

## Ideological Discourse Analysis of On-Screen Discourse on Terrorism

ELBAH Zoulaikha\* 

University of Khenchela Abbes Laghrou, Algeria  
elbahzoulikha@gmail.com

Received: 27/02/2023,

Accepted: 30/03/2024,

Published: 30/06/2024

**ABSTRACT:** *The purpose of the current study is to shed light on the representation of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood on-screen discourse on terrorism. It seeks to answer, especially, three main questions: What is the difference, if any, between pre- and post- 9/11 representation of Arabs and Muslims? Does post- 9/11 on-screen discourse reflect true experiences of soldiers in battlefields? And how is Islam perceived by westerners? To analyse the on-screen discourse, we have adopted Van Dijk's model of Ideological Discourse Analysis. The chosen data consider pre-and post- 9/11 attacks. As such, it comprises six films before and after this event. The analysis of on-screen discourse reveals that after 9/11 attacks, there has been a shift from a comical representation to a serious one. Also, post- 9/11 on-screen discourse on terrorism either depicts or simulates true experiences of American soldiers in battlefields. Besides, Islam is represented as a threatening radical ideology against a peaceful world.*

**KEYWORDS:** Terrorism, Islam, 9/11 attacks, Hollywood discourse, Political Propaganda.

\* Corresponding author: **ELBAH Zoulaikha**, [elbahzoulikha@gmail.com](mailto:elbahzoulikha@gmail.com)

ALTRALAG Journal / © 2024 The Authors. Published by the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria.

This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

## Introduction

A major assumption in Critical Discourse Analysis (hereafter CDA) states that people belong to different ideological groups that exist in opposition and struggle over power and social goods. The ideology, defined as a set of fundamental shared axiomatic beliefs (Van Dijk, 2011), is embedded in everyday social practices, including that of on-screen discourse, a good example of which is Hollywood discourse. The crucial aim of CDA is to investigate this often opaque relationship of causality and determination between discursive practices and social and cultural structures (Fairclough, 2013). In other words, the task of CD analysts is to address social wrongs (Fairclough, 2013) via making explicit social actors' ideological bias (Van Dijk, 2011, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

In the context of this study, analysing Hollywood discourse takes place to address potential prejudice and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims by a racist westerner. Meanwhile, it checks three main hypotheses. The first states that after 9/11 attacks, there has been a shift from a comical representation to a serious one. The second hypothesis states that post- 9/11 terrorist discourse either depicts or simulates true experiences of soldiers in battlefields against Arab and Muslim terrorists. The last hypothesis states that Islam is represented as a threatening radical ideology against a peaceful world.

Worthy of mention, several studies have considered Hollywood representation of Arabs and Muslims, particularly Shaheen's (2001, 2003) *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Shaheen claimed that "Arabs are the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood" (2001, p. 14). He (2003, p. 172) also added that more than 900 films "portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women, and children are really like". He further explained that he "was driven by the need to expose an injustice: cinema's systematic, pervasive, and unapologetic degradation and dehumanization of a people" (2003, p. 172). Other significant studies include Reid's (2013) *Discourse of Film Terrorism: Hollywood representations of Arab Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, 1991-2011* which represents a close study of Hollywood motion pictures. Also, Woods' (2019) *Adventure, Intrigue, and Terror: Arabs and the Middle East in Hollywood Film Music* is an interesting study that combines different approaches including Orientalism/postcolonial theory, film studies, and musicology.

### 1. Van Dijk's Ideological Discourse Analysis

Different CDA approaches have taken place to analyse discourse *critically*. Critical refers to "making visible the interconnectedness of things" (Fairclough, 2013, p. 39). Van Dijk's (1998) socio-cognitive approach is one of the most significant approaches within Critical Discourse Analysis. It examines the aforementioned interconnectedness in terms of a triangle: *discourse*, *society*, and *mind*. Its importance lies in considering cognition as an important mediator between discourse and society (Van Dijk, 1997). Also, focusing on both individual and social cognition is meant to explain the dynamic aspect of ideology. Van Dijk (2000) proposes a model of ideological discourse analysis that would enable critical discourse analysts to reveal the ideology set behind words, actions, and interaction. It also shows how certain linguistic structures, strategies and moves reflect an ideological bias. For a successful implementation of Van Dijk's model of ideological discourse analysis, we need first to go through two basic expressions before proceeding with the analysis of on-screen discourse. These include the structure of ideologies and the ideological square.

#### 1.1 The Structure of Ideologies

As stated above, ideologies are shared by social group members, and displayed in different social practices. As such, one of the social functions an ideology has is to signal social group unity, and distinction from otherness.

Van Dijk stated that “an ideology is a self-serving schema for the representation of Us and Them as social groups” (1998, p. 69). As such, it has the structure of group schema and includes the following categories:

- *Membership*: Who are we? Where are we from? What do we look like? Who belongs to us? Who can become a member of our group?
- *Activities*: What do we do? What is expected of us? Why are we here?
- *Goals*: Why do we do this? What do we want to realize?
- *Values/norms*: What are our main values? How do we evaluate ourselves and others? What should (not) be done?
- *Position and group-relations*: What is our social position? Who are our enemies, our opponents? Who are like us, and who are different?
- *Resources*: What are the essential social resources that our group has or needs to have? (Van Dijk, 1998, pp. 69-70).

