The Battlefield of the Media: Reporting Terrorism in Conditions of Conflict and Political Repression

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ICCT Report
November 2021

ICCT International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism

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Executive Summary

Terrorist groups invest significant resources in communication, and regard influencing media organisations as a high priority. The "battlefield of the media" is a site of contestation between state and non-state actors (including terrorist groups) that parallels the actual violence of civil conflicts. Media organisations and journalists are not merely reporters, but have agency and influence to affect change.

In civil conflicts, belligerents on all sides attempt to dominate the media landscape to ensure their version of events is paramount. Both state and non-state actors see narrative control as their primary aim. In conditions of conflict, media organisations and platforms can become highly partisan and polarised as a result.

Belligerents use a variety of means to achieve narrative control, including the use of force, the use of influence, and direct ownership. More specifically, they seek to weaponise language (for example, by labelling supporters or adversaries in ways to influence perceptions), use or threaten force against journalists in order to secure more favourable or less unfavourable coverage through intimidation, use censorship where they have political or legislative supremacy, own or operate their own media channels, and seek to influence mainstream or independent media organisations (for example, by providing them with content).

Where conflicting actors and states aim to achieve narrative control, journalists will face significant pressures in covering terrorism. Two approaches potentially mitigate some of these pressures. One is citizen journalism, which has proven to be an effective response to reporting from Islamic State-occupied territory. Another is conflict-sensitive journalism. Neither, however, is a panacea and citizen journalists are sometimes also compromised by conflict dynamics.

Recommendations

- Training in conflict analysis should be offered to journalists reporting on terrorism.

- International donors should bolster independent media NGOs that support journalists in conflict zones with training, guidance and safety/security.

- News organisations in fragile contexts should consider adopting editorial guidelines on reporting on terrorism.

- The European Union (EU) and its Member States should insist on journalistic freedoms in reporting on counter-terrorism in partner countries.

- Citizen journalists in countries affected by terrorism should be supported by training and potentially funding, and international donors (such as the EU) should provide forums and opportunities for knowledge sharing on reporting on terrorism.

Introduction

Ayman al-Zawahiri's oft-quoted comment in a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, written in 2005 – "we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media" – is one of the most famous statements on the importance of propaganda and public relations to terrorist groups. But al-Zawahiri's statement also points to the existence of other forces in the media battlefield. The advice contained in the letter is, in al-Zawahiri's own framing, about the "political aspects" of the jihadist enterprise, specifically how to gain and maintain popular support ("we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma".) From the context of his letter, it is clear that the opposition he has in mind is the United States (US) and its allies, who benefit from a "deceptive and fabricated media" as well as overwhelming military force.[1] This is not an isolated, passing observation as al-Zawahiri again returned to the topic in his more formal writings. In his polemic, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* (2001), for example, he told his readers: "We must communicate our message to the masses and break the media embargo imposed on the jihad movement."[2]

Al-Zawahiri's references to a "media embargo" and to state-inspired deception and fabrication points to the agency of media organisations in this battlefield: it is not simply the case that the jihadists are on one side and the US and its allies on another. Media organisations are channels but also targets of influence and control, and there are multiple parties in the battlefield seeking to change conditions in their favour. This is particularly true in those countries where the threat from terrorism has been especially severe, such as parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In such locations, politics – not the electoral politics that is so noticeably absent from most of the MENA region, but politics in the sense of seeking and exercising power and influence – determine what is reported and how it is framed.

This paper explores the pressures on journalists reporting on terrorism in the metaphorical battlefield of contentious politics, and the real battlefields of civil conflicts. It reflects on four case studies already published in this series which focus on the political and security contexts of terrorism reporting in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Egypt to examine how governments and non-state organisations have sought to influence the media battlefield, and how journalists and citizens have responded. As this paper explains, the use and abuse of media platforms for political interests has important and often overlooked implications for counter-terrorism.

