

Man arrested in Islamic center vandalism was targeting a bully, Fresno police say

By Marc Benjamin

Glass windows were shattered by a rock-wielding suspect in a vandalism incident at the Islamic Cultural Center in northeast Fresno. SPECIAL TO THE BEE/FRESNO POLICE DEPARTMENT

The man who vandalized the Islamic Cultural Center on Christmas Day also vandalized and burglarized a business about two miles away because he thought he was getting back at the family of a girl who he believed had disrespected and bullied him, police said Saturday.

Asif Mohammad Khan, 28, who is Muslim, was arrested the day of the burglaries and vandalism at the Fresno Digestive Center, 7405 N. Fresno St., and the Islamic Cultural Center near Nees and Maple avenues.

His older sister describes Khan as having schizophrenia. She said he is a big National Basketball Association fan and was surprised not to see him in the family home Thursday while NBA games were being broadcast.

He was arrested at the Fresno Digestive Center on Thursday afternoon as he tried to run from Fresno police officers. Detectives interviewed him Friday evening. They then went to his home in Clovis, where they recovered a Philadelphia Eagles jacket and baseball cap that matched the clothing worn by the man who was seen on the Islamic Cultural Center's video surveillance.

Khan told detectives that the crime was not meant as hateful to the Islamic Cultural Center, where he had at one time attended mosque programs. His crimes were targeted at a young woman who had bullied him and her family, Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer said.

"He did say this is not a hate crime, although he was angry and perhaps had some hatred toward individuals," the chief said. "It was not geared towards the Islamic community, it was not geared to the Islamic faith or any of those things and was simply to get back at a few people at the center who had belittled him and in his eyes bullied him."

Police theorize that Khan went to both locations because he knew nobody would be there Christmas Day.

He went to the Islamic Cultural Center about 10 a.m. Thursday and threw river rock into the glass doors to get inside before vandalizing the interior of the fellowship hall. Khan never went inside the prayer rooms or took money from locked donation boxes, police said.

A few minutes later he drove to the Fresno Digestive Center and used river rock to bust the glass doors. Once inside, he vandalized two 42-inch televisions, spread motor oil on couches and chairs and poured water on a copier, scanner and other electronic equipment, Dyer said.



Afterward, he returned home before going back to the Islamic Cultural Center a couple hours later to retrieve his jacket and cap. While there, he destroyed a podium, pulled down speakers and poured bleach on them and then did the same to an American flag.

He then returned to the Fresno Digestive Center, where police arrested him about 1:30 p.m., Dyer said.

Dyer said Khan told detectives the speakers were targeted because he didn't like the messages expressed by the mosque. He also damaged the American flag because he believed the flag was "not being portrayed in the proper way at the Islamic Cultural Center."

Video surveillance at the digestive center showed the same blue car parked outside the Islamic Cultural Center, and Khan was arrested wearing the same white shirt worn by the person seen on video from the Islamic Cultural Center, the chief said.

Dyer said that in the days before the vandalism, Khan had posted on social media that Osama bin Laden was the "most inspirational person in his life." He said Khan also made references to Adolf Hitler.

"I do not know what that reference was about," Dyer said. "Perhaps that addresses his mental state."

Khan's sister, Samia Khan, said her brother is a devout Muslim. He prays five times a day, but attends Friday prayers in a different mosque. She said her parents were "deeply sorry" for the damage.

"This was not a hate crime, but unfortunately a result of a mental condition in which our son was in a manic state," she said, speaking on behalf of her parents. "He was diagnosed in his early 20s and since then, we have worked with psychiatrists and therapists to ease his condition. That cannot fix the damage that has been done, but as part of this community, we hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive his mistake and understand the health issue that has brought us here today."

Dyer said it is unusual to disclose mental illnesses of a suspect, but he said the family's information helps tamp down worries that the person who entered the mosque committed a crime intending malice on a house of worship and religious beliefs.

At a news conference Friday he had called the incident a "brazen" hate crime, but he thinks now that it was mischaracterized.

"This is an isolated case and it's not a person who has hatred of any religion," Dyer said. "His dislike was hatred or anger for some people who bullied him and paying back the parents of someone who bullied him."

Dr. Mohammad Ashraf, a longtime Central Valley physician, said he has known the Khan family for many years. He said he recalls Asif Khan at a youth summer camp last year. He had gone into a bathroom and come out improperly clothed. Khan said he didn't know how to put his clothes back on, Ashraf said.

"He was off his medication," Ashraf said, adding that the Khan he knew was "normally a very sane person, very intelligent and very religious."

Reza Nekumanesh, manager of the Islamic Cultural Center, said it is increasingly clear that the vandalism was not meant to show hatred to the Muslim community.

"This is an isolated incident and we have nothing to fear," he said. "Thank you to all those who did come and show our center support and offer us help and support and love, and also to the Fresno Police Department. They worked with urgency and kept us involved every step of the way. They made us feel comfortable and let us know we are part of the process and that we wouldn't be excluded. We feel terrible for the family and we are sorry the family has to go through this. We are there for them if they need us."

Asif Khan is being charged with four counts of burglary, two counts of vandalism and two additional counts of vandalism to a place of worship. Previously, he had little interaction with law enforcement, the chief said.

The FBI will review the case to determine whether to charge Khan with a hate crime, Dyer said.

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