START

Evaluating Jihadist Narratives

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General Content Analysis

- 300 transcripts of Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda affiliated video and audio propaganda (2004-2009)
- Coded for the occurrence of 10 central themes
  - Recurring themes identified through a reading/discussion of initial subset of transcripts, and derived from psychological theories of radicalization (i.e., Quest for Significance; Kruglanski et al., 2014)

Commander Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman al-Rashid of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

START

National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

INGROUP: Shared Muslim identity

I say to the Islamic Ummah, advising her truthfully and with affection for Islam and its people, your first enemy is the Crusaders among the Americans and NATO.

They are those who raided the people of Islam in Afghanistan and Iraq; helped the Jews to occupy Palestine; killed the people of Islam, orphaned children, and displaced women and the elderly; and looted Muslim fortunes other than the American and their allies.

No Muslim who is able to do jihad, which is a duty of the individual, is excused to sit idle for fear of capture and so on. Instead, this makes the matter more urgent.

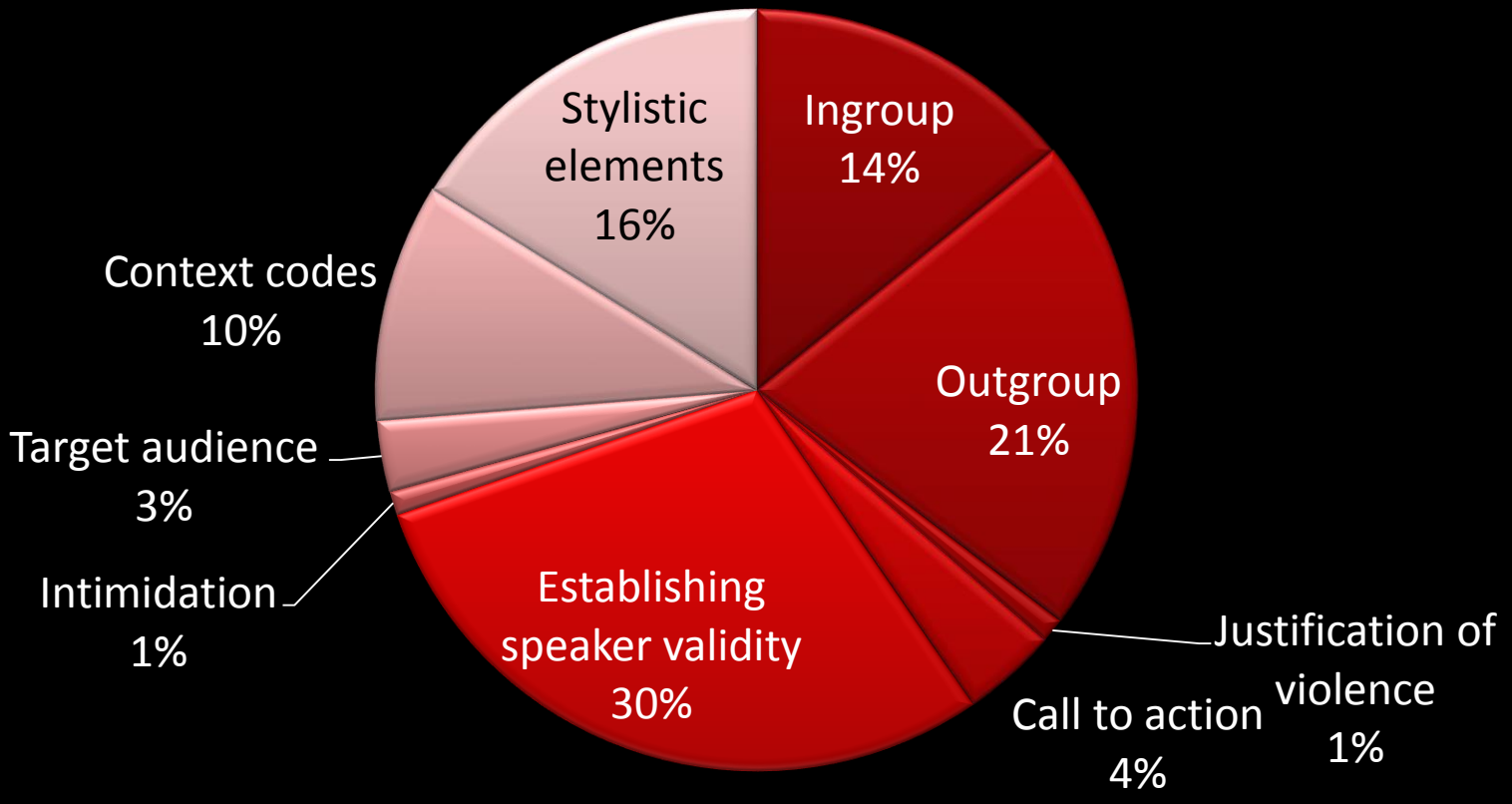
OUTGROUP: Identifying opponents

CONTEXT: location

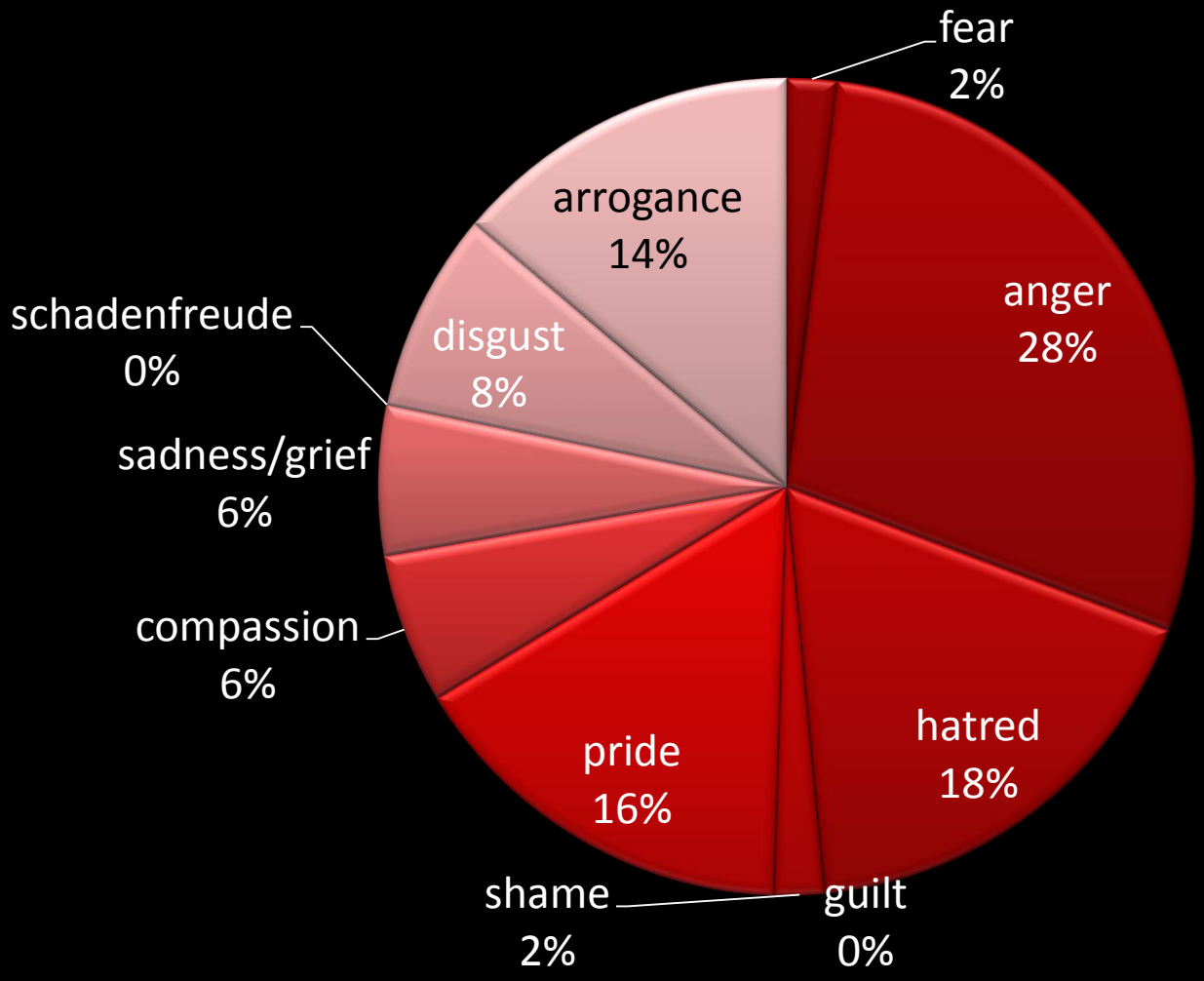
OUTGROUP: Specific negative acts by the outgroup

