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Anti-Muslim violence spiralling out of control in America

Murtaza Hussain

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Egyptian-American activist Mona Eltahawy was arrested for attempting to cover an anti-Muslim ad in the subway

On the evening of December 27, an Indian immigrant to America named Sunando Sen was **pushed by a stranger onto the subway tracks** in New York City and struck and killed by an oncoming train. Sen had called New York home for years, and after years of hard work and struggle had recently managed to achieve his lifelong goal of **opening a small business** of his own, a copy shop in Upper Manhattan.

His roommate, MD Khan expressed shock at the death of his friend, a soft spoken man who liked to stay up late watching comedy shows and listening to music: "He was so nice, gentle and quiet... It's broken my heart."

The following day, the NYPD announced the arrest of Erika Menendez, a 31-year-old woman who had been spotted on security footage fleeing the scene after Sen had been pushed. Upon being detained and taken to a 112th Precinct police station for questioning, Menendez confessed to Sen's murder and revealed as her motivation a desire to commit violence against Muslims. **As she told detectives:**

"I pushed a Muslim off the train tracks because I hate Hindus and Muslims... Ever since 2001 when they put down the Twin Towers, I've been beating them up."

Sunando Sen was not a Muslim, but as a brown-skinned foreigner living in the United States, he was targeted and killed in an act of hate which is the by-product of an ongoing campaign of bigotry and demonisation against Muslims living in America.

Muslim-Americans, as well as **Hindus, Sikhs** and others who purportedly "look Muslim" have been **humiliated, assaulted** and in **many cases murdered** by individuals often galvanised to violence by politicians and media figures who have enthusiastically **engaged in public hatemongering** against the Muslim community in the country.

Anti-Muslim violence increases

The 9/11 attacks precipitated a surge in hate crimes, but even as the events themselves recede further into history, the level of hatred and violence directed at Muslim communities is paradoxically increasing. Within the past month, in New York alone, police have suspected racial hatred as being the motive behind several crimes.

This includes a string of murders specifically targeting **Middle Eastern storekeepers** in Brooklyn, the last of whom, a 78-year old Iranian immigrant named Rahmatollah Vahidipour, was **shot to death** while closing his boutique and whose lifeless body was then dragged to a backroom and covered over with merchandise from his store.

Within the same week as Vahidipour's murder another Muslim man was **viciously beaten** by two men who preceded their attack by asking him whether he was "a Hindu or a Muslim", while another man was stabbed several times outside of a mosque in a random attack by an assailant who screamed "**I'm going to kill you Muslim**", while repeatedly plunging a knife into his victims' body.

Far from being aberrations, these incidents are in line with national statistics which show anti-Muslim violence in America **nearing record highs**, a trend which comes in tandem with highly public campaigns against mosque construction as well as fear-mongering by politicians and media figures regarding alleged plots by Muslim-Americans to override the constitution and **impose Islamic law on the country**.

The US election cycle also saw Muslims used as convenient targets for politicians seeking office, with one example being incumbent Illinois House of Representatives Republican Joe Walsh who told a cheering crowd at a campaign rally that "**Muslims are here trying to kill Americans everyday**", before making a baseless and highly incendiary claim that radical Islam had "infiltrated" the Chicago suburbs and that Muslims there were planning an attack that would "make 9/11 look like child's play".

While working the crowd into hysterics was a convenient campaign strategy for Walsh, just days later the Muslim community experienced the consequences of his rhetoric. A man **opened fire on an Illinois mosque** while it was packed with hundreds of congregants for Ramadan. The next day, another mosque **was hit with an acid bomb** thrown at a window while worshippers had gathered for night services.

Despite these attacks against Illinois Muslims in the wake of his statements, Walsh steadfastly refused to apologise for his rhetoric demonising the Muslim-Americans and instead **doubled-down** on his blanket accusations against them, a reflection of the mainstream acceptability of anti-Muslim rhetoric by political figures in the US today.

Indeed the use of Muslims as a punching bag by opportunistic politicians seeking a minority group to scapegoat has become a **regular feature** of American political life which shows no signs of abating, despite the "trickle-down" effect by which this bigotry is now manifesting itself in real violence against innocent Muslim-Americans on a regular basis.

Behind this hatemongering lies a deep cynicism, as leading anti-Muslim politicians such as Newt Gingrich who have warned of "stealth jihad" and other nefarious plots by Muslims in America were within recent years helping facilitate **Sharia-compliant finance programmes** in the country and who maintained notably cordial relations with prominent Muslim leaders.

Political hatemongering

With Muslim-bashing becoming politically fashionable in recent years, politicians such as Gingrich have markedly changed their tune and it has been to the detriment of Muslim-Americans, as well as to the general level of social cohesion and tolerance in the country.

In addition to political hatemongering, the past several years have seen a highly organised and **well-funded group** of anti-Muslim activists who have been sponsoring campaigns targeting Muslims across the country.

Leading figures in this movement such as Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer have led a crusade to vilify Muslims throughout the country and to exclude them from public life through campaigns of smears and hate-mongering which have cast Muslim-Americans as an insidious fifth column within the country.

Their views have gotten considerable popular attention, and thanks to a documented network of funders and media associates they have managed to bring their message to people across the United States.

In the past few months, a major controversy erupted when Geller's anti-Muslim organisation sponsored the placement of **Islamophobic advertisements** at major subway stations in New York as well as in other cities across the country.

Some advertisements depicted **pictures of the 9/11 attacks** with verses from the Quran superimposed, while others called Muslims "**savages**" and implored people to "fight Jihad". While the campaign has been challenged by many liberal commentators, including one infamous incident in which Egyptian-American activist Mona Eltahawy **was arrested** for attempting to cover a sign with pink spray paint, they continue to run across the country and to spread a message of indiscriminate, vitriolic hatred towards Muslim-Americans in a manner unlikely to be tolerated were it to pertain to any other minority group.

While correlation does not necessarily imply causation, the question must be asked - what effect do advertisements such as these have on the psyches' of people such as Erika Menendez? Was Sunando Sen, a law-abiding, hardworking immigrant who had given his life to achieving the American dream and who was pushed to his death by a woman who "hated Muslims" a direct victim of this campaign of bigotry? That he lost his life on the same subway system which for months has played host to hateful, incendiary advertisements such as Geller's is a tragic irony but is in many ways the natural result of a national culture of anti-Muslim bigotry that has become mainstream in both politics and popular culture.

The sad, inescapable truth is that Sen will likely not be the last victim of the accelerating phenomena of violence against Muslims in the United States - the only question today is how far into the darkness America must travel before it decides to take a stand against it.