

## Letter From London

### Obama Was Right to Skip Paris

*By lionizing Charlie Hebdo, Europe is empowering Al Qaeda.*

by Amil Khan

President Obama has run into harsh criticism, both at home and abroad, for not attending this week's Paris protest march or sending a high-level substitute in his place. French and European leaders, meanwhile, have won widespread praise for their aggressive and bold stand against jihadists.

Yet it's the European reaction that plays right into Al Qaeda's hands, and the Americans who are actually taking the wiser approach by not turning the Paris terror attacks into a giant battle for civilization—and *Charlie Hebdo* into a rallying cry for free speech. It was hardly a surprise that the group Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [appeared eager](#) to claim responsibility Wednesday for the attacks. But for Al Qaeda, a triumph isn't complete until it gets a reaction.

And, wow, did it ever get a reaction in Europe—precisely the wrong kind.

Since the 9/11 attacks, Western governments—the United States included—have struggled to grasp the challenge posed by al Qaeda's strategy. They still seem all-too-mystified about how to respond and extinguish the enduring appeal that al Qaeda's ideology seems to have for young Muslims. The world's most infamous terrorist group—at least until Islamic State burst on to the scene last year—has in turn spent decades trying to figure out how to instigate a global Muslim rebellion against the West. It has always relied on a sort of geopolitical judo, using its enemies' strength against them by making them prove its own worldview.

This strategy has succeeded to a greater degree among Muslim communities in Europe compared to the United States. In Europe, in general, Al Qaeda has found it easier to win over angry young European Muslims—as has the Islamic State—because it has found a pliable audience and exploited it. The most effective way to convince a target audience to buy into a rhetorical vision is to echo and respond to their grievances. In other words, use their existing complaints to make them sign up to your plan to fix things. Globally, al Qaeda's problem has always been that although average Muslims have many long-standing complaints about Western foreign policy—

such as support for Israel and Arab dictatorships—the vast majority were not ready to subscribe to its remedy of war and harsh religious law.

In response, Al Qaeda has sought to overcome this lack of interest among Muslims by trying to polarize Muslim and Western views, and here is where it has had a great deal of success in Europe, far less so in the United States. The Muslim underclass in many of these European countries is already polarized, and the over-the-top reaction to the *Charlie Hebdo* killings is only exacerbating that trend. The idea, as stated in the jihadi strategy document “Management of Savagery,” is to “transform societies into two opposing groups, igniting a violent battle between them whose end is either victory or martyrdom.” The best way to make sure the intended audience understands the justification for the attack is to make the attack itself self-explanatory, the strategists behind the document say. Clearly, the targeting of *Charlie Hebdo*, a magazine well known for printing images that many, if not most, Muslims would find offensive, but were seen as part of a cherished European tradition of free expression, fit very comfortably in this strategy.

True to Al Qaeda’s methodology, the attack is sharpening differences between communities and isolating European Muslims from their countrymen. Thanks to the efforts of European leaders and opinion makers to show solidarity with *Charlie Hebdo* by embracing its humor—and the now-ubiquitous “*Je Suis Charlie*” slogan—many mainstream Muslims are resentful about the impossible choice they are being forced into: To demonstrate they do not support murder, they must show support for images they find offensive. Demands that European Muslims condemn the attacks serve to make many feel that they are seen as guilty until they prove themselves innocent. The focus on freedom of speech also re-opens simmering accusations from Muslim Europeans of double standards; in the days after the Hebdo attacks, a notorious French comedian known for his anti-Semitic comments, Dieudonne, was actually arrested for posting an offensive comment on his Facebook page. Overall, the direction of the public debate plays directly into Al Qaeda’s narrative that Muslims cannot live in the West without demeaning themselves. Meanwhile, the increase in anti-Muslim violence in the wake of the attacks reinforces the idea that Muslims are in danger and under siege.

Even Pope Francis has weighed in, oddly enough, on the side of offended Muslims and against the lionization of *Charlie Hebdo*. “You cannot insult the faith of others. You cannot make fun of the faith of others,” the pope said on Thursday, giving voice to seething Muslim resentment.

More worrying is the messaging being directed towards young, criminalized Muslims. While the attack was still underway, television channels around the world played images of the Kouachi brothers—the two terrorists who broke into the *Charlie Hebdo* offices—getting out of a car, moving along a street and shooting dead an injured policeman. News anchors described them in terms verging on awe, mentioning frequently that they seemed “highly trained” and “skilled in military tactics.” Such coverage glamorizes an act to an audience that is excited by the idea of instant recognition and adulation. According to [one account](#) of the hostage drama at the kosher market in Paris after the Hebdo killings, while the standoff was going on the gunman, Amedy Coulibaly, spent a lot of his time monitoring what was being said about him in the media—and grew very angry that new channels were not reporting that he had killed people.

