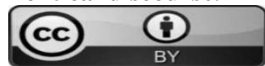**Noor Liwaa Abdulaali**

Prof. Enas Naji Kadhim (Ph.D.)

College of Education for Human Sciences, Wasit University

Email:
noor.liwaa@uowasit.edu.iq
enaskadim1985@gmail.com

Semiotic Analysis of Zionists-Hezbollah Conflict (2024) in Selected American and Iranian Media

A B S T R A C T

This study conducts a semiotic analysis of selected photos from American and Iranian media reports concerned with the June 2024 Zionists-Hezbollah conflict to uncover how visual representation and framing differ across these media channels. Using Barthes' model of semiotics, the analysis focuses on denotation and connotation to reveal both the images' cultural understanding (stadium) and emotional impact (punctum). The study examines four photos: two from CBS News and two from Press TV. Findings indicate that American media frames the conflict as a security issue, emphasizing Hezbollah as a militant threat and portraying the IDF as a defenders. In contrast, Iranian media frames it as a struggle against Israeli aggression, describing Hezbollah as a legitimate resistance and the IDF as aggressors. Both media use visuals to evoke strong emotional responses, but the framing and portrayal of actors reflect their distinct political and cultural contexts. This comparative analysis highlights the influence of cultural and political contexts on media framing and audience perception, contributing to a deeper understanding of media bias and its impact on public discourse.

التحليل السيميائي لصراع حزب الله مع الصهاينة (٢٠٢٤) في وسائل الإعلام الأمريكية والإيرانية المختارة

الباحثة: نور لواء عبدالعالي   أ.د. ايناس ناجي كاظم

جامعة واسط / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

المستخلص

تجري هذه الدراسة تحليلًا سيميائيًا لبعض الصور المختارة من التقارير الإعلامية الأمريكية والإيرانية حول صراع حزب الله مع الصهاينة في يونيو ٢٠٢٤ للكشف عن كيفية اختلاف التمثيل البصري والإطار السردي عبر هذه القنوات الإعلامية. باستخدام نموذج بارث للسيميائية، يركز التحليل على الدلالة والإيحاء للكشف عن الفهم الثقافي (الاستاديو) والتأثير العاطفي (البنكتوم) للصور. تدرس الدراسة أربع صور: اثنتين من أخبار CBS واثنتين من قناة Press TV. تشير النتائج إلى أن الإعلام الأمريكي يصور الصراع كقضية أمنية، مشددًا على حزب الله كتهديد مسلح ويصور الجيش الصهيوني كمدافعين، بينما يصور الإعلام الإيراني الصراع ككفاح ضد العدوان الصهيوني، ويصور حزب الله كحركة مقاومة شرعية والجيش الصهيوني كمعتدين. تستخدم كلتا الوسيلتين الإعلاميتين الصور لإثارة استجابات عاطفية قوية، لكن الإطار السردي وتصوير الفاعلين يعكسان السياقات السياسية والثقافية المميزة لكل منهما. يبرز هذا التحليل المقارن تأثير السياقات الثقافية والسياسية على تأطير الإعلام وإدراك الجمهور، مما يساهم في فهم أعمق للتحيز الإعلامي وتأثيره على الخطاب العام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحليل السيميائي ، نموذج بارث(١٩٦٨) ، صراع حزب الله مع الصهاينة ، التحيز الإعلامي.

1. introduction

News reports have become one of the primary sources from which people learn information about what is happening inside and outside the country. This study aims to conduct a semiotic analysis of some selected photos from American and Iranian reports about Zionists'-Hezbollah attacks in June 2024 to uncover both the stadium, which provides a broad cultural understanding of the image, and the punctum, which reveals the personal emotional impact the photograph has on the viewer (Barthes, 1981). The study sheds light on how media channels use various strategies to influence viewers towards certain events. In June 2024, Hezbollah launches a significant attack on Zionists, leading to heightened tensions and a series of retaliatory actions. The attacks begin with Hezbollah firing numerous rockets and launching drones at various targets in northern Zionists. This offensive includes at least 215 missiles and multiple drones, causing widespread alarm and some property damage, although no immediate casualties are reported. The attacks are partly in response to the killing of a senior Hezbollah commander by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) earlier in the month. The IDF responds with extensive airstrikes targeting Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon.

