

Framing Sweden as a target of terrorism

An analysis of al-Qaeda's collective action frames about Sweden in response to the Qur'an burnings

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Abstract

This study examines how Sweden transformed into a target in al-Qaeda's public discourse in response to the Qur'an burnings in the nation. Using contentious politics, a theoretical framework and collective action frames as the analytical framework, statements made by al-Qaeda and affiliates framing Sweden as a legitimate target were analyzed. The results shows that three diagnostic frames were recurring across the statements constructing Sweden as a target because of its involvement in sacrilege against Islam, Western hypocrisy about freedom of expression, and a continuous war against Islam. The prognostic framing refers to physical violence as the course of action, and Muslim duties and future rewards as motives for mobilization. The findings carry important implications for research into how symbolic incidents can function as triggers for the construction of states as legitimate targets of terrorism. More so, it suggests the need for institutions to take discursive elements of terrorist organizations into account when making risk assessments. Future academic research could build on the findings by conducting a comparative analysis of the effect of the Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Denmark, respectively, on al-Qaeda's target selection discourse.

Keywords: social movement studies, contentious politics, frame analysis, collective action frames, jihadist terrorism, al-Qaeda, Qur'an burnings, Sweden

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Glossary / Acronyms

<i>9/11</i>	11 September 2001 terrorist attacks
<i>Aakhirah</i>	Life to come
<i>AQ</i>	Al-Qaeda
<i>AQAP</i>	Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
<i>AQIS</i>	Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent
<i>Crusaders</i>	People part of military campaign by Christian powers in the 11th to 13th century against Muslim rulers
<i>Dua</i>	Personal invocation, prayer of supplication
<i>Fidayeen</i>	People who sacrifice their life for a cause
<i>Infidel</i>	Unbeliever
<i>ISIS</i>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<i>Jihad</i>	Fight against harmful impulses (greater jihad); armed struggle on the path of God (lesser jihad)
<i>Mujahideen</i>	Person who engages in jihad
<i>Risalah</i>	Epistle; Mission of the prophet-legislator
<i>SMS</i>	Social Movement Studies
<i>SÄPO</i>	Swedish Security Service (Säkerhetspolisen)
<i>Tawheed</i>	Oneness of God (Allah)
<i>Ummah</i>	Community of believers
<i>U.S.</i>	United States (of America)
<i>WMD</i>	Weapons of Mass Destruction
<i>Qital</i>	Physical violence; War
<i>Qur'an</i>	Central religious text of Islam

1 Introduction

In late July 2023, the Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson released a statement alluding to the series of Qur'an burnings in Sweden, stating that the nation is 'facing the most serious security situation since the Second World War' (Kristersson, 2023, my translation). Later known as the Qur'an crisis of 2023 in Swedish and international media was initiated in 2020 where copies of the Qur'an were publicly burned in cities across Sweden (Lövheim, 2024: 226; Larsson, et al., 2024: 9). Some Qur'an burnings had legal consequences (Stockholms Tingsrätt, 2025), and others were granted permits to be organized which resulted in several public desecrations of the Qur'an the following years which were mainly carried out by two individuals, Rasmus Paludan and Salwan Momika. As evidence showed, the Qur'an burnings resulted in widespread ramifications in Sweden with extensive public debates and demonstrations throughout Sweden, some of which became violent. One of the most aggressive outbreaks of violence being the Easter Riots of 2022 with clashes between demonstrators and the police, resulting in approximately three hundred injured Swedish police officers. Ultimately, the burnings caused a serious discussion about the balance between freedom of expression and religious respect (Larsson, et al., 2024: 8-10).

While there were large effects within Sweden, the repercussions extended beyond national borders with heavy criticism from countries with large Muslim populations. The burnings also triggered violence around the world, such as the storming and burning of the Swedish embassy in Baghdad and attempted attacks on the Swedish embassy in Beirut (Lövheim, 2024: 227-228; Sveriges Radio, 2023). Moreover, several disinformation campaigns especially from Russia and countries in the Middle East portrayed Sweden as an Islamophobic nation which sanctions Qur'an burnings (Lindström, 2023). Amidst it all, Russia invaded Ukraine changing the security landscape in Europe causing Sweden to apply for NATO membership. With an arranged Qur'an burning outside the Turkish embassy in Stockholm, Sweden's membership was impeded whereby president Erdoğan of Turkey uttered he would not approve Sweden to become a member unless they stopped accepting Qur'an burnings (Larsson, et al., 2024: 9-10).

At this point, it was evident that the image and the tone of other countries toward Sweden had changed significantly (Lindström, 2023). The Qur'an burnings followed earlier events in Europe that were of similar nature, with publications of Muhammad cartoons in Denmark in 2005, in Sweden 2007, and in France 2012 which resulted in a terror attack in Paris in 2015 (Lövheim, 2024: 226, 229). Indeed, the alert of terrorist attacks against Sweden became actualized in 2023 by which the Swedish Security Police (SÄPO) decided to raise the terror threat level from three to four on a five-point scale where Sweden had begun to be seen as a priority target. While the threat was described as long-term and not dependent on a single event, it was described as particularly prevalent from actors within violent Islamism. Nevertheless, the dynamics of the threat remained unspecified (Säkerhetspolisen, 2023). As analyzed by Larsson et al (2024: 10-12), however, the terrorist

organization al-Qaeda was one of the actors who during this period described Sweden as a target legitimate for attack.

1.1 Research Problem

Contemplating a statement by the former leader of al-Qaeda, Usama bin Laden, just over 20 years ago, it is asserted that Sweden is not considered to be an aggressor towards Muslims and thus the nation is not a target. Indeed, bin Laden revealed that al-Qaeda's target selection is dynamic rather than being consistently executed to all western countries. Accordingly, referring to Sweden as a nation of freedom, bin Laden argued that 'Free men do not underestimate the value of their security, despite Bush's claim that we hate freedom. Perhaps he can tell us why we did not attack *Sweden*, for example?' (Lawrence, 2005: 238 [emphasis added]). Conversely, in 2023, both al-Qaeda Central and its affiliates¹ articulated their perception in Sweden which revealed a considerable change relative to the earlier position. Specifically, addressing Qur'an burnings in Sweden (and Denmark), al-Qaeda Core incentivized 'killing every person who participated in these ongoing attacks, burning and blowing up Swedish and Danish embassies all over the world, and harming their diplomats' (MEMRI, 2023b). Similarly, al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) argued that 'it is obligatory to wage *Jihad* and *Qital*² against the governments [...] who support and cooperate in such evil acts' (MEMRI, 2023c [original emphasis]). Given these differences in al-Qaeda's communication about Sweden, it is clear that historically, the country has not had an established position as an enemy and therefore not been constructed as a central target for violence. However, as evidenced, this discourse changed rapidly after the Qur'an burnings where Sweden and Swedes were explicitly mentioned as legitimate targets. This divergence and rapid escalation make the nation an analytically interesting case for understanding turning points in al-Qaeda's discursive construction of selected targets. Unlike other nations that have been continuously positioned as enemies of al-Qaeda, Sweden therefore becomes an outlier that reveals the transformative process through which legitimized hostility towards a state can quickly emerge in terrorist discourse. In contrast, a case study of a country such as Denmark, whose enemy status in al-Qaeda's discourse has been stable since the early 2000s with reference to previous symbolic events, would only reinforce an already established view of the nation. Thus, it would not contribute to new knowledge about how a state is re-interpreted and transformed to become discursively constructed as an enemy.

¹ *Al-Qaeda* is understood as the central terrorist organization founded by among others Usama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. For clarity, al-Qaeda will hereinafter be referred to as al-Qaeda Central (command), al-Qaeda high command (Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri), or al-Qaeda Core. When the term al-Qaeda is used alone, it is used to refer to al-Qaeda together with its affiliates. Important to note, however, is that some entities may have divergent preferences and behavior from the central command. *Al-Qaeda affiliates* then denote established insurgent groups subordinate to the central organization that adopt the label and follow the leadership of al-Qaeda core. (Byman, 2014: 434-435; Holbrook, 2014: 19).

² *Jihad*, for the purpose of this thesis, is understood as fighting in the path of/for the sake of God. *Qital* then denotes a closely related term to the word of jihad which means "fighting" (Bonner, 2006: 2).

