant had legally purchased the weapons used in the attack, which included two semi-automatic rifles.
- He had traveled around the world and lived sporadically in Dunedin, a town outside of Christchurch, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said at a press conference.
- The Australian government has confirmed the suspect is an Australian citizen.
- Australian police said the suspect had only been known to them for "minor traffic matters," and he had not been on the intelligence community's radar.

NETHERLANDS: Muslim organizations call on board of Amsterdam school to resign

By Janene Pieters

NL Times (12.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2HfN7zX> - A group of Islamic organizations issued a joint call on the board of Cornelius Haga Lyceum to resign. They want the administrators to take responsibility for the controversy that arose around the Amsterdam secondary school last week, AD reports.

Last week the national coordinator for counterterrorism and security NCTV warned Amsterdam mayor Femke Halsema that teachers at the school devote part of the curriculum to "Salafist doctrine". According to information from the NCTV and intelligence service AIVD, school employees also had links with terrorist organization Caucasian Emirate in the past. The school received multiple threatening emails after this revelation.

"In the discussion that erupted in recent days around the Cornelius Haga Lyceum, we increasingly see that individual interests prevail over the general interests of good Islamic secondary education", the Islamic organizations said in their joint statement. The organizations want the directors of the Islamic education foundation SIO, which covers the Cornelius Haga Lyceum, to put aside their personal interests. "So that the Cornelius Haga can continue to exist and we can further develop the school with the knowledge and experience gained and the involvement of the local Muslim community. The children of the Cornelius Haga Lyceum deserve this."

According to the organizations, many years of hard work went into the quality of Islamic education. "And that is bearing fruit. There is a growing number of excellent Islamic schools in the Netherlands. The bar is high and we want to live up to those expectations."

The statement is signed by the Islamic school boards organization ISBO, the union of Moroccan mosque organizations in the Netherlands UMMON, the Home Empowerment Foundation, the Euro-Mediterranean center for migration and development Emcemo, the Moroccan Initiative Foundation Amsterdam and Nisa for Nisa.

BELGIUM: Jewish museum killer sentenced to life in prison

Mehdi Nemmouche shot dead four people in Brussels in 2014 after returning from Syria



Police officers stand in front of the courthouse in Brussels during the trial of Mehdi Nemmouche. Photograph: John Thys/AFP/Getty Images

AFP (12.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2NY1qIQ> - The French jihadist who shot dead four people in a terrorist attack at a Jewish museum has been sentenced to life in prison by a Brussels court, after prosecutors branded him a coward and a psychopath.

Mehdi Nemmouche was convicted last week of "terrorist murder" for the antisemitic gun rampage in the Belgian capital in May 2014 after his return from Syria.

He was found to have killed the four victims in less than 90 seconds, shooting them with a handgun and a Kalashnikov rifle with what one paramedic who attended the scene called "surgical" precision.

Before jurors retired to consider the sentence on Monday, the 33-year-old smiled and told the Brussels criminal court "life goes on".

The court, which handed down the sentence in the early hours of Tuesday morning, said the 33-year-old had shown no regret for the killings.

"Mr Nemmouche, you are just a coward. You kill people by shooting them from behind, you kill old women by shooting them with an assault rifle, you kill because it gives you pleasure to kill," Yves Moreau, prosecuting, had said.

Urging the jury to take a firm line, Moreau said: "If you say that in Belgium one can be a terrorist without being punished very severely, then we must not be surprised to see people arrive in this country with bombs or assault rifles in their suitcases."

Nacer Bendrer, who was found guilty of being the co-author of the attack for supplying the weapons Nemmouche used, was given a jail sentence of 15 years.

Bendrer, who is also French, said he was ashamed he had ever met Nemmouche, saying: "He's not even a man, he's a monster."

The pair, who have 15 days to lodge an appeal, will serve their sentences in France.

The investigation showed the two men had dozens of telephone conversations in April 2014, when Nemmouche was preparing for the killings.

Six days after the shooting, Nemmouche was arrested in Marseille in possession of a revolver and a Kalashnikov-type assault rifle.

Among the victims of the attack were an Israeli couple, Miriam and Emmanuel Riva. Nemmouche claimed the couple were agents of the Israeli intelligence service Mossad who had been hunted down and killed by someone else.

He denied responsibility for the shootings and said he had been "trapped".

On Tuesday, a lawyer for the murdered couple said the sentence was "fair and proportionate".

Prosecutors say the attack was the first carried out in [Europe](#) by a jihadist returning to the continent after fighting in Syria.

Nemmouche, who was brought up in foster care, has become a case study in the radicalisation of young European Muslims. Belgium and France, in particular, fear the defeat in Syria of groups such as [Islamic State](#) will lead to the return of more angry young men to Europe.

During his time in the war-ravaged country, Nemmouche is accused of acting as the jailer of four French journalists taken hostage by jihadists in Aleppo in 2013. Two of the journalists who travelled to the court to give evidence said they had no doubt it was him. He is due to go on trial in France over the hostages at a later date.

NETHERLANDS: Islamic school in Amsterdam in contact with a terrorist group

NL Times (09.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2tZ60hO> - Minister Ferdinand Grapperhaus of Justice and Security, intelligence service AIVD and national coordinator for counterterrorism and security NCTV have major concerns about Islamic school Cornelius Haga Lyceum in Amsterdam. In a letter to parliament and Amsterdam mayor Femke Halsema, they wrote that there are indications that the board of the school has been in contact with a terrorist group for years, RTL Nieuws reports.

The board of the school has been in a Salafist and radical environment since 2000, the NCTV said. According to the letter, it is known that the board had contact with terrorist group Caucasus Emirate for at least three years. This group is responsible for multiple attacks on the Moscow metro in 2010, among other things, according to the broadcaster.

