

Islam, Jihad, and Terrorism in Post-9/11 Arabic Discussion Boards

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This study analyzed the contents of three of the most popular Arabic-language online message boards regarding the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the United States. Although terrorists claimed that the attacks were committed in the name of Islam, those who posted messages on all three forums rejected this claim. More than 43% of the messages condemned the attacks as a criminal act of terrorism that contradicts the core teachings of Islam. Some 30% saw some justification behind the attacks, even if they felt sorry for the victims and their families. However, those participants viewed the attacks as a political, rather than a religious, issue.

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Introduction

Islam is the youngest, fastest growing, and perhaps most controversial of the three monotheistic religions. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States (henceforth, 9/11), Islam and Muslims started to come to the forefront of the Western media, albeit not for very positive reasons. Because Osama Bin Laden cited religious motives for his criminal attacks, a debate started brewing in the Western media over the true nature of Islam and whether or not it justified or even encouraged violence, particularly against non-Muslims. Many media outlets referred to the 9/11 terrorists simply as “Muslims,” which fueled stereotyping of Islam and did nothing to help stop the verbal and physical attacks taking place against Muslims in the U.S. at the time.

In an attempt to study how Muslims viewed the attacks from a religious point of view, this article examines the online message exchange on three major discussion boards in the Arab and Muslim world. Through a descriptive content analysis of these messages, the different viewpoints reiterated through Internet conversations are examined. This is an important medium in this part of the world (the Middle East), since most of the media are government-owned and controlled. The Internet, however, provides a relatively free expression forum for Middle Eastern audiences.

It therefore has the potential to reveal Muslim points of view without governmental slanting of ideas in any particular political or religious manner.

Arabs and Muslims in the Western Media

At the outset, there is a need to differentiate between the terms “Arab” and “Muslim,” which tend to be used interchangeably in the Western media. Arabs are members of an ethnic group of people who reside in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Muslims are those who choose Islam as their religion. Most Arabs (more than 90%) are Muslims. However, the majority of Muslims are not Arabs. The majority of Muslims come from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, all of which are non-Arab countries (Abdulla, 2007).

Long before the attacks of 9/11, Arabs had voiced their concerns about their image in the Western media. In 1980, journalist Djelloul Marbrouk noted that the Arab in American television stands for “terrorism, hijack, intractability, sullenous, perverseness, cruelty, oil, sand, embargo, boycott, greed, bungling, comedic disunity, primitive torture, family feuds, and white slavery” (Shaheen, 1980, n.p.). Shaheen quotes *Newsweek* regarding the image of an Arab on television, “He is swarthy and bearded, rich and filthy, dabbling in dope smuggling and white slavery; swaddled in white robes, he carries a curved knife, rides a camel and abuses young boys. He knows a thousand vile curses such as ‘May the fleas of a diseased camel infect the hair of your first born’” (n.p.). Shaheen provides examples of many programs that portrayed Arabs in a negative light in the late 1970s, from Hollywood pictures and productions such as *Vegas*, *Fantasy Island*, and *Charlie’s Angels* to comic strips such as Brenda Starr and Dennis the Menace. He also provides examples of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim coverage from reputed news shows such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20*, in addition to regular news bulletins that associated Arabs and Muslims with terrorism.

A few years later, Shaheen (1984) noted that “the stereotype [of Arabs] remains omnipresent, appearing in new programs and dated reruns” (p. 113). Shaheen reports on an interview with a CBS Vice President who confirmed the notion, saying he “had never seen a ‘good Arab’ on TV,” and that Arabs are rather usually portrayed as “warmongers and/or covetous desert rulers” (p. 114). Indeed, Slade (1981) analyzed a poll of American attitudes and perceptions towards Arabs and found that Americans have little knowledge of Arab culture, history, or contributions to the world. She reported that Americans commonly think of Arabs as “anti-American,” “anti-Christian,” “unfriendly,” and “warlike.”

Christensen (2006a, b) argues that the spread of Islamophobia in the West is at least in part the responsibility of distorted and imbalanced media coverage. He argues that news programs are perceived usually as “serious” and “truthful” because journalism is associated in the public mind with objectivity and fairness. Western news stories, he says, tend to show a mosque, a minaret, or a veiled woman regardless of the nature of the story, even when the story is about terrorism. “The combination

of stereotypical images adds up to a whole that is, in many ways, greater than the sum of its parts” (Christensen, 2006b, p. 30).

Said (1997) argues that the image of Islam in the U.S. media has always been influenced by a framework of politics and hidden interests and is therefore laden with “not only patent inaccuracy but also expressions of unrestrained ethnocentrism, cultural and even racial hatred, deep yet paradoxically free-floating hostility” (p. ii). He characterizes the image as involving “highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility” (p. xi). Said, himself an American Christian scholar, states, “Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians” (p. xii).