1.2 Objectives and Research Question

The aim of this thesis is to examine how Sweden transformed into a legitimate target in the public discourse of al-Qaeda in response to the Qur'an burnings. In pursuit of achieving the overarching aim, the study focuses on examining the social construction in which al-Qaeda frames its targets, emulate from the understanding of terrorism as a form of political interaction between a government and a group, and seeks to identify how symbolic acts are recognized as antecedents from which terrorism is presented as the solution. Thus, the study aims to answer the research question of:

- How can Sweden becoming a target of terrorism be understood by analyzing the public discourse of al-Qaeda Central and affiliates in response to the Qur'an burnings in the country?

Positioned within the broader fields of social movement studies, political science, and terrorism research, the study seeks two main contributions through societal relevance and scholarly significance. First, against the backdrop of the heightened terror threat level in Sweden in 2023, this thesis attempts to contribute to a greater understanding of what SÄPO's assessment of an increased and long-term threat against Sweden as a priority target entails. It does so by analyzing the dynamics behind the threat from al-Qaeda. Further, studying the dynamics of the threat has the ability to provide insights that are of importance to prevent attacks in Sweden. In fact, al-Qaeda has historically communicated threats to their adversaries in their public discourse which was later followed by attacks. A case in point being in November 1997 when bin Laden issued a warning towards the U.S. to stop acts against Muslims or otherwise Americans and their interests would not be safe. Evident by history, this discourse was followed by an attack against two U.S. embassies in East Africa nine months later (Holbrook, 2014: 106).

Second, regarding scholarly significance, analyzing Sweden within the subject of terrorist target selection adds to existing empirics which can inform research on how choice of target can change over both temporal and geographical dynamics. Relatedly, given the scarcity of research into Sweden, the forthcoming study aims to fill an empirical gap identified within existing research on terrorist target selection. Furthermore, as al-Qaeda continues to pose a threat following their culmination with the attacks on 2001, an analysis of the terrorist organization's public statements is essential to gain an understanding of the messages the organization disseminates to attract followers and maintain its ideology.

1.3 Disposition

Heretofore, the introduction has shed light on the research topic that will be studied. This thesis is organized into six chapters, and the remaining are arranged as follows. First, the subsequent chapter

provides an overview of previous research on terrorism related to target selection. In continuation thereof, the theoretical point of departure is introduced in chapter three while chapter four outlines the method and operationalization for the study. What subsequently follows is an in-depth analysis of al-Qaeda's public discourse about Sweden as a target in response to the Qur'an burning. To situate the findings for the study, the primary analysis is preceded by a contextual examination of master frames by the global jihadist movement. The closing chapter addresses what the results entail in light of the research question, various implications, and suggestions for future research.

2 Previous Research

This chapter provides an overview of previously conducted studies pertaining to the topic of terrorist target selection to map the field for the subsequent study and illuminate existing gaps in literature.

2.1 Overview of Relevant Literature

The attacks on September 11, 2001, noticeably changed the field of terrorism research on numerous facets. Beyond causing al-Qaeda to be universally known as a terrorist organization, the events prompted a strong focus on religious-driven terrorism and increased the proportion of literature produced (Byman, 2014: 431; Haghani, et al., 2022: 1, 18). Not surprisingly, scholars who have examined the development of the field since then observe that the research on Jihadist terrorism increased considerably (see e.g.: Phillips, 2023: 410; Bakker & Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2023: 76). Notably, however, there has been a shift of focus from al-Qaeda towards the Islamic State (ISIS) in recent years. Although the subjects that terrorism research has tended to give precedence to has been influenced by current terrorist threats, prevailing themes has been non-state terrorist actors, suicide terrorism, the (potential) use of WMDs by terrorists, radicalization, and foreign fighters (Jackson, 2012: 15, 19; Schuurman, 2019: 464-466, 472-473). That said, although there is considerable research into terrorism and Jihadist terrorism more specifically, the topic of target selection, however, has been devoted less attention (Ahmed, 2018: 376). This thesis aims to contribute to a reduction of the demonstrated research gap by analyzing the process of how a selected terrorist target is discursively constructed.

2.1.1 *Terrorist Target Selection*

Among scholars who have analyzed the dynamics of how terrorists select their targets, there is a common denominator – their research tends to address the subject from the perspective of factors that influence how terrorist organizations choose their targets. This is based on the predominant idea within literature that terrorist organizations do not attack targets randomly, but rather according to a strategic logic (Alakoc & Johnson, 2025: 796). Drawing on the work of Drake (1998: 54-57), a prominent scholar in the field who argues that ideology is central to the process of target selection, researchers consistently argue for the importance of ideology as an element of terrorists' decision-making of targets. According to Drake, ideology is crucial in the process of terrorist target selection as it establishes the worldview of an organization and therefore functions as a moral compass that guides their choice. Similarly, Asal et al (2009: 262, 274) argues that ideology is what determines the targets that are selected in the end of terrorists deliberate evaluation of enemies. Ahmed (2018: 379) contributes to the literature by arguing that ideology guides the process of target selection whereby it operates as a filter for different choices of the terrorist organization where

careful calculations hinge on its objectives. The scholar however argues that while ideology is the driving force, the capabilities of terrorist organizations influence the operational decision.

Notwithstanding the contention that ideology has an impact, other scholars mention additional factors in their analysis of how terrorist targets are selected. For instance, Ganor (2008: 278-281) suggest that operational capabilities and motivations guide the target selected for attack. Adding to this he holds that the factor of opportunity influences the process where selection of certain targets is more or less feasible. Moreover, Polo (2020: 239-242) argues that organizational elements together with factors of constraint and opportunity impact terrorist target selection. The scholar makes the case that terrorist organizations make careful choices about their targets to create an optimal targeting strategy. Such a target selection process, she argues, is dependent on three factors: the principal sources of support for the group, the degree of antagonism between the terrorist organization and people perceived as enemies, and the effect of indiscriminate state repression. Further, highlighting factors that impact, Brandt and Sandler (2010: 218-220, 233) outline three categories: the dominant type of terrorism that prevails and influences, the countermeasures that exist that make attacks more difficult, and whether the terrorists in question have any state support for their actions. While all of these studies provide important insights into the dynamics of target selection, they focus on several organizations to analyze the phenomenon. Given the apparent variations in target selection among terrorist organizations, the literature thus falls short in explaining the selection of targets by specific organizations such as al-Qaeda. With this discrepancy in mind, other scholarships analyze target selection through case-study application.

2.1.2 Al-Qaeda's Target Selection and the use of discourse

Within the context al-Qaeda's target selection, Libicki, et al (2007: 5, 9) highlights that the organization's targeting logic hinges on it being a goal-driven organization. That said, with the larger goal of creating an Islamic caliphate that extends beyond one country, the organization have several subordinate objectives to reach this. To what degree is a target regarded as valuable or not is then based on the aspiration of the objectives. Opposedly, Moghadam (2013: 478, 484, 487) argues that decisions of targets are being dependent on the preferences of the leadership in al-Qaeda's central command. Mendelsohn (2016: 41-42) makes a contrasting argument stating that al-Qaeda Core does not always share the strategic objectives with its affiliates and as such the target selected by the high command may not transfer to affiliates. Nonetheless, Mendelsohn also points out that the organization at large has tended to prioritize the U.S., and the West more broadly, as a target (2016: 12). Further arguments reinforce the notion that al-Qaeda and its affiliates diverge in their target selection. To illustrate, Byman in his and Mir's article (2024: 1574) assert that affiliated groups exercise a certain level of autonomy and thus often make their own decisions including choice of targets. This he argues to be consequence of al-Qaeda central not holding a high degree of command

over its affiliates. Evidently al-Qaeda in Iraq, for example, has targeted Shiite instead of American forces as preferred by al-Qaeda's central leadership.

Building on terrorist target selection as strategic and purposeful, it is also a communicative process. In fact, through the use of media platforms, terrorist organizations often broadcast their beliefs and disseminate messages including vindication of their targets chosen for violence (Alakoc & Johnson, 2025: 800). Kavrakis (2023: 1241-1242) provides an examination of such communication by employing collective action frames to identify how al-Qaeda's ideology is visualized through texts. His analysis shows that the U.S. and individuals referred to as crusaders are regularly appointed as targets. Moreover, in their study of the al-Qaeda affiliate in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Aboud et al (2023: 456-457) further illustrates how target selection becomes visible through the organization's communication. Referring to a statement from al-Qaeda's magazine "Inspire," the authors highlight an utterance by al-Qaeda in which America is described as a target which al-Qaeda is "forced" to attack because of their aggression against Islam. Despite this literature being informative for the thesis, there are still notable gaps in how al-Qaeda has come to construct its selected targets in a Nordic context.

