

# THE REEM ISLAND GHOST:

## Framing State Narratives on Terror

By Vivian S. Walker

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# **The Reem Island Ghost: Framing State Narratives on Terror<sup>1</sup>**

Vivian S. Walker

## **Introduction**

Today, an act of extreme violence, especially when it appears to threaten social cohesion, is often immediately labeled as terrorism—well before such a linkage can be credibly established.<sup>2</sup> As it plays out in the global media space, this “terrorist” act has the potential to erode public trust in state legitimacy. It can catalyze latent intolerance, bolster distorted beliefs and fracture values-based consensus. It also threatens a state’s economic and security interests. To restore perceptions of its strategic viability among domestic and international publics as well as policymakers,<sup>3</sup> a state must quickly and deliberately create a sustained counter-terrorism narrative, one that projects strength, tolerance and unity.

This case study examines the effort of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to rebuild international confidence in its carefully managed image as a secure, tolerant and viable international partner following the brutal murder of an American school teacher in Abu Dhabi by a Yemeni-born Emirati national in early December 2014. Drawn exclusively from Internet-based English language media sources, this study focuses on the external counter-terrorism narrative that the UAE aimed specifically at expatriate and international audiences.

The UAE’s scrupulous management of its counter-terrorism narrative transformed a brutal, senseless tragedy into an affirmation of state legitimacy and control. This case study examines the construction of the UAE’s narrative framework, beginning with the attempt to define the murder as an instance of terrorism. It looks at how state security officials chose to describe the murder and how facts were selected and shared in such a way as to promote a particular interpretation of events.

The study then considers the UAE’s diagnosis of the root cause—the motivations behind the “terrorist” act. This diagnosis provides the basis for the government’s construction of an unambiguous, morally

compelling condemnation of terrorism. Finally, the study looks at how the UAE overcame the threat to its reputation and restored confidence in its future by folding the trial and conviction of the murderer into a broader counter-terrorism narrative.<sup>4</sup>

The success of a state's effort to inform and influence audience perceptions in support of national strategic objectives depends on the construction of a credible narrative designed to shape audience attitudes and responses. This case study illustrates how, in the aftermath of a destabilizing event, the UAE shaped the public discourse as a reaffirmation of state legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, the UAE's antidote to terrorism includes a narrative that projects unambiguous national power even as it champions internationally shared values.

### **I. Telling the Story: The Reem Island Ghost**

On December 1, 2014, between 1:00 and 2:00 in the afternoon, a female Emirati citizen attacked an American woman in a bathroom located in an upscale Abu Dhabi shopping mall. After stabbing kindergarten teacher Ibola Ryan multiple times and leaving her to die in a pool of blood, Alaa al Hashemi went on to plant a bomb in front of the Abu Dhabi apartment of a prominent Egyptian-American cardiologist, Dr. Mohamed Hassan.<sup>6</sup> The explosive device was subsequently found and dismantled. Had it been detonated, it could have resulted in significant loss of life and infrastructure damage.

News of the murder and attempted bombing sent shock waves through local, regional and international communities. The attack tore away at the UAE's carefully maintained reputation as a model of tolerance and openness, and a safe, secure, and peace-loving nation. The statistics bear this out: according to the UNODC's Global Study on Homicide, in 2012 the UAE experienced a total of 2.6 intentional homicides per 100,000, compared to the global average of 6.2 per 100,000.<sup>7</sup> Attacks against expatriates, who make up approximately 80% of the total population,<sup>8</sup> are even more infrequent. As the *2015 State Department Report on Crime and Safety in the UAE* indicates, violent crimes, especially against American citizens, are a "rarity."<sup>9</sup>

Confirmation of the murder appeared immediately in the online edition of *The National*, a government-owned English language daily newspaper based in Abu Dhabi.<sup>10</sup> By the next day, Abu Dhabi police officials began to issue a steady, if limited, stream of information, confirming the attack and announcing a search for the killer. With the exception of a few early bystander accounts, initial reports in regional and international English language media outlets relied almost exclusively on the details provided by police and ministry officials through official press conferences and releases.

