Diffusing Explosive Reactions to Terror:
Why the suicide attack isn't what you think it is.
Or
The Importance of Asking Better Questions
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I want to begin today with some word association. Try to focus on the first thoughts that come to mind when I mention the following phrases. Suicide bomber. Terrorism. What is a suicide bomber? A terrorist of course. And what is terrorism? Why, it's religious extremism, and in a contemporary setting, this brings to mind something like radical Islamists. Terrorism rears its ugly head as a risk in today's world. A risk, or *threat* as I would like to discuss it.

We experience fear in response to this risk, this threat, and our perception of this risk calls for a reaction. In a paper on mediating the social and psychological impacts of terrorist attacks, M. Brooke Rogers and others write that individuals base risk judgments on feelings created in response to a perceived risk, and that the majority of these reactions are formed rapidly and automatically.[i] This rapid and automatic reaction allows space for only a single, simple story, and encourages the employment of that single story. Our single story tells us that terrorists threaten our way of life, that they are a risk as a threat we fear. We interpret this feeling through our understanding of the "facts" of the threat they constitute.

There is a danger in this single story, and I want to refer to Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, a Nigerian author who gives a thought provoking view of the dangers of telling single stories. Adiche claims that she has "always felt that it was impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of a single story is this: it

robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar."[ii] She goes on to say that "it is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power… Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."[iii] When we tell a single story about the Islamic terrorist, and unfortunately we often reduce this story to one about Islam in general, we focus on a single story that communicates a "threat" to *our* way of life, a way of life that couldn't possible be like *theirs*. In this, we reduce an entire population to a specific character in a specific story: the *threat.* And we reduce the story itself to a combative one: Us vs. Them.

In 2012, ISIS organized attacks using 22 suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices and 18 suicide vests. In 2013, these numbers increased to 78 and 160 respectively. Our single story of attacks like these arises from our rapid and automatic reactions to them, and tells us that they are acts of religious terror that emphasize the "threat" of the violent Muslim extremist, and in many cases, Islam in general.

I echo Talal Asad, who writes extensively on issues facing the Muslim world today, by urging you all to consider terrorism as the epistemological object that it is in modern society, one that calls for theorization forcing us to ask, "What is terrorism?" We must consider the contemporary mode of violence referred to by the Western Media as "Islamic Terrorism," and ask, as Asad does, "Is there a religiously motivated violence?"

Let us begin by asking two questions: 1)What is terrorism? and 2) What is the suicide bomber's motive (or, put simply, *Why?*) To address these questions, I will briefly discuss key elements of the first two chapters of Talal Asad's *On Suicide Bombing* in order to suggest that in reference to the first question and in response to the "us vs. them" story, we are not quite as different as you may think, and in reference to the second question, that we are not quite as similar as you may think. This discussion will then frame my approach to two further questions: 1) Is ISIS Islamic? and 2) Is there a place for the Muslim in the West?

My goal here is to demonstrate that by complicating our understanding of the ways we answer the first two questions, rather than simplifying it, we can *diffuse* explosive reactions to terror that are unhelpful, thereby disrupting the tradition of our telling single stories about Islam as a threat to the West.

What is Terrorism?

I would like to prelude this discussion by noting that my research here is ongoing.

In the first chapter of *On Suicide Bombing,* Asad discusses at length issues of legitimate and illegitimate violence and the role power plays in determining which category we assign instances of violence to. I would like to focus, however, on his response to Michael Walzer's characterization of the "morally strong leader."

Asad reviews Walzer's book *Arguing About War,* and devotes significant attention to the ways Walzer discusses what he refers to as the "morally strong leader." Walzer writes that "public transgression in the domain of war should be accompanied by a sense of remorse, that when this [transgression] happens, the

feelings of guilt about what has been done may make it more difficult to repeat that

transgression in the future."[iv] Walzer is referring to those "unfortunate necessities"

of war, and by his framing of the morally strong leader, he allows guilt to become a

type of grace. Asad refers to this tendency as a peculiar combination of compassion

and cruelty used by sophisticated social institutions (i.e. the powerful) to enable and

encourage their use of "legitimate" violence.

