Alienating the Grassroots: Looking Back at Al Qaeda’s Communicative Approach Toward Muslim Audiences

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Alienating the Grassroots: Looking Back at Al Qaeda’s Communicative Approach Toward Muslim Audiences

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This article explores the way in which the Al Qaeda leadership appeals to and addresses different cohorts of Sunni Muslim audiences through its statements. This communicative approach is understood in the context of collective action frames from the social movement literature. The article analyzes the way in which communiqués from Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have approached different Muslim audiences, defining three principal approaches: encouragement, excommunication, and exasperation. The article discusses how these approaches developed from the early 1990s up until the end of 2011, arguing that denunciation of Muslim publics has become an ever more prominent feature of this discourse.

Jihadi Media and Al Qaeda Leadership Statements
In early June 2011, just over a month after Osama bin Laden was killed in his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, his successor as leader of Al Qaeda—Ayman al-Zawahiri—issued a statement acknowledging bin Laden’s death and welcoming his “martyrdom.” In the statement—titled “The Noble Knight Dismounted”—al-Zawahiri renewed existing pleas to Muslims, urging them to support their “fighting vanguard” against the forces of tyranny, secularism, and debauchery. As he celebrated bin Laden’s life and anticipated legacy, al-Zawahiri insisted that his predecessor had achieved what he had set out to achieve in the first place. Rather than some sort of operational objective or strategic milestone, however, al-Zawahiri chose a different measurement to assess the success of Al Qaida’s principal leader. Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri argued, “was aiming to incite the Ummah to Jihad, and his message reached from East to West and all over the world. The Muslims answered it, as did all the oppressed on the face of the earth.” “And today, all praise be to Allah,” al-Zawahiri continued, “America does not face an individual, group, or sect. No, it faces a rising Ummah that has awoken from its slumber in a Jihadi awakening that challenges it wherever it is.”

Setting aside al-Zawahiri’s predictable hyperbole, his eulogy of bin Laden is revealing in the sense that he identifies the ability of Al Qaeda to incite and deliver its message to the
Muslim ummah as the principal yardstick of its success. Acts of terrorism, of course, form part of this message in a more abstract sense—after all, “terrorism can be conceptualised as a violent language of communication”2—but in a more specific interpretation, al-Zawahiri is focusing in particular on the need to communicate with potential followers and mobilize them for the cause.

This adds to existing—and well documented—references made by Al Qaeda leaders where they have emphasized the importance of issuing statements and messages that are distributed online or brought to the attention of followers, potential followers and adversaries through other means. Bin Laden, for example, referred to the importance of “media war” in a letter to Taliban leader Mullah Omar and emphasized the role of engaging with the media as the most significant component in “preparation for battles.”3 al-Zawahiri saw the dissemination of indigenous media communiqués as a specific form of jihad in its own right. “Jihadi media operations” would, thus, spoil “the enemies’ publicity campaigns”4 and demolish their “monopoly” over information.5 The way in which this would be achieved, al-Zawahiri argued, rested on the three-pronged objectives of the jihadi media machinery. These were: “clarifying the facts, dispelling misconceptions and removing the masks from the traitors.”6 Al-Zawahiri, of course, has also envisaged a role for himself in this process, placing particular emphasis on the dissemination of public statements. In his 2001 memoir Knights under the Banner of the Prophet, al-Zawahiri emphasized the need to communicate with the masses and hone messages that would appeal to the general ummah, rather than just scholars and elites.7

Both bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have been prolific in the dissemination of statements on behalf of Al Qaeda. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency with which the two principal leaders produced and published communiqués (including interviews) from the early 1990s until the end of 2011.

