

A weapon of violence

Al Qaeda and Taliban video

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Television is a weapon for strategic communication and violence. Al Qaeda and the Taliban have capitalized on it to articulate a narrative, and drive their themes and messages. Osama bin Laden's attack on the World Trade Towers on 9/11 stands out. Planes destroyed the twin towers. But the weapon that provided impact globally was television.¹ Through that medium, horrifying images were communicated and strong emotional responses evoked.

Al Qaeda's growing sophistication

Al Qaeda's grasp of new media technologies is impressive. But unfolding events such as the 'Arab Spring' present new challenges to a group battered by Bin Laden's death. His successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has tried to carve out a role in these scenarios and failed. In May, he unveiled a video declaring: "On more than one occasion, I have called upon the Arab people in general and the Egyptian people in particular to revolt against the regimes of corruption and tyranny, which oppressed us."² Nobody much cared.

The Arab Spring may prove a dagger thrust into the heart of violent Islamist ideology. It is an outpouring of frustration, resentment, and rebellion against authoritarian governments that have used oppression, corruption and patronage to constrain freedom and opportunity except for favoured elites. It is motivated by a desire among citizens - notably younger generations in nations in which the young form significant percentages of the population, but which has drawn in older generations as well - to take control of their own destiny. The demonstrators want to decide their future themselves. They are not looking for Islamists like Zawahiri to impose their version of religious law, substituting one form of authoritarian rule for another. Critically, the Arab Spring is a profoundly *Arab* and *Muslim* expression. The West did not initiate it, and doesn't sponsor, drive, or control it. That knocks out the underpinnings from Bin Laden's 1996 *fatwa*, which defined Al Qaeda's rationale for action in its criticism of *foreign, non-Muslim* parties. That political reality stiffens its challenge in the current political environment.

Still, video remains key to its efforts to recruit and mobilize within the global Muslim community. The power of modern electronic media lies in its capacity to achieve resonance: it affords immediate, direct access to the mind of a listener or viewer. It provides visual context for a message. It is hard to change fixed beliefs and the best political communication rarely tries to do so. As Tony Schwartz, who produced what is arguably the single most powerful television political ad in history (the 1964 U.S. presidential campaign ad *Daisy*), would put it, effective media provides stimuli that evoke feelings an audience already has and provides a context for a viewer to express

these feelings.³ It takes what is unconscious in the mind, makes it conscious, and directs an individual to support a particular message and a narrative that gives meaning to the message. The challenge is less to get things “across to people as much as out of people.”⁴ Al Qaeda has shown a clear grasp of this political truth in its use of the best techniques of Western political communication to promote its own narratives and drive its themes and messages.

Al Qaeda is both a vertical hierarchy and a horizontally dispersed network, without being constrained by either. It is an innovative, open-source, interactive, participatory operation. It offers distinct agendas and publicizes its decisions in the public domain rather than by communicating secretly through compartments. Using the Internet, anyone can provide input into its strategy and tactics. New participants can easily enter this world. They may borrow or adopt from Al Qaeda’s ideological pronouncements, but in the Information Age they can form new groups and undertake violent acts without contacting a central organization or securing permission.

The media space in which the ideas and ideology of violent Islamists operate starts at the grassroots, with one-on-one relationships, and reaches upward to include paid and earned media. All elements of this space may interact with the others. Their words and actions aim for political impact in this space. Their kinetic operations are geared to achieving political information effects, not winning tactical military engagements. What matters is how the target audiences perceive its actions. Their tactics are geared to tapping into the emotions and existing dispositions of intended audiences to forge support for its narratives and to motivate people to action. It operates throughout this media space, and defeating it requires engaging simultaneously at every level.

In political communication, video provides context. It combines emotion and persuasion to shape the political environment. It has a unique power to turn attitudes into political will, and to galvanize ideas into action. Al Qaeda operatives grasp that. Their sophisticated videos give global range and power to its rhetorical appeals to its target audiences. They use a variety of distribution channels, including the Internet, cassettes, mobile phones and DVDs. Some videos are picked up and shown as news items on Western broadcasts, providing new reach into mainstream audiences. They are adept at uploading a video simultaneously to several websites and posting messages on numerous others to attract audiences throughout the Muslim diaspora.⁵ Many of the products are aimed at terrorist-cell leaders, who can download them to create DVDs or cassettes which can be shown in appropriate venues. Responsibility for the production of these videos lies with an entirely different cell than those that do the fighting.

