

What Does “Allahu Akbar” Mean?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Mert Ney, the convert to Islam in Australia who recently went on a stabbing spree, shouted, as jihadis invariably do, “Allahu akbar.” And just as invariably, in the Western world these two words were translated in two different ways, both of them incorrect. [Robert Spencer dealt with the proper translation of this phrase](#) several years ago, so I am merely following his lead in contributing my own astonished mite, that even now, nowhere does one find this Arabic phrase’s meaning accurately conveyed.

According to [Agencia EFE](#), “while being chased in the streets of the Sydney Central Business District during his Tuesday

rampage, Ney shouted 'Shoot me in the (expletive) head!' followed by 'Allahu akbar' ('God is greatest' in Arabic).” Also, if you search for BBC stories about other Muslim killers, “Allahu akbar” is always translated as “God is greatest.” It’s the BBC house style, apparently.

[The Australian](#) goes with a second alternative, in more-in-sadness-than-in-anger mode: “As he lunged at office workers, the man shouted ‘Allahu akbar!’ – God is Great, probably the best known Arabic phrase in the West; the sublime poetic tradition of that language is sadly obscured.” The American newspaper of record, the New York Times, always goes with “God is great,” as does its rival, the Washington Post.

After another jihadi, Cherif Cherkatt, opened fire at the Strasbourg Christmas Market last December, CNN offered still a third alternative: “ A gunman who opened fire near a popular Christmas market in the French city of Strasbourg shouted the Arabic phrase ‘Allahu Akbar,’ meaning ‘God is greater,’ at the time of the attack and was also carrying a knife, a Paris prosecutor said Wednesday.” For CNN’s reporters, it’s always “God is greater.”

In an increasing number of papers, they often get around the problem by not bothering to translate “Allahu akbar” at all. They leave it in Arabic, and let the reader decide for himself what that phrase means. But that’s a dereliction of duty. It’s the journalist’s job to make the meaning of important foreign phrases clear. And “Allahu akbar” is, when used by jihadis, a very important phrase indeed.

The Daily Mail is one of those that no longer bothers to offer a translation: “A woman has allegedly shouted ‘Allahu akbar’ before stabbing two people with a box cutter in a supermarket in southern France.”

Le Monde and *Le Figaro* and *The Times* (London) and *The Telegraph* are among the many leading papers that do not

translate the phrase. Perhaps their reporters realized that there was something not quite right about each of the three versions on offer (God Is Great, God Is Greater, God Is Greatest), but weren't sure what to do about it, and decided not to translate the phrase at all. Anyway, we all know what the phrase means – don't we? No.

"God is Great" is the least disturbing of the three off-the-rack translations of the Arabic phrase. For Believers in one of "the three great monotheisms," that's just a statement of fact: God Is Great. What Believer would disagree? No comparisons, invidious or otherwise, are being made.

"Allahu akbar" can be used in a wide variety of ways. It may have nothing to do with Jihad, but be an expression of fatalism, or dismay, or astonishment, or pleasure: That maple tree collapsed in a storm and smashed in the roof. *Allahu akbar*. I failed my driving test. *Allahu akbar*. The stock market went down 700 points this morning. *Allahu akbar*. He won the lottery. *Allahu akbar*. I'm taking early retirement and going to sail to the Galapagos. *Allahu akbar*. Or it might be a way to express appreciation of various kinds: Just look at Gisele Bundchen on the cover of *Vogue*. *Allahu akbar*. Or: Your grandchildren are so darling. *Allahu akbar*.

But none of those expressions – of fatalism, dismay, pleasure, appreciation, etc. – have anything to do with what "Allahu akbar" means when it is uttered by jihadis. It's what Mohammad Atta intended to say when, in a letter to himself, he wrote of his intention to utter "Allahu akbar" on the plane he would commandeer, as a terrifying war cry, sure to "strike terror" in the hearts of the Infidel passengers. It's what Major Nidal Hasan yelled when he killed 13 of his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood. It's what Said and Cherif Kouachi shouted as they murdered the staff at Charlie Hebdo. It's what the Muslim who rammed his truck into pedestrians in Nice shouted. It's what the terrorists who shot up the Bataclan nightclub yelled. It's what the killers of Drummer Lee Rigby kept repeating, as they

first ran him down and then dismembered him with knives.

When shouted just before, or while committing, or just after committing, a violent act against Infidels, the context tells us that "Allahu akbar" must be understood as a war cry, a supremacist or triumphalist exclamation. We can terrorize, we can defeat you, the Infidels. Grammatically, it means "Our God is greater." Greater than what? is the obvious question. Semantically, to properly convey its meaning, it has to be translated by adding a few additional words: "Our God is greater than your God," or "Our God is greater than anything you can think of."

Why is it that the New York Times and the Washington Post and the Guardian, when they bother to english it at all, continue to translate "Allahu akbar" as "God is great"? Why does the BBC stick with "God is greatest"? And why can't the Western media that, with "God is greater," come the closest to what the phrase means, convey the proper meaning by adding a few words: "Our God is greater than your God"? It could reflect ignorance: they just don't know what the phrase, when used by jihadis, means. Or it could reflect a deliberate desire not to convey the true meaning of the phrase, with its obvious supremacism that can only harden hearts and minds against Muslims. And that, of course, would never do.

Now supposing some intelligent journalists – even at the Times, even at the Post – are willing to concede that the best way to translate the phrase "Allahu akbar" is "Our God is greater than your God." But they are faced with doubters, who insist that that translation is too long and too unwieldy for a newspaper article. Just think, they say, of how it would read: "Mert Ney shouted 'Allahu akbar' ('Our God is greater than your God') as he stabbed random people in Sydney." Or imagine someone on the radio saying it: "Said Kouachi shouted 'Allahu akbar' ('Our God is greater than your God') as he ran from the office of Charlie Hebdo." It could be rejected for its length alone. There is a simple way to convey the meaning

of “Allahu akbar,” without having to add all those words. That is to begin with the possessive pronoun: “*Our* God is greater.” The “Our” is in obvious opposition to the unstated “Your.” And the triumphalist essence of “Allahu akbar,” when a jihadi uses the phrase – “Our God is greater than Your God” – is properly conveyed.

First published in