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Summary

This dissertation examines how modern Islamic terrorists and al Qaeda in particular use the Internet and new media technologies. It seeks to identify and analyse the various uses and determine to what extent this web presence contributes to the advancement of the global jihad cause. Drawing on primary sources from experts in the field and selected monitoring reports of radical Islamic sites, this work identifies and analyses a number of uses of the latest technologies and goes on to examine how these promote or facilitate the agenda of al Qaeda.

Drawing on the analysis of expert monitoring reports and online media (text and video) material from jihadi sites, this dissertation identifies and analyses a number of uses of the latest technologies and goes on to examine how these promote or facilitate the agenda of al Qaeda. By so doing, it seeks to identify and analyse how the Internet is explored by al Qaeda, demonstrating how it contributes to the advancement of jihadi operational objectives such as propaganda, recruitment, fundraising and cyberplanning. The argument presented here is that the use of the Internet by al Qaeda has altered the organisational dynamics of the jihadi movement, making it more flexible and adaptable than traditional hierarchical structures inasmuch as it reduces transmission times and operational costs.

The dissertation offers various examples of how this Islamic terrorist web presence is being implemented and finds that, to some extent, it reveals new operational tendencies on behalf of al Qaeda and a growing awareness of the power of the Internet as a strategic communicational tool. These insights are vital to a substantive understanding of structural changes and new operational tendencies of the global jihadi movement.

Resumo

O presente trabalho examina a forma como o terrorismo Islâmico moderno e a al Qaeda em particular utilizam a Internet e as tecnologias dos novos media. Procura identificar e analisar as várias utilizações e determinar em que medida esta presença na Web contribui para a progressão da causa da jihad global. Assente em fontes primárias de especialistas e numa selecção de relatórios de monitorização de sites radicais Islâmicos, a pesquisa identifica e analisa as várias aplicações das mais recentes tecnologias, assim como examina a forma como estas promovem ou facilitam a agenda da al Qaeda.

Baseada na análise dos relatórios de monitorização e na análise de conteúdos mediáticos (texto e vídeo) online em sites jihadis, reconhecendo as várias aplicações das tecnologias, procura identificar e analisar a forma como a al Qaeda explora a Internet, demonstrando de que forma esta contribui para a concretização de objectivos operacionais jihadi como propaganda, recrutamento, angariação de fundos e ciberplaneamento. O argumento aqui defendido é o de que o emprego da Internet por parte da al Qaeda alterou a dinâmica organizacional do movimento jihadi, tornando-o mais flexível e adaptável que as tradicionais estruturas hierárquicas, na medida em que reduz os tempos de transmissão, bem como os custos operacionais.

A dissertação avança vários exemplos de como a presença terrorista Islâmica na Web tem vindo a ser implementada e descobre, em certa medida, que esta revela novas tendências operacionais por parte da al Qaeda, assim como uma crescente consciência do poder da Internet enquanto instrumento comunicacional estratégico. Estas percepções são vitais para uma compreensão substantiva das mudanças estruturais e novas tendências operacionais do movimento jihadi global.

Keywords

Global Jihadism

al Qaeda

Internet

Communication

Cybermobilisation

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Introduction

The attributes of the Internet – its networked structure and international character, low costs and easy access – have provided modern terrorists with new and effective tools in the pursuit of their goals. In some cases, the Internet changed the very nature of terrorist organisations, transforming their classical hierarchic structures into organic and dynamic movements, horizontally organised, flexible and adaptable to environmental changes. My research focuses on the applications of the Internet by modern Islamic terrorists, particularly al Qaeda.

This dissertation sets out to demonstrate just how modern Islamic terrorists have harnessed the power of the Internet and the new media to enhance their responsiveness and resilience and, in turn, how these communication technologies improve their operational capacities, enabling them to remain one step ahead of counterterrorism measures. The purpose of this dissertation is to situate this research question in today's geo-political context, contributing to establish a bond between the existing knowledge on the subject and further comprehension. It hopes to help centre and refine the question, reflect and broaden the understanding of the phenomenon.

Great advances in information and communications technology have made a major impact on our society: a large percentage of our life and activities has come to depend heavily on this critical infrastructure. This is evident in both the public and private sectors. Essential factors of public life, such as airplanes, traffic control, electricity, gas, nuclear plants, telecommunication systems, police and fire departments, hospitals, government, vital sectors such as national defence, and many more public services, are now organised and controlled through the use of computers and networked systems. Furthermore, the situation is not much different in the private sector. By any measure, computers and the Internet are highly involved in the way most people work, communicate, exchange products, do businesses, move money, educate or entertain. Banks, stock markets, and other monetary institutions that transfer or handle vast amounts of money base their operation entirely on computer systems.

The information revolution has also changed the nature of political conflict across the spectrum, altering not only the weapons terrorist groups use but also the ways

in which they operate and structure their organizations.[1] There is a growing awareness of the power and efficiency of these communication technologies in the coordination of dispersed activities and in the transmission of a virulent ideology in an uncensored manner. This dissertation assesses the degree to which modern Islamic terrorists are functioning in a networked manner and how they are dependent on the Internet and new media technologies to achieve that purpose. The analysis reviews past researches and offers a series of educated guesses about how the employment of these technologies is contributing to the advancement of the global jihad cause.