Al Qaeda understands better than most of its Western adversaries that winning a political debate rests as much as anything on how the debate is framed. Although its messages are negative, it maintains impressive message discipline in casting its actions in terms and with images that drive a narrative about standing up for the dignity and integrity of Islam, battling injustice and repression at the hands of the West, fighting

against foreign occupation, rebuffing a modern Christian Crusade to dominate Muslims, anti-Zionism, nationalism and related themes.

These videos legitimize violent tactics. They arouse fear among adversaries through images of gross brutality, such as beheadings. They espouse doctrine and ideas through speeches by leaders such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, and until their deaths, Bin Laden and Iraqi terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. They glorify suicide attacks. They record sniper attacks and destruction using weapons such as improvised explosive devices to demonstrate the ability to achieve military success. They show how to use weapons and kill people.

Iraq: capitalizing on battles

Al Qaeda videos produced in Iraq demonstrate Al Qaeda's strategy and tactics in the use of videos. That war may be winding down, but it is far from over. The duration of the U.S. presence there remains unclear. Importantly, videos used in Iraq have wider application. Al Qaeda will use images from this conflict to argue its broader theme that the war exposes the U.S. - the 'far enemy' - as fundamentally hostile to Islam and Muslims, and must be defeated. Its videos have attacked Americans as crusaders; abusers of women and prisoners; sponsors of violence who destroy cities, homes and families; and as infidels who seek to destroy Islam, divide Iraq and Muslims, kill innocents while protecting their own troops, and spread injustice and repression. The videos also tout success stories, martyr biographies and operational news. Most are short, but some are much longer. *The wedding of martyrs*, for example, is a 30-minute documentary about the ambush of a U.S. patrol in Iraq.

Two examples show off Al Qaeda's political savvy. Produced by a group calling itself The Flag of Truth (Raya ul-Bayinah), *The Re-emergence of the Crusaders* twisted the meaning of a single sentence that President George W. Bush uttered to Congress into a broadside against American credibility. "This Crusade, it's going to take a while," Bush stated. The magic word was "Crusade." The video mash-up intercut the statement over and over with denunciations of Muslims by Christian Evangelical leaders, images of American soldiers bearing Christian symbols and images that suggested mistreatment of Iraqi civilians.⁶ It portrayed the American presence in Iraq as an effort to promote Christianity, divide and destroy Islam, and humiliate and undermine the faith of Muslims. It argued that to achieve these goals America will do or say anything to win, including murdering innocent Iraqi civilians. It is powerful media.

The Republic of Fallujah was a one-hour documentary produced by al-Arabiya Television. A key segment featured the family of Hajj Mahmood, a resident of the Iraqi city of Fallujah, who volunteered for the Red Crescent during the first battle for the city in April 2004, the Coalition's *Operation Vigilant Resolve*. The Mahmoods cooked and delivered food to needy families and fighters. Coalition forces called off the operation after an agreement was reached with local residents to keep insurgents out of the city. After the second battle, *Operation Phantom Fury*, in November 2004, al-Arabiya went

back to see what had happened to the Mahmoods. The segment is a powerful before-and-after look that jihadis used to advance the argument that they were fighting against a brutal and unjust foreign presence. The “before and after” segment tells a simple, easily understood story. The “before” images depict a happy middle class household. The “after” images depict images of a home totally destroyed. Insurgents turned it into a compelling message denouncing the arrogance of American power and the destructive consequences of American tactics in Iraq.

The video’s impact turns, as did *The Re-emergence of the Crusaders*, on the combination of words, music and images that Iraqis saw on television. Indeed, so powerful are video images that, as George Washington University Professor Marc Lynch observed, Al Jazeera’s media coverage of the first battle, where its crews were present, “contradicted the coalition’s narrative so graphically and dramatically that it determined the outcome of that battle.”⁷

It is not clear who actually destroyed the Mahmood home. Battle may have destroyed it. Insurgents may have destroyed it in order to create a photo-op to discredit American operations. A key lesson is that the Al Qaeda insurgents are ruthless in capitalizing on any battle to develop and drive the messages that support their rationale, and they show sophistication in comprehending what images help achieve that goal.

