

The recruiter's dilemma: Signaling and rebel recruitment tactics

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Abstract: How do terrorists recruit? We know much about the profiles and pathways of recruits, but little about the strategies and tactics of recruiters. Such procedures matter because they help determine who joins. I highlight a key determinant of recruiter tactics, namely, the tension between personnel needs and infiltration risks. Drawing on signaling theory, I present an analytical framework that conceptualizes recruitment as a trust game between recruiter and recruit. I argue that the central logic shaping recruiter tactics is the search for cost-discriminating signs of trustworthiness. Due to the context-specificity of signal costs and the room for tactical innovation, optimal recruitment tactics vary in space and time, but the underlying logic is the same for most groups facing a high threat of infiltration. I apply the framework to an al-Qaida recruitment campaign in early 2000s Saudi Arabia, where it helps explain tactical preferences (why recruiters favoured some recruitment arenas over others) and differential network activation (why recruiters preferred war veterans over radical candidates from other networks). The trust dilemma also accounts for unexpected recruiter choices, such as their reluctance to solicit on the Internet and in mosques, and their preference for recruits who knew poetry or wept during prayer. Thus the signaling framework does not challenge, but provides a useful micro-level complement to, existing theories of recruitment.

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This [recruitment] method relies on conventional techniques, based on presenting the cause to someone you trust. However, before we start, who are the special people to whom we present the cause? In other words, what are the characteristics that make us trust some people, and not others?

From "Method of recruiting elements for a cell", posted by "Taha" on the online jihadi discussion forum *al-Muhajirun*, March 3, 2006.¹

Exactly how do terrorist recruiters find and screen new members without getting caught? We know much about the profiles and pathways of recruits, but little about the strategies and tactics of recruiters. In this article, I examine rebel recruitment from the perspective of the recruiter.

A common misperception about extremist groups is that they enlist any willing person they can put their hands on. In reality, recruiting is very dangerous. The recruiter can be captured when approaching strangers, and the whole organization will suffer if the latest recruit turns out to be an informant. Groups must therefore be careful and selective in their admissions procedures.

Thus, to understand why some people and not others join militant groups, it is not enough to study recruits. A group's membership is also shaped by the tactical choices of recruiters, such as where they look for candidates, how they screen them, and who they are inclined to admit. The purpose of this article is to explore this much-neglected demand side of rebel recruitment, especially what we may call the proximate determinants of recruit demand.

I present an analytical framework based on signaling theory that conceptualizes the recruitment process as a trust game between recruiter and recruit. I argue that the central logic shaping recruiter tactics is the search for cost-discriminating signs of trustworthiness, i.e., signs that are too costly for mimics to fake, but affordable for the genuinely trustworthy recruit. Because signal costs are context-specific, optimal recruitment tactics vary in space and time, but the underlying logic is the same for most groups facing a high threat of infiltration. The framework does not challenge existing theories of recruitment, but supplements them by generating more fine-grained predictions and identifying a mechanism that accounts for known patterns and correlations.

To illustrate, I apply the framework to an al-Qaida recruitment campaign in early 2000s Saudi Arabia. I explain unexpected choices by recruiters, such as their reluctance to recruit through the Internet and in mosques, and their preference for recruits who knew poetry or wept during Qur'an recitation. The case study draws on rare primary sources and offers an unusually detailed look at jihadist recruitment.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I review the literature and situate my argument within it. Then I present the theoretical framework. Third, I justify the case selection and describe the data. The fourth and fifth sections test the predictions against qualitative data on the group's procedures for outreach and screening respectively.

¹ <http://www.mohajirun.com/vb/> (accessed February 18, 2007). I thank Anne Stenersen for sharing the document.

Differential recruitment in the literature

The question why some people and not others become politically active has preoccupied social scientists for decades. Differential recruitment to militant groups has been studied in a range of semi-independent sub-fields, including social movement studies, terrorism studies, and conflict studies. Much of the literature falls into one of four categories, depending on whether the focus is on supply or demand, and on underlying or proximate determinants (see table I). Each of the four lines of inquiry explores a different aspect of the recruitment exchange.

Table I. Typology of analytical approaches to differential recruitment

	Supply	Demand
Underlying determinants	Recruit attributes	Group attributes
Proximate determinants	Networks, socialization	Recruiter tactics

The most common approach is to examine the underlying determinants of supply, i.e. the attributes that make recruits inclined to join. A major subset of this literature studies the socio-economic background of recruits (Bakker, 2006; Berrebi, 2003; Clark, 1983; Fair, 2008; Hegghammer, 2006; Ibrahim, 1981; Jäger et al, 1981; Kavanagh, 2011; Krueger & Malečková, 2003; Lee, 2011; Reinares, 2004; Russell & Miller, 1977). Another subset investigates psychological profiles (Horgan, 2003; Hudson, 1999; Post, 1990; Victoroff, 2005). The approach has identified broad characteristics of recruit populations, for example that terrorists tend to be well educated (Krueger, 2007) and that insurgents are often poor (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008). It has also uncovered some curiosities, such as the fact that many Palestinian suicide terrorists have altruistic traits (Pedahzur et al., 2003) and that engineers are overrepresented in jihadi groups (Gambetta & Hertog 2007). However, strong predictors of recruitment have yet to be identified.

