25. Feb. 2016

von gast

in Terrorismus

Kommentare (0)

Terrorism and Jihad: A Less Biased Debate Would Benefit Us

by Philipp Holtmann

A short while ago, an interested reader inquired about one of my articles on the topic of jihad and terrorism. I am thankful for the inspiring question. The reader asked me to clarify why there seems to be no difference between terrorism and jihad nowadays, and why this boundary has disappeared in debates by many people in the social media and in other places.

There is indeed a great need for clarification of what jihad and terrorism mean and what their relationship is. Both concepts have no universally accepted and binding definitions and the existing definitions are often dominated by discourse and opinion leaders, who do not necessarily reflect more comprehensive and holistic views on both topics. This point comes to the fore if we look at Western definitions of terrorism which clearly lack foci on illegal state repression and irregular warfare by state actors. Instead, definitions of terrorism mainly concentrate on non-state and sub-state actors, who nowadays are mostly non-European and Muslim, which situates the debates influenced by this definitional imbalance in new realms of neo-colonialist, racist and imperialist discourses. At the same time, it is equally clear that there is no universally valid and accepted definition of jihad, but that jihad comprises highly dynamic concepts which change over time and within the contexts, in which jihad is put to use. This entails campaigns for public cleanliness, the quest to purify one's soul, but also armed struggle by state armies and substate actors.

Indeed, the concept of „jihad" and its relation to politico-religious violence is nowadays dominated by „Muslim terrorists." If we want to define Muslim terrorists, then we could refer to people who regard themselves as devout Muslims, often have only a shallow understanding of Islam and intentionally propagate totally selective and constructed ideas. These are used to incite and legitimate indiscriminate acts of unforeseen and sudden lethal violence for religious and/or political purposes against third party and civilian targets in order to transfer key messages to other primary adversaries – which can be governments, populations and other sectarian groups, but also hostile concepts, such as democracy. These acts are mixed with the publication of their messages. But in addition to the terrorist concept of jihad, there is a vast array of jihad-concepts which are not connected to terrorism. In fact, the broadest definition of „jihad" is simply „an effort towards a religiously commendable aim." The interpretation and misinterpretation of this definition as legitimation for terrorist attacks is, of course, dominant today. Yet, a thorough understanding of jihad with all its facets is invaluable; understanding the vast concept of jihad helps in understanding a lot about Islam.

Some shorter Western definitions of „terrorism" resemble the one I have given you above. However, terrorism-definitions, as already mentioned, can be very biased, or let us say, create biases. Although „neutral" political and academic institutions, scholars and experts produce these definitions, they can – without too much self-criticism – not be neutral and objective in the true sense of the word, the reason being that „terrorism" means something that is diametrically opposed to our culture. Terrorism is the epitome of evil

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and disorder. It contradicts the ethics and ideals of Western humanism and civilization, and it is thus a matter of collective fear and emotions, as well as a projection surface for all our fears and phobias. This can easily lead to one of the greatest dangers: Falling into the trap of outright racism! This isn't a new problem, nor is this connection caused by the refugee crisis and the participation of alleged refugees in terrorist attacks in Europe. For the better part of a decade, the term "terrorist" has been used almost exclusively against non-Western „substate actors," very rarely against Western state actors and their operations of state terrorism through illicit warfare in many wars and conflicts past and present. The Western concept of terrorism as a coloured, Muslim, substate phenomenon flows, thus, into political, public and social media debates and often blurs Islam, Islamic cultures and discussions on jihadi terrorism with prejudices on Muslims and Middle Easteners in general. This unconscious effect, of course, aggravates deep seated mistrust, fears and conflicts between Muslims and Non-Muslims, Westerners and Southeners, or Middle-Easterners respectively.

If you look at the whole issue from the viewpoint of Western public awareness and security policies, then jihad at present equals terrorism. One will hardly find alternative visions of jihad in the media and in the Internet. There are clear reasons for this: Firstly, the terrorist presentation of jihad is dominant, as is the fact that most substate terrorist attacks are perpetrated by people who refer to themselves as Muslims. Thus, and as we have pointed out above, Muslim terrorists have gained intepretational sovereignty over jihad; this is bolstered by massive Western media coverage and social media discourses, which describe jihad as epitome of modern terrorism. Many private, public and political debates about „Islam," „Muslims" and jihad reflect this understanding. Such debates are emotional, self-righteous and short-sighted, but nevertheless seem to successfully inform Western publics. Following the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, for example, a commentator wrote in the British „Telegraph" that there was not „any moral equivalence between ourselves and the butchers of the Bataclan," linking this to the notion that terrorism is deeply rooted in Islam, yet not to the high ideals of Western civilization. Such debates coincided timewise with a wave of indiscriminate racist discrimination and violence against refugees.

Those who market "jihad" as "terrorism" at present are indeed terrorists, and they need to be stopped, but those who define terrorism as jihad are mostly non-Muslim Westerners. And there is a decisive difference in both. We can only be responsible for our own deeds and should broaden our perspectives! The terrorist nature of contemporary jihad should be discussed openly, also in regard to the blatant shortcomings of many Muslim opinion leaders and communities, who do not criticize jihadi terrorism decisively and openly enough. Yet, less cultural prejudice should be applied in dealing with the issue from a Western perspective, acknowledging the sad fact that terrorism is a universal sin, supported and applied by many Western states as well. And this requires – from a cultural standpoint – a much more self-critical approach.

Dr. Philipp Holtmann beschäftigt sich seit 15 Jahren intensiv mit sozialen und politischen Konflikten im arabischen Nahen Osten, Palästina und Israel sowie deren Auswirkungen auf Europa und spricht, u.a., Arabisch und Hebräisch. Er hat international mit zahlreichen Universitäten und Think Tanks zusammengearbeitet. Im Frühjahr 2016 erscheint sein neues Buch in Essayform über die Folgen totalitärer Internetpropaganda.

Tags: islamism, jihad, journalism, press, Salafism, terrorism

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