

Packaging Inspiration: Al Qaeda's Digital Magazine *Inspire* in the Self-Radicalization Process

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Al Qaeda is today a fragmented organization, and its strategic communication efforts now focus largely on recruiting individuals in the West to carry out "individual jihad" in their home countries. One Al Qaeda-affiliated publication, *Inspire*, represents an unusual use of the digital magazine format and content for recruitment. This study examines the content and design of *Inspire* to determine how the magazine may advance the self-radicalization that it seeks to induce in its readers. This analysis finds that the magazine weaves together jihadist ideology, a narrow interpretation of Islam, and appropriations of Western popular culture to maximize the publication's potential for motivating readers toward violence.

Keywords: Al Qaeda, terrorism, self-radicalization, digital magazine, counterterrorism

A 19-year-old London perfume salesman was jailed in May 2012 for having four digital copies of a magazine (Hodges, 2012). Four more men in England, all originally from Pakistan, were charged in April 2012 with terrorism-related crimes for plotting an attack. All possessed copies of the same magazine (Greenwood, 2012). The United Kingdom deported two German nationals in March 2012 after their conviction for possessing this digital magazine on a hard drive (Slack, 2012).

In the United States, Army Pfc. Naser Jason Abdo, age 22, faces life in prison if convicted of "attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction." Abdo was arrested in July 2011 for possessing bomb-making materials with which he allegedly plotted to attack Fort Hood in Texas. When police searched his hotel room, they found bomb-making directions from this same digital magazine. At a court appearance, Abdo shouted, "Nidal Hasan, Fort Hood, 2009." His shout referred to the army officer who attacked soldiers at Fort Hood in 2009, killing 13 and wounding 38, and who this magazine mentions as a model for aspiring jihadis (Brown, 2012).

What is the magazine that may have motivated these men—and possibly others, even at this moment—to plot terror attacks? It is *Inspire*, a digital publication created by members of Al Qaeda in the

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Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and distributed online for anyone to download and read. Designed to radicalize marginalized Muslims in the West and motivate them to initiate independent terror attacks, *Inspire's* message has resonated with at least a few readers. And only a few inspired readers would be needed to cause significant destruction and loss of life.

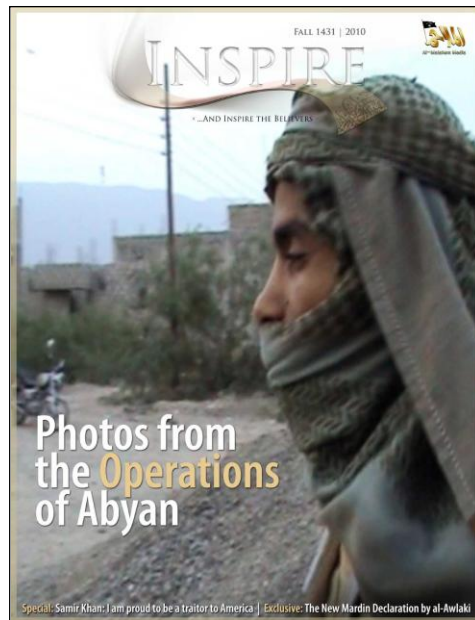


Figure 1. The cover of the Fall 2010 issue of *Inspire*.

Inspire is a fascinating representation of multiple phenomena: the fragmentation in Al Qaeda's structure and message, the magazine medium's ability to form communities around specific interests and promote opportunities for self-actualization, and the strategic use of digital media to encourage self-radicalization among audiences intrigued by such ideology. (See Figure 1.) This study examines how *Inspire's* construction capitalizes upon the coincidence of these factors. This article examines *Inspire's* physical design in the style of a mainstream Western magazine as well as the ideology and narratives it uses to guide readers through the processes of self-radicalization—which appears to have occurred with the individuals above.

Al Qaeda Today and Its Communication Strategies

Documents obtained during the May 2011 assassination strike on Osama bin Laden revealed the extent to which Al Qaeda had deteriorated as a unified group. In a review of bin Laden's correspondence, analysts at the Combating Terrorism Center (Ressler, Koehler-Derrick, Collins, al-Obaidi, & Lahoud, 2012) describe his frustration with Al Qaeda's fragmentation into multiple regional groups and with his inability to control their activities and messages. Bin Laden felt these groups lacked competence in crafting communication and operational strategies. Bin Laden preferred complex operations, not attacks by solitary

individuals, and thought *Inspire's* promotion of haphazard independent operations would have "dangerous consequences" for the jihadi cause (Rassler et al., 2012, p. 52).

Counterterrorism experts are concerned about the growth of smaller, harder-to-detect terror groups and by Al Qaeda's effort to recruit independent individuals in the West to carry out "lone wolf" missions in their home countries (Springer, Regens, & Edger, 2009). Lone wolves have many motivations for terrorism and can access a wide variety of encouraging online materials. For recruitment, Al Qaeda deploys strategic messages. Corman and Schiefelbein (2008) describe three primary goals of Al Qaeda's overarching communication strategy, inasmuch as it remains coherent: (1) legitimating its own views and actions to gain social and religious acceptance among Muslims; (2) recruiting new followers; and (3) intimidating opponents, whether Muslims who disagree with the jihadi cause or Westerners the organization seeks to frighten. Al Qaeda uses many digital tools in this strategy, including e-mail lists, blogs, forums, chat rooms, games, social media groups, magazines, and videos for flexible, global distribution, with little real threat of censorship. Although these formats permit infinite reproduction of Al Qaeda communications, they also fragment its messaging and open those messages to users' critique (e.g., in comments on YouTube videos; Torres Soriano, 2012).

Al Qaeda's Digital Magazines

Among these formats, the magazine medium can help Al Qaeda refocus an increasingly fragmented message and motivate those interested in its ideology and mission. As documented by Seib and Janbek (2011), Al Qaeda used digital magazines prior to *Inspire* to spread its ideology and recruitment messages, with many published in Arabic, but some in English and designed for Westerners. For example, in 2009, the Al Mosul Islamic Network published a digital magazine called *Defenders of the Truth* that Iraqi insurgents hoped would activate American Muslims during the Iraq War (Seib & Janbek, 2011, p. 34). The closest comparison to *Inspire*, however, was an earlier English-language magazine called *Jihad Recollections*, also published by Samir Khan of Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. (See Figure 2.)