CALL TO ACTION: duty/obligation

Results


Stylistic elements 16%
Ingroup 14%
Context codes 10%
Outgroup 21%
Target audience 3%
Intimidation 1%
Establishing speaker validity 30%
Justification of violence 1%
Call to action 4%

Results: Presence of various emotions



Initial Findings

- Prominent themes
  - –Outgroup, ingroup, speaker validity
- Uncommon themes
  - –Intimidation of the enemy, calls to action
- Preponderance of negative emotions

Extreme Language / fanaticism expressed by al Qaeda leadership

- AQ Core

Usama Bin Laden

Ayman Al-Zawahiri

Abu Yahya Al-Libi

- AQ Iraq

Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi

Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi

Abu Hamza al-muhajir

Methodology

- Computerized text-analysis identified sentences that express absolute and fanatic ideas
- Human raters coded these sentences to identify the concept being modified by the extremizer

- Main analyses
  - Regional differences (Iraq vs. Afghanistan)
  - Speaker differences (bin Laden vs. al Zawahiri)

Example

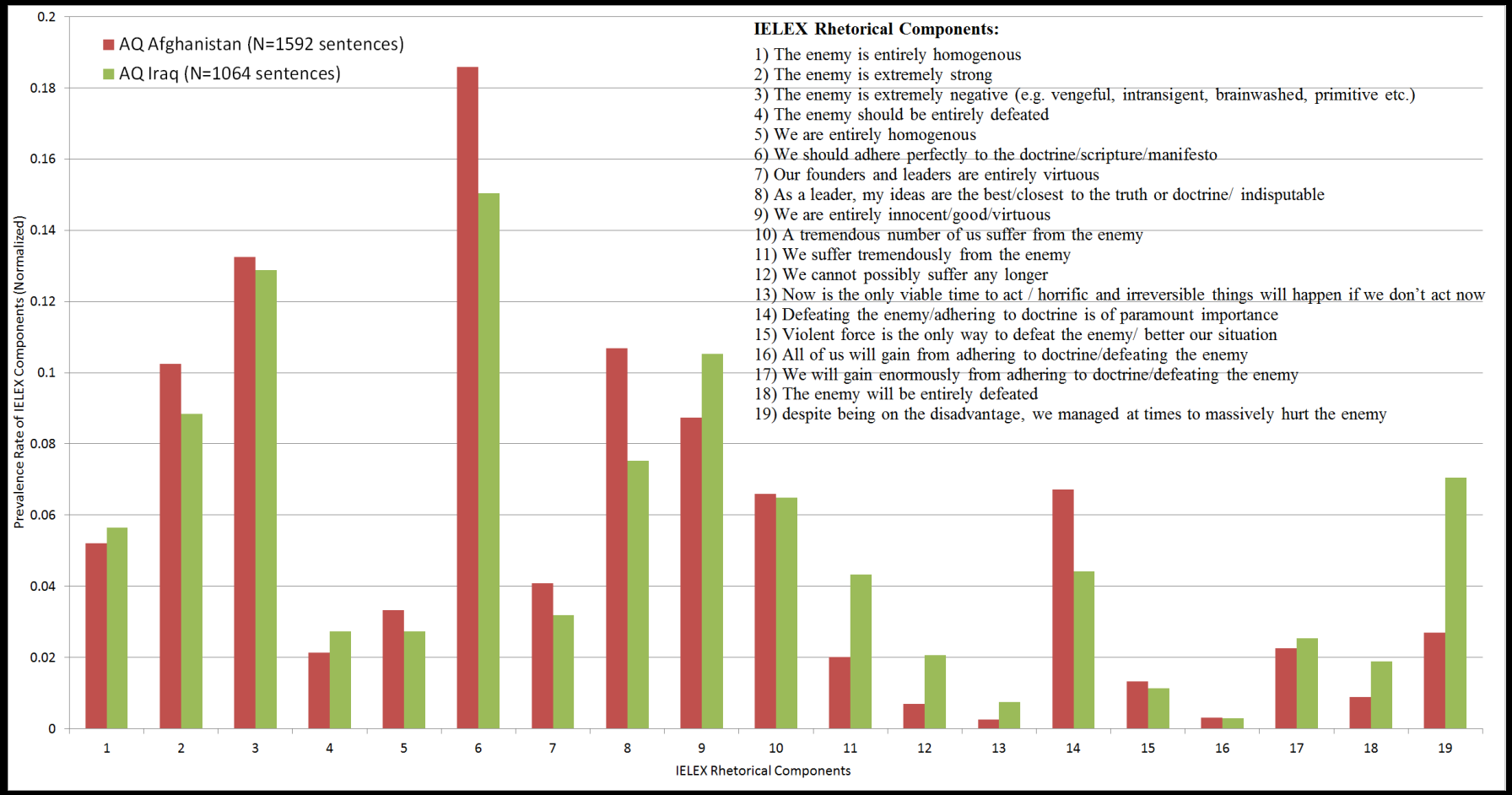
- The Muslim Ummah has always suffered from every western regime.

