



A Media / Terrorism Model: The Saudi Experience

Dr. Ali Al-Karni (*)

Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand the relationship between mass media and terrorism, and how the Saudi response to terrorist acts has affected the country since 2003. A media/ terrorism model is proposed in the study in order to shed light on the complicated relationship between the parties involved: government, mass media, terrorist organizations, and the general public.

The model suggests four-action elements that take place among the four parties when dealing with such events:

- 1 Terrorists: creating events.
- 2 Media: reporting events.
- 3 Government: influencing events.

Furthermore, the model proposes six interaction relationships among the four parties involved in terrorists' events. Each one deals with how one interacts with the other.

Many studies have investigated the relationships between mass media and terrorism. The most interesting conclusion the studies revealed was that this relationship was very symbiotic between terrorists on one hand and mass media on the other. Another important factor in this relationship was the attempt by terrorist organizations to use the mass media's reporting of terrorist events to achieve political objectives for these groups (Schmid and de Graaf, 1982, Schlesinger, 1991, Nacos, 1994, Lockyer, 2003, Norris, Kern and Just, 2004).

Terry Anderson (1993) discussed the role played by mass media in a terrorism context, stating that "the media is part of the deadly game of terrorism" and added that the game could scarcely be played without media. The first victory for terrorists is reporting their violent

* Associate Professor of Journalism, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

actions, albeit kidnappings, assassinations or bombings. However, another important stage of terrorist actions is the transfer of political messages to the public.

Anderson (1993) raises the question of balancing the public's right to know with the media's role in revealing facts and covering events, while knowing this type of publicity will achieve the terrorists' political goals. He realizes that there are no satisfactory answers for such a dilemma. The media should fulfill their duties in reporting events and bringing information to general public; at the same time, the government should aim to limit the benefits terrorists gain from such publicity by censorship.

Frey and Rohner (2006) reported that no formal model has been built based on this issue (the relationship between terrorist groups and the media) and only limited empirical research has been conducted in this particular subject.

The language, with which media report and discuss terrorist issues, is extremely important, as the media language will set the parameters for public discourse (Lockyer, 2003). The media transmission of political terrorist messages to the public gives rise to ethical issues. The images of political terrorism, as portrayed by media messages, affect the public's perception. Likewise, the depictions of terrorist events and incidents of extraordinary violence exercise a significant influence on public fears and expectations (Miller, 1982).

This notion has been observed by Lazarsfeld and Melton (1971) as publicity from mass media is considered by itself "status conferral". Schaffert (1992) explains that mass media, by reporting terrorism, hopes to elevate its own status. Live televised interviews with leaders of terrorist organizations can give them the same status as that given to respectable politicians. O'Sullivan (1986) admits that it is difficult for a television channel to interview a terrorist without projecting him as a political figure; in other words, television legitimizes terrorism.

Media and the government usually have common objectives in ensuring that media are not manipulated into promoting the cause of terrorism, and limiting any political gains that terrorists can derive from media coverage (Perl, 1997). Graber (2004) pointed to three

approaches of relationships between government officials and mass media when considering the press freedom in time of crises or reporting national security issues: the formal censorship approach, the free press approach, and the informal censorship approach.

- 1 - The formal censorship approach involves legislations that determine what is publishable and not publishable. The government officials decide these guidelines for media policy.
- 2 - The free press approach leaves journalists free to decide what is publishable under any circumstances but there is still a high risk of slipping into national security issues.
- 3 - The informal censorship approach is a combination of the two, whereby there is no formal censorship by government, and journalists are free to decide what it does and does not wish to publish.

The political extremists employ terrorism as a communication strategy; thus they purposively select targets and the timing of their events to gain maximum effects. Frey and Rohner (2006) explain the circumstances that terrorist groups aim to employ for their media effectiveness. Terrorists attack on big cities with a bulk of media organization, and during big events, such as G8 Summit, Olympic Games, elections, or other national or international occasions.

