



# The Narrative Landscape of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of an analysis of the narrative landscape produced in texts by and about al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from 2007 to 2013. We analyzed invocation of cultural master narrative use by the group, and then performed a detailed thematic study of the texts using Critical Discourse Analysis. This report is timely, as there are indications that the threat of terrorism in North Africa is on the rise.

The analysis of Master Narrative use allows us to better understand how AQIM exploits cultural knowledge of its audience for strategic communication purposes while the qualitative analysis is useful to explore the use of the particular words and grammatical forms to establish meaning, identities, interests, and behaviors of political agents in the narratives.

The analysis shows that AQIM uses master narratives in a way that is distinct from Islamist extremist groups outside the Maghreb. Though they employ many of the same narratives, they appear in a higher percentage of their texts than is the case for extremist groups outside the region. In addition, they often use three master narratives relating to back-and-forth conflict between Muslims and Christians in Andalusia, which have particular resonance in the Maghreb. The analysis also shows that the use of the master narratives varies over the years studied, suggesting changes in AQIM strategic communication priorities. In particular there is a notable shift around 2010 when the group was under pressure from authorities.

The Critical Discourse Analysis reveals that AQIM invests a great deal of time in representing the enemy with the utmost negativity. Of particular interest is that AQIM's members also depict themselves in highly negative ways. The analysis suggests that while the strategy of negative self-representation maybe effective in the short term to attract new supporters and recruit new, it is probably ineffective in the long run.

This report makes three recommendations for influence activities to counter the AQIM discourse: (1) Focus information efforts on the Maghreb, (2) avoid supporting their critique of neo-liberalism, and (3) emphasize the long-term implications of the AQIM's negative self-image.

## INTRODUCTION

The Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies reports that terrorist attacks in the past ten years by violent North African groups have increased more than 500 percent from their low point in the period, to reach 204 attacks in 2009.<sup>1</sup> For decades, European and American academics and policy makers have overlooked North African states. Yet in the last few years, those states—together with Chad, Mali, and Niger—have emerged as one of the most worrying strategic challenges to the international community.

One violent Islamist group in this region, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is of particular concern. It originated as a splinter of the Armed Islamic Group around 1999, and formally pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda around 2007. While it is nominally committed to establishing an Islamic state in Algeria, its operations span the Maghreb states and extend into the Sahel. US AFRICOM believes that it is cooperating with violent Islamist groups in other parts of Africa, such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab,<sup>2</sup> creating concerns that a pan-African extremist organization may crystallize.

An important question is whether AQIM is more than clone of the broader al-Qaeda movement. If it is nothing more than an “al-Qaeda lite,” then communication strategies used to counter the larger group can simply be extended to the Maghreb region. But if AQIM has a unique approach to recruiting and influencing contested populations, then there may be opportunities for more specialized efforts to disrupt its strategic communication.

## AI-QAEDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB

AQIM is considered one of the most vocal and active terrorist groups in North Africa. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “many experts suggest AQIM is the primary transnational terror threat in North Africa”.<sup>3</sup> Originally formed in Algeria as *al-jamaat al-salafiyya lil-dawa wal-qital*, or the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, the organization pledged alliance with al-Qaeda and adopted the new name at the start of 2007. The leader of AQIM or *emir* is Abdelmalek Droukdel [also spelled Abd al-Malik Droukdel],<sup>4</sup> who is also known as Abu Musab Abd al-Wadoud, assumed the post following the death of his predecessor in 2004.<sup>5</sup> Sources estimate that the number of AQIM members is several hundred<sup>6</sup>, between 600 and 800 fighters in Algeria and Europe<sup>7</sup>, or under a thousand in Algeria with a smaller number in the Sahel.<sup>8</sup> The organization is divided into brigades, which, according to Al-Monitor (a Washington-based Middle Eastern news site), are led by local emirs who must pledge allegiance to the national leader.<sup>9</sup>

The US Congressional Research Service notes that the cohesiveness of the organization is “questionable, as it may be operating as relatively autonomous and/or rival cells”.<sup>10</sup> Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is involved in a range of criminal activities, such as kidnappings for ransom (especially of Europeans), and smuggling across the western and central Sahara-Sahel region as well as in the Maghreb.

AQIM’s primary goal has been to overthrow the Bouteflika regime in Algeria and to establish an “Islamic State” that governs according to the *sharia*. Throughout the years, AQIM has also taken responsibility for a number of terrorist incidents in the region. During 2012, AQIM carried out 125 attacks.<sup>11</sup> AQIM attacks have generally focused on Algerian targets, especially military and police units. But it looks in recent years as though it has been trying to pursue a more global strategy.

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*Sources indicate that AQIM has links with other African terrorist organizations, including al-Shabaab and Boko Haram*

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The group commonly establishes bases of operation in countries neighboring Algeria. For instance, in December 2012, an AQIM recruiting and training cell was discovered in Tunisia outside of Feriana in the Kasserine Governorate. Furthermore, because of the increased difficulties encountered in northern Algeria, and in line with the AQIM’s emir Droukdel’s regional ambitions, its operations have also moved into Mali, Niger, and Mauritania. There also indications that the group has wider aspirations. Sources indicate that AQIM has links with other African terrorist organizations, including al-Shabaab and Boko Haram.<sup>12</sup>

## **AQIM STRATEGIC NARRATIVE**

Narrative is an especially important aspect of Islamist extremist strategic communication. The Islamic tradition is essentially a collection of stories from the Quran and Hadith. Extremists frequently cite these stories as justifications for their ideology and strategies, and this narrative rationality extends to interpretation of contemporary events. One particularly important narrative tactic is *vertical integration*.<sup>13</sup> Here communicators use cultural master narratives as analogies for local narratives about the here-and-now, and encourage their audience to align their personal narratives with the local ones. This integration makes for an especially persuasive package, and is routinely used by extremist groups.

