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## Terrorism Today

By Philip Carl Salzman

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Great news! We are told by the *Washington Post*: “Terrorist attacks are quietly declining around the world.”<sup>1</sup> Citing the University of Maryland’s report on terrorism<sup>2</sup>, the *WP* author points out that there are fewer terrorist attacks since 2016. So, nothing to see here, folks; move along.

Not so fast. I am not sure we are quite ready to celebrate the fact that in 2017 there were “only” 3780 terrorist attacks in the Middle East and North Africa, with 10,819 murdered. True, this appears to be a 38% decline in attacks compared with 2016, and a 44% decline in body count. There are similar reports from other regions, but with lower absolute numbers. All told in 2017 there were 10,900 attacks, with 26,445 deaths. Should we stop worrying?

In most regions of the world terrorist attacks and consequent murders have declined to some degree in 2017 compared to 2016. But not in all regions. Can you guess which ones? In Western Europe the number of terrorist attacks increased to 271. In North America there were 97 terrorist attacks, an increase of 29% over the previous year, resulting in 124 deaths, fully a 70% increase. Feeling more relaxed now?

This *WP* article reflects the tendency of the mainstream media and some governments to downplay the existence or importance of terrorism, irrespective of the facts. This reflects the orientation of the mainstream media leaning left ideologically. Most American media support the Democrats, tended to idolize President Obama, have joined the “resistance” against President Trump, and are advocates for multilateralism and soft power. Most Canadian media support the Liberals or NDP, were fierce opponents of the Conservative Prime Minister, tend to oppose the military, and favour “peace-keeping” over peace-making which might require kinetic engagement (fighting). So the mainstream media downplays adversaries (except Russia, because it can be used as a weapon against Trump).

Leftists hold to the assumption that human nature is inherently good and malleable (except for conservative politicians and capitalists), and so no enemy should be condemned harshly, as they are really just looking for good jobs, or “desperate” for acceptance. They also take the neo-marxist “postcolonial” view that the capitalist West is guilty of abusing the world, and thus is itself the cause of terrorism, which it deserves. You will recall that Liberal Prime Minister Chretien said that it was America’s fault that it was attacked, a view, informed by Canada’s leftist media and held by Canadians generally. “A recent (2006) poll found that a majority of Canadians, including a whopping three-quarters of Quebecers, believe that U.S. foreign policy was the root cause of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This shouldn’t be so shocking; their previous Prime Minister, Jean Chretien, said practically the same thing.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Canadians and Americans do not follow the mainstream media and leftist political parties

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/15/terrorist-attacks-are-quietly-declining-around-world/?utm\\_term=.f04ea6a6c743](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/15/terrorist-attacks-are-quietly-declining-around-world/?utm_term=.f04ea6a6c743)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START\\_GTD\\_Overview2017\\_July2018.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_GTD_Overview2017_July2018.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2006/09/are-canadians-stupid-tom-nichols/>

and their governments in their desire to deny the existence or importance of terrorism. For Americans, protecting the country from terrorists is their top priority:

“Over the course of more than 15 years and three presidential administrations, Americans have consistently said that defending the nation against terrorism should be a top policy priority for the White House and Congress, according to Pew Research Center surveys conducted since shortly after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. In January of this year (2018), 73% of U.S. adults said defending the country against future terrorist attacks [should be a top priority](#) for President Donald Trump and Congress – making this one of the most frequently cited priorities, along with improving the educational system (72%) and strengthening the nation’s economy (71%).”<sup>4</sup> In 2018, two-thirds of Americans said that they worried about terrorism “a great deal” or “a fair amount.”<sup>5</sup>

In a 2016 poll, Canadians are much less worried about terrorism than Americans. For Canadians, the economy and unemployment are the top concerns, with only a small number saying terrorism is their highest concern: “Immigration is considered the most important issue by 5%, terrorism 2% and foreign policy or defence 1%.”<sup>6</sup> (However, forcing respondents to select one priority as their most important issue, may greatly underrate the concern, as seen by the fact that health care receives only 14%, the environment 8%, and education 4%.) When Canadians select their three top concerns, health care (40%), unemployment and jobs (39%), and taxes (32%--presumably wanting less, not more) come out on top, but “immigration control,” which may reflect concern about terrorism, reaches 23%.<sup>7</sup>

Let us now take up the question of who the “terrorists” are. The terminology in its non-specificity is very telling. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans did not speak about “terrorists,” but about Japanese. When America joined the war in Europe, Americans did not say they were going to fight terrorists; they said they were going to fight Germans. It seemed important to identify who the enemy was, so that they could be countered, not to obfuscate who the enemy was, which would throw in doubt any counter-action. Today, in our “politically correct” times, the name of our adversaries may not be mentioned.

