

Our first Islamist terror attack



[Getty Images]

A century has passed but not much has changed

The first instance of murderous Islamic terrorism occurred in Australia more than 100 years ago. Nothing has changed. The primary cause still exists and has never been firmly addressed.

On 11 November 1914, there was a proclamation of a holy war on behalf of the pan-Islamic world against the Allies by Sheikh al-Islam, the spiritual advisor to the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed V. This occurred less than a month after the Ottoman Empire joined the Axis forces in World War I. News of this international fatwa travelled fast. Terrorism took place in Australia seven weeks later and months before the Allied invasion of Turkey on Anzac Day, 1915.

At 10 am on 1 January 1915, two Islamic terrorists attacked a picnic train on the outskirts of Broken Hill. As a result of the attack and later gun fights, four innocent people were killed, and seven were wounded, including a policeman with multiple wounds. The two terrorists were shot dead. There were no warnings or prior actions, no victims were Jewish, and the indiscriminate shooting of unarmed men, women and children on a day of celebration was planned.

The terrorists were Mulla Abdullah, 60, a former cameleer and halal butcher from the Muslim camel camp in North Broken Hill, who came from what is now Pakistan and the Afghan Gool Badsha Mahomed, 40, a former cameleer and ice cream vendor. Mulla Abdullah had numerous convictions by the local health inspector and may have had a grudge against the local council authorities.

In the late 19th Century, Afghan Muslim cameleers opened up and serviced inland Australia, carrying freight in outback desert areas. As non-drinkers, they were entrusted with precious liquids and, in the early 20th Century, camels started to be replaced by motor lorries. The former cameleers lived in what was called the camel camp on the northern outskirts of Broken Hill. They planted date palms, built their own mosque, and generally lived peacefully in the community, which was deeply Christian, with a Catholic cathedral and numerous Catholic, Anglican, Wesleyan, Methodist, Primitive Methodist, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, Baptist, and Lutheran churches, as well as a synagogue and Freemason lodges.

When supervising Muslim research students working on Broken Hill geological problems, I would borrow the keys to the mosque from the Broken Hill Historical Society, which was based in the deconsecrated synagogue, and deliver them to the mosque for Friday prayers, their holy day. As part of the students' education, I asked whether they would be allowed to take me to worship in a church in their country on Sundays.

Each religious denomination ran benevolent funds, charities, old people's homes, community activities and some hospitals. Such community activities probably also existed in the camel camp at that time. The combined lodges of the Manchester Unity Independent Order of Oddfellows held an annual picnic for the public on New Year's Day at Penrose Park, 26 kilometres west of Broken Hill. On picnic day 1915, some 1,200 passengers left Sulphide Street station in the city centre on a narrow-gauge Silverton Tramway Company ore train with two brake vans and 40 wagons containing temporary bench seating.

After two kilometres, more passengers were picked up from Railwaytown. After another 3.2 kilometres, two men with turbans opened fire with single-shot rifles at easy, exposed targets on the train. The terrorists were hidden in a water pipeline trench behind an earth bank. Gool Mahomed's white ice cream cart – flying the flag of the Ottoman Empire – and Mullah Abdullah's horse were next to the trench at the railway fence.

Once the train was out of range, the terrorists skirted Broken Hill on foot to the west and were planning to take shelter in a house. They shot the owner in the stomach, and he shut the door, which protected him from a second shot, continued northwards towards the camel camp and became holed up on a hillock called White Rocks. At that time, the Broken Hill regeneration area had not been established, there was no vegetation, and the terrorists took cover behind rocky outcrops. By then, about 30 police, local militia, rifle club members and armed citizens had been mobilised, and a two-hour gun battle took place. During the gun battle, James Craig, who was nearby in his backyard, chopping wood, was killed by a stray bullet. God knows why someone would be outside, in range, and chopping wood during a gun battle?

After some time, when no more shots were fired, the militia found Mulla Abdullah dead, and Gool Mahomed mortally wounded. Both left notes stating they were subjects of the Ottoman Sultan, and one included the words "Allahu Akbar." Sound familiar?

Several hundred gathered that evening in Argent Street, marched three blocks to the German Club and sang songs of retribution against Turks, Germans and Afghans. The fire alarm wires were cut, and the German Club was doused in spirits and burnt down. The police quickly went by motor car to the camel camp ahead of a lynch mob and protected the two imams and the mosque. Mulla Abdullah and Gool Mahomed were buried secretly by the police the same night in unknown graves. Afterwards, the military and police arrested all aliens. Later, six Austrians, four Germans and one Turk were sacked by the mines and run out of town. BHP had a ceremony for the three mine horses sent to the front, but not for the hundreds of mine workers who enlisted as a result of the heightened patriotism in Broken Hill following the terrorism. The picnic train attack site, plus a railway wagon, and the White Rocks gun battle site, with the restored ice cream cart, are now tourist attractions in Broken Hill.

The terrorism in Broken Hill in 1915 was cold-blooded, indiscriminately targeted men, women and children, and was planned by Muslims who hated Australians and our democratic system. It was not an act of war; it was terrorism by those with a higher loyalty to religious leaders and autocratic foreign countries. Then, as now, the root cause was Islamic terrorism with hatred fanned by religious leaders creating Islamic extremism resulting in the murder of Australian citizens. Logic, appeals to common decency, calls for adherence to the law of the land, hollow platitudes, weak leadership, denial, reviews, social media bans, restrictions on freedom of speech, blanket advertising and weapons restrictions solve nothing. Coming down like a ton of bricks on those who incessantly spread hatred in mosques, Muslim communities and families is the only solution.

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Sources: The Spectator Australia