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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

I Want 'Allahu Akbar' Back



By Wajahat Ali

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Allahu akbar. It's Arabic for "God is greatest." Muslims, an eccentric tribe with over a billion members, say it several times in our five daily prayers. The phrase is also a convenient way to express just the right kind of gratitude in any situation.

I say "Allahu akbar" out loud more than 100 times a day. Yesterday, I uttered it several times during my late-evening Isha prayer. Earlier, during dinner, I said it with my mouth full after biting into my succulent halal chicken kebab. In the afternoon, I dropped it in a conference room at the State Department, where I'd been invited to address a packed room of government employees about the power of storytelling. Specifically, I expressed my continuing gratitude for the election of Barack Obama, whom, in a joking nod to the Islamophobic paranoia that surrounded him, I called "our first Muslim American president," adding "Allahu akbar!"

People in the crowd laughed and applauded, the world continued to spin, no one had an aneurysm, and only a few people seemed to wonder with arched, Sarah Sanders-like eyebrows, "Wait, is he ...?" I even confess to saying "Allahu akbar" two days ago in a restroom after losing the battle, but ultimately winning the war, against a nasty stomach virus.

I'm 37 years old. In all those years, I, like an overwhelming majority of Muslims, have never uttered "Allahu akbar" before or after committing a violent act. Unfortunately, terrorists like ISIS and Al Qaeda and their sympathizers, who represent a tiny fraction of Muslims, have. In the public imagination, this has given the phrase meaning that's impossible to square with what it represents in my daily life.

"Allahu akbar" is in the headlines again because the 29-year-old man who plowed a rental truck along a bicycle path killing eight people and injuring a dozen in Manhattan on Tuesday is reported to have said it after the attack. My heart sank as I heard the live news coverage, dotted with pieces of information meant to help us make sense of a tragedy: the suspect's physical description, the kind of vehicle he drove, the stunned eyewitness accounts emphatically saying that it didn't look at all accidental. And the two words the police say he shouted when the unthinkable act was over: Allahu akbar.

The attack had similarities to the one that took place in Charlottesville, Va., in August, when a neo-Nazi, James Alex Fields, rammed his car into a crowd of people who were protesting against a rally staged by white nationalists, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring 19 people. President Trump defended his initial response blaming violence on “many sides,” saying, “It takes a little while to get the facts.” That caution doesn’t seem to be applied when the suspects have been described by witnesses as “Middle Eastern” — and definitely not when they’ve said, “Allahu akbar.”

Not long after the killing in Charlottesville, Muslim extremists in Barcelona plowed a vehicle through a crowd, killing 16 people. Within hours, Mr. Trump repeated a long-debunked myth, urging those who sought to combat terrorism to “study what General Pershing did to terrorists when caught” — shoot them with a bullet smeared in pig’s blood. “There was no more Radical Islamic Terror for 35 years!” he tweeted. Allow me to clarify: You don’t have to dip your bullets in pig blood to kill us. Regular bullets work just fine. Why? Because we’re human.

That’s why it hurts that on Tuesday, “Allahu” and “akbar,” those two simple words so close to our hearts, instantly shaped the entire news coverage and presidential response. A common, benign phrase used daily by Muslims, especially during prayer, is now understood as code for “It was terrorism.”

It’s easy to forget that language is often hijacked and weaponized by violent extremists. Some people yell “Allahu akbar” and others chant “heritage,” “culture” and “white pride.” The preferred slogans of a killer don’t make much difference to the people whose lives are lost or their loved ones, but they make all the difference in Americans’ collective understanding of a tragedy.

Within hours of the Manhattan attack, Mr. Trump tweeted: “I have just ordered Homeland Security to step up our already Extreme Vetting Program. Being politically correct is fine, but not for this!” He also said on Tuesday that he would end the Diversity Visa Lottery program through which officials say the attacker entered the country. It’s the sort of reaction that was conspicuously lacking with respect to gun control after the recent mass shooting in Las Vegas.

If only the hurricane that devastated Puerto Rico, leaving American citizens in desperate need of power, food or water, could have yelled, “Allahu akbar,” triggering that kind of tough response. Perhaps our president would have been able to see the storm as evil. Perhaps he would have been energized by a “them versus us” rage to insist on swift action to repair the damage.

Last night, as breathless news coverage of the phrase the suspect uttered repeated on a loop, I took my children trick-or-treating in the Virginia suburbs. We walked the streets with friendly, diverse neighbors and hordes of happy kids wearing costumes and clutching bags filled with fattening goodies. My 3-year-old was a pirate and my 1-year-old was Supergirl. We all shared smiles and candies with strangers, with open hearts, without fear. Allahu akbar. God is greatest.

Wajahat Ali is a playwright, lawyer and contributing opinion writer.