

Mediatization of Terror in Cyberspace: Scrutinizing Al-Qaeda's Media Strategy

Rasha El-Ibiary

Abstract

Al-Qaeda's quick and pervasive use of all forms of mass media, ranging from print, satellite broadcast and the Internet is central to its decisive and strategic use of the mass media to further its short-term and long-term goals. Videotaped messages of Osama Bin Laden, and his main strategist, Ayman El Zawahri, are now exclusively produced and disseminated online for publicizing its ideology, legitimizing its goals, and winning hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims, while at the same time inflating fear in the West, at both government and people's levels, via constant threats and intimidations. This research critically analyses Al-Qaeda's media strategy, as central to its military strategy in its fight against the West. Assessing the various ways it is communicating its strategic deeds, this paper argues that the apparent worldwide success of Al-Qaeda's media strategy, eased by new technologies, carries the seeds for its eventual failure due to the inherent contradictions in its propaganda messages, the absence of territorial-based legitimate goals, and the inability of their virtual online activity to substitute for the real world. In addition, the deliberate targeting of civilians worldwide, which directly works against the essence of Islam, loses them public support in the Arab and Islamic Worlds. Using critical discourse analysis, it closely examines and scrutinizes selected videotaped messages, which represent the central strategic tool of the organization to win hearts and minds. Evaluating the intertextuality and discursive formation of image and text, it aims to provide a persuasive critical account of Al-Qaeda's communicated audio-visual rhetoric of policies and strategies, raising questions, and opening up for constructive arguments, rather providing answers, expectations or recommendations.

Key Words: Cyberterror, terror, bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, jihad, media strategy, propaganda, publicity, legitimization, intimidation.

Introduction :

The convergence of media and communication technologies—allowing for the Internet to carry text, audio, and audio-visual messages, easily downloadable in multiple formats—has opened up the way for terrorists to exploit the new media in accumulating strategic interests. Jihadis, say Cornan

and Schiefelbein, execute their communication and public relation strategy in a highly developed fashion 'assimilating new media into their repertoire' to establish 'a virtual worldwide jihad movement.'¹

Since 2001, post 9/11, Al-Qaeda organization emerged as a highly influential terrorist organization efficiently using various types of mass media, including the internet, in communicating its ideology. Quickly and efficiently expanding its Internet presence, it became evident that audiovisual propaganda messages of its leading strategists, Osama bin Laden and Ayman El-Zawahri, are vital to the organization's media strategy, by-and-large driving its political and military strategies.

Despite arguments on the Internet's extending terrorists' power, this research argues that the apparent worldwide success of Al-Qaeda's media strategy carries the seeds for its eventual failure. This is due to various factors including, the inherent contradictions in its propaganda messages, the absence of a territorial-based legitimate goals, the inability of their virtual online activity to substitute for the real world, and the deliberate targeting of civilians in its operations, which deeply works against the essence of Islam.

Scrutinizing Al-Qaeda's media strategy and discursively analyzing its videotaped messages, whether disseminated online or through satellite television, is central to assessing its strengths and weaknesses, thereby anticipating its success and/or failure opportunities. Evaluating the intertextuality and discursive structure of images and words, this research provides a persuasive critical account of Al-Qaeda's communicated audio-visual rhetoric of policies and strategies, raising questions, and opening up for constructive arguments, rather providing answers, expectations or recommendations.

I- Terrorism and the Mass Media

1- Fixing the Terrorism Label

Classic definitions of terrorism are only centred on '*state terror*' when states commit deliberate acts of violence against their own people or the people of other countries. *Regime de la terreur* is the French origin of the term terrorism or terror. It developed during the French Revolution as an instrument of governance to consolidate the state's power to intimidate what was regarded as counter-revolutionaries, subversive groups.² According to Oxford English Dictionary, it is 'a system of terror' or 'intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power,' and it is 'intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted.'³

Opposite to classic definitions lie contemporary—post 9/11—definitions mostly transfixed on terrorism conducted by non-state actors, usually Muslims. Theorists distinguished between terrorism *from below*, practiced by ‘those outside the dominant group,’ and terrorism *from above*, referring to ‘coercive intimidation practiced by the state directly or sponsored by the state indirectly and practiced by surrogates.’⁴ This includes the US-Pakistan sponsoring and arming Afghani militias, alongside Osama Bin Laden, to resist the Soviet invasion, in the 1980s.⁵

The overtly-biased Western media coverage of terror events, practiced *from below*, coupled with the global disagreement on a single definition for terrorism, helped fixing the terrorism label solely on non-state actors—especially Islamists—and totally excluding governments—especially liberal democracies. The disagreement over a single definition for terrorism says Grosscup, has left the term ‘politically loaded,’ and opened up for officials to formulate their own definitions in a ‘consistently inconsistent’ fashion that suits their political agenda, and ‘to avoid the terrorism label being applied to their own violence.’⁶