Analysts and observers have also highlighted the significance of the Al Qaeda leadership communiqués. Burke, for instance, argued that cases of “home-grown” Islamist violent extremism were illustrative of the fact that “bin Laden and his associates had been able to attain at least one of their major strategic aims: to disseminate the al-Qaeda worldview—the ideology, . . . —to a huge new audience.”8 A report by the Washington Institute, moreover, warned that “the ideological tenets of al-Qaeda thrive, and other, arguably smarter, adversaries continue to exploit its ‘ideological package.’”9 Bowie and Schmid, meanwhile, observed that “to study the communication output of terrorists is as important and studying the acts of violence.”10

This all relates to the ideational component of Islamist violent extremism. Ronfeldt, for instance, argued that the threads of Islamist militancy were “held together not by command-and-control structures . . . but by a gripping sense of shared belonging, principles of fusion against an outside enemy, and a jihadist narrative so compelling that it amounts to both an ideology and a doctrine.”11 The Al-Qaeda leadership, of course, did not invent this ideological doctrine, nor does it have exclusive ownership of its content. Numerous actors and components contribute to and shape the Islamist extremist ideational environment. The focus here is on the way in which the Al-Qaeda central leadership—in the form of Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden—has sought to shape this discourse via the dissemination of statements and public appeals.

**Framing and Communication**

This perspective moves beyond a focus on organizational components or operational “nodes” or other physical points of analysis to more “culturalist” notions of Al Qaeda’s
participation in violent extremism. In this sense the Al Qaeda leadership might seek to gain effectiveness not through established authority or instrumental procedures, but through exploiting, what Cetina termed, “systems of amplification.” Principal among these were new forms of media, particularly online forms of communication, which are intended to act as mobilizing and coordinating forces. According to Cetina’s interpretation, these communiqués are often “intentionally moral and performative in the sense of ‘calling’ the audience to particular forms of actions,” as of course, is the objective of the Al Qaeda leadership.

The communication of values, grievances, and goals can thus be seen as an integral part of the composition and operation of Al Qaeda. A systematic and longitudinal analysis of this material can, in turn, offer insights into how Al Qaeda’s public communicative campaign has evolved over the years. This concerns what Cozzens termed the “less apparent ‘expressive’ and ‘existential’ quality to al-Qaeda’s character and its warfare that is not given due attention in the literature.”

In short, therefore, specific catalysts and other events do not occur in an interpretive vacuum. Watershed events may of course provoke spontaneous outbursts of anger, elation, or sympathy, but a group like Al Qaeda is tasked with translating these events and emotions into specific action. Even when events occur that fundamentally undermine existing doctrine—such as the events of the Arab Spring—the Al Qaeda leadership and its sympathizers seek to frame these events according to their goals and aspirations. In his study of Islamic activism, Wiktorowicz defined frames as: “interpretive schemata that offer a language and cognitive tools for making sense of experiences and events in the ‘world out there.’”
For the Al Qaeda leadership, there has been a particular need to seek to translate these experiences and events into support for its cause, recognition of its world view and even participation in its violent campaign. The process whereby group or movement leaders seek to frame events with the aim of mobilizing potential constituents to become activists, can best be described using Benford and Snow’s concept of “collective action frames.” These are defined as “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization,” often with the particular aim of encouraging mobilization against perceived injustice.

For the Al Qaeda leadership, this relates not only to contextualization and legitimization of past attacks or violent campaigns. Messages to the wider public must also demonstrate the continued relevancy of opinions and options presented by the leadership and its ability to address concerns of those for whom the appeals are generated. Furthermore, through collective action frames, the leadership must, in order to remain relevant, incorporate emerging issues within the broader framework of Al Qaeda’s ideational positioning.

The literature on collective action frames has generated a host of different frame variants. For the purpose of this article, however, the three initial—or core—framing tasks identified by Benford and Snow are particularly useful. First, there are diagnostic frames. These refer to the need to diagnose “an event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration.” Diagnostic appeals thus ask “what is or went wrong?” and “who or what is to blame?” Second, there are prognostic framing tasks that consist of a “proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done.” Third, there is the more ambiguous task of conveying motivational frames. This refers to the need to generate a “rationale for engaging in ameliorative or corrective action” and produce an “elaboration of a call to arms” that goes beyond diagnosis and prognosis. Agreement about causes and necessary solutions does not “automatically produce corrective action” or the type of activity that the leaders are seeking to encourage. These motivational frames thus refer to specific “prods to action” that involve direct appeals to target audiences. As Snow and Byrd note, “constituents have to be moved from the balcony to the barricades.”

