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The Language of Violent Resistance: A Discourse Analysis of Themes and Narrations in Terrorist-Insurgent Communications.

How Modern Counterterrorism Operations are Interpreted by Violent Resistance Groups in the Middle East.

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Growing up in rural conservative Indiana, for as long as I can remember I have been surrounded by loud voices and stubborn opinions, of which I've held my own at certain points in my life.

I've also, at certain points, had transformational realizations. One came in 2020, after applying to over forty universities in a search of what I believed I would dedicate my life to. None of these options would seem to pan out, for various reasons; Ultimately, I realized I was not going to grow in the ways I wanted to by staying in the same place I have always been.

So I bought a one way ticket to a university 3,800 miles away from my home, in a tiny Welsh village I had not heard of just months prior: Aberystwyth.

What was admittedly terrifying for eighteen year old me, was surely even more so for my dear parents. Yet, amidst all their worries, they drove me to Chicago and saw me off on my own adventure. Every single day before, and every day since, they have always supported me in all my dreams. This work would not have been written without their support and dedication.

I must also thank my grandparents, through all their wisdom they have always believed in me.
Lexy and Gabby, who have shown me just how immensely valuable sisterhood is.
Skyylar, who taught me from a young age how to be better for someone other than myself.
My friends at EMA; Zuzanna, Lakin, Alberto, and others, who affirmed my persisting belief that to be loved is to be known, and I've never felt more known than I have by them and EMA.

Lastly, all the versions of myself, the ones I have grown from and in particular the woman I hope I'm growing into, committed to human rights for all and dedicated to being a beacon for justice.

Abstract

This thesis critically examines how modern counterterrorism operations in the Middle East are interpreted by terrorist and insurgent groups and analyzes the rhetoric these groups use to justify and legitimize violent resistance. Drawing on the operations of the US in Afghanistan and Israel in Palestine, this thesis will remain geographically confined to the Middle East, focusing from 2001 to the present day. By thematically coding and analyzing 627 public statements from Hamas, Fatah, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban, this study reveals consistent rhetorical themes in terrorist and insurgent communications, and the differing prominence among the groups.

The findings highlight consistent themes such as (an opposition to) Foreign Occupation, Unmet/Unheard Grievances, Victimhood/Trauma, Collective Identity, Retaliation/Revenge, and a Need for Significance, among other less frequent themes. More importantly, it shows how such themes vary by group, urging for international actors (such as the US, Israel, and the international community such as the UN) to practice disaggregation and adapt counterterrorism/counterinsurgency frameworks that reflect such differences.

By analyzing these operations and the subsequent terrorist and insurgent communications that followed, this study urges for a reevaluation of counterterrorism strategy. It advocates for approaching these groups with a willingness to engage and communicate, inclusion to the international political community, and ultimately addressing the core grievances that drive violent resistance as reflected in their language. This work contributes to a growing body of academia that sees violent resistance not solely a security problem, but as a multifaceted issue that requires a multi-layered approach rich in psychological, strategic, and socio-political theories.

"The violent subjugation of the Palestinians, Iraqis, and Afghans will only ensure that those who oppose us will increasingly speak to us in the language we speak to them—violence."

- *Chris Hedges*

Introduction

At the time of writing it has been twenty-three years, eight months and nineteen days since the September 11th terrorist attacks. Nearly a quarter of a century since global counterterrorism policy has undergone a profound and irreversible transformation, yet terrorism has not gone away. In many places it has seemingly evolved, despite the decades long military operations intended to eradicate it. So what does it suggest, that we have been fighting a War on Terror for 23 years, and still terror persists? Are there alternative approaches that could be utilized to reduce violent resistance? To answer this question, we must not tire ourselves of the millions of answers we, the West, have already conspired, but instead ask the terrorists themselves.

"Your leaders responded that they do not negotiate with terrorists and that they are winning in their war on terrorism. I tell them, O' liars and greedy war merchants, who is pulling out of Iraq and Afghanistan, you or us?"[1]

Ayman Al-Zawahiri, 2006

(Al-Qaeda Leader)

Al-Zawahiri's story isn't inherently tragic, especially compared to later testimonies that will be analyzed. Instead, Al-Zawahiri came from a wealthy, prosperous family, was well educated, an honorable surgeon, and otherwise set for a good life.[2] He was quite political from a young age and felt deeply connected to the works of Sayyid Qutb, a key Islamic thinker from the Muslim Brotherhood.[3] He was one of many arrested for the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and allegedly severely tortured in prison.[4] The Sadat regime was heavily backed by the

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[1] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda, 2006 - *"Al-Zawahiri Releases Videotape." CNN*, 30 Jan. 2006, https://web.archive.org/web/20060528221145/http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/asiapcf/01/30/zawahiri.transcript/

[2] Scheschkewitz, Daniel (June 16, 2011), "Ayman al-Zawahiri – from medical doctor to al Qaeda chief", *DW*, archived from the original.

[3] Allen, Lisa M. "The Philosophy of Sayyid Qutb Will Persist as Al Qaeda's Intellectual Heritage." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2011, pp. 7–9. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26350986.

[4] Bowcott, Owen (January 24, 2003). "Torture trail to September 11: A two-part investigation into state brutality opens with a look at how the violent interrogation of Islamist extremists hardened their views, helped to create al-Qaida and now, more than ever, is fueling fundamentalist hatred". *The Guardian*. London. Archived from the original.

US, and was the main factor in Al-Zawahiri's radicalization, believing Egypt had been slipping from its Islamic identity.[5] He would later go on to collude with Osama Bin Laden, issuing a joint fatwa[6] titled, "World Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders," and together these two later became the leading architects of Al-Qaeda narratives.[7] All of this to say radicalization rarely occurs in a vacuum, and even the most well-off young individuals can fall into extremism. Al-Zawahiri's story is just one of many; what is particularly interesting, is how he would go on to legitimize his trajectory into violence and create narratives that moralize Al-Qaeda's violence. As one of Al-Qaeda's key leaders, his narratives spread far and wide, becoming key in the discourse that the group utilizes. This thesis analyzes such stories and subsequent narratives, in particular how terrorist and insurgent groups interpret, justify, and legitimize their violent responses to state actions, and why understanding this rhetoric matters if we are ever to end these cycles of violence that have spanned generations now.

The persistence of terrorism in the Middle East despite this intense shift after 2001 suggests that something within our current framework is deeply flawed. In the aftermath of 9/11, global security policy, spearheaded by the United States, shifted rapidly and aggressively towards the eradication of terrorism (which in itself presents issues, can a concept, one which hasn't universally been defined, really be eradicated?). Preemptive attacks, fear based deterrence, political interference, and occupation were seen as necessary evils, to prevent unnecessary evil. While these strategies often yielded short term tactical success, their long term consequences are less analyzed with the same enthusiasm.

The Middle East specifically has borne the brunt of these operations, particularly in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Palestine. Civilians have been caught in the crossfire, metaphorically and literally, as state violence has leveled cities, displaced communities, and erased entire

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[5] Ibrahim, Youssef M. "U.S. Stake in Egypt Rests on One Man, Anwar el-Sadat." *The New York Times*, 30 Mar. 1980, www.nytimes.com/1980/03/30/archives/us-stake-in-egypt-rests-on-one-man-anwar-elsadat.html.

[6] An Islamic legal ruling in Sharia law.

[7] Holbrook, Donald. "Using the Qur'an to Justify Terrorist Violence: Analysing Selective Application of the Qur'an in English-Language Militant Islamist Discourse." *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2010, pp. 15–28. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26298457. Accessed 27 June 2025.

bloodlines.[8] While actively researching Gaza online, a common comment from the general public resurfaces in seemingly every post, particularly in regards to children who have lost their entire families, rephrasing the sentiment, it goes like this, *"if I was in their position, who do you think I would turn to?"* These commenters were alluding to the militant groups in these countries, and specifically in Gaza, they meant Hamas. This question, while informal, represents some level of public perception (or intuition), that was the inspiration for this research. Many of the people who asked such questions did so in a rhetorical manner, but nobody seemed to be asking these violent actors themselves. However, it seems as if these actors believe in a similar sentiment. Mohammed Dahlan, an ex Fatah leader, stated in a 2023 interview, "If Israel, a stable country, is considering revenge, what do you expect from children now in Al-Shifa Hospital when they grow up?"[9] These statements, by both the public and these actors, reflect a deeper belief: that the way these operations are interpreted and/or experienced by those who are affected may inadvertently lead to violent resistance. Such sentiment was the foundation to my research questions:

1. **Primary**:

   How are modern counterterrorism operations in the Middle East, specifically the US in Afghanistan and Israel in Gaza, interpreted and rhetorically framed by terrorist and insurgent groups to legitimize violent resistance? (discourse analysis)
2. **Secondary**:
   - What common patterns emerge in terrorist and insurgent narratives responding to these operations? (thematic analysis)
   - Based on the group analyses of terrorist and insurgent communications, what could be some alternative counterterrorism/counterinsurgency approaches to each of these groups? (application of data)

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[8] "Investigation Identifies Entire Palestinian Families Killed by Israeli Strikes in Gaza." *PBS NewsHour*, 1 Sept. 2023, www.pbs.org/newshour/world/investigation-identifies-entire-palestinian-families-killed-by-israeli-strikes-in-gaza.

[9] "Ex-Fatah Leader Says US Complicit in 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Palestinians in Gaza." *Arab News*, 19 Nov. 2023, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2411556/amp.

Intuitively it may seem obvious, of course *some* of these individuals may turn to extremist groups for protection, opportunity, or vengeance. However, when looking more into academic work to support or refute this statement, one will quickly realize there is very little data on how true these sentiments are. Of course, these children could very well grow up to become doctors or lawyers as much as fighters, or flee the land that they've endured such trauma in. There is no evidence-based, scholarly consensus on whether such trauma leads to militancy or if these individuals would rather pursue nonviolent means of resistance. Therefore, if we cannot come up with a consensus on if these operations lead to further radicalization, we must at least make an attempt at understanding how they are interpreted and narrated by those who do decide to join violent resistance groups. This gap in terrorism/insurgency studies, inspired by public intuition (such as the sentiment by Dahlan referenced above) and based in academic understanding, is what I want my research to attempt to fill, at least in some small part.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review: Constructing the Field: What Is Terrorism and Who Gets to Define It?

To begin any meaningful discussion into terrorism and counterterrorism operations, it is imperative to start with the basics. What is terrorism and who defines it? Unsurprisingly, there is not a universally accepted definition of terrorism, however there are still dominant narratives that flood the international political community. The term carries significant power and political weight, but lacks universality and consistency. This ambiguity is not accidental. As Lisa Stampnitzky (2013) argues in *Disciplining Terror,* terrorism has not simply been studied through a lens of objectivity, but has been actively constructed through the process of knowledge production.[10] Those that have interest in defining terrorism, such as the US or Israel, are the largest drivers for their knowledge production[11]. However, one actor seems to be missing from this conversation: the terrorists themselves. Their voices, motivations, and framing is rarely centered, despite being the actor in which the entire field is constructed upon. We cannot have

[10] Stampnitzky, Lisa. *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism."* Cambridge University Press, 2013.
[11] Phillips, Brian J. "Who Are the Terrorism Researchers? A Study of Scholars in an Evolving Field, 1970–2019." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 1, 2025, pp. 1–28. Taylor & Francis, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2025.2490631.

this discussion of what terrorism is without looking at how terrorist groups see themselves and their opposition. Stampnitzky further argues that if counterterrorism is a response to terrorism, then how we define terrorism determines which responses are considered fair and legitimate.[12] This insight allows us to work with the notion that state violence is often exempt from critical scrutiny in counterterrorism studies: not because it isn't present, but because it isn't primary. Counterterrorism operations, even ones with large civilian casualties, are not only seen as not stretching the limitations of human rights, but as a necessity. For more information on Stampnitsky's contributions, see Appendix A.1, and for an alternative, more traditional (dated) definition on terrorism, see Martha Crenshaw's contributions (1981) in Appendix A.2.

Further cementing this idea is Richard Jackson, in *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-terrorism* (2005), where he criticizes the post 9/11 "War on Terror" narrative as one that has foreclosed alternative understandings of political violence.[13] After September 11th, terrorism was increasingly treated as an evil that needed to be eradicated.There was immense global pressure to join this *crusade* spearheaded by the United States.[14] So much so that the Bush Doctrine, created by US President George Bush, argued "you're either with us or against us," to other sovereign states.[15] Thus began the global War on Terror. This ideological shift not only resulted in significant policy change - both in US foreign policy and the international framework on counterterrorism - but it also challenged political discourse by labeling terrorism as something irrational that cannot be reasoned with. A popular phrase arose out of the Afghanistan operations, "we do not negotiate with terrorists."[16] Engagement with terrorists was never an option, and at the same time, we could not define who the terrorists were, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda were one and the same threat.

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[12] Stampnitzky, Lisa. *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism."* Cambridge University Press, 2013.
[13] Jackson, Richard. "Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-terrorism." *Manchester University Press*, 2005.
[14] The term "crusade" is intentionally used here as language of the West as "crusaders" will appear prominent in terrorist discourse, particularly in Al-Qaeda's communications.
[15] "The Bush Doctrine." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 Oct. 2002, https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2002/10/the-bush-doctrine?lang=en.
[16] Barsuhn, A. (2022). "We Don't Negotiate with Terrorists"—Afghanistan, Bargaining, and American Civil–Military Relations. *Armed Forces & Society*, *49*(4), 953-964. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X221077299

By placing Stampnitzky and Jackson in this conversation, we begin to see a shift in the development of terrorism discourse and its entanglement with state power. While the US attempted, and in many cases achieved, in recruiting the international community to join them in their global War on Terror, it was not without hurdles. The first major one, as described above, was creating a universal definition of terrorism. The second hurdle was deciding if, and how, the international community should engage with these actions. Alex Schmid writes in *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin? (2014)* the importance of engaging with these groups and their narratives. He suggests that in order to decide which groups are worth engaging with politically and diplomatically, the question should not be whether or not they are violent, but if they are extreme or not.[17] Using this suggestion, it is important to look into what radicalizes individuals, which will be the basis of the next subchapter. For more of Schmid's contributions, particularly on the definitional problems of terrorism, see Appendix A.3.

Using these authors, this chapter begins by establishing the political language for which counterterrorism is founded today. Having laid this foundation, the next section expands on how individual and collective grievances fuel radicalization to extremism, and then Schmid's suggestion of disaggregation (between extremist or not) by introducing another author who advocates for the same in chapter 1.2. Using academic literature, it will explore not only why people become radicalized into joining terrorist and insurgent organizations, but how trauma, injustice, and state violence can become rhetorically mobilized within such narratives to recruit new members and justify violent resistance.

[17] Schmid, Alex P. *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29434. Accessed 7 July 2025.

1.1 Political-Psychological Theories of Radicalization and Grievance: What Drives Individuals to Violence?

The discourse surrounding terrorism is primarily shaped by a struggle over narration. On the dominant side, state narratives rule (such as the US's post 2001) and generally dictate how terrorism and counterterrorism is approached in foreign policy, both by the state and the international community (as seen in how modern definitions typically omit or tolerate state violence). However, the voice of these violent resistors is still missing from the conversation. Therefore, if counterterrorism is to be deemed a necessity, the way terrorist and insurgent communications has been understood and/or utilized is severely flawed, and modern counterterrorism/counterinsurgency strategy warrants change reflecting these insights. Furthermore, neither side should be exempt from critical scrutiny, both due to their vast impact on civilians, but also because they fuel eachother, and addressing these problems carelessly risks fueling cycles of violence that is harmful and inefficient for all involved. It is important to recognize, however, that given the very nature of these two actors, different responsibilities are involved. Terrorist organizations, by design, operate outside the bounds of international norms. Their strategies often rely on asymmetric warfare - one of which being targeting civilians and using shock and fear as an extreme means to achieve their political aims.[18] Their actions, while condemnable, are not restrained by the framework of international law or human rights. States, on the other hand, are signatories to numerous international treaties and human rights affirmations that hold them to a higher standard. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 37/43, adopted in December of 1982, reaffirms the rights of peoples to self determination, in resistance to "colonial, foreign, and alien domination," and claims it is a "a fundamental condition for the effective guarantee and observance of human rights and for the preservation and promotion of such rights."[19] Furthermore it denounces foreign occupation, and military

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[18] Sloan, Stephen. "Terrorism and Asymmetry." *Challenging the United States Symmetrically and Asymmetrically: Can America Be Defeated?*, edited by Lloyd J. Matthews, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1998, pp. 139–150. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep11957.12.

[19] United Nations General Assembly. *Resolution 37/43: Importance of the universal realization of the right of peoples to self-determination and of the speedy granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples for the effective guarantee and observance of human rights.* 3 Dec. 1982, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/37/43.

interference and aggression on groups of peoples seeking self determination.[20] Unlike legally binding Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions are not signed or ratified in the same sense, they are voted on among all the eligible members of the UN, and if approved, contribute to the development of customary international law.[21] This is significant because it argues that UN member states, such as the US and Israel, carry an increased responsibility to uphold these principles if they are to legitimately claim participation in the international community. *More importantly to this point*, denying resistant groups, even violent ones, access to these same institutions, while simultaneously giving privileges to states that may violate such core principles, reflects a double standard and hypocrisy. This is seen in the UN treatment of Palestine as only a non-member observer state with no vote, and the continued recognition of the previous Afghan government as the representative of the country despite now being controlled by the Taliban.[22][23] This sentiment of hypocrisy and political exclusion, as will be seen in the discourse analysis, is heavily referred to in insurgent and terrorist discourse as a major grievance that drives their extreme actions.

Therefore, when states engage in violence that violates or undermines these commitments, while simultaneously not giving these groups the same opportunity to rise to these responsibilities and encourage direct engagement, they risk undermining the very legitimacy they claim to reign over these violent groups and possibly contribute to grievances that fuel the same cycles of violence in which they seek to end.

To understand how these cycles persist, it is important to move from a macro-level critique of state violence to the micro-level experiences that shape individual pathways to extremism. Specifically, we need to go beyond the words of the terrorists, and look into their mind. To do this, I will look at three political-psychological theories that address why individuals radicalize,

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Schwebel, Stephen M. "The Effect of Resolutions of the U.N. General Assembly on Customary International Law." *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting (American Society of International Law)*, vol. 73, 1979, pp. 301–09. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25658015. Accessed 2 July 2025.
[22] United Nations. "Palestine's Status at the UN Explained." *UN News*, 18 Apr. 2024, news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1148351.
[23] Zaman, Sarah. "UN Talks in Doha, but End Recognition Remains a Distant Dream for Taliban." *Voice of America*, 1 July 2024, www.voanews.com/a/un-talks-in-doha-end-recognition-remains-distant-dream-for-taliban-/7681320.html.

these theories will be the basis for some of the themes to be coded in their communications. Arie Kruglanski's *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks* (2019) becomes useful. Kruglanski offers a psychological account of how and why individuals embrace radicalized ideologies and ultimately join terrorist networks.[24] Her work helps highlight how state violence leads to increasing grievances and perceived injustice which can become integrated into the counter-narratives utilized by terrorist groups to increase recruitment and cycles of violence. For the data collection of this research, Kruglanski's "Need" component will be of significance. The "Need" refers to an individual's need for personal significance, which can be amplified after experiences of humiliation, trauma, or perceived injustice, experiences that are often present in war zones or where counterterrorism operations are active. Specifically this need for significance can be activated where there are large civilian casualties, vast damage to infrastructure or culture, or perceived usage of disproportionate force.[25] As such, modern counterterrorism operations may inadvertently fuel this Need for Significance, justifying acts of violent resistance in the narrations of violent actors.

However, Kruglanski is not the only academic to notice this psychological factor of radicalization to extremism. Jessica Stern (2003) incorporated this idea almost a decade prior in *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill.* In her book, Stern uses interviews with self-identified terrorists to argue that many are not driven through ideology alone, but by deeply rooted trauma and a search for meaning. She writes, "Terrorists are often people who feel humiliated and disenfranchised, and who experience a profound need to restore a sense of honor and significance, both personally and for the group with which they identify."[26] This emphasis on humiliation and loss predates but emphasizes what Kruglanski argued with her need for significance, while expanding it to include the collective aspect of trauma, where personal pain can make an individual feel even closer to radicalized communities and sympathetic authority leaders. This helps explain feelings of collective identity that arise from these operations.

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[24] Kruglanski, Arie W., et al. *The Three Pillars of Radicalization: Needs, Narratives, and Networks*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Stern, Jessica. *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. Ecco, 2004.

Stern's work, paired with Kruglanski, suggests that terrorism may be as much about repairing a sense of self as it is seeking justice. When individuals view their civic engagement as futile, or worse, mocked and humiliated, violence can be interpreted as the only viable path to reclaim agency and enforce change. This individual narrative (that they must restore personal agency) built on trauma, individual or collective, becomes crucial in understanding how individuals radicalize, and how terrorist organizations form. It also begins to reveal the limitations of modern counterterrorism operations that overlook these psychological and emotional drivers. For another theory of radicalization that specifically includes the external role of state violence, see Andrew Silke's contributions in Appendix A.4.

Altogether, Kruglanski, Stern, and Silke all argue in their own significant ways, that radicalization is not born out of a vacuum. It is shaped by many factors, such as personal loss or trauma, collective narratives of injustice, and violent state actions that inflame rather than resolve underlying grievances. Their work is indirectly reflected in terrorist and insurgent communications when they refer to humiliation, a need for significance, and unheard grievances.

1.2 Blowback and Unintended Consequences of Modern Counterterrorism: Why Disaggregation and Communication is Important.

While the previous authors are useful in understanding how radicalization occurs on an individual level, we must look at it from a macro lens as well. While this micro lens of radicalization is important in discussing how radicalization to terrorism occurs, it is incomplete without looking at the broader response of counterterrorism/counterinsurgency. One unintended consequence of modern counterinsurgency operations is what David Kilcullen refers to as "The Accidental Guerrilla," in his book *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One (2009)*. Kilcullen, a former military advisor for Iraq, is widely considered a highly esteemed modern counterinsurgency expert. In practice the line between insurgency and terrorism is frequently blurred, if not entirely disregarded. The Fatah at different points of its lifetime has been considered both insurgent and terrorist, highlighting the fluidity of these designations. For the purposes of this essay, drawing a rigid line between the two is unnecessary

as insurgent groups will frequently use acts of terrorism as a means of strategy. However, in his book, Kilcullen argues it is of utmost importance to disaggregate from fighters within resistance groups, expanding on Schmid's suggestions above.

Specifically, Kilcullen identifies three types of resistance fighters[27]:

1. The hardcore ideologues: these individuals are those who truly believe in the causes they are fighting for. They are the least likely to be deradicalized and/or cooperate, and those who should be targeted militarily.
2. Opportunistic fighters: these individuals joined the cause with ulterior motives, usually to gain financial benefits, but also could be for protection or a sense of community, these fighters can be negotiated with and will work towards a solution beneficial to them/their cause.
3. Radicalized individuals: these are your "Accidental Guerrillas," they joined because of the psychological factors we discussed above that had pushed them to violence. These individuals care less about negotiation since their motivations are internal, however they still have the ability to be deradicalized.