Through the Department of Defense Human Social Culture Behavior research program, CSC has developed a database of over 5000 texts from Islamist extremist groups and their followers. We have coded these texts for invocation of 18 master narratives and identified individual stories they contain. To assess AQIM’s strategic narrative we analyzed information from this database from 2007 to 2013.

## MASTER NARRATIVE USE

To better understand how AQIM exploits cultural knowledge of its audience for strategic communication purposes, we compared 246 texts from our database about or authored by AQIM with 4492 texts outside that set published within our target timeframe. Each text in the database is coded for invocation of any of 18 master narratives of Islamist extremism.<sup>14</sup> In this context, a master narrative is a story from Islam or Muslim history that is so widely known by members of the extremists' target audience that it can be invoked with key words or phrases (as opposed to being told outright).

These narratives are used as analogies, to frame current events in a way that is strategically useful to the extremists. Calling the US and other Western governments "Crusaders" is an example of this, as it references the master narrative of the Crusades. For each year, for each master narrative, we obtained a count of the number of texts in the target set that invoked that master narrative. This gives an idea of whether and how AQIM master narrative use is different from that of Islamist extremists in general.

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*AQIM shows distinctive use of three master narratives particular to the Maghreb region*

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Of the 18 master narratives (MNs) studied, several are of particular interest because they show trends, abrupt changes, or correspond to important events. Three of the MNs—Uqbah bin Nafi, Yusuf bin Tashfin and Tariq ibn Ziyad (see the Appendix for brief descriptions)—are of interest because they are particular to the Maghreb region. As we would expect, all three are used significantly and substantially more in AQIM than non-AQIM texts (with the exception of Yusuf bin Tashfin in some years; see Figure 1 a-c). Uqbah bin Nafi is prominent only in 2010-2011. This may be a reaction to the Arab Spring, reflecting a desire for Islamic governance, rather than Western secular democracy, to be the outcome of the uprisings. All three of these MNs reflect the actions of military champions who brought Islam to North Africa, or pursued successful campaigns and resistance in Andalusia.

The Crusaders MN, the most common in our database, is significantly more prominent in AQIM texts than in non-AQIM texts for all years except 2013. In addition there is evidence of a downward trend (see Figure 1d). This may reflect a decreasing focus on Western threats and growing focus on regional governments the extremists regard as evil. This is supported by the consistently high use of the Pharaoh MN in 2008-2012 (see Figure 1e).

These two master narratives reflect a theme of *anti-neoliberalism* we have identified in other publications.<sup>15</sup> This narrative criticizes the takeover of natural resources by large Western corporations and the importation of capitalism to the region, which supports such exploitation. In 2007 Abu

Musab Abdel-Wadoud (Droukdel) said: “Big foreign companies took hold of our resources and our internal wealth, they controlled our domestic markets after they forced us to accept the principle of liberating the exterior commerce, the use of the privatization laws, transferred the ownership of many of our strategic economic companies to foreign countries.”<sup>16</sup>

There is also a downward trend for 72 Virgins (Figure 1f), a MN that glorifies martyrdom and promises rewards in the afterlife for those who die as martyrs. This probably indicates that AQIM fighters are sufficiently motivated by the group’s political goals that rhetoric providing divine incentives is no longer too important.

One other feature of AQIM MN use is that there is a clear change that takes place in 2010. This is most clearly indicated in the Nakba MN, which is heavily used in 2007-2009, then drops off sharply in 2010 (see Figure Figure 1g). Pharaoh also drops significantly in 2010 to then come back in 2011-2012. The Maghrebi MNs also show changes in 2010-2011. A 2011 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies<sup>17</sup> notes that the group was under significant pressure from government forces in 2009, and “the lethality and quantity of AQIM attacks in 2010 dropped considerably from previous years” (p. 5). This same year is when AQIM began to develop its alliance with Boko Haram in Nigeria.

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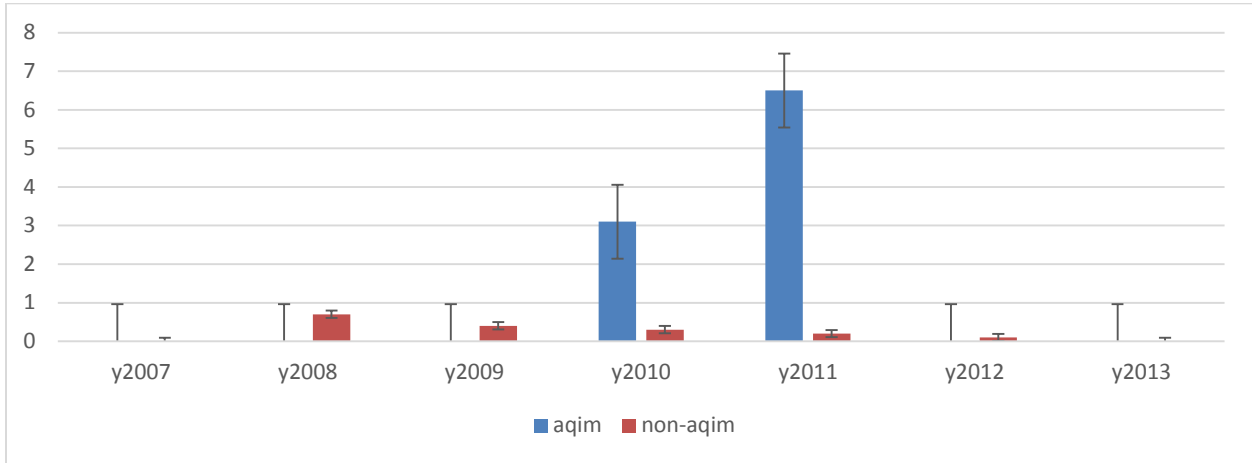
*One other feature of AQIM master narrative use is a clear change that takes place in 2010*