Nearly every state-sponsored definition of terrorism... not only excludes the liability of state terrorism,⁷ but also—as observable in political, academic and popular texts—is deeply centred around the notion of ‘Islamic terrorism,’ which, according to Richard Jackson, strangulate the process of understanding terrorism, the long-run struggle to control it, while deeply harming community relations.⁸ ‘It is most frequently assumed – often without any evidence provided, as if it were a self-evident fact – that terrorism is directly linked to, emerges from or is inspired by extremist and fundamentalist forms of Islam.’⁹

Though many nowadays refute to accept terror as the by-product of state activity, it is inevitable that ‘governments – including regular armies in declared (‘lawful’) wars – seem to be capable of terrorism.’¹⁰ The deliberate US aerial bombardment of civilians in its entire war history is sufficient evidence. As statistics demonstrate, the victims of state terror are incomparable in volume and intensity to the victims of non-state terror. This ‘*imbalance of terror*,’ elucidates Der Derian, ‘has emerged, based on a mimetic fear and hatred coupled with an asymmetrical willingness and capacity to destroy the other without the formalities of war.’¹¹

b. Propaganda of the Deed:

Just as the media has transfixed terrorism on non-state terrorists, terrorists have frequently exploited all forms of mass media, including the internet, to promote their strategic deeds. The Terrorists' ultimate objectives are political, says Nacos. 'Without making friends and foes aware of their existence, of their motivations, and their objectives, terrorists would not see a chance to further their political agenda.'¹²

Propaganda of the deed includes extremists' employing political violence or terror as well as the mass media to justify their deeds and gain public sympathy for their goals. The main idea is that 'terrorists strikes would drive fear into targeted societies and make them amenable to the revolutionary changes they sought.'¹³ In this realm, fear becomes part and parcel of both the terrorist and counterterrorist rhetoric targeting audience that both the terrorists and the governmental leaders claim to represent.

The mass media inflates fear via exaggerating threats of perceived enemies. Political violence or terror, especially when supported with live coverage, shows off the ability to supersede the other apparently-powerful side. Both state and non-state actors, thus, exploit the media to rationalize their deeds and legitimize their perpetual violence, recommend actions or counteractions, clarify their ethical virtue and efficacy, and the liability of realizing those actions, usually requiring purposeful violence.

The relationship between the media and non-state terrorists is widely described as 'symbiotic' or mutually beneficial. Their deeds in using the media, according to Enders and Sandler, includes exploiting the media's ability to reach nearly 'every corner of the globe almost instantaneously.' Terrorists use the media to inflate fear, widen public support, recruit new candidates, and 'portray government responses as brutal in the hopes of winning popular support.'¹⁴ Their use of violence aims to incite governments into 'harsh and indiscriminate counterterrorism responses in order to radicalize and mobilize a population' which they claim to represent its interests.¹⁵

The mass media is mainly interested in the size of its audience, along with other goals. 'Larger audience means higher viewer ratings and advertisers demands for television and larger profits for print media.'¹⁶ The media goals in reporting terror events mainly include: getting a *scoop* by reporting the news first; intensely *dramatizing* an event and its causes,¹⁷ which seems the most compelling for both the media and terrorists. Nevertheless, 'there is no

credible scientific evidence that establishes ‘a cause-effect relationship between media coverage and the spread of terrorism.’¹⁸

Propaganda of the deed is also made possible via the internet. Deemed as a form of cyber-terrorism, terrorists’ use of the Internet, says Crilley, is an ‘adjunct’ to ‘conventional warfare’ when dissident groups use the Internet to campaign for legitimacy. The convergence of information and communication technologies has allowed for ‘the widest ever propaganda campaign’¹⁹ to take place online. The Internet has provided terrorist, extremist or activist groups with the means to propagate their ideology at a very small cost, which has encouraged organizations, like Al-Qaeda, to use the Internet in raising funds and disseminating propaganda and misinformation. Supporters and sympathizers, as a result, could access documents, read updates, buy goods and share information by email.²⁰

But how effective is the internet in empowering the terrorists’ agenda is yet another question. ‘The evidence to date,’ adds Crilley, ‘is that sub-groups at least use the Internet mainly for propaganda, secure communications, intelligence gathering and fund management.’²¹ Though the widespread availability of knowledge and the anonymity of cyberspace may facilitate the creation of new terrorist groups, ‘real’ resources are still required to execute a terrorists’ plan.²²

The internet, thus, seems to be an extremely unreliable and unstable location in terms of information provision. It is neither good as a substitution for the print or broadcast media, nor online protest can gain enough media and political attention. ‘The amount of people with access to television or a newspaper is still possibly proportionally larger than those with Internet access and a website is still useful in providing in-depth and up to date information to the ‘already converted’ or to those who are aware of the issues, rather than for creating awareness.’²³

The internet, in short can complement the other types of print and broadcast media, but its virtual nature cannot replace the real world. According to Crilley,