These "Accidental Guerrillas" are not individuals with strict jihadist beliefs, for example, nor are they individuals pushed to violence because of external factors like livelihood or security. Instead, these fighters join because of internal responses to an external force. For example, Western intervention in their country; whether seen as a friend or foe, triggers a nationalistic response.[28] In this context, violence is not merely ideological or political, but it is reactive. This reaction is seen in their communications. As argued by Anas Haqqani, a current Taliban leader, in a 2022 interview, "Yes, we were at war, and I belonged to one side. Both sides attacked each other. There were actions and reactions."[29] Haqqani is a good example of an accidental guerrilla,

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[27] Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Koelbl, Susanne. "DER SPIEGEL Interview with Taliban Leader Anas Haqqani: 'You Ask Questions Like an Investigator.'" *SPIEGEL International*, 8 July 2022, www.spiegel.de/international/world/der-spiegel-interview-with-taliban-leader-anas-haqqani-you-ask-questions-like-an-investigator-a-da3d8658-fcce-4865-a4f2-91eb3e1aff93.

he was 'radicalized' not because of existing beliefs or ideology, but likely through multiple external events that led him to believing violent resistance was the best pathway forward. Though he took multiple academic courses in various fields, his life was interrupted at twenty years old when he was detained by the US in 2014 after legally returning from Doha where he met with Guantanamo Bay inmates at a Taliban political office.[30] He was detained for being a member and the brother and son of the founders of the Haqqani Network, a violent group who had attacked the US-backed Afghan government.[31] However, Haqqani in particular worked in the Taliban's negotiation team, and the Taliban urged for his release so that he could do his negotiation work with the US, stating, "Anas Haqqani is a student, he did not commit any crimes to be imprisoned, therefore he should be released to play his part in the new negotiating team."[32] Since his release, he has seemingly abandoned his previous academic work and now dedicated his entire life to the Taliban cause. His trajectory highlights how individuals may shift from mutual involvement (through family ties, community affiliation, etc.) to full commitment to violent causes.

This further exemplifies the importance of disaggregation. Kilcullen argues the hardcore ideologues are typically the only group that cannot be reasoned with, therefore, we should make attempts to understand and communicate with the other actors, such as opportunistic fighters and the accidental guerrillas. Haqqani was not a hardcore ideologue when he was detained, and his long-term arrest likely only pushed him more into the group the US set out to dismantle. For more of Kilcullen's sole contributions, see Appendix A.5.

To analyze the Afghanistan operation more specifically, Kilcullen partnered with developmental expert Greg Mills in writing *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* (2021), in which they argue that "what happened in Afghanistan was not a defeat, it was something between a betrayal and moral collapse."[33] They identified an important event which they called the

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[30] "Afghan Forces Arrest Haqqani Militant Network Leaders." *BBC News*, 16 Oct. 2014, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-29640243.
[31] Ibid.
[32] The Frontier Post. "Taliban Include Jailed Anas Haqqani in Negotiating Team." *The Frontier Post*, 2019, thefrontierpost.com/taliban-include-jailed-anas-haqqani-in-negotiating-team/.
[33] Kilcullen, David, and Mills, Greg. *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan.* Hurst Publishers, 2021.

"original sin," which criticized the Bush Administration for their refusal to negotiate and speak with the Taliban after its initial defeat in 2001. In this error, the US failed to understand the Taliban's motivations and thus severely underestimated them. As was the same issue with defining terrorism, the voices of terrorists are missing. This, again, represents how strongly the sentiment of not negotiating with terrorists was after 2001. And more importantly, highlights how the US did not disaggregate between actors in Afghanistan, treating the Taliban the same as more extreme groups, like Al-Qaeda. Mark Perry, in *Talking to Terrorists* (2010) urges that understanding extremist groups requires engaging with them directly. Engaging with them, not through the lens of Western policymakers or dominant media narratives, but by listening to their own words.[34] Omitting this step risks completely misunderstanding and undermining the motivations of violent fighters, as well as their appeal to vulnerable individuals who could become radicalized. This approach aligns with my thesis' approach of utilizing interviews, press releases, and public statements from the terrorists themselves. By analyzing the voices typically disregarded in political and policy discourse, we can better assess how state violence is perceived, internalized, and utilized, and why it may fuel the very cycles of violence it aims to end. This emphasis on primary source engagement not only fills a gap in existing research, but will be only one of a two part methodology utilized, which will now be outlined.

[34] Perry, Mark. *Talking to Terrorists: Why America Must Engage with Its Enemies*. Basic Books, 2010.

Chapter 2 - Methodology.

As regarded in existing literature and studies, notably ones around the US counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan post 9/11, as well as Israeli counterterrorism operation in Gaza, modern counterterrorism operations may not only fail to prevent terrorism but may also actively contribute to its legitimization and justification in the eyes of such violent actors by fueling radicalization and cycles of violences, especially through civilian casualties.[35][36][37] This foundation has already been researched through the literature review with various authors and academics above. What is more important, and will be central to my research, will be to collect data and analyze how these operations are interpreted and rhetorically utilized by the terrorists themselves. This will be done through a dual methodology:

Firstly, in order to situate these narratives within their broader context, a brief background of these operations (Afghanistan and Palestine) will be conducted. This is not meant to exhaustively review each conflict, but rather how specific counterterrorism strategies, particularly ones utilized in these case studies, can inadvertently create the conditions for violent resistance to proliferate and justify itself. Above, authors like Kilcullen (2010), Mills (2021), and Silke (2003) have all provided critical insight into how over militarized operations can lead to further radicalization of the population. They provide a discipline of strategic studies to a topic that is simultaneously deeply psychological, such as supported with the work of Kruglanski (2019) and Stern (2003). Therefore, these case studies must be described first to determine the significance of these academic theories that will guide the following chapters and primary data research of this paper.

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[35] Condra, Luke J., Joseph H. Felter, Radha K. Iyengar, and Jacob N. Shapiro. *The Effect of Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq*. National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 16152, July 2010. https://www.nber.org/papers/w16152

[36] Porges, Marisa L. "Radicalization Processes in Afghanistan." *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 5, no. 1, Jan. 2012, https://ctc.westpoint.edu/radicalization-processes-in-afghanistan/

[37] Yayboke, Erol, and Christopher Reid. "Counterterrorism from the Sky? How to Think Over the Horizon about Drones." *CSIS Briefs*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/counterterrorism-sky-how-think-over-horizon-about-drones

The secondary methodology, and majority of this thesis, will focus on a discourse analysis of terrorist communications, such as interviews, press releases, and public statements, to demonstrate how these counterterrorism operations have been perceived and referenced as core motivators or justification for violence, in the words of the violent resistors themselves. To conduct this research, a thematic coding approach will be applied to these sources. Codes will be developed both deductively, based on existing the political-psychological theories introduced above (references to trauma, humiliation, retaliation, need for significance), and inductively, based on recurring language and themes found within the texts themselves. Below is an example, however the codes will be further analyzed in the introduction to the discourse analysis chapter.

Theme	Definition	Example
1.Victimhood/Trauma (Stern, 2004) (Silke, 2003)	Mentions of civilian deaths, homes or livelihoods destroyed, personal loss (family or friends affected), imprisonment, trauma.	"He is in this house, they don't care about his kids. They will just bombard it. They will kill all of them and they did it. They kill wife of Dr. Ayman Zawahiri and his two daughters and his son in one bombardment…They arrested my kids intentionally. They are kids. They been arrested for four months they had been abused."[38]
2. Foreign Occupation/ Anti-West sentiment (Kilcullen, 2009) (Kilcullen, Mills, 2021)	Mentions of Western intervention, invasion, sovereignty violations.	"If the Americans agree to our conditions — namely, to leave Muslim lands, to stop supporting the oppressive Jewish occupiers in Palestine, to stop supporting the apostate governments that have usurped power in the Muslim world, and to stop attacking Muslims — if they do all of that, and release the prisoners from their jails...then the fighting between us and them will stop."[39]
3. Retaliation or Revenge (Perry, 2010)	Language that frames violence as retribution, inevitable, casual, self defense.	"Is defending oneself and punishing the aggressor in kind, objectionable terrorism? If it is such, then it is unavoidable for us…Your security is in your own hands. And every state that doesn't play with our security has automatically guaranteed its own security."[40]

[38] Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, Al-Qaeda, 2007 - "Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN 10024: Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, 10 March 2007." *U.S. Department of Defense*, 10 Mar. 2007, https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/78034-isn-10024-khalid-shaikh-mohammed-combatant/394f687ce3c5e017/full.pdf.

[39] Mustafa Abul-Yazeed, Al-Qaeda, 2009 - "Exclusive Interview with al-Qaeda Third in Command." *YouTube*, uploaded by Al Jazeera English, 22 June 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZ8SNsQF9KU.

[40] Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, 2004 - *"Full Transcript of Bin Ladin's Speech." Al Jazeera*, 1 Nov. 2004, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/11/1/full-transcript-of-bin-ladins-speech.

4. Humiliation (Stern, 2004) (Silke, 2003)	Mentions of loss of dignity or honor.	"They stripped me naked, out in the open, where everybody could see…and you came and destroyed our nation. But at least bin Laden was a Muslim and did not humiliate us like this."[41]
5. Need for Significance (Kruglanski, 2019)	Language that signals a need for remembrance, legacy, martyrdom. Given the religious component, this will also include a need to appease Allah.	"Since we all feel that we are targeted, we follow an Arabic saying, 'Don't die before showing you're a strong opponent.'"[42] "You just die once, and it can be from cancer, in a car accident, or by assassination. Given these choices, I prefer assassination."[43] "Oh Muslims everywhere, I call on you to fight and become martyrs in the war against the Zionists and the crusaders."[44]
6. Collective Identity (Obaidi, Anjum, et al., 2020 - contribution described more in the discourse analysis section).	Use of us vs. them rhetoric, nationalism, religious identity (fight between Muslims versus others; Jihad).	"Bush, do you know where I am? I am among the Muslim masses enjoying their care with God's blessings and sharing with them their holy war against you until we defeat you, God willing…it is a global Crusader war against Muslims, and there is no dividing line between the local and the global battle."[45]
7. Unheard/Unmet Grievances (Perry, 2010)	Mentions of uncooperation, political exclusion, feeling ignored or misunderstood.	"Israel would not have continued its massacres even against those simply searching for food to survive as seen recently in Rafah without continuous military and political support, most recently the US veto at the UN Security Council against a resolution demanding an end to the blockade and the urgent entry of aid into Gaza,"[46]

[41] Mohammed Naim Farouq, Taliban, 2008 - Lasseter, Tom. "Guantánamo Inmate Database: Mohammed Naim Farouq." *McClatchy News Service*, 15 June 2008. *Guantánamo Testimonial Project*, Human Rights Center, UC Davis, https://humanrights.ucdavis.edu/projects/the-guantanamo-testimonials-project/testimonies/prisoner-testimonies/guantanamo-inmate-database-mohammed-naim-farouq.

[42] Zakaria Zubeidi, Fatah, 2006 - Toomey, Christine. "Discussing the Politics of Murder: Christine Toomey Was Invited to Lunch with One of Israel's Most Wanted and Implacable Enemies, Zakaria Zubeidi, Whose Disciples Are Trained in the Cause of Martyrdom." *The Sunday Times*, 11 June 2006.

[43] Usamah Hamdan, Hamas, 2004 - Bello, Walden. "Revisiting an Interview with a Leader of Hamas." *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 16 Oct. 2023, https://fpif.org/revisiting-an-interview-with-a-leader-of-hamas/.

[44] Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda, 2006 - *"Al-Zawahiri Video: US Broken in Iraq." Al Jazeera, 29 Apr. 2006, https://web.archive.org/web/20061027122348/http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/1D608570-C11E-4AEB-B14B-84B47DC401E7.htm*.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Khalil al-Hayya, Hamas, June 5th, 2025 - Majed, Mohamed, and Rania Abu Shamala. "Hamas Says It's Ready for New Round of Talks Aimed at Permanent Ceasefire in Gaza." *Anadolu Agency*, 6 June 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/hamas-says-it-s-ready-for-new-round-of-talks-aimed-at-permanent-ceasefire-in-gaza/3590332.

By utilizing these strategic and political-psychological theories within the primary source material from terrorists themselves, this study aims to illuminate the rhetorical blowback of certain counterterrorism strategies (such as the Bush Doctrine, non-negotiation, aggregation of groups and fighters) and their role in sustaining radicalization because of how terrorist and insurgent groups interpret and utilize such operations to justify their violent resistance. The strategic theories and codes include the works of Kilcullen and Mill's disaggregation and engagement arguments (codes 2, 6) and Perry's political inclusion suggestions (code 7). While the political-psychological theories and codes include the works above of Kruglanski's "need for significance" theory (codes 3, 5), and Stern's trauma-centered approach to radicalization (codes 1, 4), While initial codes are formed by these existing theories, new codes may emerge in the process of research and the coding framework will remain flexible or accommodate emerging themes within the data.

Research Design and Justification

This research will employ a qualitative, interpretative research design. It does so through two intertwined methods: a brief case study to give context of the US in Afghanistan and Israel in Palestine and an exhaustive discourse analysis. These methods are well suited to political psychology and security studies, especially when dealing with subjective matters such as violence and rhetoric. The inclusion of coding acts to add academic rigor and an additional layer of depth to the research, and may, where appropriate, provide limited quantitative insight through frequency of repetitive themes.

Case Study Rationale

The US in Afghanistan and Israel in Gaza were chosen due to this illustrative value in analyzing the unintended rhetorical consequence of modern counterterrorism operations. Both reflect prolonged, large-scale counterterrorism efforts that have been widely criticized for their effectiveness, and most infamously, the amount of civilian casualty. The former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights called Afghanistan, "among the deadliest places in the

world to be a civilian."[47] Estimate casualties are above 55,041 from 2009 when the UN began keeping records until 2021 when US troops withdrew.[48] In Gaza, the numbers are harder to attain, both because it is an ongoing operation, but also because data is either unverifiable from third party sources (most data comes from the Gaza Health Ministry or from Israel). Furthermore, it has become increasingly difficult for those gathering data to be able to distinguish between civilian casualties and terrorist fighters. However, numbers from the Gaza Health Ministry, as reported by OCHA on the 4th June, 2025, records Palestinian casualties upwards of 54,607 with over 125,341 injured.[49] These figures alone demonstrate a need for extensive research. I also chose these cases because they both represent Western or Western-aligned democracies using advanced military efforts and dominant political legitimacy against asymmetric resistance fighters who are embedded within civilian populations. There is an aspect of power dynamics that can be analyzed which may fuel grievances compared to a conventional war between two equal actors.

These two cases are thus not only representative of the human cost associated with counterterrorism operations, but also the broader strategic and psychological effects that fuel long term instability and cycles of violence. The sheer scale of civilian casualties, injuries, displacement, infrastructural and societal damage, all make ripe conditions for terrorist organizations to radicalize and recruit future fighters through use of rhetorical narratives. These two cases offer two of the most consequential, data-rich, and strategically revealing examples of how counterterrorism operations generate blowback in language.

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[47] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) & Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). (2021, February 23). *Civilian casualties surged after peace talks began in Afghanistan – UN report*. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/02/civilian-casualties-surged-after-peace-talks-began-afghanistan-un-report

[48] United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). (2021, July 26). *Civilian casualties set to hit unprecedented highs in 2021 unless urgent action to stem violence – UN report*. UNAMA. https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence-%E2%80%93-un-report

[49] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2025, June 4). *Reported Impact Snapshot: Gaza Strip*. OCHA oPt. https://www.ochaopt.org/content/reported-impact-snapshot-gaza-strip-4-june-2025

Background of Case Studies

Firstly, it will be important to ground the research in real-world context, therefore the first methodological component will include a brief background of the operations of the United States in Afghanistan and Israel in Gaza. To gather this relevant content, the research will draw on third party NGO reports, journalistic investigations, and academic studies. It will question the extent to which these operations disaggregated and engaged with these groups or if other strategies were prioritized. This background section will be minimal, compared to the following discourse analysis, it intends only to create a strategic and political backdrop of context which is necessary for the discourse focus of this research.

Discourse Analysis of Terrorist Communications

The second, primary methodology of this essay will be a discourse analysis of communications produced by terrorist groups themselves. These will include interviews with terrorists, public statements and press releases - specifically those referencing the personal effects of actions taken by the US and Israel. This analysis will attempt to identify recurring themes, grievances, or justifications that reference state action as a motivator or legitimizing factor of terrorism, in their words. This part of the research will mirror those interviews Stern analyzed (2003).

Unlike alternative discourse analysis, this approach will be more interpretive and contextual. It will rely on coding, but follow a qualitative theoretical and thematic approach, identifying patterns across multiple sources and relating them back to the broader psychological and contextual factors mentioned above. The codes, as listed above, were inspired by Kruglanski, Stern, Kilcullen and Mill, Silke, and Perry.

Limits and Ethical Considerations

This research recognizes its limitations, which will be expanded more after the conclusion of the study. What is set out here is what is anticipated to contribute to such limitations. Firstly, the

selection of sources is inherently constrained, many communications with terrorists are classified, translated, some even produced under duress (such as in court or after traumatic detention). Therefore I will only pull from legitimate knowledge producers, such as esteemed media organizations, or from the terrorists themselves. Secondly, this paper makes no claims to sympathize or justify terrorism or violence. Rather the opposite, it seeks to understand how state actions can be interpreted and utilized to radicalize future recruits, in order to prevent them. Lastly, the geographical and temporal scope does not allow for generalizations across all counterterrorism operations, and thus findings should only be applied to the cases and groups analyzed in Afghanistan and Gaza.

Chapter 3 - Case Studies: Contextual Background.

This chapter examines the strategies and blowback of US counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Israeli counterterrorism in Gaza both after 2001. This chapter does not aim to compare Afghanistan and Palestine in terms of operational success, but instead highlights strategies that often did not prioritize engagement and communication with the violent actors themselves, resulting in additional grievances and blowback. Blowback in relation to modern counterterrorism can be defined as "the nasty consequences that result from the use of certain counterterrorism tools: angering masses of people and thus creating more sympathy for the terrorists and, presumably, increasing their fundraising and recruitment capabilities and making it easier for them to operate."[50] These case studies are important to acknowledge the strategic and personal aspect of how groups like Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Hamas and Fatah interpret the situation and justify their violent resistance.

This analysis proceeds by comparing key tactical patterns and strategies. Special attention is paid to events where state violence blurred the lines between combatants and civilians, resulting in mass collective trauma that terrorist actors later utilized rhetorically. These events of state violence were more than moments of unfortunate collateral damage, they acted as discursive openings to justify continuing cycles of violence.

By using Kilcullen's Accidental Guerilla Theory, Kilcullen and Mill's analysis of Afghanistan, Mark Perry's argument for open communication, and Silke's emphasis on communication and cooperation, this chapter interprets the cases through a strategic-security lens. It will show what the states did, the unintended consequences, and most importantly, what they communicated to individuals on the ground, and how this perception was utilized by terrorist narratives.

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[50] Byman, Daniel. "Foreign Policy Essay: Thoughts on Counterterrorism and Blowback." *Lawfare*, 4 July 2015, www.lawfaremedia.org/article/foreign-policy-essay-thoughts-counterterrorism-and-blowback.

3.1 U.S. in Afghanistan 2001-2021.

The US intervention in Afghanistan following the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks marks the beginning of the modern counterterrorism era. What was initially framed as a necessary response to a new and emerging global threat, quickly expanded goals from not only eradicating Al-Qaeda to a prolonged nation-building effort, marked by military occupation. What began as a mission to dismantle terrorist networks quickly unraveled into decades long intervention that, despite vast resources and enthusiasm from the US, ultimately failed to eliminate terrorism. This chapter will examine how US counterterrorism and nation building strategies in Afghanistan inadvertently produced civilian casualties, feelings of trauma and humiliation, and a loss of collective sovereign identity, that later fed into the rhetoric and recruitment of terrorist groups. These outcomes are crucial for understanding how groups like Al-Qaeda and the Taliban interpreted events and crafted special narratives of victimhood and resistance, explored later in the discourse analysis of this essay.

Ignoring Grievances

The US counterterrorism strategy evolved rapidly after its initial invasion in 2001, but it consistently prioritized overwhelming military force, preemptive operations, a focus on eradicating terrorism than preventing radicalization that leads to such extremism.[51] Operations were often guided with a focus on removing terrorists and subsequent nation-building, however it lacked a comprehensive approach that would disaggregate between resistance groups, and make cooperation and engagement appealing. Ultimately despite relative success in removing some terrorists, there still was no security for the Afghan population, due to blowback from operations and growing pressure from remaining groups to violently resist.[52]

While the US was initially successful in diminishing the power of the Taliban as early as the Fall of 2001, where they had set out to eradicate Al-Qeada and other violent groups in the country, this victory was short lived as many key leaders fled into neighboring countries, allowing violent

[51] Middle East Institute. *Rethinking U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy*. July 2020, Middle East Institute, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-07/Rethinking%20US%20Counterterrorism%20Strategy.pdf.
[52] "Historian Says the U.S. Is 'Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan.'" *NPR*, 19 Apr. 2017, www.npr.org/2017/04/19/524654637/historian-says-the-u-s-is-losing-hearts-and-minds-in-afghanistan.

resistance groups not only to continue operations under safe haven in other states, but to physically disperse and spread their message.[53] Over the years as the US shifted its focus to Iraq, and during this time the Taliban began to resurface. The temporary defeat of the Taliban was not the elimination of it, as thought by the US at the time, but instead a decentralization of it, which arguably made it harder to fight in the future. "After 2001, the Taliban reorganized as a decentralized network of fighters and low-level commanders empowered to recruit and find resources locally while the senior leadership remained sheltered in neighboring Pakistan."[54] To combat this, the US had to begin implementing different strategies in Afghanistan, such as night raids, indiscriminate drone strikes and targeting, and political interference, all of which were supported by the CIA and Washington and did not attempt to introduce open communication or diplomatic engagement with such groups, aggregating them all as threats that warranted a heavily militarized response.[55] For more information on these tactics, see Appendix B.1.

The operation quickly turned into a two decade long occupation where the long term goals became almost unrecognizable. Counterterrorism blended into counterinsurgency as the US sponsored new governments, firstly Hamid Karzai, then Ashraf Ghani, both of which were widely accused of being puppet leaders for the US.[5657] This became a core grievance for groups in Afghanistan, who did not like having US boots on the ground and foreign intervention into their government.[58] While Al-Qaeda did not have the same motivations to participate politically, this was very frustrating for the Taliban, who saw these governments as foreign imposed occupations, taking away their own right to rule. When there was direct engagement with these groups, they were in the form of violent resistance, and civilians often got caught in the crossfire.

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[53] O'Hanlon, Michael E. "A Preliminary Verdict on Afghanistan Strategy." *Brookings*, 5 Oct. 2021, www.brookings.edu/articles/a-preliminary-verdict-on-afghanistan-strategy/.

[54] Mashal, Mujib. "How the Taliban Outlasted a Superpower: Tenacity and Carnage." *The New York Times*, 26 May 2020, updated 15 Jan. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-war.html.

[55] Suhrke, Astri, and Antonio De Lauri. *The CIA's "Army": A Threat to Human Rights and an Obstacle to Peace in Afghanistan*. Chr. Michelsen Institute, 21 Aug. 2019, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/Costs%20of%20War%2C%20CIA%20Afghanistan_Aug%2021%2C%202019.pdf.

[56] "Afghanistan Profile President Hamid Karzi - Timeline" *BBC News,* 16 May 2013.

[57] Ghani, Ashraf. "Ashraf Ghani Sworn In as Afghan President." Al Jazeera, 29 Sept. 2014.

[58] Both Afghan groups, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had high prominence of Foreign Occupation rhetoric, signalling this frustration.

This leads to the other primary grievances among the Afghan population, which was the staggering numbers of civilian casualties. The Watson Institute for Public Affairs *Costs of War Project* at Brown University estimates 46,839 civilians were killed in Afghanistan as a direct war death.[59] Among the most frustrating effects for Afghan civilians who had to live through this was not only the events themselves, but the lack of oversight and accountability that followed. This allowed for a lack of accountability not just with US forces, but also for the US trained Afghan militias that worked alongside them. As an operation backed by the CIA with local forces, they were not subject to the same US military oversight, and many times the complaints lodged against them were dismissed as unfortunate realities of war.[60] These complaints were a means of communication from the Afghan civilians which did not get resolved. Instead, they were brushed aside, showing a lack of prioritizing engagement with those who were experiencing the direct effects of the operations. This inspired the theme of "Unheard/Unmet Grievances" that will be included in the data collection.

