

Ministerial Submission

From: Olivia Wilton

To: The Home Secretary

Title: Governmental communications around terrorism.

Issue

Governmental communications on terrorism should be reconsidered.

In response to recent attacks in Manchester and London, the Prime Minister used a number of terms, notably 'Islamist' and 'evil' in her public statements. This is an issue as language surrounding terrorist activities can aid further division and radicalisation.

Academic research indicates choice of labels or language has a marked impact on public perception and cultural cohesion. Governmental language on this sensitive subject should therefore be revisited and changed.

Recommendation

Governmental communications relating to terrorist activities should be changed to exclude the use of the term 'Islamism' or variations thereof. Terms such as 'terrorism' and 'extremism' are sufficient in identifying the nature of such activities.

Specifying 'Islamist' terrorism is misleading and inconsistent with presentations of other terrorist or extremist organisations.

Timing

ROUTINE

Response required in five working days in light of the recent UK attacks. Situation is very sensitive so need to ensure government messages continue to reflect this.

Discussion

Background

Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the foreign policy and political rhetoric of the US and its Western allies has focused on so-called 'Islamist' terrorism. President Bush created a divisive discourse of a 'war on terror' and 'axis of evil'. Academic research indicates this choice of words damages cohesion through creating an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy.

The Prime Minister's most recent speech on the London Bridge attack used similar language, attributing it to "a single, evil ideology of Islamist extremism". It also pitted "superior" British values against those of the attackers. This is not constructive and can have the unintended effect of dividing rather than unifying the population.

Religion and Terrorism

Specifying 'Islamist' terrorism is misleading and inconsistent with presentations of other terrorist or extremist organisations such as the IRA, which have also claimed to have religious motives.

Parliamentary figures indicate 46% of people arrested for terrorism related offences 2001 – 2012 self-identified as Muslim. However, Islam is likely to be disproportionately recorded due to dietary requirements when other religions may not have been.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) also consistently condemns terrorist attacks committed in the name of 'Islam'. The aim of these terror groups is "furthering mistrust and division" as the MCB highlights and Jihadist propaganda indicates.

Analysis of the speeches of Al Qaeda, Daesh and other supposedly 'Islamic' terrorist groups show their core objectives are strategic and political, not religious.

Media Coverage

UK media coverage of terrorism, Islam and 'Islamist terrorism' has risen markedly since 9/11. A significant proportion has been focused on cultural differences between Islam and British culture. Four of the five most common discourses used about Muslims in the press associate them with threats, problems or in opposition to dominant British values.

Negative media coverage has been strongly linked to creating feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and alienation amongst Muslims. This in turn weakens governmental measures to reduce and prevent extremism.

The government cannot hope to control the British press approach to terrorism but a reconsideration of its language could help reduce the impact and discourage certain approaches.

'Clash of Civilisations'

Language choice can create significant division and has been proven to create unequal power relations. This can exacerbate tensions and resentment.

Use of language such as 'evil' whilst describing an ideology linked to Islam unnecessarily enforces this 'us' and 'them' dichotomy.

Risks and Anticipated Benefits

1. Stop using term 'Islamism'

RISKS	BENEFITS
Reputational damage/condemnation from right wing media and public.	Foster sense of inclusivity and understanding.
	Avoid creating 'us' and 'them' division.

2. Do nothing

RISKS	BENEFITS
Criticism from progressive/left wing media and public.	Appear consistent.
Increased isolation and resentment among commonly radicalised groups.	Doesn't require additional money/resources.

3. Avoid the use of dichotomy

RISKS	BENEFITS
Criticism from right wing media and angry/upset public.	Avoid creating 'us' and 'them' division.
	Foster sense of inclusivity and understanding.

Anticipated Reactions

1. Disappointed Parties:

- Domestic media – tabloids on the right likely to react negatively. Respond with statements de-emphasising the religious aspect and its relevance
- Angry/fearful members of British public – respond with statement underlining terribleness of acts

Glad Parties:

- British Muslim community – notably, the Muslim Council of Britain.
- Left leaning/progressive media and members of public.

Options

1. Stop use of term 'Islamist' to describe attacks.

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoids creating negative Islamic connotations. • Acknowledges the significance of non-'religious inspired' attacks/activities e.g. right-wing or separatist activities. • Disarms extremist aim of creating division. 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is less specific in its description.
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could aid integration and improve support from British Muslim communities. • Could curb the rise of anti-Islamic/ right wing sentiment and the possibility of related attacks. • Reduce disproportionate media focus on terrorism. 	<p>THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could make government vulnerable to accusations of being 'too politically correct'.

2. Do nothing

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No additional economic costs. 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't improve the pre-identified issues.
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a consistent image – potential to be respected for this. 	<p>THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued isolation of certain communities.

3. Avoid the use of dichotomies

<p>STRENGTHS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less inflammatory/divisive. 	<p>WEAKNESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doesn't reassure or solidify identity/resilience of public.
<p>OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could help reduce feelings of isolation/resentment among British Muslims 	<p>THREATS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could make government vulnerable to accusations of being 'too politically correct' or out of touch.