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Youths in Violent Extremist Discourse: Mediated Identifications and Interventions

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This article examines the discursive strategies employed by violent extremists to build a persuasive collective youth identity, drawing from strategic communication, social movement, and membership categorization theories to analyze youth references from texts disseminated by Al Qaeda from 1996–2009. "Youth" is constructed via (a) ascriptions of allegiance to a common belief system whereby militant actions are directed toward establishing a new sociopolitical order, (b) descriptions of pious youth as "true believers" apart from "apostate" state regimes, and (c) references to hagiographies of extremist martyrs that serve as moral exemplars. This article concludes with research directions to facilitate counternarrative interventions.

Jamal Bana, a 17-year-old Somali-American student in Minneapolis, went missing for eight months before his family discovered that he had been killed in Somalia in July 2009. His family only learned of his death when a photo of his body appeared on a website. Jamal is one of more than a dozen missing Somali-American youths whose families believe they have gone back to Somalia to fight in an Islamist *jihad*. Questions about who recruited Jamal Bana to join the Islamist insurgency have been raised. "Someone must have put something in his mind," said Omar Jamal of the Minneapolis Somali Justice Advocacy Center at a news conference alongside Bana's distraught family members.[1]

This story describes a recent tragedy involving the growth of youth terrorist insurgencies and casualties. Although young people are important targets of extremist group communication, ethnic and religious community members and leaders like Omar Jamal are often unaware of the recruitment strategies and mediated campaigns aimed at youths,

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and consequently have limited influence over youth radicalization experiences. National security experts have also argued that due to an overt reliance on military operations, the U.S. grand strategy for countering terrorism neglects major sources of radicalization.[2] Although the psychological process of radicalization has received increased attention in recent years, limited research has systematically investigated the discursive construction and affirmation of youth identities by violent extremist leadership.[3] Knowledge about the discursive strategies that target young audiences' recruitment complement current keen efforts at understanding radicalization and it is imperative for understanding how terrorist leaders build dangerous bridges to young minds all over the world, and, most importantly, it also informs strategies on how to construct counter-rhetorical interventions to combat the recruitment of youth to terrorism.

A critical understanding of discourse in youth oriented recruiting is important for educators, policy makers, and law enforcement agencies because of intersecting trends in youth demographics, media development, and extremist communication. The National Intelligence Council's 2020 project predicts rising demographics among young people in Arab states.[4] These "youth bulges" present a larger population that is susceptible to radicalization and conflicts in regions with large numbers of radical adherents, including Islamist extremists.

Beyond the quantitative rise in the youth population in contested regions, Colleen McCue and Kathryn Haahr have also noted that the contemporary youthful cohort will be "qualitatively worse given their exposure to conflict and violence [stemming from exposure to conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent decades] during critical phases of emotional and moral development."[5] Furthermore, there are strong international concerns about youth radicalization, especially where prior research identified issues of rootlessness, disaffection, unemployment, and discrimination experienced by second generation immigrants, often those with hyphenated identities.[6]

These apprehensions about the potentially destabilizing social trends build on recurrent appeals to youths by extremist groups who seek to perpetuate their existence and to expand their membership. Social movements, particularly violent movements that encourage martyrdom, must recruit to survive. Both historically and especially in recent years, mass media has become critical to youth oriented recruiting,[7] providing information and a place for virtual extremist community formation, particularly among youths who are stigmatized for their adherence to a totalistic ideology in real life.[8] Today, violent extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda or Kahane Chai, actively use media to legitimate and propagate their movement to supporters and sympathizers.[9]

Extremist leaders rhetorically communicate terrorism and position their audience(s) in very specific ways.[10] For example, Al Qaeda adopts various discursive strategies to construct a particular vision of young people as humble, angry, and obedient warriors. They employ media specialists to create and disseminate persuasive messages via print and electronic media. For instance, Somalia's Al Qaeda–backed group, called *al-Shabaab*, which means "the Youth" in Arabic, produces professional quality video and audio recordings. Their messages gain traction as they are reinforced, extended, and appropriated across various media platforms and formats and, as a result, the violent extremist narratives and images are widely circulated. These messages, many of which are distributed online with subtitles in English to target those with Western backgrounds, can be accessed by young people on a global scale. As Carl Ciovacco has observed, Al Qaeda's leadership is highly adept at exploiting regional sensitivities with tailored media statements for differing audiences around the world.[11] David Betz recently argued that Islamist insurgents value "market segmentation" and proposed that "more than any other actor in the international scene so

far, [insurgents] have mastered the arts of marketing for warlike purpose" but his work did not delve into how extremist propaganda targets specific social groups.[12]

This research article investigates violent extremist discursive strategies aimed at youth and examines the ways in which extremist communication constructs youth identities to develop their militant social movement. This analysis first discusses how social movements build collective identity, and how in particular youth identity construction is important to contemporary homegrown and diasporic terrorism worldwide. Drawing from a dataset of key violent Islamist extremist texts that was reviewed from a larger research project on strategic communication,[13] this article proceeds to specify key ways in which youth identity is constructed for the political performance of terrorism and the recruitment of its insurgents. Contrary to popular conceptions of extremist groups as being unsophisticated, these groups disseminate discourse that consistently targets young people by building a strong and persuasive collective identity for radicalized Muslim youth. Thus, this article explicates three key ways that radical propaganda constructs "youth" as a social category and thereby builds a collective identity, where they are seen as a righteous vanguard, as a "special" pious group, and as essential capital for the cause of *jihad*. This article concludes by proposing future research directions and counter-radical discourse strategies that may serve to deconstruct violent extremist youth identities and blunt its effectiveness for appealing to young hearts and minds in the Muslim world.

Collective Youth Identity and the Discursive War on Terror

Social movement groups have long recognized the importance of appealing to youths via the use of mass media discourse to build identification, support, and social change. Prior research on social movements and political science shows that submission to group collective identity is key to the success and growing momentum of a social movement.[14] Collective identity is a social psychological concept that explains the cognitive, moral, and emotional link an individual has to a group. It refers to "a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly."[15] Beyond instrumental rationality as an explanation for strategic choice, collective identity can explain the cultural effects of social movements.[16] When a group has a strong collective identity, the movement can garner support and power because the participants feel that they are all working toward common goals, have defined opponents, and have an integrated sense of being that is incorporated into movement ideologies.[17]

It is important to understand the discursive strategies of identity-based movements because activists use shared texts to "frame" identities, to create an imagined community, and solidify otherwise porous in-group boundaries. "Frames" are the interpretive packages developed to mobilize potential adherents and constituents and to make a compelling case for the effectiveness of collective "agency" to right "injustice" conditions between "us" and "them."[18] Thus, for collective identity to become established, a new level of consciousness of the actors within the group needs to be raised.

