

As I watch flowers pile up on Bondi, I imagine the cries of fear

● Message I received on site of Sydney massacre was clear: globalise the fight against antisemitism



Barry O'Halloran

As I flew over the familiar landmarks of the Sydney Opera House and the Harbour Bridge coming in to land last Monday, I had no idea that another of Sydney's iconic sites had become a jihadist killing zone.

On Sunday evening, while I was still in the air, the peace of a Jewish Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony was shattered on, of all places, Bondi Beach.

The essential message in the ritual is that spiritual light will overcome oppression and darkness. The ceremony was being celebrated that evening by a group of Australian Jews who had come to affirm their religious identity on Sydney's public space for fun and recreation.

They could not have foreseen that their lights of hope, along with many of their lives, would soon be extinguished by the dark and deadly forces of Islamic fundamentalism.

There have been regular calls by Western pro-Palestinian protesters to "globalise the intifada", and on a summer's evening last week, the intifada came to Australia. When the shooting finally stopped, the white sands of Sydney's iconic beach ran with the blood of innocent Australian Jews. They had thought themselves safe

to celebrate their beliefs in public and without risk. They were wrong. Before the sun had set again on Bondi beach, 15 people would be dead and over three dozen wounded, some seriously.

As is often the case, in the middle of all the carnage, there were acts of sublime courage and bravery. Among the bravest of the brave were those who defied the sound of the guns. Unarmed, they ran towards the gunmen in a bold effort to protect their fellow citizens from the deadly attack. Some of them paid for their courage with their lives.

North Bondi is a heavily Jewish area. Two local residents, the Gurmans, were out for a Sunday evening stroll. They quickly realised the danger at hand when they saw the older terrorist, Sajid Akram, emerge armed from behind an Islamic State banner that was draped across his Hyundai hatchback.

Boris Gurman, an elderly man, immediately tackled and disarmed the gunman. But Akram simply took another rifle from his car boot and shot the Russian-Jewish couple, Boris (69) and Sofia (61) Gurman, at close range. They were the first to die before the real killing spree began.

Reuven Morrison had driven from Melbourne that day for the Hanukkah celebration. Bondi had always been special for this 62-year-old grandfather. As a teenage refugee from Kyiv, then part of the Soviet empire, it was on Bondi beach that he met the 17-year-old who would become his wife.

As the first shots rang out on Sunday, the unarmed Mr Morrison charged at the terrorists throwing bricks and stones and shouting at them to stop. He too was shot dead.

His daughter explained later how one of her children "slept with a bottle



Tributes at Bondi Beach for victims of the massacre. Photo: Steve Markham

of soda water that night, worried that grandpa would want his favourite fizzy drink if he came back".

An 87-year-old grandfather, Alex Kleymann, had survived the Holocaust and had moved to Australia from Ukraine with his wife in his final years. As the bullets began to fly, he jumped in front of his wife, Larisa, to protect her with his body. She survived but he died instantly. A shocking incident of antisemitic terrorism succeeded in doing what the Nazi death camps had failed to accomplish.

In an incredible act of bravery, Ahmed Al-Ahmed, a devout Muslim, approached, tackled and then ripped the rifle from one of the terrorists. The video of his actions has been seen by many millions on social media. Although now in hospital recovering from severe gun-shot wounds, his swift action saved many lives.

He has become a "source of pride" for family and friends back in his native village near Idlib in war-torn Syria. The Sydney tobacco shop owner has become a celebrity across the Arab world, with people expressing both pride and relief that an Arab, and a Muslim, had shown the type of human bravery and compassion that transcends the ethnic, religious and political divide.

In Australia, a GoFundMe page has already reached \$2.5m (€1.4m) from over 45,000 donors.

Sadly, antisemitism is no stranger to Australia. Within hours of the Hamas invasion of southern Israel on October

7, 2023, a large crowd gathered outside the Sydney Opera House chanting "F**k the Jews" and "Gas the Jews".

