

Quebec mosque shooting: How safe are our public spaces?



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A police car is parked outside the Islamic Centre of Quebec in St-Laurent on Monday, Jan. 30, 2017. In light of the Quebec City shooting, the Muslim Council of Montreal is asking police to be more proactive with individuals showing signs of extremism online. *DAVE SIDAWAY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

With room to pray for 1,000, the Canadian Islamic Centre Al-Jamieh in Dollard-des-Ormeaux is the largest mosque on the island of Montreal.

Outside of a minor graffiti incident, the mosque has never been the target of hate crimes in its 16-year history, and never seen much need for security measures other than security cameras.

After someone threw what they claimed was pig's blood onto a mosque in Saguenay in 2013 and left a racist screed, the D.D.O. centre installed another 16 cameras.

After Sunday night, the Canadian Islamic Centre Al-Jamieh and other mosques are contemplating once again how to ensure safety at sites designed to allow the free flow of hundreds of people a day.

"We've been thinking for a few months about extra security, especially during the busy prayer sessions on Friday, but what happened yesterday gave us a big shock," Ahmad Chaar, president of the centre, said on Monday. "But with five prayers a day, we have to ask: do we have to have security on every prayer we do?"

"Security was never our preoccupation. We live in a free country where we don't have any problems. Now we're starting to wake up."

Like most Montreal religious institutions, the Islamic centre has an open-door policy allowing followers to come and go freely — a necessity when as many as 600 faithful pour through their doors at once. Budgets don't permit full-time security guards, and logistics don't allow for time-consuming individual screening.

It's a reality Montreal's Jewish community has lived with for decades. Security measures at the city's synagogues, Jewish schools and institutions ebb and flow in reaction to global events, said Rabbi Reuben Poupko, leader of the Beth Israel Beth Aaron Congregation. Most institutions have cameras to monitor and record visitors, and security guards are hired during high holidays or after incidents. Several synagogues used guards for a year following the firebombing of a Jewish school in St-Laurent in 2004.

Employees are trained to look out for suspicious individuals and how to react. Exercises, like active shooter drills, are regularly carried out in Jewish schools.

"Security is taken very seriously in the Jewish community, for obvious reasons," Poupko said. Montreal police are very helpful in terms of responding to concerns and adding extra patrols, he said.

Even so, measures in Montreal and elsewhere in Canada are far more lax than what is seen in Europe, where armed security guards are common.

After years of threats, racist rhetoric and vandalism against Muslims in Quebec that never devolved into fatal violence, mosque officials and police may have become overly complacent, said Salam Elmenyawy, president of the Muslim Council of Montreal.

His organization is counselling members to look for government grants to subsidize security measures, and asking police to be more proactive with individuals showing signs of extremism on the Internet.

Video surveillance only goes so far, said Adam Cohen, an Israeli security expert who was director of security for Federation CJA in Montreal and now runs the Perceptage firm, counselling synagogues, mosques and Catholic institutions in prevention.

"Nobody's invented a camera that can jump off walls to stop a bad guy," he said.

The most effective technique for schools, synagogues, churches or mosques is to train personnel there to look out for people who look threatening and to quickly shut the doors and lock potential attackers out, Cohen said. Reinforced doorknobs and security film that renders windows practically unbreakable are relatively inexpensive methods to keep attackers at bay until a 911 call brings police, he added.

"There may be collateral damage outside, but at least the majority of people who are massed inside a prayer hall or classroom will be saved," he said.

Ultimately, officials noted, there is little people can do to deter a madman with an AK-47.

"We ask our members to be vigilant. We always do that," said Chaar of the Islamic centre in D.D.O. "But it's still Mission Impossible."

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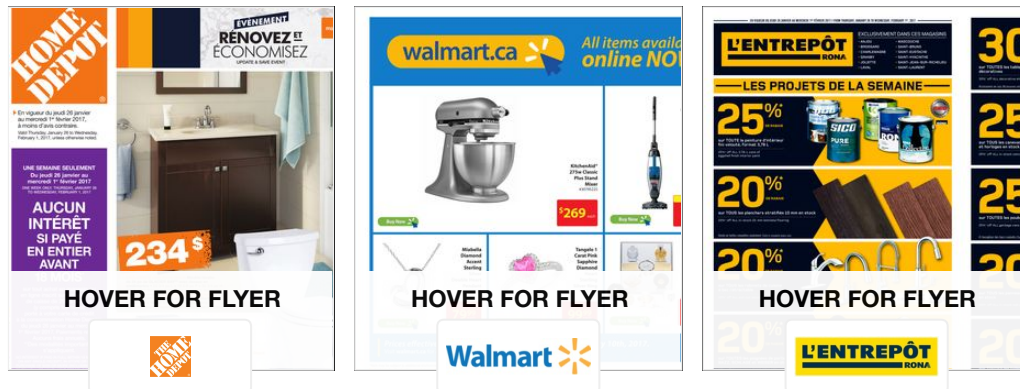
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