

Al-Qaida's propaganda technique and argumentation

25 November 2009

Summary

Al-Qaida's (AQ) propaganda videos have become increasingly sophisticated in recent years. At the same time, they are reaching a wider audience across the world via their media production company on the internet. AQ's propaganda videos are setting the trend for other militant Islamists and, consequently, they are important for the understanding of the militant Islamist ideology.

AQ's videos cover three overall topics: religious, historical and political theme, combined to form one coherent and often very simple narrative, which constitutes a key element of the group's ideological platform.

AQ uses a number of well-known propaganda techniques, including repetitions, demonization of opponents and out-of-context quotations from opponents. However, in recent years, AQ has generally put greater emphasis on using visual effects to support its ideological messages in its propaganda videos.

According to AQ, the West is motivated by a wish for supremacy and colonisation of the entire world and its resources through oppression of Muslims, in particular. AQ is trying to portray itself as consisting of true believers and honourable warriors who are fighting western and Israeli evilness and brutality with humble means.

AQ plays considerably on emotions, for example through images of suffering children, but also more indirectly through the use of Quran recitals and poetry readings. However, the group also makes extensive use of political and actual events – both past and present – that are adjusted and simplified. Within the framework of this single narrative, new arguments and themes may be used in a forward-looking manner.

Therefore, AQ's propaganda is quite efficient and may appeal to a global audience.

Introduction

The Danish military involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but especially the cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad published in *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 and their reprinting in a number of Danish newspapers in early 2008, have led to an increased focus on Denmark from al-Qaida (AQ) and other militant Islamists. Statements from AQ are given extensive media coverage and reach a wide audience across the world. In addition, the methods used by AQ – also within the field of propaganda – are trendsetting for other militant Islamists. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how AQ argues in favour of terrorism and how it legitimises the use of violence.

The purpose of this analysis is to provide an overview and understanding of AQ's enemy images, world-view and propaganda techniques. The analysis only deals with AQ videos that directly or indirectly mention Denmark. The first part of the analysis outlines the propaganda technique and visual effects used by AQ. The second part offers examples of the applied argumentation and themes in the selected videos.

Background

Since 2006, AQ has published a total of nine videos or audio messages mentioning Denmark and the cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. However, most of the statements have a broader agenda. The Danish Cartoon Case is only mentioned as an example of what AQ considers to be the overall western strategy aimed at oppressing the Muslim World. This paper is primarily based on an analysis of these nine selected videos and audio messages supplemented with inputs from other AQ videos produced in recent years.

AQ's videos and audio messages are usually produced and published by AQ's own media company, as-Sahab. Generally speaking, all elements of the productions are carefully prepared and consistent in terms of titles, effects and the use of metaphors.

CTA has analysed the nine AQ media productions below:

- 04.04.2006: Ayman al-Zawahiri's untitled video speech regarding the western warfare against Islam – focus on the Cartoons, Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine.
- 23.04.2006: Usama Bin Laden's untitled speech regarding the western warfare against Islam, focusing on the Cartoons as well as the fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and Palestine.
- 11.05.2006: Abu Yahya al-Libi's speech: "And those who annoy Allah's messenger will have a painful torment".

- 9.03.2008: Usama Bin Laden's speech: "May our mothers become bereaved if we do not support our Prophet, Peace be upon him".
- 07.07.2008: Two speeches/poetry recitals by Bin Laden's son, Hamza Bin Laden.
- 04.09.2008: Mustafa Abu al-Yazid @ Sheikh Saeed's video: "The Word is the Word of Swords 1: The Raid of Muezzin, Abu Ghareeb".
- 12.04.2009: Adam Gadahn @ Azzam al-Amriki's video: "How to prevent a Repeat of the Gaza Holocaust".
- 13.06.2009: Adam Gadahn @ Azzam al-Amriki's video: "Let's continue our Jihad and Sacrifice".
- 22.09.2009: Ayman al-Zawahiri, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Attiya Allah, Abu Yahya al-Libi and Adam Gadahn @ Azzam al-Amriki: "The West...and the Dark tunnel".

