



# Violent Extremism

Naming, Framing and Challenging

The Dialogue Society is a registered charity, established in London in 1999, with the aim of advancing social cohesion by connecting communities, empowering people to engage and contributing to the development of ideas on dialogue. It operates nation-wide with regional branches across the UK. Through discussion forums, courses, capacity building publications and outreach it enables people to venture across boundaries of religion, culture and social class. It provides a platform where people can meet to share narratives and perspectives, discover the values they have in common and be at ease with their differences.

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## **Violent Extremism**

Naming, Framing and Challenging

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# Foreword

Violent extremism is a serious problem in the contemporary world. It operates negatively on a number of societal levels: it destroys cohesion, increasing suspicion among social groups; it animates fear, hatred and animosity; its existence can be used to provoke and support certain religious, cultural and political biases. Ultimately, it undermines the principles of dialogue – of greater understanding, empathy and care – the values and modes of engagement that the Dialogue Society aims to promote. As a consequence, the Dialogue Society cannot remain indifferent to violent extremism.

Since the Dialogue Society's foundation, we have maintained that a positive and proactive approach needs to be promoted at the grass-roots level to challenge the underlying causes and ideology of violent extremism. We have repeatedly asserted that the goal of defeating violent extremist ideology and its associated mind-set cannot be effectively achieved if it is simply *pursued*. Rather, it is an outcome that can be helped to *ensue* by adopting a comprehensive and proactive approach which, while not making deradicalisation its primary objective, achieves the same result nonetheless.

More specifically, we have argued in favour of an approach which instils and re-emphasises the core and foundational Islamic teachings of love and compassion, belief in diversity, free will, the middle path, engagement, self-reflexivity and positive action based on a thorough understanding of the purpose of creation and the relationship between the created and the Creator in Islam – foundational teachings that necessitate dialogue, mutual respect, social interaction, proactive citizenship and human rights. These teachings, values and the propositions that flow from them are mutually exclusive with those associated with violent extremism: the stronger one set grows, the weaker the other becomes. If we can re-discover, re-emphasise and re-assert these authentic (Islamic and other) values, we can, as a by-product, diminish the influence of violent extremist ideology. Put differently, we can *deradicalise by default*. The advantage of this approach is that while the project does not appear to take 'defeating violent extremist ideology' as its objective, it achieves this result. Thus, the project remains positive and proactive and escapes the disadvantages entailed by being perceived as reactive (Dialogue Society 2009, 10).

To this end the Dialogue Society has carried out a number of community projects, publications, courses and research. While there are too many to mention them all,

they include the publication and dissemination of a book analysing the scriptural necessity for dialogue in Islam, a course on dialogue in Islam, a dialogue school aimed at disadvantaged youth and dialogue manuals aimed community organisations, youth centres and places of worship.<sup>1</sup> In attempting to address the root causes of violent extremism, it is vital to first understand how we communicate on this subject. In this report, the authors consider how the language we use influences the way that we think about and cause others to think about this challenge. As the Dialogue Society, we consider language to be a particularly crucial component of our various modes of communication. The motivation for this publication is our fundamental commitment to communication and language, and to the advancement of honest, open dialogue.

Finally, the Dialogue Society abhors and condemns all forms of violent extremism and stands for democratic values, the non-instrumentalisation of religion in politics, and for freedom of speech. We do not believe that Islam permits indiscriminate killing (through acts of violent terror, the declaration of jihad by any group, and inherently violent ideology) and we acknowledge that the process of radicalisation is extremely complicated. Nothing in this report, co-authored by two Dialogue Society research fellows and a Dialogue Society advisor should be interpreted to contradict these key principles of the organisation.

Sadik Cinar,  
Executive Director,  
London, September 2015

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1 For a more in-depth discussion of our position and our work against violent extremism, please refer to 'Position through Praxis: Dialogue on Extremism' forthcoming in Autumn 2015.



# 1. Introduction

The problematic relationship between ‘the West’ and Islam is well documented. Edward Said was among the first to discuss the idea of Western bias against the Muslim ‘Other’ from the Middle Ages to the present age in his classic work, *Orientalism* (1978), with his later book *Covering Islam* (1981) building on this to explore the way in which this centuries-old problem has been manifested in modern news coverage of Muslims across the globe.

However, while awareness of the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media and the public sphere has grown in academic circles, the popular discourse surrounding Islam and its followers has been slow to respond. As numerous studies have shown, there is still a widespread tendency in popular culture and thought – from Hollywood films to newspaper articles and commentaries – to portray Islam and its followers as an anachronistic, violent and ignorant mass (Shaheen 2001; Poole 2002; Akbarszadeh and Smith 2005; Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008; Morey and Yaqin 2011). Such imagery has only increased in the years since 11 September 2001, for although violent terror is in no way restricted to certain religious, linguistic, or cultural contexts or groups, the use of violence against innocent civilians has, in the popular imagination at least, become synonymous with Islam (Crenshaw 2014).