2.1.3 Terrorism Studies focused on the Nordic Context

As evident by studies into al-Qaeda's target selection, and in terrorism literature overall, there has been a preliminary focus on the U.S. with more scarce studies focused on the Nordic countries. A propensity that in all probability denotes the lower level of political violence experienced in the region (Malkki, et al., 2018: 761, 769). Within literature denoted to terrorism and the Nordic region, research has a preliminary focus on Islamist foreign fighters, right-wing terrorism, and (de)radicalization of jihadists from Scandinavia (see e.g.: Aasland Ravndal, 2018; Nilsson, 2022; Gustafsson & Ranstorp, 2017). Examining the targeting of the Nordic countries by jihadist terrorists, Nesser's (2014: 452) illuminate a significant increase of targeting of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway after 2005. A development the scholar argues to be a consequence of Muhammad cartoons disseminated in Denmark and Sweden. Few scholars analyze target selection of these countries with further insights beyond these events. Indeed, Malkki et al (2018: 762) argues that the academic field of political violence has undervalued the scholarly utility of studying political violence in the Nordic region. This study fills this inadequacy by analyzing the dynamics of target selection within a Swedish setting against the backdrop of symbolic acts.

2.1.4 Target Selection Research and Symbolic Events

As outlined, the focus on symbolic acts composes a notable exception in the scarce literature on terrorism in Nordic countries. Scholars who have analyzed the incidents of cartoon crises in the Nordic region have done so from a variety of perspectives. To begin with, the topic has been

examined from the perspective of media and public discourse where authors have analyzed divergence in media framing of the cartoon publications. Such analysis has for instance compared Denmark and Britain (Meer & Mouritsen, 2009), as well as Sweden and America (Shehata, 2007). Other scholars have addressed the events in relation to identity, such as Veninga (2016) who examined the role of national identity in relation to the Danish publication of Muhammad cartoons. Additionally, Agius (2017) has compared the identity discourse of Sweden and Denmark from an ontological security lens. Further studies have addressed the relation between the symbolic acts and the discussion of freedom of speech and religious sanctity analyzing how these should be balanced within a legal framework (Post, 2007) and the need for a revised perception of the idea of freedom of speech (Tønder, 2011).

The Qur'an burnings as symbolic acts in Sweden are another phenomenon which has gotten recent attention and which thematic literature coincides with that of the cartoon crises. Like the cartoon controversy, literature on the Qur'an burnings in Sweden has revolved around the issue of free speech. To exemplify, Lene Kühle (2024) argues that the Qur'an burnings is a case of the discussion between freedom of expression and the matter of sacrilege pointing out that Paludan has referred to free speech as a justification for his Qur'an burnings. Furthermore, the symbolic act has been studied within the context of public opinion and political discourse whereby Larsson and Mattson (2024) have analyzed different perceptions on the events and Lövheim (2024) has investigated how Nordic media has addressed the burnings. More so, Ranstorp and Petterson Daniels (2025) provides a study illuminating how states such as Russia, Iran, and China, have with attempt to create polarization and undermine the perception of Sweden abroad, exploited the events and its ramifications in disinformation campaigns. Yet, considering the diversified implications of the Qur'an burnings and its coverage in literature, responses from a terrorist point of view have yet to be examined.

2.1.5 Gaps in Research on Target Selection

To this end, the overview of literary sources reveals two major gaps. The first gap is empirical, where Sweden has been largely absent in research on terrorist target selection which gap this study addressed by analyzing the operationalization of terrorist organizations through a novel case. The second gap concerns the lack of research into how the Qur'an burning incidents have been interpreted by terrorist organizations. The forthcoming study examines this by analyzing the incidents from a unique perspective which analyzes statements by al-Qaeda in response to the Qur'an burnings in Sweden.

3 Theoretical Framework

This chapter serves to outline the theoretical assumptions of contentious politics within which this thesis is situated. First, however, conceptual clarifications of terms that are integrated into the analysis are provided.

3.1 Conceptual Starting Points

Considering the lack of a universally established definition, this thesis derives from an encompassing definition outlined by Schmid & Jongman (1988: 27 cited in Jackson, et al., 2011: 104) who define terrorism as:

an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by [...] actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal or political reasons [...]. The immediate human targets are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) [...] and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communication processes [...] are used to manipulate the main target [...] turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion or propaganda is primarily sought.

Terrorist organizations, in line with Price's (2012: 9) definition, are understood as 'consisting of more than one person that engaged in violence with a political purpose aimed at evoking a psychological reaction in an audience that extended beyond the targeted victims.' Within this thesis, "organization" and "group" will be used synonymously to refer to the entity in study. Further, the entity of study, al-Qaeda, is a jihadist terrorist organization. Jihad means "striving" in Arabic, and it is often followed by the phrasing '*fi sabil Allah*' which translates to 'in the path of God,' which even if not explicitly stated is assumed to be in force when using the term. Hence, jihad is to be understood fighting in the name of God (Bonner, 2006: 1-2).

Furthermore, at the core of this thesis lies the phenomenon of terrorist target selection. Schmid (1988, cited in Asal, et al., 2009: 259) makes a distinction between being a target of violence and one of attention which denotes terrorism using both explicit violence but also to convey messages. Acknowledging that the elements are rarely separated, this thesis will refer to terrorist targeting as both. Henceforth, targeting shall be understood as *the process through which terrorist organizations identifies and discursively frame an enemy as legitimate to direct attention and violence towards.*

3.2 Contentious Politics Theory

In order to analyze how al-Qaeda came to select Sweden as a target, this thesis takes on an organizational and dynamic approach to the study of collective action mechanisms. It does so by drawing on the informative capacity of social movement studies (SMS) that examines how groups are influenced and adapt their behavior from interactions with their opponents and changes in the

social world (Bosi, et al., 2019: 134). Hence, the chosen theoretical framework undertakes the theory of contentious politics which manifests that actors that are part of social movements act in place of social contexts (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 13-14). As articulated by Neidhardt and Rucht (1991: 450, cited in della Porta, 1995: 3) social movement amounts to efforts by a collection of interrelated organizations or individuals which use different forms of activism with the purpose of either advocating for or opposing social change. In line with this explanation, the attribute of al-Qaeda being an organization part of the larger “Global Jihad Movement” which seeks to change existing circumstances, is suitable for the framework applied (Rabasa, et al., 2006: 1). Importantly, with the exception of the contribution of a few scholars (see e.g.: Tilly, 1978; della Porta, 1995; Bosi, et al., 2019), SMS has been characterized by a prevalent interest to non-violence rather than political violence, and as such the intention here is to study terrorism from a less established approach (della Porta, 1995: 5).

Contentious politics theory concerns political interaction within which claims are made against a form of authority, usually a government, by actors. Fundamentally, claim-making signifies the articulation of claims put forward by an actor with an expressed demand that influences another entity. Correspondingly, the actors in contentious politics are commonly referred to as the claimant (the subject) and the recipient of the claim (the object). Whilst the claim-making inherently comprises the object being influenced by way of their well-being or interests, the form varies from hesitant requests to more imperative calls, or direct attacks (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 7-8). Examples of political actors involved in such interactions are outlined by McAdam, et al (2001: 11-12) who distinguish five distinct types: Agents of government, Polity members, Challengers, Subjects, and Outside political actors. ‘Challengers’ denote political actors that do not enjoy routine access to agents and resources of a government which category terrorist organizations fit into given their reaction to their inaccessibility to decision makers (della Porta, 1995: 8). Indeed, as stated by della Porta (1995: 2-4) terrorism can be seen as a ‘particular repertoire of collective action that involves physical force’ and thus a violent and more extreme form of contentious politics. It is extreme because it exceeds conventional repertoire by engaging in illegitimate political action to impose their political aims. In fact, political contention is rarely violent (McAdam, et al., 2009: 262). In contrast to other forms of contention, such as revolutions, strike waves, and democratization, which uses campaigns such as protest marches, sit-ins or boycotts, the repertoire of contention that terrorist organizations employ is based on direct or threat of violent confrontation to make their political claims (McAdam, et al., 2001: 4, 41; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: 21; della Porta, 1995: 4).