Jihad Recollections also promoted terrorist activity, but was perhaps less appealing to potential recruits—and, crucially, less intriguing to Western media. Although both *Jihad Recollections* and *Inspire* display relatively sophisticated design and content, *Inspire* represents a distinct approach; its subtleties are discussed below, but key differences are noted here to establish *Inspire's* uniqueness. First, *Jihad Recollections* and *Inspire* both appeal to Muslims in the West, but *Inspire* especially focuses on Westerners' anti-Islamic activity. This emphasis may invoke readers' concern about "a future of religious intolerance for Muslims in the United States" (Braniff & Moghadam, 2011, para. 4). Second, *Inspire* appeals to Western youth and celebrity culture, often focusing on AQAP leader Anwar Al Awlaki, whom readers may wish to emulate due to his "celebrity sheikh" and "Al Qaeda Idol" status, described by Brachman and Levine (2011). Finally, the often humorous and satirical tone of *Inspire* differs from that of *Jihad Recollections*. While *Inspire* contains heavy ideological and religious texts, it includes lighter items (inasmuch as possible in a terrorist publication) that appeal to a youthful audience. Perhaps more importantly, those lighter items drew Western media attention as *Jihad Recollections* never could. *Inspire*

articles with eye-catching titles like “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom” and “The Ultimate Mowing Machine” were perfectly suited for sensationalized Western media coverage of *Inspire*.

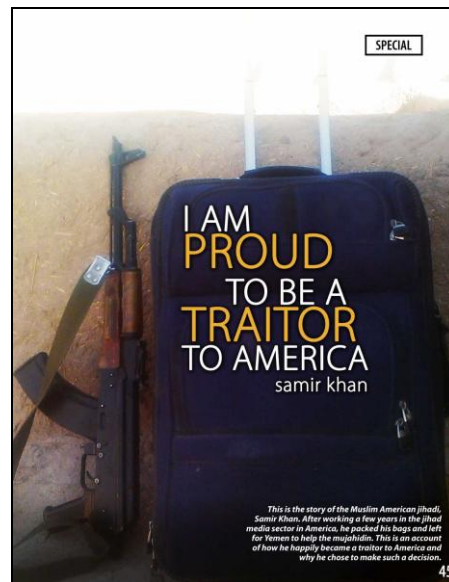


Figure 2. One of Samir Khan's articles in *Inspire*.

Inspire attracted more attention from mainstream Western media than *Jihad Recollections*. LexisNexis searches for coverage of *Jihad Recollections* and *Inspire* reveal dramatic differences: The former was mentioned 93 times in all news sources, while the latter appeared more than 4,000 times.¹ Concomitant with this coverage, a Google Trends search shows that, aside from one small spike in searches for *Jihad Recollections* in the second quarter of 2009, its search traffic is dwarfed by that generated by searches for *Inspire*. *Inspire* magazine has consistently been a far more active search term since its first issue in summer 2010 (Google Trends, 2012). And, although a full analysis of coverage of *Inspire* is beyond the scope of this study, it appears that much American coverage of *Inspire*, particularly online news and blog reports, is derogatory. While journalists certainly would not endorse the publication, much of the coverage does not take *Inspire*'s message or goals seriously and insults its creators and readers, calling them “weaksauce wannabes” (Ackerman, 2011), “sour grapes,” and “jerks” (Linkins, 2011). Western journalists' frequent, negative portrayal of the magazine might have intensified *Inspire*

¹ This analysis, conducted in September 2012, included the LexisNexis categories of “Major World Publications,” “All News (English),” and “Broadcast Transcripts” for all time periods available. The search for *Inspire* in “All News (English)” returned more than 3,000 news records; beyond that number, LexisNexis will not provide a precise quantity of results. The “Major World Publications” and “Broadcast Transcripts” categories contained 745 and 1,051 results, respectively, that mentioned *Inspire*.

readers' desire to seek it out, amplified their preexisting doubts about Western attitudes toward Islam, and augmented their reactions to representations of Islamophobia within the magazine. As a whole, *Inspire* appears to possess a greater capacity for reaching and affecting readers than previous Al Qaeda English-language publications.

Although a September 2011 U.S. drone strike in Yemen killed Samir Khan and Anwar Al Awlaki, *Inspire* clearly benefited from their media experience, technological sophistication (particularly Khan's graphic design knowledge), and extensive experience living in the West. Their facility with English and deep understanding of Western popular culture lent *Inspire* significance and resonance that surpassed that of previous publications, as explored below. Moreover, though a new publisher now manages *Inspire* and lacks his predecessor's English fluency, precedents set by Khan and Al Awlaki persist. The new editor proudly declares in the Winter 2012 issue that he is "still publishing America's worst nightmare." One year after the drone strike, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center told the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs that

AQAP remains intent on publishing the English-language *Inspire* magazine . . . in order to mobilize Western-based individuals for violent action. While the deaths of al-Aulaqi and Khan have affected the quality of the magazine, the publication endures and continues to reach a wide global audience of extremists. (*Homeland Threat Landscape*, 2012)

As this testimony suggests, spelling and grammatical errors likely won't deter *Inspire's* audience from considering its messages.

