

**PICTURE FRAMING:
IMAGES OF WAR, PROTEST, AND FLAGS ON THE ALJAZEERA IN ARABIC WEBSITE**

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Abstract

War and protest are major components of the daily news. "If it bleeds, it leads" is a central axiom of news broadcasting. This paper examines the way that one globalizing news network uses images to frame stories about war and protest. Individualistic images of soldiers and weapons; death, destruction and suffering present important visual themes. At the same time, flag images invoke more communal identities. We examine such images from war and protest news stories in Arabic editions of Aljazeera websites during 2005-2006.

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Images as Frames

Picture frames suggest wooden slats surrounding colorful paintings. By the frames, we know art. In recent years, framing has also become a popular topic in the fields of political communication and psychology. Political framing, in this metaphorical sense, focuses on the way that context influences the meaning of public events. Much existing research has examined the framing effects of verbal political rhetoric (Lakoff, 2006 http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/projects/strategic/simple_framing ; Entman, 2003; Norris, 2003). Recent work has separately explored the dynamics of still and moving images in political life (Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Nelson and Boynton, 1997). In spite of the maxim that a picture is worth a thousand words, however, the way that images frame public issues has not been deeply explored. This paper moves into this space and focuses on visual rhetorical effects. It examines the way images were used to frame war and protest on the Aljazeera [Arabic] website between November 2005 and the end of 2006.

Images and Global Communication

The analysis of the 2005-2006 Aljazeera [Arabic] website springs from a larger project of our own. We have been studying global communication for a number of years (Beer and Boynton, 2007, 2004 <http://www.acjournal.org/holdings/vol7/index.htm>

Beer, Francis A. and G. R. Boynton. 2003 http://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/poroi/papers/beer030725_outline.html , 2003). We started with television news programs aimed at a global audience broadcast by BBC and CNN.

Visualization has been a central element in television broadcasting, and an important feature of our analyses. More recently we have turned to websites that aspire to a global audience: websites of Aljazeera, BBC and CNN. The technology for communication on the web has continued to change rapidly, and the news organizations followed the technology. We, in turn, followed the news organizations, moving our research to web based communication. This allowed us to add another 'voice' for our research. Aljazeera has both an English language website and an Arabic language website. We have followed both even though we cannot read Arabic. We can, however, follow the photo images at Aljazeera [Arabic].

While visualization had been an important element in television it appeared to be de-emphasized on the web. The websites of Aljazeera [English], BBC World, and CNN World had photo images with almost all stories, but they were still images rather than video and they were very small. This was probably due to bandwidth considerations. Both the news organizations and their readers had connections to the internet that moved information/bytes rather slowly. We are convinced that visual communication is an important amplification of words, and believe it is important to study the images used by the news organizations.

Globalizing news organizations are always in search of audience. War and violence are important in people's lives and lead them to search for news. We, therefore, think it useful to look at images of war and protest, which are central components of the daily news. As images appear in global news stories about war and protest, they frame the messages the stories convey, and they provide part of the texture that gives meaning to war and protest. The images include pictures of soldiers and weapons; death, destruction, and suffering; and flags. The study of these images on the Aljazeera [Arabic] website seems particularly appropriate since the Bush administration has felt that Aljazeera was working against them by showing graphic images of the US invasion.

Soldiers and Weapons

Images frame war and protest in different ways. One set of images frames war in terms of soldiers and weapons. We have such images from the 2005-2006 Aljazeera [Arabic] website.

This is the War Zone



And this



And this



Suffering and Size

War is not only about the actions of soldiers and weapons. It is also about destruction, death, and suffering wrought on their targets. Media also use images to portray these meanings of war. In this visual framing, the size of the image matters [Bob Boynton, <http://globalizing.wordpress.com/2006/12/07/size-matters>].

Images at 'postage stamp' size are not 'worth a thousand words.' The three English language websites have used photos at three sizes: tiny, in between, and small. The tiny photos were used to identify the story and averaged 75 pixels by 58 pixels. The in between size average was 204 by 157 pixels; this is the size of the photos at the top of each story. Aljazeera [English] and CNN World each used a single photo to focus the reader on the major story of the day, which averages 278 by 218 pixels. How these differences are important to the communication can be shown by taking a single photo and showing it at all of these sizes.

