

A response to Bernard-Henri Lévy

By Leslie S. Lebl, Connecticut, USA



On November 16, 2015, French public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy published a commentary in which he urges the West to acknowledge that it is at war and must call things by their right names. He subsequently argues that we must battle Islamic jihad while understanding the difference between those Muslims who worship death and those who support a peaceful, tolerant form of Islam.

It is difficult to quarrel with this concept, especially when one remembers that by far the largest number of people who have died fighting various jihadist groups have been Muslims. But, as in so many other cases, “the devil is in the detail.” Lévy’s argument suffers by failing to acknowledge or understand some of the “details.”

Distinguishing ‘moderate’ from ‘radical’ Muslims sounds easy, until you try it. For example, Lévy includes former Bosnian President Alija Izetbegović among the moderates. Yet Izetbegović’s famous *Islamic Declaration* (1970) presents a vision of Islamic triumph completely consistent with the Islamist goal of imposing traditional Islamic law, or *sharia*, in Western countries. It argues that Muslims living in a non-Muslim majority country should play by the rules of that country—until they are strong enough to overthrow the system and install an Islamic government. The Declaration has been dismissed as a youthful folly, yet Izetbegović distributed it to Bosniac troops during the 1990s war, suggesting that it still reflected his thinking – as did other actions promoting Islamism and *jihad* taken while he was in office.[i]

A number of people, including Adolf Hitler, perceived similarities between Islam and Nazism, but it does not help to charge that Nazism is a form of Islamism, as does Lévy while citing French poet, dramatist and diplomat Paul Claudel, a well known Catholic at the time. This trivializes Nazism as just another form of Islamism. From a historical perspective, this is an extremely difficult argument to make, in view of all the other sources of Nazism much closer to home. Nor does it help promote understanding in today's world, where the word "fascism" is tossed about with abandon. Applying it to the terrorist groups attacking the West does little to focus our thinking. Nor does Levy's explanation address the much more pressing and painful fact that Islamism has, since World War II, poisoned the Muslim world with its genocidal hatred of Jews, the Jewish state of Israel and the Western way of life. Today, Arabic translations of *Mein Kampf* and *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are available in just about any bookstore, and stories like those told by Robert Satloff of Arabs saving Jews during World War II appear hopelessly remote.[iii] Yes, Arabs in the Middle East can argue that they had nothing to do with the Holocaust, but they cannot simultaneously proclaim their admiration for Nazism while claiming moral superiority.

Lévy is also wrong when he states that the "real source of this flood of horror" is the Islamic State. Islamic State may have carried out the latest attacks, and be our most significant threat right now, but it is only following in the well-established tradition of other groups like Al Qaeda and the Algerian GIS. Nor is it the bloodiest or most murderous group today: that honor belongs rather to Boko Haram.

The problem is not the group but the ideology, which all these terrorist organizations share with the so-called "nonviolent" Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, whom Lévy seems to ignore. All of them want to establish a global Caliphate under sharia, but the "nonviolent" groups believe it is easier and more efficacious to do so without violence. Former U.S.

President George W. Bush was indeed wrong to declare a “War on Terror” when what threatens the West is not a tactic but an ideology. Banning hate preachers is fine but will achieve little as long as groups like the Brotherhood, posing as friends of Western democracy, laws and values, in fact act as a Fifth Column (as did Nazi groups, as Lévy notes). Recent events in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere have revealed the Brotherhood’s true face, but Lévy seems to ignore these revelations. Unfortunately, however, the Brotherhood’s presence throughout Western Muslim communities, and its ability to poison traditional Islam, make the problem of isolating our true enemies much more difficult than Lévy imagines.

[i] For more details, see Leslie S. Lebl, *Islamism and Security in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Strategic Studies Institute, May 2014, pp. 20–26.

[ii] Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust’s Long Reach into Arab Lands* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006).

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