



Reflections on Fort Hood

by James Zogby
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"In our media age, where news is omnipresent and instantaneous, we don't just read about stories as detached observers, we live them. We become caught up in unfolding dramas with each new morsel of information becoming "breaking news", and the subject of endless commentary. As a result, more than being just a story, a crisis becomes an event in which we become participants. It draws us in directly and drives our emotions."

I landed in London at 6:30 am (GMT) and turned on my Blackberry to find it flooded with emails sent while I had been in the air, flying home from the Middle East. Looking at just the "sender" and "subject" lines, I observed that some were "news alerts", others came from various members of my staff at the Arab American Institute in Washington. The last group included statements and press releases issued by other Arab American and American Muslim organizations.

My curiosity piqued, I commenced reading these emails in the order they had been received. The "news alerts" began mid-afternoon providing, at first, just the bare outlines of the horrible murders of what was thought to be 12 military personnel at Fort Hood, Texas. Reading on, the story unfolded with new details emerging and erroneous early reports corrected as facts became known. Early on, for example, I read that there were thought to be three shooters, before it was established that there was just one. At one point there was a report that the lone shooter was a Muslim, possibly a convert, and that he had been killed. Only later was the killer's identity established and it became clear that he is an Arab American 39 year old Army Major. He is Jordanian-Palestinian, born in the US. It was also established that he is a psychiatrist counseling returning soldiers from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Next came a flurry of missives from my staff writing to me or to each other, copying me, reporting on their handling of this crisis and what they were hearing from

reporters who were calling for reactions or from the community seeking guidance. (The earliest of these was sent at 8 pm EST, the last after 3 am). My first reaction to this particular set of emails was a pang of guilt. My current staff, though extraordinarily talented and dedicated, is quite new — new enough not to have been on board when we last faced similar crises. I know the pressure they are under dealing with demands from all sides: statements needing to be prepared, as do talking points for community leaders around the country, and they would need to put in place mechanisms to deal with the hate or threats that might come (one such call, I learned, had already come into the office shortly after 6 pm), and much more.

Though I wanted to be with them, to provide whatever guidance I could, as I continued to read their emails, I found that, for the most part, they had the complex demands of this situation well in hand. Since some had sent questions to me (not knowing when I would get them, or whether I would be able to respond in time), I used my wait in the airport lounge to give my best advice on next steps: what a follow-up statement might include; what messages to avoid (I noted that among the emails I had received were statements for some other groups with headlines condemning the killings and warning against anti-Arab or anti-Muslim backlash. My advice was “don’t go there”. This is not about us right now, it’s about the victims and the pain of their families. If it were to be about anyone or anything else, it shouldn’t be about the potential this horrible act poses to Arab or Muslim American groups. Rather concern should be shown for the challenges all this will pose for the thousands of patriotic Arab Americans currently serving with distinction in the US military, some of whom, may now unfairly be targets of suspicion.); how to log and deal with threats should they come, and who should do what before I return.

In the more than three decades I have been engaged in this work with my community, we’ve weathered many storms — from hijackings and terrorist acts (some of which were perpetrated by Arabs, while in other cases there was a rush to judgment wrongly accusing Arabs) to wars, some involving our country fighting in the Middle East, others involving Israel, but with our political leaders and many in the media behaving as cheerleaders. In each of these instances we’ve had to face down challenges.

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I have been here before, riding this rollercoaster — forced to live these stories but wondering what it would be like to just watch them: to be able to just mourn the senseless loss of life without having to look over my shoulder because someone holds my community responsible and may strike out, or at least create fear by threatening violence. To not have to, as one of my staff members wrote in an email “hold my breath and pray that it’s not an Arab involved” — because we know that if it is some may hold us all responsible.

Of course, what was different this time was that I learned about all of this from afar, feeling it unfold while reading about it on my Blackberry in the London Airport lounge. I then boarded a plane, lost in reflection about the trauma and the fear that captured so many, and wrote about this all the way home knowing that once back I would, no doubt, become a participant once again in wherever the unfolding story would be upon my arrival.

Source:

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