

Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research

What “Allahu Akbar” Really Means

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I'll never forget the day a US army veteran who had fought in Iraq embraced Islam at my former mosque in New Orleans. He arrived in his full uniform, and was overcome with emotion when he heard the congregation shout "*Allahu Akbar*" after he uttered the Islamic declaration of faith.

The army veteran never thought that the words that had terrified him in Iraq would be the very same that would welcome him to his new faith. They are words that he now uses in prayer.

Contrary to what many people seem to think, the words "Allahu Akbar" simply mean "God is greater." It is a powerful declaration used by Muslims on many occasions and in many prayers. It is a celebration of life, the first words fathers whisper in the ears of their newborns. They are used to indicate gratitude when God bestows something upon you that you would have been incapable of attaining were it not for divine benevolence. It is a prayerful phrase that reminds us that, no matter what our concerns may be, God is greater than them.

Worshippers at a mosque in Quebec [reportedly heard the phrase "Allahu Akhbar,"](#) the very phrase they recite in morning prayers, uttered by their white supremacist attacker just before he opened fire and killed six Muslims this January. And Muslims at a mosque in Minnesota were reciting "Allahu Akbar" during their morning prayers when their mosque was [firebombed this August](#).

Is "Allahu Akbar" [sometimes used as a battle cry](#)? Yes, though as Sen. John McCain [has argued on Fox News](#), that does not make the phrase itself abhorrent. While noting that "moderate Muslims" also say "Allahu Akbar," McCain said the phrase is no more troubling than a Christian saying "Thank God."

But the way "Allahu Akbar" often appears in the media seems to serve a nefarious agenda: to instill fear of anyone who utters the phrase and to raise concerns even about Islam itself. But a lone terrorist who shouts "Allahu Akbar" while murdering innocent people in the streets of New York does not get to own that term. Nor do

those who declare that no further details are needed to determine motive once a man with a Muslim-sounding name perpetrates an attack using those words.

As Hassan Shibly, executive director of CAIR-Florida, [said in response](#) to the recent terror attack in New York, "That is the biggest act of heresy to shout God's glorious name when committing the worst crime against God."

Though these words that are used to celebrate life also sometimes accompany horrific acts, this is not a new phenomenon.

Of the greatest ironies noted by the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), was the birth and death of Abdullah Ibn Az Zubayr.

Abdullah Ibn Az Zubayr was the first child born in the Muslim community after they had migrated to Medina from Mecca to escape persecution.

Some residents of Medina told Muslims that they had placed a spell on them that would prevent them from having children. When Abdullah was born, his grandfather Abu Bakr carried him through the streets as the crowd happily chanted "Allahu Akbar."

When Abdullah was murdered by another group of Muslims as he stood for justice in Mecca, his murderers also chanted "Allahu Akbar."

As one witness said, "I was there the day Abdullah was born, and I am here the day he has died, and I heard those who said Allahu Akbar the day he was born and I heard those who have said Allahu Akbar the day he has died, and I swear by Allah those who said Allahu Akbar the day when he was born were far greater than those who have said Allahu Akbar today!"

While those who killed Abdullah used the same words as those who celebrated his birth, only one group truly honored the greatness of God. They are the ones who get to own the term: those who live in a way that celebrates the greatness of God by obeying his commands and serving his creation, [not those who flout those commands and attack his creation unjustly.](#)

We mustn't allow terrorists or agendas of fear to own any of the words, concepts, or devotions found in the sacred text of a quarter of the world's population. That would give them exactly what they want. And God is far greater than the ugliness committed in His name. "Allahu Akbar..."

Read more:

[Is Islam a Death Cult? Martyrdom and the American-Muslim Imagination](#) by Dr. Jonathan A. C. Brown

[War, Islam, and the Sanctity of Life: Non-Aggression in the Islamic Code of Combat](#) by Hassan Shibly

[Forever on Trial: Islam and the Charge of Violence](#) by Dr. Nazir Khan

[Jihad as Defense: Just-War Theory in the Quran and Sunnah](#) by Justin Parrott