On December 3, within 48 hours of Ryan's death, the Security Media Department at the Ministry of Interior circulated closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage of the suspect, whose gender was as yet unknown. Wearing an abaya, black gloves and a face covering veil known as a niqab, the suspect is seen dragging a small suitcase, approaching and entering the Boutik Mall on Al Reem Island, exiting the elevator near one of the mall bathrooms prior to the attack, reentering the elevator and hurrying out of the building. The suspect immediately earned the sobriquet of the "Reem Island Ghost," looming large in the public imagination as a symbol of inexplicable violence and terror.

### ***The War on Terror***

The Ibola Ryan murder occurred in the context of a renewed UAE "commitment to confront, degrade and eradicate terrorism and extremism" in all its forms.<sup>11</sup> In June 2014, a UAE court convicted and sentenced seven of nine alleged members of an al-Qa'ida (AQ) cell on charges of "running or belonging to an AQ terrorist cell; recruiting and promoting the actions of AQ (including possible terrorist attacks within the UAE)...and reportedly recruiting and fundraising for [the] al-Nusrah front."<sup>12</sup> In the same period, the UAE convicted and jailed several Emirati and Egyptian citizens for having attempted to form Muslim Brotherhood (MB) cells. In the UAE's view, the MB seeks to exploit Islam for its own radical political ends, and in so doing, breaches the separation of church and state.<sup>13</sup>

On August 21, 2014, President Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al-Nahayan issued a new federal law to strengthen UAE counter-terrorism capabilities. Aimed at preventing UAE citizens from “joining or establishing terrorist organizations inside the country or abroad,” Federal Law No. 7, which replaced Federal Law No. 1 of 2004, built on existing legislation by “criminalizing additional conduct and imposing stricter punishments...to deter terrorism and dissident activities.<sup>14</sup> The new law defined the act of terrorism as “including any action or inaction constituting a crime under the provision of the law” and sanctioned the imposition of the death penalty on those convicted of terrorist acts.<sup>15</sup>

Two months after the implementation of Federal Law No. 7, a terrorist threat emerged that targeted expatriate communities in the broader region—specifically teachers at international schools. On October 29, 2014, the U.S. Embassy in Abu Dhabi issued a security message notifying the U.S. citizen community of

“A recent anonymous posting on a Jihadist website that encouraged attacks against teachers at American and other international schools in the Middle East. The Mission is unaware of any specific, credible threat against any American or other school or individual in the United Arab Emirates.”<sup>16</sup>

This threat message, conveyed per State Department protocols to U.S. citizens throughout the Middle East, did not contain target information specific to the UAE. However, it is likely to have heightened concern within the international school community, as well as among local authorities with an interest in keeping the expatriate community safe from harm. And, in the immediate aftermath of Ryan’s death, this message fueled speculation that her killer acted in fulfillment of this threat.<sup>17</sup>

On November 14, 2014, just two weeks before the Ryan murder, the UAE Cabinet placed the UAE Muslim Brotherhood (MB) at the top of a list of 85 groups designated as terrorist organizations under the auspices of Federal Law No. 7.<sup>18</sup> Another reference to MB “organization and groups” also appears further down the list. The UAE decision to bestow the terrorist designation on the MB, which the U.S. government (USG) does not consider to be a terrorist organization,<sup>19</sup> represented a

rare deviation in its otherwise consistent effort to coordinate with USG counter-terrorism initiatives.

By December 1, 2014, the day of the Ryan murder, the UAE had significantly strengthened and consolidated its abilities to define, prevent and prosecute terrorism. In addition to broadening state judicial powers, Federal Law No. 7 created the framework for a more robust, proactive anti-terrorism narrative. As reports of the murder spread across the global media space, UAE authorities quickly and deliberately took control of the story.

### ***The Reem Island Ghost***

A few hours after the release of the initial CCTV footage of the Reem Island Ghost, the Ministry of Interior put out a carefully edited video that contained dramatic footage showing the suspect's arrest and "evidence" of the crime.<sup>20</sup> The video, distributed broadly to news and social media outlets, features a SWAT team bursting into the suspect's home in the middle of the night. Graphic footage shows the team forcing a man to the ground at gunpoint and dragging a woman away in handcuffs. The video also offers images of what appears to be crime scene evidence: homemade bombs and knives, the blood-smearred interior of the suspect's SUV, a black suitcase identical to the one placed at the doctor's residence, and the bloody exterior and interior of the toilet stall where Ibolá Ryan died.