If the website is shut down, will this lead to a loss of collective or historical memory within the organization? Will this lead to a certain amount of instability? Whilst there have been cases where online protests have made their point, ten-thousand emails does not have the same impact as ten thousand protesters in Whitehall.²⁴

In addition to the insecurity/instability, and subsequent ineffectiveness of online information and propaganda, the absence of face-to-face communication amongst members of an organization erodes their structure and vanishes their power. The decline of face-to-face communication amongst extremist/terrorist groups, adds Crilley, means that 'the very structure of these groups may be affected in ways that could be hard to anticipate.'²⁵ The anonymity provided 'helps distance those sympathetic with the cause from those actively fighting for the cause in ways that may be objectionable to the sympathizers.'²⁶ So, unlike conventional forms of mass media, the unreliable nature of the Internet erodes its power, and eventually turns it into a less effective medium for propaganda of the deed.

2- Al-Qaeda's Media Strategy:

'Al-Qaeda has become a significant player in global politics largely because it has developed a sophisticated media strategy,' Philip Seib.

The 'symbiotic' relationship binding the terrorists' and media, together with the Western media-centred definitions of terrorism, solely focussing on terrorism *from below* practiced by non-state actors, solely transfixed on Islamic terrorism, has deeply helped Al-Qaeda fostering its ideology and strategy. The global nature of modern communication technologies, especially satellite television and the Internet, met spontaneously with Al-Qaeda's goals in globalizing Jihad, recruiting supporters from around the globe, to further its violent undertakings, deepen its impact and create an uncontrollable situation for the West—spreading a contagious fear from terrorism—thereby leading to major transformations in their local and foreign policies: applying tight security, combating terrorism laws, and above all, supporting the so-called US-led 'war on terror'.

The 'visual culture' of television dictates that the availability or lack of audiovisual material determines what to be aired and what to be excluded. Al-Qaeda has learned and applied this lesson well in 9/11. Hitting major landmarks in New York, where largest television stations and film studios are concentrated guaranteed them 'exhaustive coverage and a global projection of their actions.' Television simply looks for 'attention-drawing' elements, 'prioritizes violence indirectly,' where newsworthiness depends on 'more dramatic... more spectacular in a visual sense and more emotional' content for 'an image-oriented culture.'²⁷

According to Soranio, then, 'Terrorism's permanent and unconditional presence in current mass media 'overdimensionalizes' its capacity for reaching the population, strengthening the effects of its threats and coercion.'

The nature Western media coverage of bin Laden and Al-Qaeda has thus deeply exaggerated its acclaimed power and impact on the Arab and Western public, eventually assisting the organization in its attempts to achieve its strategic propaganda goals: *propagating* its ideology, *legitimizing* its vision, and *intimidating* its enemies, all in one shot.

This part examines at the relationship between Al-Qaeda and the mass media, and explores how Al-Qaeda has skilfully employed various types of mass media, especially the internet, to further its strategic agenda. According to Marc Lynch, 'Al-Qaeda the organization has increasingly become indistinguishable from Al-Qaeda Media Phenomenon.'²⁸ Skilfully employing satellite technology, then, to air its video messages to Arab and Western audience alike, nowadays, the Internet represents the central stage for Al-Qaeda's media battlefield. Bin Laden's messages were first directed to the Arab and Muslim public, but now they carry English subtitles to appeal to non-Muslim western audience as well.

Believing in the media's capability to multiply their power, Al-Zawahri, the second Al-Qaeda in-command, asserts, 'We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media... we are in a in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.'²⁹ Nevertheless, Al-Qaeda keeps denouncing the media role in covering the 'war' it is carrying out on behalf of the Muslim world. In their viewpoint, the press keeps lying, not only about their real motivations, but also about the Western governments motivations, usually reported as seeking peace and international security, and 'hiding their economic exploitation of the Muslim world' and their 'deep rooted hostility against Islamic religion and its followers.'³⁰

Central to Al-Qaeda's media strategy was approaching Al-Jazeera as the network of choice to air their propaganda via satellite, since 1998. The Qatari station's pan-Arab line of reporting, hostility to most Arab governments, continuous support for Arab causes, especially in covering the second Palestinian uprising in 2000, has placed it at the network of choice for Osama bin Laden, who claims to speak on behalf of the Arab and Muslim people. Al-Jazeera is widely popular in the Arab world for pushing off the tight limits of free expressions and allowing for unprecedented diversity. The tackled issues and the speakers invited to voice out their opinions are chosen to be most controversial in the Arab world, including Israeli officials as well as bin Laden.