## 1.2 The Ideological Square

The overall strategy that signals ideology in discourse is a polarized structure of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 260). This strategy consists of four main moves that form what Van Dijk called an Ideological Square:

1. Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us.
2. Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them.
3. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them.
4. Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us. (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 267).

In simple words, social actors show adherence to their ideological belonging(s) by emphasizing Positive Self and hiding and mitigating Negative Self. Meanwhile, they emphasize Negative Other and de-emphasize Positive Other.

## 2. Categories of Ideological Discourse Analysis

The ideological square above is reflected in different discursive strategies, structures, and moves that Van Dijk referred to as categories of ideological discourse analysis. Van Dijk (2000) suggested a list of categories that is by no means an exhaustive one. That is, ideological analysis of discourse can always reveal other ones. In the context of our study, we draw on these categories to claim for or against the existence of a racist ideology against Arabs and/or Muslims in pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse on terrorism. In doing so, we also check the aforementioned hypotheses.

### ACTOR DESCRIPTION (MEANING)

In both pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse, actors are described as members of two major groups: Terrorists and anti-terrorist heroes. There is also a third group of anti-terrorist Arabs. However, as the latter are perceived by anti-terrorist heroes (westerners) as an ‘Other’ which cannot be trusted, just like other Arabs, this group ends up being classified implicitly within the group of terrorists.

### Pre- 9/11 Attacks (Battlefield in the United States)

In pre- 9/11 on-screen discourse on terrorism, the confrontation between terrorists and anti-terrorists took place in the United States.

## Anti-Terrorist Heroes

The group of anti-terrorist heroes shows the following characteristics:

- Military Groups: Omega Sector (invented), FBI, CIA.
- Non-muslims.
- Living in West (U.S.).
- Western Names: Harry, Helen, David, Cahill, Anthony, etc.
- Moral Description: Special agents, secret agents, smart, unbreakable, they master the language and the strategy of the enemy (the Arabs), they master technology and they are highly equipped.
- Physical Description: Classy, elegant, and good looking.

## Terrorists

Terrorists, for their part, show other characteristics:

- Jihad groups.
- Muslims: They make use of a certain vocabulary such as: ‘Allah’, ‘Allah Akbar’, ‘Djihad’, ‘Islam’, ‘Islamic beliefs’, the other life, ‘Al thar’ (an Arabic word which means ‘Revenge’), etc.

In *Executive Decision*, a dark-complected man, early 20s, has exploded a restaurant using a canvas vest to which are taped a dozen blocks of plastic explosive. This man screamed in Arabic “Listen to the sound of Al-thar” (Beard, 1996, 00.10.41), and presses the detonator.

- Muslims are also recognized by their way of dressing.
- Living in the Middle East (Syria, Irak, Iran, etc.).
- Arabic Names: Khaled, Djamel, Naji Hassan, etc.
- Moral Description: Stupid, irresponsible, easily deceived, crazy, reckless, radicals, they do not master technology, they use primitive weapons (for the bomb used in *Executive Decision* (Beard, 1996), it has been made by a *French Algerian* i.e., a westerner), some terrorists are misled by other ones.
- Terrorists are also described as criminals as they do not care about innocent people. In *Executive Decision*, a terrorist called Ali Nagi Hassan, who was responsible for Jaffa's (the leader of the terrorists) security sent a message to the U.S. government stating:

This is Al Tar. I have a message for the American president. The London bombing will have indicated the strength of my resolve. I am in control of flight 343. This aircraft and its passengers shall remain in my custody until Abu Jafa, criminally held against his will, is released from captivity. My instructions are to be followed precisely, no theatre, no negotiation. El Said Jafa will be released and taken to Gatwick airport where a private jet will be given clearance to land, then allowed to leave with him. Upon the release of our leader, flight 343 will continue on to Washington where half the passengers will be exchanged for fuel and for fifty million in gold bullion. Abu Jafa must be airborne and in communication with me by 6 a.m Greenwich mean time or the citizens of London will suffer another punishment on your behalf that will make today's bombing pale in comparison (Beard, 1996, 00.18.28).

- Physical Description: Indecent and inelegant look.

## Anti-Terrorist Arabs

This group includes those Arabs who are against terrorism. Their main role is to stand by anti-terrorist heroes to fight terrorism. The anti-terrorist Arabs are represented by:

- Faisil (Grant Heslov) in *True Lies* (Cameron, 1994).
- The second-in-command of Naji Hassan in *Executive Decision* (Beard, 1996).
- Frank Haddad (Tony Shalhoub) in *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998).

These characters are described as:

- Muslims.
- Faisil and Frank Haddad live in the West, whereas the second-in-command of Naji Hassan lives in the Middle East.
- Faisil and Frank Haddad work, as second-class agents, with anti-terrorist heroes.
- Faisil and Frank Haddad are raised and live in the West (still, they are not fully trustable because of their Arabic origin).
- Thanks to being trained by the ‘Other’ (Westerners), Faisil and Frank Haddad are fairly good.

