

British strive to build interfaith bridges amid terrorist attacks

by [Courtney Traub](#) and [Sara Miller Llana](#)

This article appears in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue.

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) When British prime minister Theresa May responded to the London Bridge terrorist attack this month with the words “enough is enough,” it wasn’t just campaign rhetoric.

The phrase summed up the loss of patience across Western Europe, which has endured more than a dozen major terrorist attacks in the past two and a half years.

Britain had been spared the barrage, much of it inspired by the so-called Islamic State, until it suffered four attacks beginning in March. The first three were perpetrated by extremists in the name of religion, taking the lives of people commuting from work, walking, dancing at concerts, or celebrating. The youngest victim was eight years old. The latest attack was carried out June 18 against Muslims worshipping at a mosque during the holy month of Ramadan, confirming the dread that many have felt amid a fraying of nerves: that “enough is enough” will give way to the most violent forms of Islamophobia.

In the middle stand community groups and faith leaders who are trying to foster dialogue and counter the hotheadedness that threatens to roll back years of work on coexistence.

“In the current climate of the world we live in, there’s a need for more understanding,” said Imam Yunus Dudhwala, the head of chaplaincy at Barts Health NHS Trust, a group of hospitals serving East London.

He was speaking at a recent “sunset walk” that started on the sun-dappled steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London and ended at the East London Mosque. “The more we meet, the more we have dialogue and events together, it’s an opportunity to understand each other,” he said. “It breaks the barriers of fear, of the unknown.”

Standing beside the imam was Jonathan Baker, the bishop of Fulham.

“It’s hugely important that we all witness the fact that we stand together as citizens of the one city,” he said. “We all want to live in peace, in safety, in mutual respect with one another.”

That can seem a lofty goal these days, with mistrust running high between communities across many quarters of Europe.

The suspect named in the attack near the Finsbury Park Mosque was Darren Osborne, a resident of Wales, who allegedly said at the scene that he wanted to “kill all Muslims” when he drove a van into a crowd. One person was killed. The attack was all the more contentious amid media reports that the mosque, once the stage of radical cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri, had recently been recognized for its efforts to fight extremism.

In the week following the London Bridge rampage, reported attacks against Muslims increased fivefold, according to figures released by London mayor Sadiq Khan.

Nida Mumith, a teen volunteer with British nonprofit Muslim Aid, which sponsored the sunset walk, says she and her friends are frightened by such statistics. “It creates this sense of not being comfortable in your own area—wherever you go you’ll hear about someone being beaten up because they’re Muslim, or [about] hateful comments thrown at them,” she said.

Taking part in the sunset walk, which was initially organized to raise funds in support of Syrian refugees but expanded to condemn extremist violence in Britain and around the world, was Mumith’s way of helping to counter intolerance: “We’re all here to show unity. Everyone is sympathetic to each other’s beliefs and differences.”

Tensions in Britain are high, but the strains were also felt elsewhere. As London was reeling the day after the mosque attack, a car crashed into a police vehicle on Paris’s Champs-Élysées, which authorities called a probable terrorist act. Such incidents barely make the news anymore; three major attacks in France have left 231 dead and hundreds injured since the attack on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015.

Muslim groups have shown a similar degree of exasperation over what are starting to feel like incessant strikes. London-based Quilliam, a counter-extremism organization, released a statement following the early June attacks in the British capital.

“Enough is enough—we need action now and not tip-toeing around the issue,” said Haras Rafiq, Quilliam CEO. “The [terrorists’] ideology has its roots in Islamist-inspired Salafi Jihadism, and we must all admit the problem before we can attempt to challenge it.”

Meanwhile, Muhammad Manwar Ali, a former militant who now combats Islamic extremism through his organization JIMAS, tweeted in support of the British government’s controversial anti-radicalization program, Prevent.

Still, many fear such programs are counterproductive.

“Basically the state is asking people to spy on each other, and that’s really not conducive to an atmosphere of trust,” said Amina Yaqin, a senior lecturer in postcolonial studies at SOAS University of London. “It also gives groups like ISIS a real opportunity to say, ‘Look, you’re mistrusted anyway, so come over to our side.’”

She sees interfaith and grassroots initiatives as generally more effective than state-led programs in fostering the kind of mutual vulnerability that engenders cooperation—the kind on view as the two-mile sunset walk ended at the East London Mosque on a recent Saturday.

“How do we respond to bombs and murder in Tehran, Syria, Manchester, London? By refusing the fragmentation and the fear that these killers wish to instill into our open society,” said Alan Green, rector of St. John Church on Bethnal Green and chair of the Tower Heights Interfaith Forum. “In the face of fear, murder, and ignorance, we continue to proclaim that we are better together and have no place for hate. . . . In the end, the way we will defeat those who seek to divide us—we do it simply by talking and listening.”

A version of this article, which was edited on June 30, appears in the July 19 print edition under the title “British strive to build interfaith bridges amid terrorist attacks.”