Set to the theme music from the 2012 Batman movie *The Dark Knight Rises*, the video clearly intended to cast the state security service as a powerful force for good vanquishing the evil represented by the Reem Island Ghost. Indeed, the six and a half minute clip is paced as a high-octane thriller, beginning with footage of the suspect moving through the mall, followed by still images of the blood-spattered bathroom floor and walls and a dismantled explosive device. As the music crescendos, a weapon-brandishing SWAT team carries out a full-scale nighttime invasion of the suspect's home, and triumphantly restores order through her arrest and the dismantling of her apparent arsenal.

The video's explicit thematic nod to the Batman movie offended many in the expatriate community, who felt that the "Hollywoodization" of the events surrounding the murder served to trivialize it.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, regional and international media reports on the Reem Island ghost returned over and over to the cache of images contained in the video. Its principle visual elements—the veiled woman, the trail of blood, the bomb making materials and weapons—become potent symbols and powerful narrative drivers.

### Issues for Discussion

- How did the UAE State Security Service choose to portray the Ryan murder to an external audience?
- What were the ingoing assumptions about target audiences?
- How compelling was the initial orchestration of available evidence to frame the narrative?

## **II. Assessing the Cause: Random Murder or Premeditated Act of Terrorism?**

Local security officials initially claimed that the suspect "targeted Ryan and the doctor based solely on their nationalities and did not know them."<sup>22</sup> With no other apparent motive, authorities proceeded to characterize the attack as a random murder, an assertion upheld by the initial release of the CCTV footage. At the same time, however, authorities described the suspect's home as the "'base of operations' for the terror plan." This somewhat ambiguous claim, bolstered by the fact of Ryan's U.S. citizenship, reverberated through domestic and international media reports as a confirmation of terrorism.

Shortly after the release of the CCTV footage, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, Lt. General Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al Nahyan, gave a press conference in which he announced the arrest of the "Niqabi suspect" for Ryan's murder and the attempted bombing of the "Arab-American" doctor's residence, emphasizing that "the suspect was identified in less than 24 hours, and arrested in less than 48 hours."<sup>23</sup> Sheikh Saif initially characterized the murder as an

attack on his country's reputation for "safety and security" as well as its fundamental values: "We stand today before a crime that is alien to our secure country—a crime that has disregarded all human values and norms and targeted innocent people."

Sheikh Saif quickly established an enduring profile of the victim that would come to serve as a stark contrast to the narrative depiction of her assailant. In describing Ibola Ryan as a "school teacher...committed to building strong future generations" as well as "a mother of three children," Sheikh Saif evoked basic shared values such as a respect for motherhood and teachers. Subsequent official discussion and reporting on the case consistently built on this appeal, characterizing Ryan as "something pure in this world, someone who lived to make the lives of others better."<sup>24</sup> This particular narrative strand enabled authorities to depict the suspect's ultimate arrest and conviction as evidence of the UAE's ability to protect and uphold these basic, universal values.

Sheikh Saif then asserted that "the suspect targeted her victims based on nationality alone and had nothing to do with personal issues. She aimed to create chaos, shake the security of the country and terrorize the people in the UAE." At this point, without actually describing the murder as a terrorist act, Sheikh Saif nevertheless laid the groundwork for that possibility, first by alluding to the nationality of the alleged victims and then by using the word "terrorize" to describe the suspect's behavior. Sheikh Saif also made a concerted effort to disaggregate Islam and the violence of the murder in the public narrative of events, characterizing "[this crime] as a slap to every noble human value that the UAE cherishes—all of which are derived from the teachings of Islam and the genuine Arab heritage."

Finally Sheikh Saif issued a stern warning to all those "who even thinks (sic) to disrupt the security and the stability enjoyed [by] the people in the UAE." Though not explicitly addressed to terrorists or terrorist sympathizers, his remarks could certainly be interpreted as such. In this way, Ibola Ryan's murder became associated with terrorism, in the state's narrative of events as well as in the media that reported on them.