The Internet - and, consequently, new media technologies - were popularised in the 1990's. Since then, the possibility of online activism has changed the nature of social and political movements. However, there is still much to be ascertained regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet in political conflict. Though it is generally accepted that terrorist groups maintain a Web presence, like every other political organisation today, there are still many doubts as to whether that is the result of a conscientious decision and indicative of a new direction in organised terrorism. So there is not yet a state of consensus amongst the several experts on this terrorist presence online.

Whilst some believe this is the result of a growing awareness of the Internet's capacity to reach massive audiences, while cutting short both operational costs and transmission times - and, as such, a concerted adaptation to the changing times - others argue this web presence is essentially maintained by a handful of media-savvy sympathisers, while terrorist organisations themselves remain a bunch of unsophisticated ruffians. So is there an organised effort on behalf of modern Islamic terrorists in harnessing the Internet as an operational tool? Or are they just using the Internet as the rest of us?

This terrorist web presence also raises questions regarding the need to regulate the Internet. Are the terrorists capitalising on the absence of regulatory mechanisms? Should governments limit what can be posted online? While some praise any and every necessary measure that might contribute to enforcing security, many experts are beginning to alert to the possible consequences of intruding in an open channel such as the Internet. Concerns over whether imposing limitations on freedom of speech would be well received by global online users raises questions regarding the efficiency of such

[1] See John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, Ed. *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001).

measures. Others even draw attention to the unprecedented access to terrorist communications and openly discussed ideologies.[2] Should we sacrifice our freedom of speech in an attempt to limit theirs? Or should we defend the ultimately free communication medium and, in doing so, allow these virulent messages to continue circling the Internet?

Another controversial aspect of terrorists' use of Internet is its application in recruitment efforts. There is a growing concern that recruiting through the Internet will rapidly increase the number of active operatives with a minimum amount of actual training. Most necessary information is publicly shared on the Internet, containing *do-it-yourself* instruction for real life combat. Recent studies show the Internet has spawned a new type of recruit, know as the *homegrown* terrorist – western or westernised enthusiasts who use the Internet and available contents to participate or collaborate in terrorist acts. Is the Internet alone capable of generating a terrorist? Is there a virtual army of Islamic terrorists brewing about?

The information available today is still, unfortunately, insufficient and therefore does not allow the determination of a productive analysis between the positive and negative consequences of this terrornet[3] and counterterrorism measures in place so far have only addressed part of the problem.

This dissertation is an effort to systematize information and dispersed research conducted so far, which the author considers to be an important and necessary contribution for a better understanding of the phenomenon of Islamic terrorism and new media and to future academic research efforts. This involves gathering previous research relevant to the comprehension of the phenomenon, as well as observing jihadi media outlets and products. The majority of collected sources cited herein originated from the Internet, either published in trustworthy sites, refereed publications or coming from accredited organisational and institutional sites. Cited works were also published in trustworthy sites, refereed publications and accredited organisational and institutional sites. The criteria used in the selection of sources ensure that all of them are relevant and contribute to the investigation surrounding the research question hereby formulated.

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[2] *See* Kohlmann, Evan. 2005. "Al Qaeda and the Internet", *The Washington Post,* August 8, 2005. Accessed November 1, 2011.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2005/08/05/DI2005080501262.html

[3] See Gabriel Weimann. "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses The Internet." (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2004) Accessed February 5, 2012.
http://www.usip.org/files/resources/sr116.pdf

The dissertation is structured to cover four vital applications of the Internet: propaganda, cybermobilisation, fundraising and cyberplanning.

In addressing propaganda, the main concern is to define what is propaganda in an Islamic terrorist context and how it plays out in the Internet. It sets out to determine that the Internet represents a fundamental advantage over traditional media: control over the message and the propagandistic process in general. This section identifies there is a pre-existing effort of isolating various target audiences[4] to which the contents are adapted. It also explores the identification of four rhetorical structures[5] around which all jihadi propagandistic discourse online is built, all designed to appeal to western and westernised audiences. It offers a general view of the standard structure of a jihadi website and its usual contents, while exploring the investment in multimedia functionalities.

In the second part, the dissertation addresses the issue of cybermobilisation, attempting to show to what extent the Internet operates as an enabling agent of radicalisation processes. It aims to show there is a careful study of the demographic profiles of users online in order to, similarly to what is done in propaganda, adapt messages to reel in prospective recruits. It also presents the dimension of self-radicalisation, by dwelling upon examples of two individuals that found their way into jihadi circles and eventually got involved in terrorist acts through the Internet. These individuals were chosen because they were considered to be most representative of the process of web based radicalisation and participation through the Internet. Both were elucidating examples of what are considered *homegrown* terrorists. In order to illustrate what makes it possible for someone to radicalise online, the research tries to demonstrate that modern Islamic terrorists also consider the Internet a valuable tool in training, developing efforts to divulge as much information as possible on jihadi techniques, be it reading material or video instructions.

In addition, fundraising is listed as another significant use of the Internet by Islamic terrorists. Global jihad is heavily dependent on spontaneous donations and, in light of financial counter-measures following 9/11, is also in serious need of fronts that allow them to move money unsuspected. This section explores how Islamic terrorists benefit from the Internet in their fundraising ventures.

