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Jiahd in the Global Village: Al-Qaeda's Digital Radicalization and Recruitment Campaign

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JIHAD IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE: AL-QAEDA'S DIGITAL
RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN

By

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Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
for the designation of Department Honors

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ABSTRACT

Following America's "War on Terror," al-Qaeda and its affiliates became highly decentralized in terms of organizational and media operations. Though mass media outlets continue to play a significant role in drawing attention to al-Qaeda's transnational campaign, Salafi Jihadists have recently begun to rely on new media for purposes of legitimization and promotion. The Internet serves as a suitable platform for these groups' media objectives since it is inherently anonymous and absent of censorship. Most importantly, the Internet facilitates al-Qaeda in reaching a global audience, which is made evident by the growing amount of Salafi Jihadist media that is translated or created for English speakers. The latter change may seem paradoxical to the groups' anti-Western sentiment, but it underscores an important shift in al-Qaeda's recruitment strategies. The proliferation of English content promoting the Salafi Jihadist cause may imply that al-Qaeda is shifting its attention towards the Muslim diaspora in the West with the intent to recruit, radicalize, and promote acts of terror.

This study analyzed a variety of online publications that were disseminated by al-Qaeda and similar Salafi Jihadist groups. The sample included speech and video transcripts, digital magazines, and articles that were analyzed for the intent to radicalize readers through the employment of Albert Bandura's eight mechanisms of moral disengagement. The analysis provided substantial support for the latter claim, indicating that many of the digital publications disseminated by Salafi Jihadist groups are intended to both radicalize and recruit readers through the promotion of moral disengagement.

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Al-Qaeda's New Media Campaign

Since the United States declared its “War on Terror,” the structure and strategies of terrorist organizations have undergone transformative changes. Today, the al-Qaeda network that successfully executed the atrocities of 9/11 has become highly decentralized as an organization in terms of location and leadership. However, this does not necessarily mean that the group's ideology is disseminated any less than it was before the United States heightened its presence in the region. While al-Qaeda has been dispersed around the Arabian Peninsula, the Maghreb, the Levant, and the Horn of Africa in terms of on-the-ground operations, the reach of its Salafi Jihadist ideology has been bolstered by new technologies. After decades of relying on rural localities, Islamic organizations, student groups and face-to-face communication for purposes of recruitment and support, potential members are now being attracted to the jihadist movement by means of websites, social media pages and online forums. Individuals who were once far from the influence of Salafi Jihadism can now become active and willing participants in the group's virtual umma — or community — from the privacy of their bedrooms.

Until recently, terrorist cells were largely dependent on mass media outlets in order to garner attention to their radical ideology and global mission. However, with the advent of new media technologies came a new sense of independence for al-Qaeda and its affiliates' international media campaign. Today, Salafi Jihadist groups have harnessed the ability to disseminate information and communicate with an international audience independent of mass media organizations. This newly found freedom allows such groups to share information that would have otherwise been censored or deemed dangerous to

the public or state governments. Because of the Internet's interactive, uncensored, and pervasive nature as a medium, jihadists' presence has become increasingly accessible to a wider global audience. Though it may seem paradoxical to the anti-Western sentiment that is found at the core of Salafi Jihadism, a substantial amount of the jihadists' electronic media is created or translated for the English speaking, Muslim diaspora. This development in al-Qaeda's media campaign compels one to wonder whether these electronic forms of jihadi media are created with the intent to radicalize and recruit individuals beyond the region's borders; and if so, could such messages of moral disengagement and reinforcement of Salafi Jihadist attitudes potentially influence individuals to carry out acts of terror?

The following chapter examines the ways institutions and scholars have defined terrorism and jihad over time. The origins of modern, international terrorism and Salafi Jihadism are then addressed in order to set al-Qaeda's current operations and campaign in its appropriate, historical context. Because this study will pay particular attention to the propaganda techniques being employed by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, common tactics and methods of persuasion are also explored. However, the implications of exposure to propaganda are of additional interest to this study. Therefore, social learning theory is used to suggest propaganda's potential effects upon behavior and attitude formation among sympathizers. The literature review concludes with a brief overview of al-Qaeda's online presence both before and after 9/11, provided by previous research that has examined the uses, benefits, and dangers of digital jihadist media.

The third chapter delineates this paper's method for analyzing Salafi Jihadist propaganda by first defining content analysis, which is followed by the advantages and

process of conducting a qualitative research for the purposes of understanding political, social, and cultural phenomenon. The eight measurements that were used throughout the analysis are then defined, which leads into the study's three working hypotheses. The chapter concludes by addressing the limitations of convenience sampling, which is necessary for this study due to language barriers and issues with accessing sensitive content.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Terrorism and Jihad

Though a definition of terrorism has yet to be fully agreed upon by states and global institutions, the term commonly denotes the use of violence and intimidation for political means. Terrorism has been referred by a 2004 United Nations Security Council resolution as:

...criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstances justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature . . . (2).

Another definition provided by the United States Department of State that can be found within Title 22 of the U.S. Code, Section 2656f(d) also mentions politically motivated, violent tactics that are intended to intimidate a population. However, unlike the 2004 UN resolution, the definition underscores that the violent acts being perpetrated are “usually intended to influence an audience” (2010). The political motivation behind acts of terror has also compelled scholars to suggest that terrorism functions as a form of communication. According to political psychologist John Horgan, what sets terrorism apart from other violent acts is the nature of its victims; the immediate victims of attacks are often unassociated with those who hold positions of political power, thus rendering them to serve the purpose of conveying the terrorists’ message to the intended receiver — state leaders and governments (2005). The victim is entirely arbitrary when it comes to acts of terrorism. In cases of Salafi Jihadism, they are only targeted to express the

terrorists' political opposition and discontent towards what they perceive as the Western contamination.

Beyond the semantic uncertainty surrounding the term, it is also of importance to differentiate between distinct forms of terrorism. The most common categorizations include state-sponsored and non-state actor acts of terror. The latter form contains subcategories of domestic or international application, which is dependent upon the population being targeted by the non-state actors (Weimann & Winn, 1994). Because al-Qaeda and its Salafi Jihadist affiliates operate transnationally, they can be categorized as both domestic and international terrorist organizations. However, the groups' global mission often designates their actions as international terrorism, because they seek to influence a much broader audience than those being victimized (Weimann & Winn, 1994).

There has also been contention among some scholars regarding the way the term 'terrorism' is employed by Western governments and media. This cohort's argument rests upon the notion that Western officials and media outlets — most notably of the United States — only apply the term to violent acts carried out against themselves or their allies. Among this cohort are scholars Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, who are frequently cited for their work *Manufacturing Consent*. Throughout the book, Chomsky and Herman argue that American media propagate U.S. interests by means of editorial distortion (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Both have also voiced similar suggestions about the government and media's use of the term 'terrorism.' Within his study "The Semantics of Terrorism," Herman suggests that instances of state-sponsored violence often occur without ever being addressed as acts of terrorism, and that the lack of recognition tends to

“confine the word’s application to non-state acts of intimidation for political ends” (2000, p. 3). He additionally notes that this failure stems from the fact that the governments carrying out acts of terror are often closely aligned with the West, and usually resort to violence for protecting transnational corporate interests (Herman, 2000). Chomsky raises a similar issue with the U.S.’s inconsistent application of the term. According to Chomsky, an acceptable definition is difficult to establish when, if used, the definition implies that “the United States has been a leading agent in terror,” which would presumably be considered as “an unacceptable conclusion” (2007, p. 44). He supports this notion by citing America’s aggression in Nicaragua under the Reagan presidency, which was condemned by both the International Criminal Court and the United Nations Security Council more than once for being an “unlawful use of force” (Chomsky, 2007, p. 44). The clear problem in the case of deciding on a binding definition of terrorism is thus the “rejection of one of the most elementary principles: that we apply to ourselves the same standards as we do to others, if not more stringent ones” (2007, p. 45).

For the purposes of this study, terrorism will be defined as the use of violence or intimidation tactics for the purpose of achieving politically-motivated goals, while garnering a response among audiences of both victims and sympathizers.

‘Jihad’ is also an ambiguous term. In many ways, its meaning has been tarnished by terrorist organizations that use the term to justify their ideological and political mission. The origins of jihad can be traced to the Arabic word “jahada,” meaning to strive against anything considered ungodly or evil (Okon, 2013). Differentiations are often made between two forms of jihad, the internal and external. While the internal is centered on the individual striving to overcome desires and temptations, the external

denotes a collective obligation to wage holy war against infidels in order to secure the Islamic umma (Gould, 2005; Okon, 2013; Janbek, 2011).