The Power of the Magazine Medium

Given Al Qaeda's need to provide potential recruits with a coherent message, motivation, and course of action, the magazine medium offers an effective way to present a coherent set of ideas through its editorial voice and community-building capability. Insights from magazine research suggest that these are strengths of the magazine medium. Magazine researchers emphasize magazines' ability to unify audiences through the construction of communities around topics and through the medium's distinctive mode of address. Abrahamson (2007) calls this phenomenon "magazine exceptionalism." Abrahamson attributes this ability to the lack of journalistic distance among editors, authors, and readers due to their shared personal interest in a publication's topic. Researchers have analyzed how communities as diverse as "netizens" (Frau-Meigs, 2000), gay consumers (Sender, 2001), and generational identities (Kitch, 2003) have been constructed in part through magazine content designed to define and motivate them. In *Inspire*, numerous first-person pieces, including some by Al Awlaki and Khan themselves (e.g., Al Awlaki's "Why Did I Choose Al Qaeda?" series), demonstrate these shared interests. Furthermore, magazines direct their readers to specific ways to participate in the shared community (as does *Inspire*). A digital magazine like *Inspire* might not have the same capability to unify and activate a community of readers that a print magazine may possess. Circulating a print Al Qaeda magazine would be impossible. But the content and format of the magazine could still create a sense of connection to the jihadi cause among readers motivated to seek out the digital magazine.

Magazines also draw readers into their content and often encourage lifestyle changes. Specialized magazines encourage readers to identify with the images presented, offering what Breazeale (1994) calls “calculated packages of meaning whose aim is to transform the reader into an imaginary subject” (p. 9). Machin and van Leeuwen (2005) note the frequent use of second-person address in magazine content: The editorial persona calls the reader “you.” This direct address implies that the reader should act upon the magazine’s messages, often through lifestyle changes, as part of self-actualization. Whether and how readers act upon this encouragement is not fully understood, but there is evidence that magazine content does affect readers. Much of this research has focused on Western women’s body image and magazine exposure (e.g., Arciszewski, Berjot, & Finez, 2012) and reveals that magazine content can indeed shape audience attitudes in significant, life-changing ways. In addition, studies within the magazine industry have found that magazine content and advertising can motivate purchasing decisions and online information seeking (Association of Magazine Media, 2012). As explored below, the Western magazine model adopted by *Inspire* might similarly alter attitudes among already intrigued readers accustomed to internalizing messages presented in this communicative style.

Finally, constructing a coherent package of ideas in the form of *Inspire*, within which greater editorial control and even brand identity can be asserted, could help AQAP better communicate its goals to potential lone wolf recruits. Whereas other online media permit user feedback and remixing, a magazine, even in digital form, is a unitary, stable package of content that is harder to alter. The digital magazine medium offers advantages for communicating a consistent, motivating message to AQAP’s target audience.

***Inspire* in the Self-Radicalization Process**

Inspire’s target audience, its content makes clear, is prospective lone wolf terrorists, particularly Muslims in the West who feel marginalized in their countries of origin or current residence. This individual might fit the “Loner” description in Pantucci’s typology (2011) of lone wolf terrorists:

an individual who plans or attempts to carry out an act of terrorism using the cover of extreme Islamist ideology . . . [without] any actual connection or contact with extremists—beyond what they are able to access through passive consumption on the Internet or from society at large. (p. 14)

For Loners, the ideologies and activities proposed by online jihadist literature may seem a valid way to rectify other personal issues or perceived social and political injustices. With its keen sense of Western culture and emphasis on Western Islamophobia, *Inspire* may be an especially alluring medium for motivation.

In general, the Internet’s role in self-radicalization is becoming clearer. Europol (2010) has noted terrorist organizations’ growing Internet recruitment, especially among youth. Increasingly, this outreach occurs in Western languages (Europol, 2010). Homegrown terrorists proliferate in the United States. Of 202 people in the United States charged with “serious jihadist crimes” since September 11, 131 were U.S. citizens, representing diverse terrorist training and Islamic ideological perspectives (Greenberg, 2010).

Musa and Bendett (2010) trace an increase in terrorist plots by individuals who were inspired by media, sought out like-minded individuals online, did not participate in a face-to-face Muslim community, and lacked a strong interpersonal connection to a terrorist network. In these cases—as with Pantucci's Loners—Internet media were the primary or sole link to jihadi ideology and information.

To explain these individuals' development into prospective terrorists, Helfstein (2012) offers a useful model of the self-radicalization process with four stages: *awareness*, *interest*, *acceptance*, and *implementation*. In Helfstein's model, *awareness* is a long-term process that occurs over time as an individual's knowledge of radical ideology and tactics deepens. *Interest* in this model consists of more than curiosity; it also includes "the willingness to alter one's belief system or social norms to reflect those associated with an ideological doctrine" (Helfstein, 2012, p. 16). When potential lone wolves become "interested" in jihad under this model, they also integrate jihadist ideas into their own thinking. *Acceptance* is the final assimilation of radical ideas and norms into the recruit's thought processes. Recruits to violent causes must accept the necessity of violence to achieve sociopolitical goals and enact radical ideology. Only then can the newly radicalized individual follow through on the *implementation* of a violent act.

Helfstein states that current evidence shows that self-radicalization is not a linear process but rather an "iterative" development within the individual that may contain feedback loops. Moreover, this long-term process can be either interrupted or reinforced by outside forces, including by the individual himself or herself. Some people become *aware* and *interested* but don't complete the *acceptance* process "without greater exposure to new information and social relationships"; furthermore, "interested parties" may intervene to support or discourage radicalization (Helfstein, 2012, p. 17). Some segments of the process are also easier to complete. Helfstein argues that developing *awareness* is relatively simple, but gaining the deeper *interest* described above is more challenging. The movement from *interest* to *acceptance* is especially difficult. However, terror propagandists are aware of the challenges of this self-radicalization process. Helfstein notes that much recruitment messaging focuses on moving prospective participants from interest to acceptance, because following acceptance, there is "a tendency to reduce cognitive dissonance" (p. 19) by proceeding directly to violent action. Once at acceptance, the recruit must act violently to embody his or her new perspective.

Conditions of *Inspire's* Reception

Just as the self-radicalization process differs among recruits, readers engage with *Inspire* uniquely, depending on preexisting individual beliefs. Readers also locate the magazine through many routes. Some may seek it after seeing Western media reports; some may learn of it from interpersonal contacts; others may find it on jihadi websites or discussion boards they already frequent. Regardless of the source, readers likely have questions about the magazine, either independently or prompted by online discussions. Although a full analysis of online discussions of *Inspire* is beyond the scope of this study, readers' perusal of these discussions as part of their consumption of *Inspire* would undoubtedly affect their reception of the magazine's messages.

