

## **Do You Know Your Enemy: The Role of Known Actors as Framing Devices in News Media**

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We examine how and why al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria have come to dominate discourse of the international terrorist threat in the post-9/11 era, through their emergence as the primary referents for understanding terrorism, the organizations that employ it, and the actions taken to combat it. We propose a simple mechanism—based on relevance theory—wherein a given actor might attain and sustain a socially shared understanding, allowing them to function as symbolic referents in media discourse. In Study 1, we address the plausibility of this mechanism, using computer-assisted linguistic analysis to assess coverage of Foreign Terrorist Organizations in *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* from 1996 to 2017. In Study 2, we conduct an inductive framing analysis aimed at identifying unique and commonly reoccurring applications of framing packages relying on known actors as framing devices. We conclude by discussing implications of these practices.

*Keywords: terrorism, news frames, framing analysis, al-Qaeda, ISIS, media discourse, social constructionism*

Much of the existing terrorism research is predicated, whether explicitly or not, on a problematic assumption: There is an objective and knowable reality of terrorism. In doing so, this research often fails to

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acknowledge that what is understood as terrorism is actually a set of interpretations of events and the motives of actors (Hülse & Spencer, 2008), as well as assumptions and projections about how terrorist organizations are constituted and organized (C. Stohl & Stohl, 2011). As a result, these works neglect to consider the importance of Western perceptions of said motives, functions, structures, and associations, and the role of the media in driving these perceptions.

In concert with previous work (e.g., Hülse & Spencer, 2008), we see the terrorist actor as defined not only by the violence of their actions but also by how they are socially constructed, especially in media discourses. The perception of terrorism and terrorist organizations, as constructed through media discourse, is at least as important as any objective reality of these actions and actors, as counterterrorism policies and public support thereof are largely dependent on the held perceptions of terrorist groups (Gadarian, 2010). In this study, we examine how and why al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have come to dominate discourse of the international terrorist threat in the post-9/11 era, through their emergence as the primary referents for understanding terrorism, the organizations that employ it, and the actions taken to combat it.

To illustrate, consider the example of the September 11, 2012, attacks on two U.S. diplomatic compounds in Benghazi. Three days after the attack, an article in the *Wall Street Journal* reported the following:

U.S. officials are investigating indications that a local group of Libyan militants held a series of conversations Tuesday with al Qaeda extremists . . . in the first sign of possible coordination in the attack between local fighters and the global terrorist movement. (Gorman & Entous, 2012, para. 1)

Metaphor, metonym, synecdoche, analogy, and other rhetorical tropes are frequently employed to cast lesser known actors in terms of an "overarching organizational entity" (Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012, p. 965). In this case, "al Qaeda" is a synecdoche for al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the actual group with whom the "Libyan militants" purportedly conversed (Gorman & Entous, 2012, para. 2). This type of part-whole substitution implies equivalence—that al-Qa'ida and AQIM are one and the same, or that the actions of one are the actions of the other—and indeed, it appears that both the U.S. public and public officials have responded to AQIM as if they are al-Qa'ida (see, e.g., Moore, 2014; National Security Council, 2018). This belief is incredibly misleading, however, as any relationship between these organizations is at best proforma: These organizations do not share the same strategy, ambitions, motives, or tactics, and there is no indication that the leadership of AQIM has ever taken orders from al-Qa'ida leadership (Chivvis & Liepman, 2013, p. 13). As with most organizations formally associated with al-Qa'ida and/or ISIS, there is little binding them apart from branding (Boudali, 2007).<sup>1</sup>

This and similar conflation between organizations can arguably be traced to the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF). Multiple administrations have interpreted AUMF as applying not only to al-

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the shared branding is mutually beneficial. Being an al-Qa'ida or ISIS affiliate affords groups like AQIM an increase in credibility and saliency, both of which help with securing money and manpower (see, e.g., Boudali, 2007). In exchange, al-Qa'ida and ISIS get to appear more prolific and influential.

Qa'ida but also to any actors "associated with" al-Qa'ida at any point in the past, present, or future (National Security Council, 2018, p. 3). This acts as an incentive for the U.S. and its allies to find and subsequently publicize connections between al-Qa'ida and other terrorist actors—or between ISIS<sup>2</sup> and other terrorist actors—regardless of how tenuous those connections may be,<sup>3</sup> with these explanations subsequently guiding media reporting (cf. Entman, 2004).

Though this explanation fits well with previous literature on the communicative constitution of terrorist organizations (e.g., Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012; C. Stohl & Stohl, 2011), and media framing of terrorism writ large (see, e.g., Finlay, 2009; Reese & Lewis, 2009), it does not fully explain the broader phenomena wherein known actors (KAs; e.g., al-Qa'ida, ISIS) are used to characterize the actions of lesser known actors and their actions.

Drawing on relevance theory, we argue that—due to sustained discursive prominence—referents can attain a highly symbolic socially shared meaning, allowing them to transcend their status as literal entities. References to these actors can thus function as framing devices within the broader terrorism discourse, allowing journalists (and others) to more efficiently communicate information about unfamiliar (and often unrelated) terrorist groups and their actions, as well as other actors and actions occurring in this discursive arena. However, in line with the argument of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) that the "essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 5) we argue that imposing the KA framing device on discussions of unknown or lesser known actors and their actions has the effect of imposing our understanding and experience of the KA on our understanding of the framed entity. This can, in turn, distort our understanding of that actors' purpose, motivation, or threat.

### **The Pragmatics of Communication and the Creation of Known Actors**

We define a KA as an actor whose reference is inherently, pervasively, and enduringly meaningful or relevant to an audience within a given discursive domain. This is a high threshold that very few terrorist organizations can reach. Since passage of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, the U.S. Department of State has designated 74 organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).<sup>4</sup> We suspect that the average American could name no more than a few. In drawing an analogy between terrorism and theater, M. Stohl (1983) writes that "while the central ingredients are present in all forms of terrorism, as in the legitimate theater, only certain plays are given prominent reviews and fewer still become hits. Likewise, only a few actors and directors become stars" (p. 1). In understanding what allows one or two actors to stand out against so many, the pragmatic principles underlying human communication may provide some insights.

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<sup>2</sup> Despite being in active conflict since at least 2014, both the Obama and Trump administrations have used their previous proforma relationship with al-Qa'ida as justification for applying AUMF to ISIS and all affiliated actors (National Security Council, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in the case of AQIM, there are some indications that the Algerian government may have intentionally exaggerated the connections with al-Qa'ida to garner further support from the U.S. (Chivvis & Liepman, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Through 2017, and including 13 organizations that have subsequently been delisted, most recently the Adu Nidal Organization, which was delisted on June 6, 2017.