In fact, as a number of academic studies have shown, religion is rarely the sole or even main reason for what is often referred to as ‘radicalisation’ among Muslims (Sobolewska 2009; Hegghammer 2014). Indeed recent evidence has suggested that those travelling to Syria or Iraq to join extremist groups such as Isis or al-Nusra Front are often ‘religious novices’ with little understanding of Islamic doctrine on the use of violence (House of Commons 2012; Hasan 2014). Meanwhile, studies from academia and policy groups have shown that there are a number of political and social factors that may contribute wholly or in part to an individual’s decision to turn to violent extremism (PPN 2010; House of Commons 2012). If this is the case, why has public discourse not yet altered to reflect the growing body of academic research and what can be done, perhaps, to change this?

This paper will argue that a very important part of the answer lies in the way that language use interacts with our understanding of cognition, because although our knowledge of violent extremism and terrorism has increased exponentially over

recent decades<sup>2</sup>, the media, political and policy-making discourse surrounding these issues has, generally speaking, failed to adapt accordingly. The paper begins, in Section 1, with an overview of ‘framing’ theory and its relevance to discussion of violent extremism, before going on to examine three significant examples of problematic language regarding Islam, violent extremism and the phenomenon that is often referred to as ‘radicalisation’. Section 2 addresses the issue of demands for Muslims to denounce acts of terror. Section 3 offers a number of recommendations to policy makers and media organisations on alternatives to the language and framing currently used when discussing these topics. The conclusion then aims to set these specific issues into some wider contexts, considerations and measures that may need to be taken to bring about an overall positive change and development in relation to these matters.

The purpose of this paper is not to dispute the widely accepted factors behind extremism claiming religious justification in either its violent and nonviolent forms, including political ideology and alienation, nor to dispute the fact that the issue of violent extremism is not a pressing issue to tackle in relation to, and within, the Muslim community. Rather, this paper argues for the creation of a new discursive frame when speaking about violent extremism in the public domain to help reach a better understanding of the nature of the problem and of possible solutions. The aim is therefore to highlight the negative way that discussions surrounding issues of violent extremism associated with religion in the public sphere has been presented and, as part of a project to create a new frame, to suggest proactive ways that contributors to the media, politicians, policy-makers and others in the public sphere can avoid using problematic language in future. Naturally, as an organisation focused on bringing about greater understanding between people and communities through action and word, the Dialogue Society is sensitive to the way in which the frames and terms through which we communicate can inhibit, skew and prejudice discourse, as well as their potential to impact on eventual policy decisions and undermine dialogue at the community level – hence the general and particular theme of this Dialogue Society publication.

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2 See [RadicalisationResearch.org](http://RadicalisationResearch.org), a web-based resource on high-quality academic research on ‘radicalization’ that makes research findings accessible for policymakers, journalists and others whose work deals with this area.

## 2. Problematic Language Use: Framing

### 2.1 Language Comprehension

In order to understand the problematic nature of current debates around ‘violent extremism’, we first offer a brief overview of how work informed by cognitive linguistics and political psychology can, in conjunction with other approaches drawing on social theory and critical media studies, contribute to further understanding of how issues are framed, and the consequences of this for our present discussion.

The sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) classically made the distinction between the experience of society and the organisation of it, holding that our perception of reality, rather than our experiences, influences our understanding of the world. ‘I assume that definitions of a situation are built up with principles of organization which govern events [...] and our subjective involvement in them,’ he wrote. ‘[F]rame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify’ (Goffman 1974, 10-11). From within the field of cognitive linguistics, a similar theory of frame semantics quickly followed.<sup>3</sup> Frame semantics shows that how we process information through language shapes our specific conceptual knowledge. This is due to the way that neural circuits in the brain create conceptual schemata (or frames) from the information that is fed into it.

The human brain is comprised of thousands of pre-existing, conceptual mapping circuits. These circuits are developed in childhood through physical and social encounters. Different forms of metaphorical thought are characterised by each circuit. Complex metaphorical thought is formed via neural binding mechanisms, where synapses connect elements of concepts existing in different circuits (enabling complex reasoning). A series of linguistic schemata arise that connect these concepts, ranging from elementary to complex. Elementary schemata make sense of basic physical experiences such as motions and forces, whereas more complex schemas treat of abstract concepts such as love and deceit.

When new information is fed in, the brain works to assimilate it into a pre-existing schema (Axelrod 1973). It will connect the new idea to an existing concept, slotting it into the relevant schema. In doing so, the circuits with the strongest existing synapses are the most likely to be activated. The brain tends to use what it already

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3 See, for example, Charles J. Fillmore’s work on ‘Frame Semantics’ or Ronald Langacker’s concept of profiling in cognitive grammar (Fillmore 1976; Langacker 1987).

knows to assimilate the new data into the appropriate pre-existing schema, seeking 'a best fit' (Bryant 2009). Repetition is highly effective in strengthening these synapses. The frequent priming of an association in memory tends to make the link stronger (Dixon 2006). Lakoff describes this as 'saturation': the point where repetition has so reinforced a schema that it becomes accepted as reality, and it is subsequently very difficult to dismantle (2008).