For example, readers might ask whether *Inspire* was authentic—that is, a true representation of Al Qaeda. Torres Soriano (2012) notes that terrorist groups work hard to establish the credibility of their online messaging, especially because counterterrorism agents distribute messages falsely branded as terrorist media, sometimes for entrapment. The Al-Faloja online forum initially warned participants that *Inspire* was “the work of the apostate hypocrite dogs who are trying to discredit the Mujahideen,” as the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (2010) reported—but forum administrators soon reversed course and provided links to *Inspire*. Ample Western media coverage helped publicly authenticate *Inspire* soon after its release, as journalists reported government officials’ concerns about the publication.

Readers might alter their interpretations of *Inspire* based upon the route to, and discussions of, the magazine that they encountered. Such disparities in readers’ conditions of reception mean that not all *Inspire* readers would follow the same course toward self-radicalization upon exposure to the magazine, or that self-radicalization would occur at all. This study suggests a few ways that the magazine may aid some readers through the progression of self-radicalization.

Research Question

As noted earlier, *Inspire* has already been linked to terrorist attacks in the West, both attempted and successful. Though not the sole cause of these attacks, its content has appeared to assist, in some readers, the advancement of self-radicalization. Prior research on the magazine format suggests that the medium alone might help Al Qaeda unify an increasingly fragmented strategic communication effort and reinvigorate an otherwise vague organizational identity. However, there are additional insights to be gained from a close examination of *Inspire*’s content and style.

Therefore, this study posed the following research question: *In what ways may the content and style of Inspire reinforce the self-radicalization process described by Helfstein (2012)?* The question encompasses the design of the magazine, the presentation of Al Qaeda ideology within the magazine’s content, and the narratives within its articles.

Analyzing *Inspire*’s Content: Method

Sample

For this analysis, I obtained digital PDF copies of all nine issues of *Inspire* available at the time of writing: Summer 2010, Fall 2010, a November 2010 “special issue,” Winter 2010, Spring 2011, Summer 2011, a Fall 2011 “special issue,” Fall 2011, and Winter 2012. These nine issues constitute 525 pages of text and images. I downloaded these issues from the website Public Intelligence (2012). The same PDF files of *Inspire* can easily be located using search engines and are accessible on many websites. This ubiquity implies that both mainstream Internet users and jihadist website visitors can easily find *Inspire*.

The magazine’s authenticity is a concern not only for its readers but also for researchers. Some critics (e.g., Fisher, 2010) initially raised questions about whether *Inspire* was an Al Qaeda publication. However, later public discussion among counterterrorism experts and officials appears to confirm its

legitimacy as an Al Qaeda publication. The consistency of these expert descriptions with the content of my copies suggests that editions used here match those possessed by counterterrorism experts.

Analytic Approach and Limitations

I conducted this analysis from an "involved outsider" perspective (Hermann, 2001). In the context of researching violent conflict, Hermann defines the involved outsider as

one who is personally connected to the conflict by virtue of belonging to one of the national, religious or ethnic groups involved in it, or because of an identification with a general political stance . . . relevant to the analysis of the specific conflict. (2001, p. 79)

As an American academic, I am not part of the target audience for *Inspire*, but I am part of a national group that its creators would like to attack through terrorist activities. My culture is also intertwined with that of prospective *Inspire* readers living in the West in that I share with them access to the same contemporary popular culture, the basis for much of the analysis below. However, I am not Muslim and do not read or speak Arabic, unlike *Inspire's* desired audience, and likely possess a different socioeconomic status from many prospective readers; these differences may cause my interpretation of the magazine to vary from that of a truly insider reader within *Inspire's* potential audience. Despite these differences, I have attempted to become "sensitized to multifarious historical, cultural and political specificities" through extensive relevant research (Mangen, 1999, p. 110) well beyond what is cited here.

As a whole, my interpretation may not access some subtleties of *Inspire* that an insider reader from its prospective audience might offer. Gathering responses from this prospective audience to the magazine's content would be another useful strategy for assessing the magazine's potential for self-radicalization, if perhaps ethically challenging. Yet cross-cultural qualitative research—particularly in an area as complex and important as terrorism—requires what Mangen (1999) calls "pragmatic accommodations" (p. 111). *Inspire's* apparent ability to influence its target audience is already suggested by the range of news reports of its involvement in the planning of terror attacks, such as those noted in the introduction above and in recent scholarly summaries like that of Weimann (2012). The analysis that follows is an attempt to identify within the magazine's design and content the elements that best seem to fit the current scholarly understanding of the self-radicalization process and that may have aided the magazine in possessing such influence.

During my analysis, as I read the magazine, I noted physical characteristics, including its use of magazine design techniques, photography, and advertising-like images. I also read its text closely. My reading strategy can be described as a hermeneutic style of close reading, "locating the frame within the relevant context . . . traveling . . . repeatedly from the broader political culture to the specific ideational elements found in primary data and back again" (Gillan, 2008, p. 260). Gillan argues that this type of reading, which seeks a "deeper, more holistic meaning" (p. 260), looks for the roots of the frames that emerge from the text within the broader cultures in which they were constructed. This approach is an excellent fit for the cultural interpretation carried out here with regard to Al Qaeda's strategic communication.

Results

A careful analysis of *Inspire* reveals that the magazine's design, content, and narratives cohere in ways that could reinforce the stages of self-radicalization described by Helfstein (2012). Regardless of an *Inspire* reader's degree of self-radicalization, the magazine format itself, as well as the content of the magazine, seems well designed to induce progress along the path from awareness to implementation.

Awareness

Content enabling the stage of *awareness* in the self-radicalization process is easily recognized within *Inspire*. To reiterate, awareness in Helfstein's model (2012) constitutes the development of a recruit's knowledge of terrorist ideology and tactics.