Violent jihadist ideology has its origins in Salafism, which draws upon traditional Islamic jurisprudence to justify jihad as a communal obligation for all Muslims (Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013; Stemman, 2006; Sageman, 2004). The militant form of Salafism that has taken prominence on the world stage promotes a return to authentic Islam enforced by Shari'a law, while condoning the use of violent jihad in order to defeat both local and foreign heretics accused of preventing the establishment of a true Islamic state (Sageman, 2004; Lewis, 2013). This fighting version of Salafism rests at the core of al-Qaeda's global jihadist ideology, which prioritizes combating the far enemy rather than the near enemy of regional regimes (Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013; Sageman, 2004). The tendency towards a global mission, rather than one that focuses on the groups' immediate environment, is rooted in the external jihad's conception of human society being divided into two, geo-religious spheres: Dar al-Islam — the land of Islam — and Dar al-harb, which signifies the land of conflict and unbelievers (Okon, 2013; Sageman, 2004). According to Salafi Jihadism, it is the Muslim umma's duty to expand the borders of Dar al-Islam so societies can live in a state of religious truth and just social order (Okon, 2013; Sageman 2004).

Theories of Terrorist Activities

Throughout history, terrorist activities have swept across societies in waves. According to UCLA Professor Emeritus of Political Science David Rapoport, each wave is defined by the political themes of its time (2014). The first wave, often referred to as

the Anarchist wave, marked the first instance of modern, international terror with its beginnings in Russia during the late 19th century (Rapoport, 2012). The end of the Anarchist wave ushered in the anti-colonial wave of the 1920s, which introduced organizations including Israel's Lehi group and the Irish Republican Army (Rapoport, 2012). The third, "New Left" wave was first defined by the Vietnam War and the Viet Cong's guerilla warfare tactics, but quickly found its way into the Western world with groups such as the American Weather Underground, the Italian Red Brigades and the West German Red Army Faction (Rapoport, 2012). Along with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), third wave terrorist organizations had their sights set on the West, with America as a primary target for aggression; in fact one-third of the third wave's attacks involved American targets, largely because of the nation's support of repressive regimes in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia (Rapoport, 2012). Unlike the first and second waves, the third drew lasting attention to the issue of terrorism from both global and state institutions; the UN adopted numerous conventions throughout the course of the third wave that deemed certain acts including hijacking and financing international terrorist activities as crimes (Rapoport, 2012).

The fourth and current wave was launched in the late 1970s by a series of events that took place in the Islamic world (Rapoport, 2012). Sparked by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, fourth wave terrorism became rapidly rooted in the region's religion (Rapoport, 2012). The Mujahedeen's victory over the Soviets in 1989 may have been the most significant event of the fourth wave, since the invasion drew together various bands of militant Islamists for the first time (Sageman, 2004). From the Mujahedeen's perspective, Islam had been the force that drove out the secular Soviets, whose decline as superpower

provided new swaths of Muslim-populated lands to serve as fertile ground for recruiting and training Islamic rebels (Rapoport, 2012). The Mujahedeen's victory also compelled the militant groups to identify and analyze other common problems (Sageman, 2004). Though the movement was transnational from its beginning by attracting Mujahedeen from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, their success against the Soviets spurred a more refined, global perspective when it came to setting targets and defining their mission (Sageman, 2004). Rather than focusing on local Muslim leaders who were considered puppets of the Western world order, the Mujahedeen set their primary focus on waging jihad against the source of regional corruption — the world's only remaining superpower, the United States (Sageman, 2004).

Though modern terrorism seems to have its origins in the late 19th century, some scholars claim that today's terrorism tactics originated in the 20th century. In his work on modern terror, terrorism expert Brian Jenkins points to the methods of guerilla warfare that were gaining attention in the 1900s — particularly those being employed by Mao Zedong. According to Jenkins, the Chinese communist revolutionary popularized the use of military tactics by those lacking political influence or armies (1983). Mao encouraged a people's war of revolutionaries to defeat the state's stronger military force with the intention of mobilizing citizens who would normally remain uninvolved in a military conflict (Jenkins, 1983). From Mao's perspective, guerrilla warfare was intended to generate a response and change of attitude among the public; any physical damage experienced by the enemy thus became a secondary achievement — the first was citizens' response to witnessing the violence of guerrilla warfare (Jenkins, 2013). By drawing on Mao Zedong and his use of guerrilla tactics throughout the Chinese communist revolution,

Jenkins seems to imply that tactics and motives of terrorism saw an important shift in the 20th century — many of which can be found in jihadism today. A group's primary motivation is no longer one of solely affecting institutions to garner a response; rather it's to generate a reaction among a specific audience.

Much of the aforementioned research suggests that terrorism is a political phenomenon that can occur in any country or culture. However, some scholars of international relations find what is referred to as 'fourth wave terrorism' to be indicative of the current state of Islam. Bassam Tibi, an international relations professor who has extensively studied the political dimension of Islam, proposes that jihadi-inspired terrorism is only one issue surrounding the larger problem of politicized Islam (2005). What Tibi considers as a "return to the sacred" can be linked to a number of structural causes, such as the economic and demographic state of the region, but cultural aspects including both identity and political crises are also major factors (2005, p. 248). Together, the structural and cultural crises serve as the foundation of politicized Islam (Tibi, 2005). In addition to Islam's claim of universality, both crises have caused the religion to become a religiously-driven internationalism; jihadism is only one expression of the current state of politicized Islam, despite being the most successful in attracting global attention to its mission of de-Westernization (Tibi, 2005).

Propaganda and Radicalization Theories and Techniques

Salafi Jihadists are not the first, and presumably will not be the last, to use religious rhetoric as a method of legitimizing politically motivated actions. Throughout history, religions have been effective vehicles for propaganda, especially when it comes

to disseminating political and social ideas (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). The term propaganda became widely used during early twentieth century during World War I, and was later employed to describe the persuasive tactics of totalitarian regimes (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). Early propaganda scholars Leonard Doob and Edward Robinson defined the term as “the employment of non-logical, or affective, appeals in the public dissemination and modification of ideas, attitudes, and beliefs” (1935, p. 88). Following World War II, the term began to highlight a message's effect on its receiver. Thus, propaganda soon came to denote “the influence through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual,” or the dissemination of “a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal come to ‘voluntarily’ accept a position as if it were his or her own” (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991, p. 9).

What differentiates propaganda from other forms of coercion or persuasion is that an individual conceives their response to be of their own decision — in other words, “it controls without occasioning antagonistic emotions” (Biddle, 1931, p. 283). Hence, propaganda is considered as a method of emotional conditioning that occurs without the individual's recognition (Biddle, 1931). Edward Bernays — a pioneer of propaganda studies — referred to this phenomenon as an “invisible government” (1928, p. 9). Beyond merely shaping attitudes and beliefs, it is generally accepted that propagandists intend to eventually have these attitudes lead to some form of action that will strengthen their ideology or mission (Biddle, 1931; Doob & Robinson, 1938; Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006).

In order for propaganda to be effective, there are certain elements that must be present within the final disseminated message. Professor of propaganda, William Biddle

has narrowed these requirements into the following four rules: a propagandist must avoid any possibility for an argument, and instead appeal directly to the receiver's emotions; next, the message needs to be placed inside a context that emphasizes the contention between “us” and “the enemy,” especially if the message addresses an unresolvable conflict of morality; the third rule requires propaganda to be directed towards a particular social group, rather than directly targeting individuals; lastly, the true voice behind propaganda should remain unidentified whenever possible, or kept anonymous through the message's affiliation with a larger entity (1931).

The messages featured in propaganda are presented in numerous ways and contain an assortment of persuasive tactics. These messages are usually interwoven with cultural symbols and social values, which carry prestige and thus have a better chance at receiving recognition, comprehension, and response from the targeted audience (Doob & Robinson, 1938). Propaganda commonly utilizes one or many of the following four methods: persuasion, which assumes that an individual's behavior is shaped by his or her own ideas; a direct emotional appeal that targets certain sentiments intended to compel an individual towards conduct; direct suggestion, which uses repetition of emotionally toned ideas to evoke action; and indirect emotional appeal, which presents the propaganda as entertainment or news in order to inspire particular behaviors (Biddle, 1931).

