

To Counter and to Resist: Cyber Discourses of Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Amani Ismail

Abstract

Cyberspace allows the circulation of messages from those who are otherwise stigmatized by society and marginalized by mainstream media. The stigmatized include political violence groups, sometimes called “terrorists.” This textual analysis of websites of two organizations classified as “terrorist” by the U.S. government (Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad) examines how cyberspace allows them to circulate their ideologies. Findings suggest that the Internet may be an empowering vehicle that transcends the barriers of mainstream media and challenges their dominant representation.

Keywords: Terrorism, Internet, United States, Hezbollah, Palestine, Israel

Of the characteristics that render the Internet revolutionary, its status as a mass medium carrying a vast array of communication configurations (Morris & Ogan, 1996) is particularly outstanding. This manifestation of technological progress not only supersedes more traditional channels of communication – be they print, radio or television – in its potential reach but, like the others, it is also a venue intimately connected to culture. “Whether we think of culture as a ‘way of life,’ a web of meanings in which we are all suspended, or a set of practices for producing the real, technology embodies, realizes, and expresses such ways, meanings and practices” (Carey in Game, 1998, p. 118).

News media have continually played multiple roles within cultures in which they operate. They not only influence public opinion (Mutz & Soss, 1997) and contribute to agenda-setting (McCombs 1997) but also help construct the mainstream versus the deviant in society, whereby the deviant and associated ideologies are typically vilified as outside the margins of mainstream normalcy (Weimann & Brosius, 1991). Perpetrators and advocates of political violence are commonly featured on this list of deviants (Steuter, 1990; Tuman, 2003; Weimann & Brosius, 1991). In recent times, however, cyberspace has functioned as an open forum for those with access and technological know-how to express their ideas, regardless of how socially and culturally acceptable or shunned they are.

This study investigates how two groups designated as “terrorist” by the U.S. State Department (2001) – Hezbollah (Lebanese) and Palestinian Islamic Jihad – counteract a dominant, hegemonic ideology that casts them as marginal by constructing their ideologies on their respective web sites. Both organizations are based in the Middle East, a region long portrayed in U.S. media as a hotbed for terrorism and extremism, with the context of neither term examined (Said, 1995). The study is exploratory in nature since it begins to investigate how resorting to cyberspace may help those classified as terrorists to practice self-expression in regards to their deeds, stances and objectives – that is, speak for themselves, as opposed to letting conventional media represent their causes. The study conducts a textual analysis of Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s websites (www.hizbollah.tv and www.qudsway.com, respectively) to accomplish this purpose.

Literature Review

Discourse on Terrorism-Media Intersection

Although “terrorism” continues to defy consensual definition (e.g. Crenshaw, 1995; Tuman, 2003; Whittaker, 2003), news media are generally cued by officials as to what labels to ascribe to political violence (Nacos, 2002; Steuter, 1990), be they along the lines of zealotry, assassination, murder or even terrorism.

The evident linguistic fuss over what terrorism means, however, invites the question of why attention should be devoted to word choice in the first place. Apart from the potentially serious ramifications of terrorism in material and psychological terms, the use of labels to describe political violence becomes highly pertinent. Language – with a plethora of codes, connotations and cultural implications – is an integral component of ideology (Hall, 1982). That is, the powerful in society use language as a springboard

to perpetuate and fixate a particular set of values, beliefs and perspectives. Further, while individual speech is unique to each person, the language system is a social system and “speakers were as much ‘spoken’ by their language as speaking it” (Hall, 1982, p. 72).

The terrorist act itself and subsequent responses to it constitute a communication process in which the terrorist is essentially the sender and the target audience(s) the receiver. Responses (whether to punish or succumb to terrorist initiatives) may be regarded as the feedback in this model. What renders terrorism rhetorical is the message behind the violence and not the infliction *per se*. Terrorists might indeed be sending signals to multiple groups via a single act, e.g. government, news media, general public or a combination (Tuman, 2003). Of course, the fact that media represent the prime publicity agent for the terrorist (Dowling, 1986) make them invaluable agents in the delivery of the message: typically through fear-inducing acts.

Nonetheless, disagreement persists on whether terrorists succeed in exploiting media to promote their agendas (e.g. Cohen-Almagor, 2000), media effectively demonize terrorism in the eyes of the public (Steuter, 1990; Wittebols, 1991) and whether media coverage satisfies news employees’ craving for sensationalist material while giving terrorists the dramatic publicity they desire (Tuman, 2003).