Taylor and Whittier note that conscious awareness of shared experiences, shared opportunities, and shared interests of a social movement are apparent in formal documents, speeches, and writings that the group shares.[19] More recently, Kenneth Payne notes that Al Qaeda has devised propaganda strategies to construct and disseminate mass-mediated messages that contain persuasive calls to unite Muslims in their struggles to return to Islamic purity.[20] Given the increasingly important role of media in many young people's lives, rhetorical appeals to Muslim youth today are tightly associated with media campaigns and messages.[21] Collective identity may be most clearly manifest via the construction of media

texts and dissemination of a group's ideology and narratives via print and electronic media. For example, Al Qaeda employs interviews with key radical leaders, YouTube videos, blogs, conferences, radical websites, and traditional print media. They believe that by building a subculture around certain phrases and images, and transmitting these symbols through media that appeals to youth, some youth may find the beliefs and tactics of extremist groups to be more palatable.[22]

As such, the analysis of discourse targeting youth in violent extremist media texts is critical as contemporary terrorism is increasingly being recognized as "a battlefront of ideas," a battle for "hearts and minds" necessitating symbolic action.[23] As attention has shifted toward issues of "smart power" in recent years, numerous reports related to strategic communication, public diplomacy, and defense policy have made mediated communication strategies central to "irregular warfare," and the global "long war on terrorism."[24]

The importance of discourse is also recognized by extremists. For instance, a massive new book by the influential Egyptian Islamist (based in Qatar), Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, entitled *Fiqh al-Jihad*, stresses a broadened concept of *jihad*, including a "*jihad* of the age" of ideas, media, and communication, using rhetorical messages disseminated via media like the television and the Internet.[25] In this new struggle, persuading Muslims of the message of Islam and the importance of this mediated *jihad* in the path of God should be a priority. Significantly, in a contemporary society linked by mediated communication networks, the emergence of a "resistance identity" may be particularly influential given how fringe communities create meaning and rituals to mobilize action against a projected antagonistic external social reality.[26] Identity construction is a cardinal interest in the persuasion of youth. Prior interview data indicates that terrorists subordinate their individuality to group identity.[27] Schwartz, Dunkel, and Waterman also propose that terrorism should be understood as an identity-based movement whereby elements of personal, cultural, and social identity are evoked in generating support for religious- and ethnicity-based terrorism and terrorist movements.[28]

A vivid example of the identity-based nature of terrorist movements for youths can be found in Kahane Chai, a Jewish extremist group active in Israel and the West Bank. Kahanist ideology originates in the teaching of Rabbi Meir Kahane (d. 1990), who advocated the establishment of a theocratic state in the biblical land of Israel (secular Jews are enemies), implementation of Jewish law, and the expulsion of all Arabs and *goyim* (non-Jews) from the land of the Jewish people. In 1995, the Anti-Defamation League issued a report describing the Kahanist movement as "a cult of violence and racism" that "violates both the substance and spirit of Jewish tradition."[29] Kahane's teachings have been described elsewhere as "Jewish Nazism," and his statements about Arabs have been compared to Adolf Hitler's and found to be disturbingly similar.[30] The most infamous terrorist attacks carried out by Kahanist extremists are those by Baruch Goldstein at Hebron in 1994, the 2005 bus shooting by Eden Natan Zada, and the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir in 1995. The United States, Israel, and the European Union officially recognize Kahane Chai and other Kahanist groups (e.g., Kach) as terrorist organizations, but support and fund raising for Kahanist groups still remain commonplace.

The Kahane Chai ("Kahane Lives"), founded by Meir Kahane's son Binyamin (d. 2000), maintains a youth group known as the Noar Meir. In 1999, the leader of the Noar Meir was convicted of sedition by the Israeli government for distributing fliers advocating the murder of Arabs, praising the assassination of Rabin, and calling for donations to the "Baruch Goldstein Fund."[31] On an English-language website associated with Noar Meir, American Jews are encouraged to form local chapters of the Noar Meir, arguing: "Jews we must wake up and show solidarity with our Jewish brethren in Israel."[32] The website further

ominously warns of a second "Final Solution" and states: "Whether it is High School, University, Yeshivas and Seminaries, we need volunteers to help us spread the only Jewish alternative to the plan that the goyim [i.e. non-Jews] have in store for us."

Thus, in relation to young people, the rhetorical construction of youth as a signifier by extremists is highly dependent on scripts projecting gestures of identification and cultural meaning in pursuit of practical, kinetic goals.[33] Among the discursive strategies informing collective youth identity are the following themes:[34] First, collective identity necessitates the construction of a common belief systems and goals. This process entails building a shared definition of reality and cognitive agreement about a group's values and actions within larger society. Second, identity construction requires the erection of boundary markers that delineate the group from others (e.g., Jews vs. *goyim*) and mark off differences between group actors and the opposition. Third, identity construction involves consciousness-raising, whereby a group becomes self-aware through a series of reevaluations of shared opportunities, experiences, and interests. These methods of identity construction map onto the three strategies extremists use to appeal to youth, which are explained in what follows.

Method

Analysis for this article was conducted through use of a textual database created by Consortium for Strategic Communication. It contains approximately two hundred and ninety primary texts from Al Qaeda's leaders, dating from 1 January 1994 through 5 August 2009. The texts are made available through the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, renamed the Open Source Center (OSC) in 2005, a U.S. government organization that provides translation and analysis of texts related to foreign policy and national security. Other texts were added directly from various news organizations including: London's Independent, Pakistan Observer, Al-Jazeera, IntelCenter, Al-Quds al-Arabi, Center for Islamic Studies and Research, and the Associated Press. The database contains texts (see Appendix) from the following key Al Qaeda leaders: Osama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Sulayman Abu-Ghayth, Abu-al-Layth al-Libi, and others.