Approaching a single channel, not only contributed to the worldwide fame of the organization's leader, but also guaranteed a relatively favourable coverage for his exclusive scoops. 'Terrorist groups,' says Tuman, 'learned that manipulation of media could be achieved if they approached news reporters acting less like terrorists and more like politicians or public relations experts.' By granting interviews to some but not all reporters, or newspapers or television networks, 'terrorists could hold out the promise of a comprehensive scoop while also guaranteeing coverage and possibly more favorable treatment in a story.'³¹

The nature of Al-Qaeda's relationship to Al-Jazeera, thus, has often been misunderstood by the west, drawing wrong policy conclusions, as a result, says Lynch. The migration of bin Laden's videos into the Internet was an expression of Al-Qaeda's discontent about Al-Jazeera's airing of counter arguments to his views, hosting US officials to voice out their opinions, to seek objectivity. Presenting 'the opinion and the other opinion,' as Al-Jazeera's cliché goes, the Jihadists found the Arab media 'an unreliable ally,' and bin Laden in a January 2004 statement identified the Arab media as 'the primary source of deviation in the Muslim world.'³²

The global reach of the Internet, thus, has helped Al-Qaeda establishing itself as a 'virtual state' communicating with its 'citizens,' and expanding its audience. According to Seib, 'For every conventional video performance by Bin-Laden that appears on Al-Jazeera and other major television outlets, there are hundreds of online videos that proselytize, recruit, and train the Al-Qaeda constituency.'³³ Similar to traditional media in wartime, the jihadist online media seeks to *intimidate* the enemy, *legitimise* its activities, and *propagate* support. In addition, it fulfils the need for education, and creating a virtual community of 'like-minded individuals'. Its impact however is hard to assess.³⁴

The symbiotic relationship between terrorists and the mass media perfectly meets in the Internet age. 'Don't shoot yet, we're not on prime time': Publicity is the key aim of terrorists, and with the heightened competition in news provision, 'the Internet as a news source is being exploited not only by terrorist and extremist groups but also by the news media themselves.'³⁵ Terrorists make the most shocking and emotive news, attractive enough for readers/viewers alike. According to Crilley, 'the increasing use of live audio, real player, news streaming and webcams are bringing mainstream media directly into the PC screen.' As a result, 'The 'CNN Effect' has come out of age on the Internet.'³⁶

Al-Qaeda's Media Committee headed by a jihadist professional nicknamed Abu Reuters is mainly in charge of handling the Arab and Western media, as well as Al-Qaeda's online presence. In 2001, the appearance of multi-media company as-Sahhab (the Clouds) marked the production of bin Laden and Al-Zawahri audio and videotapes. As-Sahhab also produces documentary films about the Jihadist movements as well as operational videos. 'Its productions, says Rogan, are known for their technological sophistication, cinematic effects, and unique footage, as well as for efforts to reach a Western public with translations and subtitles in foreign languages.'³⁷

Tuman, concurs, 'the bin Laden tapes, while shot in a style suggesting an amateur working with a simple video camera, were actually fairly sophisticated rhetorical artefacts.' While not only intended for Arab audience—as suggested by his Arabic speeches and the choice of Al-Jazeera—these tapes also targeted a larger global audience, 'including the United States, her allies, and those neutral countries President Bush had warned in his speeches.'³⁸

The main strategic goals of as-Sahhab-produced videos include *propagation*, *legitimization* and *intimidation*. Operations videos depicting attacks on Western troops, whether in Afghanistan or Iraq, seek to boost morale amongst supporters, by visually propagating Al-Qaeda's victory in contrast to the Western failure. In addition, much of the content of bin Laden and al-Zawahri's speeches is linked to international political events, such as the 2004 US election, the CIA prison imbroglio and the Israel-Lebanon 2006 war.³⁹

According to Rogan, 'the most important goal of communication is legitimization of the movement activities. This is articulated through religious justification and by presenting the movement as a rightful resistance group within the context of Islamic history.' Then, when directly addressing the West and the western public opinion, warning and reminding of the truce offered by bin Laden and ignored by the West, the goal is surely intimidation.⁴⁰ Having the legitimization goal as the most important one for Al-Qaeda directly indicates its central weaknesses. Realizing their falsehood of their claims, in all cultures and all heavenly religions, both Al-Qaeda spiritual leaders, bin Laden and Al-Zawahri, spend a considerable time trying to justify their actions, as the discourse analysis demonstrate.

Analyzing Bin Laden Speeches: Critical Discourse Analysis

'With his turban and camouflage jacket, his ornate Arabic and harsh vows of continued terror against America, Osama bin Laden revealed in his speech the instinctive cunning that has made him such a formidable foe,' Judith Miller.⁴¹

Using critical discourse analysis, the methodology undertaken in this research to analyze bin Laden's online videos, both scrutinizes the image and the content of those videos, and attempts to illustrate how they are both created to fulfil a strategic function. Image and wordings together, as two distinct elements, eventually complement each other to offer the outcome/product, essentially produced to play a strategic role in world politics.

Applying critical discourse analysis on bin Laden's online videos has demonstrated that they are all revolving around the same strategic goals, propagating ideology, legitimizing manners and intimidating perceived enemy. Those goals are always overlapping in the discourse, where the same intimidating thought, works to enhance support and justify situations at the same time.

