

# Coding Messages from al-Qa'ida Leaders

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# Project overview

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- 51 transcripts from video, audio, and computer messages from al-Qa'ida leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri
- Translated, transcribed, and provided by the FBI
- Scholars at several universities doing separate analyses
- Purpose: To identify features of the messages that could inform and possibly predict future terrorist activity



# U of Maryland team

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- Content analysis to examine communication associated with terrorist attacks, involves:
  - 1. Coding transcripts: 5 part scheme
  - 2. Comparing with time line of terrorist activities
  - 3. Analyzing communication patterns over time

# Coding scheme

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- Information provided by FBI about each transcript:
  - Message type: Video, print, Web statement, audio statement
  - Source: bin Laden, al Zawahiri, both, uncertain
  - General target: General, all Muslims, extremists, West, or combination
  - Type of communication: Article, interview, statement, epistle, letter



# Steps for coding and analysis

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- Unitize transcripts
- Code units one scheme at a time
- Two to three coders trained for each scheme
- Code 10% of units with all coders, verify reliabilities (Cohen's  $K = .80$  or better)
- Continual development and improvement of codebook
- Examine coding for trends over time and patterns related to terrorist activity

# Coding schemes

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- A. Reference: Who or what is the reference of the sentence or smaller unit?
- Leaders, countries or regions, enemies or enemy action, allies, specific attacks, Allah or Muhammad, Islamic religious texts, Types of political resistance, general values (not Islamic), expressions (e.g., religious sayings or quotations, formulaic sayings), other people not specified.
- Specific subcategories within each of the major categories

# Coding schemes

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- B. Valence for references
- + 4 to - 4, with no zero code
- +4 = extremely positive commentary, e.g.,  
“Muslim’s greatest heroes”
- -4 = extremely negative commentary, e.g.,  
“lull Muslims into butchering them”
- +1 and -1 used for nearly neutral statements  
but within positive or negative context

# Coding schemes

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- C. Motivations and justifications (adapted from Taylor & Donald, 2004)
- Justification: Specific reasons given to explain and justify past actions
- Motivation: Specific reasons given to explain and justify future actions
- Focus of justification or motivation: Instrumental, identity, or relational goals
- Types of explanations, e.g., revenge, retaliation, the Law, tangible benefits, international standards, rights
- Valence code (+4 to -4) for the justification or motivation

# Coding schemes

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- D. Compliance gaining tactics
- 16 tactics from communication research
- These tactics divide into two factors: Aggressive vs. non-aggressive tactics
- What tactics are used in the messages to try to gain compliance?
- E.g., Promise, threat, moral appeal, positive or negative altercasting (a person with good/bad qualities would/would not comply), altruism

# Coding schemes

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- E. Power (adapted from Winter [1994] and Donohue & Hoobler [ 2002])
- Codes for degree of pressure (e.g., strong & forceful action, control or regulation, influence attempts, advice, emotional reaction)
- Valence of power

# Current status

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- Coding references and valences
- Cohen's *Kappa* = .89 on references
- Example: “We also call on **Muslim ulema leaders** (11.4), **youth and soldiers** (4.2) to launch the raid on **Satans and U.S. troops** (3.5) and **devil supporters** (3.10) and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn the lesson.”
- 11 = Other people, .4 = Muslim religious specialists
- 4 = Allies, .2 = Global community of Islam
- 3 = Enemies, .5 = U.S. military & agents, .10 = U.S. allies

# Challenges and benefits of manual coding

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- Ambiguities in meaning:
- For example: “That is why the United States had to decide to reduce its forces in Saudi Arabia.” 3.5 (U.S. military) or 2.4 (U.S. as a nation)?
- Issues related to direct translation:
- For example: “In Pakistan also, Muslims are supporting us in the Jihad and the United States is also confused in Pakistan.”

# Challenges and benefits

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- Challenge of coding hyperbole:
- For example: “I witness that there is no God but God and Muhammad is His slave and Prophet. God Almighty hit the United States at its most vulnerable spot. He destroyed its greatest buildings. Praise be to God. Here is the United States. It was filled with terror from its north to its south and from its east to its west. Praise be to God.”



# Challenges and benefits

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- ❑ Keeping attuned to the intensity but not overwhelmed (especially with coders):
- ❑ Managing the shifting tones
- ❑ Discerning positive and negative valence: positive and negative to whom? To the coders as Americans or to the speakers?
- ❑ Keeping in mind the cultural approach of argument and hyperbole

# For example:

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- When these defended their oppressed sons, brothers, and sisters in Palestine and in many Islamic countries, the world at large shouted. The infidels shouted, followed by the hypocrites. One million Iraqi children have thus far died in Iraq although they did not do anything wrong. Despite this, we heard no denunciation by anyone in the world or a fatwa by the rulers' ulema. Israeli tanks and tracked vehicles also enter to wreak havoc ...and we hear no voices raised or moves made. But if the sword falls on the United States after 80 years, hypocrisy raises its head lamenting the deaths of these killers who tampered with the blood, honor, and holy places of the Muslims. The least that one can describe these people is that they are morally depraved. They champion falsehood, support the butcher against the victim, the oppressor against the innocent child.



# Conclusions

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- ❑ Each scheme should provide insight over time into shifts in focus, power, and tactics
- ❑ Labor intensive but with benefits
- ❑ Previous success in coding Chinese media over one year for valence and subjects
- ❑ Goals of seeing trends, relating trends to events, and gaining insight into cultural approach to politically loaded statements