This "sense of remorse" is felt by the morally strong leader, who Walzer

writes of as "someone who understands why it is wrong to kill the innocent and

refuses to do so, refuses again and again, until the heavens are about to fall. And

then he becomes a moral criminal (like Albert Camus;s 'just assassin') who knows

that he can't do what he has to do- and finally does."[v] He does this based on due

proportionality and military necessity, but determines what is necessary and

proportional based on overall war aims and military strategy. Asad reminds us that

this is always the case in war, that there are always war aims and strategic military

necessities-and on both sides.[vi] For Asad, this means that "every kind of forceful

means can be- and is- used in war on that basis, including the destruction of civilians

and the terrorizing of entire populations."[vii] That is, provided that the leader acts

like a "criminal" with a bad conscience and in great anguish.[viii]

The morally strong leader can act as a "criminal" because he uses what

Walzer discusses as "emergency ethics," which permit these transgressions under

circumstances of absolute necessity, but only after all other options have been

exhausted. Walzer refers to politics as the "art of repetition," and claims that though

morally strong leaders may reach a "lastness" calling for emergency ethics,

terrorists can never reach this lastness as they have not exercised politics as this art of repetition.[ix] I am skeptical of this claim. To perceive oneself as outside the realm of and reach of politics could just as easily be seen to bring the terrorist closer to this "lastness."

The morally strong leader employs a humanitarian vocabulary, but as Asad notes, both terrorists and liberal states utilize a humanitarian vocabulary of necessity, proportionality, and humanity such that "the ruthlessness of terrorists often matches the effects achieved in the strategic strikes made by state armies, even when the latter use the language of humanitarian law in which a liberating or self-defensive purpose can be claimed."[x] It is important to note that what we consider proportional and necessary is dictated by our "us vs. them" story, and that "they" are telling this story also, with one alteration. They constitute the "us" in their story, and as such consider their actions equally proportional and necessary.

Asad writes that the difference we find between the morally strong leader and the terrorist comes not in the "vocabulary of moral argument or the conscience of the virtuous warrior, but [in] the existence of an independent institutional structure that has the ability to set a legal process into motion and apply its legal verdict in relation to conduct in war regardless of who is to be judged."[xi] He also suggests that it should be noted that "powerful states are never held accountable to such institutions, [and] that only the weak and the defeated can be convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity."[xii]

So, we have a morally strong leader who as a member of a powerful state is granted impunity, but as Asad points out, "the sincerity of the terrorist's conscience,

of the excuses he makes, is of no significance in the categorization of his action, [while] the military commander's sincere conscience… may be crucial to the difference between an unfortunate necessity and a war crime." [xiii] Why is this? Why is there so stark a difference? And why is it so readily accepted?

The morally strong leader "understands why it is wrong to kill the innocent and refuses to do so, refuses again and again, until the heavens are about to fall. And then he becomes a moral criminal… who knows that he can't do what he has to do- and finally does." In this line of reasoning, isn't it possible to consider, as Asad does, the killing of innocents by taking one's own life as the final gesture of a morally strong leader? Isn't it possible that in this story of us vs. them, we're not quite as different as you might think?

As Asad says of his book, "[I] do not pretend to offer solutions to moral dilemmas about institutionalized violence, [and I do not purport to justify the violence of the suicide bomber OR the liberal state], but instead hope to disturb [others] sufficiently, so [they] will be able to take a distance from complacent moral responses to terrorism, war, and suicide bombing." [xiv]

What is the Suicide Bomber's Motive (or *Why?*)

So now, we move on to discuss the second question. Asad says that we are confronted with a dominating question following a suicide attack: "Why did he do this terrible thing?"[xv] In other words, we seek a motive. We wish to know when and how the intention to kill formed. Which desire predominated? Killing oneself? Or killing others? What were the bombers thoughts moments before he committed the attack?[xvi]

Asad discusses a Western preoccupation with explaining motives behind suicide attacks, and says that these attempts reveal more about liberal assumptions of religious subjectivities and political violence than they do about what they attempt to explain. He discusses several explanations of motive in the second chapter of *On Suicide Bombing*, but I will be focusing on what we will refer to as a (mis)understanding of "sacrifice" as a religious motive.

Asad discusses well known religious studies theoriest Ivan Strenski, who wrote that the "phenomenon of suicide bombings are better explained through [concepts] of religious sacrifice and gift than through theories explaining suicide." [xvii] He responds to the explanation of the suicide bomber's motive in terms of religious sacrifice by noting that there are three conditions of Islamic sacrifice: 1) in response to a divine command, 2) as thanks to the deity, and 3) as a sign of repentance, and claims that suicide bombings do not fall under any of these conditions. [xviii] He calls for us to consider the Islamic conceptions of martyrdom, sacrifice, and gift.

