

New Haven mosque struggles to resume Ramadan rituals after arson attack

Diyanet Mosque was set ablaze in broad daylight, destroying much of the ground floor. Attendance has been low at its iftar meals.

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This article appears in the [June 19, 2019](#) issue.



Volunteers prepare the iftar meal outside the Diyanet Mosque of New Haven, Connecticut, on May 20, 2019. RNS photo by Rhonda Roumani.

A week after an arson attack left the Diyanet Mosque of New Haven uninhabitable, a few dozen members gathered in front of the building for the Ramadan ritual of a community iftar, or the breaking of the day's fast.

Seated around two long rows of folding tables, men, women, and children broke their fast with a traditional Turkish meal of bean stew, rice, and yogurt.

“I feel like I can’t look behind me,” said Hulya Elevli, 49, facing trailers in the parking lot so as not to look at the damage. “Normally we have 200 people every night at our iftars. . . . Our people did not come today.”

The New Haven mosque was set ablaze in broad daylight on May 12, destroying much of the ground floor and blackening the front of the building. The following day, New Haven law enforcement officials announced that the fire was the result of arson. The FBI and other federal agencies also conducted investigations.

Local politicians condemned the attack, and hundreds of neighbors and members of other local faith communities came to the mosque on May 16 for a vigil.

With the initial FBI and law enforcement investigations over, mosque president Haydar Elevli, Hulya Elevli’s husband, is waiting for the insurance inspectors to finish their work so that the mosque can begin reconstruction. Three separate online fundraising campaigns have already raised nearly \$200,000. For the moment, Diyanet’s members are praying on blankets in two long trailers in the mosque’s parking lot.

“We lost our second home,” said Fazilet Ozkarakoc, a mother of three who had attended a Qur’an reading earlier that day. “It’s the holy month of Ramadan. You don’t expect this much evil to happen.”

Elevli, a teacher at the mosque’s school, said that between listening to Qur’anic recitations, praying, and socializing, members would normally spend up to eight hours a day in the mosque during the month of Ramadan.

Irem Uzun, 16, a high school sophomore who has been attending the mosque since she was six, felt the absence of those large gatherings.

“It didn’t feel like Ramadan anymore,” she said. “We’re so used to everyone gathering together every night.”

The building, which the local community purchased in 2009 and has spent a decade converting to a mosque, is the only one in the New Haven area that looks like a classic Middle Eastern mosque, with towering minarets and a large prayer room laid with oriental carpets. It is one of 30 around the United States bearing the name Diyanet, all of which receive funding from the Turkish government. The building also has a dining room, numerous classrooms for religious instruction and Turkish

language lessons, plus living quarters for the mosque's imam, with room for guests.

A domed prayer area on the third floor with stained glass filtering natural light from above was still a month from being finished when the fire was set. The community's plan to pray in the space for the first time on Eid, the celebration that ends Ramadan, is now on hold.

"This house is like one of my children," Elevli said. "Step by step, we built every inch of this mosque."

The attack in New Haven was just one in a rising number of attacks against US Muslims. At a mosque in Escondido, California, an arsonist left a letter referring to the killing of 51 people in Christchurch, New Zealand, during prayer.

In one week in May, a New York man was indicted on hate crime charges after authorities said he trashed a mosque in Queens, a Virginia woman was arrested after allegedly threatening to bomb the Petersburg Muslim Center, and Florida police arrested a man they said posted threats on Facebook that he would "kill Muslims one by one."

A report published by the Council on American-Islamic Relations titled *Targeted: 2018 Civil Rights Report* recorded 144 antimosque incidents in 2017, of which 57 were labeled hate crimes.

According to Abbas Barzegar, CAIR national research and advocacy director, "anti-Muslim sentiment has been on the rise since the election season of 2015, with a spike in 2017 after the declaration of the Muslim ban," referring to President Trump's executive order restricting entry to the US for residents of five Muslim-majority countries.

This year's American Muslim Poll, the fourth annual survey of US faith communities conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding in Washington, D.C., found that Muslims remain the most likely group to report experiencing religious discrimination. The ISPU's annual Islamophobia Index, which measures the public's endorsement of five negative stereotypes about US Muslims, inched upward from 24 in 2018 to 28 in 2019.

Jewish Americans score the lowest in anti-Muslim sentiment (after Muslims themselves), while white evangelicals score the highest. Results correlate with

knowing a Muslim personally. More than half of Jews report having favorable views of Muslims, compared to 20 percent of white evangelicals—the group least likely to know a Muslim.

“Personal interaction and affinity to a member of the community can go a long way to make people less likely to succumb to the toxic rhetoric that we’re hearing all the time,” said Dalia Mogahed, ISPU director of research. —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “New Haven mosque devastated by arson.” The online version was edited June 3.