Over the next few days, official responses to Ryan's murder began to offer more nuanced evidence linking it to a deliberate act of terrorism. WAM, the Emirates News Agency, reported that, according to an unnamed official security source, the suspect acted alone and had no direct links to terrorist organizations, although "the investigations show that the accused has recently logged into some terrorist websites through which she acquired the [sic] terrorism ideology and learnt how to manufacture explosives."<sup>25</sup>

In a refinement of Sheikh Saif's earlier statement, the official source went on to explain that rather than targeting an American or any other nationality, she was looking for anyone who looked foreign—in short, "she selected her victims randomly."<sup>26</sup> Ibola Ryan's murder was, according to this official, "a personal terrorist act." On the one hand these statements appear to be designed to reassure U.S. and key Western allies that their citizens are in no particular danger in the UAE. On the other hand, characterizing the Ryan murder as a "personal" act of terror raised the possibility that anyone could be capable of terrorism—an issue that would come to dominate subsequent iterations of the narrative.

### ***The "Lone Wolf"***

The following week, *The National* ran a series of opinion pieces and articles that took on the question of personal terrorism and its implications for the state. The Reem Island Ghost emerges as a "lone wolf," someone who had been "self-radicalized." The "good news," apparently, was that she did not belong to a terrorist cell operating at will in the UAE. However, the "bad news" was that "the perception of danger has become more confused in the UAE."<sup>27</sup> As one commentator notes:

"Self-radicalization is perhaps the most complex terror threat that the Arab and western worlds now face...In the post 9/11 era...Jihadi thinkers promoted the idea of an individualized jihad, whereby those radicalized would attack whenever and wherever they could. The aim of this was not to stage spectacular attacks but to promote a feeling of chaos and uncertainty."<sup>28</sup>

This commentary is consistent with Sheikh Saif's<sup>29</sup> initial description of the suspect's intent to "create chaos" and "shake the security of the country."

The best way to deal with this threat, the commentator continues, "is not merely to shut down the ability of these groups to organize, but also to go after the message itself." To this end, the writer argues for more public engagement, to include active reporting on and dissecting of "terrorist arguments" and "allowing religious leaders to counter their views." If terrorists are permitted "to frame the narrative," the writer concludes, "we are allowing them to speak freely to people who may have a very limited understanding of politics and religion and are easily persuaded."<sup>30</sup> In a way, this argument transforms the Reem Island Ghost from perpetrator to victim, casting her as a target of terrorist rhetoric, compelled to act murderously under a malign influence.

In fact, this characterization of Ibola Ryan's assailant as someone "led astray by ideology"<sup>31</sup> became part of the official narrative. Commenting on the murder less than three weeks later at a forum on "Future Security of the Gulf Cooperation Council," the deputy chairman of police and general security in Dubai said,

"I am certain she regrets what she has done for she must realize how she wronged her family and her community...But this case shows how people can be mobilized via social media that leads them to commit mindless actions."<sup>32</sup>

Clearly the Reem Island ghost's actions represent a fundamental betrayal of family and community values. But this version of events also offers an interesting distinction between witting and unwitting terrorism. If her crimes are deemed "mindless," then to what extent is she in control of, and responsible for, her own actions? In addition to allowing the UAE to disassociate its citizenry from deliberate acts of terror, this narrative would also appear to lay the groundwork for an insanity plea.

### ***The “Veiled Murderer”***

As part of the managed dialogue about the Reem Island ghost’s motivations, an officially sanctioned debate about the religious and cultural importance of the niqab emerged in *The National* as well as other regional online English language media. In the immediate aftermath of the murder, these reports featured proponents of a ban on face covering for national security reasons. Citing Islamic scholar Ahmad Al Qubaisi, one supporter of the ban argued that wearing the niqab is not “obligatory” in Islam. “Therefore if it is necessary to ban it for the security of the country and its people, the government can ask women not to wear it.”<sup>33</sup> Others noted that because “the niqab is not a religious tradition but rather a cultural one in the Gulf,” the implementation of such a ban, while feasible, “would require the local leadership to discuss it with tribal leaders.”<sup>34</sup> Still others called for a selective ban on the face veil based on national security requirement, noting that women are required to show their faces in passport pictures.<sup>35</sup>

