who view the world in black-and-white often have a hard time comprehending such nuanced distinctions.

By the time children go through years of indoctrination in the *madrasa* system, many are recruited or choose to join a militant organization. Again, while not all radical *madrasas* advocate the use of violence, these children have also heard the same messages repeated over and over again and have been socialized in an atmosphere of hatred and intolerance. According to Azhar Hussain, among more than 200 students he interviewed, many voiced an affiliation for at least one militant group, some noting they liked Lashkar-i-Tayyiba but not Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or they preferred Jaysh-i-Muhammad to Lashkar-i-Jhangvi.[31] Although some militant groups, including the TTP, recruit children as young as six years old, children do not become suicide bombers until they are teenagers.[32]

### Solutions

In March 2010, the Pakistan Army established a boarding school to absorb and deradicalize 86 young militants in the Swat Valley, who had either been captured by the military or brought in by their families.[33] While the efforts of this center should be lauded, more resources must be allocated to absorb the overwhelming number of child fighters, particularly as Pakistan's military gains ground against insurgents in the country.

Although many of these young recruits have experienced years of indoctrination and radicalization, rehabilitation efforts must center on providing them with an alternate and legitimate surrogate authority, such as a more moderate cleric or a member of the military. According to Hussain, although many children with whom he spoke were willing to blow themselves up, "Most were timid and very much

open to listening to other adults."[34] Therefore, intervention efforts must be made to train and build capacity of potential guidance counselors to bolster the rehabilitation process.

More importantly, a comprehensive approach by the government of Pakistan must be developed to address this phenomenon as a whole. If the source of the issue is the more extreme *madrasas*, then long-term efforts must be made to strengthen parallel education systems to provide more attractive choices for families. In the short-term, efforts by local and provincial authorities to engage *madrasas* in curriculum reform, conflict resolution training, and peace-building workshops must also be supported. Moreover, the state should undertake continued efforts to discredit the narrative espoused by radical *madrasas* and militant organizations. In Pakistan, the issue of radicalization is a complex process, which can only be countered through a holistic, multifaceted and nuanced strategy.

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# The Third Way: A Paradigm for Influence in the Marketplace of Ideas

By Scott Helfstein

PRIOR ATTEMPTS AT crafting a sustainable long-term strategy for combating terrorism fail to appreciate the importance and power of the dichotomous choice fostered by the al-Qa`ida narrative.[1] Al-Qa`ida maintains that the Muslim way of life is under siege by the West, and that Muslims have two options: surrender or fight. Given this choice, some portion of the Islamic community will inevitably choose to fight. Long-term counterterrorism policy looks toward political and economic solutions, focusing far less on the attitudes and norms that al-Qa`ida manipulates to generate recruits and support. The key to draining this support, and improving the long-term strategic outlook, is by disrupting this choice and presenting a "third way."

Since the September 11 attacks, there are numerous examples of hard fought tactical and operational counterterrorism victories, but efforts to counter the spread of violent extremism have achieved limited success. Al-Qa`ida today is a global terrorist organization, carrying out attacks against civilians around the world, while simultaneously tied to regional and local insurgencies aimed at overthrowing specific governments. Kinetic activity, while important to security, will not provide a long-term solution. Fundamentally, this is a norm-based fight, and al-Qa`ida's leaders are adept at framing issues in a normative way to generate the dichotomous choice.

The vast majority of people will never aim to kill their neighbors or blow up a local café. Those prepared to do so go through a period of radicalization and mobilization where choices steadily disappear, and they are faced with a single path. These people develop strong attitudes and overcome the normative constraints on the use of violence. Breaking this cycle is crucial

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31  Personal interview, Azhar Hussain, May 8, 2010.

32  If children are recruited at a young age, they go through a similar indoctrination process until they are teenagers. Prior to this time, they are also allowed to hold guns, or ferry items around for the militant group. Details are based on personal interview, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, May 10, 2010.

