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Lessons of Bondi Beach should not be ignored

I was deeply saddened to learn of the massacre of 15 Jews at Bondi Beach, Australia. On the first night of Hannukah, more than 1,000 people had gathered to celebrate, some dancing and banging drums when two individuals opened fire on a crowded group. The incident devastated and shocked not only the Jewish community, but the world.

The outstanding moment was that a bystander, Ahmed al-Ahmed, a 43-year-old Syrian father to two girls, risked his life by tackling an alleged shooter and seizing the gun during the attack. While the funerals of the victims of the shooting had not even taken place when we were shocked to learn that three men were arrested in Toronto, one on ISIS-linked terrorism offences while the other two for alleged hate-motivated extremism targeting women and Jews.

According to the latest edition of the annual audit of antisemitism incident by B'nai Brith Canada, antisemitism in Canada has reached "perilous, record-setting heights." Antisemitism or Islamophobia has no place in Canada or any other country.

Hatred and stereotypical behaviour have become a common occurrence in Canada due to lack of contact



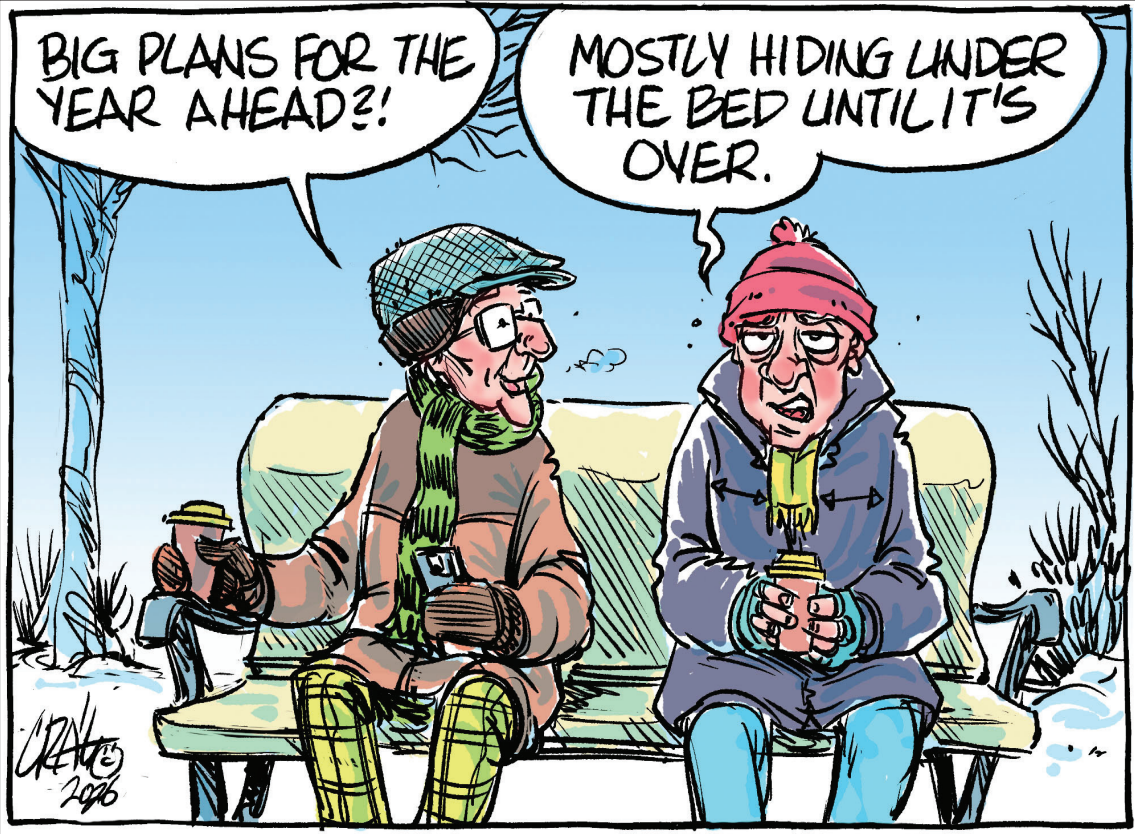
Mansoor Ladha

Mansoor's Musings

between people or races. The main drawback is that there is a lack of regular contact between different races, giving rise to stereotypical views. Everyone has a role to play in eradicating stereotypical thinking that exists in our society by establishing friendship and acquaintance with neighbours and colleagues at work.