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[4] *See* Yariv Tsfati and Gabriel Weimann, "www.terrorism.com: Terror on the Internet", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25:5 (2002), 317-332. Accessed October 19, 2011.
doi: 10.1080/10576100290101214

[5] *Ibidem.*

Lastly, this work addresses the issues of data mining and cyberplanning. It will try to illustrate how they dedicate to analyzing data gathered on the Internet and summarize into useful information. Data mining techniques are employed to building the profiles they later use in propaganda, fundraising or in scouting prospective recruits. Finally, cyberplanning tools have proven to be an absolute gold mine for terrorists in operational terms. Anonymity, encryption, free communications or gathering intelligence such as coordinates, satellite images, schedules, employee lists is also possible and quite easy as long as you have access to a computer with Internet connection, as most of that information is public and free.

All this is supported by previous research in the field of terrorism and new media and will be further developed after a review of the relevant literature.

I. Methodology

This dissertation is the result of a two-year investigation period, initiated in September 2010, as part of the Masters program in History, International Affairs and Cooperation, held at the University of Oporto.

The main purpose of this investigation was to generate information that could contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between modern Islamic terrorism and the New Media, focussing especially on how and why al Qaeda uses the Internet.

The choice of al Qaeda as a study subject, in detriment of other Islamic terrorist organisations, has to do with the fact that, from a communication point of view, al Qaeda's case is comparatively more complex. Sunnis are a majority in the Islamic world, a majority that is scattered throughout several distinct geo-political contexts – Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Maghreb, Indonesia, and others – this makes the strategic objective of unifying the extremists of all these disparate geo-ethno-cultural contexts a tremendous challenge for al Qaeda. They were also pioneers in the establishment of the communication platforms that still exist today and that are used by all terrorist organisations present online.

This research sought to identify and address, as much as possible, all previous relevant publications related to this subject matter. Even though available information on terrorism and, in particular on Islamic terrorism, is substantial, data on how modern terrorists use the Internet and on the actual effects of this relationship, on the contrary, is not. Therefore, the majority of the sources herein mentioned were obtained on the Internet; and from the author's personal library, used to select resources due to the lack of research material on Portuguese libraries. Sources from the Internet were produced by recognised professionals and experts in the field. These works were published in trustworthy sites, refereed publications and accredited organisational and institutional sites, such as the Terrorism Research Center, RAND Corporation, the ICSR – International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation – Kings College, University of London, and others.

The sources also included data from security agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and reports issued by the US Defence Department on the matter, as well as articles from well-established and credible newspapers.

Moreover, and given that the focus of the investigation is placed on the relationship between *jihadis* and the Internet, part of the information was obtained from institutions, such as the International Institute of Counter-Terrorism (ICT), that collect, gather and analyse jihadi sources, including online publications, videos and sites. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the original sites and their contents, probably due to their illegal nature, oscillate between active and inactive statuses, consequence of disagreements with Internet Service Providers or as a result of hostile measures taken against them. As such, their web addresses change frequently, making it incredibly hard to follow up on their contents. Other difficulties are related to the fact that a portion of the information is in Arabic or simply password-protected.

The criteria applied to the selection of relevant sources was: (a) ensuring pertinence of contents; (b) ensuring that it addressed the subject in the general scheme of available bibliography, avoiding unnecessary duplications; and (c) ensuring that it clearly stated the subject in the title or defined the title in a preliminary statement.

The concept for this investigation drew on the qualitative perspective, which specifies that *"the object of the study is not the behaviours of actors but rather their intentions and situations, that is, it addresses the ideas and meanings of individual actions in social interactions".*[6] And in fact, the objective was not to stipulate that modern Islamic terrorists are using the Internet, but for what and why they chose this medium, or, as Pacheco determined

> *"The analytical focus is placed on contents rather than on procedures. Hence, the methodology adopted herein is determined by the subject matter, with generalisation being replaced by particularisation, linear causality by contextual complex relations, unquestionable results by questionable results, systemic observation by experimental, engaged, observation. The questionability of results is taken for granted given that, more important than the study of large samples, we are concerned with the study of cases of actors/subjects that act in certain situations inasmuch as the meanings they share are enacted meanings."*[7]

[6] Clara Pereira Coutinho, *Metodologia de Investigação em Ciências Sociais e Humanas: Teoria e Prática* (Coimbra: Edições Almedina, 2011), 26.
[7] José A. Pacheco, "O pensamento e acção do professor em formação" (PhD diss., Universidade do Minho, 1993).

Qualitative research employed in this study is divided in two major categories

i. Analysis of monitoring reports and other expert reports that ascertain and characterize the existence of patterns regarding terrorist use of Internet tools, namely standardized strategies or techniques;
ii. Data that confirms the existence of self-radicalized members of al Qaeda and Affiliated Movements (AQAM). It includes security and intelligence reports on the apprehension of such individuals, as well as news coverage of these events and/or proceedings.

From the analysis of data from the two categories, the study hopes to demonstrate how and why modern Islamic terrorists - and al Qaeda in particular – use new media in the advancement of their cause.

