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# 'Islamism' has no place in terror's lexicon



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Very soon, a deluge of '11 September six years on' analyses will descend on us. They will almost all say the same thing: that the threat from modern Islamic militancy remains high, that victory in the war on terror is a long way off, that our own errors have often made a bad situation worse and that there have been some notable successes. There will be some debate over the exact current significance (and health) of the fugitive leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. The more perceptive writers will note that the vast bulk of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims continues to reject extremism. The less perceptive (and less travelled) will talk about a continuing war for civilisation.

As well as considering the views of the various commentators, we would do well to stop a moment to consider the language in which they are expressed. For we have reached a critical moment in the war on terror. Sorry, let me rephrase that, we have reached a critical moment in our efforts to counter the terrorist threat. No. We are at an important juncture in the continuing process of countering Islamism... no... Islamic militancy... er ... modern Muslim radicalism... al-Qaeda... no, make that al-Qaeda-inspired violence... er... on second thoughts...

For the semantics of the post-9/11 era have never been easy. From the mantraps of the use of words such as 'crusade' in the days after 11 September to difficult decisions by broadcasters and print journalists over whether they talk about 'terrorists', 'militants' or 'violent activists', the battle fought to ensure a language that more or less accurately describes the phenomenon that we have seen emerging in recent years, which I call 'modern Islamic militancy', for want of a better term, and the response to it has been as important as any other. And that battle is far from over. It took many years to establish a vocabulary that was broadly accepted to adequately describe the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Finding an equivalent set of terms for the threat posed by bin Laden and others will take longer still, but as language often determines thoughts and, thus, policies, it is an essential process that we need to survey as carefully as our check-in queues. It is a counterterrorist effort as valuable as any other.

As in more conventional areas, this battlefield has seen victories and defeats. An example of the former is, following the arrival of Gordon Brown at Number 10, the consigning of the inflammatory and counterproductive term 'the war on terror' to the governmental linguistic dustbin.

The term 'al-Qaeda' has also evolved. Senior British politicians now speak carefully of 'al-Qaeda-inspired' violence. There is now sufficient knowledge among the general population of the actual nature of al-Qaeda, an ideology as much as an organisation, for it to be impossible for a politician to claim baldly that any given attack is the work simply of Osama bin Laden.

This reveals the mechanisms by which the vocabulary used to describe the terrorist threat against us evolves. Words, often originating in the specialist jargon of counter-terrorism, are introduced into general conversation by journalists and politicians. They are then tested at the bar of public opinion. Sometimes, they are rejected. Frequently, they are adopted, but only after their sense has been nuanced to be closer to general perceptions.

The shift in the popular understanding of the term 'al-Qaeda' feeds back into political language, into the media and finally into policy-making. Here, cultural and linguistic factors are interlinked. In the US, where individual responsibility is emphasised and analysts tend to express themselves in an apparently rigorous, precise and empirical style, the understanding of 'al-Qaeda' has always contrasted strongly with that in countries such as France, for example, where social and historical context is emphasised, the collective trumps the individual and analysts, policy-makers and

commentators are far happier with ill-defined concepts and ideas.

In the wake of 9/11, French analysts decided, rightly, that al-Qaeda was a 'nebuleuse', a word which has no direct equivalent in English and denotes a nebulous, floating, dynamically evolving phenomenon that is half-network, half-idea. Words can also collect different meanings. So 'jihad', already laden with several contesting theological interpretations, has further senses in the columns of, say, the Daily Mail and in the daily conversation among, for example, teenagers of Pakistani origin in Walthamstow. For the latter, sadly, 'jihad' is a glamorous, secretive, countercultural, ultra-violent lifestyle choice as much as a religious and cultural concept charged with centuries of Islamic history and religious argument.

Recently, a new label has been proposed for the diverse and dynamic phenomenon which threatens us: 'Islamism'. Sadly, this is not a helpful term. First, because it is already used by specialists to denote a fairly narrow ideology aiming to mobilise Muslims to take over existing modern states that differs substantially from the more eschatological ideas underpinning the project of 'al-Qaeda'. And second, because it implies a direct causal link between Islam and the violence we have seen in recent years.

Islam may be part of the problem, but it is wrong to suggest that a hugely diverse and dynamic faith is the sole source of the current threat. 'Islamism' emphasises the religious above all other factors, the social, the political, the economic and the cultural. Its supporters should bear in mind that MI5 now describes terrorism in the UK as, at least in part, a 'cultural phenomenon'.

These arguments will continue for a long time. For the moment, 'modern Islamic militancy' might serve as a catch-all term that admits the religious component of the current violence while preserving a sense of its general context. No doubt, it will be bettered very shortly. And so it should be. Only a lively and informed debate will speed

the evolution of the right vocabulary and thus the right policies to pursue what once was known as 'the war on terror'.

• Jason Burke is author of *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* and *On the Road to Kandahar* (both published by Penguin)

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