The Aim: Narrative Control

In each case study, reporting on terrorism was one front in an information war, which in turn was inseparable from actual conflict (albeit sometimes contained, as in the case of Egypt).[3] As David Betz has observed, the '"Global War on Terror" … has two dimensions: "the first is the actual tactical field of battle in which bullets fly, bombs explode and blood is shed; the second is the virtual, informational realm in which belligerents contend with words and images to manufacture strategic narratives which are more compelling than those of the other side and better at structuring the

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1 Aymann al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, 9 July, 2005, intercepted and then released to the media in October 2005. The text of al-Zawahiri's letter can be found in English at https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf
2 Quoted in Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli (eds.), Al Qaeda in its Own Words (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2005), 204.
3 Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Countering Terrorism through Media in Egypt", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – ICCT, 03 March 2021. Available at: https://icct.nl/publication/mitigating-the-impact-of-media-reporting-of-terrorism-countering-terrorism-through-media-in-egypt/.

responses of others to the development of events".[4] Similarly, al-Zawahiri wrote in Knights Under the Prophet's Banner that breaking the "media embargo'" was "an independent battle that we must wage side by side with the military battle".[5] Such analyses have valuably explored the direct implications of this media contestation for counter-terrorism policy and practice, but the wider media ecologies in battlefield countries have been largely overlooked. These have tended to be seen as neutral environments for combat between the 'strategic communication' or 'counter-narrative' practised by the US and its allies, and the 'propaganda' of al-Qaeda and its successor organisations.[6] The four case studies in this series have shown that the media battlefield is where belligerents fight to control the narrative to achieve their strategic and political objectives.

Following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya experienced a sudden transition from totalitarian dictatorship to a political free-for-all, and the media landscape mirrored the chaotic political landscape. The worsening political and security situation was exacerbated by this media contestation, which turned the armed conflict into what Mary Fitzgerald calls a "battle of narratives". Media outlets were used to fight wars in a quite literal sense – allies and enemies were identified and either supported or attacked on media platforms. As Fitzgerald explains:

> *The weaponisation of Libyan media outlets, which have been transformed into propaganda tools for warring groups, has led to the perception that such outlets – and the individual reporters that work for them – are merely another arm of political and military factions. As a result, journalists are seen as integral to the conflict, whether through bolstering or challenging a narrative, the latter often leading to their targeting by belligerents.[7]*

Media communication thus becomes a continuation of war by other means, but in the Libya case the battle for control over information remains unresolved.

The authoritarian regimes of Syria and Egypt, on the other hand, occupy a more dominant position in their countries' media landscapes, although obviously the Syrian regime has ceded part of the media as well as physical landscape to opposition forces.[8] While the prolific output of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has almost monopolised scholarly attention with respect to the Syrian Civil War, the role of independent citizen journalism as an alternative to both Assad's totalitarian media control and the jihadists' propaganda, has been overlooked until Haroro Ingram's study.[9] But it is in Egypt, where in recent years, conflict has been largely contained to the Sinai Peninsula and subject to media blackouts, that demonstrates how far a regime can go in controlling the counter-terrorism narrative. As the paper on Egypt makes clear, the state's counter-terrorism policy and media laws have become so intermeshed that "countering terrorism becomes as much about controlling public narratives as it is about interdicting attacks and arresting perpetrators".[10]

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4 David Betz, "The virtual dimension of contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency," Small Wars and Insurgencies 19:4 (2008): 510-540, p. 510. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310802462273

5 Kepel and Milelli, Al Qaeda in its Own Words, 204.

6 See, for example, Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism (Vol. 39, No. 5, 2016): 381–404. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2015.1116277

7 Mary Fitzgerald, "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Libya case study", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – ICCT, 28 December 2020, 2. Available at: https://icct.nl/publication/mitigating-the-impact-of-media-reporting-of-terrorism-libya-case-study/.

8 Antoun Issa, "Syria's New Media Landscape: Independent Media Born Out of War", Middle East Institute Policy Paper 2016-9 (2016). Available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17574.13.

9 Haroro J. Ingram, "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Syrian and Iraqi Citizen Journalists versus the Islamic State," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – ICCT, 11 February 2021. Available at: https://icct.nl/publication/mitigating-the-impact-of-media-reporting-of-terrorism-syrian-and-iraqi-citizen-journalists-versus-the-islamic-state/

10 "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Countering Terrorism through Media in Egypt", 4.

