SEMIOTICS OF VIOLENCE - SIGNIFICANCE OF SIGNS, SYMBOLS AND IMAGES IN TERRORIST MEDIA

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Many research studies have been conducted on terrorist media, be it audiovisual, visual, printed, electronic, or otherwise describing, explaining, criticizing and assailing the form and content of such media messages. Ripping these articles to shreds, critics have also identified their tools and those developing and using such tools with the impact created on society. Taken together, such media organizations have gone further steps, drawing heavily on signs and connotations; some are deeper and more permanent than direct discussion, whether they tickle feelings, provoke retaliatory instincts or persuade people to adopt a deeply ingrained ideology with religion reduced down to a consumable commodity, most exploited with deception, suavity, astuteness and dogged determination.

EMPLOYING SYMBOLS AND SIGNS

Terrorist organizations are fully aware of employing symbols, signs, colors, and images to defend their perceptions, attracting followers and expanding areas of sympathy to create a public sphere or social environment; if the community decoyed does not support them, at least it will not go against them. This is a gain that counts for short or long term. As strategized, terrorist organizations are doing it for a bet that the public will sit on the fence, grappling with the active political, social and security forces, which extremists and terrorists realize are a stumbling block to their access to power.

Combined together, it has become necessary to provide an explanation of how semiotics is used in the discourse and media practice of terrorist organizations, such as the slogans they coin, the icons they invent, the banners they unfurl, the body language shown in their gestures, the outfit their followers wear, the way they appear and the photos they publish.

We should provide a deeper and more detailed description and analysis of the silent side of the glaringly bold media, using tools, names and icons that are infamously more

impressive and impactful than snappy phrases and flowery languages. The signs in the extremists' discourse are visible, and it seems that they are downright wary and cautious of such tools. Otherwise, they would not have sought to distinguish themselves in appearance and outfit from other members of society, and encrust their speech with repeated phrases. Hardly can one organization be distinguished from the other when closely examining their distinctive features as they have almost the same traits and characteristics. These sentences have become codes to identify them and understand their ideologies and appearances.

Naturally, their highly exploited semiotics has a profound impact on making such organisations widely visible and distinguishable, and spreading their ideologies. Throughout history, militarized organizations, or those with political orientations, have a tendency to use symbols and icons, and are keen to export a specific image of themselves to the public, depending on the goals and objectives developed and set.

In the past, these signs were widely spread through magazines or newspapers issued by such organizations, as well as on the banners fluttering and waving in their public conferences and religious and political seminars, as well as in the public statements and clandestine publications. By time, the internet, especially social media, created wider opportunities to make themselves notoriously ubiquitous.

Monitoring the traditional direct media messages of terrorist organizations and analyzing their form and content would not pay off to learn about their potential for publicity, ubiquity, visibility and attraction. Equally important, it would be helpful to assess their awareness by adopting a media discourse that goes beyond the regular means that have drawn the attention of the security services, researchers, and editors who specialize in following issues of religious violence and terrorism, exploring the seemingly silent content, shrouded in semiotics and connotations that translate the ideologies of extremists, militants and organized groups into violence and terrorism.

ORIGINS OF EXTREMIST SEMIOTICS

The discourse of extremists and terrorists is not derived from nowhere; rather, it is built on others, even if the other is old and silent in the view of modernists, enlighteners, advocates of the application of reason or those calling for renewal in jurisprudence and interpretation. Such a discourse is full of constant movement, renewal, and efficiency in the eyes of extremists and militants, who are more inclined to the old because their ancestors adopted it and they are following suit.

Terminologies such as 'banner' and not 'flag', 'sword' and not 'gun', and 'division' and not 'class', are the most discussed and used by these groups, and they are not empty terminologies; rather, they are words charged and couched with meaningful indicative signs and connotations. They can be employed without effort to achieve the goals of these organizations. An example is the adoption of an extremist group of the concept of a "surviving faction" and each group claiming that it represents it; they seek to displace the contemporary concept of civil institutions, entities and gatherings, which are not necessarily established on a religious basis, or such groups claim that such a group with its pure and religious values is the only trustworthy in worldly practices.

Many cultures seek beyond their roots to prove that what they are is not born out of thin air or comes overnight of no past legacy; rather, they well understand and are aware of temporal, spatial and contextual differences. Extremists and rigid people in every belief, culture or thought falsely believe that only the old legacy is the best for use and circulation, and that is why every old legacy becomes a 'symbol', be it historical leaders, religious trends, or books written by the predecessors; more so, some individuals transform into what goes beyond their personalities to become complete symbols that are dubbed bombastic and pretentious titles such as 'Hujjat Al-Islam', 'Sheikh Al-Islam', 'Nation's Pontiff', 'Relief', and 'Qutb' ... etc.!