Photos have the power to evoke strong emotions, which can deepen the connection between the media content and its audience. Emotional images can trigger feelings such as joy, sadness, anger, or empathy, making the content more memorable and impactful. Media channels often use photos that resonate with the audience's experiences or sentiments, enhancing viewer engagement and loyalty (Bakalash & Riemer, 2013). Providing context

through photos helps viewers understand the significance of the content. Captions, subtitles, and associated text can enhance the viewer's comprehension and connection to the photo, making the information more accessible and engaging. This is particularly important in news reporting, where photos provide visual evidence and context for the stories being told. For example, captions are crucial in drawing readers' attention and aiding their understanding. Well-written captions provide essential context and significantly increase the likelihood of a photograph being noticed and remembered. Captions help establish the story behind the image, leading to better comprehension and retention by the audience (Quinn, 2017).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The media has become heavily interested in the wave of events of Hezbollah's attack on Zionists in 2024. Despite significant research on media bias, there is limited understanding of how American and Iranian media represent the same conflict events differently. This gap leaves an incomplete picture of the influence of cultural and political contexts on media framing and audience perception. The June 2024 Zionists -Hezbollah conflict provides a pertinent case study to explore these differences. By examining the visual representation and framing of this conflict in American and Iranian media, we can gain insights into the broader implications of media coverage on public perception and political discourse. According to Hall (1980), "There is no single or 'correct' way of decoding a message. Meaning is not fixed by the sender; it is interpreted by the audience." (p.136). Media messages are encoded by the creators with specific meanings, but the audience decodes them based on their cultural background and experiences, leading to multiple interpretations of the same media content (Hall, 1980). Media does not tell us what to think, but it does tell us what to think about. They argue that the media's focus on specific issues over others can shape the public agenda and influence the importance attributed to those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

1.2 Research Questions

1-What are the differences between American media and Iranian media in their visual representation and framing of the June 2024 Hezbollah-Zionist conflict?
2-How do American and Iranian media portray the actors involved in the conflict: Hezbollah, IDF, and the civilians?

2. Literature Review
2.1 An Overview of Semiotics

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, is a field that explores how meaning is constructed and understood through various forms of communication, including language, images, gestures, and objects. According to Abbas & Kadim (2019), a number of prominent figures have played a crucial role in the field of semiotics namely, Ferdinand de Saussure from the European school and Charles Sanders Peirce from the American school. Saussure, a Swiss linguist, is often considered one of the founders of semiotics, which he referred to as semiology. Saussure introduced several key concepts that form the backbone of semiotic analysis. He posited that the sign is the fundamental unit of meaning, comprising two components: the "signifier" (the form of the sign, such as a word or image) and the

"signified" (the concept it represents). Saussure emphasized that "the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary" (Saussure, 1983, p. 67), meaning that there is no inherent connection between the two; instead, the relationship is established by social conventions.

Peirce expanded the study of signs with his triadic model, which includes the "representamen" (the form of the sign), the "interpretant" (the meaning derived from the sign), and the "object" (the actual entity or concept to which the sign refers). Peirce categorized signs into three types: icons, which resemble their objects (such as photographs); indices, which have a direct connection to their objects (such as smoke indicating fire); and symbols, which have an arbitrary or conventional relationship with their objects (such as words). Peirce asserted that "we think only in signs" (Peirce, 1931-1958), underscoring the pervasive role of signs in human cognition and communication.

2.2 Applications of Semiotics

Semiotics is widely applied across various fields, providing tools to analyze and interpret how meaning is constructed in different contexts. In media and communication studies, semiotics helps to uncover how images, sounds, and texts create and convey messages. For example, Roland Barthes, another key figure in semiotics, analyzed advertisements and media images to reveal how they carry hidden ideological meanings. Barthes argued that "myth is a type of speech" (Barthes, 1972, p. 109), where everyday objects and images are imbued with broader cultural significances reinforcing societal norms and values.

In cultural studies, semiotics examines how cultural artefacts and practices create and sustain meaning. Hall (1997), a prominent cultural theorist, utilized semiotic analysis to explore how media representations shape public perception. Hall noted that "representation is the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged" (p. 15), emphasizing the role of signs in constructing social reality.

2.3 Major Concepts of Semiotics
2.3.1 The Sign

The concept of signs is fundamental to semiotics, which is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. A sign is anything that conveys meaning. The study of signs encompasses a wide range of disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, and communication studies. The two most influential theorists in the study of signs are Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, each of whom developed foundational models for understanding signs. Saussure (1983) introduced a dyadic (two-part) model of the sign. He posited that a sign consists of two interrelated components:

1-Signifier (Significant): The form that the sign takes, such as a word, sound, image, or object. It is the physical form of the sign that the senses can perceive.

