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Introduction

by Alex P. Schmid (editor-in-chief) & Lorraine Bowman-Grieve (guest co-editor)

The US-led 'War on Terror', launched after 11 September 2001, has consisted predominantly of military and intelligence operations abroad and police and secret service operations at home. The main goal has been to arrest, kill or otherwise incapacitate members of Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups and cut off their financial support. Given the massive employment of resources and the amount of kinetic force used to deal with no more than a few thousand jihadists, the results of this 'Global War on Terror' have been disappointing. The same is, luckily, also true for the other side: nowhere have jihadists managed to gain state power. At best, they have been able to exercise a degree of fragile control over some barren territories in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

However, the one field where Al-Qaeda and other terrorist and extremist organisations have gained a surprising amount of terrain is in the virtual world of the Internet. While the offline presence of many of these organisations is weak, their online presence is strong. They have used publicly available global communication structures to good effect for advertising their existence, influencing public agendas, propaganda, networking, indoctrination, incitement, fund-raising, radicalisation, mobilisation, recruitment as well as instruction and training. Ironically, the Internet, originally created by the US military, has become the terrorists' strongest weapon. Western efforts to counter, radical, extremist and terrorist propaganda, in particular jihadist rhetoric, on the Internet have so far been largely unsuccessful.

While terrorism is a combination of violence and communication [1], counter-terrorism has focused largely on the violence. It has failed to make major inroads with 'soft power'-type 'strategic communication' initiatives against terrorists and their supporters and sympathisers. Take for example, the basic message of Al-Qaeda: 'Islam is under attack from the Crusaders and Jews and Islamic territories are systematically occupied'. It has resonated far beyond the terrorists' own circles and their immediate supporters - despite the fact that many more churches and synagogues have been attacked worldwide than mosques and that more Muslims live in the West than Westerners in Muslim countries. Recasting its own provocative acts of aggression against civilians as resistance against a 'satanic' America and its allies, Al-Qaeda has had some success in portraying itself as champion of a sacred cause. It has found a sympathetic ear among sections of the Muslim community - not least among alienated young Muslims in Western diasporas. The West has been unable to counter Al-Qaeda's simple narrative with a convincing counter-narrative that has a credible appeal among those vulnerable to Al-Qaeda's rhetoric and audio-visual propaganda. Mainstream moderate Muslim organisations, in turn, have not been much more successful in reclaiming key concepts of Islamic theology, especially the concept of 'Jihad'[2], which has been hijacked and instrumentalised by Al-Qaeda like some other Islamic principles that Salafists filled with new meanings while claiming to follow the oldest interpretations.

There are several reasons for the failure of Western counter-terrorist efforts on the ideological front. For one thing, the 'West' is heterogeneous, divided and without a single, simple message.

What it preaches is also often not what it has practiced - although the gap between rhetoric and reality is not as deep as during the Cold War and, at any rate, minor compared to what exists in, and comes from, other power centers such as Iran. In addition, many in the West are opposed to countering propaganda with propaganda. Many also do not wish to interfere with the freedom of the press and the Internet. Yet perhaps the most important reason for the failure to fully engage violent extremism in words and images on the Internet is that the broader public in the West is simply not aware of the massive volume of jihadist propaganda and incitement going on online, in blogs, forums, on *YouTube* and in social media like *Facebook*. The World Wide Web is divided into numerous sub-cultures of like-minded people who communicate mainly among themselves. This has allowed real terrorists as well as ‘armchair warriors’, claiming to speak for terrorist organisations, to operate anonymously from unknown locations (because coded IP addresses are used) and create and expand an online subculture that supports and promotes extremist ideologies. The massive extremist and terrorist presence on the World Wide Web has offline repercussions in the real world: some armchair media jihadists put their online glorification of violence and Al-Qaeda’s cult of death into offline practice in the form of *lone wolf* attacks. These, in turn, are picked up and replicated by some vulnerable and impressionable young people in copycat crimes. Online incitement and offline terrorism have become a vicious circle.

This thematic issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* has been the result of a collaborative effort of guest co-editor **Lorraine Bowman-Grieve** and the editor-in-chief of PT. It brings together a number of diverse articles from researchers and experts exploring various dimensions of the Internet presence of terrorists and their supporters.

In the first article, *James Forest*, sketches the ways in which propaganda seeks to influence audience perceptions and behaviours. He then identifies a number of areas where Al-Qaeda is vulnerable because it has to hide some inconvenient truths.

Yotam Ophir and *Gabriel Weimann* take a look at the Basque ETA, examining the ways it tried to utilize the Internet to gain acceptance for its goals and win support.

Jytte Klausen and her colleagues show how Al-Muhajiroun jihadists exploit the US Constitution’s First Amendment protections to evade European laws against incitement and hate speech. Their sophisticated network analysis and their comparison of Al-Muhajiroun’s network with the one of the American Tea Party reveals that behind a seemingly large network there are, at least in this case, only a few operatives who run multiple channels of communication.

Gilbert Ramsay, in turn, takes a look at an exchange of arguments that took place on an Arabic language Web Forum in late 2009 and early 2010 between supporters and critics of Al-Qaeda. From this battleground of pro- and anti-jihadist voices, Ramsay draws some cautionary lessons on the potential of using online counter-narratives.

Bud Goodall and his colleagues explore the potential that humour and ridicule might offer for ‘disarming’ dead-serious terrorists and changing the narrative landscape within which they operate.

Finally, we conclude with a report of a Working Group of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force on Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes, held in 2011 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Notes

[1] Cf. Alex P. Schmid & Janny de Graaf. *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: Sage, 1982.

[2] According to Ruediger Lohlker five varieties of Jihad may be distinguished (i) Jihad as propaganda, (ii) modern defensive Jihad, (iii) anti-colonial Jihad, (iv) pacifist Jihad and (v) jihadist offensive Jihad . – Ruediger Lohlker. *The Forgotten Swamp Revisited*. In: R. Lohlker (ed.). *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism*. Vienna: University Press, 2011, p.137.

Articles

Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare

by James J.F. Forest

Abstract

Many kinds of entities—including terrorists and insurgents—seek to influence perceptions and behavior among various target audiences, and have become increasingly reliant on the Internet in their efforts, incorporating social media, blogging, public video sharing and other online tools. This article is focused on the ideological messages that terrorist groups use to convey with these tools. Drawing from a study of Al-Qaeda, this discussion illustrates how ideologies of violence have certain vulnerabilities that can be exploited in order to degrade a terrorist group's ability to achieve its objectives. While crafting and disseminating counter-narratives can be a critical part of a counterterrorism strategy, it is also important to identify ways in which terrorists undermine their own central narratives and exacerbate pre-existing "influence warfare" challenges.

Introduction

On any given day, we are inundated with a flood of attempts to influence our thoughts and behaviors. A wide range of entities—including governments, charities, neighbors, and companies trying to sell us products and services—compete against each other for our attention, support, loyalty and money. They use a wide variety of narratives, concepts, themes, images, sounds and so forth in their efforts to elicit cognitive and emotional responses that help their messages resonate among members of their target audiences, with a goal of influencing different kinds of behavior. Political parties try to secure your vote for their candidate or platform, while civic organizations try to rally communities to come together over locally important issues, like education, health awareness, or voter participation. Religions have probably the longest history of any organized entity in terms of trying to influence our values, beliefs and behaviors. In the world of commercial marketing, the financial stakes are high: Coca Cola battles for market share against Pepsi Cola; Nike tries to convince consumers that its products are better than Reebok; in the skies, Delta competes against United and American Airlines for a larger percentage of the traveling public.

Radical extremists are also competing for our attention and influence. They use indiscriminate violence, fear and intimidation to influence the policies and actions of societies and their governments. Beyond the violence, modern terrorist groups also spend considerable effort trying to influence us using conventional means of communication—especially via the Internet. Bruce Hoffman notes that “virtually every terrorist group in the world today has its own Internet website and, in many instances, multiple sites in different languages with different messages tailored to specific audiences.”[1] Gabriel Weimann has described how these websites provide an online forum for indoctrination as well as the distribution of terrorist manuals, instructions and data [2]—evolving into what Evan Kohlmann calls a “MySpace-like social-networking hub for

[extremists] intent on becoming the next generation of terrorists, hijackers and even suicide bombers.”[3] In short, the Internet offers a variety of tools that terrorists and other violent non-state actors use to participate in the competition for influence.

All actors engaged in the competition for influence must, however, overcome a variety of challenges. To begin with, messages and messengers must be perceived by their target audiences as credible and legitimate. In order to influence our perceptions and behaviors, they must first get us to listen. Yet so many streams of information converging on our consciousness can be overwhelming and cause us to tune out: newspapers, radio, television, and even the Internet are basically channels that we can turn on or off. To preserve our sanity and avoid information overload/overwhelm, many of us have become selective of the communication channels we tolerate, especially when those channels make demands of us. Meanwhile, the goal of all these competing influencers is to keep us from turning to a different stream of information.

In this era of increasingly intense competition for limited attention span and limited time, the truth (which can be bland and unexciting) may be easily drowned out by a cacophony of fiction, conspiracies or mere entertainment, creating a distinct disadvantage for governments or educators. For example, a data-rich study will always get less attention among the general public than a dramatic scandal or a Hollywood star’s sordid exploits. When our lives become more complicated (through recession, unemployment, war, natural disaster, etc.), our patience and attention span suffers further. Many of us are drawn toward narratives that offer simplification of complex realities. In many cases, the “us versus them” narrative common among terrorist and insurgent groups resonates among individuals, especially those who are grasping for someone to blame for complex difficulties they face.

Today, these narratives can be offered by anyone via the Internet, using websites, blogs, *YouTube* videos, *Facebook* pages, e-mail distribution newsletters and various other forms of social media. [4] In essence, anyone can be a potentially powerful “influencer” of perceptions and behavior; this greatly expands and complicates the competitive landscape. Further, the globalization of communication technology provides opportunities for one influencer to weaken or discredit another. One way of doing so is to draw attention to an adversary’s counterproductive mistakes, things that are said or done on their behalf that can undermine their legitimacy and credibility. Another is to offer a more compelling narrative, drawing potential supporters away. These are the kinds of things that take place in the arena of “influence warfare”—the struggle to shape perceptions in a war of ideas.[5]

For the counterterrorism community, the question becomes one of identifying the aspects of a terrorist group’s challenges in this arena that can be made more difficult for them. Dell Dailey, until recently the State Department’s counterterrorism chief, once commented that “terrorists’ center of gravity lies in the information domain, and it is there that we must engage it.”[6] A terrorist group must promote a compelling narrative that resonates among their target audiences, and must be perceived as more legitimate and credible than other competing forces within the same milieu. Their failure to do so dramatically reduces their chances of success or longevity; as Audrey Cronin and other scholars have noted, a loss of credibility is one of the key ways in which a terrorist group meets its demise.[7] In essence, combating a terrorist group should

include an attempt to see the world through the eyes of the organization's leaders and see what they fear most, particularly in terms of their ideological vulnerabilities.

The Case of Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda offers an interesting case study of vulnerabilities and challenges that a terrorist organization faces in on the battlefield of influence warfare. Previous research has described how Al-Qaeda has pioneered new online efforts for strategic influence, from distributing its propaganda in dozens of languages to creating a central clearinghouse (*as-Sahab* or “the clouds”) in order to coordinate the global effort.[8] Al-Qaeda leaders, supporters and what Jarret Brachman calls “jihobbyists”[9] all utilize multiple channels of communication to disseminate and reinforce one of its core messages: “think globally and act locally.” Clerics have played a prominent role as well in this influence effort, e.g. Anwar al-Awlaki, whose online lectures and *Inspire* magazine articles promoted Al-Qaeda's ideology to a broad, English-speaking audience. Other so-called Internet imams of infamy include Abdullah el-Faisal, who was deported from Britain in 2007 for inciting racial hatred, but still preaches online, urging his followers to kill Hindus, Christians, Jews and Americans; Sheikh Khalid bin Abdul Rahman al-Husainan of Kuwait, who encourages his followers to pursue martyrdom; and Abu Yahya al-Libi, a Libyan cleric who escaped from prison in Afghanistan in 2005, and is considered a key inspirational leader among Al-Qaeda members.[10]

These and other prominent voices of Al-Qaeda consider managing perceptions to be a vitally important effort, as Ayman al-Zawahiri explained in a July 2005 letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a race for hearts and minds of our *ummah*.”[11] Al-Qaeda attempts to manipulate perceptions of legitimacy and the way people think and talk about it. Its leaders have different messaging strategies to support recruitment, coalition or affiliate relationships and, of course, trying to demoralize the enemy. Al-Qaeda also spends a great deal of time trying to deflect attention away from its own shortcomings (and as a terrorist organization that kills innocent people, the organization certainly does have a few shortcomings). Further, as a decentralized network organization, Al-Qaeda sometimes has to engage in “damage control” to protect its image from ill-conceived activities and mistakes caused by individuals acting in its name. The actions of al-Zarqawi in Iraq are one of several examples in recent years. Not only were the videotaped beheadings deemed repulsive throughout the Muslim world; his group's attack on three hotels in Amman, Jordan on November 9, 2005—which killed 54 people including many who were attending a wedding party—was particularly damaging to Al-Qaeda's image and provoked a massive public demonstration. In his statement responding to the public outcry, a defensive al-Zarqawi argued that Muslims should not have been at the hotels, which he called “centers of immorality.”[12]

Because Al-Qaeda is decentralized, bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and others in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region had and have little if any control over the violence carried out in its name elsewhere around the world.[13] Thus, the risks of counterproductive violence are greater than for other, more hierarchical terrorist groups. The same is even more true for challenges in the non-violence influence warfare arena. Anyone can promote the Al-Qaeda image online in his or

her own way, but this reduces Al-Qaeda's ability to ensure message consistency and cohesion of effort. Although its leaders want to exercise control, they cannot control what people say and think about them. Further, the Internet allows other voices to be heard, including those whose messages pose a direct challenge to Al-Qaeda's credibility and ideological resonance.

The remainder of this article explores a relatively simple premise: What kinds of things do Al-Qaeda's leaders want people – especially potential supporters – NOT to hear, think or believe? If we could read its leaders' minds, or hear their thoughts, what would we find them worrying most about? From a review of Al-Qaeda-affiliated websites, discussion forums, videos and other online resources, this analysis identifies 6 themes that reflect major concerns of the network's senior leaders and propagandists: (1) religious authority; (2) strategic authority; (3) group integrity and cohesion; (4) competing voices; (5) operational capacity; and (6) relevance. I shall discuss them in this order.

1. Religious Authority or Apostasy?

For Al-Qaeda's leaders, perceptions associated with religious legitimacy are absolutely critical. They must constantly convince themselves, their supporters, and those they are trying to recruit that Al-Qaeda serves God's will. In order to project an aura of pious and pure holy warriors, holding true to authentic Islam, they rely heavily on *fatwas*—religious rulings and decrees—issued in support of salafi-jihad ideological tenets. They often select specific passages from the Koran and try to use them (out of context) to justify their ideology.[14] Further, like all religiously-oriented violent groups, they make every effort to convince others that this is an epic struggle between good and evil, with God on their side (and of course, there can be no compromise allowed when it comes to doing what God demands). In their propaganda, they draw on a sense of crisis within the Muslim world, and argue that Islam is under siege—one that can only be lifted by true believers willing to join a global violent jihad.

Monitoring salafi-jihadist web forums reveals a wide range of religiously-oriented debates among the members. There is a huge issue of clerical credibility here; with so many self-declared religious “authorities” in the mix, we see a multidimensional competition for legitimacy. This competition leads to arguments and attempts to discredit others. Often, questions of legitimate interpretations of the Koran are raised. At the core of this is the reality that Al-Qaeda suffers tremendously when its members or supporters—not to mention prospective recruits—begin to doubt that God wants them to do the things that Al-Qaeda does.

In essence, Al-Qaeda's survival requires gaining and maintaining legitimacy within the Muslim world; failure to do so will inevitably doom their cause and the future of the movement. Thus, Al-Qaeda's leaders became noticeably defensive when Saudi Arabia's top cleric, Grand Mufti Shaykh Abdul Aziz al-Asheik, gave a speech in October 2007 warning Saudi citizens not to join unauthorized jihadist activities [15] - a statement directed mainly at those considering going to Iraq to fight U.S.-led forces. In May 2010, Saudi Arabia's top religious leadership, known as the council of Senior Ulema, issued a *fatwa* that denounced terrorism, including the financing of terrorist acts.[16] Also in Saudi Arabia, a government-supported program has enlisted hundreds of Islamic scholars-turned-bloggers to fight online radicalization by challenging the jihadist interpretations of the Koran on extremist social-network forums.[17]

Similarly, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a top leader of the armed Egyptian movement Islamic Jihad and a longtime associate of Ayman al-Zawahiri, published a book that renounces violent jihad on legal and religious grounds.[18] In his heated rebuttal, Zawahiri questions the timing of the book (as its author was in an Egyptian prison at the time), and claims that “it serves the Crusaders, Zionists and infidel Arab leaders by attempting to anesthetize the mujahideen and force them out of the jihadi field.”[19] Abu Yahya al-Libi issued a statement indicating that Muslims ought to just dismiss this as a result of torture, brainwashing and blackmail.[20] As Abdul Hameed Bakier noted, this kind of response “demonstrates that al-Qaeda is seriously alarmed by the possible negative consequences the document might inflict on their ideology and the jihadi movement.”[21]

In Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, Mufti Zainul Abidin issued a *fatwa* that declared the Taliban to be “out of Islam” as a result of its violence, its failure to follow Islamic teachings, and its pursuance of a *takfiri* ideology (the latter referring to the Salafi-jihadi practice of declaring fellow Muslims “infidels” if they oppose jihadist dogma).[22] These and other instances cause far greater problems for Al-Qaeda’s leaders than any U.S. or Western leader’s condemnation of their violent attacks. It also explains why several clerics in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and other countries have been murdered by Al-Qaeda members over the past decade. In essence, Al-Qaeda’s leaders and fellow jihadists fear *fatwas* more than bullets.

2. Strategic Authority or Ineptitude?

Al-Qaeda’s core leaders also want to project (to their supporters and their enemies) an image that they are the competent vanguard of a powerful movement, with tentacles and cells all around the world. An occasional terrorist attack in some corner of the world—whether it kills dozens, hundreds or thousands—feeds this perception. For Al-Qaeda to remain viable, the group is not required to conduct a steady drumbeat of attacks against the United States or other Western countries; it just needs to conduct—or convince a small group of individuals to conduct—a terrorist attack at some location in the world that can be claimed as an Al-Qaeda initiative. At the same time, well-publicized failed attempts and disrupted plots (e.g. recent plots in Denver, Dallas, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Washington, DC and major cities in Europe) also feed this perception of a vibrant enemy with global reach. Encouraging this perception aids them by generating fear and causing governments to overextend and overspend on homeland security and counter-terrorism efforts, reflecting a core Al-Qaeda strategy that draws from Paul Kennedy’s theories on how empires decline.[23] As Bruce Hoffman recently noted, “A key dimension of Al-Qaeda’s strategy is economic warfare . . . it seeks to undermine our economy” through a prolonged war of attrition.[24]

This strategy is reflected in various kinds of Al-Qaeda propaganda, suggesting strategic agreement. However, analysis of Al-Qaeda documents captured in safe houses throughout Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq and in a number of other countries (and now stored in the Department of Defense’s “Harmony” database) have brought to light a number of ideological and strategic debates among Al-Qaeda’s top leaders.[25] These debates are mirrored by thousands of participants on jihadi-salafist web forums, whose doubts about strategy and tactics also lead to questions about leadership and integrity. In one captured document, the author, ‘Abd al-Halim

Adl, expresses concern that Al-Qaeda is “experiencing one setback after another,” and placed the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of Osama bin Laden.[26] In a recent analysis of Al-Qaeda web forums, Gabriel Weimann noted that in 2007, members of the password-protected Al-Qaeda-affiliated forum *al-Boraq* began discussing why Al-Qaeda does not strike Iran, believing that doing so would fit within the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.[27] There have also been debates between various Salafi Islamist ideologues, using websites and discussion forums as a means for airing their strategic disagreements. In one example, described by Weimann, prominent Sheiks Hamed al-Ali and Abu Basir al-Tartusi had an open disagreement about the strategic utility of attacking Arab regimes.[28]

Perhaps the most well-known example of strategic disagreements within Al-Qaeda is over the question whether the 9/11 attacks might have been a big mistake. Before 9/11, bin Laden and his close colleagues had convinced themselves and supporters that the U.S. was a paper tiger; that because the U.S. had pulled out of Beirut in the 1980s and pulled out of Somalia in the 1990s, we would just be beside ourselves with grief and anarchy after a major attack on our homeland. That, of course, was a huge miscalculation. But instead of admitting their mistake, Al-Qaeda’s leaders have to continue this false narrative that the enemy is weak, and that the Jihadists will eventually win this struggle, again in part because God is on the side of the true believers. The truth, of course, is that the West has proven far more resilient and far less vulnerable than Al-Qaeda wants to admit. And this suggests that Al-Qaeda really does not understand Americans as much as its leaders sometimes think they do. If that is the case, the strategy it pursues against the U.S. is based on incomplete intelligence, at best.

Another strategic mistake that Al-Qaeda does not want to admit is that promoting terrorist activity in Muslim countries has not been a way to mobilize the Muslim world. On the contrary, it has created coalitions between governments, and in some cases with other Muslim networks, who want to stop the jihadists. Al-Qaeda is trying to build a populist movement, and yet their terrorist attacks kill or alienate potential supporters throughout the Muslim world. Further, some Al-Qaeda members and supporters are troubled by the rather inconvenient truth that they have killed eight Muslims for every one non-Muslim infidel they have killed, as noted in a study by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point.[29] The last thing that a Muslim radical group wants people to believe is that they don’t really value Muslim life. A litany of prominent jihadist spokesmen, including Adam Gadahn, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Shaykh Atiyatallah, Tariq Azzam, and Hakimullah Mahsud, have all issued statements specifically addressing the issue of Muslim civilian casualties, often incorporating arguments about strategic and operational necessity. One of the most prolific Al-Qaeda ideologues, Abu Yahya al-Libi, offered a theological justification known as “Hukm al-Tatarrus” in his book *Human Shields and Modern Jihad*. Yet as Jack Barclay has noted, “the deployment of obscure religious concepts to explain the slaughter of large numbers of their co-religionists is unlikely to convince the wider Muslim public, particularly at the local level where communities are forced to continue their daily lives amid a climate of repeated bloodshed.”[30]

On December 16, 2007, al-Zawahiri posted an open invitation for journalists and jihadists to ask him questions via the primary jihadist web forums. Thousands of questions were posted to popular password-protected websites like *Al-Ekclass* and *Al-Hesbah*. On April 2, 2008, *As-Sahab* Media released the first part of Zawahiri’s response in the form of a one hour, forty-three minute

audio statement, which was accompanied by Arabic and English transcripts. Al-Zawahiri was very selective about the questions he chose to respond to. He also seemed to be particularly defensive in response to questions about killing fellow Muslims, arguing “We haven’t killed the innocents; not in Baghdad, nor in Morocco, nor in Algeria, nor anywhere else.”[31] The inconvenient truth for Al-Qaeda, however, is that its members routinely promote, orchestrate and celebrate the murder of hundreds of innocent Muslim men, women and children each year. As President Obama noted in his June 2009 speech in Cairo, “more than any other, they have killed Muslims.”[32] When debates erupt about this issue, the response from Al-Qaeda’s leaders has been to try and discredit the source as illegitimate, a conspiracy promoted by the infidel enemies. They also routinely blame others for the killing. But the reality is that through its actions, Al-Qaeda has generated and strengthened an anti-jihadist response from Muslim populations worldwide.

3. Group Integrity and Cohesion or Self-Interested Criminals?

Al-Qaeda documents and web forum debates also reveal that there are individuals within the network who get preferential treatment—like better salaries and leadership promotions—for reasons that have nothing to do with merit. For example, there has for a long time been an undercurrent of resentment among Pakistani, Indonesian and other Southeast Asian members of Al-Qaeda who feel that the Arab members (especially the Saudis, Egyptians and Yemenis) are treated differently than the rest. In his recent testimony before Congress, Evan Kohlman notes that “As early as 1990, at Al-Qaeda’s own guesthouses in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, mujahideen fighters began to loudly grumble that too many Egyptians—primarily al-Zawahiri’s cronies—were being appointed to senior positions in Al-Qaeda.”[33] Former Al-Qaeda lieutenant Jamal al-Fadl also noted during testimony in a U.S. federal court how Egyptians were viewed as receiving preferential treatment.[34] This sentiment was echoed by an angry Libyan fighter named Abu Tamin, who posted on a jihadist web forum “why [is] everything run by Egyptians?”[35] By the same token, some observers have noted that family members of Al-Qaeda’s leaders have rarely been chosen to become martyrs or sent out on dangerous operations. These things challenge the notion of Al-Qaeda as an inclusive network representing the interests of all Muslims, and undermine the perceptions of fairness and integrity that the network’s leaders want to convey.

And on a related note about perceptions of integrity, we know from court records, interrogation interviews and captured documents that there are various levels of corruption and malfeasance within Al-Qaeda’s rank and file. These information sources have revealed numerous cases of embezzlement, counter-productive violence, insubordination, criminal activity (including drug running) and other activities that undermine the desperately promoted perception of Al-Qaeda members being devout Muslim “holy warriors.” The aforementioned Jamal Ahmed Al Fadl stole money from Al-Qaeda, got caught, went on the run, and approached the U.S. government in an attempt to save himself and his family. Khalid Shaykh Muhammad—the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks—was a flamboyant, globe-trotting womanizer and drinker who spent lavishly and stayed in plush hotels until his 2003 capture in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.[36] A Saudi militant captured in Iraq complained that he had been falsely promised there would be long lines of Iraqi

women willing to service him,[37] inadvertently suggesting that his motivations for joining the jihad may have been self-interest rather than defense of the *ummah*.

In order for Al-Qaeda to convince its intended audiences of its status as a vanguard of jihadists defending the global Muslim community, it must establish and sustain a perception of integrity, worthy of trust and respect. The words and actions of those who have answered the call to jihad have, at times, created difficulties in shaping these kinds of perceptions. As many of us will recognize in our personal experiences, trust is much easier to break than to build. On an organizational level, Al-Qaeda has a significant challenge with regard to building and maintaining trust within the Muslim community.

