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# Counterterrorism Intelligence Analysis: Language as Threat, Vulnerability, and Risk

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Abstract: The author discusses the role of language in describing possible membership in or connection to al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda. To some it's an organization. To others it's a network. Maybe it's a corporation with franchises fees, although one that looks on wannabees, poseurs, copycats, hommes de paille, and femmes de paille with benevolence. The language used in generating the question of and describing what Al Qaeda is affects how and what we think of it and how we respond to it. This, of course, assumes Al Qaeda is an it with some kind of socio-cultural structure, function, and process—an it that is material in nature and continuously and dynamically changes, but also an it that continuously and dynamically changes because it is constituted by emotional, cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and normative components of perceivers such as intelligence analysts. And just as Al Qaeda, whatever it may be, may change moment-to-moment, our language to describe it may change as well, whether or not Al Qaeda changes, and whether the language changes are words, combinations of words, denotative or connotative referents, expressions, representations, symbols, signs, and the like.

Readers at this point may wonder how a focus on language helps us understand anything in the so-called real-world of terrorism. Here's a case in point involving judicial decision making wherein the judges function as intelligence analysts.

According to Charlie Savage writing in *The New York Times* on July 14, 2010, there's been a difference of opinion on whether a detainee at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, Mohammed Al-Adahi, "...was a member of Al Qaeda...". A District Court Judge, Gladys Kessler, "...ruled that the government had failed to prove that the detainee...was a terrorist...". (An assumption is that being a member of Al Qaeda is commensurate with being a terrorist. This may be similar to an assumption that being a member of Goldman Sachs makes one a capitalist or even a crook or capitalist terrorist.) However, a member of a three-judge panel, Raymond Randolph, disagreed and wrote that "...there can be no doubt that Al Adahi was, more likely than not, part of Al Qaeda...".

Now, there's the immediate question of whether Al Qaeda is something, some it, of which one may be a member. And, if so, whether all members of Al Qaeda and, if not, whether all terrorists should be detained until properly adjudicated. But according to Savage's article, there's a larger question of how language affects decision making leading to a determination of Al Qaeda membership and/or terrorism status.

Savage writes that "...Judge Kessler examined each piece of evidence and found each insufficient to declare him part of Al Qaeda, arguing that flawed accusations cannot be assembled into a persuasive mosaic...". "But Judge Randolph criticized that logic as a 'fundamental mistake'...[and] that the evidence should be piled together as mutually corroborative because it is probable that a person with many suspicious indicators was part of Al Qaeda". Savage adds that Benjamin Wittes "...a Brookings Institution terrorism specialist..." found Judge Kessler's opinion unusual "...because of the volume of evidence tying Mr. Al-Adahi to Al Qaeda...". (Immediately, issues surface about the absolute and

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comparative viability and utility of sufficiency, suspiciousness), and based on Savage's reporting, Judge Kessler seems to be analyzing and deriving meaning from words and combination of words--each in isolation—as to the ultimate question of being an Al Qaeda member and/or a terrorist. For each word and combination of words, she seems to be judging credibility, relevance, logic, and other interrelated characteristics like sufficiency and suspiciousness bearing on the ultimate question. (Volume is not an Issue, because this would involve leaving isolation for the context of how different words and combinations of words relate together). She then seems to be deciding that if each word or combination alone does not have enough of something—let's call it doubt reduction, resonance intensification, or that eureka moment—to lead to a decision of Al Qaeda membership and/or terrorist status, then that word or combination at that point becomes irrelevant to that decision, and that decision must not be made. As well, Judge Kessler seems to be assuming that words and combinations of words not only have one preponderant and most pertinent meaning to the ultimate question, but also may have an invariable meaning bearing on this question as constituted by denotative or connotative referents, expressions, representations, symbols, signs, and the like. Not to harp on the point, but most importantly, she seems to be assuming that the meaning(s) of words and combinations of words cannot be changed by usage(s) and meaning(s) of other words and combinations. So the meaning of fire would not change whether the verbal context was a house burning down or the taste of someone's hot sauce. So the meaning of going to school would not change regardless of the kind of school; who else were teachers, staffers, or students in there; and the idiomatic context which could take us from an actual school to an expression for coming under the informal tutelage of a master in any sort of behavior whatsoever.

Based on Savage's reporting, Judge Randolph seems to be engaged in the converse. The meaning of words and combinations may change based on the context of other words and combinations. So degrees of suspicion each insufficient may lead to sufficient suspicion. Here are two relevant, if crude, analogies bearing on Judge Randolph's assumed approach versus that of Judge Kessler's. Randolph: The more smoke, the more there may be fire, and fire there may be even if we can't see it. Kessler: All the smoke in the world is not fire, and there's no fire, because smoke can occur for reasons having nothing to do with fire. Randolph: The whole may be more than the sum of its parts. Both a clear narrative and story may come out of a welter of details each of which is anything but clear as to meaning in and of itself. Kessler: The whole is as strong as its weakest link. To mix metaphors, a house of cards no matter how impressive only comes tumbling down.

Looking at words (and images as text) in a new way based on other words (and images as text) is a *sine qua non* of intelligence analysts, linguistics professors, film noir audiences, perhaps, all of us. So prevailing socio-cultural practices would seem to favor Judge Randolph. On the other hand, Judge Kessler may still be right on Mohammed Al Adahi. If so, her being right may be based only on her smoke and her house of cards. So, to her, two wrongs may well make a right.

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