The Al Qaeda leadership’s diagnostic frames would refer to identified ailments, such as specific grievances, hardship, as well as the spread of values deemed unpalatable. The leadership’s prognostic frames would consist of the proposed solutions to these problems, primarily the use of violence, but also unity and a set of principles that would replace the current prevailing norms. The motivational frames, however, are more complex and form the focus of this article. Here the Al Qaeda leadership’s motivational frames are studied through assessing the way in which bin Laden and al-Zawahiri approached the Sunni Muslim audiences that constitute its perceived constituency.

**Methodological Approach**

In order to study the Al Qaeda leadership’s approach to Muslim audiences over time, the current study scrutinized 245 individual communiqués issued by al-Zawahiri and bin Laden. Although the list may not be exhaustive, the review covers the vast majority of the two leaders’ public output from the early 1990s until the end of 2011. Out of the 245 communiqués analyzed, 145 were authored by bin Laden and 100 by al-Zawahiri. The distribution of these can be seen in Figure 1.

Existing studies, such as those conducted by Mendenhall and Pennebaker and Chung, have formulated automated and computerized processing of Al Qaeda communiqués, paying particular attention to specific key words and their relation with a pattern of phrases. This study, by contrast, applies what could be termed “manual coding” as a
qualitative approach, whereby each communiqué is analyzed using a pre-designed checklist of themes.

The focus here is on the development of broader themes, rather than specific words, and the interpretation of ways in which matters are framed and specific narrative components are delivered. To this end, the communiqués under review were read and processed according to a pre-defined template. This template identified three major communicative approaches toward Muslims: (1) positive encouragement and guidance with emphasis on benign factors and rewards for participation, as well as consequences for collective failure; (2) criticism of Muslims for lack of support, warnings against incorrect behavior, and direct references to those who neglect to support the causes of the Al Qaeda leadership; and finally, (3) threats and allegations of apostasy directed toward Muslims, with the implication that they can be targeted. Although these are broad categories where a degree of overlap is, in some cases, possible they nonetheless capture three different aspects of the Al Qaeda leadership’s communicative approach toward Muslims: encouragement, exasperation, and excommunication. The remainder of this article analyzes the outcome of this review.

The Al Qaeda Leadership Approach Toward Sunni Muslim Audiences

The ability of the Al Qaeda leadership to communicate the diagnostic and prognostic components that lie at the heart of the group depends on the quality and nature of the rapport with their “constituents.” Through analyzing the approach toward Muslims, we also get a sense of how the leadership defines “true” Muslims, versus those who are seen as apostates, based on the Salafi principle of excommunication (takfir). It should be noted that in order to make the current analysis more manageable, approaches toward Shi’a Muslims are beyond the focus of the current article.

For the Al Qaeda leadership the communiqués provide an essential vehicle allowing al-Zawahiri and bin Laden to address “constituents” and potential supporters in an emotional narrative that ties together diagnosis and prognosis in messages directed toward specific audiences. Thus, almost every communiqué analyzed contained specific messages, advice, and appeals to the “Islamic nation” or individual Muslim communities that were urged to recognize their obligation to rise up in support of jihad. “On our path to reform,” bin Laden wrote in an open letter to the people of Saudi Arabia in 1995, “we are tasked with bringing the regime’s dangers to the attention of the people.” With their statements, the Al Qaeda leaders hoped to prod the wider Muslim population to act in some way. Muslims, according to the narrative, thus had to “wake up from their sleep” and mobilize. “The situation that Muslims are living in today,” bin Laden argued in 2003, “requires the mobilization of everyone who belongs to this religion and the utilization of his resources.” These “action-orientated” messages, therefore, appear to conform to Benford and Snow’s notions of collective action frames.

Motivational Appeals

The majority of the Al Qaeda leadership communiqués contain some sort of motivational encouragement for the Muslim masses. These appeals elucidate the rewards for “correct” behavior that follows the advice of the Al Qaeda leaders and the price of failure if the ummah fails to respond to this call. These appeals form part of what the Al Qaeda leaders described as their objective, which was to “motivate the nation to support its mujahideen sons financially and morally [with] men, money, equipment and expertise.”