4. Righteous Confidence or Fear of other Prominent Muslim Voices?

Further complicating its relationship with the Muslim community is Al-Qaeda's apparent superiority complex, which is manifest in the many ways that its leaders are constantly criticizing other radical Islamist groups, like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, calling them stupid and ineffective. Ayman al-Zawahiri in particular has repeatedly criticized Hamas for its embrace of democratic politics, among other things.[38] As a result, many extreme Islamists—including Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood—have a deep animosity toward Al-Qaeda. Pundits and politicians too often lump all “radical Islamists” into a single category, implying that they are all of the same mindset. This is dangerously misleading. It is a fact that Hamas has consistently rejected even the suggestion that they align with Al-Qaeda, while leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in several countries have consistently condemned Al-Qaeda's actions and leadership.

Indeed, attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda affiliates in Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and elsewhere have not mobilized a unified Muslim *ummah* to the cause. Instead terrorist attacks have driven wedges of ideological disagreement that only serve to benefit nations prosecuting the global war against them. Moreover, Al-Qaeda has failed to gain traction in Syria, Lebanon, or the Palestinian Territories, and it has lost its tenuous footholds in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. For years, Al-Qaeda leaders have courted the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) as an attempt to gain another affiliate group in the Maghreb, but leaders of the LIFG have consistently rejected such overtures. In 2009, the group even released its own doctrinal statement, a “New Jihad Code,” which challenged several core tenets of Al-Qaeda's religious ideology. According to the 417-page document, “Jihad has ethics and morals because it is for God. That means it is forbidden to kill women, children, elderly people, priests, messengers, traders and the like. Betrayal is prohibited and it is vital to keep promises and treat prisoners of war in a good way. Standing by those ethics is what distinguishes Muslims' jihad from the wars of other nations.”[39] As CNN's Nick Robertson and Paul Cruickshank reported, the code was circulated among some of the most respected religious scholars in the Middle East and has been given widespread backing.[40]

A superiority complex is usually a symptom of deep fears and insecurities. This also appears to be the case with regard to Al-Qaeda's leaders. They fear the power of competing voices in the Muslim world, particularly those whose credibility exceeds their own. Al-Qaeda's leaders despise the Muslim Brotherhood and other major organizations in the Islamist milieu precisely

because they are listened to by—and have influence over—millions of Muslims throughout the world. These organizations compete against Al-Qaeda on the battlefield of influence warfare and can make it more difficult for Al-Qaeda to achieve the level of global support in the Muslim community that is necessary before its strategic objectives can be achieved.

Counterterrorism policymakers in the West have recognized the importance of drawing potential support and attention away from Al-Qaeda and its messages of violent extremism. As a consequence, we have seen in recent years increasing support for grassroots efforts to promote alternative narratives. Prominent examples include the *Alliance of Youth Movements*, *Sisters Against Violent Extremism*, *Global Survivors Network*, and the *Quilliam Foundation*.^[41] Another notable effort is the *Radical Middle Way* - an organization of young British Muslims who have rejected the Salafi-jihadist interpretation of the Qur'an and are trying to consolidate a mainstream response to fundamentalist Islam. Their public events and Internet activities are funded by the sale of music videos, and are being touted as an example of how to weaken the resonance of al-Qaeda's ideology among youth.^[42] Similarly, in Indonesia, Ahmad Dhani—the leader of the immensely popular rock band Dewa—has used music to influence millions of fans, encouraging them to resist the tide of religious extremism. As Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid—former president of Indonesia—observed, “Dhani and his group are on the front lines of a global conflict, defending Islam from its fanatical hijackers [and helping] to rescue an entire generation from Wahhabi-financed extremists whose goal is to transform Muslim youth into holy warriors and suicide bombers.”^[43] In sum, many Muslim political and grassroots organizations challenge Al-Qaeda's ability to dominate the influence arena, and Al-Qaeda despises them for it.

5. Operational Capacity or Amateur Hour?

Similar to the challenge of promoting perceptions of strategic competence and personal integrity, Al-Qaeda is also constantly struggling to project an image of robust operational capabilities. In order for Al-Qaeda's leaders to get people to believe in them, they have to project an air of confidence and competence. They really do not want anyone to think that they are amateurs, not warriors. Hence, when newspapers report on amateurish tactics and failed plots, this is worrisome to Al-Qaeda. Further, there are already widespread concerns about potential ineptitude (or perceptions thereof) among Al-Qaeda's rank-and-file. To be sure, the Arab mujahidin had little to do with Soviet troops leaving Afghanistan in 1989, but they did acquire useful skills in conducting irregular warfare against a superior enemy. Many of these veterans formed the core of Al-Qaeda at the turn of the century, and have been the focus of various post-9/11 intelligence and military actions. But since then, the consistent call “come join the global jihad” has rarely yielded recruits with practical skills, military training or experience, or specialized knowledge of value to the organization. Most often, these new recruits do not even bring money or useful intelligence—all they offer is a desire to join the cause and do something. This is why many of them were put into the pipeline for training as suicide bombers, particularly in Iraq. Some jihadists can avail themselves of opportunities to learn in rudimentary training camps in Pakistan, but more often it appears that events in Iraq and Afghanistan have provided much-needed “on the job training” for these recruits.

Another concern about Al-Qaeda's operational capabilities stems from a lack of knowledge about their declared principal enemy, the United States. This lack of knowledge is reflected in several publications, such as the Al-Qaeda training manual *The Encyclopedia of Jihad*. Under the "Assassination Training" section, the author advises that a good way to suffocate an American in public is through a pretend pie fight where instead of using a pie, the attacker uses quick-drying foam, which can then be thrown "at the opponent's face as if [he] is having a food fight." Nobody will notice, the author writes, "because [Americans] will be laughing at what they think is a pie throwing food fight game, which is a scene they are accustomed to." Even some of the most ambitious efforts to analyze the United States have fallen short. For example, in 2006 Muhammed Khalil al-Hakaima published a 152-page study of how the U.S. intelligence system works, and what the intelligence community can and cannot do legally under U.S. law.[44] However, he relied mainly on information gained from conspiracy websites and other dubious sources. As a result his report contained bogus information—e.g. how South Korean intelligence allegedly influences America's national security agencies through the *Washington Times*, a newspaper controlled by the Unification Church.[45]

Similar to the challenges of manipulating perceptions of capabilities, Al-Qaeda's leaders ask for money *all the time* because they are desperate for cash; none of them have jobs, after all. Al-Qaeda's central organization is becoming increasingly reliant on local and regional affiliate groups, like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, not only to conduct operations, but also to collect and transfer money. A recent story in *Forbes* magazine highlighted how these affiliate groups mainly engage in criminal activity, from trafficking to kidnapping, in order to raise money for the cause.[46] At the same time, Al-Qaeda's leadership needs people to believe that it's all about pursuing God's will; they do not want people to believe that a *primary objective* of the organization is to acquire money and political power, without which the organization is likely to decay and fall apart, just like most terrorist groups throughout history.

Overall, a key challenge for Al-Qaeda involves trying to advance the organization's objectives with constrained financial resources and a restricted knowledge base among its personnel. At the same time, they need to project an image of competence and capability, in order to attract new recruits. Doing so in the midst of evidence to the contrary is a major challenge for Al-Qaeda's propagandists.

6) *Relevance*

Finally, at a core level, Al-Qaeda's leaders fear that the Muslim world will someday view them as incapable of doing anything relevant. As Brian Jenkins recently observed, "these virtual jihadists are locked into a closed-loop discourse on the Internet that is increasingly irrelevant" and their biggest fear is that one day, no one will really be listening.[47] A catalyst for the attacks on 9/11 was that Al-Qaeda's leaders felt a need to prove themselves to the Muslim world that they could support their words with deeds. Having captured center stage, they reaped the whirlwind of military-led responses and intelligence gathering that has seriously degraded Al-Qaeda's operational capabilities. Since then, Al-Qaeda's leaders have tried mightily to keep a spotlight on themselves and their self-appointed vanguard group of "knights" by issuing periodic

audio and video statements and encouraging a viral marketing campaign to support the global spread of their ideology. They clearly recognized the risk that, having been unable to orchestrate a follow-on attack equivalent (or greater) in scope and scale as 9/11, perceptions of their prominence and capabilities within the Muslim world are likely to diminish. Combined with the concerns described earlier about organizational ineptitude and opportunities squandered, this impatience among its followers may pressure Al-Qaeda's leaders into hasty, desperate and sloppy decision-making, or even to a rapid downward spiral toward atrophy and disintegration.

The perception of increasing irrelevance has become more pronounced following events in the Arab World this past year, the so-called "Arab Spring." A core argument of Al-Qaeda has been that corrupt, Western-backed regimes can only be changed through the use of terrorist attacks to mobilize the *ummah*. But in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, change has taken place without any meaningful involvement whatsoever by Al-Qaeda. This, in essence, discredits Al-Qaeda's ideology, as John Brennan has noted.[48] As Eric Schmitt and Thomas Shanker have highlighted in their recent book *Counterstrike*, the U.S. counterterrorism effort has tried to seize the opportunity this provides to engage in the influence warfare arena. The Department of State's new Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications produced an online video, posted to *YouTube* in February 2011, which spliced together scenes of jubilant protesters celebrating the resignation of president Hosni Mubarak with a videotaped statement in 2008 from Ayman al-Zawahiri insisting that "there is no hope to remove the corrupt regimes in Muslim countries except by force." When Zawahiri asked "Let anyone who disagrees give me a single example," the video clip shifted to the jubilant throng in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Forty-eight hours after the video was posted, it had garnered 42,000 hits.[49]

Individual doubts and fears within any organization undermine confidence. Within Al-Qaeda, there are already a wide variety of faults and ideological contradictions that make it difficult to attract new recruit or financial support – let alone achieve their aspiration for an Islamic caliphate. When major events serve to further undermine the credibility and resonance of the professed ideology, such difficulties are exacerbated. And when such difficulties become insurmountable, the propagandists will have nowhere to go, no capacity for influencing the Muslim world in any way beneficial to Al-Qaeda. It will cease to be relevant, like so many terrorist groups before them who lost contact with their purported constituencies.

Conclusion

To sum up, terrorists compete for attention and support against all other entities (including other terrorists) that seek to influence their target audiences. While it is critical to appreciate the central tenets of a terrorist organization's ideology and strategy (and the ways in which their leaders try to manipulate perceptions in support of it), it is also important to understand how the organization's leaders try hard to protect their image, and control what people say and think about them.

The case of Al-Qaeda represents an example of influence warfare. Counterterrorism efforts should seek to understand what terrorist groups do to try and shape perceptions, and what the group appears to be most defensive or concerned about. The goal should then be to exploit ideological vulnerabilities, reducing potential for ideological resonance, diminish the group's

influence capabilities, and drive wedges in the solidarity of the movement that can help undermine and discredit its mobilizing ideology.

The Internet provides new opportunities to exacerbate a terrorist group's influence warfare challenges. Al-Qaeda strategists like Abu Musab al-Suri have consistently encouraged the followers of the movement to use the Internet for mobilizing the *ummah*, arguing that communications via open source channels empowers the movement by distributing the ideology as well as strategically or tactically useful knowledge. However, the ability for virtually anyone to communicate on behalf of the movement introduces a potential struggle for the power to shape the message and the direction of the movement. This has emboldened some individuals from within the community of radical muslims to voice their disagreements with Al-Qaeda tactics or strategy.

Overall, we should keep in mind the benefits that can be derived by influencing the "street perception" of a terrorist organization. A counterterrorism communication strategy could include damaging perceptions of the organization's strategic authority, religious credibility, operational competence, financial integrity, and so forth. In many cases, the truth is what the terrorist groups should fear most. And the truth is that throughout the history of terrorism, across the entire spectrum of violent ideologies, it has been extremely rare for an organization to successfully achieve its strategic objectives through the use of terrorist violence. By effectively engaging Al-Qaeda in the influence warfare arena, we can diminish its ability to survive, and thus help them more rapidly to meet its inevitable demise.

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From Terrorist to Persona: Para-Social Interaction and the ETA Website

by Yotam Ophir and Gabriel Weimann

Abstract

The great virtues of the Internet - ease of access, lack of regulation, vast potential audiences, and fast flow of information, among others - have been exploited by terrorist groups. Consequently, the Internet has become a useful and effective platform for terrorist organizations and their supporters. Applying para-social relationships theory, this study examines the ways terrorist groups utilize the Internet to gain sympathy and support for their appeals and goals. The case of ETA's website (ETA - Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, an armed Basque nationalist and separatist organization), dedicated to Basque prisoners imprisoned in Ireland and fighting extradition to Spain, is used as an illustrative example of the applicability of the para-social theorem. The various tactics adopted for establishing and promoting para-social relationships between media characters and the audiences as revealed in Basque terrorist video clips on YouTube are analyzed.

Introduction: Terror on the Internet

The face of modern terrorism is decidedly different from the phenomenon in the past, not least because of increasing use of the Internet as a means of facilitating terrorist activities. The Internet has expanded the terrorists' theater of operation, allowing them to bypass the traditional media gatekeepers through the use of the cyberspace infrastructure. Although the presence of terrorist groups on the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon, the growth of such activity has exploded in recent years. In 1998, few terrorist organizations maintained websites; today, almost all active terrorist groups have established at least one form of presence on the Internet; many use various online platforms: *Facebook*, *YouTube*, chatrooms, forums, *Twitter*, and official websites.[1]

Recent scans of terrorist presence on the Internet revealed thousands of websites serving terrorists and their supporters.[2] Growth in the use of the Internet by terrorist groups is due to its key characteristics: ease of access, which facilitates the possibility of reaching massive, worldwide audiences; the absence of any effective regulation or censorship; rapid and "always on" flow of information; low cost; anonymity of communication; and a multimedia environment. The rapid proliferation and increased sophistication of terrorist websites and online forums point to the growing popularity of the Internet for terrorism campaigns. They also indicate a vast pool of sympathizers that such organizations are aiming at and, in some cases, have managed to attract.

Many terrorist groups, among them al-Qaeda, have undergone a transformation from strictly hierarchical organizations with designated leaders to affiliations of semi-independent cells that have no single commanding hierarchy.[3] Through the use of the Internet, these loosely interconnected groups are able to maintain contact with one another and with their followers and

supporters. Radical terrorist organizations have demonstrated an ability to harness online platforms for offensive operations, as well as for propaganda, fund-raising, and recruiting purposes.[4] Despite the multiplicity and diversity of terrorist websites, they share a number of key characteristics, among them often being notable for their colorful, well-designed, and visually arresting graphic content. In this respect, these sites appear designed to appeal particularly to a younger, computer-savvy, media-saturated, video-game generation.

Although this alarming side of the Internet has received extensive attention from counter-terrorism agencies, the media and some researchers, the empirical evidence gathered has merely been descriptive; what has been lacking is a theoretical framework or conceptualization. Communication theories have seldom been applied to the emerging phenomenon of online terrorism, thus creating a theoretical void in this area. This article is an attempt to demonstrate the applicability and utility of bridging between mass communication theory and the use of the Internet by post-modern terrorist practitioners. One of such theories is the conceptualization of para-social relationships. The case of ETA (ETA - Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, an armed Basque nationalist and separatist organization) website, dedicated to Basque prisoners incarcerated in Ireland and fighting extradition to Spain, is used as an illustrative example of the applicability of the para-social theorem.

Para-social Relationships

Para-social interaction theory has been used to describe the one-sided relationships that can develop between a media user and the media being consumed.[5] Used to understand the process by which individuals form attachments to media personae, [6] the theory may also help explain the behavior of those consumers who use Internet-based content. The term “para-social relationships” was introduced by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956 in order to describe the illusion of face-to-face relationships between television consumers and the performer (character or actor).[7] Since Horton and Wohl introduced the concept, para-social interaction developed into a popular field of Communication Science.[8] According to Rubin and Rubin, a television viewer experiences emotional feelings and operates heuristics loaned from his or her own experience in real social contacts.[9] Even though such one-way relationships are based on the illusion of interaction via the media rather than on actual social encounters, a bond of intimacy is created, and many viewers feel they really know the media character. As opposed to real-life relationships, however, para-social relationships are one-sided and symbolic.

The persona with which the viewer is making a connection might be considered a friend, a consultant, a comforting person, or even a role model for this individual. Viewers tend to experience their relationships with media characters with differential strength and in different ways. Some studies have shown that these differences depend, in part, on gender and social class. [10] Other studies, using the same connection-models, have found a connection between viewers' para-social relationships and their childhood relationships, mainly with their parents. [11] The existence of strong para-social relationships between viewers and the program's characters increases the viewers' affection for, and loyalty to, the television show or program, thereby raising the viewers' potential to absorb its content in greater detail.[12]

Horton and Wohl claimed that the viewers' part in the process of television consumption consists of an active response component. That is to say, the active dimension of the media-consumption process can strengthen connections between a viewer and the production's personae. The viewers then feel as though they "know" the persona and understand its motives. In effect, the persona is being judged with the same tools the viewer uses for assessing friends and family. However, since the persona is crafted by the program producer, it is not likely to surprise viewers; therefore his or her behavior can more easily be expected.

Horton and Wohl also described several basic strategies that the production team uses in order to create intimacy between the viewer and the persona. The most common strategy is the duplication of face-to-face gestures and environments. An example is "small talk" between the characters. Another example is the characters' speaking directly to the viewer. Intimacy can also be formed with the help of technology, such as the Subjective Camera view (i.e., a shot from a character's point of view) or the use of close-ups.

Para-social relationships are established by means of several production manipulations and techniques. As noted by Horton and Wohl, the persona that is presented to the viewer duplicates the nuances of appearance and the gestures of real interpersonal interaction in order to imitate ordinary social behavior. Sometimes the character is seen as engaging with others in the production. Yet "...often he faces the spectator, uses the mode of direct address, talks as if he were conversing personally and privately. The audience, for its part, responds with something more than mere running observation; it is, as it were, subtly insinuated into the program's action and internal social relationships".[13] Virtual intimacy and casualness may be seen as key features in para-social relationships. Studies have shown that the exchange of messages most frequently occurs between a source and a receiver when they are alike and similar.[14] Higher levels of homophily (i.e., "love of the same", the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with similar others) have been linked to greater identification with television characters, which in turn is sometimes extended to the desire to be like or to behave like the character.[15] Cohen suggested that attraction was the foundation of para-social interaction;[16] others, however, argued that it is grounded not only in attraction but also in perceived similarity and empathy.[17]

The persona offers a continuing relationship, based on sharing its history and past experiences, which may give additional meaning to the present performance. The viewers then come to believe that they know the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do and that they can understand his/her actions, motives and values. In order to ease the personification and identification processes, the persona is often introduced as good tempered and sincere, "real" and "warm." The publicity campaigns built around these performers usually try to emphasize the sympathetic aspects of their personality and behavior. The audience is expected to respect and support the personae's struggle for recognition and success. Perse and Rubin connected para-social relationships to uncertainty reduction theory.[18] This theory was proposed to predict and explain relational development (or lack thereof) between strangers. The theory explains how individuals seek to reduce uncertainty between each other during initial interactions, based on self-disclosure. Perse and Rubin's study supported the hypothesis that attributional confidence will relate positively to para-social interaction. Other studies have found that the use of media is motivated by a desire to reduce uncertainty about social behavior.[19] Indeed, a persona's behavior usually stays predictable and avoids causing any surprises to the viewer, therefore

reducing uncertainty and increasing the illusion of intimacy. Another means of ensuring para-social interaction is based on technology: close-ups that create the illusion of intimacy and face-to-face interaction, fluid camera movements that increase realism and even soundtrack music that is used to intensify interaction.[20] For example, television close-ups allow viewers to read an actor's non-verbal gestures, enabling the persona to create a two-sided relationship illusion through scripted reactions to anticipated viewer comments.[21] Understanding and responding to a persona is not left entirely to the experience and intuitions of the audience. The model of para-social interactions sees the audience as a kind of coaching system that guides the viewer in the appropriate ways to react to and answer the persona. According to Horton and Wohl, the experience does not end with watching the program: viewers may continue to analyze and judge a persona's behavior and actions when discussing the program's content with other people.

Finally, para-social interaction relies on the use of personification and the illusion of personal bonding. This attribute is very relevant to mass-mediated terrorism: Terrorist events are frequently presented in the media through personal framing.[22] The personification of such events categorizes the participants according to dramatic roles, such as "the good" (i.e., the authorities or the victims), "the bad" (i.e., the terrorists) and "the spectacular" (i.e., "terror celebrities," such as Carlos the Jackal, Leila Khaled and, more recently, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahari).[23] Thus, from the para-social perspective, terrorists greatly desire the personification of an event. For them, the optimal personal framing presents the terrorists as devoted heroes, victims of the authorities' atrocities and freedom fighters while their enemies are presented as villains, criminals, the "real terrorists."

Para-social Relationships in the Age of the Internet

Although most literature has focused on para-social interaction as a television and film phenomenon, new communication platforms, and in particular the Internet, have provided new dimensions to such interactions. The Internet is, in fact, often used for creating and maintaining social relationships, some of which are para-social.[24] In 1998, Eighmey and McCord observed that the presence of para-social relationships constituted an important determinant of website visitation rates.[25] "It appears," the researchers stated, "that websites projecting a strong sense of personality may also encourage the development of a kind of para-social relationship with website visitors." [26] Hoerner, explaining that websites may feature "personae" that host visitors to the sites in order to generate public interest, proposed a method for measuring the use of para-social interaction on the Internet.[27] Personae, in some cases, are nothing more than the online representations of actual people, often prominent public figures, but sometimes, according to Hoerner, they are the fictional creations of the sites' webmasters. Personae, he said, "...take on many of the characteristics of a [real-life] companion, including regular and frequent appearances, a sense of immediacy...and the feeling of a face-to-face meeting".[28]

Using the para-social Interaction (PSI) scale developed by Rubin, Perse, and Powell,[29] Hoerner modified it to more accurately assess para-social interactions on the Internet, specifically to gauge participants' reactions to a number of different websites and, more generally, to determine whether or not para-social interaction theory could be linked to Internet use. Hoerner's study concluded that "the literal, mediated personality from the newscast or soap

opera of the past [around which the original PSI-scale was framed] is gone. The design metaphor, flow of the web experience, and styles of textual and graphic presentations of the information all become elements of a website persona and encourage para-social interaction by the visitor/user with that persona".[30]

Such a theory of para-social interaction may be useful for understanding how terrorists try to attract and seduce online audiences. To demonstrate the applicability of this theory, we will analyze the Basque terrorist (ETA) group's campaign on YouTube.

ETA's Campaign

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna ("Homeland and Freedom") is an armed Basque nationalist separatist organization. Founded in 1959, ETA has evolved from a group promoting traditional Basque culture to a terrorist faction whose aspirations, as outlined in its 1995 publication, *Democratic Alternative* (Euskal Herriarentzako Alternatiba Demokratikoa, original Basque text), is to force the governments of Spain and France to agree on the following: (a) recognition of the Basques' right to "self-determination and territoriality"; (b) acceptance of the principle that the Basque citizenry form a "unique subject" in order to make its own decisions about the future of the Basque country; (c) amnesty for all members of the organization, whether prisoners or self-imposed exiles; and (d) respect for "the results of the democratic process in the Basque country." The group has been designated as a terrorist organization by both the Spanish and French authorities, as well as by the European Union as a whole and the United States.

Over its more than 50 years of existence, ETA has been responsible for killing 829 individuals, injuring thousand, and undertaking dozens of kidnappings (for a list of ETA's attacks and victims, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ETA_attacks). Its violent actions included the assassination of a Spanish prime minister, Carrero Blanco, in 1973, and the murder of 13 citizens in a coffee shop in Madrid in 1974. The Herri Batasuna party was established as the political wing of ETA in 1978, but was declared illegal at the beginning of the 21st century by the Cortes (Spain's parliament). ETA's most lethal terror attack took place in Barcelona in June 1987, when 21 people were killed and 45 others injured by the explosion of a car bomb near a supermarket. All the victims in this event were Spanish citizens. In recent years, ETA has been critically weakened by numerous raids by security forces that led to multiple arrests among its leadership. The organization's terrorist activity has declined in recent years and came to a total halt in 2010 after the unilateral declaration of a cease-fire.

In the course of its history, ETA's targeting expanded from military- and police-related personnel and their families to a wider circle, including businessmen, politicians, judges and prosecutors, journalists, university professors who publicly criticized Basque separatism, and private and public properties considered valuable assets of Spain, especially railroads, tourist sites, industries, and shopping malls. All these objects were targets of ETA's campaign of killings, bombings (often with car bombs), anonymous threats, extortion, blackmail, kidnappings and armed robberies.

Since its establishment, ETA has made extensive use of the mass media to spread its message. Like most terrorist organizations, it gained ample amounts of mainstream press coverage

following its attacks. In addition, the organization operates its own media outlets: pamphlets, posters, murals, newspapers (both electronic and print), web-streamed radio, and websites. ETA has often used pamphlets to address the Basque people directly and indirectly to send a message to the government and to the Spanish people.[31] Simultaneously, ETA sent to the Spanish and international press communiqués describing its point of view, declaring a ceasefire, or warning of coming attacks. ETA operates its own newspapers either directly or through sympathizers and supporters, including *Euskal Herria*, *Gara*, *Egunero*, and *Le Journal du Pays Basque*. *Gara* is considered to be operated directly by ETA. The organization also runs an online radio station and distributes propaganda films, video clips, and television clips. In recent years, many of these videos were posted online, mainly on YouTube.

ETA on the Internet

ETA's fluctuating online presence has included websites, one being *Euskal Herria Journal*, a magazine-formatted site, and another being *Basque Red Net*, a collective of writers who declare themselves radicals.[32] The newspaper *Gara*, which is targeted by the Spanish government, now has an online presence. A major online outlet is the *Euskal Herria Journal*, which is published online in English, with some documents in Basque, French, and Spanish. The website presents itself as a factual and professional journal espousing Basque culture, history, and independence. It argues that Navarre is the seat of the Basque country, and maintains that the Spanish and French Basque regions constitute occupied sovereign Basque territory which should be independent. In the “history” segment, the objective is clearly to show Spanish and French transgressions and to stress the long history of the Basque people and their existence in the region before other European cultures came into being. The segment on repression details actions taken by the Spanish and French governments against the Basque people in general and ETA in particular, such as the outlawing of the Basque language, the operating of Spain’s Antiterrorist Liberation Groups (GAL - which the journal labelled “death squads”), and the conduct of “Spain’s Dirty War” (a paramilitary campaign against ETA sanctioned by the Spanish government). Despite this site’s mainly cultural, ideological, and informative character, *Euskal Herria Journal* was supporting ETA, its goals and activities - including violent actions. Recently, the Journal has gone offline and is no longer accessible.

