

# Warsaw Muslim centre attack renews Islamophobia fears

by Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska  
7 Dec 2017



Warsaw, Poland - On the night of Monday, November 27, two men in hoodies vandalised the Muslim cultural centre in Warsaw, breaking windows with stones and pieces of concrete.

The attack took place amid deepening Islamophobia in Poland, where Muslims comprise a mere 0.1 percent of the population.

CCTV footage confirmed the incident, but in the darkness of night, the attackers' faces are unrecognisable.

"I hope that the perpetrators will be caught soon", said Mariusz Blaszczak, minister of interior.

So far, the men have not been named.

"This was not the first attack against our centre," said Anna Lukjanowicz, a Polish convert to Islam who works at the institute, citing three previous attacks.

In October this year, a masked man threw a bottle against the front door, leaving visible marks.

"Recent events are part of a politically fuelled, unpleasant atmosphere of xenophobia and racism in Poland," she told Al Jazeera. "Because of the verbal and physical attacks against not only Muslims, but also people who 'look like Muslims' - that is people with a darker skin, and the attack against the Muslim Culture Centre, Muslims living in Poland are losing the sense of security."

Completed in 2015, the centre's architecture blends Middle Eastern tradition and European trends.

It hosts conference halls, a library and the largest prayer room in Poland, with space for 600 people.

At the beginning of 2017, the centre's employees wrote to Polish officials, including the president, the prime minister, both chambers of parliament and all parliamentary parties, expressing their concern with the "biased media coverage of Islam and its people" as well as the "consolidation of anti-Muslim attitudes" in the political debate.

According to the authors, these could lead to the increase in xenophobia and violence against Muslims.

In, 2016, police figures revealed the second highest number of hate crime incidents after 2015, with 765 reported cases of violence. In 2014, police recorded 262 incidents.

In 2016, local prosecutor offices investigated 1,631 hate crimes fuelled by racism, anti-Semitism or xenophobia.

Since 2015, the number of attacks against Muslims rose from 192 to 362, followed by attacks against Jews and Roma people.

## 'No explicit condemnation' from officials

In May 2016, Prime Minister Beata Szydlo abolished an anti-discrimination council that was tasked with preventing xenophobia and intolerance.

The Muslim cultural centre's letters generated little response from the authorities. In the only reply, in spite of evidence to the contrary, the office of the Senate said physical attacks against the centre were unlikely.

"Facts from the Polish tradition and history show that Christian Orthodox people, Protestants, Jews, Tatars, Ukrainians and Belarusians lived in peace with Poles in our country, making a great contribution to its development," the response read.

"Apart from reporting on worrying events, which take place in some countries of Western Europe, we have not noticed any references towards the Muslim community, which has been living in Poland for years, that would be worth condemning".

However, according to Anna Tatar from the anti-racist Never Again Association, which has been monitoring hate crime incidents in Poland since the 1990s, the political narrative in response to the refugee crisis has contributed to the increase in anti-Muslim sentiment in Poland.

"The main reason for this change is the way the Polish debate about the humanitarian crisis and the possible acceptance of refugees was conducted. This is a problem which does not concern Poland at all because there are almost no refugees here, but the hysterical way in which the issue was discussed, used and manipulated for political ends has contributed to the increase in violence," Tatar said.

"There are a number of examples of statements made by representatives of the authorities, which show that they do not want to see the problem or that they neglect it. For example, at the recent 'Independence March', a number of openly racist banners were present. Yet, there was virtually no explicit condemnation of the events," she said, an opinion shared by the wider Muslim community.

Some 60,000 people joined the "Independence March" attended by some nationalists and fascists in Warsaw on November 11 - more people than the Polish Muslim population of around 35,000 - where chants included: "The whole Poland sings with us: f\*\*\* off with the refugees."

"Public media and nationalist internet sites discriminate against Islam and Muslims and manipulate the public opinion, trying to convince Poles that Islam is a religion of violence, terror, that it is primitive," said Imam Youssef Hadid, Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Muslim League in Poland.

"There are debates and lectures which spread hatred towards Muslims, people who are invited to speak at them have xenophobic and Islamophobic views, have no knowledge of Islam, and those who specialise in it are not invited."

### **'Moral panic' and rising Islamophobia**

A study by the Center for Research on Prejudice published in September 2015, found that although 80 percent of Poles do not know any Muslims, two-thirds declare that they would feel uncomfortable in their presence.

More than half of respondents stated that Muslims threaten Poland's economic well-being and Polish values, and a similar number agreed with Islamophobic statements. Younger respondents demonstrated a higher level of fear.

"What we are currently observing is a moral panic. Polish society is easy to manipulate. Public opinion polls show that we are the first in the EU when it comes to viewing social media as a reliable source of information about the world. Over half of Poles trust social media," said Adam Balcer, a Warsaw-based researcher for the European Council on Foreign Relations. "The Polish internet is very right wing and nationalistic, and as a result, Polish youth has a negative attitude towards Muslims."

Since the country has one of the most ethnically and religiously homogenous societies in Europe with a small Muslim minority, the right wing plays on irrational fears.

"The authorities, which are openly Islamophobic, set the example. This falls on a fertile ground of fears and phobias, which reflect some deeply rooted stereotypes," said Balcer.

He compared the current atmosphere to the interwar period and the existing attitudes towards Muslims to the earlier situation of Jews.

"A Jew used to be portrayed as oriental, the other, an eastern man, incapable of assimilating and integrating, who could destroy the nation," he explained.

"Those cliches only had to be revived. You can see them in the current fears of the Law and Justice's electorate which include the alliance of [George] Soros and the Germans to destroy Poland's ethnic cohesion by bringing in refugees".

Following the attack at the Muslim cultural centre, some Poles sent messages condemning the incident and expressing solidarity. Others arrived at the scene and brought candles.

On November 29, a group of activists organised a protest in Warsaw under the slogan "No to Islamophobia".

Representatives of the Jewish community have also expressed their regret concerning the attack, acknowledging the rise in negative attitudes towards minorities in Poland.

"Poles are a hospitable nation, they are tolerant and respectful of people of other faiths, but unfortunately politics pushes them to spread nationalism and hate towards Muslims," Imam Hadid said.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/warsaw-muslim-centre-attack-renews-islamophobia-fears-171205130116919.html>