Then, a few months before the largest terrorist attack in Australian history, tens of thousands of pro-Palestinian protesters marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, some waving jihadist flags.

In Australia, as everywhere else, these were sharp reminders of something that the author, politician and public intellectual Conor Cruise O'Brien had written decades previously: "Antisemitism is a light sleeper."

Australian Jewish anguish has quickly given way to anger over government complacency regarding the rising tide of antisemitism. As Sunday's mass shooting became the deadliest expression of that pathology, the response of prime minister Anthony Albanese, the former leader of the parliamentary Friends of Palestine group, suggested that gun laws needed tightening.

Many saw this as an attempt to downplay the fundamentally antisemitic nature of the atrocity. It also ignored the

fact that Australia already has some of the world's strictest gun laws. Former prime minister John Howard said the failure that had led to the Bondi massacre was not gun laws, but weakness on antisemitism.

On Thursday, Albanese accepted the criticism that his government had fallen short in tackling antisemitism. He took responsibility, admitting that more could have been done to combat antisemitism in advance of the Bondi Beach terrorist attack.

Last week Alan Shatter, the Jewish former minister, said: "Like the Australian government, the Irish Government's unbalanced toxic rhetoric and conduct relating to the Israel/Gaza war has contributed to escalating antisemitism in Ireland. Both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste are directly complicit."

He said the tragic Bondi Beach massacre "is another warning of what antisemitic hate speech leads to".

In the wake of the Bondi massacre, the Metropolitan Police in London has now started arresting people who make such antisemitic calls.

In Sydney last Thursday, the first of the victims' funerals took place.

The youngest of the Bondi innocents was 10-year-old Matilda, whose classmates gave her an indigenous nickname, "wuri wuri" — a "little ray of sunshine".

Her image of innocence was printed on stickers worn by every mourner at her funeral and is now spreading throughout

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the world as an antidote to the Islamist darkness that had engulfed Bondi.

In a largely secular age, the existence of such untrammelled evil is a concept that many may struggle to accept. Being physically close to a place where such unconscionable violence has taken place is deeply disturbing and makes that concept harder to reject.

As I walked around Bondi beach over the last couple of days and watched the mound of floral tributes grow and grow, I couldn't help but imagine the screams of terror and fear of those who had been murdered in cold blood a few days earlier.

As I thought about the horror of the tragedy, Hannah Arendt's famous phrase "the banality of evil" came to mind. But there was nothing about this act of jihadi terrorism that was in any way "banal". It was, in fact, profoundly evil, and true evil is never banal.

The political commentator Douglas Murray and others are correct to argue that Arendt's "banality of evil" phrase has become a lazy and overused quotation.

It has become a kind of refuge for those who do not want to face the sheer depravity of deliberate violence like that perpetrated by the father and son on Bondi Beach, who had been "inspired" by Islamic State. They had just returned from a month's terrorist training in the Philippines and made a video boasting of their evil intentions.

In the national reckoning that is now under way, Australian Jews are vocal in their demand that the unprecedented rise in antisemitism that led to this outrage must be confronted and no longer denied or minimised.

Countries across the West that are experiencing similar spikes in antisemitism need to do likewise. Otherwise, similar evil may befall them. After Bondi, complacency regarding the evil of antisemitism is no longer an option.

Australia has been traumatised by the Bondi massacre. Each day, I have seen a steady stream of people, Australians and foreigners, come to lay flowers, sign condolences, or just say a silent prayer for the victims at the site of the massacre. Some have difficulty coping as the emotion of the scene is just too much.

The New South Wales government has laid on a large team of mental health workers at the Bondi site to help people cope with the overpowering experience of coming to terms with such a tragedy.

I met one of that team, Conor Kelly, a UCD-trained mental health nurse from Ballinagare, Co Roscommon, who is proud to offer practical professional assistance in the inevitably long process of recovering from a national trauma.

If there was one message that I received from the many people I spoke to at Bondi beach over the past few days, it could be summed up as simply: globalise the fight against antisemitism.