

# Assessing the Language of the EU's Counter-Terrorism Strategy

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### The Importance of Language: Critically Assessing the European Union's Counter-Terrorism Strategy

Terrorism is perceived by many as the biggest security threat of today. Even though the world has known terrorism for centuries, the attacks on 9/11 2001 elevated terrorism to the number one spot for security threats. The fact that 9/11 can be written without further explanation, and with confidence that the reader knows what is being talked about, is further testimony to the importance of that event. The first decade of the 2000's saw a number of terrorist attacks that has led to a range of different responses and approaches to terrorism, most notably President Bush's "War on Terrorism", which led to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. European countries have also been victims of terrorist attacks, and some of them also joined the USA in its war against terror. At the same time, the members of the European Union realized that increased cooperation was needed in order to better face the threat of terrorism. In 2005, the EU compiled the European Union Counter-Terrorism Strategy, an attempt to provide an important framework to help co-ordinate national policies, share information and determine good practice.[1] Given the ever increasing importance of the EU, what the EU says about terrorism is important, especially because it wants to provide a framework for national policies.

This essay will seek to critically assess the language used by the EU in its key texts regarding terrorism. Language plays an important role in making sense of the world, and this essay will explore how the language used by the EU shapes its policies. It will do so by drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA), which takes consideration of the context of language use to be crucial.[2] Moreover, this essay will argue that there are inconsistencies that need to be dealt with regarding the way the EU addresses terrorism. This is of the utmost importance, especially if there is any interest in understanding how terrorism becomes possible. I will start by outlining CDA, and how it can be used to assess language and discourse, before applying it to key EU texts on terrorism from the EU.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

Scrutinizing the language applied by the EU in its counter-terrorism laws allows for an underlying assumption that words are never neutral. Words do not simply just describe the world. They are also imperative in helping us making sense of the world.[3] It has been argued that humans are discourse dependent, and that we make sense of the world through language, that which forms the basis for our interaction with each other.[4] Following the same line of thought, Collins and Glover argue that language shapes our understanding of the world, and that, while we do not always realize it, language acts as a determinate factor in the formation of our perceptions of the world.[5] The language applied by President Bush and his administration after 9/11 was particularly important in shaping the response leading to the 'War on Terror'[6], in that politicians and media alike made it clear that evil people had launched an attack on our civilization.

The language used by *The Economist* left the reader with no doubts about the nature of the attacks, a declaration of war, and that barbarians were behind the attack: 'The appalling atrocities of September 11th—acts that must be seen as a declaration of war not just on America but on all civilized people'.[7] It was obvious that barbarians were

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behind the attacks. Only barbaric people attack civilized societies, and labelling someone as barbaric goes a long way in shaping how to deal with the people behind the attacks. Moreover, it highlights the point that words have history. 'Evil' does not, for instance, drop down from the sky with a universal meaning that is clear, unchanging and agreed upon by people in all societies.[8] It is very likely that the word 'terrorism,' to an American, is associated with 9/11 and Islamic extremism, while an Afghani might associate 'terrorism' with violent American actions. It is therefore not in the words themselves that the importance lies, but rather in the way they are used, by whom, and to what effect.[9] Martha Crenshaw notes: 'What one calls things matters. There are few neutral terms in politics, because political language affects the perceptions of protagonists and audiences, and such effect acquires a greater urgency in the drama of terrorism'.[10] The language we choose to apply does, as Foucault notes, privilege one viewpoint over others, naturalizing some understandings as rational and others as nonsensical.[11]

It should therefore be clear that discourse, language used in speech and writing, is of the utmost importance. CDA sees discourse as a form of 'social practice,' which implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situations, institutions and social structures that frame it.[12] The relationship is dialectical, in that discourse is socially constitutive and, at the same time, constituted by other social practices.[13] Moreover, CDA takes a particular interest in the relation between language and power.[14] 'Discursive practices may have major ideological effects. That is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between (for instance) social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and people'.[15] The Nazi rhetoric used to justify racial discrimination is an excellent example of how discourse has been used to construct a certain ideology and policy as common sense.