To address concerns about the characterization of youths in violent extremist communication, a rhetorical analysis was performed on youth references found in these texts. A search of the forms of the lexeme "youth" in the database yielded eighty-seven occurrences in forty-six articles. The term "children" was also searched and two hundred and sixty-five references in one hundred articles were found. This article focuses on a detailed analysis of youth, but does not include an in-depth analysis of the discursive role of children, as this would greatly add to the length and go beyond the scope of this article. However, connections will be made between the analyses of youth to children where pertinent. Figure 1 shows how many times per year youth was mentioned in the texts. As shown, references to "youth" have grown over the years.

Given the intention to understand the extent and ways in which radical extremists discursively construct a collective youth identity, this article draws from membership categorical analysis (MCA) to make sense of youth and their associated predicates and activities. Membership categorical analysis assumes that everyday knowledge gathered in talk and in shared activities with other people is stored in membership categories. As such, membership categorical analysis offers a toolkit for the examination of the selection of social categories employed in discourse and about the conditions and consequences of this selection.[35]

This form of textual analysis concerns "the apparatus through which members' descriptions are properly produced" and as such aptly serves to orient this study.[36] Specifically, the

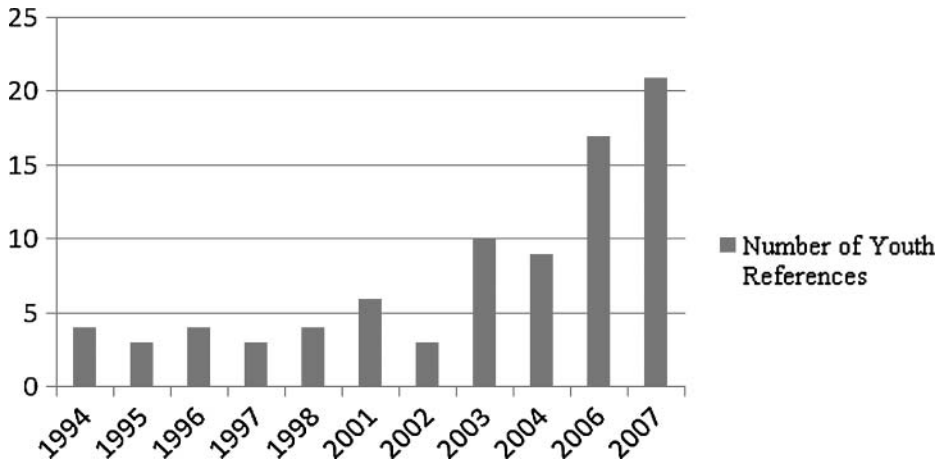

Figure 1. Number of youth references.

analysis here examines and explicates the ways in which the youth category is constructed via its associations, category bound activities, and relational pairings to infer ways in which violent extremists build a collective youth identity to support their social and moral order. According to Sacks, a category can be a member of a set, such as a "standardized relational pair," which consists of two categories of actors that have special rights and obligations in relation to each other. For example, "teacher and student" is recognized as a common pair, so that the activation of one member of the pair also invokes the other. Categories also go together with activities whereby a "category-bound activity" refers to an action that members of a culture take to be typical of a people group (e.g., "lecturing" is a category-bound activity of a teacher and reference to this activity has implications for normative actions expected of someone named a teacher). Thus, identification of relational pairings and category-bound activities show how extremist discourse constructs cognate youth identifications across multiple mediated texts.

Moreover, descriptions of people and their activities are contingent on historical understandings and expectations of the contexts of the events implicated in the categories. As Perakyla notes: "Merely bearing in mind that there is always more than one category available for the description of a given person, the analyst always asks 'why this categorization now?'"[37] In their study on descriptions of tragic events, Eglin and Hester show how categories and category pairs may be used by writers and readers to produce and recognize the relevance of the actors and actions appearing in news articles.[38] For instance, they find that categories initially employed of the "offender" and "victims" in the headlines was later transformed into "murder suspect" and that new categories, such as "police" and "witnesses," were introduced into the story. Leudar examined the public statements of George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Osama bin Laden, following the 11 September 2001 attacks.[39] In each case, the three speakers employed membership categorizations distinguishing between "us" and "them" to justify past violent actions and establish grounds for future ones as part of a "dialogical network."[40] The concept of a dialogical network allows scholars to "treat what was said in the White House, the House of Commons, and somewhere in Afghanistan, not as separate events, but as linked ones."[41] The cohesion of dialogical networks can be partly accomplished by the coordination of the participants' category work, specifically category pairs like "us" and "them." As such, relational category pairs can assume meaning

through oppositional deployment in a particular conflict that provides a double, contrastive identity.[42]

As this article explains, membership categorization is used in multiple ways for strategic influence to gain counterinsurgency support and attract new recruits. In what follows, the discursive analysis explicates how Muslim youth is constructed by key leaders of the violent extremist movement by identifying the categorical resources drawn on in their media coverage, situated in historical and contemporary sociocultural conditions of their production.

Construction of the Muslim Youth Revolution

Jihadists offer Muslim youth an internally cohesive and preferred identity based on an Islamic revival bound to militant revolutionary action. Points of identification for this membership category are both direct and indirect in violent extremist rhetoric. Direct calls to action include summons by religious leaders to take up arms and fight for a range of causes, including disputed geographic territories (e.g., Chechnya) or against regimes perceived to be tyrannical (e.g., Algeria). Indirect appeals rely on the appropriation of religious texts, invocations of particular prayers, recounting historical experiences, and inclusive membership categories such as brotherhood and community (*ummah*), which reference shared values, priorities, responsibilities, and cultural narratives. The discursive analyses show that extremists construct youth in three primary ways: As a vanguard, as a "special" pious group, and as capital for *jihad*.

Youth as Vanguard

Jihadist calls for militant action are designed to address the cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities in which Muslim audiences exist and operate. In the majority of cases, that reality is one beleaguered by poverty, illiteracy, and political marginalization. Recent estimates by the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, indicate that the percentage of people below the poverty line in member countries averaged 24% in 2004. This translates to 330 million people living on less than $1 a day.[43] In some Muslim countries, the poverty rate is even more severe. For instance, in Indonesia over half of the population (approx.129 million) live in poverty or remain vulnerable to poverty with incomes of less than $2 a day; Bangladesh and Pakistan likewise account for 122 million people each. Five of the IDB's 56 member countries, namely Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria and Egypt, account for over half a billion (528 million) of the world's poor with income levels below $2 a day or below their national poverty lines.[44] The remedy proposed by the violent extremists is revolutionary action to establish a just Islamic order against unjust and un-Islamic systems of governance and the global capitalist socioeconomic order they participate in.

