

Jihad online: how do terrorists use the Internet?

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Abstract:

Terrorism is designed to attract attention to the terrorist's cause and to spread fear and anxiety among wide circles of the targeted population. This paper provides information about the ways terrorists are using the Internet. The threat of terrorism is real and significant. As the Internet became a major arena for modern terrorists, we need to understand how modern terrorism operates and devise appropriate methods to forestall such activities.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, terror, ISIS, jihad, encryption, social responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to update and supplement my 2012 paper (Cohen-Almagor, 2012) about the ways radical, terrorist Islamists exploit the Internet. Modern terrorism is diffused into cells in different parts of the world. The Internet plays a crucial part in maintaining connections between those cells. Indeed the Internet is a multipurpose tool and weapon. It brings together like-minded people and creates a forum for them to discuss and exchange ideas. The Internet has been exploited by terrorists to deliver instructions and plans, to prepare dangerous operations and to launch violent attacks on designated targets.

2. HOW DO TERRORISTS USE THE INTERNET

Information – Terrorist organizations share knowledge globally via the Internet. Information on sensitive targets and potential state weaknesses can be easily attained via the communication systems. Google Earth covers major parts of the globe. Hamas was said to use Google Earth to plan its operations (Tamimi, 2007). Al-Qaeda maintains a database that contains information about potential American targets (Thornton, 2010; Coolsaet, 2011; Neumann, 2012). Public transport routes and timetables, maps of building sites, their opening times and their layout are readily available. The Internet can also be used to disclose code names and radio frequencies used by security services.

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Propaganda and Indoctrination – The Al-Qaeda and ISIS networks have been successful in their use of audio-visual propaganda, producing pre-recorded videotapes, computer games and music in order to spread radical ideology and to reach sympathizers across the globe (Gruen, 2006; UNODC, 2012). ISIS strictly monitors the Internet and media in places under its control to ensure its dominance. An internal US State Department assessment from 2015 held that the Islamic State’s violent narrative — promulgated through thousands of messages each day — has been winning the social media propaganda warfare (Mazzetti & Gordon, 2015).

On jihadi websites, the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York were displayed as part of an assault on the U.S. economy. There are video clips on YouTube that encourage the launch of attacks and suicide bombing. Some include English translation (Thomas, 2003). Other images show how Muslims are being victimized by American, British and Israeli and Western soldiers while yet others show images of jihadi bravery, how jihadists kill and maim their enemies.

Already in 1996, Babar Ahmad – a twenty-two-year-old computer whiz and mechanical engineering student at Imperial College in London – launched a website called Azzam.com, in honor of Abdallah Azzam, the founder of Maktab al-Khidamat and the mentor to Osama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri. The site was dedicated to promoting Islamist fighters in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Afghanistan. It quickly became a prominent and influential platform for Islamist militants because it posted firsthand news reports from amateur correspondents around the world. International news organizations, including the BBC, often cited dispatches from Azzam.com and its sister websites when reporting on events in Chechnya and Afghanistan. According to terrorism expert Evan Kohlmann, this was the very first al-Qaeda website. Even in its nascency, it was professional. While it was not technically sophisticated, still it was professional looking, attracting the attention of jihadists (Forest, 2004a; Schmidt, 2004).

The Internet is used to target young people. Terrorist organizations use cartoons, popular music videos and computer games to get their attention (UNODC, 2012). In 2003, Hezbollah began online promotion of a computer game simulating terrorist attacks on Israeli targets. The computer game, called *Special Force*, was developed by the Hezbollah Central Internet Bureau, and its development took two years. The game, played in Arabic, English, French and Farsi, was based on actual Hezbollah battles with Israeli forces. It placed the player in different Hezbollah operations against Israelis and players could gain points by killing Israeli leaders (Harnden, 2004). The game ended with an exhibit of Hezbollah “martyrs” – fighters killed by Israel. The message to users was: “Fight, resist and destroy your enemy in the game of force and victory” (WorldNetDaily, 2003). Mahmoud Rayya, a member of Hezbollah, noted in an interview for the *Daily Star* that the decision to produce the game was made by leaders of Hezbollah, and that “In a way, *Special Force* offers a mental and personal training for those who play it, allowing them to feel that they are in the shoes of the resistance fighters” (*Ibid.*).

