

REALITY CHECK

Six months after October 7th: An analysis of terror attack responses by Canada's religious groups



Rahim Mohamed, Ph.D. | April 2024

Introduction

On October 7, 2023, terrorists affiliated with Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups in Gaza launched a series of coordinated attacks in southern Israel, killing 1,139 innocent civilians and taking some 250 more hostage.¹ At least eight Canadians were killed in the onslaught,² which was the bloodiest attack in Israel's history and the worst single-day massacre of Jews anywhere in the world since the Holocaust.³

October 7th also exposed deep fissures in Canadian civic relations. A number of civil society groups, including a well-known Palestinian youth organization, posted celebratory messages to social media mere hours after word of the bloodshed in southern Israel reached Canada.⁴ Demonstrations expressing support for the Hamas-orchestrated attacks played out on the streets of major Canadian cities in the days that followed.⁵ On October 28, Montreal Imam Adil Charkaoui recited a public prayer imploring Allah to exterminate all "Zionist aggressors."⁶

Canada's major faith communities have historically enjoyed cordial relations. One hallmark of this goodwill has been the norm, among Canadian faith-based groups, of publicly condemning major acts of religiously motivated violence, irrespective of the religious group such violence is perpetrated against. The split response to the events of October 7 is a worrying departure from this longstanding custom of interfaith civility.

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Background

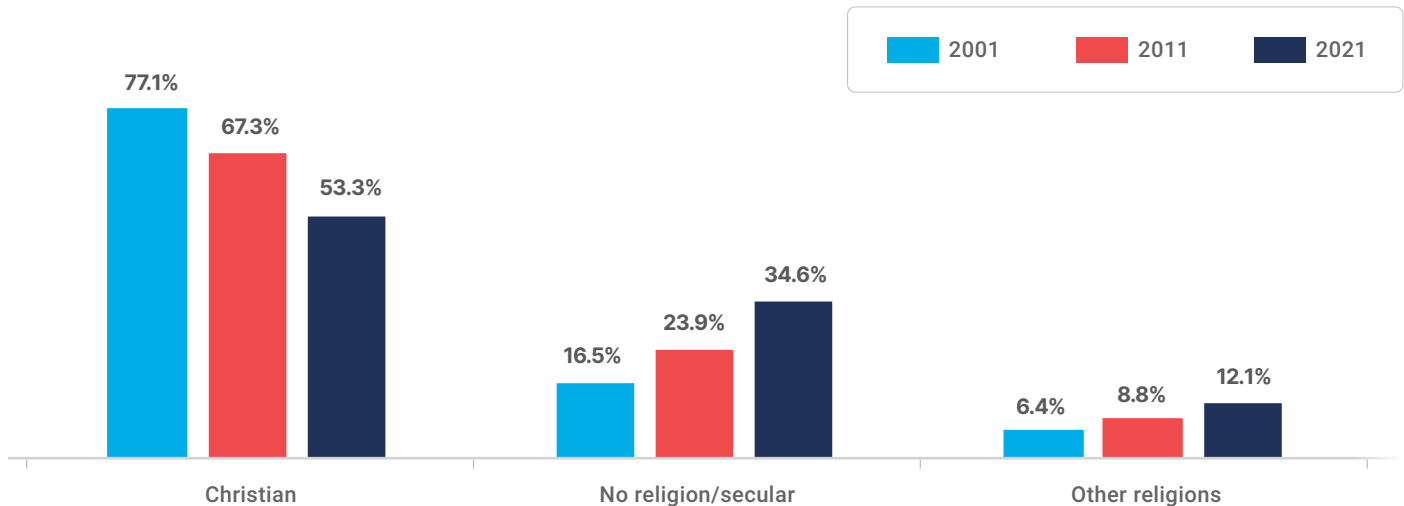
Canada is a religiously pluralistic country that is home to residents of virtually every major faith. Canadians enjoy strong religious freedoms under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, including the right to worship in peace. About two-thirds of Canadians report having a religious affiliation and more than half say that faith is at least somewhat important to their lives.⁷

As shown in figure 1, while over half of Canadians (53.3 percent) identify as Christian, this proportion has fallen significantly relative to other faiths (and “no faith”) in recent decades. Canada is now a much more religiously diverse society today than it was at the start of the 2000s when over three-quarters of Canadians claimed Christian religious affiliation.⁸

Figure 1

Religious adherents as a share of Canada’s population

2001, 2011, and 2021



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2001 and 2021,⁹ and National Household Survey, 2011.¹⁰

