



# The semiotics of violent jihadist propaganda: The message and the channel

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by Massimo Leone

On the one hand, **terrorism is the antithesis of communication**. It does not aim at transmitting any message to its victims, but at annihilating them. On the other hand, yet, **terrorism is extremely powerful communication** for those who witness the tragedy, directly or through the media, and are either terrified or fascinated by it.<sup>1</sup> Terrorist acts revolutionize the social attitudes of individuals and groups, pushing them to radically change their lifestyles. Those acts instill fear, but can also attract supporters' admiration. From September 11 on, terrorist jihadist groups have resorted to **increasingly sophisticat-**

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Uva, 'Il terrore corre sul video. Estetica della violenza dalle BR ad Al Qaeda,' Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2008; William Mitchell and John Thomas, 'Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present,' Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

ed communication in order to accompany and influence the reception of their violent deeds. Obeying to a global tendency, for jihadists it was not sufficient to perpetrate violence and instigate terror. It was equally fundamental to let the world know that violence had been committed, and what was the appropriate cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic interpretation of it. However, whereas in the first years after the 9/11 attacks terrorist jihadist groups would create messages to be transmitted by mainstream media (e.g., Osama Bin Laden's videos broadcast by Al Jazeera), from the second half of the 2000s on, these groups have increasingly aimed at **developing their own media**. The shift has been also a consequence of the world-wide diffusion of social media. Through them, indeed, terrorist jihadist groups can not only reach large audiences, but also learn how to become **increasingly proficient** at it. As several analysts have already underlined, there is a technical abyss between the amateurish videotapes that Osama Bin Laden would broadcast through Al Jazeera and the sophisticated visual editing by which the so-called Islamic State (IS) flaunts its tragic accomplishments to the world.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, whereas in the past a temporal gap would occur between perpetration of a terror act and communication interpreting it for

the global audience, nowadays **the gap has practically disappeared**. As some commentators have pointed out, whilst in the past war acts were accompanied by rolling of drums, today terrorist jihadist violence is simultaneously ushered by drones of Tweets and YouTube videos.<sup>3</sup> **Timing and technique** are not the only elements that have marked the evolution of terrorist jihadist communication in the last decade. Also **the target of such communication has changed**. Osama Bin Laden's videos were primarily addressed to an Arabic-speaking and Muslim audience. Most Westerners could access their content only through the linguistic and cultural mediation of translators and interpreters. Moreover, these videos predominantly targeted Westerners as addressees of threats. On the contrary, communication developed by IS, especially from the second half of 2014 on, has had a different communicative agenda: it addresses Westerners not only as targets of terrorist threats, but also as **potential affiliates**. That is why IS communication increasingly resorts to European languages, and mainly to English and French, but also to Russian, German, Spanish, and Italian, in order to communicate with its audience. In these messages, the **visual dimension** is becoming more and more preponderant, yet it too seems to adopt the **codes and styles of**

**Western visual communication** (for instance, Hollywood narratives and visual effects).<sup>4</sup> Made by Western affiliates for other potential Western affiliates, the current IS communication seems to more and more bridge the gap between state war propaganda and terrorist communication; social media have enabled terrorists to directly reach a global audience as effectively, and sometimes even more, than traditional state broadcasting propaganda.

## IS communication increasingly resorts to European languages, and mainly to English and French, but also to Russian, German, Spanish, and Italian

In particular, the purposes of IS communication toward Western citizens is manifold:

1. Accompanying, describing, and **interpreting terrorist acts** in order to make their own geopolitical narrative globally predominant against the geopolitical narrative diffused by western governments and mainstream media;

2 Davide Ferrario, 'Le fiamme della guerra si misurano in gradi Fahrenheit,' Doppiozero, December 1, 2014, <http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/commenti/le-fiamme-della-guerra-si-misurano-gradi-fahrenheit>

3 Anti-Defamation League 2012, 'Tweeting for Terror: How Foreign Terrorist Organizations Exploit Twitter,' December 14, <http://www.adl.org/combatting-hate/international-extremism-terrorism/c/tweeting-for-terror.html>

4 Francesco Zucconi, 'Autoritratto canaglia,' Doppiozero, December 1, 2014; <http://www.doppiozero.com/materiali/commenti/autoritratto-canaglia>

2. **Instilling terror** so as to push to a destabilization of Western lifestyles and consequent sociopolitical tension;
3. **Gaining ideological and financial support** among old and new sympathizers, as well as **winning the competition for leadership** against other terrorist groups;
4. **Recruiting** new members. This last goal represents the real novelty of IS terrorist jihadist communication. With more than **three thousand IS fighters holding European passports**, the phenomenon is difficult to underestimate.