Today the prospect of establishing a Caliphate is appealing to thousands of jihadists. The slick *Inspire* magazine, published online in English, has become popular in jihadi circles (Lemieux, Brachman, Levitt & Wood, 2014). In May 2015, ISIS released the ninth issue of *Dabiq*, its online English- and multi-language magazine². The magazine is opened with the following statement:

² <http://jihadology.net/category/dabiq-magazine/>

As the crusaders continue to reveal their intense hatred and animosity towards Islam through their relentless bombing and drone campaigns on the Islamic State, a new breed of crusader continues shedding light on the extent of their hatred towards the religion of truth. This breed of crusader aims to do nothing more than to anger the Muslims by mocking and ridiculing the best of creation, the Prophet Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdillāh (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam), under the pretext of defending the idol of “freedom of speech”³.

Thus, it is the duty of each and every good Muslim to support the cause of Allah and punish those who dare to insult the Prophet. *Dabiq* calls upon Muslims to carry their duty and perform the virtues of jihad.

Networking – Jihadi websites enable like-minded people to engage in a power struggle against the western enemy (Atwan, 2006; AIVD, 2012). Jihadi forums provide them with friends and support. In the forums they share their fantasies and aspirations with their online friends. The networking and exchange provide them with a sense of belonging to a greater community with the common cause and benchmark of Islam. The forums prove the existence of the ummah, the Muslim nation (Sageman, 2008). Among the popular jihadi forums were/are: al-Qimmah, Atahadi, al-Jihad al-Alami, al-Fajr, al-Furqan, al-Hanein, Al-Luyuth al-Islamiyyah, al-Maark, al-Malahem, al-Medad, al-Shamukh, at-Tahaddi, as-Ansar, Hanein, and The Mujahideen Electronic Network. Some of them are comprised of tens of thousands of people. www.shawati.com had more than 31,000 registered members. www.kuwaitchat.net had more than 11,000 members (ICT, 2012; Qin, Zhou, Reid & Chen, 2008).

A 2015 George Washington University report documents 71 people in the United States charged with crimes related to the Islamic State since March 2014: 40% were converts to Islam, defying any ethnic profile. They were young, with an average age of 26; overwhelmingly American citizens or legal residents. 14% were women. Nearly all of them had spent hours on the Internet boasting their feelings about the Islamic State and engaging with English speakers from other countries. Nearly all of them were arrested after their online posts drew the attention of the F.B.I. (Shane, Apuzzo & Schmitt, 2015). Consider, for instance, Ali Amin, a 17-year-old Virginia resident who was gradually drawn into ISIS virtual world, associated with other supporters and subsequently provided logistical support to ISIS, instructing them how to transfer funds secretly and drove an ISIS recruit to the airport (Posner 2015).

Psychological warfare – The internet is a major tool for terrorists to bypass mainstream media sources when attempting to use psychological warfare. Al-Qaeda and ISIS regularly publish videos that are designed to evoke fear. al-Qaeda's media department as-Sahab (“the Clouds”)⁴ produced Osama bin-Laden audio and video tapes (Stratfor, 2006), aiding Al-Qaeda in its international propaganda campaign. Another jihadi media organization, Al-Fajr Media Center, turned insurgency into a courageous journey, mayhem and violence into inspiring music videos⁵. There are thousands of jihadi-terrorist publications and videos that show gore and violence, hostage taking, suicide bombings, bomb explosions, operation tactics and religious

³ <http://jihadology.net/category/dabiq-magazine/>

⁴ <http://www.globaljihad.net/>; http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=dea_1175200207

⁵ http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=2a9_1207598912;
http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=775_1207599624

radical oratory inciting bloody jihad (Salem, Reid & Chen, 2008; Lappin, 2011; Lemieuz, Brachman, Levitt & Wood, 2014)⁶.

In May 2004, the shocking video of al-Zarqawi decapitating Nicholas Berg was downloaded millions of times on the Internet and stimulated copycat beheadings by other groups (Nye, 2005). At some point, leaders of al-Qaeda felt that the beheadings videos had exhausted their impact and stopped producing them. Part of the terrorist tactics is to surprise by changing the mode of operations. Much like changes in fashion, terrorists decide on the most appropriate method for a given time and once they feel that the method is exhausted, they will opt for another fashionable tactics. Thus, at one point they may opt for hijacking or bombing airplanes. Then they may resort to suicide bombings, to hostage taking, to planting bombs in strategic places, to launching attacks on civilians, to rocket fire, or to cyberterror. They may mix their methods, and at the same time may highlight their “signature” method to serve as a tactical contagion point for their followers. In 2014, ISIS has turned to make itself radically distinct from other jihadi organizations by their shocking and revolting group beheadings.

