

Nice Attacks: A Mass Murderer Becomes a ‘Terrorist’-Based on Ethnicity, Not Evidence

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Global Research, July 24, 2016

[FAIR](#) 16 July 2016

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Terrorism](#)

The New York Times ([7/15/16](#)), writing about the man who reportedly killed 84 people in a truck attack in Nice, France, provided no evidence that Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel was motivated by either politics or religion to commit violence—yet still labeled the murders as “terrorism,” as though the definition of that crime were based on ethnicity rather than motivation.

Times correspondent Andrew Higgins wrote that Lahouaiej Bouhlel

was known to his neighbors only as a moody and aggressive oddball. He never went to the local mosque, often grunted in response to greetings of “bonjour” and sometimes beat his wife — until she threw him out....

Mr. Lahouaiej Bouhlel appeared not to have left behind any public declaration of his motive or indicated any allegiance to the Islamic State or another extremist group....



The New York Times’ photo of the truck used in an attack the paper labelled “terrorist,” despite admitting that it had no knowledge of the presumed killer’s motives. (photo: Andrew Testa/NYT)

Residents in his former apartment building on a hill overlooking the city said

they had never seen him at the local mosque and never heard him mention religion.

Indeed, they said he rarely spoke at all and seemed to be in a permanent haze of anger, particularly after his marriage fell apart.

The militant group ISIS issued a statement praising the attack, but as theTimes story reported,

it remained unclear whether the claim of support was an effort by the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, to associate itself with a high-profile attack without having been involved in its planning or having any direct contact with Mr. Lahouaiej Bouhlel.

Despite the absence of any evidence of a political motivation, or indeed any motive at all—generally considered to be a key part of any [definition of terrorism](#)—the Times story still referred to the Nice killings as “the third large-scale act of terrorism in France in a year and a half.” The killings, Higgins wrote, “raised new questions throughout the world about the ability of extremists to sow terror.”

Why is the Times willing to label the Nice deaths “terrorism”—a label that US media do not apply to all acts of mass violence, even ones that have much clearer political motives (FAIR Media Advisory, [4/15/14](#))? In part, they seem to be following the lead of French authorities: “French officials labeled the attack terrorism and cast the episode as the latest in a series that have made France a battlefield in the violent clash between Islamic extremists and the West.”

But quotes from French officials made it clear that such claims were little more than guesswork: The story reported that Prime Minister Manuel Valls “said the attacker in all likelihood had ties to radical Islamist circles,” citing Valls’ statement to French TV: “He is a terrorist probably linked to radical Islam one way or another.” Later Valls is quoted noting that the attack happened on the French national holiday of Bastille Day:

Why on the 14th of July? Because it is a celebration of freedom. It was, therefore, indeed to affect France that the individual committed this terrorist attack.

French Interior Minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, “was more cautious,” the Timesreported: “We have an individual who was not at all known by the intelligence services for activities linked to radical Islamism,” Cazeneuve was quoted.

Why was the Times not similarly cautious about applying the label of “terrorism” to an act whose motives it admitted knowing nothing about? It’s hard to escape the conclusion that the Times believes that when the suspect is an Arab—Lahouaiej Bouhlel was a Tunisian immigrant—then allegations of terrorism require no evidence whatsoever.

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