Mainstream Terrorism Coverage and the 9/11 Factor

In making news in general, media’s reliance on societal/cultural myths with which audiences can ideologically resonate serves a vital double purpose: continuing the legacy of news production routine and securing reader familiarity with the end product. Terrorism treatment is no exception to this phenomenon. For instance, *The New York Times* conveniently utilized four mythical archetypes (The End of Innocence, The Victims, The Heroes and the Foreboding Future) to construct post-9/11 editorials. These represented the *Times*’ means of not only reflecting on a national tragedy but also consoling the public, as well as transmitting and affirming public sentiment through a style and content revolving around a set of highly resonant myths (Lule, 2002).

News and entertainment media continually portray and fixate terrorist stereotypes through mythologizing images and traits of such groups as Irish, Arab and South American terrorists. And although news media should provide consumers with real-life, factual and ideally objective information, whereas entertainment media commonly give room to fantasy and fiction, both forums end up perpetuating images that fit society’s vision of certain enemies, whether individually or collectively (Tuman, 2003). The entertainment format has even shaped news reports for several decades, emphasizing the element of fear in reporting on terrorism (Altheide, 2006).

Grievance terrorism (seeking to attain power or expose a cause) is given no historical or social context and its perpetrators are consistently cast in negative light. Institutional terrorism (seeking to maintain power and silence dissent), however, is painted with legitimacy, with U.S. involvement rarely brought to the fore, thereby discounting the notion of terrorism altogether. Given media’s reliance on official institutions for information essential to survival, however, these coverage trends pose no surprise (Wittebols, 1991).

News coverage of foreign terrorism depends on the politics of terrorists and the politics of the country whose media produce the coverage (Chatterji, 2001). The dominant frame in U.S. media coverage since the 9/11 attacks, for example, has arguably been in total support of government rhetoric and action, even including the theme of necessitating unity of American people behind their leaders (Hackett, 2001). The sensed need to demonstrate patriotism has overshadowed media’s watchdog function in the aftermath of 9/11, especially in relation to the current War on Terror (Nacos, 2002). Diminishing civil liberties in the name of national security is minimally questioned (Nacos, 2002), with government rhetoric working to substitute terrorism for Communism as the national enemy of the United States since 9/11 (Parenti, 2002). Notably, “terrorism” did not start with 9/11 but rather has “deep roots in history” (Nassar, 2005, p. 39). Yet:

. . . the official attitude toward terrorism suffers from a suspension of any inquiry into causation. Government officials seldom ask what causes terror or question their own participation in terrorist acts. Somehow one gets the feeling that there is no connection between terrorism and its root causes (Nassar, 2005, p. 41).

The Internet for the “Deviant”: A Forum to Counter Dominant Ideology?

The preceding literature suggests how the media help maintain the social order (dominant ideology) by presenting certain perspectives as “universal, natural and coterminous with ‘reality’ itself” (Hall, 1982, p. 65), while simultaneously marginalizing others. Proceeding from this premise, this study seeks to examine how groups classified under the terrorism umbrella, and hence deemed deviant, utilize the Internet to express their orientations and viewpoints uncensored.

Indeed, by according voice to marginal entities, the Internet is a potentially powerful vehicle for circumventing the dominant in society, as marginal communities construct their own communities online (Mitra, 2001). Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad represent the marginal in this study, with U.S. government and mainstream media – as primary agents of social control and influence – being the dominant, hegemonic forces.

Conceptual Framework

The interplay between media and ideology serves as a central concept informing and guiding this study. In producing news, media do not merely reflect an already constructed reality but actively participate in defining and reproducing this reality by reinforcing a dominant consensus that renders voices of dissent marginal and deviant (Hall, 1982). They even help determine the contours of discourse, as they work to “certify the limits within which all competing definitions of reality will contend” and, ultimately, support a society’s mainstream ideology (Gitlin, 1980, p. 254). Foss (1996, p. 291) defines ideology as “a pattern or set of ideas, assumptions, beliefs, values, or interpretations of the world by which a culture or group operates.”

One function of television in modern society, for instance, is to assure the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies and mythologies in active engagement with the practical and potentially unpredictable world (Fiske & Hartley, 1978). Delivering the dominant classes’ ideas such that they fit the ‘common sense’ of all classes helps naturalize them, even if typically through more implicit than explicit means (Fiske, 2001, p. 95).

Ideology has even been posited as the conceptual link between power and communication, where meaning is mobilized to serve power (Mumby, 1989). In a study contrasting *The New York Times*’ with *Newsweek*’s coverage of the 1980 South Korean student demonstrations and the 1989 Chinese student demonstrations, ideology served as a more important news factor than national interest in a Cold War context (Wang, 1995). Even beyond that era, ideology remains an integral news component. One study examined post-Cold War reports of anti-government uprisings in China and South Korea and found that news reflects unquestioned collective universals. This finding reflected standardized practices prevalent in all institutionalized mass media systems and not just evidence of ideographic articulations of capitalist societies (Kobland, Du, & Kwon, 1992).

