

## The hero, like the villain of the Christchurch attack, is an Australian

Nick O'Malley, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 March 2019

**Christchurch:** Abdul Aziz, the man who has been described as a hero after he attacked and chased off the terrorist at the Linwood Mosque, is an Australian citizen who lived in Sydney for 27 years after leaving Afghanistan as a refugee.

Aziz, a father of eight, lived in Sydney and worked as a builder before moving to New Zealand about two and a half years ago.

As Aziz spoke to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* outside the hospital in Christchurch he was embraced by two young men who kissed him and said: "You are our hero, you saved our lives."



*Afghan refugee from Australia, Abdul Aziz, 48, is hugged by a complete stranger saying, "You are a hero, you saved our lives." CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

And his was not the only story of heroism that emerged from the tragic events of Friday. Sixty-year-old Linda Armstrong's is another.

Her friend, survivor Uddin Mohammed, says that when the Australian alleged terrorist began shooting inside the Linwood Mosque, Armstrong rose and approached him, trying to reason with him, even as he fired.



*Friends of Missing Bangladeshi man Zakaria Bhuiyan hold photos outside a refuge center in Christchurch. CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

"She tried to calm him down, she was saying don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Mohammed said. The murderer shot her in the chest. Mohammed believes she died at once.

**'Anyone would do the same thing'**

Abdul Aziz was at Friday prayers at the Linwood mosque with four of his sons when he heard gunfire outside. As with some other witnesses he at first thought it was fireworks. Then he heard screaming and a man saying that people were being shot.

Aziz ran out of the mosque and grabbed the only weapon he could see at hand, a cordless handheld epos scanner on a desk by the door.



*Abdul Aziz tells his story. CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

"Anyone would have done the same thing. We are all human beings. We love each other, we try to protect each other."

Outside he saw two bodies and an armed man in military-style fatigues with a helmet, alleged to be another Australian Brenton Tarrant, 28. The gunman was by his car trying to retrieve another weapon.

"I didn't know if he was the good guy or the bad guy you know? And I said, 'Who are you?' and, I am sorry but I used some bad language and I swear to him.

"When he swear back at me I realise he is the bad guy and I threw the machine at him."

Aziz was determined to keep him out of the mosque. But the gunman ducked under the hurled machine.

"Then he managed to get another gun and start shooting at me. He probably did around four or five shots at me and I was ducking between the cars. I wanted him to be away from the mosque, so I called to him."

Aziz then found a shotgun earlier abandoned by the killer. He picked it up, pointed it at the killer and tried to fire.

"I pulled the trigger and I discovered it had no bullets."

The gunman did not see him. He was returning to the mosque, still shooting. Aziz chased him in.

For the first time, the gunman saw Aziz carrying a weapon.

"He dropped his gun and ran away. He might have run out of bullets. He ran back to his car and I managed to throw the gun on his window and smashed his windscreen," Aziz says.

"I chased him with the gun in my hands."

Windscreen smashed, the gunman drove off. Aziz ran back into the mosque where his sons were sheltering. Seven others lay dead.

"I saw a lot of injuries and deaths and I didn't know if all my sons were alright," Aziz says.

"I went but I couldn't see my boys because everyone had dived. My five-year-old was lying down and my 25-year-old was lying on top of him trying to cover him up. I didn't know if they were OK.

"My 11-year-old son was screaming and shouting, 'Daddy are you all right? Are you all right?'"

"It was very hard. Very, very hard."

Aziz heard shouting outside and fearing the gunman had returned he ran back outside to confront him again. This time he found police who prevented him from re-entering the mosque. It was another hour before he learned that all his boys were alive.

It is impossible to know how many lives Aziz saved. At the Al Noor Mosque 42 people were killed. Aziz says he enjoyed his life in Australia but that he has come to "love this place [New Zealand] more."

Asked if he had a message for those who hated Muslims he said, "The message is, we love them. They should not be afraid of us. We are all one family ... We have the same coloured blood."

### **'Fast and confusing'**

The attack had taken minutes. Other witnesses have told *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* that around 80 people were in the mosque at the time.



*A Maori elder leads a prayer in language at a makeshift shrine of flowers near the Al Noor Mosque. CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

Other witnesses recounted that the attack at the Linwood mosque was fast and confusing.