In this sense, therefore, a movement and support network could be created around the “fighting vanguard” that would be sustained beyond the life-time of the Al Qaeda central leadership itself, since—the Al Qaeda leaders hoped—the ummah would recognize their individual duty to support this vanguard. The Al Qaeda leadership’s attempts to reach out to their perceived Muslim constituents and convince them of the merits of Al Qaeda’s diagnosis and prognosis can be divided into two broad approaches. First, there are holistic appeals to the global Islamic ummah, which serve to underscore bin Laden’s and al-Zawahiri’s attempts to nurture some form of global identity and, by extension, to elevate the position of the Al Qaeda leadership on the global stage. Second, there are specific appeals, aimed at identified groups of people or geographic localities.

In terms of global appeals, a large number of communiqués contained segments that addressed the “Islamic nation” or the common Sunni Muslim masses. These frequently related to specific and localized grievances and other immediate developments that were tied to the broader threat emanating from the “Zionist-Crusader” alliance and their local lackeys and agents. These messages encouraged some sort of abstract or physical uprising. “People must do all they can to rouse the nation with all the means in their power; with their tongues, pens, and persons,” bin Laden reminded Muslims a year after the 1998 East Africa bombings.30 The Al Qaeda leaders, therefore, used these global appeals to fulfill their self-ascribed role as “instigators of the nation,” promising that “victory is imminent.”31 What the Muslim nation has to do, according to this narrative, is to follow the path prescribed by Al Qaeda and adhere to the two key prerequisites to successfully amending the status quo: religious purity32 and unity.33 Both of these notions were encouraged through references to common suffering and shared values. Additionally, several statements elucidated the rewards anticipated for “correct behavior,” such as the establishment of a pious and righteous society and the dawn of true social justice and freedom from foreign incursion and cultural corruption. Other messages, in turn, warned of the consequences of collective failure. For example, al-Zawahiri warned in 2006 that if (what Al Qaeda identifies as) the Muslim ummah were to “sacrifice the rule of sharia and bestow legitimacy on those who sell nations and sign the surrender agreements, we will lose both religion and the present life and the land will remain occupied, injustice present, and sanctities violated.”34 These statements differed from the more critical approach toward Muslims, analyzed below, in the sense that these references remained hypothetical, rather than constituting direct accusations.

Specific appeals spoke directly to people living in certain regions or countries or to particular groups of people. The direction of the former was usually dictated by ongoing developments at any given moment, such as the Arab Spring, unrest or conflict in the Palestinian territories and Pakistan, or conflict in Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Here again, the principal diagnostic and prognostic elements of the Al Qaeda discourse were conveyed. As with the global appeals, the messages to the people of these regions presented a stark picture depicting the anticipated rewards of success and consequences of failure.

For example, some specific appeals were directed toward wealthy Muslims, who were asked to do more in supporting Muslims and the mujahideen. These ranged from calls to the rich to invest in deprived areas such as Afghanistan35 to more direct calls for financial support to the mujahideen.36 In many cases, of course, references to rich (or relatively rich) Muslims quickly became more focused on criticizing their lifestyle and obsession with material things, which thus places them in the second communicative category identified, pertaining to criticism of Muslim audiences. In terms of Al Qaeda’s motivational appeals, moreover, a particularly important category is the Muslim youth. “Mohammed’s companions were young men,” bin Laden was keen to remind his audience.
in Al Qaeda’s 1996 Declaration of War. The concept of takfir itself is highly controversial within Salafi circles and even among Islamist extremist sympathizers. Meijer, for instance, describes the concept of takfir as “a monster mainstream Salafism desperately tries to keep in its cage while other currents within the movement have done their best to let it escape.” Some jihadi ideologues have also sought to limit the use of the term, fearful that excessive application of the takfir label, might render jihadis vulnerable to accusations of being like the khawarij, a reference
to a group of Muslims who rejected the Prophet Mohammad’s rule and became seen as extremist outcasts. Mohammad Al-Maqdisi, for instance, described the pronouncement of excommunication according to the following terms:

We do not perform Takfir upon all who work for the governments of Kufr [infidelity]. . . . [W]e only perform Takfir upon the one who has in his work a type of Kufr or Shirk [idolatry] such as participating in the Kufr legislation, or the Taghuti [idol-worshipping] rule, or allegiance to the Mushrikun [idolaters] and Kuffar [the infidels], or aiding them against the people of Tawhid [the one God, i.e. Muslims].

