

Decoding the Language of Jihad

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Local law enforcement is the first line of defense to counterterrorism in the United States. The task of recognizing and identifying terrorists in the local jurisdiction is, however, challenging. While law enforcement officers are trained to respond to suicide bomb attacks or other terrorist events, little training and few resources are available for the preventative and preemptive side of security work. Preemption is controversial and carries inherent risk. However, it may also prove to be the most effective form of protection in the frenetic and ambiguous world of terrorism,^[1] and so the question remains: What are the flags and indicators that suggest someone is involved in terrorism-related activities?

Developing an understanding of basic linguistic patterns can assist officers to identify extremists in their territory prior to rather than after an attack. Familiarity with terrorists' linguistic indicators—when combined with simple interview and field interrogation techniques—can help law enforcement to identify militant believers. Linguistic analysis follows a two-pronged approach, looking at phraseology and recurrent themes. Indeed, surveys of twelve important Islamist documents, fifty-eight Al-Qaeda statements, and the Hamas charter, show consistent reference to eight themes and eight texts. Of the seventy statements analyzed, all were originally in the Arabic language, excluding the Hamas Charter, which is readily accessible in English.

Background

Radical Muslims worldwide respond to *fatwas* and other calls for action by iconic leaders. For example, in a February 23, 1998 statement, Osama bin Laden declared, "To kill the Americans and their allies, civilians and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate Al-Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [in Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim."^[2] Shortly afterwards, his followers detonated two truck bombs outside the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, killing 257 and injuring more than 5,000. Bin Laden is not alone in inciting followers to terrorism. His lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri and Los Angeles-born aide Adam Gadahn regularly issue messages calling followers to jihad or issuing demands for surrender.

Many Americans may write off figures such as bin Laden, Zawahiri, or Gadahn as psychopaths. Law enforcement officers may see them as criminals inciting violence. To the violent Islamist, however, whether they are financiers, empathizers, or potential suicide bombers, these individuals are recognized as spiritual advisors who convey God's word. Too often, U.S. authorities neglect the impact verbal statements make in the world of Islamic militancy.

To the average American, the Arabic language is just another foreign language. To Muslims, however, it is the language of God. Islamic culture places a premium on literary expression.^[3] The inherent power of the Arabic language within the culture amplifies the import and power of the *fatwas* issued by individual radical scholars to potential jihadists. While Islamist advocacy groups argue that jihad is a peaceful, internal struggle, many classical Muslim theologians as well as today's radicals understand it to mean holy war. Michael Bonner, a professor of medieval Islamic history at the University of Michigan, explains:

Most accounts of the jihad agree that it has both an external and an internal aspect. The external jihad is an activity in the world, involving physical combat against real enemies in real time ... Most modern Western writings on the jihad consider that the external jihad, the physical combat against real adversaries, was the first to arrive in history and has priority in

most ways. In this view, the internal jihad, the spiritualized combat against the self, is secondary and derivative, despite all the importance it eventually acquired in Muslim thought and society.[\[4\]](#)

Indeed, most comprehensive compilations of Islamic law and *hadith* (sayings and actions of Muhammad) contain sections on jihad, often describing it in the violent sense. To the militant, it does not matter how advocacy groups or media networks define jihad. What matters is what teachers and philosophers believe. Here, the militant will find much to support his views. Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari (810-70), the most famous compiler of *hadith*, dedicated one-third of his fourth volume to jihad as physical holy war.