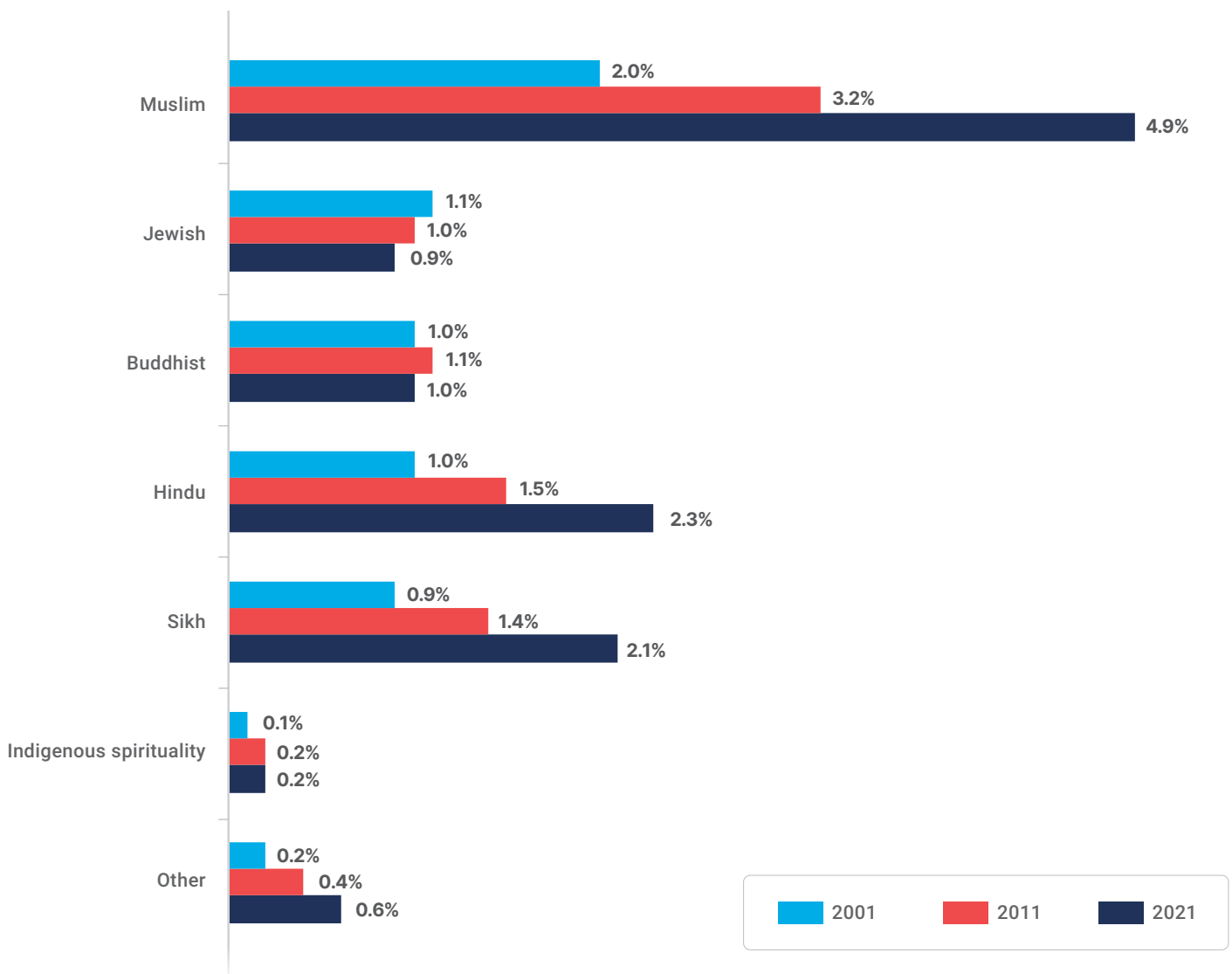
Meanwhile, the proportion of Canadians who identify as Muslim has more than doubled since the turn of the twenty-first century, now accounting for roughly five percent of the population. This makes Islam Canada’s second-largest faith (excluding “no religion”). Hinduism and Sikhism have both grown at a similarly rapid pace over the same time and now make up more than two percent of the population apiece, or about 4.5 percent combined.