2-Signified (Signifié): The concept or meaning that the signifier represents. It is the mental construct associated with the signifier.

Saussure emphasized the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified. This means there is no inherent natural connection between the form of a sign and its meaning; instead, the connection is established by social conventions. For example, there is

no intrinsic reason why the sequence of sounds represented by "tree" should refer to the concept of a tree; this relationship is purely conventional in English. Peirce developed a more complex triadic (three-part) model of the sign. According to Peirce, a sign involves three interconnected elements:

1-Representamen: The sign's form is similar to Saussure's signifier. It is the physical form of the sign.

2-Interpretant: The meaning or concept that the sign generates in the interpreter's mind. It is the mental effect of the sign.

3-Object: The actual entity or concept to which the sign refers. It is the thing or idea that the sign represents.

Peirce's model emphasizes the dynamic process of semiosis, through which a sign represents an object to an interpretant. This process is continuous, as the interpretant of one sign can become the representamen of another, leading to further interpretation. Signs can convey meaning on multiple levels, often described as:

Denotation: The literal, primary meaning of the sign. For example, the word "rose" denotes the flower itself.

Connotation: The secondary, cultural, or emotional meanings associated with the sign. For example, the connotation of the word "rose" can include ideas of love, romance, or beauty. Barthes (1968), a prominent semiotician, emphasized the importance of connotation in understanding how signs operate within cultural contexts. He argued that signs often carry ideological meanings that reflect and reinforce cultural norms and values.

2.3.2 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a critical concept in semiotics, literary theory, and cultural studies, referring to the relationship between texts and how they influence, reflect, and interact. The term was first introduced by the Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. Intertextuality highlights how texts are not isolated creations but are interconnected and embedded within a web of cultural and textual references.

Kristeva introduced the term intertextuality, emphasizing that texts are inherently interdependent. She argued that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66). This means that texts draw upon previous texts by directly quoting, alluding to, or implicitly referencing them, creating a rich tapestry of meaning that extends beyond the individual work.

Bakhtin, whose work heavily influenced Kristeva, introduced the concept of dialogism, which is central to understanding intertextuality. Bakhtin viewed language and texts as inherently dialogic, meaning they always conversed with other texts and voices. He wrote, "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his intention" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). This perspective underscores the dynamic and interactive nature of textual meaning.

2.4 Media Coverage of Political Events

Analyzing media coverage of political events from a semiotic perspective involves examining the signs and symbols used in reporting and how they convey deeper meanings and ideologies. This analysis helps to uncover how media shapes public perception and political discourse. Semiotic analysis provides a comprehensive understanding of how media represents political events by focusing on the denotation and connotation of signs. Barthes (1968) emphasizes the importance of understanding the literal meaning (denotation) and signs' associated cultural and emotional meanings (connotation). For instance, the denotation of a police presence at a protest is simply that police are there, but the connotation can range from security and order to repression and control, depending on the context and the framing.

3. Methodology

The selected model for this study, which is qualitative, was based on semiotic analysis, specifically the denotation and connotation model of Barthes (1968), to analyze the implied meanings of the news content. Barthes' model of semiotics provides a powerful tool for analyzing how meaning is constructed and communicated in various cultural contexts. By focusing on the processes of denotation, connotation, and myth-making, Barthes' approach helps to uncover the ideological underpinnings of cultural texts and practices. This makes his model particularly useful for studying advertising, media, fashion, literature, art, and broader cultural phenomena, revealing how signs shape our understanding of the world (Barthes, 1968).

