WHO IS THE AUDIENCE? THE TALIBAN’S ARABIC LANGUAGE MEDIA STRATEGY

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By

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the targeted audience for the Taliban’s monthly Arabic language magazine, *al-Sumud*. The research examines four different audience groups by applying a content analysis method on the first 48 magazine issues, from May 2006 to May 2010. The four segments are active-sympathetic (fighters/members), inactive-sympathetic (supporters), inactive-religious (fundamentalists), and an inactive-uncommitted audience (curious, undecided Arabic readers). The results show that *al-Sumud* is intended to influence an unsympathetic audience, of mostly undecided readers, as opposed to ideologically committed active or inactive readers. Given the sophisticated, well-organized Taliban media strategy, this study recommends an intensive counter-propaganda campaign aimed at Arabic-language Taliban-affiliated websites and radical discussion forums.
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Introduction

Starting in 2006, the Taliban increased their efforts in distributing communication material in several languages. Despite operating in a predominantly Pashtu or Dari speaking-population, a main focus of the Taliban’s media outreach has been the Arab world. In May 2006, the Taliban released the first issue of the Arabic online magazine *al-Sumud* (“Steadfastness”). Four years later, the movement continues to distribute it with better graphics, more thorough analysis, and longer articles. Yet up until now, there is no convincing explanation for the Taliban’s efforts in communicating with a society that is not party to the conflict in Afghanistan.

There are very few academic studies on Taliban propaganda, and even these studies offer conflicting conclusions. Tim Foxley’s June 2007 project paper at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute on Taliban propaganda activities examined the content and effectiveness of the insurgency’s communications, concluding that claims of the movement’s media successes were exaggerated.¹ Six months later, the Royal Danish Defense College released a report on the Taliban’s information warfare contradicting Foxley’s assessment. The authors illustrated how the movement has been very effective in its media activities.²

Rendering a reliable conclusion on propaganda effectiveness requires interviews and public opinion surveys of *al-Sumud* readers beyond this paper’s goals. Instead, this study explains the sophistication and deliberate message-fixing in *al-Sumud* using a content analysis method. *Al-Sumud*’s delivered themes are not random, but focused to maximize results by

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influencing four groups of readers. This paper investigates the targeted Arabic-speaking audience of *al-Sumud* by examining four segments. I argue that the Taliban distributes *al-Sumud* to influence more than one group of readers. Their intention is not only to attract those who support them in the Arab world, but also those who are unsympathetic to their movement. In order to identify the most targeted segment, I conducted content analysis and coding of the first 48 issues, covering the first four years of publication from May 2006 to May 2010.

The following thesis is divided into five major parts. The first one gives an overview of Taliban media, important individuals behind *al-Sumud*’s publication, and the magazine’s popularity. The second part is a brief survey of relevant literatures used to build my methodology. The third section is the research design, which illustrates in detail how I executed my project and reached my results. The fourth part reveals the research findings and explains the main objectives of *al-Sumud* magazine. The final section offers policy recommendations to help decision-makers develop a practical counter-propaganda campaign.

**Al-Sumud Magazine: Voice of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan**

**Brief History of Al-Sumud**

The production and distribution of *al-Sumud Magazine* is the responsibility of the Taliban’s Media Committee, which was established on September 23, 2002 with the purpose of producing magazines and audiovisuals, setting up websites, communicating with international and local media, and translating jihadi material. The first and second directors of the Committee, Qudrat Allah Jamal and Muhammad Yasir respectively, were arrested in 2004, after

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which it was led by Shaykh Nsair al-Din Hirwi, believed to be the Taliban’s leading strategist.⁴ According to *al-Sumud*, Hirwi is an alias as the individual’s real name cannot be revealed because of being blacklisted.⁵ Sometimes described as Mullah Umar’s right hand, Hirwi was in charge of *Maktab Amir al-Mu‘minin*, Mullah Umar’s office, before the invasion of Afghanistan. He served as a Chairman of *al-Sumud Magazine* until October 2009, and was instrumental in expanding the Media Committee to reach a wider audience.⁶ In February 2007, Hirwi set up the first Arabic website version of *al-Sumud*, produced and translated jihadi videos, and disseminated Taliban material on the net.⁷ The Committee’s work was not limited to Arabic; it also targeted Pashtu, Dari, Farsi, and English speakers. *Istiqamat Magazine* (―Uprightness‖), for instance, was published in November 2005 in three languages—Pashtu, Dari, and English—while the *Tora Bora Magazine* concentrated on Farsi speakers.⁸

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nsair al-Din Hirwi</td>
<td>Chairman (May 2006 – Oct. 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shihab al-Din Ghaznawi</td>
<td>Editor-in-Chief (May 2006 – Oct. 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmad Mukhtar</td>
<td>Executive Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salih el-Din Mumind</td>
<td>Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ikram Muyindi</td>
<td>Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Arfan Balkhi</td>
<td>Editor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fida’ Qandahari</td>
<td>Art Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamid Allah Amin</td>
<td>Chairman (Oct. 2009 – Present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmad Shah Halim</td>
<td>Editor-in-Chief (Oct. 2009 – Present)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Staff of al-Sumud*

*Information is available in *al-Sumud* # 18, 20, and 41.

The Committee handles online information activities through its official website *al-Emarah*, also known as *Voice of Jihad*. It appeared under different domain names and

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⁴ Kabul Center for Strategic Studies, “The Taliban’s Psychological War,” January 1, 2008.
⁵ “Media Activities of the Islamic Emirate,” *al-Sumud Magazine*, Second Year, Issue No. 6, p. 7.
languages, and received some help from foreign supporters. It offers a daily update of operations, news analysis, and official statements in Pashtu, Farsi, Arabic, and English. Unlike the al-Qaeda-affiliated websites, al-Emarah does not have a discussion forum, manuals on how to assemble bombs, nor links to other extremist websites, probably because the Taliban does yet not see itself as part of bin Ladin’s global jihad. Al-Emarah is not aimed at a local audience, especially since Internet penetration in Afghanistan is as low as two percent. The existence of several languages indicates that it is intended for a regional (Pakistan, Iran, and Arab gulf countries) and a global (English) audience.

Al-Sumud magazine is not only uploaded to Al-Emarah, but it can also be found on other Arabic discussion forums. The Media Committee has official correspondents who distribute material to extremist websites such as Ansar al-Jihad Network, Hanein, Ana al-Muslim, the al-Qaeda accredited al-Fallujah Islamic Forum, Shumukh al-Islam, and the Mujahidin Electronic Forum. Just last year, the Committee announced that al-Fallujah is a valuable, trusted jihadi forum that supports the Islamic Emirate in carrying out its public relations’ mission. One of the Committee’s correspondents is “Abdullah al-Wazir,” an official representative of the Taliban to the Arabic discussion forum al-Jazeerah Talk. As of January 2011, he posted close to 1,000

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11 Rid and Hecker, War 2.0, p. 177.
discussion threads since his September 11, 2008 registration. In addition, Taliban sympathizers in jihadi forums also assist in disseminating these publications and statements online.

Independent supporters of the jihad in Afghanistan circulate copies of the magazine on their own websites, such as the infamous teacher of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarwqawi, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. At Minbar al-Tawhid wal Jihad (“Forum of Monotheism and Jihad”), visitors can download all al-Sumud issues as well as al-Qaeda magazines, theological justifications, and jihadi books. Another supporter is Mustapha Hamid Abu al-Walid al-Masri, who claims to have written about and participated in the first jihad in Afghanistan in 1979. He has an online opinion and news service and uploads current copies of al-Sumud at his website, www.mafa.asia.

The magazine is not only available online. It is also printed and distributed for free on expensive foreign paper in Peshawar and nearby towns. The people who publish it are part of Quetta Shura Council, the Afghan Taliban’s top leadership council. Furthermore, the Taliban have distributed material to university students in Karachi encouraging them to participate in jihad. In December 2010, pro-Taliban elements supplied books and brochures to students at Karachi University, Dawood Engineering College, NED University of Engineering and Technology and Federal Urdu University.