A powerful schema cannot be dismantled merely through the mode of negation because the contradiction takes place through, and activates, the already existing schema. So, for example, when the statement 'not all Muslims are terrorists' is made, the mental image of a 'Muslim terrorist' is activated neurologically, thus further reinforcing the image that the speaker is trying to overcome. Thibodeau and Borodinsky (2011) found that audiences forage statements for information that reinforces familiar frames so as to avoid a state of cognitive dissonance. Data that does not fit into the pre-existing schema is ignored. For example, when the statement 'Islam is not violent' is heard, because of the heavy reinforcement in public discourse of a link between Islam and violence, it means that this statement is likely to reinforce the idea that 'Islam *is* violent', the negation being effectively skipped over in the process of assimilation because of the compulsion to find a 'best fit' and to avoid cognitive dissonance.

The influence of linguistic frameworks, as activated by the media, on public perception cannot be overestimated. Dixon has shown, through applying neural linguistic theory to the US media's portrayal of African Americans, that culpability judgments can be vastly skewed by the evocation of schemata (Dixon 2006). After repeated exposure to stereotypes drawn from the media (for example, that African Americans often commit crimes), participants process incoming information in ways consistent with that stereotype. When asked to comment on the likely culpability of a series of individuals of different 'races' placed in contextually similar, fictitious situations, participants showed an overwhelming bias towards the African Americans' guilt. Dixon demonstrates that recently activated information about groups is subsequently used in making judgments about those groups, and that this is open to easy manipulation.

Emotional responses can also be substantially influenced by the activation of these schemata. Thibodeau and Borodinsky undertook a study where two groups were given the same description of crime, where one description referred to crime as a 'beast' and the other as a 'virus' (2011). These two terms were the only variants in the experiment. Afterwards, the individuals were asked how crime could be reduced. The group exposed to the term 'beast' offered stricter solutions that invoked punishment and law enforcement. The group exposed to the term 'virus' instead sought less punitive solutions such as social reform policies and an emphasis

on positive therapeutic community relations. Here we can see that the two groups have understood crime differently based on the use of words evocative of certain neural schemata. A single word, attached to its own schema of conceptual meaning, can alter the perception of an entire phenomenon and elicit a specific emotional response.

Work in this field has shown that exposure to schemata that mention a certain value ‘simultaneously focus[es] and narrow[s] citizens’ thoughts about a specific policy issue’ (Brewer and Gross 2005, 943), highlighting the importance of framing for both shaping and limiting domestic and international discussions of violent extremism. Of course, in a world of information overload and immediacy, schemata can also be seen as a useful mode of helping us to perceive the world quickly and effectively (Axelrod). Thus, thinkers such as Gamson and Modigliani have argued that framing:

by incorporating and condensing a set of ‘metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices,’ supplies a readily comprehensible basis suggesting both how to think about the issue at hand how to justify what should be done about it. (Quoted in Sniderman and Theriault 2004, 135)

However, these schemata also indicate that the way we internalize concepts into a kind of conceptual shorthand can be vulnerable to external linguistic influence and can lead to simplistic and misleading analyses of complex issues. Therefore we must be especially careful in our choice of language for use in the public sphere where that language is likely to be reinforced through regular repetition. This is because, if not subjected to critical scrutiny and self-awareness, such repetition can have unintended consequences. Indeed, as suggested later in this publication, it would be even better for the media, politicians and policy-makers to try to take the time and trouble to consider the use of different words as part of an attempt to gain and promote a better understanding of the phenomena with which this paper is concerned.

## **2.2 Conflating Islam with Islamism**

Our first concern in addressing the frame that exists in mainstream discussions about Islam and violent extremism in the name of religion is the common use of terms such as ‘Islamism’ or ‘Islamist terrorism’ to refer to acts of violence and terror perpetrated in the name of Islam by a tiny minority of people. Our review of the relevant research evidence suggests that the terms ‘Islamist’ and ‘Islamism’ can conflate Islam with violent extremist ideology at the neurological level. This type of language is often used with a disclaimer that such acts cannot and do

not represent the faith's 1.6 billion followers, yet whether intended or not, the juxtaposition of words etymologically linked to Islam with terms related to violent extremism activates the cognitive link between the religion and the violent extremist ideology being described (Keles 2015). This is because of how we process derivative terms. As previously stated, the mind does not take in information (here, words) independently of other data. It uses previously assimilated terms to make sense of, and then connects with, new ones. Derivatives are already conceptually connected to their root words.