To generate awareness about Al Qaeda's history, ideology, and preferred tactics, the magazine contains excerpts from leaders' writings that have been previously distributed in other formats, though perhaps not in English until *Inspire*. For example, these include various writings by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, a senior Al Qaeda strategist and author of *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, formerly widely distributed online. This inclusion bolsters the magazine's message, given Suri's position in Al Qaeda, and also calls for Western Muslims' involvement in jihad. The three 2010 issues each include part of Suri's *Call*, retitled "The Jihadi Experiences." Suri's "military theory" argues in the Fall 2010 issue for the effectiveness of "individual, secret jihad" in the larger geopolitical context. An excerpt in the Winter 2010 issue again advocates for individual jihad, promoting "'light guerrilla warfare,' 'civilian terror' and secret methods, especially . . . individual operations and small Resistance Units . . . separated from each other" (p. 32). Similarly, the Winter 2010 and Fall 2011 issues each feature cover stories by Anwar Al Awlaki that explain the "legality" of attacking civilians and taking money from "disbelievers" in countries "at war with the Muslims." Quoting amply from the Quran and hadith, the articles present the jihadist scriptural interpretation used to justify their activities. The inclusion of this document, along with other historically grounded and complex analyses from Al Qaeda leaders, provides an understanding of Al Qaeda's rationale for its ideology and actions, even if the recruit has not yet begun to alter his or her social norms, as required for Helfstein's interest stage of self-radicalization.

Beyond ideology, *Inspire* also details terror tactics used in past attacks that might be used in future attacks—ideally by the newly radicalized reader. Knowing that these methods are available and have succeeded further supports the awareness phase of self-radicalization. Prospective jihadis can begin to visualize how the magazine's radical ideology can be enacted in the world. However, details of these methods are less important at the awareness stage than they are at the final implementation stage. I will discuss the details about violent acts that *Inspire* provides in the "Implementation" section below.

Interest

In Helfstein's model, *interest* is the step of self-radicalization in which a recruit's worldview changes to incorporate new ideology. Interest for the *Inspire* reader might be aided less by the manifest content of the magazine than by the design and format of the digital publication—specifically, its co-optation of Western magazine characteristics and their typical impact.

For the sympathetic reader, the magazine format's simple familiarity may normalize its challenging content through its representation as just another routine magazine topic in an everyday pop-culture milieu. When a front-of-book magazine page offers up photos of international figures, annotated with (sometimes funny) quotes in a handwriting-style typeface, one expects to see Hollywood celebrities portraying what not to wear, not an array of international politicians, Al Qaeda leaders, and suicide bombers. Later, what looks like a routine travel story is really a tale of moving to Afghanistan to train with the mujahideen, complete with recommendations for shoes and reading material to pack (see Figure 3). What looks like a how-to story for a home improvement project, laid out in steps with photos, is really a set of instructions for building a bomb "in the kitchen of your mom." What looks like an advertisement is really a joke satirizing a "traitorous" politician. The topic is still, always, jihad, but in *Inspire*, this otherwise disturbing content is shoehorned into a familiar visual and textual format that stylistically suggests a lighter tone and popular-culture content.



Figure 3. A page from *Inspire*.

Inspire's use of the familiar Western magazine format may help initiate the reader's acceptance of the jihadi identity. Just as Western magazines present identities that are aspirational and imply self-actualizing possibilities for the reader who acts upon the publication's recommendations, so too does *Inspire*. The expectations of the medium that a Western reader brings to *Inspire* could contribute to the normalization of the jihadi cause. Introducing jihad within an everyday, Western-style magazine context makes the idea seem plausible. This normalization might increase readers' willingness to incorporate terrorist ideology into their own worldview. As McLuhan (1964) wrote, "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (p. 9). Considering *Inspire's* magazine

nature in the Western media context, as well as its content, helps us see that its medium alone may amplify its success as a recruitment tool at the interest stage of self-radicalization.

Finally, more specific uses of Western pop-culture tropes in the magazine build its capacity for normalizing terrorist ideology and thereby encourage deeper interest. The magazine's design and content connect explicitly to the Western popular culture in which recruits are likely immersed, especially younger *Inspire* readers. One of these pop-culture connections is the appearance of rap-like song lyrics in many issues. At first, the lines appear to be simply inspirational poetry. But a closer examination of the structure and style of the lines reveals their similarity to rap lyrics:

Al Qaeda is comin' for you
 So you betta shape up as our war is anew
 Smashin' and bashin', Cashin' and Slashin'
 Is our fighting fashion
 Pleasin' the enemy is not a choice
 'Cuz it betrays Islam's voice (Winter 2010 issue, p. 62)

The lines of this text are organized into couplets, said to be the most frequently used rhyme scheme in "old-school" rap (see Figure 4). Many lines also demonstrate consonance between ideas as well as between sounds, a common feature of rap lyrics (Bradley, 2009, p. 50). These lines from the Summer 2010 issue's lyrics reflect this consonance: "Your rank in paradise will be one of progression / As the fire envelops your enemy in regression" (p. 63). With this hip-hop style, *Inspire* presents jihad in yet another normalizing, popular format that makes participation seem less foreign and more "cool." For readers seeking social acceptance, this cool factor may enhance their desire and ability to modify personal beliefs and norms in the self-radicalization interest phase.

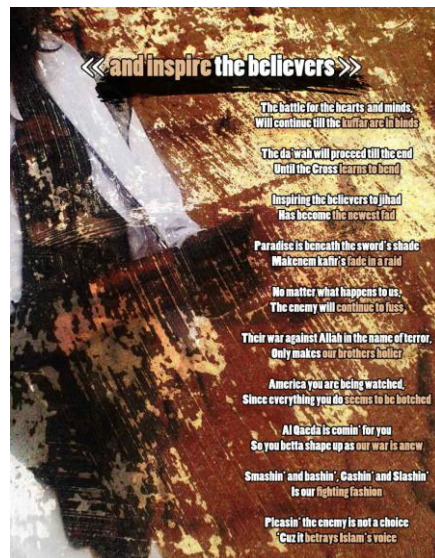


Figure 4. One of *Inspire*'s "raps."

