

Al-Qa`ida's Extensive Use of the Internet

By Gabriel Weimann

AL-QA`IDA IS A DECENTRALIZED network of networks with no structure, hierarchy or center of gravity. It is based on a global alliance of autonomous groups and organizations, in a loosely-knit international network. This composition is strikingly similar to the internet with its unstructured network, reliance on a decentralized web of nodes with no center and no hierarchy. The parallel between the two may not be so coincidental: al-Qa`ida adopted the internet and has become increasingly reliant on it for its operations and survival. The 2001 war on terrorism destroyed al-Qa`ida's sanctuary in Afghanistan and forced the organization to transform into a highly decentralized network of alliances and confederations. For the new global network of al-Qa`ida, the internet became a crucial platform, carrier and bonding mechanism.

The internet, the most contemporary of media, has become the leading instrument of al-Qa`ida's communications, propaganda, recruitment and networking. Al-Qa`ida is now operating approximately 5,600 websites and 900 more are appearing each year.¹ They are in various formats including jihadist websites, forums, chat rooms, electronic boards and blogs. This report focuses on al-Qa`ida because in terms of quantity and sophistication, it is the leading terrorist abuser of the internet.

¹ The present report is based on a decade-long project of monitoring and analyzing terrorist presence on the internet, reported in numerous publications. See, for example, Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2006); Gabriel Weimann, "Virtual Disputes: The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Debates," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29:7 (2006): pp. 623-639; Gabriel Weimann, "Virtual Training Camps: Terrorist Use of the Internet," in J. Forest ed., *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World* (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 110-132; Gabriel Weimann, "Terrorist Dot Com: Using the Internet for Terrorist Recruitment and Mobilization," in J. Forest ed., *The Making of a Terrorist* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), pp. 53-65.

Al-Qa`ida Goes Virtual

In the late 1990s, al-Qa`ida launched its first website, www.alneda.com ("al-Neda" means "The Call" in Arabic). It was registered in Singapore and appeared on web servers in Malaysia and Texas before it was taken off at the request of U.S. officials. It then changed its name and URL every few days, forced to move from server to server by citizens who complained to the Internet Service Providers (ISP) that were hosting the sites. Then, in late 2002, al-Qa`ida lost access to its internet domain because it expired and was acquired by a private citizen. The alneda.com site operators tried to reappear by using various server accounts that had no associated domain name. When that failed, they started posting the alneda.com site as a "parasite": the site would be posted on a hijacked website until it was noticed and removed by the ISP. When it was removed, however, they would simply start the process again. In April 2003, al-Qa`ida's website came back online with the title "Faroq," yet flying the alneda.com banner. Although the new site and other al-Qa`ida sites moved frequently, administrators and readers publicized the site's new locations through chat room announcements, e-mail correspondence and links on other groups' websites.

Today, al-Qa`ida's organization is even more virtual. Its reliance on the free access and use of the internet is also one of the main reasons why the group is still a dangerous force. The internet is becoming a major weapon in al-Qa`ida's strategy to win supporters to its cause, preserve its decentralized structure, galvanize its members to action and raise funds. A widespread network of websites is used to feed directions and information from the group's top leadership to supporters and sympathizers around the world. Al-Qa`ida openly acknowledges the importance of the internet as a propaganda tool, as it did on one of its numerous websites:

Due to the advances of modern technology, it is easy to spread news, information, articles and other information over the internet. We strongly urge Muslim internet professionals to spread and disseminate news and information about the jihad through e-mail

lists, discussion groups and their own websites. If you fail to do this, and our site closes down before you have done this, we may hold you to account before Allah on the Day of Judgment... We expect our website to be opened and closed continuously. Therefore, we urgently recommend any Muslims that are interested in our material to copy all the articles from our site and disseminate them through their own websites, discussion boards and e-mail lists. This is something that any Muslim can participate in, easily, including sisters. This way, even if our sites are closed down, the material will live on with the Grace of Allah.²

The Communicative Uses

From the communicative perspective, terrorism is often viewed as a form of psychological warfare, and al-Qa`ida has attempted to wage such a campaign through the internet. For instance, al-Qa`ida uses the internet to spread disinformation, deliver threats intended to cause fear and disseminate grisly images of recent actions. The internet—an uncensored medium—allows even a small group to spread its message and exaggerate its importance and threat potential. Since the September 11 attacks, al-Qa`ida has saturated its websites with a string of announcements of an impending major attack on U.S. targets. These warnings have received considerable media coverage, helping to create a sense of insecurity among audiences throughout the world and especially within the United States. Al-Qa`ida itself has repeatedly stated on jihadist websites that the 9/11 attacks not only inflicted concrete damage to the U.S. economy, but also psychological damage.

Another popular communicative use of the internet is for publicity and propaganda. Until the advent of the internet, terrorists' hopes of winning publicity for their causes and activities depended on attracting the attention of major media outlets. Now that terrorists themselves have direct control over the content of their websites, they are better able to manipulate how they are

² Cited in "Jihad Online: Islamic Terrorists and the Internet," a report produced by the Anti-Defamation League, 2002.

perceived by different target audiences and to shape their image and the image of their enemies. Thus, the most visible part of al-Qa`ida's online presence involves the spread of propaganda, which is created by the group's media branch, al-Sahab Media Production (al-Sahab means "The Cloud" in Arabic). This organization uses modern technology to produce its video statements and distribute them to the world. In addition to being released in Arabic, some published videos include English or other language subtitles, while more recent productions include videos in the English and German languages. Al-Qa`ida is also operating online radio and television broadcasting and an additional online production facility—the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), an al-Qa`ida mouthpiece group.

