Terrorist or Freedom Fighter?

The Arab Media Coverage of "Terrorism" or "So-Called Terrorism"

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Abstract

The "global war on terror" that has been launched by the US administration in the aftermath of the September 11 events has sparked a major debate over the definition of terror, its social and political probes, and how far news coverage can meet journalistic standards of balance, truth, and objectivity, especially in cases of extreme political conflict. At the heart of this debate is the role played by the Arab media in covering "terrorism" or "so-called terrorism" inside and outside the Middle East. This essay will analyze the Arab media coverage of Al-Qaeda, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and the war in Iraq.

Introduction:

The concept of terrorism is disputable, value-laden, and open to various interpretations located within broader cultural and social frames. Therefore, the world media systems have not agreed on a universal definition of terror. Since terrorism is in the eye of the beholder, the Arab media, in its portrayal of practitioners of violence as either "terrorists" or "freedom fighters," reflects its political culture, value system, and ideological and commercial interests that tend to drive media anywhere.

This essay attempts to provide a meaning for terrorism as defined in the literature. The essay also investigates the relationship between media and terrorists, and how the Arab media, through its news coverage, analysis, and debates about Al-Qaeda, the situation in Iraq, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, has portrayed terrorism or so-called terrorism.

What is terrorism?

The etymological root of terrorism is the Latin word *terrere*, which means to frighten or to cause to tremble and from which are derived the terms *terrible*, *deter*, and *terrify* as well as *terror* (Weimann & Winn, 1994). One of the common definitions of terrorism in the literature is that it is "the systematic use of coercive intimidation against civilians for political goals" (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003, p. 6).

There are several elements that are often emphasized by terrorists: their extensive reliance on both random and symbolic violence; their failure to differentiate between civilians and non-civilians as legitimate targets; their use of civilians as surrogate victims for the state; and their exploitation of the media to publicize their cause (Miller, 1982).

The relationship between terrorists and media:

Modern-day terrorists always try to seek publicity about their existence and purposes through the media. This may include issuing statements; giving interviews; claiming responsibility for terrorist actions; or sending tapes to television stations. This places extra burden on media to devise standards for dealing with the terrorists' publicity tactics. For example, media executives "face painful decisions when provided by terrorists with videos of hostages they have executed or of their captives making apparently voluntary but probably coerced statements" (Paletz & Boiney, 1992, p.8).

When Osama Bin Laden, the head of the Al-Qaeda network, decided to publicize his group's ideologies, he selected the two most popular Arab satellite channels: the Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera and the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya. In that context, Salah Nigm, Al-Arabiya News Director, said: "They [Al-Qaeda leaders] go to who's most influential. I don't know if it's their gut feeling or if someone's advising them" (Smith, 2004).

Airing the Bin Laden tapes made the US administration vilify Al-Jazeera and accuse it of serving as a mouthpiece for Bin Laden. In that context, Hafez Al-Mirazi, Al-Jazeera's Washington, D.C. bureau chief, said: "They [the US administration] are confusing the message with the messenger…The tendency of 'thugs' like Bin Laden to seek out specific media should not necessarily undermine the station's reputation for journalistic integrity" (el-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003, p.179).

Bin Laden also sent several letters to *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, an independent Arabic daily newspaper published in London. Some analysts argued that Bin Laden was aware of the high circulation of *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, which claims a readership of 300,000, and which describes itself as a pan-Arab newspaper (Salman, 2002). *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* has

often been referred to by some Western media analysts as the "Al-Qaeda paper" since it was one of Bin Laden's favorite newspapers.

In the media coverage of any terrorist event, some facts may be relatively neutral (e.g. the timing of the event); but many others may be highly controversial (e.g. the political grievances underlying these actions). This affects the language used by the news media to describe events (was it a suicide, a martyrdom, or an assassination?), the selection, depiction, and meaning of iconic images, and the choice of experts for commentary (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003). Strong emotional reactions to extreme acts of political violence mean each media system may provide different interpretations of the same events, sharing almost nothing in common. That is why, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

Characteristics of Arab media coverage of terrorism or so-called terrorism:
Market needs and "contextual objectivity" in the Arab media systems:

Unlike the situation a decade ago when most Arab media systems were monopolized by governments and were abiding by the official line, today, the new Arab satellite channels are trying to cater to the market needs. They have to think about reaching the widest possible market, which is not limited to within their own boundaries. "So the logic is no longer catering to the Egyptians or the Saudis…but to the Arab. In that sense, they [Arab media] are trying to find out what most Arabs want and what is the common denominator among most Arabs" (Telhami, 2002).