A second body of literature thus focuses on the proximate determinants of supply, i.e. the social factors that affect a recruit's availability or willingness to join, especially social networks and socialization processes. Many scholars explored the role of preexisting social networks, building on the robust finding in the broader social movement literature on the importance of networks for recruitment (Diani and McAdam, 2003; McAdam, 1986; Opp & Gern, 1993; Snow et al., 1980). In a classic study of recruitment to Italian left-wing terrorism in the 1970s, Della Porta (1988) showed that recruits joined in clusters and that most had friends already in the organization. Sageman (2004) and others have found the same for jihadi networks of the 1990s and 2000s. How networks matter has been a key theoretical inquiry in the social movement literature. McAdam & Paulsen (1993), Passy (2003), and others have explored the mechanisms of network mobilization, though without reaching a clear consensus. Another theoretical puzzle is that of differential network activation, i.e., why recruitment occurs along some networks and not others, given that individuals have "multiple embeddings" (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993). Recent studies of non-violent activism suggest identity salience is a better predictor than tie strength or network position (Lim, 2008). This is consistent with Della Porta's (1988) early finding that recruitment followed networks forged in non-violent leftist organizations. Still, identity salience offers only broad predictions on differential network activation.

Another much-studied proximate determinant of supply is political socialization. Some scholars have examined group dynamics (Baeyer-Katte, 1982; Hirsch, 1990; Sageman, 2004; Wasmund, 1986), while others have focused on individual recruit trajectories (Della Porta, 1988; Florez-Morris, 2007; Horgan, 2008; Linden & Klandermans, 2007; Munson,

2009; Silke, 2003; Vertigans, 2007). All stress the importance of socialization in motivating individuals for militant activity. Della Porta (1988) and others also emphasize the role of violent socialization, noting that past experience with semi-legal activism or low-level violence is a good predictor of involvement in terrorism.

A third literature explores underlying determinants of demand, i.e. structural factors that shape groups' recruitment strategies. The technical requirements of rebellion, for example, lead groups to screen for recruit quality (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005). The collective action problem gives rise to different mobilization strategies – such as provision of selective incentives (Olson, 1965), appeals to identities (Petersen, 2001) and appeals to the pleasure of agency (Wood, 2003) – each shaping group membership. Recent research asks why groups choose one strategy over another. Gates (2002) suggests that a group's ethnic composition, ideology and area of operation inform its recruitment strategy and thus its membership. In a more elaborate argument, Weinstein (2005, 2006) contends that recruitment strategies are shaped by economic endowments. Resourceful organizations recruit on the basis of short-term material benefits and thus attract more numerous but less committed personnel than do poorer groups. The temporal dimension of recruiting has been explored by Klandermans & Oegema (1987), who argued that organized mobilization usually occurs in four sequential steps: formation of mobilization potential, activation of recruitment networks, arousal of motivation to participate, and removal of barriers to participation.

The fourth and by far the least-used perspective focuses on proximate determinants of demand, i.e. factors informing recruiter tactics. An individual may be willing, suitable and “biographically available” for recruitment, but will not be able to join unless she is physically located and accepted by a recruiter. What determines whom the recruiter approaches and admits? This is what the current article is about.

The terrorism literature is surprisingly short on studies of recruiter tactics. With a few exceptions (Alkan & Özdemir, 2008; Blazak, 2001; Forest, 2005; Gerwehr & Daly 2006; Özeren, 2007), the literature is very recruit-centric, and most works that do examine recruiter methods are descriptive. An important exception is Fair (2004, 2007), who showed that Pakistani jihadi groups recruit across ideological faultlines and avoid *madrassa* students because they value recruit quality over piety. However, for theoretical insights on recruiting we generally have to look outside the terrorism literature.

Brady et al (1999), who studied recruitment to non-violent activism in the United States, argued that recruiters maximize the likelihood of successful persuasion by seeking subjects with certain qualities, such as past activity, resources, and engagement with politics. However, they face an information problem in that such attributes are mostly unobservable. Recruiters thus look for observable traits correlated with the unobservable ones. They also exploit preexisting social links, since these offer better information about a recruit's unobservable qualities and provide leverage over the candidate.

However, clandestine groups face a more acute information problem. Since low-quality recruits can compromise the group, rebel recruiters need better information about their recruits than do non-violent groups. At the same time, rebels often face higher constraints on information-gathering. Weinstein (2005) addressed this problem in the context of his endowment theory of rebel recruitment. Recruitment strategies based on material incentives attract opportunists, so organizations have to screen for commitment. Drawing on signaling theory, Weinstein argued that recruiters collect signals of commitment in various ways, notably information-gathering, vouching and costly induction.

Weinstein's signaling approach to screening represents a major contribution, but it can be refined. It notably leaves out a dimension of the information problem that haunts recruiters in very force-asymmetric environments, namely the threat from deceptive mimicry (i.e., spies and informants). Terrorists – who generally face relatively stronger opposition

than do insurgents – thus need to screen not only for commitment, but also for trustworthiness. This matters because it presumably takes different methods to identify deliberate deception than low commitment. Second, Weinstein does not go into details about what constitutes a credible sign, how recruiters assess signs or how a group’s environment affects sign assessment. These are all factors that presumably affect which tactics get employed and ultimately who gets recruited. In sum, we lack a good framework for understanding how recruiters solve trust dilemmas and how their solutions affect differential recruitment.

Theoretical framework

I build on Weinstein’s signaling idea by incorporating additional elements from the literature on signaling and mimicry (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001a,b; Gambetta, 2005).

Terrorist recruiters face a primary trust dilemma in the uncertainty over the quality of recruits. They need people who are trustworthy, which means a combination of at least three qualities: willingness to fight, loyalty, and vigilance. Neither of these properties can be discovered from observation, so recruiters would have to look for observable signs correlated with these properties.