In recent years, ETA’s online presence has declined, but ETA supporters continue to maintain websites that focus mainly on campaigns for releasing Basque “political” prisoners held by the Spanish government. These sites also deal with the violation of human rights in Spanish prisons. Some of the sites are only in Spanish, but most of them offer English and French versions for purposes of addressing international public opinion. Some of the sites call for re-establishing Batasuna's legal status; some try to convince visitors to sign petitions and participate in protests, while still other websites deal directly with cases of prisoner torture. An example of the last type is the website Stoptortura (<http://www.stoptortura.com/>) which contains picture galleries of wounded prisoners, often giving close-ups of the open wounds. ETA supporters also use online social networking—Yahoo! Groups, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs—to raise interest and support for their causes.

Finally, ETA propaganda is posted on YouTube. Its videos include items showing ETA members practicing with weapons, assembling and detonating bombs, and handling guns; they also issue formal ETA announcements of ceasefires by masked spokesmen. Montages of ETA symbols and of other video scenes are set to prideful music. A search of YouTube for “Euskadi Ta Askatasuna” yields over 150 video clips, mostly devoted to ETA’s propaganda. One of the websites presenting these videos is the “Don’t Extradite the Basque” site used for our case study (<http://www.dontextraditethebasques.org/>).

Website Case Study: "Don't Extradite the Basque"

This site is one of many websites supporting ETA and dealing with members of the organization held prisoner in jails. The site’s headline is “Stop Spanish political persecution against the Basque country.” Its key objective as presented on the site is to prevent the extradition of two ETA members, Inaki de Juana and Arturo Benat Villanueva, from Ireland. The Spanish authorities want Juana, who had already served 21 years in Spanish jails, on charges of “glorifying terrorism.” Originally condemned to 3,000 years in jail for 25 murders, De Juana was released in August 2008. Villanueva, charged with “membership in a terrorist organization,” faces a possible 14-year jail sentence for his political activism.

Since this site is targeting Western public opinion, it is only in English and does not even have a Spanish version. The site suggests several ways of contributing to the struggle: donating money, signing a petition, joining a *Facebook* group, following postings on *Twitter*, among others. Although focusing mainly on just two prisoners, the site also updates visitors with information about other Basque prisoners detained either in Spain or elsewhere. It should be noted that the site does not present itself as supporting ETA or as an official website of the organization. The homepage is designed in a minimalistic way, based on the Basque flag’s colors – red, green, black, and white. It presents iconic images of the two wanted men (painted only with a green outline of their faces) against the background of what looks like blood stains. The text, in bold fonts, accuses the Spanish government (under the title, “Stop Spanish Persecution against the Basque Country”). The homepage offers several buttons leading to detailed information: Home, News, Profiles, Context, Campaign, Support, and Contact. An additional, large button enables visitors to sign a petition online.

The site is clearly attempting to activate visitors and does so in various ways. As in the case of reality-TV viewers, who are expected to vote for their favorite participant/competitor to enable that individual to move to the next stage, or “survive” the selection, so, too, does the ETA website promote personal support by signing a petition that will “save” the prisoner. A second way to act is to donate money by filling in the online donation form, paying through credit card or PayPal account. Finally, there is interactive activation: surfers are directed to the campaign’s *Facebook* and *Twitter* pages. Joining these platforms allows the visitor to add comments, photos, and links to the “wall” as well as to invite friends to join.

Analysis: The Sites

Two video-clips are related to www.dontextraditethebasques.com, one for each prisoner. Both clips are about five minutes long and can be found in the profile pages of the site or directly through the *YouTube* search engine. Villanueva speaks English, while De-Juana talks only in Spanish, but the video of the latter contains subtitles in English, as well. There is a thematic resemblance in the backgrounds of the two videos, both scenes combining pastoral scenery with the prison motifs of a brick wall and barbed-wire fence. This contradiction between the prison and pastoral motifs contributes to the dramatic nature of the video interviews. Both videos contain monologues, allowing the prisoner to face viewers and address them directly. These monologues give the viewer the illusion of a face-to-face interaction with the prisoners. In this way, and especially in the close-ups that are employed, the viewer is able to constantly observe and judge the persona's appearance, voice, conversation style, and gestures.

Informality is constantly emphasized in the clips. The two men, wearing civilian clothes, speak in casual language; Villanueva is even introduced in the headline by his nickname, Beñat (meaning "strong" or "brave" in Basque). This informal address is also used in the website, where the links to the profiles of the two prisoners declare, "read Inaki's profile" or "read Arturo's profile," mentioning only their first names and so creating the illusion of intimacy and familiarity. In order to reduce uncertainty among viewers and to increase confidence, the prisoners share their personal history, describing the injustice of the Spanish government. Villanueva argues that he was sentenced to 12 years only for participating in legitimate political activity. He also mentions other "characters" - "political activists" who were arrested with him and he praises the kindness of the community of west-north Ireland. At the end of his video, Villanueva, addressing the residents of "21st century Europe," tries to motivate viewers to join the campaign, whether through its website or a radio program, or by participating in a blog. He asks the viewer to gather information and to "spread the word." As photos from Basque rallies are being shown in the background, Villanueva ends his video by calling for activism for the benefit of the Basque country and also for freedom and democracy.

De Juana also tells his story, accompanied with photos of his arrest. He connects his punishment to the Franco regime's law system and defends his "innocent" political work. De Juana accuses the Spanish justice minister, who allegedly said that he would make up new charges to keep him in jail, using two published articles supporting terrorism as incriminating evidence. He talks about his hunger strikes, which ended in "deals" made with the Spanish government (the video contains photos of the thin, hunger-striking De Juana tied to a hospital bed and connected to a feeding machine). After these hunger strikes, his sentence was shortened to 3 more years instead of 13. De Juana then describes the suffering of his family members; he claims that attacks were made against his home and his wife, causing them to leave the Basque country for Dublin. He argues that after he left Spain, the government framed him once again for a "terrorist" letter that he had not written and for participating in a political event - a charge he denies. The Spanish government, he contends, is looking for new ways to keep him imprisoned in order to satisfy the families of terror victims.

By exposure to such moving personal stories, viewers are led to believe that they know the persona more than others do and, therefore, can better understand his values, motives, and actions. As Horton and Wohl suggested, the experience does not end with watching the clips.[33] YouTube's platform allows the viewer to respond to the clips by sharing opinions in the

comments area or by clicking on the “Like” button. The videos contain links back to the website, enabling the viewer to become active in various ways. As part of its coaching of the audience, the website directs viewers to a “Support” page, which suggests additional ways of affecting the prisoners’ fate in a positive fashion, while highlighting the urgency of taking action immediately. These active options include joining a support group, mobilizing labor or student unions to join the campaign, protesting in front of the Spanish embassy in Dublin, writing letters to the Irish embassy (the address of which is found on the website), writing to newspapers, informing friends and relatives about the campaign, and participating in events. These are all means of increasing the visitors’ involvement and perhaps strengthening their para-social relationships with the personae.

Another para-social technique used to reduce viewers’ uncertainty and increase familiarity is the repetitive use of graphic icons on the website. The prisoners’ faces are digitally processed and become “cartoonized” icons (in the style of “vector art”). The faces are outlined, as mentioned, in green color, representing the positive and the innocent (and the Irish), as opposed to the use of red, representing the Spanish government. These graphic icons, showing the prisoners smiling and looking harmless, appear again and again, both on the website and in the Facebook group. After clicking on a prisoner’s graphic icon, the visitor is directed to a personal profile page, which provides a short biography of the prisoner relating his active political history, the unjust Spanish oppression he has suffered from, and the amount of time he spent in prison. These biographies emphasize the cruelty of the Spanish government, which is doing its best to keep the men in prison as long as possible, even though they only participated in legitimate political action. These pages construct a personal and emotional story that can increase familiarity with the persona, who is described as a hero of the Basque people.

Analysis: The Video Clips

The profiles also contain video clips - one for each prisoner, showing recorded monologues. These clips allow the audience to experience a virtual interaction with the prisoners. The background of both videos contrasts pastoral motives (meadows and trees) dramatically with prison elements (barbed-wire fence, brick walls). Both prisoners seem well tempered, “real,” and warm; they wear casual clothes – raincoats and t-shirts—and talk calmly. Villanueva is even seen playing soccer in the jail yard; but symbolically, he kicks a ball outside the prison walls and, hence, erodes the formality of the interview.

These clips may be analyzed as promoting para-social relationships when one uses the strategies introduced by Horton and Wohl and their followers:

- They contain *a replication of informal, direct gestures*: “Most characteristic is the attempt of the persona to duplicate the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering.[34] As in a fiction TV series, the clips provide the viewer with a sense of an ongoing, evolving plot. The monologues certainly appear to be more like a friend-to-friend conversation than a plea made by a dangerous terrorist.

- The clips are *characterized by a designed informality*[35]: Among the many elements of informality that the ETA videos display is the use of the prisoners' first names ("Arturo" and "Inaki") and even the nickname of one of them.
- *The line between the characters and the audience is eradicated* [36]: Although the conversation with the persona is actually a one-way monolog, the video clips allow the visitor to hear the story in a personal way from the first-person point of view.
- *Technical devices are exploited to create illusions of intimacy* [37]: Intimacy in these clips is achieved by the constant use of close-ups.

Another element of para-social interaction is the personification of an event, a process, or a case. [38] The ETA videos transform the legal case of extraditing terrorists into personal stories: The "bad guys" in this story, as expected, are the Spanish government ministers, who are described as eroding freedom, justice, and the rights of the Basque people. The "good guys" here are the Basque people, presented as suffering from the allegedly cruel regime. The "spectaculars" are the two prisoners, who have become sort of oppressed Basque "celebrities" and represent the troubles and distresses of the Basque people. The viewer's constant exposure to the prisoners' iconic pictures turns them from human beings into characters. The personification process also transforms the focus from ETA's murderous history to storytelling of a more human and accessible nature, whose aim is to soften the Western world's public opinion toward the Basques.

Conclusion

In an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of communication theories when analyzing terrorist communication, the present article presented an illustrative case that introduces the notion of para-social interaction. This conceptualization of media content and its bonding with audiences is clearly useful when analyzing various terrorist materials, including the thousands of videos posted by terrorist groups on online platforms, such as *YouTube*. Although para-social interaction is not a new concept, it is a theory that has not yet been applied to the study of terrorist communication. Given the important role of online communication for modern terrorism, the search for theoretical frameworks that will explain how audiences are targeted, attracted, influenced, and activated has become rather vital.

The case study demonstrated the applicability of the concept of para-social interaction to an analysis of ETA's *dontextraditethebasques.org* website. Almost all the features of the para-social strategy were revealed in the videos produced by ETA. The video clips on its website have the effect of transforming convicted terrorists into personae in a manner that promotes familiarity, sympathy, informality, and even (virtual) interaction. However, it seems unlikely that the site's operators are familiar with such theories, and it is more probable that the various para-social techniques were used intuitively. Yet, these video clips were produced by professionals and we can assume that they are aware of the well-documented success of television series based on para-social interaction. This case study is, as stated above, only an illustrative example; it is hoped that it will encourage future studies along these lines in order to broaden the theoretical scope of the conceptualization presented.

The original notion of para-social interaction emerged in the television era, and most of the literature has focused accordingly on the use of para-social relationships in television and movies. The new communication platforms, especially the Internet, necessitate a new look at such interactions. Over a decade ago, Hoerner argued that websites may feature “personae” that attract visitors in order to generate public interest.[39] Personae, in some cases, are nothing more than the online representations of actual people, often prominent public figures, but sometimes, as the study showed, they are the fictional creations of a site’s webmasters. Personae take on many of the characteristics of a real-life companion, including regular and frequent appearances, a sense of immediacy, and the feeling of a face-to-face meeting. The case of “terrorist personae” takes this notion one step further, highlighting the potential for virtual social interaction—and consequent attraction—on online platforms.

Cole and Leets presented three relational development theories that may offer some insight into the formation of para-social relationships in online communication.[40] The first is the *uncertainty reduction* theory, which suggests that relationships develop over time through a process of increasing certainty. As uncertainty decreases, liking increases, and “relationships” are developed. The second is *personal construct* theory: this theory suggests that viewers of media figures develop a sense of “knowing” them because viewers apply their interpersonal construct systems to the para-social context.[41] Third, *social exchange* theory offers explanatory value to the process of para-social interaction by connecting intimacy and relationship importance to a cost and reward assessment, in which a para-social interaction with a media personality would have a high reward and low cost exchange. It is clear that terrorist websites and video clips attempt to apply all three relational development theories: (a) they provide selective, one-sided, but very rich information for *uncertainty reduction*; (b) they try to create virtual intimacy and informality between audiences and the terrorist personae, thus applying the notion of *personal construct*; and (c) they offer “rewards” (such as contributing to a just cause, forming a sense of community, and gaining (self-) importance) in exchange for very little cost (e.g., just sign the petition, join our *Facebook* page) - all in accordance with *social exchange* theory. These three perspectives, we suggest, provide useful insights not only when explaining the formation of para-social relationships in “conventional” online communities but also when examining terrorist or criminal communications.

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Notes

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- [36] Ibid. 217.
- [37] Ibid. 218.
- [38] See for example, Tilo Hartmann, "Para-social Interactions and Para-communication with New Media Characters", in E.A. Konijn, S. Utz, M. Tanis, & S.B. Barnes (Eds.), *Mediated Interpersonal Communication* (New York & London: Routledge, 2008):177-199; and Christoph Klimmt, Tilo Hartmann & Holger Schramm, "Para-social Interactions and Relationships", in: J.Bryant & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of Entertainment* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006): 291-313.
- [39] Hoerner 1999.
- [40] Cole and Leets 1999.
- [41] For example, Perse & Rubin 1989.
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The YouTube Jihadists: A Social Network Analysis of Al-Muhajiroun's Propaganda Campaign

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Abstract

Producers of Al-Qaeda inspired propaganda have shifted their operations in recent years from closed membership online forums to mainstream social networking platforms. Using social network analysis, we show that behind the apparent proliferation of such sources, YouTube account holders associated with incarnations of the British al-Muhajiroun collude to post propaganda and violent content. European groups commonly use American platforms and domain names registered with American companies. Seeking shelter under speech rights granted by the First Amendment, they evade European laws against incitement and hate speech.

Introduction

The successes of the popular uprising of the Arab Spring have been credited, at least in part, to social networking media, and in particular to *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Twitter*. Relatively unnoticed, certainly uncelebrated, is the fact that closer to home the same mainstream social networking media platforms have been exploited by radical Islamists. They feature again and again in a series of recent terrorism indictments involving jihadists.

After following a number of recent cases in which material broadcast on *YouTube* inspired violence, we noticed that many accounts appeared to be incarnations of the same online entity. Is this the result of deliberate coordination, even a virtual representation of a political organization? Or are like-minded people simply finding one another by chance on the Internet?

Over a three-month period in early 2011, we identified 41 *YouTube* accounts—technically known as “channels”—that posted jihadist content and carried brand names with a family resemblance to incarnations of the British-based banned organization, *al-Muhajiroun*. Twenty-one used some version of the *Shariah4* label, playing on the name of Islam4UK, a banned organization in the *al-Muhajiroun* clan.

A remarkable feature of these channels is that although they are generally authored in Europe they are legally based in the US, and therefore enjoy protection under the First Amendment. In an earlier attempt to steer clear of law enforcement, jihadist groups migrated from open online forums to invitation-only sites. The strategy was unsatisfactory, because invitation-only sites limited access to potential recruits. In contrast, the social networking sites reach an unrestricted audience. Anyone can link up at the click of the mouse and dissemination is easily amplified by means of automatic reposting. Operators can also hide potentially illegal material in the mass of online postings on the sites.

The legal shield given to mainstream platforms compels law enforcement and service providers to close down sites and remove extremist videos on an ad hoc basis, one by one. First Amendment considerations make this a delicate matter if sites are registered in the US. In 2008,

Dynadot, an American domain name registrar and webhost, faced pressures over its hosting of *Wikileaks* following a complaint from a Swiss bank. Judge Jeffrey S. White of the Federal District Court in San Francisco temporarily ordered the company to cease hosting the *Wikileaks* website. A coalition of free speech groups filed a court brief protesting the restraining order on First Amendment grounds.[1] The judge later reversed the decision, commenting that his judgment had raised “serious questions of prior restraint (on speech) and possible violations of the First Amendment.”[2] *Dynadot* retains the right in its customer agreements to terminate accounts associated with “morally objectionable activities.”[3] The company is one of the webhosts frequently used by jihadists.

Taking Online Jihadism onto Social Networking Platforms

The new internet-based technologies lower the bar for participation in the global jihadist movement. On the web, one can proselytize for the jihad all day and night with friends from around the world by posting and cross-posting content on social networking platforms linked to a website with a domain name that allows the projection of an online brand.

Domain names are hostnames that are identified with a specific location on the Internet known as an Internet Protocol (IP) address. The right to use a particular online domain name, such as *RevolutionMuslim.com*, can be obtained from hosting service providers for a fee. The companies also act as web hosts by providing bandwidth on the Internet and remote storage space for subscribers on servers they own or lease.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) delegates the registration of domain names to hosting companies. The companies are responsible for keeping a registry of the name and number systems of Internet domains. Registrants must submit personal contact information to the hosting companies. This is posted on the searchable WHOIS database. (We used it to determine the hosting companies and domain holder identities of websites linked to the *YouTube* channels.)

YouTube is an Internet portal specialized in video sharing. It was launched in 2005 but usage did not catch on until spring 2006. Anyone can watch posted videos, but only registered users can upload videos. To increase traffic, *YouTube* account holders often place links to their uploaded videos on a personal webpage or on their *Facebook* profile. Google acquired *YouTube* in 2006, and the portal has recently been adapted to other languages, including Arabic. Known as “localization,” the foreign-language platforms provide user access in local languages but do not affect the engineering or hosting. *YouTube*’s hosting server is located in Mountain View, California. The portal has become the chosen vehicle for the posting of jihadist videos and other content for the obvious reason that the multi-lingual and audio-visual format suits the purpose.

Facebook is also an Internet portal. Launched in 2004, it has an estimated 800 million users worldwide. The United States leads the way with more than 150 million users, which means that close to 50% of the American population has a *Facebook* profile.[4] The United Kingdom ranks fourth with about 30 million users. (Second and third are much more populous Indonesia and India.) Users register to set up their own profile on the portal and add other users as “friends” to allow content to cross-post.

Twitter, the most recent and the smallest of the three platforms, was created in 2006. It is designed as a phone-based application and limits users to text-based postings of messages composed of a maximum of 140 characters, the standard length of a SMS. Celebrities use it to broadcast their doings and thoughts to followers. The *emirs* associated with the *Al-Qaeda*-inspired *YouTube* accounts analyzed in this article started “tweeting” in March and April 2011. *Twitter* is used to post instant observations on current affairs (e.g. “The rise of Muslims in Syria will be the end of Israel [...]”) and redirecting adherents to new postings on other platforms (e.g. “The US constitution & its laws are not even worthy for the US President to abide by & to respect www.Shariah4America.com has some solutions”).[5]

American hosting servers are a popular choice for practical and legal reasons. A domain name can be registered for as little as \$11.99 per year. Hosting services with global bandwidths can be rented for four dollars and less per month from companies like GoDaddy.com and Dynadot.com. The *Dynadot* server, located in San Mateo, California, offers a privacy service, which allows registrants to mask their identity by listing addresses as “care of” the company, a convenience that has made it particularly popular with jihadists and Internet activists hoping to elude the authorities.

Much of the content of the jihadist sites would be deemed illegal in Europe. The passage of two laws in the UK (Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 (c. 1) and Serious Crime Act 2007 (c. 27) target hate speech or incitement to violence.[6] The German Penal Code (Section 13) prohibits hate speech and “utterances capable of instigating violence, hatred, or discrimination.” The shift to American host servers exploits the First Amendment protection allowed to US-based Internet providers.

This is not a new development, nor is it limited to media-savvy European jihadists. The main *Al-Qaeda* forum, *Shmukh al-Islam*, was hosted in the United States through Domains by Proxy, Inc., but moved to an Indonesian server. The domain name is registered in the US. *Salafi Media* is hosted by HostMonster. *Authentic Tawheed* was hosted by an American server but is now hosted by a Syrian server, while *The Tawheed Movement* was previously hosted by Bytehost but recently moved to *Dynadot*.

Al-Muhajiroun's Online Media Productions

Based upon the similarities in content and design, we suspected that many of the *YouTube* channels that feature *Al-Qaeda*-inspired proselytizing are incarnations of the same organization, albeit designed to appear independent. They are calculated to be resilient to disruption, so that if one is taken down the others are able to continue to post the same material, or new ones can be easily created to replicate them.

We found that indeed there was a single production entity behind most of the propaganda: *Al-Muhajiroun*.

Al-Muhajiroun (the Emigrants) was created in 1986 by Omar Bakri Muhammad as a shell organization for Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), a pan-Islamic extremist organization created in the 1950s. When Bakri Muhammad left HuT in 1996, he declared it independent and the organization

functioned as his vehicle until 2004 when he disbanded it to forestall proscription. Bakri Muhammad was exiled from the United Kingdom in 2005 when the UK Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, revoked his residency permit. Some of Britain's most notorious jihadists have been *al-Muhajiroun* members. Britain's first suicide bomber, Bilal Ahmed, who blew himself up in Kashmir in December 2000, allegedly was a member. Asif Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif, who carried out suicide actions at a bar in Tel Aviv in 2003, and Omar Khyam, the ring-leader of the so-called "fertilizer plot" who was convicted in 2006 on charges of wanting to blow up Parliament and targets in London, were also members.

Bakri Muhammad allegedly formed over eighty front organizations in at least six countries. He continues to play a role, logging on from Lebanon, where he now lives. He was sentenced to life in prison in Lebanon in November 2010 for training *Al-Qaeda* operatives at a camp in northern Lebanon. Lebanese authorities arrested Bakri Muhammad shortly afterwards, but he is at present free on bail pending a retrial.

In 2009, one of Bakri Muhammad's disciples, Anjem Choudary, re-formed *al-Muhajiroun* in the UK. *Al-Muhajiroun* and several aliases of the group have been banned. Most recently, another incarnation reconstituted under the banner of *Islam4UK* was banned in January 2010. The names and aliases have acquired a second life as online domains. Today what remains of the group has shrunk to less than a hundred members. It now operates primarily under the alias of *Muslims Against Crusades* (MAC).

Choudary's boundary-pushing stunts have created an outcry in the United Kingdom. He received much publicity in 2009 after he declared that Buckingham Palace should be turned into the seat for the new Caliph.[7] The reaction encouraged Choudary. His subsequent releases targeting the American media market included mock-up photos indicating a jihadist take-over attached to articles on "The White Masjid," which is an allusion to the White House. The Islamic Demolition of the Statue of Liberty is dramatized by draping a *burqa* over the monument. Another posting announces the creation of the International Sharia Court of Justice to replace the United Nations in New York City. One photo shows Choudary in front of the White House with a black flag of Islam.

The content of the *YouTube* channels is strikingly similar. Over images of Muslims suffering at the hands of Western military forces, the sound track broadcasts *anasheed* (a vocal musical genre favored by jihadists) and texts from the Koran, or a voice-over explaining the righteous path. Anjem Choudary, Omar Bakri Muhammad, and Abu Hamza al-Masri are the most frequently used speakers. Videos featuring Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki are also popular. Programs addressed specifically to particular national audiences feature local celebrity emirs and activists. Choudary officially endorsed one of the channels, *Sharia4Belgium*, in March 2010: "We support our brothers in Belgium under the banner of *Sharia4Belgium* and we are ready, whatever they need to send more people to support them in their activities, in their duty, and fulfilling their responsibility." [8]

The *YouTube* channels in the *Shariah4* network also cross-post many of the same videos. Some *Shariah4* channels are created, with content uploaded, and then rarely updated. The most active channels include *Sharia4Belgium* (and its successor channels), *Shariah4Holland*, *Shariah4Australia* (and its successor channel), *Shariah4Poland*, *Shariah4Pakistan*, and

Shariah4AlAndalus. The recent uprisings in the Arab world produced a proliferation of new channels with similarly themed content: *Shariah4Tunisia*, *Sharia4Egypt*, and *Sharia4Yemen*.

The *Shariah4Tunisia* channel, for instance, highlights four videos of demonstrations in which members of *al-Muhajiroun* call for an Islamic state in Tunisia. Two of the videos show a British Tunisian. The other two videos feature Anjem Choudary. Choudary also makes an appearance in a video titled “Shariah 4 Libya” that was uploaded to *YouTube* by *londondawah*, another channel of British jihadists that is loosely affiliated with *al-Muhajiroun*. The *Sharia4Egypt* and *Sharia4Yemen* channels had only one video each. Both videos have *anasheed* in the background with pictures from the protests and text of the Koran in Arabic and English calling for the establishment of Shariah.

Recent Incidents Involving YouTube Channels Linked to Al-Muhajiroun Affiliates

These *YouTube*-based jihadist channels promote violent acts, broadcast threats, and announce and direct events and demonstrations. Counter-terrorism strategies are geared to pick up cues from surveillance of radical environments. Online extremism has moved the radicalization process into suburban living rooms, and made it possible for *Al-Qaeda* agents to recruit “homegrown” terrorists over the Internet.[9]

Violent Acts

We identified three violent acts involving the same network of *YouTube* and *Facebook* contacts, including channels from the *al-Muhajiroun YouTube* network that we analyze here. In each case law enforcement was taken by surprise. Cues indicating a need to put these individuals on watch list were either missed or non-existent.

Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly, a 30-year old Iraqi-born Swedish citizen who had lived in Luton, England since 2001, set off two bombs in downtown Stockholm on December 11, 2010. One was a car bomb and the other a pipe bomb that went off in his backpack, possibly prematurely. Al-Abdaly was killed and two bystanders injured. A Glasgow man was arrested three months later in connection with the attack, but little is known of his role. Al-Abdaly was an avid user of *Facebook* and *YouTube*. He sent an email to newspapers just before he blew himself up and may have been trying to film and broadcast his martyrdom. Al-Abdaly’s *Facebook* profile and *YouTube* viewing habits were captured by *Internet Haganah*, an online investigative project. One video al-Abdaly watched shortly before his violent act was uploaded by *videomuslim*, a subscriber account to *Shariah4Holland*, one of the main *al-Muhajiroun* channels in this study. We identified six account holders in the second wave of subscriber channels in our sample of *al-Muhajiroun* related channels, which were also on al-Abdaly’s viewing list.[10]

On March 2, 2011, Arid Uka, a 21-year old Kosovo Albanian who grew up in Germany, fatally shot two U.S. soldiers who were boarding a bus at Frankfurt airport. Uka told prosecutors that he had been motivated by a video of U.S. soldiers raping a Muslim woman. The video—in fact a scene from Brian De Palma’s fictional anti-Iraq War movie *Redacted* [11]—was uploaded on at least two *Shariah4* channels days before the shooting.[12] Uka, whose *Facebook* name was “Abu Rayyan”, added the German Jihadist group *Dawa FFM* as a friend on February 25.[13]

Uka was not a known member of local jihadist networks and was not under surveillance prior to his attack, although he was deeply enmeshed in online jihadist social networking. Uka was a *Facebook* “friend” of several well-known jihadists who also were on the Stockholm bomber’s list of *Facebook* friends.[14]

On June 22, 2011, authorities arrested two men in Seattle, USA, on charges of planning an attack on an Army recruiting center. The leader, Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif, an African-American convert, also known as Joseph Anthony Davis, was an active online propagandist. He has said that he wanted jihad in America to be “physical” and not merely “media jihad.”[15] A second man, Walli Mujahidh (a.k.a. Frederick Domingue Jr.), also a black convert, was arrested after he traveled to Seattle on a bus from Los Angeles. It was apparently the first time the men had met in person. Abdul-Latif’s *YouTube* account (*akabdullatif*) included videos of himself preaching and giving advice on Islam. His account had only a couple of thousand views, but a search of his *Facebook* and *YouTube* accounts turned up first-degree connections to a dozen sites related to Anwar al-Awlaki’s Western-based supporters and the *al-Muhajiroun YouTube* proselytizing network.[16] A third man who agreed to become an informer alerted the police to the conspiracy. The investigation was initiated on June 2, 2011, only twenty days prior to the arrests.

We caution that it is premature to conclude that online self-radicalization was involved in those cases. Radicalization involves a prolonged and gradual descent into an alternative world. Terrorist action rarely occurs without some personal contact with extremist facilitators. A perpetrator may say “the video made me do it” when in fact it was no more than a catalyst for actions for which the person was primed by others. Neighbors, prison radicalization, and family members may be powerful influences. Nonetheless, it is becoming apparent that the expansion of online proselytizing means that much of that process occurs through virtual communities outside the reach of traditional counter-terrorism prevention strategies.

The Communication of Threats

Jihadists are quick to describe their propaganda and barely veiled (or unveiled) incitement to violence as a free speech right. The First Amendment does not protect speech acts involving imminent threats but preventive removal of online content rarely meets the legal standard for “imminent.” The key question is often whether the speech act under consideration, however offensive it might be, is criminal. An ongoing instance is a prosecution in connection with online threats against an episode of *South Park*, a cartoon show on Comedy Central. On May 13, 2011, the U.S. government filed an indictment against Jesse Curtis Morton (a.k.a. Younus Abdullah Mohammad) on charges of communicating threats. Morton was arrested in Morocco.

Morton’s indictment followed the prosecution of Zachary Adam Chesser (a.k.a. Abu Talhah al-Amrikee), who pleaded guilty in October 2010 to posting threats and to providing material support to al-Shabaab, an *Al-Qaeda* affiliate in Somalia. The threats were posted on *RevolutionMuslim.com* and a number of other websites including the *al-Qimmah Forum*, which is the official forum of al-Shabaab.[17]

Morton created *RevolutionMuslim.com* in collaboration with Joseph Cohen (a.k.a. Yousef al-Khattab) in late 2007 after splitting from an older group, The Islamic Thinkers Society. The latter

was created in Queens, New York, in 1998 as a branch of the British *al-Muhajiroun*. It still exists and mainly carries out proselytizing from *dawah* (mission) stalls in Times Square. When Cohen split from the group in late 2009, Morton and Chesser started to run the *Revolution Muslim* website together. They allegedly met in person only once.[18] The Morton indictment alleges that Chesser expressed hope that his campaign against *South Park* would mobilize Muslims in the US the same way the *fatwa* (ruling on a matter of Islamic religious law) against Salman Rushdie in retribution for his book, *Satanic Verses*, had galvanized British Muslims.[19]

After Chesser was arrested in July 2010, and after Morton disappeared, Britons took over the management of *RevolutionMuslim.com*. On November 3, a *fatwa* with a “hit list” of UK parliamentary members who voted for the war in Iraq was posted on the website. [20] The posting cites a *hadith* stating: “Whoever dies and has not fought or intended to fight [Jihad in the path of God] has died on a branch of hypocrisy,” and called on the faithful to “raise the knife of jihad” against the MPs. The locations and hours of constituency open-house of the parliamentarians were listed together with a picture of a large knife and a link telling readers where to obtain one. The website was taken down following requests from the British authorities. [21]

Bilal Zaheer Ahmad, a 23-years old man from Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom who posted the hit list, was arrested and pleaded guilty to soliciting murder.[22] Ahmad is also held responsible for an Internet posting from May 2010, which was cited as an inspiration by Roshonara Choudhry, a 21-year old Briton who stabbed and nearly killed a Member of Parliament, Stephen Timms. Choudhry also cited as her inspiration videos featuring Anwar al-Awlaki that circulated on *YouTube* channels linked to *al-Muhajiroun*. The videos have now been removed. The incident bounced back and forth in the online echo chamber created by the jihadist proselytizing sites. After the attack, Choudhry was praised as a heroine on *RevolutionMuslim.com* and hailed as a victim of government suppression after she was convicted.

In January 2011, another self-styled *fatwa* targeted the UK Home Secretary, Theresa May. It was also printed as mocked-up “Wanted” posters plastered up overnight in Tooting, South London. [23] There was little doubt about the paternity of the May *fatwa*. In an interview given just days earlier, Anjem Choudary, the leader of the present incarnation of *al-Muhajiroun*, anticipated the message to come: “I can envisage people issuing *fatwas* against people like Theresa May and David Cameron.”[24]

Online Recruitment and the Broadcasting of Extremist Propaganda

The *Shariah4* online network generated a string of national spinoffs in the past year, most of which use domains that are hosted by American companies, and which offer IP addresses outside the jurisdiction of the European authorities. It started organizing events through social networking platforms. More often than not, demonstrations have been announced and then canceled in the last minute. Anjem Choudary took his *Shariah4* brand to the United States, under the banner of *Shariah4America*, and announced a demonstration in front of the White House to take place on March 3, 2011 (the anniversary of the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924). No demonstration was held but Choudary was invited onto both CNN and Fox News as a result of

his American campaign.[25] On March 29, *Muslims Against Crusaders* posted a new *fatwa* entitled “Muslims to Disrupt Royal Wedding.” The post threatened a “nightmare” on the April 29, 2011, the day of the royal wedding of Prince William should the British military not withdraw from Muslim lands. It featured a live countdown of days, minutes, and seconds to the wedding day. The police did not permit the demonstration.

In April 2011, a new French offshoot called *Jamaat Tawheed* posted an online invitation in halting French to Choudary and two other leaders in the *al-Muhajiroun*-inspired network to attend a demonstration in Paris against the French ban on the public wearing of the *niqab* (face veil). The two other *emirs* invited were Abu Izzadeen (Trevor Brooks), a Briton, and Abu Imran (Fouad Belkacem), the leader of the Choudary-linked Belgian group *Shariah4Belgium*. [26] In this case the plans for a demonstration went ahead but Belkacem was arrested by the French police on a warrant from the Moroccan authorities. He was returned to Belgium where he is awaiting trial on charges of communicating threats. Choudary was turned back and permanently banned from French territory. The Belgian prosecutor has also charged Choudary, along with Belkacem, with hate speech.[27]

RevolutionMuslim.com was originally registered in December 2007 with GoDaddy, an American hosting service, and later made the rounds of other hosting companies. The Theresa May *fatwa* was posted on an American-based website (*theresamayfatwa.com*) registered with *Dynadot.com*. The *Shariah4* website domains are often also registered with *Dynadot.com*. The same server has hosted the *Muslim Against Crusades* website.[28] *Jamaat Tawheed's* website, where a call was posted to join the *niqab* ban protests in France, was also hosted by *Dynadot*. *AnjemChoudary.com* was previously hosted by *Dynadot.com* but is today hosted by a Canadian server and has an IP address in Montreal. Another channel, German Dawa FFM, which has numerous online aliases, has an IP address listed in Orem, Utah.[29]

Methodology and Findings

Our thesis is that *YouTube* proselytizing accounts linked to the jihadist-inspired online groups constitute an integrated and centrally directed network. Although the *Shariah4* channels and the other channels in the jihadist media network are presented as independent set-ups, created by like-minded but unaffiliated administrators, we suspect that they are part of the same operation, and are designed to make removals by the *YouTube* administrators or government officials ineffective.

To test our hypotheses we subjected the channels and their subscribers to social network analysis. A chief advantage of this methodology is that information about communication points can be coded in a formalized manner and subjected to statistical analysis. We created two datasets, one consisting of jihadist channels, and a second dataset made up of *YouTube* channels linked to the Texas *Tea Party* movement. To avoid biasing our results, the channels were selected based upon name resemblances to the aliases used by *al-Muhajiroun* and the group's leaders. The *Tea Party* data serves as a case-control. By comparing the channels propagandizing jihadism to the online activism of another political movement, we are able to test the null-hypothesis that the jihadist-inspired network is *not* centrally managed. The Texas *Tea Party* nodes were selected as a comparison because the postings represent political online activism and in this regard have a

superficial resemblance to the online jihadists. We can reasonably assume that their postings are not centrally directed, and the channel owners have no reason to evade anti-terrorism laws.

All but seven of the 41 channels we identified as *Al-Qaeda*-inspired account holders with some name resemblance to the know aliases of the *al-Muhajiroun* clan were created between September 2010 and March 2011, when we finished compiling the data (listed in Table 1). Of these, twenty-one were created between December 2010 and March 2011. Three were taken down, all in February 2011, after complaints were made about the content to the hosting service. The rest was still active when we stopped collecting information. The two oldest channels are vehicles for Anjem Choudary and *Izharudeen*, a website created by Omar Bakri Muhammad. Four of the channels selected had no available subscriber information, either because they did not have any subscribers or because they did not disclose the information, and were therefore not used in the analysis.

Table 1. Jihadist YouTube Channels Used in Network Analysis

Account	Creation	Terminated	Date Data Compiled
<i>Sharia4Belgium</i>	2/9/10	2/9/11	11/22/2010; 2/9/11
<i>ShariahMedia</i>	2/4/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariahforBelgium</i>	2/13/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariahChannel</i>	2/10/11	2/25/11	2/11/11
<i>ShariahTube</i>	2/22/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Yemen*</i>	2/3/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>GlobalSharia</i>	3/9/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariahForEarth</i>	1/8/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>GlobalShariahGroups*</i>	1/4/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Egypt</i>	2/1/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4NewMexico</i>	2/3/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4America</i>	10/28/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Nebraska</i>	1/4/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4WVirginia</i>	1/5/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariaForKentucky</i>	1/2/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Holland</i>	12/13/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Australia</i>	10/19/10	2/9/11	1/25/11
<i>Sharia4Australia</i>	2/13/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Poland</i>	12/19/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Indonesia</i>	9/12/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Pakistan</i>	12/1/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4UK</i>	1/26/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4AlAndalus</i>	2/16/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Tunisia</i>	1/22/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4TheVatican</i>	1/18/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Bangladesh</i>	11/8/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Izharudeen</i>	1/29/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Izharudeen</i>	N/A	N/A	3/15/11
<i>Izhrudeen*</i>	9/10/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Islam4UK*</i>	5/11/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Islam4USA</i>	N/A	N/A	3/15/11
<i>MuslimsAgnstCrusades</i>	N/A	N/A	3/15/11
<i>MuslimsVsCrusades</i>	1/18/11	Active	3/15/11
<i>MuslimsAgstCrusaders</i>	11/16/10	Active	3/15/11
<i>IslamPolicy</i>	1/5/11	Active	3/15/11

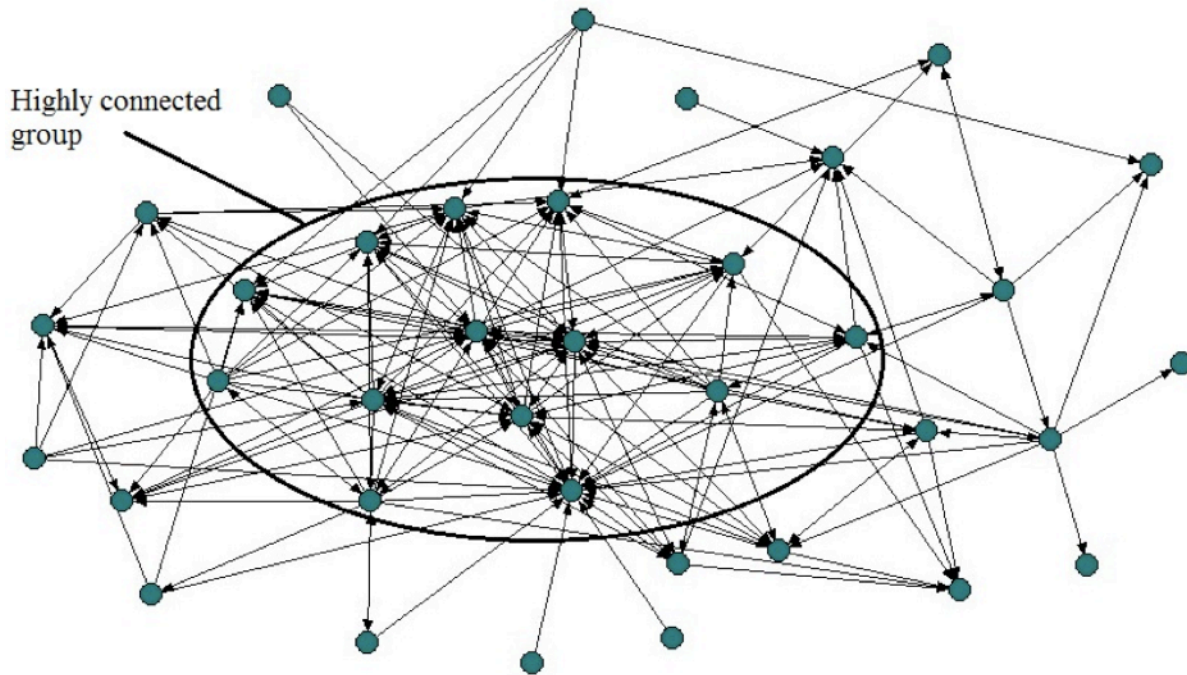
Account	Creation	Terminated	Date Data Compiled
<i>AlMuhajiroun</i>	8/31/09	Active	3/15/11
<i>SheikhOmarBakri</i>	5/15/10	Active	3/15/11
<i>AnjemChoudary</i>	10/30/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Islamicthinkers</i>	2/28/09	Active	3/15/11
<i>IbrahimSiddiqConlon</i>	10/26/10	Active	3/15/11
<i>Londondawah</i>	8/26/07	Active	3/15/11

* Channels with no subscriber information

The data on subscribers - other *YouTube* channels that sign up to follow a particular channel - is best suited to an analysis of the interconnections between related channels. This is because a subscriber actively seeks a connection with the channels it follows, and hence presupposes a willingness to interact. *YouTube* channels can also have “friends”, but unlike subscribers, account holders need not approve “friends.” A third category is subscriptions—the other channels an account holder has signed up to—but privacy settings allow channel administrators to keep such information offline. Our analysis is restricted to the relationships between the *Shariah4* channels and their channel subscribers. Including “friends” in the study might have reinforced our conclusions but proved unmanageable in terms of size.

Using a “snowball” method, we coded a first wave of subscribers to the original “starter” channels and then a second wave of subscribers’ subscribers. For the purpose of social network analysis, the channels and accounts are “nodes” and subscriber links between them are “edges”. The sampling method produced a jihadist-inspired dataset of over 41,000 accounts and 76,000 subscriptions. The set was too large for effective social network analysis. The solution was to remove all the subscribers with just one connection to the network, which produced 37 starting nodes with a total of 9,331 nodes and 43,576 edges (links). Chart 1 shows the subscriber links between the starting nodes in the jihadist *YouTube* dataset. Arrows indicate the direction of information flowing from “uploader” channels to subscribers downloading material.

Chart 1. Diagram of Subscriber Links between the Starting Nodes in the Jihadist *YouTube* Dataset



For the *Tea Party* network, our control dataset, we also removed all subscribers with just one connection. This left six starting nodes (listed in table 2) and a total of 6,480 nodes with 16,159 edges.

Table 2. Texas *Tea Party* Channels Used as Control Case in Network Analysis

Account	Creation	Terminated	Date Compiled
<i>sateaparty</i>	3/25/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>hlteaparty</i>	9/5/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>WacoTeaParty</i>	4/5/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>rgvtpweb</i>	8/29/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>lonestarteaparty1</i>	4/16/10	Active	3/23/11
<i>dallasteaparty</i>	4/15/09	Active	3/23/11

Using likenesses of known *al-Muhajiroun* incarnations as a selection criterion netted channels that perhaps did not belong in the clan. One account holder noted on his profile, in capital lettering, “Attention: this is not RevolutionMuslim’s site (a prominent member of the *al-Muhajiroun* clan), [...] so spamming my channel will not help you get at them.” The branding is

not always transparent, and we probably missed channels in the empire in our first wave sampling. Our intuitive selection did not detect some of the most prolific *YouTube* channels in the network, which entered the study in the second-wave of data sampling of subscribers. This is a good thing, methodologically speaking. We did not inadvertently bias the study by sampling “on the dependent variable”; starting by selecting the channels most likely to support our argument. The second wave subscriber accounts also included some with no jihadist content. We identified a number of bot channels (“zombies”) presumably designed to function as “listening” devices, one of which was our own, as well as channels that we guessed belonged to non-adherents, e.g. an account belonging to *TheKuffarKid*. [30]

The number of subscribers to the starting nodes ranged from only three (*Sharia4Egypt*) to 525 at the high end (*Izharudeen*). The average was 93.22 subscribers per starting node. The top-viewed videos were watched between thirty and forty thousand times, but as viewers can watch the same video many times the statistic does not tell us anything about the number of unique viewers. Overall, these are not impressive numbers for *YouTube* videos. A sermon about why Michael Jackson should become a Muslim by a South African preacher whom we identified as one of the second-wave subscribers had over eighty thousand viewings.

Different algorithms are used to measure various properties of networks: the probability that by chance a particular pattern of subscribers relations would occur, the hierarchy (or lack thereof), density, and structural duplication or redundancy. Hierarchy indicates the difference, at the extremes, between a network clustering around a central “celebrity” channel (e.g. Lady Gaga telling her fans how fabulous she is but uninterested in the non-fabulousness of her fans) and one that is “flat” because channels repost content through mutual subscriptions. Density is a measure of integration and an indication of coordination. Structural duplication suggests the existence of a planned architecture.

a. Probability:

In the case of channel subscribers, a subscription by channel B to channel A is an outward directed edge from A to B, representing the flow of information from A to B. We tested our assumption that the *Shariah4* channels and the other *Al-Qaeda*-inspired channels have many mutual subscriptions in order to make them resilient against disruption. This was accomplished by comparing the actual number of out-degree edges within the starting node group to the number of edges we would find by chance by taking a random sample of the same size from the entire network. In fact, the nodes in the jihadist network have indeed far more outward-directed relationships amongst each other (an average of 212) than one would statistically expect by chance (8.74). It is highly unlikely that this large number of cross-subscriptions could be obtained by chance ($>.0000$). In contrast, the starting channels in *Tea Party* network do not subscribe to each other at all. This outcome was less than what one might expect by chance, that half of the channels would subscribe to another channel.

b. Hierarchy:

Degree centrality is a count of the number of edges connecting a node to another node. It measures popularity by rank-ordering nodes in term of the number of subscribers. The single most popular channel was *Izharudeen*, a vehicle for Omar Bakri Muhammad and *Muslims Against Crusades*. No single node stands out as controlling the network but each of them has a medium-high number of connections. None of the jihadist starter channels were on the top ten list of nodes based upon popularity. The most popular channel in the relatively flat landscape of the jihadist network was *ShiismRevealed*, which entered our study as a second-wave channel subscriber to the *al-Muhajiroun* channels. In contrast, a celebrity “uploader” channel (*DontBeObamaZombies*) dominated the *Tea Party* network with 3.5 times the number of subscribers of the second most popular channel in the network.

Betweenness centrality measures the number of nodes that a particular node is connecting through indirect links. It is a so-called “shortest path” analysis, which identifies the gatekeepers in a network. Rather than rank-ordering nodes by the number of links, it is a measure of the degree to which a starting node controls the dissemination of content through strategic placement in the network. The higher the betweenness centrality the greater the number of unique “shortest paths” pass through the node. If our thesis that the jihadist-inspired starting nodes are duplicates is correct, we would expect the key nodes to have relatively low betweenness centrality scores compared to the *Tea Party*. The normalized (weighted) network scores were relatively similar -- .00139 for the *Tea Party* network and .00126 for the jihadist-inspired network. However, the normalized betweenness score for the starting nodes in the *Tea Party* network was on average more than two and a half times higher (.06544) than that of the jihadist-inspired network (.02499). The controlling nodes in the *Tea Party* network are individually more important to the flow of information through the network.

The finding that the betweenness centrality values are relatively low for the starting nodes in the jihadist-inspired network and the concomitant findings that multiple medium-sized channels form a core in the network and a consistent pattern of redundant reposting by means of mutual subscriptions are consistent with our expectation that the network is designed to be resistant to disruption by turning the nodes into redundant bullhorns for proselytizing. This suggests that the *Al-Qaeda*-inspired channels’ owners have a high degree of coordination, which is consistent with the hypothesis that they form a single organization.

c. Density:

A *k-core* is a sub-network (cluster) in a network where all of the nodes are connected to k number other nodes within the cluster. The letter k here indicates the unknown value. This enables us to compare groups within the network with respect to density and the degree of integration. We can measure how many nodes in a network belong to a cluster and by how many threads. *K-core* values measure how many connections a member has to other nodes in the sub-network and enables us to compare groups with respect to density and degree of integration. A 5-core group, for example, is a cluster where all the members have ties to at least five other members. Relaxing the criteria to 4 ties (4 core) adds more members but also makes the cluster less dense. If the hypothesis is correct we expect the starting nodes in the jihadism-inspired network to be in high k -value core clusters indicative of an anticipated need to resist disruption.

We found that 18 of the starting nodes in the jihadist-inspired network belonged to highly integrated sub-networks where each node had 20 or more subscriber ties to other members. Most of the network had at least two or three ties to other nodes. 4,033 (out of over 9,000) had at least two links to other subscribers (2-core). 2/3 of the network had at least double or triple subscriptions. Only 7 of the starting nodes in the jihadism-inspired network belonged to sub-networks with a k -value below 10.

In contrast, the *Tea Party* network had two sub-networks of over 2,000 people comprising the majority of the network but with low k -values. Only two of the starting nodes were members of a core with a k -value equal to or above 10. The clear difference supports our hypothesis that the jihadist-inspired network is pooled and highly interlinked. The *Tea Party* network in contrast is hierarchical, a pattern consistent with a lack of collusion or little concern over the consequences of a starting node being taken down.

d. Redundancy:

Structural equivalence is a measure of how similar the nodes in a network are to each other. If two nodes are structurally the same they are likely to fulfill similar roles in the network so the measure can be used to test for channel redundancy in the network. Strictly, two nodes should have identical lists of subscribers to be structurally similar, but a more relaxed definition compares nodes based upon their patterns of connections. We found that only 9 of the 37 jihadist starting nodes did not share a structurally similar cluster with at least one other starting node in our initial sample of channels. 13 of the 17 clusters in the jihadist-inspired network of more than 9,000 nodes were “fed” by one of the 37 starting nodes. This means that the majority of the *Al-Qaeda*-inspired channels could be replaced by at least one other node in the network. In contrast, the *Tea Party* starting nodes did not have a single cluster of structurally similar node configurations.

A real-life test of our thesis that the architecture of the jihadist *YouTube* network is designed to resist occurred in mid-September 2011 when hackers took down one of the channels (*westlondondawah*) run by the *al-Muhajiroun* media production outfit, SalafiMedia. (The channels were included in this study as part of the second-wave data collection.) The content was immediately uploaded on a previous idle *YouTube* channel (*salafimediaHD*). Over ten hours, 34 videos were re-uploaded to the reserve channel. In quick time, the entire archive from the hacked channel was transferred. In less than a month thousands of hours of videos were uploaded; two-thirds of the content transferred during the first ten days after the *westlondondawah* channel was hacked.[31]

Conclusion

Our findings are consistent with the hypothesis that *al-Muhajiroun* is the single organizing entity behind a network of related *YouTube* media channels. Redundancy is one of the critical features of the network and indicative of a coordinated effort to build an online proselytizing network resistant to disruption. The reliance on US-based hosting companies adds a legal barrier to British counter-terrorism efforts against the group.

Initial enthusiasm for using social network analysis (SNA) to detect patterns of clandestine coordination between *Al-Qaeda*-inspired groups gave way in recent years to disappointment for a number of reasons.[32] Open source information with sufficient detail about relationships in large-scale networks is rarely available. When information is available, statistical testing may not be possible for lack of random sampling or an appropriate control sample. In consequence, studies using social network analysis are either highly theoretical or use the methodology for heuristic purposes.

Our study illustrates the utility of network analysis as a diagnostic tool when dealing with proselytizing for terrorism on social media platforms. SNA can be used to map communication structures and provide an intuitive understanding of different types of communication network. Quantitative analysis can be used to back up analysis. The SNA metrics also proved efficient in our study for the purpose of differentiating between *al-Muhajiroun*-related channels and seemingly similar jihadist propaganda channels, which nonetheless proved to be stand-alone platforms with a partly overlapping audience. Among the downsides are that data collection can be time-consuming. The Boolean logic of network analysis is demanding of the software. It proved impossible, for example, to analyze “friends” who ideally should have been included to obtain a full picture of the communication structures of the networks studied.