**Popularity of Al-Sumud**

In the 1920s, Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud, embarked on an advertizing campaign to persuade women to smoke cigarettes. “Reach for a lucky instead of a sweet” was his

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slogan to encourage female smokers to use Lucky Strikes, and within the first year the cigarette company had a 300% increase in sales.\textsuperscript{18} Although it sounds ironic, the fundamentalist Taliban also use a marketing campaign through \textit{al-Sumud} to gain popularity in the Arab world. They want to portray themselves as the one and only side with legitimacy in Afghanistan, and \textit{al-Sumud} is their “Lucky Strikes” campaign defending their reputation and credibility. In the first issue and throughout the last four years, the Media Committee described the magazine as: a truthful image of the Islamic jihad in Afghanistan. Berney’s slogan exploited women’s fear about weight gain from eating desserts, while the Taliban’s statement exploits its readers supposed fear about dishonest Arabic-language media outlets. It is hard to gauge the growth of \textit{al-Sumud}’s readership; instead, one can illustrate its popularity among members of jihadi forums as well as innocuous websites. The Taliban have been distributing the magazine to al-Qaeda-affiliated websites, but today it can be found on mainstream discussion forums and file sharing websites such as Rapidshare, Filestube, and 4shared. Although it is difficult to measure the number of its readers, table 1 shows the number of downloads of various magazine issues at Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s \textit{al-Tawhid wal-Jihad}, a platform for spreading al-Qaida’s textbooks and ideology.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Issue Number & Downloads & Issue Number & Downloads & Issue Number & Downloads \\
\hline
1 & 1,225 & 16 & 984 & 31 & 958 \\
\hline
2 & 1,059 & 18 & 968 & 35 & 972 \\
\hline
5 & 1,045 & 19 & 949 & 37 & 1,254 \\
\hline
7 & 1,008 & 21 & 991 & 41 & 1,088 \\
\hline
9 & 1,014 & 23 & 990 & 44 & 1,303 \\
\hline
12 & 965 & 25 & 969 & 49 & 1,542 \\
\hline
13 & 973 & 29 & 1,055 & 51 & 1,578 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Number of Downloads of \textit{al-Sumud} at the Jihad & Tawhid Forum*}
\end{table}

* Information in this table was collected on January 22, 2011 (http://www.tawhed.ws/c/?i=390)

\textsuperscript{18} Dave Lakhani, \textit{Subliminal Persuasion} (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 27
There is also some anecdotal evidence that writers in discussion forums regularly cite articles in *al-Sumud* to prop up their own arguments. In response to critical comments by some participants about the nature of the relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, *al-Jazeera Talk*’s forum member “Al-Butairi” copied and pasted from *al-Sumud* issue number (hereafter SMD #) 40 an article entitled *Al-Wala’ wal Bara’* (“Loyalty and Disavowal”) confirming loyalty of the two groups to each other.  

At the same website, “Khabib bin ‘Uday” quoted from SMD #29 a statement made by Mullah Bradar Akhund, a Taliban commander, denying any negotiations between the Taliban and either the United States, NATO, or the Afghan government. In the al-Qaeda-accredited *al-Fallujah Islamic Forum*, forum member “Qahir al-C.I.A” (“Conqueror of the CIA”) posted a eulogy for martyrs taken from SMD #38. In August 2010, forum member “Abu al-Harith al-Turkistani” posted a graph based on numbers of dead and injured “crusaders” and “collaborators” in *al-Sumud Magazine* from July 2007 to July 2010. There are several examples like these showing a growing popularity of *al-Sumud* online as a trusted source of information about the war in Afghanistan. However, the most interesting part is that some forum participants began publishing opinion pieces in *al-Sumud*. A popular extremist ideologue on the web forum *Ana al-Muslim* known as “Ahmad Bawadi” wrote an article in SMD #36 denouncing anti-jihadists. In the same issue, Hani Yousef al-Sebai, a

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London-based al-Qaeda supporter, wrote an article condemning Afghans who collaborate with the U.S. and NATO. 23 Interestingly, Al-Sebai’s name appeared in a U.N. list of individuals associated with al-Qaeda. 24

**Literature Review**

In developing my research design, I rely on academic and media sources covering two main fields: audience segmentation methods and media strategy objectives of terrorist groups in general. Since this research is the first of its kind when it comes to Taliban media strategy, a useful literature review demonstrates how previous studies contribute to my analysis and methodology. Thus, the following sources are not only used in this brief assessment, but also in my research design as discussed later on.

Due to the dearth of academic articles on Taliban propaganda, I relied on previous research on the communication strategies of terrorist movements. One of the most important works is Joanne Wright's *Terrorist Propaganda: The Red Army Faction and the Provisional IRA 1968-86.* She elaborates on Provisional IRA (PIRA) and Red Army Faction (RAF) media objectives in targeting three audience segments: an active, sympathetic, and an uncommitted audience. Her analysis assisted me in developing three segments of *al-Sumud’s* readers: the active- sympathetic (fighters/members), inactive-sympathetic (supporters) and the inactive-unsympathetic audience (undecided readers). I also created a fourth group (the religious-unsympathetic) based on a short study by Sukla Sanyal, “Legitimizing Violence: Seditious Propaganda and Revolutionary Pamphlets in Bengal, 1908–1918.” Sanyal shows how

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propaganda is an effective means of legitimizing violence and illustrates how an emotional connection is established with the targeted audience. This connection appears frequently in *al-Sumud* to garner the sympathy of religious-minded readers by invoking the Islamic identity vis-à-vis others. This religious, but unsympathetic group includes individuals who are mainly influenced by persuasive *religious* justifications rather than *political* arguments.

Previous studies were insufficient in building a quantitative method. For that, I had to rely on two types of analysis. The first is segmentation theory in the marketing and communication fields, which assists me in developing coherent, homogenous audience groups. “Market Segmentation” by Michel Wedel, is a survey of numerous methodologies about the identification of market segments. In an a-priori descriptive method, the type and number of segments are determined before data collection on the basis of several variables. This forms the foundation of concept operationalization in my research. Based on the sympathy and active support variables, I created the previously-mentioned audience segments. Another guide is Michael Slater’s "Theory and Method in Health Audience Segmentation.” Slater provides a conceptual basis of audience segmentation strategies for health communication efforts and provides approaches to use them. I draw on his “behavior determinants” while developing my method. He stresses the need to identify subgroups that have in common similar determinants of behavior or concern, meaning that each group in this study must be homogenous with respect to patterns of selected variables. What I classify as influential messages or themes in my research is simply another form of behavior determinants that illustrate a pattern of a homogenous segment of *al-Sumud* readers. This is discussed in detail in the conceptualization and operationalization sections of the below research design. The second type of analysis discusses social science
approaches to content analysis and coding. I rely mainly on Daniel Riffe’s *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research* and Ole Holsti’s *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*. I use both as a guide to develop a three step content analysis approach.

**Research Design: Content Analysis**

Academics use content analysis as a way to make valid inferences from texts through a set of procedures. Holsti defines it as “a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages.”\(^{25}\) Riffe’s definition is similar, but includes a quantitative measurement to reduce large sets of data to a manageable form. In *Analyzing Media Messages*, Riffe’s writes the following:

> Quantitative content analysis is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context.\(^{26}\)

Both definitions highlight key tenets of content analysis, that it is systematic, objective, quantitative, and inference drawing. The approach in this study incorporates these tenets to answer the main thesis question: which Arabic-speaking audience is the focus of *al-Sumud*? Accordingly, the first step is to introduce a valid measurement or an operational definition for each group (audience segmentation). The second step is to systematically examine *al-Sumud* articles, identify messages that match each segment, and assign numerical values to infer the most targeted audience segment in *al-Sumud* (coding). The findings should explain the intention


of the Taliban in targeting the Arab world. They could be trying to affect the perceptions of an undecided audience; influence a religious audience; boost the morale of Arab jihadists; and/or draw recruits and funding from supporters. Accordingly, there will be four different hypotheses: (1) the Taliban focus on an undetermined group of people (2) the Taliban want to influence a religious audience (3) the Taliban direct their attention towards a supporting audience; and (4) the Taliban concentrate on active participants.

These hypotheses are still falsifiable. By applying a different method of analysis, one can challenge the findings in this study. The research method can also be restructured to include other variables in addition to, active support and sympathy, such as nationality or ethnic culture. In addition, a large number of articles aimed at one group is sufficient evidence against the remaining hypotheses. For instance, it is illogical for the Taliban to waste time in convincing a committed group of jihadists about something in which they already believe—the legitimacy of jihad. On the other hand, the lack of evidence to reject one of the hypotheses only indicates that it is consistent with the proposed theory of audience segmentation in al-Sumud Magazine.