### ***The Principles of Relevance***

Relevance theory unpacks the inherent tension between the needs of sender and receiver, to describe the creation and interpretation of messages. To be relevant, an input (e.g., a communicative message) must connect with background information available to the individual to yield conclusions not derivable from the new piece of knowledge alone or from existing assumptions alone. Wilson and Sperber (2004) propose that in allocating its limited resources, "human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance" (p. 603).<sup>5</sup> This is the first, or cognitive, principle of relevance. Individuals are most likely to attend to the stimuli within their environment perceived as having the greatest expected informational benefit for them relative to the expected processing effort required, and relative to the other stimuli to which they could attend at that moment.

Once attended to, the human cognitive system tends toward processing stimuli to maximize their relevance by following a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the stimuli and stopping when expectations of relevance are satisfied (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). If the minimum expectations of relevancy are not met, they will stop attending to that stimuli.

The sender of a communication generally desires to be attended to and understood and is therefore expected to strive for optimal relevancy in constructing a message. This is the cornerstone of the communicative principle of relevance: Senders are expected to produce a message such that it (a) contains information relevant enough to be worth the amount of effort required to process and (b) is the most relevant communication the sender is both willing and able to produce (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

### ***Application to Terrorism Discourse***

Based on Wilson and Sperber's (2004) conceptualization, the actions of familiar actors are inherently more relevant than the actions of less familiar actors. Whereas it would be natural to expect a more-or-less uniform distribution of articles referencing each FTO, relevancy theory suggests certain FTOs may receive disproportionate rates of coverage, in the form of a power-law distribution. As familiarity with an FTO increases—the more background information an individual has available to them about an FTO and the easier it is to recall said information—so does the relevance of new information about them, especially in comparison to a less familiar FTO. This in turn could lead news organizations to prioritize coverage that connects to KAs, leading to self-feeding sustained discursive prominence. This leads us to ask the following:

*RQ1: Does news coverage of FTOs follow a power-law distribution, and if so, which FTOs anchor the distribution (i.e., are the most frequently referenced)?*

Moreover, the communicative principle of relevance suggests that journalists (and other communicators) should be driven over time to use familiar references more frequently than and in conjunction with less familiar references, to maximize the relevancy of their communications. This may, in turn, increase the likelihood of a KA referent being used to characterize and/or index sufficiently similar

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<sup>5</sup> To be clear, neither we nor Wilson and Sperber view this as a conscious process.

non-KAs, as in the earlier example when al-Qa'ida was used as a synecdoche for AQIM. This leads us to ask:

*RQ2: Do the most frequently referenced FTOs co-occur in articles with other FTOs more frequently than would be expected by chance (i.e., at a higher proportional rate)?*

The pragmatic principles described above suggest a simple mechanism wherein a given FTO might raise to a level of sustained discursive prominence, and thus obtain a common, socially shared understanding, allowing them to function as a symbolic referent. In Study 1, we address the plausibility of this mechanism, using computer-assisted linguistic analysis to assess coverage of FTOs in *The New York Times* (NYT) and *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) from 1996 to 2017. Answering RQ1–2 only takes us part way in addressing this phenomenon, however, as it leaves unanswered the question of how these KAs shape the broader terrorism discourse.

### **Pragmatics and the Framing of the Unknown**

As with all forms of communication, the pragmatic principles described above govern the construction and interpretation of news reports. Journalists strive, within the constraints of their chosen medium and ability to effectively craft stories that maximize the relevancy of the communicated information for the audience while minimizing the likelihood of misinterpretation. They also strive for efficiency, both under the principles stated above but also as necessitated by deadlines, word limits, and other constraints of the profession. To achieve these goals, journalists rely on frames to guide the construction and subsequent interpretation of the message (Goffman, 1974).

Frames act as the packaging for a given set of information, shaping what is and is not deemed relevant for inclusion, as well as how the selected for information should be presented and interpreted (cf. Reese, 2001). This metacommunicative process of selection and interpretation (i.e., framing) serves to ensure that the complexities of reality are reduced to a graspable plausible whole (Van Gorp, 2007), efficiently helping the recipient of a communication to understand the “proper” interpretation of a message or event (Goffman, 1974).

### ***The Framing Package***

Frames become manifest (or signified) in discourse and discourse products via framing devices, such as metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, nonverbal cues, argument, exemplars, and emotional appeals. Within a framing package (FP),<sup>6</sup> the internally congruent framing devices are held together under the umbrella of a latent, socially shared organizing principle<sup>7</sup>—that is, the frame itself. Examples might include shared beliefs, values and norms, stereotypes, and archetypes. Theoretically, any shared concept may serve as the organizing principle, whether it be a shared experience between two individuals or

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<sup>6</sup> Alternatively referred to as “media packages” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) or “news frames” (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> What Van Gorp (2007) refers to as an organizing theme.

something as universally shared as “gains” and “loses.” In practice, however, the more widely shared and the more persistent the organizing principle, the more powerful it is as a frame (cf. Reese, 2001). The final aspect of any FP is the set of reasoning devices used to connect the latent frame (manifest in the framing devices) to the actors and actions being framed in a logically coherent way (see Van Gorp, 2007). Though reasoning devices may be manifest, they are more often implied through semantic structure and implicature—that is, through the syntactic and/or pragmatic form of the FP.

### ***The Known Actor Framing Package***

Whereas most of the public has (thankfully) little personal experience with terrorism, and little if any personal knowledge of most terrorist organizations, journalists writing about the actions of a little-known actor, such as Ansar al-Sharia, must assume a baseline of ignorance. Moreover, most terrorist incidents occur in regions of the world generally seen as irrelevant to the everyday lives of those living in the “West” (Miller, 2018). Thus, to efficiently fulfil the expectancies of optimal relevancy, journalists frame the unfamiliar actor and their actions in terms that are likely to be familiar to the average consumer.