### **Post- 9/11 Attacks (Battlefield Outside the United States)**

In post- 9/11 on-screen discourse on terrorism, the confrontation between terrorists and anti-terrorists took place in a hostile environment: Saudi Arabia, Irak, and a black site prison outside U.S. Just like pre- 9/11 on-screen discourse, post- 9/11 on-screen discourse describes characters as belonging to one of these groups: anti-terrorist heroes, terrorists, and anti-terrorist Arabs.

### **Anti-Terrorist Heroes**

The group of anti-terrorist heroes shows the following characteristics:

- Military Groups (FBI, CIA).
- Non-muslims.
- Living in the West (U.S.).
- Western Names: Ronald, Francis, Grant, Janet, etc.
- Moral Description: Special agents, secret agents, smart, unbreakable, ‘a legend’, they master technology and are highly equipped, no place for fear, no place to question the case.

### **Terrorists**

Terrorists show other characteristics:

- Djihad groups & European jihadists.
- Muslims: They make use of a certain vocabulary such as: Allah, Djihad, Islam, Islamic beliefs, Allah Akbar, Salam allaikm, Qur’an, Cheikh, Chahada, Jana, the other life, etc. They are also recognized by their way of dressing.
- Terrorists have a hostile attitude towards the westerners. In *The Kingdom*, a Saudi police officer addressing his colleague who was trying to protect FBI agent stating: “You’re ready to die?! Defending your enemy?!” (Berg, 2007, 00.40.15).
- Living in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Fallujah, Sadr, Ramadi, Al-Qaeda).
- Having Arabic Names: Zarkaoui, Mustafa, Cheikh El-Abidi, Yacine, Amine Mansour, etc.
- Moral Description: “They are not like other idiots” (referring to pre- 9/11 terrorists), they are trained very well, merciless, butchers, monsters, serious, unstoppable, deceitful, liars, untrustable, financially supported, they master technology.
- Some of them are not convinced with what they do (in *One Shot* (Nunn, 2021) for instance). They do not feel they have to do it. Other terrorists do it for money.

## **Anti-Terrorist Arabs**

As mentioned above, this group includes those Arabs who stand by anti-terrorist heroes in the fight against terrorism. They are represented by:

- Faris El-ghazi in *The kingdom* (Berg, 2007).
- An Iraqi in *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014)
- Amine Mansour in *One Shot* (Nunn, 2021)

In comparison with the other anti-terrorist Arabs, Amine Mansour has shifted from a terrorist to an anti-terrorist Arab as he decided to collaborate with the Other (anti-terrorist heroes) to defuse the bomb, and save his family which was in the explosion zone.

Anti-terrorist Arabs are described as:

- Muslims.
- Collaborating with anti-terrorist heroes.
- Living in the Middle East.
- Not fully trustable because of their Arabic origin.

## **AUTHORITY (ARGUMENTATION)**

Islam is represented as a motive authority that calls for violence against non-believers, whereas Christianity is represented as a motive authority that calls for settling peace in the world. Westerners take upon themselves the mission of re-establishing peace and security in the world because of U.S. political leadership of the world.

## **BURDEN (TOPOS)**

In both pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse, Arabs and muslims are described as terrorists. They are a 'burden' for the West. As such, their presence is not welcome in the West. In *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998), U.S. citizens of an Arab origin are detained as terrorist suspects.

## **CATEGORIZATION (MEANING)**

Actors are categorized into: Westerners and Arabs. Arabs are categorized negatively. They are attributed negative characteristics, especially being 'terrorists'. Those from the West are categorized positively (they are attributed positive characteristics; they are anti-terrorist heroes/peace-keepers).

## **COMPARISON (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)**

An important ideological category is that of comparison that entails comparing the Self to the Other. In the context of Hollywood on-screen discourse on terrorism, the ingroup (Westerners) is compared to the outgroup (Arabs and Muslims).

## **CONSENSUS (POLITICAL STRATEGY)**

Consensus refers to the claim that the war against terrorists ‘THEM’ (Arabs and muslims) is legitimated being a necessary and inevitable policy towards protecting ‘US’ (the West). That is, a racist ideology is embedded within a nationalist one that pretends protecting the interests of the nation (U.S.).

### **DISCLAIMERS (MEANING)**

Disclaimers save face by mentioning Self (anti-terrorist heroes) positive characteristics, but then focus rather exclusively, on Other negative attributes. For instance, in *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998), agent Frank (an Arab American) is given a space to express his anger towards detaining his son as a terrorist suspect. Addressing his partner Hub, Frank Haddad expresses his disappointment that he and his family can never be integrated in the western community whatever they do for this country (United States).