Many terrorist groups, such as Hamas and al-Qa`ida, have transformed from strictly hierarchical organizations with designated leaders to affiliations of semi-independent cells that have no single commanding hierarchy.³ By utilizing the internet, these loosely interconnected groups are able to maintain contact with one another and with members of other terrorist groups. These different groups use the internet not only to exchange ideas and suggestions, but also to share practical information about constructing bombs, establishing cells and executing attacks.

By sharing information with other terrorist groups, al-Qa`ida became the "Jihad's Franchise" by using the internet to connect terrorist groups ranging from Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (and later the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) to Pakistan's Jaysh-i-Muhammad, Chechen rebels, Iraqi insurgents or the al-Qa`ida cells in Indonesia and Lebanon.

The Operational Uses

Al-Qa`ida is also using the internet for operational purposes. After losing Afghanistan as a sanctuary and country in which to train, thousands of training manuals and documents were posted online. These documents range from instructions on creating IEDs to producing chemical weapons. Terrorists also use the internet for data

mining. They research information such as the schedules and locations of targets, including transportation facilities, nuclear power plants, airports and even counter-terrorism measures. According to then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, speaking on January 15, 2003, an al-Qa`ida training manual recovered in Afghanistan told its readers, "Using public sources openly and without resorting to illegal means, it is possible to gather at least 80 percent of all information required about the enemy."

Al-Qa`ida websites use maps, diagrams and photos of potential targets downloaded from popular websites such as Google Earth. One captured al-Qa`ida computer, for example, contained engineering and structural architecture features of a dam, which had been downloaded from the internet and which "would enable al-Qa`ida engineers and planners to simulate catastrophic failures."⁴ In November 2005, one al-Qa`ida website, al-Firdaws, posted instructions on how to make nuclear dirty and biological bombs.⁵ The manual contained 80 pages of instructions and was dedicated as a "gift to the commander of the jihad fighters, Shaykh Usama bin Ladin, for the purpose of jihad for the sake of Allah."⁶ The website received some 57,000 hits.⁷

Al-Qa`ida and other terrorist groups also use the internet for fundraising. Al-Qa`ida's global fundraising network includes charities, non-governmental organizations and other financial institutions that use websites and internet-based chat rooms and forums. The internet can be used not only to solicit donations from sympathizers, but also to recruit and mobilize supporters to play a more active role in support of terrorist activities or causes. Recruiters can log into chat rooms or visit cyber-cafes to find receptive members of the public, especially the youth. Electronic bulletin boards and user nets can also act as vehicles for reaching out to potential recruits.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Uzi Mahnaimi and Tom Walker, "Al-Qaeda Woos Recruits with Nuclear Bomb Website," *Sunday Times* [London], November 6, 2005.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

Al-Qa`ida represents the worst that globalization and advanced community technologies have to offer. Al-Qa`ida is a virtual "network of networks," a jihadist franchise marketing its messages on the internet. Since 9/11, al-Qa`ida operatives have only improved their internet skills and increased their web presence. How should democratic societies respond to the challenge of online al-Qa`ida? At least two principles seem clear. First, it is necessary to become better informed and educated about al-Qa`ida's use of the internet so that its activities can be more efficiently monitored. The growing familiarity with terrorist online discourse may guide us to use the same internet to challenge the culture of death with an alternative discourse.

Second, while it is imperative to better defend our societies against terrorism, we must not in the process erode the qualities and values that make our societies worth defending. The use of advanced techniques to search, monitor, track and analyze communications carries inherent dangers. Although such technologies might prove helpful in the fight against cyber-terrorism and internet-savvy jihadists, they would also hand participating governments, especially authoritarian governments and agencies with little public accountability, tools with which to violate civil liberties domestically and abroad. The long-term implications could be damaging for democracies and their values, adding a heavy price in terms of diminished civil liberties to the high toll exacted by terrorism itself.

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³ Gabriel Weimann, *How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2004).

Today, the al-Qa'ida movement makes extensive use of the Web, with an estimated 5,600 sites as of January 2008 and 900 more appearing each year (Weimann, 2008). These sites include static (non-interactive) websites and interactive forums, chat rooms, message boards, and blogs. Not all of these websites play a significant role, however. Al-Qa'ida's media operations are supported by a network of quasi-official production and distribution entities that brand jihadist media and provide an authorized channel for distribution on approved websites (Kimmage, 2008). These entities serve the core leaders of al-Qa'ida and the armed groups associated with it. Posted materials bear the logos of the originating armed groups and the media centers they used. Al-Qa'ida prisoners from Afghanistan have reportedly admitted under interrogation that their network intends using the internet for an attack. Ronald Dick, of the FBI's National Infrastructure Protection Centre, recently spoke of such a strike, where emergency services could not respond, water did not flow and hospitals had no power. "Is that an unreasonable scenario? Not in this world," he said. The history of al-Qa'ida has been extensively documented in many languages. Since the 9/11 attacks on the United States, massive research has been devoted to uncovering the origins of the global jihad movement, its strategies, concepts of operations, and ultimate aspirations.[1]. Such works have been assisted by the willingness of al-Qa'ida to talk openly about some parts of its narrative. While many aspects of al-Qa'ida's almost thirty-year history have been examined in impressive detail, other parts of the story remain shrouded in mystery. In some cases, gaps are caused by a lack of informat