There are two paradigms supporting this analysis: communication theory and strategic studies. Previous research has demonstrated a close link between terrorism and communication – as Gus Martin argues, if we look at terrorism as a strategy characterized by symbolic attacks on symbolic targets, then it must also be defined as a strategy of intentional manipulation of media.[8] Thus, it is imperative to look at this from a communicative perspective, first and foremost, for

> *"Communication is not simply one more thing that happens in personal and professional life; it is the very means by which we produce our personal relationships and professional experiences - it is how we plan, control, manage, persuade, understand, lead".*[9]

Though communication is a huge part of the process, it is impossible to complete this analysis without looking into the strategic role of the Internet in the relationship between politics, economic power and geography, as well as its importance intelligence-wise, in threat assessment and preparation of possible physical attacks.

[8] Gus Martin, *Understanding Terrorism. Challenges, Perspectives and Issues.* (Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 281.
[9] Marianne Dainton and Elaine D. Zelley, *Applying Communication Theory for Professional Life: A Practical Introduction,* Second Edition (Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 2.

Individuals Studied

The individuals considered either spent a significant portion of their formative years in the West or their radicalisation process bears a significant connection to the West. Their radicalisation process is closely linked to their use of the Internet. The inclusion of individuals whose process was not linked to the use of the Internet was not considered for their inclusion would disrupt the efforts in obtaining a better understanding of that form of radicalisation. Those chosen to appear in this dissertation were considered to be examples that best encapsulate the role of the Internet as an enabling agent in a process of radicalisation and were those who best satisfied the researcher's curiosity regarding the several stages of a radicalisation process.

The individuals were included in this study because, in addition to having been radicalised through the Internet, they participated in, or provided illegal support for, jihadist terrorist plots/acts. We considered valid proof that these individuals have illegally participated in such acts the existence of court verdicts, guilty pleas or other clear indication that they have done so. The subject Adam Gadahn, for instance, was never arrested nor convicted, but his appearance in al Qaeda propagandistic videos is unequivocal proof of his involvement.

Definition of Terrorism

This study employs two definitions of terrorism, considered to be complementary and, therefore, both relevant to the research. Firstly, the definition provided by the Council of the European Union according to which it is characterized as violent, intentional acts intended to seriously intimidate a population, compel a government or international organization to act in a certain way or seriously destabilise or destroy *"the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization".*[10] Secondly, Alex P. Schmid's Revised UN Academic Consensus Definition (2011):

> *"Terrorism refers, on the one hand, to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and*

[10] Council of the European Union, Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism, June 13, 2002, art. 1.1.

psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties; (...) The public (-ized) terrorist victimization initiates threat-based communication processes whereby, on the one hand, conditional demands are made to individuals, groups, governments, societies or sections thereof, and, on the other hand, the support of specific constituencies (based on ties of ethnicity, religion, political affiliation and the like) is sought by the terrorist perpetrators;(...) The direct victims are not the ultimate target (as in a classical assassination where victim and target coincide) but serve as message generators, more or less unwittingly helped by the news values of the mass media, to reach various audiences and conflict parties that identify either with the victims' plight or the terrorists' professed cause;"[11]

[11] Alex P. Schmid. "The Revised UN Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism", *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Vol. 6, No. 2 (May 2012): 158. Last accessed July 1st, 2012. http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/issue/view/3

II. Literature Review

How do modern Islamic terrorists use the Internet? Particularly, how does al Qaeda employ online tools in the advancement of their cause? This is the subject of this study. Since the popularization of the Internet in the 1990's, the possibility of online activism has changed the nature of social and political movements: it is now possible to support a cause from any given point in the globe, as long as you have access to a computer with Internet services.

The information revolution has altered the nature of conflict across the spectrum so that its outcome and general conduct depend progressively more on information and communications, with all the measures being increasingly oriented towards media exposure. This change in how conflicts are conducted has privileged network forms of organisation, allowing for a migration of power from state to nonstate actors (multiorganisational), giving them advantage over hierarchical forms of organisation. Arquilla and Ronfeldt have defined this process as *netwar,* which

> *"refers to an emerging mode of conflict (and crime) at societal levels, short of traditional military warfare, in which the protagonists use network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies, and technologies attuned to the information age. These protagonists are likely to consist of dispersed organizations, small groups, and individuals who communicate, coordinate, and conduct their campaigns in an internetted manner, often without a precise central command".*[12]

It may also be characterised by a number of dispersed nodes, often acephalous, that share a set of ideals and interests and that are compelled to work as a network. This type of organisation is capable of providing ideological and operational guidance while simultaneously benefiting from tactical decentralisation. It is clearly the case with al Qaeda and its affiliated organisations that are promoting the so-called Islamic cause – establishing a caliphate. Hoffman clarifies

[12] John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, "The Advent of Netwar (Revisited)", in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy,* edited by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), 6.

