Why is the Discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' Problematic?

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/01/26/why-is-the-discourse-of-islamic-terrorism-problematic/

JOSH HOLMES, JAN 26 2016

Routinely privileged as the overriding concern of the contemporary political order, the discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' assumes a ubiquitous position within elite and popular imaginaries. Employed alongside associated terms such as 'Islamic Fundamentalism' and 'Islamo-Fascism', the political significance of this discourse is discernible through the material investment and coverage of the on-going War on Terror that continues to manipulate everyday western anxieties. The problem is that, given the extent of the discourse's political purchase, the meaning and usage of 'Islamic Terrorism' is too often taken-for-granted, neglecting its genealogical roots and underpinning assumptions as part of a hegemonic 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 2012). Thus, it is the contention of this essay that there is a need to challenge the discursive construction of 'Islamic Terrorism' as a universal existential threat, provoking reflection upon the normative consequences of the language, ideographic framing, and knowledge production conjured by the term. Discussion will firstly trace the emergence of 'Islamic Terrorism' as a discourse and the prevailing narratives that it projects, in particular the presumed causal link between religion and violence, before drawing upon the framework outlined by Richard Jackson (2007a) to critically demonstrate how the complex and contingent realities behind 'Islamic Terrorism' have been obscured by the categorising impulses of a reified ideological project. This is not to say that the threat of extremists does not exist but rather to highlight the importance of encouraging an ethical awareness that contextualises the discourse surrounding 'Islamic Terrorism.'

At the crux of the discourse on 'Islamic Terrorism' is the conjecture that violence is inherent to Muslim societies, with the term itself signifying a unified nexus between acts of terror and practices of Islam. Commentators often pinpoint the terrorist attacks of September 11th as the moment in which this discourse markedly came to prominence, as terrorism studies promptly acquired substantial authority as a discrete field of research that blurred the boundaries between academia and policy making. This saturated body of work, exemplified by the Rand Corporation-funded journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism,* sought to delineate the conditions of a 'new era' of global terrorist activity where the 'religious imperative' is the defining characteristic (Falkenrath, 2001; Hoffman, 2002). Since Islam makes little distinction between Church and State, the overriding contention is that transcendent religious goals, rather than political ideology, provide the terrorists' motivation for "uniting all Muslims into one state and dominating the world" (Cook, 2003, 52). This holy jihad is allegedly compelled by a pathological hatred of Western modernity common amongst irrational, impotent and uneducated young males who are radicalised by the prospect of restoring pride in the face of a humiliating World Order (Austin and Twigg, 2005). However it should be recognised that the discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' has theoretical influences that can be traced back further than 9/11, as Huntington's (1993) Clash of Civilisations thesis and Rapoport's (1983) analysis of terror in monotheistic religions helped disseminate the perception that relations between global faiths and communities had approached a critical historical juncture. Turbulent events across the Middle East throughout the 1970s and 1980s, notably the Munich Massacre and Iranian hostage crisis, provoked a rapid expansion in neo-Orientalist scholarship that identified 'Islamic Terrorism' as a specific mode of political violence that was increasingly taking on a new transnational character (Juergensmeyer, 2003).

Yet, paradoxically, there has also been a tendency in the literature to present 'Islamic Terrorism' as a 'mutation of previous realities' (Baehr, 2009, 210), stressing its exceptionality as a quasi-territorial threat emanating from non-state actors, while concomitantly communicating uneasy comparisons with twentieth century totalitarianism. Jeffrey

Why is the Discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' Problematic?
Written by Josh Holmes

Herf (2002), for instance, coins the phrase 'reactionary modernism' to conceptualise the emergence of Islamist militants in relation to the conspiratorial anti-Semitism of the Nazis, reflecting upon a shared demand for the reinstatement of archaic conservative traditions incongruously pursued through modern technological means aimed at inflicting mass devastation. Despite overlooking the overtly secular nature of earlier fascist movements, it is clear to see how such parallels advance a view of Islamic terrorists beyond the amenable reaches of political negotiation, becoming intimately enrolled within a broader US-centric discourse on the War on Terror that articulates an "Axis of Evil" in opposition to liberal western democracy (Bush, 2002). Resonating with the axis alliance of the Second World War, the neoconservative mantra added weight to the vulgarized notion of 'Islamo-fascism' (Hitchens, 2001) with the discourse on 'Islamic Terrorism' offering conceptual solace by suggesting that the threat of religious fundamentalism would be overcome, as Nazism was in the past, but only through the legitimation of a realist military intervention necessary to counteract a potent force capable of destroying the Western way of life.

