Pedantic Semantics or Strategic Discourse? The Politics of Talking about Terrorism

By Cameron Sumpter

Synopsis

The language chosen by leaders to discuss terrorism and extremism has the power to shape and (de)legitimise particular strategic responses. Politically incorrect discourse will only lead to politically incorrect decisions.

Commentary

REACTIONS TO the Orlando night club massacre have sparked debate in the United States over official terminology used to discuss terrorism and the actors employing the tactic. One side is accused of alarmist rhetoric designed to win support by spreading fear through the electorate; the other is criticised for being disingenuous about the role of religion in motivating such acts of indiscriminate violence. How important are the labels used by politicians to discuss terrorism and what effect do they have on counterterrorism strategies?

Shortly after publicly congratulating himself for being "right" about the Orlando massacre, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump maligned President Obama for not using the term "radical Islam" when addressing the nation after the attack. Trump believed the president's failure to utter these words was grounds for resignation, and warned that America "can't afford to be politically correct anymore".

Mind Your Language

President Obama responded by stating the language employed by his administration had "nothing to do with political correctness and everything to do with defeating extremism … If we fall into the trap of painting all Muslims with a broad brush, and

imply that we are at war with an entire religion, then we are doing the terrorists' work for them", he said.

Considered word choice in terrorism discourse is not a recent priority. In 2007, the US Department of Homeland Security consulted American Muslim leaders to learn how senior government officials could use language more respectfully and strategically. The resulting memorandum in January 2008 stressed that terminology "should avoid helping the terrorists by inflating the religious bases and glamorous appeal of their ideology" and "must be properly calibrated to diminish the recruitment efforts of extremists who argue that the West is at war with Islam".

The European Union has also reflected on appropriate use of vocabulary. In 2006, the organisation imposed a ban on the phrase "Islamic terrorism" from its public lexicon. The move was an attempt to "be aware of the sensitivities implied by the certain use of language" and to avoid "terminology that would aggravate the problem" of violent extremism.

Australia witnessed a sea change in official discourse on terrorism and extremism when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull replaced Tony Abbott in September 2015. The former leader was notorious for statements such as: "I've often heard western leaders describe Islam as a 'religion of peace'. I wish more Muslim leaders would say that more often, and mean it".

When Turnbull took office there was a clearly audible adjustment in tone, which was neatly summarised in early 2016 by the chief executive of the Arab Council of Australia, Randa Kattan: "His collaborative and inclusive language has created a space for the community to engage on solutions, rather than continue to push back against the demonising and fear-mongering narrative that has featured strongly over recent years."

Building Bridges

President Obama's careful phrasing when discussing home grown extremism reflects his administration's increasing emphasis on community engagement and initiatives aimed at Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Since January 2016, renewed CVE strategies and recommendations have been released by the White House, the Department of State, the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, USAID, and the Department of Homeland Security.

None of these publications features reference to religion. A common theme is the need to empower civil society organisations to work on creative approaches to community-based CVE programmes. The US Government's "local partners" are considered uniquely qualified to counter the pulling power of extremist groups and address the complex mix of emotional and contextual factors that facilitate radicalisation to violence.

Key to the success of this counterterrorism strategy is the fragile trust hanging precariously between US state agencies and American Muslims in the post-9/11 paradigm. Critics of the CVE project accuse the government of securitising Muslim

communities and establishing programmes more concerned with collecting intelligence than steering individuals toward more positive pathways.

Building honest relationships between the government and communities is crucial and requires effective dialogue and appropriate language. The US Homeland Security Advisory Council published recommendations on CVE in June 2016 that stressed the importance of "tone and word choice" among government officials. "Often without knowing it", the authors point out, "we have constructed language in daily use that promotes an 'us and them' narrative of division".

Burning Bridges

Donald Trump excels at promoting this kind of division. In a speech following the Orlando attack, he repeatedly referred to "radical Islam" and "radical Islamic terrorism" (as if some forms of terrorism were not radical). He also denigrated Hillary Clinton for believing that "Muslims are peaceful and tolerant people".

Just as the Obama administration has adopted language that facilitates its nuanced approach to addressing home grown extremism, Trump wilfully employs "politically incorrect" terms to both render CVE initiatives nonsensical and normalise his own totalitarian views on appropriate counterterrorism measures.

In late 2015, Trump infamously called for a complete ban on Muslims seeking to enter the US, and the establishment of a database for all American Muslims so the government could track their movements. On Monday, he stated that if elected he would increase the powers of security agencies, ensure that Americans had enough guns to protect themselves, and "suspend immigration from areas of the world where there is a proven history of terrorism against the United States, Europe or our allies".

The well-researched, inter-agency CVE infrastructure that the Obama administration is developing would surely be torn down if Trump were to become president. His preference for an oppressive security-centric approach to countering terrorism would alienate millions, seriously threaten democratic values, and breed the kind of hatred which remains for generations.

Trump warned: "When it comes to radical Islamic terrorism, ignorance is not bliss – it's deadly". If the Republican hopeful makes it to the Oval Office, we may see how deadly ignorance can be.

Cameron Sumpter is a Senior Analyst at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.