Is Extremist Violence in the West Caused by the Clash of Cultures?

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Motion: The recent terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists in France, US, and Canada are caused by a longstanding clash of values between Islamic and Western civilizations.

On March 19, 2015, Dr. Tay Keong Tan’s senior seminar class on capitalism and globalization gathered to debate whether recent terrorist attacks by Muslim extremists in France, the US, and Canada are caused by a longstanding clash of values between Islamic and Western civilizations. The debate was arranged to include a proposition team, an opposition team, an adjudicating team, and a team of reporters, each consisting of four members. The proposition was tasked with proving that the motion is true while the opposition team was responsible for proving that factors other than longstanding clashes of values were to blame for the terrorist attacks. Each member of both the proposition and opposition teams were allotted five minutes to present their arguments to the class. Dr. Tan, the instructor of the course, served as the moderator.

The class debate on the clash of civilizations motion is not rooted in purely ideological and politically abstract terms; it has practical relevance that was exhibited in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Paris-based satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, on January 7, 2015. According to The Guardian, within hours of the attack, the hashtag #killallmuslims was trending in the Twittersphere. In essence, the clash of civilizations phenomenon oversimplifies the complex underpinnings of terrorist attacks and results in the ostracizing of an entire group of people based on the radical motivations of a few. In essence, the clash of civilizations theory separates “them” from “us.”

Throughout the debate, four members from each team presented their supporting points with factual evidence. Four members representing the proposition team covered topics such as longstanding clash of values, differences between Western and Islamic governments, and cultural disbeliefs. The first speaker for the proposition team raised the critical point of the longstanding clash of values between civilizations. She supported the claim by arguing: the two civilizations are differentiated by culture and religion; the countries lack a sense of global identity; Muslims are fundamentalists; and extremism need not resort to violence. She then concluded her presentation by saying, “These terrorists do not fear death; in fact they believe it is an honor to ‘die for God’ which makes it more
The next point brought forward to the class was one which outlined the differences between the governments of Islamic and Western civilizations. For instance, the second speaker for the proposition offered that governments within the Islamic civilization rely heavily on their God, and how this can negatively affect the citizen. In the United States’ individualistic political culture, citizens are less likely to give up their lives for a higher cause. Such differences of religion spark the long issue we have had with Islamic civilizations.

Lastly, after a point was made of Western media embellishing terroristic acts, the fourth speaker was quick to point out this broad claim and answer it with a few points of his own. Most of the terrorist attacks may not be from Islamic extremists but media coverage and sensationalizing make them much more prominent in the public psyche. In fact, some media debates in the aftermaths of the attacks in Boston, Paris and Sydney have focused on the role of differences of religion, language, and culture in creating the conditions leading to the attacks. Radical imans even used the traditional media and new media to promote their extreme views that violent acts against enemies (jihad) are sanctioned by their religion.

Meanwhile, the opposition team countered the argument that the recent attacks were not due to a longstanding clash of values, but, rather, such events were blown out of proportion by Western media. Speaker one from the opposition team came out strong and visibly well prepared. He argued that Islamic terrorism was a media portrayal from the western world. He argued that the media presents attacks by Muslims and non-Muslims differently. On one hand, a person that is a non-Muslim is referred to as “a lone gunman with an agenda” while if it were a person of Islamic faith, they are labeled as an Islamic Jihadist terrorist. He also pointed out that there is no actual preaching of terrorism in Islamic ideology. Speaker one managed his time well and set the tone for the opposition team’s argument.

Speaker two also made some good points right from the start. He started by saying that every society will have extremist groups. He used the United States as an example in that we have groups such as the Klu Klux Klan and the Westboro Baptist Church. He reiterated the point that speaker one mentioned that when you are a Christian or other non-Muslim no one seems to bring up your religion but when a member of the Muslim
community commits an act of terror it is always mentioned that he was a Muslim, associating the words terrorism and Muslim on the news. He used a great example in the recent Paris attack where the man who committed the crime did not proclaim to be an active member of Islam but was labeled as an Islamic extremist. He offered that it may be easier for the public to understand in their minds that it was just an act of terrorism by an insane man, rather than other factors that may have caused the man to commit such a crime.

Speaker three did not use her speaking time wisely, as she spent the majority of her time explaining the history of the Gulf War and how it started. Her intentions on ulterior motives besides religious aspects was refreshing since each argument was about religion; however, she did not provide an in-depth analysis. She made the argument that these attacks were partially the fault of the United States. The adjudicating team reported that it would have liked for her to go more in depth in her argument using examples of covert operations, drone strikes, and lack of media coverage on innocent victims of the war on terror. She could have used many examples to show how the West has made living in an Islamic country occupied by Western troops hard and how they have negatively affected their livelihood.