33  Kalsoom Lakhani, "We Neglect Child Soldiers at Our Peril," The AfPak Channel, March 29, 2010.

34  Personal interview, Azhar Hussain, May 8, 2010.

1 The author would like to thank Nassir Abdullah, Aleksander Matovski, Reid Sawyer, Bill Braniff, and Don Rassler for comments and assistance on prior drafts. All mistakes are those of the author.

to containing or eliminating terrorism, and any successful counter-narrative should aim to disrupt the dichotomous choice that al-Qa`ida propounds. An understanding of attitudes and norms suggests that this is best done by delegitimizing the source, the message, and the values put forth by violent actors, cognizant of the limitation of any one path.

Attempts to counter the al-Qa`ida narrative and contain the spread of violent extremism must disrupt the frame, proving that fighting for al-Qa`ida is not what the group promises, while also showing that the United States does not have grand designs for the destruction of Islam. Al-Qa`ida is adept at manipulating attitudes and norms, and prior U.S. strategies have not utilized all the different levers of counter-influence. Ultimately, there is no "unified" strategy that will result in success. Undermining the source and narrative may transcend borders, but developing alternative paths or fostering norms of cooperation must rely on local factors. While there are risks associated with engaging such issues, the United States must not be afraid to spur debate and help generate a more competitive marketplace of ideas.

### The Dichotomous Choice

According to al-Qa`ida, the West is at war with Islam. The only acceptable response is jihad. Jihad, a term with a complex definition often referring to inner struggle, is distilled to a basic and violent definition used to condone acts of violence against any Muslim and non-Muslim deemed the enemy of "true" Islam. The limited religious justification for such action relies on a distinction between clerically-condoned offensive and obligatory defensive jihad. By declaring the current conflict a defensive jihad, al-Qa`ida has lowered the barrier of entry for those willing to fight.[2]

Al-Qa`ida has patiently spun this narrative over time, and one of al-Qa`ida's strengths is the universal nature of its message. The issues that al-Qa`ida prioritizes resonate broadly across the global Muslim community including the threat from the West,

poor governance associated with apostate regimes, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the oil trade, U.S. actions, and jihad around the world from Kashmir to the Philippines.[3] People from different countries and backgrounds can find a place in al-Qa`ida's jihad. The narrative stresses that all Muslims can, and are technically obligated to, participate irrespective of ethnicity, social status, or local grievance. Only a commitment to violent jihad is required. One of the ways that al-Qa`ida achieves this universalism is through audience segmentation.

Communiqués from al-Qa`ida's leaders often address a broad audience by covering the major themes above, but tailored statements to specific groups reinforce the universal appeal. A message may be segmented along support lines, speaking to fellow jihadists, those providing material

## "People from different countries and backgrounds can find a place in al-Qa`ida's jihad."

support, those empathetic to goals, those indifferent, those opposed, and non-Muslims. Messages are also segmented along nationalist lines, with sections often targeting individuals in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, among other countries. The segmentation actually serves to increase the universal appeal of the narrative since people can see themselves in the message while sympathizing with the larger grievances that al-Qa`ida claims to fight.

Given the universal appeal of the grievances, the message segmentation and the low barriers to entry, core aspects of al-Qa`ida's narrative continue to resonate widely even as the organization itself struggles in places such as Algeria and Iraq.[4] The

dichotomous choice, fight or surrender, acts as a powerful, emotional motivator. Building a narrative that helps to complicate or dislodge the dichotomous choice is the best hope of marginalizing al-Qa`ida and its extreme views in the long-run.

### Attitudes, Norms and Terrorism

Al-Qa`ida's message plays to its strengths, harnessing tools such as emotional illustrations, common experience, and history. Any attempt to counter this message must draw on a range of mechanisms and leverage existing scientific knowledge of attitudes and behavior. Psychologists suggest that a person's attitude, their summary evaluation of an object, serves as a filter between beliefs and behavior.[5] Attitude is central to forming behavioral intent, and the act of terrorism is like any other behavior. Any successful strategy aimed at combating terrorism by altering the behavior must rely on current understandings of attitude.