Islamophobia in Canada is also a significant issue, marked by rising hate crimes, discrimination and stereotypes, leading to tragic events like the Quebec City Mosque shooting and London, Ontario attack, killing five members of a Muslim family. In several cities, Muslim women wearing hijab have been harassed in public.

The rise of Islamophobia is attributed to deep-rooted historical misconceptions, narratives associating Islam with extremism and negative por-



trayals of Muslims in Western media. Terrorism by so-called jihadists has fuelled the racial pyre. People fail to realize that terrorists are motivated by political ideology and philosophy, using religion to legitimize their actions. No religion would sanction what they have been doing in the name of religion. They have no legitimacy to speak on behalf of Muslims. Islam is a religion of peace, and it forbids violence, terrorism, bombing and murder. Those who murder innocent people as an act of revenge do not represent majority of Muslims.

As the late Aga Khan, spiri-

tual leader of Ismaili Muslims, lamented during the opening of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, that the Muslim world, with its history and culture, is still unknown to the West. "Even today, the study of the Muslim world in our high schools and universities is a specialist subject. Very little of the Muslim world features in the study of humanities in the West, where courses are essentially centred around Judeo-Christian civilizations.

"The two worlds, Muslim and non-Muslim, eastern and western, must as a matter of urgency make a real effort to get to know one another, for I fear that what we have is not a clash of civilizations, but a clash of ignorance on both sides. Insofar as civilizations manifest and express themselves through their art, museums have an essential role to play in teaching the two worlds to understand, respect and appreciate each other," he said.

Ignorance breeds suspicions and intolerance and that's why it's important to create a pluralist, cosmopolitan society, which not only accepts differences, but also actively allows everyone to learn from it. Hence, diversity is not a burden to be endured, but an opportunity to be welcomed.

Hatred and stereotypical behaviour have become a common occurrence in Canada due to lack of frequent contact between people or races. One of the best ways to eradicate this venom of hatred is to introduce programmes of intermingling of different

races. Religious leaders, especially Imams, mullahs, pundits and rabbis, should hold inter-faith functions in mosques, temples and synagogues to educate their congregations about different religions.

Local school boards and trustees should introduce curriculums on different religions and cultures in schools so that students go through the education system well versed on pluralism and diversity in Canadian society.

The media must exercise sensitivity when treating stories about minorities. Whenever there is a terrorist attack, the media is quick to identify it with Muslims and Islam. They must impose self-discipline, not succumb to fearmongering and avoid referring to incidents of terrorism as Islamic terrorism. Incidentally, the person who tackled the Bondi Beach shooter, and saved several Jewish lives, al-Ahmed, was a Muslim, but that was not mentioned in any of the stories.

One of my favourite Canadian TV show, Little Mosque on the Prairies, shot in a fictitious town called Mercy, depicts an example of religious brotherhood when a Christian church offers space to Muslims to hold their services, depicting religious co-operation, camaraderies and non-denominational brotherhood. Little Mosque on the Prairies was a fictional sitcom but it's message — two religions working for everyone's betterment in harmony — is universal and applicable to present day Canada.

The lessons of the massacre of Bondi Beach should not be forgotten. A deep soul-searching is required urgently to avoid similar incidents in future. Bondi Beach has sent us a clear message of action.

Mansoor Ladha is an award-winning Calgary-based journalist, travel writer and author of Canadian Experience, Aga Khan: Bridge between East & West, Memoirs of a Muhindi: Fleeing East Africa for the West, And A Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims.



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