Constructing Cosmic War: 
Rhetorical Outbidding and Religious Violence

With the rise of religious violence in recent decades, a great amount of scholarly attention has focused on determining what role (if any) religion plays in these conflicts. Existing approaches, however, overlook the mechanisms through which religion influences violence. In contrast, I take a relational approach to religious violence in this article, arguing that the process of *rhetorical outbidding* can help explain the nature of religious violence. Groups engaged in political violence do not just conduct attacks to gain public support, they compete for the *rhetorical resources* to generate such support. Religious militants, accordingly, attempt to advance a frame that defines the conflict as a religious one, conducting attacks to both demonstrate the veracity of this frame and their devotion to their religious beliefs. Thus, the “cosmic war” of religious violence is constructed through the efforts of religious militants. I apply this to the rhetoric of the al-Qaeda network and the effects the group’s rhetorical appeals have had on the actions of al-Qaeda-linked religious militants. The article contributes to debates on religious violence, as well as the role of rhetoric in politics.

Peter S. Henne
Doctoral Candidate
Georgetown University
psh22@georgetown.edu


This article was previously presented at the 2010 International Studies Association Conference and the 2011 International Studies Association-Northeast Conference. The author would like to
thank Daniel Nexon, Adam Mount, Stacey Goddard, David Buckley and Zacchary Ritter for comments on earlier drafts.
As Bruce Lincoln tells in *Holy Terrors*, his 2006 essay on religious violence, the al-Qaeda (AQ) operatives who conducted the 9/11 hijackings used a detailed set of instructions that consecrated their upcoming operation as an act not of mass murder but religious imperative. The instructions inextricably connected the violent acts to the operatives’ religious convictions, even referring to airplane passengers killed in the process of the hijackings as “sacrificial beasts.” And they demonstrated—in a rather shocking manner—the means through which, as Lincoln puts it, “religious discourse construed mass murder and terrible destruction as religious practices” (Lincoln 2006).

Many attempts to understand AQ have focused on the religious nature of AQ’s violence and its severity, in addition to the broader “new terrorism” of which it is part (Cronin, 2006; Gunaratna, 2003; Sageman, 2004). Essentialists ascribe terrorist acts to innate aspects of religion, either religion in general or Islam in particular. Rationalists, in contrast, argue terrorist groups’ violence is a result of strategic factors, and allow religion only an instrumental or exogenous role. More recent works point to the specific effects of certain religious ideologies or the interaction between religion and institutions to explain religious violence.

In this article, I, in contrast, highlight the role of religion in a group’s strategic calculations to explain religious violence, emphasizing the process through which religious ideology produces violence. I present a relational approach to religious violence, drawing on literature in contentious politics and rhetoric in politics to argue that religious violence is driven by the process of rhetorical outbidding, in which groups attempt to gain religious legitimacy and advance its religious frame through rhetorical appeals. Severe religious violence is both demonstrative—demonstrating the nature of its frame—and strategic, serving to undermine competitors’ public appeal and mobilize public support.
I apply this to a case study of the rhetoric and violence of AQ. Using a mechanism-based approach, the article analyzes whether the mechanisms posited in the theory are present in AQ’s rhetorical appeals and actions. AQ’s rhetoric involves attempts to join together different rhetorical commonplaces that advance its framing of Muslim societies’ grievances and undermines that of others’ frames, while its attacks serve to demonstrate the validity of this frame and attempt to activate the relevant boundary among the public.

I define religion as a “system of beliefs and practices oriented towards the sacred or supernatural” (Smith, 1996: 5). The article uses “groups” to refer to organized groups engaging in contention with each other and the state; it is thus analogous to social movement literatures’ “social movement organization” (SMO) and does not refer to segments of a population. Also, due to the vagaries in defining differences among terrorism, civil wars, insurrections and the various groups involved in them, I use “religious militants” to discuss groups engaged in these struggles (see Tilly, 2004). Finally, I draw on Juergensmeyer’s (1992; 2003) work on religious violence to discuss the concept of “cosmic war.” Juergensmeyer argues religious traditions “normalize violence,” externalizing their sacrificial rituals—intended to struggle against the presence of evil—onto society by creating an out-group, or “Satanizing” the enemy (Juergensmeyer, 1992: 108). When these “cosmic struggles” become “confused with actual” ones, religion will produce violent acts (Juergensmeyer, 1992: 114). Such violence will be “theatrical” and “symbolic” displays marked by extreme violence due to participants’ beliefs in the waging of a divine struggle (Juergensmeyer, 2003: 121-125).

The article proceeds in five parts. First I briefly review the literature on religion and violence. I then present the theory of rhetorical outbidding and the methodological discussion.
The study then discusses the rhetoric and tactics of AQ before presenting conclusions and broader implications.

**Religious Terrorism: Zealotry or Strategy?**

Numerous works have emerged on religious violence in recent decades. The first approach can be termed essentialist. Scholars in this school argue that something inherent in a religious tradition leads not only to violence but violence on a disturbing scale. Some approaches discuss religion in general, positing that the nature of religious beliefs can lead to extreme violence no matter the specific religious tradition (Juergensmeyer, 1992). Other scholars in this vein focus specifically on the nature of Islam, with violence relating to certain characteristics of this religious tradition (Ben-Dor, 1997; Kramer, 1992; Lewis, 1990). Thus, the religious violence of groups like AQ is related to the nature of religious beliefs, or the specific nature of Islam.