CDA is, thus, an approach towards analysing specific texts or speech acts and a way of understanding the relationship between discourse and social and political phenomena.[16] Firstly, it offers an approach to deal directly with specific texts, in order to discover how discursive practices operate linguistically within those texts. Secondly, it has a focus on an interdisciplinary, contextual and social analysis of the texts, in order to further illuminate the relationship between discourse and social processes. It is this approach that this essay will utilize in order to critically assess key texts on terrorism published by the EU. Assessing the whole EU discourse on terrorism is obviously out of range, but the key texts should reveal some underlying assumptions about terrorism and the ways to respond to it. As Ronald Crelinsten nicely puts it: 'How we conceive of terrorism determines to a great extent how we go about countering it and what resources-money, manpower, institutional framework, time horizon - we devote to the effort'.[17].

## EU's Counter-Terrorism Strategy

Given the inherent limits to this essay, the analysis will be confined to the introduction and the Prevent part of the European Counter-terrorism Strategy. Compiled in 2005, it still forms the basis for the EU's approach to terrorism.[18] EU's Counter-Terrorism Strategy is made up of four pillars - prevent, protect, pursue, and respond. It is a strategy that the EU frames as constituting a comprehensive and proportionate response to the international terrorist threat.[19] Within the Introduction and Prevent portion of the document are assumptions, beliefs and values regarding terrorism, which form the basis for the other pillars. The following analysis will be guided by one essential question: what assumptions, beliefs and values underlie the language in the text? This question allows us to look at the specific text itself and the wider social and cultural context.[20]

The first paragraph in the strategy makes it clear that terrorism is a threat to all states and to all peoples.[21] The EU perceives terrorism as a universal and omnipresent threat that 'threatens our security, our democratic societies and the rights and freedoms of our citizens'.[22] The wording in this paragraph is interesting because terrorism seems to be defined as one concept. The use of the word '*It*' to describe terrorism as posing a series of threats to states and people indicates a view of terrorism as a single concept and threat. Furthermore, the fact that terrorism poses a threat to people and states suggests that the EU views terrorism as something non-state actors do. This is natural given the definition of terrorism applied by the EU: 'The framework decision defines a terrorist group as a structured organisation consisting of more than two persons, established over a period of time and acting in concert, and refers to directing a terrorist group and participating in its activities as offences relating to a terrorist group'.[23] The first problem with this approach, however, is that it implies that terrorism means the same to everybody. Fairclough notes

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on this subject the importance of alternative wordings and their political and ideological significance, as, for instance, in rewording terrorists as freedom fighters and vice versa.[24] It is, therefore, a bold statement by the EU to identify terrorism as a universal threat without taking into consideration that the definition of terrorism is widely contested, especially seeing that there are currently over 200 legal and academic definitions from which to choose.[25] It would seem that defining terrorism and terrorists is not a straight forward task. A striking example is the fact that Nelson Mandela, a man few would regard as a terrorist, was first removed from the US terrorism watch list only in 2008.[26]

The entire strategy, it seems, is a response to terrorism conceptualized as a single concept. However, the Strategy outlines in paragraph six: 'This strategy focuses on countering radicalization and recruitment to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and the groups it inspires, given that this type of terrorism currently represents the main threat to the union as a whole'.[27] In this quote, it seems that the EU is focusing on one form of terrorism, implicitly saying that other forms of terrorism exist that they will not focus on. This is in contrast to paragraph one, in the introduction to the strategy, where it is made clear that we are dealing with a single form of terrorism that is a threat to all states and all people.[28] It can, therefore, be slightly confusing to know whether they are talking about terrorism as one single concept of terrorism or just one form of terrorism.

In addition, given the clarification offered in the first paragraph of the Prevent-pillar, it would seem that the terrorism that is identified as a universal threat is indeed the threat of terrorism posed by groups like Al Qaeda. However, if 'groups like Al Qaeda' means non-state actors or Islamist extremists, then this is not clear when looking at the EU's definition of terrorism. This brings us back to the discussion about the different definitions of terrorism and the difficulty in defining and agreeing on one definition. It would seem that the terrorist threat the EU has identified as a threat to all people and states is more specifically the threat, as it is perceived, to all people living in Western countries. The Strategy highlights that the EU will continue to work to build the international consensus and promote international standards for countering terrorism in conjunction with the UN.[29] However, this statement seems to indicate that there is, in fact, already an international consensus on what terrorism is and how to fight it. Moreover, the wording implies that it is this international standard the EU has adopted that is in need of promotion, not, perhaps, the other way around. Given the controversy of the 'War on Terror' over the last decade and that terrorism is a highly contested term, it is important to note that it is not at all clear that such international consensus exists or that a consensus offers an appropriate approach to terrorism.[30] This brings us to, what seems to be, a problem-solving approach to the form of terrorism represented by Al Qaeda and likeminded groups.