Thus, the Charlie Hebdo attacks highlight what many people have suspected while witnessing the spectacle of **hundreds, possibly thousands**, of young Muslim Europeans flocking to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq: Al Qaeda has managed to find a receptive audience in the continent's Muslim underclass, with their angry sense of disenfranchisement from broader European society.

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**I have witnessed the success** of this recruiting campaign with my own eyes.

From about 2005 to 2009, I worked on several journalistic investigations into extremism in the Muslim world and the UK. In the early days after 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, it was clear that al Qaeda's Western recruits – in so far as there were any - were largely Muslim men who had been born abroad and likely had a personal connection to conflicts in the Middle East. A smaller group of recruits were British-born Muslims from immigrant families. These men, like Omar Sheikh Saeed, one of the killers of American journalist Daniel Pearl, came from relatively privileged backgrounds, and adopted al Qaeda's cause after witnessing suffering in the Muslim world. (Saeed was radicalized after taking part in a relief convoy taking supplies to beleaguered Bosnian civilians in the 1990s.) At the time, al Qaeda's rhetorical vision held no interest for men from the criminalized, drug and gang culture background of the Kouachi brothers.

In 2007, I spent a year embedded with radical groups in London and saw the membership profile change. The groups' main activities were demonstrations, religious study circles (which focused heavily on the same literalist interpretation of Islam that Al Qaeda comes from) and attending mainstream Muslim events, such as weekly prayers, as a show of force to the wider community. To begin with most of the members I met were young and from Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds with settled, professional or aspirant families. Many attended events without their families' knowledge, saying that parents disapproved of them skipping classes at college or damaging their prospects at work. Spending time with them, their efforts to seem threatening by wearing hoods or bandanas over their faces in public seemed comical in contrast to their carefully packed lunchboxes full of home-cooked food. These men came to be outnumbered by an increasing group of slightly older men often with prison backgrounds and experience of violence. Some were from Pakistani or Arab families, although a significantly large proportion were Caribbean or white converts. These men spent less time attending study circles. They preferred demonstrations and other events that presented the chance of confrontation.

Since 9/11, the profile of men arrested for terror-related offences in Europe has changed. Former convicts or gang members with a history of violent crime and mental instability are outnumbering radicalized university students from middle class backgrounds.

Al Qaeda has come to realize that its rhetorical vision is finding traction among young Muslims from tough, often criminal, backgrounds and is actively trying to recruit them. Documents shared online among Al Qaeda activists and sympathizers discuss in detail the merits of attracting "youths" who understand "coarseness" and are familiar with violence. Most importantly, they are already antagonistic towards the authorities and are comfortable with the idea of operating outside the law. Al Qaeda supporters also talk about their "street smarts." The brutal efficiency

of the attacks in France shows how valuable these skills and characteristics are to groups like Al Qaeda.

Due to the wider prevalence of violent crime in the United States, it would make sense that there would be more young Americans with backgrounds in gangs and crime trying to fight with extremists in the Middle East or planning attacks at home. But this doesn't seem to be the case. The conflict in Syria and Iraq has attracted only a handful—perhaps around 100—of Americans. Only 20 to 30 are thought to be fighting with jihadi outfits like Islamic State. So far, it seems a small proportion overall come from criminalized backgrounds.

American extremists tend to be individuals with an intellectual or emotional mindset who have been motivated by events in the Muslim world. The most well-known have been ideologues and online propagandists. Anwar al Awlaki turned to extremism after becoming affected by reports of abuses by American forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Samir Khan, an American Muslim extremist who also came from a middle class immigrant family, also cited foreign policy. Both men left the United States to pursue their activities and were killed by possibly the same drone strike in 2011.

Americans ready to commit to violence in the name of Al Qaeda or similar groups also tend to be loners, like Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. But even then, the numbers are limited. One such recent example is Christopher Cornell from Ohio, who was arrested on Wednesday for allegedly planning an IS-inspired attack on the U.S. Capitol.

In large part, America has escaped seeing malcontents like the Kouachi brothers rampaging on its streets because of the success of its Muslim communities. Studies, such as the Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) survey on American Muslim voters, show that despite being a largely immigrant community with 76 percent of its members being born abroad, American Muslims are largely educated, professional and high earning. Compared to national averages, American Muslims are more likely to have college and post-graduate qualifications and earn high salaries. They are also more politically engaged than the average American. The CAIR study found 91 percent intended to vote, whereas overall turn out for registered voters was 59 percent.

In comparison, in France, private academic studies show (the French state does not collect information on the basis of religious identity) that French Muslims are more likely to be unemployed, poor or working manual, low-income jobs. In Britain, where I was born and raised, Muslims are the least likely of religious groups to be homeowners, and are more likely to live in overcrowded conditions and be out of work. In both France and Britain, Muslims are much more likely to have spent time in prison than the average person.