- Homogeneity of victimized ingroup
- Longstanding nature of their suffering
- Uniformity (negativity) of the enemy

19 Extremization Categories (sampling)

- Extremizing the enemy
  - The enemy is entirely homogenous/extremely negative
- Extremizing the doctrine
  - We should adhere perfectly to the doctrine; My ideas are best OR closest to the doctrine
- Extremizing the ingroup
  - We are entirely innocent/good/virtuous; We suffer tremendously from the enemy

AQ Core vs. AQ Iraq



AQ Core

AQ Afghanistan (N=1592 sentences)
AQ Iraq (N=1064 sentences)
We should adhere perfectly to doctrine.
My ideas are the best/closest to the doctrine.
Adhering to the doctrine is paramount.
Prevalence Rate of IELEX Components (Normalized)
0.2
0.18
0.16
0.14
0.12
0.1
0.08
0.06
0.04
0.02
0
1
2
3
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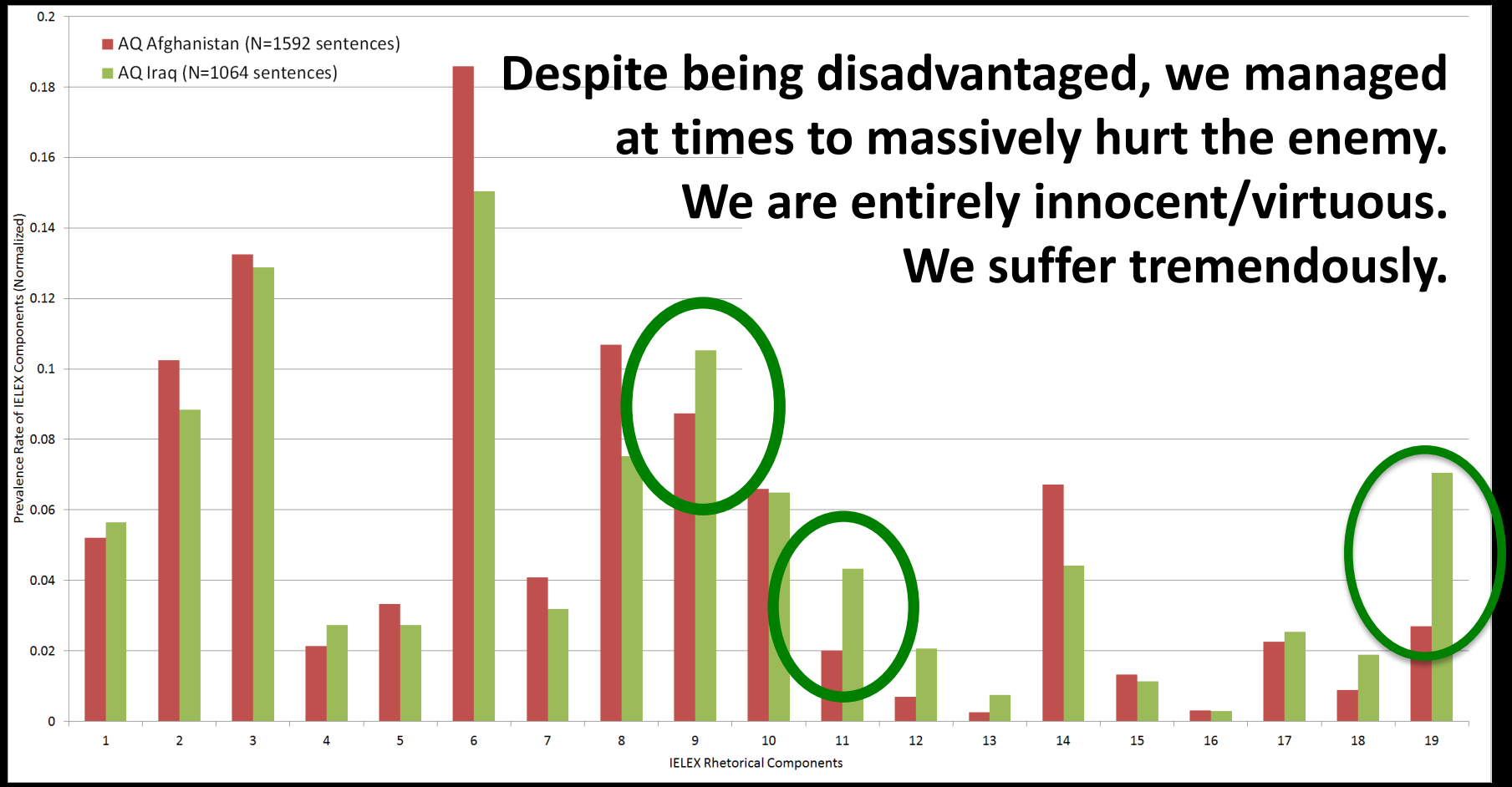
19
IELEX Rhetorical Components

