

# Promoting Peace or Propaganda?

A blunt-but-mysterious anti-terror ad campaign leaves viewers and analysts alike wondering who's behind the curtains

By Marwa Helal

**A** TRUCK STOPS ON a sandy road near a sign that reads "Iraqi border." A man in a black-hooded cloak jumps out of the tanker, his sandaled feet kicking up a cloud of dust. The thundering echo of doom sounds. He walks to the marketplace, passing a man holding a bag of garlic.

BOOM. He drops the bag and garlic spills down the stairs.

BOOM. He passes a woman, relaxing on a balcony with her cooing baby.

BOOM. The baby cries. Soundlessly, the villain slides into a café. He looks into a mirror sitting above a pair of men playing chess.

BOOM. The mirror shatters.

BOOM. The waiter serving the two men spills the tray of hot tea on the gentlemen's game.

BOOM. As swiftly as he crept in, he creeps out. His grey eyes glint from underneath his black hood. He stares into the eyes of a man pulling out of a parking space, causing him to rear end the car in front.

BOOM. A fight ensues. A cryptic smile creeps across the hooded man's face. He walks through the grocery market, passing a birdcage.

BOOM. The cage rattles. The man flows out of the covered stalls. One last BOOM and a mushroom cloud billows orange, yellow and red above the market, sending the

people fleeing and screaming while the man smugly glides out of the crowd.

A black screen follows with the word al-irhab (terrorism) in bold red letters. Underneath appear the words la deen lahu (has no religion). Finally, an aya (verse) from Surat Al-Baqqara flashes: "If any do transgress the limits ordained by Allah, such persons wrong [themselves as well as others]" (Qur'an 2: 229). The red letters of the al-irhab logo then bleed down the black background.

If you watch much Arabic-language satellite television, chances are you've seen this clip — or one like it — a dozen times or more. The ad is part of an elaborate, multimedia campaign dubbed "No Terror," whose slick production values have raised more than a

The Grim Reaper winds through an Iraqi marketplace in stills from a No Terror ad produced in the US, but now airing on regional satellite TV.



few eyebrows — and left experts and viewers alike mouthing a resounding “Huh?”

The campaign’s website (noterror.info) claims that “All religions, human codes and ethics, and even our most primitive intuition, regard terrorism to be villainous. True Islam also rejects and condemns terrorism. ‘Terrorism has no religion’ is our ongoing communication campaign against extremist ideology that breeds terrorism, and we use Quranic Verses in their true Islamic meaning; free of the distortion committed by the misguided malicious terrorists.”

The site goes on to define terrorists as “criminals who try to garner political gain by terrorizing people. They function devoid of morals or conscience. They nurture the illusion that they are fighting for a higher cause when in reality they use sectarianism to divide and conquer the Iraqi people.”

Although the images in the advertisements are set in Iraq, nuances suggest something foreign about the campaign. For example, the pointy-hooded antagonist who walks through the market with a ‘life-sucking’ energy can be interpreted as the representation of a purely Western concept: the grim reaper. The road sign at the beginning

of the ad is in English and not the native Arabic. The special effects recall nothing if not the Hollywood-esque school of film making.

According to reports carried in the international press, a Hollywood-based company by the name of 900 Frames produced the \$1 million advertisement; a Los Angeles warehouse district was used as a mock-Iraq for the purposes of filming. Although we know who produced the advertisement, mystery still surrounds who commissioned the pro-

duction company.

It has since been reported that the project was privately funded by independent, non-governmental scholars, business people and activists living in Iraq and abroad, who preferred to remain anonymous. Although individuals were not named, it was implied that foreign involvement was driving the campaign.

According to the AP, “The US government refuses to say clearly whether it’s

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"Terror has no religion," the ads' closing scenes declare.

involved in the commercial [... it] had a hand in other public relations campaigns in the Mideast, including Arabic-language, US-financed Radio Sawa and the Al-Hurra TV station." It was also reported that the US government awarded a multimillion dollar contract last year to three companies to produce "multimedia products" to counter extremist ideology in addition to paying Iraqi newspapers for stories favoring coalition forces.

Correlation does not always mean causation, and unfortunately, a search for more details about the creators of the ad led to several dead ends. Countless inquiries by Egypt Today to the single e-mail address on the campaign's website (the only contact information available for the campaign) elicited no response. The American embassy in Cairo, the satellite broadcasters running the ad and 900 Frames all refused to comment.

However, et managed to track the origin of the IP address for the noterror.org website to Scottsdale, Arizona.

"The fact that no one knows who is responsible for the ads only contributes to suspicions that it is the work of an intelligence agency — whether US, Saudi or someone else," says Lawrence Pintak, director of the Adham Center for Electronic Journalism at the American University in Cairo. "The im-

plications of remaining anonymous," Pintak adds, "undermines [the ad's] credibility."

Credible foreign media agencies including the AP have gone so far as to openly speculate that a psychological operations group associated with the US military or intelligence community played a role in designing the ads.

But a year into the campaign, is it getting results?

"It looks like a brainwashing campaign," says 22-year-old Fatimah, one of a group of students sitting at a Cairo café.

Amr, a business consultant, critiques the ad more severely. "It looks like an attempt at manipulation," he says. "It does not trigger any feelings of sympathy — with the visual effects and nice shots it doesn't even feel like it is something from my culture — it might as well be a Coca-Cola ad, and I might as well switch back to watching Haifa [Wahbe, the Lebanese singer] without an afterthought."

"It is reaching the audience, since it is on Iraqi television," Pintak notes. "The biggest question is, will it have an effect? And the answer is: unlikely. People already know the impact of terrorism; they live with it every day. Those who support terrorism are not likely to have their minds changed by a television advertisement."

While viewers' opinions remain unaffected,

the ads have left them feeling everything from confused to fearful.

"I didn't get it until I watched it for the fifth time," says Manal, an engineer, mother and regular ArabSat viewer. "And once you understand it, you wonder why they chose this approach. However, the commercial attracted me enough to want to figure out what they were trying to convey, but once I understood it, I didn't like it. I don't believe a commercial can change a person's mind about something. A person has to be convinced of doing right and wrong from within themselves."

Manal has another bone to pick with the advertisement: "They are taking the meaning of the aya out of context; that verse is actually referring to the relationship between a husband and wife," says Manal, who says she reads the Qur'an on a daily basis as well as the tafsir (explanation) of each verse.

Most of those interviewed thought that despite the shock value, such a commercial would be unable to win viewers over to its message. "The advertisement scared me while watching it," says 22-year-old Ghanna. "It shows terror. It shows nothing positive and offers no solution to the problem they are depicting."

More successful campaigns running on ArabSat include one that encourages people to treat their house servants with respect, while another portrays how educating girls could help transform society for the better. Perhaps the most visually provocative is that of a group of veiled women sitting around a cadaver, and as they talk, each rips off a piece of flesh and eats it. The message is clear: Avoid gossip, because according to Islam, it is equivalent to eating the flesh of your brother or sister. Then there is the more subtle advertisement, one with no voice-over, of a man struggling to make the choice between the chore he is occupied with and going to pray. Each time, he chooses to pray.

Such ads leave no question about the message the creators want to deliver, and have been well received by their predominantly Arab audiences. This is in great contrast to the No Terror campaign, which lacks both authenticity and transparency — two key characteristics for a communications campaign on such a sensitive and controversial topic — especially for audiences in a region long accustomed to recognizing propaganda. *et*