However, the battle of narratives is not only driven by local and national politics, but also by external forces. On a more global level, politics has influenced the framing of terrorism reporting in a post-2003 Iraq context, where the informational asymmetry between US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and Sunni insurgents (including al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI), did not translate into narrative control on the part of the CPA or, later, US-backed Iraqi governments. As Mais al-Bayaa explains, one factor in this context was the presence of Gulf-based satellite television channels, which challenged the US and the Iraqi government's narratives and, crucially, gave a voice to the insurgents, including AQI.[11] US-backed attempts to create alternatives to Al-Jazeera (backed by Qatar) and Al-Arabiya (backed by Saudi Arabia) foundered, while strategic communications operations in the country enjoyed limited success.[12] What might seem extraordinary, to anyone unfamiliar with the region's geopolitical contention, is that the US and the Gulf monarchies were longstanding allies. However, their political aims could not have been more different, and both sides instrumentalised satellite broadcasting in their own battle for hearts and minds in the region. As al-Bayaa shows, terrorism was one of the major topics of this media battle, with the satellite channels portraying the insurgency in the language of resistance, while the rival channels, created by the CPA as a counterweight to influence from the Gulf, reflected the CPA's framing of the insurgency as a terrorist threat.[13]

In the Libyan conflict, global politics similarly helped shape the framing of the reporting on terrorism. In a conflict that drew in so many external players, controlling the narrative became important not just for the domestic audience, but also as a means of influencing foreign policy making.[14] As the conflict evolved, a synergy of messaging between domestic actors and their foreign backers developed:

> *As foreign meddling in the Libyan conflict increased, so too did what appeared to be often coordinated messaging between Libyan media outlets affiliated with various factions and pan-Arab media aligned with their respective regional backers.[15]*

In other words, the internationalisation of the civil conflict into a proxy war was reflected in the conflict's media representation.

The internationalisation of the Syrian conflict, meanwhile, shaped the international media's reporting on the conflict. Western political and security priorities ensured that Western media coverage focused increasingly on the threat from the Islamic State rather than the Assad regime's aggression towards its own subjects. Consequently, there was a perception in Syrian civil society that the West's focus on counter-terrorism:

> *[t]ended to inadvertently amplify the Islamic State's propaganda, centralised the threat of violent extremism as the lens through which the war in Syria is perceived and, in doing so, carelessly aligned with the Assad regime's talking points.[16]*

Clearly, controlling the counter-terrorist narrative is a priority both for authoritarian regimes and for their opponents. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. First, where conflicts are intense (as in post-2003 Iraq, and post-2011 Libya and Syria), terrorist groups may be parties to the

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11 Mais Al-Bayaa, "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Iraq Case Study", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – ICCT, 22 January 2021, 7-8. Available at: https://icct.nl/publication/mitigating-the-impact-of-media-reporting-of-terrorism-iraq-case-study/

12 Ahmed K Al-Rawi, "The Anti-Terrorist Advertising Campaigns in the Middle East," Journal of International Communication, Vol. 19, no. 2 (2013): 182–95. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2013.833534

13 Al-Bayaa, "Iraq Case Study", 2-3.

14 Fitzgerald, "Libya case study", 4.

15 Ibid., 11.

16 Ingram, "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism", 9.

conflict, and thus, the way their activities are framed by the media shapes general perceptions of the conflict. Secondly, in countries with a significant terrorist threat, counter-terrorism is at the heart of state legitimacy: when the state becomes unable to exercise a monopoly of the legitimate use of force to guarantee security to its own citizens, its case for existence becomes more precarious.[17] And for opposing forces, challenging the state's legitimacy by demonstrating security failure is a way of breaking the "media embargo" by force of arms.

The Means: Force, Influence and Ownership

Authoritarian states and terrorist groups aim to control the counter-terrorism narrative, but through what means? How states and their opponents seek to coerce or influence media coverage of terrorism is obviously a significant issue for media professionals who may find themselves subject to these pressures. The case studies identify five techniques for controlling the narrative: weaponisation of language, coercing journalists, censorship, media ownership, and influencing mainstream outlets.

The Weaponisation of Language

It is an inescapably political process that determines who gets to use the term "terrorism" and who gets portrayed as a terrorist.[18] In conflict situations, the "terrorist" label becomes instrumentalised to justify one side's actions and delegitimise another's. In Syria, Assad's regime became notorious for its framing of a wide range of opposition forces in this way.[19] In Libya, the term "terrorist" became almost literally a weapon of war. In one incident, forces under the UAE-backed general Khalid al-Haftar tried to present a military adversary who had seized an oil facility as a representative of al-Qaeda, in order to influence the Libyan population against him. In other incidents, forced confessions of terrorist involvement were televised to provide stories that would delegitimise opponents and thereby deny them popular support. Aside from worsening the actual conflict dynamics, this instrumentalisation of labels and narratives created significant disinformation that obscured the realities of terrorist threats and allegiances.[20]

