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## ***Why Sweden?***

The news of suicide bombing on Saturday has shocked everyone. I was boarding the train at the Central station for returning to Göteborg after attending the Nobel Prize Award ceremony previous night in Stockholm, when this happened. I got a frantic call from my wife in the US, who had just then seen the news on Yahoo and had freaked out, because she knew I was in Stockholm at that time. It all appears so surreal and one question that everybody is asking is: *why Sweden?*

A few years ago, in his broadcast timed to coincide with the US Presidential election in 2004, Osama bin Laden had laconically remarked, "If it was freedom they were against, al-Qaeda would have attacked Sweden."

Ironically, on Saturday afternoon Sweden eventually became the victim of one of the ideologues of Bin Laden's vengeful militancy. Acting alone, Taimour Abdulwahab –an Iraqi immigrant and naturalized Swede - struck Stockholm's idyllic innocence, blowing up his car and himself. Even though there were no other casualties in terms of human life, one shudders to even imagine that the eve of his 29<sup>th</sup> birthday eerily coincided with his death. Eighteen years is a long time to nurse grudge and cultivate perpetual hatred for a place and people that welcomed you with open arms. A new branch of psychiatry needs to be opened and explored to understand the mindset of such dark personalities.

This was a lone act, thankfully without much damage. Had it been successful, it would have caused carnage of unimagined proportions during the festive season. It was no less barbaric though, as it succeeded in painting Islam once again as a monster religion hell-bent on causing destruction, particularly in the West. As the pages from the life of Taimour in Tranås (Sweden) and Luton (England) are unfolding, it is unfathomable that a married man with three children could be driven to such level of blind fanaticism.

Nine years ago on a crisp, beautiful, soft and sunny autumn morning, the innocence of humanity we all knew and took for granted, was struck on September 11, when a horrendous tragedy was perpetrated in the name of Islam on the American soil. Nine years later, the wounds are still bleeding, the scars are still fresh and the anger is still seething. Nine years ago, we thought American people and institutions were the sole victims of that attack. Nine years later, we know Islam also was the target. That day, we surmised that planes were hijacked, buildings were rammed into and innocent people were killed. Today we know, a storied faith was molested and its 1.6 billion followers became pariahs and ostracized for as long as it takes for the fog of ignorance and disbelief to lift.

For me as a Muslim, the very fabric of the faith which taught me the sanctity of life and what constitutes its decorum was torn on that day. Life is holy in all religions; it takes a person of ignoble misunderstanding and instability to advocate or perform violence against it. The morality and integrity of a people as a whole are vital in dealing with all people. Qur'an exhorted Muhammad to tell Muslims: "Come, I will rehearse what God has really prohibited you from: take not life, which God has made sacred, except by the way of justice and law; thus does He command you that you may learn wisdom" (4:151). Islam categorically forbids Muslims from taking life in a cowardly and unjust way - their own or those of others. The precepts of my religion, my way of life uphold this.

But when events like that of December 11 in Stockholm occur, no explanation, no apology would do. Yet, while I learned with total disbelief the swift unfolding of this ruthless act, I was longing for signs of condemnation from the Muslim community in an around Stockholm and beyond. Brief written statement from the imam of the Södermalm mosque is not enough. By now, Muslims should be on the streets shrieking strongest condemnation at the top of their lungs for this act by one of their own.

The silence of Muslims in Swedish community would send wrong message, making their neighbors angry, co-workers suspicious, and, acquaintances and friends, disillusioned. Saturday's event proves that some sections of Muslim community, no matter how small, are on the path of destruction - self and otherwise, despite the vehement denial by their community elders.

Al-Qaeda might have been weakened collectively, but apparently it has been slowly but steadily succeeding in poisoning the minds of the Muslim youth – one at a time. This supply chain must be cut at the very central artery. No material and technical sophistication or eavesdropping, no coalition of the willing, no unmanned drones and no cells at Guantanamo will be able to destroy or deter the new crop of zealous doctrinaires. Why? Because, Muslim youths are being infected with twisted thoughts and are being fed distorted version of their faith. There is no benignity about this cancer. *Physician, heal thyself!* Muslims alone would have to muster the courage to stand up and destroy it.

It is well-agreed that what Al-Qaeda stands for and what it strives to achieve is a response, primarily to the excesses and somewhat double standards of Western foreign policy in relation to the 'world of Muslims' – not necessarily the 'world of Islam'.

During the past 3 months of my stay in Sweden, I have found Swedes to be open, gentle, supportive, helpful, and least bothered about or biased towards others' belief system. It is also by far, the most tolerant country in Europe towards Muslims. Her ready acceptance of large contingents of immigrants from predominantly Muslim lands is a testimony of that.

Majority of Muslims are peace-loving law-abiding citizens, caring, respectful and compassionate neighbors all across the globe. My plea to the Swedish people and its leaders is that their future approach towards Muslims in Sweden, should not be dictated by this and other such sporadic acts of violence. Al-Qaeda and its cohorts may be inspired by the foggy misinterpretation of Islam by its leaders, but it is not a religious organization. In fact, what it has done, is doing and plans to do in future is everything Islam abhors and stands against. To defeat this demon, all Swedes – Muslims included - must come together. They must resolve to understand the dynamics of its evil fangs and stand against its outlook of the world affair.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the American-Muslims have forged strong alliance with the US officials in being vigilant and safeguarding our communities, neighbors and the homeland. It is not a choice: it is incumbent upon us as the adherents of Islamic faith. In the light of what happened on Saturday in Stockholm, no less is expected of Muslims who call Sweden home. As a country that takes 'no side in conflicts' Sweden could be a catalyst to building bridges of understanding, thus defeating the radicalization within its borders as well as in Europe at large.