The effectiveness of these methods is enhanced by a variety of tactics. The use of factoids — a statement that's implied to be factual but is unsupported by evidence — is a common attribute of propaganda, especially when the latter is directed against entire nations (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). Factoids allow propagandists to make frequent and false claims without having to be held accountable for whether the statement is true, since

factoids are usually large lies that would be impossible to prove as false (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991).

Fear has also been an effective tactic of propaganda, especially when it comes to motivating an audience to act upon the information being received (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). Based on psychologist Carl Hovland's learning model of persuasion, Pratkanis and Aronson suggest that an individual must feel rewarded at four stages of psychological processing in order for a message to truly be persuasive (1991). First, the message must be powerful enough to actually scare an audience, while also providing a solution that would allow the threat to be overcome (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). The audience must also consider the aforementioned action to be effective enough to dispose of the threat, but most importantly, it is necessary for them to believe that the suggested action can realistically be done (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991).

In addition to factoids and fear tactics, a method referred to as the granfalloon trick has been proven to be equally persuasive. The granfalloon trick functions through both cognitive and motivational psychological processes; differences between groups are brought to attention in order to create distinct out-groups, while unifying factors among members are underscored with the intention of promoting a strong sense of group identity (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991). Beyond dividing the world into 'us' versus 'them,' the granfalloon trick provides members a sense of pride and self-esteem by motivating individuals to "defend the group and adopt its symbols, rituals, and beliefs (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1991, p. 169).

According to political scientist Manuel Torres, there are three themes found throughout most jihadi propaganda. The first is a political theme that stresses the

importance of establishing an Islamic state that can place religious values at the center of society and state affairs (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). In order to obtain this political reality, sympathizers are encouraged to support the removal of Western-supported regimes to ultimately end the West's corruptive influence in Muslim countries (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). The second is a religious theme that can be found in most, if not all forms of jihadi propaganda, which reminds supporters of a golden age in Islamic societies (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). The imperative need to return to a more pure, pious society is emphasized, along with promises for rewards in one's second life and certain victory over enemies due to divine intervention (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). The third and final theme is instrumental, which promotes the necessary actions in order to arrive at an ideal political and religious society (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). Believers are directed to use force against Western oppressors in order to restore the reputation of Islam, even if it entails certain death by suicide bombing (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006).

No matter how persuasive a propagandist may be in promoting action among an audience, the decision to do so still belongs to the individual. Terrorists often justify their violent acts by making claims that they are performed for "a higher societal need, which can be understood in the context of social cognitive theory" (Weimann, 2008, p.78). According to the theory's author — psychologist Albert Bandura — one may be emotionally impacted by the content they're consuming, but they are in no way "just reactive organisms shaped and shepherded by environmental events or inner forces" (2001, p. 266). Instead, behavior is derived from a combination of personal agency and sociostructural influences that promotes self-development, adaptation, and change

(Bandura, 2001). Because this capacity for self-regulation “operates partially through internal standards and evaluative reactions to one’s own behavior,” one may be motivated to act due to “the anticipated self-satisfaction gained from fulfilling valued standards and evaluative reactions” that stem from performing a particular action (Bandura, 2001, p. 268). This is especially true when it comes to moral behaviors. There are two aspects of moral agency that every individual experiences, one inhibitive and the other proactive (Bandura, 2001). The inhibitive form is of particular interest to this study, since it is “manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely,” while the proactive is demonstrated by humane behavior (Bandura, 2001, p. 268).

In addition to being self-regulatory, individuals are also capable of self-reflection, which allows for the process of thinking, acting, and predicting occurrences that may result from their behavior (Bandura, 2001). The adequacy of one’s predictions is then judged on how well their thoughts matched with the real outcome, a process referred to as thought verification (Bandura, 2001). According to Bandura, there are four modes of thought verification: enactive verification, which relies on how well thoughts match up with outcomes; vicarious verification, which entails judging the validity of one’s thinking with an observation of others’ experiences and behaviors; social verification, which involves determining the soundness of their thoughts compared to what others believe to be true; and logical verification, which requires individuals to check for fallacies in their own thinking, based on previous knowledge (2001).

Despite an individual’s capacity to self-regulate and self-reflect upon their actions, it’s clear that their lives are not entirely autonomous of outside influences. In fact, humans are capable of learning from external influences by means of observation

(Bandura, 2001). Though this form of learning can occur unintentionally, many human values, ideas, and behaviors “can be gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of the mass media” (Bandura, 2001). Observational learning suggests that a single model can influence the ideas and behaviors of “countless people in widely dispersed locales” (Bandura, 2001, p. 271). With the advent of new technologies such as the Internet, once inaccessible ideas, behavior patterns, and values are now being disseminated across the globe by symbolic modeling (Bandura, 2001). Individuals are thus becoming more influenced by these electronic, symbolic environments, which are reconstructing social realities and public consciousness in return (Bandura, 2001).

Surely, there are many social benefits to be derived from the popularization of electronic technologies, but these new systems of communication also come with costs (Bandura, 2002). The components that make new technologies like the Internet so wonderful — its anonymity, absence of censorship, and broad scope — can also be abused for more sinister purposes. In fact, the nature of the Internet may serve as an ideal platform for moral disengagement to occur among groups and individuals (Rubin, 1994). Bandura identifies eight psychosocial mechanisms of moral disengagement that are found to function in political, military, and terrorist operations (2004). The first is moral justification, or the process of making violent behavior “personally or socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy and moral purposes” (Bandura, 2004, p. 124). There is also the use of advantageous comparison, which contrasts an amoral behavior with the reprehensible act of another in order to give the impression that one’s own action is less inhumane, or even righteous (Bandura, 2004). Displacement of responsibility allows one’s actions to be perceived as “stemming from the dictates of authorities rather

than from their own responsibility” (p. 130), while diffusion of responsibility causes an amoral behavior to be perceived as only a small contribution to a larger function or collective mission (Bandura, 2004). A fifth mechanism, the use of euphemistic language, entails the use of sanitized language to describe violent acts as being less socially deviant than they actually are (Bandura, 2004). Attribution of blame, which may be the most popular mechanism among terrorists, involves the violent perpetrator identifying as an innocent victim who has been “driven to extreme means by forcible provocation rather than acting on a deliberative decision” (Bandura, 2004, p. 134). The final two mechanisms, disregard or distortion of harmful consequences and dehumanization, both function through the process of denial. Disregard of harmful consequences entails ignoring, minimizing, or distorting the effects of one’s actions on a victim, while dehumanization depicts the victim as being subhuman, and thus justifies the perpetrator’s inhumane treatment (Bandura, 2004). It’s evident that some, if not all, of these eight mechanisms of moral disengagement would have to be utilized by terrorists in order to legitimize actions like suicide bombings, hijackings, or killing of any kind (Bandura, 2004). What’s of critical concern is that messages containing these mechanisms are now being diffused among large audiences of Internet users, whose social realities may subsequently be shaped by such ideas, values, and behaviors.

Some scholars would argue that Bandura’s theory of observational learning fails to account for other potential factors that could motivate violent behavior. Many who study Islamic-inspired terrorism point to on-the-ground, environmental factors to explain an individual’s motivation for carrying out atrocities. In the case of Salafi Jihadism, these external motivators are often linked to the economic and social state of the individual’s

home country (Simon, 2003). Problems range from low economic mobility, poor schooling, political corruption, warfare, unsustainable urban growth, and diminishing environmental resources (Simon, 2003). Many of the countries that harbor al-Qaeda affiliates are also absent of robust civil societies, which makes effective and lasting political change a serious challenge for a discontent public (Krieger & Meierrieks, 2011). Violence is thus an increasingly popular way to garner attention to one's cause and political motivations. An individual may also be drawn to violent Salafi Jihadism due to their proximity to radical religious leaders and organizations (Krieger & Meierrieks, 2011). Because most of these organizations operate out of local mosques, radical ideology is easily disseminated throughout particularly conservative Salafi neighborhoods.

Despite the latter environmental factors, which could potentially lead an individual to accept Salafi Jihadism, Bandura's theories of observational learning and moral disengagement remain relevant to this study. Because the analysis' sample will only include English content, the target audience is presumably one well beyond the reach of the aforementioned regional factors. The radicalization of an individual's behavior is thus more likely to be caused by online Salafi Jihadist content, rather than being spurred by environmental factors.