Meaning of the title

The titles used for AQ propaganda material often provide a clear insight into the main theme of the videos; which is usually identical with AQ's reason for making the statement. It may, for example, be a current political event or conflict, such as the Cartoon Case or the most recent conflict in Gaza in early 2009. However, regardless of this main theme, AQ often introduces several other themes in their videos and statements. The Cartoon Case is directly or indirectly included in the title of four of the nine AQ-produced videos comprised in this analysis, but it is a theme in all nine videos. For example, the Cartoon Case is mentioned in an 87-minute as-Sahab video from 12 April 2009 that generally deals with the Gaza conflict.¹ This confirms CTA's previous assessment that the Cartoon Case has become a key issue for AQ.²

I. Al-Qaida's propaganda technique and effects

Al-Qaida's propaganda technique

AQ applies a number of well-known propaganda techniques, including repetitions, demonization of opponents and out-of-context quotations from opponents.

▪ *Repetitions and demonization of opponents*

In Usama Bin Laden's audio message from 23 April 2006, which received extensive media coverage on the Arab satellite network al-Jazeera, the actions of the Western World are referred to as "the Zionist crusade" 14 times. The word "crusader" or

¹ The same pattern has been seen in videos produced by AQ-related groups where the Cartoon Case is included as an element. An example of this is a video produced by a more peripheral AQ sympathetic group, Jamaat ul Mujahedeen al Bangladesh, published on 30 January 2009, that primarily deals with the situation in Bangladesh but which also mentions the Cartoon Case and condemns the authorities in Bangladesh and Pakistan for protecting Danes and Danish interests.

² Cf. the CTA analysis "The Cartoon Case from al-Qaida's ideological perspective" dated 16 June 2009, www.pet.dk

"crusade" is mentioned a total of 35 times in 52 minutes. In addition, the words "Zionist alliance", "Zionist campaign" and "Zionist war" are consistently used in all AQ videos. Also, the words "Holocaust" and "massacre" are often used to describe actions carried out by AQ opponents. This helps to demonise the enemy and at the same time underline AQ's argument of the double-standards practised by Israel and the West because the enemy – in this case Israel – from AQ's point of view is committing the very crimes others have committed against themselves (the Holocaust).



Figure 1: Speech by Osama Bin Laden in which the word "crusader/Zionist" is repeated several times

- ***Out-of-context quotations from the opponent***

AQ often uses sequences containing statements from western and Arab heads of state in a context where they are discredited and portrayed as being morally ambivalent. This approach was used by the American AQ member Adam Gadahn, also known as Azzam al-Amriki, in a video that was published on 12 April 2009 to portray the United States president, Barack Obama, as a hypocrite and strong supporter of Israel by showing sequences from a speech Obama made to an American-Jewish lobby organisation. Equally, in a video published on 4 September 2008, AQ shows excerpts of an interview with the former Danish Prime Minister and present NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who, among other things, states that one of the "benefits" that may have grown from the Cartoon Case was a strengthening of the freedom of the press and the freedom of expression. In the video, AQ uses the

sequences as an argument that the Cartoon Case is part of a cultural battle between the Western World and Islam.³



Figure 2: Selected sequences with statements by Anders Fogh Rasmussen and Barack Obama are used to confirm AQ claims.

- ***The use of critical western experts***

In a number of propaganda videos, AQ uses western experts, journalists or individuals critical towards their government to strengthen their arguments. Often, these persons make critical statements about western governments or their policies. The statements are edited into the videos to make them fit the context AQ is describing. For example, American military experts are used to confirm the AQ assertion that United States and allied forces are intentionally killing civilians during operations⁴. In a similar way, statements by former military personnel and individuals critical towards their government are also used to confirm AQ statements about the United States and the use of torture in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

Visual effects

AQ's videos and audio messages vary considerably in terms of image and audio quality. This may be an indication of the physical and security-related limitations AQ leaders are living under. Thus, some statements, e.g. from Usama Bin Laden, are exclusively delivered as audio statements and often of poor quality. Other videos, e.g. from the American AQ member Adam Gadahn alias Azzam al-Amriki, are of better quality and have a documentary-like structure. These videos are characterised by professionalism, both in terms of technique, image and sound and a professional journalistic point of view.