Mark Perry however, offers an alternative approach that may have been useful in Afghanistan. While in his work, he argued that meaningful understanding of extremist organizations requires direct engagement.[61] Not an understanding that has been filtered through state policy narratives or media rhetoric, but through the words and motivations of the fighters themselves. By dehumanizing these communities (as the Bush Doctrine and post-2001 counterterrorism framework did) and refusing to speak with them in an equal, constructive way, it lost a valuable piece of intelligence it could have otherwise benefitted from. This uncooperation became dangerous when combined with unchecked military force, because it signaled to the Afghan population that their voice was insignificant and their lived experiences negligible. This compounded the trauma, added a layer of humiliation, and ultimately added to the appeal of oppositional movements. Perry's theory reinforces the need for this research, that to fully

[59] Costs of War Project. "Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001–2022." *Costs of War*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, Aug. 2021, watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Perry, Mark. *Talking to Terrorists: Why America Must Engage with Its Enemies*. Basic Books, 2010.

understand the motivations and triggers for radicalization and political violence, we must look at what the actors themselves are saying. These primary sources, their voices, allow us to understand how state occupation and violence is interpreted and utilized to continue cycles of violence.

Taken together, these theories help further reveal that the US framework in Afghanistan not only failed to eradicate terrorism and prevent radicalization, but may have planted the fertile soil in which for it to grow. The contradiction between the proclaimed mission for liberation and nation-building, opposed to the lived experiences of occupation generated a collective trauma that terrorist groups were able to weaponize in their narratives.

3.2 Israel in Palestine 2001-2025.

To begin any writing on Israel and Palestine, it is important to recognize the extremely long and contested history. Their entanglement began in the early 20th century but intensified after 1948 with the creation and international recognition of Israel and mass displacement of Palestinians following the Nakba.[62] The Israeli occupation of Palestine led to the creation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Fatah), created in 1964, which has at different points been designated a terrorist group by Israel and the US.[6364] It wasn't until the 1993 Oslo Accords between the Fatah and Israel that sparked some hopes of a two-state solution or at least peaceful cohabitation, but it was short lived as factions of the PLO broke off and developed into relatively more extreme terrorist organizations, most notably Hamas after the First Intifada.[65] By the early 2000s, any hopes of the cooperation and peace discussed in Oslo had largely collapsed.

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[62] United Nations. "Nakba of 1948 and Today Are Not Separate Events, but Ongoing Process of Palestinian Displacement, Replacement, Speakers Tell Panel, Urging Immediate Ceasefire in Gaza." *United Nations Press Release GA/PAL/1467*, 17 May 2024, press.un.org/en/2024/gapal1467.doc.htm.
[63] "Palestinian Liberation Organization," *Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Palestine-Liberation-Organization/Intifada-and-Oslo-peace-process.
[64] United States Congress. *Anti-Terrorism Act of 1987*. Title X of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1988 and 1989, Public Law 100–204, 22 U.S.C. § 5201 et seq., enacted Dec. 22, 1987. *United States Code*, https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title22/chapter61&edition=prelim.
[65] *"Hamas." Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamas.

Of course this longer history makes the case notably different from the US in Afghanistan. However, for the purposes of this case study and the following discourse analysis, the Israeli/Palestinian timeline here will begin only after 2001. This allows for a focused examination of modern Israeli counterterrorism strategies and how they have evolved alongside the US and global War on Terror. While rooted in a unique local history, we will see that Israel mirrors many of the issues observed by the US in Afghanistan, making it a valuable comparable case.

Refusing Engagement

Moving on from the historical context into the case study necessary for this research, 2000 began what is known as the Second Intifada. In 2002, at the height of the Second Intifiada, Israel built its infamous barrier around Gaza to protect itself from terrorist attacks, however this only furthered feelings of oppression and occupation to the civilians who lived there. Israel operated both in Gaza and the West bank as it set out on its own War on Terror within Palestine. Human Rights Watch estimated from 2000-2004 that over 16,000 Palestinians lost their homes in Rafah alone as Israel raided suspecting areas of terrorist activities, and illegally demolished homes, as they argued it was necessary to destroy tunnels from Gaza to Israel.[66] The rest of 2004 was marked with increasing violence from both Palestinian terrorist groups and Israel, unfortunately this escalation of violence never seemed to dissipate. (For an expanded description of the Second Intifada, see Appendix B.2)

While the actual end date of the Second Intifada is disputed, it can be placed sometime between 2004-2007. The argument for it being 2004 is that Yassir Arafat, the long-standing symbol of peaceful Palestinian resistance, leader of the PLO and Fatah, died in November. Being a symbol for peace and diplomacy, his death arguably marked the death of the Oslo Accords and any hope that Palestinians and Israelis could live peacefully. This led to internal fighting within the PLO, where Hamas rose as an alternative party opposed to Fatah, viewing violence as a better means of resistance. Hamas arguably appealed more to the hearts and minds of the general population

[66] "Razing Rafah: Mass Home Demolitions in the Gaza Strip". Human Rights Watch. Archived from the original on 24 March 2006. Retrieved 29 March2006.

by arguing they can offer better protection to civilians, because in 2006, Hamas won the general election making them the leading party of the PLO and leading political representation for the Palestinian people.[67] However, this newly acquired position did not help Palestinians much in the international arena. Israel, the US, and many states refused to negotiate with Hamas as they were a designated terrorist group. Similarly, Hamas had no interest in cooperating with Israel.[68] What is interesting, however, is how seemingly comparable Hamas was with the Fatah in its early decades of violent resistance. Fatah at different points was considered a terrorist group as well, however Israel still participated in the Oslo Accords and many other peace agreements with them. One of the main differences for this is Fatah's secularity compared to Hamas' explicit Jihadist identity.[69] As we will see within the discourse, this Jihadist identity is what connects many terrorist organizations in the Middle East. However, it is questionable whether this should disqualify these organizations from political inclusion in the international community, as the absence of their voice does not discourage them, but rather fuel their resentment due to unheard grievances.[70][71] Furthermore, it will be interesting to analyze just how often Hamas uses religious language in their communications, this background suggests they should have high themes of Need for Significance or Collective Identity.

Similarly to Afghanistan, what is seemingly the most frustrating and grievance-driving in Palestine is the lack of accountability that follows the Israeli occupation. OCHA reported, "a total of 1,456 compensation claims were submitted to the Compensation Officer at the Israeli Ministry of Defence by civil society organizations on behalf of Palestinian victims, of which 100 civil cases were filed before Israeli courts seeking compensation for 620 victims. To date, only

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[67] "Hamas Wins Huge Majority." *Al Jazeera*, 26 Jan. 2006, www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/1/26/hamas-wins-huge-majority.
[68] Barron, Robert. "Palestinian Politics Timeline: Since the 2006 Election." *United States Institute of Peace*, 25 June 2019, www.usip.org/palestinian-politics-timeline-2006-election.
[69] Hamas. *A Document of General Principles and Policies*. 2017. Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/hamas-charter-2017/page/3/mode/2up.
[70] Beck, Colin J. "The Contribution of Social Movement Theory to Understanding Terrorism." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 2, no. 5, 2008, pp. 1565–1581. Wiley Online Library, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2008.00148.x.
[71] Beck, Colin J. *Radical Islam: Social Movement Theory and the Case of Hamas*. Stanford University Press, 2015.

three claims (involving five people) have successfully obtained compensation."[72] This leads to immense frustration and resentment towards the international community and occupiers, and will be seen in rhetoric relating to unheard/unmet grievances by these groups.

The situation in Palestine today has deteriorated rapidly since the Hamas terror attacks of October 7th, 2023, where Hamas attacked a music festival and killed almost 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and the abduction of 251 to be used for hostage negotiation.[73] Fighting between Israel and Hamas has reached unprecedented levels, and the civilian toll on both sides is continuously rising still in 2025. Although exact numbers are heavily disputed, one thing that is clear: accountability is not being seen on either side. Ceasefires negotiations have become plentiful and meaningless, as hope that a lasting peace is achievable is diminishing. Of the two formal ceasefire agreements, violations have occurred on both sides. The Gaza Media Office claims Israel has violated the ceasefire agreement 265 times.[74] Similarly, Israel claims Hamas has violated the ceasefire agreements by not following through with promises of hostage releases (such as releasing other hostages than the ones agreed to).[75] While individual claims from both sides must be taken with caution given personal biases, it highlights the inconsistency in an overall understanding of the situation and agreements. The narratives on each side deflect accountability and produce justifications for their own violence. Perhaps these ceasefires are too futile, instead there needs to be genuine attempts at lasting peace, this begins with redressing past mistakes and paving pathways to future cooperation. One example could be addressing the other 1,453 claims submitted to the Compensation Officer at the Israeli Ministry of Defence, or

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[72] "Eight Years after the 2008–2009 (Cast Lead) Hostilities in Gaza: Lack of Accountability Persists." *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – Occupied Palestinian Territory (OCHA oPt)*, 11 Mar. 2017.
[73] "The October 7 Attack: An Assessment of the Intelligence Failings." *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, 2024, ctc.westpoint.edu/the-october-7-attack-an-assessment-of-the-intelligence-failings/
[74] "Gaza Media Office: 265 Violations by the Occupation Since the Ceasefire Agreement." *Safa News Agency*, 11 Feb. 2025, en.safa.news/post/3486/Gaza-Media-Office-265-Violations-by-the-Occupation-Since-the-Ceasefire-agreement.
[75] "IDF: Remains of Kfir and Ariel Bibas ID'd; 3rd Body Sent by Hamas Isn't Their Mom Shiri." *The Times of Israel*, 19 Oct. 2023, www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-remains-of-kfir-and-ariel-bibas-idd-3rd-body-sent-by-hamas-isnt-their-mom-shiri/.

recognizing Hamas, or Fatah, or both, as legitimate representation and engaging with them in a way that doesn't involve simultaneous attempts at eradicating them.

Furthermore, Israel's counterterrorism strategies since 2001 - ranging from aerial bombardments, indiscriminate drone usage, AI targeted killings, and illegal home demolitions (as further described in Appendix B.2) - have consistently under prioritized other alternative pathways to sustainable peace.[7677] While often, and arguably, deemed necessary to dismantle terrorist networks, these tactics typically produced widespread collateral damage. This collateral damage goes beyond civilian casualties and injuries, it includes an eroding public trust in the possibility of justice or long-standing peace. Like the US campaign in Afghanistan, the Israeli counterterrorism operations in Gaza typically relied on unreliable technology and preemptive force, but without meaningful accountability after the fact.[78] These conditions, such as feelings of victimhood, humiliation, and trauma, do not neutralize terrorism. Conversely, they fertilize the soil in which it grows. Especially with actors such as Hamas, the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Fatah, and others, using these actions of state violence as justification for their continuing of this cycle of violence.

As Perry and Kilcullen have both argued in their own words, the cost of refusing to engage is a strategic failure. A more humane, politically nuanced approach may not have eliminated Hamas or discouraged Fatah from violent resistance, however the current approach does not do this either, but it may have undermined their legitimacy and discouraged the narratives that these groups rely on for recruitment and justification of violence.

3.3 Reflection

All of this to say, the tactics that have been used in both operations, while possibly strategically superior in a conventional military context, provide further arguments for rhetoric that justifies

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[76] Borg, Stefan. "Assembling Israeli Drone Warfare: Loitering Surveillance and Operational Sustainability." *Security Dialogue*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2021 doi:10.1177/0967010620956796.

[77] *"Israel/Gaza: Operation 'Cast Lead'—22 Days of Death and Destruction: Facts and Figures."* Amnesty International, Index No. MDE 15/021/2009, 2 July 2009.

[78] *"Questions and Answers: Israeli Military's Use of Digital Tools in Gaza." Human Rights Watch*, 10 Sept. 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/10/questions-and-answers-israeli-militarys-use-digital-tools-gaza.

and legitimizes violent resistance as a response. The discourse analysis will analyze exactly how, but the context is important so that it illuminates a picture, one where grievances aren't baseless, and motivations are reactive. Afghanistan and Palestine are two completely different contexts, as we have seen above, but the operations employed in both, and the unintended consequences were very similar (for more of an overlapping comparison see Appendix B.3). Furthermore, the causes in which resistance groups were fighting against - liberation from Western occupation, the right to self determination, were equally similar.

The purpose of this background was not to argue the success or failure of the operations themselves, indeed one operation is still ongoing and metrics of success are contested. Instead this chapter draws on a thematic comparison of similar shortcomings (such as aggregation of resistance groups, political exclusion, and ignoring grievances). This context will become important when analyzing the words of these fighters, both terrorists and insurgents, as they refer to these operations when justifying their own violence.

Chapter 4 - Discourse Analysis on Terrorist Communications Introduction.

Now that we have a contextual understanding of the background of both cases, we can begin to look at different terrorist communications to see how they interpret and utilize these factors in order to radicalize and justify violent resistance. It's important to note that in my coding, I will only include explicitly what is referenced by the terrorist individual or organization. I will not attempt to interpret their words to fit into any theme, and if ever unsure, data will not be collected. However, while inferences will not be made, I will use the wider context to determine if sentences fit in certain codes. For example, in one statement from former Taliban member Mohammed Naim Farouq he says, "If I had a gun, I would've shot that soldier."[79] He was referring to a US soldier who had desecrated a Quran in front of him, therefore we can reasonably code this under retaliation given the context, as it was a direct response to an action he had witnessed. Additionally, certain sentences can fall under two or more categories. In that same interview Farouq also stated, "and you came and destroyed our nation (foreign occupation). But at least bin Laden was a Muslim and did not humiliate us like this."[80] (humiliation and collective identity). When designing the codes I'd be searching for in these communications, I found it important to employ a strict outline of what could and could not be considered for each of the themes. Therefore we will set parameters for each of them briefly before getting into the data.

Victimhood/Trauma

This theme is anticipated to be among the most prominent across the codes and communications analyzed. In many extremist narratives, the justification for violence is built on more than ideology, but a deeply emotional, shared narrative of victimhood and trauma. This code will capture instances in which the speaker or organization frame themselves or their people as victims of injustice and violence. This theme will draw on the work of Stern and Silke, who both

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[79] Lasseter, Tom. "Guantánamo Inmate Database: Mohammed Naim Farouq." *McClatchy News Service*, 15 June 2008. *Guantánamo Testimonial Project*, Human Rights Center, UC Davis, https://humanrights.ucdavis.edu/projects/the-guantanamo-testimonials-project/testimonies/prisoner-testimonies/guantanamo-inmate-database-mohammed-naim-farouq.

[80] Ibid.

argue that trauma and experiences that trigger intense emotions can encourage radicalization.[81][82] In operational terms, this code includes explicit references to:

1. Civilian deaths or injuries - including the deaths of their loved ones.
2. Destruction of home, school or workplace.
3. Psychological fear or trauma caused by raids, imprisonment, or harassment.
4. Language of grief, mourning, or anger caused by specific events.
5. Perceived victimhood: ("we are being attacked," "we are oppressed.")

Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment

This code is also anticipated to rank very high in prominence. It will capture references of the presence, political influence or aggression of a foreign occupation. These occupations are largely framed by these actors as illegitimate. It may include overt anti-Western rhetoric and more subtle criticisms of military interference. This theme will draw on the works of Kilcullen, and Kilcullen and Mills, who together argued that counterinsurgency operations must not be perceived as occupation or invasion in order to be successful and not generate blowback or accidental guerillas.[83][84] Relevant codes will include explicit mentions to:

1. Western military occupation or invasion (US troops in Afghanistan, Israeli presence in Gaza and West Bank).
2. Mention of the Gaza barrier wall built by Israel.
3. Mention of the US-backed governments in Afghanistan.
4. Language that suggests sovereignty has been violated.

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[81] Stern, Jessica. *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. Ecco, 2004.
[82] Silke, Andrew, editor. *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and Its Consequences*. Wiley, 2003.
[83] Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
[84] Kilcullen, David, and Mills, Greg. *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan.* Hurst Publishers, 2021.

Retaliation/Revenge

This code refers to language that frames violence as justified retribution, often is embedded in moralistic or emotional rhetoric. It captures how the group legitimizes their violence as a direct response to state actions, whether recent or historical. This theme is important because it separates instrumental violence (used for strategic gain) from emotionally charged violence such as seen here. It highlights how acts of terrorism are frequently seen as inevitable or an act of justice, but even more it shows how state violence justifies cycles of violence in the narratives of terrorists. This code will include narration that has explicit references to:

1. Avenging the death of an individual or group.
2. An attack being in response to a prior event ("we bombed them because they bombed us first.")
3. Reactive or causal language ("an eye for an eye," "they started it," "we did x, because they did y.")

Humiliation

This code relates to language containing a loss of dignity, public shame, or dehumanization experienced by an individual or group. As identified above in the literature review, it can be a key emotional trigger that can lead to radicalization. As such, humiliation in terrorist-insurgent communications is sometimes spoken as a precursor to violence, not the final straw. It is invoked to justify actions framed as restoring honor or defending sacred values. This code requires clear evidence of perceived loss of dignity, whether that be religiously, societally, or culturally. It is important to note that humiliation is subjective and given the religious differences between the actors, what is classified as humiliating in Muslim communities may not be seen as such by the West. This theme will again draw on the works of both Stern and Silke, who highlighted humiliation as one of the intense emotions that could trigger radicalization.[85][86] The code will reflect that and include explicit mentions of:

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[85] Stern, Jessica. *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. Ecco, 2004.
[86] Silke, Andrew, editor. *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and Its Consequences*. Wiley, 2003.

1. Being treated as less than human; being violated.
2. References to forced nudity or public degradation.
3. Symbolic humiliation, such as foreign soldiers destroying religious spaces or symbols (especially the Quran).
4. Language implying emasculation, dishonor, moral insult, or loss of pride.

Need for Significance - Adapted from Kruglanski

This code was inspired by the work of Arie Kruglanski. It was further adapted to fit the cultural context of these groups. As such, it captures discourse centered on personal legacy, martyrdom, or divine recognition. It reflects a desire to be remembered, or at minimum, a need to have one's actions carry moral or religious weight. What Kruglanski refers to as significance, is often materialized as a need for recognition. This could be because an individual lost their job or status, feel powerless in occupation, or believe they have a higher calling. This code refers to both religious and secular significance, as one can also wish to be remembered in their community or in the world. It helps understand how violence is moralized and immortalized in the minds of terrorists. Statements will be coded under this theme when there are explicit mentions of:

1. Aspirations of martyrdom or divine recognition.
2. References to being remembered or honored before or after death.
3. Claims their actions will fulfill a sacred duty or appease God/Allah.
    a. Includes a desire to convert individuals to Islam.
    b. References to Jihad as the best solution.
4. Defending suicidal tactics in the name of their mission, such as suicide bombings or acceptance of certain death.

Collective Identity

This theme encompasses in-group and out-group rhetoric. It involves individuals seeing themselves as part of a larger identity (Muslim, Jihad, Afghan, Palestinian, victims). It may also involve the belief of shared religion, values, or cultural identity, typically framed as opposing the

West. It is a foundational part of a belief that creates a binary worldview. Having this belief makes radicalization easier as those who are not seen as part of the collective are perceived as a threat. This code is also useful in identifying how terrorists moralize their actions, placing their cause in the context of a wider, more popular struggle. It gives those in the in-group a larger purpose outside of themselves. It was frequently used by Osama Bin Laden, who framed the Palestinian struggle as a fight for all Muslims, even those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan.[87] Furthermore, it allows terrorist groups to sympathize and relate to each other, showing how terrorism can become transnational. This theme is supported by the work of Milan Obaidi, Gulnaz Anjum, and others in a study titled: "The Role of Muslim Identity in Predicting Violent Behavioural Intentions to Defend Muslims." In this study, these scholars identify how Muslims around the world are united through a shared sense of collective suffering, despite whether these individuals have had direct exposure to Western intervention and violence or not.[88] The study suggests that, while other literature has proven foreign occupation and state violence indeed play a significant role in radicalization and creating grievances, the collective identity of Muslims is so potent, it may be present either way. Statements that will reflect this belief include explicit mentions of:

1. Us vs. them rhetoric (Us: Muslims, Afghans, Palestinians, victims. Them: West, Christians, Jews, oppressors).
2. References to Ummah: pan-Muslim solidarity, a need to unite.
3. Nationalistic or anti-imperial sentiments ("our land," "our people.")
4. Labeling of enemies: Crusaders, infidels, Zionists.
5. Framing violence as defending the collective ("We fight for all Muslims; Palestinians).

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[87] Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, 2002 - *"Transcript of Bin Laden's October Interview." CNN*, 5 Feb. 2002, http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/south/02/05/binladen.transcript/.

[88] Obaidi, Milan, et al. "The Role of Muslim Identity in Predicting Violent Behavioural Intentions to Defend Muslims." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, vol. 23, no. 8, 2020, pp. 1267–1282, doi:10.1177/1368430220920929.

Unheard/Unmet Grievances

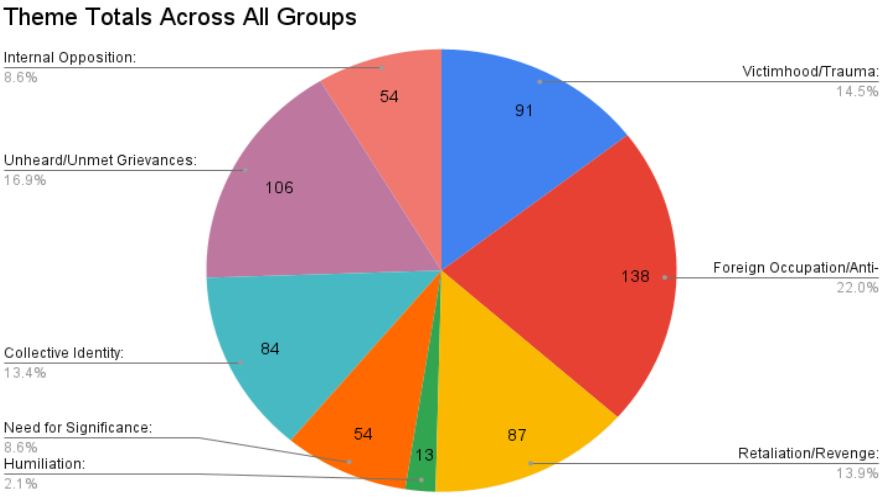
The last anticipated code is expected to have extremely high prominence and will highlight expressions of frustration, alienation, or political marginalization. This may be in response to failed negotiations or a feeling that the international community isn't hearing their pleas. This code helps identify how terrorists see themselves as isolated, and frames themselves as their own and only saviors. It connects to themes of legitimacy and will help show how terrorist organizations employ a strategic use of common grievances to justify violence as an alternative path towards their goals. This theme is supported with the work of Mark Perry, who warns against political exclusion of these actors.[89] Statements in this code will refer to explicit mentions of:

1. Peace talks, negotiations, or ceasefires being denied or violated.
2. Complaints that nobody has listened or understands the group's suffering.
3. Accusations of double standards between the West and the international community.
4. References to silence or hypocrisy from international institutions like the UN.
5. A sense that violence is the only viable path left, language of hopelessness.

[89] Perry, Mark. *Talking to Terrorists: Why America Must Engage with Its Enemies*. Basic Books, 2010.

4.1 Preliminary Findings Overview.

The coded data yielded 627 statements from 34 different actors in 4 separate violent resistance groups (all the data can be found in Appendix D). These statements were all taken from varying levels of actors among the 2 most prominent groups in both Afghanistan and Palestine, respectively: Al-Qaeda, Taliban; Hamas, and Fatah. Of these 627 statements, they were not distributed exactly evenly among the groups due to sourcing limitations, Al-Qaeda contributed 210 statements, Fatah 161, Hamas 129, and Taliban 127. It will not attempt to compare the groups to each other in terms of theme prominence relative to each other since the relative distribution does not allow for such comparisons, but it will analyze the overall language and rhetoric used by each group and make contrasts and comparisons where applicable. The most recurrent themes of the 627 statements collected among all the groups were Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment (138), Unheard/Unmet Grievances (106), Victimhood/Trauma (91), Retaliation/Revenge (87), and Collective Identity (84). Less frequent but still notable were Need for Significance (54) and Internal Opposition (54). Humiliation played only a minor role, being referred to just 13 times, suggesting an almost negligible role in public discourse from such actors.



[90]

Figure 1: Circle graph showing value and percentage of total theme prominence by all four groups.