To illustrate that argument, at a time when Arab official discourse is pressing for peace with Israel as a strategic option and opposing the Palestinian suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, some Arab satellite channels insist, most of the time, on dubbing

the Palestinian suicidal operations "martyr" operations (El Tounsy). In doing that, the Arab channels seem to voice the stand of their peoples, who are mostly supportive of the Palestinian operations as the only way to resist the Israeli occupation.

Voicing their audiences' stand has not, however, kept many of the new Arab satellite channels from presenting all sides to the story. Walking the fine line between providing audiences with a true representation of real events while still appealing to public sensibilities is what this essay's author calls "contextual objectivity." An example that illustrates that concept is that some Arab satellite channels, especially Al-Jazeera, provide news about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from an Arab perspective, i.e. they sympathize with the Palestinian resistance. However, that does not prevent these channels from providing the Israeli officials with a venue through which they can explain their position (el-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003). Moreover, Al-Jazeera airs Bin Laden tapes, but it also puts foreign officials like Tony Blair and Collin Powel on air to give the Western view.

Arab media systems are not monolithic in their coverage of terrorism:

The coverage of terrorism by Arab media, both private and state-owned, is far from monolithic. Some outlets are more balanced than others, providing factual reporting and breaking stories.

An example that shows the differences among Arab media in their coverage of violent events is that unlike most outlets, which use loaded terms such as "martyrs" when referring to Palestinian suicide attackers (as mentioned above), the London-based Saudi daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Hayat*, also based in London, use the term "suicide attackers" in their news reporting though not on their editorial

pages. Commenting on his newspaper's approach, Abdel Rahman Al-Rashed, the *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* editor in chief, said: "I know that adopting an impartial stand in the [Arab] media world is akin to suicide, because there are many who push the media into extremes and take nationalistic positions and maintain that whoever thinks differently is committing treason against the national cause" (WorldNetDaily.com, 2003).

One possible reason for the different line taken by *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat* newspapers in their reference to the Palestinian suicide bombers maybe their adoption of an "out-in" offshore distribution model, with editorial offices in a foreign venue and markets in the Arab world (Mneimneh, 2003). This model might have helped make their reporting coincide with the Western framing of the Palestinian suicide bombings.

There is a more apparent monolithic approach in the Arab media coverage of Al-Qaeda acts. After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, most elite Arab media outlets either printed or broadcast a fatwah by six prominent Islamic scholars condemning the terrorist attacks as contrary to Islam and calling for the apprehension and punishment of the perpetrators. However, in their reference to Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks that take place outside the Arab/Islamic world (e.g. the Madrid attacks on March 11, 2004), the Arab print and broadcast media do not use loaded terms like "terrorist." They refer to terrorist acts committed by Al-Qaeda as either "so-called terrorism" or "what an official called terrorism."

As for the Al-Qaeda attacks that take place inside the Arab or Islamic world (e.g. the recent attacks in Saudi Arabia and Morocco), the Arab media tend to use more loaded terms, such as "suicide attacks" and "terrorism."

In the language used by Arab media to describe the violent acts in Iraq, they use the term "suicidal attacks" to describe any acts where suicide bombers kill either Iraqis or Americans. Arab media outlets also use loaded terms like "Iraqi resistance" when troops from the coalition forces are killed. However, when Iraqi civilians or Iraqi policemen are killed, the Arab media refer to the perpetrators as "unidentified armed men." Moreover, the Arab media refer to the American troops as "occupying forces" or "invaders" rather than "coalition forces."

The description of the American presence in Iraq as an occupation echoes the hated Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. "And just as most Arabs consider Palestinian violence against Israelis to be a legitimate response to occupation, so the attacks on U.S. and British forces in Iraq since the war's end have been portrayed, and received, as both understandable and justified" (Lynch, 2003).

Writing in the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Nahar*, the Palestinian novelist Ziyad Khaddash published a short story titled: "As if I am in Basra, as if you are in Ramallah." Emphasizing the "Palestinianization of Iraq," in an imagined telephone conversation with a Basra-based Iraqi novelist, Khaddash finds it hard to distinguish between the sound of the Apache helicopters attacking the West Bank town of Ramallah and those attacking the Iraqi city of Basra (Machool, 2003).

A quote from an op-ed piece taken from the pro-government Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan*, dated November 20, 2003 commenting on the recent bombings in the Saudi capital Riyadh explains the different approaches mentioned above:

> The Arab world is facing a great quandary: the relationship between terrorism and resistance. There is no disputing the right of a people to resist foreign occupation

with force, and this is indeed what is happening in Palestine and Iraq. Likewise, there is no dispute over the idea that using armed violence to impose political viewpoints is completely rejected. Yet…it seems that the forces that rise up in resistance to foreign occupation are the same ones that instigate terrorism in our societies…No one wants to talk about this issue because it would seem to… deligitimize the right of resistance at a time when Israeli state terrorism has reached such severe levels (Arab terrorists, Arab victims, 2003).