The most basic principle of anthropological ethnographic research is to listen to the people you are trying to learn about. It is essential to learn what people are thinking about, what they hope for, what they fear, what they value, what they dislike. In other words, understanding people requires that you understand their point of view.<sup>8</sup> But when Muslim attackers and terrorists claim, as almost all do, that they are acting to defend and advance Islam, Westerners put their fingers in their ears and “hear nothing.” People in the West, especially governments, are, as we used to say, “in denial.” No less a “hard nose” than President George W. Bush told us that “Islam is love” and is a religion of peace.<sup>9</sup> President Barack H. Obama said that “Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism – it is an important part of promoting peace.” And that “We will convey our deep appreciation for the Islamic faith, which has done so much over the centuries to shape the world — including in my own country.”<sup>10</sup>

Officials of public security, from ministers of justice, to judges, to police, often refuse to declare attacks and murders as terrorist acts. The Fort Hood massacre, during which Major Nidal Malik Hasan, shouting “Allahu Akbar” (“Allah is the Greatest”), opened fire on mostly unarmed soldiers, murdering thirteen and wounding

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/11/defending-against-terrorism-has-remained-a-top-policy-priority-for-americans-since-9-11/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/4909/terrorism-united-states.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <http://abacusdata.ca/what-keeps-us-awake-top-national-issues/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/2366032/climate-change-a-low-priority-for-most-canadians-poll/>

<sup>8</sup> [http://hypergeertz.iku.at/GeertzTexts/Natives\\_Point.htm](http://hypergeertz.iku.at/GeertzTexts/Natives_Point.htm)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1237547/George-W-Bush-says-Islam-Love-9-11.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/40-mind-blowing-quotes-from-barack-hussein-obama-farrell-1500/>  
<https://www.investors.com/politics/commentary/barack-hussein-obama-americas-first-defender-in-chief-of-islam/>

thirty<sup>11</sup>, was characterized by the Obama Administration as “workplace violence,” rather than terrorism.<sup>12</sup> This, in spite of the fact that “Hasan had ... told a judge that in an effort to protect Muslims and Taliban leaders in Afghanistan, he had gunned down the soldiers at Fort Hood who were being deployed to that nation.”<sup>13</sup>

Faisal Hussain shot dead a young woman and a child, and wounded 13 others in downtown Toronto, and immediately officials and the media rushed to say that, no, this was not a Muslim shooting infidels, it was a mentally ill person, and had nothing to do with Islam.<sup>14</sup>

This explanation is a repeat from the Orlando club massacre, in which Omar Mateen murdered 49 and wounded 53, an attack that was dismissed as an anti-gay one, and had nothing to do with Islam or Muslims. But it turned out that Mateen did not even know that the club was a gay club. “The shooter’s motive was apparently revenge for United States bombing campaigns on ISIS targets in the Middle East. He had pledged allegiance to ISIS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and during the Pulse shooting [posted to Facebook](#), ‘You kill innocent women and children by doing us airstrikes. ... Now taste the Islamic state vengeance.’”<sup>15</sup> There has been a similar reluctance by politicians and judges to label attacks by Muslim on Jews as terroristic, antisemitic crimes.<sup>16</sup>

Why have Westerners, and particularly leaders who are supposed to protect their citizens, ignored what terrorists say about their motives, and edited out their claims to be acting on behalf of Islam? This response of Westerners is result of a number of concerns all contributing to “not hearing.” One is that, in the West, but not in the Islamic world, religion is supposed to be a personal matter, and not a matter for public discourse. Second, and this reinforces the first, a basic principle of the West and of human rights is freedom of religion, so it is deemed inappropriate to make pejorative comments about any religion. Third, most Westerners, leaders included, know little about Islam and Islamic history, including the history of the Arab Islamic Empire. Fourth, most Western countries have important ties with Islamic countries, not least as many Islamic countries are sources of petroleum. Fifth, there are approximately 1.8 billion Muslims in the world, around 24% of the global population<sup>17</sup>, rather more than you want angry at you. Sixth, with increasing percentages of Muslims in the population, politicians look to their elections, and want to avoid alienating Muslim voters. Seventh and finally, Westerners avoid the religious issue because they wish for some easy answer to terrorism, such as expressing our respect and apologies, or sending foreign aid, or offering technology. Westerners “desperately want to find some reason, some issue that can be *solved*, as the mainspring behind Islamic terrorism. Otherwise, they would have to confront the terrible reality that there is nothing we can give the terrorists that will stop the killing.”<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, some intrepid souls have raised the question as to whether Islam is inherently violent and aggressive. There has been much debate about what various passages of the Koran and the Hadiths (traditions)<sup>19</sup> mean. Such discussion is complicated by the Koranic principle of abrogation (Arabic: *naskh*)<sup>20</sup>, in which earlier passages are overridden by later passages.