In addition to contact with the terrorist group, there are more "worrying signals" at the school, according to the letter. "These signals include that leading people within the school would like to devote half of the school year to Salafist scholarship and plan to take pupils under their sphere of influence outside the regular teaching periods", Minister Grapperhaus said in the letter. 'Key figures' in the school also act contrary to the government's anti-radicalization strategy.

Mayor Halsema calls the signals from the school "very worrisome". Intervention is "necessary and inevitable" because the young pupils at the school are structurally influenced, she said. Halsema therefore demands that the school's board resign immediately. If that does not happen, the municipality will withdraw its subsidy to the

school and will not take the school's request for new accommodation under consideration.

The municipality will send all parents and pupils of the school a letter to inform them of the situation and measures taken. The letter will also advise parents to choose a different school for their children. This same advice will go out to new pupils who want to attend this school. The registration procedure for the new school year closes next week.

Halsema stressed that there is no acute danger to public order.

The Cornelius Haga Lyceum in Amsterdam is a small school that opened about a year and a half ago, according to RTL. The school has 174 pupils and offers MAVO, HAVO and VWO .Boys and girls attend lessons separately.

The school's opening was controversial, partly because a former board member had expressed sympathy for terrorist organization Islamic State. The municipality was against the opening of the school. "The school board stands with its back to society", the then education alderman Simone Kukenheim said at the time, according to the broadcaster. Then State Secretary of Education Sander Dekker also did not want the school to open. He did not trust the school board and feared that students would turn away from Dutch society. But the Council of State ruled that he still had to finance the school.

The Education Inspectorate launched an investigation into the school in October last year. During an inspection, as part of its investigation, at least one religious lesson was deliberately canceled, RTL writes. The investigation is still ongoing. The results are expected in June.

BELGIUM: Brussels court convicts Frenchman of murder in Jewish museum attack

Mehdi Nemmouche was found guilty of murdering four people at a Jewish museum in Belgium's capital. His alleged accomplice, Nacer Bendrer, was found guilty of supplying the revolver and assault rifle used in the killings.



Lawyers attend the trial of Mehdi Nemmouche and Nacer Bendrer, who are suspected of killing four people in a shooting at Brussels' Jewish Museum in 2014, at Brussels' Palace of Justice, Belgium February 28, 2019. (Reuters)

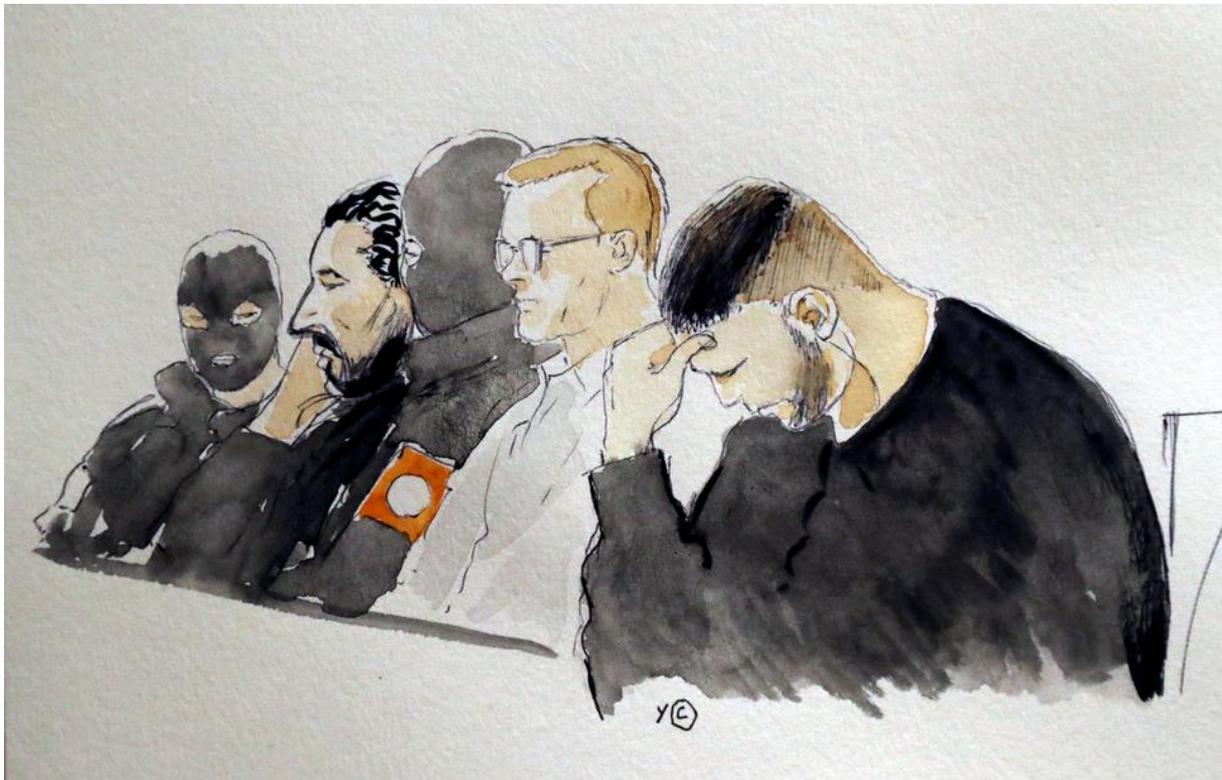
TRT (08.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2TpwTLh> - A jury found Frenchman Mehdi Nemmouche guilty Thursday of the "terrorist murders" of four people at Brussels' Jewish museum, in the first case of a Syria militant to stage an attack in Europe.

Nemmouche, 33, now faces a life sentence for the anti-Semitic gun rampage in the Belgian capital on May 24, 2014, following his return from Syria's battlefields.

Sentencing is now not expected to take place before Monday, the court said.

