

What Canada's Muslims feel they must do

Groups wrestle with reacting to acts of terror committed by those claiming to represent Islam

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Just after dawn broke in Toronto on Thursday, July 7, Tarek Fatah heard the news of the London bombings. He recalled his first thought: "Please, may it not be a Muslim who is responsible."

That is not often the way terrorism's narrative runs these days. And so, by 6:30 a.m., Mr. Fatah, a hospital technical writer, had made telephone contact with the 15 board members of the Muslim Canadian Congress, the liberal Islamic organization he helped found a few years ago.

The group members went to their computers, signed on to the MCC's e-mail list-serve, and began working together on a statement that would condemn the bombings as "barbaric and cowardly" and "a crime against humanity."

The same process, in one way or another, took place in many Muslim organizations across the country.

The executive of the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) circulated a draft statement to its 11-member national board and affiliated mosques before issuing it to the news media. The Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN) had a statement posted on its website before the day ended.

The Canadian Islamic Ihya Foundation announced it would present a concert for peace "as a strike against those who choose to terrorize the civilian population of the world."

It is what Canada's Muslims feel they must do for their self-interest and protection, leaders of the country's mainstream Islamic organizations said in interviews.

The Canadian Roman Catholic Church didn't feel it had to issue statements denouncing Catholic terrorism in Northern Ireland. Canadian Orthodox churches felt no obligation to publicly condemn the ethnic cleansing carried out by Serbian Orthodox Christians in the Balkans.

"But being a visible minority, you do not have the privilege of distancing yourself from your [global religious] community," Mr. Fatah said.

Wahida Valiante, CIC's national vice-president, said: "I don't know Osama bin Laden. I've never met the guy. I'm a Canadian. But [the Canadian media] takes the position that you're not a good Muslim unless you speak out.

"It's always called *Islamic* terrorism. Islam has become synonymous with terrorism," she said, "and so when something happens we've got to pay attention to what mechanics [make] us into the guilty party.

"Generally now, since 9/11, there's an understanding within the community that we have to condemn the acts."

But she acknowledged there isn't an "exact consensus" within the 600,000-member Canadian Muslim community on the constant requirement to denounce *jihadi* [so-called holy war] Islam and what, in reality, is foreign terrorism.

Omar Alghabra, president of the Canadian Arab Association, for example, said he is tired of fielding media calls and of being viewed as belonging to some subversive "fifth column" who must apologize for the acts of terrorists. His organization chose not to put out a statement.

The e-mail drafting session by MCC's board members lasted three hours. One member, Toronto lawyer Aris Raza happened to be in London. He gave the group the latest news about the bombings.

Mr. Fatah wrote the first draft, which included a quote from the Koran that the killing of one human being is the same as killing all humanity.

Toronto information technology specialist Keyvan Soltany argued against including the Koran reference, saying this was not a discussion about Islam but about a political act. "Once you invoke texts, you turn it into a religious debate," he said.

One by one, the rest of the group agreed. "I was the last," Mr. Fatah said. "After all, it was my text. And I genuinely feel my religion has been usurped by these bastards."

The statement was then posted on the MCC's general membership list-serve. Mr. Fatah's wife, Nargis Tapal, argued with her husband over the words "barbaric and cowardly," saying it risked the group being targeted by militant Islamists.

The statement was also sent to MCC's sister organization in the United States, the Progressive Muslim Union of North America, which rejected it because it blamed President George W. Bush for fanning the fires of Islamic terrorism into a worldwide movement.

"They felt as Canadians we were slighting their president," said Mr. Fatah, who also sits on the PMU's board.

By 10:30 a.m., the MCC statement had been sent to media organizations across the country on the Canada News Wire. It was three days before the PMU issued its statement.

The Canadian Islamic Congress also got its statement out early. However, it immediately found itself facing a barrage of media criticism for saying, in addition to condemning the bombing, that it hoped "Canadian Muslims do not pay the guilty-by-association price" -- a declaration several editorialists and columnists labelled inappropriate and fanciful.

Ms. Valiante said there was no debate within the organization's leadership about putting in the guilty-by-association reference. "You have no idea how terrified the Muslim community feels -- following 9/11 when we found our mosques under surveillance by police and CSIS and Bill C-36 [anti-terrorism legislation] was passed."

CAIR-CAN's Riad Saloojee in Ottawa echoed Ms. Valiante's view.

"As a human being and a father I felt a sense of revulsion . . . that also generated a sense of ownership over the issue of making Canada more secure," he said. "As a Muslim, I worried it would lead to scapegoating and guilt by association."

He described a community struggling to articulate a response to terrorists who claim to be pursuing goals in the name of their religion. While some Canadian Muslims question why they must apologize for "crazies" who follow their religion, others feel they cannot cede to the terrorists the ground of representing Islam, Mr. Saloojee said.

The MCC's Mr. Fatah noted that while the imam at one Toronto mosque explicitly condemned the London bombings on the Muslim Friday Sabbath the day after the attacks, he was disappointed that the imam at another mosque didn't even mention them.

The Muslim community's discomfort is aggravated by a widespread conviction that it is seen as the Other in Canada -- an alien group -- even though Muslim leaders point out that Muslims are likely more securely integrated into Canadian society than in any other Western country.

"We haven't been able to make the case [about ourselves] to the ordinary WASP Canadian," Mr. Fatah. He is organizing a conference on how Western Muslims can combat *jihadi* Islam.