AQ Iraq

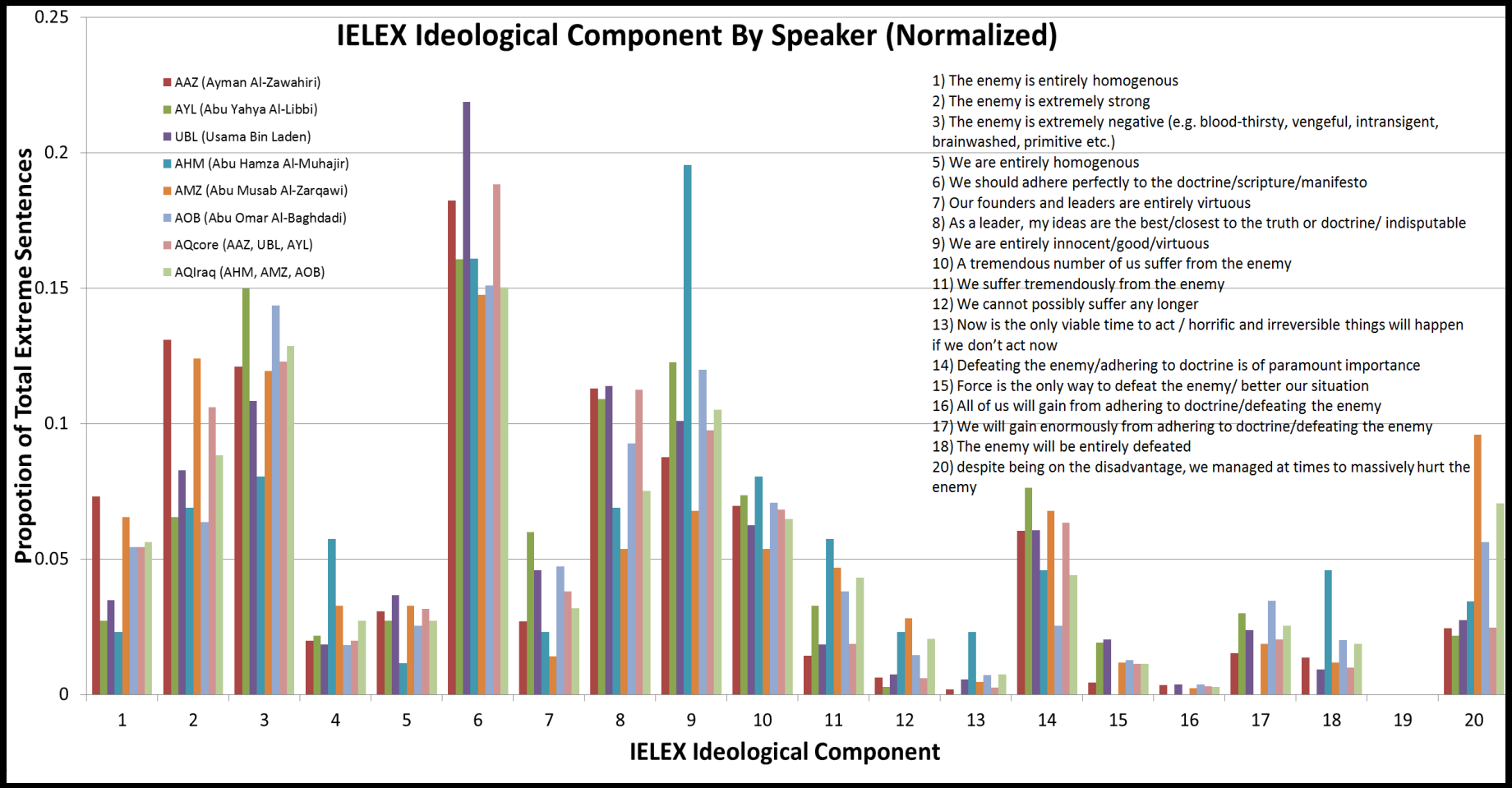

AQ Afghanistan (N=1592 sentences)
AQ Iraq (N=1064 sentences)
Despite being disadvantaged, we managed at times to massively hurt the enemy.
We are entirely innocent/virtuous.
We suffer tremendously.
Prevalence Rate of IELEX Components (Normalized)
0.2
0.18
0.16
0.14
0.12
0.1
0.08
0.06
0.04
0.02
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19
IELEX Rhetorical Components