Sporting a trimmed beard and wearing a navy blue sweater, Nemmouche showed no emotion and stared into space as the verdict was delivered.

The 12 jurors, accompanied by the presiding judge and two other magistrates, had deliberated for two and a half days in secret at a Brussels hotel before returning their verdict.



A court drawing shows Mehdi Nemmouche and Nacer Bendrer during the trial of Nemmouche and Bendrer, who are suspected of killing four people in a shooting at Brussels' Jewish Museum in 2014, at Brussels' Palace of Justice, Belgium March 7, 2019. (Reuters)

'Tricked'

Nemmouche was found to have killed the four victims in cold blood in less than 90 seconds, but he denied the accusation telling the court he had been "tricked".

Presiding judge Laurence Massart, who read out the jury's verdict, said: "The existence of a trap was not presented with enough credibility and must be ruled out."

Nemmouche's lawyers had argued he was not to blame for the slaughter, but rather he had been caught up in some kind of plot targeting the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad.

The legal argument had centred around Israeli couple Miriam and Emmanuel Riva, the first two of the four people shot dead in the attack.

A young Belgian employee, Alexandre Strens, and French volunteer Dominique Sabrier were also murdered.

According to the defence, the museum shooting was not the work of Daesh but a "targeted execution" aimed at Mossad agents.

The defence said the Israeli couple who were killed were in fact Mossad agents murdered by another man who had hunted them down.

The Riva family's lawyers have furiously rejected the theory and said attempts to pass off the tourists as secret agents was "an absolute scandal".

Miriam Riva worked for Mossad but, as an accountant, she was not operational, said the investigating judges who travelled to Israel during their investigation.



Evidence is displayed during the trial of Mehdi Nemmouche and Nacer Bendrer, who are suspected of killing four people in a shooting at Brussels' Jewish Museum in 2014, at Brussels' Palace of Justice, Belgium February 7, 2019. (Reuters)

'Set of scattered deductions'

Yohan Benizri, the head of Belgium's Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organisations, denounced what he called a "nauseating conspiracy theory".

The 12 jurors also found fellow Frenchman Nacer Bendrer, 30, who was accused of supplying the weapons, to be the co-author of the attack.

Seated next to Nemmouche in the defendant's box, encased by bullet-proof glass on the sides, Bendrer then hung his head low for a few minutes before covering it with his hands.

He also faces a life jail sentence.

The investigation showed that the two men had dozens of telephone conversations in April 2014, when Nemmouche was preparing for the killings.

Six days after the massacre, Nemmouche was arrested in the French city of Marseille in possession of a revolver and a Kalashnikov-type assault rifle.

At the trial, Bendrer admitted that Nemmouche had asked him for a Kalashnikov when he came to Brussels in early April, but claimed he never delivered it.

Among other personal effects, Nemmouche upon arrest carried a nylon jacket with gunshot residue, as well as a computer in which investigators found six videos claiming the attack with an off-camera voiceover thought to be Nemmouche.

The presiding judge singled out the evidence on his jacket which she said "contained exclusively traces of DNA from Mehdi Nemmouche".

In total, the prosecution said it had identified 23 pieces of evidence pointing to Nemmouche, who also physically resembles the shooter seen on the museum's surveillance video.

The verdict said: "The defence limited itself to outlining a set of scattered deductions without ever elaborating on them."

It added that Bendrer, by supplying the weapons, was aware of aiding a crime committed by "a longstanding radical," alluding to Nemmouche.

The prosecutors say the attack was the first carried out in Europe by a militant returning from fighting in Syria.

The Brussels killings came 18 months before the November 13, 2015, Paris attacks which left 130 dead.

CHINA/ SAUDI ARABIA: Uyghur Muslims in "de-radicalization camps": Business first for Saudi Arabia...

Willy Fautré, Director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (23.02.2019) - Saudi Arabia and China have just signed commercial agreements for \$ 28 billion (See the article of The New York Times on 20 February: <https://nyti.ms/2BLEqsG>). Annoyed by human rights criticisms and anti-corruption investigations in North America and the EU, Saudi Arabia is suddenly increasing and accelerating his business relations with China.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is the leading member of the troika of three countries at the UN, with Hungary and Kenya, which will write the report on the Universal Periodic Review of China's human rights record, whose final act will be in a few days...

One of the priority human rights issues which will be scrutinized by NGOs will be the situation of one million Muslims of all ages belonging to the Uyghur ethnicity. Perceiving them as a threat to national security, Beijing has deprived them of their freedom and put them in camps to allegedly "de-radicalize" them. Saudi Arabia's crown prince has already taken sides with China's President Xi Jinping on this problem, omitting to say that his country is highly responsible for the "radicalization" of Muslims in the world.

Time for Muslim majority countries to unite their diplomatic and other efforts for the release of all the Uyghur Muslims in China.

Al Jazeera: Saudi crown prince defends China's right to fight 'terrorism' – 23.02
(<https://bit.ly/2E4fJbo>)

"Activists say MBS' support for China's 'anti-terrorism' measures is tacit approval of crackdown on Uighur Muslims.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has supported China's right to undertake "anti-terrorism" and "de-extremism" measures, according to Chinese state media, in remarks activists lambasted as a defence of Beijing's crackdown on its Uighur Muslim minority.

Prince Mohammed made the comments to Chinese President Xi Jinping on Friday during a visit to Beijing, the last leg of an Asian tour that included Pakistan and India, according to state-run news outlets.

In his talks with Xi, MBS hailed relations with China as trouble free, the official Xinhua news agency reported, while Xi urged joint efforts to counter extremism and terror.

Xi told the crown prince the two countries must strengthen international cooperation on de-radicalisation to "prevent the infiltration and spread of extremist thinking", according to Xinhua

Saudi Arabia respected and supported China's right to protect its own security and take counter-terror and de-radicalisation steps, the crown prince told Xi, according to the same report, and was willing to increase cooperation.