## Problem-solving approach

'A problem arises when a living creature has a goal but does not know how this goal is to be reached. Whenever one cannot go from the given situation to the desired situation simply by action, then there is recourse to thinking...'.[31] Besides describing a normal problem-solving situation, Karl Duncker's quote also describes the situation in which many Western countries and the EU find themselves. Terrorism has been labelled as the biggest threat to Western societies, indeed to civilization in general, and subsequently as a problem that needs to be fought, eradicated or solved at any cost. Nowhere was this clearer than in the USA when President Bush declared a war on terror.[32] Some European countries joined the USA in the attempt to wage war against the new enemy, but, while this war was a failure, the EU compiled its strategy to combat terrorism.

The EU makes it clear that its goal is to combat terrorism by countering radicalisation and recruitment to terrorist groups like Al Qaeda.[33] This can be done through identifying and countering the methods, propaganda and conditions through which people are drawn into terrorism.[34] Propaganda and radicalisation are repeatedly mentioned in the strategy as the key areas where the EU should focus its resources in order to combat terrorism.[35] It can, thus, be argued that the EU has a problem, that being terrorism from Al Qaeda and likeminded groups, which it seeks to solve by countering radicalisation and propaganda since these factors are seen to draw people in to terrorism. Although this marks somewhat of a difference from the 'War on Terror,' this essay will argue that the EU runs the risk of generalizing terrorism in a way that obscures, rather than illuminates, the comprehensive nature of terrorism.

The EU claims in its Counter-Terrorism Strategy that it seeks to: 'Develop a global strategy for combating

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terrorism'.[36] It can do so, as discussed earlier, because terrorism is conceptualized as a single concept that poses a threat to all people and states. A global strategy could be the tool that is necessary in solving the problem of terrorism, which is by reducing the threat of it. However, there are dangers to such an approach. Developing a global strategy for combating terrorism can be seen as generalizing about terrorism, in that the EU looks to a global strategy to reach the goal of reducing terrorism. It looks a little like saying: 'We have had a terrorist attack in France. Find out who is responsible and implement the appropriate counter-terrorism strategy'. It would be nice, of course, to address terrorism like we address a disease. However, there is reason to argue that terrorism as a phenomenon is far too complex for one single approach or response. Joseba Zulaika argues that one should approach political violence by 'situating it in ritualized contexts in which social interaction and textual creation do not rely on simple rational-instrumental links'.[37] This is in line with Tore Bjørgo, when he argues that we need to fully understand terrorists in their own cultural grammar if we do not want to run the risk obscuring our insights and understanding of terrorism as a complex phenomenon.[38] What both of these quotes represent is an approach that seeks to understand terrorism in light of its historical roots, political antecedents, ritual dimensions, social functions, and by recognizing that social movements and groups evolve in a dynamic, iterative process of interaction with their surrounding state and society.[39]

Furthermore, there is a growing consensus among researchers and scholars that we are not dealing with only one single form of terrorism, but rather several "terrorisms." There is also reason to believe that a number of different causes can be attributed to different types of terrorist acts.[40] To this, Martha Crenshaw adds, 'attempts to generalize about terrorism might result in an over-generalization which obscures the process of understanding terrorism'.[41] Thus, it can be argued that the goal of the EU's counter-terrorism strategy is too narrow when examining how the first paragraph of the Prevent – pillar states that the strategy focuses on countering radicalization and recruitment to terrorist groups 'such as Al Qaeda'.[42]

It should, therefore, not come as a surprise that this essay advocates a position that treats terrorism as a multi-causal phenomenon that needs to be understood in its own cultural grammar. The danger of generalizing about terrorism and treating it as a disease we need to find the cure for is that we move further away from any real understanding of how terrorism becomes possible. The process of developing a global strategy could, of course, include an approach that takes into consideration the multi-causal nature of terrorism advocated in this essay. However, given how the EU has defined the terrorist threat, the approach seems to resemble an attempt to find the silver-bullet in the response to terrorism. Hans Morgenthau warned against over-simplification of complex problems, stating: 'the age is forever searching for the philosophers' stone, the magic formula, which, mechanically applied, will produce the desired result and thus substitute for the uncertainties and risk of political action the certitude of rational calculation'.[43] This essay does not argue that the EU's Counter-terrorism Strategy is an attempt to find the silver-bullet, but it warns against a generalization of a complex phenomenon which might obscure more than it illuminates.