While U.S. authorities often defer judgment on jihad in response to some advocates who say that true jihad is not violent, extremists adhere closely to the teachings of radical scholars. Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiya (1263-1328) provides inspiration for many Sunni radicals, notably the Salafis. So, too, does Muhammad ibn 'Abdul Wahhab an-Najdi (1703-92). More recently, Syed Abul A'la Maududi (1903-79) argued, "The objective of Islamic jihad is to eliminate the rule of an un-Islamic system and establish in its stead an Islamic system of state rule."[\[5\]](#) Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), an important Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood ideologue, said,

It is not the function of Islam to compromise the concepts of Jahiliya [pre-Islamic ignorance or barbarism extended to the present day] which are current in the world or to coexist in the same land together with a jahili (barbaric) system. Jahiliya, to whatever period it belongs, is jahiliya; that is, deviation from the worship of one Allah and the way of life prescribed by Allah.[\[6\]](#)

Street level police officers should recognize that such historical references remain significant; the commentaries of Bukhari, Ibn Taymiya, Maududi, and Qutb provide a baseline understanding as to jihad's motivation or justification. Islamist believers utilize these scholars and the standard Islamic texts, the Qur'an and the *hadith* collections, as part of their daily justification for attacks in the name of Islam.

These references are also significant for the operational value of the linguistic themes. Islamist theologians and terrorist leaders often use common linguistic themes. Terrorists provide overt indicators of extremism, often unintentionally and subconsciously. There are only so many variations upon the radical theme. Moderate Muslims and those without violent propensities and understandings of jihad may refer to some of the same texts—certainly the Qur'an and Bukhari—but seldom in the same context or in conjunction with other linguistic indicators of radicalism. Militant exegesis appears to be significant as a first indicator of a puritanical belief system. While some common references between moderates and radicals may lead to occasional confusion, such uncertainty can be resolved within the context of the breadth of investigative capacity.

Linguistic Determinants of Militancy

U.S. law enforcement officials and concerned citizens can benefit from awareness that moderate Muslims do not use the same linguistic patterns and references as Islamic radicals. A basic understanding of the linguistic patterns of militancy coupled with an investigator's normal interviewing techniques can assist in determining an individual's ideology and religiosity. With a general understanding of these techniques, the individual officer or agent can better evaluate on close to a quantitative basis the flags and indicators of those individuals potentially involved in terrorist activities.

Susan H. Adams, a retired FBI agent who has focused much research in the field of evaluating veracity and deception in criminal statements, argues that statement analysis can be an important investigative tool and should also aid law enforcement interviewing approaches. If such analysis is effective in criminal cases, then it can be useful in counterterrorism as well.

While many terrorists and militants may seek to cloak their beliefs as they infiltrate society, Adams shows that, nevertheless, linguistic behavior is subliminal.^[7] All but the most professional terrorists may have difficulty hiding their radicalism. Word choice matters.

Statements from bin Laden, Zawahiri, and Gadahn provide a useful baseline, albeit one that can be expanded by sampling the statements of other terrorist leaders. Bin Laden and Zawahiri continue to employ periodic statements calling for continued global jihad and justifying attacks in the name of Islam, which Gadahn also reworks for an American audience.

Four statements from each of the three individuals were analyzed to evaluate the factors of phraseology and recurrent common themes.^[8] Common themes and phraseology in these statements are limited, a finding consistent with those of James W. Pennebaker and Cindy K. Chung, psychologists who have carried out a computerized text analysis of Al-Qaeda transcripts evaluating the linguistic and content-related styles of both bin Laden and Zawahiri.^[9]

Osama bin Laden's statements are consistent in theme and phraseology even if the news hook accompanying each audio or videotape may differ. Bin Laden focuses his content on the United States and its allies and provides absolute statements ostensibly accepted by the mainstream Islamic community, although he appears to construct these statements carefully to reach different constituencies.^[10] Table 1 outlines bin Laden's phraseology and themes.

Bin Laden blends politics and theology. Catalyzing each statement is a noteworthy event such as a political campaign, a shift or attack in either Iraq or Afghanistan, or the publishing of cartoons about Muhammad in a Danish newspaper. A disorganized treatise sprinkled with unvarying phrases and themes often follows each statement. Analysis reveals an air of insecurity and a belief in conspiracy. Phrases aimed to "convince" rather than "convey" are replete throughout the texts. Bin Laden attempts to convince the Muslim people as well as American citizens to rise up and question their rulers. Some of the phraseology reveals apparent "strain" as he presents his case against certain regimes. He also appears to exploit the Islamic texts to justify his arguments, often in the context of admonishing Muslims not to disobey God. He further attempts to argue that the "apostate governments" have worshipped others apart from God, which would constitute *shirk*.