"China has the right to take anti-terrorism and de-extremism measures to safeguard national security," MBS told Xi, according to the state-owned CCTV.

"Saudi Arabia respects and supports it and is willing to strengthen cooperation with China," he added.

'Disgusting'

Riyadh has remained silent over China's treatment of Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in the far-western region of Xinjiang. That's despite the ruling Al Saud family's image of itself as the defender of Muslims across the world and protector of Islam's two holiest shrines.

Up to one million Uighurs and other minorities are being held in internment camps in Xinjiang as part of a draconian anti-terror and anti-separatist campaign, according to estimates cited by a UN panel.

Activists slammed MBS' stand, with Miqdaad Versi, spokesperson for Britain's Muslim Council, calling the remarks "disgusting" and a defence of "the use of concentration camps against Uighur Muslims".

The World Uyghur Congress, a Germany-based advocacy group, said MBS's failure to raise the issue of the Uighur detentions amounted to tacit support for "China's gross rights violations".

The Saudi crown prince's visit came five months after the crown prince came under intense pressure in the US and elsewhere following the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. In the US Congress, criticism has also been building for months over the kingdom's handling of the war in Yemen, where it is accused of causing widespread casualties and suffering among civilians.

China has refrained from faulting Saudi Arabia over issues such as the war or killing of the journalist, in keeping with its long-held tradition of non-interference in other countries' affairs.

The hush-hush approach reflects how China and Saudi Arabia have grown close over the past decade based on complementary economic interests, said Michael Clarke of Australian National University's National Security College.

"Basically, in the Saudi case there seem to be very clear incentives for it to not rock the boat in service of the Uighur issue," Clarke told The Associated Press news agency.

During MBS' visit to China, Riyadh's national oil giant Saudi Aramco said it had signed an agreement to form a Saudi-Chinese joint venture, worth more than \$10bn, to develop a refining and petrochemical complex in northeastern Liaoning province.

The Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority also announced the signing of 35 non-binding memorandums of understanding, worth \$28bn, including deals related to energy, mining, transportation and e-commerce.

China is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner.

See as well

<https://www.yahoo.com/news/saudi-crown-prince-defends-chinas-203233929.html>

<https://www.usnews.com/news/top-news/articles/2019-02-22/saudi-agrees-10-billion-china-refinery-deal-as-crown-prince-visits>

INDONESIA cancels early release for Abu Bakar Bashir, radical cleric linked to Bali bombings

Channel NewsAsia (23.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2S9piyG> - The Indonesian government has cancelled [the early release of radical Muslim cleric](#) and terror convict Abu Bakar Bashir as he has not met certain conditions for parole, the state palace announced on Tuesday (Jan 22).

Among the conditions for early release mentioned by presidential Chief of Staff Moeldoko were cooperating with law enforcers in investigations related to his crime, showing remorse over his crime and pledging loyalty to the Republic of Indonesia in writing.

President Joko Widodo previously announced the release of the jailed spiritual leader of Al-Qaeda-affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah on humanitarian grounds, citing his old age and deteriorating health.

But on Tuesday afternoon, he emphasised the need to adhere to the law.

"There is a system and regulatory mechanism that we have to follow. I cannot be breaking the system, especially in this case where the condition is really basic: Pledge loyalty to the Republic of Indonesia and Pancasila," he said.

Pancasila (the Five Principles) is the official state ideology of Indonesia, which includes belief in God, humanity, unity, democracy and social justice.

However, lawyers representing the 81-year-old Bashir have said that he refuses to fulfill the condition.

Bashir was imprisoned in 2011 on a 15-year sentence for funding a military training camp for terrorists in Aceh.

He is currently detained at the Gunung Sindur prison in Bogor, West Java.

He has received treatment for chronic venous insufficiency, blood clots and varicose veins in his leg since 2017, according to the Jakarta Post.

Citing Moeldoko, the report added that the government has been ensuring that Bashir has access to health facilities to treat his ailments.

Source: CNA/Reuters/jt(rw/hs)

Read more at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/indonesia-abu-bakar-bashir-early-release-cancelled-bali-bombings-11157000>

CHINA: European Parliament: 'All religions in China are persecuted': the case of the Catholics

by Bernardo Cervellera

In a meeting on religious freedom in China in the Brussels office of the European Parliament, the testimonies of Protestant Christians, Uighurs, Catholics. The voices of Tibetan Buddhists, Taoists and sects. The intervention offered by the editor of AsiaNews.



Brussels (AsiaNews) - "All religions in China are persecuted": This is the conclusion of Austrian Member of Parliament, Dr. Josef Weidenholzer, at a conference held yesterday afternoon at the European Parliament in Brussels on the theme "Religious Freedom in China". The meeting organised by representatives of the People's Party and the socialists, had several guest speakers who offered their witness to a packed hall. After a brief introduction by parliamentarians Bas Belder (Dutch) and Christian Dan Preda (Romanian), the following spoke: Bob Fu, founder and director of China Aid; Kuzzat Altay, Uighur exile in the United States; Marco Respinti, director of Bitter Winter; Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights without Frontiers; Fr. Bernardo Cervellera, editor of AsiaNews. From the audience emerged testimonies of Tibetan Buddhists, Taoists, sects, branded by the regime as "evil cults". Below we publish the intervention of the editor of AsiaNews.

On January 14, AsiaNews published **a "Christmas diary" written by a Chinese priest**, Fr. Stanislaus, who recounts the difficulties experienced by Chinese Catholics in a province of the Northeast. For "security" reasons Christmas Masses must be controlled by the police; young people under the age of 18 cannot take part; the New Year banners of good wishes, which the Chinese hang on their doorstep and with which Christians wish peace and blessings from God, cannot be sold.