The existence of agents mimicking these signs, such as spies or adventure-seekers, introduces the secondary trust dilemma in the uncertainty over the reliability of signs. Infiltrators might try to pass as recruits by deliberately adopting the dress, behavior and language of a genuine supporter. How, then, can recruiters tell friend from foe? Signaling theory predicts that they will look for signs that are too costly for mimics to fake, but affordable for the genuinely trustworthy.

What this means in practice is a central question in applied signal theory. Gambetta, in his exploration of the semiotic structure of signs (2005: 231-232), distinguishes between *cues* (congenital features), *marks* (lifestyle byproducts) and *symbolic signs* (conventional gestures, dress or statements). Usually, cues and marks are costlier to mimic than symbolic signs. For example, in jihadi communities a battle wound from Afghanistan would be a more reliable sign than would a verbal statement praising Usama bin Ladin. Crucially, however, signaling theorists do not expect to identify universally cost-discriminating signs. Gambetta & Hamill (2005: 16) stress that much signaling knowledge is local insofar as the cost of signs is context-driven.

I thus anticipate recruiters to adopt tactics that allow them to securely collect cost-discriminating signs of trustworthiness. I expect the precise features of signs to depend in part on the group’s local environment or “signaling ecology”. I further expect the sign collection to occur in sequential stages. Just as recruits go through stages to become mobilized (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987), so recruiters proceed in stages to enlist recruits, the most important being *outreach* and *screening*.² Outreach is what recruiters do to locate motivated recruits. Screening is the process of evaluating the latter’s trustworthiness once they have been identified. Building on Weinstein (2005), I expect screening in turn to consist of three stages: initial evaluation, probing, and costly induction.

Case selection and data

I apply the framework to the case of “al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula” (QAP), which operated in Saudi Arabia between 2002 and 2006 (Hegghammer, 2010). I analyze only one case because signaling analysis requires detail. Three factors inform the case selection. First, the QAP’s struggle was very asymmetric, so the trust dilemma faced by its recruiters would

² Brady et al (1999) distinguished between *finding* and *persuading*; however, persuading is less relevant for terrorist recruitment since a recruit who needs a lot of persuasion is by definition untrustworthy.

have been acute. Second, the case is from a non-Western country with cultural idiosyncracies, which enables assessment of Gambetta's prediction about the context-specificity of signs. Third, the case is unusually well documented, because QAP was exceptionally prolific and relied on the Internet for propaganda distribution.

One of the weaknesses of the case is that we lack first-person accounts by QAP recruiters on the topic of recruitment. The closest thing is a set of generic jihadi recruitment manuals circulating online. However, these say more about what constitutes a trustworthy recruit than how to spot one. For example, the so-called *Manchester Manual* listed fourteen desirable qualities in a prospective member: Islam, ideological commitment, maturity, willingness to sacrifice, obedience, ability to keep secrets and conceal information, good health, patience, tranquility, intelligence, prudence, truthfulness, ability to observe, and ability to conceal oneself (Anonymous, 2000: 15-19). It said nothing, however, about which external signs to look for. Another manual, entitled *A Course in the Art of Recruitment* (al-Qa'idi, 2008), advised recruiters to choose old friend or relatives who are not particularly religious, and to avoid very pious people and certain types of professionals. The absence of detailed advice on sign interpretation supports the expectation that signalling knowledge is resistant to generalisation. The jihadis themselves seem aware of this; "Taha", author of the epigraph above, noted that "every country has its characteristics, and the reality is different from country to country."³

In the absence of first-person accounts, we have to rely on indirect evidence of two main types. The first is aggregate data on the attributes of recruits. If a particular feature is overrepresented among recruits compared to the population as a whole, we can assume we are closing in on a sign. However, most profile datasets capture only cues and backgrounds, not signs of a more ephemeral nature such as statements and gestures. For the latter we must rely on recruitment narratives. Fortunately, we have an unusually large number of such accounts in the Saudi jihadi literature.

My main source for such narratives is QAP's own propaganda production, which we possess in its entirety. QAP produced numerous magazines, books and films which it distributed on Islamist websites.⁴ Hegghammer (2010: 250ff) provides an overview of the main titles; they includes 52 magazine issues (30-50 pages each), 26 statements (1-5 pages each), 60 theological treatises (10-560 pages each) and 18 films (5-90 minutes each). Most recruitment narratives appear in martyr biographies, which are accounts of the background and militant career of fallen militants. A second key genre is interviews with active members which figure in QAP magazines and films. A third is "operation reports" in which militants document the preparation and execution of operations, including the background of participants.

I also rely on secondary sources such as mainstream media interviews with captured militants. From 2003 to 2006, Saudi TV and newspapers featured several interviews with detained QAP members.⁵ Their publication was part of a government effort to delegitimize

³ Comment by "Taha" on *al-Muhajirun*, November 6, 2006 (www.mohajroon.com/vb/, accessed February 18, 2007).

⁴ QAP distributed propaganda on variety of websites. Most changed frequently and all are now defunct. The main outlets from late 2003 to mid-2004 were *Sawt al-Jihad* (www.hostinganime.com/sout) and *Kata'ib al-Haramain* (www.hostinganime.com/kataeb) named after the similarly titled QAP magazines. From late 2004 to 2007, the principal outlet was *al-Qa'idun* (www.qa3edoon.com). Once posted on outlet sites, new material would quickly spread to hundreds of other websites. Many of the texts can be retrieved today on www.tawhed.ws and www.e-prism.org. Some of the videos are available on www.archive.org and www.youtube.com.