Al-Qaeda's Online Presence

With the invention of the high-speed printing press in the 19th century came the ability to disseminate ideas to a very large audience in a short amount of time. Since then, the reach and speed of mass media has exponentially improved with the later advents of

radio, television, and the Internet. Any innovations in information dissemination have been learned, utilized, and occasionally abused by various institutions with a message to share among the public (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006). Media have played an increasingly important role in terrorists' activities, especially since it allows groups to exert psychological impacts across a wide audience (Weimann, 2006). From its inception, al-Qaeda has recognized the importance of maintaining an active media presence in order to attract sympathizers to its cause (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006; Rogan, 2007). According to the late al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, the group's focus extends far beyond shaping society and politics. On numerous occasions, the Salafi leader stressed, "communication is 90 percent of the struggle" (Jenkins, 2011). This statement alone may explain why al-Qaeda and its affiliates so quickly embraced the Internet. The medium has allowed a threatened on-the-ground organization to transform into an organic social movement, which is accessible to anyone with an Internet connection (Brachman, 2006).

Al-Qaeda's first phase of digital propaganda was drastically different when compared to the content being produced today. Information was mainly shared among already existing sympathizers in the form of communiqués, which consistently featured Osama Bin Laden as the movement's lead protagonist (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). The communiqués often included demands directed towards members or potential recruits, while providing little explanation or insight into any of al-Qaeda's pending projects (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). The most notable difference found within first-phase propaganda is that responsibility was never claimed for any of the group's activities; instead, responsibility for the 1998 attacks against U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were claimed by a fictitiously named group — the Islamic Army for the

Liberation of the Holy Places (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). In the years directly following 9/11, al-Qaeda directed its attention towards major newspapers and new channels for propagating its cause (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). In many ways, the group took advantage of the world's newly founded curiosity in Osama Bin Laden and his supporters, which brought weekly opportunities for international exposure (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). It was also around this time that al-Qaeda published their first website — Al Neda — that featured an array of content ranging from jihadi news to technical instructions on how to wage jihad online (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). As media attention began to lessen, al-Qaeda and other Salafi Jihadist groups started to steadily increase their online presence, until most of the groups' propaganda was only diffused online (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). Five years after 9/11, the number of jihadist websites mushroomed from the single digits to the thousands (Awan, 2007; Jenkins 2011), hundreds of which are in English (Jenkins, 2011). The steady development of English websites is especially important, since they've been found to serve as the primary inspiration to commit terrorist attacks among diasporic communities (Atran, 2005; Awan, 2007).

The fact that al-Qaeda heavily relies on the Internet shouldn't come as a surprise, despite the group's adamant claims to reject any form of Western modernity or technology (Weimann, 2006). This existential contradiction only underscores the importance of the Internet in the promotion and survival of al-Qaeda and its affiliates' mission. The medium simply provides too many tempting advantages to be ignored. The clearest advantage is that the Internet transcends national borders, which allows al-Qaeda and its affiliates to reach a once inaccessible, international audience (Conway, 2006;

Bhui, 2013; Atwan, 2007; Weimann, 2008). Additional advantages of the Internet include the low costs of maintaining an online presence, its absence of censorship, the option of remaining anonymous, and its interactivity (Conway, 2006; Atwan, 2007; Weimann, 2008).

Beyond adding legitimacy and control over their Salafi Jihadist mission, the Internet also aids al-Qaeda and its affiliates in recruiting new supporters both regionally and abroad (Brachman, 2006; Weimann, 2010; Jenkins, 2011; Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013; Torok, 2013). The constant surveillance and targeting of terrorist training camps has provided al-Qaeda no choice but to adopt new training and recruitment strategies, which are now carried out online (Torok, 2013). This shift in the group's recruitment strategy has allowed al-Qaeda to attract a new audience of sympathizers that are often tech-savvy youths (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006; Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013). This cohort is especially vulnerable to Salafi Jihadists' propaganda efforts, since many have been "influenced in their collective identity formation by various theological and political perspectives found online" (Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013). The attractiveness of group identity is an important and concerning factor when it comes to recruitment and radicalization, since the Internet allows for polarization that can lead to increases in opinion extremity and the normalization of extreme behaviors (Torok, 2013). The Internet provides an ideal environment for the creation of extremist groups, which could potentially lead to increased self-enlistment and the emergence of new cells (Cilluffo, Cardash, & Whitehead, 2007).

In addition to resonating with a younger demographic, the Internet has also diversified and broadened the scope of al-Qaeda's influence. As previously noted, there

has been an increase in Salafi Jihadist websites targeting Western English speakers (Jenkins, 2011). Much of al-Qaeda and its affiliates' propaganda encourages homegrown terrorism, and provides individuals with access to the information and materials needed in order to carry out lone wolf operations in their own countries (Thompson, 2011). Westerners drawn to the Salafi Jihadist cause are especially useful for transporting materials and acting as suicide bombers since they already reside within the target country's borders (Thompson, 2011). Keeping today's heightened security measures in mind (especially when it comes to entering a foreign country), Westerners are clear strategic assets to al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Previous research has analyzed content directed towards Western audiences by studying al-Qaeda's most notorious digital magazine — *Inspire*. Throughout his analysis, terrorism expert Brian Jenkins found that the magazine targets male, English-speaking young adults through an emphasis on taking action, rather than Islamic theology (2011). *Inspire* contains explicitly violent messages that include how to properly build a bomb, carry out successful kidnappings, or how to safely clean a Kalashnikov rifle (Jenkins, 2011). This hyper-masculinized, violent content is intended to appeal directly to “an audience of angry young men looking for meaning, hankering for status, and seeking adventure” (Jenkins, 2011, p. 16).

Additional research focusing on jihadists' online presence include studies of online forums and chat rooms (Awan, 2007; Janbeck, 2011), websites and social media pages (Thomas, 2003; Awan, 2007; Weimann, 2010; Janbeck, 2011; Thompson, 2011; Bhui & Ibrahim, 2013; Torok, 2013), digital or printed texts (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006; Jenkins, 2011), multimedia content (Rogan, 2007; Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006; O'Saughnessy & Baines, 2009), and technological tools such as special

web browsers and software that can be used to encrypt data and IP address destinations (Thomas, 2003). This study intends to build upon this growing body of research by examining al-Qaeda and its affiliates' appeals to Westerners in the form of online texts created in the years following 9/11.

CHAPTER 3 – METHOD

Content analysis has been defined as “a methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text” (Weber, 1985, p. 9). Through analysis, inferences can be made about “the sender of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message” (Weber, 1985, p. 9). Specifically, qualitative content analysis is intended to both document and understand the meaning behind communication, while also allowing relevant, theoretical relationships to be discovered and verified (Altheide, 1996). The main purpose to conduct a qualitative content analysis is to “captur[e] definitions, meanings, processes, and types...used to supplement understanding and interpretation derived from other data as well” (Altheide, 1996). Content analysis can be used for a variety of purposes (Weber, 1985), but this study will pay particular attention to detecting the existence of propaganda, revealing the focus of the group responsible for disseminating the information, and to describe particular trends found within the collected content.

According to Weber, there are a number of advantages to conducting a content analysis when compared to other methods of data gathering and analysis. First, communication lies at the core of social interaction between individuals and groups; another is that content that has existed for stretching spans of time can be accessed and analyzed in order to expose cultural indicators; and finally, cultural indicators can then be used to assess changes that have occurred socially, politically and culturally over time (1985).

In the interest of establishing whether the content provided by Salafi Jihadists is intended to propagate radicalization, this study analyzed a variety of online texts that

have been created or translated into English by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Due to language barriers and lack of access to sensitive content (which tends to disappear as quickly as it becomes accessible online), convenience sampling was utilized for this study. Sample content was retrieved from a variety of online sources, including the jihadist-affiliated Ansar al-Mujahideen English Forum, jihadist archival websites such as Jihadology.net, and broader Internet archive searches. The sample was comprised of 250 textual, digital communications produced by al-Qaeda central and five of its affiliates, which include al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), al-Shabaab, and the Taliban. The entire textual form of communication — ranging from digital magazines, speech or video transcripts, and articles — served as the study's unit of analysis.

Al-Qaeda's digital sophistication was underscored in 2009 by the premiere of their first online publication, *Defenders of the Truth*, which was later followed by the widely disseminated *Inspire* magazine. Both of these digital magazines serve as prototypes for content produced by the group and its affiliates today (Jenkins, 2011). Because this study intends to analyze Salafi Jihadists' increasing reliance on digital forms of media, all units of analysis dated from 2009 to the present. Sampling content that has been published from 2009 onward allowed the analysis to highlight al-Qaeda and similar groups' global media campaigns as they currently exist —highly decentralized with many contributors producing content that propagates their Salafi Jihadist ideology.

