Assessing the Effects of Militant Islamist Propaganda

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ORGANIZATION FLAG

Terrorist groups traditionally attempt to organize supporters under a common banner to show unity and support for the organization.

Al-Qa'ida, its affiliates, and several other extremist organizations use the Black Standard flag.

Official flag of ISIS

NOTABLE FIGURES

Prominent group leaders and influential figures assist in the radicalization of sympathizers.

Ayman al-Zawahiri   Hamza bin Ladin   Anwar al-Aulaqi   Qasim al-Rimi

Al-Qa'ida and its sympathizers have called for attacks in the United States, including threats to New Jersey officials, citizens, and critical infrastructure.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

The self-proclaimed leader of ISIS declared a "worldwide caliphate" in June 2014.

OFFICIAL MEDIA OUTLETS

Terrorist groups use media outlets to disseminate propaganda and provide information on the organizations' activities to a global audience.

As-Sahab Media   Al-Malahem Media   Al-Kataib Media

Al-Qa'ida and its affiliates maintain several media outlets.

Amaq News Agency   Al Ajnad   Al-Furqan Media

Al-Hayat Media   Al-Bayan Radio   Al-I'tisaam

ISIS has six official media outlets.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS

Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلامک تھیولاجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیر ازم

Introduction-

Soft counter-terrorism measures have largely been recognized over the course of the last two decades, as an important strategy in countering the phenomenon of terrorism and the complexity of the nature of its propaganda. Multiple schools of thoughts have emerged to counter radicalization and associated propaganda with varying degrees of emphasis on tackling the different factors contributing to the phenomenon. This paper looks at the propaganda associated with the first and eleventh editions of the Al-Qa'ida's *Inspire* magazine (released in 2010 and 2013 respectively) to analyze the potency of the propaganda in radicalizing viewers, a decade after its release.

Crucial to this approach, the analysis will employ the stated models from Dr. Haroro J. Ingram's paper on 'Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda' to explain how the propaganda designed in the *Inspire* magazines attract supporters by providing a *Competitive System of Meaning* through which to view the world and address its complexities.

Before diving into these analytical models, it is important to understand how humans think and evaluate the world around them and its effects on the behavioral change of an individual. It is a consensus in the field of cognitive psychology, that humans tend to think 1) automatically, 2) socially and 3) via mental models[1]. Mental models are the result of an individual's constructs of Identity- gender, religion, race, responsible for their associated ideologies and worldview, casual narratives etc; while broader factors, such as social networks and social norms often determine the interaction of these mental models, influencing the hierarchical precedence of one mental model over the other and when/how they will be activated. These social contexts and shared mental models hence provide an individual the lens through which to view the world and comprehend its niches and complexities.

To provide the necessary *Competitive System of Meaning*, militant Islamist propaganda cater to manipulating mental models, by increasing perceptions of crises, and playing upon social contexts to trigger cognitive biases in the minds of its audience[2].

Assessing the Competitive System of Meaning-

Studies on radicalized individuals suggest that before heading down the "slippery slope" towards embracing radical ideologies, an individual experiences a sense of uncertainty of self and the world around them, contributed by factors such as: 1) Threat to one's collective identity; 2) Need to address specific socio-political grievances; 3) Perceived exclusion from a particular group; 4) failure to fulfil one's aspirations; 5) mortality salience etc[3].

Circumstances in an individual's social context invoking one or all of the above factors can act as '*transformative triggers*', providing a '*cognitive opening*', and priming the individual to an '*identity transformation*'. Consequently, the individual is more likely to search for new social groups to validate

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[1] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).

[2] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).

[3] Winter and Feixas (2019) Toward a Constructivist Model of Radicalization and Deradicalization: A Conceptual

his/her construes. A militant Islamist group, characterized by its high cohesion, and an extreme, clear and simple view of the world, is likely to provide such a validation, lending a false sense of certainty and security about the world, oneself, the future and even life after death[4].

Militant Islamist propaganda hence assert the *Competitive System of Meaning* by strategically leveraging the Identity, Solution and Crises constructs in the minds of its audiences, providing them with a diverse range of inter-connected narratives, with which to shape and reshape their perceptions and polarize support for the group's cause.

