

5 Reasons Why the West Got Islamist Terrorism Wrong

Written by Ayla Göl

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AYLA GÖL, MAR 14 2019

The 'clash of civilizations' thesis has become fashionably outdated but still shapes the way we understand the connection between Islam, terrorism and the Middle East. In 2019, it is time to 'forget the Middle East' and change the way we perceive Islam. Vera Mironova, in 'The New Face of Terrorism', claims that the way Westerners think about 'Islamist terrorism has grown dangerously outdated', and the terrorist attacks at Western targets have been increasingly coming from militants of the former Soviet Union, not the Middle East. Following on these insights, I argue that it is time not only to 'forget the Middle East' but also stop *essentializing* Islam in the Middle East.

For Mironova, the relative increase in anti-Western terrorist attacks emanating from the post-Soviet world is a result of several national, regional and international factors. On the one hand, with the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), militants from Russian-speaking areas turned *from domestic to regional concerns*. "By 2017, at least 8,500 fighters from former Soviet republics had flocked to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State". In early 2019, following its almost total defeat in Iraq and Syria, the ISIS has lost its power and lure for these militants. Many ISIS fighters and brides have surrendered and want to return to their countries of origins, as the stark example of Shamima Begum's case shows in the UK. On the other hand, the growing numbers of prosecuted Muslims in Asia has created new grievances to turn the militants' focus *from domestic to transnational issues*. However, this is not a surprising trend. A careful student of Middle Eastern politics could easily identify the link between regional and international terrorism. For example, the Iranian Revolution in 1979 had a direct impact on the following Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which eventually led to the rise of *mujahedeen*, and then the Taliban, that are seen as the epitome of Islamist terrorism that defined the last decade of the 20th century.

When the world moved to the 21st century, the issue of terrorism has been carried over but with a new twist. It was 'the crisis of globalization' and neo-liberal international (dis)order, which had unprecedented impacts on anti-Western terrorist attacks, and the relationship between the West and the so-called rest of the world – the Global South. For centuries, the Middle East was the *essence* of the rest of the world. It was also regarded as a unique region because of Islam's presumed *essential* place in regional politics. Many readers are familiar with the age-old narrative of the 'clash of civilizations', which presumed a stark division between the West and the rest of the world, and an inherent tendency towards conflict between the West and Islam. Originally, Bernard Lewis coined the term in the 1950s but it was Samuel Huntington who revived and reinserted it into political discourses in the 1990s. Huntington's thesis was conceived in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Communism. The Western model of liberal state and democracy was then presented as the only option in the search for a new world order. Meanwhile, political and military interventions were seen as necessary to achieve socio-political changes in Muslim countries in the post-Cold War era. These interventions not only have failed miserably—as seen in Afghanistan, Iraq and the rise of ISIS—but also produced a self-fulfilling prophecy of a seeming clash of civilizations in the face of Islamist terrorism.

It was often concluded that Western strategies failed because of the rigidity of strongly religious and traditional Muslim societies. These cultural explanations were shaped by Western *ethnocentric[i]* biases towards Islam and the Middle East, which led to the following five (mis)understandings.

The Illusion of a Unified Islam

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Western ethnocentrism is based on an illusion that Islam is monolithic and homogenous. There are around 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. Muslim societies stretching from Albania to Indonesia via Turkey have cultural differences, complexities, and contradictions, as well as different political trajectories in different regions. Islam as a set of belief systems is different from political Islam or Islamism, which 'refer to those ideologies and movements that strive to establish some kind of an "Islamic order"—a religious state, shari'a law, and moral codes in Muslim societies and communities'.^[ii] There is neither a unified Islamic entity that transcends cultural, national, and regional differences in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia-Pacific, nor consolidated goals of Islamism defined by a specific political group.