Nelson and Scott (1992), in their reviewing of the cases of the relationships between media and terrorist groups during the period 1968 - 1984, came to the conclusion that media coverage did not lead to terrorism. We should, however, mention in this context that media seek maximum audience through reporting of such events, especially tabloid-newspapers and sensational radio and television channels. Thus, the question of "media or terrorists' influence" remains legitimate, significant, and theoretically required.

India is adapting a comprehensive approach to terrorism, which differentiates between domestic and international terrorism, and between indigenous and foreign terrorists. The comprehensive strategy of the Indian government provides the so-called "non-military approach" to terrorism, involving political, economic, social, and psychological aspects of facing any terrorist incident (Raman, 2003).

The Indian government, at the very beginning of the terrorist incidents, tries to ensure that people, in the affected areas, have access to media to learn what the world thinks of terrorists. It encourages those people to participate in media programs so they can air their grievances. The government works hard to counter wrong propaganda and misinformation by terrorist groups and to make sure that terrorist leaders do not become national icons in the eyes of citizens (Raman, 2003).

Another country, which has faced terrorism for decades, is the Philippines, and Asian country that has participated in international efforts to counter terrorism. Few restrictions have prevented Philipino media from covering local terrorist groups, such as Abu Sayaf; however, they witnessed some cases, which brought about media blackouts. When covering terrorist incidents, media rely on government sources: military to use and communicate with media in order to promote his political messages to the Philipino public, but on the other hand, media are hesitant to approach him on the basis that it is too dangerous to reach him and his groups (de Jesus, 2002).

A study conducted by the Jimirro Center for the Study of Media Influence at Penn State University shows that two thirds of Americans feel that media have influenced their views on the importance of terrorism as a national problem. Media are not effective in motivating people to take actions or increase their preparedness. Media seem to heightening public awareness of possible dangers without influencing people to change their daily lives (Major, 2003).

A model was suggested by a number of researchers (Lafferty, et al, 1994) to explain the effectiveness of enemy media in relation to government media, which is simplified in diagram 1. The proposed model brought into account historical situations of wars and conflicts against the United States. The model suggests three regions (A, B and C) that can be explained as follows:

Example of (A): World War II.

Example of (B): the Vietnam War.

Example of (C): the first Gulf War and future conflicts.

Region C in the model represents present day conflicts and wars. "The war on terrorism" was started by United States after the attacks

on September 11, 2001. When considering this type of war, it is expected, in this model, to deal with terrorist organizations by increasing the information overload in order to decrease the effectiveness of the enemy's (terrorists) media. In reality, as we can now see, we are finding less coverage than desired by some media and concerned governments, but more media coverage initiated by terrorist organizations. Another look at this model is needed in order to understand terrorism in its present context.

Diagram 1:

The Enemy Effectiveness/ Media Information Model

Source: Lafferty et al. (1994) with some modification

Frey and Rohner (2006) built a simple theoretical game model intended to reflect the interaction between media and terrorists. The model is an economic (mathematical) one which suggest the two parties, media and terrorists, benefit from each other. Media benefit from terrorist news and from reports about their topics. The model makes some notes regarding media types, for instance between sensational and serious media. The gains from terrorist news are increasing in the level of sensationalism. Since terrorism is a catchy subject, which can benefit tabloid media more than quality media, the more terrorists acts committed by terrorist groups, the more people become interested in reports about terror.

An empirical study was done by Frey and Rohner (2006) to test the relationship between media and terrorists using content analysis of the New York Times and the Swiss paper New Zurcher Zeitung from 1998 till 2005. The number of terrorist fatalities was tabulated for the same period of time. The investigation showed that terror fatalities cause media coverage of terrorism. At the same time, media attention causes terrorists fatalities. An important finding in the study indicates that Western media tend to cover terrorist incidents in developing countries only when a high number of fatalities are involved; therefore, such terrorist incidents in developing countries tend to produce a lot of blood to attract attention by Western media.

Terrorist events increase public interests in media reporting. A

survey study by Stempel and Hargrove (2003) shows an increase in media use before and after 9/11. Television use increased from 71% four months before the terrorist events to 83% one month after the attack, while newspaper sales increased from 55% to 61%.