On this basis, contentious politics provides a suitable theoretical framework for the study in this thesis where framing becomes the mechanism through which al-Qaeda’s political message is communicated. As such, an analysis of such meaning-making can be analyzed through interpreting al-Qaeda’s public statements. The utility of the theory for the study is further based on its dynamic

nature. As stated by McAdam, et al (2009: 264), actors within contentious politics commonly make alterations in their definitions of who are part of the in-group. More importantly, however, they also shift their definitions of who “they” are i.e., people belonging to the out-group. For terrorist target selection this implies that the recipient of the claim can change over time and space. The process through which claims are made and connected to specific objects, however, requires an analysis of how the claimant constructs its dispute with its opponent. This is feasible by investigating the framing efforts of that actor.

3.2.1 Framing as a mechanism

Within contentious politics, framing is a central mechanism of collective action that serves as an interpretative construction of disputes among actors (McAdam, et al., 2001: 44). The idea of framing was developed by Goffman (1974: 10-11) who holds that the process, through which people generate meaning of their social environment, is through the tactic of frames. According to the author, people have subjective and diverse interpretations of events and thus frames are a device to portray the social world in a certain appearance. Coupled with contentious politics, such meaning making is formed to attribute threats against selected objects of claims and legitimize purposes for claim-making against that rival as a response (McAdam, et al., 2001: 48). Hence, in the context of terrorist target selection this implies an interpretation of which a target is perceived as a threat and consequently which action is legitimized against the constructed enemy.

With the intention to create meaning of the world around them, and to do so with the aim to mobilize support for the actor, collective action frames perform the interpretive task of framing (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614). These frames function to underscore the severity of a social condition that is perceived as unjust and add a sense of blame and responsibility for action (Snow & Benford, 1992: 137). Accordingly, within collective action frames, Snow and Benford (1988: 199) illuminate three core framing tasks: Diagnostic, Prognostic and Motivational. The purpose of these is to diagnose a situation or an aspect as problematic in need of change, to propose a solution to what needs to be done to resolve the problem and create a rationale for engagement in collective action. Importantly, these three divisions tend to overlap. Looking at framing within a context of the operationalization of terrorist organizations, authors have utilized the framework to examine particular goals, mobilization, and recruitment strategies. Research employing collective action frames to disclose organizational worldviews has revealed the role of ideology, (religious) doctrines, and identity construction in collective discourse (see e.g.: Van Nuys & Carter, 2021; Omeni & Al Khathlan, 2024).

Another core concept in the framing literature is master frames (Snow, et al., 2019: 394). Following Snow & Benford (1992: 138-140) the functions of master frames are consistent with collective action frames in that they too highlight issues, assign responsibility, and link events and

experiences to create meaning. In contrast to specific collective action frames that are utilized on a meso-level and are context-specific, master frames are broader and constructed on a macro-level. In this sense, they are thought of as an interpretive medium which frames are not restricted to a particular social movement organization but function to influence and shape the worldview of associated actors which then form specific collective action frames (Snow, et al., 2019: 395).

4 Methodology

In the following chapter, the methodology for the study is described which includes considerations of research design, material, and method for analysis. Scope, constraints, and ethics are then outlined.

4.1 Research Design

This thesis comes from a qualitative research tradition, taking an interpretivist approach which studies social action subjectively. Informed by Edelman (1993: 231) who argues that how people understand the social world depends on ‘how we frame and interpret the cues we receive about that world’, this thesis is positioned into constructivist ontological orientation. Emanating from statements to detect discursive patterns in al-Qaeda’s framing, the research is inductive in its logic.

To examine how terrorist organizations select their targets, a single case study that analyzes Sweden within al-Qaeda's public discourse is applied. As Malkki et al (2018: 767) argues, the low level of research devoted to the Nordic countries makes these compelling cases for research where such can contribute to a theoretical understanding of dynamics of terrorism within peripheral countries. In relation to the other Nordic states, however, Sweden becomes a significant case study given the rapid discursive shift of al-Qaeda about Sweden from which the state newly became constructed as an enemy going from being perceived as a friend, given its non-aggression towards Muslims, to an enemy. Furthermore, al-Qaeda has been chosen not only because of its apparent statements made in relation to the Qur’an burnings but also due to its continuous presence as a transnational terrorist organization. In fact, as Hoffman (2024: 46) argues, al-Qaeda is substantially large in size with a presence in more countries than ever before.

4.2 Material

To reveal al-Qaeda's meaning-making about Sweden, statements made by the terrorist organization form the body of content for analysis. Against the backdrop of the Qur’an burnings in Sweden, this study analyzes statements made by al-Qaeda in response to these events. Data has been collected from secondary sources through purposeful sampling to identify texts that provide sufficient information about al-Qaeda's collective action frames about Sweden. To ensure the data collection, the following criteria were used, which meant that the statements: (1) were text-based or transcribed verbal communication; (2) had been made either by members of al-Qaeda's Central or al-Qaeda's affiliated organizations; (3) had either been made in, or translated into, English; (4) contained content that were illustrative to al-Qaeda's perception of Sweden in relation to the Qur’an burnings. To this end, the gathering of empirical material resulted in seven different statements by al-Qaeda Central and its affiliates.

Importantly, while the study conducts a primary analysis into al-Qaeda’s framing of Sweden after the Qur’an burnings, a supportive analysis of master frames is provided to provide a contextual

background into the broader beliefs of the global jihadist movement prior to the Qur'an burnings. These master frames are derived and interpreted from al-Qaeda's public discourse given that the jihadist movement is identifiable as al-Qaeda along with jihadist organizations that either are influenced by or affiliated with the core group (Rabasa, et al., 2006: 1). As such, al-Qaeda and its affiliates are transmitters of the broader global jihadist master frames. Hence, the material for this analysis is also presented here which consists of five statements within a period from 2015 to 2022. Together, the primary and secondary analysis include data gathered from the established internet sources MEMRI, BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, BBC Monitoring Middle East, Comparing Terrorism Center at West Point, and chapters by Moore (2018) selected from the edited volume *Al-Qaeda 2.0: A Critical Reader*. This selection of sources assured material from well-established, validated and monitored sources, skillfully translated material, and safe data collection through scholarly and institutional validation thus avoiding risks that less established or primary sources may entail.

4.3 Frame Analysis

Following the line of reasoning in the theory section, where framing is established as a mechanism of collective action within contentious politics, frame analysis is applied as the method for data analysis (McAdam, et al., 2001: 41). Goffman (1974: 21) refers to frames as 'schemata of interpretation' which means that the utilization of such is done to perceive, identify and label occurrences to draw attention to specific meanings. This practice is done through selection and salience, where the former points to the decision to highlight specific items of reality, while omitting others. Salience denotes emphasizing specific information to make it more noticeable, significant, and memorable (Entman, 1993: 51-53). As Edelman (1993: 232) argues, the social world makes up 'a kaleidoscope of potential realities [...] which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized.' These practices of reality construction are identifiable in different forms of communicating text such as speeches and statements and the premise of frames can be found in psychology, sociology, political science, and communication studies. However, in social movement studies, which the method derives from, frame analysis entails studying how such meaning making is employed by social movements actors (Benford & Snow, 2000: 611-613).

As Snow and Benford (1988: 198) contend, movement actors do not passively carry their ideology but are also active "signifying" agents that create meaning through interpreting events and defining their objectives. As such, framing illustrates the power that communication of information has over people's knowledge and insight of a certain topic. Focusing on the execution of frame analysis in the context of collective action, frames are deployed with the intention of attracting adherents, obtain support, inspire and legitimize ideology and activities (Benford & Snow, 2000: 614; Snow & Benford, 1988: 199). Indeed, as Wiktorowicz (2004: 3) argues, like other actors' part

of social movements, terrorist organizations engage in the production of frames most often with the purpose of advocating for political action.

4.3.1 Operationalization of framework

In the forthcoming analysis, the three core framing tasks within the collective framing process will be operationalized as analytical categories guiding the interpretation of data. Specifically, diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames will be applied to al-Qaeda's public discourse.