Bin Laden's speeches are by-and-large directed to the United States, whether the government or the people. Since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, bin Laden's video aired on Al-Jazeera, following Bush's speech, in the very same day when the invasion of Afghanistan started, stated the following, "God has blessed a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam, to destroy America," adding that "America will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine, and before all the army of infidels depart the land of Muhammad, peace be upon him."⁴²

Al-Jazeera's running of bin Laden statements and videotapes, however, was not new. In December 1998, he was interviewed by the channel for more than an hour, in which he remembered his childhood and claimed a duty on all Muslims to "wage" religious war, "targeting all Americans." At its time, this statement precipitated protest by the US embassy in Doha to Qatar's officials. By September 20, 2001, Al-Jazeera reran the December 1998 interview, in which bin Laden was shown as a "gun-wielding millionaire tuned into a legend by the West." The exclusive reportage cast bin Laden in a favorable light. The most wanted man on earth was shown in his childhood riding a horse, firing from an AK-47 and driving a bulldozer. Leaving behind the lavish life he enjoyed in Saudi Arabia, he appeared from an "undisclosed location in Afghanistan" assuring, "Every Muslim should seek a place to fight the Jihad... to please God," concluding with an open-ended question,

“What is wrong with resisting the aggressors?”⁴³ Who can disagree with such a statement of bin Laden? It is quite notable here how bin Laden’s discourse was clearly simplifying immoral acts of terror, so that they would be simply unchallengeable, just like the discourse of Bush speeches following 9/11.

Al-Jazeera’s rerunning of this interview at this point of time, after 9/11 and in the middle of propaganda campaign launched by the US against bin Laden, had an earthquake effect in both parts of the world. Even though the interview was claimed to have significantly raised bin Laden’s popularity across the Arab World, casting him as the man who left behind the life of millionaires for the sake of his faith, it raised questions and debates in the Arab media on Al-Jazeera motivations, and whether it helps or harms the Muslims’ image by his radical interpretation of the concept of Jihad. Nevertheless, the popular reaction proved that bin Laden is a charismatic man, able to play on the hearts and minds of the mostly-less educated Arab public, more than George W. Bush, the most powerful man on earth. And this was disastrous for the US public diplomacy effort; especially that it intensified the frequency of stories on bin Laden in American television. While Al-Jazeera was regarded as a mouthpiece for the terrorists, “world television networks queued to pay for the pictures,”⁴⁴ which were more frequently aired and cited in all types of media inside the US, more than the president himself.⁴⁵ From its side, Al-Jazeera, which kept re-running it several more times, claimed it was necessary to re-air the interview “to give viewers an insight into the ideology of the alleged terrorist mastermind.”⁴⁶

The power and appeal of both Bush and bin Laden’s rhetoric at this point is certainly quite significant. They skilfully tend to simplify issues, cast them in a benign light aimed at fulfilling good deeds, for the sake humanity, for the sake of religion and for the sake of patriotism. Bin Laden’s question, “What is wrong with fighting the aggressors?” does not really seem to be any different from Bush’s crusade war, aimed at eradicating terror and making the world a safe place, simply because, according to Bush, “every one of the victims who died on September 11th is the most important person on earth for to somebody.” Both discourses seem to be unchallengeable, for most ordinary people. Who can negate such a statement?

This is not because of anything right or ethical about it, but simply it tends to simplify things, exclude its direct repercussions, and even exclude the very religious grounds it purports. It is just designed or meant to be so simple, so that it would be convincing enough, and thus appeal to the largest proportion of the general public, who have no background on the issue.

Much of bin Laden's speeches are directed to America and are essentially meant at intimidating the US and its people, and the west in general, while at the same time appealing to Arab and Muslim public and seeking to legitimize terror activities. Appearing three years after his 2001 threat, he directed his speech for the first time, "To the American people" saying, "I have important talk to you, so listen to me carefully. I start with talking about the war between us and you, and of some of its outcome on us and you."

Here the rhetoric of bin Laden is following the same of George W. Bush, when he said, "You are either with us or against us." Both bin Laden and Bush seem to have been adopting the Clash of Civilizations theory in their speeches to deepen disparities between east and west.

Bin Laden, then, goes on with the speech, "Despite the US owning the largest economic capabilities, and the strongest and most advanced military establishment, and it is spending on this war and its army more than what the whole world spend on their armies, and it is the largest country with huge impact on world politics, as if the unfair Veto right was created for her.. In spite of all this, thank God, 19 young people could drive its fate, making the talk about the mujahideen part and parcel of all the talk of your president and it is not at all hidden what the impact and implication of this."

