

Imam Gamal Fouda: 'The second September 11 is the Christchurch attack'

Andrea Vance 05:00, Mar 30 2019

Masjid An-Nur imam Gamal Fouda leads thousands in prayers at Hagley Park, Christchurch.

As he stepped on to the stage at Hagley Park and looked out at a sea of people, Imam Gamal Fouda was overwhelmed with nerves.

"I didn't expect such a big crowd. I looked at them and thought: my goodness, am I going to be able to address those people, and tell them what I want?"

"It was the first time I talked to such a huge amount of people, it was really shocking."

A week earlier, Fouda had just begun the khutbat al-jum'a, a sermon delivered at Friday prayers that includes invocations of peace, when bullets began tearing through the Al-Noor mosque.



Iain McGregor

Fouda survived the horrifying attack on Christchurch's Al Noor Mosque.

He ducked behind the minbar (the pulpit in a mosque) and hid as a gunman slaughtered 43 people of his *jama'ah* [congregation].

The fear he felt on stage was nothing compared to the waves of terror he experienced during the terrorist's rampage.

He pauses to clear his throat. "I tried to be strong. I calmed myself, and I knew that the prime minister was there and all the people that came for our support.

"When I looked at those people I saw love, and that is what actually made me strong. So, thank you New Zealand people, you gave me strength and I was able to actually deliver the message."



MARK BAKER/AP

The imam led thousands in prayer at Hagley Park, one week after the attack that left 50 dead at two mosques.

With his mosque behind him, Fouda's voice rang clear and steady over the Christchurch park. His words moved people around the world and brought many of those listening to him in the park to tears.

"The terrorist tried to tear the nation apart with evil ideology," he said. "Instead we have shown that New Zealand is unbreakable. And that the world can see injustice an example of love and unity.

"We are brokenhearted but we are not broken. We are determined to not let anyone divide us.

"We are determined to love one another and to support each other. This evil ideology of white supremacy did not strike us first, yet it has struck us hardest. But the solidarity in New Zealand is extraordinary."



Gamal Fouda said he was "shocked" by the numbers who came together to remember the victims of the Christchurch shooting.

Fouda's [message](#) was not just one of love. He called for an end to hate speech and the politics of fear. "Islamophobia kills. Muslims have felt its pain for years around the world," he said.

He has experienced that pain first hand. In his late 20s, and just after the 9/11 terror attacks, Egyptian-born Fouda was assigned to Palmerston North to act as a religious adviser.

The Egyptian government programme allows Islamic leaders into the country to preach in New Zealand mosques. He was anxious when he finally arrived in 2003, the same year Algerian refugee Ahmed Zaoui was thrown in jail.

"I was frightened because of September 11 and the hatred towards Muslims. I thought: 'I am a religious minister and people, they have a hatred towards Muslims and I shouldn't walk in the streets. People might kill me, I will be their target'.

"I stayed in my accommodation for three months, I had a big fear. Somebody used to look after me and bring me food.

"After another three or four months, I used to go by the gate – not in this uniform," he points to his bisht, a flowing formal outer cloak.

"If I heard any cars pass by, the sound, I'd go quickly inside. It took me maybe six or seven months to go walking in the street."

The first Kiwi he encountered greeted him with: "hullo, bro."

"I did not understand the Kiwi accent, what is bro?" he laughs.



Iain McGregor

Fouda was born in Egypt but after 16 years in New Zealand says: "I am a Kiwi."

When he learned it was a shortened form of brother, Fouda's fears were eased and he began to explore. He grew to love the city and his two oldest children were born there.

He describes his first encounter with New Zealand's police, who brought him an handwritten note, scrawled in Arabic, found under a hotel room door.

"The police came to me at the Islamic centre and they said ...[this] worries us a lot, can you please translate for us?"

"I thought to myself: 'Muslims are the target, and a Muslim imam is going to translate to help? Oh, that's really interesting'.

"I translated the note: this person went to that person, and they couldn't find the person so he left his number and said please call me back. I knew this brother, he was new to New Zealand."

Fouda says Muslims experience suspicion every day.

"If we read history, we find different faiths, they were also targeted and there was hatred and racism, whether it was Christianity or Judaism. And now the target is Islam and Muslims.

"Since September 11, Muslims are the black sheep, they are targeted with hatred and racism. And I am saying the second September 11 is the Christchurch attack."

Throughout our interview, Fouda clutches a programme from the vigil bearing a New Zealand flag. He says Kiwis can be "a role model" for the rest of the world.

"This needs to be stopped and we need to start building bridges. We need to stop spreading hatred and hate speech against any human being. We need to understand and love each other, and send love to every human being."



Iain McGregor

Fouda clutching a programme from the Hagley Park memorial.

He says there is an unlikely symbol for this quest: the egg cracked on Australia senator Fraser Anning's head after he made repugnant anti-immigration comments in the wake of the attack.

"The egg that was thrown on that person is a blessed egg, it's a heavenly egg, it's an egg from paradise.

"That is going to be the slogan, the icon for the whole world. It is very simple, the egg is going to teach us."

A mark of Egyptian culture is a mischievous, spontaneous humour, even in the darkest of times. Fouda punctuates his sombre words with, a dry wit and an infectious smile.

He jokes about his "broken" English, but it's impeccable and he pronounces "eeg" with a Kiwi inflection.

Born into a poor family in a rural village outside El Mansoura, in the north of Egypt, he has a brother and sister. "It's a very simple family, trying to work hard to feed family members and support ourselves."

His grand-father, father and his brother are all builders, so his nickname is al bany – builder in Arabic. Fouda studied in Cairo at Al-Azhar, the oldest and most revered university in Sunni Islam.

He's worked as a kindergarten and primary school level teacher in Palmerston North and Dunedin, and a halal inspector.

For the last three years, he's been a "full-time" imam in Christchurch.

His last visit to Egypt was five years ago and he misses it "a lot", but says his place, for now, is here.

Fouda's father passed away in 2009. His mother, 68, is desperately worried about her son's safety.

"She is asking me to go back. I told her that New Zealand chose me to pass the message of peace to the world and to work to support those victims and families. I need to be with them at least for a while.

"So, I will ask her to come here to see New Zealand and the people and how much love they have to offer to, not only to the Muslims, but to the whole world."



Iain McGregor/Stuff

His mother wants him to return to Egypt, but Fouda says his place is in New Zealand, supporting victims.

Fouda has set up a [Give A Little fund](#) for the victims' families, to help with their financial needs, but says money is not all they require. "If you give them \$1 million, this is not going to be enough because, the wound is very big and very deep and is going to take a long time to heal."

His wife, whose name he asks us not to use, has become "the mother of all the Muslim community in Christchurch."

"She has got a big heart and is very busy giving support to the affected families ... she is pretending to be strong, I think. We are not important – first we need to give the support to those people, and we will be looked after."

His four daughters, aged 16, 15, 9 and almost 3, are coping, he says. "I have a feeling that the baby, she is the most affected one."

We meet at Boteco's cafe, which has become a hub for Fouda and his shattered community. As we talk on the sunny patio, the interview is cut short when police officers arrive to take a statement about the horrifying ordeal he survived through. In our half-hour conversation, he doesn't once mention the terrorist.