³ 04.09.2008: Mustafa Abu al-Yazid @ Sheikh Saeed video: "The Word is the Word of Swords 1: The Raid of Muezzin, Abu Ghareeb".

⁴ 04.09.2008: Mustafa Abu al-Yazid @ Sheikh Saeed video: "The Word is the Word of Swords 1: The Raid of Muezzin, Abu Ghareeb".



Figure 3: Sequences with speeches by the AQ members Adam Gadahn and Abu Yahya al-Libi

However, in recent years, AQ has generally put greater emphasis on the visual effects in their propaganda videos in order to strengthen their ideological argumentation. The visual effects are often selected based on their symbolic value, e.g. an AK-47, the Quran, a prayer rug or religious books. These symbols are also used in logos, but often they are placed behind or in front of the speaker in order to emphasise that the AQ leadership is also comprised of holy warriors living under humble conditions. AQ also uses enemy symbols to support their arguments. An example of this is a picture of a Danish military vehicle with a hoisted Danish flag while references are made to the “western crusaders”.⁵



Figure 4: Sequence of Danish troops in Afghanistan with a hoisted Danish flag

⁵ 04.09.2008: Mustafa Abu al-Yazid @ Sheikh Saeed video: “The Word is the Word of Swords 1: The Raid of Muezzin, Abu Ghareeb”.

AQ appeals to emotions – both verbally and metaphorically – by showing images of suffering children or indirectly through Quran recitals or poetry readings. Images and sequences of western leaders or military forces are often shown shortly after images of dead or wounded children. The purpose is to support the AQ depiction of an evil and morally ambivalent enemy. This is one of the key elements of the AQ videos. Statements and testaments from suicide bombers also play on emotion. There is particular focus on the suicide bombers’ status as heroes of Islam and on their joy of being chosen for the task. The videos often depict them in smiling postures rejoiced in singing Islamic songs (*nasheed*). In this way the suicide bombers are portrayed as a positive example for other Muslims.



Figure 5: Image of Iraqi children who have been killed and another example from Afghanistan

In addition, there are many images or sequences from militant Islamist training camps or of operations carried out by AQ and affiliated groups against the international military forces in e.g. Afghanistan. Such videos help to strengthen the AQ argumentation that AQ and its allies are winning the war in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the world.



Figure 6: Video speech by the AQ leader al-Zawahiri

Contrary to some AQ-related groups, the AQ media company, as-Sahab, rarely produces videos containing very brutal images or sequences that e.g. depict hostage executions. CTA assesses that this is a conscious choice as the AQ leadership is primarily focused on the ideological radicalisation. First and foremost, the AQ leaders are trying to portray themselves as intellectual, thoughtful, devout and honourable warriors who are fighting western and Israeli evilness and brutality by using humble means.

II. Al-Qaida's ideological argumentation and themes

AQ's messages are often built around a number of identical rhetorical and visual effects. The argumentation usually comprises a number of references to religious texts and authorities, historical events and figures from the time of the Prophet Muhammad mixed with contemporary, political events and conflicts. In doing so, AQ combines political, historical and religious reflections to form one coherent and often very single narrative constituting an important element of the group's ideological impact.

Thus, the above argumentation can be divided into three overall themes⁶:

- **Islamic principles (religious themes)**
- **Historical events and figures (historical themes)**
- **Current events and political themes**

⁶ Cf. the CTA analysis "The Cartoon Case from al-Qaida's ideological perspective" dated 16 June 2009, www.pet.dk

- **Islamic principles (religious themes).** AQ uses references to Islamic religious writings, including the Quran and narrations about the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad (hadith) as well as religious references to Muslim scholars and authorities. They often comprise passages that are taken from their original context and used in a narrow, militant context that serves AQ's agenda. AQ's references to religious texts are key arguments as they – according to AQ – are not debatable. Thus, the religious arguments are used to strengthen the ideological messages by serving as an Islamic founded backdrop.