In Egypt, the government has consistently used a vague and broad definition of terrorism in its draconian counter-terrorism legislation and extended its scope to cover activities that would widely be considered as peaceful political opposition or activities. As a result, "[j]ournalists, human rights defenders, and public and private figures who criticise the regime may now be held legally accountable on terrorism charges."[21] Furthermore, those who dare to question the government's official narrative are often branded as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers. This highlights the polarisation between those siding with and against Egypt's principal Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood, which was suppressed after its government was overthrown by the Egyptian military in 2013. (In further evidence of the contestation over the terrorism label, representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood subsequently presented themselves as the victims

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17 The idea that a monopoly of legitimate force is a pre-requisite for a functional state derives from Max Weber, who articulated this theory in his lecture 'Politics as a Vocation' (1919), and at greater length in Economy and Society (1921).

18 Assaf Moghadam, Ronit Berger and Polina Beliakova, "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors," Perspectives on Terrorism 8.5 (2014): 2-17. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297258

19 Alice Martini, "The Syrian Wars of Words: International and Local Instrumentalisations of the War on Terror," Third World Quarterly 41.4 (2020): 725-743. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1699784

20 Fitzgerald, "Libya case study", 5.

21 "Countering Terrorism through Media in Egypt", 3.

of state-orchestrated terrorism.)[22]

However, post-2003 Iraq shows a different side to the instrumentalisation of labels in counter-terrorism, as "Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya were viewed by the Iraqi government as taking sides against the Coalition and effectively supporting the Sunni insurgency", in part through a refusal to reproduce the Coalition's nomenclature.[23] Rather than describing incidents by Islamist Jihadists and Sunni fighters as terrorist attacks, the channels used the language of "resistance" to report on the Sunni Insurgency, thus framing the insurgency as an exercise of self-determination, not unlike the standard framing in Arabic-speaking media of the Israel-Palestine issue.[24] Al-Bayaa argues that a similar dynamic was evident following the capture of Mosul by ISIS in 2014, before Al-Jazeera's political backers realised it was not in their interest to present ISIS as liberators.[25]

Threats and Violence against Journalists

Controlling the narrative ultimately means controlling those who write the narrative, i.e. the journalists on the ground reporting on terrorism. Several case studies show that journalists have been threatened, intimidated and attacked in coercion to present a certain narrative. As the Libyan Civil War evolved, journalists increasingly became victims:

> *The growing partisanship of many media outlets led belligerents on all sides to view media in general but also individual journalists as part of the conflict. RSF [Reporters Without Borders] ranked Libya as the fifth most deadly country for journalists in 2014'.[26]*

In this communications battle, journalists were often deliberately targeted by one or more warring factions – a journalist believed to be favourable to the jihadist group Ansar al-Sunna was assassinated, and independent Libyan and foreign reporters were abducted by ISIS. As well as direct violence, many reporters experienced intimidation or were libelled by partisan actors, especially online, to discredit or influence their reporting. Inevitably, journalists in Libya increasingly censored themselves in order to stay safe. As one reporter noted:

> *If I didn't echo the language of Haftar and his supporters and describe all the people they were fighting as 'terrorists', his supporters came after me on social media. I was terrified the attacks would spill over into real life.'[27]*

Objective, neutral reporters from mainstream and international media organisations found the security situation to be increasingly perilous, further yielding the territory to partisan domestic outlets untroubled by legal and regulatory controls.[28]

In ISIS-occupied Syria and Iraq, citizen journalists filled the void left by traditional media, which had largely retreated to the safety of neighbouring countries. These citizen journalists shaped how ISIS was perceived and challenged the group's self-serving narratives of strength, competence and religiosity. As a result, ISIS members attempted to identify citizen journalists, to silence them and intimidate others.[29] A correspondent for Raqqa is Being Silently Slaughtered (RBSS), one of the major citizen journalist groups operating in northern Syria, noted: "Since our campaign began ISIS has taken extreme measures to stop our members from working in Raqqa. They

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22 Ibid., 13.
23 Al-Bayaa, "Iraq Case Study", 4.
24 Ibid., 4.
25 Ibid., 8-9.
26 Fitzgerald, "Libya case study," 9.
27 Ibid., 10.
28 Ibid., 2.
29 Ingram, "Syrian and Iraqi Citizen Journalists versus the Islamic State," 11-12.