Zawahiri, bin Laden's chief deputy, also uses a number of consistent words and themes (see Table 2) to explain the conditions that will end jihad against the West. These include repentance to God, accepting Islam, implementing Islamic law, participating in jihad, and finally, breaking apart the United States.

Gadahn has issued many lengthy statements, both independently and jointly with Zawahiri, which together provide a sense of common words and themes (see Table 3). While Gadahn may not be a household name as are bin Laden or Zawahiri, he is important as a reflection of a radical American convert who learned the language of jihad from Muslim extremists. As such, he reflects the trickle-down theory that argues that a radical Islamist is not always an extremist but learns militancy because of the linguistic and ideological environment in which he is immersed.

The example of Gadahn brings home the reality of radicalization regarding Western converts. Gadahn is an American who stumbled onto Islam, was radicalized, and adopted the "language of jihad" without effort. He also has learned the political and military intent of the organization and virulently stands for the cause. As such, Gadahn will sometimes provide a list of "demands" that in his estimation would lead to the end of violent jihad against Western civilization, including the withdrawal of all non-Muslims from Muslim lands, a termination of all aid and support to "apostate" countries and Israel, allowing Muslims to establish a pan-Islamic state, a cessation of any interference in education and media in the Islamic world, and the freeing of all Muslim prisoners.

Islamist terrorists often adapt consistent themes and phrasing that they justify through Islamic text references (see Table 4), which followers then use to justify terrorism. This does not mean that the themes represent the content of certain Qur'anic verses, but rather that they are interwoven throughout the text with provided Qur'anic references.

In "Computerized Text Analysis of Al-Qaeda Transcripts," Pennebaker and Chung examine fifty-eight Al-Qaeda transcripts, looking specifically at statements made by bin Laden and Zawahiri. While their findings focused on relational nuances and changes between bin Laden and Zawahiri, their identification of high-frequency words, the co-occurrence of words, pronouns, usage, and emotive words also can enhance the understanding of word usage as a single indicator of militancy. Pennebaker and Chung specifically focused on certain themes to include the Islam/Israeli conflict (Factor 3) and geographical co-occurrence (Factor 5). The words listed in Table 5 co-occurred often with each other. Such findings reinforce the conclusion that the analyses that sampled bin Laden's, Zawahiri's, and Gadhafi's speeches are representative.

The Hamas charter, like the Al-Qaeda leaders' statements, uses an Islamist patina to justify the group's actions. Article III, for example, reads, "In all that, they fear God and raise the banner of jihad in the face of the oppressors, so that they would rid the land and the people of their uncleanness, vileness, and evils." Article VIII states that "God is its target, the Prophet is its model, the Qur'an its constitution: Jihad is its path, and death for the sake of God is the loftiest of its wishes," and Article XIII argues that, "There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through jihad. Initiatives, proposals, and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors. The Palestinian people know better than to consent to having their future, rights, and fate toyed with."[\[11\]](#)

The Hamas charter and Al-Qaeda speeches enable derivation of a template consisting of eight common words and nine common themes that can aid law enforcement to identify Islamists who, if speaking with candor, might be at risk of straying into terrorism.

Operationalizing Linguistic Indicators

The above analysis highlights eight common words or variants and nine themes (see Table 6). Iconic believers may pick and choose among such themes, but, regardless of how they dress their treatise, such themes recur. Indeed, they are necessary to weave the underlying logic of militancy. The primary tones are manipulative, coercive, and sometimes threatening. In many of the statements, the speaker talks about the Day of Judgment, God's favor, and His actions.

In an interview setting, interrogators differentiate between the concepts of conveyance and convincing. When an individual is unequivocally telling the truth about a particular incident, he will "convey" the facts of the situation to the interrogator. In general, if an individual is guilty or seeking to obfuscate information, he will try to "convince" the interrogator of his innocence.