Another notable pop culture representation of jihad in *Inspire* is its appropriation of Western print advertising styles. One Fall 2010 ad mimics a movie poster, with individuals' names staggered across the top. "An Al-Malahem Production" appears atop a neatly arrayed series of pictures of individual jihadis' faces, like the ensemble cast of a new film. The title stretches below their pictures: "And Allah selects the martyrs," followed by the tagline "they only came to journey to their Lord." A Summer 2010 ad shows a large photo of an Adidas sneaker, but contrasts it—almost *Adbusters*-style—with a photo of feet wearing sandals made from plastic water bottles. "Ready to purchase your favorite shoes?" the headline reads. "First spend on those who deserve a share of your wealth . . ." A Qur'an verse follows in Arabic and English to lend spiritual credence to the ad, followed by a notice that this is "a production of counter-culture ads." Another ad in the Winter 2012 issue says "Yes We Can"—the 2008 Barack Obama campaign slogan—over a photo of a man hiding a gun in his waistband as he ascends an escalator into an airport-like public space. This ad is a "Fight in the West production. It seeks to inspire the believers to perform their duty of fighting for Islam's cause."

Even the word choice in the ads—such as "diss" and "LOL"—reflects youthful pop-culture language. The use of the ad format in *Inspire* appropriates Western consumerist imagery and style while demonstrating another way otherwise routine components of the Western magazine format normalize the jihadi message. This normalization, combined with the impression of jihad's coolness and popularity that *Inspire* conveys, could aid the reader in progressing through the interest stage of self-radicalization, because it makes altering personal beliefs and social norms seem reasonable and socially acceptable.

Acceptance

Following awareness and interest, the third component of Helfstein's model of self-radicalization is *acceptance*, in which recruits accept that only violence will bring about their adopted radical ideology and belief system. As noted, terror propagandists recognize the challenge of bringing about acceptance in recruits and strive to construct convincing arguments for violent "solutions." *Inspire's* creators deployed multiple methods of persuasion to induce this acceptance. Here I address two persuasive strategies to draw the reader into acceptance. First, *Inspire* repeatedly evokes guilt in the reader to call him or her to fulfill the jihadi's violent duty, as defined in AQAP's interpretation of Islam. Second, a much more subtle narrative is woven throughout *Inspire* that bears remarkable similarities to contemporary superhero narratives familiar to Western audiences.

The jihadi's religious duty. The primary identity promoted to *Inspire's* readers is the model of the individual jihadi undertaking violence (primarily against Westerners) on behalf of Islam and its people, toward the goal of the establishment of a global Islamic nation. Although *Inspire* readers may already be intellectually familiar with Al Qaeda's arguments for individual jihad (awareness) and have adopted this perspective (interest), they may not yet emotionally accept that violence must be done to fulfill the mission set forth. Therefore, *Inspire* must also bring significant emotional weight to bear upon potential jihadis, and it does so through guilt and fear.

An interview in the Summer 2010 issue with Nasir al-Wuhayshi, a senior leader of AQAP, includes this advice:

My advice to my Muslim brothers in the West is to acquire weapons and learn methods of war. They are living in a place where they can cause great harm . . . It is not enough . . . to participate in demonstrations and protests . . . The successful means are through explosive devices and sacrificing souls . . . The means of harming them are many so seek assistance from Allah and do not be weak and you will find a way. (p. 17)

While the first portion of al-Wuhayshi's command is tactical, his implication that the reader who does not pursue violence is "weak" could be perceived as insulting; readers may feel they must rise to the occasion. Furthermore, if readers don't participate, they betray other believers and God. Similarly, a Fall 2010 article, titled "O Hesitant One: It's an Obligation!" says, "Until when must the love of jihad remain just another one of those hobbies of yours with which you while away your free time[?]" (p. 65), seeming to speak directly to Pantucci's Loners who peruse jihadist material online.

The magazine idolizes those who were strong and set aside frivolity to pursue jihad. People who attempted or completed individual acts of violence are described as models for readers, with their anti-Western sentiments quoted in the Winter 2010 issue. These role models include unsuccessful "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab; failed Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad; Roshonara Choudhury of England, who stabbed a British MP (he survived); and Stockholm suicide bomber Taimour Abdulwahhab al-Abdaly, who killed himself and injured two others. A full page in the Winter 2010 issue is dedicated to Choudhury and Abdaly, highlighted as "followers of the borderless loyalty." In another section, Abdaly's picture receives the commendatory caption "We need more like him." The Fall 2011 issue contains a long article with multiple photos of dead AQAP members and testimonials to their martyrdom, demonstrating that they are remembered and valued even after death. These jihadis' bravery and fidelity are celebrated in *Inspire*.

Throughout the magazines, ample quotations from the Qur'an and scholarly commentaries accompany every call to violence, each calculated to legitimate violence through Al Qaeda's interpretation. For example, the Fall 2010 issue contains an eight-page explanation attributed to Awlaki; he disagrees with the New Mardin Declaration issued in March 2010 by a group of Muslim scholars and theologians. The Declaration asserts a peaceful Islamic perspective and denounces the justification of violence with Islamic legal edicts. The Declaration states, "Anyone who seeks support from [these legal statements] for killing Muslims or non-Muslims has erred in his interpretation and has misapplied the revealed texts" (Mardin Conference, 2010, pp. 2-3). Awlaki argues against the Mardin Conference's perspective. The magazine's constant efforts to demonstrate the permissibility of jihad, particularly individual jihad, reflect what Corman and Schiefelbein (2008) observed in a range of Al Qaeda's communication efforts: the desire to legitimate the movement to the public at large and to other Muslims. The magazine represents yet another way that movement leaders attempt to make jihad not only justified but also obligatory for "true" Muslims.

The superhero narrative. Certainly more than one narrative is present in the magazine, but the narrative of the superhero is repeated and reinforced through various stylistic and content elements.