Given their sustained discursive dominance, we propose that KAs may function as ideal tools for contextualizing both actors and actions occurring within the broader arena of terrorism discourse. In Study 2, we conduct an inductive framing analysis, aimed at identifying unique and commonly reoccurring applications of framing packages relying on the KA as a framing device within media discourse products. Referents to KAs carry an emotionally charged, socially shared meaning (e.g., as a “major threat” to the U.S.; Poushter & Huang, 2019), implying they are optimally positioned to function as efficient and potent framing devices when tied to other actors and actions through simile, metaphor, juxtaposition, implicature, and other common reasoning devices. Given this, we ask the following:

*RQ3: Are KAs used as framing devices, and if so, how is the KA framing device used in media discourse products to shape interpretations of the issues, events, and actors being depicted?*

## **Study 1: Mapping News Media’s Terrorism Discourse**

### ***Corpus and Identification of Terrorist Organizations***

We created a corpus of articles for use in Study 1 by using ProQuest to collect all terrorism related articles published in NYT and WSJ from 1996 through 2017.<sup>8</sup> Articles were selected for inclusion in the data set if they either made explicit reference to terrorism\* (e.g., terrorists, terrorism), or if the newspaper included the subject tag “terrorism.” We included only “news” articles (i.e., we excluded editorials, obituaries, book reviews, etc.). This resulted in a preliminary total of 24,356 articles ( $n_{\text{NYT}} = 18,227$ ;  $n_{\text{WSJ}} = 6,129$ ).

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<sup>8</sup> We chose to start in 1996 as that is the year Osama bin Laden issued his “Declaration of Jihad,” functionally declaring war against the U.S. and its regional allies (Blanchard, 2007).

We next identified articles with mentions of designated FTOs (i.e., all listed and delisted FTOs as of December 31, 2017) using a dictionary with all known name(s) and alias(es) for each organization (see, e.g., Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2018),<sup>9</sup> including former names (e.g., Islamic Jihad Organization for Hizballah), alternative spellings (e.g., Qaeda for Qa'ida), and abbreviations (e.g., ISIL for ISIS).<sup>10</sup> The complete dictionary contains 3,873 unique terms across 74 organizations ( $Mdn = 38$ , range: 6–379). We identified occurrences at the article level, using WordStat (Version 7.1.13). 43.2% of the articles had at least one FTO reference ( $n = 10,513$ ), including 42.0% in NYT ( $n = 7,658$ ) and 46.6% in WSJ ( $n = 2,855$ ). Of the 74 organizations, 71 received at least one reference.<sup>11</sup>

## Results

### *RQ1: Distribution of FTO Mentions*

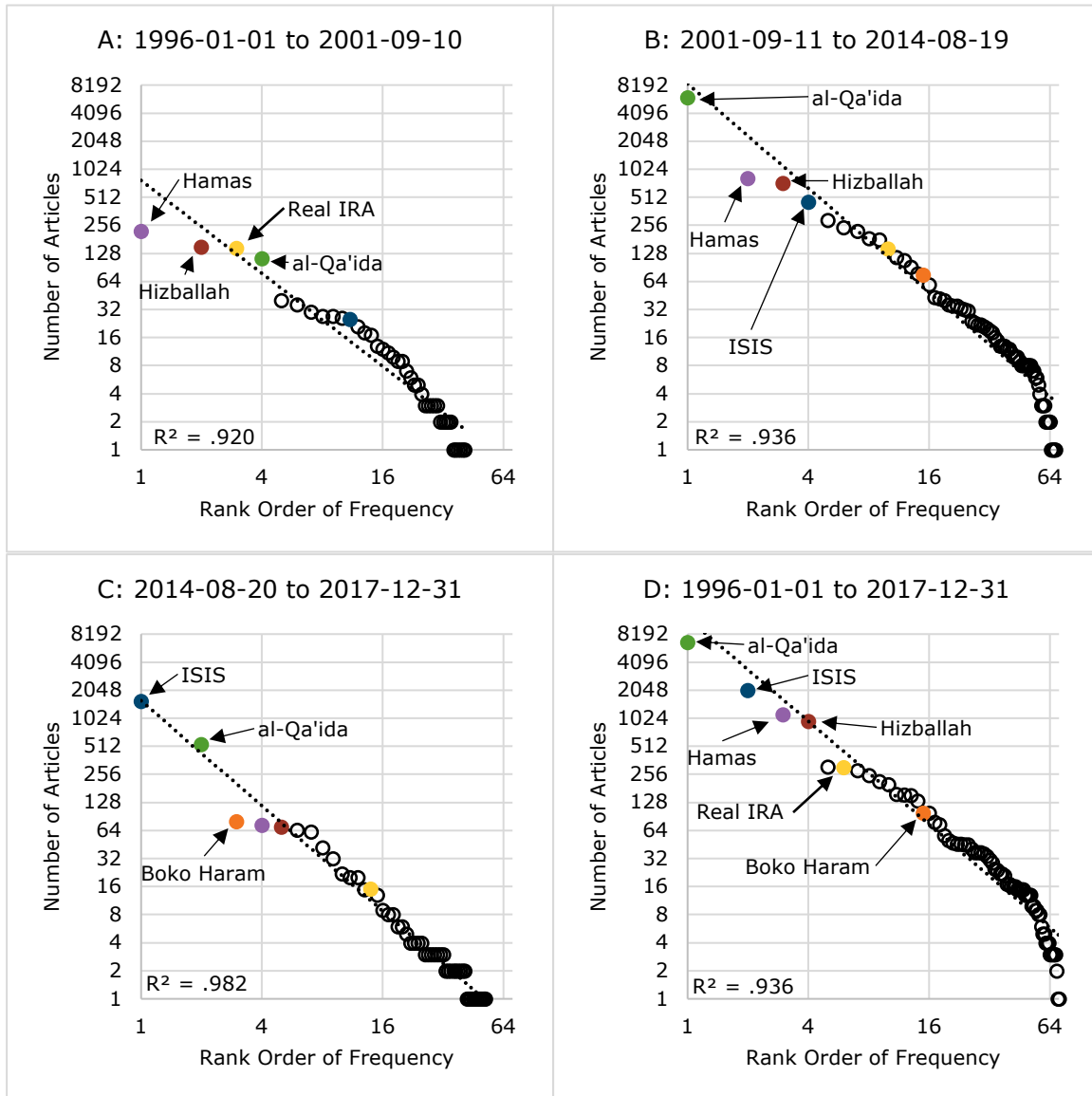
RQ1 asks whether the coverage of FTOs fits a power-law distribution, and if so, which FTOs act as the anchors of the distribution (i.e., receive the most coverage). In a power-law frequency-rank distribution (e.g., a Zipfian distribution; see Adamic, 2011), frequency is inversely proportional to rank of frequency. When visualized on a log-log graph, as in Figure 1, this type of distribution looks like a straight line. Overall, and across each of the time periods shown, an FTOs rank of usage accounts for at least 92% of the variance in the number of articles referencing that organization, suggesting a close fit to a power-law frequency-rank distribution.