I. Audience Segmentation

Audience segmentation is a two step process. The first step is to identify each concept or term used to describe the audience from previous academic work. The second step is to define the concept in terms that can be measured based on what is available in al-Sumud. These two steps lay the groundwork for content analysis and coding.

A. Conceptualization

As mentioned, Joanna Wright’s qualitative study of terrorist propaganda is the only available work with in-depth content analysis of targeted audience segments. Three groups are
commonly accepted among scholars as relevant (uncommitted, sympathetic, and active), and in her book she outlines the ideological appeals to each group. The following paper builds on Wright’s analysis for the three segments and adds to it a fourth category for the religious background of the Taliban. The purpose here is twofold: first, to illustrate how terrorist propaganda is generally similar even with a religious tone, and second to establish concurrent validity by using the measures of another study as a cross-check of relevant themes.27

(1) The Uncommitted Audience: Wright provides two ideological appeals directed towards this group. The first theme is to present daily activities of the state as disadvantaged to a particular group. The RAF, for example, kept stressing the ‘fascist’ nature of the state to present a picture of disadvantaged and persecuted groups within West Germany. The PIRA portrayed the Catholic community as disadvantaged, abused, and discriminated against under British authority. The second is guilt transfer, which lays the blame for all the deaths, injuries, and destruction on the shoulders of the regime. By doing this, the terrorist group is accusing the state of unlawful actions, such as shoot-to-kill policies and torture. From this perspective, the group justifies its actions as defensive reactions to state aggression. Blaming the British for all the violence in Northern Ireland had been a consistent tactic of PIRA propaganda. Gerry Adams long claimed that “violence in Ireland finds its roots, regardless of which groups are involved, within the conquest of Ireland by Britain.”28 With regards to the Taliban, one would expect to see the same appeals when targeting an uncommitted or undecided group of readers.

27 Riffe, Analyzing Media Messages, 165.
(2) The Sympathetic Audience: There are three elements of communication with this group: historical appeal, the legitimacy of violence, and threats. The PIRA argued that the history of Ireland showed that there could be no peace until the British leave. Historical appeals, however, had to be linked with the present situation, which was perceived as utterly wrong and unacceptable. Frequent references to Ireland’s historic battle for self-determination were coupled with appeals for a lost identity as well as a lost language. Yet, while the presence of the British may have been wrong, the PIRA still need to convince the sympathetic audience that its violent strategy was justified. This included the rejection of peaceful methods to redress the situation, stressing that violence was the only way to achieve its objectives. Gerry Adams repeatedly stressed that armed struggle was a morally correct form of resistance, and the PIRA was simply protecting the Roman Catholic community. \(^{29}\) Finally, propaganda efforts had to raise concerns that are more directly felt among potential supporters than an abstract affiliation with causes. It is not enough to blame the state for insecurity or the maltreatment of certain groups. To influence the supporters, the state requires punishment. In collaboration with the French group Action Directe in 1985, the RAF vowed that the two groups would instigate attacks against NATO; a few days later they assassinated General Audran, a French Ministry of Defense official responsible for arms production, sales, and exports to NATO. Wright contends that promises of these attacks represent the first step in a larger mobilization. \(^{30}\) Based on Wright’s analysis, historical comparisons, legitimization of violence, and threats of attacks are three themes that influence a sympathetic audience.

\(^{29}\) Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda*, 124
\(^{30}\) Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda*, 114
(3) The Active Audience: Propaganda for an active audience is built on messages that targeted the previous two groups. The new active members must have accepted the ideological appeals directed at both the uncommitted and sympathetic audiences. For instance, they obviously agree that only violence will change the current situation, and thus anything that is directed at the rest of the segments will only serve to reaffirm the same message for the active members. Yet, it is not enough to simply reiterate the same themes. The purpose of propaganda towards the active volunteers is to further bind them to the cause through action and most importantly to keep them there by stressing the need for further action.  

While the purpose of propaganda aimed at the first two groups was to change the opinions of the uncommitted and activate the sympathetic, the goal of targeting an active group is to keep it active for an indefinite period of time. To do this, Wright argues, supporting propaganda should emphasize the supreme importance of the cause and the group over the individual; the longevity of the war and the people’s or God’s support for it; and the inevitability of victory. The RAF, for instance, constantly lengthened the timescale of the revolution and stressed that victory is inevitable because as attacks continue on security forces, it would be difficult for the government to recruit new policemen or soldiers, and in this manner the system will fall.  

To maintain morale among the fighters, the organization must show attention for its imprisoned and killed members. If captured, the active members need to know that they are still part of the overall struggle; if killed, there is the promise of martyrdom. PIRA always reinforced the morale of its active volunteers using this tactic. When British security forces killed two women suspected of being members of PIRA in 1971, the organization was forced to honor its

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31 Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda*, 168  
32 Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda*, 145
promises of martyrdom in death for active volunteers.\textsuperscript{33} The state’s treatment of prisoners arms the terrorist with a strong message to target a sympathetic audience, but it is how the group treats its own imprisoned members that sway the active audience. PIRA and the RAF had orchestrated numerous operations to free prisoners, which boosts the morale of current fighters especially if a former prisoner is returned to active service at a higher rank.\textsuperscript{34}

\textbf{B. Operationalization}

Audience segmentation is simply a grouping task to maximize one’s benefits or profit. For example, attitudinal segmentation shows the importance of emotions and attitudes in understanding one’s customers and their relationship to one’s brand. An older woman’s choice for a dress is an indication of her emotional and rational needs.\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Al-Sumud} readers are also emotionally and rationally influenced through numerous articles and messages. Market segmentation has its theoretical basis in microeconomic models of price discrimination, which shows how a firm could gain maximum surplus by selling at differentiated prices. For instance, products of a certain retail store could be sold primarily for young teenagers, but that does not mean that the store’s managers are restricted to this group. They could offer discounts to senior citizens, military members, or even college students to increase their profits. \textit{Al-Sumud’s} audience segmentation follows the same principle of price discrimination. The Taliban are probably aiming for a certain group of readers in the Arab world; however, they could gain the most from their propaganda by widening the size of the targeted audience to include other groups. The difference between this research and that conducted by advertising firms is that they

\textsuperscript{33} Wright, \textit{Terrorist Propaganda}, 161
\textsuperscript{34} Wright, \textit{Terrorist Propaganda}, 169
can reach consumers to accurately build a profile of certain groups, while my research depends on *al-Sumud*’s articles to be able to infer the targeted segments.

The following hypotheses illustrate how *al-Sumud* has a level of sophistication, which editors could adjust overtime according to the selected audience in order to achieve maximum influence. The approach in this paper closely follows the “a-priori descriptive method,” meaning that the segments are defined in advance by the author without distinction between dependent or independent variables.\(^\text{36}\) A set of themes are used to assign potential readers of *al-Sumud* to a homogenous group, with the purpose of inferring the main target audience of Taliban Arabic propaganda. These messages or themes are simply descriptors of segments defined in terms of their sympathy and active participation. Although some of them are not mutually exclusive, the study is intended to illustrate how a logical distinction can be made. While a few themes could reinforce the beliefs of some segments, adaptation to the audience’s interests and concerns makes these themes more persuasive for one group more than the others.\(^\text{37}\) Accordingly, the construction of the four audience segments is based on identifying themes that resonate with specific segments, since each group has a different interest level in a particular issue, rather than how certain themes reinforce a group’s belief system or not.