Summary of Findings

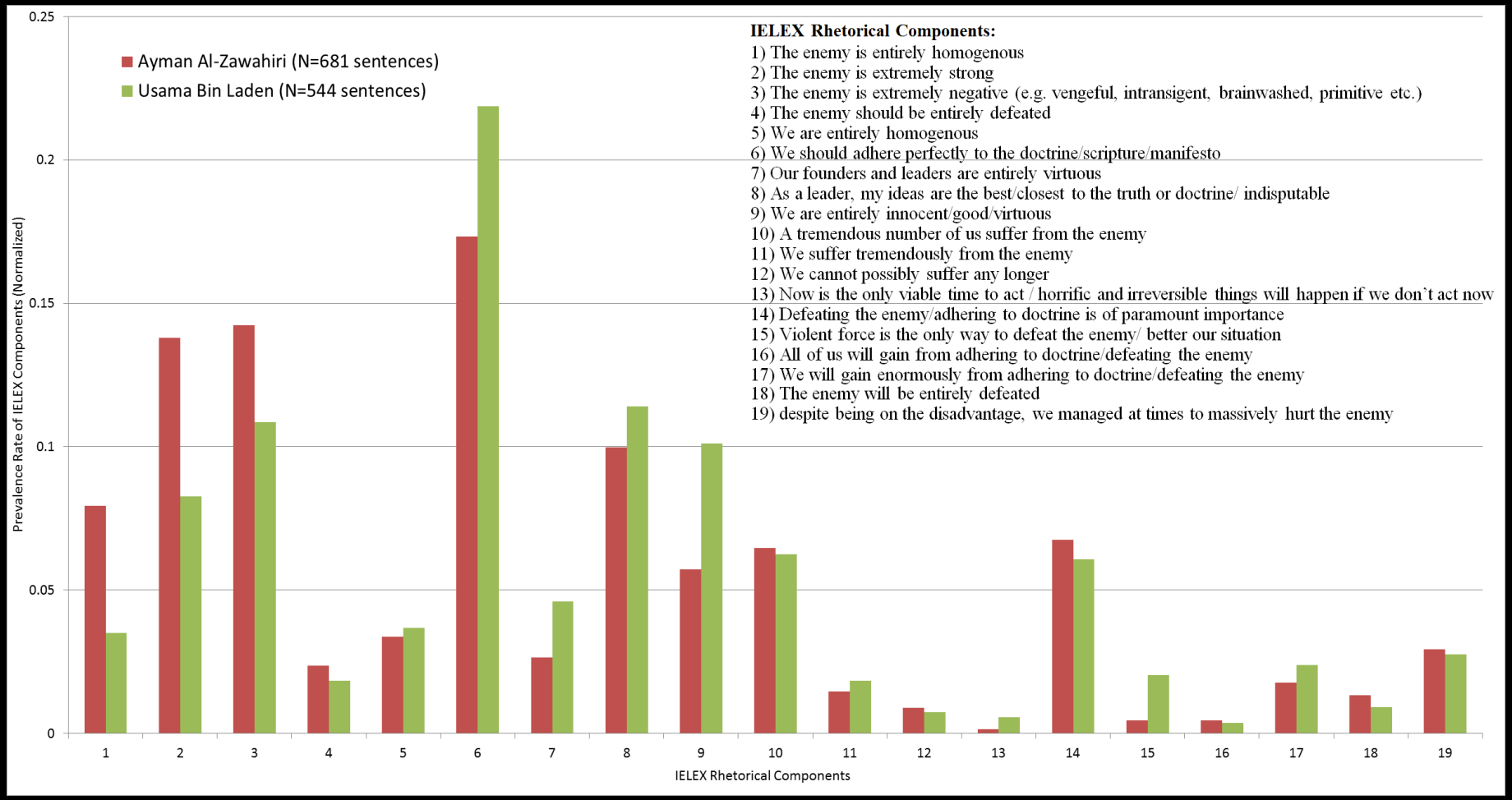
- Differences between AQ Core and AQ Iraq are consistent with other evidence
  - Bin Laden chastised AQ Iraq for not adhering to the true doctrine
  - Somali leaders blamed Zawahiri's doctrinal "snobbery" as irrelevant unhelpful, and divisive

- Differences are subtle—the use of each category is highly correlated across regions ($r = .94$, $p < .0001$)

