

## **Acting on Terror: How We Are Helping the Islamic State**

By Jake Lahut

One of the Islamic State's chief goals with each terrorist attack is to provoke Islamophobic reactions to said attacks. These reactions are not limited to the bigotry of Donald Trump and Ted Cruz. Our collective pandemonium over the recent attacks in Brussels juxtaposed with our complete lack of care and empathy for other attacks by ISIS, particularly against Muslims in Iraq and Syria, is not only deplorable but also feeding into jihadist recruiters' bloody hands. Our fear and its manifestations are exactly what terrorism seeks to produce. When we mistakenly lash out against an entire religion of 1.5 billion people, we legitimize the caliphate of the Islamic State, which convinces young people to think that the West is trying to destroy Islam. In reality, while the Islamic State has been responsible for horrific actions in the West, it wreaks even more havoc in the Middle East—including against Muslims, even the Sunni Muslims it claims to protect.

Although I referred to the Islamic State by its more common acronym, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), whose last word is often replaced by Syria or the Levant (ISIL)—the latter being the acronym used by the Obama Administration—I will now refer to this group as Daesh (pronounced dah-esh). Why Daesh? For one, it is the Arabic acronym for the organization, ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fi 'l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām. More importantly, however, Daesh is the derogatory acronym used to refer to the Islamic State, and I will use it to explicitly delegitimize this terrorist organization that the United States is at least partially responsible for.

The United States' invasion of Iraq created the power vacuum necessary for the Islamic State to flourish. Furthermore, the Bush Administration's decision to disband the Iraqi army swelled Daesh's ranks, with as many as 25 of Daesh's 40 top operatives having once served in the Iraqi military.

Despite Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi being the caliph of Daesh, much of the ethos of the organization is indebted to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, one of the most vicious figures in the Iraq War, who was killed by the U.S. Air Force in 2006. Zarqawi founded al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which later became known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) when he pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2004. From internal communications obtained by the intelligence community, Zarqawi was perceived as being too focused on violence, even for al-Qaeda. Warning him to focus on strategic goals against the U.S.-led coalition instead of indiscriminately attacking almost anyone—including Sunni Muslims—Attyia al-Jaza'ri, who led insurgencies in Algeria throughout the '90s, was extremely blunt with Zarqawi, whom al-Qaeda Central viewed as a loose cannon undermining the organization's broader strategic goals against the West. AQI nevertheless remained radicalized, eventually turning into the Islamic State.

Zarqawi's barbarism is now the model for Daesh, which burst onto the world stage with its beheadings, especially of Westerners like American journalist James Wright Foley. From the beginning, Foley's tragic death reflected a key tactic of Daesh that is unfortunately all too effective: making Westerners believe that they are the disproportionate targets of Daesh's attacks, when in fact Muslims are by far the most frequent victims of Daesh.

Although not as publicized as Brussels, Paris, and even San Bernardino (the last of which was inspired by Daesh), the vast majority of attacks that Daesh claims responsibility for affect predominantly Muslim populations. By covering and—given the current climate in much of the media—freaking out about terrorist attacks in Western countries, we play right into Daesh's hands by producing clips that are used to radicalize alienated young people who are told that they will never be welcomed in their Western home countries because they are Muslim.

As for why attacks in Western countries get more sustained and in-depth media coverage, there are several simple answers. First, media outlets have drastically cut down on foreign correspondents, which skews coverage to Western countries. Second, in a media market where attention is the most valuable and flighty commodity, more “surprising” attacks in whiter countries like France and Belgium receive far more journalistic resources than do attacks in the Middle East. Our perpetual war in the region has rendered us numb to the violence and carnage that comes out of the Middle East. Since high school, I have lamented that we almost never substantively confront the sacrifices of, and meaning behind the actions of, those who serve our country. Unfortunately, that is still true.

Instead of analyzing policies, we millennials do one of two things more often than not when we learn of terrorist attacks, depending on our politics: We either fear monger, or, more commonly within our University's community, we engage in slacktivism. Those in the latter group fall into two categories. Either they lazily change the color filter of their profile picture, when it's available, or they complain about the Euro- and white-centric focus of our grief toward victims of terrorist attacks. Calling out someone on social media for slacktivism is just another form of slacktivism. Not only do our Facebook statuses not make a difference, which some people at least acknowledge, but they also feed into a negativity that is beginning to characterize the millennial left. Furthermore, Facebook dialogue doesn't even draw from the most valuable pieces on the subject. We don't cite *The Economist's* nuanced piece on how the marginalized Molenbeek neighborhood in Brussels cultivates jihadists who are never welcomed as Belgian despite being third-generation Belgians. No: instead we cite blogs, listicles, or even worse, other millennials' equally empty Facebook statuses.

Although this piece may not make a difference, it involves research and more time than sharing a Facebook status of solidarity does. I'm all for solidarity, and it is needed for the larger audiences that social media sites can carry, but the effort should not stop there. It's like citing a Wikipedia page without examining the actual sources in the footnotes.

When we respond to terrorist attacks on social media with hatred, either toward innocent Muslims or even toward each other, we play into Daesh's hands. Their social media team scours Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for the West's hatred. Although they are far more likely to take the Islamophobic words of high profile figures like Donald Trump or Senator Ted Cruz, we should not be spewing fear or negativity on social media regarding Daesh's terrorism in the first place. That is exactly what they want us to do.

More broadly, we should do the best we can not to let Daesh interfere with our daily lives. We should let President Obama attend a Cuban baseball game even in the wake of a terror attack. We should take that research grant and travel to Europe. We should take public transportation. We should think about and talk about what our military is doing, not because the Islamic State has made us afraid for our lives, but because of the high cost and veteran suicide rate that is a product of our military engagement.

Before you go to the gun store and file the paperwork for your conceal-carry permit out of fear of the "other," try to understand them by reading the same text that extremists in the West like Rush Limbaugh and extremists in the Middle East like Baghdadi both pervert. Read the Qur'an, and more importantly, read its footnotes. Read Surah 18 where the Abrahamic figure of Moses witnesses atrocities that test his belief, or Surah 4, where there is an entire section dedicated to Estate Law, or Surahs 2 and 60 that lay out the rules of military engagement set forth by the Prophet Muhammad, which are often taken out of context by both jihadists and those on the far right in America to argue that Islam is a violent religion.

When we give in to fear and violence, we give in to the misconstrued notion that Islam and the Islamic State are one and the same. When we spew hatred toward everyone in a religion of 1.5 billion people, we reaffirm the sinister recruiter's argument that the West hates Islam. When we fail to see the humanity of those who have been pushed to the margins of Western society, we not only fail them, but we fail ourselves. We only lose the War on Terror when we let ourselves act on terror.