



**U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing at
the U.S. Congress on Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites
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Introduction:

A house of worship is a sanctuary for reflection, spirituality and peace. It is a sacred space. A consistent pattern of attacks targeting these revered spaces across the globe is a highly condemnable and worrisome development. We have seen glimpses of this evil recently from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka, and New Zealand to the United States, with attacks on innocent and peaceful Christians, Buddhists, Jews and Muslims whose only crime was that they were praying to God as per their own traditions. But the attackers were not known as anti-religion per se. The question then, is what caused them to act in such a brutal and heartless manner? Simply put, the various attackers had different goals ranging from political and economic to ideology and identity, but despite such diversity of purposes they were bound together through their bigotry, intolerance and ignorance.

One of the crucial challenges before us is to understand the contexts in which terrorists select places of worship as targets, as that will allow us to think more clearly about how to effectively prevent such attacks and counter the mindset that causes such mayhem.

I speak here both as an academic and a former law enforcement practitioner who studies religious extremism and security threats faced by South Asia and the Middle East. My current research looks at the spirituality and security of the



Islamic pilgrimage sites and holy spaces in a historical context. I have frequently traveled to holy sites in Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey alongside visits to Muslim shrines in Azerbaijan, India, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, and Turkmenistan. I will briefly share some of my findings from these travels and dozens of interviews I have conducted on the subject.

Underlying Causes of Attacks on Houses of Worship:

Understanding the root of the problem here, down to its very basic level, is crucial for crafting any remedial steps needed to curb the dangerous trend. To begin with, it is important to recognize that the problem is global and encompasses almost all major religious traditions – both in terms of victims and perpetrators. To cite specifics, Hindu nationalist forces in India target Christian and Muslim places of worship; in Pakistan, terrorists target shrines and mosques associated with Sufi mystics and Shia Muslims, in addition to other minority faith places of worship, such as those of Hindus and Ahmadiyya's.¹ In Europe and the U.S., many mosque goers are increasingly feeling insecure as mosques are vandalized.² In Afghanistan, Taliban often target (as in Nangarhar last week) mosques that defy their worldview in any way. In Saudi Arabia, the legacy of the demolition of shrines of members of Prophet Mohammad's family members in *Jannat ul Baqae* in Medina, an important and historical Muslim graveyard, continues to haunt pilgrims. Access to the graveyard is restricted to men, and pilgrims (from both Shia and Sunni backgrounds) are discouraged from paying respects to the place in a way they deem necessary in their religious tradition.³ Furthermore, in Iraq, *Arbaeen* pilgrims – an estimated 18 to 20 million a year, the world's largest annual procession – are targeted, and extraordinary security

¹ See, Surinder Kaur Lal and M. Clark, "How Hindu Extremists are Shutting Down Christian Churches," Newsweek, March 26, 2019; available at <https://www.newsweek.com/how-hindu-extremists-are-shutting-down-christian-churches-why-are-you-1360934>; Salman Masood, "Sufi Shrine Bombing in Pakistan Kills at Least 10," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/08/world/asia/pakistan-bombing-sufi-lahore.html>

² "Anti-Muslim Activities in the United States: Violence, Threats and Discrimination at the Local Level," *New America*; available at <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/anti-muslim-activity/>

³ For details, see: <https://baqee.org/>; https://madainproject.com/jannat_ul_baqi



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measures are required to keep the shrines in Karbala, Najaf, Baghdad, and Samarra safe.⁴

So what is the common root these various instances have? What, on the most basic level, is the problem? Scholarship and research on the subject, in brief, teaches us that at core, it is about power and politics. Houses of worship are attacked to make people feel insecure where they expect to be completely safe. These are also considered “soft targets” as these are unprotected and open spaces, given their essence and purpose. These spaces also have significant symbolic value in terms of defining a community and its religious and social identity.