Examples of religious themes

Quran verses: Selected Quran verses are often taken from their original context in order to legitimise the use of violence. The same verses are often used repeatedly as the Quran only contains few references to holy war.

Hadith: Hadith is a collective term for the texts that describe the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. There are numerous hadith books written by a variety of the Prophet's contemporaries that offer different descriptions of the events. The truthfulness and legitimacy of these texts are often subject to debate among different Muslim fractions and scholars. As with Quran verses, AQ only quotes hadith passages that serve its cause.

A central and recurrent hadith retold in a number of AQ statements relating to the Cartoon Case is the story of Ka'ab Bin (ibn) al-Ashraf. Ka'ab bin al-Ashraf was a Jewish poet in the time of the Prophet who criticised and conspired against the Prophet and Islam. According to the story, Muhammad told his disciples to kill him which Muhammed Bin Muslima (Muhammad ibn Maslamah) did. This particular hadith has been used in connection with the Cartoon Case to illustrate that those who insult the Prophet shall be punished by death.

Writings by early Islamic scholars: Writings by early Islamic scholars are also used by AQ as religious argumentation. The primary usage is confined to selected passages from the works of a few Islamic scholars or references to Islamic scholars with a more radical interpretation of Islamic principles or concepts such as Jihad. Ibn Taymiyya, a 13th and 14th century contemporary professional journalistic and a known advocate of armed Jihad, is often used as a reference. Another example is Ahmad Bin Hanbal, a highly renowned Sunni scholar from the 8th and 9th century who founded one of the Islamic law schools (the Hanbali law school). Hanbal is used by AQ, for example in the statement "*Whoever curses the prophet or belittles him, whether Muslim or infidel, is*

to be killed". It is important to note that most Islamic scholars argue against the use of violent Jihad in the way it is used by AQ.

Writings by contemporary Islamic scholars: In the same way as the early scholars who preach a militant interpretation of Islam, AQ uses writings by more contemporary scholars or Islamic ideologists, such as the Egyptian ideologist Sayid Qutb (1906-1966), the Palestinian ideologist and mentor for Osama Bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam (1941-1989), and known extremist ideologists such as Abu Qutada al Filistini (1960-) and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (1959-).

- **Historical events and figures (historical themes)** that are more or less known to the broad Muslim public. This may include wars or heroes from the time of the Prophet, the crusades and wars up until and including the 20th century. AQ adapts such examples to make them fit the AQ picture of the world and uses them to emphasise the continuity of western attacks against Muslims and other peoples around the world as well as the importance of waging holy war on the enemies of Islam.

Examples of historical themes

Crusades: AQ often draws a parallel between the European crusades (11th-13th century) against the Muslim countries and the current military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This allows AQ to argue that there is a continuity of western attacks against Islam. Former United States president George W. Bush's use of the word "Crusade" in reference to the war on terror has also been used many times in AQ videos to support this claim.

Western colonisation of Muslim countries: Historical film sequences, pictures and wars relating to the colonisation are often used to confirm the AQ assertion that the Western World has continuously colonised Muslim countries; militarily, politically, culturally and financially. According to AQ, the West has been using corrupt, local tyrants to maintain its position in the respective countries and, in doing so, having undermined the progression of Islam.

Decades of United States foreign and domestic policies: AQ often refers to historical events from the United States foreign and domestic policies. This is, for example, seen in one of the videos with the American AQ member Adam Gadahn that includes film sequences and pictures from the eradication of American Indians, the US bombing of civilians in Japan and Germany during World War II, the killing of civilians during the Vietnam War, racism against African-Americans and consequences derived from the

western embargo against Iraq in the 1990s.⁷ Several of these themes are recurrent in a number of AQ statements.

Muslim war heroes: In a number of videos, AQ refers to historical war heroes who have led Muslim military forces to major, historical victories. The historical heroes are very important to many Muslims. Thus, AQ tries to position itself in the same heroic category as such historical figures. Typical examples of such figures include Khalid Bin al-Walid, who defeated the Byzantine Empire and Persia in the 8th century, and Salahaddin (better known as Saladin), who defeated the Crusaders in the 12th century. Furthermore AQ often refers to the Prophet Muhammad's military deeds to underline the fact that all Muslims are under a duty to fight.