The rationale behind this operationalization is that propaganda is a resonance strategy. Paul Kecskemeti views it as manipulated communications to establish resonance with an audience’s predispositions for the purpose of persuading it of a new view that the propagandist


prefers.\textsuperscript{38} The new view is basically to make the religious and undecided audiences more sympathetic and the sympathetic supporters more active. If the purpose of propaganda is simply to reinforce preexisting beliefs, then it will be less effective in causing influence and changing opinions. Therefore, resonance means using general themes that are harmonious with the experience of the audience.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{First Hypothesis: The Taliban focuses on an active-sympathetic audience}

The group includes those who are/were fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere, including imprisoned or former Arab jihadists. The members of this group provide organizational, logistical, financial or operational support to jihadi activities and are naturally sympathetic to the Taliban. Joanna Wright asserts that the purpose of a media strategy towards this group is to bind “individuals to the cause through action.”\textsuperscript{40} Al-\textit{Sumud} articles on operations, martyrs, and enemy causalities are the outcome of an active group’s commitment to the cause. It is also assumed that members of this segment have already accepted the ideological appeal directed at the remaining segments. For instance, it is unnecessary to remind a jihadist that jihad is the “right path,” since the action has already been done. If there’s any effect at all, it is that propaganda will reaffirm belief in the cause. Wright adds that supporting propaganda for an active audience emphasizes the supreme importance of the cause, patience needed for a long war, treatment of imprisoned members, martyrdom, and most importantly the inevitability of victory, as she explains how the German RAF argued that justness of its cause ensures victory.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} Charles Patti and Charles Frazer, \textit{Advertizing: A Decision-Making Approach} (Chicago, IL: Dryden, 1988), 301
\textsuperscript{40} Wright, \textit{Terrorist Propaganda}, 140.
\textsuperscript{41} Wright, \textit{Terrorist Propaganda}, 140.
Second Hypothesis: The Taliban focuses on an inactive-sympathetic audience

Members of this group have a broad ideological and historical sympathy with the Taliban without actual physical participation. They maintain a positive political discussion about the Taliban’s objectives and justify its actions, in addition to providing financial and/or religious support. This is the most important group not only because additional recruits or financial assistance could come from here, but also because its size determines the success of a propaganda or counter-propaganda campaign. There are two main reasons for a media strategy aimed at this group, activating it and maintaining its support. First, the complete rejection of the status quo and stressing violence as the only method to achieve objectives is intended to move individuals to the first segment. Al-Sumud articles that rationalize jihad, stress its justness and necessity, and reject other forms of dispute settlement (i.e. negotiations with the Karzai government) are aimed at an inactive but sympathetic group of individuals, with the hopes that some of them would become fighters or martyrs in the future. The second reason is maintaining an appealing view of the movement as well as its cause. Featuring biographies or interviews of top lieutenants, boasting of their strength, and threatening more attacks in the future seeks to paint a picture of a “righteous” force that is not afraid of standing up against “evil” (i.e. U.S. and NATO) and the “dishonorable” (Karzai’s government). In addition, drawing similarities between the past (historical invasions and 1980’s jihadi fighters) and the present (US invasion and the Taliban) offers an explanation of what the Taliban views as wrong with the current situation. This is similar to historical appeals of the PIRA. A 1970 article in the Republican News

42 Wright, Terrorist Propaganda, 101
43 Wright, Terrorist Propaganda, 102
reads: “The men and women of all generations who have fought against British rule have
provided our glorious heritage and to follow in their footsteps is an obligation and inspiration.”

Third Hypothesis: The Taliban focuses on an inactive-religious audience

This segment includes students of religion, theologians, and fundamentalist religious
conservatives in the Arab world, who are not actively engaged with, or passionately supporting,
jihadi groups. It is also unsympathetic to the Taliban, but its sympathy is primarily gained
through religious discussions. Persuasive religious justifications rather than political arguments
could influence this group. It is important to understand that such a category is not for those who
pray five times a day or fast in Ramadan; it is meant for individuals who are well-versed in
religious arguments and interact with other Taliban supporters or read al-Sumud. This is an
important group because its members, unlike undetermined individuals, are persuaded by articles
on the religious legitimacy of jihad, coalition troops’ disrespect for Islam, social decadence of
Afghan society, and promises of enforcing Shari’a law. Unfortunately, some old propaganda
studies dismiss the impact of religious appeal. Jacques Ellul, for instance, argued that the
strength of religious propaganda is immensely inaccurate. In his 1965 Propaganda: The
Formation of Men’s Attitudes, he concluded that it is unsuccessful because “society as a whole is
not interested in religious problems.” During the same period, the PIRA distributed pamphlets
to uncommitted individuals in the U.S. portraying “the Roman Catholic community as
dis advantaged.” Taliban’s propaganda is filled with religious connotations aimed at connecting
with a fundamentalist religious audience. In studying propaganda of Banegali revolutionary

44 Wright, Terrorist Propaganda, 122.
46 Wright, Terrorist Propaganda, 92.
terrorists in the early 1900s, Sukla Sanyal asserts that the effectiveness of pamphlets was attributable to establishing an emotional connection with a targeted audience.\textsuperscript{47} This is not to argue that the PIRA is a Taliban-like terrorist organization. PIRA was simply a terrorist movement that used religion, while the Taliban is a religious movement that uses terrorism.

\textit{Fourth Hypothesis: The Taliban focuses on an inactive-uncommitted audience}

These are the remaining Arab readers of \textit{al-Sumud Magazine} who are not necessarily religious, nor actively engaged in any form of jihad, nor passionate supporters of the Taliban. This segment does not represent the entire Arab population, because the limited online distribution of \textit{al-Sumud} indicates that it is not widely read among the average person in the Arab world. It is just a group of individuals who \textit{read} the magazine, whether they stumble upon it in a discussion forum or an email from a friend. This segment is also known as the undecided, the ones whose opinions are vague.\textsuperscript{48} Although the actual size of this group—as well as all the previous segments—is unknown, the purpose here is to see whether this undetermined group of people receives the most attention in \textit{al-Sumud} or not, as the outcome affects the direction and extent of Taliban propaganda campaigns.

The best way to target an undetermined, uncommitted group of people is to scare them about the alternative. This is a classic psychological tactic that has been used by marketing companies, politicians, and terrorist groups. For instance, Edward Bernays argued to Eisenhower that fear of communists should be induced and encouraged, “because by unleashing irrational

\textsuperscript{48} Ellul, Propaganda, 49.
fears it would make Americans loyal to the state and capitalism.\textsuperscript{49} Likewise, the Taliban uses the same method. By instilling fear of the Afghan government, the Americans, and the West, \textit{al-Sumud} seeks to establish an emotional connection as well as sympathy for its cause. Negative articles about anti-Taliban governments or individuals seek to do precisely that.

From the Taliban’s perspective, gaining some sympathy from this segment is the first step to a successful propaganda operation before guaranteeing its support. It is highly unlikely for someone who is not sympathetic to the Taliban to start donating money, let alone fight with the movement. For an article to be persuasive to an undetermined reader, there must be a prior general interest with the negative portrayal of current actors or conditions.\textsuperscript{50} Accordingly, \textit{al-Sumud} chooses issues with broad appeal in the Arab world such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, U.S. invasion of Iraq, or the failure of ruling regimes. Members of this group are also expected to side against the maltreatment of innocent civilians especially Muslims; the corruption of political figures especially in Afghanistan; and the insecurity of villagers and farmers. Such governance failures are blamed on the Afghan government and coalition forces, tarnishing their credibility in the view of an undetermined group of people. The “credibility-attacks” tactic was also employed by the PIRA to influence the uncommitted audience, as allegations of British forces’ brutality and misbehavior were a dominant part of their newspaper.\textsuperscript{51} These themes could also reinforce beliefs of the previous segments, because from a terrorist perspective it is more useful for propaganda messages to move from the bottom up, rather than filter from the top down.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{49} Lakhani, \textit{Subliminal Persuasion}, 32.
\textsuperscript{50} Wright, \textit{Terrorist Propaganda}, 79.
\textsuperscript{51} Wright, \textit{Terrorist Propaganda}, 92.
\textsuperscript{52} Wright, \textit{Terrorist Propaganda}, 77.
II. Coding

*Al-Sumud* articles, the primary unit of analysis, are analyzed based on the main theme. For example, based on the previous criteria, an article discrediting the Afghan government’s ability to counter corruption will have most of its impact on uncommitted individuals—active or inactive supporters already favor the Taliban over the Karzai regime. If an article describes or comments on an operation conducted against Afghan or US troops, then it will have a stronger influence over active participants.