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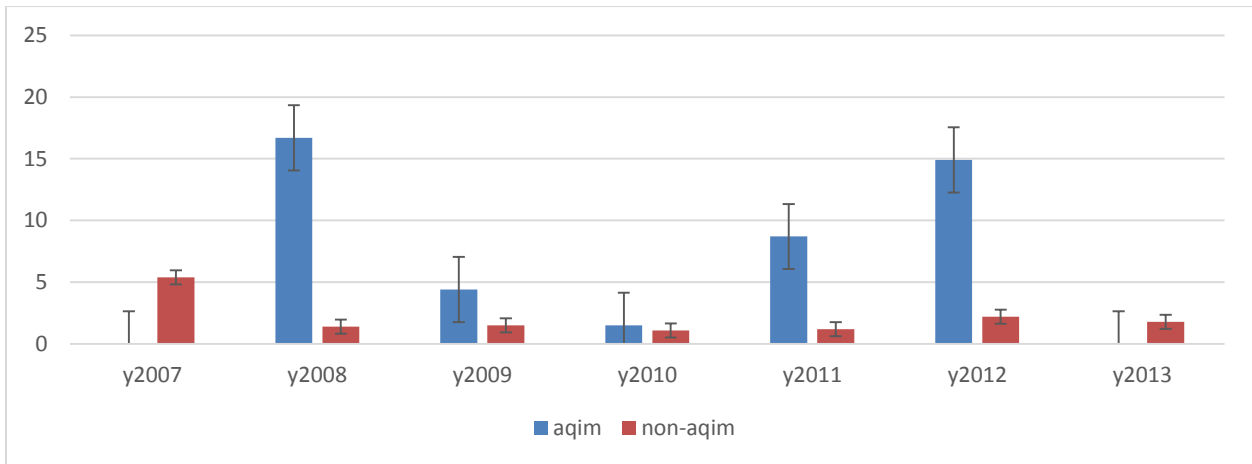
In sum, master narrative use in AQIM texts is significantly different from texts not by or about that group. As we would expect, MNs that focus on invasions of North Africa and Andalusia are much more prominent. However, there is also heavier use of the most common master narratives in our database compared to non-AQIM texts. Two of these, Crusaders and Pharaoh, support a local narrative theme against neo-liberal efforts to modernize and internationalize the economy of Maghreb states.