- **Current events and political themes** that are often familiar to a broad part of the Muslim population through the media. Such events often deal with the oppression of Muslims and western power politics directed at Muslim countries, including ongoing armed conflicts or the Cartoon Case.

Examples of political themes

The Gaza conflict and the fight between the Palestinians and Israel: The Israeli attacks in the Palestinian territories have always been one of the core themes of AQ propaganda. Many of AQ's calls for Jihad mention the liberation of Palestine and the Muslim shrines. It is often emphasised that AQ is the only organisation that is willing and capable of doing anything for the Palestinians in contrast to e.g. secular Palestinians, the Arab countries and the West.⁸ During the most recent escalation of the Gaza conflict in December 2008/January 2009, statements from the AQ leadership have been very focused on Gaza and Israel. This is partly due to the fact that the conflict was extensively covered by the media with images of dead Palestinian women and children, causing outrage among Muslims across the world.

Israel and western pro-Israeli support: The conflict between the Palestinians and Israel is also used as a theme in terms of western co-operation with and support of Israel. Countries, governments and parties that co-operate with or support Israel are often accused of Zionism and for being behind the destruction of Palestine and Islam in general. This may include statements from a head of state regarding the conflict in Israel or an agreement with Israel. The term Zionism is commonly used by AQ, not only in reference to Israel, but also as a general term for those who support Israel.

⁷ 12.04.2009: Video with Adam Gadahn @ Azzam al-Amriki: "How to prevent a repeat of the Gaza Holocaust"

⁸ Cf. e.g. 13.06.2009: Adam Gadahn @ Azzam al-Amriki's video: "Let's continue our Jihad and Sacrifice".

The wars in Iraq and the 1990s UN sanctions: The military campaigns in Iraq and the presence of US and Coalition Forces in Iraq is a commonly used theme in AQ videos. AQ portrays the war in Iraq as part of the western effort to subdue the entire Muslim World. In addition, AQ has devoted a number of videos to describing the 1990s UN sanctions against Iraq and the consequences they had for civilians, especially children, in Iraq. The UN and the Western World have been accused of moral ambivalence and for having committed genocide against Iraqi Muslims. In recent years, Iraq has become a less prominent theme in the AQ videos which is probably a result of the declining public support for AQ terrorist actions in Iraq and the reduced foreign military presence.

The war in Afghanistan: The presence of western troops and the fighting in Afghanistan are often included in AQ's propaganda. AQ describes western forces as demoralised and predicts that they are losing the war, just like the Soviet army did in the 1980s. In addition, focus is on the killing and torture of the civilian population.

Other conflict areas: Although not necessarily directly involved in the conflicts, AQ often mentions a variety of different conflict areas, including Chechnya, Somalia, Maghreb (primarily Algeria), Sudan, Nigeria and South East Asian countries so as to emphasise that what is happening in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan is also happening elsewhere. Thus, AQ is trying to give the impression that they are fighting a global battle against the West and its allies on behalf of all Muslims in the name of Islam.

The western cultural attack against Islam:

In recent years, AQ has been increasingly focused on political and ideological issues of a more contemporary nature, including the Cartoon case, the Salman Rushdie case and other cases relating to criticism of Islam in the West. European countries are the main subjects of criticism, not the United States. AQ claims that the West has made a division of labour according to which the European countries, as spearheaded by e.g. Denmark, are waging an ideological war on Islam. The Cartoon Case, Salman Rushdie as well as works and statements from other Islam critics are used to support this argument. AQ emphasises the western moral ambivalence by claiming that the freedom of expression leaves room for criticism of Islam only and not other religions.

In one of the most recent AQ videos from June 2009, the former Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen is mentioned, and the video claims that his June 2009 appointment to Secretary General of NATO was the "reward" for how he handled

the Cartoon Case⁹. The French ban on the use of religious symbols, including Islamic head scarves, is also mentioned by AQ as a specific counter-Muslim initiative. Similarly, the tightening of terrorist legislations and terror cases in Europe are also used to support AQ arguments.