It is imperative that scholars call into question the orthodox discourse on 'Islamic Terrorism' by adopting an acute sensibility toward accepted forms of knowledge production. The recent emergence of an explicitly critical terrorism studies provides a vital methodological entry point into deconstructing the self-referential discourse that defines what constitutes 'Islamic Terrorism' in terms of how it is known, located and confronted (Jackson, 2007b). Refuting any gesture toward positivist objectivity, these perspectives rest on a shared understanding of terrorism as a 'contested concept' that is always contingent upon a particular social interpretation of political context and circumstance (Cox, 1996). In other words, to use Seymour's (1975) oft-cited expression, 'one person's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.' The lack of an internationally agreed definition of terrorism allows the possibility for the term to be manipulated according to the interests of the predominant status quo, eschewing any sincere engagement with the risks and complexities of employing the term as a pejorative label. Indicative of a poststructural turn in International Relations, critical terrorism studies assumes an epistemological stance that is acutely cognisant of the dialectical relationship between knowledge and power, whereby discourse is seen to possess a "productive power" that determines permissible forms of political identity and practice (Barnet and Duvall, 2005). This preoccupation with the ways in which "language unfurls, slips on itself and determines choices" is pivotal to examining how the discourse of Islamic terrorism is deployed at an elite level without ever being reducible to it, embracing a minimal foundationalism that is able to grasp the realities of religious violence whilst acknowledging the regime of truth through which such violence acquires meaning (Foucault, 2007, 163).

On a purely semantic level, it can be argued that it is profoundly disingenuous to use the term 'Islamic Terrorism' as a universal generalizable category of behaviour for a religion that comprises over a billion people from more than fifty countries. Moreover, the dualistic thinking invoked by the term naively suggests a simple distinction between 'moderate' and 'extremist', or 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim' as Mamdani (2002) puts it, obscuring the fact that Islamist movements are moulded by specific local contexts engaging in a wide array of political, social and cultural responsibilities. Thus 'Islamic fundamentalism' needs to be grounded within a diverse and multifaceted ecology of global political violence, envisioned as a dynamic set of processes rather than a rigid identity. Tariq Ali (2003) for instance proposes a reworked definition of fundamentalism that is no longer aligned to religion per se but based instead upon an uncompromising belief system that is treated as the sole source of truth. Such a reading provocatively implies that the counterterror policies pursued by the Bush administration could ironically be interpreted as fundamentalist, representing the US as the guardian of absolute morality by projecting a neoconservative worldview that sought to refashion the Middle East in concordance with liberal ideology. It is precisely this form of critical outlook that underscores the difficulties in differentiating between religious and secular discourse.

The use of the term 'Islamic Terrorism' is undermined by its failure to recognise that prevailing understandings of religion are shaped by the contentious legacies of Westphalia which position faith as irrational and anathema to the modern secular state. This Westphalian presumption, whereby the theological disputes of the seventeenth century ostensibly necessitated the sequestration of religion to the private sphere, is deeply embedded within International Relations which has tended to either omit the role of religion in politics or in the case of radical Islam postulate it as a resurgent threat to order and civility (Thomas, 2005, 55). In claiming that the competing hegemony of religion must remain a 'sacred referent object of securitisation', Laustsen and Wæver's (2000, 705) contention is symptomatic of the secular trope that upholds a moral distinction between religion and politics. However is it possible to make a meaningful division between religious and secular political discourse? I would argue not only that the Westphalian