**Figure 1. Percent of Texts Invoking Master Narratives**

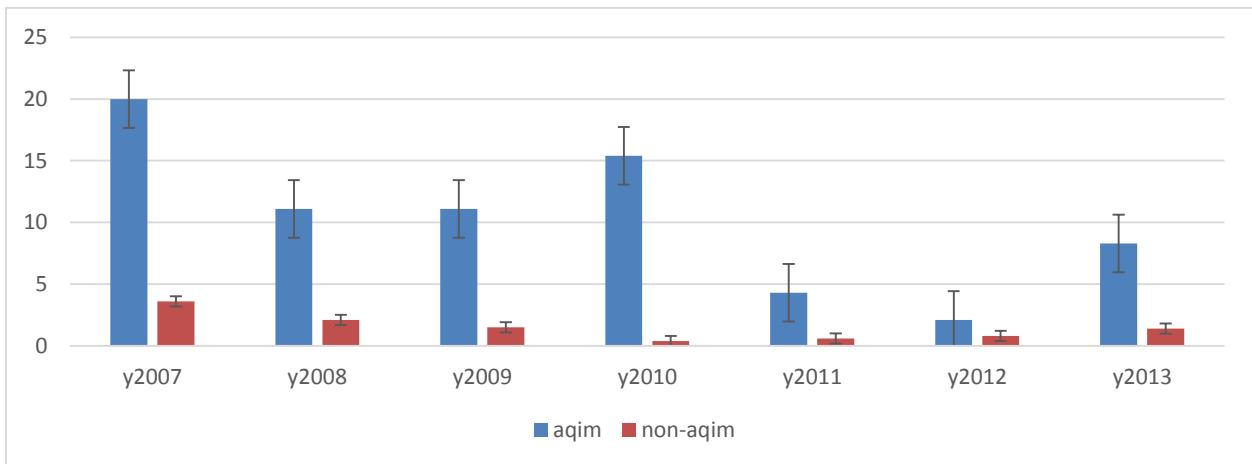
**A. Uqbah bin Nafi**



**B. Yusuf bin Tashfin**

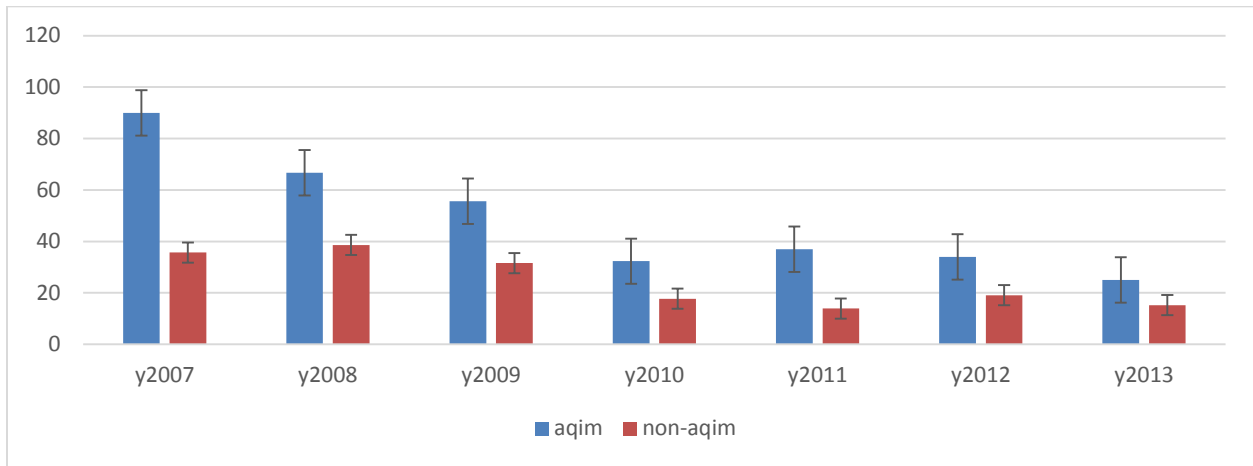


**C. Tariq ibn Ziyad**

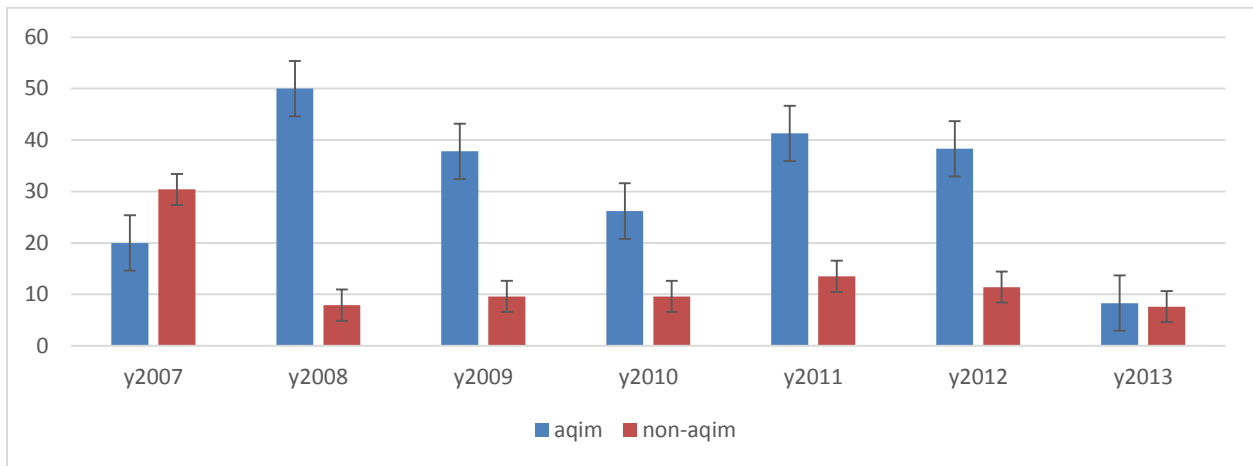


**Figure 1. Percent of Texts Invoking Master Narratives (cont'd)**

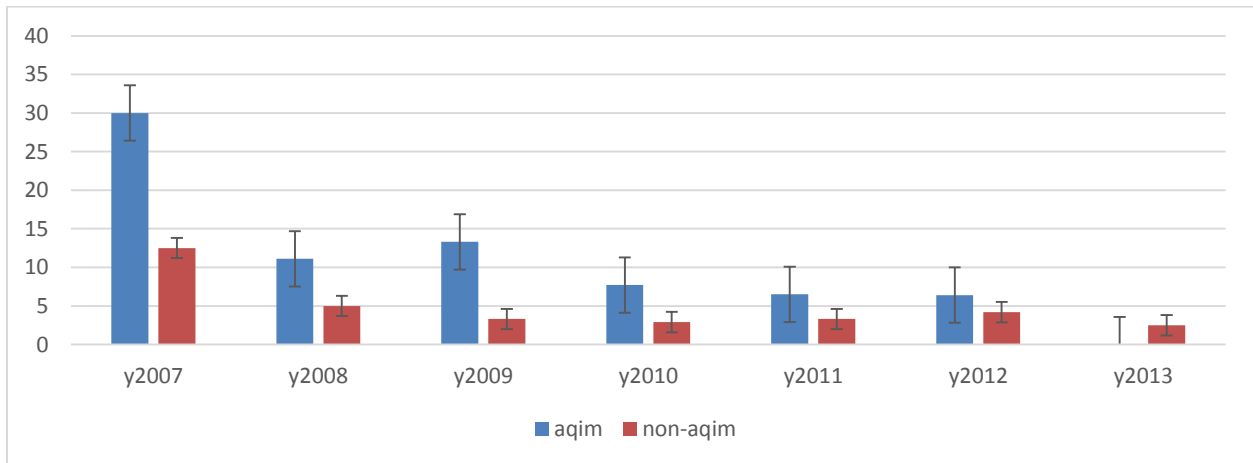
**D. Crusaders**



**E. Pharaoh**



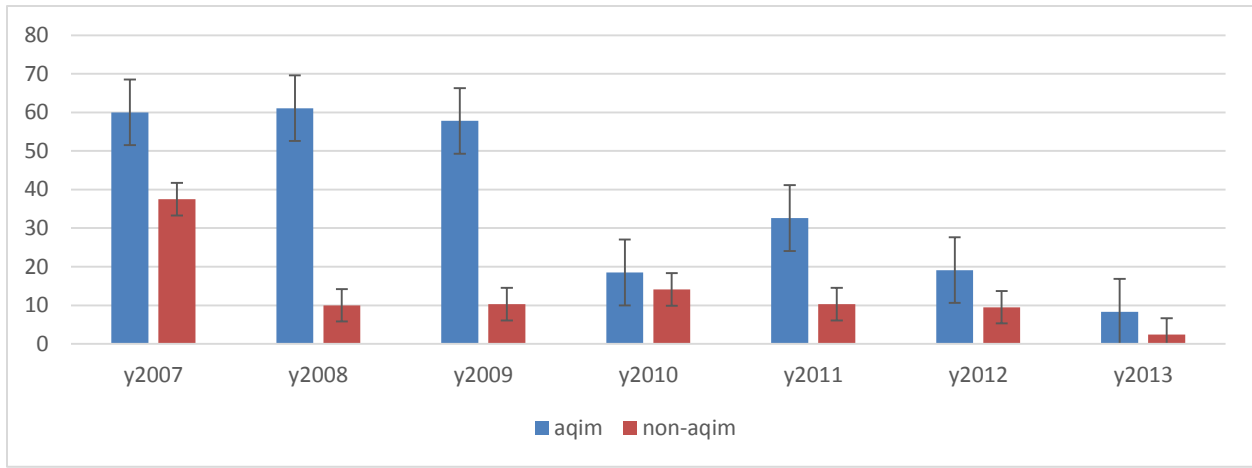
**F. 72 Virgins**





**Figure 1. Percent of Texts Invoking Master Narratives (cont'd)**

G. Nakba



## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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*There is a constant quest for legitimization of AQIM's organization and actions*

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For this analysis, we examined 106 texts authored by AQIM using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)<sup>18</sup> to explore the use of the particular words and grammatical forms to establish meaning, identities, interests, and behaviors of political agents in the narratives.<sup>19</sup> CDA goes beyond a purely “verbal” approach to uncover what is implicit or hidden in text. We found three important features in this regard: Us vs. them representations, construction of “them” as evil, and a negative self-representation of “us” associated with a duty of jihad.

**The “us” versus “them” representation and the strategy of predication.** In the texts we analyzed, there is a constant quest for legitimization of AQIM’s organization and actions. This is achieved in two ways. First there is a drastic polarization between “us” (the lions of Islam, the lions of Al Qaeda, the martyred heroes, the martyrdom-seekers) and “them” (enemies of God, enemies of Muslims, the apostates, the slaves of America and the agents of France). Second we find a highly negative AQIM self-representation, conveying the image of a strong organization able to carry out successful attacks and to kill a high number of enemies’ The first rhetorical device, commonly adopted in political communication, is a strategy of predication in which the objective is to label actors in particular ways – in this case negatively.<sup>20</sup> The following fragments illustrate this strategy:

(928) By God, the nation has lost lions of Islam, trustworthy men, and swords that startle the **brothers of the monkeys and the pigs**.

(2196) We will continue on his path, hold onto the truth, fight **the Christians and their followers, the Jews and their supporters, and the apostates and their cronies** until God judges between us and **them**.