The Media/ Terrorism Model:

The media /terrorism model, for the present study, attempts to explain the relationship among four parties involved in terrorism events: media, terrorist organization, governments and the public. All these parties compete against or with each other in order to achieve their goals and objectives. The basic question that should be raised here is "What are the objectives of each party in general and media in particular?" The model points to four types of communication events and six types of relationships among the four parties. (See diagram 2).

Diagram 2: ***The Media/ Terrorism Model*** ***Competing Against Events***

- Creating events by terrorists.
- Reporting events by media.
- Influencing events by governments.
- Understanding events by the public.

First: Creating Events:

Terrorists' number one demand is publicity. Planning and implementing events are the execution of some political, social or religious ideas. These ideas need high publicity in media, but they can not get the access without creating events. Therefore, what we see in the world, as terrorist events, are the results of violent expressions of their ideas, intended for general public through mass media.

Any media publicity resulting from terrorist events alerts the public that a problem exists, and it should not be ignored. On the contrary, it must be addressed (Perl, 2003). Hillel (1985) identified four factors that are often considered by terrorists when dealing with media.

- 1 - Events are synchronized with historically significant dates, or are a response to political development.
- 2 - Physical targets are chosen so that they will be accessible to media coverage.
- 3 - Events are meant to affect a large population, thereby causing high casualties.
- 4 - Events target governments or elite persons.

The Saudi Experience:

May 2003 for Saudi Arabia is very similar to September 2001 for the United States, in which terrorists attacked Riyadh, the Saudi capital. May 2003 commenced the start of a series of terrorist attacks on the Saudi society. The Saudi government and society began to realize that society has been living with sleeping terrorist cells. These local terrorist organizations are linked to Al-Qaeda organization, aiming at destabilizing the whole society.

The local terrorist organizations in Saudi Arabia have created many events of their own, choosing the time and the place for their attacks and surprising government security forces.

Terrorists' eyes are always targeting media coverage as they plan and prepare their attacks. In general, terrorist organizations are the party that can set the agenda for all other parties - the government, the media and the public.

Terrorists' messages have been circulated widely by some Arab TV channels such as Aljazeera. Many tapes and interviews were aired by Arab and international channels. Terrorists' messages were delivered directly by the main actors of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Dawahiri in voice or video tapes. The basic messages show a direct attack on the United States and other Western nations, in addition to the usual attacks on Saudi Arabia and other Arab nations. Those messages signify a triggering motive for local Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia to activate their terrorists' attacks on some economic and security sites. The Internet provides various analysis and views of terrorist groups or supporters of these groups. Thus, the Internet

platform is the most important medium by which the views and positions of terrorist organizations are reflected.

Second: Reporting Events:

Media want to be free to cover terrorist events or issues without restrictions from media or government agencies (Perl, 2003). One of the basic functions of mass media is surveillance. This is when media try to provide information to general public about what is happening in their world. Terrorist events fit into such criteria. (CFR, 2005) Many scholars pointed to a symbolic relationship between terrorists, who need publicity, and media organizations which seek dramatic stories to boost readership or ratings.

The Saudi Experience:

Saudi media have had gone under considerable changes in the past years, and in particular since the early 1990's after the first Gulf War. The most noticeable changes took place after September 11, 2001, when the whole society was attacked by the media. This resulted in misunderstandings and negative political campaigns from outside the kingdom. Because of these unfortunate circumstances, Saudi media began a new era of its history beginning with the turn of the 21st century. The government has given media more freedom than in previous years. Additionally, media have become open to new issues and different topics that now appear in without any government or societal constraints.

Saudi media have done an excellent job in reporting about terrorism, both domestic and international. The open system of communication that exists after the 9/11 has helped journalists to acquire and provide information to the public. In previous incidents of terrorism in the 1980's, Saudi media had relied on government briefings and official sources in reporting such events. Recently, media reporting of terrorist actions and issues has changed in scope and direction. Media have become reliant on different sources, not only government sources, when reporting different aspects of terrorism issues. Of course, this does not come without some sacrifices between media and government.