Islamist extremist tracts, whether they sympathize with Al-Qaeda or Hamas, often try to convince rather than convey. Potentially, this derives from the militant believers' intent to convince those outside the extremist faction to follow their exclusionary belief system. It may also be the result of a lack of assuredness in one's own beliefs. Nevertheless, a factor of questionability appears present in most of the militant statements evaluated. This, in turn, presents an opportunity for the officer or agent who is interviewing a Muslim in their community who may be conflicted about Islam. If they are not yet sold on following the way of violent jihad, this may be an opportunity for the officer to recruit him to assist law enforcement. Various Islamist terrorists—including 9/11 hijackers Mohammad Atta and Ziad Jarrah—have been conflicted in their belief systems in the past.[\[12\]](#)

Disambiguation, or establishing a single semantic interpretation, is another common factor. Extremists provide numerous statements leaving their audience with little doubt as to the

speaker's beliefs. There is no question that non-Muslims or those from Western societies should be the primary target of jihad. These nonbelievers are conceptually divided from the "true believers." This transcends the remainder of the statements where comments are made frequently about the unequivocal purity of Islamic law and how it should be followed by all countries. Mujahideen, on the other hand, are those that are fighting for Islam in the truest sense of the term. It is essential that the officer or agent understand this binary thinking. Listening for and recognizing this assumption in the interviewee's comments may prove an important factor in trying to identify the individual as a militant believer. Not only will the Islamist terrorist see the world in black and white, but he may view the interrogator as a nonbeliever and as a result carry out the interview in a certain manner. Overall, the militant believer sees the world with no gray areas. (See Table 7.)

In line with this binary associative thinking, some in the psychoanalytical realm may relate this to the borderline personality theory in which the patient "splits" everything in the world they come into contact with into good and evil.^[13] Although splitting may be a Western characteristic of a psychological disorder, it cannot be concluded that all militant Islamic believers have such a malady. Nevertheless, it is important for the interrogator to recognize the modal characteristic as it may pertain to the overall evaluation of a potential militant believer.

Conclusion

Investigators face a challenging compendium of issues when countering terror. Techniques and approaches abound, yet it little compares to the benefit of obtaining reliable information from an individual within a certain community. Today, investigators find themselves conducting interviews and interrogations in the Arab and Islamic culture, which brings with it great challenges and nuances. One technique to be utilized is that of listening for and identifying indicators of Islamic militancy. As identified above, there are specific themes and text words that are common among true militant believers. Knowing what they are and listening for them may assist the investigator in the totality of his investigation. Also, simply listening for various Islamic texts and the references to them may be indicators as well for the agent or officer.

Nevertheless, investigators should not limit their statement analysis to studying those that are included in this paper but should continue their evaluation of exegesis on a long-term basis. The more knowledge and experience gained, the better prepared the investigator will be to thwart terrorist activities and planning in his community. Overall, if investigators work together, sharing knowledge and techniques that are proven to be effective, a synergistic benefit will be realized throughout the global war on terror.

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Table 1: Bin Laden's Phrases and Themes

Text Words	Major Themes
Crusaders	Occupation of Iraq
Apostate governments	Peaceful means/negotiations not an option
Zionists	Establishment of an Islamic state
	Crusader war against the Islamic nation

Jihad	Palestine/Iraq/Afghanistan/Sudan/Somalia
Hypocrites	Learn from history's lessons
Islamic state	Capable Muslims' duty to fight (jihad)
American agents	Time is fleeting/opportunity is now
Infidels	Do not disobey God's commands
Caliphate	Abstaining from jihad is disobedience
Duty	Apostate governments have left Islam
Disobedience	Mujahideen are Islam's vanguard
Counterpart with God (i.e., nothing can be a partner of God. This is not only blasphemous in itself, but it is essentially the sin of those Christians who believe in the Trinity.)	Apostate governments only act with U.S. approval Question Islamic country rulers Submission (complete) to God vs. secular ways U.S. president involved in distortion/deception
God's law	
Mujahideen	
Islamic awakening	
Crusader/Zionist control	
Grave sins	
Injustices	
Iniquities	
Tyranny	
Security	
Freedom	

