

Kenya honours Muslim teacher who died saving Christians

Teacher killed protecting Christian bus passengers from al-Shabab posthumously awarded "Grand Warrior of Kenya".



Kenyan teacher Farah has been described as a powerful symbol of unity and strength [Jill Craig/VOA]

Teo Kermeliotis, *Al Jazeera*, 23 Jan 2016

Salah Farah, a Muslim teacher who died shielding Christians during a bus attack in Kenya, has been posthumously honoured for his act of courage.

Farah was shot after refusing to be separated from Christian passengers during an al-Shabab attack on a bus travelling from Mandera to Nairobi in December 2015.

He later succumbed to his wounds, leaving behind four young children aged between two and 10, and a pregnant wife.

On Thursday, Farah was **awarded the Order of the Grand Warrior of Kenya** by President Uhuru Kenyatta "in recognition of his remarkable act of valour".

The award is given by the president to acclaim "distinguished and outstanding services rendered to the nation in various capacities and responsibilities".

"He died defending people he did not know. This is because he believed in their right to freedom of worship and he knew that every single life - irrespective of faith - is sacred," Kenyatta said during the State of Nation address in parliament.

"He is a powerful symbol of our country's ambition to attain the full expression of secure and cohesive nationhood, and he is **a costly reminder that we all have a role to play in protecting our freedoms.**

"I want to tell his children that their father's sacrifice will never be forgotten - and will be long admired."



A social media campaign after Farah's death raised money for the teacher's family [Abdullahi Derow/Al Jazeera]

'Symbol of unity'

Abudallahi Derow, a 26-year-old activist who started a social media campaign in January to raise money for Farah's family, said the teacher's bravery deserved to be honoured.

"Salah died serving the country, defending his Christian brothers," Derow told Al Jazeera.

"He chose to die and save the lives of his countrymen. **He is a symbol of unity and strength** and his action is an inspiration to many."

Derow's #HeroSalah Twitter campaign raised nearly 600,000 Kenyan shillings (\$5,900), mainly through the M-Pesa money transfer service

"We have delivered the money to the family," Derow said. "We are intending to buy land and build the late hero's family a house."

Despite being pushed out of Somalia's major cities and towns, al-Shabab continues to launch deadly attacks across the country, as well as inside Kenya.

Muslims in Kenya offer a Christmas present to the world

Mandera is not a rare event - and parallel stories of human familyhood are all around us.

*Al Jazeera, 27 Dec 2015 by **Muhammad Fraser-Rahim** (programme officer for Africa programmes at the United States Institute of Peace) and **Beth Ellen Cole** (special adviser on violent extremism at the United States Institute of Peace).*



The past week is a reminder to all of us of the power of solidarity against extremism in an increasingly anguished and angry world, write Cole and Fraser-Rahim [Reuters]

After a year marred by violence that has led some people to suppose that confrontation is inevitable among humanity's religions, a busload of Muslims in northeast Kenya has given us all a gift beyond measure for Christmas and the New Year.

On December 21, when armed al-Shabab extremists halted a bus near the town of Mandera, they asked the Muslims on board to help separate out the Christian passengers for execution - a pattern of attack with which they have repeatedly traumatised Kenyans in recent years.

But the **Muslim passengers threw a human shield around their Christian compatriots and told the attackers that they would have to kill the entire busload, Muslims and Christians alike.** Muslim women took off their traditional headscarves and handed them to non-Muslims to wear for protection.

The gift of these Kenyans went far beyond offering protection for their Christian neighbours.

Kenyan society is predominately Christian, but communities of Muslim, Bahai, Buddhist and African traditional religion add an important cultural, economic and social fabric to its citizenry.

Organisations such as the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya - composed of a cross-section of faith-based communities - work vigorously to promote inclusion, and speak to the long-standing tradition in Kenyan society promoting tolerance and inclusion.

Thus, the past week is a reminder to all of us of **the power of solidarity against extremism in an increasingly anguished and angry world.**

The message of these Muslim bus passengers, with their courage at gunpoint, is that **extremist groups will ultimately fail to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims, in part because the vast majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims oppose any religious ideology that embraces violence.**

The continuous headlines of warfare in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere have

generated deep public frustration with international policies that often seem not to have dented the appeal of extremist groups such as ISIL, al-Shabab and Boko Haram.

The world's two most populous religious communities share values of tolerance and peace that can prevail over any religious or ethnic division.

Indeed, **the Muslim-Christian commitment to mutual respect is rooted in 7th-century East Africa, to which early Muslims fled as refugees** and were granted protection in the ancient Christian kingdom of Axum, in an event known as the "First Hijra".

This week's defiant act of peace at a rural roadside is no singular event in Kenya. **While communal divisions have flared, it is a nation also steeped in long traditions of tolerance and cooperation among its disparate ethnic and religious communities.**

In Nairobi, Garissa and other localities that have been traumatised by terrorist attacks in recent years, **local women now run an organisation, called Sisters Without Borders**, to prevent radicalisation of young people. They also have lobbied Kenyan legislators to provide better support for Kenyan police.

We too often fail to notice the acts of courageous compassion just like that at Mandera. **In February, more than 1,000 Muslims formed a human chain of protection around a synagogue in Norway to condemn an extremist's attack on Jews.**

Orthodox Jews in a London district recently formed street patrols in part to protect their Muslim neighbours from hate crimes.

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But social scientists, digging into real data far below the notice of those headlines, are learning about **what actually works in preventing extremism**. A global research network called RESOLVE, coordinated by the US Institute of Peace, is underscoring a simple point - that **any successful strategy must be tailored for, and rooted in, the community where it is being applied.**

This point - the criticality of the local context - was illustrated dramatically in the bus confrontation near Mandera. **The Muslim passengers acted almost instinctively because they were protecting people they knew as neighbours.**