3.1 Key components of Barthes semiotic model
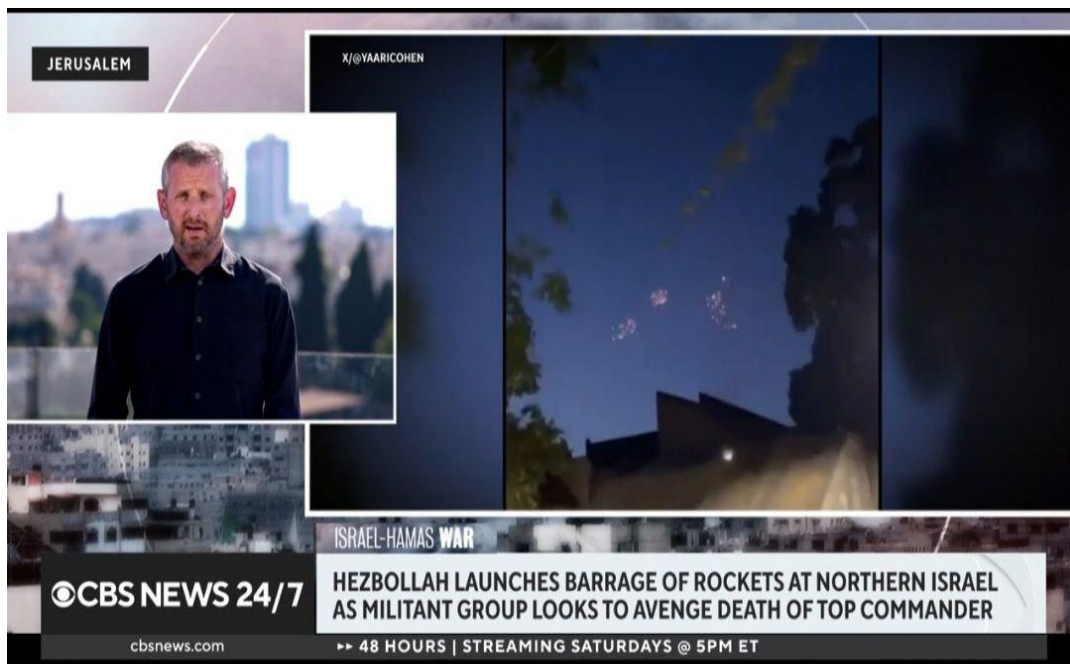
1-Denotation and Connotation

Denotation: This is the straightforward, literal meaning of a sign. It is what a sign explicitly refers to without any additional cultural or emotional implications. For example, the denotation of a photograph of a rose might simply be "a rose," referring to the flower as it is.

Connotation: Connotation involves the secondary meanings that a sign carries in addition to its denotation. These meanings are influenced by cultural, emotional, and social contexts. In the case of the rose, connotations might include ideas of love, romance, or beauty, depending on the cultural context. Barthes explored how connotations transform the literal meanings of signs into culturally specific myths, which he discussed extensively in his work "Mythologies" (Hilander, 2019).

4. Data Analysis

According to the adopted model, this section analyses some selected photos from American and Iranian reports.

4.1 semiotic Analysis of photo 1 (from CBS News Channel)

From a semiotic point of view, this photo has a denotative and connotative meaning. The denotative meaning refers to the literal, primary meaning of the sign, focusing on the apparent things without interpretation or additional context. On the left panel, a news reporter stands in front of an outdoor background. There is a label for the location "JERUSALEM." The reporter is wearing a black shirt. On the right panel, a night sky with bright lights, which appear to be explosions or rockets. The banner at the bottom of the image reads "CBS NEWS 24/7" and "HEZBOLLAH LAUNCHES BARRAGE OF ROCKETS AT NORTHERN ISRAEL AS MILITANT GROUP LOOKS TO AVENGE DEATH OF TOP COMMANDER."

The connotative analysis of the reporter's presence in Jerusalem, a significant historical and political city, adds gravity to the news. The black shirt may symbolize seriousness or mourning, potentially reflecting the sombre nature of the report. The visual of rockets or explosions at night is a typical representation of military conflict, particularly in the context of Zionists -Hezbollah tensions. It evokes images of warfare and the ongoing strife in the region. The headline uses words like "Barrage," "Rockets," and "Avenge," which carry strong, aggressive connotations. These terms emphasize the severity and retaliatory nature of the attack. The use of the term "Militant Group" to describe Hezbollah frames the group within a specific political and ideological context, often associated with terrorism and insurgency. This shapes the viewer's perception of the conflict and the actors involved.

Also, the CBS headline uses DEATH not killing or assassination to suggest that Zionists have nothing to do with the elimination of Hezbollah members.

4.2 Semiotic Analysis of photo 2 (from CBS News Channel)

From a semiotic point of view, this photo has a denotative and connotative meaning. Denotatively, the photo shows several individuals, including soldiers and medical personnel, around a stretcher with a wounded person. The individuals are in military and medical uniforms. The scene is outside an army helicopter, which they use for the evacuation of the injured person. The individuals are in the process of transferring the wounded person into the helicopter. There is visible military gear, medical supplies, and the helicopter itself.

Connotatively, military and medical personnel together connotes conflict and emergency response. It highlights the seriousness of the situation, emphasizing the need for protection and immediate medical care. The helicopter symbolizes urgency and advanced medical response. It indicates the critical situation requiring rapid evacuation and medical intervention. The description of the wounded person as a victim of a rocket attack underscores the human cost of the conflict. It evokes empathy and concern for the individual's well-being. The combination of military and medical imagery, along with the context of an active conflict, conveys a powerful message about the impact of war on individuals and the efforts made to save lives amidst chaos.