They got Frankie. My kid's here. My kid's here someplace. He's only thirteen. They came into my house. My wife told them who I was. How many times did I put it on the line, Hub --? How many times. Twenty years as an American citizen. Ten years in the bureau -- They knocked her down... and took him. Out of my own house” (Zwick, 1998, 1.22.49)

This move is meant to present a positive Self (Westerners) who gives a space to the ‘Other’ to defend himself and ask for citizenship rights. However, following this grievance by scenes of terrorist attacks held by Arabs and Muslims is meant to forfeit this right and justify accusing all Arabs and Muslims of terrorism.

### **DISTANCING (MEANING, LEXICON)**

US-THEM polarization is expressed by words that imply distance between US and THEM. In other words, WE (Westerners) are different from THEM (Arabs and Muslims). This is expressed by the use of words like (he, they, others, etc.) instead of naming terrorists. Distancing is also represented in changing the battlefield from inside the United States (pre- 9/11 on-screen discourse) to outside the United States (post-9/11 on-screen discourse). This implies that it is THEM (Arabs and Muslims) who are terrorists, not US (Westerners).

### **DRAMATIZATION (RHETORIC)**

Dramatization is meant to exaggerate the facts in one’s favour. Post- 9/11 on-screen discourse describes terrorism (Arabs and Muslims) as a real threat to the U.S. citizens. Numbers of those who have been killed and scenes of 9/11 attacks are recalled.

### **EMPATHY (MEANING)**

A good example can be taken from *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014) where the sniper gets sweaty and angry when he finds himself obliged to take down a child and a woman who intend to use a hand-carried missile against Marines. The hero (called ‘the Legend’) spent all day feeling sorry that the first one he killed was a child. However, his discussion with a team member reveals that he is not that sorry as he legitimates any action meant to stop terrorists, including killing a child or a woman. As if he says ‘We are sorry to kill you, but we are obliged to’. He also recalls a childhood scene where his father was teaching him to be the hero whose job is to protect weak people:

There are three types of people in this world. Sheep, wolves and sheepdogs. Some people prefer to believe that evil doesn’t exist in the world, and if it ever darkened their doorstep they wouldn’t know how to protect themselves... those are the sheep. Then you got predators who use violence to prey on the weak. They’re the wolves. Then there are those blessed with the gift of aggression and an overpowering

need to protect the flock. These men are the rare breed that live to confront the wolf. They are the sheepdogs” (Eastwood, 2014, 00.04.51)

Empathy in this case will be accorded to ingroup members (the Westerners) not THEM, represented as victims because they are put in such a difficult situation.

### **EUPHEMISM (RHETORIC; MEANING)**

The well-known rhetorical figure of euphemism, a semantic move of mitigation, plays an important role in talk about The Other (Arabs and Muslims). It is meant to reinforce a positive self-presentation and the avoidance of negative impression formation about US (Westerners). Negative opinions about Arabs, Muslims, and Islam are often mitigated, through giving a space of freedom of worship as far as it does not threaten the safety of US. Especially, in *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998), Expressions like “What if they (terrorists) were black people? What if they were Italian?” Said by an unseen character is meant to propagate a positive image of US. Also, “They love this country as much as we do” is another move towards camouflaging the western feeling of hatred against Arabs and Muslims. This would mitigate hence the negative impression against the West, especially after detaining but the Arabs as suspects of terrorist attacks against New York City. The last scene in *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998), where agent Frank Haddad (Tony Shalhoub) is shown in the mosque practicing his religion, is meant to appease anger against mistreating Arabs and muslims. Another important scene is that where the heroine Elise Kraft (Annette Bening), who grew up in Lebanon, gets killed by her Arab-American lover Samir Nazhde (Sami Bouajila). Saying her last words from the Bible followed by the Islamic word ‘Inchallah’ is also meant to propagate a positive Self who tolerates religious differences in spite of being, according to what is communicated in the on-screen discourse, a victim of a religious radicalization (Islam). The same is true for the negative acts of the ingroup. Thus, racism or discrimination will typically be mitigated as “anger”, “unequal treatment”, respectively (Van Dijk, 2000).

### **EVIDENTIALITY (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)**

Westerners present some evidence or proof for their bad actions against Arabs and Muslims. In the context of the films in question, reference is made to the Gulf War triggered by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and peacekeeping effort in Somalia. Both of which took place before 9/11 attacks. After 9/11 attacks, U.S. finds a powerful evidence to act against terrorist cells in Irak, Afghanistan, and any other place in the world.

### **EXAMPLE/ILLUSTRATION (ARGUMENTATION)**

So as to support their claim for a positive Self (Westerners) against a negative Other (Arabs and Muslims), the screenwriters and directors make use of an important ideological category which is that of ‘example’ or ‘illustration’. This latter represents a powerful move in argumentation and entails giving concrete examples of what happened in the Middle East and U.S. (referring to the victims of terrorism inside and outside the United States).

### **EXPLANATION (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)**

Van Dijk (2000, p. 70) stated that “social psychology uses the notion “Ultimate Attribution Error,” according to which negative acts of ingroup members tend to be explained (away), whereas the negative acts of outgroup members tend to be explained in terms of inherent properties of such actors (e.g., because they are unreliable or criminal)”. In the context of the on-screen discourse in question, negative acts of Arabs and Muslims (terrorism) are explained in terms of inherent properties i.e., all Arabs are terrorists. Even anti-terrorist Arabs, who were born and/or raised in U.S., cannot be trusted because of their Arabic origin.