The Arabic word for gift, *hadiyya,* is never used to describe sacrifice, and *qurban*, an Arabic word for sacrifice, is more commonly used by Arabic-speaking Christians to refer to communion than to sacrifice reminiscent of martyrdom. [xix] The word for martyr, *shahid*, on the other hand, takes on a more expansive meaning than commonly attributed to it. Asad points out that Palestinians, when employing a religious vocabulary, refer to any and all civilians who die in a conflict with the plural of *shahid, shuhada.* He writes, "they have died as witnesses to their faith, and [even though] there is no ritualized form to most of these deaths," they nonetheless

constitute more of a "triumph," than a sacrifice. Asad discusses this at length, and in

so doing demonstrates one aspect of the range of meaning for *shahid*, namely

unintentional death, that sets it apart from Christian understandings of martyrdom.

He warns us that "to take the suicide bombing as sacrifice is to load it with a

significance that is derived from a Christian and post-Christian tradition [with

Christ's sacrifice being the ultimate gift]," and that while this may help us to

understand, or more rightly (mis)understand the suicide bombing, it is

inappropriate as an explanation.[xx]   Instead, he suggests that we look at how such

terms are used in both their historical and contemporary settings and advises that if

we are to discuss religious subjectivities, "we must work through the concepts the

people concerned actually use, [with consideration to how they use them]."[xxi]

So though we seek to understand motives through how we may be similar,

isn't it possible that we're not as similar as you might think?

Having provided some complications to our understanding of terror and the

suicide bomber, namely that what we consider legitimate and illegitimate violence

depends on differences that aren't as stark as one might think and that one way we

understand acts of terror, specifically suicide attacks, is based in similarities that

aren't as strong as one might think, we can begin to embrace space for multiple

stories. Occupying this space together, let us now examine our two further

questions: 1) Is ISIS Islamic? and 2) Is there a place for the Muslim in the West?

Is ISIS Islamic?

In a recent essay, Anver Emon confronts a dominating question in the

Academy today: "What is/isn't Islamic?" with specific reference to ISIS. He points

out the opportunity for a better question, writing that "rather than asking whether ISIS is Islamic or not, the better question is why it matters so much and to whom?" He calls the Academy to embrace a project of producing better knowledge on Islam, saying that scholars must "interrogate [their] understandings of religion, politics, law, reason, and the state, [in addition to] the consequences that follow when we encounter others whose understandings are different or appear to be the inverse of our own."

Emon demonstrates a response to this call by examining four common arguments to answer the question, is ISIS Islamic?, two in the affirmative and two in the negative. Let us look at these arguments now.

ISIS is Islamic #1: This argument focuses on the invocation of premodern Islamic scriptural and legal texts and concepts, and while Emon says that it is undeniable that the language of ISIS refers to Islamic textual tradition, the problem with identifying ISIS as Islamic based on this lies in the fact that "we cannot assume that the authentic meaning of Islam is captured by literal references to texts," because this reduces the dynamic nature of Islam and the Muslim people to the ritual requirements that the Islamic tradition places on them.[xxii] In other words, it relies on a single story, which as we have discussed, is dangerous.

ISIS is Islamic #2: The second argument relies on the fact that some Muslims support ISIS and consider it Islamic. It is "premised on the centrality of the voices of ethnographic Muslim subjects from which generalizations are made to construct 'Muslim' as a group identifier."[xxiii] Emon calls this a "representative liberal-cum-protestant" response to what is and is not Islamic. Representative because it allows

for individuals to be generalized as applicable to the group, liberal because the

subject of ethnography, before being ethnographized, fits neatly into a conception of

the rights holder subject to state law, and protestant because what counts as Islamic

is what any given believer says or does.[xxiv] Under this response, "when individual

Muslims espouse ISIS-like ideology or commits lone-wolf acts of aggression, they are

viewed as anything but individuals."[xxv] In this, they represent the "threat" of

terrorism, specifically Islamic terrorism.

ISIS is not Islamic #1: This argument is the inverse of the first affirmative

argument. It operates under the same assumptions about the significance of

foundational texts, but instead focuses on the ways in which ISIS departs from the

textual Islamic tradition.[xxvi] It says that whether something is Islamic or not

depends on its fidelity to the textual tradition rather than a mere invocation of it.

Therefore, ISIS is not Islamic, because it regularly misconstrues or selectively

invokes aspects of the literary canon of authoritative Islamic texts.

ISIS is not Islamic #2: This argument too is the inverse of the second

affirmative argument. It follows the same representative liberal-cum-protestant

model, but relies on the fact that Muslims around the world have condemned ISIS,

This time the argument is democratic in that the majority rules.[xxvii] It claims that to

suggest that ISIS is Islamic is outrageous considering the sheer number of Muslims

who disavow its brutality.