An alternative school of thought is the rationalist approach. These scholars argue that extreme religious violence is actually the result of rational calculations on the part of combatants; such approaches often minimize the role of religion in favor of explanations based on rational responses to objective conditions (see Bloom 2007; Pape 2006). Some argue extreme violence is a rational tactic groups adopt in order to coerce their target into acceding to their demands (Gupta and Mundra, 2005). Others point to public support dynamics, with apparently-religious violence actually the result of groups outbidding each other to win the favor of the populace (Bloom, 2007; Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson, 2007).

Neither of these approaches can sufficiently explain the severity of religious violence. Essentialists overlook the great diversity of religious beliefs among Muslim and non-Muslims, and thus cannot explain the variation in political behaviors among religious groups and the fact that Muslim societies are not particularly prone to violence (Esposito, 1998; Fox, 2000; De
Soysa and Nordhas, 2007). Rationalist explanations are also insufficient. Many of them are inaccurate; numerous studies of religious violence in recent decades point to the significant role religious ideologies play, which rationalists completely elide (Asal and Rethemeyer 2008; Moghadam, 2006; Moghadam 2008/2009; Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011). And even approaches that usefully bring in militant groups’ competition for public support often assume public support for violence exists exogenous to their model, which is questionable empirically and overlooks the complex dynamics through which social movements attempt to advance a particular frame of their struggle to gain public support (see Bloom, 2007; Bueno de Mesquita and Dickson, 2007).

In recent years, numerous scholars have attempted to address these deficiencies by studying the complex nature of religious violence. Some have demonstrated that conflicts involving religion are more violent than non-religious ones, even if Muslims themselves are not more violent (Asal and Rethemeyer, 2008; Fox 1998; Piazza, 2009; Toft, 2007; Hassner, 2003; Horowitz, 2009). Others have discussed the nature of specific religious ideologies, rather than the broader religious traditions in which they reside, and how they lead to severe violence (Moghadam, 2008; Moghadam, 2008/2009; Piazza, 2009). Still others point to the interaction between violent religious ideologies and state institutions, particularly ones that restrict religious activities (Grim and Finke, 2011; Philpott, 2007; Toft, Philpott and Shah, 2011).

These studies have greatly advanced research into religious violence, but further development can add to their contributions. Most take the existence of the violent religious ideologies as a given, studying how they influence violence once formed; while this is valuable, investigation of the means through the ideologies they arose—especially if this occurred through interaction with violent contention—would be helpful. Beyond this, however, they do not address the discursive nature of religion; as Lincoln (2006) has argued, religion is a discourse in
which adherents participate, rather than a determinant of action. As a result, demonstrating that religiously-inspired violence is particularly severe is useful in showing that religion matters, but not how it matters. The latter requires investigation of the strategic actions taken by combatants that produce both extreme religious ideologies and severe violence.

Applying work on rhetoric and politics—and relational analyses more broadly—to the study of religious violence can greatly advance this research program. Scholars of social movements have long emphasized the importance of rhetoric in political outcomes, especially as frames for social movements that justify their struggle and influence public perceptions of the movements (Snow et al., 1986; Benford and Snow, 2000; Tarrow, 1998). McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) elaborated on this, calling on scholars to move beyond analyzing fixed variables and instead focus on the mechanisms that combine to produce distinctive contentious politics episodes.

Of particular relevance to this article are relational mechanisms; a relational approach to political violence, according to Tilly, “concentrates on ways that variable patterns of social interaction constitute and cause different varieties of collective violence” (2003: 7). Thus, it is not fixed ideologies or structural conditions that determine the rise and effects of contentious politics; instead, the means through which actors interact produce the form an episode of contentious politics ultimately takes. Tarrow and Tilly applied these insights to the topics of transnational activism (2005) and political violence (2003), respectively. More recently, other scholars extended this to several other substantive areas, including religious politics in the early modern era, alliance relations, domestic influences on foreign policy, and the emergence of indivisible issues in conflicts (Nexon, 2009; Jackson, 2006; Krebs and Jackson, 2006; Bially-Mattern, 2001; Goddard, 2006). These studies have demonstrated how interactions between
actors and institutions resulted in the rise of social movements and transformations in the nature of politics.

Advances in relational analyses could greatly contribute to the study of religious violence. This approach would involve viewing religion not as a fixed cultural system that motivates action but rather a constantly contested set of beliefs and practices that actors can draw on to justify their struggle. The process of religious violence, then, involves the contestation of competing religious frames by actors. This can provide greater insight into the dynamics of religious violence and explain why it differs from non-religious violence. It can also deal with counterarguments that point to strategic actions and non-religious motivations on the part of religious militants to dismiss religion’s importance; [explain].

**Rhetorical Outbidding and Religious Violence**

This article explains the severity of religious violence through the process of *rhetorical outbidding*. It takes a relational approach to religious violence, in which the violence is not driven by structural factors or fixed belief systems, but arises through the particular form of interactions that occur in the context of religious contention. When religious militants contend with other actors, they struggle to define the nature of the religious tradition within with they compete, drawing on and connecting various religious symbols to advance a particular frame with the public. This leads to a process of rhetorical outbidding, in which actors strive to gain the rhetorical resources to expand upon their public support and political power. When a militant group has an exclusivist religious ideology, they will frame the struggle as a cosmic war and focus on convincing the public of their framing’s validity; this can lead to severe, indiscriminate violence and an unwillingness to compromise on either tactics or goals. Thus, it is not the
presence of religion in a conflict that leads to violence, but the means through which groups
draw on religious symbols to compete for power.

A Relational Approach to Religious Violence

Unlike existing essentialist or rationalist approaches, or even more recent works that
provide greater nuance to religious effects on conflict, this article approaches religion as a
constantly contested discourse rather than a fixed influence on politics. Contention over religious
issues involves actors attempting to construct and advance a certain conception of a religious
tradition and its applicability to political situations. Extreme religious violence is not the result of
religion, certain religions, or strains within religious traditions but rather is the context-specific
constellation of religious symbols constructed through political contention.