As for particular shows by Saudi media, a number of documentaries about local terrorist cells were produced and aired on Saudi TV Channel One, the main channel in Saudi Arabia, in 2004 and 2005. Of course, many reports and talk shows were aired by all Saudi TV channels, but media observers believe that the seven documentary episodes were the most exciting and professional shows that had been produced by Saudi TV. A brief of those documentaries is as follows:

- 1 - The Truth: a documentary showing how terrorists educate their children, explaining how to feed their children the fanatic ideologies. A second part of the episode shows the preparation stages of terrorism attacks.
- 2 - Fundamentalism Concepts: This documentary shows the basic concepts that are employed by terrorists in order to recruit new member.
- 3 - Fatherhood: A documentary showing the soreness and pain that terrorists' fathers and families face after they have been informed that their sons are part of terrorist organizations.
- 4 - From Inside the Cell, Part I: Terrorists' reveal the works within cells.
- 5 - From Inside the Cell, Part II: More revelations by terrorists who were arrested.
- 6 - Alhayer Report, Part I: A documentary showing some of the arrested terrorists telling stories of how were arrested, how they are treated inside (Alhayer) prison.
- 7 - Alhayer Report, Part II: More stories by arrested terrorists from inside the prison.

All those documentaries illustrate the media's intentions to try, with inside stories, to report about terrorism. Many observers believe that the revelations by terrorists, in those series, have achieved the goals of Saudi media to report in an objective manner.

Third: Influencing Events:

Governments seek media cooperation when dealing with terrorist events and issues, in order not to limit any harmony in the society (Perl, 1997). During a crisis, all social institutions become alert to disrupt the

social stability. Government, as the guard of security in the society, tries to mobilize all possible efforts to support government actions. Media are not an exception.

Following September 11, the U.S. government attempted to censor media by withholding information from mass media, claiming that disclosures would endanger American national security (Graber, 2004). As we know, publicity does influence events and could even complicate the developments of these events; therefore, the government wants to separate the terrorists from the media, denying the terrorist organizations from using media as political platforms to communicate with the public. The government pushes media to name terrorists as criminals and their actions as crimes, in order to affect the perception of terrorists in the minds of the public (Perl, 1997).

The Saudi Experience:

The Saudi government has found itself in the heart of difficult and complicated situations, with international (mainly American) media bombarding the Saudi ways of life and local terrorists hitting Western expatriates' housings and a number of security forces' buildings, aiming to destabilize the control of the Saudi government of its society.

The Saudi government has tried to assemble all societal institutions and citizens in order to build a unified front against terrorist organizations. One important way of influencing the course of terrorist events is to control the flow of information, and limiting it to official channels. Another way is to limit any propaganda for terrorism that might benefit these organizations from winning public support. Initially, the government has to compete with media and then it has to compete with terrorist organizations; in both instances, the aim of the government is to influence the events.

The Ministry of Interior in Saudi Arabia is at the forefront of counter - terrorism. In 2005, this ministry appointed a speaker representing the views of the ministry. The ministry realizes that there were many reports and questions by local and international media regarding the issues of terrorism in Saudi Arabia; therefore, the appointed speaker plays an important role in delivering government

messages to media or to the general public at large. The main focus of the government messages is finding effective ways of handling terrorists' cells on one hand and inviting citizens to cooperate with the government in its efforts to discover any suspicious moves by terrorists, on the other hand. Another important message by the Saudi government is to condemn the causes and issues of terrorists before the general public.

Fourth: Understanding Events:

The public (audience) is the ultimate goal of mass communication phenomena. The role of mass media is to inform the public about the surrounding events so that the public can make sense and form opinions about such events and the involved parties. At the time of a crisis, the public, being very puzzled and in a state of complete confusion, does not know what to do, how to understand events, and who to believe. The public tunes to different kinds of mass media in order to get information and analyse events. (Schaffert, 1992) The public's perception of terrorism can be influenced by both media content and the context by which it is presented.

The Saudi Experience:

The Saudi public has been the target of terrorist organizations, whether local or international. The aims of terrorist organizations have been to influence the Saudi citizens in order to complicate their relationships with their government and create issues of mistrusts and misunderstandings. During a terrorist crisis, Saudi public tunes in to all kinds of mass media: local, national, regional and international, to get information and analysis of the breaking events, especially when they are happening in their hometown. This tendency creates difficulties for the government, since different sources of news and analysis are brought into the national scene of events.

