

## Report on the **second attack** to burn Toowoomba Mosque

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After the first arson attack on the Garden City Mosque on 24 January 2015, the second attempt to burn the Mosque was in the early morning of Friday, 17 April 2015. The neighbours called the emergency number at around 01:00am and firefighters brought the fire under control about 02:00pm. The police and other investigating teams along with the media representatives rushed immediately after.

Muslim worshippers came to the Mosque for predawn (Fajr) prayers at about 05:00am were caught by surprise. By that time the Mosque area was declared crime zone. Having no choice we went to the University of Southern Queensland Prayer Room to perform Fajr prayers. Dr Md Shahiduzzaman and myself went back to the Mosque to see the latest and know the extent of damage due to the fire.

We met an officer at the cul-de-sac (rear side) entrance of the Mosque. He did not allow us to go inside the property but told us that the damage is much more than the first arson attack in January. Accompanied by him we were able to see some smoke markings on the entrance (door) of the office of the Imam and burned wood and air condition machine on the northern side of the office from outside. The area was full of smoke smell and marks of destructions.

Then we went to the parking side of the Mosque and found Acting Superintendent Ben Marcus whom we met earlier in the Mosque after the first arson attack along with a number of other police officers. He told us that the damage is much more than the first attack, and when asked if we could see it, he agreed to take us to the Mosque. It was still dark in the morning, about 5:55am.

First we were told that the attacker smashed the glass door at the rear side of the building to enter inside the Mosque and then set fire, possibly in the Imam's office. It seems that the attacker knew that the hard drive of the CCTV was in the office. When we entered the Mosque building, we were horrified by the extent of damage caused by the fire. We could not stay inside longer but what we saw was unbelievable and shocking.

The fire burned Imam's office to the ground and the neighbouring room burning the partitioning structure and entered to the main prayer area. Everything in the front part of the Mosque including copies of the Qur'an, books, bookcases, sound system, mic and speakers aircondition machines, etc burned to the ground. There was a large hole on the north-western side of the building letting fire burn the structures between the ceiling and roof. The glasses of the windows and the large glass mounted on the two ends of the building were broken and cracked. There were only ashes in the office area and inside the building it was all dark due to flame and the smoke. The carpet in the front part of the prayer area melted and then split. The women prayer area at the rear end of the building is also damaged due to flame, heat and smoke. The damage was extensive and left a mark of how the attacker intended to cause maximum damage to the Mosque. If the neighbours did not call the emergency number the whole building will turn into ashes and the house in the neighbourhood could have been burned as well. We left the Mosque with heavy heart, but will be full of determination to rebuilding the house of Allah In Sha Allah.

The incidence was covered by local media as follows:

<http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/toowoomba-mosque-damaged-overnight-fire/2610025/>

<http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/this-is-not-toowoomba-islamic-community-forgives-a/2610553/>

From early in the morning many media reporters phoned and emailed me. I was able to talk to some of them while working with the community to stay calm and determine the next course of actions. We decided to perform Friday Jumma prayers in the Newington Park, on

the other side of West from the Mosque. The Mayor of Toowoomba Regional Council was kind enough to allow us to use park. Worshippers were asked to come with prayer mats and make ablution at home.

USQ Senior DVC, Prof Janet Verbyla was the first one to email me to express her sympathy followed by the Vice Chancellor, Prof Jan Thomas. During the day I received around 400 emails, mostly from non-Muslims expressing their dismay to the attack on the Mosque and disassociating the rest of the community from the attacker.

Minister of Multicultural Affairs Queensland, Hon Shannon Fentiman MP was the first government official to phone me just before 7am expressing her support for the Muslims community and offer of help in the difficult time. Later, I received a phone call from the office of the Police Minister, Hon Jo-Ann Miller who made a trip to Toowoomba to stand by the community and ensure that the criminal must be brought to justice. I met her at the Neil St Police Station along with a number of key members of the investigating team at 1:30pm, just after the Jumma prayers.

Just before the Jumma prayers one of my old colleague, Michael came to meet me in the Newington Park. He said sorry and started crying while expressing his emotional support for the community. After the Jumma prayers, I was briefly interviewed by a reporter of the daily Chronicle of Toowoomba. When I was about to step towards my car to go to the Police Station to meet the Police Minister, another non-Muslim approached me and said sorry to me for the arson attack on the Mosque. While he was sharing his words of support his eyes were full of tears, and he was very humble to be able to express his emotion.

A press conference was scheduled by the police at 11:00am at the Neil St Police Station on Friday where I was requested to speak. This was later changed to 02:00pm near the Mosque to allow enough time for the Police Minister to come to Toowoomba from Brisbane to speak in the press conference. Many of the journalists who called me were asked to be there in the press conference to hear the brief. The mayor of the city, Cr Paul Antonio and the State Member of Toowoomba South Dr John McVeigh MP also spoke in the press conference.

The Open Day of the Mosque and Second Toowoomba International Food Festival was scheduled on Sunday at the Mosque premises. We decided to go ahead with the event as lots of preparation for the event was completed or underway by then. It was in the best interest of the community to bring the residents of the city and nearby places to the function and to take it as an opportunity to show the community unity at this difficult time. Due to the fire damage and ongoing police investigations we had to find an alternative venue for the Sunday event. The Toowoomba Regional Council (TRC) offered the Newington Park for the event. University of Southern Queensland (USQ) offered Clive Bergoufer Recreation Centre as an alternative venue. Given the accessible facilities and unpredictable wet weather condition, we accepted the offer of the USQ. Within very short time we had to rearrange everything from the Mosque premises to USQ. With the generous support of USQ staff and dedication and hard work of the volunteers everything went well, and we had a very successful Open Day and Food Festival on Sunday, 19 April 2015 as per plan.

In the formal speech session of the Open Day of the Mosque and Food Festival all invited the speakers reaffirm their support for unity and stood by the members of the Muslim community and their Mosque. The speakers included

- Mr Derby McCarthy, Indigenous elder of Toowoomba
- Cr Paul Antonio, Mayor, Toowoomba Regional Council
- Prof Jan Thomas, Vice Chancellor, University of Southern Queensland
- Mr Jim Madden MP, representing Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk
- Dr John McVeigh MP, State Member of Toowoomba South
- Mr Wayne Briscoe, Executive Director of Multicultural Affairs Queensland
- Bishop Robert McGuckin, Catholic Church, Toowoomba
- Bishop Cameron Vinables, Anglican Church, Toowoomba
- Venerable Wu Ping, Pure Land Learning College

- A/Professor Mohammad Abdalla, Griffith University
- Mr Ismail Cajee, President of Islamic Council of Queensland
- Acting Superintendent Ben Marcus, Queensland Police
- Professor Shahjahan Khan, President of Islamic Society of Toowoomba

The local newspaper covered the food festival

<http://www.thechronicle.com.au/photos/international-food-festival/30795/#/0>

<http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/eat-drink-and-be-community/2611336/>

Lone protest by a resident on wheelchair

<http://www.thechronicle.com.au/news/lizs-lone-vigil-to-rebuild-mosque/2611354/>

### **Some photos of the burned Mosque building**



Burned to the ground



Inside the Imam's office room.



Burned roof damaging the roof



Burned ceiling and aircon machines



Speakers on the Open Day of Mosque



Audience and food stalls of the Food Festival on Sunday 19 April 2015.