Jihadism online
Al-Qaida’s use of the internet

To say that the internet has replaced al-Qaida’s training camps in Afghanistan is an exaggeration. Yet, the Internet can be seen as the glue that keeps a now decentralised movement together.

By Hanna Rogen and Anne Stenersen, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI)

In December 2007, prominent jihadi websites announced a Q&A web session with Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaida’s second-in-command. While this media stunt received world wide attention as a novelty and proof of al-Qaida’s vitality, the incident was in fact quite characteristic of the global jihadi movement’s internet based communication strategy, ongoing since the early 2000s.

The global salafi-jihadi movement, of which al-Qaida is the main constituent, is a violent revivalist movement that, in very brief terms, aims to repel ‘Western assaults on Islam and restore ancient practices from the time of the Prophet’. However, it should remain clear that, in the view of most jihadi, this aim is not incompatible with the use of modern technology, much of which was developed in the West. Therefore, al-Qaida and its followers early embraced new information communication technologies and have over the last decade proved to be prolific users of the internet.

The internet has, indeed, become of major importance to the global jihadi movement today: for a geographically scattered movement, the internet facilitates network building and ideological cohesion; for an illicit movement, the Internet offers relative anonymity. While the Internet fulfills various objectives for the global jihadi movement, the most important functions are of a communicative character. The much feared cyber terrorism, i.e. destructive attack on information systems inflicting real world damage and violence, does not, so far, seem to be a main objective for the jihadi use of the Internet.

Functions of jihadism online

One may identify a number of different functions of the internet for the jihadi. Among them are direct communication, data mining and reconnaissance, recruitment, spreading of propaganda, training, and financial support.

These are all examples of communicative uses of the internet – although the latter may include both communications (the call for finances) and an instrumental use of the Internet (the online transfer of money).

While instrumental uses of the internet for terrorist purposes are quite rare, ‘hacktivism’ is a popular activity among online jihadi. Hacktivism refers to politically motivated computer attacks that are intended to disrupt internet-based services but not lead to violence. It

Terrorism research at FFI

The Terrorism Research Group (TERRA) is a subdivision of the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI).

FFI is the prime institution responsible for defence-related research in Norway. The Establishment is also the chief adviser on defence-related science and technology to the Ministry of Defence and the Norwegian Armed Forces.

The TERRA project provides in-depth academic analyses of contemporary jihadi movements; their ideology, motivations, patterns and types of operations, and the processes of radicalisation and recruitment.

The current TERRA project consists of four full-time research fellows, three Ph.D. candidates and several MA students and research assistants. This makes FFI’s Terrorism Research Group one of the largest research communities on jihadism in Europe.

TERRA’s research is based on open sources and is published as unclassified studies.
includes simultaneous denial of service (DoS) attacks and the spread of viruses. Recorded incidents of jihadi hacktivism have been quite innocent, yet one cannot rule out the possibility that this activity is still just in its infancy. Furthermore, with the motivation to use existing human and technical capabilities, in addition to future progress in the field, jihadi hacktivism may possibly evolve towards cyber terrorism.

In the following narrative, the jihadi use of the internet will be discussed, with a particular focus on the two most common communicative functions: the media jihad and online training.

Online media jihad
Over the last few years, jihadi media groups have mushroomed on the internet. The term ‘jihadi online media group’ denotes an entity that presents itself as a media company and that produces, re-produces and/or distributes media material on the internet, while adhering to and promoting the global jihadi ideology.

Examples of such groups include as-Sahab Media Front (GIMF) and al-Fajr (also labeled ‘the Reuters of al-Qa’ida’). These promote the global jihadi movement in general, and are known to distribute material from various factions and geographical locations.

The media groups produce written and audio-visual material. While their work in general can be easily dismissed as propaganda, they clearly strive to provide venues for direct communication, between the leadership and its constituency of supporters and sympathizers. Much effort is made to offer tailored education of supporters, to intimidate enemies, to legitimate controversial jihadi activities, and to recruit new members to the movement. Examples of jihadi media productions include religious lessons, video recordings of jihadi operations such as sniper attacks or abduction and decapitation scenes, martyrdom stories, and interviews with leaders of the global jihadi. The media groups also produce documentary-style films about the history of the movement or a specific conflict in which it is, or has been, involved.

