

**INTERVIEW** SAYS HE REFUSED TO KNEEL: 'I WAS NOT GOING TO DIE THAT WAY'

## Hostage: Attacker chose synagogue, thinking Jews powerful enough to free 'sister'

Jeff Cohen recounts emotional moment he phoned family for what he thought would be last time; urges Jewish communities to take active shooter course, which helped save their lives



Jacob

Congregation Beth Israel member Jeffrey Cohen speaks via Zoom with The Times of Israel on January 17, 2022. (Screen capture/Zoom)

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COLLEYVILLE, Texas — Malik Faisal Akram chose to hold synagogue worshipers hostage in Colleyville, Texas Saturday because he believed in antisemitic tropes and was convinced that the Jewish worshipers inside would

have the power to organize the release of a Pakistani prisoner jailed nearby, one of the four worshipers held at gunpoint told The Times of Israel on Monday.

“He did not come there to kill Jews ... He came here to release [Aafia Siddiqui], and he had bought into the extremely dangerous, antisemitic trope that Jews control everything, that we could call President [Joe] Biden and have him release her,” Jeffrey Cohen said in an interview over Zoom.

Siddiqui is serving an 86-year sentence for terror offenses at a military prison 15 miles from Colleyville. She is known to US authorities as “Lady al-Qaeda,” but Akram referred to her throughout the standoff as his “sister,” albeit not literally, Cohen said.

The 57-year-old resident of nearby Keller was among the last of the hostages to escape Saturday night after being held at gunpoint in Congregation Beth Israel, where he has been an active member for the past several years.

Cohen recalled the harrowing events of the day, nonchalantly referencing acts of heroism taken by himself and others in the CBI sanctuary that allowed the day to end with all four hostages alive and unharmed.

With the memories still raw, Cohen choked up several times throughout the 40-minute conversation, describing the phone calls he made to his wife and children that he thought would be his last, as well as the gratitude he had for having taken an active shooter course, which provided him with the “forethought” for how to conduct himself throughout the day and helped him stay alive.



SWAT team members deploy near Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue during a hostage situation in Colleyville, Texas, January 15, 2022. (Andy Jacobsohn/AFP)

“I went to school in Pittsburgh, and I used to regularly walk by Tree of Life,” he said, referencing the synagogue targeted in the deadliest antisemitic attack in US history less than four years ago. “Of course we had a very different ending here than we did there, thank God.”

Cohen attends Sabbath services just about every weekend, but he said he was particularly excited for this past Saturday because it was *Sabbath Shira* when Jews read the Torah portion on God splitting the Red Sea for the Israelites after they exited Egypt.

When Cohen arrived at the Reform synagogue, Akram was already inside. CBI Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker greeted Cohen and told him to say hello to their guest who had been outside in the below-freezing weather and was having a cup of tea.

“All the things they tell you to look for in somebody — eyes darting about, hands being jittery or hidden, facial or body expressions being troubled — he didn’t have that,” Cohen recalled. “He was smiling, he was comfortable, he was relaxed... So I really didn’t think much of it.”

The four CBI members inside began services shortly thereafter.

“After the *Amidah* [prayer]... and I sat down and... heard that unmistakable sound of a slide on an automatic weapon,” said Cohen.

Moments later, Akram pounced out of his chair and was yelling. Cohen doesn’t remember what the attacker said, but he took his phone out of his pocket, dialed 911 and turned it over so his hostage-taker couldn’t see what was on the screen.



US law enforcement vehicles sit in front of the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue on January 16, 2022 in Colleyville, Texas. (Brandon Bell/Getty Images/AFP)

The ordeal was also unfolding on the livestream that CBI has set up each week since the pandemic to allow members uncomfortable praying indoors to do so from home. While Cytron-Walker [credited](#) the livestream from ensuring that fewer members were in the synagogue when the standoff unfolded, to Cohen, the benefit of the feed was that it allowed those watching to quickly alert the authorities.

Akram would go on to order Cytron-Walker, Cohen and the two others, whose names have not yet been disclosed, to move to a corner of the sanctuary. While there, Cohen carefully aligned himself with an exit door.