Conducting the content analysis shows whether *al-Sumud’s* articles propagate the previously-mentioned themes or message characteristics. As of December 2010, there is a total of 54 issues, all of which were released every month since May 2006 uninterruptedly, and every issue has 12-20 articles. This study will focus on the first 48 issues to evaluate the “overall” theme in each article without reference to its effect upon the audience. Otherwise, coding results could produce one message that fits all four segments. To avoid this complication, I adopted the following criteria to ensure that every message is only coded once. Not everything in the magazine will be analyzed and coded. Arbitrary reference to actors, ideas, or incidents will not be taken into account when deciding the intended audience. The overall message of each article is what counts. An article eulogizing Taliban martyrs might have two or three sentences blaming the United States for killing Muslims, but I will ignore that latter because it is not the main point of the discussion. It is used to prop up an argument. Images and pictures will not be coded either. *Al-Sumud Magazine* routinely supplements its articles with pictures of armed fighters and dead US soldiers. While the author recognizes their impact on *al-Sumud* readers, the

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53 Ole, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 27.
images will not be coded for several reasons. First, coding images is beyond the scope of this research. The purpose here is to identify audience segments through the propagandist’s own words and not images taken from Reuters or unknown sources. Second, the data pool for images is very limited. In fact, the first few issues of *al-Sumud* did not have a single photo possibly because, unlike al-Qaeda, the Taliban emerged as an organization that rejects the use of images and videos. Third, it seems that *al-Sumudi’s* editors enjoy recycling old pictures. A lot of them are used numerous times, which would affect the reliability and accuracy of the coding process. Future research on terrorist media can examine the role of images in terrorist propaganda activities.

Furthermore, the nature of the overall theme affects the coding process. This approach closely follows recommendations from the *Psychological Operations Field Manual No. 33-1*, released by the Department of the Army in 1979. Positive or negative qualities (praise or blame) make a person or an entity more acceptable or discredited. The technique evokes an emotional response stimulating an audience to identify with the propagandist.\(^5^4\) I consider Taliban-positive messages, such as praising the movement and refuting accusations, to be aimed at a sympathetic audience. The logic here is that this segment (active or inactive) needs to be reassured that the movement remains morally superior and is indeed the right party. Eulogizing Taliban martyrs, lionizing the movement, and talking boastfully about military accomplishments have a tremendous influence over an already-sympathetic group of people more than an undecided reader. Since Taliban sympathizers already believe that the US and NATO forces are the enemy,

the undecided audience needs exposure to an ugly image of foreign and Afghan forces, not a positive one. Accordingly, enemy-negative messages, such as commenting on the failure of Karzai’s government, are intended for an undecided audience. Joanna Wright illustrates how credibility-attacks and guilt transfer messages by the PIRA and RAF were generally directed towards an uncommitted group of people. The Taliban regularly attacks the credibility of the Afghan government and blames US and NATO forces for the killing Muslim Afghans. Positive messages gratify and boost the morale of fighters and supporters, while negative messages seek to gain the support of an undecided audience by tarnishing the image of the other party. This will act as a reliability test based on the segment most affected by the delivered message. Table 3 clarifies the content analysis process in my paper.

Table 3: Analysis of Audience Segmentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active-Sympathetic</th>
<th>Inactive-Sympathetic</th>
<th>Inactive-Religious</th>
<th>Inactive-Unsympathetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inevitability of victory; Glorification of martyrs; physical readiness, combat tactics, and strategies; enemy casualties; freeing of captured members; commitment to the cause; and successful operations.</td>
<td>Praise for Taliban leadership; drawing on historical comparisons; rewards of jihad; interview with field commanders; threatening of upcoming attacks; course of war; interaction with readers</td>
<td>Implementation of Shari’a law; theological discussions; religious legitimacy of jihad; social decadence in Afghanistan under the occupation; Western disrespect for Islam; religious advice; passages from the Holy Quran and the traditions of the Prophet</td>
<td>Logical reasoning of jihad or bombings; failure of foreign forces to provide security; drugs and corruption in the Karzai government; and issues of the Arab world (Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, US troops in the Arabian Gulf, un-Islamic Arab rulers…)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taliban-Positive Tone
Praising the movement; honoring martyrs; defending against criticism; refuting allegations of killing innocent Afghans

Enemy-Negative Tone
Blaming foreign troops for everything in Afghanistan; accusing the government of corruption and collaboration; credibility attacks

55 Wright, *Terrorist Propaganda*, 79.
The coding process is what links content analysis with audience segmentation. I created a dataset that includes the following horizontal fields: year and month of publication (mm/yy), issue number, article number, positive themes, negative themes, active-sympathetic audience (AS), inactive-sympathetic audience (IS), inactive-religious audience (IR), and inactive-unsympathetic (IU) audience. The time dimension will show if there were any changes over the past four years and allow us to compare segmentation efforts overtime. The entire dataset is available upon request.

I assigned a numerical figure (0 or 1) for each theme designated for a specific population segment using a nominal level of measurement. Every segment is treated as a variable and its themes are assigned a number that either includes or excludes them from the variable. For instance, an article about the corruption of the Afghan government means “1” has to be entered under the Inactive-Unsympathetic category and three zeroes for the remaining three segments.

While every article must fall in one of the four audience categories, it is not expected for each article to have a positive or negative tone. Religious articles such as fasting and praying and biographies of martyrs did not receive a numerical figure because the message tone is neither positive nor negative.

Finally, I tallied all the numbers under each category vertically. The segment with the highest number is most likely the main focus of the Taliban’s propaganda. To test the validity of my results, I also counted the positive and negative fields to avoid any subjectivity. Based on the content analysis, the coding would be inaccurate if the inactive-unsympathetic audience receives the highest score, while the total of the Taliban-positive messages are higher than enemy-
negative messages. In the end, the fields with the lowest total disprove the hypothesis of their respected audience.

**Coding Samples**

To better clarify how the coding process works, I picked two articles from *al-Sumud*, summarized each argument, and explained how each one was assigned to a specific audience segment. The first article, *Obama Is More Dangerous than Bush*, is from SMD # 37 (July 2009) and is written by Saudi Shaykh Abd al-Aziz al-Jalil.  

Interestingly, while the content of the article is addressed to an inactive-unsympathetic audience, al-Jalil represents the inactive-sympathetic audience segment. He is a Saudi Shykh who is ideologically in support of the Taliban, but is not engaged in any actual physical participation. It is unclear whether al-Jalil asked *al-Sumud* to publish his article or whether its editors reproduced it without permission. His website offers fatwas and opinions sympathetic to Sunni militant groups.  

The second article is taken from SMD # 14 (July 2007), and is entitled “Taking Foreign Hostages Is the Mujahidin’s Latest Strategy against the Occupiers in Afghanistan.” 

**Obama Is Much More Dangerous than Bush**

**Summary**

Al-Jalil writes that he wrote this article after he noticed a lot of cheerfulness among Muslims over the election of the Obama administration. He realizes many will react negatively to the headline, because it was Bush who who invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, not Obama. So how

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could the latter, who declared that America is not at war with Islam, be more dangerous than the
former? To make his point, al-Jalil offers the following reasons. He says that Bush’s stupidity
actually benefited the Muslims by inflicting significant damage to America. The most important
backlash of Bush’s policies was the wake-up call it produced among Muslims in terms of
realizing the true nature of their enemy, reviving the creed of loyalty toward Muslims and
dissociation from infidels (al-Wala’ wal Bara’), and raising the flag of jihad in several
battlefields. Second, America’s reputation on the world stage was damaged under Bush. In the
eyes of the world, America became a proponent of oppression, torture, and human rights
violations. Al-Jalil says that God had duped Bush and made him act in the interest of Muslims.
When the Americans realized what was going on, they tried to address their mistakes. To
improve their image, the Americans brought Obama. With his sly policies, Obama deceived the
Muslim world by criticizing Bush and claiming to be a supporter of peace. Unfortunately, many
Muslims became duped by Obama’s sweet-talk and pinned their hopes on him to lift oppression
away from them.

Al-Jalil argues that this causes a great danger on Muslims with regards to the creed of
Loyalty and Disavowal. It weakens their enmity against America and makes them more
positively inclined toward the future of U.S. policies. In al-Jalil’s view, Obama is numbing the
Muslim people and this outcome reduces hatred toward infidels, which prevents Muslims from
fighting America. The improvement of America’s image is not in the interest of Muslims.
Instead, it is in the interest of Muslims that the decline of America’s image continues.