Tiny Standard Story Large Focus Attention

Aljazeera [Arabic]

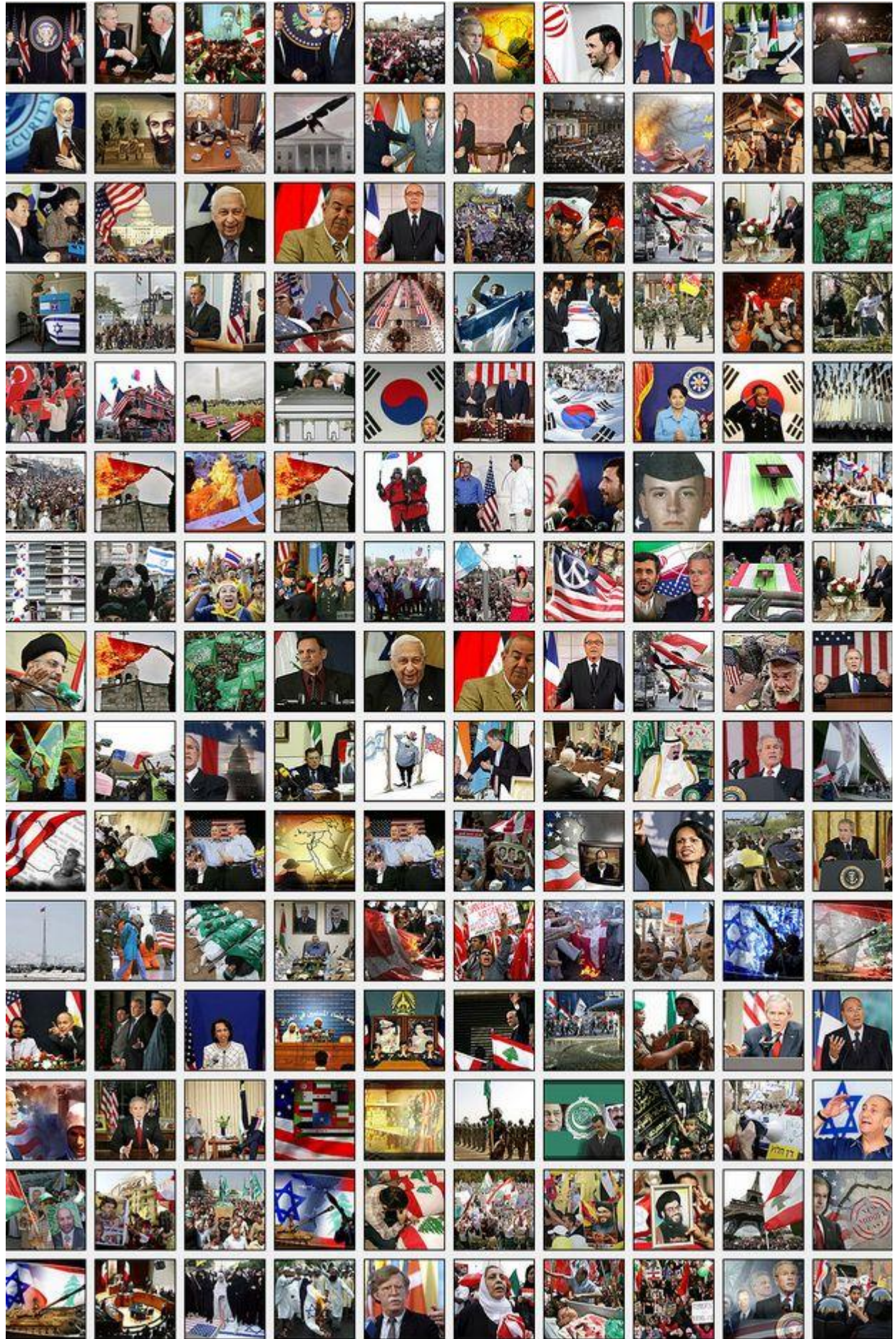


The communication of the tiny size is close to zero. The standard story size is still too small for the information that the picture could carry. The large photo used on the front page to call attention to the lead story of the day begins to reach a size in which someone looking at the photo can pick up on the details of the image. Aljazeera [Arabic] has consistently put the largest photo images on their website. Their photos measure 390 by 310. At this size the emotional impact of the image becomes as prominent as the ability to recognize what is being pictured.