In the English language, derivatives often employ a root concept: for example, honour – honourable, sign – signal, occur – occurrence, kind – kindness. There is a tendency to immediately understand derivatives as the action or descriptor of their root word. Even if those using the term Islamism intend to refer to a distinct ideology, it is neurologically readily understood by the listener to be a performance of Islamic ideology, and an Islamist is an actor of Islamic ideology. The brain creates an assemblage whereby it networks information based on the term Islam, including Islamic, Islamist and Islamism. These words all share the base concept of Islam. Repeated use of the terms Islamist and Islamism further reinforce this network of connected meanings, and extremist ideology becomes connected with Islam in personal and public consciousness. In a speech he made in July 2015, the UK Prime Minister David Cameron distinguished Islam, the peaceful religion, from Islamist extremism, the poisonous ideology (Cameron 2015). Whilst naming a particular phenomenon helps to define and thereby differentiate it, in doing so one must be careful for the reasons given above. As argued by Lakoff and others, our brain does not work in a linear fashion. In fact, our subconscious sometimes works in an unexpected way whereby it does the opposite of what it is 'told': the title of Lakoff's book, 'Don't Think of an Elephant' demonstrates this simple point by immediately causing the reader to think of an elephant (Lakoff 2004). Similarly, every time Prime Minister Cameron and other commentators tell us to differentiate Islam the religion from Islamism the ideology, the neurological processes in the brain do the opposite and reinforce the link between the two.

It is important to note that our intention is not to gloss over the challenges arising from violent extremism in the Muslim community, which is especially important following the decision of several hundred young Britons to travel to the Middle East to join armed extremist groups including ISIS. The group's rapid advance in Syria and Iraq over a territory the size of Great Britain, and also its pretensions to being a so-called Caliphate, mean that we cannot and should not dismiss the ideological element of violent extremism (Cockburn 2014). Indeed, one of the group's major successes has been its ability to use obscure Islamic sources to bolster its ideology (Hassan 2015), while its claims to represent *all* Muslims under a Caliphate led

by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have set it apart from other groups, including al-Qaeda (Saltman and Winter 2014, 31–2). A more sensitive and accurate choice of language is therefore needed to ensure that we are able to have a clear and productive debate about the role of religion in these matters, including about whether Islamic texts contain a clear basis for encouraging violent extremism. While many people would agree that the actions of violent extremist groups such as al-Qaeda or ISIS have nothing to do with the vast majority of Muslims or their religion, refraining from using terms which derive from the word Islam (such as ‘Islamist extremists’) would allow for a more effective engagement with those who claim that Islam and the wider body of Muslims are also culpable on some level (Keles 2015).

In the case of groups such as ISIS, which claims an ideological foundation based on the idea of a pan-Islamic Caliphate, the main reason for its spread, and that of similar phenomena in other countries, is not religion (Quraishy 2010). Rather, it is important to understand the overall role of regional instability in creating the circumstances under which this type of violent extremism can flourish. Thus the influence of the disenfranchisement of the country’s Sunni population following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime and the on-going conflict in Syria should not be underestimated. While these circumstances are not directly responsible for the violent actions of those born and raised in the UK, they underscore the complex nature of the phenomenon that is usually referred to as ‘radicalisation’. The message for those working in the media, for politicians and for policy-makers is clear: in order to have a constructive and useful debate about violent extremism and Muslim communities, we must avoid evoking the framing used by both violent extremism and neo-orientalism (which, though opposite in many ways, often share basic premises). Indeed, because of similar misgivings, US President Barack Obama, has publicly refused to use the words ‘Islamic’, ‘Islamist’ and ‘terrorist’ in the same sentence (Plante 2015). Instead, a new frame or frames must be sought that more accurately represent Muslims as any other group in society would be represented, by accepting the ‘varying nationalities, regions, politics, sects and languages’, as well as differences in ‘age, gender, class and education’ that together comprise the reality of Muslim communities in the UK today (Poole 2002, 44).

One solution is generally to avoid using the label of Islam and its derivatives but, where unavoidable, to opt for the more convoluted but less descriptively problematic formulations such as ‘claiming a religious motivation’ or ‘claiming an Islamic motivation’ rather than simply describing the perpetrators of acts of violent terror as ‘Islamist, Islamism or Islamic’. Another alternative is to refer to them by their names where that name does not fall foul of the neurological processes explained above. For example, using the acronym ISIS as a name, rather than giving the full multi-part name would be better. Other forms of violence that is intended to instil terror

and that is inspired by or in some capacity associated with ISIS or Al-Qaeda could be described as 'ISIS-linked/inspired' (see below for a fuller discussion as to the naming of the ISIS group) All of these alternative terms are imperfect but preferable in our opinion to those such as 'Islamism' and 'Islamist'. Avoiding generalisations concerning group identity means that we can consider the individual circumstances in which violent religious extremism flourishes and thus gain a better understanding of how to reduce its attractiveness to some young people.

One may also ask about why this discussion is necessary; after all, the vast majority of those speaking about Islam in the public sphere would reject the notion that Islam as a religion is responsible for the reprehensible acts of an extreme minority. However, as noted above, the way we talk about important issues affects public perceptions of both the problem's source and its potential solutions. Therefore using terms that are etymologically linked to the Islamic faith when talking about global security issues can cement the idea of a particular religion's culpability for radicalisation. Of course, there may be those who genuinely believe that Islam is inherently violent and therefore culpable for some of the violent extremism we face. Our point here is not to pre-empt such a debate. Rather, it is to avoid using terms and labels that prejudice the outcome of our inquiry before it has been concluded. If some argue that Islam as such is in any capacity culpable, then let them state this point clearly so that an honest and candid debate can take place.