If this was the image before 9/11, things took a turn for the worse after the criminal attacks. Despite the fact that all Arab countries condemned the attacks, for the most part, voices communicated through the mass media still failed to differentiate between Arabs and Muslims, on one hand, and terrorists, on the other. Pintak (2006) reports on Eric Rouleau of *Le Monde*, who criticized the tendency to portray images of “Muslims praying, mosques or women in chadors to illustrate stories about extremism and terror” (p. 33-34). Pintak adds that after the events of 9/11, “the U.S. media immediately fell back on the prevailing—and stereotyped—narrative about Arabs and Muslims and reverted to its historic tendency to present the world, in Henry Kissinger’s words, as ‘a morality play between good and evil’” (p. 39).

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR, 2001) noted that “many media pundits focused on one theme: retaliation. For some, it did not matter who bears the brunt of an American attack” (n.p.). For example, on September 12, 2001, Steve Dunleavy wrote in the *New York Post*: “The response to this unimaginable 21st-century Pearl Harbor should be as simple as it is swift—kill the bastards. A gunshot between the eyes, blow them to smithereens, poison them if you have to. As for cities or countries that host these worms, bomb them into basketball courts.” On September 11, former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger commented on CNN, “There is only one way to begin to deal with people like this, and that is you have to kill some of them even if they are not immediately directly involved in this thing” (FAIR, 2001, n.p.).

On September 13, Bill O’Reilly, on his popular *The O’Reilly Factor* show on the Fox News Channel, said it “doesn’t make any difference” who you kill in the process of retaliation against the attacks (FAIR, 2001, n.p.). On the same day, syndicated columnist Ann Coulter wrote:

This is no time to be precious about locating the exact individuals directly involved in this particular terrorist attack.... We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren’t punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That’s war. And this is war. (FAIR, 2001, n.p.)

At a meeting of the Global Policy Forum, Hans Giessmann of the University of Hamburg's Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy criticized the Western media for how it "fully attributed blame for the September attacks on 'Muslim terrorists' and stopped there" (Inbaraj, 2002, n.p.). He added that "the media accepted the side effects of a stigmatization of religion, cultures, states, people and minorities and this paved the way for prejudices" (n.p.). Journalists at the meeting agreed that the media failed to provide context for their pictures and stories. That, they said, would have "allowed readers, viewers and listeners to gain a clear understanding of the background issues and of the clash on interpretations in a war where the lines were blurred between reporting and propaganda in a controlled atmosphere" (Inbaraj, 2002, n.p.).

Perhaps most offensive to Muslims was Reverend Jerry Falwell's statement on *60 Minutes*: "I think Mohammed was a terrorist. I read enough of the history of his life written by both Muslims and non-Muslims, that he was a violent man, a man of war" (CBS news, 2002, n.p.).

Statements like this coincided with and may have contributed to an increasing anti-Muslim sentiment. CNN reported that the anti-Islamic sentiment following 9/11 was spreading around the world. Several mosques in Europe and Australia were petrol-bombed by individuals who believed they were "doing the U.S. a favor." In South Shields, Northern England, graffiti on a wall near a mosque read in red paint, "Avenge U.S.A. Kill a Muslim now" (Jones, 2001, n.p.).

Such trends in the American media coverage of the post 9/11 attacks were documented in several studies. Pintak (2006) reports on a content analysis of CBS newscasts carried out by the Center for Media and Public Affairs. The study found that in covering the war on Iraq, the network was "most supportive" of U.S. government policies (p. 44). Those who displayed an anti-war message or attitude were found to constitute fewer than 10% of interviewees on *CBS Evening News with Dan Rather*. The study concluded that CBS coverage was even more conservative than Fox News, which is seen as "the headquarters for patriotic fervor" (p. 44). Pintak further reports on another study by the U.S. Department of Defense, which analyzed U.S., European, and Middle Eastern newspapers. The study concluded that the American media "primed its audience to support the war," while silencing opposition voices (p. 43).

Fadel (2002) conducted a content analysis of an Egyptian daily newspaper (*Al Ahram*) and an American daily newspaper (*USA Today*) in the three months following 9/11. The study showed that the top two subjects mentioned in relation to Arab countries in both newspapers were terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. However, while *Al Ahram* stressed the Arab world's condemnation of the attacks and of fundamentalism, *USA Today* linked Arabs to Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, and extremism all over the world. The study also reported that the American newspaper "adopted a clear line of linking violence and terrorism with resisting Israeli occupation in parts of Lebanon and the Palestinian territories" (p. 451).

Gomaa (2002) conducted a content analysis of the image of Islam and Muslims in the American, French, and German press. She analyzed the *International Herald*

Tribune, *Le Monde*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine* during the 50 days following 9/11. She reported that although the *Herald* focused on Osama Bin Laden as the party responsible for the attacks (even before any evidence had surfaced), the newspaper tackled the issue in light of Huntington's (1993) "clash of civilizations" thesis and portrayed it as a start for a Crusade between Islam and the West. The *Herald* claimed that the Arab and Muslim countries have become a safe haven for terrorism and are breeding a "culture of violence" (p. 239). The study contrasted this with *Le Monde*'s coverage, which stressed the dangers of terrorism as a global issue that is not restricted to the Muslim world, and clarified the nature of Islam as a religion of tolerance and peace. The French newspaper focused its analysis on the importance of understanding the other and acquainting oneself with foreign civilizations. It stressed that the issue is not one of a clash of civilizations, but rather a clash between extremists and moderates within each civilization and across ethnicities and religions worldwide. In this light, the newspaper argued, France should support the U.S. not in a war against Islam but in a war against the terrorists who carried out these attacks on humanity. Still, the study reported that *Le Monde* reported negatively on the Arab and Muslim worlds in about 65% of its total coverage. This figure was up to 78% in the *Herald*, and 86.5% in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. In its coverage of the sources of terrorism worldwide, the *Herald* linked terrorism with the Arab and Muslim world 96% of the time.