In contrast to moderate Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, radical extremists envision revolutionary violence as the principle mechanism for change and an integral part of religious salvation. Participation in *jihad bil-sayf* ("*jihad* by the sword") is a goal in itself, regardless of the political or territorial gains. In fact, political aspirations among violent extremist factions often differ. Some factions are principally interested in the restoration of the caliphate that ended when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk abolished the Ottoman caliphate in 1924 amidst the establishment of the secular republic of Turkey. Others are principally interested in the implementation of Islamic law (*Sharia*) within an existing nation-state framework.

In virtually all cases, violent extremists see Muslim youth as the vanguard necessary to bring about the new social reality. Vanguard means a Qutbian (i.e., the thought of Sayyid Qutb) emphasis on Muslim youths as the forefront of the Islamist movement and the foremost agents of the great revolutionary struggle underway on a global scale against apostates, hypocrites, and infidels through military *jihad*. For instance, in a statement by Osama bin Laden, youths are described as the imminent vehicle for Muslim vengeance against America, stating:

> Therefore, I am telling you, and God is my witness, whether America escalates or de-escalates this conflict, we will reply to it in kind, God willing. God is my witness, the youth of Islam are preparing things that will fill your hearts with fear. (bin Laden, 6 October 2002)

Collective youth identity construction and the formulation of a shared sense of reality also involve discursively forging shared values and belief systems about right and wrong. The vanguard personifies the righteous and good youth of the Muslim *ummah*. From the texts analyzed, there appears to be a consensus on what constitutes a good Muslim youth. Youths are bound with qualities like purity, loyalty, faithfulness, and enthusiasm. Perhaps invoking Qur'anic imagery of paradise (see Qur'an 76:19), youths are said to be "pious and chaste," even innocent and pure, although they have engaged in bloodshed and kinetic action. The violent extremist youths are frequently honored as "great heroes," who are effective, "determined," and united in their fight against the infidels and heretics:

> The youth came from everywhere in answer to the call to ready themselves for jihad, and in response to the orders of Allah and His Messenger after they became certain that the liberation of their sacred places and lifting of oppression from their ummah will only happen through sacrificing themselves cheaply in the path of Allah, and after they realized that with effort and difficulty comes the beginnings of victory and establishment. (bin Laden, 10 September 2006)

> The youth came from every land, heading for the towering peaks to rally around the standard of the mujahideen and to stand as one in fighting the Jews and Crusaders who occupy their land and to take revenge for their brothers whose blood was shed on the land of Palestine, Iraq, and other Muslim lands. (bin Laden, 10 September 2006)

Youths are also conferred positions of scriptural wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. This is an implicit rebuke of the *ulama* (clerical scholars), or the "old guard," who allowed the "spirit of *jihad*" to wane and slumber, thus creating the conditions for lost Muslim generations that allowed the infidel powers to rise, conquer, subjugate, and exploit the Muslim world (for example, through colonialism). Extremists have also criticized the *ulama* for allowing liberalizing and secular policies to take shape in Muslim countries, further establishing the conditions for weakness and corruption in the Muslim world. In their messages to Muslim youths, they call on youths to resist this lax form of Islam and rally around the call of the new leaders (i.e., the Islamists). Contrary to common relational pairings of youth with ignorance, radical Islamic leaders stress that Muslim youths are

"conscientious," "zealous about their belief," and that others have mischaracterized them as being misguided and corrupt. As bin Laden states:

> Those youths knew that the road to eternal damnation is the obstruction of the shar'iah [Islamic law], and even some of its rulings. . .You also characterize youth as people who are espousing misguided thinking and a corrupt clique. (10 September 2003)

> This ruling applies when the ruler is a Muslim. Besides, you accuse the youths of ignorance on matters about which all Muslims are knowledgeable. (16 December 2004)

Ayman al-Zawahiri further relates:

> And despite the fact that its historians, thinkers and research centers are aware of many facts and realities, they are all participants in the conspiracy of silence, in an attempt to rescue what remains of their prestige after the strength of their fire and iron failed to save them or protect them after their defeat—by the Grace of Allah—in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in an attempt to deceive their peoples, whose youth they are driving like blind sheep to the mires of death in Afghanistan and Iraq, and whose taxpayers they blackmail in order for them to continue to fund the projects of their leaders—the emperors of evil—in their greedy plans to enslave mankind. (5 May 2007)

Accordingly, a good youth is constructed with category bound activities like strict observance of Islamic law. In contrast, a bad youth chooses to listen to other sources of "doubts and baseless arguments" and "perverted ideology" in the mass media. The good youths are therefore urged to see themselves as members of an Islamic civilization and to reject ethnic, national, or tribal loyalties and divisive conceptions of individual identity, including allegiances to nation-states and their central governments. Every conflict against hypocrites, unbelievers, or apostates in the Muslim world is a shared responsibility amongst the Muslim *ummah* (as a single nation) and not exclusive to individuals of a particular "nationality" or holders of a particular passport. The good youth fulfills his obligations as a member of this *ummah*.

The youth should furthermore resist the alternative identities constructed by their national governments, tribes, or families. Bin Laden states:

> Therefore, the youth . . . who love the religion and sacrifice [themselves] for Allah must pay no attention to these civil servants and to those who refrain [from waging *jihad*]. . . As a result of the communications revolution and the enormous advances in communication . . . the young people hear from a young age that Sheikh 'So-and-So' sent a telegram to the king, and the king sent him a telegram in return, and he appears at the king's right hand every Monday, and so on . . . youth should pay no attention to media. (18 July 2003)

The bad youths are described as "free and lofty" and associated with the rejection of religious duties. A bad youth pursues materialistic interests. This is expressed through narratives about youths that have yet to embrace an identity based on Islam, and remain susceptible

to other messages, particularly those delivered by the West. These rival constructions of youth identity are grounded in hedonistic and individualistic pursuits and fearful passivity:

> As the narration begins, the video shows people driving luxury cars speedily. The commentator begins by saying: "He is one of the Muslim youth who had led a life of fun and pleasure, oblivious to what they have been created for. His life went on like that until the zero hour struck." (bin Laden, 5 December 2003)

The youth audience is thus warned of a fateful end to a life driven by godless ambitions and pleasures—a Western lifestyle that loves life and fears death. As the Qur'an admonishes human beings: "Truly, you seek to escape death, but it will overtake you; then you will be sent to the Knower of the Hidden and the Seen [i.e., God], and He will inform you of what you were doing!" (62:8). Hence, the boundaries of identity dictated by the *jihadists*, embedded with particular values and a construction of reality, are fortified by a final threat of eternal damnation (i.e., Hellfire) rooted in binary opposition to the abode of the good and righteous (i.e., Heaven).