Applying the collective action frames to the selected statements by al-Qaeda in response to the Qur'an burnings, indicators such as problem definition, attribution of blame and proposed solutions are mapped. The first of three tasks, diagnostic framing, alludes to an organization establishing a problem-diagnosis to an aspect of reality, such as an event, which is regarded to need adjustment of some sort. This task includes a description of the cause and who or what is responsible for the problem. These things can be several, however most often one preliminary factor is identified, and blame is put on external factors outside the movement (Snow & Benford, 1988: 200). By reviewing diagnostic framing in al-Qaeda's statements about Sweden, the reasons behind selecting the nation as a target can be illuminated (Snow & Byrd, 2007: 124-125). Prognostic framing then specifies the adjustment argued to be needed as a consequence of the problem identified. This framing includes specification of what action, including strategies, tactics, and goals, which are to take place (Snow & Benford, 1988: 201). This frame will aid the analysis of how the problem diagnoses transforms into presenting specific actions against Sweden as legitimate (Snow & Byrd, 2007: 126-127). The third core framing task concerns the rationale that is put forward which pushes for participation of action. In other words, in contrast to diagnostic and prognostic framing which tasks neither translate into action by the members of the organization, motivational framing creates the specific incentive that aims to mobilize people into collective action such as for instance moral obligation or rewards (Snow & Benford, 1988: 201-202). Through an examination of how al-Qaeda utilizes this framing task in different statements about Sweden, different appeals used to impel members and adherents to perpetrate violence towards the target can be identified (Snow & Byrd, 2007: 129).

Accordingly, to operationalize the research question the study will look at three interrelated issues for investigation: (1) The problems and responsibility attribution al-Qaeda emphasize in their response to the Qur'an burnings in Sweden; (2) The remedies and solutions al-Qaeda frame as legitimate towards Sweden; (3) The strategies for motivating action towards Sweden that al-Qaeda use.

4.4 Scope, Constraints, and Ethics

Two primary delimitations have been applied to the study of terrorist target selection. These are the geographical scope which is intentionally set to Sweden, and the organization of study which is al-Qaeda Central and its affiliates. Due to the risks associated with the use of primary sources to extract data, a delimitation has been made to use secondary and publicly available sources. Thus, for safety reasons no direct contact has been made with the actor for analysis. For good reason, this thesis does not intend to encompass every statement made by the terrorist organization within the selected time period, in fact there are a number of limitations that hinders such an extensive material width. Therefore, the scope has been delimited to encompass statements relevant to the study aim that allows for a comprehensive analysis.

Relatedly, the sensitivity of data from terrorist organizations entails a number of constraints including that there are restrictions to which information and the volume of statements that can be accessed. Moreover, there is a language barrier to understanding Arabic, in which a lot of statements are released which limit the material breadth to English-language statements. Additionally, to place the study into context, it is important to stress the provocative nature the subject has. Because of this, the thesis has been conducted with ethical caution where the analytical focus is highlighted. Acknowledging these important caveats, the material gathered and the methods used provides a basis of optimism for contribution to a deeper understanding of al-Qaeda's discourse about Sweden as a target of terrorism.

5 Analysis and Results

This chapter provides an analysis of sampled statements made by al-Qaeda and affiliates as a response to the Qur'an burnings in Sweden guided by the three core tasks of collective action frames. Before the principal analysis, a smaller analysis of master frames of the Global Jihad Movement is outlined to look provide a contextual background for the specific frames about Sweden that are later established. To provide an overview of the analysis, figure 1 summarizes how the collective action frames and the master frames work to construct Sweden as a target.

5.1 Contextual Master frames

Upon analysis of statements from al-Qaeda Central and al-Qaeda affiliates three interrelated master frames are notably recurring which the specific collective action frames interact with in their discursive construction of Sweden. These are designated as Global War on Islam, Defense and Solidarity of the Ummah, and Duty for Jihad.

5.1.1 *Global War on Islam*

A central master frame within the global jihadist movement concerns the notion that there is an ongoing global war on Islam. Within the master frame, western military intervention is emphasized as an example with references to involvement in conflicts in Muslim countries. To illustrate, the former leader of al-Qaeda Central, al-Zawahiri, invoked this discourse in 2017 stating that 'America and its allies spent all they could to invade Afghanistan, followed by Iraq [...], and the Levant [...] to bomb these places and elsewhere.' Further emphasizing experienced hostility towards Islam al-Zawahiri held 'the west [...] the Crusaders [...], the secularists' as accountable for 'the most vicious campaign of aggression in the history of Muslims' (BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2017). Extending such reasoning al-Zawahiri stated in 2015 that because 'the Western crusader countries are leading this campaign, and the rest take orders from them' terrorism should be used against such countries because then 'they will stop the war and revise their policies' (Moore, 2018c: 210). A supplementary illustration of the global war on Islam is sacrilege against the religion. These acts are similarly referred to as attacks committed by a unified west. Al-Qaeda central argues that such acts serve as examples of the west's aggressive behavior against Islam which transcends military means. To evidence this, the organization asserts that 'Europe and the boastful West are uprising in defense of freedom, which in reality is their freedom to do whatever they like with us, to attack us in any way they wish and to commit sacrilege against us' (Moore, 2018b: 173).

5.1.2 *Collective Victimhood and Defense of the Ummah*

A secondary master frame pertains to the importance of solidarity and defense of the global community of Muslims (the ummah). The framing here denotes the ummah contentiously facing

harm and thus being a collective victim of suffering. The frame plays into shared experiences of injustice and oppression which is mirrored in a variety of statements by al-Qaeda. An example of events concerns the symbolic offence that the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed presented. Arguing that ‘the enemies of Islam, including [...] Europe [...] did not show any respect for us or any consideration for our religion’ the statement by al-Zawahiri in 2015 plays into notions of the larger victimization of the ummah (Moore, 2018b: 173, 175). Further, establishing the unity of the ummah al-Zawahiri argues in 2016:

We are from you and for you and part of you even if we were separated by lands and countries. Doctrine and religion have united us, and we are with you waging the same battle in various fronts (Moore, 2018a: 266).

Integrated into the victimhood sentiment is the necessity to protect the ummah where violence is reactive to the harm Muslims experience. Uniting the ummah against the enemies of Islam is hence presented as the necessary action, whereby al-Zawahiri argues for ‘supporting the jihadi groups and trying to unite the *ummah* around them in the face of the greater enemy’ (Moore, 2018d: 236 [original emphasis]). To further instantiate this, al-Qaeda argues for Muslims to ‘unite, come to terms with one another, communicate [...], and extend a helping hand to your Muslim brothers in every Muslim land, for this is the path to victory’ (BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2017).

5.1.3 *Universal Duty for Jihad*

Duty for jihad is distinguished as a third master frame which calls on jihad as a religious obligation to respond to injustices, humiliation, and aggression. To exemplify al-Qaeda High command argued for jihad to be a duty rather than a choice if you are a Muslim:

Our duty today is to defend the jihad in Syria with all we can, and we march forth to its victory, whether you are healthy, young and wealthy or ill, old and poor. Our duty today is to urge the unity of the mujahidin in Syria until it is liberated from the secular [...] Western crusaders allies. (Moore, 2018a: 264)

This statement argues that jihad is a duty for Muslims to fight the long-perceived western enemy in which they collectively should engage. Further arguments by al-Qaeda stating that jihad is the required retaliation in response to perceived harm say ‘Our land will not be purified of the invaders, and our governments will never get rid of the tyrants, thieves, and criminals without jihad in the cause of God’ (BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2017). This further exemplifies the logic of the master frame arguing how aggression from perceived enemies triggers the duty that all Muslims need to perform with response of Jihad. More than arguing that it is a duty, the master frame utilizes discourse of morality stating that jihad should be performed as a means to get rewards or rather end the harm experienced. For example, al-Qaeda directing a statement towards the Muslim community

states ‘O ummah of mine, you will not be liberated from humiliation, dependency, oppression and corruption unless you perform righteous jihad’ (BBC Monitoring Middle East, 2017).

5.2 Collective action frames about Sweden

Having outlined overarching Jihadist Master Frames, the analysis directs attention to specific collective action frames by al-Qaeda Central and affiliates. A thematic consistency is identified in the public discourse of al-Qaeda within which Sweden is presented as a legitimate target. This results in three diagnostic frames which reverberate in the statements selected for analysis which receives special attention by guiding the analysis. Furthermore, the study recognizes that the closely related tasks of prognostic and motivational framing are similar in characteristics across the three diagnostic frames. Therefore, these are discussed in conjunction with the identified diagnoses.