Uddin Mohammed recalls there being gunfire and shouting from outside the mosque. "He was shouting 'F...g come out here' and bad things like that," before the attacker found his way in.

After he entered the mosque he hunted his terrified victims back and forth between the men's and women's section, says Mohammed, who tried to slow him at one point by locking a door in the partition between the two sections.



*Farid Uddin Ahmad, survivor of the shooting at the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch. His wife Husna was killed helping people escape. CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

Farid Uddin Ahmed is a softly spoken Bangladeshi New Zealander who has lived here since the 1980s. Since 1998 he has been confined to a wheelchair, having been paralysed by a drunk driver.

On Friday he was at the mosque with his wife Husna. As the attack went on, his wife led a group of children and women out the front to a shelter in a neighbouring home's front garden. She then returned for him and was shot dead.

"She was my best friend. She was also an inspiration."

After Farid Uddin's long recovery they made a decision to be happy again, he says through tears.

"And we did it. We were very happy."

Terrorists want people to be afraid, he says, insisting this community will remain its harmony.

"I won't hate the killer. I love him. Somewhere along in his life maybe he was hurt. I have forgiven him and I am praying for him, that God will guide him."

Islamic scholars from around New Zealand as well as Fiji and Australia have gathered in Christchurch to help wash and prepare the dead for burial. After midday on Sunday a

committee of community members met at Hagley College to discuss funeral arrangements with the bereaved.

### **Preparing for the dead**

Outside a group of friends of Zakaria Bhuiyan, who remains missing, gathered with photos of him to ask for the media help looking for him.

One later said he believed that he might be one of the four victims that remain unidentified, but facial injuries were making confirmation difficult.

Meanwhile, as the funeral meeting began at Hagley College, workers with earth moving equipment continued the task of preparing burial grounds at the nearby memorial park cemetery. It is expected that most of the victims will be buried at this site, though some families plan to expatriate bodies to their home countries.

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*Multiple graves being dug at the Memorial Park Cemetery. CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

Others continued sharing stories of horror and survival.

Engy Bedir was dropping off her daughter and husband at Al Noor mosque on Friday but when she arrived men ran towards screaming to run because "they were killing all the Muslims".

Moments later the gunman appeared on the steps. Because of his camouflage gear and helmet the family thought he was a police officer. They saw him shoot at men on the street and, along with others present, began to think that police were deliberately killing Muslims.

Up the street her husband jumped out of the car to return to the mosque to help. He told her to go home to their other children and hide. Seconds later more police arrived and Bedir slunk down in her seat to hide from them.



*Engy Bedir recounts how afraid she was during the shooting as she believed the shooter was a policeman. CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

It was long minutes before she was reassured by other survivors that they were not being attacked by police.

From what she witnessed, Bedir believes that at least two officers were on the scene when the gunman returned to his car to retrieve a second weapon and then re-enter the mosque to resume his killing. She is angry at what she believes was a slow response.

Amjad Ali, the assistance principal of al-Madinah school in Auckland, who is in Christchurch to assist the community, said he had spoken to several survivors who were concerned about the length of time the response took.

But he said the community had been overwhelmed by the support of authorities and the general community since the attack.

He said it was positive and important that the government and media had so quickly described the attack as an act of terrorism.

### **'He does not represent Australia'**

Abdi Ali, a 30-year-old student worked overnight on Thursday and slept through his alarm, running late to Friday prayers for the first time. His flatmate was killed.

But he agrees that the support shown to Christchurch's Muslim community had moved many survivors.



*New Zealand police carry flowers left by well wishers to the Al Noor Mosque. CREDIT: JASON SOUTH*

"There are Christians in there, there are," he says, pointing at the high school in which survivors and supporters have gathered. "It has brought us together.  
"The person who did this is a coward - killing women, killing children, even the lifeless. He came back and shot the lifeless."

"It does not change my views of Australia. He does not represent Australia."

Tarrant, 28, a white supremacist, has been charged with one count of murder in the slayings and a judge said on Saturday it was reasonable to assume more charges would follow.

Latef Alabi, the Linwood mosque's acting imam, said the death toll would have been far higher at the Linwood mosque if it wasn't for Aziz.