[90] Figure 1

The prevalence of *Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment* and *Unheard/Unmet Grievances* affirms the idea that terrorism and insurgency are driven by more than just ideology or innate violence. Instead, it suggests that these actions are reactionary to real or perceived injustices, often stemming from military interventions or longstanding political rejection. Hamas and Fatah had a comparable number of both Occupation and Grievance themes appear in both of their discourses, whereas Al-Qeada and Taliban while having similar numbers of Occupation themes, had approximately less than half the number of Grievances. This suggests one of two possibilities: either these actors have less grievances (unlikely, given the background), or these actors are less willing to negotiate than those in Palestine, never allowing for a chance to solve their grievances in diplomatic efforts.

One striking outcome of my research was the need to create an additional code, Internal Opposition. I found that a lot of rhetoric was not solely directed at the West, or even towards their occupiers, but at opposition groups within their own state. While not initially anticipated as part of the coding themes, there were persistent mentions of inter-group antagonism and critique. While in Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had opposed the former US-backed Ghani government, therefore their focus was not as much on critiquing each other, but instead shifting blame to the former regime. This was still prevalent in the more recent interviews and statements analyzed. Alternatively, in Palestine, these two groups had much higher prevalence of Internal Opposition rhetoric, mostly from Fatah, who had 31 of the 54 statements in this theme. Both of these groups are consistently challenging the other's legitimacy in an internal fight for political power, adding to the instability within their own population and land.

Notably, leaders like Osama Bin Laden or Ayman Al-Zawahiri, both from Al-Qaeda, were found to touch nearly every theme in their communications. This makes them highly effective rhetorical figures for recruitment, and likely why they were the face of their organization. This rhetorical breadth is strategic and may suggest that charismatic leaders within violent groups are likely the leaders because of their ability to weave together emotional, political, and retaliatory

messaging.[9192] They notably avoid discussing events or feelings of humiliation, similar to all actors across all groups. This is a limitation that will be discussed later but is likely an intentional choice. In patriarchal, militarized societies, it could be seen as emasculating to admit humiliation, let alone narrate it. It goes against the masculine bravado that these groups wish to portray themselves as.

Additionally, actors in Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were more likely to recognize a *Need for Significance*, suggesting a desire to frame their movement as part of a larger global jihad. This contrasts Palestinian data that is more likely to center Occupation, Grievances, and even Victimhood. Religion and secularity, although seen as the main difference between Hamas and Fatah, appears to be of little significance when these actors are discussing their organization. Palestinian militancy appears to be more secular, focused on grievances, political sovereignty, and land. Afghanistan militancy, on the other hand, sees their fight as a divine mission.

Finally, the data supports the idea that radicalization and violent resistance are contextually and discursively constructed. The group's narration varied by actor, audience, purpose, and the geopolitical climate of the year the communication was conducted. Despite this, significant, and insignificant, consistent themes arose.

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[91] Bacon, Tricia, and Elizabeth Grimm. "What Leadership Type Will Succeed al-Qaeda's al-Zawahiri?" *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 15 July 2022, icct.nl/publication/what-leadership-type-will-succeed-al-qaedas-al-zawahiri.

[92] Hofmann, David C. "The Influence of Charismatic Authority on Operational Strategies and Attack Outcomes of Terrorist Groups." *Journal of Strategic Security*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2016, pp. 14–44. Digital Commons, University of South Florida, https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol9/iss2/3/.

4.2 Thematic Analysis Overview.

4.2.1 Victimhood/Trauma

The theme Victimhood/Trauma appears 91 times across the 627 statements (14.5%), making it a prominent theme in the discourse of these actors. While it was not as significant as Foreign Occupation or Unheard Grievances, it was seen to be a more emotionally provocative language. Claims of victimhood and trauma are emotionally heavy, and often used to legitimize retaliation and invoke collective identity, making it a unifying concept that often was accompanied by other themes. For example, by framing their struggle through personal and collective trauma, it sets the foundation for creating an in-group collective identity. The narrative of victimhood, or a victim mentality, is strategic in that it shifts the blame externally. In an academic article on victim mentality and violent behavior, it stated, "Some of these individuals tend to catastrophize situations, which can lead to aggression or violence directed at their perceived perpetrators. They may justify their immoral actions as punishment for harm done to them or rationalise it by saying that it is to prevent a similar situation from happening again."[93] War and occupation are in and of themselves, catastrophic by nature, far more than the everyday actors references in the article. If psychologically, individuals removed from conflict zones can rationalize violent resistance through a victim mindset, it stands to reason that those subjected to immense, direct trauma, as such in war or occupation, may be even more susceptible to using their trauma as justification for violent resistance in the forms of terrorism or insurgency. Among the four groups and 91 statements, Fatah (28), Al-Qaeda (28), Hamas (20), and Taliban (15) all invoked language in which they perceived and framed themselves as victims.

4.2.2 Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment

The theme Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment was the most prominent of all the themes coded. It appeared 138 times of the 627 statements analyzed (22%). The prominence represents a universal theme among both Afghanistan and Palestinian groups, one which unites

[93] Kets de Vries, Manfred F. R. "Transcending the Victim Mentality." *INSEAD Knowledge*, 8 Mar. 2023, knowledge.insead.edu/career/transcending-victim-mentality.

them in many ways. These groups typically frame their violent resistance as necessary and justified means against occupation. The language and scope varies between actors, from more localized (against US/US backed governments, and Israel), to more regional/universal (Western interference/"Crusaders,"). Despite these slight differences, the strategic goals of this discourse remain the same, to reframe their acts of violence to acts of self defense and self determination, which is supported as a right of oppressed peoples by the UN.[94] This framing positions the occupier as the initial aggressor, and as the occupation as the initial/primary grievance. These groups attempt to gain legitimacy and sympathy through a focal rhetorical point on sovereignty, historical injustice, and the right to resist occupation. Similarly, the use of anti-Western sentiment in their communications serves to further divide the group from their occupiers, allowing them to delegitimize Western-backed governments and authorities (such as the Ghani government, US and Israeli troops, the IDF) to their own marginalized people.

4.2.3 Retaliation/Revenge

The theme Retaliation/Revenge emerged a moderate amount of times in the data collection, accounting for 87 statements of the 627 (13.9%) collected. This narrative, among all the groups, consistently framed violence as a response. It aligns with earlier suggestions that these groups view their actions as a retaliatory act, viewing their actions as a moral and legal rebalancing after undergoing perceived injustice. Among all the groups, revenge served as a rhetorical tool to radicalize individuals from victims into vigilantes. In a study on community vengeance as a motivator for terrorism, it was found that vengeance serves as a predisposing factor for individual involvement in terrorism, and that retaliation and retribution serve as a factor in escalating violence leading to cycles of violence.[95] Unsurprisingly, in my research, *the Retaliation/Revenge* theme was typically seen alongside the themes of Victimhood/Trauma. In fact, 16 of the 87 statements (18.4%) in this theme were spoken in the same statement that

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[94] United Nations General Assembly. *Resolution 37/43: Importance of the universal realization of the right of peoples to self-determination and of the speedy granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples for the effective guarantee and observance of human rights.* 3 Dec. 1982, https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/37/43.

[95] Bowman Grieve, Lorraine, Marek Palasinski, and Neil Shortland. "Psychology Perspectives on Community Vengeance as a Terrorist Motivator: A Review." *Safer Communities*, vol. 18, no. 3–4, Oct. 2019, pp. 81–93. Emerald, doi:10.1108/SC-08-2018-0023.

triggered the code for Victimhood/Trauma, and many of the interviews would include both at some point, even if not in the same statement. In this way, these actors frame their violence as a reclaiming of power. However, unlike Victimhood/Trauma which views the self as morally pure or alleviated of accountability, Retaliation/Revenge does not attempt to moralize the self. In many cases, the actor will acknowledge their act as wrong or violent, but frame it as righteous retribution or necessary for survival.

4.2.4 Humiliation

Of the 627 statements coded, humiliation was cited significantly the least, only 13 times (2.1%). This is particularly interesting because it seems to contradict partially the work of Kruglanski and Stern, who argued that radicalized militants often felt humiliated or that experiences of humiliation will trigger a Need for Significance. However, this certainly does not mean that feelings of humiliation don't still play a large role in radicalization or perpetuating cycles of violence. Rather, I think there are other explanations that can explain this lack of discourse. This absence is likely more strategic rather than accidental. Rhetoric to public audiences from terrorist or insurgency forces are more likely to emphasize discourse that includes resilience, pride, and honor, not emotional vulnerability. Secondly, there could be a cultural difference that needs to be accounted for. In highly masculinized and patriarchal societies, like that of Islamic or Jihadist communities, acknowledging humiliation may be interpreted as weak. To maintain authority among followers and encourage recruitment, these actors must project strength. A good addition to Kruglanski and Stern's work may be this limitation, an acknowledgment that Western feelings such as humiliation may not be actively acknowledged in these societies, whether accidental or intentional. It does not mean that humiliation as the West understands it doesn't exist, but rather that it isn't prominent in their vocabulary, as suggested from this data.

The Taliban was the only group with a slightly elevated frequency, citing humiliation 7 times out of the 127 statements coded (5.5%). However this data is slightly skewed and must be acknowledged. Nearly all of the Humiliation statements from the Taliban arose from a single actor, Mohammed Naim Farouq, an Afghan police chief who was incorrectly identified as a Taliban member by the US and sent to Guantanamo Bay, where he was detained for around 2

years.[96] In this time he was severely humiliated and abused by the US. Farouq recounts his time detained as full of humiliation, "They stripped me naked, out in the open, where everybody could see," and argued that, being a Pashun, he'd "rather be killed than have his naked body shown in public," finally he directly cited, "you came and destroyed our nation. But at least bin Laden was a Muslim and did not humiliate us like this."[97] Farouq was an assumed terrorist, when at most was a crooked cop. However, after his release in 2003, he began to work closely with the Taliban in operations against the US. Farouq's case should act as a warning, despite humiliation not being actively cited by militant actors, it does not mean that they may not play an individualized, extremely radicalizing role. It highlights how in counterterrorism operations, slight misunderstandings can proliferate if acted upon, turning marginal threats into rather extreme, violent actors.

In conclusion, humiliation may still be a critical psychological driver of radicalization, as Kruglanski and Stern suggest. However, it remains a rhetorical liability in most cases. Its near absence tells us that it is not widely acknowledged, but also presses us to ask why, and could warrant further research.

4.2.5 Need for Significance

The theme Need for Significance was also among lower prevalence, arising just 54 times out of the 627 statements cited (8.6%). However it is contextually rich given its origin. Drawing on Kruglanski's Need for Significance theory, this theme captured the individual need for meaning and purpose. Although I found it necessary to slightly adapt the theory to the context of Jihadism and some of the groups in Afghanistan/Palestine. This meant accounting for the need for religious and spiritual significance, allowing for statements that included rhetoric of martyrdom or sacrifice. While the other themes in this study were more political in nature (apart from Humiliation), Need for Significance is more about internal, religious, or existential motivators. Particularly, when state actions trigger feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, or vulnerability,

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[96] Lasseter, Tom. "Guantánamo Inmate Database: Mohammed Naim Farouq." *McClatchy News Service*, 15 June 2008. *Guantánamo Testimonial Project*, Human Rights Center, UC Davis, https://humanrights.ucdavis.edu/projects/the-guantanamo-testimonials-project/testimonies/prisoner-testimonies/guantanamo-inmate-database-mohammed-naim-farouq

[97] Ibid.

some individuals are more susceptible to narratives that promise restoration of meaning and purpose in their lives, even if such restoration is through sacrifice. This pursuit of meaning can become so powerful that it transcends worldly concerns; things like martyrdom or suicide attacks, then become not just a strategic act for their resistance, but a symbolic and moralized act. For many, it will result in a divine reward or eternal recognition, which is far more appealing than other forms of resistance that don't guarantee such promising results. This theme is therefore highly contextual based on the significance of religion in each group, which will be reflected in the analysis as some groups had lesser prominence of this rhetoric than others.

4.2.6 Collective Identity

Collective Identity was another moderately significant theme, arising 84 times of the 631 coded statements (13.3%). While not the most frequently cited, it still holds unique weight as it was closely intertwined with other themes, notably Retaliation/Revenge and Need for Significance. This suggests that collective violence is more easily justified when it is framed as reactionary or divinely authorized. Collective Identity rhetoric operates as a group-binding narrative, it is used to foster solidarity and reinforce loyalty (like to the Ummah). It reframes the group's identity to not just political but also existential, warning against "Crusaders," "Zionists," "Imperialists." As one academic article describes it: terrorism, or violent resistance, can stem from "the confluence of a cultural identity strongly based in collectivism... a social identity based in sharp contrasts between one's own group and groups perceived as threats."[98] Therefore, this role of collective identity is particularly prominent in conflict zones such as these cases, where identity (rather national, religious, cultural, or other) is seen as being under threat. However, collective identity as a motivator for violent resistance is not something innate, it is constructed through fear, as we will see in the discourse. In this research we will see how the different groups frame their collective and their enemy, and equally importantly, how they frame their enemy/out-group as a threat requiring or justifying violent resistance.

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[98] Schwartz, Seth J., Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman. 2009. "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32 (6): 537–59. doi:10.1080/10576100902888453.

4.2.7 Unheard / Unmet Grievances

Unheard/Unmet Grievances was the second most frequently cited theme, yielding 106 statements of the 627 collected (16.9%). These statements reflected frustrations with diplomacy, perceived betrayal or abandonment from the international community, or specific recurring needs unmet during occupation. What separates this from the Victimhood/Trauma theme is these claims many times acted as a precursor to the violence that followed. It signaled a warning that states: when legitimate concerns are dismissed, many actors will believe violence is the only last resort to being heard. This theme is the one most writtled with frustration, for groups who have either participated, or been denied participation, in formal political processes. The communications typically followed after failed peace talks or broken ceasefires. This language often signalled betrayal, but not from the occupiers, whom these actors mostly have no positive expectations for, but from the international community. In the discourse, institutions like the United Nations are accused of hypocrisy and states accused of supporting the violence through partnerships with Israel. This sentiment fosters a belief that diplomatic pathways are ineffective, rigged, or inaccessible to them. It is not always the initial cause of radicalization, but many times, is spoken as a final straw that pushes individuals or groups to abandon the political process and embrace violent resistance. The rhetoric here is not ideological or strategic, but rather responsive. A continuation of the conversation they felt they weren't being heard in.

4.2.8 Internal Opposition

Finally the last theme, Internal Opposition, was cited 54 times of the 627 statements analyzed (8.6%). This was a less frequent theme, but I still deemed it important to add to the codes because of its prevalence in one group: Fatah. While the other themes reflected violence as a response to external actors, I realized during the research that the instability was also present within these states and their own representative governances as well. It became clear that instability wasn't just directed outward, but also inward on rival factions or opposition leaders. In Fatah, this manifested as a direct opposition and condemnation of Hamas, often accusing them of corruption or enhancing the Palestinian struggle through their choice of violent resistance strategies. Therefore, this theme analyzes ideological and strategic differences, as well as

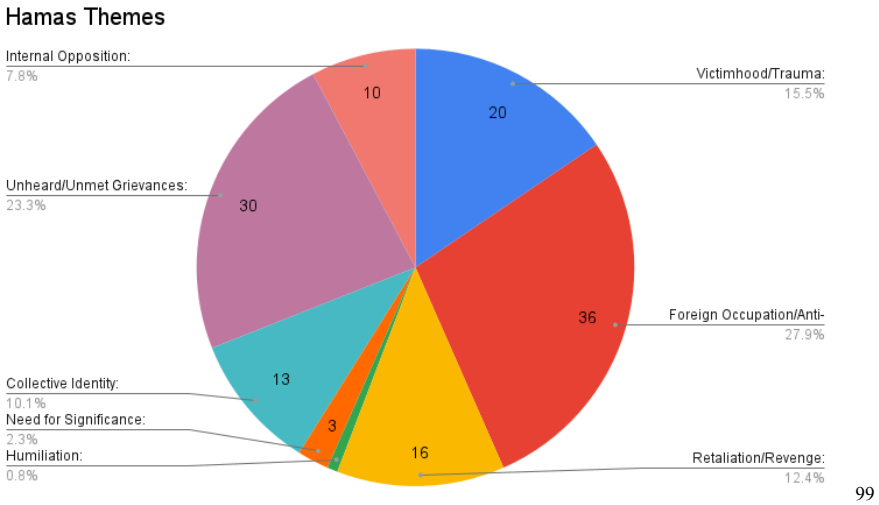
contesting legitimacy. By framing their rivals as weak, corrupt, or compromised, groups can position themselves as the only authentic representatives of their struggle. In broader conceptualization, it represents that when movements are fractured from within, and internal representation is contested, it complicates peace efforts and recognition from the international community. This theme suggests why resolving these conflicts through diplomatic efforts may be so difficult. In conjunction with the last theme that argues how these groups are excluded from the international community, even if they were invited to participate in political processes, there is a further question of who is the legitimate representation. As of now in Palestine, there is no agreed-upon answer.

Chapter 5 - Analysis of Each Group Based on Thematic Findings.

This section will now recite the data from all the groups independently and attempt to analyze the themes within their own rhetoric and discourse, as a singular entity apart from the wider discourse. The former section briefly analyzed the eight themes as part of a wider terrorist/insurgent discourse, now this section will analyze the groups themselves based on theme prominence. This separates it from the preliminary findings chapter as it allows for further analysis into specific group discourses while not relating it to wider insurgency or terrorist communications. It allows us to look at the groups holistically rather than through the lens of any individual theme to find broader patterns across the groups. Due to the lack of prominence on the *Humiliation* theme among all the groups, it has been omitted from this section and instead further analyzed in the previous chapter.

5.1 Analysis of Hamas Communications.

Hamas in their rhetoric has proven to interpret and perceive themselves as urgency-based reactionaries. They attempt to utilize moral outrage within the Palestinian conflict to justify their violent actions. The largest themes Hamas employed in their communications were Foreign Occupation (27.9%), Unheard/Unmet Grievances (23.3%), followed by Victimhood/Trauma (15.5%). In more recent statements, Hamas relied more on Victimhood/Trauma and Retaliation/Revenge (12.4%), reflecting the current conflict since 2023. Interestingly, Hamas made almost negligible statements in the categories of Humiliation (0.8%) and Need for Significance (2.3%). The marginal role of Humiliation is not surprising given their role as a militant group, however it was not anticipated for Need for Significance to be this small since Hamas is typically considered less secular, especially compared to Fatah. Collective Identity (10.1%) also played a considerable role in their discourse, particularly in their alliance-building with Hezbollah and constructing a Palestinian identity; they did not attempt to appeal to the Ummah as other groups had. Overall, Hamas discourse is localized and highly reactive. While their methods are violent, their framing remains morally coherent and attempts to justify their actions as inevitable.



[99]

Figure 10: Circle graph showing value and percentage of Hamas' most prominent themes.

[99] Figure 10

Victimhood/Trauma Themes in Hamas Communications

Hamas referenced Victimhood/Trauma 20 times out of the 129 statements collected (15.5%). In this, it was mostly referred to in relation to violations of human rights by Israel, including civilian deaths, forced displacement, or collective punishment. In one interview with Dr Ibrahim Fares Al-Yazouri, one of the leaders of the Hamas organization, he states "Over time, Israel's violations and provocations against the Palestinian people in the newly-occupied territories increased…The peak was when an Israeli truck driver ran over a number of Palestinian workers and killed four of them."[100] These statements, despite whether there is truth to them, serve a purpose. These statements frequently are used to justify their retaliation. Hamas' use of Victimhood/Trauma appears alongside a narrative of inevitability. When asked why he chooses to fight Israel, Al-Yazouri plainly states, "Because it occupied our land, killed many of us before, during and after the 1940s."[101] Hamas positions their trauma as an inevitability of life under occupation, and perceived violent resistance as the only means viable. In this framing, violence, whether terrorism or insurgency, is a retaliatory act, one born out of perceived injustice and individual and collective trauma.

Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment Themes in Hamas Communications

Hamas has equally high levels of references to Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment as the Afghanistan groups, yielding 36 statements out of 129 (27.9%). While it had similar complaints relating to displacement and illegal settlements as the Fatah, it had a different narrative of Israel as a whole. Hamas would more frequently frame Israel as an illegal state, solely by its existence. It tracks with Hamas official communications, such as their 1988 Charter in which they explicitly refused to acknowledge Israel's existence in their Preamble, and sets out to "obliterate it."[102] This elevates Hamas' position from resistance as a reactionary action to one of preemptive action, suggesting they may be more provocative than Fatah or other actors. In this

[100] Al-Yazouri, Dr. Ibrahim. "Interview with Dr. Ibrahim Al-Yazouri, a Founder of Hamas." *Middle East Monitor*, 14 Dec. 2017, middleeastmonitor.com/20171214-interview-with-dr-ibrahim-al-yazouri-a-founder-of-hamas/.
[101] Ibid.
[102] The Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) 1988." *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, 18 Aug. 1988, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/Hamas.asp.

way, Hamas frames their occupier as an existential threat, which makes radicalization easier when it is under this highlight of fear.

Retaliation/Revenge Themes in Hamas Communications

Hamas referenced Retaliation/Revenge among the same frequency as Fatah and Taliban, 16 out of 129 statements (12.4%), which is interesting given its more extremist strategy. These statements were typically alongside themes of Victimhood/Trauma and/or Foreign Occupation, being cited as the reason for their retaliation. More specifically, these statements were usually temporal or specific, the tone is urgent. In one statement, Hamas Leader Moussa Abu Marzouk stated, "there is no planning because it's very difficult to make something like this to be perfect…. When you killed his brother or his [fellow Palestinian] civilians, he wants to retaliate. It's very difficult to say anything bad to him."[103] This framing repositions Retaliation/Revenge not as a premeditated attack, but as an impulsive one, emotionally driven due to traumatic loss. Hamas thus blurs the moral line between individual grief and collective resistance. This also allows them the same strategy as Fatah, where they can justify the action without taking full responsibility for it.

Need for Significance Themes in Hamas Communications

Hamas only referenced Need for Significance 3 times of the 129 total statements (2.3%). This theme was triggered more so in the Afghanistan groups than the Palestinian ones, suggesting perhaps Hamas is more secular compared to religious militant groups elsewhere. Of the three, two explicitly accept death as a necessary means to their mission. Former Senior Representative of Hamas Usamah Hamdan stated in an interview, "You just die once, and it can be from cancer, in a car accident, or by assassination. Given these choices, I prefer assassination."[104] In an interview with an anonymous Hamas recruiter, the member stated, "the killing and the suffering ends when the Israelis walk out of our land. But if they decide to stay, we will continue to fight.

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[103] "*A Hamas Leader Refuses to Admit His Group Planned to Kill Civilians." The Economist*, 11 Oct. 2023, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/10/11/a-hamas-leader-refuses-to-admit-his-group-planned-to-kill-civilians.

[104] Bello, Walden. "Revisiting an Interview with a Leader of Hamas." *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 16 Oct. 2023, https://fpif.org/revisiting-an-interview-with-a-leader-of-hamas/.

And if I die, someone else will take my place." While these two statements may not prove much scientific significance, again given sourcing limitations, it is notable that two very different, prominent actors within the same group share similar beliefs of this manner.

Collective Identity Themes in Hamas Communications

Hamas referenced Collective Identity slightly more than Fatah, with 13 statements of the 129 recorded (10.1%). They followed the same rhetoric as Fatah, in which their sole outgroup was Israel and its military allies when relevant. Additionally, recently they employed even more collective rhetoric in line with the Palestinian cause, showing appreciation for Lebanon and Hezbollah who have fought alongside them against Israel in recent years. Khaled Mashal, Second Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau stated, "we, in Palestine, are fighting. This is our position and decision. Outside of Palestine, we are grateful to whoever is standing by us. Hezbollah, the Lebanese front is now on fire, and we are grateful for that. Whether it is done by Lebanese, Palestinians, or anyone."[105] However, he continued in which he criticized the other Arab nations for not getting more involved, notably Egypt. These sort of statements reflect Hamas' attempt to expand the Palestinian cause past their own borders, similar to Fatah. Perhaps the difference is Fatah attempts to do so on the international stage, where Hamas calls for help from their Muslim brothers, attempting to bring other countries into their conflict when Fatah knows better. This layered identity allows Hamas to create stronger ties with similar groups such as Hezbollah while temporarily distancing itself from other Arab governments (even Fatah) who they deem as complicit.