Media often function as vehicles for subordinating certain marginalized groups or those outside the hegemonic power structure. U.S. newspaper coverage of the Spanish-American War, for example, served to support the ideology of imperialism and inscribe the ethnic otherness of the Puerto Rican people, portraying them as subjects in further need of colonial administration (Rodriguez, 1998). More recently, and also under the influence of dominant ideology, U. S. coverage of the 1995 Fourth United Nations Conference on Women and the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum in Beijing heavily criticized China as a Communist nation. The goals of the global feminist movement and their critical areas of concern appeared to hold far less immediacy and salience for the U.S. press than the need to assert dominant U. S. values. On the other hand, under the influence of Communist ideology, Chinese coverage reflected a pro-equality frame and a strong focus on the critical issues of concern to the global feminist movement (Akhavan-Majid & Ramaprasad, 1998).

Along parallel lines, an analysis of news coverage of Major League Baseball agent Joe Cubas and his clients, defecting Cuban ballplayers, showed that the stories about Cubas are framed in a way that reifies the dominant ideology of the materialist mythos of the American Dream. The “Cubas Narrative” presents anecdotal evidence justifying the American “rags-to-riches” Dream, framed against a vilified Communist Cuba. This narrative, the authors suggest, provides a poignant example of how the news media’s framing process can help reify dominant ideology necessary to normalize and rationalize some inequitable aspects of capitalism (Nomai & Dionisopoulos, 2002).

More directly pertinent to the current study is an analysis of ideology and news of terrorism, which found that news media are not a convenient tool that terrorists exploit to convey their political messages to target audiences. Rather, by virtue of embracing an anti-terrorist ideology – despite claims of neutrality and objectivity – news media work to demonize terrorism in the eyes of the public. Such was manifest in semantics, language, headlines, lack of social and historical context, trivialization and amplification of violence (Steuter, 1990).

Attaching the terrorist label itself becomes a vital tool in constructing this anti-terrorist ideology given the classification of “terrorism” as an ideograph (Dobkin, 1992). Ideographs constitute a middle ground between ideology and myth and help explain power dynamics within society as well as maintain social control and influence. Another vital function of ideographs is uniting members of a group, while distinguishing them from outsiders with a different ideographic frame of reference (McGee, 1980). Hence, government typically designates certain acts and actors as affiliated with “terrorism” to construct a pronounced us/them dichotomy, which in turn becomes manifest in media coverage (Dobkin, 1992).

The Internet stands in stark contrast to orthodox media by being a public forum allowing multiple voices to construct and communicate their own presence and ideologies to a potentially more diverse and dispersed audience than the conventional media of any one country. The Internet represents a convenient avenue for creating new sites and connections that have their own intrinsic power because of the unique set of connections established between the real and the virtual (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001). By carrying voices of the marginal, the Internet might even pose threats to mainstream entities since those deemed deviant essentially challenge their long-held and perpetuated ideology (Mitra, 2001).

As illustrated in the literature review, perpetrators and advocates of political violence lie at the heart of this marginal camp, one that also embraces causes and messages it wishes to communicate. Paralleling how collections of diasporic people often strive to create their nations online to find the points of commonality that real life spatial disruption might have disconnected (Mitra, 1997), the Internet might also help groups officially classified as terrorist and thus stigmatized by society at large to construct their ideologies online.

Therefore, by examining the web sites of Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of how cyberspace allows political violence entities to mediate what they stand for, in contrast to letting mainstream news media perform this task.

The study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad each use their respective websites as forums to construct their respective ideologies?

RQ2: How might ideology constructions, produced by each organization online, be interpreted as oppositional to U.S. mainstream ideology? And how might this construction speak to the role of the Internet in the construction and dissemination of “deviant” or counter-hegemonic group identities?

Method

To analyze the websites of Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, this study uses textual analysis informed by Foss’ (1996) ideological criticism to analyze media artifacts. According to Fair (1996, p. 8), textual analysis ‘facilitates discovering how meaning is produced’ and ‘goes beyond counting stories, describing their content, evaluating their accuracy, and assessing whether they are positive or negative in tone. Rather, it is an approach that allows for the interpretation of texts in relation to the cultural contexts in which they operate.’ Foss’ approach to ideological criticism involves identifying the nature of ideology, interests included and strategies in support of the ideology. Foss (1996, p. 297) also suggests a series of questions that should be asked within each step to accomplish the analysis, such as “What values or general conceptions of what is and is not good are suggested?” and “Whose interests are privileged or favored in the dominant ideology?” Such sub-questions serve as guidelines to identify the overall nature of ideology, represented interests and supportive strategies and thus help guide the textual analysis.