The final speaker for the opposition team made some compelling arguments before his final conclusion. He pointed out that less than two percent of terrorist attacks on American soil have been from Islamic extremists and mentioned that there have actually been more attacks by Jews than Muslims in the country. He suggested that these attacks could be caused by the aggravation from western culture on the Islamic world rather than religious differences and noted that Islam is a peaceful religion. This aggravation comes from political insensitivity and pushing Islamic civilization over the edge to conform. While this was a great point, he merely brought it up and did not go into much depth about examples of political insensitivity. Overall, the opposition team made some good arguments, however the adjudicating team was disappointed that they, as well as the proposition team, focused too heavily on the religion and media portrayal of religion in their arguments. There was so much left out in this debate in terms of aspects of what is causing this attacks such as poverty, minority alienation by Western countries towards Muslim immigrants, social prejudice, laws that discourage exercise of religious freedom (ban of the hijab in France), drone strikes, etc.

After the debate between the proposition and opposition teams was concluded, the adjudicating team organized itself to select a winner of the debate as well as a best speaker. Following the deliberation, the adjudicating team awarded the victory to the opposition team based on their presentation and inclusion of more evidence than the proposition team. Aaron Spradlin, the final
speaker of the proposition team, was recognized as the best speaker.

In addition to the strategic and academic objectives of the first debate, a major component of the exercise was to draw on lessons learned to enhance the experience of subsequent debates. In a period of reflection immediately following the debate, participants alluded to weaknesses in both the proposition and opposition teams’ arguments, which then morphed into a discussion about broader lessons from the debate.

First, to strengthen the arguments presented by the proposition and opposition teams, teams should rely more heavily on hard evidence to streamline the process and either prove or disprove the motion. Secondly, to enhance the quality of the presentation, teams are advised to invest more time in coordination and preparation. Lack of preparation can cause fragmentation within the group and undermine the overall value of the evidence and quality of presentation during the debate. Thirdly, and as a result of coordination and planning, it may be beneficial in subsequent debates for teams to follow a linear progression for their presentation wherein clear introductory ideas and concepts are introduced first, followed by the inclusion of evidence to support the respective team’s argument(s), and concluded with a strong summation of the concepts and evidence to tie in to the motion.

More broadly, the class learned that a motion in the style of this debate is designed to present a controversial statement. The proposing team’s arguments should be directed at proving that the motion holds true while it is the mission of the opposition team to present evidence counter to the argument presented in the motion. During the class meeting following the debate, a further debrief on the debate was conducted by the course instructor with the entire class. The discussion delved into the possible strategies for both teams, touching on key arguments on the pros and cons of the motion. Certificates of award were presented to the winning opposition team and the best speaker.

Possible arguments by the proposition included the replacement of ideological struggles of the Cold War with cultural clashes primarily between dominant Western powers and Islamic states and groups; the rise in attacks carried out in Western countries as a result of self-radicalization carried out largely with the help of social media, and the emergence of home-grown terrorist groups spawned by preaching of violent extremist leaders. These new conflicts and movements are fanned by some fundamental differences between Western and Islam cultures (i.e. individualism, human rights and democracy in the West vs. communitarianism, partial human rights and theocracy in Islamic cultures). The presence of American troops in Muslim countries, notably Saudi Arabia, and perception in some quarters that US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were modern-day crusades against Islamic regimes are factors that fuel resentment of radicals and extremist leaders.

Some arguments for the opposition included the factors that have little to do with cultural clashes but the policies and economic/social situations in Western countries. Alienation, lack of assimilation, poverty and youth unemployment of a substantial and marginalized Muslim minority in Western countries may create the
conditions conducive to radicalization. The process of self-radicalization of home-grown violent extremist is also aided by the use of social media, especially by populist leaders. The growing phenomenon of self-radicalization by which people become extremists has mobilized some Western governments to take steps to counter extremist narratives and encouraging moderates to speak out against extremists and violence. However, policies aimed at assimilating minority Muslims, offering them opportunities in mainstream society and protecting them against discrimination and unfair profiling may be the longer term solutions. Dr. Tan also alluded to the fact that between 1970 and 2012, terrorist attacks on U.S. soil totaled approximately 2,400; of that, only 60 (or 2.5%) were carried out by Muslims.