Western use of torture: In recent years, AQ has produced numerous videos that refer to western use of torture in e.g. Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and Afghanistan. Often, AQ uses sequences of western government critics to support the argumentation. The videos also contain offensive images of torture to enhance the impact of the arguments.

Western co-operation with corrupt heads of state in the Muslim World: This has always been an important theme for AQ as it believes the majority of Middle Eastern governments are illegitimate and that the western support of these governments is an expression of western moral ambivalence on the issue of democratisation. AQ's position on the illegitimacy of present governments in power is based on political and religious arguments, including claims that Middle Eastern governments are corrupt, undemocratic and working against the will of the people. A number of the videos that refer to the Cartoon Case mention the al-Yamamah agreement as an example of western moral ambivalence. The al-Yamamah agreement is a case involving charges of corruption in connection with an extensive arms agreement between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia.

The fight against the Pakistani government: AQ has also produced several videos dealing with or referring to the events in Pakistan in connection with the fighting between government forces and militant Islamists. AQ accuses the Pakistani government of infidelity and collaboration with the West and the so-called Zionists. Additionally, there have been a number of references to the July 2007 fights against extremist Islamists in the Red Mosque (*Lal Masjid*) in Pakistan.

AQ-critical Islamic scholars and muftis and their collaboration with "infidels" and "Zionists": A number of AQ videos contain video clips or images of Muslim scholars and muftis. In addition, reference is made to several well-known and – in many cases – official Islamic scholars and muftis. These persons who often reject AQ and AQ's actions through the use of religious arguments are portrayed as being morally ambivalent and controlled by the West and the so-called Zionists. To strengthen the arguments, images and sequences are shown depicting such Islamic scholars and muftis while shaking hands with or embracing the Pope, rabbis or priests. The primary

⁹ 13.06.2009: Video of Adam Gadahn @ Azzam al-Amriki: "Let's continue our Jihad and Sacrifice".

subjects of criticism are Islamic scholars who are or have been more or less radical and who confess to Salafi views. It is important for AQ to distance itself from these Islamic scholars, in particular, as they are presumably capable of asserting greater influence on AQ sympathisers than more moderate AQ-critical Islamic scholars.

The Obama administration's new political approach in the Muslim World: AQ has been very focused on the United States president, Barack Obama, even before he was elected president. Many of Obama's speeches and decisions have appealed to many Muslims and his popularity may, therefore, become a problem for AQ. Thus, through the videos, AQ has tried to underline that Obama is going to continue the policy of the former president with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, support of Israel and the use of torture. AQ is thereby trying to portray Obama as being untrustworthy and unwilling to change politics in relation to the Muslim populations.

Other themes: AQ also uses more peripheral themes in relation to its ideological agenda to support its views. This may include references to the financial crisis, "the Jewish lobby" in the West, climate changes, the Pope's "control over western heads of state" and the western "secret missionary work" in Muslim countries.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, the AQ statements analysed by CTA are composed of some recurrent narratives and enemy images as well as some more or less standardised verbal and visual effects. The narratives stay within three overall themes – a religious, a historical and a political theme, combined to form one coherent and often very simple narrative, which constitutes a key component of the group's ideological impact.

Aside from Denmark, the recurrent enemy images particularly circle around the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel and France, the Saudi Royal Family, the Pakistani government and Arab leaders supported by the West. The overall AQ conspiracy theory was articulated in the Osama Bin Laden video speech published on 23 April 2006 in which he uses the description "*Clash of Civilizations*"¹⁰ thus indicating that co-existence is not an option and that the West is acting on one thought alone: supremacy and colonisation of the entire world and its resources through oppression of all non-Christian populations.

AQ communicates by using classical propaganda techniques with great emphasis on the emotional aspects. However, the group also makes strong references to political

¹⁰ A reference to the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington's theoretical work regarding the clash of civilisations.

and factual events, current as well as historical, although adjusted and simplified. New arguments and themes may be drawn into this simplified narrative. Therefore, AQ's propaganda is quite efficient, hard to counter and appeals to a global audience.