On the same day, the foreign ministry spokesperson, Ms. Hua [Chunying], said: "You do not understand China. Do not you know how many Buddhist and Taoist temples and Christian churches in China operate legally? According to the law, Chinese citizens enjoy full religious freedom! We have taken preventive measures against terrorists and extremists, to allow so many ordinary people to fully enjoy normal religious freedom! "

Perhaps in China all young Catholics under 18 are considered "terrorists", forbidding them to attend Christmas Mass, Sunday Mass, and catechesis. To allow them to "fully enjoy religious freedom", in primary and secondary schools of various provinces of China

(Anhui, Henan, Inner Mongolia), representatives of the Ministry of Education have forbidden pupils and students to celebrate Christmas (and the Lunar New Year), to exchange gifts or to participate in religious ceremonies; in several provinces (Hebei, Shaanxi, Yunnan) **Christmas celebrations and decorations were forbidden in the cities**, seen as "**an attack on Chinese culture**", a submission to Western "spiritual pollution".

Apart from the historical error of considering Christianity as a "religion of the West" (given that Jesus was born in Asia and that Christianity arrived in China in the 7th century from Iraq), it is clear that the Chinese Communist Party is conducting a veritable "religious war" on Christianity and Catholics, all in the name of "security" and "nationalist patriotism".

In the name of security

In the name of security, religious activities are divided into "normal" and "illegal", although there are no differences in rite or execution between the two. What makes a religious activity "normal" is its submission to the control of political authorities: bishops, priests, places of worship registered with the Ministry of Religious Affairs; registered publications; registered pastoral plans; registered times; registered participants. Added to this are the ubiquitous cameras in the parish offices; the permits to ask to meet Chinese or foreign Catholic personnel; the continued presence of the police around or inside the places of worship.

"Illegal" religious activities are those carried out with personnel or in places that are not under control. The Catholics who carry out these activities, defined as "criminals", claim their freedom as guaranteed by the Chinese constitution, but risk arrests, fines, expropriation of buildings, or their destruction.

In 1994, the UN envoy for religious freedom, Abdelfattah Amor, asked China to eliminate this difference between "normal" and "illegal" activities, but this request went unheard.

It should be noted that this division - inserted by the government - creates the so-called official Church (of "normal" activities) and the underground (or unofficial) Church.

The instrument of this division is the Patriotic Association, guarantor of "normality", whose statutes violate the integrity of the Catholic faith because it wants to build a Church "independent" from the universal Church and the Holy See. Official Church members agree to register as the "lesser evil"; those of the underground Church categorically refuse to register. But both communities suffer violations of religious freedom and risk elimination: the former from a suffocating control; the latter from arrests, disappearances, killings, destruction.

The situation has become even more radical with the launch of the **New Regulations on Religious Activities on February 1, 2018**.

Under the new regulations the official communities must submit to the control of the dimensions, colors and position of crosses; the height and position of statues; texts posted online, with a ban on the live streaming of all ceremonies. The underground communities do not even have the right to exist.

Activities carried out in unregistered places and with unregistered personnel are subject to heavy fines: between 100 and 300 thousand yuan for "unauthorized" activities (Article 64).

In addition to incurring fines, sites that host "illegal" activities will be closed down, seized and subject to forfeiture in state assets. For several months police and representatives of the Religious Affairs Bureau have been systematically meeting bishops, priests and lay faithful of the underground communities for "a cup of tea" and "to advise" them to register in the official communities.]

This explains the various "forced vacations" of **Wenzhou bishop Peter Shao Zhumin**, or **the indoctrination classes** of priests in Hebei, Henan, Inner Mongolia, ...

Underground bishops and priests are "advised" to register in the official communities, taking them to "forced vacations" or to "indoctrination classes".

It is our duty to at least name the victims of this persecution: Msgr. James Su Zhimin, underground bishop of Baoding (Hebei), who has been missing in police custody since 1997; Fr. Liu Honggeng of Baoding, missing since 2015; **Fr. Wei Heping (also known as Yu Heping), who died in 2015 in mysterious and suspicious circumstances.**

There are also victims in the official Church: **Msgr. Thaddeus Ma Daqin**, bishop of Shanghai, since 2012 in isolation and under house arrest for having dared to leave the Patriotic Association; **Fr. Liu Jiangdong, of Zhengzhou** (Henan), expelled from his parish in October 2018 and forbidden to live as a priest, for having dared to organize meetings with young people even under the age of 18.

For all of this, since February 2018 many communities have been forcibly closed, **convents** and places of worship destroyed with bulldozers, **including some shrines** in Shanxi and Guizhou. It is estimated that in 2018 at least 30 Catholic churches have been closed and destroyed.

But there are also churches (official) that are destroyed in the name of urban expansion - as in **Qianwang and Liangwang (Shandong)** - and whose land is seized for building development without any compensation.

In the name of nationalist patriotism

Another method of submission and elimination of Catholics is nationalist patriotism, or "**sinicization**". According to the dictates of Xi Jinping, the Church must not only assimilate Chinese culture, and express its creed with Chinese categories, but must create theologies, history, works of art according to the dictates of Chinese culture. Again it falls to the Patriotic Association to verify this is being done. But the race for inculturation has also become iconoclasm with the destruction of works of art from the past ("too Western") and that of external and internal church decoration, **the demolition of crosses from bell towers, the destruction of domes and facades considered "not Chinese in style"**. Patriotism obliges communities to hoist the Chinese flag on every religious building, to sing patriotic hymns before services, **to hang a portrait of Xi Jinping even on the altars.**

The provisional agreement between China and the Holy See, signed on September 22nd 2018, has not changed this situation. It is true that in some ways, the agreement is a conquest because for the first time in modern China history the Pope is recognized as head of the Catholic Church in China.

