

Manchester: Death threats for imam who took on fanatics – and earned bomber's ire

From the [Sunday Times](#) and the [Daily Mail](#)

To the families of the 22 people killed in the Manchester Arena bombing, Mohammed El-Saeiti is a hero. *I wouldn't put it that strongly, but he did do the right thing.*

The former imam broke ranks in his community when he spoke about the extremist elements he had witnessed over his decade working at Didsbury mosque, where the bomber, Salman Abedi, worshipped.

However, not everyone was happy when he spoke out at the Manchester public inquiry into Abedi's terrorist attack at a pop concert in 2017.

A week after he gave evidence, El-Saeiti was confronted in the street outside his home by three men who threatened him. One told him in no uncertain terms what the consequences would be if he continued to speak out. "You'll be dead," he told the terrified imam.

El-Saeiti noticed that one of the men, who appeared to be Libyan, was wearing a backpack and had his hand in his pocket. He believes the man's stance was deliberately calculated to invoke that of suicide bomber Abedi, also of Libyan descent,

Six police cars were called out to Mr El-Saeiti, but the three men had gone before they arrived.

He has now left Manchester and will be moving to a secret location with help from the police, after becoming increasingly worried about his safety.

Anti-terrorism police concluded that his life is in danger, following its own risk assessments.

'He has to leave Manchester, a city that he loves. He has to do it because it's not safe for him here,' a friend to Mr El-Saeiti told The Times.

The former iman had criticised extremist views that he experienced while at Didsbury mosque, which was attended by Abedi and his brother Hashem, 25.

The friend said that the cleric had 'Facebook threats and physical threats' targeted at him, after giving evidence at the Manchester Arena bombing inquiry. 'The three individuals had been watching his house in Manchester and following him,' the friend told The Times. He was also followed to the mosque by the same men... 'The mosque checked its CCTV cameras and the men were on there, standing on a street corner, waiting for him to come out.'

The friend, who did not wish to be named, said ill feeling towards Mr El-Saeiti at the mosque had begun before the attack, after the imam "gave a lecture warning against extremism and violence in Libya".

Counter Terrorism Policing North West are still running inquiries into the three suspects, it is understood. The social media threats are also being studied by the Crown Prosecution Service, in a file of evidence.

During the inquiry, Mr El-Saeiti recalled receiving online death threats following his speech at the mosque on the day ISIS claimed it was responsible for the murder of Manchester taxi driver Alan Henning in October 2014.

He discouraged violence and warned it was a "transgression [against] lives and wealth and honour ... this is the first and most important warning given to us by our Prophet ... before he passed away". He spoke against "ghastly crimes done by

fanatics”, referring to terrorist groups Isis and al-Qaeda, as well as Ansar al-Sharia, a group operating in Benghazi, Libya.

After that, when they saw him at the mosque, the bomber Abedi and members of his family had “looked at Mohammed [El-Saeiti] with hate”, the friend said. On one occasion, according to witnesses, Salman and his younger brother, Hashem, sat close to his pulpit, and Salman fixed him with an angry stare throughout his sermon. Abedi’s older brother, Ismail, “had an argument with him about his stand against extremism”, while Abedi’s father, Ramadan, wrote on Facebook that the “congregation should expel him from the mosque”... (and) also urged worshippers to ‘isolate’ Mr El-Saeiti to stop the mosque being shut down by the government.

After the Manchester bombing, El- Saeiti told the inquiry that extremist sermons had been delivered at Didsbury mosque by Mustafa Graf, another imam, who is of Libyan heritage.

He was dismissed from his post in 2020 having spent more than 10 years working there, after confirming he would be a witness in the inquiry.

Meanwhile, the stalking and harassment Mr El-Saeiti was experiencing became increasingly intense, ultimately forcing him to make the decision to move. “People like that are unpredictable,” the friend said. “He has to leave Manchester, a city that he loves. He has to do it because it’s not safe for him here.”

The Didsbury area, filled with cafés, independent shops and restaurants, is popular with students and young professionals including BBC staff.

In April 2016, after the rise of Isis, anti-terrorism police in Manchester tried to engage with a number of mosques in the south Manchester area in order to get imams to discourage young men from going abroad to fight in Syria. The response of Didsbury mosque to engagement was [“less positive” than other](#)

[mosques](#), according to Detective Chief Superintendent Dominic Scally, the head of Counter Terrorism Policing North West.