PARIS TO DELAWARE: LOCAL RESPONSE TO GLOBAL CRISIS

Muqtedar Khan, University of Delaware
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Dr. M. A. Muqtedar Khan

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Global Crisis

Terrorism has become a driver of global business. Driven by satellite television and twenty-four seven news channels hungry for events that can grab the attention of viewers away from entertainment, every horrific episode is beaten to death, every related and unrelated aspect is explored extensively and in a fashion that raises public anxiety and sustains viewership. The popular usage of social media, which itself is just a consumer and interpreter of content, extends the reach and impact of digital and satellite media content providers. I suspect the disappearance of ISIS and Al Qaeda might have a negative impact on the profitability of news media and positive impact on the entertainment industry\(^2\).

But for Muslim communities living in the West, the media frenzy culture has become a curse\(^3\). It brings events and issues completely unrelated to their lives to their doorstep. When Muslims anywhere do something shocking Muslim communities everywhere, and especially in the West, have to deal with its media and political consequences. Two French social misfits go on a violent rampage in Paris, and three Muslims in Delaware spend two sleepless nights, putting together a letter of condemnation, a panel discussion to explain to Americans that this was not about Islam and a spontaneous Mewlid – traditional Muslim celebration of the life and message of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) – to comfort Muslims who are traumatized by the abuse their Prophet, their faith and their communities are suffering in some sections of the Western media.

I want to share the efforts of this small Muslim community in Delaware as it tries to cope with the double trouble that comes with every terrorist act perpetrated by Muslim radicals. First, Muslims are also victims of these attacks – even in Paris two of the seventeen victims, one police officer Ahmed Merabet, and one copy editor Mustapha Ourrad, were Muslims. Second, Muslims are also the victims of the backlash\(^4\), the hate

\(^1\) http://www.turkeyagenda.com/paris-to-delaware-1850.html


\(^3\) http://www.independent.org/newsroom/article.asp?id=2179

\(^4\) http://mic.com/articles/108206/how-bad-is-france-s-anti-muslim-backlash-to-the-charlie-hebdo-attack-check-this-map
crimes, the violence, the media outrage and the new policies that target Muslims and their civil rights.\(^5\)

The media coverage and the issues that are raised in absence of hard news, demand at the minimum, a corrective response to the narrative, which is often insensitive to Muslim issues and sometimes deliberately false and malevolent. Fox News for examples had so called experts talking about ‘no-go-zones’ in Europe where Islamic radicals supposedly hold complete sovereignty.\(^6\) These cases attracted attention because they were exposed and ridiculed widely but a lot of Islamophobic messaging is left unchallenged by mainstream media. Additionally correctives and apologies do not undo the malicious consequences of false reporting. Bobby Jindal, a republican governor and Presidential candidate, was repeating the same falsehoods about European Muslims even after Fox News had apologized and recanted\(^7\).

Besides the narratives in the West, Western Muslims also have to deal with messages sent out by extremists in the Muslim world. For example, two small congregations, in Peshawar, Pakistan and Hyderabad, India, offered funeral prayers for the attackers of Charlie Hebdo and glorified them as martyrs of Islam. Small isolated events but they were video taped and posted in the social media and Muslims here again have to explain how that is not how we understand our faith.

**LOCAL RESPONSE**

Muslims in the West have no choice but to respond to defend their faith, their culture, and their values and expose the prejudicial narratives in the media. In Delaware we, responded by creating a small think tank called *Delaware Council on Muslim and Global Affairs*. This small outfit, currently composed of three motivated individuals, decided the first thing to do was to send in a strongly worded condemnation of the violence while expressing our discontent with Charlie Hebdo’s policy of satirizing the Prophet of Islam (pbuh). It took less than an hour to compose the letter but it took over forty hours to get it endorsed by all the mosques in the region and by other Muslim organizations.\(^8\) Several hours of negotiations later we had our consensus and we sent our message in the form of a letter to the editor in the main newspaper of Delaware, *The*  

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Our message was simple: we strongly condemn the violence but we are not Charlie Hebdo, we do not mock anyone’s sacred beliefs.\(^9\)

We followed it up with a public forum designed to explore the issues from expert perspective and also enable a diverse audience to express how they felt about the attacks in Paris.\(^10\) Meanwhile I had published an essay calling for a double dialogue, between Muslims and the West and between Muslims.\(^11\) The arguments I made in that essay underpinned the format with which I approached the structure of the forum. We invited a distinguished University of Delaware Professor, Dr. James Magee, to speak on the issue of freedom of speech. He explored its complexity and its contentious nature. The editorial pages editor of The News Journal, John Sweeney, shared the thinking that went behind editorial policies and how cartoons and columns were selected. Sweeney also made the important point that just as Muslims were not monolithic, neither was the media. The two speakers’ remarks were highly informative and helped communicate to the audience the importance of freedom of speech in any free society.

Two Imams, Sheikh Abdul-Hadi and Sheikh Shadeed Muhammad, brought the Islamic perspective to the table. They emphasized how the radicals were a fringe phenomenon and unrepresentative of the community. They also explained how Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was revered by Muslims and how even God praised him in his book the Holy Quran. A prominent community leader Sadia Kareem spoke about how terrorist was a threat to everyone and it was, she argued, a consequence of the crisis of knowledge in the community. The response from the audience was very animated and thoughtful. The youth talked about being confused and complained about lack of proper thought leadership in the global Muslim community. Others complained about US foreign policy and Western hypocrisy. All agreed that we needed to work together to combat both radicalism and Islamophobia.

A day after the dialogue we celebrated the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Yours truly gave a short lecture about what everyone should know about the life of the Prophet of Islam and after a brief question and answer session we celebrated his blessed life by listening to several nasheed (poetry in praise of the Prophet).

A small community like ours, with less than two-three thousand active Muslims, does not have the capacity or the resources to do more. We have five fully functional mosques two of which are Turkish-American community mosques. We are fortunate to

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have many dedicated members in the community who work tirelessly for it. The community is also blessed to have the Tarbiyah Islamic School, which is the hub of Islamic intellectual activity in Delaware\textsuperscript{12}. It hosted both the events and did host similar dialogues in the past to share with fellow Americans the situation in Gaza and mourn the tragedy in Peshawar. Tarbiyah Islamic School has become the center for civilizational dialogue in Delaware.

Today we live in a global village\textsuperscript{13}. No tragedy is too far away. No event is unrelated. We all face many challenges and if we can back a global vision with local initiative, we have done our part.

\textsuperscript{12} http://tarbiyahschool.org

\textsuperscript{13} http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=muqtedar_khan