### **2.3 The Example of 'Islamic State'**

Perhaps one of the most significant examples of the importance of names and wording comes from the confusion over how to refer to the so-called 'Islamic State', whose name has been variously abbreviated to ISIS, ISIL, or IS (depending on the translation of the word '*sham*' in the group's original Arabic name). Many prominent Muslims have objected to the name that the group has given itself, asserting that its actions distort the spirit and content of Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings and tradition (e.g. Letter to Baghdadi 2014). As explained in Section 1, the choice of language is important, as is also shown through the pressure on businesses and groups that share a name with the group to rebrand – ranging from a US mobile payment service to a language school, as well as a non-profit nuclear non-proliferation organisation – out of fear of being associated with the violence in Syria and Iraq (Bland 2014; Institute for Science and International Security 2014; Coughlan 2015). A change in the way that the media and politicians refer to the group is therefore essential in removing the cognitive association between the widespread killings, rape, and slavery perpetrated by the group and the beliefs of over a billion Muslims living across the globe, in order both to prevent the ostracisation of minority Muslim communities living in the UK and elsewhere, and



to discourage the legitimisation and spread of the group's extremist ideology among young Muslims. Aware of the threat that the group poses to global perceptions of Islam, a leading Sunni authority in Egypt has promoted the use of QGIS, or Al-Qaeda Separatists in Iraq and Syria, as a way to avoid any terminology that directly links the group's actions to the religion at large (Kingsley 2014). A further solution, adopted by the Pentagon and senior politicians in France and Australia, has been to refer to the movement by its Arabic acronym, *Daesh*, which not only solves issues of terminology, since there has been no consensus on how to accurately translate the group's name into English, but also removes any semantic link between the group's violent ideology and the Islamic faith (Nasr 2014; Sommers 2014; McConnell 2015). In addition, this name has a negative connotation in Arabic, and ISIS has punished its use in the areas it controls. The significance of language and framing is clear from wider debates on terms such as 'climate change' in comparison with 'global warming', 'migrant' in comparison with 'asylum seeker' and 'Islamophobia' in comparison with 'anti-Muslim attacks.' In each instance those of differing political views have argued vehemently over the terms used for precisely the reasons given in this report. It is thus evident that naming *does* matter.

## 2.4 Terms which 'Other' Muslims

A further step is to stop using terms that serve to alienate Muslim communities, and which strengthen the narratives of groups like ISIS. For example, 'the West' is a very widespread term used to refer to European and North American people and culture in juxtaposition to the Muslim 'Other'. The problem with such a distinction is that it fails to take into account both the diversity found among Muslims (who include people of various ethnic backgrounds and who may hold widely differing beliefs) and the diversity among people (including Muslims) living in Europe and North America. Because of this conflation between Islam and an imagined homogenous 'East', the opposing term 'West' fundamentally calls into question the loyalty of Muslims regardless of their backgrounds, denomination, or linguistic or ethnic background, and places them in direct opposition to the countries in which they were often born and raised.

This is not an idle theoretical discussion, as it is precisely an absolutist and apocalyptic portrayal of this divide that has been used by ISIS and other organisations that employ violence to instil terror to promote a dangerously antagonistic and simplistic view of the world. A recent report (Hoyle, Bradford and Frenett 2015) has shown the important ideological role of enmity between a supposedly uniform 'West' and the global Muslim community in accounts of young females who have joined ISIS and seek to recruit others, who use the idea of a dichotomy between Muslims and non-Muslims as a principal justification for planning and engaging in

violent attacks against those they consider to be non-Muslims. As such, the media, politicians and policy-makers should seek to present more nuanced discussions of Islam and questions of Muslim identity in the UK. One issue is that Islam is often presented in the media as an 'homogenous threat', which fails to take into account the various ethnic, linguistic and religious differences that exist among British Muslims (Poole 2002, 40) and the fact that British Muslims often have a much stronger sense of British identity and loyalty compared to other religious and ethnic groups (Dunt 2015; ComRes 2015). The view of Islam as a monolithic and menacing entity has become pervasive in popular culture, and not only leads to mistrust from the non-Muslim population, but also creates a sense of alienation among Muslim communities, who are repeatedly reminded that society views them as a threat (Said 1981; Akbarzadeh and Smith 2005; Beaumont 2012). The media should therefore be encouraged to avoid generalisations when discussing British Muslim communities, while community organisations should be supported in offering media training to minority groups, including Muslims, so that they may learn how best to manage media stories, counteract false information about their communities, and promote a more positive and more representative image of themselves and their faith (Petley and Richardson 2011, 267–9). Because of this, it is important that the media and public figures avoid reinforcing any perception of this absolutist division through the use of careless language.