In this context, the frequent use of third-person plural pronouns (they, them; average 1.848 times per text) suggests that AQIM is defining itself by comparison to an oppositional group. Furthermore, a frequent usage of third-person plural pronouns and of first-person plural pronouns (we, us, average 1.502 times per text) indicates that the speakers are addressing an audience that (they think) share the same worldview, while at the same time are attempting to bring people closer to their ideology. Finally, the common usage in the AQIM texts of exclusive words such as “except,” “but,” “exclude,” and “without” signal the intention to make a distinction, to separate “us” from “them.” See for instance the following extracts:

(5445) The mujahideen will bring dark days upon **them**, God willing, making **them** forget the elation of the false dreams and aspirations that **they** promoted in **their** media.

(3657) Here are the masses of Muslims chanting ‘**we are all Usama**’.

(5156) **We** seek the satisfaction of God in all **our** acts. God guides **us** to the righteous path.

(2839) **But** we now tell them that time has changed [...] we are more alert and aware of all the schemes with the pockets of hypocrisy and treason that are being plotted against us.

**Constructing an evil “other.”** A “self,” in order to make sense of its identity, requires an opposing “Other.” In the texts we analyzed the ‘other’ is (unsurprisingly) represented in highly negative terms, and there is a remarkably high rate of anger and hostility words. In the book *Faces of the Enemy* (1986), Keen shows how enemy images can be historically categorized within certain archetypes, such as enemy as animal, enemy as torturer of prisoners, enemy as barbarian.<sup>21</sup> These archetypes can be found also in AQIM’s portrayals. The enemy “other” is frequently represented *as animals* that are commonly associated with negativity or even repulsion, such as rats that have to be killed “to cleanse the earth,” pigs, monkeys, apes, snakes, and dogs.

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*The ‘other’ is represented in highly negative terms and there is a remarkably high rate of anger or hostility words*

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(928) By God, the nation has lost lions of Islam, trustworthy men, and swords that startle the brothers of the **monkeys** and the **pigs**.

(1080) To the Jews, Christians, and their apostate **dogs**, we say: Rejoice in what will befall you, and dig your graves (God willing), for the descendants of Tariq Bin-Ziyad are racing to martyrdom.