The dynamics of the media jihad
There exist a large and increasing number of jihadi media groups, which operate in relative interaction on the internet. First of all, the main nodes of the jihadi media campaign appear to be the web forums. A shift away from the use of non-interactive, official websites by the media departments of jihadi groups has been observed over the last few years. This use of discussion forums with active participation of
members and sympathizers arguably makes the media jihad ‘self-sustainable’. Participants themselves redistribute material, and provide information about new web addresses to jihadi sites whenever they become unstable or are removed. This assures continuity of the media campaign.

Moreover, the media departments of jihadi groups continue to produce media material, but seem to have outsourced much of the distribution work to ‘professional jihadi media companies’, such as al-Fajr and GIMF. These media companies are responsible for timely and simultaneous distribution to designated web forums, often after re-designing and translating the media material and advertising it in advance.

**Authenticators**

Furthermore, the professional jihadi media companies appear to act as what can be labeled ‘authenticators’, meaning that they are seemingly acknowledged by online supporters as authorities — and the media material they produce is considered authentic. Also, when such media companies distribute material produced by sometimes unknown militant groups, such as Somali jihadi groups, the material appears to be almost automatically accepted by an otherwise relatively skeptical community of online jihadis. The logo of a senior media distributor company on a media issuance thus seems to work as a stamp of authenticity for that material.

In addition, it seems that the online jihadi media companies play a role as ‘agenda setters’ within the global jihadi community. First, they apparently influence each other: a story published by one media company will often be picked up by the others. Second, the media companies seem to shape interests within the online community: it is common to find discussions on the jihadi web forums about topics that have been promoted through media productions.

This abundance of jihadi media material, and the overlapping coverage of issues, turns the media companies into ‘force multipliers’. This notion indicates that the media companies reinforce the importance of a certain issue by bombarding the websites with it. The force multiplier role can also be seen in efforts to increase the value of a terrorist incident. One can argue that attacks, suicide operations, and hostage situations would perhaps not have been as profitable for the jihadis without the attention attracted to them through their media.

**English subtitles.** A speech by Usama bin Laden is translated into English and published on the internet. This tells us that the message is meant for a broader audience, not only jihadis.

**Explosive belt.** Some Arabic-language instructional videos have been circulated on jihadi web pages. Those of notably better quality are not produced by al-Qaida, however, but by the Lebanese Hezbollah.

**Training.** While aspiring jihadis may use the internet to learn the basics, it appears that real-life training is still the preferred alternative, even if it involves much greater security risks.
**Volume, variation and control**

Generally, there seems to be a widespread perception among jihadis that the internet represents a purposeful vehicle for strategic communication. This is despite the fact that an internet-based media campaign may imply certain disadvantages or weaknesses from a jihadi point of view, such as lack of central control over content and possible non-conformity of message, and opportunity for critical voices to mix with the official jihadi propaganda. The main advantages with an online media campaign seems to lie in the volume and variation of content that the internet allows for, and the fact that the jihadi media groups exercise control over mass media outlets – contrary to relying on mainstream media as they did in the past.

**Virtual training**

In addition to propaganda material, there is an abundance of military and tactical training manuals on jihadi web pages. This has led some analysts to speak about the internet as ‘al-Qaeda’s new training camp’, or ‘virtual Afghanista’. To say that the internet has replaced al-Qaeda’s training camps in Afghanistan is an exaggeration, however. While the internet may function as a library of jihadi training material, and to some extent as a virtual classroom for aspiring jihadis, there is currently no organised effort by al-Qaeda to train its followers online.

**A ‘library’ and a ‘classroom’**

The main function of the internet is as a ‘library’ where jihadi training manuals and handbooks can be easily accessed from anywhere in the world. The available manuals cover almost any topic considered relevant for training and preparation, such as conventional weapons, improvised weapons and explosives, field tactics, guerrilla warfare, organisational and field security, and physical training.

The sources of the manuals vary; some of them are based upon English open-source literature such as US Army Field Manuals or various ‘explodics cookbooks’, while others appear to be written by experienced jihadis, field commanders or trainers, or are based on notes from jihadi training camps in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

In addition to written training material, some 50 Arabic-language instructional videos have also been circulated on jihadi web pages. Around 20 of these are of a notably better quality than the others. They are not produced by al-Qaeda, however, but by the Lebanese Hezbollah. Although internet jihadis have made attempts to compile and organise the training material, the information overflow on jihadi web pages generally makes it hard to distinguish good-quality training material from the rest.