However, last December, Wang Zuoran, deputy chief of the United Front and former director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, once again stressed that the principles of independence and self-management will not be eliminated "at any time and under any circumstances".

In words reportedly shared with one [of these] underground bishop [s], the Pope is said to have referred that if the agreement was not signed, China threatened to illegally ordain 45 bishops "independent" from the Holy See, creating the basis for a real schism. The agreement was therefore blackmail.

In addition, immediately after the signing of the agreement, in many regions of China the United Front and the Patriotic Association held rallies for priests and bishops explaining to them that "**despite the agreement**", **they had to work for the implementation of an independent Church**. The destruction of crosses, churches, indoctrination sessions, arrests continued just as before the agreement, if not worse.

Four conclusions

1. It is clear that the government and the Chinese Communist Party are engaged in a real religious war to oust the God of Christians and replace Him with the god-Xi Jinping, which implies a total submission to the Communist Party, a condition included in the New Regulations to nurture religion in China. In the name of the sinicization and subjugation religions are distorted until they become simple instruments of collateral support to the Party.
2. What happens to Catholics, also happens to civil society and the business world. In recent years, control of media, social networks, the population, NGOs has grown ... and even in the business world, submission to the Party is required, on fear of kidnappings, arrests and convictions.
3. China ploughs ahead undisturbed trampling on religious rights, civil society and commerce thanks to the indifference of the international community or the servility of many states which in view of possible, rapid economic gains with the Chinese market, turn a blind eye to these violations.
4. The international community and the Chinese government suffer from myopia: they do not realize that religions - not only Catholicism and Protestantism - are spreading ever more rapidly just as esteem for Party politics is diminishing. The result is an erosion of Chinese society and a greater need for political and economic reforms. Ensuring religious freedom for Christian communities and other faiths could help China to achieve greater cohesion by saving it from chaos.

UKRAINE: Russian Orthodoxy, a security issue in Ukraine

The politico-spiritual move away from Russian Orthodoxy, presented by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko as a major national security issue, has deeply angered Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has political ambitions in the region, writes Willy Fautré.

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers



Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko takes the Holy Communion during the Orthodox Christmas service in St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, Ukraine, 7 January 2019. [Sergey Dolzhenko/EPA/EFE]

EURACTIV (22.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FTHqWQ> - On 6 January, in Istanbul, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew handed the official decree of autocephaly (independence from Moscow) to the head of the new Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Metropolitan Epifaniy (Dumenko).

On 15 December, the election of Epifaniy as Metropolitan by the unification council finalised the merge of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) under the name of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU).

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church that is in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate refused to participate in this process because of a longstanding dispute over legitimacy.

Two months earlier, on 11 October, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had announced he had decided to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) which deemed itself to be the successor of the historical Orthodox Church, created in the aftermath of the conversion and baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 988, at a time when Moscow did not even exist.

On 14 October, Ukraine's President Poroshenko declared on television that the autocephaly of Ukrainian Orthodoxy is a question of national security. The date of his public announcement was a symbolic one as it is both a religious day (Intercession of the Mother of God) and an official holiday honouring Ukrainian armed forces.

In the meantime, the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate had invalidated its decree transferring the jurisdiction of the Kyiv Metropolis from Constantinople to Moscow in 1686.

It had also lifted Moscow's disciplinary measures against the heads of the two Orthodox Churches which had respectively broken away from Moscow Patriarchate's ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the early 1990s: Patriarch Filaret (Denysenko) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate), excommunicated by Moscow in 1997, and Metropolitan Makary (Maletych) of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC).

In immediate response to the autocephaly initiated by Constantinople and in retaliation, the Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate immediately declared the full severance of relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Since the regime change initiated by the overthrow of President Yanukovich in 2014, President Poroshenko and the Ukrainian parliament have expressed serious concerns about the 'ambiguous' stance or silence of the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) regarding crucial national security issues.

They failed to support the Maidan Revolution of Dignity, aiming, among other things, to thwart Moscow's influence and interference in Ukraine's internal affairs. They failed to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea and the eradication of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ Kyiv Patriarchate parishes in the peninsula.

They failed to condemn the Moscow-sponsored separatist war in Donbas. The result was that they were perceived as Trojan horses following the political agenda and interests of Moscow.

On 20 December, 240 Ukrainian parliamentarians approved Bill No 5309 obliging the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (in unity with the Moscow Patriarchate) to indicate in its official name that it is part of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has its seat in Moscow.

The bill provides for specific limitations of the activities of religious organizations under the jurisdiction of a religious centre based in "an aggressor country", which is the case of Russia in the eyes of Kyiv. The first set of restrictions concerns the access to military units for their clergy and chaplains and more can be expected.

Moscow's break from Constantinople is now consummated. After its territorial and political independence, Ukraine is now on the way of conquering its spiritual independence.

Noteworthy is that the Orthodox Church in Poland, an EU member state, has decided not to recognize the OCU's autocephaly. The same negative position was also adopted by the Orthodox Church of Serbia, a European state engaged in a process of accession to EU membership.

Other Orthodox Churches in the Balkans and the EU, which are in communion with the Russian Orthodox Church, are keeping a low profile and are, for various reasons, obviously reluctant to recognise the OCU's autocephaly.

As for the Orthodox Church of Georgia and the newly elected president, they have not taken a position yet about Ukraine's autocephaly, out of fear that the Russian Orthodox Church would recognise the Abkhaz Orthodox Church's independence, which would negatively impact efforts to restore Georgia's integrity.

No doubt that, after losing Ukraine, Moscow Patriarchate will use all its power in Europe, with the support of the Kremlin, to avoid any recognition of Ukraine's autocephaly by its sister churches.

DENMARK/ MOROCCO: Denmark deports Said Mansour, deprived of citizenship, to Morocco

Said Mansour is the first Danish citizen to lose his citizenship and be deported because of a terrorism conviction.