This section has addressed what seems to be a problem-solving approach to terrorism that is not without problems. To counter terrorism, the EU argues, one must address the radicalization and propaganda that draws people into Al Qaeda or likeminded groups. These two factors play a major role in recruiting new terrorists and are, thus, the areas that need to be addressed. This section has also warned against generalizing about terrorism and highlighted the importance of a complex response to a complex phenomenon. The EU might claim that its approach is comprehensive and proportionate, but the next section will argue that the approach is capable of being more comprehensive and proportionate.

## Complex response to a complex phenomenon

The strategy sets out objectives regarding the prevention of new recruits to terrorism by countering radicalization and promoting mainstream opinions that rejects violence. There is nonetheless one important question to be asked: how is it that people are open to radicalization in the first place? Is it because there are inherently evil people out there who just wait for a chance and opportunity to attack the West, as President Bush argued, or could it be that some people are subject to radicalization because there are real social and political grievances in place?

The strategy addresses these issues in two paragraphs. In paragraph five, the EU recognizes the importance of

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conflict resolution and in addressing the motivational and structural factors underpinning radicalisation.[44] In paragraph eleven, the strategy identifies a range of conditions that may create an enabling environment for terrorism. These conditions include poor or autocratic governance, rapid but unmanaged modernisation, and lack of political or economic prospects and of educational opportunities.[45] Thus, the strategy goes to some length in addressing why some people are radicalized. The Strategy is on target when it assumes that these conditions play into the picture of understanding terrorism. Data collected by Neil Bowie and Alex Schmid shows that the top 5 countries, in terms of terrorist fatalities per million people, are all countries (Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, West Bank and Columbia) where there are ongoing conflicts.[46] The fact that most terrorist attacks take place in a small number of countries and are a part of an on-going conflict makes the conflict-resolution aspect of the strategy especially important.[47]

Consequently, making an effort to understand a terrorist group in its context might go a long way in understanding why the group chose to resort to terrorism in order to communicate its message. The case could be made that people in these areas, but also in other parts of the world, are radicalized because they are trying to address what they perceive as unjust and abominable treatment by a state, or states, towards a group of people. In addition, a foreign policy briefing from 1998 by Ivan Eland of the Cato Institute, an American think tank, concludes that 'all of the examples of terrorist attacks on the United States can be explained as retaliation for U.S intervention abroad'.[48] It is also important to keep in mind that the 9/11 attack was just the most spectacular one within a cycle of violence between the USA and Al Qaeda that had been escalating since the early 1990's.[49] Keeping in mind that the foreign policies of Western countries might be a main source for radicalization, and finally terrorism, is, thus, important to keep in mind.

It could, therefore, be argued that when the EU seeks to counter radicalization to draw people away from terrorism, it would do so by addressing the conditions for why people are subject to radicalization in the first place, if it seeks to approach terrorism as a complex phenomenon. The EU should also be aware of not taking acts of terrorism or terrorist groups out of their context. Instead of implementing legislation to spot radical behaviour in society and on the internet through increased monitoring and community policing[50], understanding why people resort to terrorism in the first place might reduce the audience for radical and extremist ideologies, and consequently reduce terrorism. For the EU, given that it wants to provide a framework to help co-ordinate national policies, share information and determine good practice[51], it is imperative that it keeps in mind that how member states, as well as the EU, act on the international stage is likely to have consequences in terms of terrorist attacks.

Actions have consequences, and terrorist attacks might be correctly labelled as cowardly when innocent people are random victims in a political struggle. However, it is worth keeping in mind the explanation from one terrorist on trial in Norway. When confronted with the statement that his action was cowardly, he indicated that he could have called up the army and challenged them to a duel, but would have been killed without having communicated his message. This kind of logic is the same amongst other terrorists around the world. Hamas does not have the resources to challenge Israel's militarily, so it resorts to terrorism in order to communicate its message and inflict harm upon people they perceive as suppressors and intruders. Now, Israel can build fences and monitor its society to eternity, but as long as the conflict goes on, there is an increased chance that people around the world will sympathize with the Palestinians and be subjects to radicalization. Thus, the cycle of violence continues and continues.

