

What are the consequences of the notion of "Islamist terrorism"?

Written by Harriet Fildes

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HARRIET FILDES, MAR 3 2011

Critically assess the nature and consequences of the notion of 'Islamic' or 'Islamist terrorism' specifically, and 'religious terrorism' more broadly.

"A new type of terrorism threatens the world"[1]

The 'new world order' which developed in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, has led to countless revisionist attempts to explain the divide between the supposedly secular and modern West and the 'barbaric' and religious Middle East dominating the study of International Relations[2]. Western discourses on religion are saturated with inherent negative connotations of terrorism and violence. Some Middle Eastern rhetoric is also dominated by civilizational framing and religiosity, particularly in the communiqués and manifestoes of self-consciously ideologically organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Due to the extensive and inexhaustible material available on this subject it has proved pragmatic to concentrate on a specific set of notions or conceptions of Islamic terrorism. As such, this essay will be focussing overtly on Western representations and perceptions in the media and academia. A single all encompassing, unproblematic definition of 'terrorism' does not exist, nor is there any one interpretation of what is meant by 'Islamic' or 'religious.' However, a definition by nature is a form of representation; therefore a variety of definitions and interpretations must be employed throughout. By doing so, this essay will attempt to decode the current epistemology of power and wider assumptions about the fissure between East and West which lead to the construction of knowledge about Islam as an enduring threat to the West[3]. By contrasting this debate within the broader framework of critical analysis of religion I intend to prove that political myth-making has been used to amplify the Islamic threat for the benefit of the terrorism industry, Western governments and Hollywood.

"It is one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses come to be identified and constituted as individuals."

This essay will utilize discourse analysis throughout in order to better understand the variable representations and evaluations of the Islamic 'Other.' Foucault provides a comprehensive insight into the applicability of this kind of analysis; 'Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But... since all social practices entail meaning and meanings shape and influence what we do, our conduct, all practices have a discursive aspect.'[4] There are three main discourses prevalent in post 9/11 narratives; they are ethnocentric, domination and demonisation discourses[5]. These three discourses act as one to construct 'knowledge' or 'truth' in a Foucauldian sense. They corroborate to institutionalise particular sets of social values and cultural preferences. Combined, they are capable of forming an ideological hegemonic narrative based on segregation, Othering and purposeful misrepresentation. Foucault's conceptualisation of power and conflict in domination can also be applied to ethnocentric study of Islamic terrorism, particularly regarding the global response to it. For Foucault, violence and securitisation dominate the political realm. This is embodied by ethnocentric discourse, in its construction of the

What are the consequences of the notion of "Islamist terrorism"?

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nation or self as the fundamental entity where anything other than that becomes separate, unknown and inferior.

'They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.[6]'

There is a causal link between media representations and public perceptions of the Islamic faith. To understand this causality and how discourse and rhetoric are instrumental when presenting a comprehensive analysis of the 'terrorist' subject, a critical reflection of what constitutes representation is necessary. Representations offered by the media are a construction of reality based on their subjective perception of it. The media informs public opinion and that in turn affects policy making. The cyclic nature of the subject matter means that although representations may appear stagnant, they are, in their nature, a reflection of the dominant hegemonic position and as such should evolve as we do. When analysing texts it is crucial to assess where they are coming from and who they are directed at, essentially, who is the author and who are the audience. This interchange of information can be examined by recognising the naturalised codes inbuilt by the author which transform into normative perceptions when decoded and accepted by the audience. This is important as when terms such as 'Islamic terrorist' are used there are inherent connotations and meanings which consolidate dominant ideologues, reflecting the hegemonic position on religion, race, ethnicity and violence which enable the audience to make their preferred reading of the subject matter.[7] Public debate and broadcast are fraught with encoded religious terminology such as Jihad and Hijab, and it is assumed that the audience are able to decode them. This is a dangerous assumption as the reader is encouraged to make an implicit connection between religious terminology and terrorism which has repercussions for moderate Muslims. Polarised representations show the enormous impact that interpretation and manipulation of truth have on people's perceptions of events, terminology and individuals. Jan Mohamed terms this creation of binary and infallible discursive opposition constructing the Muslim 'Other' as the Manichean allegory.