⁵ See notably the documentary series *Inside the Cell* which aired on Saudi TV in 2004 and 2005. Saudi newspapers also featured several interviews with former militants, see, e.g., *al-Ukaz*, 8 October 2005 and *al-Riyadh*, 7 October 2006.

militants and encourage defections from QAP. There are problems with all of these sources. Primary sources are coloured by group ideology, while secondary sources are tainted by the government's counterterrorist agenda. Still, many accounts are too idiosyncratic and detailed to be dismissed as pure fabrication.

I extracted the data through content analysis. I viewed all documents, carefully collecting all available information on recruit trajectories. The data was originally extracted for an earlier study on the supply side of QAP recruitment (Hegghammer, 2006), so the risk here of a selection bias in favor of the signaling framework is low. The recruitment narratives were not coded, but I organized the information in biographical entries, since different elements of a person's story might appear in different documents. I generated a list of 260 individuals whose names figure in QAP publications and relevant secondary sources between 2003 and 2006. From this full sample, I also extracted a core sample with fewer missing values, consisting of the 69 most active and best known fighters. Overall, the data is uneven and incomplete, but richer than what we have for most groups of this kind.

Outreach

Before a trust game could even begin, recruiters and recruits would have to find themselves in a situation where they could exchange signals. Where and how did such situations emerge?

Starting with the elimination method, we have no evidence of QAP recruitment over the Internet. This is surprising given the centrality of the Internet in the organization's propaganda effort. From late 2001 to his death in May 2003 Yusuf al-Uyayri ran a website called *Center for Islamic Studies and Research* and was active in chatrooms on the live audio interface *Paltalk*. From September 2003 to late 2004, QAP's media unit operated the *Voice of Jihad* website which featured films, books and magazines. Their two biweekly magazines *Voice of Jihad* and *Camp of the Sabre* included email addresses of the editors accompanied by calls for reader contributions. QAP members were also present on radical online discussion forums such as *al-Salafyoon* and *al-Ansar*. Nevertheless, there are no accounts in QAP literature of people being recruited online. Instead, QAP leaders explicitly apologized for not being able to accept joining offers submitted over the Internet and encouraged people to form independent cells instead.⁶ One text describes a person so frustrated with the difficulty of finding collaborators that he ended up carrying out the attack on his own.⁷

Less surprising is the paucity of evidence of individuals having been recruited in mosques. There is some evidence that QAP initially attempted to recruit in mosques: In the summer and early autumn of 2002, QAP ideologue Ahmad al-Dukhayyil reportedly toured Riyadh's smaller mosques giving fiery speeches.⁸ However, this became impossible after October 2002 because of stricter policing. Some contacts may have been initiated in mosques or in Mecca, but QAP does not seem to have systematically targeted these venues after late 2002, presumably because the risk of capture was too high. Elsewhere in the world, the extent of jihadi recruitment in mosques also seems to vary with constraints: for example, it is rare in the West (Neumann & Rogers, 2007: 37) but common in Pakistan (Fair, 2004: 494).

The virtual world was somewhat safer for recruiters to frequent, but it was not used for recruitment, presumably because digital signal costs are harder to verify. QAP is not unique in this respect. Jihadi Internet propaganda has inspired individuals to approach

⁶ In May 2004, QAP leader Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin wrote: "[We have received] a plethora of questions, requests and messages from our brothers [...] They are calling for direction and are longing to join the ranks of the mujahidin. A number of others are asking for permission to act... Brothers desiring jihad should not wait for permission from one of those engaged in jihad ... For God has ordered jihad and there is nothing left but to obey and act." *SJ* 10:17-19. See also the numerous "Letters to the editor" in *SJ* 8, 20, 21, 26, 27 and 28.

⁷ *SJ* 6: 30-31.

⁸ *SJ* 26: 12.

organizations, but there are very few known cases of established groups soliciting new recruits online (Taarnby, 2005: 39; Watts, 2008: 2).

For the most part, initial contact between QAP recruiters and recruits seems to have been established in two types of places: social gatherings in private homes and private lectures by radical preachers. In Saudi Arabia, where there are few public entertainment options other than the shopping mall, private homes arguably constitute a relatively more important arena for socialization than in many other countries.

Since the early 1990s, there had existed a loosely knit community of Saudi veterans of the wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and elsewhere. Like many ex-military men, they romanticized about their time in the field and enjoyed talking about it with other veterans. The people who returned from Afghanistan in early 2002 formed similar networks. They would host and attend *majlises* frequented primarily by other veterans and their relatives and friends. It is important to note that most jihad veterans were not interested in fighting in Saudi Arabia; ideologically, most were “foreign fighters” focused on other Muslims conventional struggles of national liberation, not “global jihadists” involved in international terrorism against the West (Hegghammer, 2010: 7). Still, these private gatherings were very important recruiting arenas for QAP; there are several accounts of people first meeting QAP recruiters at such venues.⁹

The other main type of recruitment venue was private religious meetings and lectures. While this is an important Islamist recruitment arena in many countries (Hairgrove & McLeod, 2008), it is even more so in Saudi Arabia, because the Kingdom has an unusually large informal religious sector. It is very common for religious scholars, especially in the central Najd region, to give classes and lectures in their homes and to host and attend receptions. In the late 1990s and early 2000s there emerged a community of scholars in the cities of Burayda and in Riyadh who produced increasingly radical *fatwas* and books denouncing US foreign policy and what they saw as the social liberalization of Saudi Arabia (Lacroix & Hegghammer, 2004: 7, 12). Their writings were disseminated on the internet and attracted the attention of Saudi Islamists nationwide. These scholars, who included Nasir al-Fahd, Ali al-Khudayr, Sulayman al-Ulwan and others, drew a considerable following which they entertained in private forums. We know that QAP members frequented and recruited at these lectures.¹⁰