Content was coded as either propagating radicalization or not, depending on whether it contains any of the following eight mechanisms of Albert Bandura's theory of moral disengagement: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous

comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequence, dehumanizing victims and attribution of blame. Possible implications of individuals' exposure to messages containing mechanisms of moral disengagement are explored through the application of social cognitive theory.

For the purpose of measurement, Bandura's eight mechanisms are defined as the following:

Moral justification: The justification of violence by "cognitively redefining the morality of killing, so that it is free from self-censuring restraints" (Bandura, 2004, p. 124). In the case of jihad, violence is depicted as a religious duty justified by Muslims' obligation to expand and secure Dar al-Islam (Okon, 2013; Sagemen 2004).

Advantageous comparison: The presentation of "reprehensible acts as being righteous" by means of comparison with "more flagrant contrasting inhumanities" (Bandura, 2004, p.127). For example, terrorists tend to downplay the amoral nature of their actions by claiming jihad as their only means of defense to "curb the widespread cruelties inflicted on their people under tyrannical regimes" (Bandura, 2004, p. 127).

Displacement of responsibility: Actions are seen as "stemming from the dictates of authorities rather than from their own responsibility" (Bandura, 2004, p.130). Despite the fact that violence is in no way included in Islamic religious code, clerics are often responsible for condoning jihad (Bandura, 2004), thus allowing for individuals to claim obedience to a religious authority's orders as a reason for carrying out attacks.

Diffusion of responsibility: An action is depicted as a subfunction of a greater, communal enterprise; responsibility is thus diffused among the entire group rather than being placed upon the individual (Bandura, 2004). External jihad is defined as a

collective obligation of all Muslims to secure their Islamic umma (Gould, 2005; Okon, 2013; Janbek, 2011). The responsibility to wage violence upon enemy targets is therefore the responsibility of an entire community of believers, not just the individual performing the act.

Euphemistic language: The strategic use of sanitized language to label or describe amoral actions (Bandura, 2004). The term 'jihad' is religious in nature, and is often legitimized through references to Islamic texts or the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (Lewis, 2013; Okon, 2013;). Killing is thus sanitized through pious language, allowing for violent acts to appear less inhumane.

Disregard or distortion of consequences: Minimizing, distorting, or ignoring the effects of an action's consequences upon victims (Bandura, 2004). Jihad waged against nonbelievers is often depicted as a divine duty. Following an attack, the jihadist's martyrdom is recognized and celebrated, while the victims are rarely mentioned (Sageman, 2004).

Attribution of blame: Placing blame on adversaries or compelling circumstances; the perpetrator depicts themselves as "faultless victims driven to extreme means by forcible provocation rather than acting on a deliberative action" (Bandura, 2004, p.134). In the context of Salafi Jihadism, the West is often depicted as provoking violent attacks because it condones "oppressive and inhumane social conditions and thwarted political efforts" through its support of repressive regimes (Bandura, 2004, p. 135).

Dehumanization: The victims of violent acts are depicted as inhuman or subhuman, and regarded as "insensitive to maltreatment and influenceable only by maltreatment" (Bandura, 2004, p. 136). Victims are commonly referred to as 'kafirs,' or

nonbelievers, which renders them as infidels from a Salafi Jihadist perspective; a frequently cited hadith instructs jihadists to kill any infidel they may encounter, while promising rewards on the Day of Resurrection for doing so (Okon, 2013).

Beyond establishing whether the sampled content is intended to propagate radicalization, this study addressed three research questions regarding the use of the aforementioned mechanisms. The first and central research question determined which of the eight mechanisms are most frequently used throughout Salafi Jihadist propaganda. The second examined whether the frequency of employed mechanisms has changed over the sample's time frame. Lastly, content was analyzed to establish whether the frequency of the eight mechanisms differs depending on the affiliate group responsible for its production.

Because content has been collected through a non-random sampling technique, any conclusions drawn from this analysis will not be inferred upon other sources of jihadi media originating from either Shi'ite groups, or smaller Salafi Jihadist organizations that are unrecognized by the mainstream, al-Qaeda brand. One exception that has been made concerning the latter point is the inclusion of material produced by the Islamic State (formerly ISIS). Though Ayman al-Zawahiri — the current leader of al-Qaeda central — formally renounced the Levant-based cell in the spring of 2014, the Islamic State was established, recognized, and began gaining its prominence in the region as an al-Qaeda affiliate. In addition to the fact that the group shares similar Salafi Jihadist motivations with al-Qaeda central, the Islamic State is also a leading producer of English, digital content when compared to other affiliates. For these reasons, content disseminated by the recently disavowed group was included in the study.

CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS

Due to the inaccessibility of the content being analyzed, this study relied on a convenience sample. As a result, the convenience method may have caused the frequencies of affiliates, years, and publication formats within the sample to be disproportionate. Alternatively, the sample may reflect a broader trend of affiliates' digital communication activities. Of the 250 digital publications, 27.6% were produced by AQAP, 23.2% by the Taliban, 17.2% by AQIM, 12.8% by ISIS, 10.8% by al-Qaeda Central, and 8.4% by al-Shabaab. While some affiliates regularly disseminate content online, others tend to do so less frequently. Thus, digital content produced by the most active affiliates is easier to come by than materials created by less active groups. Affiliates are also more likely to disseminate content after a successful attack or major event within the region, which may explain why materials published in certain years were more accessible than others. A greater portion of the units were published in 2013 (30.8%), 2011 (24%), and 2014 (20.8%), followed by those produced in 2009 (8.4%), 2010 (8%) and 2012 (8%). Articles were the most disseminated format, and thus served as 65.2% of the 250 units of analysis. Speech transcripts were the second most disseminated format, making up 14.8% of the sample, followed by digital magazines (12.4%), and video transcripts (7.6%). The disproportionate frequency of formats within the sample may be linked to their production requirements — while single-page articles can be produced directly in English, speech and video transcripts often require translation. The production of digital magazines requires a broader set of editorial and design skills than the latter three formats, which may explain why so few were accessible for this study.

The first research question examined which of the eight mechanisms of moral disengagement was employed most frequently in Salafi Jihadists' digital content. Of the 250 units of analysis included within the sample, more than 90% contained one or more mechanisms. Euphemistic language was the most frequently employed, appearing in 94% of digital publications. The remaining seven mechanisms, ranked in order of their frequency, are as follows: attribution of blame, 88.4%; moral justification, 83.2%; advantageous comparison, 71.2%; diffusion of responsibility, 66.3%; dehumanization, 64.4%; displacement of responsibility, 57.6%; and disregard of consequences, 52.8% (see Appendix A for a frequency distribution figure).

The second research question addressed whether the frequency of employed mechanisms had changed over time. Cross tabulation and Pearson's chi-square test were used to explore differences that occurred from 2009 to 2014. The analysis showed that there was a notable increase in the employment of moral justification in 2013, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 17.31, p = .004$. Disregard of consequences also experienced an increase in employment throughout 2013, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 12.796, p = .025$.

The final research question examined whether the employment of mechanisms had differed across affiliates. Each of the eight mechanisms showed significant differences in their application across groups. The first significant result concerned the groups' use of attribution of blame, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 15.19, p = .010$; in this case, the Taliban was less likely to employ the mechanism than other affiliates. The results of the remaining seven mechanisms were highly significant. Moral disengagement produced a highly significant result, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 42.912, p = .000$, which suggested that the Taliban used the mechanism less frequently than others, while al-Qaeda central employed it more

frequently. Advantageous comparison also produced a highly significant result, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 38.714, p = .000$; while AQAP and al-Qaeda central used the mechanism more frequently than others, AQIM and al-Shabaab's materials contained it less frequently. Another highly significant result was found in regard to displacement of responsibility, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 44.768, p = .000$, which suggested that while the Taliban and al-Shabaab used the mechanism less often than others, AQAP and AQIM tended to employ it in their materials more frequently. Diffusion of responsibility also produced a highly significant result, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 22.963, p = .000$; though ISIS was found to employ the mechanism more frequently than others, the Taliban and AQIM were less likely to do so. Affiliates' use of euphemistic language additionally produced a result that was highly significant, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 23.783, p = .000$; once again, the Taliban was the outlier among affiliates when it came to the employment of the latter mechanism, using it less often than expected. Furthermore, disregard of consequences produced a highly significant result, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 47.650, p = .000$. This result showed that ISIS and al-Qaeda central used the mechanism more frequently, while the Taliban used it far less than other affiliates. The final mechanism of dehumanization also produced a highly significant result, $\chi^2 (5, 250) = 61.04, p = .000$. Similar to the previous mechanism, dehumanization was employed more often by ISIS and less often by the Taliban.