The role of Identity in Militant Islamist propaganda-
Identity constructs play a crucial role in the *Competitive System of Meaning* and are ubiquitous- to an extent where it becomes a cyclically reinforced narrative in the group's propaganda. Defined by Dr. Haroro J. Ingram as a "*package of values, rooted in a historical narrative, that is strategically constructed in response to a socio-historically specific reality.*", identities are a standard or criterion for justifying one's own and other's actions and attitudes, for morally judging self and others, and for comparing self with others[5].

Militant Islamist groups place primacy on their identity as righteous Muslims above all else and enforce the same on their supporters and audiences. Potential/new recruits are first trained to be a "proper Muslim"[6], renounce secularism and see the world according to the system of meaning provided by the group; their interpretation of the religion and their rules of Shariah. This provides the extremist group with the ability to tie narratives of extreme crisis supposedly experienced by the global *Ummah* while also providing their supporters with the necessary solutions to overcome the extreme crises.
Identity constructs are leveraged explicitly or even subtly, as demonstrated in this particular excerpt:
"When one reflects on the Boston events, his attention is drawn to the tumult made by the fact that the Tsarnaev brothers were Muslims. To Americans, your belongingness to Islam is enough to classify you as an enemy. As a matter of fact, they look at us as Muslim youth regardless of our appearance and education. They do not consider our citizenship and the childhood we spent in their neighborhoods. Our enemies treat us as Muslims only, nothing more."[7]

The enemy (Americans) are projected as discriminating individuals based on their Muslim identity and cracking upon the global *Ummah* for following Islam. This increases the perceptions of crises in the minds of the audiences (need to guard one's identity and the discrimination against the global *Ummah*). By tying narratives of crises with identity, militant Islamist groups promise their audiences with solutions; provided they place primacy on their identity as a Muslim and follow the group's extreme interpretation of the religion and the world.

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[4] Winter and Feixas (2019) Toward a Constructivist Model of Radicalization and Deradicalization: A Conceptual and Methodological Proposal. Front. Psychol. 10:412. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00412
[5] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).
[6] For example, ISIS would send any new recruits travelling to Iraq or Syria to first attend religious training and learn their interpretation of Islam before providing weapons training.

Leveraging Crisis Constructs-

In addition to playing a role in the identity construction of an individual, perceptions of crises also act as an important push factor for individuals to join extremist groups. Militant Islamist groups leverage crisis constructs by employing three interrelated narratives[8]-

1) *In and Out Group Identity Construction (narratives of dichotomy)*- In and Out group identity construction happens relationally[9]. Propaganda by militant Islamist groups widely use the dichotomy of the In-group and Out-group identities to augment the sense of crises among its followers while justifying violence against the Out-group with varying degrees of subtlety. The Out-group can include anyone who is not part of the In-group's narrow interpretation of Islam.

The following excerpt, quoted by Anwar Al-Awlaki from the *Inspire* magazine shows how dichotomy is leveraged to increase perceptions of crises and hate-

"Today, with the war between Muslims and the West escalating, you cannot count on the message of solidarity you may get from a civic group or a political party, or the word of support you hear from a kind neighbor or a nice co-worker. The West will eventually turn against its Muslim citizens."[10]

By projecting that the war has already begun and is in fact escalating, the propaganda is aimed at increasing the perceptions of crises in the minds of the audiences, while also contributing to extreme dichotomy by subtly stating that anyone helping out a Muslim now will eventually turn against them to support their own country in the ever-increasing discrimination against the *Ummah*.

Here is another excerpt indicating how dichotomy and perceptions of crises are increased in the minds of the audiences:

"The war on Islam is taking different faces. There is a physical war being fought out in Afghanistan, Iraq, and now an escalating remote-control war on Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. There is a battle of hearts and minds fought out in the media and in academia, and then there is a legislative war being fought out in parliaments and courtrooms across Europe and North America, and the focus of this battle is the niqab."[11]

Portraying a multifaceted war on Islam, the propaganda aims at increasing the perceptions of crises on an individual's collective identity while indicating a clear dichotomy of good (global *Ummah*) versus evil (the West). Such extreme negative constructions of an Out-group, perceived as responsible for the individual's (or in group's) suffering, allows further definition of self in contrast to the Out-group.[12].