Concerned that the “veiled murderer” might have “tainted the image of the niqab,” members of the UAE’s Federal National Council (FNC) entered the fray a week after Ryan’s death. A federal authority with a mandate to discuss legislation or proposed government initiatives,<sup>36</sup> the FNC ultimately came out against a ban, concluding that that the decision to wear the niqab was “a personal choice that could not be denied.”<sup>37</sup> As reported in *The National*, although they were divided on the need to require additional security checks for veiled women in public places, FNC members concluded that the UAE “must respect all religions. Why should we stop people from expressing themselves? This was a single criminal act.”<sup>38</sup>

The debate about the security implications of the niqab ultimately became part of the officially sanctioned narrative of tolerance, one that acknowledged the requirement to preserve individual sovereignty and freedom of religious expression. In interviews published by *The National*, Emirati citizens and expatriate residents also agreed that such a ban would represent a violation of personal sovereignty, noting that it would be

“Disrespectful to those who believe in covering their face for religious and modesty reasons...Everyone should have the right to wear whatever they want. Any robber or murderer would hide their face before performing a crime, yet they are still found through investigations, fingerprints, etc. So why should we discriminate against a group of people?”<sup>39</sup>

However, according to *The National*, as the debate about the niqab as a cultural artifact unfolded in Arabic language social media networks, it became more bitter and divisive. These discussions centered around religious texts that appeared to support the niqab as an essential element of Islam. In the course of this debate, some local commentators noted the emergence of a value-laden “intolerance of differing perspectives”:

“The people who were against the niqab labeled those who support it as ‘backward,’ ‘uneducated’ and ‘extreme.’ The other group was slated as ‘liberals,’ ‘immodest’ and ‘having no morals.’”<sup>40</sup>

This tendency to resort to stereotyped assumptions in the face of disagreement, according to one observer, reflected “the limits of civil debate” in the UAE. Several journalists called for greater respect for differing viewpoints, suggesting that the officially sanctioned narrative of tolerance had not penetrated Emirati society. Nevertheless, the appearance of this debate, however streamlined, in the official narrative served to underscore the UAE’s stated commitment to a degree of religious tolerance.

### Issues for Discussion

- Is the narrative characterization of the assailant as a “Lone Wolf” credible? Is the assailant a victim of “terrorist ideology”?
- How credible is the characterization of the decision to wear a niqab as a matter of personal choice?
- Does the debate about the niqab enhance the credibility of the UAE’s narrative of tolerance and openness? Why or why not?
- How does the UAE’s definition of the root causes of terrorism evolve in the aftermath of the Ryan murder?

### III: The Moral Justification: “Reclaiming Decency from Nihilism”

By late December 2014, the official narrative about the Reem Island Ghost had become an unambiguous story of good triumphing over evil. A “Year in Review” retrospective in *The National* enumerates a series of official actions that culminated in a reaffirmation of the UAE’s moral authority and legitimacy. The article begins by describing the murder of Ibola Ryan as a “malevolent act seemingly designed to create public division and fear” that, instead, “united the UAE in grief.”<sup>41</sup> The arrest of the suspect in less than 48 hours confirmed the efficiency and skill of UAE security forces, while the murder’s designation as an act of “personal terrorism” served to allay public fears about the presence of known terrorist organizations in the UAE.

The article then details the outpouring of sympathy and gestures of solidarity from Emirati citizens and expatriate groups, framing it as an affirmation of the UAE as a model of unity and inclusiveness. The open debate about the niqab demonstrated the UAE’s commitment to tolerance and personal choice. In fact, the article claimed “much of what has happened in the weeks since...the killing has been about reclaiming decency from nihilism.” Citing comments culled from the condolence page on its website, *The National* article chronicles Ibola Ryan’s metamorphosis into an icon of motherhood and service to the community:

“[She] was on a noble mission to teach and rear the youngsters of our nation, and raise her family in UAE society so to appreciate other people’s culture...All that was cut short by a demented individual who stands for everything opposite to the decency of Ibola.”

The protection of children, the importance of education, the celebration of family, the promotion of cultural diversity—all of these shared values or “cultural congruencies”—triumph in the aftermath of Ryan’s senseless death. At this point in the narrative, the power of the community—and basic human decency—has been restored, and the “nihilism” of Ryan’s murder has been vanquished.