Unheard/Unmet Grievances in Hamas Communications

Hamas references Unheard/Unmet Grievances at the second highest frequency, 30 times of 129 statements (23.2%). Many of their statements being fairly recent as well. Not that grievances didn't exist for Hamas in the early 2000's, but that those grievances typically fell under Foreign Occupation themes rather than political grievances. Given their rising political authority, despite not being accepted by Fatah, Israel, or the international community, they have gained leverage in

[105] "Hamas Official Says Group 'Well Aware' of Consequences of Attack on Israel, Palestinian Liberation Comes With 'Sacrifices.'" *Arab News*, 20 Oct. 2023, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394966/middle-east.

other ways. After the October 7th terrorist attacks, they have used hostages to force negotiations, again affirming the idea that violence is resorted to when voices and pleas are ignored for prolonged periods of time. Hama's tone, compared to Fatah, is more urgent and less diplomatic. They shift blame from themselves onto Israel for not accepting certain agreements, just recently in June 2025, Hamas header leader in Gaza, Khalil ay-Hayya stated, "we presented our vision for a comprehensive deal that includes the release of all captives in exchange for a final end to the war, but the occupation rejected that proposal too."[106] Despite this local leverage acquired through hostage taking, Hamas has no international authority. This is especially true in the United Nations, where the US has protected Israel in almost every resolution condemning them for their actions in Gaza.[107][108][109] This has been increasingly frustrating for Hamas who now feels forced into direct confrontation with Israel since the international community turns a blind eye to them, or bails out Israel of any accountability. Ay-Hayya continues that Israel "Israel "would not have continued its massacres even against those simply searching for food to survive as seen recently in Rafah without continuous military and political support, most recently the US veto at the UN Security Council against a resolution demanding an end to the blockade and the urgent entry of aid into Gaza,"[110] This rhetoric reinforces Hamas long-standing belief that international diplomacy doesn't work and violence is the only viable path forward. In framing their actions as necessary, they simultaneously frame themselves as the only group willing to do what is necessary to protect their people, undermining Fatah's legitimacy and paving the way for Internal Opposition, causing further instability for Palestinians.

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[106] Majed, Mohamed, and Rania Abu Shamala. "Hamas Says It's Ready for New Round of Talks Aimed at Permanent Ceasefire in Gaza." *Anadolu Agency*, 6 June 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/hamas-says-it-s-ready-for-new-round-of-talks-aimed-at-permanent-ceasefire-in-gaza/3590332.

[107] "United States Vetoes Gaza Ceasefire Resolution at Security Council." *UN News*, 20 Nov. 2024, news.un.org/en/story/2024/11/1157216.

[108] "U.S. Vetoes Security Council Resolution Demanding Permanent Ceasefire in Gaza." *UN News*, 4 June 2025, news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164056.

[109] Kelemen, Michele. "The U.S. Has Again Vetoed a U.N. Resolution Demanding an Immediate Cease-Fire in Gaza." *NPR*, updated 20 Feb. 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/02/20/1232636543/un-security-council-gaza-cease-fire-vote.

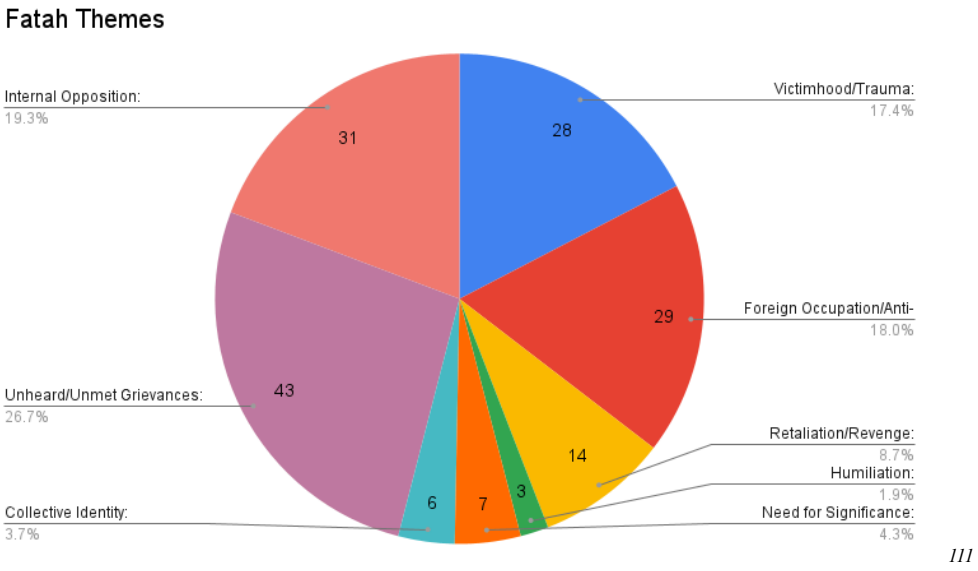
[110] Majed, Mohamed, and Rania Abu Shamala. "Hamas Says It's Ready for New Round of Talks Aimed at Permanent Ceasefire in Gaza." *Anadolu Agency*, 6 June 2025, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/hamas-says-it-s-ready-for-new-round-of-talks-aimed-at-permanent-ceasefire-in-gaza/3590332.

Internal Opposition Themes in Hamas Communications

Hamas referenced Internal Opposition 10 times of the 129 statements collected (7.8%). Every single one of these statements were in direct opposition to Fatah, and spanned from sources from 2004-2017. Hamas feels a consistent need to diverge itself from the Fatah, which makes sense since it is a splinter group. However, they do not seem to have the same sort of in-party internal opposition that Fatah has and are happy with their current leadership. Instead, their statements of Internal Opposition are used to frame Fatah as weak or undermining the Palestinian cause, usually referring back to Oslo when the two groups significantly diverged from one another. In this way, Hamas uses this theme of rhetoric to position itself as a more active resistance force than Fatah, who is perceived to prioritize political struggles that overshadow the resistance fight.

5.2 Analysis of Fatah Communications.

Fatah is the most politically involved and strategic of the four groups, balancing discourse with external historical grievances and internal legitimacy struggles. The most popular themes Fatah utilized were Unheard/Unmet Grievances (26.7%), Internal Opposition (19.3%), Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment (18%), and Victimhood/Trauma (17.4%). This reflects Fatah's dual identity crisis, where on one hand it must appeal to the Palestinian population who has been subjected to intense trauma and occupation, where on the other, Fatah must simultaneously appeal to the international community to maintain legitimacy. This explains why Retaliation/Revenge (8.7%) was a less prominent theme in this discourse as they attempt to present themselves as a fairly mediatary actor. Humiliation (1.9%) and Need for Significance (4.3%) were also low in prominence, arguably for the same reasons as Hamas since they operate within the same culture. However, they also had low levels of Collective Identity (3.7%) discourse possibly due to the triple layer of internal opposition they face (from Israel, from Hamas, and from within their own group).



[111]

Figure 11: Circle graph showing value and percentage of Fatah's most prominent themes.

[111] Figure 11

Victimhood Trauma Themes in Fatah Communications

In Fatah communications the theme Victimhood/Trauma accounted for 28 out of Fatah's total 161 statements (17.4). One such statement was from a 2006 interview with Zakaria Zubeidi, the leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, a West Bank centered faction of the Fatah, which has been alternating designation from a terrorist group to an insurgent group throughout the years by both the US, Israel, and others in the international community. In this interview he stated, "You took our house and our mother and you killed our brother. We gave you everything and what did we get in return? A bullet in my mother's chest. We opened our home and you demolished it. Every week, 20-30 Israelis would come there to do theatre. We fed them. And afterward, not one of them picked up the phone. That is when we saw the real face of the left in Israel."[112] Zubedi began by using peaceful resistance means through theatre, but shifted to violence means after this experience. This trajectory, from cultural engagement to militant resistance, illustrates just how deeply personal loss and trauma can radicalize individuals. Andrew Silke highlighted how victim narratives are often central in the pathways that encourage an individual to progress into violent methods, suggesting that stories like Zubedi's are common.[113] Zubedi's story stands as a significant example of how state actions and perceived betrayals can push an individual to radicalization, reinforcing cycles of violent resistance that modern counterterrorism operations often fail to account for. Moreover, Fatah's overall framing of victimhood reflects Zubedi's story, where many actors expressed that there has been a slow erosion of general faith in peaceful avenues.

Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment Themes in Fatah Communications

Fatah had moderately higher of Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment among their communications, yielding just 29 statements out of 161 (18%). Of these statements, many referred to the continuation of limited civil liberties that Palestinians face, both in Gaza and the

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[112] Strobel, Warren P. *Detainee 035: Mohammed Nayim Farouq*. McClatchy Washington Bureau, 15 June 2008. Archived at *Wayback Machine*, https://web.archive.org/web/20080619034013/http://detainees.mcclatchydc.com/detainees/35. Accessed 11 June 2025.

[113] Silke, Andrew, editor. *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and Its Consequences*. Wiley, 2003.

West Bank. There were references to displacement, illegal settlements, and occupation which has lasted decades. Fatah typically does not reference the West directly, instead focuses their frustrations on Israel, but when it does, it typically contains an element of betrayal. Given Fatah's political standing, especially since Oslo, it likely is more hesitant to criticize the West while trying to gain its approval.

Retaliation/Revenge Themes in Fatah Communications

Fatah cited revenge only 14 times of the 161 statements collected (8.7%), ranking it moderate prominence within their communications. In these cases, however, Fatah frames Retaliation/Revenge as acts out of their control. Not once in the 14 statements do Fatah members actively encourage violent actions with statements of Retaliation/Revenge. Instead, they shift the narrative to state that 'Palestinians' will be driven to these actions if Israel does not stop its occupation or bombardment. This distancing allows Fatah to remain politically legitimate and it encourages cooperation from international actors who are otherwise hesitant to negotiate with militants. They frame Retaliation/Revenge as an inevitable consequence of continued occupation, a consequence that is out of their control and acted on by individuals outside of their group. This rhetoric serves two purposes: as previously stated, it preserves their diplomatic standing internationally, but it also appeals to domestic audiences who may view violent actions as justified.

Need for Significance Themes in Fatah Communications

Fatah referenced Need for Significance just 7 times out of 161 (4.4%), making it marginal, but not negligible. However the sources make this category slightly limited, as 6 of the statements came from one individual, Zakaria Zubedi, who was referenced above in the Victimhood/Trauma chapter. In a few of these statements he actually cited how he felt as if he lost significance within his community after being detained by Israel. Then when he got out, he helped orchestrated suicide bombings. When interviewed and asked about this tactic he stated, "So this is how suicide attacks happen. When people lose hope. When a suicide bomber decides to carry out an attack, he's fully convinced there is no more hope…Since we all feel that we are targeted, we

follow an Arabic saying, 'Don't die before showing you're a strong opponent'"[114] So while this data isn't significant in an applicable way, given its sourcing limitations, it still shows a further picture of one individual's story, an individual who was radicalized into violence to the extent of feeling like sacrifice or martyrdom was better than the hopelessness he described. This is a feeling that I believe the other groups relate to, even if not explicitly mentioned.

Collective Identity Themes in Fatah Communications

Fatah referred to Collective Identity only 6 times of the 161 statements collected (3.7%), showing significantly low prominence in their communications. Of these references they were primarily focused on the Palestinian cause. The in-group were the Palestinians and the outgroup Israelis, sometimes mentions of Americans given influential US/Israel political ties. However, Fatah did not frame the West as a whole as an out-group. Surprisingly, recent statements referred to support for the Palestinian cause outside of Palestine, how their cause has spread globally. Abbas Zaki, member of the Fatah's central committee noted in 2024, "We are now seven million here and seven million abroad. Those who are abroad are taking part in demonstrations, and the people here are taking part in this glorious feat"[115] This reaffirms their desire to be recognized internationally while maintaining their issue is with Israel alone, or possibly with states who fund Israel.

Unheard/Unmet Grievances Themes in Fatah Communications

Fatah made the most references to Unheard/Unmet Grievances, accounting for 43 of the 161 coded statements (26.7%). This is no surprise as Fatah is arguably the only group that has been remotely successful in participating in political processes towards achieving peace. Fatah has simply had more exposure to diplomacy and international actors, also for a longer history than the other actors, therefore they have years of experiencing this political frustration. Furthermore, the temporary success, followed by the downturn of events following the Oslo Accords sent an

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[114] Toomey, Christine. "Discussing the Politics of Murder: Christine Toomey Was Invited to Lunch with One of Israel's Most Wanted and Implacable Enemies, Zakaria Zubeidi, Whose Disciples Are Trained in the Cause of Martyrdom." *The Sunday Times*, 11 June 2006.
[115] "Fatah Central Committee Member: May Allah Bless October 7!" *MEMRI TV*, 14 Sept. 2024. https://www.memri.org/tv/fatah-central-committee-member-zaki-allah-bless-october-7-reshuffled-deck

important message to Fatah, that political peace processes, even ones that are considered highly successful, do not guarantee peace. Furthermore, in recent events, Fatah has grown increasingly frustrated with the international community for not intervening in Gaza. Lastly, there is a prevailing hopelessness in Palestinian society given the ongoing violence and lack of sight of any peaceful resolution, this is certain to radicalize vulnerable affected individuals. In an interview with Fatah's shadow leader, Samer Sinijlawi stated, "there is a lack of hope, a disappointment, on the Palestinian side. Palestinians today, they wake up every morning and they are confident that today is going to be worse than yesterday."[116] Unfortunately, it seems like until either Israel or the international community can truly listen and understand the plight of these peoples, there will only be more fighters created in the mess, even Fatah, a secular, relatively non-violent group in modern times, argues this. Due to source limitations, all Fatah communications were taken after 2006, two years after the death of Yassir Arafat, and the year they lost politically to the elected Hamas government, both of these events possibly contributing to this hopeless feeling towards diplomacy.

Internal Opposition Themes in Fatah Communications

Fatah was the reason to include this theme, they had the majority of statements, yielding 31 of the 161 statements included (19.3%). Most of these statements were aimed at Hamas, in which they frequently framed them as reckless or illegitimate. Fatah frequently invokes its own political history and status within the PLO to show a commitment to diplomacy that Hamas' militancy strategy lacks. In a recent press release with current PLO and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas, he calls Hamas "sons of dogs," and argues "since its coup against Palestinian national legitimacy in 2007, and its work throughout this period to separate the Gaza Strip from the West Bank and Jerusalem, causing six wars on Gaza - without exempting the occupation [Israel] of course from responsibility - has inflicted severe damage on the Palestinian cause"[117] This is part of a wider political strategy to demoralize, and thus delegitimize Hamas, in a fight over the Hearts and

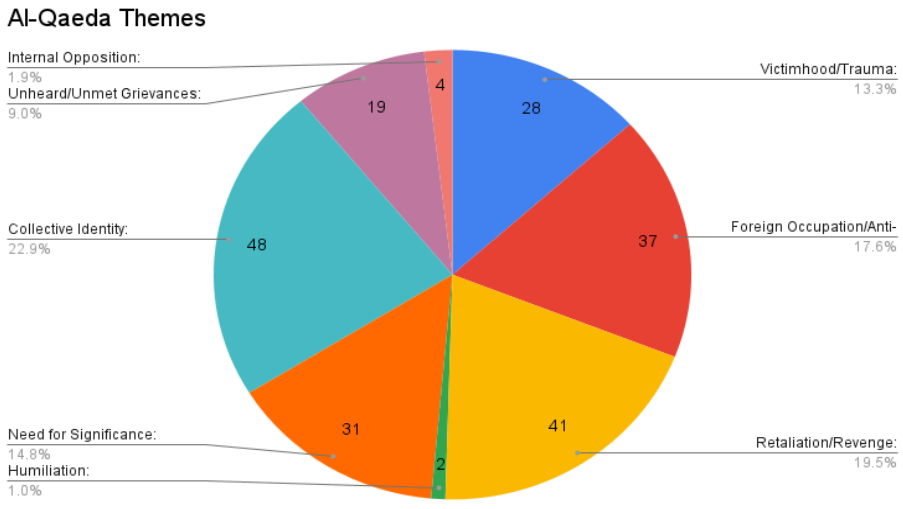
[116] Svetlova, Ksenia. "Interview with Shadow Fatah Leader Samer Sinijlawi." *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, Aug. 2024.
[117] Khalil, Naila. "PA President Abbas Demands 'Sons of Dogs' Hamas Free Captives." *The New Arab*, 23 Apr. 2025, www.newarab.com/news/pa-president-abbas-demands-sons-dogs-hamas-free-captives. Accessed 18 June 2025.

Minds of the Palestinian people. By arguing that Hamas is actively inflicting damage on the Palestinian cause by their violent actions, Fatah is still seeking to reclaim political authority. However, Hamas is not the only Internal Opposition that Fatah is facing. Even within the own party, there is dissent. Samer Sinijlawi is a shadow Fatah leader, who opposes Abbas as the leader of the PLO. He stated in a 2024 interview, "Ninety percent of the Palestinians are requesting that President Abbas leave political life, even better that he leave the country. If 90 percent are requesting this, they are in the opposition…President Abbas has been dealing with six different American presidents, nine different Israeli prime ministers, and he couldn't achieve anything with any of them. It means his strategy is broken."[118] Therefore, the instability within Palestine, but specifically Fatah is threefold: firstly opposition of the occupation, secondly, opposition to other political groups such as Hamas, and thirdly, opposition within their own party. This triple-layer opposition represents just how fragile politics within Palestine has become, Fatah now finds itself defending its legitimacy on multiple fronts. This perhaps is why Fatah's theme of Collective Identity was so low, because they feel separated in their own society, grasping for any sort of legitimacy it can be afforded.

[118] Svetlova, Ksenia. "Interview with Shadow Fatah Leader Samer Sinijlawi." *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, Aug. 2024.

5.3 Analysis of Al-Qaeda Communications.

Al-Qaeda is certainly the most ideologically driven and expansive group of the four by far. They prioritize discourse that centers global Jihad and Muslim unity, framing themselves consistently as worldwide victims, garnering sympathy and making them ripe for radicalization. Interestingly, they seem to utilize most of the themes fairly equally, except for Humiliation (1.0%), which is of marginal significance, and Internal Opposition (1.9%). The largest theme was Collective Identity (22.9%), followed by Retaliation/Revenge (19.5%), and Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment (17.6%). Al-Qaeda's dominant use of Collective Identity reflects their expansive and transnational motivations, making the most references to the Ummah and outsider groups such as the "Crusaders" or "Zionists". Their heavy reliance on Retaliation/Revenge reflects their worldview that their actions are justified as they morally balance the injustices and hypocrisy committed by the West. Their Need for Significance theme (14.8%) was slightly less prominent but fuelled with rhetoric that framed sacrifice as a divine or honorable act, further reflected in their heavy usage of sucicide attacks. They made even smaller reference to Unheard/Unmet Grievances but this was likely incidental as they are not a group who has made much effort in participating in diplomatic or political efforts and leaves that to the Taliban.



[119]

Figure 12: Circle graph showing value and percentage of Al-Qaeda's most prominent themes.

[119] Figure 12

Victimhood/Trauma Themes in Al-Qaeda Communications

Of Al-Qaeda's 210 statements, 28 referred to Victimhood/Trauma (13.3%). In these statements Al-Qaeda frames their victimhood as part of a wider attack on Muslims worldwide. They make explicit reference to Palestine, but also Iraq, Lebanon, Kashmir, and many other places.[120] This produces a pan-Islamic victimhood mentality, whether factual or not, that enables violent resistance across the region and globe. They use this to legitimize and justify their cause. In her book Stern argues, "Religious terrorism attempts to destroy moral ambiguities. We should be wary of succumbing to the extreme dualist view that the perpetrator is a manifestation of pure evil, rather than a suffering human beleaguered, as we are, by unmet aspirations, negation, and despair."[121] This victimhood set the foundation for the collective identity that spans as wide as religion in the Islamic world.

Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment in Al-Qaeda Communications

Al-Qaeda employed the theme of Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment 37 times out of 210 (17.6%) with discourse that is both expansive and ideologically charged. When Al-Qaeda spoke of Foreign Occupation, it referred to not just the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, but also Israeli occupation in Palestine. The current leader, Sayf al-Adl even recently remarked in 2024, "the continuation of the genocide [in Gaza] calls for the Islamic peoples to strike all Zionist interests (both Western and Jewish) in all Islamic lands…this strike must be a painful one as we are too late in doing what is required of us."[122] This was a statement that triggered many codes, Victimhood/Trauma (genocide reference), Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment (genocide;Zionist interests in Islamic lands), Revenge/Retaliation ("we are too late in doing what is required of us"), and lastly Collective Identity (references to Gaza despite being located and fighting for Afghanistan). This rhetoric follows the same narrative that Al-Qaeda used in its statements of Victimhood/Trauma in which they frame their experience as a wider Muslim

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[120] Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, 2002 - *"Transcript of Bin Laden's October Interview." CNN*, 5 Feb. 2002, http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/south/02/05/binladen.transcript/.
[121] Stern, Jessica. *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. Ecco, 2004.
[122] Roggio, Bill, and Caleb Weiss. "Al Qaeda Leader Calls Foreign Fighters to Afghanistan." *The Long War Journal*, 8 June 2024, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2024/06/al-qaeda-leader-calls-foreign-fighters-to-afghanistan.php.

experience, that expands outside of just Afghanistan. Unlike Hamas or Fatah that refer to specific societal and political grievances caused by the occupation, Al-Qaeda speaks in a civilizational binary, in which they frame the occupation as Muslim countries versus the West.

Retaliation Revenge Themes in Al-Qaeda Communications

Al-Qaeda referenced Retaliation/Revenge a significant 41 times of the 210 statements (19.5%), making it their second largest theme within their communications. In these statements, Al-Qaeda, similar to all the groups, frequently referred to themselves as victims defending themselves. However, there was another narrative alongside this, one of hypocrisy. In many statements, Al-Qaeda members would state how the US could kill their people, so it was only right they could do it too. One Al-Qaeda member, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, who was extradited to the US and facing trial stated, "Never Islam give me green light to kill peoples. Killing, as in the Christianity, Jews, and Islam, are prohibited. But there are exception of rule when you are killing people in Iraq. You said we have to do it. It's up to you to call it what you want . But other side are calling you oppressors. If now we were living in the Revolutionary War and George Washington was being arrested through Britain. For sure he, they would consider him enemy combatant. But American they consider him as hero."[123] This rhetorical narration highlights feelings of double standards and hypocrisy from members of Al-Qaeda. In other statements, members would reference Iraq or Gaza, casting themselves as resistance fighters being subjected to worldwide imperial violence. By invoking historical analogies (like the American Revolutionary war and Iraq war), Al-Qaeda attempts to argue for some sort of moral symmetry. They use this to delegitimize and demoralize their enemy. Of course, Al-Qaeda also uses Retaliation/Revenge as a call to arms in their ideological mission of expanding Jihad, but they also use it strategically to highlight Western hypocrisy.

[123]Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN 10024: Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, 10 March 2007." *U.S. Department of Defense*, 10 Mar. 2007, https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/78034-isn-10024-khalid-shaikh-mohammed-combatant/394f687ce3c5e017/full.pdf.