He then writes that Obama and Bush are simply two faces of the same coin, because
American policies have never changed. It is a mistake to believe that a single individual can alter
an institutionalized US policy. The only difference between Bush and Obama is that they applied different methods for the same objective. While Obama cajoles the Muslim world in the media, the “American-Crusader” aggression against Muslim countries and the support for Israel continue. Obama claims that he opposed the use of banned weapons against civilians, yet he is the one who gave the Israelis these weapons to use them in Gaza and stepped up the missile campaign against civilians in Pakistan. So what kind of compassion does the criminal Obama declare with these acts and intentions? Al-Jalil concludes: beware of this clever Satan, because he is more dangerous than the foolish Satan.

**Coding**

My coding of this article puts it in the inactive-unsympathetic audience category with an enemy-negative tone. The content is aimed at those Muslims who seem to be in favor of President Obama. Obviously, it is not addressed to a Taliban-sympathetic audience, because these readers already have an unfavorable view of the US regardless of who is the president. It would be a waste of time to convince an anti-American audience to dislike the US. Although al-Jalil talks about the Islamic creed of Loyalty and Disavowal, which is a purely religious topic, this discussion was not the main focus of the article, and therefore it is not considered to be aimed at a religious unsympathetic audience. On the other hand, as demonstrated in the fourth hypothesis, credibility-attacks and attempts to scare the readers of the alternative are two major tactics of a propaganda campaign targeting an inactive-unsympathetic audience. Al-Jalil constantly denounces President Obama and tries to dissuade the readers from changing their negative view about America, because US policies will never change. As for the negative tone, al-Jalil discredits Obama’s attempts to improve US relations with the Muslim world and portrays
him as a deceitful individual with intentions that are similar to Bush’s. At the same time, al-Jalil did not praise the Taliban nor did he refute any allegations. He only spoke negatively about the U.S., and for this reasons the article has an enemy-negative tone.

Taking Foreign Hostages

Summary

The anonymous author of the article explains how senior commanders of the “crusader coalition” are worried about the Taliban’s latest strategy. He quotes General Dan McNeill, commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan in 2007, saying that the Taliban are creative and constantly developing new combat tactics against coalition soldiers. One of these tactics, which is also the most effective in pressuring ISAF, is taking foreigners as hostages. Major Christopher Clay of the US Army in Afghanistan also commented that coalition forces have failed in countering this strategy, as it has increased the Taliban’s strength and lowered the morale of coalition soldiers.

The author then moves on to show how this strategy has led to several victories over foreign forces. By using this method, the mujahidin want to prove to the world that they are in control of the situation in the battlefield and will not stop unless all coalition forces withdraw from Afghanistan. He quotes the dead Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah saying that the mujahidin gained politically and militarily after they exchanged the kidnapped Italian journalist for five imprisoned Taliban fighters. With this strategy, the author adds, the mujahidin were able to instill fear in their enemies by making them feel as though they could be taken hostages and
killed at anytime, even from fortified centers. He boasts that the mujahidin were able to kidnap four Macedonians in March 2006, who were employees with a western company called Ecolog.\(^59\)

The author then shows how this strategy has caused coalition forces to quarrel and disunited them. Negotiations between the Taliban and the South Korean government over the release of Korean hostages were a major problem for the Americans, NATO, and the collaborating government of Karzai, because these talks signify an official recognition of the Taliban’s existence and their ability to control Afghanistan. The South Korean government’s decision to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan in exchange for the release of its hostages was a painful hit for the crusader coalition. The author stresses that the mujahidin will use the most recent military technology and all available methods including suicide operations, kidnappings, and planting roadside bombs against the crusaders. He ends with a quote from the Quran about how God will support and heal the believers against their enemies.

**Coding**

My coding of this article puts it in the active-sympathetic audience category with a Taliban-positive tone. In spite of minor and hidden messages in the article, the main theme is about a successful tactic (hostage-taking) employed by the Taliban in the battlefield. As illustrated in Table 3, articles on operations and tactics fall under terrorist propaganda for an active-sympathetic audience. As the author explains how this new strategy benefits the Taliban, he is also encouraging those active readers to use it. It is not possible to ask an inactive member

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\(^59\) The Seattle Times reported on March 18, 2006 that four Afghans and four Macedonians of Albanian descent were abducted in either Kandahar or Helmand, two neighboring southern provinces. All eight worked for Ecolog, which provides sanitation services at U.S. and Afghan army bases. See Noor Khan, “Roadside Bombing Claims Nine Afghan Police,” *The Seattle Times*, March 18, 2006, accessed March 27, 2011. http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002873119_afghan18.html
or an unsympathetic reader to kidnap in the name of the Taliban. To do so, one has to be actively participating in jihad for a militant group. Furthermore, the article clearly shows how the Taliban enjoy boasting their accomplishments, as if hostage-taking were a Taliban creation. For coding purposes, it shows a clear positive focus in tone about the movement.

**Strengths & Weaknesses**

There are two ways to answer my research question. My approach is to identify audience segments and standard propaganda themes, conduct content analysis, and then code each article. It is deductive in nature, and begins with a theoretical analysis then moves down to identify the targeted audience. In a second approach, however, one can start by analyzing the content of each article based on recurrent topics (such as corruption, jihad, and religion), assign numerical values for each one, and finally build a profile of the targeted audience based on the most recurrent themes. Such an inductive approach moves from specific observations in *al-Sumud* to broader generalizations. Perhaps there is a third or fourth approach as well; however, I believe that my method is stronger for three reasons. It is more flexible and could be applied to more than one group. Instead of following a coding system with themes fixed on the data, I try to see whether message characteristics representing four groups are observable or not. Second, it also takes into account the tone or nature of the message (positive vs. negative) as part of the analysis, which avoids inaccuracies of coding articles on broad themes. Third and most importantly, my method is solidly based on previous research about audiences of terrorist propaganda, namely the PIRA and the RAF. While I do not argue in my paper that terrorist groups are identical, I do stress the point that terrorist propaganda is similar in its general themes, and therefore a solid audience segmentation method as the one proposed in this paper could be used to identify the main
targeted audience of any terrorist group’s propaganda campaign. This would not be possible had I adopted the second inductive approach because not all terrorist groups discuss the same topics.

An obvious limit of this methodology is the audience itself. Here is a comparative example to further clarify the weakness of this segmentation method. A hair trimmer company could ask an advertising office to identify consumers for its product. The office would conjecture that the product is mostly used by employed males with facial hair, though it can also be used for other parts of the body. In this paper, I want to do exactly the same to identify consumers of *al-Sumud* magazine. Since the Taliban is an armed religious movement, I presume that *al-Sumud* will be read by other militants, sympathizers, and religious individuals; however, to expand their audience, the Taliban must want to target undetermined individuals as well. The difference in both, however, is that the marketing firm can reach existing customers to obtain biographical data and preferences, while reaching *al-Sumud* readers is almost impossible. Accordingly, this study cannot conduct an attitudinal segmentation and verify whether it corresponds with the results of the method. Interviewing 100 randomly-selected *al-Sumud* readers to see whether they were influenced by specific articles and messages aimed at them could further reveal the accuracy of the method, but it is obviously impossible. Another criticism is the subjectivity of the content analysis process. Since it depends primarily on the author’s perspective of the main theme, the final tally of results might not be as objective as it looks. However, the transparent nature of the research method means that anyone can reexamine the same data, segment the audience, and employ the same method to ascertain its accuracy or falsify each hypothesis.

Some can argue that influential messages are universal and could be aimed at all four groups. While it is true that one or two message characteristics aimed at one segment could
reinforce the beliefs of another, what really matters is the final count for each segment. Additionally, the selection of influential messages is based on a reasonable assumption: a person who is fighting with the Taliban does not require further explanation to support the Taliban. On the other hand, someone who is not engaged in jihad needs reassurance that the Taliban’s use of violence is legitimate and that the Afghan and foreign forces are discredited for violating Islam, killing villagers, or any other reason. This is an important difference between messages aimed at a sympathetic group and those for an inactive segment, religious or uncommitted.