Said Mansour convicted of incitement to terrorism.

By **Susanna Spurgeon**

Morocco World News (05.01.2019) - Denmark has deported Said Mansour, convicted of incitement to terrorism and formerly a dual Moroccan-[Danish](#) citizen, to Morocco.

According to [Danish media](#), Mansour arrived in Casablanca yesterday night, aboard Royal Air Maroc flight 222 from Copenhagen. Danish authorities handed him into Moroccan custody.

Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen tweeted that he was “very satisfied” with Mansour’s deportation: “Said Mansour has been handed over to the Moroccan authorities. A final end to a pertinent effort to carry out the Danish Supreme Court’s ruling to deport him in 2016.... It sends a clear message that criminal foreigners, who so obviously act against the Danish values and promote terrorism, do not belong in Denmark.”

Rasmussen had talked to Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita in December about Mansour’s deportation, according to Danish news outlet Horsens Folkeblad.

'Justice has been served'

Danish immigration minister Inger Stojberg was in Morocco this week on a secret trip to make a deal with Morocco on the deportation.

In a statement today, Stojberg said, "Justice has been served." Mansour, she said, was "one of the most fanatic Islamists who we have deported.... He was on the very top of our list."

In an unprecedented 2015 ruling, a Danish court [stripped Said Mansour](#) of his Danish citizenship. The court had convicted Mansour of incitement to terrorism for Facebook posts praising Osama bin Laden and encouraging followers to join the al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, according to [Al Jazeera](#).

The court sentenced Mansour to four years in prison. Mansour appealed the loss of his citizenship, arguing he would face torture in Morocco.

The Danish Supreme Court in 2016 ruled against Mansour, and the Danish government has since been trying to deport him.

Stojberg today asserted the deportation deal "is completely in order concerning the obligations we have to abide by the international human rights of Said Mansour." The remarks imply Denmark received promises from Morocco that Mansour would not be physically harmed, tortured, or executed.

On December 17, 2018, Danish tourist Louisa Vesterager Jespersen was found murdered with a Norwegian tourist near Imlil, in Morocco's Atlas Mountains. Morocco has arrested 23 suspects in the case and connected it to terrorism.

The Imlil murders may have expedited Denmark's efforts to deport Said Mansour.

Mansour was the first Danish citizen to lose his citizenship and be deported.

In 2007, Mansour received a separate terror conviction and spent 3.5 years in prison in Denmark.

Born in Morocco, Mansour has lived in Denmark since 1983, earning citizenship in 1988. He has four children with a Danish ex-wife and grandchildren living in Denmark.

Morocco does not have an extradition agreement with Denmark. According to a Norwegian source, many Norwegian and Danish criminals come to Morocco to avoid extradition.

MOROCCO: Towards a new approach of violent extremism after the murder of two Scandinavian women?

HRWF (06.01.2019) - In the aftermath of the brutal murder of two young Scandinavian women in the Atlas mountains a few weeks ago, several journalists and intellectuals in Morocco have questioned the efficiency of Rabat's anti-extremist policy. On 25 December 2018, Morocco World News published an interesting article of Youssef El Kaidi, a PhD candidate at the University of Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdelah Fez, entitled "Terrorism in Morocco, a drastic approach needed now" (<https://bit.ly/2Vzw8wg>). See hereafter large excerpts of his paper (the titles in the text are those of HRWF).

"Morocco has invested significant efforts in both the security and religious fields in order to build its reputation as a peaceful, welcoming, and tolerant country in the otherwise turbulent region of North Africa and the Middle East. Those efforts were consistent and serious, leading ultimately to very positive effects worldwide.(...)

About the murder of the two Scandinavian women in the Atlas and the prevention of violent religious extremism

The proactive measures taken by Morocco's intelligence and security services have made the country impenetrable ever since the inception of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or so it seemed. Does this crime indicate that Morocco has finally been penetrated? Is this terrorist act an indication of more terrorist activity taking place in our country in the coming days? Were the security and religious approaches implemented by the government to fight religious extremism really enough? What measures can be taken next to spare the country from other harsh incidents?

The above questions are pressing and should be thoroughly contemplated and addressed before any strategic move in the fight against religious extremism is made in the future. The religious and security approaches that Morocco has relied upon so far were very instrumental and should not be underestimated or belittled.

The strategic national policy initiated by King Mohammed VI in the aftermath of the 2003 Casablanca attacks to monitor and manage the religious field through the control of mosques, the training of moderate religious scholars and preachers, and the control of *fatwas* by appointing the Supreme Scientific Council were all very successful. Moroccan intelligence and security services have also managed, since 2002, to dismantle more than 183 terrorist cells across the country, according to the Central Bureau of Judiciary Investigations ([BCIJ](#)).

The recent murder of two Scandinavian tourists, however, has raised concerns about Morocco's counterterrorism approach, which had previously inspired many countries at the regional and international levels. The dismantling of dozens of terrorist cells every year should have been seen as an indicator of the strong existence of the terrorist ideology in Morocco. The successful and decisive intervention of Morocco's intelligence services before those terrorist cells could translate their ideology into brutality and bloodshed does not change the fact that the mechanisms by which that ideology works and spreads are still operating.

Therefore, terrorists and religious extremists could even be around us anywhere on any day, in private and public places, waiting for the right time and the right place to put their radical beliefs into action. The claim made by one of the arrested suspects in a video declaring his allegiance to ISIS prior to the murder of the Scandinavian tourists should be taken seriously. He said, addressing the leader of ISIS, Abu-Bakar Al-Baghdadi: "You should know that only God knows of the exact number of the followers you have in Morocco." How can we track down and prevent those followers? What about those who firmly hold the ideology but do not belong to organized terrorist cells?