Chomsky (2001) asserted that the mainstream media in the U.S. constituted "well-run propaganda systems" whose capacity "to drive people to irrational, murderous, and suicidal behavior" should not be underestimated. He urged citizens to resist the notion of responding to terrorist crimes with more terror directed against civilian Muslims abroad but said the "hysterical" attitude of the media in such circumstances was not surprising (p. 69).

Pintak (2006) contended that the bias in American media after 9/11 constituted what could be called "jihad journalism" (pp. 42-44). He added that such slanted coverage was "the hallmark of the post-9/11 era" (p. 44). Fruit (2001) called it "a result of racist jingoism," adding, "This is shocking but not surprising in the face of the Anti-Islamic, xenophobic hysteria in the media and from our 'world-leaders'" (n.p.).

In light of the above literature, this study examines discussions about Islam in the Arabic-language postings of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11. It discusses whether those who posted messages thought Islamic teachings were the reason behind the attacks, and whether the attacks are considered acts of terrorism or acts of Islamic jihad.

The Arab World, 9/11, and the Internet

The latest estimates assess world Internet users in January 2007 at more than 1.1 billion (Internet World Stats, 2007). Out of this enormous number, the estimated number of users in the Arab world is about 18 million. However, with major developments in the Internet technology markets of Arab countries, the growth rate for

users in the Arab world is exploding by a factor of 500% in some countries (Abdulla, 2007).

Arabic portals have started growing on the Internet. Several websites now offer Arabs the full service of a Web portal, including email services, search engines, news, culture, sports, art, music, discussion forums, and blogs. Islamic portals also offer information about the religion, recitations and interpretations of the Quran, and religious teachings, as well as sections for Muslims to communicate with Islamic scholars through posting questions whose answers appear on the websites. Arabs and Muslims have taken to discussion boards on the Internet, since they provide an alternative to the otherwise primarily government-owned and government-controlled media systems. These discussion boards cover a variety of topics, including politics, sports, culture, religion, and civic society.

Some scholars believe that discussion forums and bulletin boards can help people get through difficult times in an almost therapeutic manner (James, Wotring, & Forrest, 1995; Rosson, 1999). After the attacks of 9/11, a variety of online bulletin boards were dedicated to discussing the event and sharing sentiments of grief and anger. In addition, most online news outlets had a discussion board dedicated to 9/11. These included, for example, *The New York Times*, CNN, and *USA Today*.

Arab and Islamic portals also had discussion boards for Arab Internet users to voice their opinions concerning the attacks. Since these forums are uncensored and are outside the realm of government supervision, they provided a good opportunity for Arabs and Muslims to voice their honest opinions, even if those opinions contradicted those of the governments, whose official stance was to condemn the attacks. This study may therefore help us gauge the true feelings of Arabs and Muslims regarding 9/11.

Methodology

A descriptive content analysis was conducted of message boards on three of the most popular Arab portals: Masrawy (<http://www.masrawy.com>), Islam Online (<http://islamonline.net>), and Arabia (<http://www.arabia.com>).¹ Masrawy is the first and one of the most popular Arabic-language portals on the Internet. The word "Masrawy" is colloquial Arabic for "Egyptian." The site offers its users free Internet connectivity, free email, and domain name registration, in addition to all the regular services offered by major portals such as news, directories, classified ads, search options, health, sports, stock market information, entertainment, shopping, auctions, instant chat, and message boards.

Islam Online is one of the most popular and most comprehensive Islamic portals on the Internet. The site is supported and maintained by a large group of Muslim scholars headed by Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi, one of the top authorities in the Muslim world today. The portal, offered in both Arabic and English, is run by a staff of over 200 people from different backgrounds. In addition to all of the usual Islamic information, the site features large sections on science and medicine, psychology and cyber-counseling, political news and current affairs, women's rights, parenting, the

Internet and IT technologies, arts and culture, and live discussions. Each of these sections is handled by professionals, many of them Ph.D. holders in their respective fields. According to El-Kashef (2005), in the aftermath of 9/11, the site witnessed a dramatic increase in visitor numbers, with page views increasing from an average of 24 million to 150 million per year.

Arabia was a major portal that offered its users the option to access it in Arabic or in English. Owned and operated by Arabia Online, which is based in Dubai's Internet City in the United Arab Emirates, the site offered a wide array of services, including a search engine, free email, free greeting cards, news, games, entertainment, business, sports, Arab and international media outlets, horoscopes, an instant messenger service, cartoons, travel and shopping information, as well as chat and discussion boards. Rossant (2002) reported estimates of 1.5 million visitors per month to Arabia, making it one of the most popular portals in the Arab world.