### ***The “Ghost on Trial”: Murderess, Mother, or Militant?***

Thanks to the dramatic video footage of her movements before and after the Ryan murder, as well as her arrest, Alaa Al Hashemi became instantly recognizable as the “Reem Island Ghost.” And yet, she remained essentially unknown in early iterations of the narrative. The absence of publically available information about Al Hashemi’s identity and motivations facilitated her almost immediate transformation into a symbol of pure, unreasoned evil. Her general characterization as a “demented individual” offered an effective narrative counterpoint to the depiction of her innocent victim. As her trial began in the UAE’s Federal Supreme Court however, the “ghost” began to emerge as a person, with a voice and a series of overlapping and sometimes contradictory identities.<sup>42</sup> Al Hashemi also appears, at times, as a victim in her own right.

In early April 2015, *The National* and other regional English-language media outlets began to release details about her court testimony. Initially, Al Hashemi pleaded not guilty to charges that she murdered Ryan, placed explosives with the intent to harm an Egyptian-American doctor and his family, and collected bomb-making materials. Indeed, the Reem island “ghost” described herself as a victim of mental illness, suffering “unreal visions” populated by “ghost-like people”:

I act without thinking or realizing. I have had this illness since I was as young as 3 or 4 years. I started seeing women, speaking to them and playing with them...I ask the court and the prison to consider my situation and to provide me with psychological help.<sup>43</sup>

In her defense, Al Hashemi’s court-appointed lawyer argued that she was forced to confess during her interrogation and requested a medical assessment of her psychological condition as well as an additional review of evidence and witness testimony.<sup>44</sup>

The prosecution, however, portrayed her as an active, witting terrorist who embraced “takfiri and jihadist ideology.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, prosecutors accused her of sending financial aid to al-Qa’ida in Yemen and establishing websites upon which she allegedly “spread terrorist

ideals," "promoted ISIL's ideals and beliefs" and "defamed symbols of the UAE to ruin the country's reputation."<sup>46</sup>

During the next hearing in mid-April 2015, the prosecution played a confession video that was never publically released. *The National* reporters present in the courtroom described Al Hashemi's vivid, detailed narration of the "horror show" of Ryan's murder. According to the journalists, after assessing potential victims in the upscale mall bathroom—disqualifying one because she "was pushing a baby in a pram"—she settled on Ryan. Al Hashemi then recounted that after asking Ryan for help in accessing a toilet for the disabled,

"I locked the door and asked her to sit down on the side of the toilet. When she refused I took out the knife...She tried to attack me... She started screaming for help and I pushed her to the wall where I stabbed her—I don't know how many times, but mostly in her chest area."<sup>47</sup>

When later confronted in court with the video of her confession as well as the footage of her passage through the Reem Island mall, Al Hashemi is reported to have said, equivocally: "I suspect that it could be me, but I don't remember anything about it."<sup>48</sup> Court-ordered psychiatric testing ultimately concluded, however, that she was fully aware of her actions, and the insanity defense was later dropped.

In the weeks that followed, other potentially exculpatory—or at least mitigating—details emerged to create a portrait of a woman at the mercy of forces out of her control. For example, reports revealed that she had not seen her six children—the youngest just a few months old—since her detention. That she acted out of fear and anger following her husband's arrest. That her husband may have abused her.

However, in *The National's* summation of her story, released on the day of her conviction, she is definitively characterized as an active accomplice:

"Alaa Al Hashemi's journey began as a young bride aged 20, when she married an overbearing bully who introduced her to the world of

violent extremism. It continued for 10 years, fueled by indoctrination in the teaching of Al Qaeda leaders, video lessons on how to kill and how to make a bomb, and regular dispatches of cash to terrorist organizations abroad.”<sup>49</sup>

*The National* adds that her husband’s arrest for alleged support of terrorist activities prompted her to “seek vengeance” by creating “fear, especially for American, British and French expatriates.”<sup>50</sup> In this portion of the narrative, Al Hashemi is depicted in a series of overlapping and occasionally conflicting identities: a calculating killer; a sufferer of chronic mental illness; an avenger of family honor; a bereft mother; a bullied bride; an unrepentant militant. But ultimately, she was convicted as a terrorist rather than a victim, and the narrative of her trial framed as a triumph of “decency over nihilism.”