The study highlights the dilemmas faced by enforcement agencies hoping to stem the tide of terrorist propaganda online. The massive number of sites threatens to overload investigators. Removing illegal or offensive material can be like hacking kudzu weeds. A video with a sermon by Anwar al-Awlaki, “The Dust Will Never Settle”, is still easily found by surfing the channels included in this study despite having been a target for removal by the British and U.S. governments and *YouTube* administrators. On the other hand, the public platforms offer advantages. Users often assume that social media platforms enable them to obscure their identity and circumvent restrictions on permissible speech but this is only partially true. Material posted on social media sites is not private and not subject to privacy protections, and therefore the identity of the author (or authors) public information. Moreover, while postings by Britons and other foreigners on US-owned sites are protected under US law, the speakers are subject to sanctions in their country of residence. Jurisdiction-shopping will in such cases protect the speech but not the speaker.

Postscript November 2011

British Home Secretary Theresa May ordered a ban on *Muslims Against Crusades* (or MAC), starting midnight November 11, 2011. The primary website, www.muslimsagainstcrusades.com, is no longer available. A *Twitter* account by the same name was also taken offline. At the time of this writing, aliases of the now banned incarnation of *al-Muhajiroun* nonetheless continue to operate on *YouTube*, including *MuslimsAgstCrusaders* and *MuslimsvsCrusades*. The Home Office ban was a response to the group’s announcement of demonstrations in connection with Armistice Day celebrations in London but provided nonetheless a real-life test of our conclusions regarding the resilience of the social media propaganda networks against disruption. Barely three weeks after the ban, Anjem Choudary began redirecting followers to a new website and an

interlinked network of *YouTube* channels using variants of *OneUmmah* and *UnitedUmmah*. In the meantime, MAC's foreign affiliates filled the gap left by the banned sites.

In separate developments, on November 20, 2011, an indictment was filed in Manhattan criminal court against Jose Pimentel, who is accused of producing pipe bombs and seeking to blow up targets in New York City. Pimentel maintained a website named *trueislam1.com* and a *YouTube* channel under the name of *mujahidfisibillillah1*. When Pimentel's online aliases were made public we identified him as a subscriber to nine of the starting nodes in the *al-Muhajiroun*-related data set used in this study; *Sharia4Nebraska*, *ShariaTube*, *Shariah4Earth*, *SheikhOmarBakri*, *Shariah4Bangladesh*, *ShariahMedia*, *Shariah4Pakistan*, *IslamicThinkers* and *GlobalShariah*. In addition, Pimentel was "friends" with five of the starting nodes in the study; *SheikhOmarBakri*, *Shariah4Nebraska*, *Shariah4Earth*, *ShariahMedia*, and *Shariah4Pakistan*. His channel showed up a whopping 1,030 times in the snowball analysis.

The growth of cyber jihadism does not mean that the risk of attacks has similarly increased. The types of actions and the sources of recruitment to terrorist actions may change but it is too early to say with certainty. Only two conclusions can safely be made; first, Internet-based technologies have become an important activity for the contemporary Western-based *Al-Qaeda*-inspired movement and, second, would-be terrorists who are active on the Internet stand a good chance of getting arrested or have their plans disrupted.

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Notes:

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- [28] See <http://www.muslimsagainstcrusades.com/>.
- [29] DawaFFM.de has an IP address listed in Orem, UT, USA.
- [30] "Bots" are also known as spiders or crawlers. They are software commands designed to automatically search and retrieve documents and files, and then record the information and links found on the pages.
- [31] The new channel carries a message to hackers: "THIS IS AN ARCHIVE WEBSITE - SHOULD SALAFIMEDIA.COM GO DOWN YOU MAY DOWNLOAD ALL OUR MATERIAL FROM HERE- THE TRUTH WILL NEVER DIE AND WE WILL DEPEND ON ALLAH ALONE TO CARRY THESE WORDS SHOULD THEY EVER TRY TO SILENCE US."
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Online Arguments against Al-Qaeda: An Exploratory Analysis

by Gilbert Ramsay

Abstract

While the idea of countering ‘violent extremist’ narratives is a matter of considerable policy interest, particularly in relation to beliefs associated with the wider Al-Qaeda movement, little has been written on the specific dynamics of arguments between supporters and critics of Al-Qaeda on the Internet. In this exploratory article, I attempt, based broadly on the pragma-dialectic perspective of argumentation theory, a detailed analysis of one set of arguments between supporters and critics of Al-Qaeda in a debate which took place on an Arabic language Web Forum in late 2009 and early 2010.

Introduction

The emergence of decentralized forms of ‘violent extremism’, largely sustained by the democratization of media made possible by the Internet, has led to a growing policy interest in developing ways to engage online with the ideological discourses and narratives of terrorist movements. The claim has been made again and again that ‘defeating’ the Al-Qaeda movement will require ‘winning’ a ‘war of ideas’, and that, to do so, it is necessary to find ways of matching this movement’s sophisticated use of the Internet as a medium for propaganda. An apparent paradox of much of the writing about Al-Qaeda’s supposed memetic virulence is the emphasis, on the one hand, on the group’s alleged skill and sophistication at ‘information operations’ and, on the other, on the supposed thinness, weakness and lack of credibility to its actual message. As Alex Schmid has argued:

In this new type of struggle, where ‘the information domain is a battlespace’, one can focus either on the propagation of one’s own narrative or try to discredit the narrative of the adversary – or, ideally, both. Since Al-Qaeda’s single narrative is based on weak argumentation, half-truth and downright lies, it is, in a way, easier to attack Al-Qaeda on that front.. To do so, one has to challenge the assumptions underlying Al-Qaeda’s ideology, expose its fallacies and dismantle its conspiracy theories. This can be done by academic researchers or by government analysts and scholars familiar with Islamic politics, history and theology. Yet the dissemination of such analyses should better be left to modern Muslims – moderates and radicals – who have greater credibility with the most relevant target audiences.[1]

The implicit thesis of this perspective appears to be that, since Al-Qaeda’s narrative is not inherently credible, its apparent success can only be attributed to the sophistication with which it is packaged. If so, this seems to suggest that an equally sophisticated attempt at packaging and distributing a counter-message would be able to confront, refute and therefore weaken it. Based on this line of thinking, a significant amount of research and analysis has gone into the question of how best to shape a ‘counter-narrative’ in general, and how best to use the Internet for this purpose in particular. Most of this research, however, has focused on what might broadly speaking be called high level policy or ‘strategic’ issues in this area. That is to say, it has either

focused on the general challenges presented by the Internet medium[2] and on ideological splits within the global jihadist movement as a whole[3] (including how these splits have played out online),[4] or on appropriate ways of mobilizing civil society actors to take on violent radical narratives.[5] A related literature focuses on the wider role of ideological beliefs (or their absence) in processes of disengagement and de-radicalisation.[6] Such analyses have tended to recommend the cautious facilitation of civil society actors – especially those seen as representing credible messengers – towards the project of countering Al-Qaeda’s messages via the Internet. Somewhat ironically, the basic communications model underpinning such arguments appears to be the classic ‘message-channel-recipient’ model of communication processes[7] that the emergence of interactive digital media has done much to render obsolete. An alternative view argues that counter-narrative efforts should aim simply at producing ‘noise’ - thereby inhibiting and disrupting the formation of clear narratives.[8]

To date, however, there is very little research which specifically offers a fine-grained analysis of how specific instances of, seemingly deliberate attempts to engage with online supporters of Al-Qaeda and counter their arguments play out in practice. This is perhaps particularly surprising, given the fact that there are actually existing projects, whether officially carried out by state organs or by state-supported civil society initiatives which are specifically premised on doing more or less exactly this.

A notable example of an initiative along these lines is the US State Department’s digital outreach team, a group of ten people, including Arabic, Persian and Urdu speakers whose job it is to review Web forums and post responses to negative characterisations of US policy. The work of the team has been assessed empirically in an exploratory case study by Lina Khatib,[9] ; she reached a judiciously unfavourable conclusion regarding the effectiveness of the project. Khatib’s study, however, is premised on a quantitative thematic analysis of posts and responses. Therefore, while it provides information on the topical themes in these discussions, on proportions of these which can be categorized as ‘logical’, ‘emotional’ or a mixture of the two, it does not detail and explore how the conversations evolve dynamically, thereby showing the effect of different rhetorical or argumentative moves.

The Sakinah campaign, by contrast, is at least notionally a civil society initiative, bringing together Islamic scholars and media experts in Saudi Arabia for the purpose of - amongst other things - engaging with supporters of Al-Qaeda related extremism on the Internet.[10]As far as could be ascertained, there currently exist no formal studies about the effectiveness of this programme, although it has been discussed in a brief article by Christopher Boucek[11] and also be the subject of a MEMRI report by Y. Yehushoa.[12] The latter provides a single sample of an online discussion in which – purportedly, at least – an erstwhile supporter of Al-Qaeda is persuaded to change his views. While this conversation is interesting as an ideal example of such an intervention, it cannot, of course, be taken as evidence for how similar encounters normally play out.

Exploratory Study

Muslim.net is an Arabic language Web forum specifically devoted to the discussion of Islamic issues, registered in Mecca. Alexa data suggests that the forum is one of the largest of its kind on

the Web. According to Abu Harith al-Mihdar, administrator of the now defunct jihadist forum *Madad al-Suyuf*, the forum was an important precursor to ‘true jihadist forums’ and remains an important site for discussions between jihadists and non-jihadists.[13] In the much circulated treatise *39 Ways to Serve Jihad and the Mujahidin*,[14] the forum is named as one of the suggested sites for conducting ‘electronic jihad’ in order to attract recruits for global armed struggle.

For this exploratory study, this forum was broadly surveyed for a number of months from mid 2010 onwards in order to obtain a general feel about the nature of its community and the types of member and posts that might be encountered. On the basis of this, it was decided to focus the exploratory study on the complete posting record of a single forum member, Ibn al-Badiya. This member’s posts were chosen for three reasons. First, his forum contributions appeared to focus consistently on criticizing Al-Qaeda. Second, his record, spanning roughly a year was sufficiently brief to be minutely analyzable by a single researcher conducting an exploratory study. At the same time, it was extensive enough for the member to become a recognized participant in the forum community, with regular allies and antagonists. Finally, Ibn al-Badiya’s record (including both threads he initiated and those which he merely contributed to) seemed to contain a reasonable diversity of discussions, both in terms of the range of topics encountered, the tactics used in the discussions, and the presence of ostensibly successful, unsuccessful, and ambiguous encounters.

The general approach of sampling the record of a single member (including threads to which he contributed, but which were initiated by others) was taken on the grounds that it offered a more naturally bounded and therefore more naturally variegated sample than would have been the case had a particular set of argumentative encounters been chosen based on a different set of criteria. Thus, rather than dealing only with encounters of obvious argumentative significance, the sample also contained false starts of various sorts. This, in turn, meant that the sample – being the entire posting record of one particular member – provided a sense of the overall progress and development of this member’s ostensible project against supporters of Al-Qaeda. Finally, there was a relatively clear overall context for posts within the forum community, in so far as it naturally captured the social network of a particular community member, complete with regular allies and antagonists manifest within it.

Methodologically, the present analysis is heavily informed by the methodology of qualitative argumentation analysis,[15] as set out, particularly, in the work of Van Eemeren and Grootendorst. This is a form of discourse analysis aimed at determining how real life argumentative encounters perform the function of resolving differences of opinion. This is done by comparing them systematically to a normative model for an ideal, rational dialogue, developing through four orderly stages:

- (i) a ‘confrontation stage’ in which the two arguing antagonists meet;
 - (ii) an ‘opening stage’ in which the standpoints to be defended are advanced;
 - (iii) an ‘argumentation stage’ in which various arguments are advanced for and against one standpoint, subject to various rules relating to the relevance of the utterance, its logical validity, etc.
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- (iv) a ‘concluding stage’ in which the argument is resolved in favour either of the proponent or of the opponent of the debated issue, by forcing one or the other into a position where he would have to contradict a previous assertion.

In practice, in order to elicit the underlying argumentation structure from real life discussions, it is necessary to apply four ‘transformations’: *deletion* (the removal of those elements irrelevant to the reasoned resolution of a difference of opinion); *addition* (inserting into the argument moves or claims that are otherwise only implicit); *substitution* (replacing ambiguous formulations with clear ones), and finally, *permutation* (rearranging items within the text in order to clarify the role they play in the resolution of the argument).[16]

A method as tightly focused on the logical structure of arguments as this one may seem problematic in the context of the encounters under consideration in this paper in which – as Khatib has observed – emotive and rhetorical moves are at least as important as rational ones. These difficulties are, however, not as serious as they may appear. For one thing, even logicians now recognize that in the ‘marketplace arguments’[17] that characterize real life, emotive statements which appear to have no role in a rational exchange may, in fact, carry an implicit argumentative force - for example by stressing the value or importance of a given claim to the speaker.[18]

Indeed, viewed as a *method* rather than as an inextricable part of an epistemological project, this rigidity can be seen as a boon; the very fact that argumentation analysis takes fully rational dialogue as its starting point makes the framework it offers all the more effective at isolating those discursive moves which seem to be effective despite being dialectically irrelevant or logically fallacious.

Finally, as has already been observed, if the purpose of a counter-narrative is indeed countering ‘weak argumentation, half truth and downright lies, and to ‘challenge assumptions... expose fallacies and dismantle conspiracy theories’ (Schmid, see above), rather than the cynical marketing of another political ‘brand’ then it would appear that a focus, ultimately, on the usefulness and applicability of logical argumentation to counternarrative situations is entirely appropriate.

Results

Overall, the threads to which Ibn al-Badiya contributed were, with few exceptions, clear-cut cases of online confrontations between one or more critics of Al-Qaeda on the one hand, and supporters of the group on the other. Of the thirty-seven threads which Ibn al-Badiya either initiated or contributed to, thirty were straightforwardly categorisable as opening with attacks on Al-Qaeda and unfolding as clear-cut confrontations between its critics and supporters. Of the remaining seven, one was a critical discussion about a non-jihadist cleric which did not obviously relate to militancy. Two were conversations internal to the forum’s jihadist community relating to the decision of one of its members to leave the forum. Two others were posts praising Al-Qaeda or the ‘mujahidin’ to which Ibn al-Badiya contributed. Another thread involved a complex discussion which will be considered below. It presented itself (perhaps tactically) as an attempt to reconcile the ‘lovers and haters of Al-Qaeda’. Finally, one thread was initiated by a

member who was critical of certain aspects of the jihad in Iraq, without opposing Al-Qaeda *per se*.

With regard to those discussions which amounted to clear confrontations between critics and supporters of Al-Qaeda, the 'success' of a thread initiator seemed to be assessable with regard to two considerations: (1) the extent to which the thread developed into an orderly argumentative discussion, as opposed to a series of *ad hominem*, evasive or irrelevant comments, and, where the former was to some extent achieved, (2) whether the argument appeared to be won or lost by the initiator of the thread.

Initiating Argumentative Encounters

In every case assessed, attempts to criticize Al-Qaeda were met with at least some responses which were either *ad hominem* or evasive. Members of the forum's self-described 'jihadi' community appeared to assume more or less automatically that consistent critics of Al-Qaeda were paid employees of governments or affiliated organisations. It is, of course, entirely possible that some or all of the online critics of Al-Qaeda encountered in the study actually were such government agents. However, more important is the fact that Al-Qaeda supporters on the forum thought they were.

What was more observably the case was that conversation on *Muslm.net* – notwithstanding any distinctive features (compared to English-language forums to which most previous work relates), arising from its status as an Arabic language forum and a 'cyber-Islamic environment'[19] – was recognizably governed by the familiar constraints to argumentation previously observed in empirical work by Aakhus and others.[20] That is to say, conversations on the forum were rife with 'dump and run' posts, non-sequiturs, straw man fallacies and similar features of limited dialogical value.

In spite of this, however, most threads examined contained at least some exchanges that could be seen as argumentative, defining an argument as a situation in which posts expressed differences of opinion specifically regarding the claim made by the initiator of the thread (as opposed to the worthiness of the initiator him or herself) and, further, where there was an attempt to provide reasons for these differences of opinion. Indeed, by these criteria, some threads developed into fairly extensive and in-depth arguments. This fact is of both empirical interest and, possibly, of wider theoretical interest as well. *A priori* it would seem impossible – using language alone – to compel someone to have an argument against his will. Argumentation theory recognizes the existence of so-called 'meta-discussions' (whether conducted explicitly or implicitly) over the nature and format of an argumentative encounter.[21] But it has relatively little to say about how such encounters actually unfold, other than a general recognition of the problem of demarcating argumentative 'forums', and the problem of infinite regress that this may entail.

Moreover, it appeared that the process by which the initiators of counter-Al-Qaeda threads were able to manoeuvre their jihadi antagonists into arguments over the claims they advanced had, in themselves, an argumentative structure which overlapped with the structure of the argument that took place over the standpoint initially put forward. That is to say that in some cases the very process by which supporters of Al-Qaeda were persuaded to engage in argumentation with critics

of the movement also implicitly forced them to accept assumptions which, once accepted, made it more difficult for them to defend the group itself.

The underlying processes at work in such situations were usefully made explicit in a particular encounter that followed the following a post on 1 December 2009 by a member called 'Al Mustanir'.

Between the lovers and the haters of Al Qaida, can we find any solution? Please post.

Brothers, I would like to start by saying thanks to God and prayer and peace on His messenger. God's blessing on every brother which is a true monotheist who writes in this forum to support Islam and the Muslims, and not for hatred of a person or the desires of a troublesome personality, but rather as a Muslim who loves Islam and what is good for them in what God almighty ordained and who longs for the establishment of an Islamic state which I ask God the Most High, the Omnipotent that my eye should witness it and that I should live under its shadow before I pass away.

I am a believer, brothers, that the beginning of the path to an Islamic state is unity in a single rank, governance and mind in which there are no disputes about law. Honoured brothers, I have read a number of threads posted on this forum and seen new splits between brothers, which is a small window when we live it in reality. By way of an actual example, [there are] the haters of Al-Qaeda and those who insult it and cast aspersions on the mujahidin and consider some of their works to be corrupt, and in no respect resembling Islam, and accuse it of distortion of the shari'a; and [on] the opposite side, [those] who see in Al-Qaeda the sole ray of hope which fights in the path of God, and thus, at the hands of the mujahidin, shall establish a caliphal state.

O brothers, all of us know that the first plan of the enemy is to initiate difference as an obstacle, so till when shall we take this food and sleep biting each other? Thus I implore you by God to pull together under the same words without insult and cursing and accusation, and if we all think together with one loud voice to find solutions, then this will become real, and I ask you that you remember that the first caliph of the Muslims, our Lord Abu Bakr used to say on the day of his oath of allegiance:

'O people: I have been placed over you, and I am not the best of you. If I do well, then help me. And if I do badly, then resist me.'

We must learn and get to know what the mistakes are in every party and try to find solutions to bring together the different parties among the brothers. What is your opinion, brothers in monotheism?

While this post presents itself clearly as a neutral statement, in the context of *Muslim.net*, it appeared to be, within its context, a serious challenge to the forum's 'lovers of Al-Qaeda'. This was so, because, as has already been observed, critics of Al-Qaeda were already interested in having arguments about the group, whereas supporters of Al-Qaeda tended to consider the critics of Al-Qaeda as interlopers on the forum whose intention in being there had nothing to do with an honest interest in arriving at Islamic truth, and everything to do with a the extension of state power into cyberspace.

The assessment that the post above functioned more as a challenge to supporters than to critics of Al-Qaeda was strongly confirmed by the actual progress of the discussion as it subsequently unfolded. Here, Ibn al-Badiya , representing the ‘haters’ of Al-Qaeda, launched a series of standard critiques of the group (specifically its killing of Muslim and other civilians), as well as accusations against the group’s supporters amounting to the implication that they were blinkered fanatics who were unable to engage in reasoned discussion or see any fault in their heroes. On the other hand, a prominent ‘jihadi’ member of the forum, ‘Abu Wa’d’ attempted to defend the position of the supporters of Al-Qaeda, specifically their refusal to engage in argument with the group’s critics.

What was interesting about the way in which this discussion unfolded was that, even while Abu Wa’d refused to engage directly with any of the claims made by Ibn al-Badiya , and even while Al Mustanir appeared to play the role of the neutral mediator, gently challenging each of these members to move closer to a common position, Abu Wa’d’s position shifted progressively, as epitomized in the following three statements:

- 1) And if it is necessary to offer advice to the people who love jihad and the mujahidin, comradeship is comradeship. Do not surrender yourselves, and do not exchange with the people of the words of snakes as [if you were] like them, and make your intention the defence of the manhaj, [Arabic for: ‘method’, ‘path’ or ‘approach’] not about personalities, except for those who are not able to reply because of having died or being engaged in jihad with a post in this forum or another, and God preserve you.
- 2) whoever has shari’a proof then let him come now and present his proof and distance himself from insults and slander, for there will not be found among the lovers of Al-Qaeda anyone whose heart is not open for debate and arriving at the truth by what God has said, and what the Messenger of God has said (prayer and peace of God upon him), but what we read is sweeping claims of accusation and fabrication and implication of the mujahidin based on the presentation of personalities, and if it issued from the scholars or the students of knowledge, but in fact there are those who cast aspersions then flee and do not enter debate, and among them the one who enters our thread to derail it from its path, and among them the one who communicates lies and builds upon them.
- 3) Esteemed brother, it is not possible rationally to deny that in every work of jihad and da’wa there will be mistakes. But the mistakes do not justify in the slightest the weak spirited perspective that draws the sword against the mujahidin.

In other words, Abu Wa’d moved in three steps from a total refusal to engage in debate with the ‘haters’ of Al-Qaeda, to an acknowledgement that a debate could be had *in principle* (as long as it was conducted according to proper shari’a methodology) to finally addressing the specific issue of possible ‘mistakes’ by the mujahidin – thereby effectively entering into the very debate he initially refused to take part in.

The mechanism by which this process took place can be located, so it seems, in the claim to worthiness which Abu Wa’d makes at the outset. Abu Wa’d clearly recognises the ‘people who love jihad and the mujahidin’ as a distinct entity (that is, distinct from the mujahidin as such). Moreover, he attributes to this entity certain virtues which, as a necessary corollary of how he has demarcated this group, must follow from the honourable way it disposes of itself through its

discursive practice. Having done this, he is then bound to uphold these values. As it happens, a fortuitous event then makes his position particularly difficult: a fellow supporter of Al-Qaeda makes a ‘hit and run’ intervention of precisely the sort that Abu Wa’d is claiming they are (or ought to be) too good to do. As he observes:

Abu Sa’ad al-Bahili [the ‘jihadi’ member responsible for this post] is a clear example. He gave us a single line and he makes it blink like the writing of prayers. [Here Abu Sa’ad al Bahili used flashing, coloured text for his post, GR] If the jihad and its people don’t know the shari’a in every step they take – by God’s grace – then who does?

In order, then, to force a member like Abu Wa’d into argument it is only necessary for the ‘haters’ of Al-Qaeda to performatively indicate their worthiness – by remaining calm, rational and committed to finding shari’atic reasons for what they are asserting. And all of these things – it is important to point out – are behaviours that are fully realizable through *speech* acts.

The interesting point here is not so much the trap that Abu Wa’d apparently sets for himself, but rather why the questions raised about why he would end up setting it. Abu Wa’d’s claim about the worthiness of the jihadi community *looks* at first glance, like a straightforward logical fallacy. The lovers of Al-Qaeda are morally superior as Muslims because they support the mujahidin. Therefore it follows (for Abu Wa’d) that they must also be morally superior Muslims in other respects – for example, showing a decorous respect for orderly shari’a discussion. On the other hand, the haters of Al-Qaeda (who snipe at and undermine the mujahidin) are *ipso facto* unworthy Muslims, which means that their online behaviour must be generally unworthy too. This claim can clearly be refuted by a counter-example from either side.

And yet Abu Wa’d cannot avoid making this claim, because the particular act of worthiness he expects from supporters of Al-Qaeda is not simply an arbitrary moral behaviour like being kind to animals or cleaning one’s teeth with the *miswak*. Rather, it is a matter of the epistemological foundation of being a supporter of ‘the mujahidin’ in the first place. Abu Wa’d cannot very well say words to the effect of: ‘except in so far as we perform our Islamic duty by supporting the mujahidin, we jihadis are no better than anyone else – indeed, many of us are totally credulous and completely disrespectful of reasoned argument’. Nor – a slightly less obvious point – does it seem ultimately tenable for him to say something along the lines of – ‘the critics of Al-Qaeda may come across as reasonable Muslims who argue their point through sound use of the Islamic shari’a. However, beware of their honeyed words because in fact they are agents of the unbelievers’. The problem with this (notwithstanding that supporters of Al-Qaeda do make roughly this claim) is that, in so far as supporters of Al-Qaeda claim that the actions of the movement are straightforwardly in accordance with shari’a, and that there can be no reasonable doubt in the matter, they ought in principle be immune to such advances. The underlying attitude is closely reminiscent of the position of Descartes, as quoted by Perelman and Olbrechts Tyteca in their introduction to *The New Rhetoric*, who insisted:

Whenever two men come to opposite decisions about the same matter, one of them must certainly be wrong, and apparently there is not even one of them who knows; for if the reasoning of one was sound and clear, he would be able so to lay it before the other as finally to succeed in convincing *his* understanding also.[22]

Thus, Abu Wa'd has to dodge the issue here as well by insinuating not that the 'haters of Al-Qaeda' make reasonable sounding, but ultimately hollow arguments, but rather that they do not make reasonable sounding arguments in the first place.

The significance of the use of theological framings in dictating the rules governing online performances of worthiness by supporters of Al-Qaeda, and of counter-performances by critics, is usefully illustrated by the following counterexample.

Subject: 'Call from a Muslim mother to Al-Qaeda

Hadiya al-Muslima: In the name of God the compassionate, the merciful:

O brothers, my nervousness was renewed when I heard about the suicide explosions which a woman carried out in Karbala', Iraq last Monday. And my nervousness increased after I read the post by brother 'Ibn al-Arabi': "a letter from a father to Al-Qaeda". And I was so very sad that the mind cannot imagine it. My nervousness and my horror began to impact on my sensitivities and my sentiments because I am a mother to a single little girl, 13 years old. My daughter is intelligent and obedient, and I have brought her up with Islamic education and the importance of obeying God and one's parents. My fear every day is: will my sweetheart return from school unharmed, or whether someone will kidnap her and I will never hear of her again except, God forbid, on television, when she has blown herself up like that suicide bomber of Karbala'? Surely there are mothers who share my feelings and fear about what Al-Qaeda is doing to our innocent Muslim children. Members of Al-Qaeda: have mercy on us and stay your hands from the fruit of our loins. You, too have children like us – fear God.