Emon does not claim any of the arguments to be the definitive answer to the

question of whether or not ISIS is Islamic, but instead points out problems with both

sets of arguments. The first versions remove Islam from history, and treat it as an

artifact. They do not view its discontinuities, as Emon says they should, as having a claim on the label: Islamic. The second versions rely on the voices of individuals standing on their own *and* for the group, thereby collapsing both.

It is necessary to reiterate that this is not a project attempting to propose a correct answer, but instead to complicate things by demonstrating a multiplicity of answers that show us how to ask better questions by creating and maintaining *epistemic friction* between the things we think we know.

Jose Medina refers to epistemic friction in his Foucaultian approach to a guerilla pluralism in epistemology as a "mutual contestation of different normatively structured knowledges which interrogate epistemic exclusions, disqualifications, and hegemonies."[xxviii] Epistemic friction, for Medina, is good for its own sake, because it constitutes forms of resistance, and as long as resistance is capable of creating epistemic friction, it provides further opportunites for resistance. Epistemic friction is important because we must resist dominant and exlusive explanations (or single stories) and allow a multiplicity to exist. We are capable of asking better questions only when we are prepared to hear multiple, and sometimes contradicting answers.

Is there a Place for the Muslim in the West?

Addressing our second question, I look to a recent interview with Talal Asad addressing the "problematic ways in which the presence of Muslim communities in a Western context has been characterized in response to recent outbreaks of violence."[xxix] In keeping with the theme so far, let us assume that there is a better question to be asked here.

Asad describes the commonly held argument that the problem of Muslims in the West is that they have not integrated, and formulates this problem in two ways. Either 1) "we must try harder to integrate them", or 2) "it is their fault they do not integrate, and it is because they are attached to an illiberal religion and to values that conflict profoundly with our secular, egalitarian society."[xxx] Thus, the problem is seen as why "they" do not fit into "our" society. Asad thinks that the better question is one of "*who* or *what* we are, and what must *we* do to change aspects of ourselves in order to make it possible for Muslims (who will also need to change) to be represented in the West *as Muslims*."[xxxi] One way to address this question, says Asad, is to approach Islam as a tradition.

By approaching Islam as a tradition, we can focus on those "questions and arguments held to be important within a tradition," and taking this into account, "formulate productive [or better] questions about the tradition from the outside."[xxxii] When we increase our understanding of what is important and why, we can engage in a dialogue about those things, rather than perpetuating misunderstandings about what is and is not important to a tradition. Asad claims that when we speak of Islam as a tradition, we are not claiming that "all people do this or believe this" or that "all people who identify as Muslims do follow the Quran and hadith (or must follow them to be real Muslims)," but are instead suggesting "that there is a certain kind of coherence-which may or may not be realized in particular situations- where people are trying to talk about Islam as a distinct intellectual object."[xxxiii] To free Islam from this characterization and consider it as a tradition, is to foster a space worthy of epistemic friction, of dialogue, and of

understanding. Asad calls us to "think about the Islamic tradition as a way of asking

questions that cut across (and transgress) the assumptions of a purely secular

world…"[xxxiv]

Asad returns to the question of whether or not there is a place for the Muslim

in the West, and responds that there is no single answer. Indeed, there should not

be. A single answer, a single story, neither of these are productive. There cannot be

a single answer, just as "Muslims in the West are not a single homogenous group,

sociologically or theologically."[xxxv] Asad does, however, note one answer, namely, a

call for reform of the Islamic tradition to prevent Islamic extremist violence. The

problem with this call for reform lies in its assumption that "Muslims constitute a

single political subject, that they are entirely self contained, and that reform has not

in fact been continuously undertaken in Islamic history."[xxxvi] Asad implores us to

consider, before urging reform, that the "Islamic tradition in all its variety has been

around for centuries, and mainstream Muslim authorities have condemned

[violence] for ages," and asks us to hold up a mirror to ourselves, in a sense, by

asking "Why has the phenomenon of jihadism appeared and proliferated only

now?"[xxxvii] We must realize our place in the us vs. them story we have maintained.

Remember that we are not as different as you might think, and that the single story

of Islam as a "threat" to our way of life perpetuates responses to this risk that give

the threat new life and vitality. When we complicate our understandings by asking

better questions and telling better, more heterogeneous stores, we can diffuse these

explosive, life giving reactions in an us vs. them narrative, and begin to craft a story

of us *and* them. The way forward for Muslims in the West is the way forward for

Westerners in the West. We must move forward together.