## 3. Questioning the Loyalty of Muslims

### 3.1 Calls for Muslims to Denounce

Linked to the problematic language and terminology mentioned above is the incessant demand made of Muslims to denounce violent attacks against civilians by those who claim an Islamic motivation. The effect of this is arguably even stronger than word choices which imply a separation between Muslims and 'the West', as these demands in effect assume that Muslims have a lesser capacity for empathy or lack a natural disgust towards gratuitous violence compared to their fellow citizens, and question their basic humanity (e.g. Gander 2015). Historically, Orientalist discourse has portrayed Muslims and Islam as having 'an abundant capacity for destruction' (Mamdani 2002, 767), and repeated questioning of the loyalty of British Muslims reinforces this out-dated and inaccurate worldview.

Such phenomena are not entirely new in British history. Historically, Catholic Christians often found themselves in a position of being trapped within a powerful current of anti-Catholicism that was sustained in the religious and cultural imaginary and discourses of the time (Marrotti 2005). In this context, for hundreds of years Catholics as a group were seen by the majority and those in power as potentially disloyal 'fifth columnists' with religio-political allegiances beyond the boundaries of the national community. Like Catholics, Muslims have a transnational vision of religion. And like that minority of Catholic Christians who did actually plan to or use violence in order to advance their cause, many of those who have invoked the name of Islam to carry out contemporary acts of terror have acquired their military training abroad. As a consequence of the combination of this with the broader anti-Catholic mood, just as the position of loyal Catholics was once under routine suspicion, so also today the position of many ordinary Muslims has become 'securitised'.

In the present, in the wake of the continued spread of ISIS and recent attacks in Pakistan, France, Tunisia, and elsewhere, Muslims have regularly been called upon to denounce this terror violence. A recent poll conducted for the BBC, for example, set out to gauge the reactions of British Muslims to the Charlie Hebdo attacks and to measure their loyalty to the UK. While these and similar questions may be pertinent, for those that relate to UK government foreign policy a white British non-Muslim may share similar criticisms or may understand the reasons that may lead individuals to accept an extremist ideology. However in such cases it is more readily understood that such criticism and understanding does not equate to the condoning violence and terror which they are not so often called upon in the same

breathe to denounce (Moore 2015). In fact, understanding or seeking to understand the motivations of those who carry out acts of violent terror is essential because any serious attempt to undermine violent extremist ideology requires a comprehension of the justifications given by those who engage in these violent acts. Over the last decade or so Muslims have been under pressure to dissociate themselves not only from violent extremist terror undertaken in the name of their religion, but also from anything that might be thought to be connected with what is called 'radicalisation', including from legitimate criticism of British foreign and military policy in relation to majority Muslim parts of the world, or of domestic security policy in relation to Muslims. This very real pressure on Muslim citizens and residents of Western countries either to adopt the positions of the governmental powers that be or else to keep quiet in terms of normal political participation is an example of what, in its confusion between robust democratic criticism of governmental policy and the question of loyalty to the state, can itself unfortunately be used by violent extremists to reinforce their argument that Muslims can never fully belong in a non-Islamic state.

### **3.2 Good Muslim vs. Bad Muslim**

Related to the demand to denounce is the narrative that has arisen over recent years and which divides Muslims into either 'moderates' or 'extremists', or on a more basic level, 'good' or 'bad' Muslims (Mamdani 2002; Ramadan 2010; Manzoor and Steed 2015). As Tariq Ramadan has argued, the description of 'moderate Muslim' is inherently a political and problematic label. It is political because, as Ramadan himself experienced, its use is often affected by the stance of a particular political party or individual towards the 'moderate Muslim' in question, while the label of 'extremist' can be an ad hominem attack used to discredit those with opposing political views (Ramadan 2010).

As Fauzia Ahmad has noted, the word 'moderate' can itself be a divisive term because the concept of moderation can be differentially associated (Manzoor and Steed 2015) with an assumption that Islam is inherently violent or extreme, and that the faith's adherents must therefore take care to distance themselves from its harmful teachings. Furthermore, separating 'moderate Muslims' from the wider pool of other Muslims can suggest that there are fewer moderates compared to violent extremists. While there are verses in the Qur'an and other Islamic texts that have been interpreted by violent extremists as advocating violent acts, Islam is in this regard no different from Judaism or Christianity, or any of the world's major religions and as the Dialogue Society has shown in its book on *Dialogue in Islam: Qur'an, Sunnah, History* (Kurucan and Erol, 2012), texts which are used in this way are capable of authentic and quite different Islamic readings.

Representing Islam in this way thus has the potential to alienate Muslim communities at a time in which their active engagement and assistance is more vital than ever in undermining any attraction towards violent extremist ideology among some young people. Part of the issue lies in the fact that such an image of 'moderation' relies heavily on a Latin Church understanding of religiosity; structured worship in the Western Christian traditions is largely limited to weekly services (although personal worship may of course occur on a more frequent basis), and so a person may be described as a practising Christian without engaging in organised worship on a daily basis. However, the nature of Islamic faith and practice means that such a definition is less likely to be valid. An online campaign by the French government against 'radicalisation', and issued in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, implied that increased time spent praying could be a symptom of radicalisation (Stop Djihadisme 2015). However, praying five times a day is believed by Muslims to be an essential pillar of their faith, and doing so is in no way to be regarded as evidencing a propensity towards violence or terror. This terminology is therefore problematic, as it can lead to mistrust of those who are merely fulfilling the outward requirements of faith without leading us any closer to understanding why people are drawn towards violent extremism.