set up checkpoints and started searching people and their cell phones looking for recording equipment."[30] Although ISIS's campaign of murder and intimidation was an extreme case, the intimidation of and violence against journalists and news analysts is commonplace across the MENA region, including those reporting on terror, and the region has a relatively high rate of journalists being murdered.[31]

Censorship

Censorship has long been a favoured tool to gain social control in the MENA region, where newspapers and domestic television channels are often strongly state-influenced, if not state-owned. The four case study countries all perform poorly in the RSF world ranking for press freedom – in a 2021 ranking of 180 countries, Iraq came at 163, Libya ranked 165, Egypt was at 166, and Syria at 173.[32] Defamation, data protection and cybercrime legislation, as well as counter-terrorism laws are used widely to suppress criticism of governments by independent media organisations.[33]

Egypt is an oft-cited example of the state using legal instruments to ensure that criticism, including that of its counter-terrorism policy and actions, is suppressed. Numerous international media organisations are banned, around five hundred websites are blocked, social media accounts with more than five thousand followers are classified as publishers (thus bringing them within the scope of state censorship), ministries issue directives to editors on what to report, and outlets operating outside the state's direct control are subject to politically inspired arrests and prosecutions, with more than one hundred journalists arrested since 2014 and thirty-two in prison as of January 2021.[34] Egypt's counter-terrorism laws are framed widely and flexibly, giving the state wide-ranging powers to criminalise dissent and political opposition, including media organisations, and to restrict and monitor channels of communication. Independent monitoring of Egypt's media shows that even casualty figures are required to be sourced to state outlets, while North Sinai is an information void due to comprehensive censorship and travel restrictions.[35] This shrinking information space constrains opportunities for objective reporting on the terrorist threat in Egypt, where reporting on counter-terrorism activities is politicised and censored. The impulse for narrative control in Egypt goes beyond journalism: even television dramas are coordinated to support state interests, with the presentation of the country's security forces as heroes and martyrs.[36] This strategy does more than maintain a state-centred narrative about safety and security. It also helps to keep the public largely uninformed about the causes and consequences of terrorism, it maintains a degree of polarisation in society (including through the dehumanisation of Islamists, with potentially counter-productive results), and it erodes trust.[37]

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30 Matthew Heinemann, dir., City of Ghosts (2017). Quoted in 'Syrian and Iraqi Citizen Journalists versus the Islamic State', 11.
31 Mona Badran, "Violence against journalists: suppressing media freedom" in Mike Friedrichsen and Yahya Kamalipour (eds.), Digital Transformation in Journalism and News Media. Media Management, Media Convergence and Globalization (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 417-427.
32 Reporters without Borders, 2021 World Press Freedom Index, available at: https://rsf.org/en/ranking.
33 Matt J. Duffy and Mariam Alkazemi, "Arab Defamation Laws: A Comparative Analysis of Libel and Slander in the Middle East," Communication Law and Policy 22.2 (2017): 189-211. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/10811680.2017.1290984; Reporters without Borders, "Egypt's new cybercrime law legalizes Internet censorship" August 21, 2018. Available at:
https://rsf.org/en/news/egypts-new-cybercrime-law-legalizes-internet-censorship
34 Reporters without Borders, "Less press freedom than ever in Egypt, 10 years after revolution," January 22, 2021. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/news/less-press-freedom-ever-egypt-10-years-after-revolution.
35 US Embassy in Egypt, "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Egypt," March 30, 2021. Available at: https://eg.usembassy.gov/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices-egypt/.
36 "Countering Terrorism through Media in Egypt,"11.
37 Ibid.,12-14.

Control of the Means of Production

The Egyptian government directly controls around half of the country's media organisations, but a substantial proportion of the other half are owned by state employees (often senior military and intelligence officers).[38] This military-government-media complex allows the state to have almost complete control over domestic news, while competitors (such as Al-Jazeera) and opponents (such as newspapers and television stations favourable towards the Muslim Brotherhood) are closed down or blocked.[39] However, ownership of media outlets is not limited to states. In Libya, competing sides in the Civil War were supported by partisan media organisations, which they controlled or influenced. As Fitzgerald notes, most "domestic outlets are linked in some way to political or armed factions, with many owned or funded by actors in the civil conflict that began in 2014."[40] The partisan control of media outlets that Fitzgerald identifies contributed to a lack of trustworthy reporting of the belligerents, and a media landscape vulnerable to disinformation.