As was noted above, this article approaches religion as a discourse. Religion is not a
monolithic tradition driving adherents to impose religious dogma onto politics, but is rather a
“discursive field,” in which “religious beliefs, experiences and frameworks draw
boundaries…around what constitutes acceptable arguments and beliefs” (Snyder, 2011: page;
Nexon, 2011, 150). This corresponds to work on Islam and politics by scholars such as Dale
Eickelman, David Levine, and Armando Salvatore, which they conceptualize as a contestation of
notions of the “common good” within parameters set by shared beliefs among Muslims (see
Eickelman, 1998; Salvatore and Eickelman, 2004; Salvatore and Levine, 2005). “Islamic
politics” then, is not the imposition of Islamic doctrine onto political life, but contestation over
the nature of this doctrine in the political sphere. Different actors emphasize different elements
of Islamic tradition—or innovate on existing ones—to advance their preferred interpretation.

The destructive form of violence that has occurred in the context of Islamic politics in
recent decades is a particular constellation of Islamic symbols. Religious violence resembles the
aforementioned “cosmic war,” with the externalization of religious struggles onto political issues and destructive, ritualistic violence enacted by combatants. Viewed through a relational lens, however, this cosmic war not being inherent in Islam or religious practice in general; instead, it is the result of actions and rhetoric by actors that construct this type of religious contention. This means that particular issues or types of contention—such as anger over US military actions or tactics like suicide bombing—are not inherently attached to a religious tradition; they come to be seen as religious or in line with religious standards through the process of religious contention. It also means that religious violence in line with a “cosmic war” is not the only possible effect of religion on politics, and peaceful variations are available.

A relational approach to religious violence provides two additional insights besides the “multivocality” of religions, which others have noted (see Stepan 2000). The first is that religious violence is not the result of a certain type of religious sentiment—characterized as extremist, radical, etc.—coming to dominate in a society or coming into contact with “moderate” religious strain. Instead, religious violence is itself the process through which actors contest the meaning of a religious tradition and these strains are produced.

The second contribution of a relational approach is the provision of several mechanisms from existing works that can specify how this process occurs. The first mechanism involves the attempt by actors to construct a perspective on religion, which comes from Jackson’s work on rhetoric and politics. Jackson (2006) discusses the presence of numerous “rhetorical commonplaces” available to actors; in the process of advancing their interests, actors combine various of these rhetorical commonplaces to construct a new interpretation of political conditions and gain support for their cause. This joining of rhetorical commonplaces is thus a significant aspect of contention (Jackson, 2006).
The second mechanism is that of *frame alignment*, which comes from social movement literature. As Snow and others have argued, it is “not merely the presence or absence of grievances, but the manner in which grievances are interpreted” (1986: 466) that is crucial in movement formation. This means of interpretation is a frame, joins together rhetoric and symbols in three parts: a “diagnosis” of the group’s grievances, a “prognosis” on how to address them, and a mobilization element to gain support for the struggle (Benford and Snow, 2000: 615). Much of contention involves groups advancing their frames to establish their interpretation of political conditions as dominant and mobilize public behind their struggle. Frame alignment, then—“the linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests…and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary”—is an important mechanism, in which groups focus their rhetoric and tactics to explain their frame, counter competing ones, and gain support from the public (Snow *et al.*, 1986: 464).

The final mechanism comes from Tilly’s work on political violence, *boundary activation*. This is a “shift in social interactions” so that they are based on a “single us-them boundary;” that is, contention gives rise to certain salient identity markers that were previously latent or nonexistent (Tilly, 2003: 21). This boundary activation can precipitate conflict or occur during the process of violent contention. Thus, actors will focus their strategies on effecting this boundary activation by highlighting the boundaries they hope to activate through their frames and actions.

_Rhetorical Outbidding_

_Rhetorical outbidding_ is the combination of these mechanisms. Competing groups appeal to rhetorical commonplaces in society, joining them to construct their frame. Groups then
attempt to align these frames with the public to convince the public of the validity of their struggle and gain support through rhetoric and tactics, while also attempting to effect boundary activation. Violence occurs when a group is advancing a frame that rejects the legitimacy of others’ and justifies extremely violent acts, such as a “cosmic war.”

Each actor in an episode of religious contention possesses a frame that involves specification of the diagnosis, prognosis, and means of mobilization. The frames will differ based on the specific rhetorical commonplaces used. They will also differ as to how tightly these aspects are linked in the frame; i.e., some frames will define the identity in terms only of their acceptable forms of collective action, others will link mobilization with definition of grievances, while still others will base in-group/out-group distinctions on the legitimate means through which to address grievances. As actors formulate their frame, joining occurs through appeals to various rhetorical commonplaces and the nature of their linkages.

Frame alignment and boundary activation flow from attempts to construct and align these frames. Actors will use rhetorical appeals to the public to convince them of the superiority of their framing of the struggle, and undermine the appeal of their competitors. They will focus their rhetoric on the boundary they hope to activate, directing appeals to certain portions of the population and demonizing others. Actors also gear their tactics towards this, picking certain repertoires of contention that fit their frame and demonstrate its validity. And they will focus their tactics on highlighting the relevant boundary, by targeting those deemed outside of it.

This process need not involve violence, but when one group advances a frame that is exclusivist in nature—such as a “cosmic war”—violence is likely to arise. Frames that reject the legitimacy of any other approach to the issue make it unlikely actors advancing them will attempt to resolve differences through peaceful political processes. Likewise, viewing one’s
struggle as sacred makes it easier to justify extreme actions. And defining the struggle in exclusive terms leaves much of the populace outside the acceptable boundary, allowing for more indiscriminate and extreme violence.