Youth as Special Category

In close relation to the aforementioned discussion, the second primary way in which youth collective identity is built is through the erection of social boundaries, including how Muslim youths are positioned against the West or other social categories, such as children and elders. Extremist Islamist ideologies depend on varying forms of "othering" to delineate and safeguard boundaries of communal identity and geographic territory (e.g., Palestine, Kashmir). In his foundational work *Orientalism*, Edward Said explored "the Orient" as one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the Other."[45] This conception formed the basis for Europe's (and America's) defining binary distinction between East and West and served as a starting point for a vast array of intellectual, cultural, and artistic products that perpetuated the "Orient" construct to a mass audience and subsequently shaped actions, ideas, and government policies. This binary construct also assumed important institutional forms, whereby statements and views regarding the Other (i.e., the Orient) were "authorized" for dissemination. Europe's colonial dominance over the Orient was affirmed and justified through institutional pronouncements that described it, taught it, and settled it, including the geographical parameters where the "Other" and its peculiar "mind" dwelt. In short, "the Orient was not (is not) a free subject of thought or action."[46] Likewise, the "Occident" or West in violent extremist discourse is a kind of inversion of the Orientalist (or Neo-Conservative) binary worldview. The West is a construct imagined and described as the opposite of Islamic virtue and justice. Its membership community has a "mind" with accompanying social and cultural norms that are antithetic to membership within the Islamic civilization and must be opposed or repelled through violence. It echoes, in some sense, the rhetoric of the aforementioned Kahanists who warn fellow Jews of the imminent "Final Solution" that the "*goyim*" of the world have in store for the Jewish people, thus necessitating kinetic action.

The prominence of binary categories within violent Islamist extremist discourse is considerable. Some are grounded in Islam's sacred texts (e.g., Qur'an, Hadith), making them universal references for all Muslims, while others are later innovations and more distinctly *jihadist*. The Qur'an, the "Speech of God," is the source for the principle relational dichotomy of *islam* ("submission") and *kufr* ("hubris" or "unbelief").

Islam: submission; surrender; gratefulness; piety; monotheism
Kufr: hubris; rebellion; ungrateful; impiety; idolatry

The first category, *islam*, includes not only believers in God, but also the natural world (e.g., animals, plants, the planets), which exists in an innate state of *islam* as the *deen al-fitrah* ("innate monotheistic religion"). Only human beings and *jinn* (incorporeal sentient beings or spirits) are endowed with the power (*qudra*) of choice between *islam* and *kufr*. It is reported in the traditions of Sahih Muslim that the Prophet Muhammad once said: "Every child is born in a state of *fitrah*, but then his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian."[47]

Islam furthermore rejects the Christian doctrine of Original Sin and contends that children are not accountable for their sins until the onset of puberty. Heaven (*jannah*) is essentially assured to them. However, once the onset of puberty occurs, they are fully accountable individuals that must earn God's grace through their own efforts and piety. Unlike Christianity or Twelver Shi'ism, in Sunni Islam (85% of all Muslims) there is no redemptive savior that atones for the sins of imperfect devotees, such as Christ (the Christian version) or Imam Husayn (in Shi'ism).

This notion is not lost on Sunni extremists, who regularly extol the redemptive power of martyrdom *fi sabil Allah* ("in the path of God") as an opportunity for instantaneous salvation, regardless of past sins or shortcomings. Thus, it should be noted that Muslim youth are accountable for their sins at the precise time that they become sexually aware and develop lives and social circles independent of protective family structures. Extremist discourse attends to both of these points, invoking new communal identities and promises of sexual gratification in Heaven (e.g., *al-hur al-ayn*).

In contrast to youths, the category of children is typically employed in Islamist discourse as a repository of absolute moral innocence and employed rhetorically to cast the West and its allies as cruel, heartless, criminal, and unjustified in their actions. Numerous *jihadist* statements use children in relational pairings with women and the elderly for the same purpose (as well as orphans and widows). In some cases, Islamist statements go one step further and identify children as deliberate targets of barbaric unbelievers and their many sinister machinations against Islam and Muslim peoples, perhaps in systematic campaigns of genocide.

These statements suggest that unbelievers, unlike the Muslims, have no moral qualms about the deliberate killing of children. Indeed, the Qur'an prohibits the killing of innocents, stating: "Whoever takes a life, unless it is for murder or mischief in the land, it would be as if he killed all of humanity; and whoever saves a life it would be as if he saved all of humanity" (5:32). This is further clarified in the Hadith where the Prophet forbade the killing of women, children, the elderly, monks, and others. But killing children and other innocents is not completely forbidden under certain circumstances and violent extremists, as is known, have often murdered innocents (as in the case of 9/11). Specifically, several of the violent extremist statements express religio-legal justifications for killing infidel children under certain circumstances and absolve any blame or punishment for their deaths. For example, bin Laden defended the 9/11 attacks in an October 2001 message, stating:

> But, the ban on killing innocent children is not absolute. There are provisions that restrict it. God says: "And if ye do catch them out, catch them out no worse than they catch you out." Religious scholars, including Ibnal-Qayyim, Al-Shawkani, and Al-Qurtubi say in their interpretations and many also say that if infidels purposely kill our women and children, then there is no reason why

> we should not treat them equally so as to stop them from killing our children and women again. Now, this is from the legal aspect. As for those who talk without religious knowledge, they say that it is impermissible to kill a child. The youths, whom God opened the way for them did not intend to kill children. (21 October 2001)

Another statement by Nasir Bin Hamd al-Fahd further clarifies:

> It has been established that the Prophet forbade the killing of women and children. However, if you put these hadiths together, it will become apparent that the prohibition is against killing them intentionally. If they are killed collaterally, as in the case of a night attack or invasion when one cannot distinguish them, there is nothing wrong with it. Jihad is not to be halted because of the presence of infidel women and children. (1 May 2002)

An undercurrent present in violent extremist statements on children is their role as the heirs of their respective civilizations and peoples, and thus as proto-youth who are destined to assume the vanguard passed down to them as they mature. Children are a core component of the legacy, dignity, and future of Muslim families, peoples, and nations, to be safeguarded and preserved. Violent extremist statements often invoke children alongside terms such as money, wealth, time, property, or other similar valued capital or resources. They also juxtapose the children of other peoples (e.g., the West) as the heirs of their corrupt or deviant legacy that may also be invoked in justifications for the death of children in violent extremists' attacks.

