

“Six ideas we must remember” - One Week After the Charlie Hebdo Attack: Refuse to Sign Up for the Clash of Civilizations

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Contents

- [1\) Denounce communitarian](#)
- [2\) Defend secularism](#)
- [3\) Reject victim-blaming](#)
- [4\) Pursue a comprehensive](#)
- [5\) Fight real discrimination](#)
- [6.\) Stand together to face](#)

What happens after a group of Muslim fundamentalist thugs in Paris slaughter unarmed cartoonists, and shoppers at a Kosher grocery, then invoke God and claim to be avenging the Prophet on video for all the world to see? Where do we go from here?

In considering this question, I have thought a lot about things my Algerian father taught me. He was an anthropologist named Mahfoud Bennoune, who like many Algerian intellectuals during the 1990s “dark decade” of fundamentalist terrorism that claimed as many as 200,000 lives, wondered every time he went out if he would come home again, or if he would be killed that day for opposing Islamist terrorists.

As I worried for him, he always admonished me not to do the work of the terrorists for them. Be smart, but try not to be terrified. Don't stop teaching evolution even though the head of the Islamic Salvation Front shows up in your classroom to denounce you as an advocate of “biologism.” Don't cover your head because they say they will kill you if you don't. His consistent defiance reflected the spirit expressed by slain *Charlie Hebdo* editor Charb: “I would rather die on my feet than live on my knees.” My father survived the “dark decade,” while many of his compatriots did not, and as we all know, Charb did not survive this dark January, but was killed by radicalized brothers of Algerian descent - the infamous Kouachis.

To honor those who have stood up to fundamentalism, and those who have fallen to it - from Algiers to Paris and beyond - defenders of human rights and humanism have to carefully consider our strategy in the days ahead. Here are six ideas we must remember.

1) Denounce communitarian analysis

This is a political struggle against an extreme right wing political movement - Islamism and its expression in jihadist terrorism. It is not a war between Islam and the West. There are many Westerners - both on the left and the right - who have either justified or come close to justifying the attack, and there are countless people of Muslim heritage who have decried it.

For example, an eloquent, terse statement entitled, “We will not give in to fear” issued by Manifeste de Liberté (Manifesto of Liberty) in France, a grouping of progressive people of Muslim heritage, signed by everyone from the president of the Muslim scouts to writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, simply says: “To the families and friends of Charb, Cabu, Wolinski, Tignous, Bernard Maris, Honoré, Elsa Cayat, Mustapha Ourad, Frédéric Boisseau, Michel Renaud, and the police officers Franck Brinsolaro and Ahmed Merabet, and to the team at *Charlie Hebdo*, we express our horror, our solidarity, our grief. To their killers, we say that you will find us blocking your path, and on the side of liberty.” (The statement was published rapidly following the January 7 attack, and so did not include those killed later, including at the Kosher grocery store. Its originators later updated online: “Of course, we also share the grief of the families of the victims of the anti-Semitic killings in Vincennes: Philippe Braham, Yohan Cohen, Yoav Hattab, François-Michel Saada, as well as the friends and family of the policewoman killed in Montrouge, Clarissa Jean-Philippe.”)

Such voices defy the hatred purveyed by people like Rupert Murdoch, who recently tweeted: “Maybe most Moslems peaceful but until they recognize and destroy their growing jihadist cancer they must be held responsible.” Mr. Murdoch- many of us recognized it long before the West did, many of us have been trying to destroy it - at risk of our lives - for many years, and your divisive rhetoric only makes it harder to do just that. Your worldview is akin to that of terrorists who target all Westerners because they are Westerners.

Instead, we must refuse to sign up for the clash of civilizations that both the Islamist terrorists and the Western far right have in mind, and cling to our principles: liberty, equality, brother-and-sisterhood, dignity, and universal human rights.

2) Defend secularism

It is fashionable in the English language media to blame the attacks on French secularism, or Gallic discrimination against Muslims. This is misguided. I have done fieldwork in the Muslim population in France, the majority of which is North African, and comes from countries like Algeria and Tunisia that have important secular traditions - though they have been eroded in recent years. Presumptions should not be made on the basis of the views of some Muslims elsewhere.