2) *Uncertainty*- The uncertainty lever is an effective tool for propaganda, with the sense of uncertainty known to exhibit a positive correlation with an individual's construing of groups that provide a sense of

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[8] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).

[9] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).

[10] Anwar Al-Awlaki, "Message to the American people and Muslims in the West", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.58.

[11] Yahya Ibrahim, "The West should ban Niqab covering its real face", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.19

[12] Winter and Feixas (2019) Toward a Constructivist Model of Radicalization and Deradicalization: A Conceptual

certainty, feelings of superiority with the In-group, perceived threat and favorable attitude towards violence perpetrated on the Out-group[13].

Three types of Uncertainty levers are applied in militant Islamist propaganda[14]-

   a) *Theological/Jurisprudential (dilution of 'true' Islam)*- Aimed at moderate Muslims, this lever is used to blame the moderate community within the *global Ummah* and the *Ulema* who have supposedly lost respect for the religion by supporting the enemies, for worldly gains (money and power). This sort of messaging is also used to increase credibility of the militant Islamist group, who claim to bring its audience the true form of Islam as was followed by the Prophet Muhammad, while creating a dichotomy between its audience and the more moderate Muslim community.

   Example of Theological/Jurisprudential lever incorporated in militant Islamist propaganda:
   [On Taliban destroying the Bamiyan Buddha statue]- *"These ulema came to defend shirk in the name of 'preserving history', and never came before when we needed their help to mobilize the ummah to support their Taliban brothers against the criminals."*[15]
   The above message seeks to paint the *Ulema* as corrupt and siding with the infidels or the *'shirk'* rather than support the mujahideen in fighting the enemy and defending the global *Ummah*. By using euphemisms such as *'shirk'*, the message also contributes to increasing the deviousness of the Out-group, needed to reinforce narratives of extreme crises and the subsequent extreme solutions required to solve these crises.

   b) *Socio-political (occupation of Muslim lands by foreign forces)*- Aimed at increasing perceptions of crises by incorporating narratives of illegal occupation of Muslims lands and destroying the sovereignty of Muslims by foreign forces.

   Example of Socio-political lever incorporated in militant Islamist propaganda:
   "Another thing, which is surely still fresh in the American memories, a source of shame and disgrace, is the ‹Big Lie› of the 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' owned by Saddam, cooked by 'Rumsfeld and Cheney'. The lie was followed by the occupation of Iraq and a pile of files of crimes, scandals and assaults of honor."[16]

   The above message clearly invokes hate against the United States, portraying the country as capable of fabricating lies in order to invade Muslim lands and strip them of their sovereignty.

   c) *Existential (purpose of life)*- A very important lever used to tie the above narratives of crises and address the purpose of life of a Muslim. This lever is used to conjure feelings of existential crises

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[13] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).
[14] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).
[15] Adnan Muhammad Ali As-Sa'igh, "The fight over the mountains", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.60
[16] Abu Abdillah

among audiences/supporters, making them susceptible to construing groups adhering to radical ideologies, offering the individual with a sense of structure and purpose of life.

This particular excerpt from Anwar Al-Awlaki's speech is an explicit call on supporters and audiences to look at their purpose of life as a Muslim and take the "right" decision:
"We were all created by God on this earth to worship Him, and then after death it is either Paradise or Hellfire for eternity. So' the matter is not one to take lightly. It is your future."[17]

Speaking strongly on the individual's identity as a Muslim, this message seeks to invoke feelings of uncertainty in the mind of an individual regarding their purpose in life.