Another notable relational pairing made by violent extremists is Muslim youths and elders. A youth is subservient to an elder, so long as the latter does not explicitly order conduct that contradicts the Qur'an or Sunnah (example of the Prophet). As the Qur'an states: "And We have ordered man (i.e., humanity) to treat his parents with goodness, but if they force you to take partners alongside Me (i.e., idolatry), which they have no knowledge of, do not obey them" (29:8). This is further elaborated in the story of the prophet Abraham, whose father was an idol maker. The Qur'an states: "Abraham said to his father Azar: 'Do you take idols for gods? Verily, I see you and your people in clear error'" (6:74). This youth identity construction, as discursively positioned to elders, is an important concept for the violent extremists. Serving a secular (or any insufficiently "Islamic") government is a form of idolatry (*shirk*) in the Islamist view because God's laws have been replaced by manmade laws. Thus, it allows violent extremists to subvert the traditional authority of parents and elders in Muslim societies and summon youths to defiantly or secretly engage in *jihad* and sacrifice their lives.

In the texts analyzed by the authors, violent extremists exhort youths not to wait for advice from their elders; rather, youths are defined as active and able agents themselves. Indeed, they are the vanguard through which the Islamist revolution will be brought to fruition. In contrast, elders are admonished not to stand in the way of youth action. As bin Laden states:

> Now, if you can endure all this, uphold the banner and your reward is with Allah; but, if you are afraid for yourselves, abandon the banner of defense and fighting, but do not stand in the way of the youth of the Nation to keep them from [waging] jihad for the sake of Allah. (16 February 2003)

In juxtaposition to the elders, the vanguard youths are characterized as energetic agents of change and used to motivate complacent elders toward action. Some references even push the limits of traditional cultural hierarchies, calling on elders to listen to youth and follow their example: "If some of the seniors forsake God or sit idle, then those to pursue the duty are the ones who follow in rank, even if they are youth" (Bin Laden, 6 May 2004).

Youth as Capital for *Jihad*

Third, youths are often described as contested capital for the cause of *jihad*. The violent extremists seek to utilize the surging population of Muslim youths as a vital and greatly valued resource for the cause of *jihad* and the Islamist movement. Their statements reject alternative activities for youth, such as dedicating time to religious education or the pursuit of material interests and careers in the modern economy. Many violent extremist statements have pointed to figures in the movement that rose to prominence very early on in their lives. The idealization of these men as warrior-saints or heroes serves the need for alternative militant paradigms among the violent extremist ranks. For example, in a 2007 interview, Abu Yahya al-Libi said that "most Muslims are young, between 15 and 30 years old. These statistics frighten [the West], as everyone knows that the youth represent the real power and the effort that is exerted to establish every righteous project for the Islamic nation." He goes on further to say:

> The ages of the prophet's companions, with whom God was pleased, were young. We all know this. Al-Zubayr Bin al-Awwam became Muslim at the age of 12, Ali Bin Abi Talib embraced Islam when he was no more than 10, and Osama Bin Zayd was leading armies at 20. And this is how the men of the nation are today, by the grace of God taken from the youth of our Islamic countries. (28 August 2007)

This type of hagiographical material is hardly unusual in the Islamic world. Sufism and "popular" Islam are well known for transmitting such narratives, relating the pious exploits (even miracles) and exceptional character of their male and female saints (*awliyya*).

The best known Muslim hagiography is that of the Prophet Muhammad, recounting fantastic details and miraculous events that the Qur'an (which is not the story of Muhammad's life) does not mention. These rich narratives provide important (even entertaining) archetypal paradigms of perfect human submission (*islam*) to the Will of God, and therefore the normative path to salvation. But the story of Muhammad's life poses an interesting dilemma for violent extremists. The Prophet, the paradigm of Muslim life, did not die on the battlefield waging *jihad* against the unbelievers. He died quietly in Medina at the age of 62 in his bed from an illness. Hence, violent extremists have established their own tradition of hagiographies celebrating the righteousness and glorious martyrdoms of young violent extremists as alternative militant paradigms in their appeals to Muslim youth. Here is an excerpt of one such narrative celebrating the life and "martyrdom" the Saudi militant Yusuf al-Ayiri (d. 2003):

> This young man [Yusuf al-Ayiri] memorized the Quran and the six books [of Hadith]. He is a seasoned military man. He is a genius and theorizer who served jihad with his writings and theorization. He never wavered for a moment from waging jihad by himself and his pen in the various Muslim countries. He is an inspired genius and a miracle of the age. Had he been in another nation, they

> would not have made him walk on the ground. They would have carried him on their heads. But the tyrants in our country, and in order to serve the Cross, have insisted on killing or capturing him. He chose martyrdom and its virtue over everything else. (12 May 2003)

In the dominant construction of youth as the violent extremist frontline, youth are called to a set of category bound actions, such as to "join the *jihad* battlefields" and personally sacrifice themselves for the sake of the *ummah* (Muslim community). In many of the violent extremist statements the authors analyzed, Osama bin Laden focused on the mobilization of the youth toward militant action and martyrdom. Indeed, as early as 1994, his statements have underscored how youth is a crucial time to participate in *jihad*: "Oh, Muslim youth in the cradle of Islam, the time of diligence and action has come. The time of listlessness and relaxation has gone." The urgency of this religious awakening is further highlighted in an al-Zawahiri message to Muslim youths, urging them to seize the moment and know that the time for action is now: "The youth should not wait for anyone. They should begin the resistance now, and they should learn lessons from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Chechnya. They should learn how the resistance ruined the plans of the Crusaders and Jews, and put them in the predicament of the defender looking for an escape" (1 October 2004).