For example, there is a strong argument, based on social science research, that a majority of the population of Muslim heritage in France - some of which is believing and practicing, some of which is not - supported the 2004 law prohibiting religious symbols in public schools. It was also embraced by some Muslim leaders like Soheib Bencheikh, the former Grand Mufti of Marseille. You would never know this from reading the generalizing English-language critiques. During my research, many people of Muslim heritage in France told me that they appreciated secularism because it guarantees the right to religious freedom for everyone in a mixed society - an idea embraced by at least 57% of declared Muslims in France, according to surveys.

Two days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, I asked Paris-based Algerian Muslim journalist Mohamed Sifaoui what he thought of the argument made by some that French secularism or discrimination against Muslims in France was responsible for it. He said that to advance such an argument, “means you misunderstand the Islamist ideology..... This is playing the game of the terrorists who want to paint themselves as victims to justify what they are doing.”

3) Reject victim-blaming

It is also popular in certain circles to blame France simply because it is France. For me, as the granddaughter of an Algerian peasant leader who was killed fighting the French colonial army during the war of independence, I know that France, like all former colonial powers, has a great deal to answer for historically. However, I also know that those who were murdered at *Charlie Hebdo* would have defended my grandfather, rather than the French colonial machine. While the perpetrators of colonial crimes must still be brought to justice, those crimes are no excuse whatsoever for this new atrocity, and to suggest otherwise is entirely disrespectful of those who fell fighting imperialism. In fact, Algerian Muslim fundamentalists often espoused the view that those who died fighting France for Algeria's freedom were not real "martyrs" precisely because they did not die fighting for an Islamic state.

4) Pursue a comprehensive anti-terror strategy

We need an unyielding and thoughtful response to jihadist terror. Sifaoui - who was nearly killed in a jihadist attack on Press House in Algiers in 1996 in which he lost colleagues - stressed that the strategy must be multi-faceted. It must include educational and economic components. He stressed that "We must not make the error of the neo-conservatives in America after 9/11 who thought they could respond only with the army. Yes, involve the army and the security forces, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. When we talk about eradicating terrorism, you have to do this with political and ideological means." He underscored the importance of discrediting the ideologies of Islamism, Salafism and jihadism.

Moreover, the right needs to understand that force alone is not enough, and misused force (e.g. the Iraq War) can have disastrous consequences. And the left needs to come to terms with the fact that sometimes force must be used to destroy movements bent on deliberately mowing down civilians.

5) Fight real discrimination but do not thwart essential critical debate

Discrimination against Muslims - when it actually manifests - is absolutely unacceptable, and must be uncompromisingly opposed. Yet, if we want to put an end to it now, we have to destroy movements that turn "Allahu Akbar" into a death threat, and deliberately provoke backlash. Criticism of Islamism is not racist - it is vital. If we invoke sweeping concern about prejudice so as to keep governments from doing what they must to stop this terrorism, we will only make both problems worse in the long run.

Rather than being defensive, we people of Muslim heritage in the diasporas need to grapple with tough questions about what is going wrong, and face up to the challenge of stopping it. Many - especially in our countries of origin - have the guts to do just that and we must support them. The Algerian journalist Adlene Meddi wrote in the newspaper *El Watan* (The Nation) after the attacks, "before we ask others not to engage in generalizations and to respect our faith - even while we are making a caricature of this faith - we should start by thinking of our very own failings toward ourselves so that we can break the cycle of hate."

Of course, racist assertions like Murdoch's narrow the space for such views to be voiced. We must break out of this vicious circle.

6.) Stand together to face this truly grave threat

As Zazi Sadou, spokeswoman of the Algerian Rally of Democratic Women (RAFD), who took great risks to denounce the jihadists in the 1990s, recently wrote from Paris: The fundamentalist movement tied to political Islam should be combatted everywhereIt is not a question of waging "a war against Muslims" but of acting TOGETHER to stop those who are killing US, and throwing our children in the pyres that they are building everywhere... The hate of the other, the hate of the foreigner is the ingredient that feeds these fires. We must maintain solidarity and vigilance. "The strategy she calls for is not optional. The stakes are too high. As the Algerian sociologist Marieme Helie-Lucas wrote, "All my Algerian friends in France are scared: there is a real threat from the far right. If the fundamentalists are as well armed as I think they are, and if the far right attacks 'Muslims' ... what will happen?"

No one can win a clash of civilizations. But we can all win if we stand together to fight for civilization.

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P.S.

* Huffington Post. Posted: 01/14/2015 4:09 pm EST Updated: 03/16/2015 5:59 am EDT:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/karima-bennoune/one-week-after-the-charli_b_6467034.html

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