At the same time, there is an important debate to be had about the role of words within absolutist styles of religion in facilitating the formation of a mindset which can induce, under certain circumstances, violent forms of such absolutism. This is a complex area which must be approached with clarity and care. This is because that while there is (biographically, at least) evidence of linkages in the journey of some individuals from 'religious extremism' to 'violent religious extremism', this is not always the case. And it is certainly not the case that an obscurantism of the kind that leads to narrow personal religious practice, or a personal rigorous piety that may be difficult for people who are not religious to understand, necessarily translates into a desire, let alone a project, to impose such practice upon others by force. At the same time, just as the loose use of language regarding 'violent extremism' by politicians, policy-makers and those in the media can demonise whole groups of people and thereby stoke the fires of the phenomenon to which it refers, there is also a need for great care to be taken among religious groups in their choice of language to describe the religious or non-religious 'other'. In terms of what might be called religious schemata and framing, if not subjected to self-criticism and awareness this too can facilitate the development of 'enemy images'. These ultimately need to be replaced by alternative forms of description rooted in their authentic religious traditions.

Nevertheless, violence and terror in the name of Islam is as far removed from the vast majority of British Muslim communities as other forms of violent extremism are for other religious groups in British society. Just as (with the exception of certain

sections of Protestant Loyalism) the actions of the IRA were not generally taken to be representative of Catholic Christianity or Catholics in general (Armstrong 2005), or the actions of Anders Breivik were not generally portrayed as the logical culmination of Protestant Christianity in Europe, so we should understand that ordinary Muslims have nothing to do with violent forms of extremism that claim an Islamic justification.

This does not, however, prevent the recognition that, in targeting British Muslim communities, groups such as ISIS are using Islamic scripture to justify their cause and that, as a result, elements of the British Muslim communities are at particular risk of being groomed and seduced into its orbit. Furthermore, denying that violent extremism has anything to do with Islam or the vast majority of the British Muslim communities is not the same as denying that those who claim an Islamic motivation in their use of violent terror do, in fact, have a motivation that they understand to be rooted in Islam. It is possible to acknowledge the source of one's subjective motivation whilst simultaneously denying that the source of such motivation objectively justifies a course of action. The making of such a distinction is, of course, something that our criminal courts do daily when they acknowledge the mind-set of the suspect (for example, that a motivation understood by the suspect to be one of self-defence) but rule that the circumstances did not justify the intent and thereby find the suspect guilty.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper has sought to argue for the importance of developing and an alternative and proactive frame to address the issue of the support that can be found among Muslims in the UK, for violent extremism in the name of religion. Changing the words used to refer to groups such as ISIS is by no means sufficient, but challenging the language that is often unthinkingly used by policymakers, and adapting it on a daily basis, at least has the potential to make a positive impact on the current debate surrounding violent extremism. That the use of the words by which issues are framed is of significance, not only to intellectual and research informed critiques, but also in the spheres of law, politics, power and security, can be seen in the recognition given to these issues in the Canadian context in a document produced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It was significantly entitled *Words Make Worlds: Terrorism and Language* and clearly argued from a policing and security perspective that:

Terms like ‘Islamic terrorism,’ ‘Islamist terrorism,’ ‘Jihadism,’ and ‘Islamofascism’ succeed only in conflating terrorism with mainstream Islam, thereby casting all Muslims as terrorists or potential terrorists [...] Distorted and inflammatory linkages between Islam and terrorism can serve to convince Muslims – both in the West and in the larger Islamic world – that the West is, in fact, their enemy (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2007, 3).

We have seen that the way in which we process information and language shapes our understanding. Once our understanding of a subject has been shaped, it is difficult later to dismantle the incorrect or obstructive frames that are based on the concepts formed, especially when these frames are firmly reinforced through regular repetition. To avoid such negative reinforcement, it is advisable to consider the benefits of using names such as ISIS or, ideally, *Daesh* instead of ‘the Islamic State’; ‘violent extremism’ instead of ‘Islamic extremism’ or ‘Islamism’; ‘violent extremists’ instead of ‘Islamists’. Speakers in the public sphere must not be indifferent to the cognitive effect that their choice of language and labelling has, both etymologically and by implication. The gap between academic research into violent extremism in the name of religion and in broader public and political discourse must be narrowed in order for a more nuanced and ultimately more effective approach to be able to emerge in discussion of the subject.

