

Jewish Leaders Renew Antisemitism Battle After Texas Hostage Case

Although the FBI initially said the man who held four people hostage at a Texas synagogue was focused on an issue “not specifically related to the Jewish community,” the captor voiced beliefs that Jews controlled the world and had the power to arrange the release of a prisoner, survivors said after their escape.

The gunman’s words were all too familiar to Jewish leaders and terror experts who saw the attack on Congregation Beth Israel as yet another in the rising number of antisemitic hate crimes, a sign of the continued need of vigilance and interfaith solidarity.

The hostage-taker—identified by authorities as Malik Faisal Akram—“thought he could come into a synagogue, and we could get on the phone with the ‘Chief Rabbi of America’ and he would get what he needed,” Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker told the Forward, a Jewish news site.

The hourslong standoff ended after the last hostage ran out of the Colleyville synagogue and an FBI SWAT team rushed in. Akram was killed, though authorities have declined to say who shot him.

The attack recalled recent deadly assaults on synagogues, including Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life in 2018 and California’s Chabad of Poway in 2019. Unlike those attacks, when assailants linked to white nationalist motives went on shooting rampages soon after entering, Akram took hostages to have them to use their influence to obtain the release of Aafia Siddiqui.

Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist who is suspected of

having ties to al-Qaida and was convicted of trying to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan, is serving a lengthy sentence in a prison in nearby Fort Worth.

Jeffrey Cohen, another of the synagogue hostages, said Akram “did not come there to kill Jews” but tried to use them in the belief they could get Siddiqui released.

Akram “had bought into the extremely dangerous, antisemitic trope that Jews control everything, that we could call President (Joe) Biden and have him release her,” Cohen told the Times of Israel.

Lorenzo Vidino, director of the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, said that while only Akram himself knew his motives, his words reflect “a misguided and conspiratorial mindset.”

“The idea that Jews are overwhelmingly, disproportionately powerful and control America is completely mainstream” in some politically Islamist factions, similar to tropes among white nationalists, he said.

And he said Siddiqui’s case is a “cause celebre” in those factions. Siddiqui herself voiced “chilling” words at her court proceedings, blaming her conviction on Israel and asking for genetic tests on jurors for possible Jewish connections, he said.

On Saturday, the special agent in charge of the FBI’s Dallas field office said the hostage-taker was focused on an issue “not specifically related to the Jewish community.” But on Sunday, the FBI called the ordeal “a terrorism-related matter, in which the Jewish community was targeted.”

Akram “was looking for a Jewish target,” said Nachman Shai, Israel’s Cabinet minister for diaspora affairs. “If it’s not about Jews, why didn’t he walk into a church, a mosque or a supermarket there?”

The attack resonated in Jewish communities across the country, including those that had been attacked before.

“It’s upsetting to me whenever Jews are under attack, whenever human beings are under attack,” said Beth Kissileff, a Pittsburgh author and member of New Light Congregation. The congregation was one of three meeting in the Tree of Life building that lost members in the Oct. 27, 2018, attack that claimed 11 lives.

She hopes survivors of the Pittsburgh attack—who were consoled in 2018 by Muslim survivors of a deadly mosque attack in Quebec—can offer similar support to those in Colleyville. “People reached out to us, and we want to reach out,” she said.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, the denomination Beth Israel is affiliated with, noted that Muslim, Christian and other faith leaders quickly gathered to support the congregants.

“While the uptick of antisemitism is clear, we’ve never lived in a community where there’s more solidarity,” he said.

Anna Eisen, the founding president of Beth Israel, experienced that first-hand, citing support “from neighbors, strangers, churches, the governor” and others.

“I feel safer,” she said. “I know now I’m a part of this community and this country.”

Some advocacy groups and lawmakers have cited the Texas hostage situation in calling on the Senate to take up Biden’s nomination of Deborah Lipstadt to serve as a special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism.

The Emory University professor’s nomination languished last year, forcing Biden to resubmit her name two weeks ago. The Anti-Defamation League called on the Senate to “act now” to

show the urgency of confronting antisemitism.

"We need to treat antisemitism not as an aberration but an everyday reality," said Jonathan Greenblatt, chief executive officer of the ADL.

Rabbi Noah Farkas, the president and CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, said he has been speaking with rabbinic colleagues in the wake of the Texas incident and many have trepidations about leading services.

"To be a Jew in America today, to wear Jewish ritual garb like the yarmulke or a Star of David, is an act of courage, and I would say defiance as well," Farkas said.

The attack underscores how "the Jewish community is an affected and targeted group," said Bradley Orsini, senior national security advisor for Secure Community Network, which consults with major Jewish organizations on security.

He took part in a weekend webinar that drew about 1,600 Jewish community leaders to update them on the Colleyville situation. "We really need to keep preparedness in front of us," he said.

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