People form attitudes about objects both consciously and unconsciously, dealing with issues as diverse as politics and weather. Research on attitudes toward terrorism and anti-Americanism yield some interesting conclusions.[6] There is little evidence linking religiosity with support for terrorism, corresponding with advice from an al-Qa`ida recruitment manual encouraging operators to target uninformed individuals.[7] The greatest predictors of support for terrorism in Algeria and Jordan are negative feelings toward one's own government rather than economic conditions or judgments about Western culture.[8] While al-Qa`ida cloaks political issues in a

2 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Message to the Islamic Ummah," al-Jazira, November 29, 2004.

3 Carl J. Ciovacco, "The Contours of Al Qaeda's Media Strategy," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32:10 (2009): pp. 853-875.

4 For difficulties in Algeria, see Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb: A Case Study in the Opportunism of Global Jihad," *CTC Sentinel* 3:4 (2010).

For difficulties in Iraq, see Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside al-Qa`ida in Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009).

5 Icek Ajzen and Martin Fishbein, *Understanding Attitudes and Predicting Social Behavior* (Englewood-Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

6 Mark Tessler, "Arab and Muslim Political Attitudes: Stereotypes and Evidence from Survey Research," *International Studies Perspectives* 4:2 (2003): pp. 175-181.

7 Abu-Amr al-Qaidi, "A Course in the Art of Recruitment," undated.

8 Survey information in Mark Tessler and Michael D.H. Robbins, "What Leads Some Ordinary Arab Men and Women to Approve of Terrorist Acts Against the United States?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51:2 (2007): pp. 305-328.

religious veneer, this research suggests that supporters are often motivated by political rather than religious cues.

Once attitudes form, the ease with which they change varies significantly. Attitude changes occur in one of two ways: logic and heuristics.[9] Logical attitude change occurs when a person gathers new information, and reasoning

> "While al-Qa`ida cloaks political issues in a religious veneer, this research suggests that supporters are often motivated by political rather than religious cues."

leads them to a new position. People rely on heuristics, or rule-based mechanisms, when they are unwilling or unable to engage in logical analysis. Heuristic change often relies on the information source, where those trusted exert greater influence on attitude. Logical attitude change is stronger and more enduring, whereby heuristic change is less stable, more accepting of counter positions, and less likely to drive behavior.

Some argue that "moderate voices in Islam" provide the best counter to al-Qa`ida's message. Enlisting such authoritative figures relies on heuristic change, and resulting beliefs thereby subject to counter by other sources. Any attempts at triggering such attitude change must be matched by actions aimed at delegitimizing al-Qa`ida and its message to prevent backsliding. This approach will not be as powerful or enduring as logical attitude change, but different *a priori* attitudes complicate such efforts. For example, in 2002, 78% of respondents from nine predominately Muslim countries did not believe that the 9/11 attacks were perpetrated by Arabs.[10] Such asymmetry in assumptions flows

into logical arguments, and attempts at logical appeal must address such basic differences before moving forward.

Emotion or affect can also have a major impact on attitudes and attitude change. This is particularly important since al-Qa`ida's narrative evokes strong emotion.[11] Affective associations are often triggered more rapidly than cognitive associations, meaning that a person's first response to new information is more likely emotional than logical.[12] By extension, al-Qa`ida's message should be most successful when used preemptively, blocking the logical appeals of others. Further, negative affect-inducing communications exert larger influence on attitudes when the source is perceived to be credible.[13] Al-Qa`ida can benefit from this, but research also shows that illegitimate sources find it far more difficult to rely on negative affective messages. Finally, fear has a big impact on attitudes when people feel vulnerable, which is a recurrent part of the jihadist message.

While there is no single theory of behavior, most scientists believe that behavior is motivated by attitudes and social norms, so attitudes are one half of the coin and social norms the other.[14] The attention proffered to political and economic explanations of terrorism are surprising when one considers that, at its core, terrorism is a normative issue. Terrorism is unique among forms of political violence, not in its aims or brutality, but in its violation of societal norms on the acceptable use of violence. Targeting of civilians for political means is eschewed across many cultures around the world. While terrorists may have political aims, terrorism itself is inextricably tied to society's norms, and

its tactical strength is the willingness to violate such norms. Strong norms prohibiting terrorism can provide a powerful check on radical attitudes, either preventing action or forcing individuals to go beyond the local community for validation.