If we look at this part we find that bin Laden starts with listing the various integrated powers that the US enjoys, economic power, military power and political power, mixed with the fact that it is the country number one in the world the single superpower in our unipolar world. Then, he stresses that despite all this 19 people could drive its policy. Stressing the power of the enemy ahead of the attack that he claimed has driven its policy is not only aimed at showing the US people how weak and vulnerable is their country that they think is the most powerful in the world, but is also aimed at showing the Arab and Muslim public that they can supersede a world superpower with a little organization determination and action. This part of the speech works to both intimidate the enemy and recruit supporters at the same time.

In addition, using the word mujahideen (those who fight for the Jihad) is also another misconception of the term Jihad, which simply should be practiced for good deeds, in defence of one's country, property or honour against those who are fighting the Muslims, not in attacking other countries and killing civilians. The concept is not only limited to war and violent defence of oneself, it includes working, seeking education, developing of nation, and all positive actions that Muslim does in their life, for the sake of humanity and for the sake of God, are considered a form of Jihad, and accordingly if they

die while doing them they are considered martyrs. So, bin Laden's usage of the term Jihad and Mujahideen works to justify terror and violence against civilians as something for good deeds practiced as a form of defence. It seeks to legitimate Al-Qaeda's actions to the Arab and Muslim people who are wholeheartedly against them.

Bin Laden, then, says, "The US since 9/11 and most of its politics is affected by the mujahideen, and this is the gift of God, and as a result, people learned about its reality, and accordingly its reputation worsened, its international power was broken, and its economy since then is bleeding, and its interests, which negated those of large companies and the new conservatives, with the difference in their willingness and their media. In the first year of the war, the US has lost its credibility and its media looked like a tool of the tools usually used by colonial emperors, and turned out in most cases worse than dictatorship media that follows the path of a single leader."

While bin Laden keeps referring to the Mujahideen to justify 9/11, he indicates how the powers he previously listed for the US are collapsing one after another due to its post 9/11 retaliation in terms of the economic and political losses. This not only works to intimidate and show the American people, the prime target of the video, the losses that they are suffering out of supporting their country in its so-called 'war on terror' but also to demonstrate perceived strategic victory gained after those attacks on the US.

Most strikingly, as well, is how the mass media coverage of the so called 'war on terror' turned out to be a topic discussed by both bin Laden and the US officials in the so called 'war on terror'. Bin Laden's claims about the US losing credibility or losing the media war, certainly refers to its direct efforts at censoring the media during the assaults on Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), and this includes in specific his own video-taped speeches and even his name, as well as establishing specialized bodies for the dissemination of propaganda, both inside and outside military zones. The US losing credibility is then listed as a part and parcel of bin Laden's list of US losses that resulted from its post 9/11 policies.

In a further speech by bin Laden, which was posted on You.Tube one year later, in 2005, and was also directed to the American people, he starts out by intimidating them, "The best way to stop another disaster, the war its reasons and its outcome. Security is an important aspect of human life. Liberated people don't give up their security." Then, explaining or justifying his actions, he says, "In contrast to Bush's claims that we hate freedom. Those who hate freedom don't give up the spirits of 19 martyrs. We fought because we are free. We want freedom to our Umma." Then back to intimidation, he

says, "As you break our security we break yours. Despite getting into our fourth year after the 9/11 incidents, Bush is still practicing misinformation and disinformation on you, and hiding the real reasons from you. And then, the circumstances are inviting the repetition of what has happened."

So, the argument here is obviously quite weak. The connection he tries to make between 'freedom' and the acclaimed 19 martyrs is unconvincing. According to bin Laden's vision, those martyrs fought an acclaimed war by hitting the WTC and the Pentagon to seek freedom to the Umma?? Is it meant to force the US, for example, to back away and desert its military establishment in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab and Muslim World?? Or it is meant to force the US into further retaliation and drive them into more violence and kill them though plenty of suicide bombing taking place in Iraq or Afghanistan?? And would that lead to freedom in a way or another??? I don't think so.

Claiming to speak for the 'Umma,' however makes the rhetoric of bin Laden deeply controversial, for his simple usage of the 'Umma' concept. The concept of 'umma' in Islam refers to all the Muslim people around the world not the Muslims living in the Arab or the Islamic world. And it is centred on the Muslims uniting and cooperating for good deeds not for terrorism. This is why when he speaks in the name of the 'umma' he attempts to justify terror activities as actions done for good deeds.

Bin Laden, goes on to justify his cause for committing 9/11, which in itself a proof of weakness and obviously an attempt to win the American people to his side, practicing some sort of public diplomacy, "I will talk about the reasons behind these events. To tell you the truth, the moments when the decision was taken, God only knows, that we did not think of hitting the towers. But after we fed up, and we witnessed the unjust of the Israeli-American alliance and their attacks against our people in Lebanon and Palestine, I thought of doing so. And the events that affected me the most are the 1982, when the US allowed the Israelis to attack Lebanon, and in those hard moments so many meanings were flooding in my psyche, which are hard to describe but it lead to a strong feeling to refuse injustice and strong determination on punishing the unjust. While I was looking at those demolished towers in Lebanon, I thought of punishing the unjust the same way and destroy towers in the States, to taste what we have tasted and feel the pain of killing our women and children."