4.3 semiotic analysis of photo 3 (from PressTV Channel)

From a semiotic point of view, this photo has denotation and connotation meanings. Denotatively, the photo shows a group of uniformed fighters holding yellow flags. The uniforms inform that they are part of a military group. The scene appears outdoors, with the fighters standing in formation and raising flags. The yellow flags bear symbols and text, which likely represent the organization to which the fighters belong.

Connotatively, the presence of uniformed fighters connotes organization, discipline, and a militaristic culture. It refers to a cohesive group with a shared purpose and identity. The yellow flags symbolize Hezbollah's identity and ideology. Flags are potent symbols of allegiance and solidarity, often used to rally support and convey messages of unity and strength. The memorial for Sheik Abbas Al-Mousawi underscores themes of sacrifice and martyrdom, which are central to Hezbollah's narrative. It emphasizes the group's historical continuity and ideological commitment to its cause. That Al-Mousawi was killed by an Israeli airstrike highlights the ongoing conflict between Hezbollah and Zionists. It frames the narrative within a context of aggression and retaliation, evoking a sense of injustice and the need for resistance. Raising hands indicates readiness and unity, while uttering and repeating certain phrases and words (as shown by their full open mouths) indicates anger, revenge, and stance-taking.

4.4 Semiotic Analysis of Photo 4 (from Press TV Channel)

From a semiotic point of view, this photo has denotative and connotative meanings. Denotatively, the photo shows a building that has been heavily damaged. The structure is partially collapsed, with significant debris scattered around. The scene is outdoors in what appears to be a village. Several individuals are wearing high-visibility vests, possibly rescue workers, moving through the debris. A partially visible sign in Arabic is present in the foreground, likely indicating the area's name.

Connotatively, the destruction of the building connotes violence, conflict, and loss. It is a powerful visual representation of the impact of war and aerial bombings on civilian infrastructure. The presence of rescue workers offers efforts to save lives and provide aid amidst the destruction. It connotes hope, resilience, and the humanitarian response to the crisis. Because of the building's destruction, members of a single family died and were buried under the rubble. This evokes empathy and it highlights the human cost of the conflict. The overall composition of the image, with the stark contrast between the destroyed buildings and the presence of rescue workers, conveys a narrative of destruction and resilience. It highlights the devastating impact of conflict and the efforts to mitigate its consequences.

5. Conclusion

1-The analysis shows that the framing in American media, such as the CBS channel, tends to focus on the conflict as a security issue, highlighting the threat posed by Hezbollah to Zionist civilians and the defensive actions of the IDF. The narrative often underscores the asymmetry of the conflict, portraying Zionists as responding to aggression. There is an emphasis on factual reporting with a tone of objectivity, but the choice of visuals and language can convey a subtle bias towards portraying Zionists as the victims of unprovoked attacks.

2-The framing in the Press TV channel, tends to focus on the conflict as a struggle against Zionists' aggression and occupation. Hezbollah is often portrayed as a legitimate resistance movement defending Lebanese sovereignty and civilians. There is a strong emphasis on the narrative of resistance, martyrdom, and the illegitimacy of Zionist actions, presenting the conflict in a context of historical and ongoing oppression.

3-American media portrays Hezbollah as a militant group and a terrorist organization, while the Iranian side portrays Hezbollah as a heroic resistance movement fighting against Zionist aggression. The American side portrays the Israel Defense Forces IDF as the legitimate military force defending its nation, and the Iranian side portrays them as aggressors and occupiers responsible for civilian casualties and destruction. Zionist civilians are frequently shown as victims of rocket attacks, emphasizing their vulnerability and the threat they face on the American side. In contrast, the Iranian side portrays Lebanese civilians as prominently featured, particularly in contexts showing suffering, resilience, and solidarity in the face of Israeli attacks.

4.There is media bias on both sides. The US CBS news sides with Zionists or IDF, while Iran's Press TV sides with Hezbollah.

5.The main actors utilized in the Zionist-Hezbollah conflict are place (where southern Lebanese buildings are shown destroyed or Jerusalem is shown under attack), people (Lebanese aid workers searching for survivors or IDF memebers treating military personnel), and action (a CBS journalist reporting updates or Hezbollah fighters conducting a military parade).

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