## **FALLACIES (ARGUMENTATION)**

The on-screen discourse includes many fallacies meant to legitimate actions against Arabs and Muslims. For instance, in *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014), when the hero's friend gets killed, the hero states that it is the letter he has written that killed him. In this letter, his friend questions the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq. Another fallacy states that if the Westerners do not stop terrorism in the Middle East, terrorism will move to U.S. This fallacy is especially reinforced by the 9/11 attacks. Another fallacy states that U.S. is the principal peacekeeper in the world which sacrifices its soldiers to protect an 'Other'. Also, another fallacy states that people in the host countries; victims of extreme systems, welcome and appreciate U.S. presence and help. This is especially displayed in the support the U.S. troops get from anti-terrorist Arabs. In *The Kingdom* (Berg, 2007), the FBI agents, who are not welcome by the local authorities, find all sorts of difficulties in their investigation. It is only when the FBI agent Ronald Fleury (Jamie Foxx) blackmails the Saudi Arabian consul that the team gets five days to finish their job. Supported by Colonel Faris Al Ghazy (Ashraf Barhom), the team was able to accomplish the hard mission in a very hostile environment.

## **GENERALIZATION (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)**

Another important discursive practice is that of generalization "in which concrete events or actions are generalized and possibly abstracted from, thus making the claim broader, while more generally applicable" (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 71). In the context of this study, terrorist attacks are not considered as actions of small groups of terrorists, but are attributed to Arabs and Muslims in general. The latter are depicted as violent and extremist. This has been especially confirmed in *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998) where all Arab Americans are detained, including women, children, and the elderly. Worthy of mention, this film is considered as a prophetic film to 9/11 Attacks.

## **HISTORY AS LESSON (TOPOS)**

This category states that "the present situation can be relevantly compared to earlier (positive or negative) events in history" (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 72). After 9/11 attacks, on-screen discourse refers to this event as a lesson of history. Especially, in *One Shot* (Nunn, 2021), the ultimate aim of the anti-terrorist group is to prevent, whatever the cost, the same tragedy to happen again. This would include accusing and murdering the 'Other' (Arabs and Muslims).

## **HUMANITARIANISM (TOPOS, MACROSTRATEGY)**

Humanitarianism refers to the defence of human rights. Westerners pretend to interfere in Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and other sites in the world to defend people's rights. However, they are doing so while murdering other ones. Also, a scene like that at the beginning of *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014), where the American soldier 'the Legend' was obliged to kill a child and a woman, is depicted as a very harsh experience for him. Also, another scene where the butcher 'an Arab terrorist' kills an Arab child with a drill is depicted by the film maker as an unbearable experience for the American soldiers. Furthermore, in *One Shot* (Nunn, 2021), the analyst Zoe Anderson (Ashley Greene) protests abusing the prisoners, especially Amine Mansour (Waleed Elgadi) stating that it is not the right way to make them talk. All these scenes are meant to propagate a positive image of a 'human' Self.

## **HYPERBOLE (RHETORIC)**

"hyperboles are semantic rhetorical devices for the enhancement of meaning [...] bad actions or properties of the Others are expressed in hyperbolic terms (our bad actions in mitigated terms), and vice versa" (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 73). Bad actions of Others 'Arabs and Muslims' are described as terrorism. Whereas, bad actions of

US ‘Westerners’ are described as Self-defence and peace-keeping procedures. Hyperbole is also expressed in broadcasting the image of an unbreakable, courageous (sometimes a Legend e.g., in *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014), intelligent, handsome, well-equipped, etc. westerner in comparison with a crazy, stupid, reckless, ignorant, irresponsible, etc. Arab Muslim. Not only people are depicted in such a dichotomy. Even their belongings are depicted in the same way. In a scene in *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014), when a friend of the hero has bought a ring from Iraq as a gift to the woman he loves, the hero’s reaction was negative. He could not believe buying something from that ‘shit’ (he means Iraq). Worthy of mention, underestimating the power of the Other ‘Arab and Muslim terrorists’ has decreased after 9/11 attacks. That is, on-screen discourse has shifted to consider the latter as a serious threat. Arab terrorists of post- 9/11 on-screen discourse are well-equipped, intelligent, courageous, and financially supported jihadists who are ready to die to get what they want. In *One Shot* (Nunn, 2021), in spite of being tortured for many days, Amine Mansour, who wanted to revenge the death of his son killed in a U.S. bombing, did not confess where the bomb was. Only when agent Harris told him that his pregnant wife was in the explosion zone that he showed readiness to collaborate.

I’m dropping the weapon. I’m unarmed. Ok ... Just let me talk to you. Amine. Amine. It’s your wife. Your wife. She is pregnant. She is pregnant... Four months. Four months. That’s sixteen weeks. Look. It’s a boy. Do you see that? ... They are both in the blast zone. But it’s not too late. You could still save them. You just need to tell him where the bomb is. They don’t have time to search the whole D.C. You need to help us. Please, we need your help. If you go out that gate, your son and your wife are gonna be dead, you understand? They are gonna be dead. We need your help.” (Nunn, 2021, 01.28.14)

At last, Amine Mansour stated: “I don’t know what to believe in. I don’t know what to believe in anymore” (Nunn, 2021, 01.31.22) before he finally surrendered.