Emotionality of Arab reporters on the ground:

In their live coverage of violence, Arab field reporters working for the new Arab satellite stations often show emotions in their reporting. They adopt what is called a "journalism of attachment" where the journalists' emotional involvement is reflected in their reporting (Foerstel, 2001).

In a recent report from Iraq, correspondent Ahmed Mansour's features tightened and his eyebrows furrowed as he snapped at the anchor in the Al-Jazeera studio: "I am not going to tell you about the developments. I am going to tell you about the deteriorating situation here in Falloujah" (El-Deeb & Cooney, 2004).

The studio anchors, who are away from the scene with all its emotions, tend to be more poised and to show less emotions than the field anchors. For example, the Arab studio anchors use the term "killed" when an Iraqi dies as a result of a terrorist attack. However, some field reporters tend to be more emotional and occasionally use the term "martyrs" to refer to the Iraqi casualties.

Another aspect of the field anchors' emotionality is their use of maximalist superlative absolutes and sometimes premature speculation in their assessment of the

situation at hand. For example, the Al-Jazeera field anchor, Abdel Azeem Mohammed, in his report from the Iraqi city of Fallujah following the killing of four US contractors on April 1, 2004, said: "The Iraqi security forces and the American troops are absent from the scene, which maybe a sign that they are fed up with this wave of violence. This escalation that we're witnessing today may be intentional to send a message to the American troops that the armed resistance is the best way to get rid of the occupier."

Walid Al-Omary, Al-Jazeera's senior correspondent in the West Bank town of Ramallah, described the difficulty of emotional neutrality and the complexity of an Arab journalist's position in the heart of action: "To be objective in this area is not easy because we live here. We are part of the people here. And this situation belongs to us, and we have our opinions" (el-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003, p.53).

CNN's Christiane Amanpour, a prominent example of the "journalism of attachment," echoed Al-Omary's approach when in 1996 she told an audience of journalists that neutrality was not acceptable in places such as Bosnia, because "when you are neutral, you can become an accomplice" (Foerstel, 2001, p.107).

Episodic and thematic frames of terrorism on Arab media:

Episodic coverage means "concrete occurrences or events with little contextual or thematic connection" (Cho, et al., 2003, p.310). While thematic coverage means "providing a broader and more contextualized understanding of the background factors contributing towards these issues" (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003, p.14).

In their coverage of terrorism, Arab journalists have an edge over their Western counterparts, who were "parachuted" in to cover events in remote areas that are totally foreign to them, and who are not as familiar with the Middle Eastern culture and

language with all its nuances and intricacies. This has allowed the Arab reporters to provide their audiences with a thematic narrative to make sense of a range of diverse stories and individual incidents. Most terrorist incidents covered by Arab media are placed in context. Information about the perpetrators is balanced by information about the official response to them.

For example, in its coverage of a recent Bin Laden tape in which he warned the European countries to stay away from Iraq or face the consequences, Al-Jazeera satellite channel invited a panel of officials and experts, including a spokesman from the German Parliament, a Saudi media professor, an Arab researcher from Washington, and a Belgian political science professor. The panelists assessed the Bin Laden message, comparing it to previous messages and highlighting its implications.

On many occasions, Arab journalists try to approach political violence thematically by providing explanations for the actions of Palestinian suicide bombers. This thematic coverage includes shedding some light on the background of a suicide bomber and his reasons for committing such acts. These journalists who are catering to their Arab audiences are often accused by Western media of contributing to the "legitimation of terrorists and encouraging them to engage in further acts of violence" (Irvin, 1992, p.65).

Clash of civilization on Arab talk shows:

The concept of "the Clash of Civilizations" first appeared in an article published by Harvard professor Samuel Huntington in the summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. In that article, Huntington argued that the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations (Huntington, 1993).

Many discussions by various panelists invited by Arab satellite networks' political talk shows have revolved around the concept of the "clash of civilizations" and the war between Islam and the West. The active participants in what the US administration has called "the global war on terror" have presented their own definitions: "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" was the line in the sand drawn in the immediate aftermath of September 11 attacks by the US President George W. Bush. Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden soon provided his own version of the putative dichotomy: "These events have divided the world into two camps: the camp of the faithful, and that of the unfaithful." It is a war on terrorism for the former, "an obligatory jihad against Crusaders and Jews for the latter" (Mneimneh, 2003).

President Bush's zero-sum environment, and his characterization of the war as a "crusade" helped feed that notion of the clash of civilizations despite attempts on the part of many Arab news anchors to put that into the American perspective in saying that President Bush meant an all-out effort to fight terrorism, and he was not referring to the historical Crusades.