After discovering unexpected discrepancies between the Taliban and al-Qaeda central's observed versus expected counts of employment, additional frequency analyses were used to explore each groups' application of Bandura's eight mechanisms. Of the 58 units of Taliban publications, a surprising 22.4% contained displacement of responsibility and disregard of consequences. Dehumanization appeared in only 25.9% of the group's

materials, while diffusion of responsibility was employed in just 39.7% of the units. Conversely, al-Qaeda central demonstrated higher frequencies of employment than expected. The group was discovered to have used the mechanisms of moral justification and euphemistic language in 100% of their digital publications. Attribution of blame and advantageous comparison were also frequently employed, appearing in 96.3% of al-Qaeda central's materials.

CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION

General Discussion

As the United States and its allies continue to combat terrorism across the Middle East and parts of Africa, Salafi Jihadist organizations are adapting new methods to perpetuate their ideology and recruit new members. The increasing proliferation of digital English propaganda underscores a notable shift in the groups' global strategy. In addition to on-the-ground combat, groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS must also wage a battle over hearts and minds in order to remain as a significant threat to Western powers. The results of this study indicate that the latter form of psychological warfare is largely taking place online, where groups encourage potential sympathizers to become active supporters and participants of global jihad.

This study also provides evidence that Salafi Jihadists' digital content is laden with themes of moral disengagement, which are intended to mitigate the unconscionable behaviors associated with terrorism. Of all eight mechanisms, euphemistic language was employed most often by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. This is likely because most publications, whether or not they were purposed to recruit and radicalize readers, contained some form of sanitized language in regards to violent and amoral actions.

Additionally, an increase in the employment of two mechanisms — moral justification and disregard of consequences — was found to have taken place in 2013. The discrepancy found between 2013's observed and expected counts for both mechanisms might be linked to the accessibility of materials published that year. However, it's also worth noting that ISIS began to disseminate materials more regularly

in 2013, as they became more of an influential and recognized participant in the Syrian conflict.

The most notable findings of this study concerned the third research question, which addressed any changes in the employment of mechanisms among affiliates. Some discrepancies between groups' observed and expected frequencies can be explained by the nature of the affiliate and the defining characteristics of their content. For instance, moral justification was employed more often by al-Qaeda central than it was by other affiliates. In order to mitigate any chances of being tracked and located, the group publishes digital content infrequently in comparison to counterparts. Because al-Qaeda central is less likely to regularly disseminate materials, most of their digital content is intended to reinforce their existence, mission, and use of terror against the West and its allies. The mechanism of moral justification, which appeared in 100% of al-Qaeda central's digital publications, allows the group to depict their violent interpretation of jihad as a religious duty of pious Muslims seeking freedom from Western interference. By pairing moral justification with euphemistic language, the group sanitizes their call for attacks by citing jihad as a duty condoned by Islamic texts and the Prophet Mohammad.

The difference discovered among groups' use of advantageous comparison was reflected by four affiliates' observed versus expected counts of employment. While AQAP and al-Qaeda central were found to have used the mechanism more often than expected, al-Qaeda's Africa-based affiliates AQIM and al-Shabaab employed it less. An observation concerning content produced by the latter two affiliates may provide some context to this finding. Throughout the study, it appeared that both were less likely to

make moral or political comparisons between themselves and Western powers. On the contrary, AQAP and al-Qaeda central often focused on posing “us” versus “them” arguments throughout their digital publications, and thus employed advantageous comparison more frequently than other affiliates.

While exploring the differences in groups' employment of Bandura's eight mechanisms, it was found that Taliban used them less frequently than originally anticipated. Discrepancies in the Taliban's observed and expected counts of employment were found among seven of the eight mechanisms, including moral justification, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, euphemistic language, attribution of blame, disregard of consequences, and dehumanization. These chi-square test results compelled me to run an additional frequency analysis on mechanisms employed by the Taliban. The low frequencies of four mechanisms in particular (diffusion and displacement of responsibility, disregard of consequences, and dehumanization), supported an observation made while coding the group's materials.

Compared to other affiliates, the Taliban appeared to be less concerned with condoning jihad and recruiting fighters through their digital content. Rather, the group's materials were often used to inform readers about Afghanistan's political and military environments. Of all formats, articles in particular were used to provide context to events taking place throughout the country. A number of the group's digital articles resembled white papers, which encouraged readers to support and propagate a Taliban interpretation of Afghan politics among their localities. Others were very similar to opinion columns, and featured Taliban leaders' assessments of former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the true capabilities of the country's security forces, and the implications of a bilateral

security agreement between American and Afghan forces. As a result, the mechanisms that were typically employed to mitigate the immorality of jihadism were used less often by the Taliban than they were by other organizations.

An additional observation made throughout the analysis concerned al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia. Though the group produced English publications between 2009 and 2014, their digital materials were much more limited in comparison to other affiliates. Al-Shabaab's production of content in other languages seemed sparse as well, which may be linked to Somalia's low Internet penetration rate of 1.5% (Internet World Stats, 2013). However, it would be erroneous to conclude that Internet penetration alone is responsible for the group's meager production of digital content. For example, AQAP is based in Yemen, which has a 20% penetration rate (Internet World Stats, 2013). This positions it among the three lowest ranking countries across the Middle East, including Syria, which has a current rate of 26.2%, and Iraq, where only 9.2% of the population are regular Internet users (Internet World Stats, 2013). Despite Yemen's modest rate, AQAP is considered as al-Qaeda's leading media arm for the dissemination of both Arabic and English digital propaganda — suggesting that a country's low Internet penetration rate is not enough to keep groups from sharing content online. Alternatively, this may imply regional disparities in financing, and thus technological resources, among al-Qaeda affiliates.

Over the course of this study, it was also recognized that jihadists' digital, quarterly magazines received the most time, attention, and allocation of funds among all forms of publication. Unlike other formats included in the sample, digital magazines were unique in the fact that they contained a variety of content due to their length, which

averaged 40 pages per issue. Magazine content ranged from both real and mock interviews with Salafi and Western leaders, to DIY instructions on how to make lethal weapons and successfully carry out violent attacks (see Appendix B for content examples). Eulogies of recent martyrs were a hallmark of all digital magazines. The most popular formats for these eulogies were in-depth martyr profiles and two-page spreads dedicated to photos of the deceased (see Appendix C for a martyr profile example). The latter remembrances were rarely somber in tone, and often lauded jihadists as heroes. If the martyrs' victims were mentioned within profiles, they were typically dehumanized as infidels or positioned as trophies of a successful attack.

Though the content of magazines remained consistent across the sample's span of time, a major difference in the quality of writing and design took place between 2009 and 2014. Compared to 2009 editions of AQAP's first English digital magazine, *Defenders of the Truth*, publications that followed like *Inspire* and *Azan* contained fewer grammatical errors, and exhibited more detailed, sophisticated design elements (see Appendix D for a comparison of 2009 and 2014 publications). Magazines that were published from 2012 onward also began to direct readers to social media pages and video hosting platforms, which feature content ranging from jihadi music videos to feature-length productions. The inclusion of these links may suggest that groups like AQAP and ISIS are now setting their sights on a younger, tech-savvy audience for purposes of radicalization and recruitment.

Implications

This study sought to provide additional insight into the propagandistic purposes of Salafi Jihadists' digital materials. Of specific concern was whether the groups' digital publications contained themes of Bandura's eight psychosocial mechanisms of moral disengagement. By employing these themes within their digital publications, groups like al-Qaeda intend for readers to not only accept their Salafi Jihadist ideology, but to act on it as well. If the Internet now serves as an electronic, symbolic environment that can potentially reconstruct an individual's social realities and public consciousness, the dissemination of such materials could successfully lead to the radicalization and eventual recruitment of individuals. This certainly isn't to say that anyone exposed to such content is likely to accept an ideology that demands participation in violent, global jihad.

However, the few individuals that may in fact subscribe to these once inaccessible ideologies and behaviors are enough to pose unprecedented security concerns for the United States and its allies. By effectively radicalizing and recruiting Westerners, Salafi Jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS gain an indispensable weapon in their arsenal of tactics — loyalists capable of travelling throughout Western countries without having to obtain visas or forged passports. For this reason alone, Western fighters are recognized as unparalleled assets among jihadist organizations.