In testimony to a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee regarding AQAP and *Inspire*, Al Qaeda expert Jarret Brachman stated that the magazine offers:

an arena for escapist fantasy and role-playing by empowering their audience with new knowledge, skill-sets, role models and incentives for actualizing that knowledge. AQAP's role models, like any comic superhero, are portrayed as average men who discover that they have superhuman abilities. These "ordinary guys turned superheroes" who comprise AQAP's dominant media personalities must then wield their superpowers to triumph over evil (the Crusaders) and save damsels in distress (Islam). (*Terrorist Threat*, 2011)

Though Brachman provided this description of *Inspire* in his testimony and mentions it briefly on his blog, locating this narrative within the magazine requires further analysis. This particular narrative connects to the real-life social conditions faced by the target audience for *Inspire*, perhaps intensifying its resonance. *Inspire's* construction of the superhero narrative has four notable characteristics, each of which is represented in previous superhero tales in a variety of media. These are the marginality of the superhero; the secret identity of the superhero; the simplistic construction of the villain fought by the superhero; and the emphasis on the masculinity of superheroes, especially in contrast to the weakness of the women they defend.

Inspire is targeted primarily to Muslim readers in the West, many of whom struggle in difficult economic circumstances and intolerant social environments, and likely feel they live on the fringes of society. *Inspire* emphasizes intolerance, oppression, and violence against Muslims worldwide by Western governments, speaking to

Muslim brothers residing in the states of the Zio-Crusader coalition, whether they are from the emigrant communities, like those which live on the margins of society in the miserable suburbs of Paris, London and Detroit, or are from those arriving in America and Europe [to study or work]. (Winter 2010 issue, p. 17)

These are precisely the groups that are the subject of concern regarding Al Qaeda recruitment (Sageman, 2008). *Inspire* suggests that these individuals can become heroic if they participate in individual jihad. The words *hero*, *heroism*, and *champion* are used often: "Anyone who says [violence is not necessary] . . . is not prepared to make sacrifices that heroes and champions make" (Fall 2010 issue, p. 47). A direct line to God and a "true" understanding of God's plans could even replace superpowers. Marginal figures are elevated to heroes with a sacred mission, and *Inspire* tells them God endorses their actions.

Inspire also glamorizes readers' "secret identity" as covert jihadis, making it sound intriguing, intellectually challenging, and mysterious. The Winter 2012 issue describes "Qualities of an Urban Assassin" who is "qualif[ied] as a tool for the religion's victory." These qualities include the "ability to intermingle well into modern society and its culture . . . He seems to be an ordinary citizen in everyday clothing . . . Instead of appearing ultra-conservative in religion, he can make himself appear as matured through life experiences" (pp. 37-38). This is followed by advice regarding beard maintenance. The Summer 2010 issue contains four pages of instructions for using encryption software for "sending

important messages without it being noticed by the enemy" (p. 41), and also suggests writing physical letters in "special symbols" and "leaving them in 'uninhabited areas'" (p. 44), evoking spy novel plots. And, lest the reader still hesitate: "We shall send you coded messages whose meaning only you will understand, in newscasts, newspapers, and websites. Every report which talks about us you will read as if it is talking about you" (Fall 2010 issue, p. 66). The ability to perceive this message seems a special gift in itself, even if a reader is tentative about participating in jihad. This complex double life perhaps beguiles the reader who may otherwise live on the edge of society and feel unimportant. This emotional appeal increases *Inspire's* capability to engender the acceptance stage of the self-radicalization process.

A third characteristic of this superhero narrative that pertains to the acceptance stage is the simplistic construction of the jihadi superheroes' enemy. Superheroes' enemies are usually mere caricatures with little backstory or rational basis for their evil. The villain in *Inspire's* story is "the West" or "the Crusaders." *Inspire* discusses the enemy little beyond describing injustices and violence done to Muslims, resulting in a thin portrait of those whom Al Qaeda fights. Supporters of the West are called "servants of the Zionist-Crusader project" (Fall 2010 issue, p. 44). As Weimann (2008) describes, those trying to convince others to engage in behavior that contravenes their moral standards use a variety of rhetorical tactics, including dehumanization: "stripping the victim of human attributes . . . [resulting] in the victim's being viewed as subhuman and not as a person with feelings and qualities" (p. 79). The reduction of all Western civilization to two simplistic monikers distracts recruits from the value of individuals within Western societies. The fact that they are not Muslims justifies their murder: "it is legitimate to target the people of the West and we have no doubts about its legitimacy" (January 2011 issue, p. 21).

Finally, true jihadi heroes are defenders of women, yet another way in which guilt and emotion can bring *Inspire* readers to the stage of acceptance. *Inspire* frequently mentions the "injustices" done to "chaste" Muslim women and their "honor," particularly as manifested by the French ban of the niqab garment worn by some Muslim women (addressed at length in the Summer 2010 issue). The magazine often notes women's deaths in fights with Western troops. Jihadi "brothers" are called upon to defend women, just as male superheroes defend damsels in distress. Uniting with one's brothers as jihadi superheroes—martyrs for faith, women, and other Muslims—must seem a compelling and somewhat familiar narrative for some audience members. The magazine format and its pop-culture styling make this narrative feel even more normal and plausible.

Although the concept of the violent jihadi as a hero might seem contradictory to outsiders, today's Western pop culture provides multiple models of flawed heroes who live on the fringes of society, who fight for righteousness even though they themselves are not perfect, and who commit violence to bring about justice. *The New York Times* recently noted the rise of the "self-made superhero," as in the recent films *Kick-Ass* and *Super* (Lidz, 2011). These films' main characters lack actual superpowers, but set themselves personal missions of heroism, just like a Loner jihadi. In many ways, the plausibility of the jihadi as a hero may seem greater to *Inspire* readers who reside in Western cultures, where the superhero narrative is popular and superheroes are often shown as flawed, morally uncertain, and self-fashioned heroic figures whose social position is personally resonant for the inspired jihadi. The subtle resonance of

this narrative of (super)heroism may enhance the magazine's ability to move prospective jihadis into the acceptance stage of the self-radicalization process.