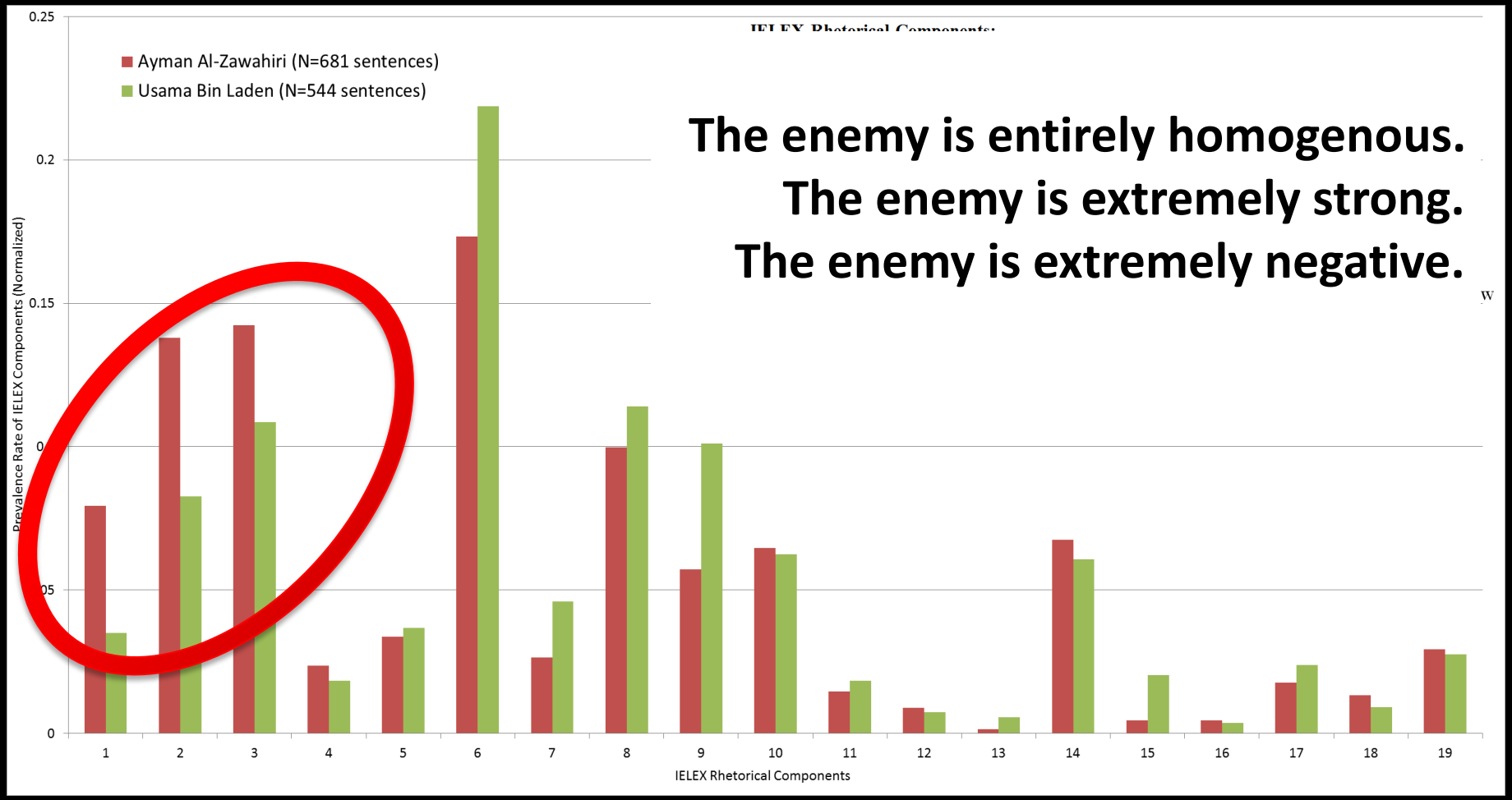
All Speakers



al Zawahiri vs. bin Laden



al Zawahiri


Ayman Al-Zawahiri (N=681 sentences)
Usama Bin Laden (N=544 sentences)
The enemy is entirely homogenous.
The enemy is extremely strong.
The enemy is extremely negative.
Prevalence Rate of IELEX Components (Normalized)
0.25
0.2
0.15
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0
1
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IELEX Rhetorical Components

bin Laden

Ayman Al-Zawahiri (N=681 sentences)
Usama Bin Laden (N=544 sentences)
We should adhere perfectly to the doctrine.
We are entirely innocent/good/virtuous.
Prevalence Rate of IELEX Components (Normalized)
0.25
0.2
0.15
0.1
0.05
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IELEX Rhetorical Components

Summary

- Differences between bin Laden and al Zawahiri are consistent with Abbottabad documents expressing bin Laden's frustration with al Zawahiri's granting of "affiliate status" to groups that did not understand Islamic law (Cruickshank, 2012)

- Overall, these differences are very subtle

Conclusions

- Propaganda messages are remarkably similar across speakers and regions (Universality?)
- Long program:
  - Which components are most persuasive? Best at bringing about action?
  - Subtle regional differences a result of tailoring the message best for a specific audience?
  - Inoculate at-risk populations
  - Design counter-propaganda messages

Think AgainTurn Away @ThinkAgain_DOS · Sep 5

. @Aalaw_ More proof that Muslims worldwide reject #ISIS brutal ideology-ISIS stands alone #thinkagainturnaway

Think AgainTurn Away @ThinkAgain_DOS · Sep 5

Iraqi teenager, given by #ISIS to fighters as a "gift," escaped before she could be sold goo.gl/kGt5Bf #thinkagainturnaway

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The Research Team

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