

New Zealand mosque shooter sentenced to life without parole

by [Nick Perry](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue



Mosque shooting survivor Taj Mohammad Kamran reacts with supporters outside the Christchurch High Court after the sentencing hearing for Australian Brenton Harrison Tarrant in Christchurch, New Zealand, on August 27. (AP Photo / Mark Baker)

On August 27, the White supremacist who slaughtered 51 worshipers at two New Zealand mosques was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, the first time the maximum available sentence has been imposed in the country since the death penalty for murder was abolished in 1961.

Judge Cameron Mander said the crimes committed by 29-year-old Australian Brenton Harrison Tarrant were so wicked that a lifetime in jail could not begin to atone for them. He said they had caused enormous loss and hurt and stemmed from a warped and malignant ideology.

After the sentence was announced, survivors of the shootings raised hands and fists in celebration and greeted supporters carrying roses and waving signs with painted hearts outside the court building.

The March 2019 attacks targeting people praying at the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch shocked New Zealand and prompted new laws banning the deadliest types of semiautomatic weapons. The attacks also prompted global changes to social media protocols after the gunman livestreamed his attack on Facebook.

During the four-day sentencing hearing, 90 survivors and family members recounted the horror of that day and the trauma they continue to feel. One of those who spoke was Temel Atacocugu, who was shot nine times at the Al Noor Mosque.

Atacocugu said he felt relieved at the sentence. “Finally we can breathe freely, and we feel secure, and my kids feel secure,” he said. “The justice system has locked up this ideology forever.”

Tarrant pleaded guilty in March to 51 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder, and one count of terrorism, reversing his earlier not guilty pleas. He fired his lawyers and told the judge he didn’t wish to speak at his sentencing. A standby lawyer appointed by the court told the judge that Tarrant did not oppose the maximum sentence.

The judge said Tarrant recently told a psychiatrist that he now rejects his extremist views and considers his attacks “abhorrent and irrational.”

Dressed in a gray prison tracksuit, Tarrant showed little emotion during his four-day sentencing. He watched the speakers, occasionally giving a small nod or covering his mouth as he laughed at jokes, often made at his expense.

The sentencing hearing gave survivors and family members a chance to confront the gunman. As the hearing went on, the speakers became more emboldened and the numbers who signed up to speak swelled.

Some chose to yell at the gunman. Others called him a monster, a coward, a rat. Some sang verses from the Qur’an or addressed him in Arabic. A few spoke softly to Tarrant, saying they forgave him.

“It was very empowering,” said Aya Al-Umari, who spoke about the death of her brother, Hussein. “Every one of us was so powerful in delivering our statements.”

Al-Umari said the hearing had shown how resilient the Muslim community in Christchurch has been in recovering from the trauma of the attacks.

“No sentence will bring our loved ones back,” she said. “But at least we can close this chapter and move on.” —Associated Press