The current analysis would suggest that Al Qaeda was also somewhat cautious in the period under review in declaring Sunni Muslims apostates. Even before merging his group with Al Qaeda, al-Zawahiri was forced to defend his Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) group from accusations of being “takfiri,” insisting that he did not see all Muslims who sinned as apostates. Nonetheless, the notion of takfir and the identification of the criteria that separated apostates—Muslims who supposedly had left the fold of Islam—from mere “sinning” Muslims who had strayed off the true path (but could be guided onto it again) were crucial for justifying the targeting of those who fell within the former category. Struggling to find ways in which to justify the targeting of (in this case Egyptian) members of the security forces in majority Sunni Muslim countries, al-Zawahiri, in his 2008 “open meeting” initiative, offered the following justification:

It is permissible to kill the officers of State Security and the rest of the personnel of the police [in Egypt], whether we declare them unbelievers individually or declare them unbelievers in general, if that is in the framework of a combat campaign . . . of the jihad [in the context of the] obligatory defensive Jihad.

Takfiri declarations, according to this interpretation, could thus be applied to specific groups or more holistically, in relation to a particular “campaign.” Indeed when excommunication in the Al Qaeda leadership statements under review was analyzed, a clear distinction emerged between declared apostasy of clearly identified and specific groups, on the one hand, and broader movements and larger groups of a particular disposition or in relation to particular developments, on the other. Figure 2 places each statement where these two types of takfiri references were identified on a timeline. Understandably, the more specific declarations of apostasy—focusing on regimes, political elites, and their immediate support structure—were much more common than those excommunicating larger (and often vaguer) groups of people. Furthermore, apart from a few early references to the apparent infidelity of those who embraced democracy, most of these more wide-reaching accusations of apostasy appeared mostly toward the latter half of the period under review, particularly in the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and later in connection with counterinsurgency campaigns in Pakistan against the Tehrik-i-Taliban and other Islamist militants.

The early takfiri references directed toward specific rulers and elites consisted primarily of bin Laden’s denunciation of the Saudi regime and, to a lesser extent, al-Zawahiri’s condemnation of the Egyptian government. In the case of bin Laden’s statements and “open letters,” however, his focus was often on the deeds of the Saudi ruling elite that, according to bin Laden’s interpretation, undermined Islam. These decisions would bring the rulers “shame in this world and torture in hell,” bin Laden warned. The Saudi regime was fighting an “open war” against Muslims and it had to be stopped at all costs. These statements,
although clearly denouncing the governance of Saudi Arabia as un-Islamic—thus making it permissible to overthrow the regime—were not as direct in the sense of takfiri rhetoric, as were later references toward the Saudi regime. In 2002, for instance, bin Laden spoke of the “high treason” of the Saudi ruling family (after it offered to broker peace accords involving Israel and Palestinian representatives) and described Prince Abdallah bin-Abd al-Aziz as a “Zio-American in Saudi government clothes.”

Two years later, bin Laden unequivocally announced that the Saudi regime had committed deeds that “that lead to one becoming non-Muslim.” It had supported the “infidel America against Muslims,” which was “one of the ten things that lead to one becoming non-Muslim.”

What about more holistic declarations of apostasy? Again, it should be stressed, these were never completely limitless and never without caveats in the Al Qaeda leadership statements analyzed. Furthermore, as noted, these references were particularly notable in relation to specific conflicts and crises, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and elsewhere.

Although more a warning of what could become rather than a specific act of excommunication, bin Laden’s November 2001 statement, issued as the Taliban were retreating from their Afghan strongholds, appears to fall within this category of broader application of takfiri. “Anyone who lines up behind Bush in this campaign,” bin Laden warned, “has committed one of the 10 actions that sully one’s Islam. Muslim scholars are unanimous that allegiance to the infidels and support for them against the believers [i.e., the Taliban] is one of the major acts that sully Islam.”

In another statement, issued six months later, bin Laden appeared to go even further, when he announced that “cooperation with the West against what they call Islamic extremism, whether it’s performed by one word, or a declaration, or any other manner, either directly or indirectly, is apostasy from the religion of Allah Most High.” “Whoever refuses the principle of terror against the enemy,” bin Laden argued, “also refuses the commandment of Allah […] and His shariah.”

