

France: After Nice, Don't Give ISIS What It's Asking For

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NOT MUCH IS yet known about Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, the 31-year-old man French police say is responsible for a horrific act of mass murder last night in the southern city of Nice. In the wake of the killings, French President Francois Hollande has denounced the attack as “Islamist terrorism” linked to the militant group the Islamic State. Supporters of ISIS online have echoed these statements, claiming responsibility for the attack as another blow against its enemies in Western Europe.

While the motive for the attack is still under investigation, it is worth examining why the Islamic State is so eager to claim such incidents as its own. On the surface, ramming a truck into a crowd of people gathered to watch Bastille Day fireworks seems like an act of pure nihilism. No military target was hit. Initial reports suggest that the killings may lead to French attacks on ISIS's already-diminishing territories in Iraq and Syria. And French Muslims, many of whom were reportedly killed in the attack [1], will likely face security crackdowns and popular backlash from a public angry and fearful in the wake of another incomprehensible act of mass murder.

But the Islamic State's statements and history show that such an outcome is exactly what it seeks. In the February 2015 issue of its online magazine *Dabiq*, the group called for acts of violence in the West that would “[eliminate] the grayzone” by sowing division and creating an insoluble conflict in Western societies between Muslims and non-Muslims. Such a conflict would force Muslims living in the West to “either apostatize ... or [migrate] to the Islamic State, and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens.”

This strategy of using violence to force divisions in society mimics the group's tactics in Iraq, where it used provocative attacks against the Shiite population [2] to deliberately trigger a sectarian conflict, one that continues to rage to this day.

It may be that the Islamic State had no direct line of communication to Bouhlel. Unlike many other previous attackers, he had not been on the radar of French security services. There is no indication that he had received training or traveled to ISIS territory. Initial reports from those who knew him paint a picture of a depressed and angry man [3] who “spent a lot of his time at a bar down the street where he gambled and drank.” He had a history of petty crime, including an arrest this past May following a road-rage incident [4].

But in a way, these details don't matter. ISIS's model for terrorism relies on the weaponization of individuals such as Bouhlel; the group calls on the young, angry, and purposeless around the world to lash out at those around them in its name. In this way, the power of desperate insurgents is magnified through a combination of social media and propaganda of the deed [5]. An influential text used by the group, titled *The Management of Savagery*, prescribes terrorist attacks as a means of “inflam[ing] opposition,” to drag ordinary people into conflict whether “willing or unwilling, such that each individual will go to the side which he supports.”

In the West, deadly attacks in Paris, Brussels, Orlando, and elsewhere are bringing the Islamic State's goal of a divided world closer to fruition.

Far-right parties hostile to minorities are growing in popularity in Europe, while in the United States, polls show significant public support [6] for once-unthinkable measures like banning non-citizen Muslims from the country. Like a hurricane in slow motion, every act of violence seems to do incremental damage to the possibility of a tolerant, liberal society.

After yesterday's attack in Nice, former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich piled on by calling for "[testing] every person here who is of a Muslim background" and adding, "If they believe in Sharia, they should be deported." It was a somewhat ironic statement for Gingrich, who in years past helped arrange space for Muslim staffers to pray on Capitol Hill and took part in planning sessions for the Islamic Free Market Institute, a free-market advocacy group that supports Sharia-finance products [7].

Gingrich's outburst, however impracticable, does reflect hardening public sentiments. As time goes on and attacks by lone wolves and others in the name of ISIS continue, it's not unfathomable that proposals such as his could gain traction.

But from both a strategic and moral perspective, the worst thing that could be done in response to the horror of incidents like Nice would be to give ISIS what it says it wants: polarization and communal hatred. Proposals for ethnic cleansing or "civilizational war" may satisfy a desire to project toughness, but in reality, they feed into the group's narrative of a world irrevocably divided along religious lines.

Western Europe has faced down greater waves of terrorism in the past without giving into the strategy of the terrorists or sacrificing its intrinsic values [8]. The crisis of the Islamic State will require a similar degree of steadfastness. But only by recognizing the trap it has set can we avoid inflicting a defeat on ourselves far worse than a desperate, fanatical insurgent group could ever hope to achieve on its own.

Murtaza Hussain

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* <https://theintercept.com/2016/07/15/after-nice-dont-give-isis-what-its-asking-for/>

* Murtaza Hussain is a journalist and political commentator. His work focuses on human rights, foreign policy, and cultural affairs. Murtaza's work has appeared in The New York Times, The Guardian, The Globe and Mail, Salon, and elsewhere.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/nice-attack-latest-news-lorry-terrorism-muslim-victims-isis-a7138156.html>

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/22/international/middleeast/blast-destroys-shrine-in-iraq-setting-off-sectarian.html?_r=1

- [3] ESSF (article 38491), [Nice \(France\) – Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel: who was the Bastille Day truck attacker?](#).
- [4] <http://news.trust.org/item/20160715152401-h7md1>
- [5] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda_of_the_deed
- [6] <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/274521-poll-half-of-american-voters-back-trumps-muslim-ban>
- [7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_banking_and_finance
- [8] <http://qz.com/558597/charted-terror-attacks-in-western-europe-from-the-1970s-to-now/>