Need for Significance Themes in Al-Qaeda Communications

In Al-Qaeda communications the theme Need for Significance accounted for 31 of the 210 coded statements (14.8%). This aligns with their Jihadist ideology, which frames personal sacrifice as noble and honorable in the name of the collective Islam community. This relies closely with their global recruitment strategy, which attempts to transform ordinary Muslims into radicals through religious or political justifications. Martyrdom is portrayed as a form of existential elevation, where martyrs will meet and be rewarded by Allah. It offers individuals a chance to regain personal autonomy at the expense of sacrifice, a chance to make their suffering mean something significant. It is arguably the best rhetorical recruitment strategy among the 8 themes for this given group. Al-Qaeda utilizes Kruglanski's theory the most efficiently, their language involves assigning divine purpose and a permanent relief to individuals facing immense suffering. The group's ability to frame violent acts as spiritually meaningful and religiously righteous transcends any military capability the West could use in combat. Comparatively, Al-Qaeda uses this Need for Significance to call Muslims to more than just martyrdom. It is also utilized to call for Ummah, or Muslim identity worldwide. It is used to unite Muslims in their oppression, religion, and in general life. However, in this context it has been framed as a call to resist Western occupation or imperialism. In one 2021 radio broadcast from Al Sehab Media, known as being run by Al-Qaeda, they state, "So our dear Ummah! It is time for you to prepare for the next stage of the struggle, the way for which has been paved by the victory of the defiant Afghan nation," as Sahab's men advise, "With the help of Allah, this historic victory will open the way for the Muslim masses to achieve liberation from the despotic rule of tyrants who have been imposed by the West on the Islamic World."[124] This is notable for two reasons, firstly it shows a willingness to accept the Taliban and their authority, it reaffirms that Al-Qaeda is not a group looking for political significance. Secondly, it urges Muslims around the world to follow in the Taliban's footsteps for "liberation," and stresses the necessity of struggling in order to achieve their goals. Therefore, Al-Qaeda is certainly the best example of Kruglanski's Need for

[124] Joscelyn, Thomas. "Al Qaeda Praises Taliban's 'Historic Victory' in Afghanistan." *Long War Journal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 31 Aug. 2021, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/08/al-qaeda-praises-talibans-historic-victory-in-afghanistan.php. Accessed 18 June 2025.

Significance theory of the four groups, as it employs a secondary meaning of significance that extends beyond martyrdom, allowing for more individuals to participate in the ways they wish to. They both have the same effect, however, it combines spiritual destiny with political struggle, allowing the group to make a compelling argument for resistance through sacrifice.

Collective Identity Themes in Al-Qaeda's Communications

The theme Collective Identity was the most significant in Al-Qaeda's communications, with 48 of the 210 coded statements (22.9%) in this theme. One thing that became immediately prominent in the rhetoric was the transnational identity of Al-Qaeda, an identity that stretched further than separate factions or countries; an identity of victimhood, occupation, grievances. Osama Bin Laden in one of his famous interviews directly after 9/11, referred to the Palestinian more than he spoke about Afghanistan, or Iraq, or Pakistan, he argued the Palestinian cause united them all and their liberation was a sacred duty that united Muslims across borders and under Allah.[125] That is because the victimhood that terrorists feel under occupation, legitimate or not, is a shared identity that allows them to connect with different extremist factions in other circumstances. Adding in the religious aspect, there is an even stronger, immortal identity shared by Jihadist fighters. This theme for this group is very similar to their Need for Significance, as mentioned before, many statements were double coded as they referenced the Ummah, Muslims versus Crusaders, collective struggle for liberation. The language from this group paints Muslims as a unified body that must rise against the West, notably against the US. Al-Qaeda's use of Collective Identity rhetoric is crucial in establishing a transnational Jihad. In many ways they have been extremely successful, having Al-Qaeda factions in many parts of the world. It has operated in a number of countries, including and not limited to: Sudan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, the Philippines, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and the Kashmiri region of India and the Chechnyan region of Russia.[126] This spans three continents and it can only safely be assumed there are Al-Qaeda members in the other continents of the world operating overtly. Therefore,

[125] Bin Laden, Osama. Interviewed by Tayseer Al-Ouni. *Al Jazeera* (Kabul), 21 Oct. 2001. Transcript reposted by CNN, 5 Feb. 2002.
[126] "Al Qaeda | Inside The Terror Network | FRONTLINE." *PBS*, WGBH, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/network/alqaeda/indictment.html.

Al-Qaeda has been one of, if not the most efficient and expansive terrorist organizations in the world. This certainly has to do with the identity that has been carefully created by leaders such as Bin Laden, Al-Zawahiri, and currently Sayf al-Adl. I believe it is best summed up plainly in an interview with Al-Zawahiri in which he states, "It is a global Crusader war against Muslims, and there is no dividing line between the local and the global battle."[127]

Unheard/Unmet Grievances in Al-Qaeda Communications

Al-Qaeda had 19 statements of the 210 cited (9.1%), making it of lesser prominence but still notable. Al-Qaeda's mentions of frustrations had less to do with political frustration and were more related to Victimhood/Trauma, with many statements overlapping. They argue how they have been showing the world, and the West, their trauma for years and it's gone unacknowledged, or worse accepted. In one overlapping statement, Bin Laden stated, "And that day, it was confirmed to me that oppression and the intentional killing of innocent women and children is a deliberate American policy. Destruction is freedom and democracy, while resistance is terrorism and intolerance…This is the message which I sought to communicate to you in word and deed, repeatedly, for years before September 11th."[128] In this sentiment, Al-Qaeda is stating that their violence is more than reactive, it's also communicative. Instead of Fatah or Hama's grievances which are more political, Al-Qaeda frames their grievances as existential. They again frame their violence as inevitable given their Muslim struggle, using the world's silence as proof of hypocrisy and justification for their global Jihad mission.

Internal Opposition Themes in Al-Qaeda Communications

Al-Qaeda mentions Internal Opposition a small 4 times of the 210 statements (1.9%), making it a significantly small factor in the group's discourse. In these four statements, all were attempts at separating themselves from the Taliban, stating they had no collusion with one another. This

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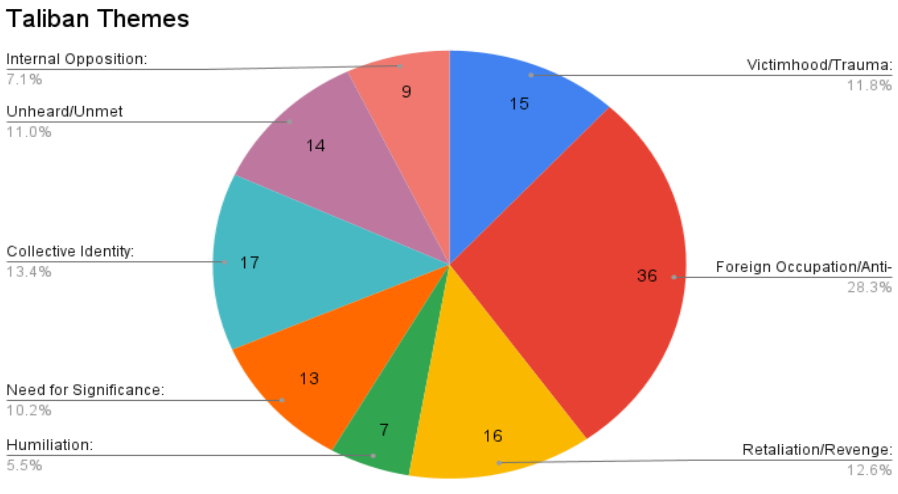
[127] Joscelyn, Thomas. "Ayman al-Zawahiri Defends 9/11 Hijackings in Anniversary Address." The Long War Journal, 11 Sept. 2019, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/09/ayman-al-zawahiri-defends-9-11-hijackings-in-anniversary-address.php.

[128] Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, 2004 - *"Full Transcript of Bin Ladin's Speech." Al Jazeera*, 1 Nov. 2004, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/11/1/full-transcript-of-bin-ladins-speech.

distancing allows Al-Qaeda to preserve its ideological and religious roots and avoid political entanglement. However, Al-Qaeda has not shown any desire in their communications to wish to participate in politics, therefore there is not much Internal Opposition from them and the Taliban. Furthermore, given the Taliban's standing as the current political representation and dominant militant group in Afghanistan, it is of better use to Al-Qaeda not to oppose them and to stay in good relations allowing their operations in the country to continue.

5.4 Analysis of Taliban Communications.

Lastly, the Taliban, narrates themselves primarily as a post-insurgency, nationalist, governmental group. They frame themselves as the legitimate authority after occupation and have made attempts at diluting their language, as to be accepted more so in the international community. The Taliban also had fairly even distribution among the themes except with Foreign Occupation (28.3%) which was significantly more prominent than the rest. Following that theme is Collective Identity (13.4%), similar to Al-Qaeda, but instead framed in more a nationalist rhetoric than religious. Then, Retaliation/Revenge (12.6%) in which they attempt to justify their prior actions before the government takeover in 2021 and use it as a foundation for building legitimacy now that they're in power. Victimhood/Trauma (11.8%) and Unheard/Unmet Grievances (11%) followed, both with the same strategy of the former, to legitimize their authority and gain international recognition. With less prominence was Need for Significance (10.2%), in which they framed their government as divinely mandated. Lastly was Internal Opposition (7.1%) where they attempted to distance themselves from Al-Qaeda and more extremist groups. Humiliation was more prominent in this group than all the others but was heavily skewed by one actor so it cannot be taken as representative of the whole group.



[129]

Figure 13: Circle graph showing value and percentage of the Taliban's most prominent themes.

[129] Figure 13

Victimhood/Trauma Themes in Taliban Communications

The Taliban cited Victimhood/Trauma just 15 out of the 127 Taliban statements recorded (11.8%). Qualitatively similar to Al-Qaeda, many of the statements the Taliban used themes of Victimhood/Trauma were when referring to themselves or other Muslims in other countries. If not, then during the former regime. Since the 2021 government takeover, they do not often refer to themselves as victims, but as victors or survivors. In a 2021 Taliban press conference, member Zabihullah Mujahid used this victimhood and trauma as justification for their coup stating, "They wanted to abuse the name of the Islamic Emirate, to enter houses, or to harass the people, to steal. So we, therefore, instructed our forces to enter Kabul to ensure, to stop all this and to ensure security."[130] In a way, US operations became central in their victim narrative, legitimizing their violent actions as necessary resistance. This shift in tone also reflects a broader shift in their identity, from resistance to governance. While past trauma remains part of their narrative, the present discourse has centered on restoration and building legitimacy. In contrast to the other groups, the Taliban now uses trauma retrospectively as a justification to their rule rather than a call to continued resistance.

Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Themes in Taliban Communications

The Taliban also recorded 36 mentions out of 127 (28.3%) for Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment, making it significantly prominent in their discourse. Their statements also frequently included mentions of Palestine and other Muslim countries facing occupation, showing a qualitative similarity with their more extremist counterpart (Al-Qaeda). However, comparatively, they referenced US invasion in Afghanistan more, before and after 2021. Before 2020, there were references to feeling frustrated about the previous year's election. In 2019, incumbent President Ghani won reelection, but only after months of delays, in which the International Election Committee (IEC) cited low voter turnout and allegations of fraud.[131] This sentiment was apparent in the words of the Taliban, and perhaps a factor in the low voter turnout. In 2020,

[130] Zabihullah Mujahid, Taliban, 2021 - "Transcript of Taliban's First News Conference in Kabul." *Al Jazeera*, 17 Aug. 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul.
[131] Al Jazeera. "Afghanistan's Presidential Election: Ashraf Ghani Declared Winner." *Al Jazeera*, 18 Feb. 2020, www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/2/18/afghanistans-presidential-election-ashraf-ghani-declared-winner.

Taliban spokesperson Mullah Mohammed Omar said, "First I want to tell you this is not an election, it is selection. People are selected from the White House. This is just a joke and we ask from our Muslim brothers and our population not to take part in this election because this is people selected from the White House before the election."[132] This discourse is significantly qualitatively different from Al-Qaeda's, whose primary use of Foreign Occupation discourse involved allegations of genocide and a call to self defense. The Taliban, alternatively, was more focused on the illegitimacy of the government due to American/Western influence. So while Al-Qeada leverages occupation rhetoric to justify global Jihad, the Taliban uses it to frame themselves as the sole representative of Afghanistan. Their Anti-West Sentiment is more politically charged and strategically utilized, aimed at gaining national control rather than encouraging cycles of violence. This does not mean, however, that they are nonviolent, rather Omar continued his statement to conclude, "If they want to send 20,000 to start a new campaign, this is a war and we will see the war and make our policy. We also have the good players; we have the good experts of the war,"[133] reaffirming their role as both a legitimate governmental organization and an insurgency.

Retaliation/Revenge Themes in Taliban Communications

The Taliban also cited Retaliation/Revenge just 16 times of 127 statements (12.6%), making it of lesser prominence. However, when used, the Taliban was more likely to place individual blame: on Bush, on US troops, on the Pentagon, rather than on the West or United States as a whole. They also framed their actions in the war as inevitable, but showed in recent years a renewed motivation to not fight again, saying things like, "we did not choose this war. It was forced upon us. I hope that we will never have to suffer these things we suffered during those years again."[134] The Taliban's rhetoric remains rooted in national experience and framed through a lens of reluctancy. This, again, reflects their shifting role from insurgent during wartime to political

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[132] Robertson, Nic. "Afghan Taliban Spokesman: 'We Will Win the War.'" *CNN*, 5 May 2009, edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/05/05/afghan.taliban.transcript/index.html. Accessed 18 June 2025.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Bin Javaid, Osama. "Q&A: Anas Haqqani on One Year of Taliban Rule." *Al Jazeera*, 14 Aug. 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/14/taliban-leader-anas-haqqani-speaks-to-al-jazeera.

authority during times of relative stability for their organization. The Taliban, in this theme, shows a desire to move past conflict, to move past Retaliation/Revenge.

Need for Significance Themes in Taliban Communications

The Taliban referenced Need for Significance 13 times out of 127 statements (10.2%), making it of lesser significance. The Taliban primarily used this theme to justify their political standing as something that was divinely chosen by Allah. They also utilized it to argue for Sharia law before and after 2021. When references to martyrdom were made, they were framed as an inevitable, but still noble sacrifice, one that has roots in their religion. Mullah Mohammad Omar stated, "This is from the history of Islam from the days of Prophet Mohammed, from the history of those days. They sacrificed some people, friends of Mohammed, for the sake of Islam. This is part of the jihad and part of the fighting."[135] The Taliban's rhetoric in this theme blends religion with contemporary political legitimacy, enforcing a claim of divine mandate.

Collective Identity Themes in Taliban Communications

The Taliban reference Collective Identity 17 times of the 127 statements collected in this theme (13.4%). These statements were often in conjunction with rhetoric of national sovereignty and Afghan liberation. Their discourse emphasizes that the Afghan people are a distinct group with just a recent history of resistance for the past two decades. Unlike Al-Qaeda, similar to other themes, the Taliban's use of collective identity is locally grounded and not expansive. The Taliban also did not reference collective identity primarily as religious, despite their Sharia law, their construction of identity was nationalistic and ethnic. In one 2020 statement Taliban Co-Founder Mullah Abdul Baradar states, "If there's no U.S., we [will] for sure reach an agreement between ourselves, because they are Afghans and we are Afghans."[136] While their political authority is contested now, even within Afghanistan, the Taliban still leverages this shared Afghan identity to frame themselves as the rightful governing authority.

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[135] Robertson, Nic. "Afghan Taliban Spokesman: 'We Will Win the War.'" *CNN*, 5 May 2009, edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/05/05/afghan.taliban.transcript/index.html.
[136] Baradar, Mullah Abdul Ghani. "Flashback: What a Taliban Co-Founder Told FRONTLINE in 2020." FRONTLINE, WGBH/PBS, 3 Aug. 2021.

Unheard/Unmet Grievances in Taliban Communications

The Taliban cited grievances 14 times in the 127 statements sourced (11%). In these statements, there was much overlap between their statements in the theme of Unheard/Unmet Grievances with their statements in the Victimhood/Trauma theme. However, the Taliban used more politically correct language to describe their frustration with the hypocrisy of the international community. In a 2022 interview with Taliban leader, Anas Haqqani, he states, "You seem to have forgotten that we ourselves were attacked by the U.S. under the pretext of human rights. Yet we are the true flag-bearers of human rights" and "We are not responsible for that, but rather the international community is, the Americans are. This is tantamount to the collective punishment of our people. Why doesn't the international community cooperate with us?"[137] These statements reflect the ongoing effort of the Taliban to reframe themselves as a legitimate governing body, one that has been unfairly excluded from the international community and a victim of hypocrisy. The invoke language of human rights and collective punishments, two prevalent concepts within the West, possibly signalling an adaptation of language in an attempt to be included.

Internal Opposition Themes in Taliban Communications

The Taliban mentions Internal Oppositions only 9 times of the 127 statements collected (7.1%). In the majority of these statements, it involved the Taliban blaming current struggles as an ongoing repair from the previous US-backed government. The few other statements were attempts to separate from Al-Qaeda, stating the Taliban would not allow their operations to occur in Afghanistan under their rule, likely an attempt to appeal to the international community. So while Palestinian groups have immense Internal Opposition currently, the Taliban faces a sort of historical Internal Opposition, attempting to rebuild itself after a perceived failed government in which it took over. Their rhetoric focuses on post-conflict restoration and national unity, rather than openly addressing internal challenges they may be facing.

[137] Anas Haqqani, Taliban, 2022 - Bin Javaid, Osama. "Q&A: Anas Haqqani on One Year of Taliban Rule." *Al Jazeera*, 14 Aug. 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/14/taliban-leader-anas-haqqani-speaks-to-al-jazeera.

5.5 Limitations of Findings.

Terrorist and insurgent communications cannot be taken as uniform, certainly individuals may be motivated by distinctly different factors, some of which may not even be recognized by the actor themselves. One suicide bomber may commit an attack as an act of martyrdom representing a Need for Significance, while another may be driven to it in rage or grief after a personal loss resulting in Victimhood/Trauma. Religious and sociopolitical factors usually dominate the narratives, but as the literature would argue, psychological factors play an important hidden role. All this makes thematic categorization inherently reductive, it attempts to capture patterns, not universal truths. That is why this research remained confined to just four groups within only two contexts in a fixed time period. While the groups proved, as anticipated, to have significantly different communications, and thus, motivations, the themes were still consistent across all of them. This suggests that terrorist and insurgent discourse uses similar rhetoric when addressing the public, even when such groups diverge on context or background; or even strategy or ideology. This raises further questions about if these discursive choices are subconscious, arising from the psychological effects cited before, or if they are calculated, reflecting an awareness in what mobilizes support and encourages radicalization.

A second limitation was present throughout the entire study, which was anticipated, in that almost all of the communications needed to be translated from their original language, primarily Arabic, into English. These translations were already conducted by the interviewers or media stations in which they appeared, however it must be noted that between any two languages, specific expression or tone can be lost in translation. Translation inevitably produces a possibility of misunderstanding, especially in such emotionally driven communication. However, given the credibility of the producers of such communications, it can be safely utilized with this limitation mentioned.

Thirdly, this study made every attempt possible to prioritize both quality with quantity. All sources were vetted and double checked for credibility and relevance, but the study itself had quite strict restraints which made sourcing a difficult task. The study focused on group communications post 2001, only in Afghanistan and Palestine. These parameters proved difficult

for the Al-Qaeda communications since it does operate as a transnational organization and many of the actors who do speak publicly are from other factions fighting for another country, these were not sourced. The study leaned heavily on media interviews, public speeches, or broadcast/legal transcripts, many of which were collected by secondhand sources instead of produced by the actors themselves. However, I ensured that only direct quotations were coded into data. It was of utmost importance to only use direct quotations as I found it imperative to not include statements that have been diluted through Western narration.

Furthermore, because of these limitations, a moderate amount of sources had to be found through digital archives, such as the Wayback Machine or others. This wasn't a problem for quality, but does highlight how fragile this material is. Many social media or internet platforms will restrict or ban these actors from using their websites to communicate to the public, reasonably so, given the radicalizing nature of these communications. However, it does present a problem in academia, when open communication such as these allow for a wealth of knowledge. Thus, the field of terrorism research proves to be increasingly reliant on second-hand sources, many of which only after being approved by governments or corporations, and future research may find itself confined to similar sourcing limitations. Former senior CIA analyst and chief of the Bin Laden Issue Station, Michael Scheuer, stated: "Western media have made no consistent effort to publish Bin Laden's statements, thereby failing to give their audience the words that put his thoughts and actions in cultural and historical context...Bin Laden has been precise in telling America the reasons he is waging war on us. None of the reasons has anything to do with our freedom, liberty and democracy but everything to do with US policies and actions in the Muslim world."[138] This quote highlights the importance of accessing first-hand sources, not in any attempt to justify or sympathize with terrorism, but to understand it so we can better combat it in ways that won't further reinforce it.

Lastly, a final limitation arises within the actors themselves, specifically in the group comparisons. Thematic coding was applied fairly equally across all the groups, however it cannot account for the group or individual actors' media access, literacy rate, or individual

[138] Bin Laden, Osama. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden.* Edited by Bruce Lawrence, Verso, 2005.

communication preferences. Certainly it was seen that some actors are more or less sophisticated than the rest, such as group leaders. As well, some actors were more willing and enthusiastic to communicate, while others were more hesitant, resulting in different quantities of codes from different actors.

Despite these limitations, the findings still offer meaningful insight into terrorist and insurgent communications, namely in how these groups perceive themselves, justify their actions, and strategically communicate their motivations to the public. It shows that while the strategy and ideology of these groups vastly differ, the rhetoric and discourse present shows patterns that can be useful in cooperating with or combatting them. It also suggests ways that we can begin to rethink counterterrorism.

Chapter 6 - Discussing Counterterrorism; a Conversation on the Importance of Disaggregation and Political Inclusion.

The previous chapters have demonstrated that many terrorist and insurgent actors are not acting out of blind hatred or irrational violence. Nor are they naive to the effects of their communications, using them strategically to enforce rhetoric, self-perception, and create a public identity. By drawing on 627 coded statements from Hamas, Fatah, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban, this study has shown that themes like Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment, Unheard/Unmet Grievances, Victimhood/Trauma, Retaliation/Revenge, and Collective Identity dominate the discourse. There are two equally interesting explanations for this: either these are strategic uses of rhetoric to control the narration of the conflict they're in, or, these narrations are the true motivators in the minds of these actors - whether they are aware of them or not. In other words, these themes may be conscious or subconscious, the data cannot answer that, but does question it. The literature already suggests that the aggregation of these groups, and even of individual members to their own group, is harmful. The discourse data collected further argues this as it shows that each group has its own rhetoric, themes, and narratives that drive motivation and justifications for violence. Therefore, we must treat these groups differently instead of applying a blanket counterterrorism approach to all groups and individuals.

Despite this suggestion from the literature, current counterterrorism operations and frameworks embraced by the US, Israel and the international community, still choose to prioritize heavily militarized responses, occupation, aggregation, and political exclusion, only negotiating when there seems to be no other option (such as Israel with the hostages taken in 2023). These strategies either blatantly ignore, or at minimum, severely diminish what the actors themselves are telling us. Scholars like Marsha Crenshaw and Jessica Stern have argued that terrorism is frequently a product of calculation, not solely a consequence of extremist ideology. It raises the question, which came first: did a pre-existing extremist ideology push them to this calculation, or did these actors calculate that extremism was the best path forward? Contemporary counterterrorism operations fail to truly listen and understand the "why" embedded in terrorist

and insurgent communications, dooming all actors to repeat the same cycles of violence, producing further destabilization and grievances that were the primary reason for their actions in the first place.

This chapter will argue that effective counterterrorism must begin with mutual understanding of these groups and the individuals within them. Firstly, we must understand the true goals of each and question if compromise is possible. Do these groups really want to spread violence or are they instead reacting to violence and instability? Secondly, we must challenge our own Western bias and assumptions, are these groups really comparable? Is it efficient to use the same tactics with each of them when their communications are so different? Using the thematic findings of this study, this chapter will now revisit the case studies and suggest alternative approaches that prioritize what these actors have been telling us.