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<sup>9</sup> We did not allow overlap when coding, thus, "al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" references AQIM, but not al-Qa'ida.

<sup>10</sup> We excluded some overly common terms (e.g., "IS" as reference for ISIS).

<sup>11</sup> The organizations with no reference: Ansar al-Shari'a in Darnah, Lashkar I Jhangvi, and Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front Dissidents.

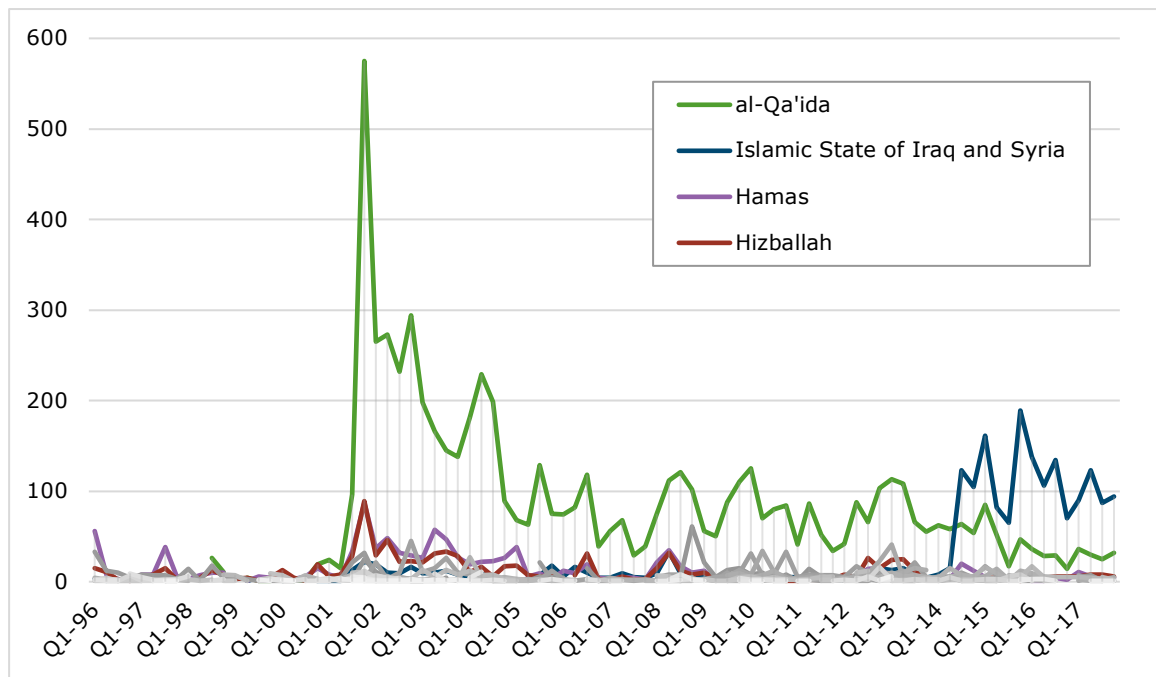


**Figure 1. Log-log graphs showing the number of article mentions per FTO by frequency rank for selected time periods. Note. The trend line is the expected distribution of case occurrence frequencies assuming a power-law frequency-rank distribution. The total number of FTOs with at least 1 mention for each panel is as follows:  $n_A = 41$ ,  $n_B = 68$ ,  $n_C = 52$ ,  $n_D = 71$ .**

Figure 2 shows the total number of articles referencing each FTO by quarter and seems to suggest that the mechanism described in relation to the cognitive principle of relevance may indeed be driving coverage of these KAs. From Q3-2001 to Q2-2014, al-Qa'ida was referenced in more articles each quarter



than any other organization. From Q3-2014<sup>12</sup> through at least Q4-2017, ISIS was referenced in the most articles each quarter, with al-Qa'ida consistently the second most referenced. In contrast to these two omnipresent organizations, most terrorist actors receive little to no coverage. Moreover, the distribution of FTO mentions does not appear on its face to be driven by any inherent characteristics of the organizations.



**Figure 2. Number of articles mentioning each FTO, per quarter. Includes all organizations with at least 10 article mentions.**

While ISIS has certainly been a prolific and lethal actor in the recent past, they receive a disproportionate level of coverage compared with other prolific FTOs. In 2017, for example, ISIS committed 1,348 terrorist acts—killing 7,204 (START, 2019)—and were directly referenced in 394 articles. Compare ISIS's rate of coverage—1 article per 3.42 terrorist acts—to that of the second most prolific/deadliest organization, al-Shabaab. They committed 575 terrorist acts—killing 1,899—yet were only mentioned in four articles; 1 per 143.75 attacks (START, 2019).

Even more notable is the continued focus on al-Qa'ida. In 2017, NYT and WSJ referenced al-Qa'ida in 123 articles, despite zero attacks claimed by or attributed to al-Qa'ida since 2011 (START, 2019). In contrast, from 2004 to 2017, no articles in our data set referenced the New People's Army, despite the organization committing 363 acts of terrorism in 2017 alone (START, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> This corresponds with ISIS's beheading of American journalist James Foley, on August 19, 2014 (Callimachi, 2014).

Al-Qa'ida and ISIS's status as consistent anchors in the power-law distribution of FTO article mentions suggests that their appearance in news articles may, in at least some instances, function as more than referents to literal and objectively knowable entities. Based on the communicative principle of relevance, they may also function as inherently, pervasively, and enduringly meaningful symbolic entities (i.e., KAs).

*RQ2: FTO Article Co-occurrences*

In RQ2, we asked whether the most frequently referenced FTOs co-occur in articles with less discursively prominent FTOs more often than would otherwise be expected by chance, as implied by the communicative principle of relevance. To explore this, we assessed the conditional probability of FTO article co-occurrence, that is, the probability that an article mentioning referent X (e.g., al-Qa'ida) also mentions target Y (e.g., al-Shabaab):  $P(X|Y) = P(X \cap Y)/P(Y)$ . This coefficient takes the maximum value of 1 when the referent always co-occurs with the target, even if the reverse is not necessarily true. We then took the average across all FTOs with at least one mention during the time period to create a single inclusion index ( $C$ ) for each FTO, equivalent to calculating the weighted degree centrality for each entity in the semantic network.