Findings

The majority of al-Sumud articles target the inactive-unsympathetic audience. There is constant criticism of the Karzai government or the occupation regime in general for almost everything wrong in Afghanistan. Most governance problems cover the failure to exact justice for innocent civilian deaths, torture in prisons, and corruption of government officials. For example, SMD #1, ‘Ammar Abu Saheib wrote that accidents in Kabul caused by NATO forces led to the deaths of many civilians, yet no charges were made despite demonstrations of the Afghan people. SMD #1, 2, and 3 had articles on the torture of inmates and the “truth about what happens behind bars.” Their author, Abu Yahya al-Libi, is a top lieutenant in al-Qaeda of Afghanistan, who wanted to share his experience in the Bagram interim detention facility, from which he escaped in July 2005. Other articles highlight the widespread corruption of government officials. In SMD #5, the author of “Operations of Occupation Forces and the

Security Situation in Afghanistan” writes that “administrative corruption in the government has reached a level where no work can be done without bribery.”63 In SMD #12, Shihab al-Din Ghaznawi argued that the government is benefiting drastically from the rise of drug production and trafficking, and has done nothing so far to counter it.64 Finally, al-Sumud provides coverage of all major incidents in the Arab world such as the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, the Iraq war and the 2007 U.S. surge, and the 2008 Israeli war on Gaza. President Obama’s Cairo speech to the Muslim world in June 2009 led al-Sumud to warn against the growing optimism and naivété of some Muslims in al-Jalil’s article.

The active-sympathetic audience was next in line. Al-Sumud’s most favorite theme is the Taliban’s inevitable victory over NATO/U.S. While the first six issues had thirteen articles on this topic, from the SMD # 35 to SMD # 46 there were 23 articles concentrating on the Taliban’s triumph. This increase overtime is perhaps due to the rising concern in the U.S. about the inability of accomplishing the mission in Afghanistan, which is translated by the Taliban as the beginning of the end. Indeed, al-Sumud announced in April 2009 the beginning of a “decisive set of operations in the name of victory.”65 Consequently, everything that happens is interpreted as a sign of victory. President Obama’s decision to increase troops in Afghanistan in April 2009 is proof for Taliban’s battlefield victories, while the divergence of views between the U.S. and its European allies on the course of action in Afghanistan illustrates NATO’s failure.66 In 2006, al-Sumud articles talked about the inevitability of victory, in 2010 al-Sumud authors considered that

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the U.S. had already been defeated and it was only a matter of time before it declares its failure in the form of withdrawal. Abu al-Walid begins his March 2010 article with the following: “No one doubts that the American collapse has become confirmed in principle; the issue is just about its timing.”67 This positive focus on victory boosts the morale of supporters and financial backers, despite the Taliban losses. A constant reminder of triumph over coalition forces makes certain setbacks look like insignificant losses to the commitment of the movement. In SMD #11, an article eulogized Mullah Dadullah, a senior Taliban commander killed in a raid by Afghan and NATO forces in May 2007. The author stressed that “the movement is not impacted by the martyrdom of a leader because it is not a movement of public figures, but a movement of eternal principles and ideas; [the Taliban’s] path is a path of victory and martyrdom.”68

The third most targeted group is the inactive-sympathetic audience. *Al-Sumud* published a few articles comparing the current situation in Afghanistan with that of the Soviet occupation. In SMD #1, the magazine’s editor Shiba al-Din Ghaznawi argued that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan is no different than that of the Soviets. In every single issue, there is an interview with a different field commander, who explains to the readers his command’s role in combating the occupiers. On special religious occasions, such as Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, *al-Sumud* featured a letter from Mullah Umar to the Muslim people, in which he delivers his greetings and offers guidance. Although Mullah Umar and other commanders preached about the importance of jihad, there were few articles dedicated to the rewards of jihad and virtually nothing that shows direct interaction with the readers.

The least targeted audience within the last four years of *al-Sumud* is the inactive-religious readers. It is unclear why this group happens to be the least important at the moment, but perhaps because it does not represent the majority of the targeted population. The Taliban approaches this segment by pretending to be a vanguard for the interest of Muslims. There are several articles that discuss the “Christianization” of Afghan society. Ikram Muyondi used the example of a 41-year old Afghan who changed his religion from Islam to Christianity to claim that Westerners are occupying Afghanistan to alter its religion and culture. In addition, *al-Sumud* stresses that the Taliban does not recognize the incorporation of foreign “infidel” laws to *Shariah* and the un-Islamic democratic form of governance. In SMD #12, Mullah Muhammad Fadil Jawwad wrote an article illustrating the role of the Taliban in giving credibility to the ability of religious scholars to govern as a “righteous” alternative to secular governance. In the same issue and in an article entitled “Who Is Killing the Innocent People?” the author accused NATO and U.S. forces of directly attacking Islam and Afghan traditions by spreading “European behavior” through “the establishment of brothels” and altering the education system to Christianize Afghan society. He adds, “because of these reasons, the crusaders forced us to fight and defend ourselves and Islam.”

From the results shown in Table 4, the Taliban’s main targeted group is the inactive-unsympathetic audience, closely followed by the active-sympathetic. Over the covered time period (06/2006-05/2010), there had been a dramatic increase in themes directed at a non-

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70 Muhammad Fadil Jawwad, “Taliban’s Role in Increasing the Nation’s Trust in Ability of Religious Scholars to Govern,” Issue No. 12, First Year, Jamadi al-Awal, 1428 Hijri (May-June 2007 AD), p. 20.

sympathetic audience, a combined total of 397 articles (55 percent) for both the religious and unsympathetic audience in comparison with 326 (45 percent) for the active and inactive sympathetic. This is also confirmed by the total of negative articles over the same period, 250 compared with 186 positive themes. Generally, the religious audience received the least amount of attention, while the inactive-unsympathetic had the lion share of propaganda efforts, 286 targeted themes out of 725. The total number of articles in each issue had also increased. There were only 141 articles in the first year compared with 222 in the last one, a 57 percent increase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Articles</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>IS</th>
<th>IR</th>
<th>IU</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Positive</th>
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<td>144</td>
<td>111</td>
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Table 4: Audience Segmentation in al-Sumud 2006-2010
What Do the Figures Tell Us?

(1) The results imply that the Taliban has been trying to increase its base of support and keep up the morale of the active audience simultaneously. The attention given to the inactive-unsympathetic audience indicates the Taliban wants to widen its reach to larger numbers of Arab readers who are not yet sympathetic to its cause. At the same time, the intensity and duration of the Afghanistan war had probably pressured *al-Sumud* to dedicate enough attention to a group of Arabic speakers whose financial and physical contributions are extremely important.

(2) The proportional increase gives a clue to a possible alteration in Taliban’s propaganda strategy. Although the figures show a nominal increase in the total number of articles aimed at the inactive-unsympathetic audience, the percentage of increase from one year to the other has been on the decline. There was a 51 percent increase from 2006-2007 and a 22 percent increase from 2007-2008, but from 2008-2009 the focus on the group declined by 6 percent. On the other hand, there was a proportional increase in articles targeting the religious
audience: zero percent increase from 2006-2007, 33 percent from 2007-2008, and a 46 percent increase from 2008-2009. It is difficult to understand the difference between a percentage and numerical increase of the other two groups due to proportional fluctuation. It is also unclear why there was an increase in messages aimed at the religious audience in the first place. Either way, this shows that the main attention will remain on a non-sympathetic group of people, which is also verified by the yearly proportional increases in enemy-negative messages over the same period.

(3) As mentioned in the hypotheses section, earlier academic works argue that inactive-sympathetic readers are the most important in a propaganda campaign, because additional recruits and financial assistance comes from them. However, research findings reveal that this group is not *al-Sumud*’s main target. Over the last four years, articles aimed at an inactive-unsympathetic group doubled and tripled those aimed at an inactive-sympathetic group. It is possible the Taliban lack a wider base of support, and therefore targeting an inactive-unsympathetic audience helps increase the numbers of their inactive supporters. If the purpose of terrorist propaganda is to influence, then it behooves *al-Sumud* to direct its focus on the largest group rather than a smaller one.

