

SAM HARRIS

THE BLOG

Reply to Robert Spencer

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Over at *Frontpage Magazine* and *Jihad Watch*, Robert Spencer has published an essay titled [?Sam Harris and the Collapse of the Counter-Jihad Left: A Failure of Nerve.?](#) Here is my brief response:

Robert?

I'm sorry to say that your career as a mind reader is off to a poor start. In fact, almost every claim you make about me in your essay is false. Allow me to clarify a few points:

1. I didn't oppose Trump because I've gone soft on Islam. I opposed him because I believe he is an ignoramus, a con man, and a malignantly selfish and unethical person. I'm now in the uncomfortable position of hoping I'm wrong.
2. I didn't support Clinton because I've gone soft on Islam. I supported her?despite her countless flaws?because I judged her to be preferable to Trump. In fact, one reason I supported Clinton is that I thought she would act *more aggressively*

against jihadists than Trump would. (You may recall that many Trump supporters, and even Trump himself, derided Clinton as a warmonger and worried that she would entangle us in further conflicts in the Middle East.) Of course, you may disagree with that assessment. You may even believe that killing jihadists isn't the best way to frustrate their aims. These are fair points to debate. But I hope you will concede that my actual reasons for voting as I did (however misguided you may consider them) contradict what you have written about me.

3. Regarding Clinton's public statements about Islam, and the money her foundation took from Islamist theocrats, I'm not aware of anyone who has criticized her more pointedly than I have. But (to turn this new cliché about Trump supporters around) I took Clinton "seriously but not literally" when she spoke about the war on terror. And I know, as you surely do, that she wouldn't have trained her drones on the Amish. Despite Clinton's obscurantism about Islam, I believe she understands that 100 percent of jihadists are Muslim. As you know, it's possible to speak honestly about this state of affairs without being a bigot. In fact, I wrote a section of a speech that I thought Clinton ought to give, spelling out the link between Islamic doctrine and Muslim violence while disavowing bigotry:

<https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/what-hillary-clinton-should-say-about-islam-and-the-war-on-terror>

Needless to say, she didn't take my advice. The point, however, is that I expected her to *agree* with what I wrote there. And for that reason I found her habit of dissembling about the religious roots of jihadism as galling as you did. As for my views about Muslim immigration, they are detailed in that speech. Once again, you may want to debate my reasoning, but please don't question my motives. I oppose Islamism and jihadism as much as you do.

4. Although I cover many other topics in my work, I believe I have discussed the religious roots of jihadism as clearly as anyone has—and the book I wrote with Maajid Nawaz is no exception. If you think I've experienced a "failure of nerve" since Maajid and I wrote *Islam and the Future of Tolerance*, I invite you or any of your readers to find fault with my most recent statements on the topic. For instance:

<https://www.samharris.org/podcast/item/what-do-jihadists-really-want>

5. As for Keith Ellison, the only time I've mentioned him was in 2011. My remarks can be found here, and I suspect you will agree with them:

<https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/honesty-the-muslim-worlds-scarcest-resource>

I confess that I haven't followed what Ellison has said since. Perhaps he has spoken with greater candor about Islam in recent years, and perhaps he hasn't. Maajid didn't consult me before endorsing Ellison to head the DNC, and I'll leave him to discuss his thinking on that point. I can say one thing to a moral certainty, however: Maajid is no longer an Islamist. In fact, he is one of the bravest opponents of Islamism I know. He is also a tireless critic of identity politics as practiced by CAIR and similar groups. I'm confident that if Ellison turns out to be just another shady liar like Reza Aslan or Dalia Mogahed, Maajid will disavow him.

We each have a unique role to play in this war of ideas, Robert. And it would be only decent of you to recognize that Maajid has a harder job than either of us. In fact, the task he has set himself—to inspire a true commitment to secularism and liberal values throughout the Muslim world—may prove impossible. But the alternative is grim. I recommend that you stop questioning Maajid’s motives and give him your support—even if, for obvious reasons, he can’t afford to return the favor.

No doubt there is more to be said, but this short note will have to suffice for the time being. I invite you to publish it wherever you want. Perhaps it will clear up some confusion.

Sincerely,

Sam Harris

Notes

Find this article online at: <https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/reply-to-robert-spencer>