What is often described as ‘radicalisation’ may occur for a variety of reasons and has no sole cause. There are, of course, important and legitimate critiques that can

and should be made of the status quo and of the ‘powers that be’ in the world as it currently exists. For Muslims (and especially young Muslims) in Western societies who experience at least some degree of discrimination and disadvantage and who see injustice in majority Muslim parts of the world, the idea that it might be possible to make an important and historic contribution to the creation of a completely new society is a potentially seductive one (Keles and Sezgin, 2015; Choudhury, Malik, Halstead et al. 2005, 11; and Weller, Purdam, Ghanea, Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2013). Through all of this, a nexus of vulnerability comes about within which individuals who are targeted for recruitment by ISIS and similar groups can start off by apparently discovering new forms of personal, social and religious significance in an unjust world.. But through the use of psychological grooming, these ideals can be manipulated and channelled into what ends up as a readiness to justify, support and then commit to violent extremism and terror that appeals to a religious justification.

Therefore change in the use of language, although important and central to the focus of this publication, is not itself enough to prevent violent extremism conducted in the name of religion. Work must therefore be undertaken to address the full range of underlying issues that can contribute to the circumstances in which this violent extremism can thrive. Reflecting on some of the challenges emerging on what he called “The Other Side of Terror/War on Terror”, one of present co-authors has previously identified what he called six “points of challenge” (Weller, 2009, 205-206), as follows:

1. Governments must learn from history that to combat terror with methods that undermine human rights will only strengthen those forces that use terror as a means of advancing their cause.
2. To ignore or deny the reasons that those who use terror to advance their cause give for their actions is unlikely to lead to a resolution of the problems caused by terror.
3. Terror in the name of religion is particularly dangerous both to the wider politic and to religions themselves, because it harnesses ultimate convictions and in its destructive service.
4. Attempts by the ‘powers that be’ artificially and externally to create a ‘liberal’ or ‘moderate’ Islam (or indeed any any other religion) are likely to prove ineffective and may also backfire
5. Muslims (and indeed people of other religions) have to accept a greater responsibility for combating the dissemination and propagation of ‘enemy images’ among their faithful.
6. For multiculturalism to continue to have a future, governments and societies must acknowledge and tackle Islamophobia, and indeed all other forms of hatred and discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief.



But alongside and within all the above it really is the case that “words make worlds” and, as argued in the document of that name (at the time with reference to what was called “Al-Qai’da-type” violent extremism but of equal relevance to the current threat which ISIS presents):

The most effective long-term strategy against Al-Qai’da-type extremism, whether domestic or global, may be rooted in the construction of ‘alternative narratives’ designed to subvert extremist messaging (Royal Canadian Mounted Police 2007, 3).

Among the contributions made to creating such alternative narratives have been the Dialogue Society’s *Deradicalisation by Default: The ‘Dialogue’ Approach to Rooting out Violent Extremism* (2009), and Keles and Sezgin’s *A Hizmet Approach to Rooting Out Violent Extremism* (2015). Importantly, these contributions come out of an experience of dialogical engagement both with, and within, ‘Western’ society as a whole. But at the same time they are informed by a deep and authentic Islamic tradition, practice and vision – in this instance as refracted through the example and teaching of the Turkish Muslim scholar and activist, Muhammad Fethullah Gülen. Such alternative narratives are being created among Muslims throughout the world who are also determined to make clear that the actions of violent terror perpetrated by some are done ‘not in our name’. And these narratives are, in principle at least, capable of speaking equally to Muslims and to people of other religious traditions and none, both in the UK and in other European societies (Weller and Yilmaz, eds. 2012) as well as in the wider world (Barton, Weller, and Yilmaz, eds. 2013), including those parts where Muslims are in a majority and societies are often in fundamental transition, of a very unstable and sometimes quite dangerous kind for all, including for Muslims themselves.

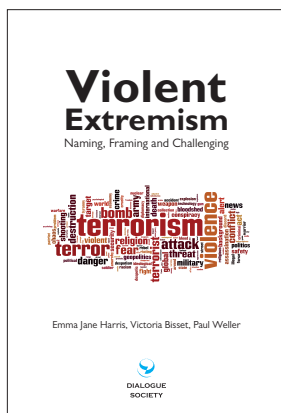
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Violent extremism undertaken in the name of religion threatens the basic premises on which dialogue operates, as well as the conditions within which it can grow. In understanding the causes of this phenomenon, with a view ultimately to tackling them, we must first consider the ways that we communicate about and around the subject. This influences how we think about it and cause others to think about it. While our knowledge of violent extremism and terror in the name of religion has increased exponentially over recent decades, the public and political language surrounding the issue has, generally speaking, failed to adapt accordingly. Through this publication, the Dialogue Society aims to show how certain language frames can negatively contribute towards and reinforce major misunderstandings. The report first provides an overview of how relevant work in the field of cognitive linguistics and related approaches can aid and illuminate examples of problematic language use. It explains how terms such as ‘Islamism’ and ‘Islamist’ should not be used without first considering their etymological roots, and that the use of such terms can convey and conflate concepts distinct from their intended meaning. The issue of demands for Muslims to denounce acts of terror is then addressed and shown to be connected to the misuse of linguistic frames and terms. Finally, the report offers to politicians, policy makers and media organisations some recommended alternatives to currently used linguistic frameworks that are often used in discussing violent extremism, and commends some alternative narratives and approaches that can contribute to bringing about positive change in relation to this phenomenon.