## **ILLEGALITY (ARGUMENTATION)**

For Westerners, Arabs and Muslims, even those who have been born in western countries, are foreigners. This is displayed in treating them illegally by the authorities. They are the first to be accused for committing crimes or conducting a terrorist attack. In *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998), of all ethnic groups, only Arabs are detained without any due process. The son of an FBI agent Frank Haddad (Tony Shalhoub), who is only 13 years old, is also detained just for having an Arabic origin. His father’s position could not save him.

## **INTERACTION AND CONTEXT**

Not only at the level of words and actions that the Other (Arabs and muslims) is being negatively treated and described. Even at the level of interaction, Arabs and Muslims are looked down and underestimated. Whether pre- or post- 9/11 attacks, they are always inferior to their counter-part (the westerners). In *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014), Mustafa (Sami Sheik) is depicted as a powerful Arab sniper. Yet, his counter-part Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper) is depicted as a ‘Legend’ who was able to take him down in spite of being an impossible target. The context is also described in the same way. Western countries (US) are more developed than Middle Eastern ones (THEM). Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, etc., are described as nothing but a “damaged zone” where primitives, savages, criminals, and terrorists hide and must be eliminated.

## **IRONY (RHETORIC)**

In *True Lies* (Cameron, 1994), the hero Harry Tasker (Arnold Schwarzenegger) makes fun of an Arab in a party saying “How are you? So good to see you” (Cameron, 1994, 00.05.15), pretending they know each other. This Arab is left embarrassed trying to remember this old friend. Also, riding a horse and pursuing an Arab terrorist on a motorcycle is meant to underestimate Arabs. Besides, putting the four bombs in Persian

statues, on-screen discourse makes fun of Persian civilization. Also, referring to the Arab cameraman who has forgotten to charge the battery is meant to signal Arabs' incompetence. Furthermore, in *Executive Decision* (Beard, 1996), the terrorists are described as cowards with old-fashioned firearms, who panic and scream the moment real heroes (westerners) enter the frame.

### **LEGALITY (ARGUMENTATION)**

Part of the arguments for military involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia is to settle peace and legality in the region, and to offer support to the oppressed people. In other words, in an attempt to justify the invasion of these countries by the United States, on-screen discourse describes the westerners as the heroes whose mission is to stop terrorism and save people's life.

### **LEXICALIZATION (STYLE)**

"Similar meanings may thus be variably expressed in different words, depending on the position, role, goals, point of view or opinion of the speaker, that is, as a function of context features" (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 77). An example of that is the fact that killing is referred to as 'taking down an enemy' or 'self-defence' if the doer is a westerner. If it is an Arab Muslim, it is 'a merciless murdering'. The reality is one, but referred to differently.

### **METAPHOR (RHETORIC)**

To claim for a positive Self, social actors can also rely on metaphors. For instance, in *True Lies* (Cameron, 1994), the American agents work as secret agents in Omega Sector described as the 'Last Line of Defence'. Also, in *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014), the American sniper is referred to as a 'Legend' repeatedly and in exaggerated way. These metaphoric expressions and others are meant to propagate not only a positive self-image, but a powerful and an unbreakable one.

### **NATIONAL SELF-GLORIFICATION (MEANING)**

"positive self-presentation may routinely be implemented by various forms of national self-glorification: Positive references to or praise for the own country, its principles, history and traditions" (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 78). This has taken place in different scenes like, for example, referring to Crusades in *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014).

### **NEGATIVE OTHER-PRESENTATION (SEMANTIC MACROSTRATEGY)**

"the categorization of people in ingroups and outgroups, and even the division between 'good' and 'bad' outgroups, is not value-free, but imbued with ideologically based applications of norms and values" (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 78). As already stated, the Other (Arabs and Muslims) is negatively presented at all levels. It is a strategy meant to justify accusing them of terrorism and killing them.

### **POSITIVE SELF-PRESENTATION (SEMANTIC MACROSTRATEGY)**

Meanwhile, the Self (westerners) is positively presented at all levels. Hence, it should lead the world because it is meant to do so.

### **NUMBER GAME (RHETORIC, ARGUMENTATION)**

Van Dijk stated that "Much argument is oriented to enhancing credibility by moves that emphasize objectivity. Numbers and statistics are the primary means in our culture to persuasively display objectivity"

(2000, p. 79). In several scenes, the number game (the number of actual and potential victims of terrorism inside and outside U.S.) is invested as an intelligent move towards legitimating acting against Arabs and Muslims.