To some extent, the jihadi web also functions as a ‘classroom’ where people can discuss training-related issues, exchange personal experiences and communicate with online ‘trainers’ who can explain and clarify problematic subjects. Figure 1 shows the distribution of typical discussions topics in one well-known jihadi discussion forum dedicated to online training. It is worth noting that the topic of

---

**Figure 1** shows the distribution of typical discussion topics in one well-known jihadi discussion forum dedicated to online training. The statistics are based on an analysis of 764 threads that were posted between February 2005 — December 2006.
explodes manufacture and conventional weapons constituted over half of the threads posted in the forum, while discussions on chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) materials and weapons were surprisingly marginal, constituting merely some five percent of all threads posted.

‘Pre-school’ of jihad
A general observation, with regards to jihadi online training, is that jihadi discussion forums are mainly an arena for beginners and aspiring jihadis to learn the fundamentals, not a tool for more experienced jihadi groups to proliferate newly developed technologies on a wide scale. An obvious reason for this is that jihadis are well aware that their forums are being monitored by outsiders, including Western and Arab intelligence services. Any information revealed on these forums could potentially be used for counter-terrorist purposes, making the forums unsuitable places for jihadis to divulge ideas about new terrorist tactics.

On the other hand, the discussion forums are seen as being suitable for transferring basic knowledge that in any case is openly available. During an online Q&A session on explosives, for example, the forum’s ‘expert’ stated that the lesson would be based on available jihadi and foreign literature, noting that “this information has been known to the enemy for more than 20 years, so even if we explain it or discuss it in public, the enemy will not care...”.

When the information transferred is kept at such a fundamental level, it is perhaps more descriptive to call the internet a ‘pre-school of jihad’ rather than a ‘university of jihad’ as it has sometimes been referred to. This also reflects the fact that many of those pursuing knowledge from jihadi forums have little or no previous jihadi experience.

More up-to-date and advanced training material may of course be exchanged on more private channels such as e-mail or forums open to selected members only, which were not considered in this study.

Who organises virtual training?
Another observation is that al-Qaida’s ‘virtual training’, as of today, is initiated from below, rather than being organised from above. So far, there are few examples of established jihadi groups who have made an organised effort to train potential recruits online.

A possible exception is al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP), which in 2004 turned to the internet after the security situation in Saudi Arabia made traditional training difficult. They launched an online magazine, al-Battar Camp, which contained ideological articles as well as practical lessons on elementary military skills. The first issue stated,

‘...in order to join the great training camps you don’t have to travel to other lands. Alone, in your home or with a group of your brothers, you too can begin to execute the training program. You can all join the al-Battar Camp’.

The ‘students’ of al-Battar Camp were encouraged to communicate with the editors through e-mail during the course, and to submit questions and contributions, which were sometimes included in later issues of the magazine. Readers were also encouraged to learn from the magazine and then act on their own. Issue 12, for example, provided a list of 'Tasks for the Summer Holiday' for their readers, which include revising previously issued magazines, training on practical skills in a remote area and then planning and carrying out a jihadi operation on the Peninsula. It is unknown whether anyone followed up on this call, but the magazine is still among the more popular training documents distributed on jihadi web pages. One of its issues was even found on a computer belonging to the so-called Madrid cell, which was responsible for the train bombings in Spain in March 2004.

The significance of virtual training
Apart from the QAP, there are few other known attempts by al-Qaida central, or by af-
iliated groups, to use the internet for training potential recruits, although great efforts have been made by the same actors to use the internet for propaganda and other types of communication.

In sum, therefore, the internet does not function as a ‘virtual training camp’ organised from above, but rather as a resource bank maintained and accessed largely by self-radicalised sympathizers. While aspiring jihadists may use the internet to learn the basics, it appears that real-life training is still the preferred alternative, even if it involves much greater security risks. In a case study of jihadi training in Europe, FFI research fellow Petter Nesser has concluded that “with one possible exception, I have not been able to find examples of terror cells that can be characterised as 'virtual-only' in terms of developing operational capabilities”.

Countering jihadism online

With an obvious jihadi presence on the internet, – exemplified here with the online media jihad and training – what is being done to counter such activity?