The number of Jews in Canada, by contrast, has stayed virtually unchanged over the past two decades, resulting in a slight decline in the faith’s population share. Roughly one percent of Canadians currently claim Jewish affiliation, which is about the same as the proportion who identify as Buddhist (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Non-Christian religious adherents as a share of Canada’s population

2001, 2011, and 2021



Source: Census of Population, 2001 and 2021,¹¹ and National Household Survey, 2011.¹²

Comparing interfaith responses to religiously motivated attacks

As Canada grows more religiously diverse, it is essential that the country's various faith communities retain strong norms of tolerance and civility. One way that faith-based organizations can foster a climate of interfaith civility is by issuing public condemnations of major acts of religiously motivated violence, irrespective of the religious communities such attacks are perpetrated against. Such statements convey interfaith solidarity and send a clear message against religious hatred in all forms.

This section accordingly compares the public reactions of 10 major Jewish-Canadian organizations to two deadly attacks targeting Muslims—the Quebec City mosque shooting of 2017 and the London, Ontario truck attack of 2021—to the corresponding reactions of 10 major Muslim-Canadian organizations in response to the October 7, 2023 attacks in southern Israel.

The organizations were chosen based on their influence, as measured by membership or, if membership figures were unavailable, their number of Facebook followers. The sample is also broadly representative of different branches of each religion (i.e., Orthodox and Reform Judaism; Sunni and Shia Islam). Due to the relatively small number of national organizations, regional and local organizations were also included in the sample.

It should be noted, for the sake of clarity, that any condemnations of civilian casualties in the subsequent war in Gaza that were issued by any of these organizations fall outside of the scope of this analysis and, as such, were not tracked. Civilian deaths are a tragically unavoidable consequence of warfare.¹³

Each organization's website, if they have one, and social media accounts (Facebook, X/ Twitter, and Instagram) were reviewed for statements relating to each of the attacks. Some of these statements were also inferred from comments representatives of these organizations gave to the media.

Findings

The analysis, reported in Table 1, indicates a one-sided show of interfaith solidarity following major acts of religiously motivated violence. All but one of the Jewish and Jewish-led organizations in the sample publicly condemned the January 2017 Quebec City mosque shooting that left six worshippers dead. Most of these groups (six of 10) also issued condemnations in June 2021 after members of a Pakistani Muslim family in London, Ontario were intentionally struck by a vehicle while crossing the street.¹⁴

Table 1

Responses of Jewish and Muslim organizations to major acts of religious violence

Jewish Organizations	Quebec City shooting (2017)	London, Ont. attack (2021)	Muslim Organizations	October 7 attacks
B'nai Brith	✓	✓	Muslim Assoc. of Canada	✗
CIJA	✓	✓	Ntl. Council of Cdn. Muslims	✗
Indep. Jewish Voices	✓	✓	Cdn. Council of Muslim Women	✗
Friends of S. Wiesenthal	✓	✓	Canadian Muslim PAC	✗
R. Wallenberg Centre	✓	✗	Islamic Society of N.A.	✗
Atlantic Jewish Council	✓	✗	Muslim Students Association	✗
Chabad-Lubavitch	✗	✗	Ahmadiyya in Canada	✗
UJPO/Winchevsky Centre	✓	✓	The Ismaili Canada	✗
Montreal Holocaust Museum	✓	✗	Muslims Facing Tomorrow	✓
Jewish Fed of Canada	✓	✓	Global Imams Council	✓

✓ Condemn ✗ Did not condemn

By comparison, only two major Muslim groups that are active in Canada publicly condemned Hamas after the October 7th attacks. A third group, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, expressed its condolences for the Israelis who died in the attack but stopped short of condemning the terrorist organization for its actions.

A number of the Muslim groups instead issued messages of solidarity with Palestinians in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, with some at least implicitly attributing the bloodshed to Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian territories (see Figure 3).¹⁶

Figure 3

Canadian Muslim Public Affairs Council tweet

October 8, 2023



Conclusion

October 7th marked a concerning departure from the erstwhile norm among Canadian faith groups to make a public show of solidarity following deadly acts of religiously motivated violence. While the attacks took place on foreign soil, they claimed the lives of over half a dozen Canadian nationals and had a profound psychological and emotional impact on Jews across Canada. The failure of most major Muslim-Canadian organizations to issue condemnations of Hamas in the days that followed suggests a fraying of the bonds of interfaith solidarity that underpin religious plurality in Canada. For Canada to remain a relatively peaceful, religiously pluralistic country, Jewish and Muslim communities must condemn terrorist attacks on civilians in Canada and, if relevant to their organization, abroad.

About the author

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