Rats are usually seen as particularly loathsome, and invariably associated with destruction, disease, the spread of plague, and repulsion. Similarly, the image of the snake suggests that the enemy is by nature poisonous, hostile, vicious, and often lethal, demanding its own destruction as the

result of its intrinsic dangerousness. Monkeys emphasize the inferiority of the enemy. Representing people as a monkey is a way to express disbelief toward them. Pigs are considered the dirtiest animals in Islam, and in large part of the Muslim world dogs are seen as impure and unclean.<sup>22</sup>

Associating the enemy with these kinds of animals comes along with other words, commonly used when speaking of wiping out diseases or infestations. In some speeches, the other is not only represented as inhuman, but it is even reduced to a parasite. When human, parasites are people who live at the expense of others. Parasites, indeed, cannot live independently—they need a host to live, grow and multiply, gaining strength at the host's expense. Usually they are small and reproduce very quickly. Crucially, they are characterized by their mass—their sheer number make them a threat.

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*The image of parasite brings with it the idea of creatures that are hard to kill and, once killed, are able to return*

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The image of parasite brings with it the idea of creatures that are hard to kill and, once killed, are able to return – stronger than before. The image of rats underlines the enemy's resilience and its ability to spread. Finally, the metaphor of the snake conveys the image of an enemy that is naturally poisonous and innately lethal. Representing the enemies as these kinds of animals de-humanizes them up, implying that the only conceivable solution is to eliminate them.

Other representations reinforce the de-humanization of the enemy. In several extracts the enemy is also represented as a desecrator of innocents, women, and children and as a torturer of prisoners. As we see in the extracts below, the enemy is represented as vicious and cruel, and its actions are brutal and destructive:

(929) The scene of the **innocent, completely unarmed, sick, women, and children** who were killed [...], the barbaric torture [...] are all hard evidences which clearly indicate that it is a profligate and unjust Crusade [...] under the slogan: 'Destroy Islam and annihilate its people'.

(945) The recent hostilities, arrests, and **torture** carried out by the forces of injustice and oppression, and their crusader masters, against the **pure Muslim young men** in our beloved Mauritania will not pass without punishment.

While the "other" is represented as impure and inherently bad, AQIM's supporters and affiliates are represented as innocent, defenseless, and pure. The question of purity/impurity is particularly important. Purity is connected with cleanliness, and is an essential aspect of Islam. The human analogue to impure animals like dogs and pigs is the *kafir*, the infidel, apostate, or unbeliever (as opposed to the true Muslim). A *kafir* can become *tahir* (pure) only if he/she converts to Islam. See, for instance, the following fragments:

(912) In addition, they have sworn to God that they would not be happy or satisfied and would not halt using their swords until they **cleanse** the Islamic Maghreb of the **impurity** of the **impure** apostates and their Crusader masters, who are rancorous men with their vile man-made laws.

(1648) Praise be to God, the Almighty and All-Powerful, Champion of the pious and Disgracer of the **impious**.

The enemy is also represented *as criminal and aggressor that is greedy*. See for instance:

(2760) [...] the **criminals** who have the blood of innocent Muslims on their hands.

(2585) The result was a déjà vu defeat that left dozens of killed and wounded among the ranks of the **money worshippers** who are **driven by monetary rewards**.

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*The 'other' is de-personalized, either not fully human or the very personification of evil*

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In the texts we analyzed, non-Muslims, unbelievers and apostates—all engaged in a war against Islam—are represented as vicious criminals, deprived of any sense of honor, killing women, innocents and even elderly and sick people without discrimination. They do this not because of beliefs, but to conquer lands, steal resources and have more money. They are *barbarian*, destroyers of a culture; they are rude and uncivilized:

(2196) the Americans tossed him into the sea much like what **evil pirates** and gangs do with their victims; like what the **primitive, most backward savages** do with their enemy.

The “other” is de-personalized, either not fully human or the very personification of evil. The enemies are represented as deniers of God, enemies of God, infidels, evils, evildoers, worshippers of evil. The United States of America, seen as the epitome of evil, is depicted as the “chief of non-belief,” the nursery of evil, and as the producer of all the bad things in the world.

(2196) His [Bin Ladin] sword still drawn against America, the **chief of non-belief**, the **nursery of evil**, the source of vice, the pinnacle of vileness, the epitome of injustice, and the emblem of savagery.

As this discussion makes clear, the enemy is represented in a highly negative ways up to the point of being de-humanized. Such representation of the “other” reflects a worldview that essentially consists of two pairs of binary oppositions: human/not-human, and we/they, where we equals human and they equals not-human. This rhetorical strategy is frequently used by warring groups to ensure mobilization against the enemy. What is remarkable here is that this strategy of negative “other” representation is not accompanied by a strategy of positive self-representation. On the contrary, in the AQIM texts, the organization’s members are often depicted in a highly negative way.

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*A rhetorical strategy that AQIM adopts in its quest for legitimization is a highly negative self-representation*

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**AQIM self-representation and the duty of jihad.** As mentioned above, the other rhetorical strategy that AQIM adopts in its quest for legitimization is a highly negative self-representation. They achieve this by stressing the brute force of its affiliates, by listing the number of people they have injured and killed, and by offering accurate descriptions of events in which murders, attacks and bombings (allegedly carried out by AQIM) have occurred. This is peculiar because usually in political rhetoric the “forces of goodness” fight the “forces of darkness” (see for instance President Bush’s rhetoric on terrorism). But in the AQIM texts “the lions of Al Qaeda” linguistically represent themselves in highly negative terms, by describing their own actions as brutal and destructive and themselves as forces of destruction and death.