"Al Qaeda, in fact, is unique among all terrorist groups in this respect: from the start its leadership seems to have intuitively grasped the enormous potential of the internet and sought to harness this power to further the movement's strategic aims and to facilitate its tactical operations."[13]

The rise of these networked organisations is very much a result of the IT revolution, which has affected the way groups operate and structure their organisations. Jihadists began using the Internet as soon as it became accessible to the public. As Kimmage notes, al Qaeda was at the forefront of early efforts to spread the jihadist ideology through the Internet, and it was their supporters who laid the groundwork for the system of forums and file-hosting sites that still function and do so effectively.[14] Like private corporations that aim for greater operational and logistical efficiency, terrorist groups like al Qaeda have adapted the immense power of Information Technologies towards enabling new operational doctrines and coordinating disperse activities. While pointing out al Qaeda as one of the most interesting examples of *netwar,* Zanini and Edwards identify and analyse the relationship between command, control, communications and the role of IT:

"lateral coordination mechanisms facilitate the operations of networked groups. In turn, such coordination mechanisms are enabled by advances in information technology – including increases in the speed of communication, reductions in the costs of communication, increases in the bandwidth, vastly expanded connectivity, and the integration of communication and computing technologies".[15]

Thus, these new technologies are extremely advantageous for a group whose members are geographically dispersed but are still required to perform distinct yet complementary tasks – terrorist organisations can operate from any part of the world, so long as they are in possession of the necessary IT infrastructure.

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[13] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 214.

[14] Daniel Kimmage, "Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet", Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, *New America Foundation* (March 2010). Accessed February 20, 2011. http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/kimmage2_0.pdf

[15] Michelle Zanini and Sean J.A. Edwards, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age", in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy,* edited by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), 35.

The obvious advantages of the Internet have not overshadowed the importance of traditional media, which continues to play a vital role in terrorist acts, operating as a privileged vehicle carrying news of violence through to the general population. The difference lies in the control over the message: the Internet expands opportunities for publicity and exposure beyond the scope of traditional media, while providing terrorists with an alternative, immediate and more cost efficient way to transmit a message over which they maintain almost total control.[16]

Therefore, due to its nature, Weimann considers the Internet is in many ways an ideal arena for activity by terrorist organisations.[17] Amongst the advantages that have not gone unnoticed by terrorist organisations, Weimann enumerates:

> *"easy access; little or no regulation, censorship, or other forms of government control; potentially huge audiences spread throughout the world; anonymity of communication; fast flow of information; inexpensive development and maintenance of a Web presence; a multimedia environment (the ability to combine text, graphics, audio, and video and to allow users to download films, songs, books, posters, and so forth); interactive medium; and the ability to shape coverage in the traditional mass media, which increasingly use the Internet as a source for stories;"*[18]

Most of the characteristics mentioned above are advantageous for any Internet user. Neumann argues that violent extremists use the Internet and value the exact same features as the general population.[19]

Nevertheless, some features prove to be paramount in the preservation of a vital communication flow upon which may depend an entire operation, namely those that make it possible to transmit information through the Internet in a relatively safe way, bypassing the control of flow or content. From a merely technological perspective, the possibilities of data encryption, steganography, encryption of cell phone transmissions or cell phone number theft are only some examples of how computer mediated

[16] Zanini and Edwards, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age", 42.
[17] Gabriel Weimann, "Virtual Disputes: The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Debates", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29:7 (2006), 624. Accessed October 19, 2011. doi: 10.1080/10576100600912258
[18] Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace Press, 2006), 30.
[19] *See* Peter R. Neumann, "Chapter Five: The Internet", *Adelphi Papers,* 48:399 (2008). Accessed September 26, 2011. doi: 10.1080/05679320802686841

technologies facilitate illegal activities.[20] Thomas mentions simpler aspects, although equally vital, such as online phone services, temporary accounts, public Internet access (cyber cafes, Wi-Fi coverage, library computers, and universities), and the possibility to lodge malicious sites on legal Internet Service Providers (ISP).[21] From an organisational perspective, the advantages are also immense: enabling dispersed activities with a reasonable degree of anonymity; maintaining a flexible network; eradicating national borders (which decreases the need for state sponsorship); physically distancing the planners from the actual attackers or the capacity to mobilise masses attuned to the same interests or ideologies.[22]

Understandably, there are also risks associated with computer-mediated communications and these organisations are not immune to them. Kimmage, concentrating on the human aspects, points out that despite the appealing attributes of greater connectivity, social networking makes these organisations vulnerable to many risks.[23] Among them is digital tracing – all interactions in a digital environment leave behind a trail of data that amounts to a record of all actions undertaken, which can easily be followed by authorities for detection/location purposes. Another common risk is the issue associated with message control. Contents of the sites are weaved with other user-generated content that can be considered offensive or undesired. One of the clearest examples is YouTube: formal video messages appear in search results mashed with humoristic or insulting content. Also, in the eventuality of interception by intelligence agencies or other security forces, computer databases can reveal massive amounts of incriminating information such as contact databases or locations.

After identifying the recognisable advantages and disadvantages of the Internet for terrorist activities, it becomes imperative to ascertain how they use the Internet in the pursuit of their goals. Weimann observes that

> *"all active terrorist groups have established at least one form of presence on the internet and most of them are using all formats of modern online platforms,*

[20] Zanini and Edwards, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age", 36-38.
[21] Timothy L. Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of Cyberplanning", *Parameters,* Vol. 23 Issue 1 (2003), 112-123. Accessed August 3, 2011.
[22] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of Cyberplanning"; Zanini and Edwards, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age".
[23] Kimmage, "Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet", 15.

including email, chatrooms, forums, virtual message boards, and resources like You-Tube, Facebook, Twitter, and Google Earth".[24]

Research has shown that terrorists use the Internet for a wide variety of purposes such as communicating, raising public awareness and harvesting sympathy for their causes, psychological warfare, fundraising, data mining, recruitment/mobilisation and even training.