6.1 Afghanistan Group Disaggregation in Light of Terrorism-Insurgent Discourse Analysis.

As the case study before showed, Afghanistan was originally invaded by the US with the goal to dismantle Al-Qaeda and overthrow the Taliban. It was a retaliatory move with clear military objectives, fuelled with emotion after the shock of 9/11. While the literature stressed the importance of disaggregation, the US never fully disaggregated from Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, despite their significant differences. Despite this, the data from the Internal Opposition theme revealed a desire from both groups to be acknowledged as separate entities. Yet, the US lumped them together under a similar umbrella of “enemy.” This oversimplification ignored the key differences in which both groups were communicating. Most notably, Al-Qaeda viewed the invasion as part of a wider Muslim struggle, where the Taliban saw it more as a traditional occupation and political grievance. By separating the groups in the ways they wanted to be separated, perhaps the US could have had different relations with each one. Not that the conflict wouldn’t have occured, but that maybe it could have developed differently. We know from the government takeover in 2021 that the US severely undermined the Taliban and their significant

motivations to return to power, while simultaneously hyperfocusing on Al-Qaeda's extremist nature and labeling many individuals as similar.

Kilcullen further argued for the disaggregation of insurgent fighters within each group themselves, which the US failed to do.[139] While Al-Qaeda in its rhetoric proved to be more of "hardcore ideologues," the Taliban communications showed more of "opportunistic fighters." The hardcore ideologies, as Kilcullen argues, are less likely to be deradicalized, and warrant a larger military response, which the US did deliver. However, the opportunistic fighters can be negotiated with, which the US did not do. This shortcoming often meant that Taliban members were faced with the same hostility as those in Al-Qaeda. As a result, more moderate or opportunistic fighters, who may have been driven by themes such as Unheard/Unmet Grievances or Internal Opposition, were then pushed into more violent means to achieve their goals. Rather than attempting to disaggregate, the US relied on a blanket counterterrorism/counterinsurgency model, which inadvertently may have increased levels of Collective Identity and Victimhood narratives that these groups used to recruit, among the other themes.

Additionally, statements from Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri revealed that Al-Qaeda was more extremist and focused on Retaliation/Revenge, which the US responded to. However, other statements in this study, such as those by Anas Haqqani reveal that the Taliban sees itself as a legitimate political actor who has been a victim of occupation and international hypocrisy. The US' refusal to engage meaningfully with moderate groups or lower level actors only validated this perception. Mark Perry argued for open communication and negotiation with these groups in order to prevent them from further radicalizing or turning to more violent paths.[140] By failing to heed this advice, the US affirmed the Taliban's preconceived notion that peaceful negotiation was never on the table for their group. This reflects what Kilcullen and Mill cited as the "original sin" of Afghanistan, in that the Bush administration refused to even speak to the Taliban after 2001.[141] This binary framing from the US side, enemy or civilian, fails to account for mid-level

[139] Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
[140] Perry, Mark. *Talking to Terrorists: Why America Must Engage with Its Enemies*. Basic Books, 2010.
[141] Kilcullen, David, and Mills, Greg. *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan.* Hurst Publishers, 2021.

actors, who may have the capability for more violence. The US categorized all resistance under the enemy umbrella, ignoring key thematic distinctions. This may have played a significant factor in the collapse of US goals in Afghanistan in 2021 after troops withdrew. Had the US strategically disaggregated groups, openly communicated with them, and acknowledged and sympathized with their grievances, the instability may not have resulted in the level we saw in 2021 and that continues today.

US and Taliban Relations

The Taliban presents itself as a post-insurgency nationalistic group whose primary goal is governmental control. Given the discourse analysis on Taliban communications, the Taliban prioritized narratives of Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment significantly more than other themes and Collective Identity following with similar significance. However, all the other themes were comparable in size (between 10.2%-12.6% prominence of each), minus Internal Opposition and Humiliation (which has been deemed negligible anyways). This suggests that operations that are best receptive to the Taliban and promote engagement must not be seen as further foreign interference or increasing power of the occupation. It must instead provide a pathway in which foreign occupation will not continue and instead head control back to the Afghan people themselves. However, the low levels of Internal Opposition suggests that the Taliban doesn't frequently condemn or challenge Al-Qaeda in their communications, therefore, the Taliban's opposition is outward, not inward. Given the US's initial goal of eradicating Al-Qaeda and terrorism, engagement from the Taliban's side may need to include more condemnation of Al-Qaeda if the US was to release control (this is a recommendation in hindsight, as we know how the conflict has since unfolded). Ultimately, the US's operation points to a missed opportunity for the US to have framed negotiations not as concessions, but as steps towards Afghan self-determination, which likely would've been received positively as responses to their narratives against Foreign Occupation and for Collective Identity. Moreover, statements like those from Anas Haqqani show the group trying to position itself as politically legitimate, not expansive or extremist. This distinction could've been better leveraged by the US by choosing to engage with figures like Haqqani from these groups, in this way the US might

have been able to shift the internal drivers of Taliban rhetoric and narrative. While the Taliban did not prioritize themes of Internal Opposition in their communications, the US may have been able to simultaneously build it's relationship with the Taliban and delegitimize actors like Al-Qaeda if negotiations with Taliban included them public rhetorical shifts (such as condemning Al-Qaeda and refusing their protection in Afghanistan). Even subtle discursive changes like this would have signalled not just the US, but to the international community, that the Taliban was capable of operating within a larger political process of negotiation, compromise, and engagement, rather than remaining embedded in a permanent resistance identity.

US and Al-Qaeda Relations

Al-Qaeda has proven itself to be ideologically driven with the goal of expansion. Given the discourse analysis on Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda prioritized rhetoric revolving around Collective Identity and Retaliation/Revenge more than any of the other themes. Notably, they had the highest references to Need for Significance as well. This suggests that engagement and cooperation with Al-Qaeda must be conducted much more cautiously. Al-Qaeda, of all the groups, shows to be the most ideologically driven. As warned by Kilcullen, these hardcore ideologues are the least likely to be reasoned with or cooperate.[142] If it was up to Kilcullen, these groups would be responded to with military response, as has been the case in Afghanistan. However, as we have seen, this response has only fuelled grievances and terrorism (and Al-Qaeda) is still flourishing. Therefore, while military response may be necessary to some extent, there must be a dual approach with groups like Al-Qaeda that acknowledges those individuals who joined for other reasons. Unlike the Taliban, Al-Qaeda allows little rhetorical room for compromise. Instead, what the US failed to do was disaggregate the core ideologues from sympathizers drawn in by the emotional victimhood or the collective identity-based appeal. Rather than pursuing purely a militant counterinsurgency operation, the US may have benefited from targeting the group's rhetorical legitimacy. This could have involved boots on the ground prioritizing engagement with the general population in a way that didn't feel occupational,

[142] Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

disrupting propaganda that framed sacrifice and martyrdom as significant, or supporting alternative ideas of collective identity that didn't involve an us versus them existential threat mentality. By failing to challenge Al-Qaeda's narrative monopoly in the region, their rhetoric appealed to those affected by the operations in Afghanistan and the group's ideologies spread faster than the US could eradicate it.

6.2 Political Inclusion and Communication as an Alternative Pathway to Peace in Palestine.

The Israeli counterterrorism strategy has long relied on fear-based/aggressive deterrence and a total military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. However the statements taken from the two distinct Palestinian actors, Fatah and Hamas, suggest that these strategies do not deter the threat of terrorism or insurgency, and instead may fuel it. The two largest themes were the same for both groups: Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment and Unheard/Unmet Grievances. While disaggregation will still prove useful in Palestine, what is equally important is simply opening pathways for communication with *all* the actors.

While all groups were Islamic, the Palestinian groups had lower rhetoric signalling Need for Significance or Collective Identity; While Hamas is considered more religious than Fatah, its communication made significantly less references compared to Al-Qaeda, or even the Taliban. Instead, both groups blend religious, political, and emotional language in their communications. Jessica Stern specifically warned that ignoring the political context of terrorism can be strategically disastrous.[143] This is particularly true in Gaza, where religion plays a lesser role as there seems to be no political or diplomatic means to end the immense civilian suffering, thus promoting radicalization and justifications for violent resistance as a political tool. This led to high levels of Unheard/Unmet Grievances themes in both the groups. To compound the feeling, the US consistently vetoes United Nations resolutions aimed at holding Israel accountable,

[143] Stern, Jessica. *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. Ecco, 2004.

furthering both Hamas' and Fatah's feelings that the international system is stacked against Palestinians.[144]

Scott Atran, a leading anthropologist in terrorism studies, similarly argues that actors such as Hamas or Fatah are products of their environment, and not driven by solely ideological or religious motivations. In his book, *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists*, Atran argues, similar to Perry, that open communication is the best defense against terrorism, and we must make attempts to understand these groups. Atran states, "It's about attempting to demystify terrorism, lessen our fears, and reduce the dangers of violent overreaction by talking with people in the field—especially terrorists, but also ordinary folk who know them, support them, and can easily become them…People almost never kill and die just for the Cause, but also for each other: for their group…their brotherhood, fatherland, motherland, homeland, totem, or tribe."[145] This sentiment also suggests that terrorism and insurgency is a sort of selfless act, at least in the eyes of the actors, who believe they are fighting for a cause greater than them (their brotherhood, motherland, tribe, etc, as Atran stated).[146] This tracks with all of the themes coded (minus perhaps Humiliation). Victimhood/Trauma was sometimes referred to as detention the individual faced, but was more so referenced with the loss of loved ones. Foreign Occupation referred to the collective restriction the community faces. Unheard/Unmet Grievances reflected the needs of the general population of civilians, not for the fighters themselves. Even the most controversial theme of Retaliation/Revenge, which typically involved statements of taking another's life to balance some perceived injustice, was framed as a selfless act by the terrorists and insurgents. This belief frames violence as a moralized sacrifice, not a barbaric act. Atran's insight challenges this Western narrative of violent resistance which typically treats terrorism as pathological or devient. If fighters are driven by a sense of honor, pride, and personal sacrifice at the expense of protecting their brotherhood or homeland, then

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[144] Kelemen, Michele. "The U.S. Has Again Vetoed a U.N. Resolution Demanding an Immediate Cease-Fire in Gaza." *NPR*, updated 20 Feb. 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/02/20/1232636543/un-security-council-gaza-cease-fire-vote.
[145] Atran, Scott. *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists*. Ecco, 2010.
[146] Ibid.

heavily militarized counterterrorism operations will do little to deter further cycles of violence. Such strategies would instead further entrench the group's operational narratives.

The rhetoric used by these groups reflect Atran's argument. In every thematic section, every single statement coded, violence from these two groups was framed as protective, not aggressive. This means that even while these actions are offensive in nature, their justification is often rooted in something more sacred or justifiable, such as community, homeland, or faith. These go beyond arbitrary grievances. In the context of Palestine, this calls for a fundamental shift in policy, strategy, and general relations between all actors. Israel and the international community must first reconsider its role in sustaining the grievances these actors such as Hamas and Fatah present. This means ending the occupation, allowing for legitimate international political recognition (of whatever democratically elected party), and a genuine willingness at engagement and cooperation that these groups have signalled they are prepared to give as well. Until these are implemented, no amount of occupation or control will silence what is proven to be, at its core, a plea to be heard.

Israel and Hamas Relations

For Hamas, they narrate themselves as urgency-based reactionaries, driven by the Palestinian cause. Hamas communications revealed high prominence of frustration with Foreign Occupation and Unheard/Unmet Grievances. Specifically, these grievances differ from Fatah's as Hamas main grievance was shown to be an unrecognition of political legitimacy and exclusion from the international community. Hamas won the Palestinian election in 2006, however, as recited above, they were never given the opportunity to truly participate in the international political community. Israel, and by extension the US and wider international community treat Hamas as ideologically radical, lumping them into the same sort of extremism as transnational Jihadist groups. Certainly their 1988 Charter stands out here as a possible explanation, but it has since been revised in 2017, which included more secular and less radical language.[147] This signaled a

[147] Hamas. *A Document of General Principles and Policies*. 2017. Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/hamas-charter-2017/page/3/mode/2up.

renewed motivation for compromise, one that is still ignored by Israel and the international community.

This political exclusion of the group undermines peace processes in two ways. Firstly, by refusing to acknowledge the organization or their attempts to compromise, it further promotes a frustration caused by exclusion, which was directly cited as a reason for their violent resistance in their Unheard/Unmet Grievances section. Secondly, as Fatah lost political cohesion, as seen by its increasing Internal Opposition, Hamas was more reactive and filled the gaps where Fatah failed to, increasing their own legitimacy within Palestine and undermining Fatah's. While at the same time, increasing fighting between Hamas and Israel, and occasionally Fatah, led to many civilian casualties, increasing themes of Victimhood/Trauma, Collective Identity (through solidarity) and Internal Opposition.

In the literature chapter, Schmid argued the importance of disaggregating not between violent and non-violent actors, but by extremity.[148] This data suggests that we should employ counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies that reflect this. By diminishing all resistant actors as radical or extremist, it presents two significant dangers. Firstly, it blinds us to early warning signs of radicalization that stem from emotional, political, or sociological grievances, (ones that can be deradicalized) rather than radicalism that comes from true ideological extremism. Secondly, it delegitimize any possible resolution by making engagement with these actors appear futile or immoral. Atran, like Perry and Stern, urges policymakers and the general population to simply listen. Not to accept or tolerate violence, but to sympathize with its root causes and present alternative pathways to peace. In this case, however, Hamas is not a group composed of hardcore ideologues or extremists, they have shown willingness to negotiate and compromise (updating their charter, accepting and authoring ceasefires), but fleeting ceasefires with Israel is not the level of engagement needed for this group - they must be acknowledged and accepted as a political entity worthy of international legitimacy. This way, they will be held to

[148] Schmid, Alex P. *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29434.

the same standard as states and representative governments, and perhaps a long-term solution can be agreed upon by the international community, which would include Israel *and* Hamas.

Israel and Fatah Relations

Fatah positions itself as politically driven and strategic in its communications, where the group had the most references to Unheard/Unmet Grievances, which was significantly their largest theme. Similarly to all the groups, they had high levels of Foreign Occupation as well, however they had the most references of Internal Opposition that also comprised a substantial amount of their communications, followed by Victimhood/Trauma. Firstly, it's understandable how Fatah had high levels of Unheard/Unmet Grievances. Despite being included in the international community for decades, and at times successfully co-authoring peace agreements with Israel (such as the Oslo Accords), Fatah shows that just because a group is invited to participate, does not mean the outcome is sufficient for them. Oslo didn't remain, and at the same time, competing challenges arose. Mostly for Fatah, this was Hamas. This was somewhat acknowledged by Israel, who has continuously condemned Hamas and rejected them as legitimate representation of Palestine. However, this condemnation of Hamas did not automatically translate into meaningful support for Fatah as a more moderate and politically legitimate actor. Instead, Fatah was subjected to the same military responses that Hamas was, and treated with equal suspicion. This failure to disaggregate Fatah from its distant factions only deepened their narratives of being unheard and unsupported.

Their emphasis on Internal Opposition could have been utilized by Israel by providing more support to and engagement with Fatah that promotes its legitimacy to not just the international community, but also to the Palestinian people. This could significantly help Fatah regain support from the Palestinian people and oust Hamas. From a counterinsurgent perspective, the thematic prominence of Internal Opposition suggests Israel could've pursued a strategy that explicitly supported Fatah, both in rhetoric and policy. Instead, Israel viewed Fatah and Hamas as two sides of the same resistance coin. This in turn, created an argument for Hamas that Fatah was inefficient (not making progress as the long-standing political actor for Palestine, and also not

proactively defending the people). This failure to disaggregate and open the door for a more comprehensive alliship between Fatah and Israel subsequently undermined one of the few Palestinian factions that had shown a sustained willingness to engage in political processes. However, the conflict is not over, and Fatah continues to condemn Hamas and show a desire to engage with Israel and the international community. It is not too late to repair Israeli-Fatah relations and use it to help address the wider Palestinian conflict.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a question: *How are modern counterterrorism operations in the Middle East, specifically the US in Afghanistan and Israel in Gaza, rhetorically interpreted and framed by terrorist and insurgent groups to justify and legitimize violent resistance?* It followed with secondary questions relating to common patterns in violent resistance narratives and how interpretations can lead to cycles of violence or radicalization. It ended by offering alternative approaches backed by scholarly theories and the results of the discourse analysis.

Through a qualitative analysis of two separate case studies and an extensive discourse analysis comprising 627 coded statements, among 8 distinct themes, this study uncovered rhetorical patterns in terrorism and insurgency groups that motivate and justify violent resistance. Themes such as Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment, Unheard/Unmet Grievances, Victimhood/Trauma, Retaliation/Revenge, and Collective Identity were present in all the groups, regardless of geographic and tactical differences. These themes point not to senseless violence, but to rational logic (even if disturbing), rooted in lived realities and historical grievances that we in the West have not faced.

Overall, despite group, historical, or political differences, all of these groups shared a deeply referenced desire to end the conflicts that have been ongoing in their countries for decades. However, disaggregation and political inclusion are two concepts which seem appropriate for all groups, even if the level of political inclusion varies or disaggregation must happen on multiple levels (disaggregation from other groups, individuals within the group, factions, etc).[149]

What also arises from this analysis is a demand for accountability through change. How we have conducted counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations have not only increased grievances and trauma in the Middle East, but if we are to take the words of these groups, it has proven counterintuitive to the West as well. From the post 9/11 US invasion of Afghanistan to Israel's

[149] For a final, repetitive summary of the groups, their themes, and alternative approaches to engagement, see Appendix C.

lifelong occupation in Palestine, these operations fail to acknowledge, and implement change, that reflects the very motivations that these actors cite most often. In fact, in many cases, the US and Israel have instead doubled down on their military operations and political exclusion that was the root of many of these radical motivations in the first place. While this might not be an intentional fuelling of cycles of violence, it is a negligent one that has been warned against by scholars like Crenshaw, Stern, Kilcullen, Mills, Schmid, Perry, and Atkan. Rather than viewing terrorism as primarily ideological or religious, despite the presence of such factors, this research has emphasized the relational nature of violent resistance. How it is reactionary to state violence, how it frames and legitimizes its actions as moralized or necessary, and how violent actors perceive themselves as selfless, justified, or inevitable in a fight for their survival (individual or communal). If we continue to ignore this narrative, we will never be able to disrupt its appeal.

Ultimately, the fight against terrorism and insurgency should not be only about defeating the enemy, but understanding them. There is no better way to understand than by listening, sympathizing (even if not approving), and opening pathways for engagement and compromise. As long as we continue to treat violent resistance as something foreign to us, instead of a reaction to us, we will continue to produce the very conditions possible for its proliferation.

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23. **As Sahab Media, Al-Qaeda, 2021** - Joscelyn, Thomas. “Al Qaeda Praises Taliban’s ‘Historic Victory’ in Afghanistan.” *Long War Journal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 31 Aug. 2021, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/08/al-qaeda-praises-talibans-historic-victory-in-afghanistan.php. Accessed 18 June 2025.
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32. **Mohammed Dahlan, Fatah, 2023** - “Ex-Fatah Leader Says US Complicit in ‘Ethnic Cleansing’ of Palestinians in Gaza.” *Arab News*, 19 Nov. 2023, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2411556/amp.
33. **Samer Sinijlawi, Fatah, 2024** - Svetlova, Ksenia. “Interview with Shadow Fatah Leader Samer Sinijlawi.” *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, Aug. 2024.
34. **Abbas Zaki, Fatah, 2024** - “Fatah Central Committee Member: May Allah Bless October 7!” *MEMRI TV*, 14 Sept. 2024. https://www.memri.org/tv/fatah-central-committee-member-zaki-allah-bless-october-7-reshuffled-deck
35. **Mahmoud Abbas, Fatah, 2025** - Khalil, Naila. “PA President Abbas Demands ‘Sons of Dogs’ Hamas Free Captives.” *The New Arab*, 23 Apr. 2025, www.newarab.com/news/pa-president-abbas-demands-sons-dogs-hamas-free-captives. Accessed 18 June 2025.

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39. **Mullah Mohammed Omar, Taliban, 2020** - Robertson, Nic. "Afghan Taliban Spokesman: 'We Will Win the War.'" *CNN*, 5 May 2009, edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/05/05/afghan.taliban.transcript/index.html. Accessed 18 June 2025.
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41. **Anas Haqqani, Taliban, 2022** - Bin Javaid, Osama. "Q&A: Anas Haqqani on One Year of Taliban Rule." *Al Jazeera*, 14 Aug. 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/14/taliban-leader-anas-haqqani-speaks-to-al-jazeera.
42. **Anas Haqqani, Taliban, Aug 2022** - Koelbl, Susanne. "DER SPIEGEL Interview with Taliban Leader Anas Haqqani: 'You Ask Questions Like an Investigator.'" *SPIEGEL International*, 8 July 2022, www.spiegel.de/international/world/der-spiegel-interview-with-taliban-leader-anas-haqqa

ni-you-ask-questions-like-an-investigator-a-da3d8658-fcce-4865-a4f2-91eb3e1aff93. Accessed 18 June 2025.

43. **Emir Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, Taliban, 2025** - Roggio, Bill. “Taliban Emir Decries ‘Zionist Assaults and Acts of Oppression’ in Gaza.” *Long War Journal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 7 June 2025, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/06/taliban-emir-decries-zionist-assaults-and-acts-of-oppression-in-gaza.php. Accessed 18 June 2025.

Appendices - Supplemental Information

Appendix A - Expanded Literature Review: This appendix includes literature that is relevant to the broader studies of terrorism/insurgency and radicalization, but not directly engaged in the thesis's core contribution. It includes the definitional problem of terrorism and general theories on motivations for radicalism.

Appendix A.1: Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, terrorism was no longer just a distant phenomenon to be studied, but became an urgent evil to be eradicated. This shift had profound implications that has persisted ever since. The boundaries between academic analysis, public discourse, and policy implementations have become increasingly blurred. In short, terrorism, both as a study and an act, has become shaped by who gets to define it and for what purposes.

Stampnitzky's work is contemporary, it arose out of the modern counterrorism framework that prevails in the 21st century. It critically challenges the idea that terrorism is a fixed, static phenomenon. Instead, she situates it as a production of different actors - politicians, academics, and the media.

Appendix A.2: Juxtaposed to Stampnitzky, Martha Crenshaw is another notable author in the field of counterterrorism. However, Crenshaw, having published most of her work prior to 2001, serves as a reminder of what traditional terrorism is and how it was framed. Crenshaw (1981) argues in *The Causes of Terrorism* that terrorism is a rational strategy employed by non-state actors to achieve political aims. If one were to take any modern terrorism course, this would certainly be close to the basic definition employed for beginner study purposes. However, it certainly lacks many elements that modern definitions will now include, such as the use of fear tactics or civilian targets, and no mention of motives or goals. Despite this, while Crenshaw provided an early rational-actor model of terrorism that remains foundational in terrorism studies, it also challenges the modern political discourse that has perversed through the post 9/11

shift that conversed about terrorism in normative and absolutist terms.[150] This discursive shift, while not mirror in academic definitions, has shaped counterterrorism policy and public understanding in profound ways.

Appendix A.3: Alex Schmid wrote in *Terrorism - A Definitional Problem* (2004), that "these are the principal contentious issues within the United Nations which stand in the way of arriving at a universal definition of terrorism. The two main issues that obstruct progress are, however, "state terrorism" and the "struggle for national liberation" - both of them related to the Palestinian question."[151] This essay will not attempt to bring in definitions of state terrorism, but it is important to note that state violence, often accepted as a necessary evil politically, has raised eyebrows in the search for a durable, legitimate definition of terrorism.

Appendix A.4: Lastly, these insights are further developed by Andrew Silke (2003) in *Terrorists, Victims, and Society.* In his work, he attempts to bridge the gap between individual radicalization and broader systemic counterterrorism responses. Silke emphasizes that trauma experienced by individuals, especially those committed by states - such as indefinite detention, torture, or collective punishment - can actually be a key factor in pushing an individual on the fence of radicalization into violent extremism, including terrorism. He argues, "counterterrorism strategies that ignore the role of perceived injustice and humiliation are not just ineffective but potentially counterproductive."[152]

Kruglanski and Stern argued the internal, psychological motivations of radicalization. Silke warns that external policies, such as overtly oppressive or militant ones, can exacerbate the very dynamics they aim to oppress. His work supports the argument that the way states respond to terrorism risks contributing to its perpetuation, particularly when their operations inflict harm that can trigger the need for significance.