In such cases, violence serves both a demonstrative and strategic function. It serves as a sort of “costly signaling,” demonstrating the actors’ resolve and dedication to their interpretation of the struggle; this can convince the public of the worthiness of the groups’ cause, increasing support. It can also undermine the frames of competing actors by differentiating the violent actor from ones more acceptant of the status quo and demonstrating the viability of the violent tactics; this can serve to decrease public support for competing groups (see Crenshaw 1972; Tilly 2003). Finally, the violence can help to activate the actor’s preferred identity by tying its targeting to boundary definition, highlighting who is not included in the identity and the proper rules for dealing with them.

Religious violence thus arises through the contestation of religious standards, as competing actors attempt to join together rhetorical commonplaces, advance their frames, and activate the relevant boundary among the populace. Groups compete for public support but not—as in outbidding theories—by appealing to fixed public preferences for certain goals or tactics. Instead, they attempt to outbid each other for the rhetorical resources to generate such support by constructing and advancing frames and effecting boundary activation. The severe religious violence that occurs is a result of the nature of the frames and the intensity of the competition.

It should be noted that the posited effect of rhetorical outbidding on religious violence does not depend on groups convincing their competitors or the public of the validity of their frame, or seizing political power. The severe violence accompanying rhetorical outbidding arises
through the attempt by groups to advance their frames in a conflict, rather than their success in doing so.

This is distinct from alternative explanations. Essentialist explanations would expect religious violence to flow directly from Islamic doctrine, which would be reflected in a group’s rhetoric; explanations focusing on types of religious ideologies would expect a similar dynamic, although one related to strains of Islam—such as Moghadam’s *salafi-Jihadism*—rather than Islam itself. Rationalists, in contrast, would expect AQ’s rhetoric to focusing on coercing its target or appealing to the public, while its attacks would do likewise.

**Methodology**

This article uses a mechanism-based method to assess the validity of the above theory. The article does not measure the variables that explain religious violence and display the correlation between changing levels of the variables and a group’s actions (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Instead, it examines whether the mechanisms of rhetorical outbidding are present, and whether they correspond to the type of violence posited in the theory. As such, the study uses a form of process-tracing, gaining theoretical leverage through assessing the extent to which a piece of evidence corresponds to a theory (Bennett, 2010).

The article focuses on AQ as a case of religious terrorism. It may be argued that AQ is a most-likely case for the effects of religious violence, and the theoretical leverage to be gained over this subject will be minimal as a result. Yet, AQ is also a most-likely case for the two alternative explanations this theory is attempting to counter, the essentialist and strategic approaches; it can therefore be useful in analyzing the ability of each theory to explain the group’s actions. Beyond this, however, concerns about the study’s generalizability are not detrimental to its validity. A mechanism-based approach does not require the mechanism to
occur regularly in all situations, and the specific means through rhetorical outbidding affects religious violence will vary greatly based on local conditions and actors’ decisions (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001).\footnote{See also Jackson’s (2011) discussion of “critical realism.”}

The article draws on press releases and speeches by AQ to its members, potential supporters, and enemies. Some of the data were adapted by the author to graphical form, with the rhetorical commonplaces comprising AQ’s frame operationalized; the commonplaces to which each communiqué appeals are indicated.\footnote{AQ’s releases are from Ibrahim 2007. For detailed graphical representation, see Appendix.} The article also refers to two secondary studies of the rhetoric of AQ and affiliated groups: a piece by Torres, Jordan and Horburgh (TJH) (2006) involving propaganda released by AQ and its media fronts, and a study of videos released by AQ-linked groups in Iraq by Hafez (2007). AQ’s rhetoric is organized into rhetorical commonplaces. Several of the rhetorical commonplaces are self-evident, but a few require some explanation, which is presented in Figure 1. (See Figure 1)

[Figure 1 Here]

The case study involves a discussion of the frames of AQ as well as its primary competitors, highlighting the nature of the various rhetorical commonplaces and how they are connected. It then applies this to AQ’s rhetorical appeals and compares these to AQ’s violence, to determine whether the mechanisms of rhetorical outbidding are present. As was discussed above, the theory presented on rhetorical outbidding deals with the attempt to gain public support, rather than the success in doing so. Thus, the cases will not deal with reception of AQ’s message among Muslim publics, but rather the strategies AQ has adopted to advance its frame.

**Rhetorical Outbidding and AQ’s Violence**
The religious violence of AQ is a result of the rhetorical outbidding that occurs between the group and its competitors. Religion influences AQ’s violence, but as a set of rhetorical commonplaces from which the group constructs and advances a particular framing of Muslim societies’ grievances; its attacks then serve to demonstrate the validity of this frame, undermine competitors’ frames, and activate the relevant boundary among Muslim publics. This section first discusses the religious contestation of which AQ is a part before analyzing its rhetoric and attacks to assess whether the mechanisms of rhetorical outbidding are present.

Religious Contestation and Islamic Politics

AQ’s violence arose in the context of broad-ranging debates over the nature of Islamic doctrine and its applicability to contemporary politics. Muslim governments have attempted to co-opt religious opposition groups by tying themselves to Islam, while religious nationalists contend with the state for control. AQ, meanwhile, competes with both groups, differing in its choice of targeting and tactics.