From the specific point of view of European countries, the shift in communication by IS involves three major security risks:

1. The risk that especially young

European citizens are **indoctrinated** by IS propaganda and persuaded to join terrorist activities in the Middle East, mainly in Iraq and Syria. Fight casualties in these countries already include hundreds of young European citizens;

2. The risk that some of these European fighters **return to their countries** after being indoctrinated and militarily trained, with the agenda and the ability to perpetrate major terrorist attacks against civilians in European cities, such as those that recently took place in Belgium, France, and Denmark;
3. The risk that supporters of IS who are European residents, even without training outside of Europe, are given detailed knowledge, mainly through the Internet, about how to **perpe-**

**trate major terrorist attacks** against civilians in European cities.

## Today terrorist jihadist violence is simultaneously ushered by drones of Tweets and YouTube videos

Given these risks, a major effort of intelligence is required. This effort must aim at several goals. On the one hand, **short-term investigative goals**; it will prove increasingly fundamental to:

- Know **history, evolution, present state, and prospective lines of development** of





- jihadist terrorist media agencies;
- Analyse media **strategies** adopted by these agencies;
  - Analyse **texts** produced and distributed through these agencies;
  - Study the **circulation** of these messages through the web;
  - Gather evidence and formulate hypothesis about the **cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic impact** of these media campaigns and messages on Western audiences;
  - Investigate the **potential and actual Western targets** of jihadist terrorist propaganda, in order to understand whether they share a common social, cultural, or psychological background.

On the other hand, investigative goals should be paralleled by **long-term comprehension**

**goals:**<sup>5</sup> jihadist terrorist propaganda is not an isolated phenomenon in history, but one that can be compared and contrasted with other instances of violent confessional persuasion that emerged in other socio-cultural contexts, historical periods, and religious domains.

### The evolution of media technology pushes toward new levels of efficacy

Research must therefore put jihadist messages in cross-cultural, trans-historical, and interdisciplinary perspective, in order to understand the transversal features of violent religious propaganda. **Gaining authority** through ref-

<sup>5</sup> Scott Atran, 'God and the Ivory Tower,' *Foreign Policy*, August, 2012.

erence to sacred texts and values;<sup>6</sup> **labeling the Other** as "the infidels"; **inciting believers** to forced conversion or to the annihilation of "infidels"; evoking through words, images, and other signs the idea of an **idolatrous enemy** to be violently subjugated; instilling the desire of embarking on **dangerous religious missions** and invoking the **sweetness of martyrdom**; **destroying the cultural and religious artifacts of the Other**: all these elements appear recurrently in history, often adopting expressive and emotional formulae that thin lines of cultural genealogy link to past representations, but that the evolution of media technology pushes toward new levels of efficacy.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, 'Reframing Sacred Values,' 221-46. *Negotiation Journal*, July, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Massimo Leone, 'Sémiotique du fondamentalisme religieux : messages, rhétorique, force persuasive' Paris: l'Harmattan, 2014.



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**Massimo Leone** is Professor of Semiotics and Cultural Semiotics at the Department of Philosophy, University of Turin, Italy. He graduated in Communication Studies from the University of Siena, and holds a DEA in History and Semiotics of Texts and Documents from Paris VII, an MPhil in Word and Image Studies from Trinity College Dublin, a PhD in Religious Studies from the Sorbonne, and a PhD in Art History from the University of Fribourg (CH). He was visiting scholar at the CNRS in Paris, at the CSIC in Madrid, Fulbright Research Visiting Professor at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Endeavour Research Award Visiting Professor at the School of English, Performance, and Communication Studies at Monash University, Melbourne, Faculty Research Grant Visiting Professor at the University of Toronto, “Mairie de Paris” Visiting Professor at the Sorbonne, DAAD Visiting Professor at the University of Potsdam, Visiting Professor at the École Normale Supérieure of Lyon (Collegium de Lyon), and Visiting Professor at the University of Kyoto. His work focuses on the role of religion in modern and contemporary cultures. Massimo Leone has single-authored six books, *Religious Conversion and Identity - The Semiotic Analysis of Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004; 242 pp.); *Saints and Signs - A Semiotic Reading of Conversion in Early Modern Catholicism* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010; 656 pp.), *Sémiotique de l'âme*, 3 vols (Berlin et al.: Presses Académiques Francophones, 2012), *Annunciazioni: percorsi di semiotica della religione* (Rome: Aracne, 2014, 1000 pp.), and *Spiritualità digitale: il senso religioso nell'era della smaterializzazione* (Udine: Mimesis, 2014), *Sémiotique du fondamentalisme: messages, rhétorique, force persuasive* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2014), edited twenty collective volumes, and published more than three hundred articles in semiotics and religious studies. He has lectured in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. He is the chief editor of *Lexia, the Semiotic Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication*, University of Torino, Italy and member of the jury that determines the Mouton d'Or Prize given to the best article published in the international journal *Semiotica* (de Gruyter) in a year (2012, 2013, 2014, chair of the jury in 2014). He is member of the scientific board of fifteen international journals. He is editor of two series of books, including *Semiotics of Religion*, at Walter de Gruyter.

He speaks Italian, English, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and has a working knowledge of Farsi and other ancient and modern languages.