Private gatherings and lectures were attractive recruitment venues for several reasons. For a start, someone’s very presence in a jihadi *majlis* or at Nasir al-Fahd’s house indicated recruitment potential. Moreover, these locations offered the right balance between security and openness. They were closed to the public and out of sight of police, while at the same time open for newcomers with the right connections (a person can bring anyone to their friend’s *majlis* (reception) even if the third person does not know the host). Finally they constituted arenas where the cost of being caught mimicking would be relatively higher than in public spaces, since a mimic would be in a minority and thus potentially at physical risk if caught lying.

Because the organizers and most of the guests at such gatherings were not QAP members themselves, they were not disrupted by the authorities, at least not until the summer

⁹ For example, Abd al-Latif al-Khudayri, who would later join QAP himself, “was in close touch with mujahidin from many fronts ... Sometimes he would host them in his house, at other times he would organize meetings for them.” *SJ* 27: 12. A recruit named Bandar al-Dukhayyil recalled meeting Ali al-Harbi at a gathering for jihad youth in 2002 and remembered that “Ali was arguing strongly in favour of jihad on the Arabian Peninsula.” *SJ* 24: 22-26.

¹⁰ Al-Uyayri was married to a sister of a wife of Sulayman al-Ulwan. Several QAP militants, including Abd al-Latif al-Khudayri and Turki al-Fuhayd, had studied with these clerics; see *SJ* 27:11-12 and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 June 2003.

of 2003. These venues therefore constituted relatively stable “gates into the underworld” for QAP. In a given neighborhood, many locals would know where to find the “jihad guys” [*shabab al-jihad*]. This enabled QAP to undertake targeted outreach – such as leaving propaganda at the doorsteps or the windscreen of the cars of old friends – and be relatively confident that the recruit would find his way to the nearest veterans’ reception if he was interested.¹¹

Screening

Once in the presence of potential recruits, QAP members looked for signs. If the signs observed in an initial encounter were inconclusive, recruiters provoked the emission of further signs, using two strategies: probing and induction. We can thus divide the screening process into three sequential stages and examine the signaling in each.

Initial evaluation

QAP recruiters do not seem to have paid much attention to a recruit’s tribal origin and social class. Members valued tribal cultural heritage, but tribal affinity does not seem to have made recruiters trust recruits more. There is a simple explanation for this, which is that tribal identity in Saudi Arabia does not seem to be correlated with any particular political preferences. The same tribes that are represented in QAP are also well represented in the Saudi security services. Similarly, the group does not seem to have considered recruits from certain social classes more trustworthy than others. The wealthy had incurred a relatively higher cost by going for jihad, but this did not make them more trustworthy since they also had more exit options in the future.

Ethnicity, on the other hand, seems to have mattered greatly. There were no South Asians and only 12 non-Saudi Arabs among the 260 in our sample. South Asians and non-Saudi Arabs, who together make up about a quarter of residents in Saudi Arabia, are thus underrepresented. This distribution must be at least partly shaped by demand, given that 1) South Asia and the Arab world have relatively large jihadi communities, 2) some (admittedly few) South Asians and non-Saudi Arabs have engaged in radical activism in Saudi Arabia outside a QAP framework¹², and 3) QAP’s ideology offered a pan-Islamic public good (the liberation of the Holy Sites and the sharing of oil wealth between the world’s Muslims). It is fair to assume, then, that QAP did not trust non-Arabs and were less likely to trust non-Saudi Arabs than Saudis. Asian, African or Western features would thus have been a strong negative cue, while very dark- or light-skinned Arab features would have been a moderately negative one. These preferences probably had both a rational and an irrational component. It would be easier to check the background of a Saudi than a foreigner and easier to communicate with an Arab than a non-Arab. The low income and status of Asians in Saudi Arabia would have made them more susceptible to bribes and vulnerable to blackmail. At the same time, prejudice toward Asians and Africans is very widespread in the Kingdom, and the international jihadi movement has historically been characterized by a certain Arab chauvinism (Devji, 2008).

Once a recruit’s Arabness, or preferably Saudiness, had been established, recruiters would presumably look for signs of commitment to militant Islamist activism broadly defined. They no doubt knew that personal piety was an unreliable proxy for commitment to jihad, since external signs of personal piety are shared by so many Saudis. Interestingly, a

¹¹ QAP member Khalid al-Sabit would leave issues of *Sawt al-Jihad* at the doorstep of former friends; *SJ* 15: 24-28. In February 2006, QAP propaganda videos were found in the windscreen of cars parked outside a Quran memorization school in Qasim; *Saudi Gazette*, 28 February 2006.

¹² Tenet (2007: 147) mentions a foiled plot by Pakistanis to attack the US consulate in Jidda in the summer of 2001.

history of delinquency or non-observance was not an obstacle for joining QAP. At least one person in our sample was involved in petty crime, two had been dismissed from work for embezzlement, while two described as having lived “in sin” (an expression associated with smoking, drinking, womanizing and/or the failure to observe prayer).¹³

At the same time, personal piety at the time of recruitment was certainly a necessary condition for joining. Failure to observe any of the basic rituals or engaging in sinful behaviour – by skipping prayers, smoking, or watching Hollywood films – would have constituted a very negative sign.¹⁴ Moreover, even at the far end of the piety spectrum there were small signs that distinguished the extremely pious from the very pious. These signs were not in material objects such as clothes, but rather in body language and habits. QAP martyrdom biographies would highlight the piety of some and not that of others, which suggests some variation. Judging from texts and videos, the behaviors that were appreciated included reading the Qur’an at every available spare moment, weeping while reciting the Quran, frequent minor pilgrimages (*umra*) to Mecca, efforts to acquire religious knowledge, etc. However, to observe these signs, recruiters needed to already be in direct contact with the recruit.