For each website, a constructed week was sampled, yielding a total of seven days of online material for each site. The time period examined for Hezbollah’s web site ranged from 29 September 2003 through 16 November 2003. The time period examined for Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s web site ranged from 29 September 2003 through 30 November 2003 – a larger range than Hezbollah’s since Islamic Jihad’s site

was sometimes unavailable. The chosen time period marked a particularly pronounced level of friction and tension in the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict (in which both Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are directly involved) – something that becomes highly evident through analysis of their websites. The Arabic versions of these websites were analyzed since this is the native tongue of the material creators and owners and should hence represent a direct, “first-hand” account of what they embrace and intend to convey. Speaking in one’s native tongue enables more fluency and precision in expression than speaking in other languages.

Hezbollah’s homepage includes a series of images and titles of the various entries featured on the site such as “overview of Hezbollah,” “mail,” “archive,” “political statements,” “resistance statements” and “video shots.” This study examines (1) the homepage, primarily for the visual text (which shows such images as soldiers in camouflage uniform, Hezbollah’s secretary general with a raised weapon and more); (2) “overview of Hezbollah” (which identifies the group’s goals and what it stands for); (3) “political statements” and (4) “resistance statements.” The latter two each provide a series of dated statements by the organization addressing armed initiatives, responses to occupation and similar matters. These dimensions of the web site clearly suggest the organization’s ideology by detailing its positions and stances over time, both generally and in regards to specific instances of, say, armed confrontations.

Unlike Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s homepage carries a plethora of written and visual text, rendering the homepage alone a sufficient venue for analysis to investigate the organization’s ideology. Examples include multiple up-to-date news items with datelines on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and bombings; invitations to boycott Israeli and American products; images of “martyrs”; ideologically loaded pictures of wounded children, grieving mothers and tanks; and even caricatures.

Analysis

Struggle as Ideology in Cyberspace

The first research question asked how each organization used its website as a forum to construct its ideology. Beginning with Hezbollah, it is important to point out that the organization’s name is directly derived from the Qur’an (the holy book for Muslims) and means “The fellowship of God”; the relevant Qur’anic verse¹ is as follows: “As to those who turn (for friendship) to God, His Apostle, and the (fellowship of) Believers, – it is the fellowship of God that must certainly triumph” (005:056). In fact, this verse is found on the entry page to the web site, the page that gives the user the option to choose either the Arabic or English versions of the site.

Hezbollah’s website reflects the organization’s belief that its resistance to Israeli occupation is a simultaneously patriotic and religious duty, portraying them as part and parcel of each other. The ‘overview’ section describes Hezbollah as a “struggling, Islamic movement” whose turning point emerged in 1982 when “the Zionist enemy invaded Lebanon, reaching the city of Beirut, which was the second Arab capital to be occupied in the Arab-Israeli conflict history after Jerusalem.” Israeli occupation of Palestine and parts of Egypt, Syria and Jordan “formed the objective frame for crystallizing the struggling, militant identity of Hezbollah as a domestic political-social-ideological movement.” Hezbollah explicitly defines itself as an organization of an “ideological nature” that does not perceive “in the Zionist enemy any legitimate facet . . . [which] renders the nature of the conflict with [the enemy] one of legitimacy with a sacred, religious dimension” (Ta’reefon an hizbillah, 2003).

Hence, Hezbollah is keen on depicting its relentless belief in and unwavering commitment to the justness of the cause for which it stands – liberating Lebanon from Israeli occupation – as well as its representativeness of related values: “Political and other pressures will not influence [Hezbollah’s] principled positions and it will remain a symbol of struggle, resistance, righteousness, independence and rejection of injustice no matter how much sacrifice this will cost” (Mothakkiraton min hizbillah, 2003).

Solidarity with fellow Arabs in territories also occupied by Israel is another key theme defining Hezbollah’s self-presented ideology. In fact, it declares its full-fledged support for the current Palestinian intifada (uprising), casting it in an equivalent light to Lebanese resistance: ‘Hezbollah is proud of its resistant performance, its position among people, its support for the Palestinian intifada and the right of the struggling Palestinian people to retain their land’ (Mothakkiraton min hizbillah, 2003).

It further condemns the “failed assassination attempt” against a leader in Hamas (a Palestinian political movement also classified by the U.S. State Department [2001] as terrorist), calling it a “vicious attack,” whose resulting two deaths constitute “martyrdom” (Albayano allathi asdaraho, 2003).