The Muslim youth are repeatedly called to kinetic warfare to reinforce violent extremist group interests. "I [i.e. Bin Laden] also urge the Muslim youths and merchants to sacrifice their cherished and dearest things to secure the needs of the mujahideen through the trustworthy mediators, especially in Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Sudan" (AQP0628, 1 July 2006). Abu Ghayth states:

> The Muslim youth, having learned about our simple method in fighting the enemies of God, should follow the path of their brothers in killing this corrupt clique and those infidels who seek to spread corruption in the earth. Every Muslim youth can fight the enemies of God with what he has. You can throw a stone at him [the enemy of God], stab him with a knife, or kill him with a bullet. You should use any means to fight the enemies of God. (23 June 2002)

Osama bin Laden's messages consistently focus on directing the youth to take the initiative against the enemies of Islam. The text that follows illustrates how youth activity and the apex of youth energies should be directed at killing American Crusaders and Zionists:

> I confirm that all the youth and the whole nation should concentrate their efforts on the Americans and the Zionists because they are the head of the spear that has been pointed at the nation and delivered into the nation's heart, and that every effort concentrated on the Americans and the Zionists will bring good, direct, and positive results. Therefore, if someone can kill an American soldier, it is better than wasting his energy on other matters. (20 February 1997)

The raising of youth consciousness for the *jihad* is further indicated in discourse where youths are specifically upheld as the subject of prayer. Bin Laden frequently prays to God for the youth, asking God to "guide the Muslim youth to jihad for your sake." He states:

> O God, those youth have come together in support of your religion and your banner, so give them your support and bless their hearts. O God, strengthen the youth of Islam, guide their steps, and strike amity into the hearts of Muslims

> and unite their ranks, and give us patience and steadfastness and grant us victory against the heretics. (2 September 1996)

Jihadist statements emphasize the purity of believing youths and their capacity to receive and comprehend true divine guidance from God as *mujahideen* (warriors), in contrast to adults and *ulama* (scholars), whose hearts have been sealed to the true message of Islam because of their laxity, ignorance, or infidelity. As the Qur'an states of the impious: "As for those that disbelieve it is the same for them if you warn them or not, they will not believe; God has put a seal on their hearts and on their hearing and on their eyes is a veil, and for them is a great punishment" (2:6–7). In contrast, bin Laden states of the youth: "As to the youths, whom God had opened their hearts, transferred their battle to the heart of the United States, and made them destroy its most prominent economic and military landmarks, they acted with God's grace in the way we understand and uphold it and in self-defense" (21 October 2001). Such language suggests that religious insights held by *jihadist* youths come from God and may be beyond other Muslims whose hearts have yet to receive such grace. This notion appears again implicitly in the following statement:

> The Prophet, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, told the youth Ibn Abbad, may God be pleased with him: "O young man, let me teach you these words: Hold to God and God will hold to you. . . . If you are asked anything, turn to God. If you seek help, turn to God. Remember that even if the nation gathered to help you, it will only help you with what God has willed for you." . . .Don't consult anyone on killing the Americans, proceed with God's blessing, and remember your rendezvous with God Almighty in the company of the best of the prophets [i.e., heavenly reward for martyrdom], may the peace and blessings of God be upon him. (21 October 2001)

In the aforementioned ways, the time of youth is rhetorically constructed as a golden age, a time of trial and opportunity for religious awakening and participation in the global *jihad*—which creates the conditions for pious sacrifice, fulfillment of one's duties, and ultimately blessed martyrdom. Interestingly though, the traditional paradigm of martyrdom in Sunni Islam (the violent extremists examined here are all Sunni) is Hamza ibn Abdul-Muttalib (d. 625), the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad known as Asadullah ("Lion of God"). Hamza was a brave and fierce warrior killed by a pagan assassin hired by Hind bint Utbah during the Battle of Uhud. He was not a youth, but an elder man in his fifties. Again, the violent extremist hagiographies are evoked to compensate for such details.

Regarding the martyrdom of the believers, the Qur'an states: "And do not say of those killed on the path of God (*fi sabil Allah*): 'They are dead.' Nay! They live, but you do not perceive it" (2:154). In several instances in the texts analyzed, bin Laden echoes this verse and extols youths to seek martyrdom with such phrases as "come to eternity," or "crave death and life will be given to you" (27 October 2002, emphasis added). In two documents, he states:

> These youths that sacrificed their lives in New York and Washington—and we pray to God to accept them as martyrs—were the spokesmen of the true conscience of the nation. (21 October 2001)

> And the youth realized what others did not, that the difficulty of direct confrontation between the people of faith and the people of unbelief doesn't mean surrendering to them, and that with martyrdom operations, it will be easy to infiltrate their ranks and inflict large losses on them. (10 September 2006)

Conclusion and Future Research Recommendations for Countering Extremist Discourse

This analysis of Al Qaeda statements has examined the discursive strategies employed in extremist discourse to mobilize and direct Muslim youths to violent kinetic action against the "West" and its "apostate" allies, a category that includes the ruling regimes of many Muslim countries (e.g., Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria). *Jihadist* groups target and recruit Muslim youths for these actions by building a persuasive collective identity. This article contributes to the small but growing literature related to discursive attention for counterterrorism in contemporary mediated society by identifying three key ways in which violent extremists attempt to communicate a cohesive youth identity. These include the (a) construction of a common belief system with end goals, such as the establishment of the "Islamic state," (b) creation of membership boundaries between "believing youth" and the "apostate" regimes they live under, and (c) raising of attention toward hagiographies of *jihadist* fighters who sacrificed their life and wealth against the "enemies of Islam" as moral exemplars for youths to reference and emulate.

There are certain inconsistencies in violent extremist discourse that can be expanded and exploited to facilitate intervention and counternarrative strategies. These may serve to deconstruct *jihadist* youth identity. Three possible strategies, discussed next, will conclude the analysis as well as point to directions for future research.

First, alternative discourse can dilute youth collective identity by questioning proposals for commitment to the *ummah*, the singular Muslim community or nation across the world, and the reestablishment of the Islamic state. Specifically, alternative discourse can deconstruct popular category pairs of "us" and "them," in this case, "*ummah*" and "apostate" given that the pious abstraction of the *ummah* is highly susceptible to disruption on several fronts.[48] All of the texts analyzed are rooted in a distinct sectarian subgroup within Sunni Islam, which itself is only one of several sectarian branches of Islam (e.g., Ibadi Islam, Ismaili Shi'ism, Zaydi Shi'ism). By situating the *jihadists* within a particular sectarian tradition, which they consciously seek to de-emphasize, alternative discourse can create new categorical pairs, whereby violent extremists themselves are positioned as "them." For instance, alternative discourse can employ oppositional categories on Osama bin Laden, an adherent of the Wahhabism sect. Wahhabism, originally an eighteenth-century sect responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims and the destruction of Islamic holy sites and shrines (deemed "idolatrous"), was eventually defeated by the Caliph of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, a recommendation is that counter narratives of divided allegiances and conflicts be mobilized to undermine the collective identity of bin Laden's pious exhortations of the *ummah* as a single cohesive body.

