

Man killed Muslim boy and wounded woman in hate crime motivated by Israeli-Hamas war, police say

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Online Desk: A 71-year-old Illinois man accused of fatally stabbing a 6-year-old boy and seriously wounding a 32-year-old woman was charged with a hate crime Sunday. Police allege he singled out the victims because of their Islamic faith and as a response to the war between Israel and Hamas.

In recent days, police in U.S. cities and federal authorities have been on high alert for violence driven by antisemitic or Islamophobic sentiments. FBI officials, along with Jewish and Muslim groups, have reported an increase of hateful and threatening rhetoric.

In the Chicago-area case, officers found the woman and boy late Saturday morning at a home in an unincorporated area of Plainfield Township, about 40 miles (65 kilometers) southwest of Chicago, the Will County Sheriff's Office said in a statement on social media.

The boy was pronounced dead at a hospital. The woman had multiple stab wounds and was expected to survive, according to the statement. An autopsy on the child showed he had been stabbed dozens of times.

"Detectives were able to determine that both victims in this brutal attack were targeted by the suspect due to them being Muslim and the on-going Middle Eastern conflict involving Hamas and the Israelis," the sheriff's statement said.

According to the Will County sheriff's office, the woman had called 911 to report that her landlord had attacked her with a knife, adding she then ran into a bathroom and continued to fight him off.

The man suspected in the attack was found Saturday outside the home and "sitting upright outside on the ground near the driveway of the residence" with a cut on his forehead, authorities said.

Joseph M. Czuba of Plainfield was charged with first-degree murder, attempted first-degree murder, two counts of hate crimes and aggravated battery with a deadly weapon, according to the sheriff's office. He was in custody Sunday and awaiting a court appearance.

Attempts to reach Czuba or a family member were unsuccessful Sunday. His home phone number was unlisted. Messages left for possible relatives in online records and on social media were not immediately returned. The sheriff's office and county public defender's office did not immediately return messages about Czuba's legal representation.

Authorities did not release the names of the two victims.

But the boy's paternal uncle, Yousef Hannon, spoke at a news conference Sunday hosted by the Chicago chapter Council on American-Islamic Relations. There the boy was identified as Wadea Al-Fayoome, a Palestinian-American boy who had recently turned 6. The organization identified the other victim as the boy's mother.

"We are not animals, we are humans. We want people to see us as humans, to feel us as humans, to deal with us as humans, because this is what we are," said Hannon, a Palestinian-American who emigrated to the U.S. in 1999 to work, including as a public school teacher.

The Muslim civil liberties organization called the crime “our worst nightmare,” and part of a disturbing spike in hate calls and emails since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. The group cited text messages exchanged among family members that showed the attacker had made disparaging remarks about Muslims.

“Palestinians basically, again, with their hearts broken over what’s happening to their people,” said Ahmed Rehab, the group’s executive director, “have to also worry about the immediate safety of life and limb living here in this most free of democracies in the world.”

In response to the increased threats, the Illinois State Police are communicating with federal law-enforcement and reaching out to Muslim communities and religious leaders to offer support, according to a Sunday press release from Illinois Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker.

“To take a six-year-old child’s life in the name of bigotry is nothing short of evil,” said Pritzker. “Wadea should be heading to school in the morning. Instead, his parents will wake up without their son. This wasn’t just a murder—it was a hate crime. And every single Illinoisan — including our Muslim, Jewish, and Palestinian neighbors — deserves to live free from the threat of such evil.”

FBI Director Chris Wray said on a call with reporters Sunday that the FBI is also moving quickly to mitigate the threats.

A senior FBI official who spoke on condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the Bureau said the majority of the threats that the FBI has responded to were not judged to be credible, adding that the FBI takes them all seriously nonetheless.

The official also said that agents have been encouraged to be “aggressive” and proactive in communicating over the last week with faith-based leaders. The official said the purpose is not to make anyone feel targeted but rather to ask clerics and others to report to law enforcement anything that seems suspicious.