(4782) We confirm to the sons of our ummah that the strikes of the mujahidin and their blows *will continue to kill the slaves of America and the agents of France.*

(4370) 8 *Jumada al-Thani* [29 April 2012]: **By God’s grace, they were able to kill five police officers** [...]; 11 *Jumada al-Awwal* 1433 [2 April 2012]: an explosive device planted by the mujahidin detonated against a military truck. As a result, **five soldiers were seriously wounded.**

In many other speeches, similar actions are praised, see for instance:

(3616) In this clash, the lions of monotheism **killed** more than 30 soldiers and wounded others.

(4782) [We] will continue to **kill** the slaves of America and the agents of France.

The struggle against non-Muslims, infidels, and apostates is framed as an act of revenge against ‘the Crusaders’ that for years have ‘inflamed’ the rage of Muslims. Violence is represented as the last option: negotiation was attempted but in vain.

(3657) **Your action will do nothing but to foment flames of war. This has increased the animosity** of the [Islamic] ummah, **incited its desire to take revenge on you, and stimulated it to fight and achieve victory over you.**

(5197) **For three years we have been willing to negotiate**, and our demands were clear and legitimate. Nevertheless, **these demands were sometimes rejected, snubbed, and ignored**; other times we were provoked by the French government.

The struggle (*jihad*) becomes as a duty, a call that all Muslims need to listen at – and God is not neutral in this struggle. On the contrary the battle is fought ‘with God’s support’.

(936) **Jihad was a duty** since Andalus fell to the hands of the Christians, and this ruling has not changed till this day. **Jihad has been a duty** since 1492 C. E. [...] **Jihad will remain a duty** until we restore every part that was Islamic to the land of Islam and the hands of Muslims.

(965)  **jihad in the cause of God is the only solution.**

(2196) **We will continue on his path**, hold onto the truth, fight the Christians and their followers, the Jews and their supporters, and the apostates and their cronies **until God judges between us and them. He is the fairest of judges.**

In the AQIM discourse violent actions are not only legitimized by an evil enemy but also framed as necessary and unavoidable and as guided and supported by God himself. In the texts analyzed, there is an abundance of religious references adopted to help ‘sanctify’ AQIM’s actions and the struggle is elevated to a cosmic battle between ‘right and ‘wrong’, between ‘us’ and ‘them’. This rhetorical tool implies “a dogmatic control of the truth which require[s] the speaker simply to exhort audience approval or action, not to deliberate upon which course of action to take”.<sup>23</sup> See for instance the following extracts:

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*‘The West’ is represented as a monolithic category that comprises European States, the U.S. and their ‘friends’ or ‘slaves’*

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(2839) The **ongoing war between truth and evil** is comprised of a group of battles and subsequent stops.

Furthermore, in the discourse ‘the West’ is represented as a monolithic category that comprises European States, the U.S. as well as their ‘friends’ or ‘slaves’. France and the U.S. are very often mentioned together to represent the worst ‘evil’ deserving annihilation. In the texts analyzed, the ‘West’ is depicted as infidel, unbeliever, racist, cruel, bloodthirsty, crusader and greedy.

(2760) We would like to assure you that the strikes and attacks of the mujahidin will continue to inflict massive calamities upon **the slaves of America and the proxies of France.**

(4782) We confirm to the sons of our ummah that the strikes of the mujahidin and their blows will continue to kill **the slaves of America and the agents of France.** [...] **The United States, France, and the infidel West** have not and will not accept any real change that does not serve their interests in Tunisia.

The analysis also reveals that the specifics of the two States as well as the differences in their foreign policy agendas are absolutely ignored. On the contrary, France and the U.S. are represented as having the same political agenda, the same foreign policy and a common goal, the destruction of Islam and the domination of the Muslim world.

In sum, the CDA analysis focused on the construction of ‘an evil other’ (the West and the apostates), AQIM’s negative self-representation and the representation of *jihad* as a duty for all pious Muslims. Results reveal that while the strategy of predication is a very common rhetorical strategy adopted to put the “other” in a negative light, in the AQIM discourse the construction of an evil other is particularly well designed. In the texts, a lot of effort is put into representing the enemy as intrinsically evil using

various metaphorical associations: enemy *as animal, as desecrator of innocents, women, and children* and *as torturer of prisoners, as impure, as criminal, aggressor and greedy, and as barbarian*.

The other rhetorical strategy adopted by AQIM—the negative self-representation—is of particular interest from a strategic communication point of view. This rhetorical strategy can possibly work in the short run to ensure support toward an organization that appears effective in carrying out its aims and even to attract new affiliates among contested populations in the Maghreb. But in the long run it could be detrimental to the organization as very few people would want to be led by killers.

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*AQIM tries to persuade itself that its actions are justifiable, appropriate, and necessary to pursue the organization's cause*

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it also seems that the purposes of AQIM's communiques listing its organizational successes are not only about boosting about the AQIM's actions to others, or to enlarge its recruitment pool. It is also about persuading themselves that their actions are justifiable, appropriate, and necessary to pursue the organization's cause. As such, it looks like AQIM applauds and glorifies itself not only to attract new people but also to motivate members to further activities.

Despite the violent, nihilistic and apparently irrational ideology espoused by AQIM, it seems that al-Qaeda continues to be a popular brand identity that is widely recognized and sought after by an increasing number of people in the Maghreb. AQIM's message of anti-Muslim oppression, a Western-led war on Islam and call to *jihād* for all Muslims appeals to those (especially young) people who seek revenge as a way of overcoming frustration, to those seeking identity through group membership, and those seeking adventure or escape of ordinary situations. AQIM's messaging thus comes to be seen as a heroic narrative with an idealized version of Islamic *jihād*.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our analysis, we make three recommendations for communication strategy against AQIM.