The Internet is a vital instrument in maintaining a continuous flow of information, be it private or public. On a private level or in terms of internal communication, email exchanges, chatrooms, virtual message boards (virtual equivalent of the common corkboard) or online phone services allow the sustenance of a wide grid of contacts, as well as the exchange of basic information and documents between them, subject to little to no trace regarding its contents. But it is also used for external communication, i.e. communication between the organisation and its targeted audiences. For this purpose, the most common tools are the forums and, most recently, the social networking platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Navigating from the organisation's site or lead by a simple Internet search, the user can easily enter a forum where it is possible to witness or participate (through a simple registry) in the discussion of themes relevant to the jihadi cause, be it the most recent attack, the latest statements by a spokesman, a relevant news piece or the simple release of a new video or communiqué. These forums also constitute a gateway to a more tailored approach that provides a relatively risk-free way for potential recruits to find like-minded individuals and network amongst them, enabling them to reach outside an isolated core group of conspirators.[25]

Before the arrival of the Internet, publicity for terrorist causes was dependent on the coverage of traditional media. Today, the Internet is very useful in the illustration and support of ideological narratives. Constructing a moderate exposure of their ideals and intentions, in a clear adaptation to the differences between traditional audiences and those of the Internet, terrorists secured a highly effective propaganda machine that is not only cost efficient but also grants almost full control over the message, allowing them to manipulate how they are perceived. On the other hand, and precisely because the

[24] Gabriel Weimann, "Terror on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube", *Brown Journal of World Affairs* XVI:2 (2010), 46. Accessed May 14, 2011. http://news-business.vlex.com/vid/terror-facebook-twitter-and-youtube-206322211

[25] Neumann, "Chapter Five: The Internet", 55.

Internet conveys an immense array of messages despite their validity, the features that enable this unmatched propaganda machine also facilitate the waging of a true psychological warfare, allowing for a small group to amplify its message and exaggerate its importance as well as the threat it poses.[26] Misinformation, threats, instilment of fear and dissemination of shocking images of actions perpetrated by terrorists are only some of the items in a campaign designed to create an atmosphere of permanent dread and alarm.

Similarly to other political organisations, terrorist organisations also use the Internet to raise funds for their activities. Heavily dependent on donations, these organisations build up global fundraising networks of charities, non-governmental organisations and financial institutions through which they channel money raised on behalf of front causes. The Internet can also be used as an instrument for illegal funding methods, such as money laundering and credit card fraud.[27]

The Internet offers unlimited access to most of the world's knowledge. In 2003, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, upon the discovery of an al Qaeda training manual recovered in Afghanistan, stated: *"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".*[28] Data mining or targeting is, essentially, using these open and public sources to gather information for illegal purposes. Like all Internet users, terrorists also have access to maps, diagrams, schedules, pictures and exact locations of all sorts of potential targets such as transportation facilities, nuclear power plants, government buildings, airports or ports. Thomas also includes hacking in data mining, as a way to gain access to very sensitive information or to carry out online surveillance – a vulnerability of digital information.[29]

In the same way sympathisers are persuaded to give their donation in support of the cause, they are also recruited or mobilised to play a more active role in the so-called defence of Islam. By taking advantage of a true multimedia environment, terrorists use all means (audio, digital video, etc.) to enhance their message and appeal for a greater involvement from more receptive members of the public, identified through a thorough study of demographic data of Internet users and of online profiles (usually drawn from

[26] *See* Gabriel Weimann, "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses The Internet".
[27] See Hsinchun Chen et al, "Uncovering the Dark Web: A Case Study of Jihad on The Web", *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 59:8 (2008), 1348. Accessed July 10, 2011. doi: 10.1002/asi.20838
[28] Weimann, *Terror on the Internet,* 112.
[29] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet", 121.

the information made public on social network platforms). Once having established an interactive relationship with a potential recruit, studies show that none of the participants are merely passive recipients of information: to some extent, all the actors play some role in producing and disseminating information.[30]

The organisations capitalize the magnetic capacities of the Internet on matters of recruitment. As such, they appear to be prepared to offer full training programs to self-recruiters, whom they do not need to convince, but merely guide. Al Qaeda leader Abu Hadschir Al Muqrin, cited by Der Spiegel Online, clarifies *"It is not necessary ...for you to join in a military training camp, or travel to another country...you can learn alone, or with other brothers, in [our arms] preparation program".*[31] Weimann corroborates the Internet can equally serve as a virtual training camp.[32] Stenersen has undertaken an extensive survey of all training material available online and observed items such as written instruction manuals and encyclopaedias, instruction videos, series of lessons, and other periodicals, all of which offering information on relevant topics like conventional weapons, improvised weaponry, explosives, field tactics, operational safety and even physical preparation.[33] However, Stenersen's take on this matter is not clear: though observing developing trends as to the contents of this material (made evident by the type of weaponry described or through the introduction of chapters devoted to urban combat as opposed to conventional battle fields), the author does not believe that it is a result of intentional preparation and therefore claims *"the Internet is not a "virtual training camp" organized from above, but rather a resource bank maintained and accessed largely by self-radicalized sympathizers".*[34] Jenkins recognizes the existence of a training effort but dismisses its importance in a real life combat scenario stating, al Qaeda may create virtual armies but, ultimately, these armies remain virtual.[35] Neumann advocates a more reserved opinion arguing that the online