In the same vein that Hezbollah demonizes threats to Palestinian struggle, it issues a response to the 6 October 2003 Israeli attack on Syria with identical underpinnings, even establishing connections across Palestinian, Lebanese and Syrian spheres since they all share at least one common objective – eliminating Israeli occupation:

The vicious Zionist attack on Syria is a very critical penetration and a crossing over all the red lines and rules of conflict since about three decades. It is simultaneously a risky Israeli escalation that drives the whole region into the unknown and speaks to the magnitude of the dilemma the Zionist entity is living due to the intifada of the Palestinian people who reject occupation and the persistence of Lebanon and Syria in face of all Israeli and American threats (Ta'leeqan ala alodwani, 2003).

Highlighting Hezbollah's strides and success in countering its opponents is another feature of the organization's online ideological construction. The "overview" includes:

The Islamic resistance was able to direct fatal hits to the Zionist enemy, which imposed one withdrawal after the other, the most prominent of which was the biggest withdrawal in the year 1985 and the subsequent withdrawals which imposed its departure from the occupied Christian area of Jazeen, up to imposing the option of complete withdrawal as a final option (Mothakkiratn min hizbillah, 2003).

Perhaps the will to illustrate the effectiveness of their efforts is epitomized in their homepage, which carries this statement across three images symbolizing victory: "May 25: The defeat of 'Israel' in Lebanon" (Figure 1). 25 May 2000 is the day on which Israeli forces withdrew from most Lebanese territory (Cable News Network, 2000), a process Hezbollah describes as "liberation" (Mothakkiratn min hizbillah, 2003). Placing Israel's name in quotes may reflect a lack of recognition for Israel as a legitimate nation state. The fact that it describes Israel as the "Zionist entity" in which it perceives no "legitimate facet" (Mothakkiratn min hizbillah, 2003) enhances this interpretation's realism.

Figure 1



As for the three images, one is a photograph of Hassan Nasrallah – secretary-general of Hezbollah – with a raised weapon in the middle of presumably Lebanese people. Another is a photograph of more than a dozen men (presumably Lebanese and perhaps Hezbollah members) raising either weapons or their arms in expression of triumph. The third photograph shows a soldier in camouflage uniform (presumably Lebanese) carrying another soldier also in camouflage uniform over his back (presumably Israeli to signify

the defeat of Israeli forces at the hands of Lebanese Hezbollah forces). Viewed individually or collectively, especially in light of the examined ideological facets of Hezbollah's verbal rhetoric, these images reflect an attempt to convey the story of a victorious people. Even three years later, Hezbollah's mission of resistance continues since occupation has been eliminated only from the "majority of Lebanese land" (Mothakkiraton min hizbillah, 2003) and not its entirety. "Resistance statements," a regular feature of the site, provides updates on military confrontations with Israeli forces and underlines cornerstones of achievement.

Most of these statements are preceded by Qur'anic verses that act as a prelude. For instance, the following verse – "Fight them, and Allah will punish them by your hands, cover them with shame, help you (to victory) over them, heal the breasts of Believers" (009:014) – precedes a statement declaring Hezbollah's attack on "the position of the Zionist occupation in Rowaysat Al-Alam in the occupied Lebanese Chebaa Fields" (Almoqawamato alislamiyaato tuhajimo, 2003). The verse "but if ye revert (to your sins), We shall revert (to Our punishments): And we have made Hell a prison for those who reject (all Faith)" (017:008) precedes a description of how Hezbollah's forces "defended against military Israeli airplanes that violated Lebanese airspace over the Bint Jubail area and its neighborhood in the Lebanese south" (Almoqawamatu alislamiyyato tatasaddaa, 2003).

Every resistance statement is signed "Islamic resistance," reiterating Hezbollah's belief in the religious obligation to fight for one's land. Similarly, Hezbollah says it believes Islam is a religion that seeks removing "intercultural...obstacles...through diplomatic means, but when others intend to wage war against [Hezbollah], then [Hezbollah] perceives it as a natural right to defend itself" (Ta'reefon an hizbillah, 2003).

Hezbollah's website also constructs the organization as a mainstream, widely accepted component of Lebanon – the country for which it has assumed the responsibility of protection – as well as the Middle East at large. Hezbollah has eight members in the House of Representatives and "constitutes, therefore, one of the most important points of balance in the domestic political and social life" (Ta'reefon an hizbillah, 2003). It is also "the most popular in Lebanon and the region, and its resistant performance is a site of national consensus and a site of wide official and popular support" (Mothakkiraton min hizbillah, 2003).

Palestinian Islamic Jihad also uses its website to construct its ideology. "Jihad," an Arabic word, means "struggle."² Like Hezbollah, this organization constructs Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation as an ongoing struggle, epitomized by the intifada that has now started "its fourth year while victorious over the Zionist enemy" (Sheikh Abdullah Ashami, 2003). In fact, the bulk of the movement's homepage consists of a series of up-to-date news items that revolve around a couple of interrelated themes: Palestinian plight incurred by Israel and Palestinian resistance against measures and activities contributing to this plight. For example, one article reported the loss of Palestinian lives since the intifada's beginning in 2000 as follows:

The record of the intifada's martyrs has not been free of names of children, even fetuses, who have been sacrificed as victims of Zionist beastliness. For, during three years – the Al-Aqsa intifada's duration – 510 of those under 18 were killed, in addition to 140 leaders from various Palestinian resistance movements (Bi'ayyi thanbin qutilat, 2003).