When looking at the full range (January 1, 1996, through December 31, 2017),  $\bar{C} = .023$  ( $N = 71$ ,  $SD = .056$ ).<sup>13</sup> Using two-tailed  $z$  tests, the inclusion index for two FTOs is significantly higher than average: al-Qa'ida ( $C = .421$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and ISIS ( $C = .191$ ,  $p = .003$ ).<sup>14</sup> These two organizations are also the anchors of the power-law distribution for this time period, which suggests confirmation of the inference's derivative of relevance theory and demonstrates the central role of al-Qa'ida, and more recently ISIS, in terrorism discourse over the past two decades.

This pattern—wherein the inclusion index is significantly higher for the most frequently covered FTOs—also holds when assessing the narrower time periods shown in Figure 2. From 1996 through September 10, 2001 ( $\bar{C} = .057$ ,  $SD = .053$ ), the  $C$  is significantly higher for only Hamas ( $C = .199$ ,  $p = .008$ ) and Hezbollah ( $C = .169$ ,  $p = .038$ );<sup>15</sup> from September 11, 2001, through August 19, 2014 ( $\bar{C} = .019$ ,  $SD = .060$ ), only al-Qa'ida ( $C = .471$ ,  $p < .001$ ); from August 20, 2014, through 2017 ( $\bar{C} = .029$ ,  $SD = .095$ ), only ISIS ( $C = .603$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and al-Qa'ida ( $C = .354$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

Figure 3 shows a graphical representation of the results, for the period from April 8, 2013,<sup>16</sup> to 2017. There are two major clusters of organizations, one centered around al-Qa'ida (green) and one centered around ISIS (blue). Additionally, most of the edges (representing co-occurrence  $>.50$ ) emanate from these two central organizations.<sup>17</sup>

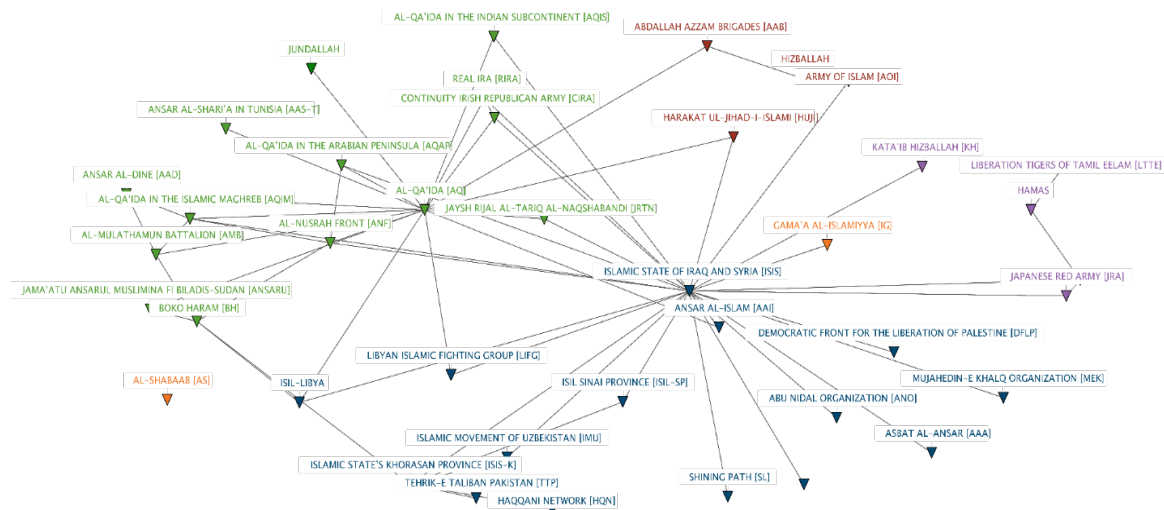
<sup>13</sup> Excluding FTOs with zero references.

<sup>14</sup> Hezbollah ( $C = .127$ ,  $p = .065$ ) and Hamas ( $C = .116$ ,  $p = .100$ ) approach significance.

<sup>15</sup> New IRA approaches significance ( $C = .151$ ,  $p = .076$ ).

<sup>16</sup> The date that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced formation of ISIS (Malas, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> As a reminder, the network graph is not reflective of real-world connections among organizations; it reflects co-occurrences of organizations in newspaper articles.



**Figure 3. Network graph of article level co-occurrences between organizations from April 8, 2013 through 2017. Location of each FTO in the graph was determined using multidimensional scaling, with randomized initial configuration. Edges designate co-occurrence >.50. Colors denote cluster membership, determined using an average-linkage hierarchical clustering method. Number of clusters was set by removing linkages until all remaining had a similarity coefficient >.05.**

### Study 2: Projecting the Known Onto the Unknown

In Study 2 we explore the form and function of KAs symbolic use in FPs (see RQ3), focusing on al-Qa'ida and ISIS; the only organizations with significantly higher rates of co-occurrence across the entire sample space of Study 1. We argue that these KAs serve as cultural frames of reference—or, more precisely, as framing devices—in media depictions of other actors and actions within the terrorism discourse arena.

#### Method

Study 2 proceeded in three parts: (A) identification of FPs using al-Qa'ida as KA, (B) identification of FPs using ISIS as KA, and (C) consolidation of the FPs. For Parts A and B, we used ProQuest to collect all articles published in NYT and WSJ from 2013 through 2014, with simple explicit references to al-Qa'ida ( $n = 2,734$ ) and/or ISIS ( $n = 2,341$ ).<sup>18</sup> This time period spans the transitional phase wherein ISIS overtook al-Qa'ida as primary referent, while also including relatively stable periods wherein only one actor was dominant, thus maximizing likelihood of identifying the full range of KA framing device applications.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> It is important to emphasize that Study 1 and Study 2 used different samples—based on different sampling procedures and different inclusion criteria—as delineated in the respective methods sections.

<sup>19</sup> 2013–Q1–2014:  $P(\text{al-Qa'ida} \mid \text{ISIS}) = .813$ ,  $P(\text{ISIS} \mid \text{al-Qa'ida}) = .097$ . Q4–2014:  $P(\text{al-Qa'ida} \mid \text{ISIS}) = .276$ ,  $P(\text{ISIS} \mid \text{al-Qa'ida}) = .537$ .

We subsequently searched each article for sentences referencing the relevant KA and recorded the paragraph containing the sentence into a separate coding data set.<sup>20</sup> For al-Qa'ida, this resulted in a collection of 6,332 coding units; 12,552 for ISIS.