#### Issues for Discussion

- How do the multiple versions of the assailant’s identity serve overall narrative intent?
- Which of the assailant’s several narrative identities was the most credible? Why?
- How does the assailant’s voice impact the narrative?
- How does the account of the trial support the UAE’s claim to a moral victory over terrorism?

#### **IV: Order Restored: The Execution of the Ghost**

On June 29, 2015, the UAE’s Federal Supreme Court sentenced Alaa Al Hashemi to death for the following crimes:

1. “Deliberate and aggressive murder...using a sharp weapon”
2. “Attempted murder...by planting a homemade bomb”
3. “Executing of a terrorist act with the purpose of threatening the stability and security of the country and harming societal peace”
4. “Creating explosive objects for terrorism purposes”
5. “Purposely using explosive devices”

6. "Providing finances to a terrorist organization"
7. "Establishing and managing an electronic account in an on-line forum...with the purpose of promoting terrorist ideals relating to ISIL"
8. "Using the electronic account to spread information to ridicule and ruin the reputation of the UAE and its symbols"<sup>51</sup>

These crimes offer a punch-list for key elements in the UAE's counter-terrorism narrative. The UAE effectively frames its judicial response to Al Hashemi's crimes as a testament to its stability and social cohesion, as well as its leadership in the war on terror.

In fact, the language for the sentencing of Al Hashemi's crimes appears to have been drawn directly from the new anti-terrorism law, implemented just a few months before Ryan's death. Under this law, "acts of terrorism" included

"Activities that pose a threat to the security of the state...enticement to join terrorist organizations and financing terrorist elements or organizations inside the country and abroad."<sup>52</sup>

Federal Law No. 7 also allowed for the imposition of the death penalty on "individuals convicted of using terror...to disturb the peace and national security" or "who establish or manage a terrorist organization inside the country or abroad."<sup>53</sup>

At dawn on Monday, July 13, 2015, just two weeks after her sentencing, Alaa Al Hashemi was put to death by firing squad. The trial judge noted confidently that her execution restored the UAE's reputation "as a haven of safety and stability" and "a model of correlation and societal peace."<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, in a banner typical of headlines in other English-language online media outlets, *The National* claimed that her "quick death sentence [was] a case of justice served."<sup>55</sup>

The public announcement of Al Hashemi's death gave way to a series of statements aimed at would-be terrorists. The chairman of the UAE Human Rights Society, for example, said "the execution...sends a strong message to terrorists worldwide that the UAE is a red line that

you don't cross."<sup>56</sup> Thus, the framing of the narrative came full circle—the terms of the new anti-terrorism law had been met, the UAE's internal stability had been restored, peaceful coexistence reaffirmed and anti-terrorist red lines clearly demarcated.

At this point, both Alaa Al-Hashemi and Ibola Ryan disappear from view in the English language regional and international press. But the UAE's counter-terrorism narrative does not. In fact, it takes on renewed momentum. In late August 2015, UAE military forces rescued a British citizen held hostage by al-Qa'ida operatives in Yemen. UAE leadership immediately touted the operation as evidence of the UAE's dominance in regional and global efforts to counter violent extremism: "The UAE is at the forefront of combating terrorism by using measures from internationally-recognized legal norms."<sup>57</sup>

In addition to serving as an affirmation of its legitimacy and national identity, the UAE's counter-terrorism narrative also sends a powerful message to would-be terrorists:

"These groups and their backers must understand that the UAE has a straightforward and unchanging policy towards terrorism, in whatever form. We will fight them wherever they are, because that is the right thing to do for our way of life, for our region and for our allies."<sup>58</sup>

While the UAE places a high premium on national security, its counter-terrorism narrative gives equal weight to the preservation of values. Terrorists have "tarnished Arab culture" and "twisted the reputation of Islam." Indeed the real threat to the UAE's security is the fact that "terrorism recognizes no limits; it respects no borders, no religion or political system." It is not a fight that can be won solely on the battlefield.<sup>59</sup> Key elements of this narrative include the UAE's commitment to tolerance and openness in the face of the "nihilism" of terrorism, which threatens the legitimacy of the state.

### Issues for Discussion

- Does the narrative make a compelling case for a triumph over the “nihilism” of terrorism? Why or why not?
- Does the narrative effectively make a credible case for the distinction between terrorism and Islam?
- How effectively does this narrative convey the merits of the UAE’s national interests, identity and values to international audiences?