Societal norms are generated and reinforced by patterns of social interaction, both negative and positive. Norms of cooperation emerge in societies where people have positive or cooperative interactions, and the belief that others will act cooperatively helps sustain and reinforce such behavior.[15] Empirical research on terrorist groups across 190 countries from 1994 to 2006 supports this idea.[16] Terrorist groups are far more likely to exist in countries with recent histories of intrastate conflict. Citizens of these countries regularly observe violent social interactions, and normative

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constraints on the use of violence are weak or non-existent. By contrast, the opportunity to interact with others in a mutually beneficial way, through certain freedoms or healthy commercial exchange, helps to generate cooperative norms that reject the use of violence against civilians. Anecdotal evidence shows that radicalized individuals often look to others for approval before carrying out violent actions.

9 William D. Crano and Radmila Prislin, "Attitudes and Persuasion," *Annual Review of Psychology* 57 (2006): pp. 345-374.

10 Matthew A. Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Media, Education and Anti-Americanism in the Muslim World," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18:3 (2004): pp. 117-133.

11 Leandre R. Fabrigar and Richard E. Petty, "The Role of the Affective and Cognitive Bases of Attitudes in Susceptibility to Affectively and Cognitively Based Persuasion," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 25:3 (1999): pp. 363-381.

12 Roger Giner-Sorolla, "Affect in Attitude: Immediate and Deliberative Perspectives," in Shelly Chaiken and Yaacov Trope eds., *Dual-Process Theories in Social Psychology* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999).

13 Gerd Bohner and Thomas Weinerth, "Negative Affect Can Increase or Decrease Message Scrutiny: The Affect Interpretation Hypothesis," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27:11 (2001): pp. 1417-1428.

14 Icek Ajzen, "Nature and Operation of Attitudes," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): pp. 27-58.

15 Robert Axelrod, *Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Robert Axelrod, "An Evolutionary Approach to Norms," *American Political Science Review* 80:4 (1986): pp. 1095-1111.

16 Scott Helfstein, "Lurking in the Shadows: The Existence of Terrorist Entities," paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA, February 2009.

**The Way Forward**

To date, counter-messaging strategies suffer from four weaknesses: lack of coordination across government, homogenous approach to issues, vague articulation of goals, and lack of framing to address the dichotomous choice. Generating and implementing a strategy that overcomes these weaknesses is crucial to long-term counterterrorism success and broader national security concerns in important regions. Existing knowledge on attitudes and norms should inform policy, identifying levers of influence to generate a sound strategy.

There are four potential paths to countering al-Qa`ida's message and the violence it propounds. First, a strategy should aim to discredit the source, helping to limit al-Qa`ida's heuristic and emotional influence. Second, the strategy should discredit the message, appealing to logical aspects of attitude change by showing that the dichotomous choice is not as al-Qa`ida presents. Third, disrupting the choice by challenging the communal norms that underlie the movement will effectively raise the barrier to entry. Finally, an effective message should highlight alternatives to violent jihad. These paths are not mutually exclusive, will often be synergistic, but at times may also neutralize one another.

Delegitimizing the source, in this case al-Qa`ida and its allies, can be a valuable weapon. The legitimacy of the source is central to heuristic attitude changes, and those lacking credibility have little ability to alter the attitudes of others. This is especially true for affect-based appeals that trigger emotional responses before logical ones, and credible sources can convey negative-affect messages with great impact. Delegitimizing al-Qa`ida as a source makes heuristic attitude change more difficult, and perhaps more importantly blocks al-Qa`ida's ability to leverage negative emotional appeals.