Ownership of media outlets is a strategy also potentially available to those seeking to mitigate terrorist threats, although as al-Bayaa and others have shown, the results from the MENA region are hardly promising. Concerned by the media dominance of the Gulf-based satellite television stations in Iraq and a lack of its own influence, in 2004 the US government launched the Alhurra television station across the region, seeking to gain Iraqis as its primary target audience. Alhurra Iraq would become the country's third most-watched Arabic news channel, although its global audience remained a long way behind Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, and its 'Western approach' was seen as less appealing to an Iraqi audience.[41] In other words, while media ownership is used by conflict actors to present partisan perspectives, it may have limited utility for those focused on stabilisation and counter-terrorism.

Influencing Mainstream Media

Terrorist and insurgent groups have long known the importance of harnessing the power of the mainstream media. Indeed, mass media is fundamental to terrorism as terrorists require an audience well beyond those immediately affected by acts of violence.[42] No group has been more insistent on this point than ISIS itself, which, in an anonymous 2016 publication, announced that "verbal weapons can be more potent than atomic bombs" and should be used to recruit members, terrorise enemies, motivate followers, maintain discipline, and promote truth over falsehood. Its author observed that "most – if not all – of the mainstream media is driven by daily lies and professionalised falsification" which misrepresents Islam (and by implication the Islamic State's ideology).[43] For this reason, ISIS has developed a cadre of "media operative brothers" (i.e. communication specialists within ISIS) and a range of proprietary platforms and publications, and through its activities it has demonstrated the importance it places on exerting influence through existing mass media channels to "compete" in the "arena" of the "propaganda war".[44] In Libya, ISIS and Ansar al-Sharia have demonstrated that jihadist groups can be as adept at exploiting information wars as in physical ones, which is evident in the prevalence of their propaganda

38 Zahraa Badr, "More or More of the Same: Ownership Concentration and Media Diversity in Egypt," The International Journal of Press/Politics, 24 June 2021. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F19401612211025164
39 "Countering Terrorism through Media in Egypt", 10.
40 Fitzgerald, "Libya Case Study", 1.
41 Al-Bayaa, "Iraq Case Study", 3.
42 Gabriel Weimann, "Terrorism as theater: Mass media and redefinition of image," in Hanna Herzog and Eliezer Ben-Rafael (eds.), Language and Communication in Israel (Routledge, 2018), 497-518; Neville Bolt, The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries (London: Hurst, 2012).
43 Al-Himmah, "Media Operative: You Are Also a Mujahid," April 2016. Qtd. in Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter (eds.), The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement (London; Hurst, 2020), 215-25.: 216, 224
44 Ibid., 216.

material in mainstream news outlets.[45]

In Iraq, it is clear that satellite television networks with a large viewership in the Arab world, such as Al-Jazeera, were seen by the insurgents, including those linked to al-Qaeda, as a potential asset. Indeed, it is significant that al-Zawahiri's letter to al-Zarqawi begins with al-Zawahiri drawing attention to an interview recently broadcast on Al-Jazeera.[46] More pertinently, al-Qaeda-linked groups were so attuned to the media battlefield and the influence of the Gulf-based satellite networks that they allowed reporters to be embedded in their ranks, reflecting the US military's practice of embedding reporters from Western networks like CNN and the BBC. The jihadists, therefore, exploited a more subtle and surprising informational contest than that seen in post-2011 Libya, opportunistically seeking support from sources that had their own agendas to pursue.

The Alternatives: Citizen Journalism and Conflict Sensitivity

The instrumentalisation of media coverage of terrorism, both by terrorist groups and by authoritarian states, has serious implications for journalists in countries most severely affected by terrorist threats. As the various case studies have shown, journalists are killed, threatened, intimidated, suborned, and censored. Given the severity of the terrorist threat in the regions, and the character of its mostly autocratic regimes, the challenges for journalists working on terrorism might seem overwhelming. However, as well as diagnosing significant problems, the case studies point to positive approaches that have the potential to mitigate the impact of terrorism without succumbing to authoritarian pressures.