### **POLARIZATION, US-THEM CATEGORIZATION (MEANING)**

This refers to the categorical division of people into ingroup (US) and outgroup (THEM). This has been observed in all films where ingroup (US) represents the anti-terrorist group and outgroup (THEM) represents the terrorists. Also, in relation to the third group, the in-between group of anti-terrorist Arabs, it seems clear that they are not fully integrated in any of the other two groups. That is, in spite of joining the first group (anti-terrorist heroes) in their war against terrorism, it looks like they cannot be fully trusted. In short, because of their Arabic origin, they end up being considered as an 'Other'. These prejudiced attitudes embodied in the on-screen discourse are insidious. For instance, in *The Siege* (Zwick, 1998), in defence of the detained Arabs, an unknown actor states: "They love this country as much as we do". However, he ignores that the same expression, that is meant to express good feeling towards Arabs, excludes them from the ingroup (They vs We). Also, being assigned to an unknown actor, the message seems unimportant and marginal.

### **POPULISM (POLITICAL STRATEGY)**

It is a strategy which states that a given opinion is shared by all people, and not only a restricted number of them. It is meant to gain support and seek legitimation. In the context of on-screen discourse, the war against terrorism is generally described as American people's will, especially after 9/11 attacks. Even those actors who question the case, they are depicted as mistaken as the consequences confirm Arabs' guiltiness.

### **REASONABLENESS (ARGUMENTATION MOVE)**

As claimed by Van Dijk (1998, p. 255), "Legitimation is one of the main social functions of ideology". So as to gain legitimation, ingroup subjects (westerners) are also depicted as rational and reasonable. This takes place in attempt to justify all their deeds and decisions (killing terrorists, suspecting Arabs and Muslims, invading some Middle East countries, etc.).

### **REPETITION (RHETORIC)**

Throughout on-screen discourse, repetition plays an important role in emphasizing the positive Self (westerners) and the negative Other (Arabs and Muslims). Repetition takes place at different levels: words, actions, scenes, etc.

### **SITUATION DESCRIPTION (MEANING)**

Describing a given situation is an important move to justify making certain decisions. For instance, 9/11 attacks are a turning point in the history of U.S. that is transferred to on-screen discourse. This event changes the situation from *comical* and *fictive* to *serious* and *realistic*. Also, violent actions from the part of ingroup subjects always take place within a highly selected context (situation) that makes it a hard, but a necessary decision.

### **VICTIMIZATION (MEANING)**

The ingroup is represented as a victim of terrorism, the main responsible of which is the outgroup (Arabs and Muslims). Scenes of dead bodies, pieces of human bodies (*American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014)), the suffering of the families of those who were killed in war sites, soldiers suffering war trauma, etc., are all meant to depict the ingroup as a victim. In *American Sniper* (Eastwood, 2014), when the hero (the Legend) finally comes back and recovers from war trauma, he gets killed by an emotionally unstable ex-soldier. However, this latter is described as a war victim. That is, the hero is a victim of another victim, playing, as such, both of them the victim role; and leaving hence the role of 'the criminal' to be played by Arabs and Muslims.

## DETOPICALIZATION

De-topicalization refers to the non-mentioning of otherness. This move is largely practiced in all films as they all focus on westerners and diminish the space devoted for otherness (Arabs and Muslims). Westerners' lives, families, work, legendary deeds, etc., are depicted, sometimes in details, whereas those of the villains' (Arabs and Muslims) are not mentioned. In fact, if Arabs and Muslims are present, it is only to distort their image.

## NORM AND VALUE EXPRESSION

An important move to describe a Positive Self is to refer to respecting norms and values. Hence, westerners are depicted as responsible citizens, caring parents, courageous soldiers, having a sense of humanity, respecting and defending others' rights and freedom, etc.

## NORM AND VALUE VIOLATION

Others (Arabs and muslims) are depicted as violating the very norms and values the ingroup hold dear, especially human rights, political freedom, and mercy for their people. Hence, Arabs and Muslims are described as primitive, savage, inhuman, and uncivilized.

## 3. Discussion

The analysis of on-screen discourse on terrorism reveals that westerners hold a racist ideology towards Arabs and Muslims. This is manifested in the overall strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. As seen above, a variety of discursive structures, strategies, and moves were implemented towards legitimating a positive Self (westerners) and delegitimizing a negative Other (Arabs and Muslims). Also, comparing pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse confirms the first hypothesis that claims for a shift from a comical representation to a serious one (see the ideological category SITUATION DESCRIPTION (MEANING)). In other words, while pre- 9/11 on-screen discourse described terrorists in a comical and ironic way, post- 9/11 on-screen discourse raised the alarm about the seriousness of terrorism.

Also, checking the socio-historical context of producing this on-screen discourse, we have found that post- 9/11 on-screen terrorist discourse either depicts or simulates true experiences of American soldiers in battlefields. For instance, *American Soldier* (Eastwood, 2014) is based on an autobiography of a Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle and depicts his experience in battlefields. Also, although *The Kingdom* (Berg, 2007) and *One Shot* (Nunn, 2021) are not based on true stories, their events simulate real situations too. For instance, *The Kingdom* is based on the incident of 1996 bombing of the Khobar housing complex, the 2004 Khobar massacre, and the two 2003 bombings of four compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the events of *One Shot* (Nunn, 2021) take place in a black site prison which resembles that of Guantanamo. Just like in reality, this prison is a disreputable U.S. facility where detainees are tortured in an inhuman, humiliating, and cruel manner. Hence, the second hypothesis which states that post- 9/11 terrorist discourse either depicts or simulates true experiences of soldiers in battlefields against Arab and Muslim terrorists is also confirmed.