The Palestinian issue is a global concern, facilitated by the Internet far more than it does by conventional media. Jihad Online was a high profile, Arabic language, Palestinian jihad-oriented site, synthesized Islamic Jihad and pro-Palestinian ideologies. It posted photos of shahid suicide murderers. The site was created in 2002 and was registered in Beirut (Bunt, 2003). Laskar Jihad, based in Jakarta, was allegedly connected with al-Qaeda, and proactively applied the Internet as a means of disseminating its ideology in Indonesian and English. The site was regularly updated with news, articles and photographs. The site contained details of the organization’s paramilitary activities in the Moluccan Islands against Christian population (Bunt, 2003).

Socialization and motivation –Those who become violent jihadis can be divided into four main groups: Truth seekers, identity seekers, revenge seekers, and thrill seekers. Those jihadists are emotionally-driven by images from Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine, where Muslims suffer humiliation inflicted on them by western powers, and by images of terror attacks carried out in Europe and in the United States (Rosen, 2006; Kern, 2015).

Security expert Thomas Hegghammer distinguished between the jihadi “mother sites” and the jihadi Internet message boards. The “mother sites” are run by people who get their material directly from the ideologues or operatives. On the jihadi Internet message boards one could find the political and religious discussions among the sympathizers and potential recruits. Among the most important message boards for al-Qaeda sympathizers were al Qal’ah (the Fortress), al Sahat (the Fields), and al Islah (Reform). Those message boards provided links to the “information hubs,” where new radical-Islamists texts, declarations, and recordings were posted. Those hubs existed in the “communities” sections of Yahoo!, Lycos, and other popular Internet gateways (Wright, 2004).

Fund raising – Funding is essential for terrorist operations. Terrorist organizations raise funds via the Internet by making email appeals or through their websites; by

⁶ West Point (2008) published an unsigned document dated on December 10, 2008. The document is labeled as top secret, and is basically an organizational chart of the media committee of an unidentified jihadi organization in Iraq. This media committee contains media section, filming and documenting section, preaching section and the section of techniques and internet. Each section is divided to division and subdivisions with details that show the duties of each individual within the hierarchy.

selling goods through their websites; through associated side businesses; through fraud, gambling, or online brokering (Gruen, 2004; Guiora, 2011); and through online organizations that resemble humanitarian charity groups. ISIS revenues come primarily from oil, from major donors, from their extensive criminal enterprises, and from small donations (Levitt, 2014).

Hizb ut-Tahir has established websites from Europe to Africa that ask supporters to assist the cause of jihad. Like those sponsored by fighters in Chechnya, the websites displayed numbered bank accounts to which supporters could contribute. Another example of terrorist fund-raising on the Internet comes from Lashkar e-Tayba (LeT), one of the most violent terrorist groups in Kashmir, serving as the terrorist wing of the Markaz Dawa-Wal-Irshad, an Islamic fundamentalist organization of the Wahhabi sect in Pakistan⁷ (Cline, 2008; Subhani, 1996). It is a well-organized and well-funded terrorist group that has trained thousands of mujahedeen, sending them to Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and the Philippines (Weimann, 2006a: 137).

Spreading tactics – Instructions and online manuals – In 2004, al-Qaeda issued a chilling manual directed at new volunteers who were “below the radar” of counter-terrorist authorities and who could not undergo formal training in terrorist techniques. The manual encouraged the use of weapons of mass destruction (Burke, 2004). *Al-Battar* (‘the sharp-edged sword’) was an online al-Qaeda journal that appeared regularly since 2003. It served as a virtual training camp, providing readers with instruction in weapons handling, explosives, kidnapping, poisoning, cell organization, guerrilla warfare, secure communications, physical fitness, the making a suicide-bomb belt (even down to the correct thickness of the cloth), how to plant land mines, how to detonate a bomb remotely with a mobile phone, topography, orientation (including crossing a desert at night), map reading and survival skills (Atwan, 2006; Kennedy, 2006; Spencer, 2004). The courses were accompanied by statements and speeches of al-Qaeda leaders. Would be jihadis were urged to follow the virtual courses at home or in groups, practice the instructions, obtain firearms and maintain a high level of fitness in preparation for taking steps to join the mujahedin.

Some of the issues focused on single, important issues. For instance, the September 2004 issue of *Al-Battar*⁸ focused on how to properly conduct kidnapping operations. It provided detailed instructions as to requirements for conducting kidnapping, stages of public kidnapping, how to deal with hostages, and what security measures should the kidnappers take (Al-Muqrin, 2004). Al-Qaeda Targeting Guidance specifies types of targets inside cities, economic targets, the purpose of human targets, the advantages and disadvantages of operation against cities (Intelcenter, 2004).

Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, known as Abu Mus’ab al-Suri, wrote *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*. This sort of strategist/ideological 1,600-page magnum opus, was written over a two-year research. This meticulous study draws on the experience of prior conflicts to explain how global terror network should organize, finance, recruit, train and operate. *The Call* gives practical instructions for mass murder and urges wannabe jihadists to act independently. It is aimed to transform al-Qaeda from a

⁷ Wahhabism is an Islamic movement dating back to the 18th Century and named after its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. It is against innovation; true Muslims must adhere solely and strictly to the original beliefs set forth by Muhammad. Wahhabism is anti-secularism and anti-modernism. Its goal, according to Bin Laden’s interpretation, is to achieve Muslim world domination. Wahhabism is the dominant Islamic tradition on the Arabian peninsula. *GlobalSecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/wahhabi.htm>

⁸ Al Battar is an alias of Sheikh Yousef Al-Ayyiri, an al-Qaeda leader in Saudi Arabia and bin Laden’s personal bodyguard who was killed in a clash with Saudi security forces.

terrorist network into a truly global movement of individuals organized in small cells ("detachments"), thus making the movement impermeable to U.S. and allied counterterrorism efforts. According to Nasar, the key to jihadi success is to make the global terror network looser, meaner and more resilient. In order to defeat the United States, jihad should spread to all parts of the world and recruit far more warriors. The fighting should be conducted in three stages, each stage with the appropriate weapons and guerrilla warfare methods. The first stage is of exhaustion which includes assassinations, raiding, ambushes and explosion operations. This is followed by the balancing stage, where the jihadis move to great strategic attacks with great battles. Finally, the stage of decisiveness and liberation after some sectors of the army join the guerrilla warriors and bring Muslim victory (Al-Suri, 2007).

The manuals were put into use. Mohammad Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, Hasib Hussain and Jermaine Lindsay who were responsible for the death of 56 people and the injury of some 700 others on July 7, 2005 downloaded the instructions on how to build their bombs from the Internet (Hewitt, 2008; Cohen-Almagor, 2012).

Many password-protected forums refer to extensive literature on explosives. Tutorials provide insights on viruses, hacking stratagems, encryption methods, anonymity guidelines, and use of secret codes. Bomb-making knowledge is available on jihadi websites in the form of detailed, step-by-step video instructions showing how to build improvised explosive devices. Online instructions played a critical role in the March 2004 Madrid bombings, the April 2005 Khan al-Khalili bombings in Cairo, the July 2006 failed attempt to bomb trains in Germany, the June 2007 plot to bomb London's West End and Glasgow, and the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, in which Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev allegedly placed pressure cookers close to the finish line (Sageman, 2008; Dastagir, 2013; Weimann, 2014a; Weimann, 2014b).

In addition to manuals and diagrams, training videos are common among terrorist websites. For example, in early June 2005, a contributor to the militant Arabic language web forum *Tajdid Al-Islami* posted a series of training videos for beginner mujahideen that included discussions on basic fitness, ninja arts, proper uniform, and communication techniques. As a follow-up, in August 2005, the contributor posted a seven-part lesson on how to use a handheld, portable global positioning system (GPS) receiver (Forest, 2004b).

Arms Trade – Terrorist organizations are using social networking sites to buy weapons. Facebook has been hosting online arms bazaars, offering weapons ranging from handguns and grenades to heavy machine guns and guided missiles. The weapons include many distributed by the United States to security forces and their proxies in the Middle East. These online bazaars have been appearing in regions where the Islamic State has its strongest presence (Chivers, 2016). A recent report documented 97 attempts at unregulated transfers of missiles, heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, rockets and rifles, used to disable military equipment, through several Libyan Facebook groups since September 2014 (Jenzen & Rice, 2016).

Recruitment – Online recruiting has increased exponentially due to the increased popularity of social networking sites. They attract interested jihadists who play a critical role in identifying potential radicals and alert about suspected others (Kunt, 2006; Witte, Markon & Hussain, 2009). The Islamic State has published videos to help in its recruitment of foreign fighters, some of these videos in the form of hyped music clips: come to ISIS-controlled territory; fight for the cause; kill the infidels and feel great about death. Allah promises virgins and violence (The Clarion Project, 2015).