The source of al-Qa`ida's credibility comes from actions in defense of the Muslim masses, perceived piety, and care for its fighters. The group's deeds, however, undermine these sources of legitimacy. Despite declaring itself the vanguard of the Muslim community, al-Qa`ida is far more adept at attacking

fellow Muslims than taking the fight to its Western enemies. From 2004 to 2008, 85% of al-Qa`ida's victims hailed from countries with Muslim majorities and only 15% came from Western countries.[17] Its actions on and off the battlefield should also drive questions about its leaders' perceived piety. Al-Qa`ida condones the murder of disarmed hostages, which is strictly prohibited by Shari`a law.[18] Coupled with allegations that al-Qa`ida's leaders paid bribes, there is ample ammunition to assail their perceived piety, driven by political expedience rather than religious doctrine.[19]

Delegitimizing the source helps to stifle heuristic influence and emotional appeal, but it does not foster logical attitude change. Stronger and enduring changes require logical arguments, which is difficult when people dispute basic underlying facts or assumptions. Nonetheless, al-Qa`ida's own messaging strategy offers clues for presenting logical arguments. In the dichotomous choice, individuals can choose whether to fight or surrender, presumably calculating the benefit from each course of action. Large perceived benefits to fighting, combined with a high cost for surrender, pushes people toward al-Qa`ida and terrorism. Setting this choice as a decision problem shows that disruption requires two very different counter-narratives necessary for success: reducing the benefits to fighting and increasing those to surrender.

One method for lowering the perceived value of fighting involves displaying military capabilities and the futility of rebellion. Ultimately, this may only buttress al-Qa`ida's narrative of rebellion of weak against strong. Another alternative highlights what it means to actually fight for al-Qa`ida, since perceptions are far from the truth.

17  Scott Helfstein, Nassir Abdullah, and Muhammad al-Obaidi, *Deadly Vanguards: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence Against Muslims* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2009).

18  Yusuf al-Qaradawi, for example, cites Qur'anic verse al-Ma'idah 32 to prohibit the killing of hostages in terrorist operations. See www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=4568&version=1&template_id=256.

19  For a discussion of Ayman al-Zawahiri paying bribes to escape Dagestan in 1996, see "The Jihadists Theorist," *Asharq al-Awsat*, November 25, 2008.

Foreigners wishing to "fight" in Iraq were stripped of their passports, money, and personal items, then forced to take part in suicide missions. Fighting for al-Qa`ida also involves breaking codes of conduct based on Shari`a law. The killing of hostages, common in places such as Algeria and Iraq, violates Shari`a law dictating that prisoners should not be harmed once disarmed.

Reducing the costs of "surrender" will also lessen the appeal of terrorism. Al-Qa`ida's narrative is strongest when surrender is associated with

> **"Attitudes and norms change slowly, and progress must be measured in years and decades rather than hours or days."**

the death of Islam and Muslims. That association triggers a strong affective response tied to vulnerability, making it important to expose this fallacy. This is difficult when there are two ongoing wars in Muslim countries, but it is not impossible. Leveraging actions such as the U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq can help to discredit the idea that the United States seeks to occupy Muslim lands, while simultaneously denying al-Qa`ida the ability to claim that it drove the Americans out. Highlighting shared values, such as accountability of government, justice, and minimal corruption, is equally important.[20]

One could also delegitimize the narrative by presenting a third way, inherently disrupting the dichotomous choice. The third way itself must take local conditions into account, since varying social, political, and economic conditions mean that alternative pathways must leverage the strengths of the particular situation. It is important to recognize, however, that alternative paths already exist. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Tablighi Jamaat offer an alternative to the violent message of al-Qa`ida, but there are risks to working with such groups that may have

20  Peter G. Peterson, "Public Diplomacy and the War on Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 81:5 (2002): p. 74.

fundamentally different interests.[21] The question for policymakers is whether they wish to strengthen the appeal of such groups or prefer to design a third path as a competitor. Either way, the development of alternative paths does not occur in a vacuum, and there is little reason to believe that these non-violent proselytization groups will moderate their views without constructive engagement.