Supporting the government of Hamid Karzai, moreover, would involve leaving the “fold of Islam.”

Similar messages were directed toward the people of Iraq, as hostilities commenced in 2003. In a statement issued shortly before the outbreak of war, bin Laden warned that:
Whoever supported the United States or the rulers of Arab countries, . . . approved [of] their actions and followed them in this Crusade war by fighting with them or providing bases and administrative support, or any form of support, even by words, to kill Muslims in Iraq, should know that they are apostates and outside the community of Muslims. It is permissible to spill their blood and take their property.56

The great irony, of course, is that Al Qaeda itself became responsible for scores of Muslim deaths in Iraq, partly due to a justificatory narrative that permitted the targeting of Muslim “collaborators.” A year into the war, for instance, bin Laden issued a statement warning that: “whoever assisted the infidels against Muslims like assisting the occupying forces and what derived from it like the temporary or permanent government has committed sin; his money and loyal support network is sanctioned and his wife would be divorced from him.”57 These apostate non-Muslims, according to bin Laden, included those who failed to join or support the mujahideen as well as anyone who offered support to the new government of Iraq or the general infrastructure in the country, including employees of haulage companies who delivered goods. These people had “defected from religion and must be fought.”58

This proliferation of more general takfiri references, that go beyond the excommunication of specific political elites for instance, appears to coincide with important crises affecting the Al Qaeda leadership. The rise in general takfiri references in relation to Afghanistan and Pakistan seem directly related to the leadership’s anxiety over the loss of a safe haven and loyal support network. Iraq, meanwhile, presented opportunities at a time of a deep crisis for the Al Qaeda leadership and provided chaos and disorder that could be fomented and exploited.

The two communicative approaches toward Sunni Muslim audiences, however, consisting of motivational appeals and encouragement on the one hand and excommunication on the other, do not cover the range of feelings expressed towards these audiences in the Al Qaeda leadership statements. A substantial proportion of the messages addressing some of Al Qaeda’s perceived “constituents” convey remarkably stark denunciations and criticism of these people that still fall well short of explicit excommunication. The next section explores some of these references.

**Denunciation of the Ummah**

In March 2008, bin Laden issued a statement where he identified three groups of Muslims. First, there were the mujahideen and their supporters. Second, there were the apathetic—those who refrained from supporting the jihad. Third, there were advocates of the Christian–Zionist conspiracy.59 The third category appears to refer to Muslims who are generally deemed apostates in the Al Qaeda rhetoric and thus covered under the takfiri banner discussed in the previous section. The first group bin Laden identified constitutes the ideal type—the role model other Muslims are urged to adopt and emulate. The second category of Muslims in bin Laden’s summary, however, constitutes those who might be potential participants and supporters but have thus far failed to heed the call and recognize what the Al Qaeda leaders insist is their individual obligation: to support the fighting vanguard of mujahideen and embrace their agenda. As described above, the Al Qaeda leaders—through their statements—have directed repeated appeals toward this category of Muslims, encouraging them to offer whatever support they can. These appeals are both general, underscoring Al Qaeda’s image of a global Muslim identity, and more specific; targeting particular groups or geographic regions.
A small number of communiqués suggested that failure of the ummah to mobilize could only be due to the inability of the Al Qaeda leadership to deliver the message effectively. In *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*, for instance, al-Zawahiri wrote:

> The jihad movement must come closer to the masses, defend their honour, fend off injustice, and lead them to the path of guidance and victory... We must win the people’s confidence, respect, and affection. The people will not love us unless they felt that we love them, care about them, and are ready to defend them... We must not blame the nation for not responding or not living up to the task. Instead, we must blame ourselves for failing to deliver the message, show compassion, and sacrifice.60

Al-Zawahiri, however, does not appear to have stayed true to this principle for long. He wrote *Knights*, his memoirs, during a period of relative stability for Al Qaeda. The post-9/11 period, however, ushered in a tumultuous new reality which appears to have impacted on the content of the leadership’s public communiqués. By the end of 2002, for instance, al-Zawahiri issued a statement warning the ummah against falling to “defeatism” and ignoring the dangers it faced.61 Almost identical sentiments were expressed in one of al-Zawahiri’s “interviews” with As-Sahab where he argued that: “our fundamental enemy is this defeatist spirit, hesitation, and attachment to safety which motivates us to backtrack whenever the tyrants attack us and to plead with them” and to protest only with means they deem acceptable.62 Al-Zawahiri would of course, as is now well documented, be proven wrong a few years later as the Arab masses courageously confronted the ruling elites during the events of the “Arab Spring,” adopting methods of public protest that had been dismissed by the Al Qaeda leadership.