5.2.1 *Sweden as a target because of its Sacrilege against Islam*

On July 14, 2023, a statement was disseminated by Al-Kataib Media Productions in which the standpoint on the Qur’an burnings in Sweden was presented from the perspective of al-Qaeda’s affiliate al-Shabab. The statement summarizes an interpretation of a perceived problematic situation:

The world has recently witnessed the painful scene that illustrate the level of animosity the disbelievers have towards Islam and its sanctities as the vile disbelievers burned the Holy Qur’an in Sweden. This disbelieving country has over the years become a symbol of hatred and hostility towards Islam and has unashamedly welcomed and applauded all those who investigate violence towards Islam and the Muslims. [...] There is no doubt that this provocative incident has political dimensions and motives that transcend the individual actions of one disbeliever, but rather has all the hallmarks of a planned and engineered stunt concocted by the Swedish government and its institutions, including its security and media apparatus. (MEMRI, 2023a)

Within the utterance, a central diagnostic frame can be observed: Sweden’s authorization and protection of acts of sacrilege against Islam. The threat frame here denotes ‘violence towards Islam and the Muslims’ to which the symbolic act of Qur’an burnings in Sweden is ascribed. The incident of burning the Qur’an is described as ‘provocative’ and a ‘painful scene.’ The adversarial framing describes Sweden as responsible for the threatening situation being diagnosed as the cause of the problem with the negative connotations ‘hatred’ and ‘hostility.’ The language used in the diagnostic framing highlights a divide between “us and them” where the identity of the two are contrasted. Referring to Muslims as the in-group who are depicted as victims of the violent actions by Sweden, the attribution ‘disbeliever’ is assigned to Sweden which purposely act in a hostile way. Moreover, referring to Sweden as the responsible actor, al-Shabab describes that the nation has ‘over the years become a symbol of hatred and hostility towards Islam.’ While informing about the perception of Sweden as an enemy, such remarks illuminate a shift in the depiction of the nation which reveals that it has not consistently been viewed as being engaged in enmity towards Islam. Linking the hostile

acts against Islam and blame for such, it is expressed that it is the involvement in such acts by ‘Sweden and its institutions’ that is problematic. Instead of pointing out single individuals that have executed burnings of the holy book of Islam, the declared responsibility of Sweden is that it has been part of the creation and arrangement of the actions. This participation in the burnings is hence argued to have political motives which are accomplished on various levels, through legal security and media measures.

Al-Qaeda’s prognostic framing further expands on the dichotomy of the victimized Muslim community and the hostile Sweden. Al-Shabab addresses what should be done by calling for defense of the religion and illuminating that Sweden should be similarly met with action that angers it in the same way that the hostile acts they are engaging in angers Muslims. The organization argues:

Let the enemies of Islam see from *us* that which angers *them* and let *them* not gloat at our inability to defend our religion. Know that the most successful and effective means of repelling the aggression of the disbelievers and bringing an end to their crimes and hostility towards Islam and the Qur’an is to wage Jihad in the path of Allaah and kill the leaders of disbelief. Allaah, the Almighty said: “Then fight in the Cause of Allah, you are not tasked (held responsible) except for yourself, and incite the believers (to fight along with you), it may be that Allah will restrain the evil might of the disbelievers. And Allah is Stronger in Might and Stronger in punishing.” [An-Nisaaa, 84]. (MEMRI, 2023a [my emphasis])

The outlined strategy for carrying out action is to wage jihad which the individual Muslim is responsible for. More so, emphasis is put on encouraging other believers of Islam to act by participating in jihad. The targets of violence are states labeled as disbelievers, wherein Sweden and leaders are part. The motivational framing aims at believers of Islam, advocating for jihad by citing words from the Qur’an to motivate Muslims to take part in the struggle. Another announcement of suggested remedies is made by AQIS and disseminated on June 30, 2023:

The heinous act of burning the Holy Quran in Sweden has outraged the feelings of all the Muslims worldwide. Those who attempted to dishonour the Word of Allah by setting it alight have warranted for themselves humiliation and disgrace in this world and the hereafter. (MEMRI, 2023c)

Although having a character of a statement rather than an explicit call for action, AQIS utterance implies that Sweden will be held accountable for the acts they have committed against Islam and Muslims. The statement issued via the organization’s media outlet Al-Sahab Media Subcontinent, asserts that the means for carrying out retaliation against the nation should be to inflict humiliation upon them. This is justified by the acts Sweden has performed against Muslims all over the world. In other words, the message proclaims that the government, due to its actions, will be subject to deep consequences. Further, this is to be conducted extensively as suggested by the line ‘humiliation and disgrace in this world and the hereafter.’

Another strand of prognostic and motivational framing calls for armed struggle where specific physical targets are outlined and rationale for engaging in collective action is described. In a

statement released on August 13, 2023, titled ‘A Statement Regarding the Assaults on the Quran and Duty of Fighting the Aggressors’, al-Qaeda Central elaborates on this:

[These attacks] obligate every Muslim to strive to severely punish the perpetrators, and every person who assisted or participated in their execution... because these are deliberate repeated attacks that receive constitutional protection and media coverage... as long as this is the situation, the truth is that every Muslim is obligated by a personal duty to mobilize all efforts to fight and punish these attackers. [...] The Islamic response must be compatible with the severity of the crime... beginning with killing every person who participated in these ongoing attacks, burning and blowing up Swedish and Danish embassies all over the world, and harming their diplomats. (MEMRI, 2023b)

Without mentioning non-violent means as an option, al-Qaeda Central Command portrays violent punishment as a reasonable solution in the wake of hostility from Sweden. The line of reasoning from diagnosis to plan of attack is revealed positioning Sweden’s participation in the Qur’an burnings together with portraying the nation as a legitimate target for attack. In line with prognostic framing, Muslims should punish Sweden and individuals who have been part of the symbolic aggression whose vengeant course of action will prevail contingent on the continuation of such behavior. The justification for the course of action is that violence is needed to meet the characteristics of the threat that Sweden’s burnings of the Qur’an is diagnosed as. More specifically, al-Qaeda central stresses a violent strategy wherein the identification of Sweden as an antagonist is followed by a logic of Swedish establishments and individuals becoming legitimate targets for attack. Evidently, the rationale for calling people to engage in the response uses compelling accounts such as that the suffering calls for obligation of Muslims to be part of the punishment where emphasis is put on mobilizing against aggressors as a Muslim duty.

Another announcement further establishes physical targets in Sweden as legitimate for attack, arguing that the Swedish police and its institution are viable targets. Visible through prognostic framing which presents the plan of attack for Muslims, and motivational framing which construct a vocabulary of motive for such, a video statement released on a pro al-Qaeda Media outlet on August 17, 2023, argues:

‘Know, my Muslim brother, you who live in Sweden, that Salwan’s action was not the first and will not be the last, unless you put an end to it by killing him. Know also that the Swedish police’s blood is a fair game for attack, just like drinking water. So shed their blood, kill their soldiers, hit their economy wherever they are. Do not underestimate the importance of killing them and fighting them. If Allah saves you from them after you kill him [Momika], go to another place, preferably a police center, and inflict a massacre on them. Let your goal be martyrdom and the spread of horror in the hearts of the infidels and hypocrites. If Allah decrees for you captivity or martyrdom, consider the reward [in the hereafter]: and know that all you have done was supporting the religion of Allah.’ (MEMRI, 2023d)

In essence, the prognostic frame relates to the diagnostic frame where Muslims are presented with the call to engage in lethal violence by targeting Swedish people both within the nation and around the world by fighting and killing them; this in consequence of the incidents of perceived hostility

against Islam. This is followed by emphasizing the goal of such violence to spread fear among the adversaries. Accordingly, motivational frames are used with language of mitigation and incentives. Using mitigation as a motive for calls to arms, al-Qaeda thus argues that killing people part of the cause of the problem are necessary to prevent further aggression against Islam. Moreover, illuminating martyrdom as something Muslims should strive for, engaging in violence is described as being considered a reward and an acknowledgement that the violence they have been conducting has been done in the name of Allah to protect and support Islam.