Sampling

Because of the difficulty of selecting a random sample on the Internet (December, 1996; McMillan, 2000; Stempel & Stewart, 2000), I decided to examine the population of messages on the three chosen portals regarding the events of 9/11. Still, the sampling process was not easy. Discussion boards on different websites organize messages in different ways. Some offer more structure than others: In this study, the Masrawy discussion board was found to be more organized than the Arabia board, and the Islam Online board was the least organized. Masrawy offered fewer overall topics for discussion, and the topics were posted by the message board moderator. To start a new thread, participants sent a message to the moderator suggesting the new topic, after which the moderator posted the suggested topic under a new title and a new thread. While participants could reply to a particular message by entering that message number, their reply was posted as a new message under the same main thread, rather than as a sub-thread. It followed that the postings to a particular topic were easier to access, scan (by title), and quantify.

The Arabia message board allowed its users to post new topics as they pleased. The board also allowed for sub-threading of messages, meaning that each message within the same topic could have several replies accessible only through that message. The resulting structure is more problematic for the content analysis researcher (or even for a keen user) to grasp. There is no easy way of knowing how many messages are posted on a particular topic, since the topic could be fragmented under as many messages as users choose. Each message within a particular topic could be posted as a separate topic, and each message could have an unlimited number of replies in its thread. While the number of replies is posted, the only way of knowing how many messages relate to a particular topic is to scan every message title on the board, determine which ones relate to the topic of interest, and add up the replies to those messages, hoping that all replies actually relate to the topic. This process is time-consuming and frustrating, since the site hosted an average of about 50 pages of questions (or topics) at any given time.

The Islam Online website was the most problematic of the three. The site offered seven main areas of discussion (politics, religion, sports, culture, society, creativity, and Internet). Within each area were seven to ten main discussion topics, and within each topic was a structure similar to the Arabia website. The problem resided in the fact that there was an undefined number of questions or topics to go through, without a clear indication of where discussion on a particular topic started. For example, one could not assume that 9/11 would be discussed under politics alone, since it could also be discussed under religion or society.

For the purposes of this study, a total of 752 messages was analyzed on the three portals. The Masrawy website had 517 messages on 104 pages, posted between September 11th and 20th.² All messages were in response to the question posted by the moderator, "Do you support the September 11 attacks on the United States?" From the Islam Online website, I analyzed 175 messages posted under different headings, although most were commenting on three themes: whether the participants thought Bin Laden was a terrorist or a hero; whether they thought these attacks would help or hurt Muslims; and whether they agreed that the attacks were an inhumane act. The messages were posted between September 11th and October 19th. From the Arabia website, I analyzed a total of 73 messages posted under numerous threads. Those messages were posted from September 11th to October 5th.

Some messages were eliminated because they were deemed irrelevant, although they were posted under a relevant title or message heading. This problem was particularly evident with the Arabia website. In some cases, some participants began sending personal messages to each other on the site. Others tried to solicit interest in a different discussion topic by posting their views about the other topic under 9/11, since that was the hot issue of the day. The total number of relevant messages analyzed for quantification in this study came to 265 messages on Masrawy, 161 on Islam Online, and 47 messages on Arabia, for a total of 473 messages. The message was the unit of analysis for this study.

Variables and Operationalization

Each message was coded for: (a) message identification number; (b) source message board (Masrawy, Islam Online, or Arabia); (c) date of message submission; (d) user member type (only provided for Masrawy users, categories defined below); (e) gender (male, female, unidentified); (f) attitude toward the 9/11 attacks (agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or attitude not mentioned; categories defined below); (g) sympathy toward victims (mentioned, not mentioned); and (h) Islam (mentioned as probable reason, mentioned as not a probable reason, not mentioned).

An attempt was made to identify the gender of message posters where possible, based on the name or signature if provided and/or on the text of the message, since many Arabic words and pronouns require different masculine or feminine endings.

Attitude towards the 9/11 attacks was coded as: "agree" for messages showing support for any possible justification, rationalization, or excuses for the attacks (even

if the message poster feels sorry for the victims); “disagree” for messages showing disagreement with the attacks in terms of denouncing them, condemning them, disapproving of the act, classifying the attacks as a crime or an act of terrorism, offering condolences for the victims and/or their families (without showing any signs of support or justification for the attacks); or “neither agree nor disagree” if the message posters admitted to not being able to make up their minds or adopt a viewpoint regarding the attacks. Messages that only raised questions or offered comments or possible answers to issues raised in other messages without taking sides were coded as “attitude not mentioned.”

Intercoder reliability was determined by having another Arabic native speaker, who is also fluent in English and has a master’s degree in communication, recode a random sample of 10% of the valid messages ($n = 48$; 27 messages from Masrawy, 16 from Islam Online, and 5 messages from Arabia). The reliability rate was calculated after excluding the variables of message identification number, source message board, date of message submission, and user member type to avoid falsely inflating reliability. Using the Holsti (1969) formula, intercoder reliability was determined to be 0.936. The author had the final say in cases of disagreement and also recoded the selected sample, which produced an intracoder reliability score of 0.962.