AQ’s rhetorical outbidding involves three primary actors: AQ, religious nationalist oppositions groups, and the governments of Muslim countries. The actions of AQ take place in a situation of several actors competing for religious legitimacy in order to gain authority over the public, with each actor advancing a different frame. Governments of many Muslim states struggle with religious nationalists over legitimate rule, while AQ attempts to outbid both actors and gain authority. [See Figure 2]

[Figure 2 about here]

---

3 Gerges (2005) refers to groups that focus on the “near enemy” as religious nationalist. There are of course several other ways to characterize the divisions among political Islamic groups; see Moghadam 2008; Philpott 2000; and Roy 2004. Gerges’ terminology is useful for this article, however, as it focuses specifically on debates between AQ and other groups, but this should not imply a rejection of other attempts at categorization.
Muslim states that base their legitimacy on Islam often do so by placing the religion under the authority of the state. Many Middle Eastern states formed after the breakup of colonial powers. While several were founded on pan-Arab ideologies, many appealed to Islam for their legitimacy, tying this to either the heritage of the rulers or the countries’ connections to Islamic history; they attempted to co-opt religious opposition through incorporating religious rhetoric into their attempts at legitimation. For example, Saudi Arabia combines the power of the state with consultation of religious authorities—or *ulema*—while Pakistan increasingly incorporated Islam into its governing to increase its power vis-à-vis religious groups in society (Bronson 2008; Haqqani 205). Competition for religious legitimacy between governments and religious opposition thus often involves the source of authority for religious actors.

Many Muslim governments thus tie religion to the state’s authority, and channel legitimate actions through the state. The legitimacy of Muslim governments—and their ideological preferences—depends on the collective identity of their citizens being defined only through Islam’s connection to the state. They draw on the rhetorical commonplace of Islam as a source of guidance for political systems but tie this to the state’s authority to establish the boundary of their citizens’ identity, so mobilization is based on the state. Muslim governments draw on commonplaces involving threats to Islam and jihad to mobilize support but only when they are convenient for the state’s maintenance of control; in other words, the diagnosis and prognosis aspects of the frame are weakly linked to the mobilization component, as leaders will avoid appealing to these commonplaces when they counter the state’s authority. Thus, Muslim governments’ preferred identity is defined in terms of the state’s authority, with legitimate means of addressing state actions being those harmonious with this authority. The frame involves
tightly-linked commonplaces for the mobilization component of the frame, while linkages with the prognostic and diagnostic components of its frame are weak.

The primary opposition to states’ rule has been among religious nationalist groups that have attacked the religious credentials of their governments; while some are reformist groups, many reject the authority of the state in favor of direct appeals to Islam and often advocate violent opposition. Religious nationalists argue that Islam, rather than nationality, should form the preeminent identity for Muslims—although they focus their efforts on transforming specific nation states—and the authority for any sort of contentious politics waged for Islamic causes should come from Islamic beliefs directly, rather than being filtered through the state (Gerges, 2005; Roy, 1994; Okruhlik, 2004; Robinson, 2004; Wickham, 2004). Furthermore, they point to the threats to Islam posed by Western influences on society and political practices (Roy, 1994; Wiktorowicz, 2004). Finally, they argue for the obligation of Muslims to act against religiously inappropriate states. The means through which this can occur varies; some members of the Muslim Brotherhood advocating democracy and several religious nationalist scholars have proposed the possibility of compromise with the West (Wiktorowicz 2004). Similarly, some groups see *dawah*, or an emphasis on social programs and preaching, as the proper means through which to advance their goals (Roy, 2004). The boundary of religious nationalists’ frame comprises both the preeminence of Islam in guiding political actions and the perceived threat to Islam from un-Islamic regimes, while the necessary actions in response to threats are invoked but are weakly tied to the frame. Religious nationalists’ frame involves tight linkages between the mobilization and diagnostic components—with legitimacy a function of both the lines of mobilization and the grievances the community faces; by emphasizing the threat posed by the “near enemy,” or un-Islamic regimes, Religious nationalists also tie their preferred identity to the
state in which they operate. The linkages between these two aspects of the frame, however, and the prognostic component is weaker. Religious nationalists’ preference is thus more exclusive than their governments’—as it links the mobilization and diagnosis in its legitimacy—but allows for differing interpretations of the suggested steps to advance this frame.

Beyond competition between the government and religious opposition, however, many debates emerged among militant religious groups, as seen in AQ. Bin Ladin initially took control of AQ in the context of a debate with his mentor, Abdullah Azzam, over the nature of the jihad; Azzam believed it should be confined to defensive operations against invaders of Muslim lands, while bin Ladin and others—notably Ayman al-Zawahiri—envisioned the jihad occurring on a global scale. Tensions emerged between AQ and other religious groups over the proper steps to achieve a Muslim society, with AQ virulently opposing the aforementioned moves by RNs, seeing any nonviolent means to advance their goals as compromising Islamic principles (Gerges, 2005; Roy, 2004). Another line of tension involved the incommensurability of Western and Islamic interests, with AQ’s religious ideology based on the status of the West as an existential threat to true Islam (Gerges, 2005).

AQ thus possesses the most exclusive preferred identity, allowing for little compromise with other actors. Like religious nationalists it rejects state authority independent of Islam, and asserts the predominance of Islamic identity (Roy, 2004). While AQ admits to the need to counter illegitimate Muslim regimes, however, it focuses primarily on the “far enemy” (Sageman, 2004). Furthermore, AQ presents jihad—defined offensively in terms of violence and often martyrdom—as an obligation for all Muslims, and as the only means available to combat the far enemy (Sageman, 2004; Gerges, 2005; Kepel 2003; Roy, 2004). Finally, it hopes to mobilize supporters through both its appeal to Islam as the sole solution to society’s problems.
and its assertion of the preeminence of Islamic identity, superseding national identifications (Sageman, 2004).