Charismatic leaders

The fortunes of war can shift rapidly. Al Qaeda built its global appeal in no small measure around Bin Laden’s charisma. That quality was not inherent. It was a smartly constructed image rooted in a well-devised narrative, articulated in images and language, about a virtuous, humble man who worked hard, had ability and dreams and, moved by the grace of God, left his rich lifestyle to lead a jihad in harsh surroundings. Bin Laden symbolized Al Qaeda’s ideal: a warrior-leader, a modern Saladin, engaged in a historical struggle that is a part of divine destiny. Images reinforced this narrative: jihadi propaganda depicted him in images in which he wore combat gear or a camouflage jacket seated next to an AK-47. His press interviews were held outside caves.

Bin Laden’s death creates a void. Zawahiri and other violent Islamists lack his global appeal, although Yemen’s Anwar al-Awlaki - an American jihadist - is an excellent communicator for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The shoes of charismatic leaders are seldom filled. Projecting that appeal beyond national borders is especially difficult. Chechen leader Shamil Basayev, Tamil Tigers leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran, FARC leader Paul Reyes and Shining Path leader Abimael Guzman established themselves as parochial national icons, but their appeal was limited to their own countries. Although now side lined by serious illness, Hugo Chavez has tried hard. He’s smarter than his critics recognize. The \$50 billion he’s given away has earned him goodwill among some political leaders. Still, the *chavistas* reside in Venezuela.

In modern times, only Gamal Abdel Nasser and Ruhollah Khomeini have attained the status as trans-national iconic figures. Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. He became the standard bearer for secular nationalism and Pan Arabism. Khomeini hated America, but Shiites found inspiration in his long opposition to a hated Shah. An enormously resourceful politician, he seized power by forging a broad coalition and led a historic revolution in Iran that reverberates today beyond its borders. Give them credit. Each put themselves on the line for what they believed.

Al Qaeda will try to imbue other leaders with charisma. That won't be easy. Actual leadership, as much as ideas, fuel causes. Deaths of charismatic leaders matter. Bin Laden cohorts like Zawahiri will fight on, but they must climb a steeper slope. For such groups, effective propaganda requires viable, effective, articulate leaders.

The Taliban: violence as a strategy

The Taliban tried hard to dominate the information battle space. It has learned from Iraqi insurgents. It has built a formidable network to define its goals and get out its narrative, especially at the grassroots level in Pashtun areas.⁸ There is irony here. When they ruled Afghanistan, the Taliban banned television. Today they distribute videos to drive their messages.⁹ The social philosophy may be medieval, but it embraces the latest technology.

A media committee produces videos accompanied by Quranic chants (*'nasheeds'*)¹⁰ delivered to Al Jazeera,¹¹ transmitted on cell phones,¹² posted on Facebook, using through channels such as its websites *alemarah-leanet*, *shahamat.info*, and *Al Emirate* ('The Emirate'), which it maintains against efforts to shut it down by switching providers,¹³ and finally a YouTube account, 'Istqlalmedia'. Uploaded videos are stored on multiple file-hosting services, creating dozens or hundreds of ways to access them on the Internet.¹⁴ The Taliban also distribute DVDs to villages, where they can be viewed individually or in small groups. The production values of the videos can be excellent.

The videos employ songs, religious chants and poetry appealing to nationalism and Islamic pride,¹⁵ and to convey a greater sense of coherence than they actually enjoy.¹⁶ Songs serve as ring tones for cell phones.¹⁷ Pamphlets, magazines, mobile and satellite telephones, radio and television, fax, Twitter,¹⁸ text-messaging, night-letters and the Internet are used in tandem with video.¹⁹ Propaganda is expressed in multiple languages, including English, Pashto, Dari, Urdu and Arabic.²⁰

Rapid response has become standard. Taliban spokesmen waste no time contacting journalists after attacks. They use email and text messages to issue press releases.²¹ There is a mantra. They denounce International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) injuries to civilians or to their property, such as defiling Islam by burning the Quran.²² Much claims are false. Rarely do they disclose their own casualties or identify their commanders. The focus in their videos is on combat success, and the videos are couched in the language of combat,²³ even as they drive messages about the clash of Muslim and Christian

civilizations, hammer “Jews and Christians and their rented Afghan Army,”²⁴ blast Hamid Karzai’s government as an American puppet, and condemn ISAF as occupiers.²⁵ One Dari-language video has invited ‘Believers’ for jihad to fight government corruption in Kabul.²⁶