Reflecting on the perceived “obstacles to jihad” in a 2005 statement, al-Zawahiri argued that the mujahideen were not being as successful as initially envisaged because the ummah was too afraid of its individual safety and the safety of family members. Muslims, according to Zawahiri, were essentially cowards and as long as this “malignant illness” kept spreading, there would be no hope for victory. “The Muslim ummah has turned into a pile of people assassinated by subjugation, ignorance, fear and resignation,” al-Zawahiri complained.63 Thus, al-Zawahiri had reneged on the principle he defined in his 2001 memoirs where the failure to achieve greater mass mobilization (or recognition of Al Qaeda’s agenda) would be blamed on Al Qaeda alone. Even in his 2008 “open meeting”—an initiative (never again repeated) to reach out to Muslims and explain Al Qaeda’s ambitions—al-Zawahiri could not resist expressing his continued frustration with what he saw as the failure of normal Muslims to support Al Qaeda: “I call on the Islamic nation to fear the day when God will ask it why it failed to back its mujahideen brothers;” he warned.64

What about bin Laden? The Al Qaeda leader repeatedly stated—as did other jihadi leaders such as Abdullah Azzam and Mohammad Salam Faraj—that fighting or supporting jihad was an individual obligation—the duty of each Muslim. In numerous statements, therefore, bin Laden warned of the sin Muslims would incur if they neglected this duty. In a statement issued in early 2003, bin Laden warned that: “Jihad today is compulsory on the entire Ummah and she will remain in sin until she produces her sons, her wealth and her power to the extent of being able to wage Jihad and defend against the evil of the disbelievers.”65 This warning was reiterated in numerous subsequent statements. The notion rested on Al Qaeda’s fundamental prognosis, which required all Muslims to celebrate (and support) jihad. Those who did not would be seen as disobedient, lazy, and acquiescent.66
As with the takfiri references analyzed in the previous section, these signs of more general exasperation toward Muslims appeared to have different manifestations in the Al Qaeda communiqués analyzed. The preceding paragraphs discussed holistic references, applied to the general Muslim public. Numerous disparaging or critical messages, however, were explicitly directed towards specific localized audiences. These included the Pakistani population that was blamed for “allowing” the “agents of crusaders and Jews” to “hurt” the Taliban. Speaking about the 2007 siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad, al-Zawahiri asked: “aren’t there any honourable ones in Pakistan? Isn’t there anyone who prefers the hereafter to the life of this world?”

In terms of seeking to develop motivational narratives designed to mobilize groups of people and the broader public, the way in which the Al Qaeda leadership appears to have alienated vast swathes of this perceived constituency through expressing mounting levels of exasperation in its public communiqués seems remarkable. In the ten years after the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with the response from the majority of Muslims to Al Qaeda’s call to jihad. Rather than placing the blame on themselves or Al Qaeda’s chosen prognosis, these leadership messages increasingly sought to present normal Muslims as responsible for the failures of Al Qaeda. Messages critical of Muslim masses, normally in specific geographic localities, had emerged in a limited number of communiqués prior to the 9/11 attacks but became far more prominent after the attacks and particularly in the wake of specific crises. Figure 3 places these critical references toward Muslim publics on a timeline. This includes the general ummah or Islamic nation as well as more specific populations, such as Pakistanis, Afghans, and others.

When viewed in conjunction with Figure 2, it appears that the tone adopted in specific appeals in al-Zawahiri’s and bin Laden’s statements became harsher toward Sunni Muslims in the ten years after the 9/11 attacks, compared with the same time frame prior to the attacks. In this regard, the flight from the safe haven of Afghanistan appears to have had a particular impact.

