

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Solidarity with Muslims is essential amid increasing Islamophobia

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Last week, Eid al-Adha, one of the holiest days in Islam, was marred by continued acts of violence against the Muslim community. Days before this holy celebration, a Muslim woman in traditional garb was lit on fire by a passerby while walking down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. The night before Eid, a mosque in Fort Pierce, Florida — which Omar Mateen, who killed 49 people at a Florida nightclub, reportedly used to visit — was set on fire in an act of arson. As an entire faith community is attacked again and again, in a country that is supposed to stand for the freedom



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to express and practice religion, too many of us have stood by unaware or silent about the injustice.

Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes are rampant in America. Since the beginning of 2015, there have been hundreds of documented attacks, an increase of 78 percent over the year, including arsons at mosques, assaults, shootings and threats of violence.

The increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes has a lot to do with increasingly anti-Muslim rhetoric, as Charles Blow has written for The New York Times, which has very real consequences beyond simple words. Rhetoric becomes hate, and hate becomes violence.

And this does not only affect Muslims, but other groups that get confused with the stereotype as well — including Arab-Americans and those who follow the Sikh faith.

We have seen these intersecting consequences of Islamophobia in our community: in December 2015, a Sikh store clerk in Grand Rapids was shot in the cheek, avoiding a more fatal shot, but targeted because of his identity.

Across the country, Americans are being religiously, racially and ethnically profiled in such a way that causes people to commit hate crimes and violence against others for looking different and believing different things.

I am not a Muslim, but I have friends who are affected every day by these acts of violence and fear of being targeted for their identity. Locally, I work with people who are cornered into advocating for their humanity by explaining what their faith identity is and is not about.

One hijab-wearing Muslim woman said to me. "I feel like

I have to explain what I'm not before I can say who I am."

As a non-Muslim who wants to see the end of Islamophobia, I stand in solidarity with my Muslim brothers and sisters as they struggle to be treated equally and fairly in our country. But what does meaningful solidarity look like?

It is a challenge to know what to do with something as widespread and systemic as Islamophobia, which really is just another version of racism and xenophobia. But like any change, it starts with each of us.

If the recent surge of Islamophobia is rooted in exclusionary and vitriolic rhetoric, then we must consider the language we use to fix the problem as well.

How are we reminding our Muslim neighbors that we support them? How are we advocating for them in our houses

of worship and organizations? How are we publicly declaring we are against this discrimination and insist that Muslim-Americans are important parts of the fabric of the American identity and public?

Our affirmative and inclusive rhetoric is not enough, but it is a start of what we can do in our daily lives and in our daily conversations. It is one way to practice solidarity as a habit that will, and must, turn into further and larger actions.

Linda Sarsour, a Muslim-American activist, recently wrote: "As a Muslim woman, not only is wearing my religious headscarf in public an act of faith, but it has become an act of courage."

All of us need to respond with acts of courage to do what we can, where we are, so others do not have to have courage simply to live peacefully in our communities and nation.