Losing the War

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Bush

Administration declared a "War on Terror." Since that time, it has come to be

known by other names, the "War on Ideas," a "War of Ideologies." Regardless of

what we call this war, it is important to realize that this is not a war with winners

and losers, but a war with winners *or* losers. The collective "we" have consistently

lost battle after battle in this war, by using the wrong language, by asking the wrong

questions, and by telling single stories. We want to tell Islam that violent

extremism does not belong in its religious tradition, but consistently refer to

"Islamic terrorism," and "Muslim extremists." What's more, when we criticize the

Muslim world for the presence of violence within it, we ignore the role violence

plays in the Western world, and the role we play in the violence of the Muslim

world. And it's important to remember that even the very term "Muslim world," is

not neutral, but is filled with content and has an agenda that makes us imagine the

world in a very specific way. Each day, with airstrikes, raids, and occupation, we

show individuals in Islamic countries that violence is a part of their daily life, while

simultaneously urging them to rid themselves of violence. We give just enough

space for the extreme to plant roots and grow, and question why we see extremists

cropping up around the world. We must work harder to understand each other and

the roles we play in each other's stories, or we will all lose this war. Islam has no

definitive and static *is* and *is not.* It lives with its people, and will be what they (and us, through our interactions with Islam) make it to be.

I would like to end today by telling a story. I recently saw video footage of an interview with Syrians who were the victims of an airstrike. Who committed the strike is not of particular significance to the point I would like to make. Men stood round the smoking rubble that was, not long ago, their neighborhood. One man calmly explained that his son had been killed in the strike, which had occurred just hours ago. Collectively, the men made promises of vengeance. They did not seek justice, but vengeance. Still, these men are not the focus of my story. My focus is on the half dozen or so children perched on various pieces of rubble around their fathers, brothers, and uncles. There eyes wide with shock, with confusion, with sadness, they absorb the gravity of their situation, and internalize it. This is *life* in their world. Just as we tell single stories, they hear a single story from the promises of revenge reverberating off of the fabric of chaos surrounding them. The war we fight today will be theirs tomorrow. This war on ideas will destroy them, and indeed already is. Unless we do something about it now.

The study of philosophy here at Oakland University taught me the importance of asking questions. The mentorship of the amazing faculty here, and specifically Dr. Tristin Hassle, has challenged me to not only ask questions, but to ask the right kinds of questions, and my own commitment to intellectual growth has fueled my project of continuously asking better questions. I am continuously inspired by the gathering of thoughtful individuals like all of you here today, who have the courage to discuss complicated issues, and I invite you to join me in an

unending journey of asking better questions that allow complicated, nuanced, and

heterogeneous answers, thereby allowing us to tell better and more inclusive stories

about the world around us. Thank you.

[i] Rogers, M. Brooke et. al. "Mediating the social and psychological impacts of terrorist attacks: The role of risk perception and risk communication." *International Review of Psychiatry.* 19.3 (2007): 281.

[ii] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. "The danger of a single story." Filmed at TEDGlobal in July 2009. TED Talk video, 18:49. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en

[iii] *Ibid.,*

[iv] Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), Kindle eBook, chap. 1.

[v] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[vi] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[vii] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[viii] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[ix] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[x] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[xi] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[xii] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[xiii] *Ibid.,* chap. 1.

[xiv] *Ibid.,* Introduction.

[xv] *Ibid.,* chap. 2.

[xvi] *Ibid.,* chap. 2.

[xvii] *Ibid.,* chap. 2.

[xviii] *Ibid.,* chap. 2.

[xix] *Ibid.,* chap. 2.

[xx] *Ibid.,* chap. 2.

[xxi] *Ibid.,* chap. 2.

[xxii] Anver Emon, "Is ISIS Islamic? Why it matters for the study of Islam." *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, religion, and the public sphere* (blog), March 27, 2015, http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2015/03/27/is-isis-islamic-why-it-matters-for-the-study-of-islam/

[xxiii] *Ibid.,*

[xxiv] *Ibid.,*

[xxv] *Ibid.,*

[xxvi] *Ibid.,*

[xxvii] *Ibid.,*

xxviii Jose Medina, "Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and *Guerilla* Pluralism." *Foucault Studies.* 12. (2001) 21.
xxix Hasan Azad, "Do Muslims Belong in the West? An Interview with Talal Asad." Is there a place for Muslims in the West? *Jadaliyya.* February 3, 2015,
http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20768/do-muslims-belong-in-the-west-an-interview-with-tan
xxx *Ibid.,*
xxxi *Ibid.,*
xxxii *Ibid.,*
xxxiii *Ibid.,*
xxxiv *Ibid.,*
xxxv *Ibid.,*
xxxvi *Ibid.,*
xxxvii *Ibid.*

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