More recently, *Al-emera* has uploaded a video that dismisses as American propaganda media reports suggesting that Taliban officials may negotiate peace. Reportedly, rumours about talks are creating distrust among mid-level Taliban leadership, which is divided over the issue. The video may also represent an Al Qaeda effort to quell that discourse and communicate resolve.²⁷

International audience

Taliban content lacks the political sophistication of Al Qaeda videos but they do have power. Two videos illustrate its approach. One depicts the cold-blooded murder of sixteen captured Pakistani policemen. A masked Taliban commander accuses the police of killing Pakistani children in Swat. “These are the enemies of Islam who originated from Pakistan, who have abandoned Islam,” he pronounces.²⁸ The video has three confluent objectives. First, argue that the Taliban message stands for justice. Second, demoralize Pakistani police. Third, show that they are powerful.

Does it work? Polling in Pakistan by Pew Global Attitudes Research²⁹ has shown that Taliban violence alienates Pakistanis, although support for using the Pakistan Army to fight extremists has diminished over the last two years from 53 per cent to 37 per cent. Polling data suggests that Afghans also hold no love for them.³⁰ One can argue that the Taliban strategy of violence against civilians is misfiring. Not accidentally do they try and deny responsibility for civilian injuries or deaths. It may prove their Achilles Heel. But Taliban violence instills unease and excites fears that neither the Afghan nor Pakistan governments can protect their citizens.

One must avoid hasty generalization. While Taliban violence against citizens turns off many, Muslim youths yearning for excitement are finding it in the DVD stalls in Kabul. Taliban attacks that kill American or ISAF forces excite them. The videos include images of exploding military vehicles, troops “tossed high in the air,” and “terrified foreigners being dragged and mutilated.”³¹ Journalist Pamela Constable reports that the videos sell for prices comparable to those that clips of pop videos bring.³²

Why do Afghan youths root for Taliban murderers? Journalist Neil MacFarquhar observed in years of covering the Middle East that people in the region whatever rationale the U.S. articulates about standing up for the little guy, “the U.S. is almost always seen as promoting its own self-interests,” and they “harbor a certain admiration for anyone willing to stand up for it.”³³

The second example of the Taliban’s approach is POW videos, another favourite topic. In one, captured Pfc Bowe Bergdahl is presented as downcast and frightened. He states:

"I'm a prisoner. I want to go home. This war isn't worth the waste of human life that has cost both Afghanistan and the U.S."³⁴ The audiences are not Afghans but Americans and ISAF forces. The objective: demoralize.

Clearly the Taliban seek to demonstrate the ability to succeed, create momentum, demoralize the enemy. What has changed is that today the Taliban have an international audience. Information Operations (IO) specialist Jack Guy, who served as a senior IO consultant in Afghanistan in 2010, observes that "the Taliban have focused on specific countries like Spain and the Netherlands successfully to encourage them to bring their troops home. It's difficult to obtain reliable metrics on how successful other Taliban media or ISAF media has been."³⁵

Like Al Qaeda, the Taliban continue to develop sophistication in the use of video propaganda, recognizing that destroying the will of an adversary to fight, neutralizing enemies, and winning over the complicity or support of target audiences matters as much or even more than anything to who wins or who loses a war.

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1. Mark Danner also noticed this. See: "Words in a /time of War: On Rhetoric, Truth, and Power," *What Orwell Didn't Know: Propaganda and the New Face of Politics*, p.
2. Al-Zawahiri urges Saudi Uprising," Zawahiri video, *Ansar al-Mujahidin Network*, May 21, 2011.
3. Tony Schwartz, *The Responsive Chord* (New York: Anchor Press, 1973), p. 93
4. *Ibid.*, p. 96
5. The BBC documentary 'Jihad_TV.avi' available at <http://video.google.ca/videoplay?docid=6652279024382177865&total=31&start=0&num=10&so=o&type=search&plindex=9>, explores this pattern in detail.
6. The center for International Issues Research identified versions of this video on Arabic, Chechen and Indonesian websites in a variety of languages.
7. Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 6
8. Tom Foxley, "Countering Taliban Information Operations in Afghanistan," *NDU Press*: <http://www.ndu.edu/press/countering-taliban-information-operations.html>.
9. See, e.g., Ivan Watson, "Taliban enlists video in fight for Afghanistan," NPR, November 2, 2006.
10. Bashir Ahmad Gwakh, "Taliban employs modern weapons in 'war of words,'" supra.
11. "Taliban's propaganda war in Afghanistan," *Al Jazeera*, October 16, 2007.
12. "Wired cites RFE in article about Taliban communications efforts," *States News Service*, March 17, 2011.
13. Jason Motlagh, "Afghanistan's Propaganda War: The Taliban's Public Relations Machine," *US News.com*, November 12, 2008.