The above report is accompanied by a picture of a dead girl surrounded by flowers (Figure 2).

Figure 2



Another report explains a Palestinian's fear that the "occupation's bulldozers would destroy his house . . . after it has become threatened with demolition just like neighboring houses that were demolished for no reason" (Indama tosbihio za'iran, 2003). The reference to this man as a "citizen" underlines the movement's belief in the legitimate right to a Palestinian homeland with recognized citizenship. Another story reports

that “51 citizens were inflicted with varying degrees of wounds” in the Palestinian province of Al-Khalil since September of 2003 (Hatta aljodrano talaha, 2003).

On the other hand, Palestinian Islamic Jihad boasts accomplishments and condones those who sacrificed themselves for their national cause. One illustrative article reported:

Zionists have a right to feel woe and pain after three full years of the intifada have passed, not only because of the monumental losses their economy has incurred but also because of the unprecedented economic boom their state was experiencing before the intifada’s outbreak at the end of September 2000 (Intikason ghayro masbooqin, 2003).

This report is accompanied by a caricature of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in a white and blue suit (colors of the Israeli flag), barefoot and on fire with an expression of agony on his face (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Performers of bombing operations are labeled as “martyrs,” including Hanadi Tayseer Jaradat, “the sixth female martyr of the intifada” and one of Islamic Jihad’s recruits (Ibnato assaraya batat, 2003). She conducted a bombing at a downtown Haifa restaurant on 6 October 2003 which killed 18 and wounded more than 50 in a “martyrdom operation” (Amaliyyaton istishhadiyyaton fee, 2003). In fact, her picture is placed above those of her male counterparts, and she was dubbed “the bride of Palestine and its sun” (Hanadi Tayseer Jaradat, 2003).

This designation of those who die for the Palestinian cause as martyrs regardless of the route to such death (e.g. military fire or bombings) underlines the religious dimension embraced by the organization’s activity, which is perhaps reflected most prominently in the adjective “Islamic” in its name. The official emblem of the organization carries the phrase “Allahu Akbar,” God is the greatest. The Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, one of the holiest sites for Muslims (Tuman, 2003), is also depicted. As with Hezbollah, therefore, the notion of religion legitimating resistance and struggle against occupation is evident.

Also paralleling Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s website expressed solidarity – even collaboration – with its Arab neighbors. One article, for instance, reports “a deal between Hezbollah and the Zionist entity” to release a number of Palestinian POWs (Qurabato sab’i mi’ati, 2003). On a similar note, it reports that the Arab League of Nations criticized American plans to punish Syria in the aftermath of the 6 October 2003 missile attack by Israel under the headline: “Punishment of Syria is punishment for its attacker” (Iqabo sooriya iqabon, 2003).

Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s efforts at claiming even non-Palestinian appreciation and recognition for its cause appear in such reports as the following:

International human relief agencies have called on the Hebrew state to release the constraints it imposes on Palestinians. A group of more than 20 international human relief agencies released a statement encouraging the Zionist authorities to allow Palestinians freedom of mobility in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Da’waton ila raf’i, 2003).

The organization’s commitment to the ongoing intifada is unceasing, for its three-year-plus persistence “is among the most realistic evidence for the fruitfulness of the intifada option and the military work against the Zionist occupation as a sole route to retain Palestinian rights” (Alintifadato fee aamiha, 2003).

Constructing Us/Them Dichotomies and Rescuing Marginalized Ideologies

The second research question made two complementary inquiries: first, how the organizations' ideologies as constructed online may be interpreted as oppositional to U.S. mainstream ideology (since literature points to the marginalization of political violence groups by U.S. government and mainstream media); and second, how the two organizations' ideological construction online speaks to the role of the Internet in the construction and dissemination of "deviant" or counter-hegemonic group identities?

To answer the first part, the notion of Israeli-American alliance in opposition to legitimate struggle is a theme that appears at various junctures in Hezbollah's cyberspace rhetoric. For instance, alluding to Israeli political authority, Hezbollah describes 'an enemy led today by foolish and crazy leadership that enjoys full endorsement from the most foolish and crazy American administration in history' (Ta'leeqan ala alodwani, 2003). The recent attempt to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, known as the "roadmap," is described as among the "proposals of surrender" that succumb to "what American and Zionist plans seek, including robbing the Palestinian people's identity, trying to deny Jerusalem and the central issue it represents and eliminating the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their land and homes" (Albayano allathi asdaraho, 2003).