Counterterrorism officials both in the West and the Middle East closely monitor the jihadis’ steps on the internet. This has sparked a debate about whether one should seek to close down jihadi websites, or rather allow them to stay online, and continue their surveillance in order to gain insights about the movement. This debate also pertains to the issue of balancing security and civil liberties.

The body of laws, both on national and international levels, regulates the measures that may be taken against such websites, and while a legal framework controls certain criminal activities on the internet (such as child pornography, identity theft, credit card fraud, etc.), online propaganda activities seem to have been partially protected by the concept of ‘freedom of speech’.

Yet, over the last years, the increased awareness about terrorists’ online propaganda activities has led to the establishment of resolutions and statements by various authorities, such as for example the United Nations. For example, UN Security Council Resolution 1624 (2005) calls to “prohibit by law incitement to commit a terrorist act or acts”, and, the Plan of Action of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288), 2006, calls on member states to “a) coordinate efforts at the international and regional levels to counter terrorism in all its forms and manifestations on the internet,” and, “b) use the internet as a tool for countering the spread of terrorism [...]”. A G-8 declaration dated July 16, 2006, confirmed the commitment to “develop and implement an effective strategy to counter terrorist propaganda and recruitment”.

Despite these efforts, it has been noted that “the small number of suspects arrested for dissemination of propaganda may indicate the lack of a legal basis and difficulty in investigating these types of crimes”. Nevertheless, recent cases in Europe indicate that increased action is being taken: on July 5, 2007, Youness Tsouli, aka online jihadi Ikhabi 007, was convicted for inciting to commit acts of terrorism, and, on July 26, 2007, five British Muslim men were sentenced for downloading and sharing extremist terrorism-related material.

Furthermore, it has been pointed out that most jihadi websites are hosted by Western, and especially U.S. internet Service Providers (ISPs), that often are unaware of the identity of their clients and the content on their sites. ISPs have a legal authority to remove sites that violate the law, or that abuse regulations stated by the ISP itself. Therefore, a preferred method by some in the counterterrorism community is to notify ISPs that host jihadi websites, that they have both the ability and the obligation to remove such sites from their servers. During the summer of 2007, private initiatives carried out a ‘notification campaign’ which resulted in the disruption of a handful of key jihadi websites.

Conclusion

Despite this and other initiatives, jihadi activity continues to flourish on the internet. Used mostly for communicative purposes, the internet remains a facilitator for network building and ideological indoctrination of supporters and potential recruits across the globe. As a training ground, the internet offers basic level jihadi instruction but does not compare to real-life training and can only be considered a supplement to the latter.

One of the main advantages of the jihadi internet campaign seems to lie in the volume and variation of the online content. Yet, without central control over online activity, the jihadi ideology may be diluted by information overflow and conflicting messages on the web. The advantage of ‘online decentralisation’ may thus also represent the weakest point of the jihadi use of the internet.
Read more:


Rogan, Hanna. “JIHADISM ONLINE - A study of how al-Gaida and radical Islamist groups use the Internet for terrorist purpose” FFI/RAPPOR-2006/00915.


Publications from FFI’s Terrorism Research Group can be accessed at www.ffi.no/TERRA

Authors

Hanna Rogan is a Ph.D. candidate with FFI’s Terrorism Research Group. She holds an M.Phil. in Asian and African Studies from the University of Oslo. Trained in linguistics (French, Albanian and Arabic) and Middle Eastern Studies, Rogan’s research has focused on the jihadist use of new communication technologies. She is currently studying Islamist insurgencies in North-Africa. In 2006-2007, she was a Visiting Fellow at the Terrorism Research Center, Washington, D.C.

Anne Stenersen is a Ph.D. candidate with FFI’s Terrorism Research Group. She has conducted research on militant Islamism since 2006, focusing on al-Gaida’s efforts at acquiring CBRN capabilities, as well as terrorist use of the internet. Currently, she studies al-Gaida-Taliban relations. Stenersen has previously served as an interpreter in Russian for the Norwegian Armed Forces in Kyrgyzstan. She holds an M.Phil in Asian and African Studies from the University of Oslo, majoring in Arabic language.

Contact

Norwegian Defence Research Establishment
P.O. Box 25. 2027 Kjeller

Telephone: 63 80 70 00
Mail to FFI-FOKUS: fokus@ffi.no

www.ffi.no