MODERN ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL GROUPS

Many have meticulously thought of the slogan of the Brotherhood, which consists of two crossed swords and the Holy Quran, and the plural imperative verb form of "You All Prepare" cited from the Holy Quran, inferring by this that the group, since its inception by Hassan Al-Banna in 1928, has focused on using material power to change society followed by the government, according to its vision and pathway.

Such a 'symbol', with all its semantic and semiotic connotations and denotations, with the use of the image of the Quran and the green color that symbolizes goodness, growth and prosperity to be a justifiable framework. Many confirm that what the Brotherhood will do when empowered differs from what it calls for when still trudging through vulnerability and patience; with all suavity and courtesy displayed cannot make people blind to the statement made by Al-Banna: "The strength of this religion is best manifested in the Holy Quran that well guides and a sword that will achieve victory." Simply put, this means that the sword and the Holy Quran are yoked together and work in tandem; while in reality, the sword is glaringly outdoing the Holy Quran.

By the same token, it is almost true for the Egyptian Islamic Group, which made the Holy Quran go between the two blades of the sword, brandishing and wielding it at anywhere as if translating the verse quoted from the Holy Quran: "Fight them so as to make no room for sedition and religion becomes all for Allah". After the launch of the initiative to bring violence to an end in 1997 and the start of negotiations with the security services, the sword was raised and an alternative Quranic verse was put up: "To establish the religion and not to become divided for it". This verse remained and the sword returned after the January Revolution.

Although some of the group's leaders remained silently loyal to the old slogan, and returned to violence after the Brotherhood's rule was overthrown in July 2013, their choice of another verse and the removal of the sword shows their awareness of the impact of symbols on the life of any group or organization.

The slogan of JIHAD group is a knight on a horse, with a black flag on his left and his weapon on his right, claiming that it is the banner of the Messenger Muhammad, peace be upon him, and that he used the sword as a way of change and empowerment, although most of the wars that took place during the era of the Messenger were defensive. This slogan, with all its connotations, was applied in the various jihadist organizations until adopted by the 'Al-Qaeda', before the 'Jihad Organization' itself moved to another symbol, which is the Holy Quran between two automatic rifles in 1994, before the so-called 'International Islamic Front for Fighting Crusaders and Jews' known in the media and on the security level as 'Al-Qaeda' in 1998, by adopting another slogan, which is a black banner on which is written monotheism-based phrase: 'There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah', similar to the color of the banner that the Messenger took to the Muslim army at the beginning of the call. ISIS has adopted the same slogan.

In addition to slogans, these groups and organizations employ images to establish a mental image, which they want to spread and entrench to show their strength and power, as notoriously displayed in the image of the burning of the Jordanian pilot, Moaz Al-Kasasbeh, who was imprisoned in a cage and set on fire. Likewise, the image of Egyptian Christians kneeling with their necks stretched forward to be hit by an ISIS sword. Then the pictures show how the sea shore opposite this brutal place of execution was bloodied. These are two despicably blatant cases, as ISIS is interested in employing the image in the service of its purposes.

As for appearance, many groups are keen to distinguish themselves from other people, as well as from their counterparts, such as the dress code that distinguishes the followers of the Tabligh and Da'wah group from the rest, with the fringes that hang from their turbans. The Brotherhood are generally keen to distinguishe themselves with short beards and manicured mustaches. ISIS adopts black uniforms, not only for women, who are called the "Sables", but also for men. All of this symbolism coupled with semiotics is unspoken connotations.

EXTREMISTS AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF BODY LANGUAGE

The semiotics of extremist organizations not only used traditional expressions charged with paradoxical connotations of their contexts and are used connotatively and sometimes more symbolically; rather, they went beyond slogans and banners to employ body language in achieving their goals. Those who follow the rhetoric of these groups find their leaders and preachers employ their bodies in persuasion, intimidation and terrorization in case of their strength, and in courtship and rapprochement in their weakness to gain sympathy until they recover their strength.

Throughout their history, these organizations have known many leaders and preachers who addressed the public in direct or televised meetings, or in the electronic media, and they were adept at using body language, either to help their spoken words achieve their goals and objectives or for that body language to express in its own right myriad meanings and thoughts, while they are silent.