All Arabic entries were translated into English for the purposes of this study by the author. Efforts were made to remain faithful to the tone, structure, and punctuation of the original entries.

Relevant Methodological Issues

Lindlof and Shatzer (1998) pointed out the problems of participation and identity verification on an Internet discussion forum. In this study, although message posters logged in with a name, almost no one logged in with his or her real name. The name used was usually a self-chosen nickname. Sometimes, however, participants signed the actual message with their real name, which was different from the name they used to log in.

The domination of a thread by a single or a few message posters is another issue frequently encountered in content analysis of discussion boards (Miller & Gergen, 1998; Perlman, 1999). In this study, several login names at times dominated the discussions.

The geographic location where a message originated is another issue. Even on Masrawy, which means “Egyptian,” it cannot be assumed that all messages were posted by Egyptians. Although most messages were written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic,³ this is a dialect widely spoken in the Arab world; hence, any Arab (or anyone who speaks Arabic) could have posted the message. There were also some English-language messages, which could have been by non-Arabs or by Arabs whose Web browsers do not support Arabic characters or who simply chose to post their messages in English. The Arabia site featured more messages in English than did the other two sites, some of which were clearly self-marked as posted by Americans.

External validity is another concern in Internet research (Miller & Gergen, 1998; Stempel & Stewart, 2000). While this study is limited to Internet users, who constitute only a small percentage of the Arab population, it nonetheless draws on one of the few uncensored media channels in the Middle East, and represents the basic sentiments voiced in the Arab world regarding the events of 9/11 and the religious arguments made in connection with them.

Results

Message posters on Masrawy were classified on the site by member type: junior members were those under 21 years of age, and senior members were those above 21. Theoretically, a user can enter a fake age, although there is little reason to do this, since both user types have the same rights and responsibilities on the website.

Out of the message posters on Masrawy, 63.4% ($n = 168$) were junior members, and 21.9% ($n = 58$) were senior members. The remaining percentage was listed as "member," probably because posters did not list their age upon registration. Of the messages on all three discussion boards, 53.1% ($n = 251$) were from males (judging by either the names they signed or the pronouns they used in the syntax of their message), 16.7% ($n = 79$) were from females, and 30.2% ($n = 143$) had no indication of gender.

Of all messages on the three websites, 43.1% ($n = 204$) condemned the 9/11 attacks as an act of terrorism with no justification, political or otherwise. However, 30.2% ($n = 143$) offered some justification for the attacks, even if they acknowledged feeling sorry for the victims and their families. The rest of the message posters (26.7%, $n = 126$) were either undecided, showing feelings of pure shock for the most part, or they offered political analysis without taking sides. Justification messages tended to be shorter and were mostly posted during the first four days following the attacks. For example, on September 11, several messages on Masrawy just said, "Yes, I agree with the attacks." In contrast, condemnation messages were longer and continued to be posted throughout the time period analyzed.

Almost all justification messages on the three websites cited as their reason American foreign policy regarding the Middle East. Message posters who saw justification for the attacks viewed the issue as political, rather than religious or social. The political issues identified mainly focused on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Iraq. Other messages cited American foreign policy in several other parts of the world, including Japan, Vietnam, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iran, Lebanon, and Pakistan.

For example, a female junior member wrote on Masrawy on September 11, "Americans have to feel what the Palestinians feel, the destruction, terror, and all the homeless people. And they have to know that their foreign policy and their support for Israel will hurt their country and their interests in the Middle East."

On the other hand, many condemnation messages cited the killing of innocent civilians as barbaric and inhumane. One male junior member wrote on Masrawy on September 12:

Any human being with a heart rejects the killing of children, men, women, elderly people, and all innocent people. There will be victims from all nationalities. We are against killing Palestinians, and also killing Jews. Any religion forbids killing. What did the men and women and children who were killed do? It could've been your brother or your son or your father or your mother or your wife. This is not permissible under any religion.

Another male wrote on Arabia on September 13 (in English): "I feel bad for all our Middle Eastern families being killed, but two wrongs don't make a right here. All innocent people have a right to live a happy life, both Middle Eastern and Americans."

One member wrote on Masrawy on September 12:

I or any Arab or Muslim cannot support barbaric, vengeful revenge like I saw yesterday. No, a thousand no to such naïve, idiotic, barbarian operations. If it were in my hands, it would kill every terrorist that had to do with this. My hearty condolences to the victims' families.

Could Islam Be a Justification for the Attacks?

Although the terrorists behind the 9/11 attacks claimed that they committed their crime in the name of Islam, the participants in this study clearly believed otherwise. Only 11% ($n = 52$) of all messages posted on the three websites mentioned Islam as a probable justification for the attacks. In comparison, 30% ($n = 142$) stressed that such attacks are against the core teachings of Islam. The remaining 59% ($n = 279$) did not mention Islam at all in their discussions of why the attacks could have happened, which indicates that religion was not a factor in their view of the events.

A male poster on Islam Online posted his message together with a copy of the *fatwa* (Islamic ruling) of Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi. Parts of the *fatwa* read:

We are extremely sorry for the attacks on the World Trade Center and other entities in the United States of America. This is in spite of our objection to the political policy of the U.S. that is pro-Israel on all fronts, military, political, and economic.