The frame based on this preferred identity is thus the most exclusive. The identity is defined in terms of the violent prognosis for Islam’s troubles, mobilization along Islamic lines and the diagnosis of the “far enemy” as Islam’s greatest threat; this presents the most clearly delineated and exclusive boundary of the actors. AQ’s frame is accordingly tight, with each component of the frame strongly linked to the others; the mobilization is along Islamic identity, but an Islamic identity defined in terms of offensive martyrdom *jihad* and a focus on the “far enemy”—which constitute the prognostic and diagnostic components of the frame, respectively—so all three are inextricably linked for AQ. Such a frame presents an extreme interpretation of reality, which proscribes any compromise or moderation. Thus, this frame can be seen to follow Juergensmeyer’s discussion of “cosmic war” (2003: 157) (See Figure 3)

[Figure 3 Here]

*Rhetorical Outbidding*

Although AQ’s rhetoric does highlight grievances and extol the effectiveness of its actions, a great deal of its communications focus on religious legitimacy. The group’s efforts to spread its ideology are almost as important an aspect of its operations as the terrorist attacks it conducts and inspires (Rabasa *et al* 2006). Communication to Muslims far outweighs attempts at coercion aimed at non-Muslims; between 1996 and 2005, there were over 2,000 releases to Muslims and less than 100 to non-Muslims (Torres, Jordan and Horsburgh, 2006). And most releases involved commentary on events or “re-vindication of attacks,” both efforts to display the group’s religious legitimacy (Torres, Jordan and Horsburgh 2006). This can be seen specifically in the “Declaration of War” released by AQ and the “World Islamic Front,” which
highlights the groups’ grievances against the United States, but presents its struggle as one that all Muslims are obligated to support (Bin Ladin et al, 2007).

Moreover, such rhetoric is an essential aspect of the group’s attempts to persuade potential supporters of its legitimacy. Gunaratna (2003) has noted the heavy use of religious symbolism in bin Laden’s appearances, through which he hoped to increase the salience of his message and the group’s ability to mobilize support. Thus, AQ’s rhetoric serves a strategic function—to gain religious legitimacy and mobilize support for its actions.

The use of rhetoric by AQ involves the mechanisms posited in the rhetorical outbidding process. First, AQ advances its frame through its rhetoric, breaking the linkages in competitors’ frames—specifically involving mobilization and prognosis—and joining these to its exclusivist frame through the linkages to its prognosis. This can be seen in common themes described by TJH; each theme contains assertions of Islam as the preeminent identity, the focus on the United States and its allies as the primary threat to Islam and the necessity and appropriateness of suicide operations in order to counter this threat (Torres, Jordan and Horsburgh, 2007).

This is illustrated in analysis of AQ’s rhetoric. AQ’s rhetoric includes repeated references to jihad—defined as offensive and martyrdom—and the obligation of all Muslims to support its actions (see Roy, 2004: 41). These two commonplaces are very common, with the indivisibility of its goals and a focus on the “far enemy” also prominent. Moreover, these commonplaces are often presented in conjunction with each other, indicating their connection in AQ’s ideology. AQ thus repeatedly appeals to the commonplaces comprising its frame, joining these commonplaces tightly to construct its preferred identity. (See Figure 2).
These mechanisms not only constitute an attempt to construct its frame, but also undermine the authority of its competitors by breaking their rhetorical linkages. AQ’s rhetoric was intended to attack the authority of Muslim governments, drawing on the “far enemy” commonplace to highlight states’ ties to the United States and their lack of religious legitimacy (Gerges, 2005). Moreover, it drew on commonplaces involving the obligation of jihad to excoriate RN groups that attempted to cooperate with authorities—such as the GI in Egypt—thus harming their legitimacy as well (Kepel 2003). Building off this, AQ’s rhetoric focused on demonstrating its religious credibility to gain legitimacy, and establish itself as the worthiest actor vying for Muslim publics’ support (Ibrahim, 2007; Gerges, 2005). AQ’s attacks on its competitors’ legitimacy, however, are often accompanied by the positive aspects of its frame, connecting the two closely; this indicates its attempt to outbid competitors through rhetorical commonplaces. That is, by drawing on alternative rhetorical commonplaces to break linkages in its competitors’ frames and join commonplaces to form strong linkages in its own frame, AQ attempts to weaken other actors’ authority and establish its own.

Second, AQ’s rhetoric serves to effect boundary activation, actualizing the identity it hopes to construct through its frame. One of the primary goals of the movement’s propaganda is to focus attention on the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, which—having been defined by AQ—will enable mobilization along this boundary (Torres, Jordan and Horsburgh, 2007). This is also apparent in communications involving Iraq, which draw on both religious rhetoric and emotional appeals to demonstrate AQ’s legitimacy and encourage the audience’s identification with the “martyrs” (Hafez, 2007). As was noted, AQ repeatedly appeals to offensive jihad, Islam’s preeminence and the indivisibility of its goals, with a focus on the “far enemy” often included; these commonplaces are often linked together to construct its frame. The
combination of these appeals with attacks on competitors’ legitimacy serves to highlight the boundary of the identity AQ is attempting to construct. (See Figure 2)

Terrorist Attacks

The rhetoric of AQ thus displays the mechanisms within the rhetorical outbidding process. Yet, rhetoric itself is not enough to align AQ’s frame; costly signaling, in the form of terrorism, is required in order to catalyze the process. AQ draws on terrorist violence as a means of effecting rhetorical outbidding, due to the violence necessitated by its frame.

