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Gunning for a multicultural US



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By Sean Foley

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SILVER LINING: The Newtown school tragedy also showed up a more tolerant America, writes Sean Foley

IN 2010 and 2011, I was a Fulbright scholar at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation in Kuala Lumpur and often saw movies on weekends with a circle of friends, many of whom were physicians or paramedics. They often shared their keen insights into Malaysian history and its rapidly changing and diverse society. For a scholar who had been raised in California, trained in Middle East studies, and had lived in the Arab World and Turkey, these conversations were an invaluable tool for me to come to terms with the forces shaping Malaysia and my own nation, the United States.

Among these many conversations, I will never forget the shocked reaction of my friends to an American doctor who had given a speech at a Malaysian academic conference about the many gunshot victims his hospital in Dallas, Texas treated annually. From the vantage point of the average American, the doctor's words would not have been shocking. While gun violence has declined significantly in America and in most large metropolitan areas in recent years, it remains a problem in a number of poor areas of American cities. Last year, President Barack Obama's adopted hometown and America's third largest city, Chicago, Illinois, witnessed at least 500 homicides.

The Malaysians noted that guns were not widely accessible in their country, including in gun clubs, where pistols or rifles were often the most powerful weapons available. One doctor noted that he could only remember treating a single gunshot victim during his decade as an emergency room physician in Kuala Lumpur, a city whose population is comparable in size with Dallas.

Since the fatal attack at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut on Dec 14, last year, I have frequently thought about the reaction of my physician friends to the experiences of their Dallas colleague. That happened again this week when I changed planes in

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McCann Airport in Las Vegas, Nevada while returning home to Tennessee from a trip to visit family in California. There I saw a large sign for the Gun Store off Las Vegas' fabled street of Casinos and Hotels known as the "Strip". The sign features a young blond woman wearing combat fatigues and holding a machine gun, pictures of many machine guns, and an invitation for travelers to visit the store and "shoot a real machine gun". The store's website displays the many types of guns and ammunition it sells along with classes it offers in self-defence for women and in gun safety for children as young as 5 years old.

Significantly, Nevada is a not a typical Republican and conservative "Red" state that many associate with America's gun rights lobby or gun enthusiasts. Nevada is home to senior politicians in America's liberal (Democratic) party that has traditionally supported gun control. Senate majority leader Harry Reid is from Searchlight, an hour's drive from Las Vegas. Nevada voted for Obama by comfortable margins in 2008 and last year. The state has a diverse population and its tourism industry has global appeal. The Gun Store's website reflects the store owners' and the state's desire to market to a worldwide audience. There are pictures of people of many ethnicities, and one can access the website in Arabic, Bahasa Melayu, English, Farsi, Mandarin, Urdu, and dozens of other languages.

Ironically, the Gun Store's appeal to individuals from Malaysia and other nations with large Muslim populations points to what may be one of the most positive and unexpected lessons about contemporary America to emerge from the violence that occurred in Newton: the growing acceptance of Islam in America -- despite Washington's strained relations with the Muslim world since 2001 and the Islamophobia in America.

While it is generally known that there are large Muslim communities in Chicago, Dallas, Las Vegas, and other cities, few people know about the many Muslims living in communities like Newtown.

Although its population is just 27,829, Newtown has a mosque, an Islamic school, and Islamic centre: the Al-Hedaya Islamic Center. That centre is part of the town's interfaith council and enjoys excellent relations with people of all faiths. According to the centre's director, Eman Beshtawii, there are thirty to fifty Muslim households in Newtown and a quarter of those are converts. There are also Muslims from China, India, Indonesia, the Middle East, and the Philippines.

When Newtown held its interfaith vigil on the Sunday following the shootings, Obama spoke, along with the leaders of Newtown's Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other faiths. With the president in the audience at Newtown and millions of others watching on national television, Muadh Bhavnagarwala, an 11-year-old boy of Indian and Palestinian parents from Newtown, beautifully read a 2-minute Muslim prayer in Arabic. Jason Graves, an American convert to Islam and a Newtown native, followed Bhayangarwal on stage. He read a statement that quoted the Quran, called on a special place in paradise for those who had been lost and for people of all faiths and backgrounds to pray for comfort from God. He concluded by quoting the Quran: "Verily, with every difficulty there is ease." Both Bhayangarwal and Graves wore Western suits and the cap associated with observant Muslim men, the taqiyah.

In his speech at the Newtown vigil, Obama talked about the need to work collectively to protect America's children from violence and to build a nation worthy of the memory of the lives that had been lost. While many commentators focused on how the president's words would impact gun control legislation in Congress, the president's words could have also invoked the remarkable image of Muadh Bhavnagarwala at the Newtown

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prayer vigil. On national television, a young Muslim American wore Islamic headgear and recited a prayer in Arabic in front of his country's leaders, the US and Connecticut flags, and a podium bearing the seal of the most powerful individual in the world: the president of the United States of America.

If such an image can be normal and not raise controversy, perhaps the fiscal cliff and the nation's other seemingly intractable issues can also be resolved?

The writer is an associate professor at Middle Tennessee State University in the United States and was a Fulbright research scholar in Kuala Lumpur

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