'The basic tenants of neo-Orientalism are universalised.[8]'

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, discourse has been dominated by Orientalist and essentialist understandings, promoted by government funded academia and media analysis. The 'knowledge' or 'truth' resulting from this was adeptly manipulated to support foreign policy objectives. 'Truth' in this sense relates to Said's critique of Orientalism, in which the Islamic 'other' is created as a negative ideograph of the West and maintained by the dominant political power, capable of constructing its own realities and 'knowledge.' The classification of Islamic groups as 'terrorist' is a form of Orientalism as inbuilt 'knowledge' about the word and what it denotes means that, as irrational, religious fanatics, they cannot be negotiated with. This is accepted as knowledge by many prominent scholars in the field, one of whom suggests that; 'appeasing al-Qaeda is difficult in theory and impossible in practice' due to their Islamic foundations.[9] The classification of terrorist actors in this way, as static, total spoilers[10] who are incapable of rational decision making prescribes to the Orientalism thesis and according to Hall's definition, is a reflection of 'symbolic power[11]' which results in specific policy recommendations regarding counter-terrorism and non-negotiation based on the hegemonic stand point. By removing this classification and the connotations inherent, negotiation and other arenas of diplomacy become available to the terrorist actor. This legitimisation allows terrorists to use non-violent political channels to transform society; a successful strategy in Northern Ireland with the IRA, who at the time were framed religiously and stereotypically depicted in a similarly destructive way to Islamists. The prevalence of an inflated Islamic threat based on Islamophobia obscures the arguably far greater domestic threat of violent extremist anti-abortion groups such as Army of God who have murdered civilians, bombed clinics and used arson as an expression of their religious values. Their religious rhetoric is remarkably similar to that of Islamic terrorists, yet academic discussion on the domestic threat they pose is non-existent. This serves as an example that religion as an entity to be feared from a Western conceptualisation, only exists about Islam.

"We believe in equality, liberty, and the sacredness of human life—they do not. We believe in modernity, they live and preach the ideas of a dark age[12]."

Although the news is motivated by geopolitical and socio-economic considerations, encoders are influenced heavily by Orientalism, prevalent in the literature which defines this subject, and as such ascertains the frameworks in which it is currently interpreted. Demonizing monologues have been promoted and utilized by the West not only to legitimise illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and economic sanctions, but also to justify the declaration of a state of exception,

What are the consequences of the notion of "Islamist terrorism"?

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as theorised by Schmitt. Hypothetically this served to release the Bush administration from the binding ties of international law and public opinion in terms of the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo bay. Racism is inherent in this kind of discourse; it is prevalent throughout the religious rhetoric and civilizational framing of the conflict. Berlusconi's argument that 'We should be conscious of the superiority of our civilization,'[13] embodies how the West perceives the East and this is mirrored in our framing and understanding of Islamic terrorism. However, the Vatican's immovable stance of the use of contraception is arguably more dangerous than all Islamic terrorist groups combined. It has facilitated the spread of the HIV/Aids pandemic in areas of sub-Saharan Africa, and as a direct consequence of this, taken millions of lives.[14] This can be characterized as ethnic and cultural subjugation as a tactic of religiously motivated domination and oppression, also shown by the prevalence of 'femicides' in Latin America[15]. Although this is not terrorism as understood by the traditional definition of the subject, these examples provide an insight into the dangerous nature of any kind of extremism, and into how, we in the West, choose to focus on the existential threat of Islamism rather than deal with our own ambiguous attitude towards the value of human life. The need to represent Islam in this way is connected to hegemony as a strategic tool. The construction of the Muslim 'other' serves to maintain and control neo-colonial and imperial economic and political domination. This is evident in both actions taken before and during the Iraq war and in America's foreign policy towards Palestine. The representation of an entire group of people as 'terrorist' or 'Islamist' is never more prevalent than it is in Palestine.

'Foxes who evolved gradually to become snakes and scorpions.'^[16]

Dehumanization discourses and ideological representations are employed effectively as a tool of Israeli propaganda, emphasized and supported by governmental statements, for example the above quote from Nissim Dahan's demonizing the worshippers in the al Aqsa Mosque. This kind of animalistic representation of Islamic terrorism is now common place and serves to both further dehumanization and perpetuate the use of extreme, systematic violence against them. These can be seen as condonable by the public once sympathy for the subject has been methodically destroyed. This can be shown in Israel's use of state terrorism in retaliation to the Munich hostage situation. They too framed their response within the realm of religious discourse, naming one of their operations 'Wrath of God.' The state of Israel has used strategies against Palestinian terrorists and civilians alike, which by most definitions, can be described as state terrorism[17]. Assassinations, inhumane treatment of detainees and unlawful civilian bombings have dominated Palestinian life since 1967, however due to Israel's status as an island of secular democracy in the Middle East; their religious motivations remain largely unquestioned. Due to the dominant stereotypes, Hamas is classified by its militant wing, the Al-Quassam Brigades, and not by its Da'wa activities and the myriad of charities and social welfare programs it has implemented. This is one of the many consequences of the early 'Arab mind' narrative which has evolved into the 'terrorist' imaginary, in which collectively, Palestinians are categorized as Islamic terrorists or fundamentalists. This is not due to the actions of resistance movements but due to the use of propaganda as a political tool by the dominant hegemonic actors in the region.