3) *Breakdown of Traditions*- Such narratives are used to portray the lack of efforts by the *Ummah* to follow Islam as it was followed in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The narratives also allow militant Islamist groups to project the influence of the Out-group on moderate Muslims, hence painting them as corrupt and therefore as devious as the Out-group. Every militant Islamist group will claim to provide its followers with the most accurate interpretation of the Sharia and Islam- as followed by *Salaf as-Salih* or to ensure that the *Ummah's* response to its enemies is based "upon the principles of the *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah* under the guidance of the righteous scholars."[18]

The following excerpt by Anwar Al-Awlaki demonstrates the same:
"The Muslim community in America has been witnessing a gradual erosion and decline in core Islamic principles, so today many of your scholars and Islamic organizations are openly approving of Muslims serving in the US army to kill Muslims, joining the FBI to spy against Muslims, and are standing between you and your duty of jihad. Slowly but surely, your situation is becoming similar to that of the embattled Muslim community of Spain, after the fall of Granada."[19]

Apart from sketching a supposed breakdown of traditions pertaining to Islam, the above example also demonstrates how perceptions of crises related to the *Ummah* are increased using such narratives. By connecting historic contexts relating to the plight of the Muslims with the current perceived persecution of the *Ummah*, such statements increase the feeling of uncertainty among the audience, acting as a major push factor to support the system of meaning drafted by the militant Islamist groups. Consequently, this paves the way for the extremist group to convince the audiences that only extreme solutions (violent Jihad) is the answer for such extreme crises.

The following excerpt supports the preceding argument:
"Jihad has been deconstructed in our age and thus its revival in comprehension and endeavor is of utmost importance for the Caliphate's manifestation."

[17] Anwar Al-Awlaki, "Message to the American people and Muslims in the West", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.58
[18] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016).
[19] Anwar Al

Leveraging Solution Constructs-

Acting as a "pull" factor to the Crises construct's "push" factor, the Solution constructs leveraged by militant Islamist groups convince the audience to adhere to extreme ideologies while legitimizing violence against perceived enemies.

It follows that characteristics of Solution constructs are exactly opposite to that of Crises constructs[20]-

1) *Commitment to In-group-* Characterized by love, piety, courage and respect, commitment to the In-group provides the individuals with the necessary contrast to the Out-group, while polarization of values enables the militant Islamist groups to cyclically reinforce perceptions of crises and solutions. As Dr. Haroro J. Ingram points out, *"the values of the in-group identity must be expressed in action or they remain in the abstract. The Others' values are evident in their crisis-fueling actions and so the in-group must respond accordingly with their own actions."*[21]

The following excerpts from Anwar Al-Awlaki's speech depict the same:

"These perpetrators are not operating in a vacuum. Instead they are operating within a system that is offering them support and protection. The government, political parties, the police, the intelligence services, blogs, social networks, the media, and the list goes on, are part of a system."[22]

"Hence, my advice to you is this: you have two choices: either hijra or jihad. You either leave or you fight. You leave and live among Muslims or you stay behind and fight with your hand, your wealth and your word. I specifically invite the youth to either fight in the West or join their brothers in the fronts of jihad."[23]

These examples show how perceptions of dichotomy, increasing crises and solutions are leveraged in militant Islamist propaganda. Such narratives also incorporate factors of *Moral Disengagement* among the audience. By suggesting that every institution in the land of the enemy plays a part in discriminating against Muslims, everyone who is a part of this system is a legitimate target. Hence, the only solution to this extreme crisis is to get rid of them; either by waging war against them from Muslim lands or by staying back and fighting.

2) *Certainty-* Imbued with attributes of predictability, militant Islamist groups seek to provide their supporters with definite and supposedly proven methods to overcome the uncertainty faced by an individual. By tying narratives of uncertainty to crises and certainty to solutions, such narratives provide the followers with a definite structure and lens through which to see the world around them.

Examples of Certainty lever used in militant Islamist propaganda:

"We, Muslim youth are privileged with being proud of our deen. Because we have a clear message, we strive to achieve a noble goal. This spiritual tranquility, which Islam grants us, drive us forward. It

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[20] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016)

[21] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016)

[22] Anwar Al-Awlaki, "May our souls be sacrificed for you!", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.28

[23] Anwar Al-Awlaki

gives us a propelling force to convey Islam, as it has been revealed, to every human. So that he lives in prosperity in dunya and aakhirah."[24]

The above excerpt is meant to paint a sense of certainty to the readers by providing a purpose to their lives- suggesting that by following the *deen* (violent Jihad against the "oppressors"), the individual is granted clarity and purpose not only in this world but also in life after death.