One can also take action to undermine the norms espoused by al-Qa`ida, which are rejected by most societies. Islam has strict rules on the use of violence, and most societies reject *takfir*, or the excommunication of fellow Muslims. Combining *takfir* with the lack of a single overseeing authority, factions that disagree with one another often find themselves labeling Muslim enemies apostates to justify infighting.[22] The norm of conflict is pervasive. Undermining al-Qa`ida's support will be particularly difficult in places where civil conflict and insecurity have eroded local social norms, since communal constraints on the use of violence are already low. Normative constraints can play a key role in mitigating violent behavior.[23] Even Usama bin Ladin is said to have sought external validation for the use of nuclear weapons, given the strong normative constraints, a call that was widely condemned. Changing interaction and fostering norms need not be tied to grand societal programs and are common in reconciliation plans.

These examples do not have to be mutually exclusive, and many speak to source, message, and norms. It is important when messaging that target or targets be clearly articulated. While delegitimizing the source, message and norms are crucial to any long-term success, it is important to acknowledge the shortcomings of any "unified" strategy. Undermining al-Qa`ida as a source, or its dichotomous message, may resonate across different regions; however, attempts at establishing a third path or undermining the group's norms must rely on a disaggregated or tailored strategy, acknowledging local conditions (such as membership in proselytization groups) and community norms (such as the Pashtunwali code).

## The Third Way as a Third Policy Lever

The third way represents an approach to counter al-Qa`ida's narrative, but it also serves as a third policy lever for U.S. counterterrorism. Counterterrorism efforts usually focus on kinetic activity or large societal programs. Given the cost and difficulty associated with successfully implementing large programs, such as nation-building or regime change, kinetic activity is often the favored option. Kinetic counterterrorism efforts effectively address the symptoms without addressing its roots. It also generates discontent, reinforces al-Qa`ida's narrative and possibly contributes to future terrorism. Given the paradoxes associated with kinetics and the costly difficulties of large societal programs, policymakers should see the third way as a third policy lever. Such an approach is especially important as appetite for resource intensive counterinsurgency operations wanes, while the al-Qa`ida threat becomes a more diffuse, disaggregated alliance bloc.

Prior attempts at stimulating debate call for action from the moderate Muslim community, and the assumption is that Western sources lack capacity for influence. While waiting, the marketplace of ideas is a monopoly or oligopoly inherently antagonistic to the United States and its interests. Evidence suggests, however, that well-reasoned and empirically-supported arguments are capable of fostering debate and altering discourse in the marketplace. A short report on al-Qa`ida's violence against Muslims recently fostered discussion in venues such as Muslim. net and Ikhwanweb.com. Al-Qa`ida has no hesitations about participating in this marketplace, and Western sources should not be afraid to put forward empirical arguments to foster debate. This approach will not generate widespread Muslim support for the United States or its policies, but it will be successful if people reject al-Qa`ida and embrace a third way.

It is important to note that any progress will be slow, difficult to observe, and hard to measure. Attitudes and norms change slowly, and progress must be measured in years and decades rather than hours or days. Changing attitudes and norms will be difficult, but it is absolutely crucial given current trends around the world, such as the growing anti-American and extremist tone of pop music in Pakistan along with the growth of extremist television clerics throughout the Middle East.[24]

It is easy to conclude that the problem is too difficult, and the third way strategy too soft or too slow. Yet 50 years ago Muslims were not using suicide attacks, and public perception of the United States in the Middle East was generally positive. Attitudes and norms change, but the process takes time. Right now al-Qa`ida is losing support, but anti-Americanism and the extremist milieu are gaining ground. It is crucial to address this issue and try to change the trajectory. Al-Qa`ida spent years developing and reinforcing their narrative, it will take time to lay it bear.

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21   Marc Lynch, "The Brotherhood's Dilemma," *Middle East Brief* 25 (2008).

22   Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

23   For an example in the jihadist context, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

24   Adam B. Ellick, "Tuning Out the Taliban," *New York Times*, video production, 2009.