This is because our religion respects the human soul and protects it, and prohibits any such attacks on humanity, and denotes it as a huge crime. The Quran says, "If anyone slew a person—unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land—it would be as if he slew the whole people; and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people."... Islam does not permit the random killing of people, innocent and un-innocent alike, for no soul shall carry the burdens of another.... These killings are therefore a major crime in the eyes of Islam.

However, there were still some who argued that the killings are justified in light of what the U.S. is doing with its foreign policies in the Middle East. For example,

one male on Islam Online wrote, "Those who are saying what happened in the U.S. was terrorism, what do you call what happens in Palestine every day?" Another wrote, "America has chosen to wage war against God. Henry Kissinger, their former Jewish Secretary of State, said publicly, 'Islam is not our religion,' so what does that mean? Don't they deserve what happened? They deserve more."

Responding to these messages were many others that strongly opposed the view that the attacks could be backed by religion. One male junior member on Masrawy wrote on September 12:

I'm an Egyptian Muslim, but before anything else I'm a human being, and what happened is not permissible under any religion. I pray for mercy for those who died innocently for no reason, whether they were Muslims, Christians, or Jews. They have their religion and I have mine.⁴

A male who signed, "A Muslim who loves his religion," wrote on Islam Online on September 12:

The most criminal act in the eyes of God is killing an innocent soul as stated by Sheikh Yusuf Al Qaradawi in his *fatwa* (Islamic ruling) about the attacks in the U.S. Even if they do kill innocent Muslims, this does not justify killing innocent Americans. This is not an Islamic principle.

One female senior member wrote on Masrawy on September 14:

This is against all religions. God did not say to kill innocent people.... It is totally against our Islamic religion to terrorize innocent people.... Terrorizing innocent people is not acceptable in Islam, it is totally against the religion.

Some posters had harsh words for those who use Islam as a backup for terrorism. One male wrote on Masrawy on September 14 (in English):

I don't see how people can use our wonderful religion to justify such horrible acts. I am a Muslim who loves his religion, but I want to say something here. If this is Islam, then I don't want to be a Muslim. What I know about my religion is that it is about peace, mercy, and compassion. Anything else is not Islamic.

On Islam Online, this member wrote, "I condemn these acts because they are not legitimate, whoever did them. Killing innocent people was never a way of confronting an enemy in Islam."

Another male wrote on Arabia, "Islam is a peaceful religion. These terrorists aren't true Muslims. In the Quran it is forbidden to kill innocent people. My heart and prayers go out to all those affected by this tragedy. I feel that my religion is being raped by these terrorists. I wish they would just leave Islam out of it."

Some message posters took it upon themselves to explain the true meaning of some Islamic concepts that might be used to justify the attacks. On September 14, a female senior member posted a lengthy explanation on Masrawy of why the attacks

can not be attributed to, or justified by, Islam. She referenced the concept of *kassas* (retribution) in Islam:

Kassas as dictated by Islam is murdering a murderer, and only the murderer. This serves the ultimate good of the human life, because then you decrease the percentage of murder crimes. But this *kassas* as portrayed by the terrorists or the American media is what was prevalent in pre-Islamic times, and it led to much fighting and wars between tribes and hurt many innocent people. And actually you cannot call this *kassas* at all, this is pure murder. Our Prophet (peace and prayers be upon him) laid the foundations for these basic rules in Islam. Islam has regulated all this, and put strict rules even for times of war, and it clearly prohibits killing innocent lives. Even if we were at war with America, this would not be permissible in Islam. And since we're at peace, these are definitely not the regulations dictated by Islam.

Another male junior member took to Masrawy to explain the concept of *jihad*. He wrote, "This is not *jihad*, this is nonsense. According to our Prophet Mohammad (peace and prayers be upon him), *jihad* is struggle 1) against oneself to achieve a higher level of purity, and 2) against enemies in times of war. This is not *jihad*."

Some messages discussed whether the attacks, justified or not, would help or hurt Arab and Muslim interests. Most seemed to believe that the attacks would have negative effects on the Arab and Muslim world. These posters were especially concerned about the West not differentiating between such criminal attacks on one hand and efforts to fight Israeli occupation on the other. This female wrote on Masrawy:

Whoever did this cannot be Arabs or Muslims. This is an inside operation. But whoever did it, it caused us a greeeeeeeeeeeat deal of harm:
Now Israel will do whatever it pleases to Palestinians and no one will ever care. They will use this opportunity to its full potential.
Arabs and Muslims in the States and Europe are already facing a lot of hassles and being treated as terrorists.
America will now support Israel even more to face what they call "Palestinian terrorism."

One female junior member wrote on September 14 on Masrawy:

I'm against American policies in the Middle East, but the innocent civilians had nothing to do with politics. This is forbidden in Islam, whether the victims are Iraqis, Americans, or Palestinians. And do you think Arabs will benefit from these attacks? Not at all. We will suffer as a result (although I'm sure whoever did this are American extremists). But look at what's happening. The world is so concerned about the United States, and in the meantime yesterday Israel went into Jenin and Ariha. They killed 11 Palestinians yesterday, and four today. No one cares of course.