Here is another excerpt from the speech delivered by Nasir Al-Wuhayshi (former head of AQIM), seeking to point out the root cause for oppression in the Muslim world:
"the targeting of Muhammad bin Nayif was part of our effort to purify the Arabian Peninsula from the traitors. He and his ilk are the ones who allowed the Americans to set base in the Peninsula of Islam, playing the role of Abu Ruqal in its worst forms. He is an American in the clothes of an Arab. If it wasn't for these traitors, the American airplanes wouldn't have bombed Iraq and Afghanistan from the airports of Kharj and Riyadh and others."[25]

Speaking about the socio-political uncertainty faced by the civilians in Muslim countries, militant Islamist groups aim to provide clear answers about the cause of oppression and war in Muslim lands, while also targeting the country's leaders, who, according to militant Islamist groups are corrupt and puppets of the West. By comparing the former Saudi Crown Prince to Abu Ruqal (a form of Jinn or the 'evil eye' in Islamic folklore), such narratives project deviousness on the individual and add to the extreme dichotomy that militant Islamist groups aim to propagate.

3) *Return of Traditions*- As mentioned earlier, by connecting the breakdown of Islamic traditions and dilution of the religion to perceptions of extreme crises, militant Islamist groups claim to bring back such traditions and restore the religion to its former glory. The reinforcement of traditions thus manifests as a bulwark to crisis-inducing Others and a celebration of the In-group and the solutions only it is capable of providing[26] - portrayed by the following excerpt:

"we are transparent and open in proclaiming our message to the world. Our objective is to bring back Islam to life. We seek to remove the tyrannical and parasitical rulers of the Muslim world, and replace them with men of God, who know the difference between right and wrong, good and evil."[27]

"The Afghan Jihad against the Russians awoke the spirit of jihad in the ummah. Although that war devoured many men, it produced a lot of good for this ummah. Then came the jihad against America, it weakened the US and exposed the treacherous leaders. It sowed the ummah with seeds of jihad against the treacherous rulers, and the fruits are still ripening."[28]

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[24] Jonas The Rebel, "Dear American Muslim", *Inspire*, Issue 11, (2013) p.9.

[25] Nasir Al-Wuhayshi, "Interview with Shaykh Abu Basir", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.14

[26] Ingram, H. J. "Deciphering the siren call of militant Islamist propaganda: Meaning, credibility & behavioural change", The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague 7, no. 9 (2016)

[27] Anwar Al-Awlaki, "Message to the American people and Muslims in the West", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.57

[28] Ibrahim Ar-Rubaysh,

It is clear from the above examples that a militant Islamist group's claim to bring back traditions to its followers is mainly centered around narratives to support the extreme solutions provided by the group (as narrated in the second example).

Looking at the various Crises and Solution constructs leveraged by militant Islamist groups, it is evident that a remarkable variety of messaging is deployed to reinforce the narratives in the minds of its spectators. Such narratives are carefully constructed so as to not overwhelm the audience with the dubious nature of the Out-group, but rather encourage the mobilization of violence against the Out-group by providing a balanced framework of cyclically reinforced narratives of Dichotomy, Values and Crises to support the militant Islamist group's *Competitive System of Meaning* as portrayed by the image below.
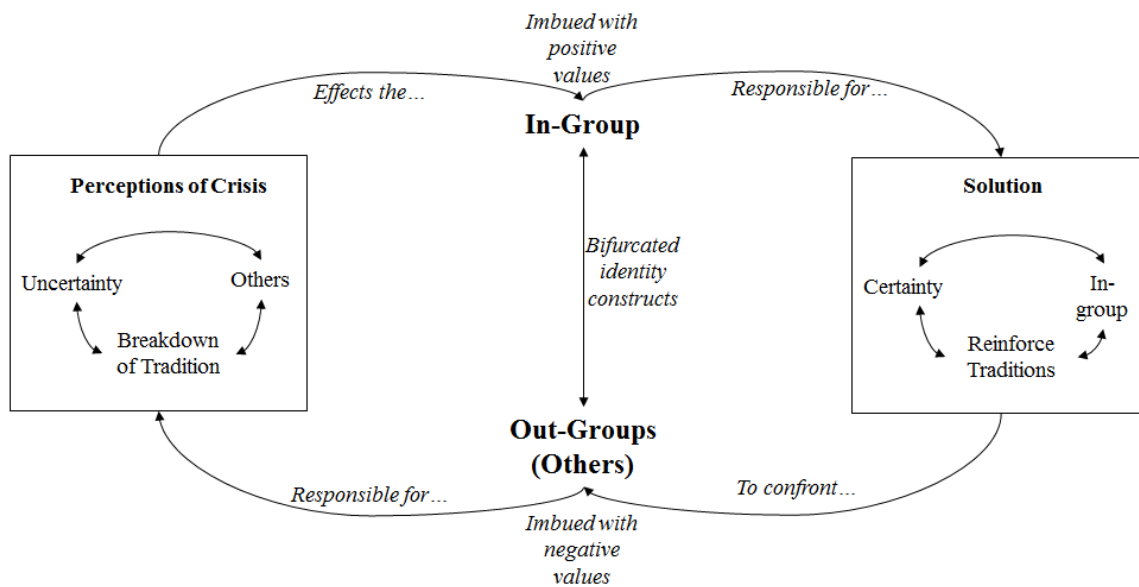

