There has been an outpouring of horror in the wake of the massacre at two mosques in New Zealand. Turkey’s president blames the West but, as Duncan Bartlett explains, other Muslims are calling for interfaith cohesion.

The extremist gunman accused of massacring fifty people in the March 15 attacks on two mosques in New Zealand had another, even more high profile target on his mind.
In a manifesto which Brenton Tarrant published online and sent to politicians and the press, he said that he planned to murder the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. He wrote: ‘We are coming for Constantinople and we will destroy every mosque and minaret in the city.’

HATEFUL WORDS

Most of the international media have been cautious about reporting the hate-filled manifesto, lest it glorifies violence or somehow brings a twisted legitimacy to the New Zealand attacks. But the content of the diatribe was quickly picked up in Turkey and translated. When he became aware of it, President Erdogan reacted with fury to the threat against his life.

At appearances at election rallies around the country, he repeatedly described the Christchurch mosque killings as part of a wider conspiracy against Turkey and Islam. He even used video footage of the attacks taken by the shooter and uploaded online. The horrifying images were relayed to millions of homes across Turkey by television stations which were covering his rallies live.

BLAMING THE WEST

The violent footage was matched by equally violent language from the president, who warned that his enemies ‘would be going home in caskets’. According to Mr Erdogan, the atrocity in New Zealand was the fault of the West.

‘This was not an isolated event, it was something more organised,’ he told his supporters. He went on to ask, ‘Why does the Western media keep silent?’ – a strange question, given the vast amount of press coverage the Christchurch massacre has received.

Australia and New Zealand reacted with dismay to President Erdogan’s remarks. Their governments summoned the Turkish ambassadors to their foreign ministries to express their disapproval.

DIGNIFIED RESPONSE

New Zealand’s prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, has asked the country’s censor to ban the gunman’s manifesto – although she acknowledges it is not possible to remove its content from the internet.

The measured and dignified response of Ms Ardern was in sharp contrast to Mr Erdogan’s angry reaction. She has stressed that the Muslims who were killed at the Christchurch mosques were full members of New Zealand’s society – ‘They are us,’ she said – not part of a minority group who could be regarded as outsiders, aligned to an alien culture or religion.
Prime Minister Ardern publicly mourned the killings alongside New Zealanders of all faiths. Interfaith services of condolence have also been held in many other countries.

INTERNATIONAL REACTION

This has brought some comfort to members of Muslim communities around the world who fear they might be next in the line of fire. The anxiety is particularly acute among Muslims who live in countries where Islamophobic attacks have already occurred, such as Britain, where a right-wing extremist ran down and killed a worshipper outside London’s Finsbury Park mosque in 2017.

Muslim community leaders have started talks with the police about providing additional protection for their places of worship. This could mean some mosques adopt a level of security similar to that seen at Jewish synagogues in the UK, which are often patrolled by private security guards and sometimes by armed police.

ACCUSATIONS OF HYPOCRISY

However, there are some people in Turkey who feel that the outpourings of public grief and messages of consolation relating to the New Zealand killings contain an element of hypocrisy.

The journalist Sara Hassan wrote on the Turkish TRT website: ‘Generally when a Muslim is the perpetrator of an attack, his race, origins, and religion make immediate headlines. In this case, the shooter has not been referred to as a “white terrorist” or a “Christian terrorist”, even though his manifesto has clear racial and religious references. No religion should come under attack as a result of violence committed by its adherents, but why has the term “Islamic terrorist” been normalised?’

She went on: ‘Other terms such as “white supremacist” also don’t use the combination of “white terrorist”, as opposed to the common use of “Arab terrorist”.’
CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

The General Secretary of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organisation, is worried that the New Zealand attacks will create more hatred and division. Yahya Cholil Staquf insists that solidarity across racial, religious, cultural and political lines is the appropriate way to try to prevent this.

But he says that, as a Muslim, he faces challenging questions that require difficult but honest answers. ‘The targeting of Muslims at prayer in Christchurch comes after nearly two decades during which Islamist atrocities have been a pervasive feature of news bulletins around the world. The massacre in New Zealand would likely be inconceivable if divorced from this wider context in which Islam has become synonymous with terror in the minds of many non-Muslims,’ Mr Staquf told the British newspaper, The Daily Telegraph.

His message to his fellow Muslims is to reject interpretations of the religion which justify hatred and violence.

PRAYER AND TEARS

For many Muslims, the way forward will include much prayer, reflection and discussion among the community. One follower of the faith used social media to send a heartfelt message of defiance to the killer.

The post, from a woman who uses the Facebook name Jinghan Naan and who also goes under the pseudonym The Radiant Muslim, has been shared over 45,000 times on Facebook, with over 4000 comments.

She wrote: ‘You showed the world how Muslims welcome, with open arms, even people like yourself into our Mosques. You have broken many, many hearts and you have made the world weep. You have left a huge void. But what you also have done is brought us closer together. And it has strengthened our faith and resolve. In the coming weeks, more people will turn up in the Mosques, a place you hate so much, fortified by the strength in their faith, and inspired by their fallen brothers and sisters.’

It is a message we should all heed: that hatred should not breed more hatred, but a sense of strength and solidarity.

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https://www.asianaffairs.in/magazine/tears-anger-and-solidarity/#.XMb605NKhTJ