As mentioned above, the Saudi government has been pushing the conservative Saudi, pushing the conservative Saudi society to make changes at all levels. Mass media is among those changes. The public is interested in seeing many changes in media, since they make comparison with media in neighboring countries, such as Qatar,

Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. Arab media channels usually compete in covering terrorist incidents inside Saudi Arabia by providing different opinions and perspectives which might interest the Saudi public to understand these events.

Saudi audience has an open media market regarding the reporting of events or issues of terrorism, local, regional or international. Saudi citizens seek information from all sources available from different media, in order to understand what is happening in their society. Another important source of information upon which lots of reports, views, images and issues of terrorists' events can be found in the Internet consequently, the public can escape the formal messages sent out by the government or formal mass media. The whole picture of events is brought to them through different and opposing sources of information.

Diagram 3:
The Media/ Terrorism Model
Six Bilateral Relations

The media/ terrorism model reveals six types of relations among the four parties involved. Each type reflects bilateral relations between two parties. Each type of relationship has two subrelationships which usually go in opposing directions. Each relationship reflects what one party needs from the other one. Diagram 3 shows the six lines of relationships.

- 1 - **MG:** media to get information; government to censor information. Mass media in Saudi Arabia can be classified as formal (television and radio) and private (newspapers). All media are considered under some degrees of government control. Recently, after 9/11 and especially after May 2003, more freedom was given to all kinds of media. This historical change becomes very obvious when dealing with terrorist incidents. Only limited restrictions are forced on media, thus, allowing mass media to work in relaxed atmosphere. Media generates information about terrorism, while the government offers and disseminates its views of these incidents.

- 2 - **MT:** media to cover actions; terrorist to manipulate media and get publicity for their cause and issues.

The relationship between media and terrorist groups in Saudi Arabia is very sensitive, since neither party has communications with the other. The only way to acquire reports about these organizations is through arrested members of terrorist organizations. Media provide extensive reporting about ideology, hierarchy, and leaders of terrorist groups. The feedback of terrorists on what is reported in the media is often found on the Internet; usually through criticism of media, people and content. Direct views of terrorists are denied by Saudi media.

- 3 - **MP:** media to inform the public; the public to understand the whole picture of events from the media.

There is a strong interaction between media and the public, through traditional channels of communication such as, articles, letters to editors, phone-backs, TV and radio, etc. Unfortunately, there are very few survey studies of the Saudi public that can describe their attitudes toward media's contents and performances. While mass media tend to achieve the basic function of their roles, the public aims at understanding the complicated issues of terrorism by giving attention to the Saudi media. When the public turns to non-Saudi media for assistance, this indicates that the Saudi media could not provide the total picture of terrorism subjects.

- 4 - **TG:** terrorists to change government policies; government to stop violence.

Tension is the characteristic of the relationship between the Saudi government and terrorist groups. Government campaigns go all over the country looking for terrorist cells. Citizens also participate in efforts to uproot them. Although, terrorist groups play games with government forces (hide and seek), the Saudi government has achieved a great success in its efforts to counter terrorism. The basic aim of the government is to condemn terrorist groups, and the terrorists' main objective is condemning the government.

- 5 - **TP:** terrorists to use the public as a mean to put pressure on

governments; the public to feel safe and express dissatisfaction with the violent actions of terrorists and encourage them to use peaceful means to achieve their goals.

It can be observed that most of the Saudi citizens are supporting the government, but we still find many who sympathize with terrorist groups or the cause of terrorism, especially when dealing with Palestinian issues. The terrorists' agenda has been a concoction of local, regional and international issues.

- 6 - **GP:** government to convince the public to be calm and to be disassociated from terrorists; the public seek accurate information from the government.

As for any government, the Saudi government is working very hard to improve its image inside and outside the country. In an effort to stabilize the country and meet the public's expectations, the government has been bringing new and fresh issues to citizens, such as national dialogue, local elections, and women's rights. This interaction between the government and the public lends credence to the government's efforts to counter terrorism.

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