A clear limitation of this study was the inaccessibility of al-Qaeda and similar groups' digital materials. Though Internet archives, jihadist forums, and jihadist-monitoring websites provided an ample amount of digital publications, links were often removed or broken after they were flagged as sensitive content. Because of this, the study

used convenience sampling, which may imply that the findings are less representative than they would be if drawn from a random sample.

Language was another limitation to this study. While there were plenty of English materials produced by Salafi Jihadists to draw from, a meta-analysis of content across a variety of languages would be ideal in order to gain a greater understanding of global jihadist campaigns. Additionally, the materials analyzed in this study were strictly textual, which resulted in a wealth of multimedia content being omitted from the sample. Though previous studies have analyzed jihadists' multimedia content, ISIS' recent campaign alone warrants further research. Future studies of this kind could benefit from the analysis of videos' aesthetics, symbolism, intended audience, and effectiveness in attracting recruits.

Bandura's eight mechanisms may effectively explain the psychosocial processes that lead to acts of terror, but one must be judicious when making generalizations about the effects of jihadists' rhetorical appeals — especially when suggesting that digital propaganda alone compels individuals to become active jihadists. However, a recent rise of Western jihadists may be indicative of the mechanisms' high ecological validity as a measure of intent to radicalize and recruit individuals online. While potential sympathizers within the region may subscribe to Salafi Jihadism because of a number of environmental factors, Western recruits are assumingly beyond the reach of such influences, and are thus more likely to be motivated to act by groups' online, rhetorical appeals. This would indicate that a certain cohort of readers may be moved to not only accept Salafi Jihadists' ideology, but to join such groups in on-the-ground combat throughout the region.

Because Salafi Jihadists focus on an external form of jihad, their rhetoric often underscores the importance and duties of the group rather than the individual. Though diffusion of responsibility defines an individual's actions as being a subfunction of a larger, communal enterprise, it underplays the true significance of jihadists' collective identity. Beyond mitigating an individual's responsibility for an attack, Salafi Jihadists present the notion of belonging to a brotherhood, community of believers, and cell of fighters as a recruitment strategy. This is an especially effective propaganda tactic online, where youths' identities are often shaped and influenced by varying political and religious perspectives. For this reason, future qualitative studies should consider creating a specific coding category for the theme of collective identity.

A second rhetorical device that failed to fall within the parameters of Bandura's eight mechanisms was the idealization of an Islamic caliphate. Similar to the utopian themes that were fixtures of Soviet propaganda, affiliates portray the Islamic state as being a place of Islamic unity and solidarity. The state is depicted to be free of any corruptive and unwanted influence, which allows for the rule of Shari'a Law in all corners of life. Despite the fact that the caliphate would entail both a political and religious state, jihadists' rhetoric usually omits the political dimension of statehood in order to emphasize the spiritual benefits it would bring to the Muslim umma.

Another dimension of jihadists' digital campaigning that would be worth exploring is their growing presence on social media platforms. It appears that these channels of communication are beginning to match, if not rival, jihadist-hosted online forums in the recruitment of fighters and the dissemination of digital materials. This type of research would be prone to similar challenges of accessibility, but is of increasing

importance in today's political and media landscape. Recruitment and content sharing on these platforms will only increase in popularity as the violent subculture continues to trend among a digitally connected generation of supporters.

Future research may also explore the most effective methods for counteracting groups' dissemination of radicalizing materials. This would be especially relevant in light of the United States' response to ISIS' digital campaign. Following the barrage of media attention that the Levant-based group received in the summer of 2014, the U.S. Department of State's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) launched a digital campaign of their own — "Think Again, Turn Away." However, rather than abstaining from the use of tactics employed by ISIS, the CSCC has frequently chosen to combat the group's images and videos of brutality by sharing similarly violent content on websites like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. If Western nations intend to steer potential sympathizers from radicalization towards realization, an effective counteractive messaging strategy is necessary. This type of study could potentially aid countries in constructing campaigns to curb the recent rise of Western recruits who have fallen victim to jihadists' increasingly sophisticated, digital campaigns.

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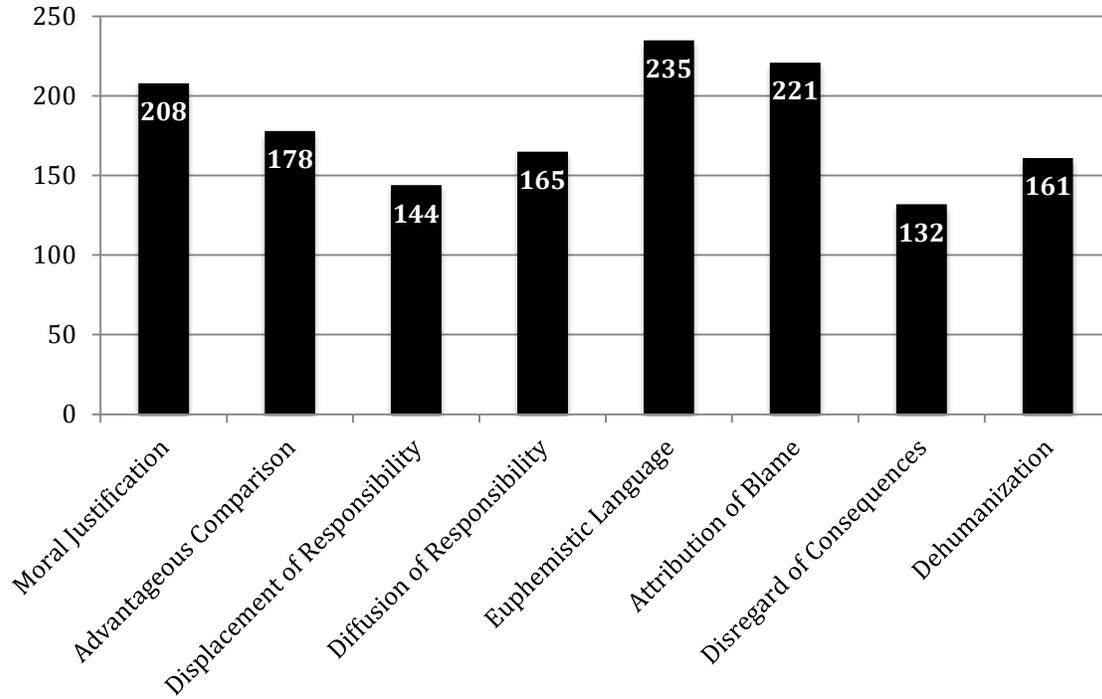
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APPENDIX A

Frequency Distribution of Albert Bandura's Eight Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement



APPENDIX B
Features of Digital Magazines

Figure B1 is an example of a hypothetical interview with President Barack Obama.

An Interview with OBAMA
Q: To begin, do you believe your regime plays clean and fair in this war?
A: I believe we compromised our basic values by using torture to interrogate our enemies, and detaining individuals in a way that run counter to the rule of law.
Q: Don't you care about the Muslim civilians that American drones kill?
A: It is a hard fact that U.S. strikes have resulted in civilian casualties, a risk that exists in all wars. For the families of those civilians, no words or legal construct can justify their loss. For me, and those in my chain of command, these deaths will haunt us as long as we live, just as we are haunted by the civilian casualties that have occurred through conventional fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.
Q: Al-Qaëda says that you are too coward to put boots on Muslim grounds; you cannot take a new defeat after what happened to your army in Iraq and Afghanistan. How true is this claim?
A: It is false to assert that putting boots on the ground is less likely to result in civilian deaths, or to create enemies in the Muslim world. The result would be more U.S. deaths, more Blackhawks down, more confrontations with local populations, and an inevitable mission creep in support of such raids that could easily escalate into new wars. So yes, the conflict with Al-Qaëda, like all armed conflicts, invites tragedy.

Figure B2 is an example of DIY instructions for lethal weapons or behaviors.