Conclusions

A dissection of the Al Qaeda leadership’s statements reveals that different communicative approaches are deployed toward different types of Sunni Muslim audiences. Predictably, the
two most prominent Al Qaeda leaders—Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri—have placed some specific groups outside the fold of Islam, thus declaring them apostates who have betrayed core tenets of the faith. This applies in particular to political and military elites as well as members of the wider intelligentsia. Those remaining, who in the Al Qaeda leaders’ eyes are still true Muslims, constitute potential participants or supporters of Al Qaeda’s agenda, at least as far as its leadership is concerned. Benford and Snow’s concept of collective action frames assumes movement leaders will attempt to “sell” their notions of correct diagnosis and appropriate prognosis in motivational appeals to these perceived constituents in order to “bring them from the balcony to the barricades.”

One way in which these appeals can be studied is to analyze specific messages intended for these audiences where they are urged to accept the described diagnosis and prognosis offered by the leadership. This study found, however, that although encouragement and positive appeal are present in much of the Al Qaeda leadership discourse under review, a critical and disparaging approach toward these audiences is increasingly prominent. These are distinct from takfiri denunciations.

This critical stance is perhaps indicative of growing frustration that emerged with the lack of response from Muslim masses in the ten years after the 9/11 attacks. Indeed, criticism appeared, at times, a more common feature of bin Laden’s and (particularly) al-Zawahiri’s approaches toward Muslims than did praise or gratitude. This, coupled with the proliferation in takfiri accusations that included large groups of people rather than individuals or very specific elites in the decade after 9/11, may be a sign of how the Al Qaeda leadership’s public statements changed as the pressure on the leadership increased. Although the Al Qaeda rhetoric has celebrated the 9/11 attacks as a great success, therefore, the attacks (or more accurately their aftermath and the fall of the Taliban regime) may have prompted a change in communicative approach toward Muslims in the public messages, where a negative undertone has become increasingly prominent.

In a physical sense, there is no doubt that the Al Qaeda central leadership—as it was originally constituted—is dying. Few now remain from the initial group that established Al Qaeda or helped shape its early agenda. This demise of the first generation of Al Qaeda’s leadership was always inevitable and sometimes recognized in the statements under review. But will the words of the Al Qaeda leaders live on and continue to inspire? It is clear that individual jihadi leaders and their communiqués and publications can have great impact and continue to resonate after their deaths. Books and statements by Abdullah Azzam and Mohammad Salam Faraj, for instance, continue to be translated, repackaged, and distributed online. There also seem to be concerted efforts to ensure that Anwar Al-Awlaki’s message continues to be heard through various publications and user-generated content. The long-term legacy of the Al Qaeda leaders will depend on a number of factors, not least on the extent to which violent attacks against Muslims continue to be perpetrated in the name of Al Qaeda. This article, however, has sought to focus on one aspect of the Al Qaeda leadership’s preoccupations, namely the dissemination of public statements. The findings suggest that even here—through initiatives that were virtually completely under the control of the leadership itself—signs of frustration that illustrated the isolation of the Al Qaeda leadership began appearing years before the seminal events of the Arab Spring. In this sense, the Al Qaeda leadership appeared to be alienating the very people it claimed to represent.

Notes

22. Ibid.
25. It should be noted that this study relies on translated statements and transcripts (although often Al Qaeda’s own).
32. Bin Laden, for instance, remarked in 2003 that the Muslim ummah was the “greatest human power on the face of the earth [but] only if it establishes Islam properly.” Bin Laden, untitled statement, unknown publisher (February 2003). Transcript from IntelCenter, Words of Osama bin Laden Vol. 1.
33. A large number of communiqués urged Muslims to unite in the pursuit of common objectives that transcended geographic and tribal boundaries.
34. Al-Zawahiri, “The Alternative is Da’wa and Jihad.”
39. See note 33.
45. The label was used, for instance, by Abu Hamza al-Masri as he sought to distance himself from the more extremist elements of the Algerian jihad. See “The Khawaarij and Jihad” (by Abu Hamza al-Masri, edited by Ibn Umar).
46. Mohammad Al-Maqdisi, This is Our Aqidah (no date). Available at http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/This%20is%20our%20Aqeedah.pdf (accessed 29 April 2013), p. 59.


55. See note 33.


60. Al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*.


64. Al-Zawahiri, “The Open Meeting with Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, Part Two.”

65. See note 33.


