Chapter 7

TERRORISTS WE LIKE AND TERRORISTS WE DON'T LIKE

Deni Elliott

Smoke billowed from the World Trade Center buildings on 9/11 as photojournalists made that day's attacks the most documented in the world's history. Associated Press (AP) photographer Mark D. Phillips caught in a picture's frame smoke that evoked an eerie combination of eyes, nose, mouth, and horns that some viewers saw as the face of Satan and others saw as an image of Osama bin Laden.[1]

Jack Stokes, AP Media Relations manager, said the photo had not been manipulated. "The smoke in this photo, combined with light and shadow, has created an image which readers have seen in different ways," he said.

Smoke and light and shadow may influence the meaning viewers bring to some photographs, but U.S. photojournalists provided images of terrorism both before and after 9/11 that included cues to tell viewers how they should feel. In providing negative cues regarding some non–U.S. terrorists, news media have reported nationalistically, in line with whom the U.S. government has termed *evil*. However, in situations in which the U.S. government's view is ambiguous regarding the appropriateness of terrorist activity, news media are similarly nonjudgmental.

U.S. citizens need something from news media that is different from that which they get from government. To make educated decisions for self-governance, citizens need a media perspective that is broader than the governmental rhetoric, and citizens need images that do more than serve the government's agenda.

This chapter explores alternative views of those labeled terrorists, with a special focus on images related to the attacks of September 11, 2001, and those related to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

TURBANS AND GENERIC IMAGERY

Type in keywords *terrorism* and *images* in any Web-based search engine and what comes up first and continually are image galleries from 9/11. Few would need to explore those galleries to be reminded of the images we carry in our memories: jet airliners crashing into the Twin Towers, both buildings collapsing, shocked and sweat-covered survivors, jumpers frozen in their eerily elegant falls to deaths, and pictures of grief made public.

The primary images of terrorism from 9/11 are of the consequences of the acts. The actors are less specific. Published images of the suicide bombers who carried out the attacks blur into a generic mug shot of a man of Middle Eastern ancestry. The pictures of Palestinians purportedly celebrating in response to the attacks include women in veils and men in turbans. Osama bin Laden is portrayed as the face of evil on "Wanted, Dead or Alive" posters, but his turban and other-than-Anglo features identify him most easily.

Just as the juxtaposition of airliners slamming into the world's most impressive office buildings creates an inescapable subtext of American power crumbled by American technology, the religious and cultural symbols of regional dress became icons for evil. When terrorists look different from the Anglo American dominant society, it is easy to label that look as evil. It is easy to extend that label to stereotypically include other people who happen to share a religion, culture, or physical look, or even to encompass an entire geographical region as the home of terrorists.

Americans used the turban as a symbol of terrorism long before 9/11, said Eli Sanders, *Seattle Times* staff reporter. Sanders suggested this tendency "may stem from the Iran hostage crisis" of the late 1970s. The symbolic connection between turbans and evil is blamed for hundreds of unprovoked post 9/11 attacks on Sikh men, although there is no connection between Sikhs and the 19 men who carried out the hijackings (Sanders, 2001).

The entertainment industry "has been at war with Islam for the last two decades," said Akbar Ahmed (2002), who teaches Islamic Studies at American University. Films that show Muslims in negative ways have "conditioned the American public to expect the worst from a civilization

depicted as 'terrorist,' 'fundamentalist,' and 'fanatic.' So powerful has this image been that popular culture makes the equation without thinking about it" (Ahmed, 2002). Long before September 2001, Americans were becoming acclimated to equate Middle Eastern look and dress with threat. People unfamiliar with those traditions may be made uneasy by differences in dress or religious traditions, but what permeated the American subconscious was not Muslim difference but Muslim threat. The image of this threat became an icon for terrorism.

PALESTINIAN SUICIDE BOMBERS

A photograph released by the Israeli army in June 2002 showed a Palestinian toddler dressed as a suicide bomber with explosives strapped to its body. The child wore a headband proclaiming allegiance to Hamas. (Hamas is a militant group that has claimed responsibility for the majority of the 71 suicide bombings in Israel in less than two years.)

Publication of the photograph reinforced and perpetuated the concept of the Middle Eastern terrorist, according to both Israeli and Palestinian sources. "The photograph of the baby suicide bomber symbolizes the incitement and hatred which the Palestinian leadership have been using to brainwash an entire generation of Palestinian children who have, unfortunately, taken in this message like mother's milk," said Dore Gold, a senior adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Palestinian Labor Minister Ghassan Khatib accused the Israeli media of using the photo to "further distort" the Palestinian position.[2] Dressing the child as a suicide bomber was explained as a joke.

DEFINING TERRORISM

Terrorism is defined by Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656 f (d), to include premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by non–state-sanctioned agents.[3] One of the primary things that distinguishes terrorism from military engagement is that while some civilians may be slain in military engagements, these unintended and unfortunate victims are *collateral damage*. In terrorism, civilians are the intended targets. In addition, terrorists differ from state-sanctioned military combatants because the latter fight on behalf of a recognized nation-state. Terrorists instead are funded and supported generally through less-formal means, including individual support, coalitions, and the informal support of some governments.

The actions and tactics that define terrorists often have little to do with how we distinguish terrorists we like—or that are portrayed in a positive way by mainstream U.S. media—and those we don't. Distinguishing good terrorists from bad terrorists is difficult when their tactics and complexions are the same, as with the Catholics and Protestants in Belfast. The distinction of good and bad terrorists is also made difficult when the U.S. government fails to recognize either side as threatening U.S. national interests. But when the U.S. government labels terrorists "freedom fighters," or "rebels," or the "opposition army," they are not likely to be condemned or presented in a negative light by media. The distinction between terrorist and freedom fighter, however, often turns on little more than the appearance of the non–state-sanctioned combatants, what our governmental leaders call them, and whether the current U.S. government supports their political agenda.

This permits terrorists to be transformed overnight. For instance, in 1985 then-President Ronald Reagan received a group of Afghan mujahideen and called them "freedom fighters" (Ahmad, 2001). Eqbal Ahmad, professor of international relations, examined 20 official U.S. documents on terrorism and found that "not one offers a definition" (Ahmad, 2001). In this way, "the terrorist of yesterday is the hero of today, and the hero of yesterday becomes the terrorist of today" (pp. 12–13).

Osama bin Laden, himself, was an ally of the United States in the mid-1980s. Ahmad writes:

> When the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan... Zia ul-Haq saw an opportunity and launched a jihad (a struggle) there against godless communism. The U.S. saw a God-sent opportunity to mobilize one billion Muslims against what Reagan called the Evil Empire. Money started pouring in. CIA agents started going all over the Muslim world recruiting people to fight in the great jihad. Bin Laden was one of the early prize recruits. (p. 22)

According to Ahmad, bin Laden remained loyal to the United States until the end of the Gulf War.

After Saddam was defeated, the American foreign troops stayed on in the land of the kaba (the sacred site of Islam in Mecca). Bin Laden wrote letter after letter saying, "Why are you here? Get out! You came to help, but you have stayed on." Finally he started a jihad against the occupiers. His mission is to get American troops out of Saudi Arabia. His earlier mission was to get Russian troops out of Afghanistan (p. 23).

THE COSTS OF POLITICALLY MOTIVATED LABELS

Portraying some terrorists as evil and some as not interferes with citizens' ability to understand the world in which they live. Understanding requires that one know the perspective that purported terrorists bring to their cause. Without that understanding, it is not likely terrorist activity can be prevented.