Muslim youth, especially if they are poor and illiterate, may not have studied history in any significant detail, so assertions of a reconstructed *ummah* and an "Islamic state" remains an area susceptible to rampant extremist distortions and inventions. For example, the Muslim conquest of Spain under Tariq ibn Ziyad in 711 is often hailed as a pious *jihad* to be emulated. What extremists fail to mention is that the Muslims actually forged alliances with the Jews of Spain during their campaign and fought side by side with them against the

Catholic Visigoths. Therefore, future research attention should be directed to historically grounded discourse and resources for the education of Muslim youths so that simplistic membership categories can be subverted and rendered ineffectual in the justification of violent action.

Second, alternative discourse can focus on replacing traditional category-bound activities like acts of kinetic warfare and martyrdom with other non-kinetic actions. As mentioned earlier, Muhammad's prophetic mission began at the age of forty and continued until his death at the age of sixty-two, when he was a father and husband (multiple times). He did not act as a youth warrior nor die as a martyr on the battlefield waging *jihad*, despite his participation in military conflicts from 624 until 632. Rather, he died at home in Medina lying in his bed surrounded by family and friends. As the earlier analysis detailed, extremists invoke separate hagiographies that emphasize and recount the stories of other extremist martyrs to compensate for this fact. Admittedly, statements recounted in the books of Hadith (oral traditions attributed to Muhammad that were written down and codified in the ninth and tenth centuries) do contain exhortations praising martyrdom on the path of God. These traditions are often cited by extremists. However, the same collections of Hadith contain equally powerful exhortations praising actions such as caring for widows and orphans, raising daughters, and caring for animals that carry salvific implications equal to martyrdom. Therefore, counterterrorism discourse should decouple extremist youth category-bound actions of martyrdom and publicize other activity replacements.[49] Attention, for instance, could be paid to constructing alternative youth identities tied to activities like education, sports, the arts, and participation in civic volunteerism devoted to caring for the poor and sick as youths seek salvation in Islam by emulating acts of charitable piety by Muhammad, as a father, husband, friend, teacher, and leader.

Third, to reduce the efficacy of extremist textual construction of youth identity, future research attention should be dedicated to examining source credibility of extremist authors and emphasizing ways to undermine their religious authority. Sunni Islam, to which all of the extremists cited above identify, does not have a priesthood or central hierarchical institution (like the Vatican in Catholicism) through which official "orthodox" pronouncements are made. Rather, it has a tradition of scholarship with the *ulama* who are specialists trained in certain religious disciplines, such as law, like the rabbinic tradition in Orthodox Judaism. In many cases, members of the *ulama* are affiliated with a particular institution of higher learning, such as al-Azhar in Cairo, Egypt, or the Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco. It should be noted that virtually all of the extremist statements analyzed in this article are the products of "lay" figures, not *ulama*, even though extremist followers do indeed treat bin Laden and al-Zawahiri as if they were trained scholars (they are not). Yet the prominence of "lay" figures in the Islamist movement, with their frequent *fatwas* (edicts) and declarations, directly undermines the *ulama* and their institutions of authority. Such strategies contravene normative Sunni Islam and contradict a wealth of Islamic texts regarding obedience to authority and the eminence of the scholars. Indeed, one saying of the Prophet Muhammad states: "The ink of a scholar's pen is holier than the blood of a martyr." In this sense, violent extremists hold limited religious authority and cannot speak on behalf of the *ummah*. Hence, future research and counterterrorism practices should investigate how youths perceive credibility of extremist texts in strategic cultures and in particular, how credibility functions in new media platforms which are increasingly deployed in youth communication and recruitment missions. In this way, strategic communication efforts can work toward reducing the persuasive impact of violent extremist communiqués and degrading the credibility of those who represent limited religious authority, in order to progress in winning the battle for young hearts and minds.

Appendix

The complete list and content of primary texts are accessible on http://hdshcresearch.asu.edu/aqp.

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33. Jeffrey C. Alexander, "From the Depths of Despair: Performance, Counter-Performance, and September 11," *Sociological Theory* 22 (2004), pp. 88–105.

34. See Downing, "Social Movement Theories and Alternative Media"; Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements"; Taylor and Whittier, "Collective Identity and Lesbian Feminist Mobilization."

35. Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation*: *Volume I & II* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

36. Ibid., p. 139.

37. Anssi Perakyla, "Analyzing Text and Talk," in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, eds., *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials: 3rd Edition* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 357.

38. Peter Eglin and Stephen Hester, *The Montreal Massacre: A Story of Membership Categorization Analysis* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003).

39. Ivan Leudar, Victoria Marsland, and Jiri Nekvapil, "On Membership Categorization: 'Us,' 'Them' and 'Doing Violence' in Political Discourse," *Discourse & Society* 15(2–3) (2004), pp. 243–266.

40. Ibid., p. 243.

41. Ibid., p. 245.

42. Ibid., p. 262.

43. Islamic Development Bank, *34th Annual Report 1429H (2008–2009).* Available at http://www.isdb.org/irj/go/km/docs/documents/IDBDevelopments/Internet/English/IDB/CM/Publications/Annual_Reports/34th/AnnualReport_34.pdf

44. Mohammed Obaidullah, "Fighting Against Poverty in Islamic Societies," *Islamic Voice* (2007). Available at http://islamicvoice.com/December2007/MuslimEconomy/

45. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 1.

46. Ibid., p. 3.

47. *Sahih Muslim*, Book 033:6429. Available at http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/hadith/

48. Matthew Herbert highlights the importance of understanding the wide spectrum of Islamists who inhabit distinct yet sometimes contradictory identities. See Matthew Herbert, "The Plasticity of the Islamic Activist: Notes from the Counterterrorism Literature," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32(5) (2009), pp. 389–405.

49. Schwartz also notes that an important direction for counterterrorism intervention is to promote youth development that creates a positive sense of identity among youths who are taught to value tolerance and caring traits. See Schwartz et al., "Terrorism," pp. 553–554.