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)
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.
Results

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

- **fear**: 2%
- **anger**: 28%
- **hatred**: 18%
- **guilt**: 0%
- **shame**: 2%
- **pride**: 16%
- **compassion**: 6%
- **sadness/grief**: 6%
- **arrogance**: 14%
- **schadenfreude**: 0%
- **disgust**: 8%
- **guilt**: 0%
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

**IELEX Rhetorical Components:**

1. The enemy is entirely homogenous
2. The enemy is extremely strong
3. The enemy is extremely negative (e.g., vengeful, intransigent, brainwashed, primitive etc.)
4. The enemy should be entirely defeated
5. We are entirely homogenous
6. We should adhere perfectly to the doctrine/scripture/manifesto
7. Our founders and leaders are entirely virtuous
8. As a leader, my ideas are the best/closest to the truth or doctrine/ indisputable
9. We are entirely innocent/good/virtuous
10. A tremendous number of us suffer from the enemy
11. We suffer tremendously from the enemy
12. We cannot possibly suffer any longer
13. Now is the only viable time to act / horrific and irreversible things will happen if we don’t act now
14. Defeating the enemy/adhering to doctrine is of paramount importance
15. Violent force is the only way to defeat the enemy/ better our situation
16. All of us will gain from adhering to doctrine/defeating the enemy
17. We will gain enormously from adhering to doctrine/defeating the enemy
18. The enemy will be entirely defeated
19. Despite being on the disadvantage, we managed at times to massively hurt the enemy
We should adhere perfectly to doctrine. My ideas are the best/closest to the doctrine. Adhering to the doctrine is paramount.
Despite being disadvantaged, we managed at times to massively hurt the enemy.

*We are entirely innocent/virtuous.*

*We suffer tremendously.*
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

IELEX Ideological Component By Speaker (Normalized)

1) The enemy is entirely homogenous
2) The enemy is extremely strong
3) The enemy is extremely negative (e.g. blood-thirsty, vengeful, intransigent, brainwashed, primitive etc.)
4) We are entirely homogenous
5) We should adhere perfectly to the doctrine/scripture/manifesto
6) Our founders and leaders are entirely virtuous
7) As a leader, my ideas are the best/closest to the truth or doctrine/indisputable
8) We are entirely innocent/good/virtuous
9) A tremendous number of us suffer from the enemy
10) We suffer tremendously from the enemy
11) We cannot possibly suffer any longer
12) Now is the only viable time to act / horrific and irreversible things will happen if we don’t act now
13) Defeating the enemy/adhering to doctrine is of paramount importance
14) Force is the only way to defeat the enemy/ better our situation
15) All of us will gain from adhering to doctrine/defeating the enemy
16) We will gain enormously from adhering to doctrine/defeating the enemy
17) The enemy will be entirely defeated
18) despite being on the disadvantage, we managed at times to massively hurt the enemy
al Zawahiri vs. bin Laden

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19) despite being on the disadvantage, we managed at times to massively hurt the enemy
al Zawahiri

The enemy is entirely homogenous.
The enemy is extremely strong.
The enemy is extremely negative.
bin Laden

We should adhere perfectly to the doctrine.

We are entirely innocent/good/virtuous.
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
@Aalaw_ More proof that Muslims worldwide reject #ISIS brutal ideology-ISIS stands alone #thinkagainturnaway

Sorry People of America this not the Behavior of our ISLAM and Profit

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