14. "Is this finally catching on?", *Jawa Report*, December 17, 2009.
15. See, e.g., video of suicide attacks. The attacker speaks in English, asking his parents to be proud that he is a martyr: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bel7Trt49hE>.
16. Jason Motlagh, "Afghanistan's Propaganda War: The Taliban's Public Relations Machine," *US News.com*, November 12, 2008.
17. Nahal toose, "Taliban using sophisticated media network," *USA Today*, July 24, 2008.
18. The account @alemarahweb was opened in 2010 and posts tweets in Pashtun. Some tweets are also sent in English. See: JM Tuazon, "Taliban boosts propaganda with English tweets," *GMA News OnLine*, May 13, 2011: <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/220521/technology/taliban-boosts-propaganda-with-english-tweets>
19. See: Tom Foxley, "Countering Taliban Information Operations in Afghanistan," supra.
20. Abdulhadi Hairan, "A profile of the Taliban's propaganda tactics," *Huffington Post*, February 1, 2010. Hairan offers a detailed description of the full spectrum of Taliban propaganda tactics.
21. Dawood Azami, "Taliban slick propaganda confronts US," *BBC Persian and Pashto*: August 3, 2009: <http://forums.islamicawakening.com/f18/bbc-taliban-slick-propaganda-confronts-us-27215/>
22. Abdulhadi Hairan, "A profile of the Taliban's propaganda tactics," supra, discussing an article appearing in the Taliban propaganda magazine *Shahamat* (The Bravery).
23. See, e.g., <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yi3gQ8lmbQE>; and, posted on YouTube's site, the Open Source Center Report of 30/11/09 detailing the elements of the 7-minute, 38-second video: <http://www.4law.co.il/tal1.pdf>.
24. Bashir Ahmad Gwakh, "Taliban employs modern weapons in 'war of words,'" *ISN/RFE*, March 22, 2011: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/ISN-Insights/Detail?lng=en&id=127887&contextid734=127887&contextid735=127885&abid=127885>
25. Abdulhadi Hairan, "A profile of the Taliban's propaganda tactics," supra.
26. Killid, "The Jihad Propaganda," *The Killid Group*, February 26, 2011: <http://tkg.af/english/reports/political/425-the-jihad-propaganda>
27. "Taliban denial of talks," *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, July 26, 2011.
28. See: Bill Ardolino and Bill Roggio, "Video of brutal Taliban execution of Pakistani policemen emerges," *Long War Journal*, July 18, 2011.
29. ""Support for Campaign Against Extremists Wanes," *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, June 21, 2011: <http://pewglobal.org/2011/06/21/u-s-image-in-pakistan-falls-no-further-following-bin-laden-killing/>. Hostility to the U.S. also remains high, with around three-quarters of the population asserting an "unfavorable" opinion of the U.S. Id.
30. See: "Views improve sharply in Afghanistan, though criticisms of the U.S. stay high," *ABC News*, January 11, 2010, reporting on a poll by ABC News, the BBC and ARD German TV, which showed that more Afghans saw the Taliban as the main source of their country's strife, while fewer blamed the U.S. and NATO forces.
31. Pamela Constable, "In Kabul, Taliban videos hold allure," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2010.
32. Id.

33. Neil MacFarquhar, The Media Relations Department of Hizbollah Wishes You a Happy Birthday: Unexpected Encounters in the changing Middle East (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), pp. 72-73.
34. "Taliban release video of captured U.S. soldier," *Associated Press/MSNBC*, April 7, 2010.
35. Interview with Jack Guy.