Further, the discourse of al-Qaeda central and affiliates directs attention to similar events of sacrilege that Muslims have experienced before the Qur'an burnings in their statements. As such, al-Qaeda makes references to the incidents in France where cartoons of the Prophet were published by the magazine Charlie Hebdo which consequently made the terrorist organization violently attack targets that engaged in the symbolic hostility. To exemplify, the pro-al-Qaeda media group Malahim Cyber Army stated that action comparable to the attacks in France would take place against Sweden, threatening the nation to 'Beware of a day like Charlie Hebdo, and have confidence that it will inevitably come... and when this day comes, your government alone will be responsible for this' (BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific, 2024). Al-Qaeda Central argues accordingly stating that 'It seems that Europe has yet to understand our message in Charlie Hebdo correctly' and as part of their prognostic framing call for violent action corresponding that conducted in France. This is done by stating 'Cut off the heads of those who went out to fight them and make them taste from the same cup from which the Kouachi brothers made them taste in Charlie Hebdo' (MEMRI, 2023b). Further the statement by al-Qaeda Central Command calls on people engaging in jihad, especially in the name of al-Qaeda to focus on fighting their enemies of Qur'an burnings in their struggle:

O protectors of Islam in Sweden and Denmark... Know that the reward of your Lord is according to the dimensions of your sacrifice. We send a special call to all to the heroes of Islam wherever they are, the mujahideen of the nation on all fronts, and especially the mujahideen of Al-Qaeda, to make the 'battle of the Quran' their main occupation and purpose. (MEMRI, 2023b)

This statement also employs motivational framing stating that there will be a reward from God for those engaging and sacrificing for the purpose of the struggle, and that the length of the reward will be in proportion to how much the person has sacrificed.

5.2.2 Sweden as a target because of its part in Western hypocrisy about Freedom of Expression

Notably, different diagnostic framing occurs within the same statements as other problem diagnoses. Diagnosing the Qur'an burnings in Sweden as manifestations of western hypocrisy about freedom of expression as a problematic issue, is an example of this. In al-Shabab' statement from July 14, 2023, the affiliate draws on the Qur'an burnings in Sweden to describe a broader problem that Muslim's

experience from the western world as an aggressor. The statement summarizes the issue a recurring matter which Sweden now has embodied:

The criminal who burnt the Noble Qur'an came out under the protection of the Swedish government and with deliberate media coverage all the while citing the right of freedom of expression, a double slogan that allows attacks on Islam and Muslims while preventing acts of anti-Semitism or homophobia. The burning of the Qur'an in Sweden is nothing but a manifestation of the disbelieving west's hypocrisy and enmity towards Islam, the fastest growing religion in the world despite the many obstacles and malevolent plots to subvert its propagation. As such, it comes as no surprise that after the disbelievers failed in challenging the divine evidences of the Qur'an and its compelling arguments, that they cowardly succumb to burning its pages. Allah, the Almighty said: "They want to extinguish the Light of Allaah (the religion of Islam and the Quran) with their moths. But Allaah will complete His Light even though the disbelievers hate it. It is He Who has sent His Messenger (Muhammad) with guidance and the religion of truth (Islam) to make it victorious over all religions and even though the pagans hate it." [As-Saff, 8-9]. (MEMRI, 2023a)

Herein, the threat frame outlined is attacks towards Islam and Muslims under the label of freedom of expression. The attribution of responsibility frame in this utterance highlights Sweden which is held responsible for the Qur'an burnings in the nation. Mentioning Sweden as an adversary it is again referred to as a 'disbeliever' who is part of the broader 'disbelieving west.' Against this background, freedom of expression is described as a hypocritical claim which is only used in situations of interest to label actions as acceptable. The Qur'an burnings in this instance are described as being defended by alluding to the liberal concept which al-Qaeda argues is hypocritical with the assertion that it only protects attacks on Islam and Muslims. This argumentation further implies that the liberal idea is abstained from being referred to when safeguarding other actions that would fall under the same category that are not directed towards Islam. Within this context, al-Shabab contends that Sweden, like other western states, does not ascribe incidents against other religions, particularly Judaism, with the same language. Quoting a passage from the Qur'an, the statement indicates that acts intended to harm Islam will not win over the 'religion of truth' but it will be further sought to conquer over other religions. Attributing blame for being hypocritical in its self-representation as a liberal country with freedom of expression at the forefront of its values, AQIS illuminates this argumentation by describing Sweden as being engaged in and justifying anti-Muslim activities:

'Freedom of Expression' in the modern world's 'New World Order' is nothing but a farce and an empty idea. The world is witness to the fact that the purpose behind the propagation of this idea is solely to besmirch the only true and divine revelation 'Islam', and to engage in a verbal war against it. (MEMRI, 2023c)

The victimization of Muslims is repeatedly articulated across al-Qaeda's public discourse with little modifications of language. To illustrate, describing Islam as the true religion which face verbal attacks, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) holds that Islam is the 'religion of humanity's nature, which guides it to the righteousness in all aspects of life.' Elaborating the message, the

affiliate implies that the idea of freedom of expression thus duplicitously ‘is actually the freedom to insult Islam, its rituals, and people,’ (MEMRI, 2025).

Beyond this point, al-Qaeda makes use of the shared belief and perceived injustice of the ummah to present a prognostic frame that draws on the problem identification. In its four-page statement issued February 2, 2025, AQAP argues that the reasonable solution is dependent on what the enemy chooses to do:

Those who dare to harm our religion should know that we are an ummah that does not ignore injustice, and we are willing to sacrifice our lives, sons, and all properties for our Quran and prophet... The Quran will prevail, no matter the enemies’ plots and harm. The mujahideen will prevail, Allah willing, the Quran readers and memorizers... They should know that Allah is watching them... They need to choose between the two options and follow one of the paths: either repentance and guidance, or unbelief and wandering. (MEMRI, 2025)

Presented to the targeted enemy are two options, either become part of Islam or stay in unbelief and disoriented thinking. Either way the articulation of solution is that Muslims will act against the injustice they endure, which action they are willing to go the extra mile for, going as far as to sacrifice individual lives part of the ummah. The language indicates that the injustice against Islam will not be ignored but result in action against people who are hostile to the religion hence signify Sweden as a target in regard to the Qur’an burnings. Al-Shabab adds in the advocacy for reasonable solutions:

With that being said, we urge the entire Islamic nation to cooperate and unite in repelling the fierce attacks against Islam and the Noble Book of Allaah. We specifically urge our Muslim brothers and sisters living in Sweden and in Europe to stand in defence of the Qur’an and their Noble Prophet (Peace and Blessings be Upon Him). For indeed, a nation has no worth if the Book Allaah is burnt in front of their eyes and their sanctities violated while they idly spectate without doing anything. May Allaah have mercy on the Martyr of Islam, Shaikh Usama bin Laden who said in his famous speech while addressing the disbelievers, “if the freedom of your speech has no border, then let your hearts be welcoming for the freedom of our actions.” (MEMRI, 2023a)

Articulating unity and cooperation as strategies for carrying out remedies against Sweden, the Muslim community is encouraged to coordinate in their defense against aggression direct towards their religion. The core invocation for engaging in collective action is then to repel the attacks against Islam in which vocabulary of propriety is used where Sweden as a nation is described as being invaluable if the Qur’an and other sacred things are burnt without its intervention. Moreover, to justify a reasonable solution in which violence is advocated, the al-Qaeda affiliate quotes the former leader of the organization, Usama bin Laden, which suggests that if allowing actions against Islam under freedom of speech then the organization has the freedom to attack them.

5.2.3 *Sweden as a target because of its part in a continuous War Against Islam*

With resemblance to the two former diagnostic frames identified, a third frame can nonetheless be identified in al-Qaeda's public discourse. The final point of contention denotes a problem formulation describing the Qur'an burnings in Sweden as part of an ongoing war against Islam between on one side the unbelievers, the west and the crusaders, and on the other side Islam and Muslims. Accordingly, the war is interpreted to be consequent to differences in religious beliefs which recurrently constructs a dichotomy between "us" and "them." That said, Sweden is acknowledged in the adversarial framing of al-Qaeda to be held responsible for the threatening issue of enmity towards their religion. Indeed al-Shabab states:

This latest incident, despite its bitterness in the hearts of Muslims, is a clear sign indicating the extent of West's war against Islam and its deep-rooted enmity towards religion of Allaah, just as Allaah the Almighty has informed us in His Noble Book: "O You who believe! Take not friends those outside your religion since they will not fail to do their best to corrupt you. They desire to harm you severely. Hatred has already appeared from their mouths, but what their breasts conceal is far worse. [...]" (MEMRI, 2023a)

The attributional process within al-Qaeda's diagnostic framing further illustrates the extent to which Sweden is deemed responsible for waging war against Islam. This is outlined in a statement from September 15, 2023:

Sweden has chosen to take the lead in the war against Islam ... among the European Union countries, thus competing with France, Denmark and others for first position in the race for enmity to God. (Jackson, 2024: 31)