Fighting against the roots of violent religious extremism

We need to understand that religious extremism is an ideology and the fight against it should be at the intellectual and educational levels first and foremost. Morocco, despite the efforts that have been made, was remarkably lenient with the discourses of hate, intolerance, and bigotry which surface in schools, the media, and public spaces.

We have repeatedly seen videos circulating on social media by prominent Wahhabi leaders in Morocco demonizing and threatening intellectuals such as Ahmed Assid, Rachid Aylal, and others by accusing them of heresy. Somehow, those people were never arrested or tried (*). Perhaps the pressures by Islamic forces (Islamic parties, Islamic groups, conservative civil society, etc.) in the country put the state in a difficult and complicated position. Those conservative forces have always fiercely objected to reforms interpreting them as secular and anti-Islam, starting from the *Modawana* (family code) in 2003 to the Islamic education school curriculum reform in 2018.

The recent terrorist attack near the tranquil and peaceful village of Imlil in the High Atlas Mountains awakens us to the bitter truth that terrorism is a constantly looming threat for Morocco. Thus, a more drastic and comprehensive approach should be implemented with zero tolerance to bigots, extremists, and the advocates of hate and terror in the name of religion.

Morocco should address the conditions conducive to the emergence and spread of terrorism by fighting poverty and social disparity in the country. Moreover, strengthening the educational system and building students' cultural awareness, promoting the culture of peace and coexistence through educational programs and curricula, ensuring humans rights and the rule of law, and promoting the universal values of peace, justice, co-existence, integrity, love, and cross-cultural dialogue would be a few steps in the right direction.

May the souls of Louisa Vesterager Jespersen and Maren Ueland rest in peace, and may peace, love, and prosperity prevail in the world."

(*) [HRWF comments](#)

A few days ago, Sheikh Kettani, an Islamist preacher, heavily criticized Moroccan channel 2M for airing on New Year's Eve a comedy show allegedly degrading Qadi Ayyad, an Islamist scholar in the 11th and 12th century. He also called on Ulama council's scholars and intellectuals to condemn and raise voices against this act. Seikh Kettani was a former political prisoner. In September 2003, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison for alleged connections to the Casablanca bombings in 2003. Eight years later, Kettani was granted a royal pardon due to efforts of his lawyer, Mustapha Ramid, who also obtained

the pardon of other Islamists along with promises to renounce violence and extremism. In 2012, Ramid became Morocco's Minister of Justice as a member of the Party of Development and Justice (PJD) advocating Islamism. The PJD is the main party in the government with almost 1/3 of the seats in the parliament.

In 2017, another controversial cleric, Sheikh [Abdellah Annahari](https://bit.ly/2VswULL), stirred up controversy once again on social media by claiming that celebrating New Year's Eve was "undoubtedly Haram." In a video shared on his Facebook account, the Salafist preacher declared that celebrating the New Year would be an "unforgivable sin" and that all New Year's commercial activities should be strictly prohibited. "Whoever celebrates the New Year is no different from Christians and their religion of debauchery," Annahari said. "Buying or selling the fir tree is Haram, taking a picture next to Santa Claus is Haram, partying is Haram and even sending New Year wishes is Haram," he shouted while violently stumping his cane. Annahari also claimed that celebrating any non-Muslim festivity will lead to imitation of the "infidels' creeds". The Oujda-based cleric, who is well known for his provocative statements, went as far as describing as "zebras" Moroccans who exchange hugs during their celebrations. (More about Annahari on Morocco World News: <https://bit.ly/2Re4OW6> - <https://bit.ly/2VswULL>)

The Islamist ideology is alive and well in politics and society in Morocco.

MOROCCO: Islamic jurisprudence must follow social changes, says Moroccan Ulema

Fears of a resurgence of terrorism are igniting debate on Islam and radicalization in Moroccan scholarly circles.



Morocco's Mohammed VI League of Scholars Secretary General Ahmed Abbadi

By Tamba François Koundouno

Morocco World News (03.01.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2RcPfZH> - Morocco's ulema, a body of religious clerics, have launched an assault on radicalization, vowing to counter its messages and stop the spread of "textual and erroneous" interpretation of religious texts.

The Mohammedia League of Scholars, Morocco's ulema or highest body of Islamic scholars, met on Friday, December 28, to discuss how to counter the "worrying spread" of radicalization. The scholars sought to find ways to counter radical discourse and equip both the public and imams with sufficient training and general knowledge to "resist the radicalization trap."

Speaking after the Friday meeting, Ahmed Abbadi, the league's secretary general, said that the ulema seeks to simplify and uphold Morocco's Maliki tradition of Islamic practice, which is "grounded in tolerance and openness."

According to Abbadi, the radicalization industry is thriving in many countries and in some quarters in Morocco because a number of believers are not sufficiently informed to discriminate between messages.

"The practice of Islamic jurisprudence should reflect social changes," Abbadi said. He explained that in today's context of globalization and rapid changes in the communication industry, Islamic scholars need to invest in social networks and other communication channels to detect and counter the rhetoric of radical groups which are already established on such platforms.

Instead of their traditional reactionary attitude towards social changes, religious clerics ought to "positively react" to social transformations and take them into account in making sense of the world for believers. Abbadi explained, "An effective Islamic jurisprudence in the 21st century must think and accompany its environment's social changes."

Religious teaching today should be both accessible and updated to "immunize the people" against the constant danger of radicalization, he argued.

Abbadi's statements come amid fears of a revival of terrorism following the double murder of Scandinavian tourists in Morocco and news of a prospective return of former ISIS fighters.

Founded in 2006 by royal decree, the Mohammedia League of Scholars is part of Morocco's counter-terrorism efforts. Operating on the ideological front, the body is charged with training "a new generation of Islamic scholars and imams" to disseminate religious tolerance and prevent the spread of radical Islamism.