[30] Neumann, "Chapter Five: The Internet", 54.
[31] Toby Westerman, "Terror Training Online: Al Qaeda Franchises Out", *International News Analysis* (April 23, 2004). Accessed January 20, 2012. http://inatoday.com/terror%20training%20online%2042304.htm
[32] Weimann, *Terror on the Internet,* 127.
[33] *See* Anne Stenersen, "The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:2 (2008), 215-233. Accessed March 11, 2011. doi: 10.1080/09546550801920790
[34] *Ibidem,* 216.
[35] *See* Brian Michael Jenkins, "Is Al Qaeda's Internet Strategy Working?". Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcomittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, United States House of Representatives, on December 6, 2011. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Accessed March 13, 2012. http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT371.html

environment is not, by itself, capable of replacing personal interaction.[36] This relates to Sageman's belief that for the type of allegiance that the jihad demands, there is no evidence that the Internet is persuasive enough by itself.[37]

Equally significant to the analysis of the categories of use of the Internet by these terrorist organisations is the study of the targeted audiences. Tsfati and Weimann define four target audiences, according to the products made available online.[38] Appeals to current and potential supporters are evidenced from the employment of local dialects and from the existence of gift shops selling items such as printed t-shirts or leaders' statements in audio and video supports. The enemy public, i.e. the socio-political opposing community in the conflict, is also targeted even though this attempt might not always be evident. It manifests in an effort to demoralise the enemy states or to instil a feeling of guilt through the publication of images depicting violent acts perpetrated by the enemy against women and children or that illustrate acts of torture. The aim is clearly to rattle the cage of public debating in the enemy states. Also important as an audience is the international public not involved in the conflict. The translation of all online contents to several western languages, in addition to local languages, and the concern with featuring extensive basic and historical information about the organisations are indicators of an investment in this audience. It might also be construed that the journalists constitute one of the target audiences given that press releases are almost always posted online and that there is a section in most terrorist sites dedicated to more detailed information on the organisations' backgrounds. Soriano confirms, notwithstanding the majority of the contents directed at current supporters, gradually, jihadist groups have devoted more energy to attempting to connect with this potential western audience.[39]

The approach to these targeted audiences falls into a carefully thought rhetoric, designed to fit an audience that is no longer the one that only received the information aired on television or print on newspapers. In order to adapt to a better-informed audience, more oriented towards human rights and, at the same time, meet the

[36] Neumann, "Chapter Five: The Internet", 54.
[37] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 163.
[38] Yariv Tsfati and Gabriel Weimann, "www.terrorism.com: Terror on the Internet", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25:5 (2002), 326-327. Accessed October 19, 2011. doi: 10.1080/10576100290101214
[39] Manuel R. Torres Soriano, "Jihadist Propaganda and Its Audiences: A Change of Course?", *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Volume I, Issue 2 (2007). Accessed December 10, 2011. http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/9/pdf

propagandistic motivation and the anxiety of a correct construction of their image, jihadist organisations have adopted a more pacifist posture in the presentation of their goals.

The main challenge for modern terrorist organisations communicating online is the justification of violence in the pursuit of their objectives. Tsfati and Weimann explored the main rhetorical structures of terrorist discourse online.[40] The first outline is the *"no choice"* edifice – presenting violence as a necessity of the weak in order to confront an oppressive enemy, thus legitimizing the use of violence as a self-defence mechanism. The second structure builds on demonizing and de-legitimizing the oppressive enemy who is stampeding on their rights, presenting its cruelty as the only obstacle in the pursuit of freedom or liberation. The third rhetorical approach is emphasizing weakness and a climate of persecution, making terror the only weapon of the weak – it is either armed resistance or the slaughter at the hands of the enemy. Lastly, the attempt to emphasise the supposed peace-loving nature of the organisations, clarifying that, in actuality, the movement seeks a non-violent solution or a diplomatic agreement but those are denied by other parties.

Cronin, in regard to motivation, observes that *"personal narratives of injustice, struggle, and noble sacrifice are among the most powerful vehicles for mobilization in any culture, and today they are being actively disseminated over the Web".*[41] These personal accounts can prove to be essential in creating solidarity bonds, fundamental in the mobilisation of a group or the Diaspora, as the Internet substitutes for the loss of bases and territory.[42] Neumann is also aligned with this opinion that the sense of belonging is paramount in mobilisation efforts on behalf of Islamic terrorist organisations, stating that *"after all, the Internet both represents and powerfully projects the sense of umma – that is, being part of a global community of believers – on which the ideology of the Islamist militant movement rests".*[43]

Evolution today therefore follows the path of the individual driven by a common inspiration, better-informed, more demanding, but also more motivated and with greater power to inflict more damage than ever before. The recruitment of this individual is one