"The present terrorism on the part of the Arab and Muslim world is Islamic in nature."[18]

The construction of Islamic terrorism as a new and greater threat than other terrorism relies upon two main narratives. That Arab or Islamic terrorists are psychologically impaired in some way, thus more susceptible to radicalisation and extremism, and that, as uneducated and sexually repressed young men, they are subject to propaganda and anti-Western rhetoric. This undermines the political agency of Islamic terrorists, as violent acts which are meant as a way to combat adverse socio-economic conditions are reduced to individual expressions of abnormality, hatred or sexual repression. These theories can be disproved on many accounts and Hamas's activists can provide crucial evidence of this. The majority of Hamas's elite are educated, secular professionals who may utilize religious rhetoric to present the conflict within the wider framework of religious values[19]; however, they conduct most of their resistance within the wider framework of a nationalist battle for self-determination and preservation.[20] The existence of female suicide bombers in the organisation since Wafa Idris detonated a bomb in Jerusalem in 2002 serves to combat the representation of Islamic terrorists as young, uneducated, easily brainwashed men who hope to sate their sexual needs through martyrdom. As such, Juergensmeyer's assertion that martyrs 'expect that the blasts that kill them will propel them to a bed in heaven where the most delicious acts of sexual consummation will be theirs for the taking' can be classified as Orientalist and therefore unhelpful in understanding the realities of Islamic terrorism. This kind of discourse is nevertheless supported by popular cultural

What are the consequences of the notion of "Islamist terrorism"?

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representations.

"Islam, particularly, comes in for unjust treatment"[21]

Discourses on Islamic terrorism have evolved dramatically since September 11, 2001 and a somewhat medieval Malthusian approach of 'blaming the victim'[22] has been adopted. This is particularly important in terms of how we understand and perceive Islamists and Muslims; as overall, it can be argued that the masses do not differentiate between the two. This can be shown in the rise of hate crimes in the UK since September 11, last year alone there were 260,000 racially or religiously motivated hate crimes in the UK.[23] The issue of identity cards was raised soon after 9/11 which was directly related to the issue of immigration by The Sun, therefore encouraging audience associations of Muslims and terrorists[24]. Once again this is arguably a result of decades of racist imagery permeating and resonating in people's minds, affecting their ability to distinguish between an Islamic terrorist and an innocent civilian[25]. Immigration policies and public opinion on the matter have been adversely affected by these kinds of discourses. The credibility of these new representations and characteristics is debatable, and negligible regarding the development of neo-Orientalism. The historical image of Arabs as intolerant, backward and violent is still dominant in Hollywood, in fact, besides the improved production values there is little difference in the representation of Islamic terrorists in 'The Delta Force' (1986) and 'Rules of Engagement' (2000). The constant reproduction of explicit and implicit connections between the Islamic faith and terrorism is destructive to relations between Western countries and the Middle East. The call to prayer now denotes a more sinister tone than actual imagery of bombs and guns, inevitably in mainstream cinema, the latter is the natural progression from the former. "Such scenarios are common fare." [26]

***'Racist imagery and 'terrorist' or 'Arab mind' labels serve as powerful images of a non-civilized Other.'*[27]**

To understand the consequences of the aforementioned theories and dominant assumptions about Islam, Muslims and the Middle East, an analysis of where they derive from is necessary. Negative stereotypes and representations are created. By analysing how this happens and examining the purpose they serve it becomes possible to critically assess how they preserve and expand the current climate of fear, mistrust and propaganda. By examining the inimical use of language and rhetoric within media portrayals of Islam the implicit connections between Islam and endemic violence, religion and irrationality, these connections can be negated. Journalists, Hollywood and academics each have their part to play in the facilitation and construction of the terrorism narrative. Televised news broadcasts are a particularly valued source of information, their approach is supposedly one of objectivity, however as aforementioned, it is impossible not to be influenced by the dominant assumptions and as such, substantial parts of broadcasts reflect a hegemonic, Western agenda. Over-reliance on sound bites and the views of a small group of terrorism 'experts' has led to further promotion of Orientalist, othering discourse[28]. By concentrating overtly on the voice of extremist Islam the media actually provides a platform for the minority of Islamists to represent the views of the majority of moderate Muslims. This has a significant impact on the representation of Islamic people as the audience associates extremist Islam with the whole of the Middle East's significant Muslim population of over 1 billion. The majority are then subjected to prejudices' aimed at Islamic terrorists, furthering their own sense of isolation, marginalisation and alienation. Accordingly, Western representations can serve to produce the 'Other' and encourage an entire civilization to perceive themselves as the West does; as inferior and even barbaric. [29]

"Washington and Hollywood spring from the same DNA."