This theme is manifest in a regular feature of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad web site titled: "Deflect their bullets from our Palestinian people's heart" (Figure 4).

Figure 4



It depicts an axe carrying the imperative verb 'Boycott' and slashing a star that carries a smaller, blue Star of David (Israeli flag feature) along with red stripes and blue stars on a white background (American flag features) (Imna' rasasahom an, 2003). In other words, it is a call to boycott products from Israel – the country against which they are directly struggling – and the United States – a country allied with Israel and whose relationship involves economic cooperation. Embedded in this boycotting invitation is the presumption that the two countries' economic power enables the purchase of military equipment (hence, "bullets") that targets Palestinians, discouraging their fight for independence.

That Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad present their stances and behavior to act upon these stances as righteous and legitimate epitomizes the stark contrast between their ideology and that of the U.S. mainstream. In fact, contrary to U.S. official designation of Hezbollah as terrorist (U.S. State Department, 2001), Hezbollah casts the designators under this very terrorism umbrella: "Our readiness to confront the current and forthcoming challenge with all that is necessary is the only route to saving our country [Lebanon] and region [Middle East] from the catastrophic effects of the belligerent, terrorist policies of Sharon, Bush and every terrorist camp" (Ta'leeqan ala alodwani, 2003). Additionally, Hezbollah urges Palestinians to "stand united as a protective barrier in the face of the continuous terrorist legacy the [Israeli] occupation pursues, to devote the option of resistance through continuing the intifada and to adopt the language of weaponry and force because it is the only language the enemy understands" (Albayano allathi asdaraho, 2003).

Along similar lines, a Palestinian Islamic Jihad poll³ inquires if users agree that the truce declared by Fatah – the Palestinian Authority's movement aligned with Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (Cable News Network, 2003) – Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad will survive in the face of the "Zionist enemy's arrogance, belligerence and terrorism against our Palestinian people and strugglers" (Mostaqbalu alhudnati, 2003). The Martyrs Brigade, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad are all on the U.S. State Department's (2001) list of terrorist organizations. Yet, as in Hezbollah's case, Israel is cast as the terrorist enemy against which resistance is legitimate, contrary to the American official stance or that of Israel, for that matter. Since Islamic Jihad posits the United States as an ally of Israel, then the U.S. government is implicated as a partner in terrorism.

Given earlier discussion of how government typically employs “terrorism” as an ideograph to construct the enemy’s image (Dobkin, 1992), this study shows that Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad also make use of this ideograph to cast their opponents – which happen to represent U.S. mainstream ideology – in the negative light that inevitably comes with terrorism. Thus a two-way ideographic usage is at work. In Carruthers’ (2000, p. 165) words, “In increasingly common vernacular currency since 1945, the term terrorist has often been applied or avoided in thoroughly partisan ways: a relativism captured in the hackneyed expression, ‘one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.’”

To answer the second part of RQ2 (regarding how such ideological construction speaks to the role of the Internet in the construction and dissemination of “deviant” or counter-hegemonic group identities), it becomes clear that if conventional U.S. media work to decontextualize political violence – largely by playing up its inherent drama and sensationalism and neglecting the issues behind it (Steuter, 1990) – then Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad’s websites act as forums where such issues are addressed.

Each group utilizes cyberspace to design and deliver verbal and visual messages to construct images that differ substantially from those that traditional U.S. communication media would, according to the literature, typically offer. Viewed this way, both groups’ resort to cyberspace might be interpreted as a means of circumventing orthodox outlets, typified by print and broadcast media, for learning about them. If mainstream media rarely question government ideology and tend to reject ideologies outside this sphere as deviant (Hall, 1982), it becomes pivotal to underline the Internet’s role as an alternative outlet for marginalized entities to construct their own version of reality. That is, they get to tell their story in their own words to consumers of their material online. This is evident through Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad’s depiction of the nature of their causes and related resistance, routes to accomplishing their objectives and bases justifying their embraced and implemented ideologies.

Whether this yields agreement, disagreement or ambivalence on those consumers’ part is a different matter. What is of central relevance here is the fact that the Internet can and actively does lend itself to vocal challenges to dominant ideological paradigms (Mitra, 2001). Whether these challenges are serious enough to threaten the status quo (Mitra, 2001), however, is beyond the scope of this study to assess. Measuring this would involve a study on a grander scheme, possibly employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, to determine what constitutes threats to the status quo as well as concrete manifestations of such threats in the real world. Considering both the real and virtual spheres is essential since the power of cyberspace partly lies in allowing for real-virtual linkage (Mitra & Schwartz, 2001).

