

Online Arguments against Al-Qaeda: An Exploratory Analysis

by Gilbert Ramsay

Abstract

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exploratory Study

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Results

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

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

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

Initiating Argumentative Encounters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conducting Argumentative Encounters

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

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

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

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

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

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

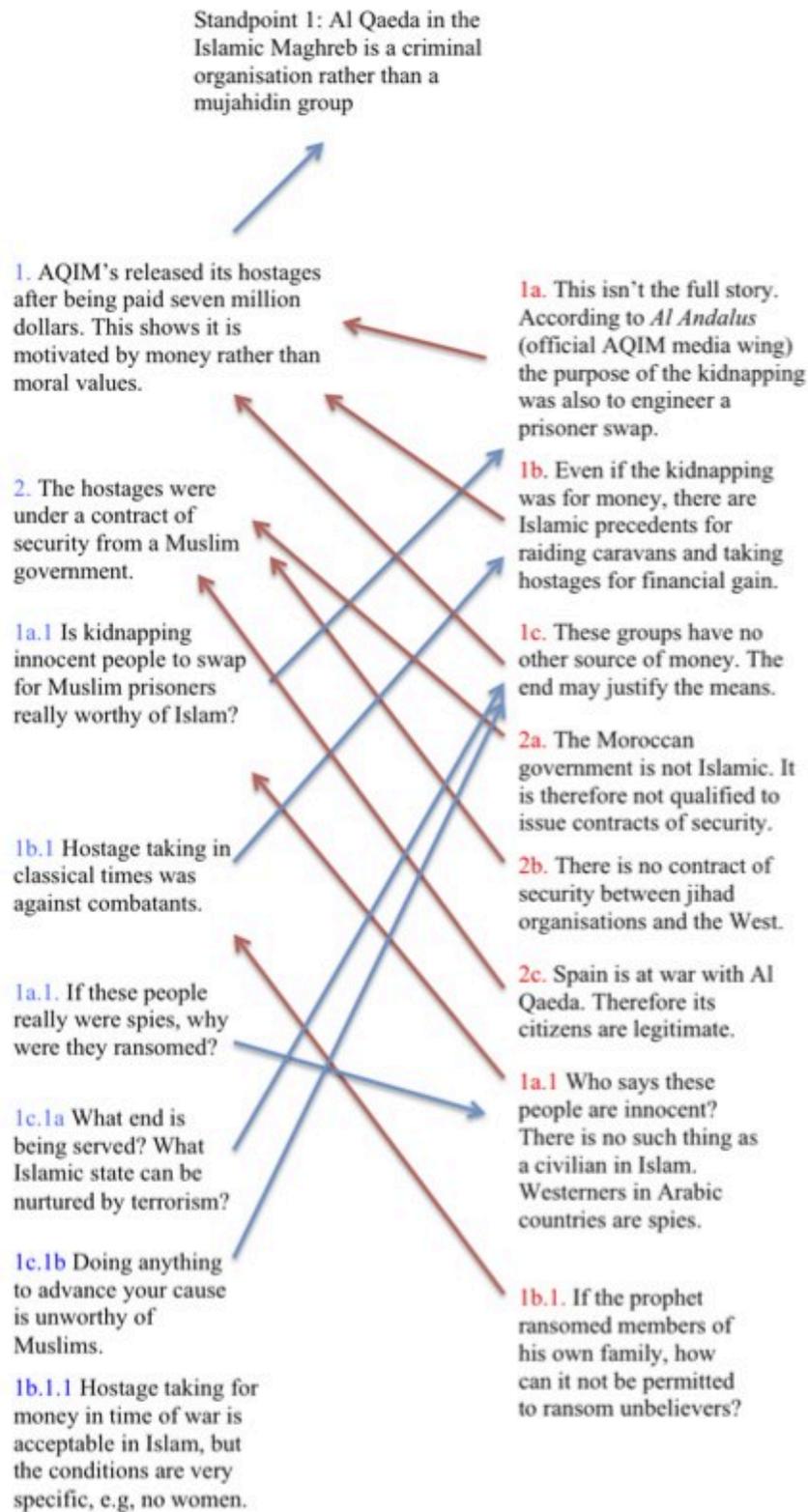
The organisation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb received seven million dollars from the government of Spain for the release from captivity of three captives in its possession, according to news sources from the newspaper *El Mundo* and the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

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

- The captives were civilians, not combatants
 - These captives were kidnapped after they entered an Islamic country and accepted a contract of security from Muslims
 - The aim of the kidnapping was to obtain money
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This is a new *bida'a* (religious innovation) which does not resemble anything in the life of the prophet, nor from the age of the rightly guided caliphs. I ask how our brothers justify this operation as jihad in the path of God. For we know that everything that is founded on falsehood is, itself falsehood.

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



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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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