Why is the Discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' Problematic?
Written by Josh Holmes

state itself demands loyalty to a transcendental authority in the form of a sovereign Leviathan, but also that contemporary ideologies such as nationalism or capitalism share a similar logic to religion by positing supreme values that impose expectations on individual subjects and their sense of identity (e.g. Benjamin, 1996). There is therefore reason to be sceptical of the rhetoric that fundamental Islam follows an anti-modern agenda driven by desires to restore an ancient Caliphate, as nostalgia for the past is more likely a means through which to galvanise political support rather than a material ambition – a strategy that resonates with the revisionist ideals of Marxism and the 'imagined community' of nationalism (Anderson, 2006). Indeed the Islamic movement of Hamas, often associated in the West with acts of terror, participates in national elections, equates piety with political incorruptibility and, although justified through sacred sites such as Dome of the Rock, has liberation goals that draw on autonomist notions of a designated homeland (Gunning, 2008). This provides a poignant example of how religious ideology cannot be divorced from secular-nationalism, putting forward the need for 'Islamic Terrorism' to be conceptualised not through fixed anarchic doctrine but within a broader discursive field of everyday cultural practices.

It is necessary to problematise the causal link between religion and violence explicitly invoked by the discourse of radical Islam, in particular the popular conviction that the terror it propagates is utterly indiscriminate. Any decision as to what constitutes indiscriminate inherently involves a degree of subjectivity, for instance 9/11 is upheld as the quintessential paradigm for the apocalyptic nature of Islamic Terror yet this marginalises the alternative, and more credible, narrative that the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Centre were selectively targeted by Al Qaeda for they represented the financial and military core of the United States. This is not meant as a way to detract any significance from the extent of violence perpetrated but rather to demonstrate the logical fallacy that a common religious cause is responsible for terrorism over strategic political decisions (Gunning and Jackson, 2011). Having examined every reported case of suicide attack between 1980 and 2003, The Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism found that 95% of attacks were part of a broad political campaign linked to perceived foreign occupation, with increased religious devotion a secondary effect of integrating within a terrorist group (Pape, 2005). While there is a danger that such quantitative approaches reinforce the categorising mentality of orthodox discourse, the point is that ideational explanations of 'Islamic Terrorism' must continually be contextualised beyond superficial secular interpretations of religious doctrine that a priori assume a disposition to violence. As could be construed with any monotheistic religion, the texts of Islam are ambivalent toward violence, emphasising the importance of peace as the ultimate spiritual goal whilst permitting the occasional use of force in circumstances where faith is unilaterally opposed (Juergensmeyer, 2003). This further reiterates that religion itself is not at the root of violence; 'Islamic Terrorism' must be understood through wider geopolitical discourses of conflict, state repression and horizontal inequality that have endured across Middle Eastern societies, and where transnational non-state networks and socio-religious structures provide opportunities to radically voice collective grievances. The characteristic profile of an "Islamic terrorist" thus resembles a politically conscious individual who is part of a grassroots movement rather than a religious fanatic (Gunning and Jackson, 2011). Many of the ideational tenets drawn upon by militants are shared by wider radical movements yet most members do not engage with acts of terror, showing that even if an individual adheres to fundamental beliefs it does not automatically mean they are prone to violence.

Reflecting on the broader ethical consequences of the 'Islamic Terrorism' discourse, the appropriation of a backward, fanatic and intrinsically evil religious identity can be seen to reify the hegemonic authority of the West. The demonised figure of the Muslim militant provides a negative counter-image through which the West can consolidate its own collective fulcrum, postulating a civilised liberal society that will be secured against the threat of the Islamic Other using whatever means necessary. According to Jackson (2008, 378), this discourse feeds into a pervasive 'politics of fear' that legitimates the expansion of state power both internally and externally, presenting a hardened nationalism that normalises punitive counterterrorism strategies while rendering conciliatory avenues such as dialogue and reform nonsensical. Moreover, by situating the source of contemporary terrorism within Islamic extremism, the discourse suppresses alternative political origins that place accountability with the West, evading the impact of colonial legacies and the extensive history of imperial intent across the Middle East. Rather than acknowledge the complex historical dynamics of struggle, intervention and non-development as a catalyst for violent repercussions, western rhetoric undermines the political agency of the terrorist by dwelling on the abnormal taxonomy of a religious sexualised deviant (Jackson, 2007a). Herein lies the value of a critical terrorism studies that invites perspectives from outside the state-centric lens of International Relations, Puar (2007) for instance demonstrates how queer theory exposes the aggressive heterosexual patriotism of a US-led War on Terror where