In fact, Sweden is described to, in relation to other countries in the European Union, be at the forefront of the 'war against Islam.' The language used in the utterance signifies other nations that have before engaged in warfare against religion. An interesting observation here is that both Denmark and France are highlighted, both which have engaged in symbolic provocation against Islam whose events are recurring in the public discourse of al-Qaeda. Indeed, the notion that there is a western, secular war against Islam, is described as an old occurrence. In fact, in a video statement in 2023 it was argued that:

Times vary...Places vary...People vary... But all those have the same concern - destroying Islam and extinguishing the light of Allah Almighty (MEMRI, 2023d)

Drawing on a narrative of injustice and victimhood, this statement holds that aggression and attacks against Islam is ever-present across different contexts. However, one that Sweden has now positioned itself into. The affiliate AQIS argues that by engaging in Qur'an-burnings, the true face of the enemy

becomes visible in which Sweden is labeled with the negative connotation of being a ‘crusader’ and ‘secular.’ This ‘ugly face’ of Sweden is described a statement from 2023:

This heinous act unmasks the face of not only Sweden but all of Europe and America, who have masked their ugly crusader faces with secularism. This war is a continuation of the centuries old crusades to which one the Popes of Rome used to call towards. (MEMRI, 2023c)

AQIS statement which argues that Sweden’s Qur’an burnings are part of a continuous war tracing back centuries resume by outlining the two categories of actors that are in conflict with each other:

The atrocious act of burning the Holy Quran is actually a war between two faiths. On one side are the creeds of *Tawheed*, *Risalah* and *Aakhirah*, and on the other is the practice of *deitifying* all except Allah, be they false religious, philosophies and ideologies or the desires and lusts of man himself. Whether this war is waged by some American Terry Jonas or by some Iraqi atheist Salwan Momika, this war is actually the war of the whole infidel world against Islam. It is an Islamic obligation to behead those among the infidels and atheists who directly engage in such accursed and heinous acts. Further it is obligatory to wage *Jihad* and *Qital* against the governments and the international organizations who support and cooperate in such evil acts. Those who don't have the ability to wage *Jihad* and *Qital* against the secular and crusader enemy; the supporters and perpetrators of such crimes, then it is their duty to inspire and call others to this end. Those who find themselves unable to do even this much should then have the belief that the only way forward to these crimes is *Jihad* and *Qital* and to behead such devils. They should then make *Dua* against such criminals, and make *Dua* in favour of the *Mujahideen* and *Fidayeen* fighting against the enemy. This is the only effectual condemnation of such evil acts. (MEMRI, 2023c [original emphasis])

Clearly outlining a diagnostic framing and presenting the organization in positive terms whilst describing those belonging in the “other” who are engaging in the war between disbelief or other religions and Islam, the selected target is then depicted. The in-group is described in terms of those who believe in the fundamentals of Islam (*Tawheed*, *Risalah*, and *Aakhirah*). Conversely, the Qur’an burnings are described as acts that are ‘evil’ ‘accursed’ and ‘heinous,’ and the targets for aggression held responsible for the adverse situation in which war is fought against Islam are outlined as ‘Criminals’, ‘Enemy’, ‘Devils’, ‘Infidel’, and ‘Atheists’. Using reasoning that links the grievances of Muslims to Qur'an burnings in Sweden, the organization presents itself as the solution. arguing for the need to attack these states and individuals who engage in causing such war against Islam. Because Sweden is outlined as an enemy causing harm to Muslims, certain actions towards it as a target becomes legitimized. In pursuing this end, the strategy for carrying out attacks against their target is described as waging *jihad* and *qital* against such enemies. More explicitly described, the statement addresses that the enemy should be killed. If a person does not hold the ability to carry out such action, the organization advocates that calling others to do so should be the course of action. If Muslims are unable to do either of these things, the action described is to hold on to the belief that *jihad* and *qital* is the only viable solution for the pain the ummah endure from the infidel world. They are further encouraged to turn to Allah for guidance against the enemy and in favour of those

engaged in jihad (Mujahideen) and those who sacrifice themselves in the struggle against their target (Fidayeen).

Following this prognostic framing, the organization does indeed refer to violence against such targets by using compelling accounts to engage Muslims to participate in collective action. Such motives draw on violence against enemies that engage in acts of blasphemy being an obligatory course of action for Muslims. By evoking emotions of collective identity, the statement hence argues that it is an Islamic obligation to behead and fight entities involved in Qur'an burnings.

6 Concluding remarks

This chapter discusses the results presented in the analysis in light of the research question, which is followed by a presentation of implications the thesis provides as well as suggestions for future research on the subject.

6.1 Discussion of findings

The aim of this thesis was to examine how Sweden transformed into a legitimate target in al-Qaeda's public discourse using collective action frames as the analytical framework. The findings shows that Sweden became a legitimate for terrorist attacks because of the Qur'an burnings which triggered a meaning-making process that transformed the perception of the nation into being seen as an enemy against Islam. This followed the construction of the country as a legitimate target against which violence became justified.

The diagnostic frame worked to establish Sweden as disbelieving, hypocrite, criminal, aggressive, and crusader country, where the Qur'an burnings were interpreted as state-authorized instead of isolated events by certain individuals. Consequently, Sweden is framed as a target for mainly three reasons: its engagement in sacrilege against Islam, its part in the broader western hypocrisy about freedom of expression, and its choice to become an integral part of a continuous war of the unbelievers against Islam. In consequence thereof, the prognostic frame rendered violent retribution as legitimate against Swedish institutions and people around the world, whereas motivational frames argued for religious obligations and rewards to mobilize to collective action. Combining the collective action frames, these reveal how local, symbolic acts, such as Qur'an burnings is opportunistically framed by terrorist organizations as aggression against their religion to justify violence against targets. Thus, the analytical results of examining Sweden as a case disclose how states can become elevated targets in discourse through framing them within the broader established master frames by the movement the organization is part of.

The choices made for the study inevitably influenced the outcome of the study. Specifically, the methodological choice had an impact where the research question was addressed from an approach of discursive meaning making rather than through dimensions such as shifts in organizational behavior. Moreover, the selection of sources and the position of the writer influenced the discourse analyzed and thus the interpretation of which frames that was regarded as pertinent for the research aim. Acknowledging this, other interpretive studies might yield different results. Even so, the use of collective action frames to analyze the public discourse of al-Qaeda could indeed be relevant for studying other Jihadist groups and how symbolic acts can function as triggers for changes in target selection.

Positioning the results in relation to the existing literature in the field, the study highlights terrorist target selection as a communicative process through which the reasoning behind the choice

becomes visible. Moreover, the findings confirm that both motivations for attack and ideology impact the target selection of an organization. Specifically, the organization's ideology which guides the target selection through a moral lens, demonstrates an effect where the view of perceived oppression and victimization guides the justification of violence against perceived targets. This transitions into the study's scholarly and societal implications.

6.2 Implications

This study contributes to the literature on target selection by filling demonstrated gaps in research on Sweden in terrorist target selection and the influence of Qur'an burnings on the public discourse of terrorist organizations. Consequently, the results add to existing empirics by providing knowledge on how al-Qaeda's target selection changed temporally and geographically to Sweden from perceiving it as a peripheral target to a central one because of its perceived aggression against Islam with involvement in the Qur'an burnings. Further this adds research by illustrating how collective frames are constructed set against master frames to maintain their ideology. More so, this thesis provide knowledge about how terrorist organizations mobilize as a result of perceived harm or offence towards them through symbolic acts, which transforms into justified violence escalating threats against states. This suggests that security assessment need to take discursive constructions into account when analyzing the risks of terrorist attacks. Hence, the assessment by SÄPO in 2023 may be interpreted as reflecting both detected changed terrorist behavior but also discursive portrayal.

6.3 Future Research

The study can be expanded upon in future research which should continue analyzing the impact of symbolic events on terrorist target selection. Specifically, while this study conducts a case study focused on Sweden, future research could expand the focal point to pursue a comparative analysis of how al-Qaeda's discourse about Sweden contra Denmark has been influenced by the Qur'an burnings given it being concurrent in both nations. In addition, given the similarity and reiterated reference to the symbolic incident of cartoon publications in Sweden, conducting a longitudinal analysis tracing how different events have changed al-Qaeda's discourse about the Sweden as a target, would be an interesting study worth pursuing. Finally, the study can function as a catalyst for further studies into the dynamics of discursive terrorist target selection, particularly in the context of peripheral states.

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