### **V: Conclusions**

Whether carried out by criminals, rioters or dissidents, “virtually any especially abhorrent act of violence that is perceived as directed against society is often labeled ‘terrorism.’”<sup>60</sup> In the immediate aftermath of violence, the linguistic and conceptual boundaries between a story of crime, a story of protest and a story of dissent are blurred at best. This allows for a narrative fluidity that can serve state interests, particularly when the motivation for the violent act is unknown. UAE officials began to tell the story of the Reem Island Ghost using the language of a criminal procedural, describing the attack on Ibola Ryan as a “targeted murder.”

However, confronted with a shocked and grieving public, which demanded immediate answers and retribution, the UAE found itself on the defensive, faced with hard questions about the apparent failure of state security measures. At the same time, its reputation as a country of openness and tolerance was put to the test. The UAE had to create a narrative that would demonstrate its ability to guarantee public safety, especially within the expatriate community. The UAE also had to affirm the strength of its cultural and religious values as a credible antidote to the “nihilism” of terror.

The UAE wasted no time in building its counter-terrorism narrative. State security officials immediately came out with statements that, in describing the events surrounding Ryan’s death, previewed its linkage to terrorism. These official statements, disseminated through a series of overlapping press conferences and interviews, were bolstered by CCTV footage that established the culpability of the Reem Island Ghost,

and affirmed the efficiency of the state security apparatus through her expeditious arrest. These early efforts to shape the narrative laid the groundwork for its interpretation as a reaffirmation of the UAE as a haven of security.

In the weeks that followed, the Reem Island Ghost emerged as a full-fledged terrorist, motivated by a "jihadist" ideology. As framed by the official narrative, her actions ultimately conformed to the now classic definition of terrorism as "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change."<sup>6161</sup> In casting Alaa Al Hashemi's actions as an effort to destabilize the regime, the UAE could then tell a compelling, cautionary tale about its ability to restore order as well as its resilience and reliability as international partner.

Having laid out the broad sequence of events leading up to Ryan's murder, the UAE narrative shifted immediately to a diagnosis of its root cause. Here the narrative explored the possibility that the murder was an unpremeditated act of violence. It also created the conditions for a managed debate about "personal jihadism" and "self-radicalization." This discussion in turn permitted a call for a more public dialogue about the nature of terrorism, and an appeal to religious leaders to more actively "counter" terrorist views in order to dissuade future recruits. The orchestration of the niqab debate, meanwhile, underscored the UAE's stated commitment to a more nuanced and open-minded embrace of Islam.

With the cause established as some form of terrorism, the UAE transformed the murder and its aftermath into a morality play about the triumph of good over evil. The almost immediate identification of the suspect and her arrest testify to the quality and efficiency of the state security apparatus. The managed outpouring of grief and subsequent offers of support to the victim's family confirm the empathic nature of the UAE's citizenry. The reaffirmation of values such as the sanctity of motherhood, the protection and education of children, and the primacy of family convey the UAE's adherence to principles of tolerance and openness to diversity.

The narrative culminates with the official version of Al Hashemi's trial, conviction and execution. Justice has been served and order has been restored. At this point, the story of the murder becomes subsumed in the meta-narrative of the UAE's broader counter-terrorism efforts. This narrative testifies to the validity of the new law on anti-terrorism, serves as a demonstration of state power, offers a stern warning to would-be terrorists and offers a neat parable of security and legitimacy.

The creation, dissemination and viability of state narratives on terror depend to a large degree on context. Prevailing threats and opportunities, state capacities and constraints, cultural biases, historical precedents and audience trigger points all play an important role in the shaping of counter-terrorism narratives.<sup>62</sup> Much depends too on the nature of the relationship between a government and the media, domestic, regional and international. Moreover, globalization, new information technologies and multiple, competing sources complicate a state's capacity to project its identity and protect its influence.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, in the face of destructive and potentially destabilizing events, when a state's identity and influence are most at risk, effective management of the narrative on terror enables the projection of state legitimacy and resilience.

## Endnotes

- 1 The opinions and characterizations in this piece are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent official positions of the United States Government. Many thanks to Bruce Gregory, Sarah Oates and Theresa Sabonis-Helf for their helpful editorial comments and suggestions.
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