### ***Identification of Framing Packages: Inductive Framing Analysis***

Two isolated teams of six research assistants—one for each KA—conducted the analysis. Guided by the lead author, we asked coders to deconstruct each randomly selected coding unit, noting the semantic and pragmatic role of the KA in creating meaningful narratives around the actors and actions depicted (i.e., the form of the FP). Additionally, we asked them to make interpretative judgments about the meaning created by inclusion of the KA, in conjunction with the other manifest and implied elements of the FP (i.e., the function of the FP). Coders used the constant comparative method to identify similarities between units and derive the theoretical properties of the FPs. Coding continued until the set of FPs reached theoretical saturation; after coding ~17% of the al-Qa'ida coding units ( $n \approx 1,050$ ); ~14% of the ISIS coding units ( $n \approx 1,700$ ).

With preliminary identification of FPs complete, a subset of coders from Parts A and Parts B—guided by the lead author—consolidated FPs across analyses. As with initial identification, we iteratively compared each category—and the items within each category—with all other categories, to identify common applications of the KA framing device.

### ***Validation of Framing Packages***

Where the initial identification of FPs focused on a relatively narrow time span and was limited to only two KAs, we subsequently validated the results using the larger set of articles collected as part of Study 1. We tasked a set of three coders—not involved in the original analysis—with independently coding 350 randomly selected articles, each preidentified as containing at least one FTO. Of these, 57% ( $n = 200$ ,  $\alpha_k = .942$ ) were positively identified as containing at least one instance of an FTO used as a framing device: 95 used al-Qa'ida (47.5%), 40 used ISIS (20%), 27 used Hamas (13.5%), 22 used Hizballah (11%), and 16 used some other KA (8%). Table 1 includes the resultant reliabilities and frequency of occurrence for each FP. No new FPs emerged during this process.

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<sup>20</sup> The unit of analysis was the sentence; however, we provided paragraphs to give coders additional context when necessary. Also note that we instructed coders to discard coding units if the KA was the subject of the sentence or a fundamental part of the predicate (~40% of all cases), in line with our conceptualization of framing.

**Table 1. Framing Packages Using the Known Actor Framing Device, 1996–2017.**

Framing package	Frequency estimates			
	% of articles	SE	<i>f</i> per article	$\alpha_k$
Connected	14.86	.019	1.8	.836
Enhancer	9.43	.016	1.6	.751
Exemplar	4.00	.010	1.2	.834
Ambiguity	6.57	.013	1.5	.780
Contrast	4.57	.011	1.4	.780
Judgment	17.71	.020	2.1	.732
Excuse	7.43	.014	1.5	.821

*Note.* % of articles = proportion of sampled articles containing the FP; *f* per article = average number of instances of the FP per article containing the FP;  $\alpha_k$  = Krippendorff's alpha.  $\alpha_k$  was calculated for three coders, across  $n = 200$  articles. Proportions are based off  $N = 350$  (of which 200 used the KA framing device;  $\alpha_k = .942$ ).

### Study 2 Results: Applications of the Known Actor Framing Device

Our investigation identified seven distinct FPs using a KA framing device: (a) connected, (b) enhancer, (c) exemplar, (d) ambiguity, (e) contrast, (f) judgment, and (g) excuse. In this section, we explicate each of the FPs, focusing on the method by which the KA is applied (i.e., the syntactic and/or pragmatic form of the FP) and the meaning suggested by use of the KA (i.e., the function of the FP).

#### Connected

The connected FP is characterized by use of the KA framing device as a tool for defining the form, function, and motivations of unknown or lesser known actors,<sup>21</sup> generally using organizational metaphor as reasoning device.<sup>22</sup> A key characteristics of this FP is the linguistically implied function of the KA, specifically serving to share information about and shape readers' understanding of the framed entity. Typically, this is done through apposition, which defines the referent actor in terms of the KA, thus allowing known attributes of the KA to be transferred from one actor to the other, whether in part or in whole. Take as example this excerpt from a NYT article describing an attack in Mogadishu: "It was not immediately clear who was responsible for the explosion. The Shabab, *an Islamist militant group based in Somalia with links to Al Qaeda*, have staged periodic attacks in the city" (Bilefsky, 2013, para. 2, emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Although it is most common to see this FP applied to named organizations, there are examples of this FP being used when framing individuals, and when framing unnamed organizations or groups.

<sup>22</sup> By organizational metaphor, we mean any metaphor alluding to a particular type of organizational structure—for example, "linked" as a network structure metaphor, "affiliate" as a hierarchical structure metaphor (see, e.g., C. Stohl & Stohl, 2007).

Here, the nonrestrictive appositive (emphasized with italics) serves as the FP, providing an operational definition of al-Shabaab under the presupposition that the reader of the article is unlikely to have an existing conceptualization of the organization. This is notable as the act of naming and defining al-Shabaab implies both that the author feels al-Shabaab is the relevant entity in this article (as opposed to al-Qa'ida), and that the author believes the average reader is unlikely to have a working understanding of al-Shabaab.

The appositive clause begins by defining al-Shabaab as a group driven by an Islamic philosophy, and willing to use extreme forms of violence. The clause continues with the verb "based" followed by two prepositional phrases: (a) "in Somalia" and (b) "with links to Al Qaeda." The second preposition functions to modify the first, implying that while al-Shabaab is based in Somalia, the reader should not interpret this as meaning they are isolated to Somalia or that they work in isolation. The reader should instead view them as part of a global network of "Islamist militant group[s]," given their "links" to al-Qa'ida. By defining the attributes of the lesser known actor in terms of the KA, the author provides the necessary context for the reader to understand and respond to the unfamiliar.

### ***Enhancer***

In the enhancer FP, the KA framing device functions as a tool for enhancing the relevancy of unknown or lesser known actors (who often go unnamed) and their actions. This FP can share surface level similarities with the connected FP (e.g., the common use of organizational metaphor as reasoning device), but differs both in syntactical form and in implied function. Most notably, when using the enhancer FP, it is implied that the framed actor is not in and of themselves relevant to the point being made by the author, but instead that there are some subset of attributes which are relevant (e.g., that they are a threat). The KA framing device functions to narrow attention onto those specific attributes, an interpretation supported through frequent inclusion of other negatively valenced framing and reasoning devices.