One female on Islam Online thought the attacks would be both of benefit and cost to Muslims. In her words:

This is not an easy question. I think these attacks both hurt us and benefited us. The hurt will be that anti-Islamists will seize the opportunity to paint a negative image of Islam in the West and make the West hate us. The good part is that Muslims who face American terrorist acts in Palestine and Iraq will get a sense of hope that this undefeated giant has been defeated, and it might also make American citizens pay attention to their government's policies that are so unfair to Muslims. But I think the cost is so much more than the benefit. We need huge political and media efforts to make up for the damage to the image of Islam.

Another female on Arabia wrote:

This will only make life harder for Arabs, here (in the Arab world) and in the States. An advisory was issued to Arabs in the States to stop talking to each other in Arabic on the streets, and Muslims are facing a lot of hassles already. I'm sure this was not done by Arabs or Muslims, but it will only cause more mistreatment to Arabs.

A male wrote on Islam Online:

What's happening to Muslims now is the best evidence that Bin Laden is a dangerous man. What he did is not heroic, what he did is a crazy act of terror. Dangerous and important things have started happening to Muslims worldwide as a result, he has only done a great favor for anti-Islamists by his acts. For example, in India, they put the Islamic Liberation Front on the list of terrorist organizations. And in China they detained a lot of Muslims and killed some, and also in the Philippines and elsewhere. Many will use this against Muslims in the name of fighting terrorism. And now we have to prove to the West that Muslims are not terrorists.

Several messages on Islam Online tackled the same issue of whether Bin Laden was a hero or a terrorist. Although the majority of respondents stated that the attacks were an act of terrorism, some still thought Bin Laden committed a heroic act, and some did not believe Bin Laden was the person behind the attacks.

The few who saw Bin Laden as a hero were taken by the ability of this one man to terrorize a nation as powerful as the U.S. Others believed that he must be a true believer since he abandoned a millionaire's life of luxury and instead took to his form of *jihad*. One female wrote on Islam Online, "I think Bin Laden is a hero. Don't you see how this one person managed to terrorize the United States and cause it to be insecure and worried? He has done what the whole Arab world and Arab governments could not do."

A male poster wrote, "Osama Bin Laden is a true fighter for Islam. He has given up on a life of plenty in this life for the hope of a better afterlife. He is the only

millionaire in the world who gave himself and his money to Islam and Muslims. God be with him.”

Other posters had their reasons for not believing that Bin Laden could do such an act. This male poster wrote, “I do believe Bin Laden is a hero. I do not think he had anything to do with these attacks in New York though.” Several messages agreed with this line of thinking. Another male replied to this message, saying, “I totally agree with you. I do not think Bin Laden did it, not because he can’t, but because he is a man of high morals and standards, and he could not be involved in such criminal acts.” Another poster said, “I don’t believe Bin Laden did these attacks. The U.S. still does not have any proof.” This female wrote:

Thank God we are Muslims for our religion is great. I can’t believe you’re asking whether Bin Laden is a terrorist or not. The answer lies in the teachings of Islam. If Osama is a true Muslim, he will not have had anything to do with these attacks because a true believer cannot do these horrible acts.... Our religion is not a religion of killings or terrorism, these acts are by no means a victory. If our enemies have resorted to terrorism, this is not an excuse for us to do the same.

To the same effect, one poster wrote, “To know if Bin Laden is a terrorist or a hero, look at his way of *jihad* and compare it to the merciful nature of Islam.” Another message came from a male poster: “By God Bin Laden is the worst terrorist. He is using our great religion to kill people in its name. He is taking people backwards to pre-Islamic times.” Finally, the following message, posted in English on Masrawy, tended to reflect several others:

The one thing we should protect the most is our humanity, our religion that urges us to rise above greed and anger and malice represented in the American and Israeli forces of darkness. They should never succeed in robbing our Islamic identity and our morality. Islam is the religion of forgiveness not revenge. We don’t kill the innocent no matter how hard it is to target the guilty.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study analyzed the contents of three of the most popular Arabic-language online message boards regarding the 9/11 attacks on the United States. The findings documented that more than 43% of the messages condemned the attacks as a pure criminal act of terrorism. However, some 30% of the message posters still saw some justification behind these attacks, even if they felt sorry for the victims and their families. It is worth noting that most of the justification messages were posted in the few days immediately after the attacks, and were short and abrupt, suggesting a hasty and impulsive reaction. Justification messages tended to become fewer over time. In contrast, condemnation messages were longer, tended to contain well-structured analysis, and continued to be posted throughout the time period included in this study. These findings were consistent across the three message boards, with no

apparent ideological differences between them. The main theme that kept appearing throughout was an overall frustration with American foreign policies in the Middle East region.

Posters condemning the 9/11 attacks felt that the massive killing of innocent civilians in such a random manner was barbaric, inhumane, and contradicted the core teachings of Islam. Many posters wrote that they felt that their religion was being raped by criminals who use it to carry out their own hidden agendas. On the other hand, those justifying or supporting the attacks tended to cite American foreign policy in the Middle East. This was particularly true with regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Iraq. It should be noted that these messages were posted before the launch of the current American intervention in Iraq.