Piety, however, was not enough. Recruiters would also need to see signs of ideological commitment of a more political nature, in particular approval of violent activism. Here again, no material signs were correlated with political radicalism. At the same time, verbal declarations of ideological support, however vocal or frequent, were not reliable signs, because they were cheap to produce. Not only could an informant easily lie about his opinions, but an Islamist might cite radical slogans for immediate social approval without being prepared to act on them. For example, in 2001 and 2002, several loudmouth preachers such as Sulayman al-Ulwan expressed extreme anti-American views and mingled with jihadis, only to stay quiet when things got serious in 2003 (Hegghammer, 2010: 159).

By far the most reliable proxy for commitment to violent activism was previous jihad experience from abroad, an attribute held by at least thirty-eight (fifty-five percent) activists in the core sample. Jihad experience was costly to acquire and very hard to fake. The costs of going abroad for jihad were significant. Volunteers usually brought their personal savings to the jihad front.¹⁵ Their absence from home marginalized them on the job market and kept them away from their family and friends. The hardship of training and risk of injury and disease often involved significant physical pain (Nasiri, 2006). People who went abroad after around 1993 also faced the possibility of arrest upon their return (Hegghammer, 2010: 36). Recent jihad experience was more costly than experience from the 1980s and thus a more reliable sign.

Interestingly, several QAP cadres (at least 14 of the the core sample of 69) had prison experience. One might have expected former detainees to be less attractive recruits given that they had been exposed. QAP must have considered that the benefits of having a trustworthy member outweighed the risk of him being tracked. As it happened, until 2003 Saudi intelligence did not keep very close tabs on past detainees, and people arrested and released as late as 2002 were able to play key roles in the 2003 offensive.

¹³ See the biographies of Khalid al-Baghdadi (*SJ* 18), Salih al-Awfi (*Arab News*, 12 December 2003), Uthman al-Amri (*Arab News*, 12 December 2003), Talal al-Anbari (*SJ* 17) and Faisal al-Dukhayyil (*SJ* 28).

¹⁴ There is no positive evidence of QAP rejecting recruits for such transgressions, but there is a telling anecdote in the biography of QAP member Faysal al-Dukhayyil, who had an unobservant past. In 1999 he had wanted to fight in Chechnya and went to see his activist cousin Ahmad al-Dukhayyil for travel advice. His cousin said: “you still smell of cigarette smoke – and you want to go to Chechnya?” *SJ* 28: 12.

¹⁵ For example, Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Madani “sold his shop and his car and took the money with him” to Bosnia in 1992; see al-Qatari & al-Madani (2002: 90-91)

The problem with identifying jihad veterans was that there were few material signs associated with jihad experience; no uniform, ring or secret handshake. In the late 1980s and early 1990s many returnees from Afghanistan had worn Afghan clothes as insignia, but this practice largely ceased in the mid-1990s when the police started viewing jihad veterans with more suspicion. Some veterans had scars from injuries sustained in battle or training, but the vast majority of veterans did not.¹⁶ Instead, jihad experience was signaled through a cluster of primarily verbal signs that were complex and counterintuitive and thus difficult to mimic. However, because these signs were verbal and numerous, they could not be observed in an instant.

Probing

To find out whether a person had really been abroad for jihad, recruiters would solicit signs of jihad experience, either by engaging the recruit in conversation, or if in a larger group, steer the conversation toward the topic of foreign jihad fronts. They would presumably look for displays of three types of knowledge, the combination of which would be very hard to acquire for a person who had not been to any of the major battlefronts.

The first was knowledge of people, places and events specific to the conflict in which the recruit claimed to have taken part. It was very common for veterans to tell stories from their time in the field.¹⁷ Such stories could not easily be made up, because it required knowledge of local names and of events that were generally not publicized. Moreover, with the exception of 1980s Afghanistan, the Saudi community on each jihad front was small enough for any references to specific people to be easily verified by others. There is indirect evidence that QAP conducted such background checks of their recruits.¹⁸

The second type of distinctive knowledge was weapons expertise. All veterans would have attended some kind of training camp. The syllabus in these camps was made up primarily of theoretical and practical courses on weapons and explosives (Gunaratna, 2006). Testimonies of former fighters suggest the camps fostered a macho culture obsessed with weaponry (Nasiri, 2006). Veterans returned able to assemble guns blindfolded and cite the technical specifications of a range of different firearms, and by all accounts they were keen to show off their skills.¹⁹ Saudi Arabia does not have conscription, and government forces use American weaponry, so knowledge of the types of arms available in Afghanistan would be hard for mimics to acquire.