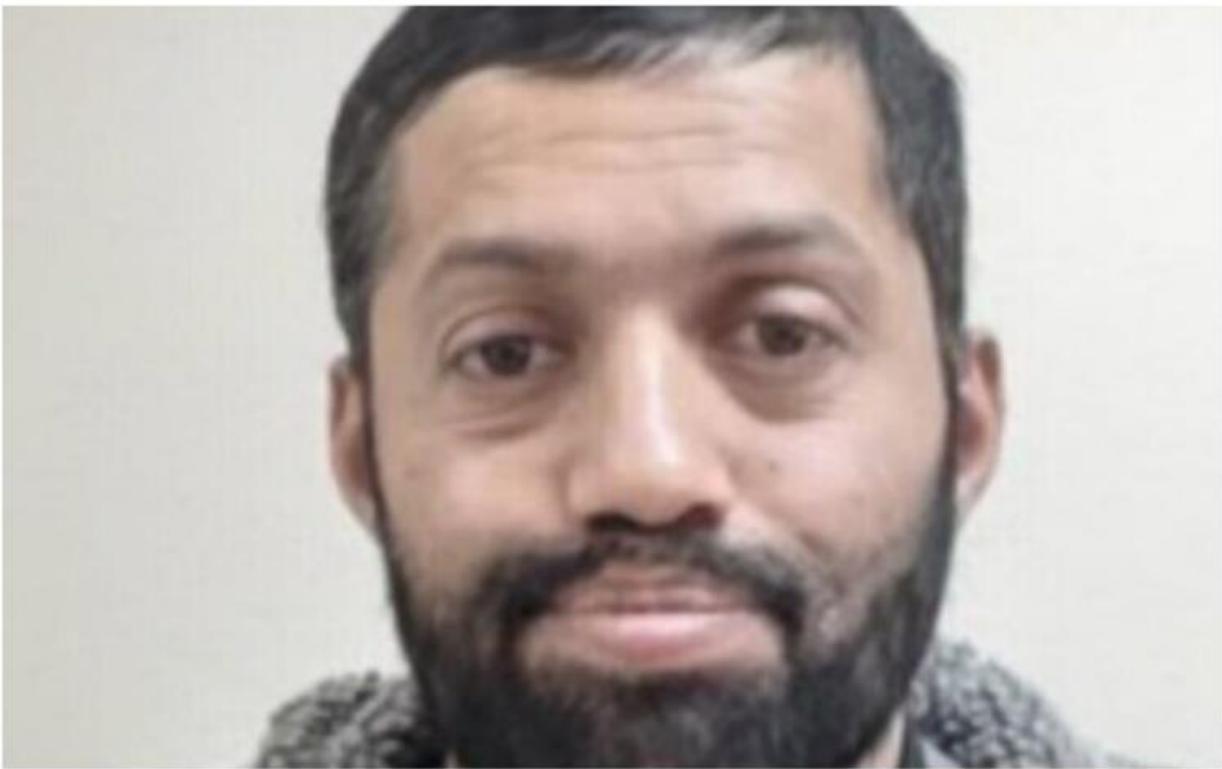
He then stopped sharing the story to make the following plea: “Make an opportunity to take an active shooter class because that’s what saved our lives. That gave me the forethought to position myself where I did.”

During the first half-hour of the ordeal, Cohen said he was convinced that the attacker intended to use his weapon.

Akram let the hostages call their families in what the worshipers believed would be the final conversations with their loved ones.

“I called my wife and children and left them each a very brief message where I basically said ‘I’m at the synagogue. We have a gunman here who says he’s got a bomb. This may not end well. I love you. Remember me,’” Cohen, a father of two, recalled, overcome by emotion.

After those first 30 minutes though, Akram calmed down and focused on trying to release his “sister” Siddiqui.



Congregation Beth Israel hostage-taker, identified as 44-year-old British national Malik Faisal Akram (courtesy)

“He had one objective. He repeatedly said that he didn’t want to hurt us... that he would let us go, that he was the only one who was going to die... and that if the police brought his sister there, he and she would go out on the front lawn and let the authorities kill him. He kept speaking about martyrdom. He was the only one who needed to die that day,” Cohen said. “He told us that he chose the closest synagogue to the facility where [Siddiqui was] being held.”

Referencing a statement issued by Akram’s brother on Sunday in which the latter insisted the gunman suffered from mental health issues, Cohen said he “believe[d] that to be true.”

Regardless, the hostage recalled the attacker railing against people of varying races, sexual orientations and religions — including fellow Muslims.

This continued for 11 hours inside the synagogue as Cohen and the other hostages sought to keep Akram calm.

It worked for almost the entire time, and at one point mid-way through the standoff, the gunman proposed releasing all four of the hostages to go and get something to eat on the condition that they return 30 minutes later.



People rally demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, who was convicted in February 2010 of two counts of attempted murder, and who was being detained in the US during International Women's Day in Karachi, Pakistan, March 8, 2011. (Fareed Khan/AP)

Realizing that they likely wouldn't return he resolved to free one of the worshipers.

At around 8:30 pm. though, Akram began losing his patience as he grew tired, frustrated and hungry. He began threatening to shoot them. "Three bullets — one in each of them," Cohen recalled the hostage-taker shouting.

Finally losing his cool, Akram ordered the hostages to get down on their knees.

"I was not going to die that way," Cohen said, adding that what he did next was the first time during the entire ordeal that he acted insubordinately and aggressively toward his armed hostage-taker.

He leaned forward, locked eyes with Akram and slowly mouthed the word, "no."

“He got a little scared and sat back down,” Cohen said.

**LockharTVMedia** @LockharTVMedia

Exclusive footage of the hostages being rescued after the end of a nearly 12-hour hostage situation at a synagogue in Colleyville.

#HostageSituation  
#BethIsraelSynagogue

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Shortly thereafter, Akram went to pour himself a cup of soda. At this point, Cohen heard Cytron-Walker yell ‘run!’ before hurling a chair at the gunman.

Cohen and the other hostage bolted through the emergency exit and their rabbi followed shortly after.

Moments later, the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team breached the building, engaging in a firefight with Akram and killing the 44-year-old British national.

Cohen admitted it was too soon to know how the hostage crisis would impact him long-term, but he had a couple of takeaways for the time being.

"Number one for me — the active shooter course is critical," he said for the second time during the interview.

"If I could do anything to help encourage anyone, any organization that is having meetings that need to do this, I would," Cohen continued, holding back tears. "Especially Jewish organizations because we are the target because of all of these horrible tropes."



Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who was held hostage inside Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas, January 15, 2022. (JTA)

"The second thing is reaching to others, so that it's harder for them to hate...We try to do that a lot in our community here," he said, noting the active role Cytron-Walker and CBI play in interfaith outreach in Colleyville.

“It’s no secret this area has had some problems with discrimination,” Cohen said of the Dallas suburb without specifying further. “But that’s not the majority of the people, and as more people become aware that others have been poisoned by these tropes, maybe we can help others to learn.”

“As far as getting back to the synagogue, I’m obviously very comfortable with Zoom, but the habit of being in the building is important to me, so if I can, I prefer to be one of those bodies in the seats,” he added.

Even next week? I asked.

“Even next week.”