More than 81% of the messages mentioned some aspect of frustration and/or dissatisfaction with American politics in the Middle East. This is an interesting finding, given that fewer than 30% justified the attacks. This means that another 51%, who mostly posted messages supporting the victims and condemning the attacks, still felt dissatisfied with American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Although the attacks of 9/11 were justified by the terrorists who committed them as having been carried out in the name of Islam, those who posted messages on all three forums—Masrawy, Islam Online, and Arabia—rejected this claim. On all three websites, only 11% of those who posted messages mentioned that Islam was a probable justification for the attacks. In contrast, more than 30% stressed in their messages that such atrocities were against the core spirit and teachings of Islam. The remaining 59% of the message posters did not mention Islam at all in their discussions, which suggests that the religion was not on their minds as a possible reason for why the attacks took place. These posters seemed to view the attacks as a political, rather than a religious, issue.

This is another interesting finding, given that, as illustrated in the literature review, most American media coverage of the issue tended to portray it as a clash of civilizations, based in essence on a confrontation between Islam as a religion and the West as a culture. The findings of this study show that Arab Muslims did not view the issue in a religious light. Rather, Arabs saw the issue as primarily political. They were (and are) frustrated with the seemingly consistent support for Israel that the U.S. displays in its foreign policy towards the Middle East, particularly regarding the Palestinian conflict and Lebanon. They see the U.S. as a “monster” that is quick to judge and take one side in support of a single entity against all others in the region.

Arab message posters also expressed concern about the then-potential problem of framing Islam as a violent and terrorist religion, a concern that was shown in the literature review to have materialized in the days and months following 9/11. In the minds of these message posters, such media coverage of the nature of Islam is distorted and hurts the interests of Arabs and Muslims everywhere.

It is the concern of this researcher that such media coverage may also have increased anti-American sentiments in the Middle East over the past few years, since Arabs felt that the U.S. insisted on dealing with Islam as an enemy. As indicated in

the findings of this and other studies (Fadel, 2002; Gomaa, 2002; Inbaraj, 2002; Pintak, 2006; Said, 1997; Shaheen, 1980, 1984), Arabs feel that the U.S. media are unduly focused on Islam as a breeding ground of violence and terrorism and that the media refuse to pay attention to moderate voices, which constitute the great majority of the more than 1.3 billion Muslims around the world. Of course, terrorist acts speak to the media much more loudly than non-terrorist acts. However, Arabs feel that the U.S. media ignore coverage of any non-violent aspect of Islam, as evidenced by the near non-existence of any content about the everyday lives or the scientific achievements or the rich cultures of Arabs and Muslims worldwide and throughout history. In the minds of most Arabs, terrorism is not related to Islam as a religion. Rather, it is born and bred out of a sense of frustration with seemingly endless unfair political policies, a point that is validated daily by the flagrant rise of violent acts in Iraq since the American intervention in 2003. This is another point that Arabs believe the American media refuse to acknowledge or even consider.

Arab messages posters discussed different aspects of the relation between Islam and the 9/11 attacks. They concluded that the attacks caused more harm than good to Islam and Muslims, both in the Arab world and in the West. Although a minority hailed Bin Laden as a hero for what they perceived to be his victorious confrontation with the U.S., the majority saw him as a terrorist who is taking advantage of Islam to serve his own agenda. Muslims took to the discussion boards to defend their religion, saying that they felt it was being “raped” by such terrorists. They posted messages trying to explain to the world the basic principles on which Islam was based as a religion of tolerance, mercy, and compassion.

The Internet provided a much needed public sphere for Arabs to express their views and speak their minds on an issue as important as this one. This is particularly valuable in a region of the world where the media are mostly government-owned and controlled. Access to public media in the Arab world is not easy, and if one is lucky enough to get through with a letter to the editor, chances are that the letter will be “edited,” sometimes heavily, before it appears in print. The Internet provides Arabs with a staggering alternative to traditional media. As is shown in this study, they have used it in the aftermath of 9/11 to denounce what they perceived as attacks on humanity and on their own religion, and to attempt to spread awareness and knowledge about the true nature and the core teachings of Islam to the world.

Notes

- 1 Arabia.com is no longer available on the Internet. The URL now leads to “Naseeb.com,” a matchmaking site for Muslims.
- 2 Some messages were posted twice, apparently due to a technical difficulty on the website. Those pairs of duplicate messages were analyzed and counted as one message.
- 3 The author is Egyptian. Arabic is her mother tongue.
- 4 “You have your religion, and I have mine” is a literal translation of a verse from the *Quran*, the Muslim holy book that dictates tolerance to people different from oneself.

The verse is from a *Sura* (chapter) called “Al Kaferoon” (The Infidels), and it stresses tolerance not just of people of other religions but of any persons, even if they are infidels or have no religion. Another translation that captures the spirit of the verse is provided on IslamiCity.com: “To you be your way, and to me mine” (*The Holy Quran*, 109:6).

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