As above, the poster is concerned, in this post, with making certain sorts of claims to worthiness. And yet, in contrast to the exchange discussed earlier, the initial responses to this post were mocking and sarcastic, making fun of the poster's 'sensitivities and sentiments', suggesting, for instance, that if she is so sensitive and delicate she might do better to restrict her posts to the sub-forum for mother and child issues, or to avoid unpleasant encounters by leaving the forum altogether. This in turn forced the poster to attempt (unsuccessfully) to defend her own authenticity as a woman and mother.

The obvious difference between the (apparently very strong) claims to worthiness made here and those made in the earlier exchange would appear to lie in the fact that these claims relate to supposed facts outside the textual world of the forum, and are therefore not subject to affirmation through textual exegesis alone. Restated in argumentative terms: the claims which the poster is trying to make about Al-Qaeda (that AQ kidnaps children and force them into 'martyrdom' operations that are actually suicide or even murder) lack an adequate, mutually acceptable warrant[23].

Conducting Argumentative Encounters

The idea that victory in an argument-based debate can be objectively assessed is a core assumption of theories of argumentation. Yet from the point of view of work which stresses the cultural context of argumentative encounters such as Perelman's 'new rhetoric', victory in argumentation cannot be assessed in terms of absolute standards of logic or epistemology, but

rather on basis of the extent to which the argumentation seems valid to a particular audience.[24] From a ‘pragma-dialectical’ point of view, however, an argument can be said to have been won or lost when one of the parties engaged in it cannot continue to attack or defend the standpoint being put forward for discussion without being caught in self-contradiction. Given the relatively anarchic nature of argumentation on Web forums, empirical research has previously observed how victory by either standard may be difficult to ascertain.[25] Participants in online arguments, faced with the prospect of being cornered into having to admit a contradiction are likely instead to change the subject. Even if it looks as if a standpoint has been successfully upheld, it may not be obvious that participants in the forum interpret this to be the case.

There was one marginal example in the posts surveyed of an argument which seemed, in a logical sense, to be won outright by a critic of Al-Qaeda. In this post, a member called ‘Ibn al-‘Arabi’ drew attention to the then recent release by Al-Qaeda member Adam Yahiya Gadahn of a speech called ‘The Mujahidin Do Not Target Muslims’. He pointed out that Al-Qaeda offered its condolences to those Muslims accidentally killed in its operations, treated this as an acknowledgement that Al-Qaeda did kill Muslims, and then went on to ask why it didn’t pay the *diyya* – the blood price obligatory in Islamic law.

This post addresses a clear problem in Al-Qaeda’s thought, previously addressed by Brachman and Warius in their discussion of Abu Yahya al-Libi’s work on the Islamic jurisprudential topic of *tatarrus*. [26] There appeared to be good reason to think that Al-Qaeda supporters on the forum were genuinely unable to address it, given that the discussion ran on for seven pages. Numerous posts were made by supporters of Al-Qaeda which attempted to address the issue raised, and yet not one of these made any direct attempt to deny the two claims made in the original post – that Al-Qaeda has on occasion killed innocent Muslims, and that killing innocent Muslims incurs the obligation of paying the blood price.

Counter-narrative victories could also be said to have been achieved, albeit in a looser sense, where supporters of Al-Qaeda, while not forced into a contradictory situation, were obliged, in the interests of consistency, to explicitly adopt an extreme position unlikely to resonate with a wider audience. An apparent example of such a case is provided by a thread opened by Ibn al-Badiya in October 2009 regarding the recent release, by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, of a number of hostages.

Subject: Release of hostages for seven million dollars: jihad or business?

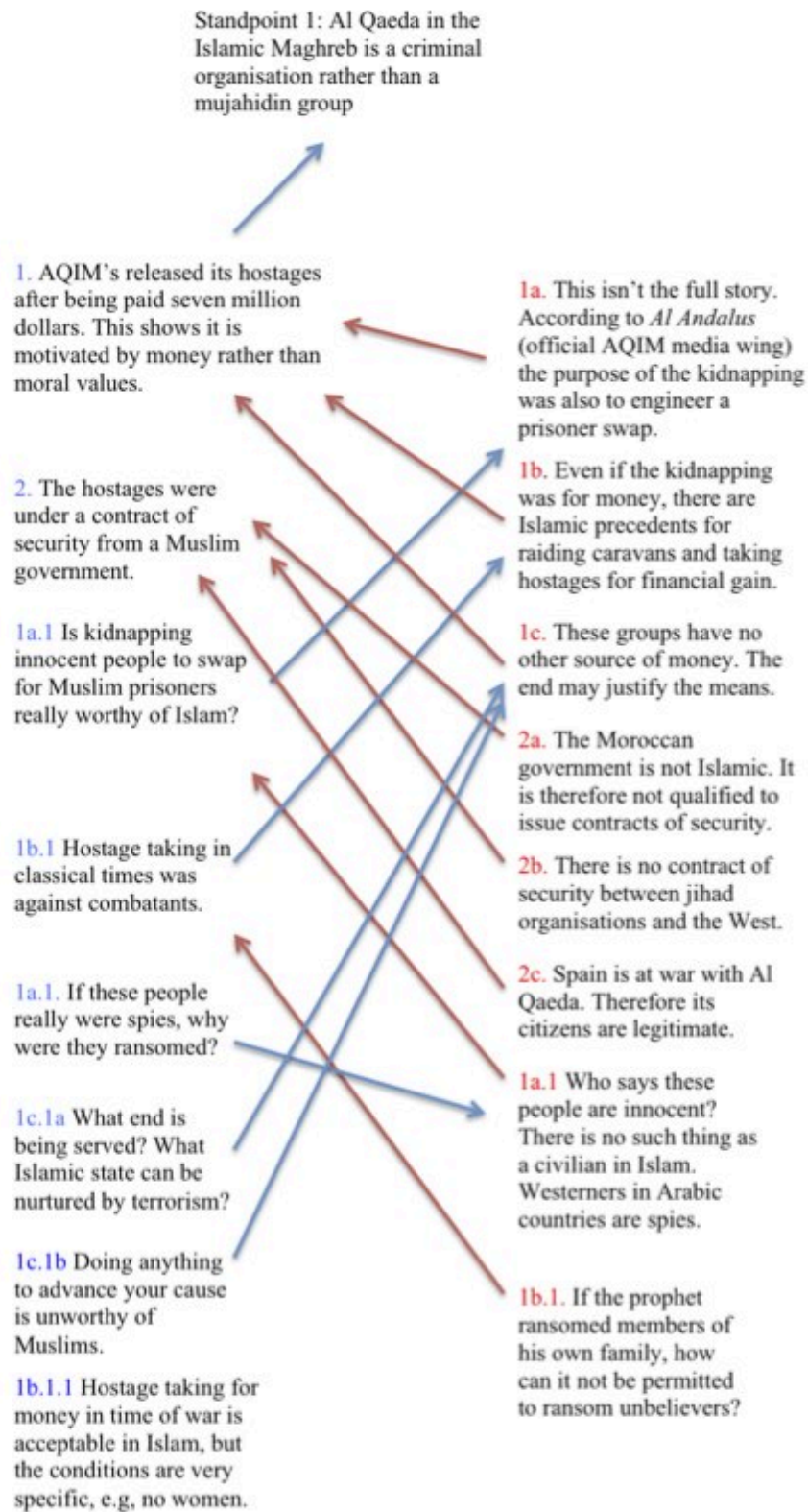
The organisation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb received seven million dollars from the government of Spain for the release from captivity of three captives in its possession, according to news sources from the newspaper *El Mundo* and the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

I am not a religious scholar or a shaykh, but this deal looks like it goes beyond the Islamic shari’a for the following reasons:

- The captives were civilians, not combatants
 - These captives were kidnapped after they entered an Islamic country and accepted a contract of security from Muslims
 - The aim of the kidnapping was to obtain money
-

This is a new *bida'a* (religious innovation) which does not resemble anything in the life of the prophet, nor from the age of the rightly guided caliphs. I ask how our brothers justify this operation as jihad in the path of God. For we know that everything that is founded on falsehood is, itself falsehood.

The relevant arguments and counter arguments in this case can be summarised diagrammatically as follows:



As the diagram should make plain here, it is by no means clear that either side can be said to have 'won' even an argument as complex and substantive as this one. Numerous relevant points and counterpoints are raised, and each one is answered by another. Conceivably, the final point raised regarding the Islamic limitations on hostage taking might be regarded as lacking in a direct answer. However, it could reasonably be claimed by the supporters of Al-Qaeda in this instance that other points (e.g. regarding the overall combatant status of Westerners in general, particularly if they are playing the role of spies), might serve to counter this claim.

However, what seems undoubtedly clear is that, in order to construct the elaborate counter argument here, it is necessary for the supporters of Al-Qaeda to make explicit some premises which position them as supporters of a 'revolutionary' rather than a 'classical' jihad position. Given the broad acknowledgement that the latter set of positions has been much more widely supported by Middle Eastern and Muslim populations than the latter, it would seem that even if the argument here amounts to a technical draw it has been effective in forcing the supporters of Al-Qaeda to adopt a rather defensive position.[27]

Conclusion

While exploratory in nature, the findings of this study would appear to challenge certain assumptions about the potential effectiveness of online counter-narratives and how to conduct them. Perhaps most significantly, the fact that critics of Al-Qaeda were able to engage in meaningful arguments with supporters of the group, in spite of the fact that the latter were broadly convinced that they were working for unbelieving governments, suggests that need for a credible messenger may matter less in such contexts than it does in mass media campaigns. The use of pseudonyms and the textual nature of these media makes it more difficult to reject the performative claim to worthiness made by the exercise of credible, logical and patient argumentation than it might be otherwise. Consistent, patient attempts – even by sworn enemies – to argue rationally according to shared standards are a kind of persuasive performance in their own right.

The importance of framing arguments in religious terms would seem to be at odds or at the very least add nuance to the often-expressed idea that Al-Qaeda supporters are primarily concerned with using theology to justify politics, rather than with theology per se.[28] Notwithstanding the value of this assessment, the performative declaration by supporters of Al-Qaeda concerning the role of theology as final arbiter for the acceptability of violent actions means that engaging with theology can be a powerful entry point for broader attacks on the claims they put forward.

However, winning arguments with online supporters of Al-Qaeda is not – as might be expected – simply about issuing dry theological judgments. Rather, it involves the artful exploitation of intersections between three systems : (i) the absolute categories of ideology – especially when backed up by religious morality; (ii) the fuzzy categories of ordinary lived social life and, (iii), the linguistically-performatively constructed categories of online communities. To revisit Abu Wa'd's dilemma above, 'supporters of the mujahidin' wish, in one sense, to define themselves in terms of an unassailable Moebius strip of epistemology: all true Muslims have a moral duty to support the mujahidin; questioning whether the mujahidin are, in fact, mujahidin is to fail to support them, therefore – in the case that the mujahidin are mujahidin, it is morally forbidden

(though not, formally speaking, logically inadmissible) to question the fact. This formula – absurd as it may seem to be when expressed as starkly as this – is, arguably, the universal structure necessary for any collective self-account of a human community dedicated to a genuine good: indeed, almost the definitive test of whether something is truly worthwhile is surely whether it overruns language such that there are times when one would be justified in enjoining people simply to shut up and get on with it. And yet the irony for the case of the online supporters of the mujahidin is that, since ‘getting on with it’ is, for them, the very action itself of promoting the mujahidin online, they must, in order to perform their self-assigned duty, cast this unassailable boundary aside and take part instead in arguments over the very meaning of their existence as a community. It is in this paradox that the key to argumentative victory over online supporters of Al-Qaeda lies: by not arguing, they prove the very point that they are a closed, cultish circle, far removed from the ordinary Muslim constituency. But arguing, they have to admit as debatable what, for them, is precisely that which must not be debated. This, in a nutshell, is why trying to argue with online supporters of Al-Qaeda may be worthwhile.

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Notes

[1] Alex P. Schmid, “The Importance of Countering Al-Qaeda’s ‘Single Narrative’”, E.J.A.M Kessels (ed). *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives*, (The Hague: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, 2010), pp. 46-57.

[2] E.g Tim Stevens, “New Media and Counternarrative Strategies”. 112-123 in the above volume.

[3] Brian Fishman and Assaf Moghadam (eds). *Faultlines in Global Jihad: Organisational, Strategic and Ideological Fissures*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

[4] Gabriel Weimann, “Virtual Disputes: The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Debates”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 6, pp. 623-639; Scott Sanford, “Faultlines in Cyberspace”, 220-231 in Brian Fishman and Assaf Moghadam (eds). *Faultlines in Global Jihad: Organisational, Strategic and Ideological Fissures*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

[5] See Tim Stevens and Peter Neumann, “Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action”, (ICSR Special Report: 2009).

[6] Omar Ashour *The Deradicalisation of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, “Assessing the Effectiveness of Current Deradicalisation Initiatives and Identifying Implications for the Development of US-based Initiatives in Multiple Settings” (START official report, 2009).

[7]E.g. Omar Ashour, “Online De-Radicalization? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2010.

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- [8] Gabriel Weimann and Katherina Von Knop, "Applying the Notion of Noise to Countering Online Terrorism", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 10, 2008.
- [9] Lina Khatib, William H. Dutton and Michael Thelwall, "Public Diplomacy 2.0: An Exploratory Case Study of the US Digital Outreach Team", *The Middle East Journal* 2012
- [10] 'Sakinah' refers in Arabic to a religiously inspired spiritual tranquility. This deradicalisation program has been going on for a number of years in Saudi Arabia
- [11] Christopher Boucek, "The Sakinah Campaign and Internet Deradicalization in Saudi Arabia", *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 1, No. 9, 2008.
- [12] Y. Yehushoa, "Re-Education of Extremists in Saudi Arabia", MEMRI, enquiry and analysis series report no. 260, 2006.
- [13] Hani al-Shadhdhili ("Abu Harith al-Mihdar"), Jihadi Forums – What They Have, What They Need (*al-muntadiyyat al-jihadiyya, ma liha, ma 'alayha*) posted on Madad al-Suyuf Forum, 2010, author's collection.
- [14] "Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim", 39 Ways to Serve Jihad and the Mujahidin (*39 Sabila li-Khidmati al-Jihad wa al-Mujahidin fi Sabil Allah*) (author's collection).
- [15] This particular term for the method is taken from M. Lewinski, *Political Discussion Forums as an Argumentative Activity Type: A Pragma Dialectical Analysis of Online Forms of Strategic Manoeuvring in Reacting Critically* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg: 2010), p.6.
- [16] See Frans Van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation: The Pragma-Dialectical Approach*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, chapter 5.
- [17] Ray Lynn Davidson and C. David Mortensen, "Logic and Marketplace Argumentation", *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol 53, No 2., pp. 143-151.
- [18] Michael A. Gilbert, "Emotion, Argumentation and Informal Logic", *Informal Logic*, Vo. 24, No. 3, 2004.
- [19] This term was coined in Gary Bunt, *Virtually Islamic" Computer Mediated Communication and Cyber-Islamic Environments*, University of Wales Press, 2000.
- [20] Mark Aakhus, "The Design of Forums for Online Public Communication and the Consequences for Argumentation", *Kentucky Journal of Communication*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Fall, 2002.
- [21] *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation*, p. 143
- [22] Rene Descartes, Rules for the Direction of the Mind; quoted in Chaim Perelman and L. Obrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1969, p. 2.
- [23] In argumentation theory, a 'warrant' is the technical term given to the evidential basis provided for a statement advances in support of, or in defence of a standpoint.
- [24] *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, p. 17 ff.
- [25] *Political Discussion Forums as an Argumentative Activity Type*. p. 6
- [26] Jarret Brachman and Abdullah Warius, "Abu Yahya al-Libi's 'Human Shields in Modern Jihad', *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 1, No. 6, pp. 1-3
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[27] For elaboration of these conceptual distinctions and their bearings on mainstream support, see e.g. Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, Cambridge University Press, 2005; Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*.

[28] For a succinct statement of this case, see Mark Sedgwick, "Al-Qaeda and the Nature of Religious Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 795-814. Another notable exponent of the idea that theological considerations are of only superficial importance with regard to the 'global jihad' movement is Marc Sageman, however, his concern is primarily with the perhaps different case of Al Qaeda supporters in Muslim minority, Western contexts. See M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.

Rhetorical Charms: The Promise and Pitfalls of Humor and Ridicule as Strategies to Counter Extremist Narratives

by H. L. Goodall, Jr, Pauline Hope Cheong, Kristin Fleischer and Steven R. Corman

“Mubarak dies and meets former Egyptian presidents Anwar Sadat and Gamal Abdel Nasser in the afterlife. They ask him:

“Poisoned or assassinated?” “Neither,” he replies. “Facebook.”

– Joke widely distributed on Facebook/Twitter during the 25th January revolution.

Abstract

In this article we provide a brief account of the uses of humor, in particular satire and ridicule, to counter extremist narratives and heroes. We frame the appeals of humor as “rhetorical charms,” or stylistic seductions based on surprising uses of language and/or images designed to provoke laughter, disrupt ordinary arguments, and counter taken-for-granted truths, that contribute to new sources of influence to the globally wired world of terrorism. We offer two recent examples of how the Internet in particular changed the narrative landscape in ways that offer potent evidence of uses of humor to remake extremist heroes into objects of derision. We also caution those who would make use of humor as a strategic communication device to take into account the negative side effects and unexpected consequences that can accompany such uses.

Introduction

One of the more interesting rhetorical aspects of public protests is the use of humor and ridicule to generate laughter and to promote solidarity among protesters. These “rhetorical charms,”^[1] or what we define as “stylistic seductions based on surprising uses of language and/or images designed to provoke laughter, disrupt ordinary arguments, and counter taken-for-granted truths,” include time-tested methods of humor such as satire and ridicule, but also include creative appropriations and uses of graphic icons and images that further demean the object of the ridicule, such as a dictator or a known terrorist or a violent extremist group.

For example, when protesters in Cairo raised placards emblazoned with the face of then President Hosni Mubarak together with an easily recognized Kentucky Fried Chicken logo, the image linked his continued reign to U.S. influences as well as branded and demeaned Mubarak as a coward, a “chicken.” For the protesters in Cairo as well as for mediated audiences worldwide who supported the uprising, iconic images such as this one were both humorous and disruptive to the narrative being spun by the dictator about his demand to stay in power.

Yet, for those individuals, government leaders and other dictators who identified with Mubarak, as well as for those who feared the collapse of his regime out of a fear of a radical Muslim takeover of Egypt, the image was surely demeaning, but decidedly not as humorous. So it is that

the uses of humor to satirize, ridicule, or otherwise to make fun of or to demean leaders and other public figures such as known terrorists and violent extremist groups can be problematic. Furthermore, in today's media-saturated political environment marked by the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other user-generated content resources for creating and circulating messages to counter official pronouncements or even to ridicule mainstream news feeds, what we have is humor as a rhetorical device that, as Kenneth Burke famously expresses it, simultaneously "unites and divides." [2]

In this article we provide a brief account of the uses of humor - in particular, satire and ridicule - to counter extremist narratives and heroes. We begin with a short history of these communication devices and offer an important caution about what happens when humor backfires. Then we offer two recent examples of how the Internet in particular changed the narrative landscape in ways that offer potent evidence of uses of humor to remake extremist heroes into objects of derision. We summarize what we have learned by creating a comparison of the effects of humor to that of "narrative IEDs" (improvised explosive devices). And we conclude with a metaphor—a playful balloon that masks an exploding clown face—that we feel captures both the promise and the pitfalls of using humor as a counter-terrorism communication strategy.

The Use of Satire and Ridicule

One of the common critiques of U.S. strategic communication efforts has been that Al-Qaeda is "winning" the war of narratives. [3] The "extremist narrative" (as if there is only one) is simple, effective, and powerful in constructing a world view that frames and justifies their actions. [4] That worldview is constructed out of storylines that suggest:

"[T]he world is corrupt and that the nations of the Arab and Muslim world have fallen from the path of "true" Islam. ... [That] the Muslim world exists in a state of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) like that which existed on the Arabian Peninsula at the time of Islam's birth, ... [and that] all "apostate" leaders of Arab and Muslim nations [should be treated] as enemies of God. ... [It is a narrative] that define[s] the West, and particularly the United States, as an enemy (the archetypal Crusader) that can only be eradicated by a military jihad, and that serve[s] as a means of recruitment into an ideological alliance that promotes the love of death and the inevitability of victory through martyrdom." [5]

Efforts at countering that narrative have been met with mixed success. One tool of countering these narratives that – while slowly gaining acceptance among analysts and some researchers [6] – has yet to gain mainstream acceptance, is that of employing *ridicule* in an offensive capacity (no pun intended).

The use of ridicule in warfare is hardly a novel idea. Many a regime or leader has banned humor at its expense in the hope of quelling dissent, recognizing that being able to laugh at something or someone inherently diminishes the power of the ridiculed. In pre-Islamic Arab and early Islamic societies, poets were considered extremely dangerous for their ability to spread satire and ridicule against an adversary. Indeed, in many conflicts, poets were often targeted for assassination to prevent them from mocking the attacker. Two examples of "dangerous" poets

during the Prophet's lifetime were al-A'sha and Ka'b ibn Ashraf. As Islamic scholar Daniel C. Peterson noted:

"To have a successful poet in a rival tribe satirizing one's tribe or clan in memorable and repeatable verses was a curse like no other, and was deemed an injury as serious as, if not more serious than, a defeat in literal battle. For a successful poet was not merely one enemy. As his verses began to be adopted and repeated by others, he became many foes" [7].

Satire and ridicule as both offensive and defensive tools have existed in the United States since the Revolutionary War. The role of propaganda in the conflict between the young colonies and the British crown has been well documented. Facing an army that was significantly larger, better trained and better equipped, those factions pushing for American independence recognized the value of ridicule. [8] The iconic lyrics of "Yankee Doodle" originated as a song sung by the British ridiculing American troops, only to have it embraced by the colonists themselves. [9] Another example is "My Country Tis of Thee," which was the music of Britain's National Anthem, "God Save the Queen."

Satire was also employed defensively during the Second World War, when American public ridicule of the German Nazis and Japanese Fascists was common. Popular propaganda at the time depicted Japanese soldiers as brutish and ape-like and Hitler's appearance and manner were common targets. [10] This included depictions of the Nazi leader by comedians such as "The Three Stooges," in, for example, their classic "minisode" "I'll Never Heil Again" (< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-opehtzq7Es> >). As Waller points out, "ridicule can be a defensive weapon if it helps calm the fears of the public at home and give hope that they can indeed defeat the enemy." [11]

Given this background, perhaps the most effective use of ridicule is when it is directed at a domestic audience. Waller points to the example of *Team America: World Police*, a show produced by the creators of the adult cartoon *South Park* that features puppets saving the world. The movie parodies Al-Qaeda and North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il, two subjects not generally considered as comedy fodder. The Team also created a controversy over the depiction of Mohammad in a bear suit, as well as a sequel fearing the Prophet as Santa Claus, but it was cancelled. The image of suicide bombers as inept and ridiculous is also a part of a popular ventriloquist act called "Achmed the Dead Terrorist" by comedian Jeff Dunham. While some audiences may not see suicide bombers as something to laugh at, Daniel Byman and Christine Fair argue:

Even in the aftermath of the botched Times Square bombing earlier this spring, the perception persists that our enemies are savvy and sophisticated killers. They're fanatical and highly organized—twin ideas that at once keep us fearful and help them attract new members... but the quiet truth is that many of the deluded foot soldiers are foolish and untrained, perhaps even untrainable. Acknowledging this fact could help us tailor our counterterrorism priorities—and publicizing it could help us erode the powerful images of strength and piety that terrorists rely on for recruiting and funding. [12]

The use of ridicule and satire to demonize the image and denigrate the skills of enemies on home audiences serves obvious ideological ends. However, making use of those communication

strategies to combat violent extremism abroad can be problematic. Humor as a weapon has a sharp double edge and that may account for some of the reluctance to view it as a valid tool of strategic communication. Hence any discussion of employing ridicule should include a caution about the dangers of its misuse. Just as an off color joke can offend your co-workers or sour a personal relationship, humor has the potential to be divisive and motivating in ways that are detrimental to larger policy goals.

While political cartoonist Patrick Chappatte [13] points out the power of cartoons to create peaceful discussion in politically volatile climates, the events surrounding the cartoons published in 2005 by Danish article *Jyllands-Posten* [13] provide clear evidence of the accompanying risk. The collection of images created by various artists which were intended to depict the Prophet Muhammad satirically – in one case wearing a turban shaped like a bomb – became a highly divisive symbol that was framed in many instances as an expression of the struggle between “free speech” and “traditional Islamic views.” [14] What started as public anger from the Danish Muslim population spread – along with the cartoons themselves – provoking physical violence and riots in several countries. [15]

The artists and editors of the article may have been attempting to make a statement about freedom of speech and the dangers of Islamist extremism, but in doing so, they attacked something held sacred to all Muslims. The “Danish Cartoon Controversy” is but one example of how satire and ridicule operating as “rhetorical charms” by appealing to a sense of humor held by some citizens may also have the equipotential to organize sentiment of extremists against those who dare to deploy it.

Yet despite the very real need for caution in employing ridicule, there exist equally real opportunities for its effectiveness. Analysis of Al-Qaeda and its ideological affiliates in recent years has highlighted a shift in structure and narrative focus. [16] As Jarret Brachman pointed out, Al-Qaeda and its ideological affiliates are much more active these days on the Internet. They have increased their efforts at building support, creating online communities, recruitment and mobilization, not just of audiences in the Middle East, but in Western countries as well. “The jihadisphere is now teeming with aspiring pundits -- fresh voices trying to make it big and establish a popular online following.” [17]

This switch in narrative focus as well as in choice of medium provides an excellent opportunity to reconsider the deployment of ridicule strategically. As Brachman argued, “we are now highly effective in targeting individuals and organizations, but where the USG’s efforts are weakest is in countering the movement.” [18] It is in countering “the movement” that ridicule may be most effective. The late bin Laden himself was quoted as saying he feared humiliation before death. [19] In an online environment of venerating certain figures such as the late Anwar al-Awlaki, ridicule has the potential to undercut and destroy the image of “martyrs.” [20]

It may seem at first glance that ridicule is a tactic that is not available to government communicators. While it is certainly true that there may be more constraints on governments, such a consideration does not rule out its use. This is certainly true in the case of so-called “black propaganda” where the government does not reveal itself as a source. In the infamous COINTELPRO articles, for instance, the FBI wrote: “Consider the use of cartoons, photographs, and anonymous letters which will have the effect of ridiculing the New Left. Ridicule is one of

the most potent weapons which we can use against it” [21]. But even in cases where the government is an acknowledged source, ridicule is used. Leaders such as Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmedinejad routinely employ ridicule to criticize the United States.