The logic of bin Laden justification is evidently flawed. He obviously used various techniques: first by using emotional appeals, by telling how he was badly affected by the Israeli hitting of Lebanon; secondly by claiming that it

is the US that allowed Israel to do so to provide the link between the US and Israel, and thirdly, by making the attacks look like counter attacks or retaliation, rather than violence. This rhetoric is meant to appeal to the American people's hearts and minds, and intimidate them, at the same time, by feeling the pain he experienced while watching the towers falling in Lebanon, around 19 years before 9/11, then intimidating them by saying that they should taste what the Lebanese have tasted. At the same time, this discourse is supposed to convince the Arab and Muslim people that he is not a terrorist, because he was fighting/attacking back, rather than killing and terrorizing innocent civilians.

The discourse is not convincing for both the American and the Arab and Muslim people. For the Americans, it totally does not concern them at all that the Israelis hit Lebanon in 1982, even if their government has approved this, the general public are not at all responsible for this. For the Arab and Muslim people, the idea of Jihad by the use of violence, is only related to direct attack, not retaliation after about 19 years.

Conclusion

Realizing that the videos of bin Laden, whether aired on satellite or online, represent the major propaganda tool of Al-Qaeda organization, this research is essentially focussed on spotting Al-Qaeda's media strategy through analyzing the intertextuality and discursive formation of image and text, to provide a persuasive critical account of Al-Qaeda's communicated audio-visual rhetoric of policies and strategies.

The central argument denotes that the apparent worldwide success of Al-Qaeda's media strategy carries the seeds for its eventual failure. This is due to multiple factors including, the inherent contradictions in its propaganda messages, the absence of a territorial-based legitimate goals, the inability of their virtual online activity to substitute for the real world, and the deliberate targeting of civilians in its operations, which deeply works against the essence of Islam.

The absence of an independent/impartial definition of terrorism has opened up the way for focussing on terrorism *from below* practiced by non-state actors, and totally neglecting state-terrorism, the original form of terror, behind which the term 'terrorism' emerged. This research starts by an attempt at fixing the terrorism label at real acts of terror exercised against civilians and inflicting a great amount of death and destruction, whether practiced by non-state actors *from below* or by governments, *from above*.

It explores role of the media in transfixing the terrorism label solely on non-state actors, especially Islamists, and excluding the possibility of any form of state terror, especially liberal democracies—which eventually opens up for applying the clash of civilizations and widens the gap between the east and the west. In addition to misleading the public about the concept of terrorism, the mass media, arguably plays a significant role in fostering terrorism, due to the symbiotic—mutually beneficial—relationship linking the media with terrorism under the ‘propaganda of the deed’ banner.

To sum up, the fact that Al-Qaeda now exist by-and-large online, as a substitute to its former existence physically in the real world, and using the internet for mainly communication only purposes imply a cheer weakness in the organizations’ structure, power and eventual impact. This is partly due to the American existence in Afghanistan, since 2001, which does not give the space for training personnel on military operations, as used to be the case in the past.

In addition, Al-Qaeda’s techniques to apply its media strategy, *propagation*, *legitimization* and *intimidation*, failed for several reasons. First, the multiplicity of techniques that Al-Qaeda uses reflects its internal failure because this reflects the internal weakness of its ideology which has no solid cultural nor religious basis. If Al-Qaeda leaders were secure enough about their violent undertakings, it would not have taken them much effort to explain its righteousness, at least to the Arab and Muslim public. In addition, each of the techniques used by Al-Qaeda essentially via the Internet, Propagation, Legitimization and Intimidation, carries the seeds for its eventual failure.

Propagation of its ideology is primary directed to the Arab and Muslim worlds, because its messages and web content are predominantly in Arabic, despite having English subtitles for some videos, for the sake of intimidation. However, the amount of Arab and Muslim people who have access to the Internet is too small and totally unlikely to gain the organization popularity in the Arab world, especially with its continued need to *legitimize* itself. It was utterly hard, however, to win Arab and Muslim hearts while killing innocent civilians all around the world, which works absolutely against the essence of Islam. Qur’an verses frankly denounce the killing of civilians, women, children and the elderly, which is not open to interpretations because it is clear and frank. So, the organizations’ failure to legitimate itself, leads sharply to the failure of its propaganda goals.

As for *intimidation* of the enemy, it is obviously hard to imagine that the Western public would turn to YouTube en masse to see bin Laden’s speaking

and read the subtitles below his speech, or try to find English material to read on terrorists' websites. I assume only researchers would do so, but not the entire public. In addition, the fact that people in the West get most of their information through the tunnel vision of local television, usually denouncing the wrongdoings of terrorists and assuring the public of the failure of their techniques, makes intimidation also a failure technique that the terrorists use.