The most common form of this FP is when the KA is used as a noun adjunct, taking vague, negatively valenced descriptions of (generally regional) actors<sup>23</sup> (e.g., fighters, rebels, militants, operatives, extremists) and adding the name of the KA. A similar process occurs with the KA used as part of a prepositional phrase. The following quote from WSJ contains both forms:

The apparent killing comes a day after militants *with possible links to al Qaeda* seized about 40 foreign hostages, including several Americans, at a natural-gas field in Algeria. The news highlights the growing influence of Islamist extremists in Africa, days after France began military action in Mali in efforts to help push back the progression of *rebel al Qaeda affiliate* groups. (Masidlover, 2013, para. 7, emphasis added)

In the first sentence, the subject, "militants," is followed by the prepositional phrase "with possible links to al Qaeda," which functions to narrow readers' focus onto this specific attribute of the otherwise

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<sup>23</sup> Though less common, it is possible to apply this FP to a named organization, as when an article in WSJ stated that Somali government forces "continue to battle Islamic militants from the al Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab group" (Flynn & Abshir, 2013, para. 5).

unnamed actor. In the second sentence, we see the KA framing device used as a noun adjunct, again focusing attention on this attribute of the "groups." In contrast to the connected FP, the framed entities ("militants," "groups") are not relevant in and of themselves; the actors and actions are enhanced to relevancy because of their linkage to the KA.

As is generally the case, the KA framing device does not act in isolation. Both instances of the enhancer FP also include examples of overlexicalization (e.g., "in efforts to help push back the progression"; a long way of saying "against") and structural opposition (e.g., the militants vs. the American hostages; the rebel groups vs. the French). Viewed in their entirety, both versions serve to amplify the perceived threat of the framed organizations, and in turn, the "growing influence" of Islamist extremism in Africa.

### ***Exemplar***

An alternative to claiming direct relationships between KAs and other actors, the exemplar FP uses simile and other forms of qualified language to identify the typology under consideration when discussing the attributes of other actors, or actions. This FP draws comparisons between the framed object and the KA, focusing attention on a subset of shared characteristics, via many of the same syntactic structures commonly used in the enhancer FP. By making explicit the comparison, however, the author narrows the range of KA attributes meant to be applied to the framed object while avoiding the possibility of the metaphorical reference to the KA being understood by the reader as literal.

In addition to the use of simile, this FP is characterized by the focus on a singular or narrow set of attributes, as when Glanz, Rotella, and Sanger (2014) wrote in NYT that "some of the [Lashkar-e-Taiba] militants pushed for a Qaeda-style war on the West" (para. 26). Here, the KA is part of the noun adjunct (albeit within a larger adjectival phrase), clarifying the type of "war" being pushed for by the "militants." There is no implication that Lashkar-e-Taiba is al-Qa'ida,<sup>24</sup> nor that the reader should conceptualize them in the same way they conceptualize al-Qa'ida, except in relation to this singular attribute.

### ***Ambiguity***

The ambiguity FP manifests when an actor is explicitly described as *not* part of the KA, or their link to the KA is explicitly made doubtful. Making explicit a lack of connection seems to violate the communicative principle of relevance: more has been written than is seemingly necessary. It can thus be presumed through implicature that the mention of "no connection" is included because it is deemed optimally relevant (e.g., Wilson & Sperber, 2004): The author either (a) believes the organizations are connected, but is constrained in the ability to say so explicitly, or (b) believes the framed entity shares enough in common with the KA as to necessitate disassociation. In both cases, the effect of the ambiguity FP remains the same: By stating that X is not Y, it is strongly implied that X is not, not Y. The logical conclusion for the reader to draw, therefore, is that the framed entity should be viewed in terms of the KA.

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<sup>24</sup> This is true both when looking at the coding unit and when looking at the full article.

The most common application of the ambiguity FP appears to be instances wherein the authors or their sources are indeed of the opinion that the framed entity or action is connected to the KA, but feel constrained in their ability to say so, as in the following excerpt from WSJ:

The stabbing attack is being investigated by antiterrorism prosecutors, and authorities said the other two cases appeared to involve mentally unstable individuals. Authorities investigating the incidents *so far* have *played down the possibility that Islamic State or any other terrorist organization might be directly linked to the attacks*. (Chow & Meichtry, 2014, para. 5, emphasis added)

There is a clear implication built into the construction of the second sentence that the attacks were directly linked to ISIS, further emphasized by the choice to describe authorities as having “played down the possibility” . . . “so far.” In other words, the authors are implying that France is under attack by ISIS, but that the French authorities are naïve to this fact.

### **Contrast**

The contrast FP is characterized by use of the KA as a baseline of comparison with the framed actor. This FP is to the exemplar FP what the ambiguity FP is to the enhancer FP. As with the exemplar FP, the contrast FP functions as a relatively narrow-cast tool for framing an actor or the actor’s actions; however, it is unique in its function. Rather than selecting for shared attributes, the contrast FP selects for attributes the two organization do not share.

The contrast FP focuses on comparing the quantity of the selected attributes—more than/less than, better than/worse than. Moreover, this FP relies heavily on implicature to draw inferences. Thus, for example, an article in NYT quoting Omer Taspinar as saying “ISIS and its caliphate is becoming a brand, looser even than a network like Al Qaeda” (Scott, 2015, para. 13).

The contrast FP generally includes many framing devices; it is not enough to say that a group or individual is better/worse than the KA, the article must address how. Additionally, there must be a reasoning device which specifies the direction of the difference, as when an article in WSJ stated: “[ISIS], a group more extreme than al Qaeda, controls territory in Iraq and Syria and pledges: ‘We will raise of the flag of Allah in the White House’” (Crovitz, 2014, para. 1). Taken as a whole, this FP provides both a heuristic for evaluating the framed organization, but also provides guidance to the reader about the specific way to apply the heuristic. Importantly, although it is possible for a group/individual to be framed as “better” than the KA, the overall connotation is still negative; this type of application simply tempers the extremity to which the framed actor should be viewed.

### **Judgment**

To this point, the FPs discussed have each carried an inherently negative connotation. However, though the valence of the KA is fixed, the valence of the FP is not. This flexibility is exemplified by the judgment FP, which uses past or current action (or inaction) toward the KA as means for either glorifying or



vilifying an external actor. This FP juxtaposes the framed entities actions (or lack thereof) with a generally implicit idealized standard for how they should have acted, taking as given the view of the KA as enemy, and implicitly ascribing moral judgment based on whether the framed entity's actions are viewed as supporting or combating the KA. If the framed entity does not adhere to the idealized standard for how they should have acted then they are inherently "bad," whereas matching or exceeding these expectations suggests they are inherently "good."