In 2011, a unit of the State Department employed a very effective ridicule strategy against Al-Qaeda. The terrorist organization was notoriously irrelevant in the Arab Spring protests, and indeed had predicted that such efforts could never succeed against the “apostate regimes.” After the protests in Egypt and elsewhere proved this wrong, the Digital Outreach Team - an above-board unit that promotes U.S. positions and policies in foreign language social media - produced a set of three videos pointing this out. They include clips of Ayman al-Zawahiri saying protest would never work intercut with scenes of jubilant Egyptians after the overthrow of Mubarak, and clips of Osama bin Laden watching videos of himself in his compound while the Arab Spring protests raged [23].

Two Recent Examples: Noordin Top and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab

The recent developments in the so-called Web 2.0 (new and social media) including blogs, video blogs (vlogs), social networking and interactive forum sites facilitate increased user-generated and participatory communication. In the process, the identity of media audiences becomes more complex as online users simultaneously act as producers, distributors and critics. The hybrid and dynamic “prosumption” (consumption and production) process, thus potentially increases the agency of individuals in finding, communicating and circulating information about terrorism, counter-terrorism and political affairs, as well as increases the exposure and interactivity between micro- and macro-level agencies as non-state actors join the communication fray. [24]

Given that the meaning of “truth” is often a key feature of hegemonic struggles, examining prosumption practices can help us understand the competing co-presence of state, alternative and insurgent “truth perspectives” and how these get narrated and circulated or transmediated online across multiple media platforms as memes. In particular, the use of humor and ridicule in online texts has been and can be appropriated to propagate satirical or hostile narratives about terrorism and their agents.

For example, our recent examination of rumors surrounding the death of one of Southeast Asia’s most notorious Islamist extremists, Noordin Top, showed that prosumption of rumors regarding Top’s sexuality based on a post-mortem pronouncement of sodomy and homosexuality in 2009 allowed him to be cast as a sexual deviant. [25] Online manipulation of official images of Noordin feminized him by adding a *jilbab* (headscarf), long hair or rouge to his cheeks. Other prosumption *YouTube* video and blog content took it further into the realm of ridicule by portraying Noordin in a variety of ridiculous disguises including a mash-up image of Noordin appearing as pop icon Michael Jackson who was similarly rumored to be homosexual.

Our analyses highlighted how these transmediated examples helped his critics and counter-terrorist interests portray Noordin as a perverse hypocrite. Notably, unlike other terrorist leaders who have garnered laudatory acclaim after their death, Noordin’s image was not ascribed with the appearance of green birds that are posited to hold the souls of Muslim martyrs. In this case, it

appeared that ridicule was a potent means to belittle a key terrorist leader and weaken the appeal of his legacy among contested populations.

In another instance, we observed how humor and ridicule was applied to mock the identity and actions of the twenty three years old Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried to detonate an explosive device on board a Northwest airlines passenger flight bound for Detroit, on Christmas Day 2009. [26] Our analysis of multiple YouTube, blog and tweet texts associated with this “underwear bomber” or “crotch bomber” showed how multiple online prosumers focused on the amateurish tactics of his attack and how he was a failure. Several online articles also suggested that Abdulmutallab was an evil and morally lax agent, by ridiculing his impure desire for martyrdom. By implication terrorism was ridiculed as a futile enterprise. These examples exemplify how online storytelling may reinforce stigma related to terrorism, amplify negative images associated with insurgents and further shift the public perceptions of terrorists and their operations.

Of course, the use of such tactics is not without risk. Since narratives of ridicule circulate in a complex system, their effects are often unpredictable. We have already cited the case of “Yankee Doodle” being launched as a ridicule campaign by the British, only to be appropriated by the colonists who were its erstwhile targets. There is also the risk that a ridicule attempt may flop, making the author of it look, well, ridiculous. And, as ridicule is often based in humor, its use may give the appearance of making light of a serious situation. Yet it seems to us that these are risks worth taking because in large part the power of terrorist groups is their ability to project menace and inspire fear disproportionate to the actual threat they represent. [27]

Another argument in favor of the use of ridicule is that effective strategic communication in a complex system requires risk-taking. In simple communication environments it is possible to isolate single variables – for example acceptance of a claim – and systematically work to affect that variable through trial-and-error learning. But a complex communication environment presents a “rugged landscape” where the only rational approach is variation over a wide range of tactics in search of one that works, [28] even though many of those attempts might fail. Given that the ridicule approach has been rarely tried, its use deserves wider consideration.

Rhetorical Charms and Narrative IEDs

Daniel Bernardi, Pauline Hope Cheong, Chris Lundry and Scott Ruston argue that rumors in a war zone operate very much like narrative IEDs (improvised explosive devices) in that they are relatively low-cost weapons that circulate unexpectedly among lay peoples. [29] Much like their literally explosive cousins, rumors can instill fear and be dangerous, particularly in times of conflict and information uncertainty. As such, the collateral damage caused by a rumor and the high likelihood of its narrative spread throughout a community or region (or globally, via the Internet) is very hard to counter with traditional forms of communication. Reasoning and argument, even when firmly based on the “truth” of a given case, are seldom served as effective remedies for rumors.

Similarly, the deployment of ridicule, satire, and/or other forms of humor may serve rhetorical ends by disrupting the existing narrative terrain and thereby organizing resistance to extremist

stories and actions. But, as we have pointed out, rhetorical devices have the capacity—indeed the likelihood—of both uniting and dividing audiences from intended consequences, and, in the case of the latter, not only of enlarging the narrative playing field but also introducing negative responses that are themselves unstable and open to interpretation and change.

It is also important to recognize the intercultural dynamics of humor since the use or “sense of humor” is context-dependent. The enactment of satirical messages may function in a different way, even fail to elicit laughter if values like respect and honor are observed in cultures that are more group- or hierarchy-oriented. Persons of varied cultural backgrounds may also attribute different intentions (if any) to the use of disparagement humor. As humor can also be a means of both emphasizing and diminishing group boundaries, there are good reasons then, to further examine the relationships between humor and intercultural communication.

In one sense the deployment of a satirical poem about the fecklessness of an extremist bombing attempt, or the creation and dissemination of an image that ridicules a terrorist’s masculinity, is like dropping a playful clown face balloon that masks an explosive device into a bar fight: it is another form of a narrative IED and there will be collateral damage. Yes, it will disrupt the fight, at least for a while, as most of those who witness it laugh at the very absurdity of it, others can become enraged at the same image. But when the fight resumes there will be those who remake that clown face into further disparagement of the Other as well as those who see in it a disparaging of their own face and with it a preferred end to the narrative that shapes and gives meaning to their lives.

As we were completing this article the January 25th revolution in Egypt was one year old and the use of humor and ridicule in celebrations of it were everywhere apparent. From hand drawn street signs depicting “Muuhbarak” as a “Laughing Cow,” complete with the image of the French cheese to nuanced uses of the Arabic language to denigrate him to Facebook and Twitter disparagements and calls for his immediate resignation, what we all saw was the deployment of these communication techniques as strategies designed to organize, expand, and make visible and audible the desired end result: the end of a tyrant’s regime.

Yet there was something else. In addition to the uses of humor and ridicule were the protesting crowds of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians in the streets and in Tahrir Square. It was the fact of their active presence coupled with their firm non-violent stance that significantly altered Egyptian history. Their uses of humor, satire, and ridicule while remaining non-violent was part of a strategy for countering tyranny, as was their use of social media and the coverage of al Jazeera television.

But were these strategies what Malcolm Gladwell calls “the tipping point?” [30] Probably not. The success of the revolution had more to do with the full-voiced presence and unity of purpose for all the world to see that left no other legitimate course of action but resignation for a leader so obviously despised by his people and so unsupported by his allies. In the end, making fun of him was just part of the mix, whether as “Muuhbarak” the laughing cow or as Mubarak the Kentucky Fried Chicken, but those images were important to the morale of the people in the streets as well as for the resistance message it sent around the world.

That those mediated images and the disruptions they caused contributed to the spread of popular uprisings in (as of this writing) Yemen, Libya, and Syria cannot be denied, as protesters in those

countries all point to the success of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as motivators for their actions. Yet it is obvious that we need more in-depth studies of the uses of humor and ridicule, of images and icons, used to combat violent extremism as well as to take down dictators. These amusing, seductive, explosive “rhetorical charms” may disrupt the narrative landscape, but more importantly they also contribute to it new resources that then help to persuade others to act, one way or another. And that is something we need to understand more fully.

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Notes

[1] The term “rhetorical charms” is our invention but the association of rhetorical devices with “charm” has a long history. For example, St. Augustine of Hippo in *On Christian Doctrine*, (Book Four; published in 426 CE), encourages preachers to make full use of “rhetoric’s charm” so long as they do not use rhetoric to promote falsehood. W. Brockriede, “Arguers as Lovers,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 5, 1972, pp. 1-11, adapts a Platonic conception of three rhetorical stances—“rape, seduction, and love” to express how “charm” is a major characteristic of rhetorical seduction, a relationship of speaker to audience that relies on deceit, fallacies, and the bedazzlements of language and style. More recently, R. P. Hart’s *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*, 3rd ed., Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2004, pp. 177-209, uses the concept of rhetorical charm to characterize the appeal of mediated political figures who rely on charisma, simplicity of argument, and humor to influence audiences. Our use of the term “rhetorical charms” draws upon all three of these standards—the seductive character of surprising/graphic depictions; the simplicity of the humor used to influence audiences, and the caution that such depictions ought not be used to promote falsehoods.

[2] K. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1950, pp. 55-59.

[3] F. J. Cilluffo, & D. Kimmage, D. How to beat Al-Qaeda at its own game. *Foreign Policy*, April 2009, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>; accessed February 11, 2011.

[4] R. B. Furlow and H. L. Goodall, Jr., (in press). The war of ideas and the battle of narratives: A comparison of extremist storytelling structures. *Cultural Studies—Critical Methodologies*, 11.

[5] J. Halverson, J., H. L. Goodall, Jr., & S. R. Corman. *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2011, p. 13.

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- [6] See, for example, J. Brachman, J., The Approach is Catching On, *Jarret Brachman*, 2010, accessed February 11, 2011, from <http://jarretbrachman.net/?p=710> and D. Byman and Chr. Fair, The case for calling them nitwits. *The Atlantic*, May 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/05/the-case-for-calling-them-nitwits/8130/> accessed February 11, 2011.
- [7] D. C. Peterson, *Muhammad: Prophet of God*. Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2007, p. 13.
- [8] P. M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*. Manchester University Press, 2003.
- [9] M. Waller, *Fighting the War of Ideas like a Real War*. Institute of World Politics Press, 2007, p. 103.
- [10] M. Waller, 2007. - In this case, it extended to overt racist imagery and stereotyping. Please note that we are *not* advising the use of racist depictions of Arabs, merely pointing out the range of ridicule and satiric options that have been deployed over time.
- [11] M. Waller, 2007, p. 100.
- [12] D. Byman and Chr. Fair, 2010.
- [13] P Chappatte, The Power of Cartoons. Lecture in *Ted Talks*; accessed February 25, 2011 at http://www.ted.com/talks/patrick_chappatte_the_power_of_cartoons.html.
- [14] BBC.co.uk. Muslim cartoon row timeline. *BBC Online*, 2006, January 19, 2006; accessed February, 2011 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4688602.stm. It is also worth noting that this same group created a show based on a depiction of the Prophet Mohammad wearing a bear suit, which then prompted RevolutionMuslim.com and Abu Talhah Al-Amrikee to make threats against the lives of Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the show's creators, saying they would end up like Theo Van Gogh, as well as to Comedy Central (the cable company hosting the show). A second episode was planned that featured the image of Santa Claus standing in for Mohammad, but it was cancelled. For a full account, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/22/south-park-mohammed-censo_n_547484.html.
- [15] M. Kimmelman, M., A startling lesson in the power of imagery. *The New York Times Online*, February 8, 2008; accessed February 11, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/08/arts/design/08imag.html?ref=danishcartooncontroversy>
- [16] BBC.co.uk. Muslim cartoon row timeline. *BBC Online*, January 19, 2006 accessed February, 2011 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4688602.stm
- [17] J. Brachman, J., Al-Qaeda's armies of one. *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2011. Accessed February 2011. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/22/al_qaedas_armies_of_one?page=0,1. See also F. Burton, F. and S. Stewart, S., Al-Qaeda and the tale of two battlespaces. *STRATFOR*, October 1, 2008; accessed February 2011. http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20081001_al_qaeda_and_tale_two_battlespaces.
- [18] J. Brachman, op. cit. (2010a).
- [19] Idem.
- [20] BBC.co.uk. Text: 'Bin Laden Tape.' *BBC Online*, January 19, 2006; accessed February 28, 2011 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4628932.stm>.
- [21] J. Brachman, You too can be Awlaki. *Cronus Global*, January 24, 2011; accessed February 28, 2011 <http://jarretbrachman.net/?p=1157>.
- [22] W. Churchill and J. Vander Wall. *The COINTELPRO Articles: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars against Dissent in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002.
- [23] See, for an example: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/q2DaOa-x7w0?rel=0>.
- [24] P. H. Cheong and C. Lundry. Prosumption, Transmediation and Resistance: Terrorism and Man-hunting in Southeast Asia, *American Behavioral Scientist*, in press.
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[25] P. H. Cheong and C. Lundry, in press.

[26] P. H. Cheong and C. Clow. Understanding the Digital Transmediation of Terrorism: (Re)presentation of the “Underwear Bomber” in new and social media. Article presented at the Terrorism and New Media: Building a Research Network conference, Dublin City University, Ireland, 8-9 September, 2010.

[27] C. R. Sunstein, C. R. Terrorism and probability neglect. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 26, (2-3), 2008, pp. 121-136.

[28] S. R. Corman, S.R. D. J. Dooley, K. J. *Strategic Communication on a Rugged Landscape: Principles for Finding the Right Message*. Report #0801, Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University, 2008; accessed February 28, 2011 at: <http://comops.org/article/121.pdf>.

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Use of the Internet to Counter the Appeal of Extremist Violence. Conference Summary & Follow-up/ Recommendations

by the United Nations Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF), Working Group on Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes, Riyadh, 24 - 26 January 2011.

Background

The Internet is a key way for violent extremists to encourage others to adopt their views. In their messaging to potential supporters and vulnerable audiences, extremists use simplistic analysis and offer violent solutions to problems that span a range of complex social, economic and political issues at both a local and global level.

Finding effective ways to counter such messages was at the heart of discussions at the Riyadh Conference on the “Use of the Internet to Counter the Appeal of Extremist Violence.” Co-hosted by the United Nations Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and the Naif Arab University for Security Sciences in Riyadh in partnership with the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, and supported by the Governments of Germany and Saudi Arabia, the Riyadh conference followed two previous meetings of the CTITF Internet Working Group, one on legal aspects of the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes, and the other on technical aspects.[1] The conference brought together around 150 policy-makers, experts and practitioners from the public sector, international organisations, industry, academia and the media. Several States participated at ministerial or ambassadorial level. The choice of

Saudi Arabia as a venue reflected its considerable effort to identify effective counter-terrorism measures, including in combating terrorist use of the Internet and in constructing and delivering effective counter-narratives.

The conference focused on identifying good practices in using the Internet to undermine the appeal of terrorism, to expose its lack of legitimacy and its negative impact, and to undermine the credibility of its messengers. Key themes included the importance of identifying the target audience, crafting effective messages, identifying credible messengers, and using appropriate media to reach vulnerable communities. The Conference agreed that Governments might not always be best placed to lead this work and needed the cooperation of civil society, the private sector, academia, the media and victims of terrorism. Given the global nature of terrorist narratives and the need to counter them in the same space, there was a special role for the United Nations in facilitating discussion and action.

This report includes a list of possible follow-up projects, further recommendations, and a summary of the discussion.

Action Points/Possible Follow-on Projects:

1. Collect examples of extremist messages on the Internet and identify the strengths and weaknesses of both their content and delivery through web-stats analysis and user reactions so as

to be able to undermine strengths and exploit weaknesses in constructing and delivering counter-narratives. Analyze themes and discussion threads on extremist websites.

2. Collect and analyze examples of counter-narratives on the Internet so as to build a picture of what works and what does not, both in terms of content and delivery.
3. Build a hub for deconstructing extremist narratives on the Internet, providing counter narratives and training workshops for practitioners, students, journalists, etc.
4. Identify the types/groups of users who access extremist messages so as to be able to reach them through the same portals with counter-narratives that play to their specific concerns and cultural influences.
5. Draw up a register of potential messengers both by category/geography and as individuals and create a platform for interaction. Messengers might include victims and former extremists.
6. Provide journalists with an easily accessible roster of experts on extremism and counter-extremism that they can turn to for substantive comment (i.e. by building on efforts such as the Global Expert Finder of the Alliance of Civilizations). Identify and draw up a list of media partners.
7. In consultation with the Organization of the Islamic Conference establish a project to offer analysis of radical messages and training for all interested stakeholders on the design and delivery of counter-narratives in order to avoid legitimizing extremist messaging and wherever possible expose its illegitimacy (in partnership with the Alliance of Civilizations).
8. Discuss with industry partners (incl. search-engine hosts) the technical possibilities of ensuring counter-narratives appear at or near the top of results pages for specific search criteria.

Recommendations:

1. Promote counter-narratives through all relevant media channels (online, print, TV/Radio).
 2. Make available in the same space a counter-narrative whenever a new extremist message appears on Facebook, YouTube or similar outlets.
 3. Offer rapid counter-narratives to political developments (e.g. highlight the absence of Al-Qaida and other extremist groups from popular protests).
 4. Consider selective take-down of extremist narratives that have the elements of success.
 5. Ensure that counter-narratives include messages of empathy/understanding of political and social conditions facing the target audience, rather than limiting the counter-narrative to lecturing or retribution.
 6. Offer an opportunity for engagement in crafting and delivering counter-narratives to young people who mirror the 'Internet Brigade' members of Al-Qaida.
 7. Support the establishment of civil society networks of interested groups, such as women against violent extremism, parents against suicide bombers or schools against extremism.
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Summary:***Session I: Framing the Issue – The Spread of Violent Extremism through the Internet***

The Internet, though a neutral medium, can play a key role in spreading violent extremist messages to individuals who might otherwise remain immune. The Internet empowers the shy and allows alienated people with extremist views to find others who agree with them. This can lead to mutual reinforcement of beliefs and validation of a world view that is otherwise hard to sustain. Forums that promote a radical philosophy however, often contain many different ideological strands. Audiences often approach forums in a state of confusion which then clarifies as they gravitate towards other members and harden their outlook. While it can and does happen, people do not always approach a forum with the intention of joining a terrorist group or even of becoming members of the ideological ghettos that exist on the Internet. The effectiveness of networks depends on their success on several levels: organizational (binding members together), narrative (strengthening self-definition); doctrinal (hardening beliefs and objectives); technological (improving capacity), and social (building trust and loyalty). Opportunities to break down networks also exist in all these categories.

The Internet has enabled the collection of extremist ideas and materials that may lead a vulnerable individual to recruit himself, sometimes unaided by any intermediary. Such self-recruited extremists can join a community of like-minded individuals which then develops its own ideology. These networks are resilient and adaptive, despite growing law enforcement efforts to take them down. Online extremist forums can play a key role in the radicalization process of an individual or a group. Often identified with religious symbolism and rituals, and a rejection of western cultures, these forums provide individuals that feel emotional outrage with a sense of identity and purpose which may lead them to consider it a personal duty to take action as soldiers in a war to protect their community. The problem of radicalization however is not limited to Al-Qaida-related terrorism. Extremism can grow out of the domestic conditions of any country, and the Internet can play a facilitating role in radicalizing any set of vulnerable individuals in the same way that it does for Al-Qaida-related extremists.

In this respect, participants cautioned against using misleading terminology, in particular as relates to deviations from Islam and the actions of violent Muslims; terms such as jihad or neo-jihad are unhelpful and counter-productive. There was complete agreement that Al-Qaida represents neither the Muslim community nor Islamic belief.

Session I: Framing the Issue II – the Terrorist Narrative (Objective and Success)

A speaker presented a comprehensive study of terrorist web forums and the ways they have been used to develop terrorist ideas and activities. These web forums provide relative anonymity; wide availability; resilient infrastructure; interactivity, and comprehensive pools of information, as well as links between armed extremists and their support bases and among themselves. It was noted that even though many Al-Qaida web forums are weakening and some have not recovered from take-down actions, they should not be underestimated, as at least three or four principal

forums are fully active and in direct contact with the Al-Qaida leadership. Most Al-Qaida web forums are now password-protected, allowing access only to established members.

Another speaker examined the types of Internet content terrorists access, using the example of the Madrid bombers. The terrorists had used the Internet for communication within and beyond the terrorist network, to share information on current events, as a tool for indoctrination and to maintain ideological group cohesion, and to share operational knowledge on violent tactics and on targets. The computers recovered from the bombers contained propaganda and proselytizing texts and audio/video clips from key leaders as well as from unidentified preachers, all reinforcing the legitimacy of terrorism.

As much as the Internet is a complementary tool for individual radicalization, in many cases the key radicalization channel still remains face-to-face interaction. Often a surprisingly short time elapses between a person becoming interested in radical ideas on the Internet and meeting someone in real life who reinforces those ideas.

The main objectives of the terrorist message are to build a sense of community, instill a sense of responsibility to defend it and promote the idea that it is under attack from a specific enemy.

Session II. The Message: Crafting a Counter Narrative

Participants made the point that extremists often get things wrong and that the web allows an opportunity for an aggressive exploitation of their mistakes. One example was the intimidating messages sent to imams and others in Afghanistan which in fact exposed the violence and intolerance of the terrorist approach. A counter-narrative was likely to succeed better if it was aggressive rather than defensive. It was also useful to underline the lack of success enjoyed by terrorist groups, the counterproductive consequences for the communities that terrorists claim to defend and the lack of legitimacy for terrorist action. However, while terrorist argumentation often shows weaknesses in content and logic, the counter-narrative that points these out needs more substance to sustain itself. Counter narratives should contain facts and have a transparency that undermines any criticism of them as information operations.

Participants emphasized the importance of finding voices that resonate with the audiences that counter narratives aim to reach, for example those of former terrorists. It was important to highlight the arguments that had led them to denounce violence. Similarly, it was useful to examine the content of internal critiques that are known to have had an impact on extremist thought. In the case of Indonesia, messages by people still involved in the movement had more impact than arguments against bombings made by former militants, in part because they went beyond the usual point-counterpoint of most arguments. Their impact suggested that an effective Internet counter-narrative requires a thorough familiarity with ongoing debates. If extremist movements are constantly evolving, then counter-strategies aimed at an Internet audience will need to do the same, showing flexibility and an ability to adapt to changing events.

A successful counter narrative should not necessarily be limited to renouncing violence but also point out that violence does not achieve the desired outcomes, while showing understanding of the political and social conditions that face target audiences. The audience that a counter-narrative should aim to persuade does not comprise foot-soldiers, but rather reasonably well-

educated computer-literate members of religious discussion groups, the intellectuals who are or might become recruiters and trainers in terrorist circles, and university students who might be tempted to provide moral, logistical or financial support. An effective message should urge them to act in a different, more effective and positive capacity. An empathetic message that demonstrates understanding of the issues that may push an individual to extremism is likely to have greater effect than one that simply says he is wrong.

A discussant gave the example of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's criticism of his former pupil, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi which was translated into Indonesian as *They are Mujahidin But They Made Mistakes (Mereka Mujahid Tapi Salah Langkah)*. The success of such counter-narrative efforts is largely dependent on the timing of their release, especially in the immediate aftermath of incidents that have dealt major setbacks to the movement.

Participants also discussed the importance of exploiting terrorist groups' strategic and doctrinal vulnerabilities. According to a discussant, this would mean that counter narrative messages need to compete in a space where undecided young people are trying to decide what activity they should support. Therefore, deploying sustained messaging to key audiences is essential. In doing so, counter narrative messages can also highlight the collateral damage of terrorist acts (Al-Qaida is killing the Ummah), challenge Al-Qaida's doctrinal vulnerabilities, undermine the authority of the messenger ('Who made you the leader, anyway?') and attack the terrorist brand image ('This isn't what I signed up for!').

Similarly, counter-narrative efforts need to focus on deconstructing religious extremist propaganda in the media where images and videos provoke emotional outrage. It is necessary to deconstruct such content by analyzing the religious sources in their original context, demonstrate the terrorist intention and replace the terrorist interpretation with a mainstream moderate perspective.

An aspect that could also be exploited is the way that web forums allow for top-down authority, and so can shape the debate towards peaceful protest, albeit radical, rather than violent protest.

Session III. The Messengers and the Media: Delivering the Narrative

The importance of the role of the messenger was highlighted repeatedly, given that the messenger is as important as the message itself. Participants discussed the critical damage that may be done if a messenger communicates the wrong message or is not knowledgeable about the topic. Individuals who have been victims of terrorism form possibly the most powerful group of messengers as they can promote a counter-narrative through personal stories and so 'speak truth to terror'. A representative of a terrorism victims' network argued that instead of terrorists getting all the attention from the media, the victims of terrorism should be allowed the same platform to challenge the terrorist narrative.