Wrapped in the Flag

Images of soldiers with weapons and the suffering of their victims portray individuals in standard wartime roles. Another set of images frames war and protest in terms of a more communal symbol; the flag. Flags are critical symbolic components of both the larger war-peace process and also of its news media dimension. The American national anthem is entitled "The Star Spangled Banner," and it reminds us that "the flag was still there." A recent Clint Eastwood film, "Flags of Our Fathers," centers on the iconic photo of six U.S. Marines raising the U.S. flag on Mount Suribachi, Iwo Jima. Public support for war, we believe, includes a "rally round the flag" effect.

Of the approximately 2000 photo images we collected from the Aljazeera [Arabic] website during 2005-2006, there are something over 350 photos that include a flag. This following composite image includes tiny views of many of them.



These are some of the photo images we use to investigate the importance of flags in the news media and how flags frame war and peace.

War is not limited to soldiers with weapons; death, destruction, and suffering. It includes other worlds of meaning that try to put war actions and events in a larger frame. Flags provide some purpose, some way of life that can provide a larger meaning. So this is also the war zone.

Flags and States

The uses of the flag that we point out below all depend on the identification of flag and state. The flag becomes the visible symbol of "we" -- our people and our state. We assume the identification is present in all of the photo images though in some images the flag plays a rather mundane role. Even though we believe that it is always present, only in some cases does the identification becomes so strong that it cannot be missed.



Whether wrapped around the neck of chess pieces or joined in multi-faceted interaction there can be little doubt that Aljazeera [Arabic] used the flags to represent two states--the United States and Iran. But it is only plausible for them to make these constructions if they can be confident the readers will recognize their identification of flags and states. Otherwise they would be interesting but mysterious photo images.

Political cartoonists also identify states with flags. They have something they want to 'say,' but the saying is limited to pictures. In this cartoon it seems clear that the cartoonist has in mind the relationship between Israel and the US rather than being simply a drawing with two flags. Unless the



cartoonist can assume that the audience looking at the image will make that identification the cartoon loses its point.

Aljazeera [Arabic] quite self-consciously identifies flag and state, and they can do this because they assume their audience does the same.

Flags and Leaders



Flags are ubiquitous -- they can be found in all corners of the world. We have pictures of flags from North America, South America, Western Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific nations in the 350 plus photo images.

Some actors even have two flags to reflect the

people of whom they are a part. Sheikh Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah, for example, stands beside both the Hezbollah flag and the flag of Lebanon. In the multi-community state of Lebanon more than a single flag visualizes the cleavages that divide them and the community that binds them together -- even if the binding of community is somewhat tenuous.

Leaders may be given something of the iconic character given to flags. Nasrallah is Hezbollah; to see him is to see Hezbollah. Of course, he is not Hezbollah. But in the communication, as his picture becomes part of the story over and over, he becomes the iconic symbol of Hezbollah.

We see the same iconic character in the two photo constructions of Iranian and U.S. presidents Ahmadinejad and Bush below.



Flags and leaders are joined in the left photo construction; the presidents, the flags become the visible figure of the states. And on the right it is al-Qaeda versus the United States: the flag as US; bin Laden as al-Qaeda.

Politicians Wrap Themselves in the Flag

When Mr. Bush speaks it is the state speaking. He does not stand alone. Instead surrounded by the symbol of state -- not just one, but many flags -- he becomes the authoritative voice of the United States. He draws on the flags to authenticate his speaking.



So we say, politicians wrap themselves in the flag. By surrounding themselves with flags they legitimate the identification of their actions with the state.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki may have been more in need of the legitimacy that wrapping himself in the flag might yield than President Bush. He and his government were in serious trouble as sectarian conflict took the country toward full scale civil war. Mr. Bush was not far behind, however. The picture appeared on the Aljazeera [Arabic] website October 21, 2006. He was about to lead his political party to defeat. In only a few weeks he would become a president whose speaking for the state had been rejected in the voting booth, and all the flags he could assemble would not save him and his party. The political problems of the two leaders did not stop them from trying to leach legitimacy from the flags, however.