My research convinces me that essentially, a serious lack of pluralism and growing intolerance about religious practices and rituals facilitate the overwhelming prejudice minorities face in South Asia and the Middle East. When coupled with hateful speech and bigotry propagated through distorted religious discourse – the situation escalates into extremism, spreading the mostly sectarian, *Salafi* and *Takfiri* worldviews that erase harmonious coexistence worldwide.⁵ This highly politicized and narrow shade of Islam provides the narrative that dehumanizes the “other” including Sunni, Sufi and Shia Muslims. It is no secret that especially since the “Afghan Jihad” days, conflict zones provided the platform for which various seminaries across Muslim majority states were funded –with the intent to produce armed zealots. Among those who funded such institutions and individuals, powerful elements in the Arab and Gulf states were on top of the list. The rest is history.

But what is important to remember is that the political economy of extremism considers places of worship as a contested space. To maneuver and manipulate spiritual narratives, extremists among Muslims aspire to own or influence the pulpit or at the least scare the hell out of those mosque goers who challenge their radical discourse. Pilgrimage routes and shrines exhibiting passion, freedom of

⁴ “Millions march in Iraq in annual Arbaeen Shiite pilgrimage,” *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2019: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/millions-march-in-iraq-in-annual-arbaeen-shiite-pilgrimage/2019/10/19/e858e39a-f25d-11e9-bb7e-d2026ee0c199_story.html

⁵ For definitions of Salafi and Takfiri, see Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London, Hurst Publishers, 2016).



rituals and folk Islam too is seen as a death knell for politicized and violence prone objectives pursued by the Al-Qaeda and ISIS types. The crux of the argument is that extremists target these spaces to dominate Muslim narratives. For terrorists, attacks on places of worship cater to the “strategic appeal of psychological victory.”⁶ Lastly, to appeal to their support base, extremists dehumanize the victims of these attacks through hate speech and propaganda inflaming sectarian tensions.

Remedies and Recommendations:

1. ***The New Zealand Model:*** The country’s political leadership moved immediately not only to denounce the attacks on mosques in Christchurch but stand with the victims – and visibly be seen joining and sympathizing with the families of the dozens of individuals killed and injured. This inspired ordinary people to come together as human beings and make a collective statement that served as a powerful antidote to divisiveness and violence;
2. ***Foster interfaith and intra-faith dialogue to prevent incitement to violence*** through regular conversations and engagements; and by inculcating respect for all religious traditions through education. It is worth mentioning as an example, inspiring work of Dr. Andrew Morrow, whose work in North America promotes pluralism based on the covenants of Prophet Mohammad with various religious communities of his time, including Christians and Jews, nurturing peaceful coexistence through a commitment to protect their places of worship.⁷
3. ***Promotion of counter narratives*** to extremism by supporting global efforts such as the Amman Message, Marrakech Declaration, Washington Declaration, and anti-sectarian messages delivered by Egypt’s Al-Azhar University and Iraq’s Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani to name a few;

⁶ Kristy Campion, “Blast through the Past: Terrorist Attacks on Art and Antiquities as a Reconquest of the Modern Jihadi Identity,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, February 2017.

⁷ For details, see: <https://covenantsoftheprophet.org/>; <https://johnandrewmorrow.com/>



4. *Offer specialized security training* to management of religious institutions; enhanced state security protocols for vulnerable religious centers; development and dissemination of best practices for securing mosques and shrines and encouraging close coordination between local law enforcement and management of faith based centers.

Sources for Learning and Research:

Protecting Houses of Worship: Event Resource Guide (Prepared by the United States Attorney's Office for the District of Colorado)

<https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=790107>

Terrorist Attacks on Houses of Worship: A Vicious Cycle Goes Global:

<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/terrorist-attacks-churches-mosques-synagogues-temples-copycat-retribution>

Recommended Best practices for Securing Houses of Worship Around the World for Peoples of All Faiths: <https://www.asisonline.org/globalassets/get-involved/councils/documents/best-practices-securing-houses-of-worship.pdf>

Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to violence That could lead to Atrocity Crimes, *United Nations*:

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan%20of%20Action%20Advanced%20Copy.pdf>

CAIR Best Practices for Mosque and Community Safety:

https://www.cairflorida.org/images/CAIR_Mosque_Safety_Best_Practices.pdf

Places of Worship are Increasingly a Target: Here are Some Security Tips,

Heritage Foundation: <https://www.heritage.org/homeland-security/commentary/places-worship-are-increasingly-target-here-are-some-security-tips>

Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites: <https://www.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ucchs.pdf>