## Conclusion

This essay has critically assessed the language used by the European Union in its Counter-Terrorism Strategy. The central approach for this essay has been to look at the assumptions, beliefs and values that underlie the language in the strategy, emphasizing that how the EU conceives of terrorism is important in understanding the policies it advocates. The analysis focused, firstly, on the definition of terrorism applied by the EU and how it seems to conceptualize terrorism as a single concept that only non-state actors conduct. This is not without problems, and this essay has advocated an approach to terrorism that takes into account the complex nature of a complex phenomenon. From defining terrorism as a single threat, the EU, at a later point, identifies the threat posed by Al Qaeda and likeminded groups as the main security threat. The EU also claims to work to promote the international consensus on terrorism, even though the term is highly contested and no definition is agreed upon. There are, therefore, some areas in the way EU defines terrorism that would need to be addressed in order for its response to become more

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comprehensive and proportionate.

This essay has argued, at some length, about the dangers of generalizing about a complex phenomenon, which is of concern when taking into account the emphasis the EU has put on one specific group and likeminded groups. This essay has also warned against a specific problem-solving approach where one is constantly searching for a strategy or magic formula. If the EU chooses to focus only on the threat from Al Qaeda, it can be argued that it is looking to solve only one problem. Yet, if one recognizes that terrorism is complex, and very often is a result of an on-going conflict, it is clear that one needs to move the focus from countering one specific group and, instead, situate a terrorist group in its context. That is the approach by which one can understand how it is possible that certain people are resorting to terrorism. Given the findings of Ivan Eland, quoted in this essay, the EU and states within Europe must be aware that their actions have consequences and that the way some people choose to respond might be through terrorism. If the goal is to reduce terrorism, the EU would be wise to focus more on the link between conflicts and terrorism and the importance of conflict resolution. Asking what it is that makes people subject to radicalization might give us some unpleasant answers in regards to the foreign policy of Western countries. However, it is the particular opinion of this essay that such an approach is more fruitful than the increased monitoring of the internet and community policing, if reducing terrorist attacks is the goal.

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[2] Vodak 2001:1

[3] Jackson 2005:21

[4] Onuf 1989:38

[5] Collins & Glover 2002:4

[6] Jackson 2005

[7] The Economist 2001

[8] Collins & Glover 2002:8

[9] Ibid:10

[10] Crenshaw 1995:7

[11] Foucault. Cited in Jackson 2005:22

[12] Fairclough & Vodak 1997:258

[13] Fairclough 1992:4 and Jackson 200:24

[14] Vodak 2001:2

[15] Fairclough & Vodak 1997:258

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- [16] Jackson 2005:24
- [17] Crelinsten 2009:19
- [18] Official Journal of the European Union 2010:24
- [19] Council of The European Union 2005:6
- [20] Jackson 2005:25
- [21] Council of The European Union 2005:6
- [22] Ibid
- [23] Council of The European Union 2002
- [24] Fairclough 1992:77
- [25] Jackson et al 2011:100-107
- [26] CNN 2008
- [27] Council of The European Union 2005:7
- [28] Ibid:6
- [29] Ibid
- [30] Jackson et al 2011:100
- [31] Duncker 1945:1
- [32] Jackson et al 2011:64
- [33] Council of the European Union 2005:7
- [34] Ibid
- [35] Ibid: 7-9
- [36] Ibid
- [37] Zulaika 1988: 291
- [38] Bjørgo 2005:1
- [39] Jackson et al 2011:202
- [40] Bjørgo 2005:2
- [41] Crenshaw 1990:113
- [42] Council of The European Union 2005:7

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[43] Morgenthau 1947:79

[44] Council of the European Union 2005:7

[45] Ibid:9

[46] Bowie & Schmid 2011:310

[47] Jackson et al 2011:130-131

[48] Eland 1998: 21

[49] Jackson 2005:43

[50] Council of the European Union 2005:8

[51] Ibid

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