**Focus information efforts on the Maghreb.** Our analysis indicates that AQIM is not focused solely on Algeria and is not an “al-Qaeda lite.” Their strategic communication deals with issues and narratives related to the entire Maghreb region, and is specialized for that region. Efforts to counter their influence should be likewise regional and specialized. For example, information operations could emphasize the imported nature of suicide attacks—AQIM's signature attacks—which were unknown even during the Algerian “black decade.”<sup>24</sup> AQIM communication strategy can also be systematically challenged by stressing the fact that AQIM kills especially Algerian Muslims, most of them civilians.

**Avoid supporting the critique of neo-liberalism.** The AQIM narrative says that the West colludes with regional leaders to establish liberal economic policies, which set the stage for capitalist exploitation of the region's resources. Western public diplomacy efforts often seek to demonstrate a commitment to shared development. For example, a 2012 report from the European Commission<sup>25</sup> justifies economic policy toward the Maghreb by stating:

The benefits of closer integration in the Maghreb would be enjoyed not only by the citizens of the five countries concerned. They would also be shared with their neighbours including the European Union. For the EU the development of a zone of stability and prosperity based on democratic accountability and the rule of law in the Maghreb is a key objective of our bilateral relations and can only be enhanced through a regional approach (p. 6).

Such statements are well intentioned, and understandable from an internal, public affairs point of view. But they can be framed by extremists to de-emphasize the joint benefits of development, and play up notions that the West is conspiring with regional governments to gain economic advantage.

From a counter-narrative point of view, a better approach for the West would be to project desire to help Maghreb countries develop, without stating expectations of economic return or other self-benefit. Emphasizing the advantages of development to Maghrebi organizations and individuals, without stressing increased interaction with Western systems, would also avoid supporting the anti-neoliberalism narrative of AQIM.

**Emphasize the long-term implications of the AQIM's negative self-image.** As we noted above, an odd thing about AQIM rhetoric is their self-portrayal in negative terms. Rather than a force of good battling a force of evil, in the AQIM narrative there is one force of ruthless killers battling another force of ruthless killers. This may be a good strategy for self-motivation and battlefield effectiveness in the short run, but in the long run it raises questions about what life would be like under AQIM rule.

A useful analogy here would be the Afghan Taliban. They too were fierce fighters who succeeded in expelling a foreign infidel army. Once in power they instituted harsh social policies based on an extreme interpretation of Sharia. They instituted brutal punishments such as floggings, and beatings of men who refused to wear beards. Access to food, water, and jobs declined while the leaders enriched themselves through smuggling operations.



Another useful analogy, more regionally appropriate, is the Banu Hilal.<sup>26</sup> In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, they invaded the Maghreb, spreading destruction and disrupting society:

[T]he Banu Hilal, destroyed forests, settlements and irrigation works all over the Maghrib, and the Mongols did much the same later in Western Asia. Ibn Khaldun used archeological evidence (the ruins that covered the region) to show that the Maghrib had had a populous and flourishing civilization before the Banu Hilal raid, and he also noted that the lands ravaged by these invaders had become completely arid desert.<sup>27</sup>

Drawing analogies through narratives about other extremist groups who came to power, and the negative aspects of their rule, could help make AQIM's negative self-representation work against them.

## APPENDIX 1. SUMMARIES OF SELECTED MASTER NARRATIVES

The following contains very brief descriptions of extremist master narratives mentioned in this report for quick reference.

**The Crusades:** Muslim lands and holy sanctities, particularly Jerusalem (al-Quds), are occupied by invading Western Christian armies waging campaigns to subjugate, exploit, and defile them for the sake of their own hegemony.

**The Nakba:** The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 in sacred Palestine and the forced migration of Arab Palestinians out of the conflict zone, never to return, is regarded as a catastrophe, or nakba, for the Arab and Muslim world that must be rectified.

**The Pharaoh:** The arrogant tyrant of ancient Egypt, the Pharaoh (presumably Ramsis II) rejects the Word of God delivered by his prophet (Moses). The tyrant is punished for his infidelity and polytheism, and his body is preserved as a divine warning for future nations to submit to God's Will or face the consequences.

**72 Virgins:** A blissful paradise with lush gardens, rivers, and dark-eyed maidens (hur al-ayn or houris) awaits those who sacrifice their lives on the righteous path of God, either as battlefield martyrs or as steadfast and faithful victims of oppression and cruelty.

**Tariq ibn Ziyad:** In 711, Tariq ibn Ziyad was sent across the strait separating Morocco from Spain on behalf of the Umayyad Caliphate. He successfully led the campaign against King Roderick (defeating him at the Battle of Guadalete) and the Catholic Visigoths who ruled there and conquered the whole of the Iberian Peninsula (modern day Spain and Portugal) for Islam.

**Yusuf bin Tashfin:** Yusuf was a ruler of the devout Almoravid dynasty who made the city of Marrakesh in Morocco his capital. As the Catholic Reconquista was defeating Muslim kingdoms in Spain, Yusuf led an army across into al-Andalus and defeated the Castilian King Alfonso VI at the Battle of al-Zallaqa (Sgrajas) in 1086. This halted the advance of the Reconquista for a time, but the death of Yusuf's heir in Morocco forced him to return and attend to political matters.

**Uqbah bin Nafi:** This narrative tells the story of an Arab general who was serving the Umayyad Dynasty and began the Islamist conquest of the Maghreb, managing to convert several thousands of people. He is also sometimes referred to as the conqueror of Africa.

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