The third type was familiarity with “jihad culture”, a set of peculiar practices and artistic expressions that emerged in the Arab Afghan community in the 1980s and developed in subsequent jihad fronts. One important component was *anashid*, battle hymns sung *a capella* during training and socializing. A similar component was poetry. Arab fighters in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya would continuously compose new poems and recite them in the camps. Veterans would be familiar with at least part of this material and would share it during social gatherings in the kingdom. Yet another aspect of jihad culture was the telling of war stories from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors. While some of these stories were part of the basic religious education of most Saudis, it required extra effort to learn many or all of them, and to be able to cite them verbatim, as custom

¹⁶ Salih al-Awfi, for example, had been badly wounded in his forehead in Afghanistan (*Arab News*, 12 December 2003).

¹⁷ We know this because martyr biographies are full of stories reportedly told by the deceased; see, e.g., *SJ* 1: 15-18.

¹⁸ One QAP text (al-Azdi, 2004: 47) intended for future organizers recommended the appointment of “recruitment teams” which should “collect information on everything about the person selected for recruitment. The information gathering process may last five years or more [sic]”.

¹⁹ QAP produced several videos showing indoor and outdoor training in which recruits proudly show off their skills; see, e.g., the film *Martyrs of the Confrontations* (2003).

required. In the training camps and the trenches, such stories were told all the time (Nasiri, 2006), so jihad veterans typically knew many more such stories than the average Saudi.

Of course, non-veterans could acquire some of this knowledge if they wanted to, but to mimic jihad experience, impostors would need to emit large and consistent clusters of correct signs – a considerable challenge. The only feasible way to acquire it without leaving the country would be to socialize extensively with veterans. However, the people able to do this already had the jihadi community's trust in the first place (usually through bonds of kinship or close friendship) and would not need to signal their credentials as these were already established by bonds.

This brings us to vouching, which seems to have been a reliable signal of trustworthiness. Someone who was vouched for by a jihad veteran was likely considered as trustworthy as the latter, especially if the vouchee had a credible excuse for not having been abroad – e.g. young age or religious study – and had been involved in support activities such as fundraising or Internet propaganda in Saudi Arabia. Most biographies of QAP members who had not been abroad highlighted these excuses and compensatory activities.²⁰

Overall, jihad experience and endorsement from a veteran were the two principal signs on which QAP relied to assess a person's commitment to violent activism. There were, however, other ways to reliably signal such commitment. Some people, at least ten, came to QAP recruiters' attention through their efforts to get to Iraq; if they could be persuaded to stay and fight in the kingdom, such recruits were considered committed because they had demonstrated readiness to incur the cost of militancy.²¹ There are also at least three cases of people who were recruited after preparing to carry out, or actually carrying out, attacks on their own or with a group of friends.²² In these cases the trustee presumably signaled trustworthiness by displaying intimate operational details about the attack in question.

Given that many of the recruits were unemployed or employed in the religious sector, it is possible that a recruit's lack of a vocational career was considered a signal of trustworthiness since it meant the recruit was unlikely to leave the group for something better. This would be analogous to the way criminals signal trust by displaying incompetence (Gambetta, 2009). This, however, cannot have been a very reliable sign on its own, given the high unemployment rate and large religious sector in the Kingdom.

All of these signs could be solicited by probing and might be communicated in an evening or two's worth of conversation. However, none of the signs mentioned so far was entirely mimic-proof, and none of them signaled all the personal qualities sought by QAP. Leaders thus needed to see additional signals of trustworthiness from a recruit before allowing him to take part in operations or giving him access to sensitive information. To solicit such signs, they put willing recruits through more lengthy screening in the underground, the process Weinstein (2005) called costly induction.

²⁰ For example, the martyr biography of Isa Al Awshan (*SJ* 30) explains how he made it to the Iranian-Afghan border in October 2001, only to find that Iran had just closed it. The biography then goes on to list the wide range of fundraising and propaganda activities in which he allegedly engaged upon his return. Similarly, the biography of Abd al-Muhsin Shabanat (*SJ* 23) goes to great lengths to show how hard he tried to reach Afghanistan in 2001 and how he was prevented by factors outside his control.

²¹ Ibrahim al-Rayis wanted to go to Iraq in the spring of 2003, but then "he met one of the brothers who suggested that he join the mujahidin on the Arabian Peninsula instead"; *SJ* 9: 28. See also the story of Musa'id al-Subay'i, Abdallah al-Subay'i and Abd al-Ilah al-Utaybi in *SJ* 19: 39-41.

²² One of the entrepreneurs was Faisal al-Dukhayyil: "Before Ramadan that year [i.e. before November 2002], he was preparing an operation, and he had conducted surveillance of some sites which he intended to strike. However, before the operation, God wanted that he meet Turki al-Dandani. [Al-Dukhayyil] suggested that he take part in the operation, but al-Dandani asked him to wait and suspend [the operation]"; *SJ* 28:14.

Costly induction

People who displayed signs of commitment to militancy and a declared desire to fight in Saudi Arabia were invited to take part in certain clandestine activities, the extended participation in which was very costly and thus a reliable signal of trustworthiness.

In the early stage of the mobilization effort, recruits would be invited to meetings in which QAP ideologues lectured about the need to fight in the kingdom. Attendance at such meetings put recruits at risk of being arrested by police, but did not otherwise demand much sacrifice.²³ Such ad-hoc rallies were abandoned in early 2003 in favour of permanent training facilities.

Another type of costly induction consisted of asking recruits to engage in activities that would put them on the radar of the authorities. Such incriminating acts included lending cars or mobile phones to known militants, hosting known militants in one's family house, or committing theft on behalf of the group.²⁴ Given that most recruits believed they would be tortured, the perceived cost of imprisonment was very high, making such "bridge burning" (Gambetta, 2009) a fairly reliable signal.