First, its attacks demonstrate the validity of AQ’s frame. That is, since AQ’s frame is defined by the need for violent struggle against the forces of jahiliyya, an effective violent struggle is required in order to demonstrate that this frame can be acted upon. As Gunaratna (2003) has noted, AQ believes that conducting terrorist attacks raises morale among supporters and provides a concrete example of AQ’s legitimacy and its lack on the part of competitors. Similarly, propaganda videos released from Iraq display a prominent theme of the ultimate effectiveness of attacks in advancing their religious cause (Hafez, 2007). There is a similar emphasis in AQ’s communiqués, with repeated appeals to the effectiveness of the group’s definition of jihad in protecting Islam. (See Figure 2) That is, AQ’s attacks are an attempt to demonstrate the effectiveness of its frame, instead of a tactic rationally deemed to be effective; the level of violence must thus be markedly high to achieve this.

Second, the attacks demonstrate AQ’s commitment to this frame. In order to gain authority over its competitors through its ideology, AQ must show that it can credibly commit to the violent struggle it advocates through terrorist acts. This involves not only tying its rhetorical constructs to its attacks but also ensuring the attacks are of sufficient ferocity to demonstrate this commitment, even if they go against public opinion. The “re-vindication” of attacks prevalent in
the group’s propaganda is an attempt to tie its actions to its rhetoric; this can also be seen in videos from Iraq that focus on the dedication of suicide operatives to Islam (Hafez, 2007; Torres, Jordan and Horsburgh, 2007). Similarly, Sageman (2004) argues that the 1998 East Africa attacks were intended partially to show that AQ would follow through on its justification of violence against civilians.

Finally, AQ’s attacks accent the boundary of the collective identity AQ is advancing through violent acts against those beyond the boundary. By conducting terrorist attacks against those it deems outside of its definition of a true Muslim, AQ attempts to demonstrate the lack of legitimacy among its targets and strengthen the boundary to facilitate mobilization. AQ’s focus on the United States in its targeting was intended partially to provide a focus for jihadi groups, uniting them against a common enemy (Gerges, 2004). This could also arguably be seen in the AQ-linked Jemaah Islamiyah’s (JI) attacks against Christian churches on Christmas Eve of 2000, which were intended to exacerbate religious tensions in Indonesia (Gunaratna, 2003). Some of this is assisted by the group’s propaganda; by releasing videos of the killing of prisoners, AQ not only displays its credibility, but also strives to sharply differentiate between the “in-“ and “out-groups” (Hafez, 2007; Torres, Jordan and Horsburgh, 2007).

*Alternative Explanations*

The process of rhetorical outbidding provides a better explanation for AQ’s violence than alternative explanations. The lack of a unified religious tradition behind the rhetoric of AQ (and its competitors) precludes an essentialist explanation, as does the persuasive focus of AQ’s rhetoric. And AQ’s attacks do display strategic considerations, and thus cannot be ascribed only to religious imperatives. Yet, the focus of the rhetoric on its frame, rather than merely appealing to political grievances, counters the expectations of the strategic approach. Finally, outbidding
can explain AQ’s attacks on its competitors’ legitimacy, but not the focus of its rhetoric on persuading the public of its own legitimacy and thus is unable to account for an important aspect of AQ’s rhetoric. Likewise, its attacks are not focused on coercing US policy change, as expected by the coercion approach, and the persistence of a high level of violence past the rise of public opposition indicates AQ’s violence is driven less by appeals to public opinion than an attempt to alter public opinion.

Conclusions

There is thus neither a causal link between Islamic beliefs and AQ’s violence, nor is religion incidental to its violence or instrumentally drawn upon to appeal to public attitudes. Instead, the group’s rhetoric and actions are focused on constructing its particular framing of Muslim societies’ grievances and advancing them to undermine competitors and mobilize the public. The contestation of Islamic beliefs and symbols and competition between AQ, RNs and Muslim states is what produces both extreme ideologies and extreme violence.

A few caveats are required. First, this is a single-case study, and suffers from some of the limitations of such studies, primarily generalization. Yet, as was discussed above the mechanism-based nature of this study does not depend on uncovering broadly-applicable generalizations; also, qualitative methodological discussions have highlighted the value of single-case studies (George and Bennett, 2005; Reuschemeyer, 2003). Moreover, while this is only one case, and an extreme case at that, this mechanism is likely present in other cases of religious violence. Another caveat has to do with the scope of the case study. As was noted, the case deals with AQ’s attempts to advance its frame and gain support, and the means through which rhetorical outbidding arises and leads to severe violence. This is not meant to indicate that AQ’s efforts have succeeded, and indeed popular support for the group has been steadily
declining. It is possible that the exclusivist ideology and extreme violence of the group are inherently self-defeating, although this would require additional studies. Relatedly, the case has focused on the rhetoric and actions of AQ and whether this validates the theory of rhetorical outbidding; it did not deal with the broader historical developments through which AQ, religious nationalist groups and officially-Islamic governments arose and contended with each other for power. Such a historical narrative would be useful in highlighting how the particular constellation of religious symbols—manifesting itself as the “cosmic war”—came together and how it may be unraveling but is beyond the scope of this article. Finally, [institutions]

This article can contribute to studies of both religion and violence and rhetoric and politics. Those scholars who argue that religion has a distinct effect on politics—for both good and ill—are correct. While the focus on types of religious beliefs and institutional conditions is useful, complementing this with a study of the process through which groups construct and contest religious meanings and how this relates to religious violence.