The emergence of citizen journalism in the MENA region has reshaped its media landscape. In spaces that mainstream media finds hard to reach, citizen journalists are able to bring local perspectives to a wider audience, and in some regions have more access and means to shape the narrative than the mainstream media.[47] In some conflicts, citizen journalists are the only reporters left on the frontline, but even where traditional media outlets are able to operate, citizen journalists can supply more immediate and independent perspectives. By using social media platforms rather than established channels or publications, they can also bypass media organisations that traditionally acted as information gatekeepers, thereby giving a voice to the under-represented and challenging received wisdom. Conversely, by definition citizen journalists lack professional training and accreditation, and some may be highly partisan (some activists and propagandists allegedly pose as citizen journalists), and may therefore be witting or unwitting mediums of influence.[48]

In Syria and Iraq, during the period of ISIS's territorial control, access became perilous for mainstream media organisations. This was tragically demonstrated by the kidnapping and, in some cases, murder of international journalists, but it is also vital to remember that during the Syrian Civil War, dozens of journalists from across the world, including Syria and Iraq, were killed by forces other than ISIS (notably the Syrian regime and its allies, which both bombed

45 Audrey Courty, Halim Rane and Kasun Ubayasir, "Blood And Ink: The Relationship Between Islamic State Propaganda and Western Media", The Journal of International Communication 25.1 (2019): 69-94. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2018.1544162
46 Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi.
47 Ibid., 13.
48 See, for example, Melissa Wall, Citizen Journalism: Practices, Propaganda, Pedagogy (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 11-22, and Stuart Allan and Einar Thorsen (eds.), Citizen Journalism: Global Perspectives, Vol. 1 (Peter Lang, 2009).

indiscriminately and deliberately targeted journalists). As Ingram explains in his paper, access difficulties meant that citizen journalists filled the void. But citizen journalists were also under enormous threat by ISIS, demonstrated by the murders of several journalists and activists working for RBSS, one of the most prolific and effective citizen journalist outlets in the conflict. In Iraq, Omar Mohamed, who published a blog during the ISIS occupation under the name Mosul Eye, lived under daily threat of exposure. As rare eyewitness sources from a territory in a conflict that was heavily exposed to disinformation from the regime and its allies, citizen journalists like RBSS and Mosul Eye were among the most trusted and trustworthy sources of information on ISIS. In contrast, elements of the international media inadvertently amplified ISIS's propaganda and the scale of its threat.[49] Citizen journalism helped provide a corrective to sensational, and sometimes inaccurate reporting that sometimes recycled ISIS's own propaganda outputs.[50]

Although some citizen journalists accept the label of "activist", which implies support for an ideological position, activism in contexts such as Syria where the information ecosystem is dominated by authoritarians and propagandists, may be inescapable. In this context, the activist approach included undermining the polarising framing of ISIS propaganda, and providing a form of therapy to an oppressed population. Simply reporting facts was insufficient: citizen journalists also had to understand the media landscape (including how it was exploited by ISIS), in order to reach audiences. However, others avoided the activist framing, as Ingram explains:

> This reflected their belief that fact-based, independent reporting in both practice and presentation both challenged the fact-exploiting and prejudiced purpose of violent extremist messaging as well as prevented accusations of bias.[51]

In such environments, the activist label can undermine the citizen journalist's claim to authenticity. In the Libya case study, Fitzgerald highlights some of the shortcomings of activist citizen journalism, citing occasions of inaccurate reporting from activists. For instance, it was incorrectly reported by citizen journalists that ISIS was in control of Dirna, an error that was relayed and magnified by mainstream outlets, highlighting the importance and challenges of verifying partisan sources.[52] Ingram identifies further problems, such as the fact that the arrival of new entrants and increased donor activity in Syria led to competition and inefficiency among citizen journalists, and donors were perceived to misunderstand the conflict, especially in its focus on ISIS and neglect of regime atrocities. There were also concerns about locals being exploited by Western donors.[53]

Citizen journalism is one of many disruptive forces in the global media landscape, but it is not a panacea. It potentially extends the reach of information gatherers, which creates both opportunities and risks in covering terrorism. It has introduced a plurality of media into often very controlled and contested spaces. It provides an outlet for varied and potentially unheard voices, in the process making it harder for one side to control the narrative, whether that is the state or terrorist groups like ISIS. However, like their mainstream colleagues, citizen journalists could be vulnerable to external pressures, including exploitation for the purposes of disinformation, while citizen journalists, potentially lacking the training and institutional support and quality control of established outlets, may be more prone to inadvertently amplifying inaccurate or unverified stories.