Image courtesy: Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility and Behavioural Change

Dichotomy reinforcing narratives-

"Americans should remember that they, until the middle of the First World War I, were minding America's internal business. But all changed in April 1917 when President Wilson asked Congress "a war to end all wars". This expression changed the American nation into a combative people, assaulting oppressed nations out of the US boundaries."[29]

"We, the Muslims, do not have an inherent animosity towards any racial group, or ethnicity. We are not against Americans for just being American; we are against evil, and America as a whole has turned into a nation of evil."[30]

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[29] Abu Abdillah Almoravid, "Who & Why", *Inspire*, Issue 11, (2013) p.29
[30] Anwar Al-Awlaki

By reinforcing narratives of dichotomy and tying the increasing perceptions of crises, militant Islamist groups justify the act of violence as legitimate and necessary on the individual's path to a more worthy or supreme goal- to rid the world of evil and bring about peace and prosperity to the world.

Value reinforcing narratives-

"The truce was offered by the one who has real authority to take such a decision on behalf of the Muslims, Shaykh Usamah bin Ladin, may Allah preserve him. His offer was refused. Whenever we offer a sound plan, they escalate in their stubbornness so we are left with no option but to defend ourselves and fight the transgressors."[31]

"The Western governments today are waging a relentless war against Islam. They brought together a coalition and have the support of their population in invading and destroying Muslim land. But there is a small band of sincere Muslims who are striking back at the enemy. The efforts of this small group of mujahidin have had a great effect in hindering the plans of the enemy. So now we have a balance of forces. As they kill Muslims, Muslims respond by killing among them. This is the effect of a small group of sincere mujahidin, so what would the effect be if the Muslim ummah wakes up? "[32]

Connecting values of mercy and amiability with the In-group and oppression and discrimination with the Out-group, the propaganda paves the way to further connect solution constructs with the In-group and crises with the Out-group.

In conclusion, the various examples taken from the two editions of the Al Qa'ida's *Inspire* magazine exhibit how the militant Islamist group championed the usage of various narratives to strengthen their *Competitive System of Meaning*, aimed at resonating with a wide range of audiences who's invalidations are subdued and uncertainty about the world clarified. As mentioned earlier, by carefully leveraging narratives of Crises and Solutions and incorporating various *moral disengagement* levers associated with the crises and solutions, militant Islamist propaganda emerge successful in creating a self-perpetuating cycle of perceptions of Dichotomy and Crises which only the group can mitigate. This provides the extremist group with the required legitimacy to convince their audiences to carry out the suggested extreme solutions in order to solidify one's purpose in this world, and therefore, contribute to further the political agenda of the militant Islamist group.

***ITCT** does not necessarily endorse any or all views expressed by the author in the article.*

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[31] Nasir Al-Wuhayshi, "Interview with Shaykh Abu Basir", *Inspire*, Issue 1, (2010) p.14

[32] The AQ chef,