Why is the Discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' Problematic?
Written by Josh Holmes

orthodox knowledges frame Islamic subjects as psychologically impaired individuals who yearn to cure their sexual frustrations through martyrdom. These mainstream representations are challenged by the emergence of female suicide bombers that subvert the narrative of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1988, 271), as well as critical studies more broadly that have found terrorists to be generally married, well-educated and firmly integrated into the community (Gunning, 2007). This reiterates how the discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' is predicated in opposition to the construction of the Western self, depoliticising and decontextualizing nuanced realities through reductionist ideography that co-constitutes the very threat it purports to overcome.

By maintaining a preoccupation with language and semantics, the chief concern with calling forth a critical terrorism studies is that the project ostracises itself from the practicalities of the political world, thereby reducing the likelihood of a progressive overhaul of hegemonic structures of knowledge. Whilst it would be erroneous to challenge the emancipatory ethics advocated by Jackson (2007b), there does appear to be disconnect between discursively scrutinising the concept of "Islamic Terrorism" and achieving substantive normative reforms. There needs to be greater endeavour amongst scholars of critical terrorism studies to aim for policy relevance within their work, though opening dialogue with non-governmental organisations and civil society would perhaps be more appropriate given the antagonism demonstrated toward state regimes.

Additionally, by establishing a radical departure from what can only ever be presumed an uncritical terrorism studies, it could be argued that the adoption of a critical epistemology runs the risk of creating an impasse within the discipline of International Relations by reproducing and hyperbolising issues that are already implicitly acknowledged by orthodox accounts. For instance, Jackson (2008) cites the absence of a conventional definition of terrorism as a fundamental limitation, yet Horgan and Boyle (2008, 51) suggest that this reflects an awareness on behalf of political scientists that the term is value-laden and contestable suggesting that critical perspectives merely 'reinvent the wheel'. Although this overly simplifies a post-positivist agenda less concerned with reworking the definition of terrorism and more perturbed by its abusive application by the West (Blakeley, 2008), there is a genuine case to be made that becoming too absorbed with language games can manifest as a political correctness that runs scared of the hard-hitting existential questions regarding the relationship between Islam and violence. Frank Furedi (2015) makes the convincing claim that the dogma of multiculturalism instils a reluctance to hold firm convictions for fear of inciting bigotry or Islamophobia. Thus, although critical terrorism studies rightly points out that Islam is not the cause of terrorism, there is still a need to understand why radical religion wields popular appeal over younger generations both in the Middle East and the West.

To conclude, this essay has sought to problematise the term 'Islamic Terrorism' as deployed within orthodox IR studies for the way in which it obfuscates complex realities by socially constructing the illusion of a clearly demarcated metanarrative which ultimately is contextually unfounded. The prescribed causal relationship between religion and violence is not only contestable but also, in fact, alarmingly reductionist, equating what is a contingent and heterogeneous collection of followers with the specific actions of a political minority. 'Islamic Terrorism' is better understood as an emotional depoliticising term intended to make publics think less and fear more, justifying a series of counterproductive measures that reifies a privileged western order by removing any levy of accountability in the face of ongoing legacies of Orientalist interventions within Islamic cultures. Only through the ethical vista opened up by critical terrorism studies (Jackson, 2007b), in refusing to take hegemonic truths at face value, is it possible to expose the normative consequences and underlying motives behind the discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' or other associated terminology. However, this does not necessarily mean that radical Islam has no influence on political violence or that the discourse has to be abandoned entirely, it is more that the religious-secular distinction upheld by a Westphalian IR has to be broken down so that understandings of 'Islamic Terrorism' are embedded in the particular political structures and aesthetics of everyday life in predominantly Muslim societies. Given that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 2007), the conceptual rigour of critical terrorism studies offers a vital corrective to the absolutist assumptions of hegemonic knowledge, making space for subversive counter narratives of anti-imperialism and subaltern struggle that offer a more balanced and ethically dependable alternative to the pervasive discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism.'