The Legacy of Orientalism

The age of Islamist terrorism was defined by the attacks of 9/11 and the following 7/7 (London), Istanbul, and Madrid bombings in the beginning of the 21st century. However, long before the age of Islamist terrorism, Western conceptions and representations of Muslims had already consigned them to the category of the 'East', 'Oriental' or 'Islamic world', as produced by the narratives of Orientalism. It was at the end of World War One that the Middle East was created as an 'imaginative geography' and peopled by 'Others'. These people were labeled as 'uncivilized', 'traditional', 'irrational', and 'violent', almost similar to the way they were defined by 'Orientalism' two centuries earlier. Meanwhile, many critical thinkers had warned their readers about Western hegemony and its attempts to confirm its power against 'Others' by trying to dominate their 'hearts and minds'.^[iii] For those who have heeded these warnings and for readers of critical social theories, the rise of resistance to Western hegemony was unsurprising. What is surprising is that this knowledge is still not filtering down into society by mainstream media in a critical way even in the 21st century. Perhaps this is because the illusion of a single Islam as a threat to Western hegemony is more apparent than real.

Islam as a Violent Religion

Western ethnocentric biases frame Islam inevitably as the primary referent for the cause of violence. While the Middle East is singled out through the *essentialised* view of Islam as a violent religion, religious extremisms and violent practices of Christians, Jews, and Hindus rarely receive a similar critique. I wonder why the increasing literature on religious terrorism contains virtually nothing on 'Christian terrorism', 'Jewish terrorism', or 'Hindu terrorism'. By singling out Islam as a violent religion, uncritical studies of terrorism do more harm than good in understanding the causes of international terrorism. Unpacking the historical, political, and socio-economic specificity of each terrorist attack in question, as well as cultural and religious motives, is necessary to understand the complexity of international terrorism without reducing it to a simple cause.

The Impact of Asymmetrical Exercise of Power

Essentializing Islam and the Middle East, in fact, prevents many Westerners from understanding the complex causes of power struggles. Historical, political, social, and ideological power structures are exercised asymmetrically not only between regional states and the West but also between oppressive regimes and marginalized groups. Without contextualizing these particular power structures it is difficult to understand what lures an individual or a group towards the use of violent tactics and joining a terrorist group. For some, the reason might be challenging the existing status quo, repressive governments at home, and for others, searching for divine justice. The consequences of asymmetrical exercise of power have been shaping the key issues in the Middle East, such as Palestinian and Kurdish struggles, for years. The reduction of the motives of violent tactics to religion alone—the so-called Islamist terrorism—is bound to fail to explain the complex causes of terrorist acts. Such reductionist views refrain from analyzing the asymmetry in existing power structures and, hence, the wrongdoings of Western—in particular US and UK—foreign policies towards not only the Muslim world, but also the Global South as a whole.

All Muslims as Potential Terrorists

In contemporary politics, much of the Western media and right-wing populist narratives continue adopting rather simplistic views of Islam as a violent and backward religion, and stereotypical images of Muslims as irrational and

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warmongering beings. These narratives contribute towards the self-fulfilling prophecy of Islamist terrorism on two grounds. On the one hand, they create a false perception of non-Muslims as rational, non-violent, and peaceful beings. Such binary oppositions contribute towards right-wing populist narratives and exclusionary politics of ordinary Muslims. On the other hand, these views prevent much needed efforts to open space for the inclusion of marginalized and dissident voices, voices that are explicitly critical of ahistorical, apolitical and reductionist understandings of violence and Islamist terrorism.

In conclusion, it is indeed time to 'forget the Middle East' but more importantly to refrain from the ethnocentric and cultural biases, which have led Westerners to get Islamist terrorism so wrong. *Essentializing* Islam will not help the West to find a solution to the use of violence by Muslims. On the contrary, it will only impede the understanding of the complexity of anti-Western terrorism, as increasingly coming out of the post-Soviet world, and also alienate ordinary and diverse Muslims across the world.

Notes

[i] *Ethnocentrism* is defined here as a belief that the norms and customs of one's own group (ethnic, cultural, religious and social) is of central importance and better than any other.

[ii] Asef Bayat, *Post-Islamism and Many Faces of Political Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p.4

[iii] See A. Abdel-Malek, 1981. *Social dialectics: Nation and revolution*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Samir Amin, *Imperialism and unequal development*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1977; Homi Bhabha, 'The other question – the stereotype and colonial discourse', *Screen*, 24 (1983: 6): 18–36; Michael Foucault, Foucault, M., 1980. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. New York, NY: Pantheon, and Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1993; Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. London: Vintage, 1997.

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