So, the failure of the terrorists techniques, coupled for the inability of the internet to stand for their propaganda goal as a long-term tool, let alone their strategic goals, nor replace the actual world with a virtual world strongly feeds into the eventual failure of Al-Qaeda's media strategy. In addition, for an Islamic Caliphate to be formed, there must be a spiritual leader able to gather all Muslim in the world and appeal to them. Bin Laden, despite possessing a charismatic character that can at some point appeal to a certain percentage of the Muslim youth in some countries, the discourse he is presenting, his outlook and his old age does not make him the best model of a popular leader for Muslim youth in the contemporary time.

Notes

¹ Steven R. Cornan and Jill S. Schiefelbein. Communication and Media Strategy in the Jihadi War of Ideas. (Arizona: Consortium for Strategic Communication, 2006) 3.

² Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 15.

³ Hoffman, Inside Terrorism. 14.

⁴ Joseph S. Tuman. Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terrorism. (London: Sage Publications, 2003) 5.

⁵ Peter G. Stillman. 'The Changing Meaning of Terrorism'. Perspectives on Evil and Human Wickedness, 1 (2) 2003, 83.

⁶ Grosscup. Strategic Terror. 156-157.

⁷ Stillman. 'The Changing Meaning of Terrorism'. 83.

⁸ Richard Jackson. 'Religion, Politics and Terrorism: A Critical Analysis of narratives of 'Islamic Terrorism'' Centre for International Politics Working Papers Series, No. 21, October 2006, The University of Manchester, 2.

⁹ Jackson, 'Religion, Politics and Terrorism,' 8.

¹⁰ Stillman. 'The Changing Meaning of Terrorism', 82-83.

¹¹ James Der Derian, 'Imaging Terror: Logos, Pathos and Ethos,' 26.

¹² Brigitte L. Nacos. 'Terrorism/Counterterrorism and the Media in the Age of Global Communication,' United Nations University Global Seminar Second Shimame-Yamaguchi Session, 'Terrorism—A Global Challenge', 5-8 August 2006, 4.

¹³ Brigitte L. Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon and Ropert Y. Shapiro. 'Post 9/11 Terrorism Threats, News Coverage, and Public Perceptions in the United States' International Journal of Conflict and Violence, 1 (2) 2007, 107.

¹⁴ Walter Enders and Todd Sandler. The Political Economy of Terrorism. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, First Edition, 2005) 37.

¹⁵ Ethan Bueno de Mesquita and Eric S. Dickson. 'The Propaganda of the Deed: Terrorism, Counterterrorism and Mobilization' American Journal of Political Science, 51 (2) April 2007, 364.

-
- ¹⁶ Enders and Sandler, *The Political Economy of Terrorism*, 38.
- ¹⁷ Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, 152-153.
- ¹⁸ William Biernatzki, 'Terrorism and the Mass Media' *Communication Research Trends*, Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture, vol 21, 2002, no.1, 6.
- ¹⁹ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 260.
- ²⁰ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 260.
- ²¹ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 260-261.
- ²² Sarah Gordon and Richard Ford, "Symantec Cyberterrorism?" *Inside*, 8.
- ²³ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 262.
- ²⁴ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 261.
- ²⁵ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 260.
- ²⁶ Gordon and Ford, 'Symantec Cyberterrorism?' *Inside*, 9.
- ²⁷ Manuel R. Torres Soriano. "Terrorism and the Mass Media after Al-Qaeda: A Change of Course?" *Athena Intelligence Journal*, vol. 3, no 1, (2008), 3-4.
- ²⁸ Marc Lynch. 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies' *The National Interest*, Spring 2006.
- ²⁹ Soriano. "Terrorism and the Mass Media After Al-Qaeda" 9.
- ³⁰ Soriano. "Terrorism and the Mass Media After Al-Qaeda" 7.
- ³¹ Tuman, *Communicating Terror*, 136.
- ³² Lynch, Marc. 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies' *The National Interest*, Spring 2006.
- ³³ Seib. 'The Al-Qaeda Media Machine' 74.
- ³⁴ Rogan, Hanna. 'Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad: Virtual Battlefronts from Iraq to the Horn of Africa' *Culture and Society. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Summer/Fall 2007, 90.
- ³⁵ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 262.
- ³⁶ Crilley, 'Information Warfare' 262.
- ³⁷ Rohan, 'Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad' 90-91.
- ³⁸ Tuman, *Communicating Terror*, 137.
- ³⁹ Rogan, 'Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad' 91.
- ⁴⁰ Rogan, 'Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad' 91.
- ⁴¹ Miller, Judith. 'Bin Laden's Media Savvy: Expert Timing of Threats,' *New York Times*, October 9, 2001, A1.
- ⁴² Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 146.
- ⁴³ Miles, *Al-Jazeera*, 110.
- ⁴⁴ Miles, *Al-Jazeera*, 110.
- ⁴⁵ Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 150.
- ⁴⁶ Miles, *Al-Jazeera*, 110.