For example, what is the significance of the following passages?

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/army-major-kills-13-people-in-fort-hood-shooting-spree>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/12/06/military-growing-terrorist-target-lawmakers-warn.htm>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/army-major-kills-13-people-in-fort-hood-shooting-spree>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-suspected-toronto-shooter-struggled-with-severe-mental-illness/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/4/5/17202026/pulse-shooting-lgbtq-trump-terror-hate>  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/noor-salman-pulse-massacre-wrong\\_us\\_5ac29ebae4b04646b6454dc2](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/noor-salman-pulse-massacre-wrong_us_5ac29ebae4b04646b6454dc2)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/29/597863454/murder-of-elderly-jewish-french-woman-triggers-demonstrations>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.nationalreview.com/2006/09/are-canadians-stupid-tom-nichols/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadith>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.quranicstudies.com/law/the-importance-of-abrogation/>

“And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter... and fight them until fitnah is no more, and religion is for Allah.”—

[Quran 2:191](#)

“But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.” — [Quran, chapter 9 \(At-Tawba\), verse 5](#): translated by [Abdullah Yusuf Ali](#)<sup>21</sup>

Some critical commentators say that passages such as these are mandates for Islamic aggression against “infidels” (Arabic: *kafir*)<sup>22</sup>, while apologists deny this and claim that such quotes applied only to a particular battle in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, or justify only defensive violence.<sup>23</sup>

There is an ongoing debate among Muslims about exactly what Islam entails, and when, where, and how *jihad* (struggle) should be understood and applied.<sup>24</sup> It seems absurd for various non-Muslims, especially non-Muslim political leaders, to weigh in with some opinion about what is and what is not correct Islam, usually assertion alone without any serious substantiation.

What, then, are we to think? First, in regard to motives, I think we have to accept what people say their motives are. If people act according to what they think their duty to Islam is, that is the important thing, not what contrary arguments someone else might make about what Islam requires. Second, it is more practical for outsiders, non-Muslims, to take into account what Muslims do in the name of Islam, rather than what is said in internal debates about Islam.

Mostly, Westerners do not know much about Islamic history. But recently we have seen an episode of conquest by the Islamic State in its attempt to establish a universal caliphate.<sup>25</sup> Muddying the water, once again, are Western leaders, such as President Obama saying that the Islamic State “is not Islamic.”<sup>26</sup> What is important is that Islamic State functionaries and soldiers believe that they are acting on behalf of Islam. What is also important is that the Islamic State is reproducing the aggressive expansionism of the Arab Islamic Empire from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>27</sup>, later taken up by the Turkish Muslim Ottoman Empire.<sup>28</sup> The Arab armies, consisting largely of Bedouin tribes, pouring out of Arabia and rapidly conquered vast Christian areas in the Levant and North Africa, Zoroastrian Persia, Central Asia, and the northern part of Hindu India. In addition to the vast death toll of the native populations who tried unsuccessfully to defend their countries, millions of the conquered were enslaved, many carried off to other regions. Enslavement too was a practice of the Islamic State, capturing “infidel” women and girls to serve as sex slaves.<sup>29</sup> Deeds speak louder than words. “Progressives” have asserted to me<sup>30</sup> that the real threat to Canada and the United States is far-right extremism, and cite a study<sup>31</sup> purporting to show that terrorism by the far right is more frequent than by Muslim terrorists. The parameters of that study begin after the 9/11 attacks, and so disregard the over three thousand murdered in those attacks. Even so, since 9/11, substantially more have been killed in terrorism by Muslims than by attacks by members of the far right. If you do not wish to dismiss the 9/11 attacks, then since 2001 the