Table 2: Zawahiri's Phrases and Themes

Text Words	Major Themes
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Crusader-Zionist	Depiction of support as attacks against crusaders
Materialistic crusader	Theft of Muslim oil
Infidel countries	Reject all agreements
Mujahideen vanguards	Peace treaty between Egypt and Israel
Ignorance	Liberate Palestine
Charlatans	Reject international resolutions
Religion-traders	Muslim nation is one nation
Occupation	Championing the cause of Muslims fighting outside parties.
Banner of the Prophet	Fighting should be based on Islamic creed
Selling their blood	Invitation to Islam
Secular criminal regimes	Balfour Declaration
Raid (attack)	Shari'a is God's law

Table 3: Gadahn's Phrases and Themes

Text Words	Major Themes
Crusades	Negotiations are not an option
Empire of evil	Demands must be met
Global crusade	U.S. is on a death march
Crusader coalition	Countries will run red with blood
Champions of Islam	Evil nature of the U.S.
Defensive Jihad	Withdraw all non-Muslims from Muslim lands
Zionist Jews	56 apostate regimes
Zionist Christians	Establish an Islamic state
Occupied	Unite Muslims

Palestine	Free Muslim captives
Baby killers	Conflict between nation and religion
War criminals	Impeding the message/propagation of Islam
Pawns	Israel slaughtering Muslims in Lebanon and Palestine
Crusader domination	Islam is the religion chosen by God
Ignorance	Qur'an abrogates the Torah and Gospels (God's 'revelation' to Jesus)
Uneducated	Islam is the final revealed religion, abrogating others
Inquisition	

Table 4: Text Themes/Phraseology

Strength
Steeds of war
Fight the pagans
Hypocrites
People misled
Obligatory
Corruption
Vanguard
Occupiers
Shari'a
Liberate the homeland
Oppression
Suppression
Fear God
Day of Judgment

Confronting the crusader war

Mujahideen

Fight for the faith

Islam is the only acceptable religion to God

Abrogation of the Torah and Gospels

One way to paradise

Empty recitation without action

Fear the coming day

Deceivers

No negotiation or compromise

Table 5: Factor 3 Words/Factor 5 Words

Crusade/Palestine
 Islam/Occupy
 Muslim/Century
 Campaign/Liberate
 Zion/Taliban
 Support/Pakistan
 Israel/Afghan
 Pakistan/Omar
 Jew/Mujahid
 Jihad
 Duty

Table 6: Common Words and Themes

Words and Variants	Themes
Crusaders/infidels	Negotiations are not an option
Zionists	Occupation of Muslim lands by non-Muslims
Shari'a	Apostate governments
Injustices/iniquities/materialistic society	Mujahideen
Ignorance (in terms of failure to recognize extremists' interpretations of Islam)	Obligation of every Muslim to carry out jihad
Islamic state	Western societies

	are evil by nature
Jihad	Muslim prisoners must be freed
Western policies	God chose Islam; all other religions are false
	American support for Israel

Table 7: Militant Worldview

<u>Topics</u>	<u>Option 1</u>	<u>Option 2</u>
Individuals	Muslims; following an exclusionary belief system	Unbelievers; ignorant; oppressors; colonizers; evil
Nations	Dar al-Islam (the Realm of Islam): following a puritanical form of the Shari'a	Dar al Harb (the Realm of War, the non-Muslim world): not following Shari'a; must be target of jihad
Laws	Follow puritanical form of Shari'a	Corrupted by man
Solution	Jihad against unbelievers	Negotiations not an option
Religion	Islam is the religion selected by God	All others are abrogated and corrupted
Israel	Muslim land that is wrongly occupied; must be returned to the Muslims	

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