Bibliography

Why is the Discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' Problematic?
Written by Josh Holmes

Ali, T. (2003). *The clash of fundamentalisms: Crusades, jihads and modernity*. Verso.

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso

Austin, G., & Twigg, S. (2005). *The Next Attack: 'know Your Enemy and Know Yourself'*. Foreign Policy Centre.

Baehr, P. (2009). The novelty of jihadist terror. *Society*, *46*(3), 210-213.

Barnett, M., & Duvall, R. (2005). Power in international politics. *International Organization*, *59*(01), 39-75

Benjamin, W. (1996). "Capitalism as Religion," in *Selected Writings,* Volume1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 288-291.

Blakeley, R. (2008). The elephant in the room: a response to John Horganand Michael J. Boyle.*Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *1*(2), 151-165.

Bush, G.W. (2002). State of the Union Address, January 2002. (*Transcript of speech accessible at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-l1.html)*

Cook, D. (2003). The recovery of radical Islam in the wake of the defeat of the Taliban,*Terrorism and Political Violence*, *15*(1), 31-56.

Cox, R. W. (1996). *Approaches to world order* (No. 40). Cambridge University Press.

Falkenrath, R., 2001. Analytic models and policy prescriptions: understanding recent innovations in US counterterrorism. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 24 (3), 159–181.

Foucault, M. (2007). `Truth and power' in *The Foucault Reader*. P Rabinow (ed). Middlesex: Penguin. Foucault, M. (2012). *The archaeology of knowledge*. Vintage.

Furedi, F. (2015). *Charlie Hebdo: Is Islam to blame? Spiked Online (accessed via* http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/charlie-hebdo-is-islam-to-blame/16446#.VT6Q1V5exEw)

Gunning, J. (2007). A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies? 1. *Government and Opposition*, *42*(3), 363-393. Gunning, J. (2008). *Hamas in politics: democracy, religion, violence*. Hurst.

Gunning, J., & Jackson, R. (2011). What's so 'religious' about 'religious terrorism'?. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *4*(3), 369-388.

Herf, J. (2002). What is old and what is new in the terrorism of Islamic fundamentalism? Reflections on the September 11 attack on the United States. *Partisan Review*, *69*(1), 25-31.

Hitchens, C. (2001). Of sin, the Left and islamic fascism. *The Nation*, *24*.

Hoffman, B., 2002. The emergence of the new terrorism. *In*: A. Tan and K. Ramakrishna, eds. *The new terrorism*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 30–49.

Horgan, J., & Boyle, M. J. (2008). A case against 'critical terrorism studies'. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *1*(1), 51-64.

Huntington, S. P. (1993). The clash of civilizations?. *Foreign affairs*, 22-49.

Jackson, R. (2007a). Constructing enemies:'Islamic terrorism'in political and academic discourse.*Government and*

Why is the Discourse of 'Islamic Terrorism' Problematic?
Written by Josh Holmes

Opposition, *42*(3), 394-426.

Jackson, R. (2007b). The core commitments of critical terrorism studies. *European political science*, *6*(3), 244-251.

Jackson, R. (2008). The ghosts of state terror: knowledge, politics and terrorism studies. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *1*(3), 377-392.

Juergensmeyer, M. (2003). *Terror in the mind of God: The global rise of religious violence* (Vol. 13). University of California Press.

Laustsen, C. B., & Wæver, O. (2000). In defence of religion: Sacred referent objects for securitization. *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, *29*(3), 705-739.

Mamdani, M. (2002). Good Muslim, bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism. *American anthropologist*, *104*(3), 766-775.

Pape, R. (2005). *Dying to win: The strategic logic of suicide terrorism*. Random House.

Puar, J. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press.

Rapoport, D. C. (1983). Fear and trembling: Terrorism in three religious traditions. *American Political Science Review*, *78*(03), 658-677.

Seymour, G. (1975). *Harry's game*. Random House.

Spivak, G (1988) Can the subaltern speak?, in: C Nelson & L Grossberg (eds), Marxism and Interpretation Thomas, S. M. (2005). *The global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international relations: the struggle for the soul of the twenty-first century*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Written by: Josh Holmes
Written at: Royal Holloway, University of London
Written for: Dr David Hughes
Date written: June 2015