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Commentary \ **The Seduction of Simplicity: Popular Claims Following the Paris Attacks**

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Elvan Isikozlu, researcher at BICC, comments on the aftermath of the Paris attacks. She argues that “the discourse following the attacks has been full of generalisations, oversimplifications and dichotomies, none of which help to better grasp who and what we in the West are dealing with.” She comes to the conclusion that “none of the popular claims following from the Paris attacks actually help anyone to understand IS and how to stop them.” Instead she underlines: “We need to keep asking difficult questions to widen the scope of available political and social responses to IS—ones that IS wouldn’t see coming.”

It is exactly three weeks since people with links to so-called Islamic State (IS) opened fire on the streets in Paris, killing and wounding hundreds, devastating many more.

As researchers on peace and conflict, we are often asked for answers on how to solve the world’s problems, how to end violence and build peace. Unfortunately there are no simple answers to these questions. We can offer knowledge—knowledge that can deepen our understanding of world events, knowledge to widen the choices and decisions to be made. Ours is a business of asking the right questions and building knowledge for informed action.

Which is why, as our collective grief after the Paris attacks settles into acceptance, the challenge for us researchers is to make sure that the new reality being accepted is not based on simplistic understandings. This is what officials and popular news media across Europe and North America are largely offering to the public. The discourse following the attacks has been full of generalisations, oversimplifications and dichotomies, none of which help to better grasp who and what we in the West are dealing with. Take for example the following three popular claims:

Refugees are IS. No one has come right out and said this, but it is implied by the discussion on refugee flows as a 'security threat' and calls (from mainly right-wing politicians) for a moratorium on refugees from Syria to Europe and North America. The Paris attacks have given credence to fears that accepting migrants makes us in the West more vulnerable to attack from within. Yet it is clear that the attackers in Paris were not refugees, but rather locals residing in Paris and Brussels. It is clear that the Syrian passport found at the scene of an attack was planted. Which then makes it clear that the attackers wanted to point the finger at refugees from Syria and make them the target of our fear, anger and hatred.

A number of excellent print and online articles have already responded to this gross misrepresentation and offer convincing arguments as to why staying the course on refugee commitments is not only humane, but also strategically significant in weakening IS: first, refugee flows from Syria decrease the available pool of people that IS can tax, extort or recruit to their army. This threatens IS' capacity to maintain their 'state', both physically and financially. Second, IS deserters are more likely to ruin the image of IS as a heavenly caliphate with stories of day-to-day abuses against civilians. For these reasons, it has been argued that the Paris attacks can be seen as a calculated move to turn the West against Syrian refugees, who will then have no choice but to return. It can also be seen as a calculated move to turn the West against all Muslims across Europe, who may then be more likely to voluntarily migrate to IS lands. The question is, will we in the West be fooled?

IS shows the nature of Islam. Because IS commits terrorism in the name of Islam, Islam is once again framed as a problem. Popular news media pose questions such as 'How much Islam can the Western world accept?' and 'Does Islam promote violence?' Some reference is still made to 'militant Islam' or 'radical Islam' in discussing so-called IS, though these qualifiers are frequently dropped. A clear division is made between the Western world and the so-called 'Muslim world.'

The discussion of Islam is not being had with any degree of sophistication in the public sphere. The facts are clear: there are over 1.5 billion Muslim people in the world and most of them live in Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, not in the Middle East. IS represents such a small percentage of the Muslim people in the world, that to use them as representative of a whole religion would be to suggest that the Buddhist marauding monks in Myanmar represent the nature of Buddhism. Scholars of religion have argued that religion itself is neither peaceful nor violent, but rather one of many factors that can be used to motivate peace or violence. They maintain that religion fills the void when other things collapse—security, opportunity and freedom, to name a few. Also, studies show that where individuals have opportunity for and freedom of social, political and economic engagement, there is less religious fanaticism and more moderation. In a similar vein, research on radicalisation and cults shows that people tend to hold more extreme beliefs at times of uncertainty. While people may join cult groups for very personal and individual reasons, it is apparently easier to join these groups when they already know other people involved.

All of this knowledge has implications for how we frame the problems. Any form of extremist belief put to action is a problem. But bigger and more urgent questions are how and why IS has been able to conquer territory across two countries and plan terrorist attacks throughout the region and in Europe? No other extremist group has been able to do this, not even al-Qaeda. What conditions have given rise to IS, what holes are IS able to fill with their brand of Islam? What policies—global, regional, local—lend support to IS, directly or inadvertently? What is the nature of this support? Instead of being distracted by simplistic claims about the problems of Islam or expecting the ‘Muslim world’ to stop IS, popular discourse needs to be flooded with more critical, sophisticated and sometimes uncomfortable questions to understand the extent of the challenge posed by IS.

Bomb or do nothing. In the aftermath of the attacks in Paris, the only response that the French government deemed appropriate was a military one: to bomb IS in Syria. A

command centre and training camp were supposedly the targets of the initial bombs dropped by the French in Raqqa, though there haven't been any reports of the outcomes. Since Paris, the US-led military coalition has ramped up their bombing of IS across Iraq and Syria while France and Russia co-ordinate the dropping of bombs in Syria. Germany and the United Kingdom just recently decided to join the bombing campaign in Syria after a lot of pressure and public debate.

Once again, political leaders are convinced that military action is the best way to defeat a terrorist entity, and they are selling it as the only way forward. Yet there isn't a shred of evidence in the fourteen-plus years of dropping bombs in Afghanistan and Iraq that these actions actually work. To the contrary—since the start of the 'War on Terror' there has been an increase in extremist groups and terrorist activities around the world. Dropping more bombs on IS, I would argue, plays to their strengths; for example, their lack of exposure. IS has set up command in highly populated cities like Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. Bombing these cities inevitably means bombing civilians in the process, which risks turning more people against the West and into sympathisers or fighters for IS. It also risks a new exodus of refugees to Europe and North America, the implications of which I already outlined. Another of their strengths is IS' control over territory—oil rich territory—which bombs have not yet been able to break. So, what are IS' weaknesses, and how can these weaknesses be exposed and exploited? Researchers and analysts have found that IS relies heavily on people not only for fighting but also for revenue: taxation and extortion of small businesses reportedly earns them close to one million US dollars a day, even more than their oil revenues. Perhaps this reliance could be exploited as a weakness if more people turned away from IS. Rather than dropping bombs, the anti-ISIS coalition could put more emphasis on policies to prevent the migration of their residents to IS, to save those who flee from IS, and to lure away sympathisers. A good place to start would be through better integration policies at home and a variety of programs for 'at-risk groups' that provide equally, if not more attractive opportunities than those promised by the caliphate. Western governments could also

initiate or increase their funding of social programmes at home against radicalisation, perhaps even offering residents with rewards or scholarships for popular social media campaigns against radical beliefs. The ideas are plenty and the knowledge is out there to make these ideas effective entry points into IS' defeat.

None of the popular claims following from the Paris attacks actually help anyone to understand IS and how to stop them. Instead, these claims paint the world in black and white and eliminate all shades of grey. This is advantageous to IS (not to mention to some Western political leaders) because they, too, rely on black and white thinking. As researchers of peace and conflict, we need to stop the seduction of simplistic explanations. We need to challenge Western leaders and the general public to discuss the issues with the level of sophistication that they deserve. And we need to keep asking difficult questions to widen the scope of available political and social responses to IS—ones that IS wouldn't see coming.