

Widespread anger over killing of three Muslim students in North Carolina

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The killing of three Muslim-American college students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina has sparked an outpouring of anger and sympathy across the US and around the world, as police continue to investigate whether religious or ethnic hatred was a motive in the shootings. A crowd of more than 5,000 people gathered in Raleigh, North Carolina on Thursday for the funerals of the three youths.

On Tuesday evening, Deah Shaddy Barakat, 23, his wife Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, 21, and her sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha, 19, were found dead in the apartment of Deah and Yusor, who were married less than two months ago. Barakat was a second-year student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill) School of Dentistry, and his wife had recently been accepted to study there next year. Her sister, a freshman studying architecture at nearby North Carolina State University in Raleigh, had been visiting the couple. Barakat is of Syrian descent, while the two women are of Palestinian descent, and all three had lived in North Carolina their entire lives.

Officers were notified of gunshots at 5:11pm, at an apartment complex home to mostly students and young professionals in Chapel Hill. The three victims were found dead at the scene, with local WRAL News reporting that all three had been shot in the head. Police say that Craig Stephen Hicks, 46, initially fled and then turned himself in late Tuesday night. He has been arrested and charged on three counts of first-degree murder. The FBI has been brought in to help police investigate the killings.

After local police initially attributed the killings to an ongoing dispute between Hicks and the couple over a parking space at the condominium, the victims' families appeared publicly to demand a hate crime investigation.

The women's father, Dr. Mohammad Abu-Salha, is convinced that Hicks killed the three due to his hatred for their religion and culture. Abu-Salha told CNN, "It was execution style, a bullet in every head. This was not a dispute over a parking space; this was a hate crime. This man had picked on my daughter and her husband a couple of times before, and he talked with them with his gun in his belt. And they were uncomfortable with him, but they did not know he would go this far."

The victims' friends and family allege that Hicks had repeatedly gone to the couple's apartment toting either a pistol or rifle, complaining about their guests parking in the condominium's parking lot, and excess noise. Abu-Salha says that when Barakat lived in the condo by himself, Hicks would not bother him, but when his daughter, who wears a hijab, moved in with her husband, Hicks began to harass the couple. Abu-Salha told CNN that his daughter told him, "Daddy, I think he hates us for who we are and how we look."

Neighbors have described Hicks as frequently angry, yelling at neighbors over parking spaces and minor noise violations. Samantha Maness, 25, who lives near the complex where the shooting took place, told the *Los Angeles Times* that Hicks "was very disgruntled, very aggressive. He would scream at people. He made everyone feel uncomfortable and unsafe."

Hicks' ex-wife has told reporters that he was obsessed with the misanthropic Joel Schumacher film *Falling Down*, and that he showed "no compassion at all" for other people. There are also unconfirmed reports that his alleged Facebook profile is filled with vitriolic denunciations of all religions, and that in the "About" section he describes himself as an "anti-theist." Hicks is also a vocal advocate of gun rights. His Facebook profile also apparently states that he was

studying at a local community college to begin working as a paralegal.

Whether or not Hicks is found guilty of the three killings, and whether he was driven by anti-Muslim bigotry, have yet to be determined. If this does turn out to be the case, he would of course be responsible for his own actions. But a much greater responsibility would have to be attributed to the actions of American imperialism and its subservient media apparatus that have played the central role in whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment as part of the “war on terror.”

FBI statistics indicate that in recent years anti-Muslim crimes have constituted roughly 13-14 percent of hate crimes committed with a religious bias, or nearly 100 anti-Muslim hate crimes each year between 2011-2013. In 2001, there were nearly 500 reported anti-Muslim hate crimes, whereas before 9/11 there was an average of 20-30 anti-Muslim hate crimes reported annually.

The war against ISIS and the overall escalation of American intervention in the Middle East serve as the backdrop for a recent upsurge of anti-Muslim crimes in the US, most notably last December’s hit-and-run killing of a 15-year-old boy in Kansas City.

News of Tuesday’s killings went viral on social media, with the hashtag #ChapelHillShooting being posted over 900,000 times on Twitter on Wednesday.

Many posts have emphasized that without the outpouring on social media, the killings would likely have been dropped altogether by the mainstream media, as the victims were Muslim. A typical posting reads “Muslims only newsworthy when behind a gun. Not in front [of] it.”

On Wednesday evening, at least 2,500 people attended a prayer vigil at UNC-Chapel Hill, to honor the victims. Concurrent vigils were held at dozens of campuses and cities across the US. Throughout Europe, many have also expressed their solidarity, as anti-Muslim sentiment has flared up in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in early January. Around the world, people have shared condolences with the victims’ families.

Barakat and Mohammad were well known in their communities, as they regularly volunteered to help the homeless and also raised money to help Syrian refugees in Turkey. Last summer, Barakat and Yusor Mohammad went on a volunteer mission to help at a

dentistry clinic for Syrian refugees in Turkey. They were scheduled to travel with other dentists this summer to Reyhanli, Turkey, to treat Syrian refugee children with urgent dental needs, distribute dental care supplies, and work with Turkish dental clinics.

Mariem Masmoudi, a friend of the Barakats, told CNN that the couple shared “so much love and so much joy and happiness.” She said the Barakats “were really an adorable young couple. I don’t know how to say it ... they really radiated this kind of light. They radiated humility, kindness, love. You couldn’t help but be inspired by them.”



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