However, the most reliable screening device was QAP's full-immersion training camps. In early 2003, perhaps before, QAP opened outdoor and indoor training facilities which required full-time residence (Hegghammer, 2010: 178). At this stage, participation became very costly; emotionally, physically and financially. That said, the training in the camps and safe houses was physically undemanding. Recruits were not driven to extreme exhaustion, nor did they undergo painful initiation rites. On the whole, QAP trainers did not rely much on physical intimidation to screen or control recruits. Instead, camp life included a number of rituals and exercises of a more psychological nature designed to gauge and strengthen recruits' willingness to fight. For example, recruits and trainers were constantly singing *anashid*, reciting poetry, telling war stories, and the like.²⁵ At this stage recruits were not screened so much for factual knowledge of, but for emotional investment in, the jihadi cultural corpus. Recruits might signal such investment by frequently suggesting that such rites be performed, by composing new *anashid* and poems, or by weeping during their performance (the epithet *baki* – "weeper" – was a badge of honour in QAP, as it is in many other jihadi groups).

Defining the precise point past which a person became a member of QAP is difficult. At some stage in the induction process, a person would go from training to taking part in operations, and at that point at least, the job of the recruiter was done.

Conclusion

This paper explored the demand side of rebel recruitment, specifically, the determinants of recruiter tactics. It argued that the threat from hostile infiltrators presents terrorist recruiters with a trust dilemma, in response to which they develop tactics and procedures that allow them to securely collect cost-discriminating signs of trustworthiness in recruits.

The signaling framework does not challenge the broad predictions of existing theories. As we just saw, QAP recruiting occurred in sequential stages, in line with Klandermans & Oegema (1987) and Brady et al (1999); information-gathering was central to the recruitment process, as Brady et al (1999) predicted; and vouching and costly induction were key screening mechanisms, as Weinstein (2005) expected. QAP also fit Weinstein's

²³ For example, on 16 November 2002, police raided one such meeting in Riyadh where Ahmad al-Dukhayyil was lecturing to a group of new recruits; *SJ* 28: 12-17.

²⁴ See, e.g., the story of Saud al-Utaybi in *SJ* 12: 18-22.

²⁵ See, e.g., the video *Badr of Riyadh* (2004) for evidence of storytelling and hymn-singing. Poetry filled many pages in the magazine *Sawt al-Jihad* and the group even published compilations of poetry, most of which was composed in the underground by QAP members.

endowment model, in that it was a low-resource group which attracted a small number of highly committed recruits.

However, the framework helps explain recruiter decisions at a lower level of analysis than existing theories, thus providing an important micro-level complement to the recruitment literature. For example, Brady et al (1999) predicted that recruiters would prefer candidates with a history of activism, but offered few expectations on which particular types of past activity would be more attractive to recruiters than others. Similarly, Brady et al (1999) and Weinstein (2005) expected recruiters to collect information about recruits, but neither offered views on which particular information-gathering channels would be used more than others. Similarly, social movement scholars would expect QAP recruitment to follow social networks (Snow et al 1980; McAdam 1986), perhaps especially networks forged in Islamist civic associations (Lim 2008), but would not explain why it was the jihad veteran community and not radical study circles or some other type of religious network that became the main conduit for QAP recruitment.

The concept of trust dilemmas helps explain not only specific recruiter choices – why recruiters targeted one arena or network over another – but also decisions that were downright counterintuitive. Take the example of the Internet, which is widely assumed to facilitate terrorist recruitment. In fact, QAP did not recruit on the Internet at all, a finding entirely consistent with signaling logic; after all, talk is cheap and cyber-talk is cheaper. Alternative explanations for this behavior, such as a stable preference among QAP leaders for face-to-face communication or high constraints on Internet use in the form of tracking technology, are inadequate because QAP used the Internet extensively for all kinds of other purposes – just not recruitment.

The article makes two additional points with important theoretical implications. The first is that recruiter tactics and calculations are highly sensitive to context, because what counts as a cost-discriminating sign is often eminently particular. For example, QAP considered familiarity with weapons a good signal, because there is no conscription in Saudi Arabia and hence non-veterans are unlikely to acquire it. Another unexpected effective signal was the ability to weep during prayer, as this is hard to fake and viewed as a commendable expression of piety in Muslim societies. In a different cultural context, weeping and fighting would be considered at odds. Thus the local “signaling ecology” of a given group thus affects the form of its recruitment procedures, but the underlying logic – the search for cost-discriminating signs – is still the same. The second key point is that the interactive nature of the trust game encourages creativity in the development of specific tactics and procedures. Given that infiltrators are constantly seeking to mimic trustworthy candidates, recruiters have to continuously update their tactics in order to stay ahead. This presumably encourages innovation.

The context-specificity of signal costs and the room for agency in tactics development clearly represent obstacles to formulating general predictions about recruitment tactics. These factors may also account for the difficulty in resolving the puzzle of differential network activation. Much of the network literature has focused on the characteristics of networks, asking whether particular network attributes – be it structure, tie strength, origin, or content – are correlated with mobilization. If the process of recruiting is as dynamic as suggested above, then a particular network’s attractiveness to recruiters depends on the degree to which it enables costly sign transmission, which appears to vary between contexts and groups. This finding adds to recent research on the conditional nature of network effects (Siegel 2009).

Does this mean that all signaling knowledge is local or group-specific? Not necessarily. Given that similar types of constraints recur in different places, and much cultural knowledge is collective, it might be possible to identify signs, or classes of signs, that

are cost-discriminating within sets of similar political systems or broader geographical regions, but this will require further research on a broader range of cases.

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