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[150] Crenshaw, Martha. "The Causes of Terrorism." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1981, pp. 379–399. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/421717.
[151] Schmid, Alex P. "Terrorism – The Definitional Problem." *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2004, pp. 375–. *Scholarly Commons*, https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/jil/vol36/iss2/8.
[152] Silke, Andrew, editor. *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and Its Consequences*. Wiley, 2003.

Appendix A.5: Kilcullen furthermore argued in his book *Counterinsurgency* (2010), "The 'War on Terrorism' is actually a campaign to counter a global Islamist insurgency. So counterinsurgency, not counterterrorism, may provide the best approach to the conflict." This distinction is notable, modern counterterrorism operations, while recognizing the underlying causes for these groups' emergence, still operate with an "Iron Fist" strategy as opposed to a "Heart and Minds" approach endorsed by Kilcullen.

The "Iron Fist" strategy is a response framework that prioritizes overwhelming military force, deterrence through fear, and at times utilizes collective punishment. Importantly, it leaves no room for communication or compromise. It was first named during the 1980s in the First Intifada, during Operation Iron Fist from the Israel Defense Force (IDF), where then Defense Minister Yitzakh Rabin authorized use of brute force and mass arrests to Palestinian protestors.[153] The approach represents a long history of Israeli preference of enforcing order through dominance and fear rather than by way of engagement or reform. The reliance on Iron Fist tactics may restrict violence temporarily, but risks inflaming the very grievances that groups like Fatah or Hamas exploit for recruitment. In contrast, Kilcullen argues that utilizing a "Hearts and Minds" strategy promotes building trust and legitimacy with the *people*. Winning the hearts and minds involve just two simple aspects: gaining trust from the people that you can protect them better than the opposition fighters and that you have their best interest at heart. It involves weakening the opponent's legitimacy through building alternative governance, delivering aid, and community engagement.[154] The divergence of these two tactics is critical when evaluating the long term effects of operations in Afghanistan and Gaza. Iron Fist does not operate in a way that allows communication or cooperation, however Hearts and Minds offers an opening. The *people* whose Hearts and Minds are to be won must include these violent actors, there should be attempts at engagement with them as well.

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[153] Arai-Takahashi, Yutaka. "Occupation, Belligerent." *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, edited by Rüdiger Wolfrum, Oxford University Press, 2009, https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-e1246.

[154] Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Appendix B - Contextual Information of Afghanistan and Palestine: This appendix includes background on the conflicts of Afghanistan and Palestine, focusing on information not directly tied to engagement and communication with terrorist or insurgent groups. Instead it looks at the tactical and strategic preferences in these operations, which, while still relevant, are not significant to the thesis's actual data on communications.

Appendix B.1: One of the operations which resulted in large civilian impact was the Afghan National Strike Unit, a clandestine operation in which fighters were typically referred to as "Zero Units," sponsored by the CIA and accompanied by US soldiers.[155] These units involved US trained Afghan fighters working alongside US troops who prioritized night raids, in which they entered civilian homes in search for Taliban soldiers and in many cases inaccurately identified such. One US Army soldier noted, "You go on night raids, make more enemies, then you gotta go on more night raids for the more enemies you now have to kill."[156] The raids were accompanied with the sound of neighbors screaming in fear, helicopters whittling outside, drones buzzing; the psychological effect of these raids went beyond the casualty toll.[157] Despite the Zero Units being established in 2008, they continued for over a decade, and between the years 2017-2019 alone, Human Rights Watch documented over 14 cases of serious human rights abuses, some amounting to war crimes.[158]

At the same time, drone warfare became increasingly utilized as a means of counterterrorism. On one hand, drone warfare gave an extra layer of protection and surveillance to US troops, however it was accompanied with heavy criticism. There are two strategies in using drones for warfare, one is to utilize them for personality strikes: targeting only vetted individuals. The other, and

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[155] Billing, Lynzy. "The Night Raids." *ProPublica*, Dec. 15, 2022. https://www.propublica.org/article/afghanistan-night-raids-zero-units-lynzy-billing
[156] Ibid.
[157] "Chronicles of Conflict: A Psychological Overview of the Impacts of War." *Oxford Journal of Conflict and Emotion*, www.oxjournal.org/chronicles-of-conflict-a-psychological-overview-of-the-impacts-of-war/.
[158] *"They've Shot Many Like This": Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces*. Human Rights Watch, October 31, 2019.

more frequent one in Afghanistan, was the use of signature strikes: where certain traits or behaviors were identified through the drone and used to make a calculated guess as to whether the individuals being surveilled are opposition fighters.[159] Both of these causes considerable grievances and trauma to the Afghan people, but particularly to those most likely to be targeted. In signature strikes, it was mostly adult males who fit the profile, moreso if they wore specific clothing or were seen to be praying, this brings up ethical concerns about drone usage on human rights, suggesting they may be more indiscriminate than the law of conflict does/should allow.[160] So while drone warfare could have the potential for more effective and discriminate targeting, it appears that US biases and misunderstanding of the culture and targets themselves caused more indiscriminate killings and frustration later referenced by resistance fighters.

Application of Theoretical Literature

As outlined in the literature review section, Iron Fist strategies, like those utilized in Israel's Iron Fist Operation or US night raids in Afghanistan, emphasize using overwhelming military force and fear based deterrence at the expense of building long term trust and legitimacy. In contrast, Hearts and Minds strategies, as outlined by Kilcullen, requires establishing support and cooperation from the civilian population, often through direct engagement and governance. While the US did make attempts at nation building, they were ultimately undermined by their simultaneous use of Iron Fist strategies that traumatized the population. Therefore it is questionable whether counterterrorism can truly succeed in utilizing both iron fist and hearts and mind strategy at the same time. It undoubtedly caused considerable confusion among the population, where during the day there were US soldiers claiming they were there to protect the civilians and take back Afghanistan from the Taliban, but then by night those same troops worked alongside questionable, unchecked units in night raids and indiscriminately targeting their neighbors, brothers, fathers through signature drone strikes. The result was perceived hypocrisy and betrayal. These tactics, while on paper had merit, failed in their application. Using Kilcullen's theory of population-centric counterinsurgency requires two important steps: the

[159] Gusterson, Hugh. "Drone Warfare." *AIP Conference Proceedings*, vol. 1898, no. 1, 2017, p. 050005. https://doi.org/10.1063/1.5009234.

[160] Vlad, Ruxandra Oana, and John Hardy. "Signature Strikes and the Ethics of Targeted Killing." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2024, doi:10.1080/08850607.2024.2382029.

removal of insurgent fighters, *and* the active cultivation of trust with the general population.[161] However, we saw in Afghanistan that this did not successfully manifest in practice. Kilcullen's model assumes that there can be a balance between the two strategies, but the group operations in Afghanistan (and as we will see in Israel) suggest that they cannot coexist without sabotaging one another. Efforts to win Hearts and Minds are undermined when that same population is subjected to consistent trauma from the group claiming to be their savior. Therefore, the US often undermined their own goals by generating new grievances faster than they could eliminate threats, thus resulting in the accidental guerrilla. Furthering this, after Afghanistan, Kilcullen and Mill together argued the US not only misunderstood their enemies, but also their supposed allies, and the overall nature of the war itself; while the US had the capabilities to tactically defeat the Taliban, it lacked the ability to go beyond mere battlefield success and implement sustainable political solutions that would resonate with the Afghan people.[162] While the night raids and drone warfare may have had tactical advantages, these battlefield victories came at the expense of the hearts and minds of the general population. In this way, I would argue that having the hearts and minds of the population is not solely about building trust, but by building understanding and rapporteur, even with violent groups who claim to represent the people. From a consequential standpoint, the use of these tactics without social and cultural understanding not only failed to secure Afghanistan, but potentially helped radicalize it. The US not only failed to protect civilians during its operations, but it actively mis-profiled them and indiscriminately attacked, leading to feelings of Victimhood/Trauma that were referenced in both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban's discourse. Civilian casualties from drone strikes, night raids, or inaccurate targeting reinforced this theme heavily. The US should have practiced more restraint and discernment in its operations to minimize trauma felt by the civilians.

Appendix B.2: The Second Intifada was a second wave of Palestinian uprising and resistance against Israeli occupation, sparked by the visit of Israeli politician Ariel Sharon to Temple Mount, where the PA helped orchestrate protests that were mostly peaceful apart some unarmed protestors throwing stones, however this was subsequently responded to by Israel with rubber

[161] Kilcullen, David J. *Counterinsurgency*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
[162] Kilcullen, David, and Mills, Greg. *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan.* Hurst Publishers, 2021.

bullets, tear gas, and live ammunition, leading to a considerable escalation.[163] This continued in the following years, resistance from Palestinian civilians, coupled with fighting between Palestinian terrorist groups and Israel. The Palestinian Authority (modern equivalent to the PLO) were even involved with some of these terrorist groups such as Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, further straining their relationship and any desire for cooperation or diplomacy with Israel.[164]

After 2006, we began to see a shift into more heavy and modern counterterrorism operations from Israel at fighting against Hamas and other violent Palestinian factions. From November 2008-January 2009, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead, this involved indiscriminate airstrikes in heavily populated urban areas of Gaza, resulting in the death of 1400 Palestinians, over 300 children and 115 women, it is unknown how many of the men were legitimate combatants or not.[165] These aerial bombardments present a number of questionable human rights claims, but the lack of further investigation through judicial trials and subsequent compensation even moreso. Far too often are civilian casualties labeled unfortunate collateral damage, or even worse, victims are blamed themselves for being in certain locations or acquainted with the legitimate target.

Aside from aerial warfare, similar to Afghanistan, drone warfare has become increasingly common in Gaza, especially after the Second Intifada and Hamas' control. But interests for such a tactic developed as early as 2004, when the head of the IAF stated, "Our vision of air control zeroes in on the notion of control. We're looking at how you control a city or a territory from the air when it's no longer legitimate to hold or occupy that territory on the ground"[166] So while Israeli boots on the ground may have appeared to leave Gaza temporarily, the reality is they still held some control over the territory aerially, and with the barrier, the occupation continued. While Hamas was arguably locked in Gaza, so were millions of civilians. Over time, these drones advanced with technology. Today, many drones in Gaza are even operated with artificial

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[163] *"The Second Intifada 2000: Backgrounder." Anti-Defamation League*, 1 Sept. 2016, https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/second-intifada-2000
[164] Ibid.
[165] *"Israel/Gaza: Operation 'Cast Lead'—22 Days of Death and Destruction: Facts and Figures."* Amnesty International, Index No. MDE 15/021/2009, 2 July 2009.
[166] Borg, Stefan. "Assembling Israeli Drone Warfare: Loitering Surveillance and Operational Sustainability." *Security Dialogue*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2021 doi:10.1177/0967010620956796.

intelligence (AI). However, while AI presents many benefits tactically, such as faster response time and data collection, it simultaneously presents many human rights concerns. For example, Human Rights Watch found that four of the systems used by Israeli AI drone technology relied on faulty data and inexact approximations.[167] As in Afghanistan, Israel prioritizes signature strikes, however Israel uses AI to analyze the behaviors of individuals and assume their affiliations. This is proven in their usage of Lavender AI which uses a suspicion point system to find potential terrorists and when algorithmically deemed appropriate, target and kill them.[168] There are two primary issues I see with this strategy, firstly it again shows an inherent bias and stereotyping of the general population. Secondly, AI is supposed to be verified and confirmed by a human after generative suspicion and kill lists are created. However, there is no way to prove this in the midst of an ongoing war. It provides a shield of accountability to Israel, that further complicates the complaint process affected Palestinians will have to go through if they are wrongfully targeted.

Application of Theoretical Literature

Israeli military strategy reflects a flawed spatial logic that Eyal Weizman critically dissects in *Hollow Land* (2007). In his work, he argues that Israel has reengineered urban space in "political technology," using architecture, topography, and vertical control to dominate without physically occupying territory in the traditional understanding.[169] In Gaza specifically, this manifests through aerial bombardments, drone surveillance, and algorithmically designed targeting systems, rather than sustained urban warfare. This approach, argued by Weizman, treats an entire city itself as targetable infrastructure. By avoiding conventional urban warfare, Israel minimizes military risk but amplifies the structural violence imposed on civilians. The consequences of this are not just physical, but deeply psychological as the operation shifts from boots on the ground, areas to be avoided, to a constant present threat overhead. Weizman's analysis of Israel's use of spatial control over Gaza through aerial forces enables a new form of occupation never seen before - remote occupation. In this, civilians are trapped in a surveilled, enclosed (through the

[167] *"Questions and Answers: Israeli Military's Use of Digital Tools in Gaza." Human Rights Watch*, 10 Sept. 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/10/questions-and-answers-israeli-militarys-use-digital-tools-gaza.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Weizman, Eyal. *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation*. Verso, 2007.

numerous barricades), dangerous environment subjected to indiscriminate force. Even more crucially, they are trapped in this environment with other terrorist groups, who are living this experience with them, who can play on these psychological factors to radicalize and recruit vulnerable individuals. This strategy fosters feelings of trauma and humiliation that have already been identified as precursors for radicalization.

The trajectory of Israeli counterterrorism may have looked differently had the international community, and Israel itself, taken seriously the potential for engagement and diplomacy - not only with political representation like the PA or Hamas after 2006, but also with the civilians that were heavily affected. Again, we will utilize Mark Perry's theory of open dialogue and communication to see if or how this could realistically occur in Palestine. While Israel and its allies have largely refused any engagement with Palestinian leadership since Arafat's death in 2004, this refusal often extended to Palestinian civilians as well, who were often seen as passive bystanders or unfortunate collateral damage rather than individuals with legitimate grievances. Here it appears Israel has made absolutely zero attempt at winning the hearts and minds of the general population and instead took a strict iron fist approach. Kilcullen warned, no counterinsurgency operations can succeed without winning the hearts and minds of the population, Israel is proof of such an argument. Their iron fist approach, marked by aerial warfare, drones and AI, traded short term military victories with long term stability.

Appendix 2.C: Afghanistan and Palestine are indeed two very different geopolitical and historical contexts, as detailed in the chapters above. One is a nation-state, the other a stateless territory; One faced a foreign invasion, the other an ongoing decades long military occupation. And yet, the strategies shown both in Israeli and US counterterrorism operations demonstrate significant similarities, such as an overreliance on Iron Fist strategies, including night raids and signature drone strikes in Afghanistan, and AI assisted drone warfare and aerial bombardments

in Palestine.[170][171][172][173] These operations, while often justified as surgical, resulted in significant trauma and civilian casualties, using conservative estimates, nearly 46,000 Afghan civilians were killed.[174] In Israel it is more difficult to get a precise number, since there is an unknown number of fighters and they are typically embedded with civilians during attacks. Additionally, the fighting had been ongoing decades before 2001, and since October 7th, 2023, there has been a significant increase leading to casualties on all fronts. A study by the Washington institute argues that the current methods of data collection for civilian casualties is too faulty to draw any conclusions.[175] This is consistent with the research I have done for this writing. Given these limitations, it is not possible to give an estimate of civilian casualties in Palestine from 2001-present day. However, all the available evidence suggests civilian harm has been both widespread and underreported, using conservative estimates again, possibly 45,000 Palestinians (including men, women, children, combatants, non-combatants) have been killed in Gaza since October 7th alone.[176]

In both cases, counterterrorism became entangled with counterinsurgency, and military strategy overrode political strategy. In both cases, civilians paid a high cost. Not just through physical damage, loss of life and limbs, but also psychologically. Both populations underwent severe

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[170] O'Hanlon, Michael E. "A Preliminary Verdict on Afghanistan Strategy." *Brookings*, 5 Oct. 2021, www.brookings.edu/articles/a-preliminary-verdict-on-afghanistan-strategy/.
[171] *"They've Shot Many Like This": Abusive Night Raids by CIA-Backed Afghan Strike Forces*. Human Rights Watch, October 31, 2019.
[172] Borg, Stefan. "Assembling Israeli Drone Warfare: Loitering Surveillance and Operational Sustainability." *Security Dialogue*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2021 doi:10.1177/0967010620956796.
[173] *"Questions and Answers: Israeli Military's Use of Digital Tools in Gaza." Human Rights Watch*, 10 Sept. 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/10/questions-and-answers-israeli-militarys-use-digital-tools-gaza.
[174] United States Institute of Peace. "In Afghanistan, Was a Loss Better than Peace?" *United States Institute of Peace*, 3 Nov. 2022, usip.org/publications/2022/11/afghanistan-was-loss-better-peace.
[175] Epstein, Gabriel. "Gaza Fatality Data Has Become Completely Unreliable." *The Washington Institute*, 26 Mar. 2024, washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/gaza-fatality-data-has-become-completely-unreliable.
[176] United Nations. "Noting More than 45,000 Palestinians Have Been Killed in Gaza, Assistant Secretary-General Tells Security Council 'Ceasefire Is Long Overdue.'" *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, 18 Dec. 2024, press.un.org/en/2024/sc15944.doc.htm.

trauma (which was collectivized), humiliation, and a deep loss of hope.[177][178] These were compounded by a lack of accountability and lack of having their voices heard: through power imbalance, occupation, political exclusion. These grievances allowed for terrorist groups to cultivate further support, framing their narratives not in isolation, but in a shared identity and struggle against Western force. In short, this context reveals how state actions act at the basis of new and existing grievances utilized by groups to justify their violent resistance as the only viable pathway toward achieving their goals (such as liberation or security). While the tactics of these operations may slightly differ, the emotional and rhetorical aftermath will prove to be the same. It is within this emotional continuity that my following chapter and research on a discourse analysis of these terrorist groups will continue.

Appendix C:

For Hamas, they narrate themselves as urgency-based reactionaries, driven by the Palestinian cause. Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment and Unheard/Unmet Grievances were the most referred to themes in their communications, reflecting a frustration of living in a lifelong Israeli occupation and feelings of alienation from the international political community, despite winning Palestinian elections. Alternative solutions to Israel and Hamas relations might involve political inclusion and recognition of Hamas as a legitimate political representation of the Palestinian people.

For Fatah, they presented themselves as a politically involved, strategic group, which had a large percentage of Unheard/Unmet Grievance themes in their communications, suggesting that even when these groups are invited to participate in international political peace processes, it doesn't seem efficient in the eyes of these actors. They express feelings that their efforts are futile or that the outcomes are ignored. However, Fatah also had a large theme of Internal Opposition,

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[177] Centre for Mental Health. *No Safe Place in Mind: Mental Health and Trauma in Gaza*. Centre for Mental Health, August 1, 2024, www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/no-safe-place-in-mind-mental-health-and-trauma-in-gaza/. Accessed 3 July 2025.

[178] Sheikh, Mohd Saleem, et al. "Afghanistan: Decades of Collective Trauma, Ongoing Humanitarian Crises, Taliban Rulers, and Mental Health of the Displaced Population." *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 65, Nov. 2021, p. 102854, doi:10.1016/j.ajp.2021.102854.

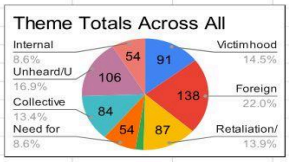
reflecting their ongoing struggle for legitimacy against Hamas, highlighting how these groups are often facing many opposition groups, not just externally, but even within, furthering the instability of these conflicts. Alternative solutions for Israel and Fatah relations include Israel's explicit support for Fatah, encouraging its disaggregation from Hamas.

For Al-Qaeda, they proved to be an ideologically motivated, expansive group, referencing Collective Identity and Retaliation/Revenge considerably more, such as calling to the Ummah, and suggesting how they view their cause as larger than themselves. Their Retaliation/Revenge rhetoric was more offensive than other groups but suggest their strategy of proaction, seeing their fight as an eternal, spiritual one. This is backed by their high claims of Need for Significance, in which they view death as an achievement for the cause. Alternative solutions for Al-Qaeda and US relations must be approached cautiously, but include the disaggregation of specific individuals within the group - the hardcore ideologues from those radicalized.

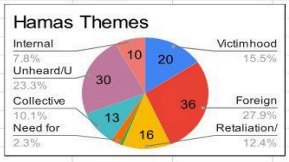
Lastly, the Taliban positioned themselves as a post-insurgency, nationalistic group, who significantly referred to Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment more than any other theme, highlighting a persistent frustration of foreign interference and a desire to govern their state themselves. The Taliban seems to have the most coherent political identity, although not widely accepted, their motivations lie in gaining legitimacy and power. For all the groups, Foreign Occupation/Anti-Western Sentiment and Unheard/Unmet Grievances were cited the most in all the communications taken together. Alternative solutions to Taliban and US relations mimic those with Israel and Hamas, and suggest that international legitimacy would appeal the most to the Taliban and encourage cooperation, possibly allowing for the Taliban to condemn and restrict Al-Qaeda operations in Afghanistan.

Appendix D: Pdf copy of all data.

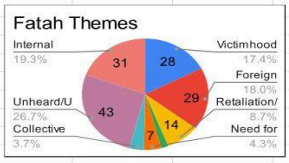
Totals:	627
Victimhood/Trauma:	91
Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment:	138
Retaliation/Revenge:	87
Humiliation:	13
Need for Significance:	54
Collective Identity:	84
Unheard/Unmet Grievances:	106
Internal Opposition:	54



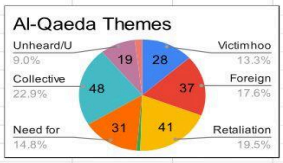
Hamas Totals:	129
Victimhood/Trauma:	20
Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment:	36
Retaliation/Revenge:	16
Humiliation:	1
Need for Significance:	3
Collective Identity:	13
Unheard/Unmet Grievances:	30
Internal Opposition:	10



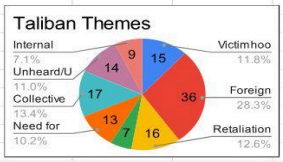
Fatah Totals:	161
Victimhood/Trauma:	28
Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment:	29
Retaliation/Revenge:	14
Humiliation:	3
Need for Significance:	7
Collective Identity:	6
Unheard/Unmet Grievances:	43
Internal Opposition:	31



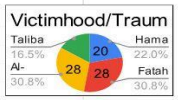
Al-Qaeda Totals:	210
Victimhood/Trauma:	28
Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment:	37
Retaliation/Revenge:	41
Humiliation:	2
Need for Significance:	31
Collective Identity:	48
Unheard/Unmet Grievances:	19
Internal Opposition:	4



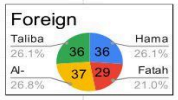
Taliban Totals:	127
Victimhood/Trauma:	15
Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment:	36
Retaliation/Revenge:	16
Humiliation:	7
Need for Significance:	13
Collective Identity:	17
Unheard/Unmet Grievances:	14
Internal Opposition:	9



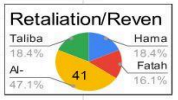
Victimhood/Trauma	91
Hamas	20
Fatah	28
Al-Qaeda	28
Taliban	15



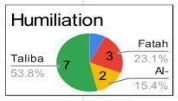
Foreign Occupation/Anti-West Sentiment:	138
Hamas	36
Fatah	29
Al-Qaeda	37
Taliban	36



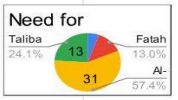
Retaliation/Revenge:	87
Hamas	16
Fatah	14
Al-Qaeda	41
Taliban	16



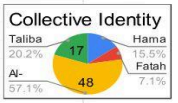
Humiliation:	13
Hamas	1
Fatah	3
Al-Qaeda	2
Taliban	7



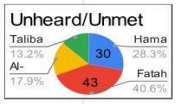
Need for Significance:	54
Hamas	3
Fatah	7
Al-Qaeda	31
Taliban	13



Collective Identity:	84
Hamas	13
Fatah	6
Al-Qaeda	48
Taliban	17



Unheard/Unmet Grievances:	106
Hamas	30
Fatah	43
Al-Qaeda	19
Taliban	14



Internal Opposition:	54
Hamas	10
Fatah	31
Al-Qaeda	4
Taliban	9