News



Family members of Wadea Al Fayoume bring his casket into Mosque Foundation in Bridgeview, Ill., Monday, Oct. 16, 2023. An Illinois landlord accused of fatally stabbing the 6-year-old Muslim boy and seriously wounding his mother was charged with a hate crime after police and relatives said he singled out the victims because of their faith and as a response to the war between Israel and Hamas. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh)

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A fatal stabbing in Illinois, a gun pointed at protesters in Pennsylvania, vandalism at synagogues and harassment of staff at a Palestinian restaurant all are raising fears that the war between Israel and Hamas is sparking violence in the United States.

The tensions follow a familiar pattern of crimes against Jewish and Muslim communities rising when conflict erupts in the Middle East and Americans have been killed or taken hostage.

"We have a two pronged threat to American faith communities," said Brian Levin, founding director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino.

While it's too soon to say with certainty whether anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish crimes have increased during the war, hate crimes overall increased in the U.S. last year. In its annual report released Oct. 16, the FBI estimated that hate crimes increased by 7% to 11,634 cases in 2022 compared to the previous year. With 1,124 incidents, anti-Jewish attacks were the second most reported hate crime, after anti-Black cases. There were 158 reported incidents of anti-Muslim attacks, and 92 reports of anti-Arab cases, according to the report.

Civil rights organizations, however, believe that even before the Hamas attacks in Israel, crime data didn't reflect reality due to a lack of participation by local police departments and internalized fear among the Muslim population, said Robert McCaw, director of governmental affairs for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. In 2021, the Othering & Belonging Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, released a study in which 85% of those who were subjected to Islamophobia said they did not report it to authorities.

"The true number remains to be seen," McCaw said.

In one of the most troubling recent incidents, a landlord in Plainfield, Illinois, is accused of attacking a Palestinian American tenant and her son with a knife on Oct.

14, purportedly because of their Muslim faith, stabbing the 6-year-old boy to death and injuring the mother. The sheriff, prosecutors and family all said the boy and his mother were targeted for being Muslim. More specifically, prosecutors said the landlord was "angry ... for what was going on in Jerusalem" and his wife told police her husband feared they would be attacked by people of Middle Eastern descent.

In Pennsylvania, a man was charged with felony ethnic intimidation after police said he pointed a gun and yelled slurs at attendees of a pro-Palestinian rally near the state Capitol on Oct. 13. In Boston, the word "Nazis" was spray-painted across the sign for the Palestinian Cultural Center for Peace.

"There's a lot of fear. There's a lot of anxiety and uncertainty in everything that's happening," said Abed Ayoub, national executive director for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. He said the group has received more than 100 reports including verbal harassment, threats, intimidation and physical attacks.

"It's very reminiscent of the early days of post-9/11, where people didn't want to go outside, they didn't want to send their kids to school," he said. "They're just worried about being in public and being approached."

In Dearborn, Michigan, which has the nation's highest Muslim population per capita, community and faith leaders met outside the city's police department on Oct. 16. The city has seen multiple threats of violence in recent days, including from a man accused of asking on social media if anyone in metro Detroit wanted to "go to Dearborn & hunt Palestinians."

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"We have to understand that these issues that are overseas are not just overseas, they are very much also issues here," said Imran Salha, the imam of the Islamic Center of Detroit.

Historically, anti-Jewish hate crimes have increased during violent Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, said Levin, a professor emeritus at California State.

In March 1994, there was a spike in anti-Jewish hate crimes from 79 incidents to 147 a month after an American Israeli extremist opened fire on Palestinian Muslims in a mosque, he said, citing FBI statistics. In October 2000, anti-Jewish hate crimes in the

U.S. surged from 81 to 204 compared to the month before after a series of violent protests in Arab villages in northern Israel. Levin observed a similar trend in May 2021, particularly in cities with significant Jewish populations such as New York and Los Angeles.

In California last week, flyers spreading anti-Jewish rhetoric were left in neighborhoods and on vehicles in the city of Orange. And in Fresno, police said a man suspected of breaking windows and leaving an anti-Jewish note at a bakery also is a "person of interest" in the vandalism of a local synagogue.

Julie Platt, chair of the Jewish Federations of North America, said synagogues and Jewish community centers around the country have been strengthening their security programs, but that she does not want to see members of her community duck for cover.

"I think the whole point of this is to terrorize us psychologically," she said. "As long as I hear of no credible threats, I believe we should live our Jewish lives."

Several Palestinian Americans interviewed Oct. 13 in a Brooklyn neighborhood with a large Arab population said the atmosphere has been tense in the last week.

Jumana Alkaram said she has not been personally threatened but that: "I know if I was to demonstrate my heritage or the Palestinian flag there would be some type of threat. Because the majority has the support of Israel and don't have the full legit story about what's happening in Gaza."

In New York City, a Palestinian restaurant, Ayat, was forced to disconnect its phone after receiving "nonstop" threatening voicemails, according to co-owner, Abdul Elenani. The storefront features a mural of a crying Palestinian and its menu includes calls to "end the occupation." On Oct. 13, a man entered the dining room shouting "terrorist" at the people behind the counter, Elenani said.

Still, the hostile reception was overshadowed by the support he has received from his neighbors, many of whom are Jewish and share his views about minimizing civilian deaths, he said.

"In New York, we all live together, we work together, we grow together," Elenani said. "And we all want this violence to stop."