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49 Courty, Rane and Ubayasiri, "Blood and ink,": 69-94; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Picture or it didn't happen: A snapshot of the Islamic State's official media output," Perspectives on Terrorism 9.4 (2015): 85-97, p. 93. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297417
50 Ingram, "Syrian and Iraqi Citizen Journalists versus the Islamic State," 11.
51 Ibid., 6.
52 Fitzgerald, 'Libya case study', 10-11.
53 Ingram, "Syrian and Iraqi Citizen Journalists versus the Islamic State," 11.

For journalists of all types, the principal lesson that emerges from the four case studies is the need for awareness of power dynamics shaping both the media and physical battlefields. Conflict-sensitive journalism has a long history and a large practitioner and academic literature, and the pressures of reporting on terrorist threats in unstable contexts make that body of knowledge an obvious source for guidance and training. The risks and pressures faced by journalists reporting on terrorism are exactly those that conflict-sensitive journalism seeks to manage. In the words of one handbook:

> *A conflict sensitive journalist applies conflict analysis and searches for new voices and new ideas about the conflict. He or she reports on who is trying to resolve the conflict, looks closely at all sides, and reports on how otherconflicts were resolved. A conflict sensitive journalist takes no sides, but is engaged in the search for solutions. Conflict sensitive journalists choose their words carefully.[54]*

Many journalists are already sensitive to the instrumentalisation of terms such as "terrorist" by parties in a conflict, and some media organisations have editorial guidelines explicitly addressing this.[55] However, as this description shows, conflict-sensitivity requires neutrality, but does not assume blandly even-handed reporting: there is also a requirement for scepticism and investigation. Clearly, that may itself be a challenge in the contexts discussed in these papers. But the ingredients of conflict-sensitive journalism – conflict analysis, awareness of the journalist's potential to alter conflict dynamics, and a commitment to not reproduce stereotypes or partisan framing – have the potential to mitigate terrorism's communicative impact in conflict-affected places.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the "battlefield of the media" is not simply a contest between terrorism and counter-terrorism, but a more complex and fraught arena for contention between multiple political and strategic interests. The politics of reporting terrorism in conflict situations are often overlooked but, as the case studies show, in the Middle East they have exerted significant pressure on journalists. Journalists are often exploited in various ways by terrorist groups and authoritarian states, vying to control the security narrative. The techniques used by state and non-state actors in the region to control the narrative include a mixture of influence, force and ownership. Citizen journalists are not immune to these pressures, but are a distinct category from professional journalists and can bring different or additional resources to bear in mitigating the impact of terrorism in the media, while a conflict-sensitive approach can benefit reporting of both types. While the case studies focus on one region, these observations may also be true of other contexts where authoritarian states are confronted by terrorist organisations.

Recommendations

In the light of these conclusions, this paper makes five recommendations:

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54 Ross Howard, "Conflict Sensitive Journalism: A Handbook" (IMPACS/International Media Support, 2004), 15.
55 Alex P. Schmid, "Prevention of (ab-) Use of Mass Media by Terrorists (and Viceversa)," in Alex P. Schmid (ed.), Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness (The Hague, NL: ICCT Press) 2020, 588-615. Available at: https://icct.nl/handbook-of-terrorism-prevention-and-preparedness/.

First, the training of journalists reporting on terrorism should take a conflict analysis approach – i.e. it should focus on the value of analysing conflict dynamics and sources of influences, how to research the background behind conflicts, the claims made by conflict actors, and the importance of neutrality in language and framing.

Secondly, international donors should bolster independent media NGOs that support journalists in conflict zones with training, guidance and safety/security.

Thirdly, news organisations in more fragile contexts should consider adopting editorial guidelines to ensure neutral nomenclature in reporting on terrorism.

Fourthly, freedom of expression, including freedom of the media, is a fundamental right that is protected by Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights. In its interactions with countries that disregard this right, the EU and Member States should insist on reform, and show that in the counter-terrorism domain, restricting this right is counter-productive and serves to undermine the safety and security of the state and its citizens.

Finally, citizen journalists can benefit from similar support to that received by their professional media colleagues, and should be supported by training and potentially funding for the service they provide. But they also have valuable expertise and skills of their own, so international donors (such as the EU) should provide forums and opportunities for knowledge sharing in this regard.

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