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<sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence\\_in\\_the\\_Quran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violence_in_the_Quran)

<sup>22</sup> [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Qur%27an\\_on\\_infidels](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Qur%27an_on_infidels)

<sup>23</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam\\_and\\_violence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_and_violence)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/jihad>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/09/11/obama-says-the-islamic-state-is-not-islamic-americans-are-inclined-to-disagree/?utm\\_term=.9ce0b2b80eea](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/09/11/obama-says-the-islamic-state-is-not-islamic-americans-are-inclined-to-disagree/?utm_term=.9ce0b2b80eea)

<sup>27</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Arabs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Arabs)

<sup>28</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_Empire)

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery_1.shtml)

<https://www.the religion of peace.com/pages/quran/slavery.aspx>

<sup>30</sup> Personal communication

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/>

ratio of American deaths from Islamic terrorism compared to right wing terrorism is sixty-two to one.<sup>32</sup>

Canadians and Americans are not fools. They do not believe that Muslim terrorism has nothing to do with Islam<sup>33</sup>, or that the main terrorist threat comes from right wing extremists. “The poll, conducted exclusively for Global News, found 74 percent of respondents viewed ISIS as the biggest security risk to the country followed by North Korea with 73 percent. Terror groups like Al Qaeda, 72 percent, and homegrown or radicalized terrorists at 72 percent.”<sup>34</sup> (The term “radicalized” is commonly used in North America for Muslim extremists.)

It should not be necessary to say that knowing that a person is Muslim or comes from a Muslim background tells you virtually nothing about them. Each individual person and citizen should be treated as an individual and judged according to his or her qualities, merit, and actions. Treatment of people as a member of categories is severely illiberal and a violation of their human rights. It should also not be necessary to say that most Muslims are not terrorists, and should not be treated as if they were, or even as if they were inclined to be. Respect the integrity of individuals.

So how do we address the fact that most terrorists are Muslims, and most believe that they are fulfilling their duty to Allah? In protecting Canadians and Americans, we need to scrutinize potential fonts of terrorism: borders, mosques, Islamic schools, and social media. Potential immigrants and refugees should be investigated to discover ties to terrorist groups or expressions of sympathy for terrorism. Mosques should be monitored for extremist views, as should Islamic schools. Just recently, the Canadian Government cancelled the charity tax status of a major Ottawa mosque for promoting “hate and intolerance.”<sup>35</sup> A Toronto mosque sermon called on Allah to slay non-Muslims “one by one.”<sup>36</sup> If we think it would be more even-handed, we could monitor churches and synagogues, Christian and Jewish schools as well. Social media should be monitored for extremist sources and networks, especially with Canadian and American connections. We have to balance our openness and freedom with security.

Those who recommend open borders, admitting terrorists with open arms, and even funding them, do not have the well-being of their fellow citizens in mind. People advancing such policies should not be put in charge.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.thecollegefix.com/prof-debunks-study-claiming-right-wing-extremists-u-s-deadly-islamic-terrorists/>

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/09/11/obama-says-the-islamic-state-is-not-islamic-americans-are-inclined-to-disagree/?utm\\_term=.9ce0b2b80eea](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/09/11/obama-says-the-islamic-state-is-not-islamic-americans-are-inclined-to-disagree/?utm_term=.9ce0b2b80eea)

<sup>34</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/3932055/isis-north-korea-home-grown-terrorists-security-risks-canada/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/4373959/ottawa-mosque-charity-hate-intolerance/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.meforum.org/articles/2018/mosque-sermon-calls7-on-allah-to-slay-non-muslims-%E2%80%98>

## About the Author



Philip Carl Salzman B.A. (Antioch), M.A., Ph.D. (Chicago) is Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, appointed in 1968. He founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and its international journal, *Nomadic Peoples*, for which he received the IUAES Gold Award. In recent years he has also served as Senior Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Open Society International Scholar at the American University of Central Asia, Erasmus Mundus International Fellow at the University of Catania, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney. Extensive ethnographic field research in Baluchistan (Iran), Gujarat and Rajasthan (India), and Sardinia (Italy) provided the foundation many articles in academic journals, and for book publications such as *The Anthropology of Real Life: Events in Human Experience* (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000), winner of the Premio Pitr–Salomone Marino, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* (2010). His latest book publication is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). His articles have been published by the Frontier Centre, the Middle East Forum, the Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, the Macdonald Laurier Institute, and Areo Magazine.