Nonetheless, this study points to potential challenges that blacklisted groups like Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad may be posing to mainstream entities, at least ones they have pitted as enemies, such as the U.S. government. That the Internet allows these groups to construct a terrorist-freedom fighter dichotomy different from its counterpart in mainstream U.S. media highlights the Internet’s role in providing alternative paradigms in a particularly controversial domain. Therefore, as posited earlier, we may draw a parallel between diasporic people’s striving to create online nations so as to locate commonality disrupted by real life spatial disruption (Mitra, 1997) and ideological construction by groups officially categorized as “terrorist.” Granted, the goals of each are not identical – the former seek compensating for a lost sense of geographic connection, while the latter express their controversial stances first-hand via an international medium. In both cases, though, cyberspace is expected to facilely fulfill functions that other venues have, for one reason or the other, failed to fulfill.

So, although evidence pointing to the uniqueness of cyberspace in rescuing marginalized ideology remains preliminary in nature, it is compelling enough to investigate further, at least as far as the political violence arena is concerned.

Conclusions

As illustrated, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad’s ideological constructions online exhibit multiple common facets. Whether portraying their opponents as perpetrators of terrorism, connecting their cause to the notion of religious duty or demonstrating how other entities support them, each echoes the other’s voice. For both, all such basic premises revolve around this axis: the value of persistent struggle and resistance. Palestinian Islamic Jihad placed more emphasis on graphic material and the day-to-day plight of Palestinians under occupation than Hezbollah. This might be partly due to the fact that, unlike the Palestinian case, most Lebanese territory is now occupation-free. Additionally, Lebanon is an officially recognized nation state, a sovereign homeland – an objective yet to be attained by Palestinians and clearly expressed through Islamic Jihad’s cyberspace rhetoric.

The extent to which Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad construct their respective ideologies online reflects not only a certain degree of technological sophistication but also their extensive exploitation of the Internet to communicate a set of beliefs and values to which they ardently subscribe. That the Internet fulfills this function for them carries the bonus of a potentially cross-cultural reach of these messages. Since this network of networks is not bound by locale, this leaves only issues along the lines of affordability and potential official restrictions to dictate access to the given cyberspace content. How this content might be influencing audiences' perceptions of issues at stake, including what constitutes terrorism, calls for audience research. This would address whether such content is affecting how potential audiences of this content makes sense of political violence, international relations, foreign news coverage and the current U.S. administration's global war on terror, among other elements.

Of course, this raises the question of who comprises the intended audience of these web sites in the first place. If Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad's rhetoric indicates that each enjoys ample recognition and support on the local, even regional levels, target audiences might also include groups and individuals beyond the Middle Eastern context. These organizations' possible dissatisfaction with their construction in, say, U.S. mainstream news media – where they are demonized as fanatic, irrational terrorists (Dobkin, 1992) – might be one (not necessarily the sole) motive for taking on this self-construction task on a global scale. That the terrorist persona has been cast in U.S. news media as the archetypal enemy for years, especially the so-called Islamic terrorist (Dobkin, 1992), may help explain why such groups would seek out the Internet in attempts to remedy their image. They strive to tell those who only know them through structures of a dominant ideology what they see as their *real* story in their *own* words.

Future studies seeking to expand this genre of research might explore the audience end of this communication process, as suggested, and also might explore ideological constructions online by other groups officially designated as terrorist. Examining different organizations might highlight different kinds of ideological facets of various marginalized militant groups and how these notions relate to their usage of cyberspace to communicate their presence and stances. Among the more fascinating aspects of this scholarship is insight gained into how the Internet is continually utilized as a vehicle for constructing a vast array of realities. Apparently, this medium becomes an invaluable tool in the hands of those not always able to speak through more mainstream avenues.

Amani Ismail joined California State University in 2006 as an assistant professor of journalism after completing her Ph.D. in mass communications at the University of Iowa. She has taught undergraduate courses in introduction to mass communication, basic reporting and writing, international news media, and media and terrorism, and graduate courses in media criticism and mass communication theory.

Notes

¹ For this study, the English translation of the Holy Qur'an by Abdullah Yusuf Ali was used because it was found to be the most accurate translation available. Details of publication appear in references.

² Jihad: The struggle, to strive for the cause of God, whether to struggle to "purify one's own self" or to struggle "to defend Islam" (Siddiqi, 1997, p. 65).

³ At the time this study was conducted, this poll was one of two interactive features of the website, the other being the opportunity to email the organization. The poll question changed depending on the given events. For example, in May 2007, the poll asked website visitors what they thought the consequences of the Winograd Commission's report would be for the Palestinian sphere. This commission is the entity that investigated Israeli government conduct during the 2006 Lebanon-Israel War.

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