

# Plus c'est la même chose: racist connotations of the “new” terror

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Candle vigil in southern Beirut to mourn 44 victims of suicide bomb, November, 2015. Demotix/Eduardo Lima. All rights reserved.

In the grip of the [refugee crisis](#), the European Union is now in mourning after the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris. In the aftermath of horror, the underlying theme of the extensive media coverage and public outrage is racism: race is very relevant in two ways. Both amount to a Eurocentric self-indulgence that could frame and shape policy decisions.

First this shouts out in the binary patterns of West vs East confrontation, but also in the selective news coverage of terrorist attacks. So while the Paris attacks feature in all the global media and spark a global wave of solidarity from states and citizens, the attacks in Lebanon attract relatively small attention. The Beirut or Ankara terrorist attacks do not fit neatly into this binary frame and are consequently marginalised in the global public discourse. The same asymmetrical pattern of coverage applied back in January this year, when the Charlie Hebdo slaughter dominated headlines while Boko Haram's [Baga](#) massacre elicited limited coverage.

The tragic events were immediately framed in the context of the recent refugee influx. This connection has not been put forward by only the 'usual suspects', the xenophobic ultra-far-right parties that are awaiting such tragic events to bolster their anti-immigrant causes, but also mainstream political parties opportunistically resorting to nationalist discourses. Far-right leaders' opinions make the headlines while

sensible and sober voices are hushed or even vilified.

## The clash of ignorance

Media coverage frequently uses the words "Muslim", "Islamist", "jihadist" and "terrorist" in an interchangeable manner. The word 'Islam' in the west is increasingly synonymous with 'extremism' and 'fundamentalism': you need to put other adjectives like [moderate](#) first to make them acceptable. Also social media clearly exhibits an implied pressure on all members of Muslim communities across the globe to publicly confess that they condemn the attacks in order to distinguish themselves from the terrorists. The very act of [confession manifests a power relation](#) operating between a sinner and confessor to elicit truth. So the default position is at the very least suspicion towards members of a certain religion that feeds Islamophobic sentiments and jeopardises social integration.

This simplistic stereotyping of 1.6 billion people as extremists is not only ridiculous but has also serious political implications. The scapegoating of Muslim communities in western countries where they are perceived as a "[5th column](#)" can only trigger racialised social division. The work of Professor Farzana Shain on the [educational implication of the 'war on Terror'](#), for example, illuminates this demonization of Muslim communities.

## Is the "New Terrorism" really new?

Though the concept of 'New Terrorism' was coined in academia in the 1990s, it was only after 9/11 that the idea of a 'new' and radically different form of terrorism gained momentum. The role of religion in motivating terrorism has been highlighted relatively recently. But the label 'terrorist' often obscures more than it reveals, applied as it is to describe tactics used by countless groups pursuing various goals. The standard orthodox periodization of modern terrorism commences with an anarchist wave in the late nineteenth century, then the anti-colonial wave that led to decolonisation, then so-called new-left terrorism, and finally the religious wave that has its roots back in 1979.

There has also been a change in tactics. The anarchist wave of terrorism required the assassination of top government officials, while the anticolonial struggle involved a more complicated undertaking, the 'new-left' terrorist introduced new methods like airline hijacking and hostage-taking and finally the 'religious' wave came up with 'self-martyrdom'. However, the common assumption that all recent terrorist activity is religiously motivated can lead to a serious misreading of its political and material dimensions. Understanding ISIS and the uneasy relationship between its [recruitment strategy and belief in extremist Islam](#) has not attracted much attention, as this contradicts the prevailing narrative.

So have we seen a radical transformation in the character of terrorism that would require us to label it as 'new'? Contemporary terrorism is not a fundamentally 'new' phenomenon, but one that should be understood and located in an evolving historical context. This is the only way we can fully grasp its significance.

Moreover, what is achieved by so labelling it? By accepting that the recent terrorist attacks constitute a 'new' phenomenon, it is easily inferred that new measures are needed to address new challenges. The concept of 'new' terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 provided the narrative that resulted in the global 'war on terror'.

## How can we combat these horrific atrocities?

Attacks that were immediately perceived by western states as an 'act of war' took place a day before the G20 summit in Antalya and will eventually pave the way for a concerted military response.

Xenophobic forces in Europe have for a long time been anticipating the securitization of the refugee influx that is gradually being established. The securitization of the refugee issue serves to legitimize Islamophobia at home and to unify the nation in pursuing foreign policy objectives against the enemy.

We do not need to square the circle. We simply need to bring to the surface and tackle the perilous assumptions about the 'clash of civilisations' that feed bigotry and hatred. Reason and democracy should prevail in an open public dialogue, while policy makers in Europe should stop turning a blind eye to the concerns of people that can be manipulated in populist and xenophobic discourse. The public discourse that will eventually shape the new orientation in Europe should eliminate racist connotations. The binary framework of 'civilised' v. 'barbaric' categories is a perilous one to apply in the formation of the European Union's policy towards refugees.