The full range of this FP is on display in this excerpt from NYT:

On hilltops within sight of frontier outposts like this one, black-clad Islamic State fighters have been battling for the last week with Kurdish militants defending Kobani, a besieged Kurdish area that has become the prize in a fierce struggle between Syria's embattled Kurds and the rampaging Islamic State militants. Turkish fighters have watched from behind the border fence. (Barnard & Landler, 2014, para. 2)

The juxtaposition of the "embattled Kurds" and the "rampaging Islamic State militants" functions to emphasize the positive characteristics of the Kurdish militants, encouraging readers to view them as brave warriors standing up to the archetypal villain. Moreover, the strength and courage of the Kurds makes explicit the standard for action against the KA, setting up the negative framing of Turkish fighters in the second sentence.<sup>25</sup>

While in the previous example, the non-KA framing devices made the intended interpretation of the FP obvious, the derived meaning is generally more implicit, as when WSJ reported: "The Obama administration charged that Tehran has allowed senior al-Qaeda members operating from Iranian soil to facilitate the movement of Sunni fighters into Syria" (Solomon, 2014, para. 1). Through implicature, this statement makes it appear that the Iranian government was actively engaged in supporting a reviled enemy of the United States, without ever making that claim explicitly. However, later in the article, it is reported that "U.S. officials said they weren't certain that Iran's government was aware of the al-Qaeda member's involvement in Syria" (para. 10), thus highlighting the role the previous statement served as a tool for framing the Iranian government.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Excuse***

In a corollary to the judgment FP, the excuse FP occurs when an action or inaction is excused or justified because the recipient of the action/inaction is the KA. The frame implicitly denies responsibility by pointing to a dangerous and often complicated threat. In its purest and most meme-like form, this FP forms the argument that whatever was done (or not done) is excusable because . . . KA. The most obvious examples of action being excused using this FP dealt with the issues of waterboarding and (separately)

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<sup>25</sup> The broader emphasis of this article is on U.S. attempts to urge greater involvement by Turkey in the fight against ISIS, despite their unease in supporting militants "linked to" the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

<sup>26</sup> Somewhat ironically, al-Qa'ida has long viewed the state religion of Iran, Shia Islam, as heretical, and have actively fought against the Iranian-backed Assad regime.

targeted killings. However, there were far more examples of this FP functioning to excuse the inability to accomplish something, or otherwise failing to act. An example of this comes from a WSJ editorial discussing the truly noble attempt by U.S. Special Forces to save American journalist Luke Somers:

There is no blame for failing to save Somers, whose al Qaeda captors had released a video on Thursday vowing to kill him in 72 hours if the U.S. did not meet unspecified demands. The jihadists were no doubt on high alert after special forces conducted a rescue attempt in late November at a hillside cave. The commandos rescued eight people, mostly Yemenis, but Somers had been moved. ("A Noble Rescue Attempt," 2014, para. 3).

The implication built into this FP is that al-Qa'ida was being unrealistic in their demands for Somers' release. This helps to excuse the inability of U.S. special forces to save his life (along with the fact that action was attempted on numerous other occasions, and, as is learned elsewhere in the article, immediately prior to his death).

Here, it is worth reemphasizing the default neutrality of the FPs discussed in this article. Although all FPs imply deeper meaning, this does not imply that the meaning is incorrect, or untrue. It is only in the specific, contextualized application of the FP that such value judgments can be made about appropriateness. In the example above, it seems as though U.S. Special Forces did do all they could to save Somers' life, and that in large part the unpredictable nature of a group like al-Qa'ida does help to explain why the commandos were not successful. The same can be said of many of the other applications of FPs that have been explicated herein, especially as it concerns the specific biases and opinions that all readers inherently bring with them to any text. However, as with all the FPs, the KAs still play a larger role in the creation of meaning within the text than a surface-level reading would otherwise suggest.

### **Discussion**

Drawing on framing, pragmatics, and terrorism studies research, this set of studies explored the role of KAs in media discourse across a 21-year span. In Study 1, we examined the relative centrality of FTOs within the article-level network of terrorism discourse, in part finding that KAs are frequently present in articles ostensibly discussing lesser known organizations, some with no known relationship to the KA. This is seen for example, in the semantic network links between al-Qa'ida and the IRAs, or between ISIS and Shining Path (see Figure 3). Taken together we argue these data show the transition of KAs from literal to symbolic entity, indicating the active and self-reinforcing use of these groups as symbolically meaningful organizations within the broader terrorism discourse.

Following this, Study 2 applied an inductive framing analysis to explore the form and function of al-Qa'ida and ISIS's symbolic use as framing devices. One notable finding was that FPs using KAs as framing devices very rarely, apart from the connected FP, function to directly define the framed entity in terms of the KA (e.g., al-Qa'ida, ISIS). Instead, the relation is generally implied, and focused on a relatively small subset of characteristics shared by the two entities.

Unfortunately, these subsets of characteristics tend to be some of the more problematic, as noted at the outset to this study. A significant conceptual issue with using KAs as framing devices is that these organizations tend to be outliers in terms of, for example, their international composition and global focus. FTOs—to include most “al-Qa’ida affiliates,” “ISIS affiliates,” and derivatives—tend to operate within a narrow geographical range (often a single nation or a discreet transnational region). When terrorists target international actors, the campaigns tend to be explicit responses to foreign intervention or occupation. Moreover, they overwhelmingly target domestic tokens of the power in question (i.e., striking U.S., European, or other foreign targets within the group’s typical area of operation), and they usually end when the occupying power withdraws (Pape & Feldman, 2010).

Interpreting unfamiliar actors in terms of al-Qa’ida or ISIS may not only obscure critical information about the framed organization but also inappropriately project onto them these organizations’ global ambitions and international priorities, which they often do not share. As a result, militant groups that could otherwise be effectively neutralized at the local level, through policing or politicization (English, 2009), often end up implicated in a worldwide zero-sum political and ideological struggle, with Western countries presumed as a primary target. Subsequent occupations or military interventions intended to undermine groups based on this perceived threat can end up reifying the danger posed to Western nations by needlessly dragging targeted militants into direct existential confrontation with the U.S. and Europe (Eland, 1998).

### Conclusion

Mass media serves as an intermediary among the public, the state, and external actors who wish to influence them. Consequently, media framing can play a significant role in shaping understandings around terrorist incidents and actors and, consequently, shape public (and public officials) perceptions about counterterrorism choices and policies (e.g., Finlay, 2009). We examined how dominant al-Qa’ida and ISIS have become within terrorism discourse through their emergence as the primary referents for understanding terrorism and the organizations that employ it. Undoubtedly, these frames have helped shape the public’s understanding of terrorism, but perhaps the more important impact has been the use of al-Qa’ida to frame ISIS (itself now a KA) and other emergent threats. This practice risks masking the ways in which organizations and their threats differ, harming the public’s understanding and quite possibly masking policy makers’ understanding as well.

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