It may also contribute to work on rhetoric and politics, by applying this research program to a new substantive area and demonstrating its utility. The fact that relational analyses can apply to a contemporary high-stake issues like religious violence indicates the value of these approaches. Moreover, the application of relational theories to religious violence could also contribute to the former research program. Few relational studies have focused exclusively on religious violence; doing so would thus extend the applicability of relational analyses and demonstrate their value in understanding a substantively significant contemporary phenomenon. Moreover, many relational studies point to the role of relational mechanisms in effecting a relatively stable outcome: conflict indivisibility, the US-Western European alliance following World War II, or the modern state system. By focusing on an ongoing, and possibly failing,
process—the violent attempt to reshape political orders in Muslim societies by religious
groups—this approach can demonstrate the value of relational analyses even when the end-state
of an episode is unclear.

The article can also provide some insights for policymakers attempting to deal with
extreme religious violence. The religious violence of groups like AQ is not due to US military
actions, and will likely continue even if the US withdraws from all Muslim countries. Yet its
violence is not the inevitable result of Islamic politics, or even conservative strains of Islam.
Instead, it arises from a contingent set of rhetorical appeals and tactics on the part of AQ and
other actors that produce extreme violence; extreme violence is not an essential part of Islamic or
religious beliefs, and the current wave of religious violence may be unique to the particular
conditions of the late 20th century. As these conditions change and the extreme violence of AQ
and other groups becomes self-defeating, this particular framing of the conflict may unravel.
That is, the cosmic war with which the world is currently grappling may deconstruct itself as
easily as it was constructed.
**Figures:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Far Enemy:</th>
<th>The primary threat to Islam is posed by the United States, through its support for the “near enemy,” or apostate regimes.</th>
<th>Islam Preeminent:</th>
<th>The primary identity for Muslims should be their religion, rather than national or ethnic identification.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indivisibility:</td>
<td>The goals of Islam and the goals of the West (and its allies) are incommensurable, and compromise is impossible</td>
<td>Offensive Jihad:</td>
<td><em>Jihad</em> is an obligation for all Muslims, defined in offensive terms and by the tactic of suicide bombing, legitimated through martyrdom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1: Description of Rhetorical Commonplaces*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
<th>Prognosis</th>
<th>Mobilization</th>
<th>Extent of linkages among components</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Governments</td>
<td>Threats to Islam, but inconsistently appealed to</td>
<td>Jihad at times, but only actions sanctioned by the state</td>
<td>All collective mobilization should be in support of the state</td>
<td>Weak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Nationalists</td>
<td>Threats to Islam, specifically from the “near enemy”</td>
<td>Defensive jihad, but some disagreement on this is permissible</td>
<td>Mobilization should be tied to the preeminence of Islamic identity</td>
<td>Moderate—mobilization and diagnosis are linked, but prognosis is open to debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Qaeda</td>
<td>Threats to Islam, specifically from the “far enemy”</td>
<td>Offensive jihad</td>
<td>Mobilization should be tied to the preeminence of Islamic identity</td>
<td>Strong—all three components are interconnected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Actor’s Frames**
Figure 3:  
Al Qaeda’s Frame:  
*Rhetorical Commonplaces, Linkages and Boundary*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme of Release (n)</th>
<th>Far Enemy 4</th>
<th>Indivisibility 5</th>
<th>Offensive Jihad</th>
<th>Islam’s Preeminence 6</th>
<th>Effectiveness 7</th>
<th>Attack on Legitimacy</th>
<th>Political Grievances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comment on Movement (4)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat (6)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilization (4)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theological Treatise (3)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (17)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4: Number of Communiques Appealing to Rhetorical Commonplaces**

---

4 Includes appeals to cultural and religious threat posed to Islam by the United States, Europe and Israel, focus on “far enemy.
5 Also includes “Satanizing” the enemy
6 Includes appeals to mobilization based on Islam’s preeminence
7 Includes effectiveness of AQ’s tactics and ultimate effectiveness of the movement.
## Appendix: Al-Qaeda Communiqués and Rhetorical Commonplaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Threat from West</th>
<th>Indivisibility</th>
<th>Offensiveness Jihad</th>
<th>Islam’s Preeminence</th>
<th>Effectiveness</th>
<th>Attack on Competitors’ Legitimacy</th>
<th>Political Grievances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AQ’s declaration of War</td>
<td>Mobilization</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Islam</td>
<td>Theological Treatise</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty and Enmity</td>
<td>Theological Treatise</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jihad and Martyrdom</td>
<td>Theological Treatise</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zawahiri Interview</td>
<td>Comment on movement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why We are Fighting You</td>
<td>Threat to US and allies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel, Oil and Iraq</td>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Fate is in Your Hands</td>
<td>Threat to US and allies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

9 Short version of titles in Ibrahim, ed., *The Al Qaeda Reader*.
10 Includes appeals to cultural and religious threat posed to Islam by the United States, Europe and Israel, focus on “far enemy.”
11 Also includes “Satanizing” the enemy.
12 *Jihad* defined as offensive, obligatory and through martyrdom.
13 Includes appeals to mobilization based on Islam’s preeminence.
14 Includes effectiveness of AQ’s tactics and ultimate effectiveness of the movement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Threat from West</th>
<th>Indivisibility</th>
<th>Jihad</th>
<th>Islam’s Preeminence</th>
<th>Effectiveness</th>
<th>Attack on Competitors’ Legitimacy</th>
<th>Political Grievances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truce Offer to the Americans</td>
<td>Threat to US and allies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am Among the Muslim Masses</td>
<td>Comment on movement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the Allies of the United States</td>
<td>Threat to US and allies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Offer to the Europeans</td>
<td>Threat to US and allies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zawahiri Berates the Queen</td>
<td>Threat to US and allies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the Muslims of Iraq I</td>
<td>Mobilization</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the Muslims of Iraq II</td>
<td>Mobilization</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Afghan-Soviet Paradigm</td>
<td>Comment on movement</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Youth of Islam</td>
<td>Mobilization</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography


Henne 33