The pool for the most potentially dangerous kind of recruit is thus much smaller in America. However, social and economic conditions are not the entire reason the United States has been more insulated. U.S. political figures have helped to ensure U.S. Muslims feel more secure in their “American-ness” despite hostility from some quarters of the media and general public. This goes a long way to undermine Al Qaeda’s narrative of an American-led war against them and their religion.

President George W. Bush's remarks in the face of a rise in attacks against American Muslims in the days after 9/11 are a good case in point. The former president made an impassioned defense of the place of Muslims in American life and declared that the American Muslim leaders he had met "love America as much as I do."

After Al Qaeda's 2005 attacks in London, Prime Minister Tony Blair merely attempted to refute Al Qaeda's ideology. This only had the effect of underlining popular Muslim grievances with Western foreign policy. By not acknowledging that these grievances were legitimate (which considering his political decisions, he could not have done) he allowed Al Qaeda to look like the champion of Muslim causes that it craves to be. Most damaging, British Muslims felt that he was drawing a line in the sand and daring British Muslims to choose between deeply held grievances and their place in Britain's social and cultural fabric. Blair's initial speech was a policy blueprint rather than a one off. After a series of similar statements by senior cabinet ministers, in 2006 Blair gave a speech in which he emphasized the need for some minorities (in other words Muslims) to try harder to integrate, saying, "No distinctive culture or religion supersedes our duty to be part of an integrated United Kingdom." News outlets reported the speech with headlines such as: "Adopt our values or stay away says Blair." Unsurprisingly for British Muslims even among the highly secular and integrated the government's position only widened the divide between them and the rest of society.

After leaving journalism, when I advised governments on complex communications challenges for a time, it became clear to me that most people do not think about their identity on a daily basis. Most commonly, the average person thinks about issues such integration, religion and culture only when he or she is forced to by something happening in the news or when it is brought up by their friends. For minorities, having their communities singled out creates a sense of siege. Being made to feel your own government is laying down an ultimatum produces a sense of alienation, exclusion and rejection.

Former President Bush is often blamed

How a group sees its place in wider society is a key factor in recruitment to extremist organizations. When a community feels victimized, an opportunity presents itself for champions and saviors. Often, those most vociferous about the need to "fight back" are people who have more experience of violence. I have seen this to be the case in Iraq, Sudan, Pakistan, and most recently in Syria. These men and women are motivated most powerfully by the opportunity to gain respect and recognition and improve their place in the social hierarchy. In America, the mainstream Muslim community feels less embattled and so there is less incentive for anyone to step up and "save" it.

The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks seem designed to put Al Qaeda back on the map after it alienated mainstream Muslim opinion by killing civilians and sparking sectarianism. The organization is focusing on what it does best, picking up support by relentlessly promoting its worldview. Since 9/11, in Europe, we have seen Al Qaeda's rhetorical vision gain popularity because of the way governments and the media have reacted to its actions. As a result, it has expanded its recruiting pool to include more potentially dangerous individuals. However, Islamist extremists have so far failed to convince the vast majority of Muslims of the need for violent action in the pursuit of

their political solution. The big risk is that reactions to Charlie Hebdo and potential future attacks create new recruitment pools for Al Qaeda, Islamic State and other such groups. To avoid helping extremists do their recruiting, it is vital to consider their strategy when responding to their actions.

Fourteen years after Al Qaeda fully unleashed this strategy on the world with the 9/11 attacks, it has had only limited success. On the one hand, through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Al Qaeda has provoked Western countries into providing the Muslim world with many more reasons to believe it is under attack. Before 9/11, an extremist trying to persuade a Muslim audience that America was at war with Islam would mostly point to U.S. support for Israel. Aside from limited interventions such as Lebanon and Somalia, there were little other concrete examples to point to. At the same time, someone disagreeing with the West vs. Islam argument, would reference U.S. support for Afghans fighting the Soviet Union. A decade of wars in the region has provided “proof” in the form of the inevitable results of prolonged occupation, such as unlawful killings, abuses and collaboration with discredited local actors. In the war for hearts and minds, it is the actions of the United States and its (mostly European) partners that helped Al Qaeda prove to its target audiences that it was right all along.

But despite the huge boost Al Qaeda’s rhetorical vision has received from the West’s recent wars in the Muslim world, it is not getting the global uprising of over a billion people it was after. Although more Muslims are ready to accept the idea of a war against Islam, surprisingly few in either the Muslim world or the West are signing up for violent resistance. In the Muslim world itself, the reason is largely down to Al Qaeda’s own failures. In Western countries, Al Qaeda’s message is least powerful where it is undermined by local political and economic circumstances. The lesson the United States needs to take from Europe’s experience—and what Europe needs to learn itself—is that the best counter-extremism policy is built around letting citizens feel they belong.

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