

## News and Observer

Op-Ed

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### **When confronting terrorism, we need a script that includes empathy, kindness.**

#### HIGHLIGHTS

What is too often missing is the context, the history, the memory, the root causes of these acts of terrorizing violence. We need to know what's behind these acts – not to absolve the perpetrators, but to understand. Every Syrian refugee family warmly welcomed in a so-called “infidel” nation weakens ISIS; acts of mercy confound their assumptions about us; acts of bigotry and hatred confirm their assumptions about us.

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By J. Mark Davidson

The script is familiar: An act of terrorism happens, innocent people are killed, we are afraid, the perpetrators are “monsters” who hate us and seek to destroy us, we tighten security, we must retaliate, we assemble our arguments to justify another round of merciless violence, we drop more bombs.

This time the location was different, but it was the same script. Each time the script is replayed, there is less need for the arguments. We already know how it goes. We are addicted to this way of thinking and seem powerless to change.

I try to remind myself that the individuals who committed these terrible acts and caused such suffering were once babies without hate in their hearts. They were once utterly dependent tiny babies at their mother's breasts. Something happened to them to turn them into killers and suicide bombers. What was that? And what role did our government and American foreign policy play? The rush to demonize and to use such words as “inexplicable” and “unimaginable” is so strong that we hardly know how to ask why anymore or to follow the truth where it leads. The script has already filled in all the blanks for us.

What is too often missing is the context, the history, the memory, the root causes of these acts of terrorizing violence. We need to know what's behind these acts – not to absolve the perpetrators, but to understand. Only knowing the stories of the attackers and the violence and injustices done to them and

those they love will enable us to see them as fellow human beings. Otherwise, they are invisible to us, and we are oblivious to the savage realities that gave rise to their savagery. Racism is a many-headed monster, and all its faces are hate. The root of hate is a failure of imagination, the inability to stand in the other's shoes.

Aurora Morales captures the current mood of anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia in her "Questions for the Media": "If Beirut has been a city for 37 centuries and Paris for 20, why doesn't anyone refer to explosions in Beirut as attacks on music, culture, civilization? We know the name of the band and what song the band was playing in the concert hall in Paris when the gunmen opened fire. We know the names of the restaurants. What kind of food they served. So why can't you tell me what Adel Termos and his little girl were buying in the open air market in Beirut when he threw himself on the second bomber and saved hundreds of lives? Why do you call that neighborhood in Beirut 'a Hezbollah stronghold' and describe the 10th arrondissement in Paris as 'progressive, hip, diverse, vibrant'? When it comes to Beirut, you say the people there are Shia, as if that is an explanation. You don't tell us who sells the best tomatoes, which businesses lost their windows, about the music, the flowers, the smell of cooking. You just repeat 'stronghold'... so we'll think casualties and not people. This is what I want to know: Can you tell me their names? I need to know their names."

We have to challenge the script. With every terrorist attack, ISIS is saying to Muslims throughout the world, "Look how we battle the Great Satan. Look how we are going after the infidels. Don't you want to come join us?" So every Syrian refugee family that is running away from ISIS brutality puts the lie to ISIS' claim of being a Muslim paradise. We want to facilitate this flight, not hinder it.

Every Syrian refugee family warmly welcomed in a so-called "infidel" nation weakens ISIS. Acts of mercy confound their assumptions about us. Acts of bigotry and hatred confirm their assumptions about us. We want those Muslims who might be swayed by ISIS to see our acts of mercy and say to themselves, "Why would 'the infidels' welcome the weak and the vulnerable? Why would they embrace Muslims as their brothers and sisters, tend to their needs and help them restart their lives and practice their faith in peace? That's not how 'infidels' act."

German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of the victims beneath the wheels of injustice; we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." Every time we confound the assumptions of those who mean us harm, we drive a spoke into the wheels of injustice. Every time we challenge our own assumptions about those we fear or do not know, we drive a spoke into the wheels. Every time we meet each other and acknowledge our mutual humanity, we drive a spoke into the wheels.

Unless we want endless cycles of violence, we need another script. It involves knowing each other, respecting each other and learning to live together in peace. All three religions born in the Middle East – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Abrahamic faiths – have been hijacked by extremists. But at their core, they teach their adherents the practice of empathy and kindness, the Golden Rule of treating others as you yourself would wish to be treated. That's the script we need to follow, now more than ever.

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