Announcements by President Bush that Iraq was part of the "Axis of Evil," which also include Iran and North Korea, and that the invasion of Iraq was only phase one of what was meant to be a multi-phase military campaign have also nurtured the belief in the Arab world that the United States was launching a war against Islam. In this context, Hafez Al-Mirazi, the Al-Jazeera Washington bureau chief, said: "When President Bush is asked about Iraq, he says, this is phase one. How about Somalia? Phase one. Philippines? Phase one? What do you mean? Are you going to use September 11th to continue for your

next four or eight-year wars as phase two, phase three, etc.?" (Foreign correspondents' perspectives, 2001).

Arab media focus on the humanitarian aspects:

In the "global war on terror" launched by the US administration to root out terrorist cells around the world, the Arab media outlets have been primarily interested in the impact of the war on the ordinary people as well as on the perceived passivity and inaction of Arab regimes in influencing events on the ground.

The Afghan war was the first real war to be covered by any Arab network. Much of the Arab media coverage of that war focused on the destruction US bombing had on the Afghan people, cities, and infrastructure.

Al-Jazeera, which was the only network in Afghanistan during the beginning stages of the US bombings, framed the war in terms of the human toll and the personal suffering of the Afghanis. Graphic video footage of death and damage to civilian sites, such as houses, mosques, and complete villages, had a profound effect on the Arab audiences. "This media framing reinforced the popular perception among Arabs that the war in Afghanistan was not against the Taliban per se but rather against Islam and Arabs" (Jasperson & Kikhia, 2003, p.126).

Some of the most disturbing videos of the campaign were those that specifically showed the personal lives of Afghanis that lost loved ones. One such image was presented of an Afghani who had lost fifteen members of his family in a bombed building in the Afghan capital, Kabul. He did not need to elaborate on his emotional pain with actions or words. Video footage showing the man searching for his relatives through the rubble was enough to make viewers sympathize with him. It was that kind of coverage

that appeared to have angered the US government and military establishment and ultimately led to the "mistaken" bombing of the Al-Jazeera offices in Kabul. (Jasperson & Kikhia, 2003).

Confidentiality between reporters and sources:

Arab reporters who were able to have exclusive interviews with Al-Qaeda members had been subject to official pressures to reveal certain details about their sources and how they got their interviews. One of those reporters, Yosri Fouda, an Al-Jazeera correspondent in London, was blindfolded and driven to a secret location in June 2002, where he interviewed two operational masterminds of the September 11 attacks. Fouda defended his position of not contacting law enforcement or intelligence agencies before or after the interview by saying that this "was not his job." He said he would only do so if he had specific information about an imminent attack on a civilian target. "Other than this, I am not going to do the job of someone else." So, for Fouda, his professional journalistic role and the people's right to know were more important than informing the authorities about the whereabouts of the wanted sources (el-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003).

Another Al-Jazeera reporter, Tayseer Allouni, who conducted an exclusive interview with Bin Laden in October, 2001, was arrested in Spain in September 2003 on allegations of links with Al-Qaeda and was later released on a bond. Allouni refused to cooperate with the Spanish authorities, who wanted information about how he managed to interview Bin Laden. In this context, Al-Jazeera's editor in chief said: "If Allouni gives out information, it will be a catastrophe to Al-Jazeera as it will completely undermine the credibility of its journalists as trustworthy professional people" (Howeidy, 2003).

The pressures put on Fouda and Allouni to reveal how they got their journalistic scoops underline the complex dangers facing reporters who probe Al-Qaeda, or as in this case, are approached by the terrorist organization to get its messages out. Al-Jazeera spokesman, Jihad Balout, said: "We're now in a situation where a reporter risks his life and security to do his job, gets information for people so that they know what's going on, then this reporter is criminalized for doing that" (Howeidy, 2003).

Conclusion:

The Arab media outlets, especially the new satellite channels, have proven to be strong contenders to the Western networks, such as CNN and BBC, in their coverage of what the United States calls "the war on terror." Achieving journalistic scoops on the ground, interviewing key terrorist members, and covering the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the political violence involved in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict using their own correspondents and resources have gained these new Arab media outlets regional as well as international legitimacy and credibility.

The Arab media professional coverage of terrorist activities and political violence in the Middle East would not have been witnessed had it not been for the freedom of expression that the new Arab media outlets have struggled to achieve. Today, the young Arab journalists are faced with a set of challenging questions that they need to address in their coverage of future conflicts and terrorist activities: How to sort truth from propaganda in a world of conflicting accusations? How to continue to present all viewpoints in such a sensitive problem as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict? What impact does anti-American sentiment in the region have on a journalist's ability to report this

complex story? And, on a very basic level, how does a reporter stay alive in this

dangerous environment?

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