Participants discussed the routes to radicalization, and whether conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism have less to do with ideology than with personal experience of social exclusion and marginalization. In radicalisation there was often a degree of accidental contact in an hour of need rather than a deliberate path. While there was no agreement as to the specifics of what "causes" terrorism, discussants agreed that effective counter-narratives had to focus in

particular on vulnerable and marginalized communities, with an aim to empowering young people. Research from across different regions - including the Middle East, Europe, and South America - seemed to indicate that radical movements were often most successful in recruiting new followers when offering some form of identity/sense of belonging. In this context, one participant highlighted the similarities in the recruitment approach of terrorist groups and criminal gangs, pointing out that a common factor was the

focus on young people. Comparing a group like Al-Qaida to a street gang could be part of an effective counter-narrative, but an effective strategy had to offer more than words or remote role models. It had to provide the emotional and physical support that individuals sought by joining terrorist or criminal gangs. It was further agreed that developing and implementing coherent youth programs was potentially one of the more effective ways to counter the extremist narrative.

Credible Messengers as Important as the Message

While it was important to craft effective messages focused on particular target audiences, participants agreed that having credible messengers deliver the message was as important as the message itself. One participant pointed out that the image presented by Usama bin Laden was extremely persuasive to devout Muslims, regardless of what he said and did, and the counter narrative should hesitate to attack such iconic figures head on. There was broad agreement about the significance of former extremists who generally have greater credibility within their communities than governments or international organizations. The problem, however, was that there was a high demand but low supply of such voices.

Furthermore, engaging with former extremists posed two significant challenges:

1) most are not part of any organized structure (i.e. NGOs/civil society organizations) so it is difficult to reach out to them; and 2) many of them often do not have the tools (facts, religious understanding, etc) to be effective in engaging other members of their communities susceptible to extremist ideologies. One way to address this was to build networks of credible voices, across terrorist groups, gangs, cults and other sectors of society (for example sports stars), and provide an institutional home such as a NGO which could coordinate their activities and provide them a platform.

Noteworthy Initiatives: The Power of Peace Network

Participants highlighted the important role technology can play in both crafting and delivering counter-narratives. One participant highlighted a UNESCO-led Initiative entitled the “Power of Peace Network” which strives to become a worldwide social networking community in pursuit of peace. The Network aims to engage and inspire young people by harnessing the power of media and information technology to support diverse social and cultural self-expression. In doing so, the initiative aims to self-generate effective counter-narratives as well as provide avenues for dissemination of those messages. It also aims to be a clearinghouse for audio-visual content for schools and universities as well as endorse university curricula.

Role of the Media

Participants also discussed the role of the media both in reporting on terrorism and in spreading counter-narratives. As with governments, mainstream media outlets could not easily disseminate counter-narratives. While mainstream media may generally cover terrorism objectively, it was unlikely that professional journalists would intentionally spread counter-narratives. Furthermore, language could sometimes be a barrier for foreign media. One participant highlighted several cases in which interesting repudiations of terrorism by repentant extremists, which could serve as highly effective counter-narratives if disseminated to a broader audience, simply did not get picked up by mainstream media due to a lack of language ability or a lack of appreciation of the source's credibility and impact. Some of these challenges could be offset by providing journalists with specific training or an online guide, or by

linking them with a group of experts whom they can easily turn to for substantive knowledge and additional context, similar to the Global Expert Finder (GEF) program of the UN Alliance of Civilizations (see: < <http://www.theglobalexperts.org/> >).

On the upside, participants pointed out that mainstream media did have significant reach, often also into vulnerable communities and relevant audiences. And while not being co-opted as propaganda instruments, professional journalists did have the responsibility to “dig deeper” – with solid reporting going beyond mere news coverage, and ideally focusing on uncovering the truth behind a story, including going beyond the terrorist narrative, discounting prevailing myths, and establishing transparency. One of the effective ways to leverage media reporting was to encourage and disseminate articles/stories about the debates and arguments inside terrorist organizations. Exposure of these fault lines – while being sound reporting – could also be used by credible messengers to pinpoint the weaknesses and illegitimacy of the terrorist narrative. Indeed, such topics could provide the strongest counter-narratives. One participant highlighted the current debate among Al-Qaida strategists on the justifications for killing Muslims. In this regard, studies had shown that Al-Qaida-related terror attacks had killed eight times more Muslims than non-Muslims. It was agreed that mainstream media could and should report this type of information while preserving necessary objectivity and transparency and ensuring proper sourcing.

Session IV: What Has Been Done, What Should Be Done – National, Regional, Global Initiatives

Participants learnt about one country's efforts to harness the internet to spread counter-terrorist narratives as well as to limit/filter its content in order to prevent vulnerable groups from being exposed to radical websites and chatrooms. While internet filtering is not without debate, representatives of that government explained how the internet had become in that country the main source of motivation for people travelling to conflict zones. Terrorist websites had grown from about 15 in 1998 to several thousand in 2010, many of them, however, were not accessible from within that particular country. At the same time, positive messages, including images and videos, were effective tools in engaging vulnerable groups, especially the country's youth. Government initiatives included a cadre of about 200 volunteers who engaged participants in radical chatrooms to challenge the ideologies and extremist ideas spread through online

discussions and websites. One of the key successes in countering the influence and ideology of terrorist groups was an independent campaign (supported by a Government Ministry) to counter online radicalization and recruitment. Focusing on a significant group of violent extremists, the campaign uses Islamic scholars to interact online with individuals looking for religious

knowledge with the aim of steering them away from extremist sources, leading about 1500 out of 3250 participants to renounce their extremist beliefs. The government also promoted the role of the family in monitoring the use of the Internet in the home.

Many participants acknowledged that while governments had become relatively successful on the repressive side of counter-terrorism, it was imperative to focus more energy on the preventive side. The move of some governments from monitoring websites that incited to violence to shutting them down was noted as a countervailing current. However, while counter-terrorism policies should continue to evolve, there was also a danger in “securitizing” counter-terrorism-related policies (i.e. socio-economic development programs, integration policies, human rights campaigns, etc), which had a merit of their own. Governments needed to walk a fine line between utilizing such programs as part of an effective counter-narrative and tainting particular programs/institutions with a counter-terrorism label. Furthermore, effective counter-narratives – and effective counter-terrorism in general – needed to be grounded in the rule-of-law and in a respect for human rights. Similarly, the debate around monitoring terrorist websites vs. shutting them down needed to take into account privacy and freedom of expression concerns. Several participants called for increased international cooperation in this area where many felt too little had been achieved to date.

One key recommendation was for governments to increase their support for translation and dissemination of messages by repentant radicals. Those messages, while often very specific to a particular context, frequently contained very effective material for counter-narratives but were only available in one language. In order to reach local audiences more efficiently, the messages/stories needed to be translated and disseminated (though not necessarily by governments). It was noted that terrorist organizations had become very adept at spreading propaganda through the internet in numerous languages. Several participants stated that Al-Qaida’s online/media activity had become as important to the group’s global reach as its real-world activity.

Participants discussed how governments could more effectively counter the challenge of internet/media-savvy terrorist groups. One approach entailed working more closely with the private sector/industry, for example with regards to search engines, in order to ensure that radical content does not appear among the top search results. Furthermore, private sector companies can play a critical role in designing and disseminating effective counter-narratives as government efforts (online and offline) are often poorly designed and not very attractive to target audiences. Participants also recommended that the United Nations, through the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, could create both a library of effective counter-narratives and build a platform for credible messengers.

One of the challenges, according to some participants, was that Western audiences often only learned about Islam through translated statements by extremists which caught the attention of the media. Instead, some argued, governments as well as NGOs and religious leaders should ensure that knowledge of mainstream Islam is enhanced in the Western world – also with a view to

reaching vulnerable communities – to highlight how religion is being distorted by terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaida. This was as easily achieved through the general exposure of the population to the reality of other religions and cultures, for example through TV shows, as it was through a deliberate counter-narrative. A further problem was the lack of a coordinated plan to react to the exploitation of issues by radical extremists, such as the publication of cartoons disrespectful to Islam in Europe in 2005.

Session IV: Ideas for New Initiatives; the Role of the UN and other Mechanisms for Cooperation

Role of social media and search engines

Participants stated that one of the major challenges for countering radicalization online was to identify the right target audience, and then design the message in a way that resonated with it. News environments were becoming increasingly insular and balkanized and people had begun to gravitate toward news sources that simply validated their opinions, thus making it more difficult to challenge their views. Social-networking such as Facebook and Twitter was increasingly used by terrorist organizations without any sustained/credible counter-effort in those forums. One participant highlighted the need to increase positive messaging and “anti-Al-Qaida” information which was very hard to find on the internet, so as to drive out the bad with the good. When searching for statements about Al-Qaida or similar extremist groups, search results were more likely to turn up extremist content than counter-narratives – and with about 75% of users never going beyond the first page of search results, this presented a major challenge. Such search-engine-optimization should become a critical component of government dialogue with the private sector.

A One-Stop-Shop for Counter-Narratives

Participants agreed that there was a need to develop a one-stop-shop for counter-narratives, for example by building an online library which could contain texts and other material arguing for moderation and non-violence, a CVE (countering violent extremism) news hub, victims’ statements, and exposés of false statements made by terrorist organizations. Another idea was to promote citizen journalism, including videos made by youth groups and NGOs. Governments should encourage the private sector to do more on this front, such as through crowd sourcing. At the same time, governments themselves should engage more in positive messaging, particularly through social-networking forums. Participants acknowledged that there could be authenticity issues with some government-driven initiatives. Experience has shown, however, that target audiences will look at such messages if they are well designed. Furthermore, the internet can be leveraged to provide platforms and venues for people coming together to solve radicalization problems, to exchange experiences from different national contexts, and to discuss what worked and what did not. Some of these efforts could be led by the United Nations; others could be led by regional organizations or national governments. One national experience highlighted the

recent institutionalization of a *Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications* which tried to leverage information technology in countering terrorist narratives.

The meeting agreed that there should be a baseline for a counter-narrative that was as simple as the terrorist message that the West was at war with Islam. This could centre on the actual consequences of terrorism. It was important to be able to react with a counter narrative to actions by terrorists as quickly as terrorists reacted to actions by States. Often terrorists were able to cover up or ‘justify’ their mistakes before States took any action. It was pointed out that even in the war paradigm there was a difference between fighting and killing.

Understanding the Target Audience & Encouraging Former Extremists

Other participants gave examples of how counter-narratives had become a major part of counterterrorism, even on the operational level, for example in defeating the Taliban in the Pakistani Swat valley, during which targeted messages on the internet (as well as through traditional media) had played a major role. Yet nothing had been more powerful than a video of the Taliban flogging a young woman, or a recording of a Taliban leader claiming to be the only true Muslim, and every advantage should be taken of such self-inflicted setbacks. There was still an insufficient understanding of target audiences which could vary even within a particular country – here, too, former extremists could be the key to a more effective outreach, using their knowledge of local languages and local circumstances. It was thus important for governments to do a lot more to win over and encourage such ex-militants. The importance of political will to unite and sustain any effort to promote counter narratives on a regional or international basis was self-evident, but it often failed at the first hurdle because there was no clarity in many States as to who was in charge of such initiatives.

Many participants emphasized the importance of working with community leaders, including religious leaders and recognized figures from the sports and entertainment world. Counter-narrative work was a “slow-burn” activity and finding partners in communities, as well as seeing what messages resonate, took time. And while the terrorists were increasingly relying on the Internet to spread their ideology, several participants recalled that there was still limited access to the Internet in many parts of the world, particularly in communities governments would like to reach. This, in turn, meant that counter-narrative work could not be limited to new technologies but should encompass traditional media as well.

While extremists might exploit vulnerable people to recruit them to terrorism, most radicals were self-selecting and they needed to be able to access counter arguments to violence. It was unclear what role governments could play in this process, whether facilitation, initiation, inspiration or some other role. Civil society was clearly an essential force-multiplier that could promote positive messages about alternatives to terrorism that would have a more powerful impact than the negative messages distributed by violent extremists. The key was to operate in the same milieu as the extremists, for example within diaspora groups.

Conference Roundtable “The Path to Rejecting Violent Extremism”

The conference also featured a roundtable discussion between two former extremists who explained what had led them down the path of radicalization towards violent extremism. The discussants explained how different drivers had motivated them to join terrorist organizations, ranging from the Palestinian situation in the 1970s and 1980s and corrupt governments, to conflicting information they had received about the meaning of ‘jihad’.

One discussant stated that while studying religion he was approached by people from his local community and began to form ideas about the situation of Muslims in Afghanistan under Soviet occupation. When beginning to shape his opinions about how to address these perceived or actual injustices, the discussant was approached by violent extremists trying to recruit anyone they felt was vulnerable enough to adopt their ideology and engage in their cause. The discussant recalled how he eventually rose through the ranks until he became the “emir” of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in Jordan, and how his role continued even for part of his sixteen year-long prison sentence. As emir, he became both a theorist propagating the terrorist organization’s beliefs and a controller of its activities. He admitted to deliberately misleading his followers through radical explanations of religious texts, knowing that they were open to alternative interpretations. The discussant highlighted that the Al-Qaida leadership was convinced that young people could easily be manipulated and deceived in their search for recognition and a sense of belonging. The extremely lively audience participation tended to underline that the lack of ideological cohesion was an area of vulnerability for terrorist groups.

Session V: Follow-up Discussions and Recommendations on Crafting Narratives

Participants broke out in two separate sessions designed to discuss practical areas for follow-up and concrete proposals for future action.

The breakout-session on crafting the narrative discussed the need for different messages for different target audiences. Participants agreed on the need to do more research on why and how people became terrorists in the first place, and of indicators that an individual was about to cross the line. This would help in designing the counter-narrative. The language of the counter-narrative had to be clear and easily understood, it needed to avoid using terms that had been hijacked by terrorist groups, and by ignoring them allow them to recover their proper meaning. The counter-narrative should show some sympathy for people who had been tempted towards extremism and an understanding of the reasons. Participants agreed that a counter-narrative should explain what terrorism is and expose the gap between what terrorists say and what they do. It should be fact-based and highlight the illegitimacy of terrorist behaviour and the lack of any policy solutions offered by terrorists to the grievances they exploit. The message should aim to promote a proactive narrative rather than a reactive counter-narrative. It should be personalised as well as targeted. Ridiculing terrorists is a useful tactic, as is exposing drug dealing or other anti-social activity as a source of terrorist income.

Participants agreed that the ownership of the counter narrative remained with the global community, not with governments or the United Nations. It should not reflect particular cultural values except where the audience shared those values. In relation to Al-Qaida-related groups, the counter-narrative should highlight in particular the significant Muslim contribution to the fight against terrorism in both words and deeds. The counter-narrative should emphasise the

unattractiveness of terrorist groups and their failure to terrorize their intended victims. There should also be some conformity between macro and micro level initiatives. There was agreement on the need to identify, share and reinforce success and a suggestion that the United Nations should host a central repository of messages and examples that anyone could draw from in crafting a counter narrative.

The breakout-session on delivering the narrative focused its discussion on the audience, the best ways to reach it and the messengers. Participants agreed that the audience could potentially be segmented and different communications applied accordingly. The primary target audience was a broad section of youth, who had access to a range of technologies and media but had no common religious or cultural heritage. Social networking forums were one of the key areas where the vulnerable audience met, and could be reached. Participants agreed that messages were not just single verbal narratives but rather layered and diverse, and they underlined the importance of images. Participants also underlined the role of public diplomacy in correcting the misconceptions that play into the terrorist narrative and the capability of industry, including Internet, telecoms and cable firms, to reach out to the target audience, while avoiding branding their efforts as Counter Terrorism.

The Working Group was of the general view that the ideal carriers of counter-narrative messages should be part of the audience, which posed a great challenge for governments, not only in identifying the messengers but in managing the political risk when messengers had anti-government opinions. Participants agreed that a variety of messengers was desirable, such as victims, repentant extremists, or government officials. Civil society networks such as those of *Women against Violent Extremism*, *Parents against Suicide Bombers* or *Schools against Extremism* could reach out to a wide audience. Whilst not all networks might desire links to governments, governments could play an important role by supporting and institutionalizing such efforts.

There should be an attempt to close research gaps, especially on audience segmentation and mapping, as well as on available capacity-building resources and current initiatives. Participants also proposed creating a platform/task force for mobilizing counter messages and disseminating them widely and rapidly around key events.

Conclusion

The meeting showed that there was considerable interest in and support for action on using the Internet to counter the appeal of terrorism. The Working Group proposes to turn the recommendations and proposals that emerged from the meeting into practical projects for the consideration of Member States, subject to further financial support.

Note

[1] CTITF reports on legal and technical aspects of countering terrorist use of the internet are available at < www.un.org/terrorism/internet >.

Resources

Literature on Terrorism, Media, Propaganda & Cyber-Terrorism

Monographs, Edited Volumes, Non-conventional Literature (incl. Dissertations) and Prime Articles.

Compiled by Eric Price

NB: some of the items listed below are clickable and allow access to the full text; those with an asterisk [] only have a clickable table of contents.*

Altheide, D. L. (2006) *Terrorism and the politics of fear* Lanham, MD.: AltaMira Press

[*<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip061/2005028887.html>]

Altheide, D. L. (2009) *Terror post 9/11 and the media* New York: Peter Lang

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See also resources on the Internet:

Cyber Terrorism Resource Centre

[<http://www.globaldisaster.org/cyberterrorrescen.shtml>]

Internet / Network Security Resource guide on Cyber-terrorism

[<http://netsecurity.about.com/cs/cyberterrorism/>]

IWS United Kingdom Website Listing

[<http://www.iwar.org.uk/cyberterror/index.htm>]

National Cyber Security Alliance

[<http://www.staysafeonline.info/>]

Terrorism Questions and Answers: Cyber-terrorism

[<http://www.terrorismanswers.com/terrorism/cyberterrorism.html>]

Terrorism questions and answers: Cyber-terrorism Europe

[<http://www.terrorismanswers.com/coalition/europe.html>]

U.S. Department of State: Country Reports on Terrorism

[<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/index.htm>]

***About the Compiler: Eric Price** is a professional information specialist. He worked for many years with the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna (IAEA).*

Book Reviews

Ali H Soufan and Daniel Freedman. *The Black Banners: Inside the Hunt for Al-Qaeda*. London: Allen Lane / W.W. Norton; 2011

572 pp. ISBN 1846145023. £25; US\$ 38.99

Reviewed by Richard Phelps

As a native Arabic speaker familiar with the societies of the Middle East, Ali Soufan was relatively unusual among FBI agents in the pre-9/11 era. Long before 9/11, the Lebanese-born law enforcement officer devoted himself to studying the Bin Laden network and the threat it posed to the US. As a result, he quickly came to serve at the forefront of the US fight against Al-Qaeda. Now having left the FBI to work as a consultant in the private sector, his memoir offers one of the most granular behind-the-scenes accounts to date of the early years of the American struggle against the Bin Laden network.

Like any memoir, there is a predictable degree of self-justification. If only others had listened to Soufan's Cassandra-like warnings about the threat that the Bin Laden network posed, and of the risks posed by the lack of inter-agency cooperation, he laments. Yet such vindication detracts little from the fascinating on-the-ground account he offers at the centre of some of the most significant episodes during the "War on Terror". Soufan is in his element when he discusses what he experienced: the trips he made, the investigations he carried out, the suspects he interviewed.

Two themes stand out from the book in particular, one of which the author tries to make with vigor and the other less so. Firstly, although he does highlight occasional exceptions, the animosity between the FBI and the CIA saturates the book – and is perhaps the central theme. Soufan details persistent personality clashes, and an ingrained and institutionalised unwillingness for the two organisations to help one another in their investigations. *That* such frustrations occurred is common knowledge, and has been well-documented in the official 9/11 Commission Report. What Soufan offers throughout are repeated examples showcasing how such rivalry and hostility was manifested, not just between the FBI and the CIA, but also involving US embassies overseas.

Nowhere is the lack of cooperation seen more than in the book's editing. The manuscript was submitted and approved by the FBI, but Soufan reports that the CIA sought to redact swathes of the text. Committed to publishing the book by a specific date, the result is that the book is published with black lines throughout, thereby indicating what the censors did not want published. In the introduction, the author voices his frustration at this, since most of the material that was censored was already in the public domain. Yet one also senses a degree of relish on his part, since the censor's pen complements the author's prose in highlighting the frustrations he reportedly came up against.

The second theme of the book is asserted less forcefully, indeed almost by coincidence. Throughout the text, the author introduces various figures associated with the Bin Laden network as being brothers or brothers-in-law, nephews, uncles, or husbands of other figures. The picture that emerges is a strong demonstration of Marc Sageman's presentation of terrorist organisations as movements rooted among socially-connected groups of people. In this regard, more than the

glossary of individuals that it offers, the book would have benefitted from a chart that depicts how the network of figures he presents joins together in terms of their relationships.

Black Banners is relatively long, and the author's grasp of Al-Qaeda and the Bin Laden network is subtle, detailed, and deep. For the benefit of unfamiliar readers, the book is padded out by lengthy forays into the background of Islamism and Middle Eastern history. Despite the author's background, it is here that he errs – when he shifts from memoir to history. In so doing, in a number of cases Soufan displays an unsophisticated grasp of wider issues: “Wahhabis came from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, Salafis primarily from Jordan, and takfiris [those who advocate the excommunication of self-declared Muslims] mainly from North Africa” (p.12) and the “appeal of an alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda was also based on a shared connection to (or, perhaps more accurately, a manipulation of) traditional Wahhabism” (p.58), he writes, for example. By contrast, the book is strongest when he relates the events he himself experienced.

Soufan's ability during his time with the FBI to access and engage first hand with A-Qaeda members and primary documents provides a strong backbone to his account. Among the many volumes published to mark the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Soufan's is a major contribution. Its strength lies in the granularity and personal experience it offers, rather than in providing a broader narrative. The author does not shy from making assertions - some of which may attract controversy, particularly when he accuses a number of individuals who currently remain at liberty despite their involvement in terrorism - and he offers a remarkable account of the fight against terrorism from the perspective of investigatory law enforcement.

About the Reviewer: Richard Phelps *an Adjunct Fellow at the Quilliam Foundation (London). He focuses on the history and development of Islamist dissent in the Arabic world.*

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

ISBN: 978-0-231-15682-0. 296 pp. ; \$ 29.50. -

Reviewed by Jason Rineheart

Erica Chenoweth's and Maria J. Stephan's book is one of the most timely released study in the past decade. Shortly after non-violent protest movements swept the Middle East - changing regimes and the political discourse in many countries – the two researchers released this comprehensive study, analyzing the historical efficacy of non-violent resistance.

Using their Non-violent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data set, the authors quantitatively analyzed 323 violent and non-violent resistance campaigns for the period 1900 to 2006. Their conclusion: non-violent movements are nearly twice as likely to achieve success (or partial success) than their violent counterparts. Chenoweth and Stephan hypothesize that non-violent campaigns are more likely to succeed because non-violent activism creates lower barriers to participation, creating the conditions for diverse membership and allowing mass mobilization across key social sectors.

Perhaps their most interesting findings relate to the consequences of violent and non-violent movements for post-conflict regimes. The NAVCO data show that successful non-violent movements produce democratic regimes more often than successful violent movements. Interestingly, the data also reveal that non-violent campaigns do not necessarily benefit from outside material support, although the authors acknowledge that small amounts of money, sanctions, and international public support can have a positive impact on successful movements. However, they caution that "outside support for local non-violent groups is a double-edged sword" since that is often used by regimes to delegitimize such movements (p. 225).

To support their findings, four case studies explain why some non-violent movements achieve success, partial success, and, at times, fail. The Iranian revolution (1977-1979) and the Philippine People's Power movement (1983-1986) are their textbook examples of how broad-based civil resistance, mass participation, and strategic non-cooperation from all sectors of society can succeed against authoritarian regimes. Similarly, the authors make a persuasive case in their explanation why the First Palestinian Intifada (1987-1992) was a relatively peaceful movement that achieved "partial success," or at least more progress than the violence used by the PLO and Hamas. The label "partial success" in this instance is one that some analysts may take issue with, since the Israeli occupation and settlement activity increased substantially over the following decades. Finally, the Burmese Uprising (1988-1990) case study shows how both violent and non-violent campaigns can fail if such movements do not create and maintain unified popular support and generate loyalty shifts within a regime.

Perhaps Chenoweth and Stephan's most daunting task is pre-empting scholarly critiques questioning how they can accurately define a resistance movement as entirely "violent" or entirely "non-violent", and sufficiently determine which faction contributed most to a movement's success when such movements operate simultaneously. But when compared against years of failed violent activism in countries like Iran and the Philippines, the authors argue that

identifying and framing successful non-violent campaigns within the fog of violent and non-violent activism is actually not as difficult as some may assume, especially when considering the amount of diverse support and mass mobilization that successful non-violent movements produce.

True to academic form, the book reads as a lengthy, quantitative research report full of nuance, definitions, and important caveats explaining the inherent difficulties when systematically studying violent and non-violent movements. Some may disagree with their methodologies or the way they coded their data, but their justifications and rationales are refreshingly straightforward and transparent.

Yet when it comes to framing their study, one striking aspect that may irk some scholars is how they situate their research within existing the literature. They claim that a "prevailing view among political scientists is that opposition movements select terrorism and violent insurgency strategies because such means are more effective than non-violent strategies at achieving policy goals" (p. 6). They argue that Robert Pape's (2003, 2005, 2010) work - which holds that suicide terrorism is an effective strategy to defeat occupying democratic powers - "could be applied to almost all scholars whose research tests the efficacy of different violent methods" because such scholars fail to compare violent methods to non-violent alternatives (p. 25-26).

It is certainly true that some security scholars are biased toward studying violent conflict. But it is a bit unfair to project Pape's heavily criticized work onto the entire research community as accepted scholarship, particularly when several terrorism researchers have argued that using terrorism as a strategic tactic is rarely successful and at times even self-defeating (Crenshaw, 1992; Rapoport, 1992; Hoffman, 2006; Abrahms, 2006). Moreover, the authors' data reveal that insurgent movements in their data base succeed roughly 25% of the time, which they acknowledge is in line with similar other studies. Thus, despite framing their research as breaking new ground in the arena of security studies, their findings are actually in line with accepted scholarship on the relative ineffectiveness of terrorism and insurgent violence.

The book is novel in its attempt to quantitatively compare and contrast violent and non-violent insurgencies and in pushing back against security scholarship that has been reluctant to study non-violent movements. As such, it is a welcomed contribution. Terrorism researchers, alas, are left wanting more nuanced analysis on the efficacy of terrorism and insurgent tactics within their NAVCO data set. But perhaps such a study is in the works.

About the Reviewer: Jason Rineheart is a Research Assistant at the Terrorism Research Initiative.

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PT seeks to provide a platform for established scholars as well as academics and professionals entering the field of Terrorism, Political Violence and Conflict Studies. It invites them to:

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