These results are not random. The data suggests that there is an intensive campaign to increase sympathy among the Arabic-speaking audience, which happens to be more educated and wealthier than its Afghani counterpart. Should the Taliban succeed in making an uncommitted audience more sympathetic or radicalize an undecided group of readers, then its yearly budget will undoubtedly increase. This is not to say that the entire objective *al-Sumud* is fundraising. On the contrary, it seeks to make readers sympathetic with its cause, and if they do
contribute financially then it would be a by-product of effective propaganda. Thus far, there is not a single article or even an announcement asking for contributions from readers. In fact, in January 2010, the Media Committee declared that “every website or person that collects funds for the Islamic Emirate is a fraud.”72 Yet, the movement continues to receive large sums of money from the Arab world. The late American special envoy for Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, affirmed in July 2009 that financial donations to the Taliban are “coming in from sympathizers from all over the world with the bulk of it appearing to come from the [Arabian] Gulf.”73 This clearly shows that the Taliban uses al-Sumud to enhance and improve its reputation and spread its message, not solely as a fundraising project.

As far as asking for physical support, there is no evidence either that al-Sumud is a recruitment tool. Since new fighters come from an already-sympathetic group of people, there is no evidence yet in al-Sumud that the Taliban is interested in bringing in volunteers from the Arab world. Undoubtedly, there are a number of Arabs fighting with the Taliban, but their presence is due to the cooperation with al-Qaeda rather than a direct recruitment campaign from the Arab world. Should we see an increase of propaganda themes directed at the inactive-sympathetic audience in the future, then it would perhaps indicate that the Taliban seeks to increase the number of its Arab fighters. Meanwhile, countering Taliban propaganda in the Arab world should be an essential part of the strategy to cut human and financial contributions.

Objectives of Al-Sumud

It appears that the Taliban have recognized that the media constitutes an extraordinary force in influencing an international audience. Based on the content of *al-Sumud*, the movement wants to strengthen its reputation by countering enemy claims and refuting negative accusations. Indeed, SMD #1, the author of the introduction wrote that the Taliban is facing an “information war that wants to muzzle jihadi media;” and as a result, the Taliban decided “to present a clear picture about the reality of the movement and its view of the past, present, and future.”

Magazine content shows that the Taliban is advertising its accomplishments, defending its actions, and redirecting blame at its opponents. In other words, *al-Sumud* is a platform to communicate with the outside Arabic world and create an alternate story without being caught or killed by coalition forces.

The Taliban wants its sympathizers to feel that the movement is a respectable force in Afghanistan and promises a better future. In October 2009 statement, Mullah Omar argued that colonial plans in Afghanistan had failed and the Emirate wanted the people to participate in the government to rebuild the country—as soon as the occupiers left. He added that the Emirate wants to develop and maintain “positive bilateral relations” with all the neighboring countries based on “mutual respect.”

A month later, another letter was addressed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, stressing that the Taliban wants to open a new door to

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“comprehensive cooperation in economic development and positive rapprochement.”76 The movement wants to reestablish itself as a powerful actor on the world stage, and that is why the main article of SMD # 41 was entitled “The Return of the Islamic Emirate: A Vision for the Role of Afghanistan in the New International Order.”77

The issue of credibility is very important. Al-Sumud does not fabricate events or stories about Taliban attacks. Although arguments are exaggerated and certain numbers are inflated such as the total deaths of NATO and US soldiers, everything al-Sumud reports appears to have taken place, and numbers of Taliban claimed attacks are reasonable in comparison with mainstream reporting. The first graph below is based on all of the Taliban’s operations as reported in al-Sumud. The second graph shows the total number of attacks conducted by Armed Opposition Groups (AOG) in Afghanistan including al-Qaida, the Haqqani Network, and other jihadists based on data collected by the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO). A close examination shows that chart lines are similar and have a consistent rise in attacks overtime. In both charts, there was a rise in operations around May 2009, a decline in August 2009, and another rise in March 2010. Data in ANSO’s graph does not include the decline in August 2010.

In short, the overarching objective of the propaganda campaign is to move one audience a step closer to sympathy and active engagement. Increased focus on an inactive-unsympathetic audience means the Taliban hopes to increase the numbers of its sympathetic supporters; a focus on an inactive sympathetic audience indicates that the movement wants to increase its rank and

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file; and a focus on the active segments signifies a morale boosting campaign. The purpose of targeting the religious segment is to make its members active in religious support for the Taliban.

**Taliban’s Attacks (al-Sumud)**

*No data is available prior to October 2006*

**AOG Attacks (ANSO)**

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Policy Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for counter-propaganda efforts. Using conventional thinking, one would assume that, since the Taliban is a radical religious movement, it will most likely try to appeal to al-Qaeda-like individuals in the Arab world. As this group constitutes a very small percentage of the audience, the conclusion would be that there is no need to embark on a counter-propaganda campaign. However, the focus on an undecided audience indicates that the Taliban is more concerned with expanding its pool of inactive sympathetic supporters rather than strictly appealing to religious fundamentalists. The rhetoric in *al-Sumud*, although ideological and derogatory in nature, often shows delicacy in dealing with undecided readers who are satisfied with their country’s leadership. Unlike al-Qaida’s rhetoric, *al-Sumud* writers are careful not to disrespect Arab Emirs or Kings in the Gulf region. In numerous articles, the authors addressed the King of Saudi Arabia as your majesty and thanked the president of Qatar for his political support of Afghanistan.

When it comes to Taliban propaganda, the U.S. and NATO find themselves on the defensive in the media war, struggling to curb the militant group’s influence. The Taliban lays all the blame on the West; describes Karzai as a puppet in the hands of the U.S.; continues to claim victory on a monthly basis; presents itself as a righteous movement that will eliminate corruption; and depicts the West as being on the brink of defeat. All of these messages are reiterated on a monthly basis in *al-Sumud* to ensure a successful Arabic language media campaign. Although the U.S. and NATO have stepped up efforts to counter the Taliban's multimillion-dollar propaganda campaign, the utility of these efforts is unclear as they are not
aimed at selected audience groups. The only reported counter-propaganda effort includes translating press releases into Dari and Pashto and condemning the Taliban for terrorist attacks.\(^78\)

This study recommends that an intensive counter-propaganda campaign aimed at curious, uncommitted readers of *al-Sumud*, who visit online Arabic discussion forums regularly, might prove very effective in the long-run. Investing in magazines that adopt the same characteristics of *al-Sumud* is more important than distributing anti-Taliban material on the International Security Assistance Force’s (ISAF) website. At the same time, such a response should come from common participants of discussion forums, not a representative of the U.S. government—as in the case of Samir Zaydan who wears the State Department insignia while debating jihadists on the Arabic broad-based forum *al-Jazeera Talk*.\(^79\)

Since the discussion of victory happens to be a recurrent theme in *al-Sumud*, a successful counter-propaganda strategy should incorporate messages that discredit the movement and instill hopelessness among its supporters. Ever since the first issue, the Taliban took credit for every attack against NATO forces and called it a sign of victory. Yet, it asks from its readers and active members to remain hopeful and patient because victory is near, if not just a few years down the road. In December 2006, the editors reported through an article from the Nation Magazine that Taliban leaders had put the year 2010 as the final deadline for liberating all of Afghanistan.\(^80\) In other words, the Taliban asked their supporters to wait four more years before Afghanistan is liberated; today, the four years had passed and Afghanistan is still under the control of NATO.


and US troops. This is a clear indication that the Taliban, as any other insurgency, garners support through promises not actions, which also illustrates how propaganda efforts can exploit the false promises of the Taliban to discredit them with their own words. Accordingly, a good propaganda campaign has to challenge what the Taliban promises not what it does. It is very easy to replicate pictures of killed civilians in a blast to discredit the Taliban, but insurgencies are not judged on their actions. They are judged on their promises, while the US and Afghan government are judged on what they do on a daily basis.  

Just as the Taliban aggressively discredits U.S. efforts and blames everything on the coalition, the U.S. should do exactly the same when communicating with the Taliban’s most targeted audience segment. An information campaign must dominate the interpretation of events in the same battlefield location and against the same target. In other words, it would be completely futile to disseminate anti-Taliban press reports at an anti-Taliban Arabic discussion forum. On the other hand, distributing articles critical of the Taliban in the same web forums that host al-Sumud magazine will yield better long-term results. If coalition forces are serious about winning a psychological war against an insurgency that receives large amounts of money from the Arab world, then they would have to begin discrediting the Taliban among those who read al-Sumud.

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Bibliography