Institutionalization of the 'Other' has resulted from dominant and preferred readings, causing misrepresentation in which fabrication and paranoia become indistinguishable from fact. Antagonism towards the Islamic religion is prevalent in the media as it is now seen to denote fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. These kinds of stereotypes and discriminatory representations contribute to the general atmosphere of othering and cultural superiority resulting in Islamophobia deriving from historical narratives relating to colonialism, immigration and racism.[30] It is considered axiomatic that Arab culture is fundamentally incompatible with rational self-governance and democracy. This conceptualization is not an illustration, it is a position brought forth to legitimize the aforementioned neo-colonial policies towards the Middle East. That all Muslims are implicated in terrorist atrocities has become a dominant ideology of Western civilizations. This kind of rationalisation runs throughout

What are the consequences of the notion of "Islamist terrorism"?

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representations of Arabs as dangerous, inhuman and irrational creatures who are either terrorists or have the potential to become so. Violence is presented as a result of Arab mentality and backwardness. Tuastad's 'new barbarism thesis' is demonstrative of the prevalent representations of Muslims and Islamists as a result of Arab culture rather than a product of adverse socio-economic conditions. This interpretation is the real life example of derogatory films such as 'The Siege' and 'Death before Dishonour.' Incessant portrayals of extremists in film perpetuates dominant stereotypes, encourages misperceptions and exploitation of fear for individual benefits. "I tend to be suspicious of all true believers. Present company included." [31] Such films may be presented as cultural critiques of the pre-existing Islamic threat; however they instead reinforce and encourage fear to develop; "they serve as both a source and an excuse for continued Arab-bashing by those filmmakers eager to exploit the issue." [32]

***"For everyone there was a sense that safety in the world had been shaken."* [33]**

The use of othering discourse and increasing threat levels encourages fear and mass hysteria in Western countries. The representation of the 9/11 attacks as an act of war was reminiscent of the beginning of the Cold War, a time when an impending nuclear holocaust was an all-encompassing threat. Western countries are constantly encouraged to remember and memorialise 9/11 as this maintains the atmosphere of fear needed for the development of the Terrorism Industry. 'Experts' in the field of Middle Eastern studies and terrorism studies are consistently called upon for their opinion and advice by the media, governments and think-tanks [34]. Manipulation of the 'truth' and subjective analysis can encourage prejudices which will circulate through academe, media, government and public opinion until theories become truth. This is particularly applicable to Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis which may well become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Robert Kaplin, a main advocate for the new barbarism thesis, believes a more nuanced, critical and self-reflective analysis of the political, cultural and social environment is unnecessary and that conflicts are purely the result of the battle between primitivism and civilisation [35]. Interestingly, the way theorists and academe discuss Muslims and the Middle East in general is reminiscent of Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda and colonial discourses of certain minority groups as subhuman and inferior. The kind of sweeping generalisations made by Huntington are antiquated, yet they still dominate the media, academia and to a certain extent, the government.

Conclusion

As a subject, Terrorism studies has the same inherent characteristics as many other disciplines; broadly defined concepts such as that of 'terrorism' become 'knowledge' which can be cited and recycled by any number of institutions and organisations, thus consolidating the acceptance of said 'knowledge'. This is highly influential in understanding the causes and consequences of terrorism, particularly regarding Islam as these set of notions inform foreign policy making, particularly regarding negotiation as a legitimate counter-terrorism device. The influence of Hollywood in creating and maintaining these (mis)perceptions cannot be underestimated. More often than not, no distinction between 'reel' and 'real' is made and once constructed; they circulate worldwide, perpetuating insidiously racist stereotypes which become almost invisible, by both reinforcing them and adversely affecting the opinions of the moderate Muslim majority. The implications of repetitive vilification of the entire Muslim community are widespread. The subjective representations of Islamists in Western film shows no reflection of the famous aphorism that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Over 300 films depict Arabs, Muslims and particularly Islamists in a demeaning way, either by characterizing them as the lecherous comic relief, or imbuing them with dehumanizing negative racial discourse. By presenting the motivations of Islamists in this light they are de-politicized and as such, de-legitimized. Their actions are seen as the result of fanaticism and extremism rather than pragmatic, ideological expressions of opposition to oppression and subjugation. Preconditioned as we are by Religiophobia, ethnophobia and Islamophobia, the exaggerated threat of Islamic terrorism specifically and religious terrorism generally cannot be negated until dominant stereotypes and representations are subjected to change.

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Written by Harriet Fildes

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What are the consequences of the notion of "Islamist terrorism"?

Written by Harriet Fildes

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