The analysis of on-screen discourse confirms the last hypothesis as well. That is, throughout all films, Islam is represented as a threatening radical ideology. Even those scenes which pretend having no grudge against Islam, they are nothing but a discursive strategy to camouflage a racist ideology. This is especially confirmed by attributing terrorism to Muslims only. That is, Islam is referred to as a religion that encourages and justifies violence against non-Muslims. According to both pre- and post- on-screen discourse, a basic Islamic belief states that there is no place for the 'Other' (non-Muslims). In other words, Muslims must do whatever it takes to impose themselves on non-Muslims. In sum, film makers portray Islam as a religion that does not tolerate co-existing with Otherness (non-Muslims).

## Conclusion

This paper analysed and interpreted Hollywood on-screen discourse on terrorism using Van Dijk's model of Ideological Discourse Analysis. Its main purpose was to shed light on the representation of Arabs and Muslims in pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse. The analysis of this latter has revealed that Arabs and Muslims are represented in a negative way with a shift from a comical representation to a serious one. That is, while pre- 9/11 on-screen discourse describes Arabs and Muslims as idiotic and ridiculous, post 9/11 on-screen discourse considers them a real threat. This has also been confirmed through depicting and simulating true experiences of soldiers in battlefields against Arab and Muslim terrorists outside US territory. Also, shifting the battlefield to sites outside US and referring to the damage and loss caused by Arab and Muslim terrorists is an important discursive move which aims at legitimating the declaration of war against Arabs and Muslims in their own backyard. Such deep hatred for Arabs and Muslims is based on a pejorative claim that considers Islam a radical ideology that threatens a peaceful world.

As such, the analysis of Hollywood representation of Arabs and Muslims has confirmed the existence of an ideological bias towards a Self against an Other. The Self represented by westerners is always depicted in a positive way, whereas the Other represented by Arabs and Muslims is always the evil side. Even those Arabs and Muslims who have shown support to westerners against their brothers and compatriots are not excluded from this pejorative image. Again, this confirms the negative attitude westerners have against Arabs and Muslims in general. It is especially in post- 9/11 on-screen discourse that feelings of enmity, arrogance, grudge and desire for revenge describe how westerners perceive Arabs and Muslims. Unfortunately, this kind of discourse has widened the gap between the Self and the Other and made it difficult for a peaceful world to exist.

## References

- Beard, S. (Director). (1996). *Executive Decision* [Film]. Silver Pictures
- Berg, P. (Director). (2007). *The Kingdom* [Film]. Relativity Media; Forward Pass; Stuber/Parent
- Cameron, J. (Director). (1994). *True Lies* [Film]. Lightstorm Entertainment
- Eastwood, C. (Director). (2014). *American Sniper* [Film]. Village Roadshow Pictures; RatPac-Dune Entertainment; Mad Chance Productions; 22nd & Indiana Pictures; Malpasso Productions
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Nunn, J. (Director). (2021). *One Shot* [Film]. Signature Films; Lipsync; Fiction Films; Amet Entertainment; Blue Box International
- Reid, J. W. (2013). *Discourses of Film Terrorism: Hollywood Representations of Arab Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, 1991-2011* [Master's thesis, The University of Adelaide]. <https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/85040/8/02whole.pdf>
- Shaheen, J. G. (2001). *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Olive Branch Press.
- Shaheen, J.G. (2003). Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 588(1), 171–193.

- Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). *Discourse as social interaction*. SAGE Publications.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. SAGE Publications.
- Van Dijk T. A. (2000). *Ideology and discourse: A multidisciplinary introduction*. English version of an internet course for the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC). [http://www.discourses.org/UnpublishedArticles/Ideology %20and%20discourse.pdf](http://www.discourses.org/UnpublishedArticles/Ideology%20and%20discourse.pdf)
- Van Dijk, T. A. (Ed.). (2011). *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction*. SAGE Publications.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2014). *Discourse and knowledge: A sociocognitive approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). Critical discourse analysis: History, agenda, theory and methodology. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 1-33). SAGE Publications.
- Woods, G. (2019). *Adventure, Intrigue, and Terror: Arabs and the Middle East in Hollywood Film Music* [Honor Scholar Thesis, DePauw University]. <https://scholarship.depauw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1129&context=studentresearch>
- Zwick, E. (Director). (1998). *The Siege* [Film]. Twin River Productions

### Author's Biography

**Dr. Zoulaikha Elbah** is an associate professor of Discourse Studies at Abbes Laghrour University, Algeria. She holds a Ph.D in Discourse Studies. She is also a member of laboratory of contemporary critical imaginary and modernist studies in thought, language and literature. Her main research interests include Discourse Studies, Critical Discourse Studies, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Linguistics, and Russell's Logical Atomism.