Open Source Jihad
o·pen | 'õpən| source |sõrs| ji·had |ji' häd|
A resource manual for those who loathe the tyrants; includes bomb making techniques, security measures, guerrilla tactics, weapons training and all other jihad related activities.
• informal A disaster for the repressive imperialistic nations: The open source jihad is America's worst nightmare.
• It allows Muslims to train at home instead of risking a dangerous travel abroad: Look no further, the open source jihad is now at hands reach.
TORCHING PARKED VEHICLES
w/ Ibtul Irtah
EASY TO DO
The West should taste some burning. They should pay for bombarding and burning our Muslim brothers and sisters' homes and our Holy Quran. For burning down forests, plantations and houses, please refer to Issue 9, it explains the topic in full details.
OPERATION NO PARKING!
Today we have something new for you, VEHICLES. Vehicle are easy to torch. And the easy part is, vehicles need to be parked somewhere, right? How safe is that somewhere, especially in deserted areas? How much more safe will the West feel parking their vehicles, when they know they're up for a TORCHING.
Procedure:
• Carry your bottle(s) of fuel.
• Find a deserted parked car.
• Avoid CCTV cameras or areas where people could see you.
• After finding a suitable place, plan your escape route.
• Pour the petrol on the vehicle(s), do not forget the tires. You can pour a line away from the vehicle.
• Leave the bottle(s) to burn so as not to be caught with it (them).
• Do not touch the vehicle(s), just in case there is an alarm.
• Don't get petrol on yourself.
• Use a matchstick to torch the vehicle directly or the line of petrol.
• Quickly execute your escape plan acting natural so as to avoid suspicion.
PS: camouflaging the petrol is an important precaution to take. You can use an apple juice bottle.
WHY A MATCHSTICK?
We are setting forth an example to the Kuffar and that example is a Matchstick. While the Kuffar are deluded into thinking that their superior technology will defeat us. We put forth that we will defeat you even if it is by a matchstick. And that our simple weapons are also just as terrifying and destructive to your economy as your weapons are by the permission of Allah.
REQUIREMENT
• Fuel (petrol - you can siphon petrol from your vehicle to avoid suspicion)
• Source of fire - a matchstick

APPENDIX C
Martyr Remembrance

Figure C1 displays a popular format of a martyr remembrance — an in-depth profile of a fighter that details his journey as a commander within AQAP.

Shuhada'
Arabian Peninsula

"Whoever died without fighting in Allah's Cause nor expressed any desire (or determination) for Jihad has died upon a type of hypocrisy."
- Prophet Muhammad

In our *Shuhada'* Arabian Peninsula section, we will be sharing their images, their lives and the legacies they left behind. We ask Allah to accept all of them and to grant us *shahada'*.

The martyrdom of the Commander Abu Ayman
Shaykh Ibrahim al-Banna

Praise be to the One who said: *«And do not say about those who are killed in the way of Allah, "They are dead." Rather, they are alive, but you perceive [it] not»* [2: 154]. And may peace and blessings be upon His Messenger ﷺ who said: *"In the name of whom the soul of Muhammad is in His hands, I wish I could fight in the path of Allah and then be killed and then fight and be killed and then fight and be killed!"*

Today we say our farewells to Abu Ayman al-Masri, Bakr bin Sa'eed Muhammad Numaan, a hero of our ummah and one of its knights, who passed away in the land of Aden-Abyan. A man who has stood against the tyrants of the Arabian Peninsula and whom the apostate media has announced his death several times after every failed operation led by their armies, and yet Allah would protect his servant Abu Ayman and expose the lies of the government media. But now Abu Ayman had an appointment with martyrdom, a status that he'd strive to reach for a long time.

Abu Ayman was one of the members of the Jihad Movement in the city of Bani Suwaif in Egypt. He left Egypt to flee the persecution of the tyrant Hosni Mubarak spending some time in Sudan and Jordan before setting in Yemen where he worked with his brothers including Abu al-Hassan al-Mihdar, may Allah have mercy upon him.

He stayed in Marib, in Husun Al Jalal and was a companion of Shaykh Abu Ali al-Harithi, may Allah have mercy on him¹. He was with Abu Ali when the military sent forces from the Republican Guard to Marib in order to capture the mujahidin. The Republican Guard forces were defeated and their commander was killed and a few of their armored vehicles were destroyed. Then he and Abu Ali al-Harithi moved to al-Jawf. During a trip with Shaykh Abu Ali between Marib and Shabwa, a U.S. drone fired a missile on the vehicle killing Abu Ali and some of his brothers. Abu Ayman and a few other brothers were not harmed as they were in another vehicle.

In the following stage of the jihad of Abu Ayman, he helped with the travel arrangements for those brothers that wanted to join the mujahidin in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Algeria.

When the twenty three brothers broke out of the Political Security Prison in Sana'a, he hosted a group of them in his house becoming a *muhajir* and an *ansar*.

¹ The Abu Ali al-Harithi mentioned here is not the same as the one who was killed recently by a U.S. drone strike in Abyan. Rather, this is in reference to Abu Ali al-Harithi who was the head of al Qaeda at the time and was martyred in 2002.

SHUHADA' COLLECTION

APPENDIX D
Differences in Digital Magazines' Graphic Sophistication

Figure D1 displays the first English jihadi digital magazine, *Defenders of the Truth*, published in the summer of 2009.

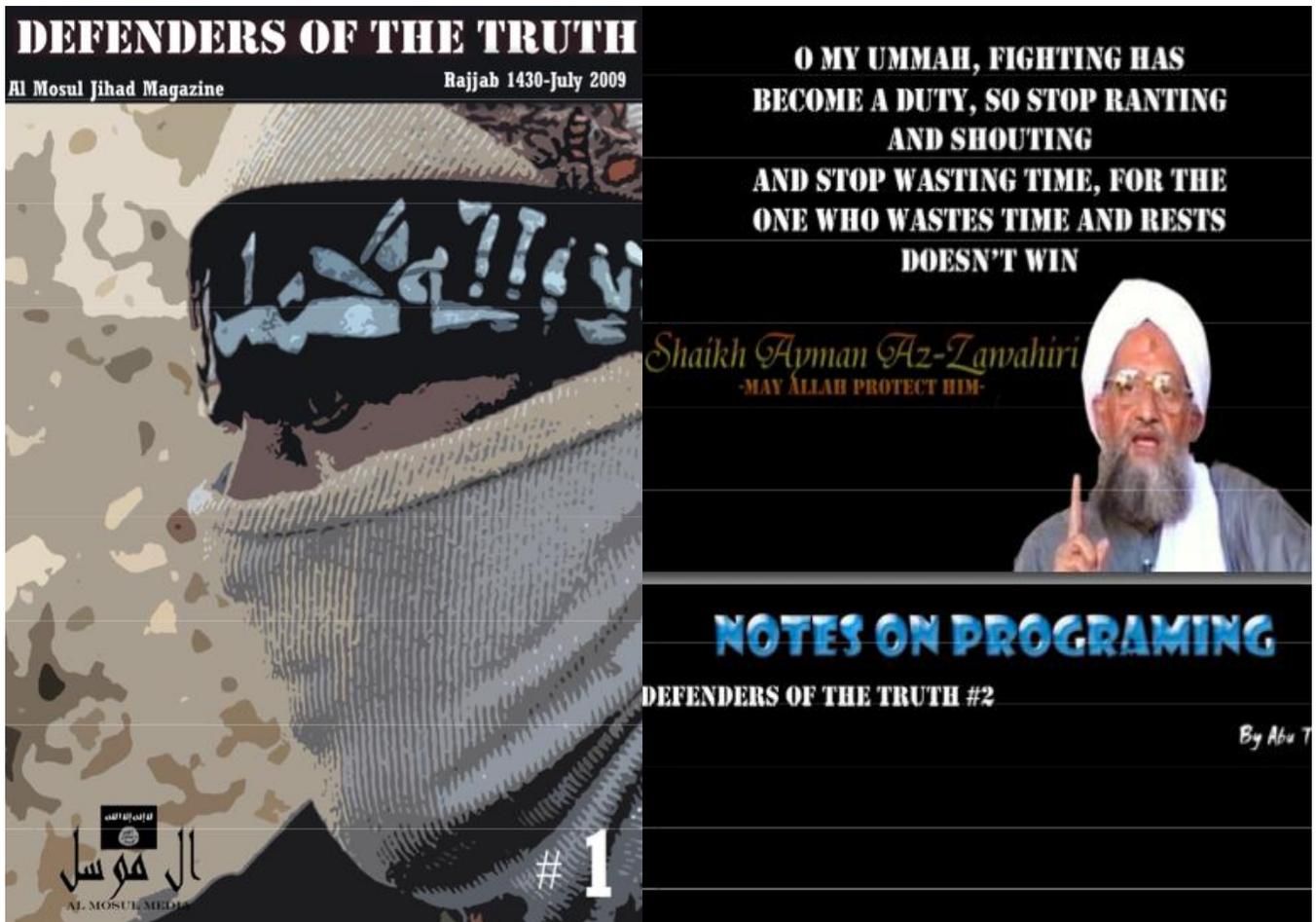


Figure D2 displays the Spring 2014 edition of *Inspire* magazine.