Implementation

Once in the acceptance phase, the prospective jihadi simply needs to carry out an actual act of violence to achieve what Helfstein (2012) calls *implementation*. As Helfstein notes, once acceptance is complete and the jihadi believes violence must be done, he or she must follow through with it to truly embody the newly accepted precepts.

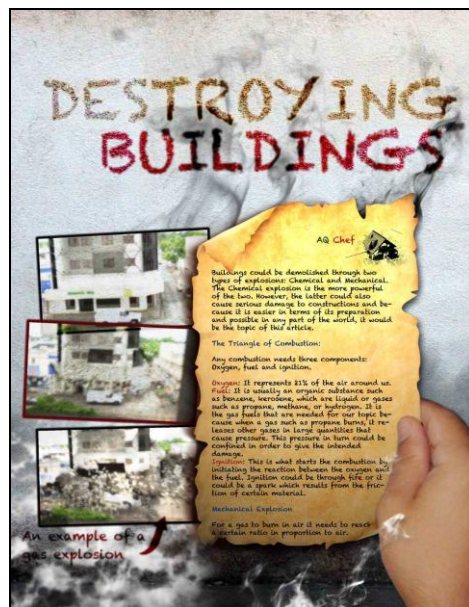


Figure 5. An instructional piece in Inspire.

Inspire presents a wealth of ideas for violence, as mentioned above, primarily in the "Open Source Jihad" series of articles. (See Figure 5.) The dictionary-style definition of "open source jihad" provided in each of these sections states that it is a

resource manual for those who loathe the tyrants . . . *informal*: a disaster for the repressive imperialistic nations: *The open source jihad is America's worst nightmare. It allows Muslims to train at home instead of risking a dangerous travel abroad. Look no further, the open source jihad is now at hands reach [sic].* (italics in original)

The Fall 2010 issue explains how to weld blades onto a pickup truck and drive it into sidewalk cafes and similar public places to cause injury and death. (Bin Laden denigrated this technique, saying it was too indiscriminately violent even for Al Qaeda [Rotella, 2011].) Several articles describe how to use

various guns and include photos of different shooting stances. The Summer 2011 issue explains how to make acetone peroxide for bombs with readily available ingredients—bombs that might be detonated with the remote control devices described in the Fall 2011 issue. The Winter 2012 issue includes a seven-page article with instructions and photos showing how to use a firebomb to start a forest fire. The article recommends “the valleys of Montana” as an ideal location for this attack. In short, each issue of *Inspire* makes the implementation stage of self-radicalization an easy task. The jihadi need only follow the provided instructions and diagrams.

Conclusion

The content and style of *Inspire* are well calibrated to ease the potential recruit’s passage through the stages of self-radicalization. As Helfstein states, this process is not necessarily linear, and, as such, the magazine contains a variety of material that could intrigue individuals at any stage in the process. This material remains subject to the individual’s interpretation, yet the magazine’s creative appropriation of Western popular-culture design motifs and narratives seems likely to resonate effectively with its target audience of marginalized Muslims in the West who seek self-actualization in the digital pages of *Inspire*.

This study is unable to examine whether the target audience for *Inspire* is in fact affected by its content in these ways. Given the marginal nature of that target audience, the magazine’s subject matter, and the criminality of terrorism, it would be challenging to research the effects of this publication on readers’ attitudes and participation in jihad. It would be intriguing (if disturbing) to trace whether *Inspire* continues to be mentioned in future accounts of attempted or completed attacks in the West, or if its suggested methods are employed. It would also be interesting to compare and contrast *Inspire*’s narratives with those presented in Al Qaeda messages in other formats.

Given the comprehensive nature of *Inspire*’s content with regard to the self-radicalization process, a review of proposed countermeasures for combating terrorism in the West reveals a logical fit: the dissemination of counternarratives and alternative interpretations that can compete with *Inspire*’s version of reality for this target audience. Sageman (2008) argues that such a narrative counterattack should be conducted by Muslims themselves for credibility’s sake, and that “non-Muslims have no role to play in this debate . . . The Internet should become the battleground of this war of interpretations, hopes, dreams, and aspirations” (p. 160). Sageman suggests that organizers should identify opinion leaders in online forums where Muslim youth seek information and guidance, and subtly “influence them to embrace nonviolence as a way to fulfill Muslim aspirations” (2008, p. 160). Amble (2012) suggests that governments should better utilize social media and other digital platforms to promote positive attitudes toward the West and circulate counternarratives. Along these lines, a recent effort by the U.S. State Department replaced Al Qaeda–sponsored anti-American ads on Yemeni tribal forums with ads that showed images of Yemeni casualties caused by Al Qaeda attacks (Clayton, 2012).

Another effort to present alternative, peaceful narratives of Islam is demonstrated by a comic book and animated TV series called *The 99*, named for the 99 attributes of Allah. Young people around the world receive superpowers from magical stones, then live by whichever of the 99 qualities they represent.

This series uses a new narrative of heroism to combat terrorist groups' suggestions. The young superheroes model international cooperation and tolerance. One of the show's creators said, "I'm one of those people who believes that the only way to beat extremism is through arts and culture. That's what happened in Europe during the Reformation and the Renaissance, and that's what has to happen in the Muslim world" (quoted in Truitt, 2011). Terrorists' ability to craft and efficiently distribute powerful narratives that appear to justify their acts must be met with counternarratives that offer an alternative repository of culturally and personally resonant ideas for potential recruits.

Fully understanding the power of various popular media formats and the cultural resonance of the narratives terrorists present within them is an initial step in developing campaigns to counter them. Perhaps media scholars can play a greater role in helping to analyze the significance and resonance of the various media technologies and messages employed by those attempting to mobilize others to participation in terror-related causes. Even if these researchers themselves are not part of the community that can credibly intervene in the actual discussions of these issues, insights from the study of terrorist media may be vital in supporting the fight against a new brand of terrorism that uses media and storytelling as powerful weapons.

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