More than 150 of the 350+ pictures involve political leaders and flags. It is the largest subset of the pictures by far. The leaders stand in front of flags, as above. They stand beside flags. They sit close to flags. They sit around a table with the flag over in the corner. They get close to flags in great variety of poses.

In the 'I don't care what you say about me as long as you spell my name right' contest Mr. Bush is the clear winner. His picture appears on the Aljazeera [Arabic] website 32 times either alone or with other foreign leaders.

Number Appearances	Political Leader
32	Bush, U.S.
19	Rice, U.S.
11	Haniyeh, Palestine
8	Abbas, Palestine; Blair, UK
6	al-Maliki, Iraq
5	Ahmadinejad, Iran; Chirac, France; Nasrallah, Lebanon; Rumsfeld, U.S.

What is clear from the table is that the important news of 2005-2006 for Aljazeera [Arabic] was conflict in the Middle East: Iraqi civil war; Israel-Palestine conflict; world concern about Iranian nuclear development; and conflict between Israel and Lebanon as well as within Lebanon. The persons listed in the table are there because of their participation in these controversies. That Aljazeera [Arabic] focussed on these controversies is not a surprise, but these were also important foci for BBC World and CNN World.

Conflict provides the opportunity for leaders of states and movements to wrap themselves in the flag in front of a camera and try to mobilize support for wars and protests.



Attacks and Protests

How do you attack a state without taking up arms?

Just as the flag is a useful symbol for politicians who attempt to draw legitimacy from it, the flag is a useful symbol for those who would attack the state. These are Hezbollah women who, in the fall of 2006, show their



contempt for the attacking state, Israel, and its sponsor, the United States. They carry the flag of Hezbollah high. The flags of Israel and the US are fit only to be trampled. They are stomped across by hundreds protesting the deaths Israel inflicts and the US approves.

The most sustained example of using the flag as protest in 2006 grew out of the controversy concerning the publication of cartoons of Muhammad in a Danish newspaper.



You have desecrated our sacred symbol and we will desecrate yours. And across the muslim world the flag of Denmark was burned. The protests and flag burnings spread from Denmark to the Middle East and then to Africa and Indonesia. They treated the flag as a parallel sacred symbol with the prophet. The sacred symbol of western civilization was identified as the flag, which serves as symbol of nation-state, in their protests. [See Beer and Boynton, 2006 <http://myweb.uiowa.edu/gboynton/cartoonprotests/cartoonprotest.html>]

Flags were used to identify the villain.



In the photo on the left the 'evil' is in the foreground: prisoners being tortured and abused. The perpetrator is identified by the flag. In the photo on the right the stars are gone and the peace symbol replaces it. The transposed flag becomes protest against war and an appeal for peace, while identifying the perpetrator of the war as the US.

In the protest, the flags may be used to identify the "us" and to bind "us" together.



We are Hamas. We will not bend. We have been killed, mutilated, and humiliated by superior force. We respond in protest bound together by our suffering and our flag that is the visible symbol of who we are.

Giving Suffering Broader Meaning

The flag is used, finally, to give war's suffering a broader meaning. In the formal world of the US military, the coffin is symbolically wrapped in the flag, as the flag drapes the soldier's tomb.



The coffin of steel. The formal uniforms. The tightly folded flag. And the face in the background. In death is the state.

And in the less formal world of the Middle East this is how the sacrifice is given broader meaning.



Again the flag. The flag of Lebanon draped over coffins. The small child wrapped in the flag of Hezbollah. When you die for the state you do not die in vain.

Mememes and Meanings

The images of war and protest that we have shown above present war and protest in alternative symbolic frames. These frames help media elites and their audiences to interpret war in the contexts of multiple worlds of meaning.

The images are not simply random visual detritus thrown up by the events. They are examples of repetitive themes, critical tropes. They are, in the vocabulary of evolutionary theory, mememes -- elements in self-replicating cultural systems of war and protest (Beer, 1999 http://jom-emit.cfpm.org/1999/vol3/beer_fa.html; International Studies Quarterly, 1996).

The mememes of soldiers and weapons; death, destruction, and suffering are important repetitive markers of individual experience. At the same time, flags are central visual symbols of larger political communities. Political leaders use flags, together with other such symbols, to mobilize and motivate their followers for war and protest. The globalizing media carry the news.

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