Ziyad Khalil's path to terror is illustrative. Khalil enrolled in a computer science course in Columbia College in 1995. He became a Muslim activist in college and created a number of radical websites. At some point, his activities were noticed by al-Qaeda. Later Khalil became the organization's procurement officer in the USA (Verton, 2003). He bought a satellite phone used by Osama bin Laden to plot the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya⁹.

In recent years we witness thousands of jihadists who volunteer to fight for ISIS. Information gathered about those people show that there is no one unifying explanation for their endeavour. Many are genuinely committed to the Caliphate project. Some of them are pious while others are not. Many have troubled histories while others would have had good prospects had they stayed in their countries. Some were driven by the humanitarian suffering of their brethren (say the Syrian people who rebel against the Assad dictatorship) while others were seeking thrill and adventure (Neumann, 2015).

Planning of activities and coordination – Al-Qaeda and ISIS have been using the Internet in planning and coordinating terror attacks. The prime example is the September 11, 2001 attack that prompted the “war on terror”. Thousands of code-word and encrypted messages that had been posted in a password-protected area of a website were found by federal officials on the computer of arrested al-Qaeda terrorist Abu Zubaydah (Weimann, 2006b; Cohen-Almagor, 2010). More recently, the *NY Post* (2013) revealed that American intelligence intercepted discussion on a jihadi website about launching attacks against American targets. Consequently, the USA closed 19 diplomatic posts across Africa and the Middle East for more than a week.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Diffusion in terrorist locations is made possible by Internet communications. Jihadi texts and videos are available for people who seek such guidance. Extreme religious ideologies are spread through websites and videotapes accessible throughout the world (Bobbitt, 2008; Glasser & Coll, 2005). Great reverence is paid to the views of the militant leadership (Windrem, 2015). The digital legacy of the jihadist ideologue cleric Anwar al-Awlaki continues to inspire countless plots and attacks (Shane, 2015; Goodwin, 2015). Fatwas of religious sages legitimize and endorse violence. Already in 2002 Middle East expert Paul Eedle had warned:

The Website is central to al-Qaeda's strategy to ensure that its war with the U.S. will continue even if many of its cells across the world are broken up and its current leaders are killed or captured. The site's function is to deepen and broaden worldwide Muslim support, allowing al-Qaeda or successor organizations to fish for recruits, money and political backing. The whole thrust of the site, from videos glorifying September 11 to Islamic legal arguments justifying the killing of civilians, and even poetry, is to convince radical Muslims that, for decades, the U.S. has been waging a war to destroy Islam, and that they must fight back (Edle, 2002).

Some Western Internet Service Providers and web-hosting companies have been hosting terrorist sites and helped the cause of jihad. Some do it knowingly while others

⁹ <https://cryptome.org/usa-v-ubl-02.htm>

did it inadvertently. A British company, ServerSpace Ltd and American company Vault Network Ltd provide Internet services to Hezbollah's www.almanar.com.lb. The French Desibox Sas provides Internet access to Hezbollah's www.jihadbinaa.org. The French Online SAS and the American Servepath provide Internet services to Hezbollah's www.almahdiscouts.net. The American HostGator LLC provides access to www.inbaa.com which is affiliated to the Hezbollah. American XLHost.com hosts Hezbollah's www.alnour.com.lb. American Global Net Access Llc provides Internet services to Hezbollah's www.alahednews.com.lb. American eNom Inc services Hezbollah's www.alshahid.org. American ISP Gogrid Llc services Hezbollah's <http://www.aljarha.net> (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2013). InfoCom Corporation in Texas hosted terrorist organizations and also served to launder money. Large amounts of money came from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to sponsor Hamas activities (The Investigative Project on Terrorism, no date; Katz, 2003; Whitetaker, 2001).

According to the security senior officials and experts, blocking and shutting websites is not a viable option. What is required is more structure.¹⁰ YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others have the technological abilities to scrutinize their servers to ensure that content that violate their terms of services (ToS) will not be posted. Terrorist content surely violates their ToS thus it should not be allowed publicity. What needed is awareness and a growing sense of social responsibility to put the capabilities into effect (Cohen-Almagor, 2015). Social responsibility should influence ISPs and web-hosting companies to verify that they do not become hubs for terror. Socially responsible Internet intermediaries are opposed to terrorism. They understand that associating themselves with terror is bad for business. Unfortunately others either support terror or do not seem to care. The struggle is hard and long. The end of the battle of ideas between the ideology of destruction and the liberal ideologies of live-and-let-live is not yet in sight.

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