[40] Tsfati and Weimann, "www.terrorism.com,", 323-326.
[41] Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Cyber-Mobilization: The New *Levée en Masse". Parameters* Vol. XXXVI (2006), 84. Accessed November 20, 2011.
http://ccw.modhist.ox.ac.uk/publications/cronin_parameters.pdf
[42] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet", 121.
[43] Neumann, "Chapter Five: The Internet", 55.

of the most important goals of this communicative approach to terror and the reason why it is imperative to maintain control over the message and the image that comes across. Jenkins writes, *"Al Qaeda has embraced individual jihad as opposed to organizationally-led jihad. Increasingly, it has emphasized do-it-yourself terrorism. Those inspired by al Qaeda's message are exhorted to do whatever they can wherever they are".*[44] By making its virulent ideology accessible to anyone with a computer, al Qaeda's use of technology has allowed for the radicalisation and empowerment of new recruits, just by shaping their vision of the world. Today,

> *"individuals interested in setting up their own terrorist cell – like those responsible for the Madrid train bombing – can find more than news updates online. Jihadi Web forums provide links to several al-Qaeda magazines, which outline step-by-step instructions for communicating with cell members, defining tactic and procedures, and constructing explosives, among other topics".*[45]

[44] Jenkins, "Is Al Qaeda's Media Strategy Working?", 2.
[45] Jarret M. Brachman, "High-Tech Terror: Al-Qaeda's Use of New Technology", *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* Vol. 30:2 (2006), 152. Accessed August 30, 2011. http://ics-www.leeds.ac.uk/papers/pmt/exhibits/2806/brachman.pdf

III. Uses

1. Propaganda

Political propaganda is the dissemination and promotion of particular ideas, perceptions and interpretations.

Propaganda is a necessary part of any political endeavour. Any individual or organisation with political aspirations must engage in propaganda as a legitimate and necessary part of a political contest. It is used to explain and justify ideals and actions to supporters; it is used to appeal to the community and nation in order to make a given line of action widely understood and to seek popular acceptance for it; and it is used to divulge whatever measures or acts have been undertaken so far.

Kimball Young's Handbook of Social Psychology, defined propaganda as *"the, more or less, deliberately planned and systematic use of symbol, chiefly through suggestion and related psychological techniques, with a view first to altering and controlling opinions, ideas and values, and ultimately to changing overt action along predetermined line".*[46]

Jowett and O'Donnel define propaganda as *"the deliberate attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist".* They further clarify propaganda as an attempt *"to create a certain state or states in a certain audience* [and that the] *desired state may be perceptual, cognitive, behavioral, or all three".*[47]

Shawn Parry-Giles, in her study of propaganda during Cold War operations, defined it as *"conceived of as strategically devised messages that are disseminated to masses of people by an institution for the purpose of generating action benefiting its source".*[48]

[46] Kimball Young, *Handbook of Social Psychology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 506.
[47] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnel, *Propaganda and Persuasion,* 4th Ed. (California: SAGE, 2006), 8.
[48] Shaw J. Parry-Giles, *The Rhetorical Presidency, Propaganda, and the Cold War, 1945-1955* (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2002), xxvi

1.1 What is propaganda for modern terrorism?

One of the characterizations included in Alex P. Schmid's Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism (2012) indicates terrorism can also be defined as *"propagandistic agitation by non-state actors in times of peace or outside zones of conflict".*[49] Kohlman considers propaganda as one of the most important ways in which terrorists use the Internet.[50] Indeed, if terrorism is to be effective, it must be communicated. And, once the stories of terrorist activity reach the general public, organizations such as al Qaeda (AQ) try to capitalize on the publicity in their recruitment efforts. The Internet is particularly important for this work – it allows fast and inexpensive dissemination of complex information to diverse publics, ranging potential supporters to prospective recruits.

1.2 *Netprop,* propaganda in the context of the Internet

As was previously mentioned, the Internet due to features such as cost efficiency, anonymity, or lack of regulation is appealing and has proven valuable in the accomplishment of terrorist goals. But why is it so important as a propagandistic instrument? This choice is in great part justified by the fact that it allows terrorist organisations to counter mainstream media depictions of their terrorist movements. Nevertheless, it is important not to overlook that the Internet is, in its nature, the ultimate engaging medium. As a true multimedia environment, a single website can be comprised of information in all formats – video, audio, text – fully accessible, downloadable, while simultaneously allowing for discussion to be held in real-time public forums. This synthetic power of the Internet carries unavoidable implications: using integrated sets of complex features, the Internet, as a truly immersive environment, shapes interactional dynamics, involving norms and expectations of engagement, making it the most persuasive medium ever.

By bypassing the media and communicating their messages directly to their targeted audiences, terrorist organisations such as al Qaeda aim to alter public opinion, diverting it away from the mainstream focus on their violent nature, and gain support

[49] Alex P. Schmid, "The Revised Academic Consensus Definition of Terrorism", 158.
[50] Evan Kohlmann, "The Real Online Terrorist Threat", *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 85, Issue 5 (September/October 2006), 116. Accessed June 9, 2011.
http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/61924/evan-f-kohlmann/the-real-online-terrorist-threat

for their cause. Tsfati and Weimann believe the purpose of these sites is to try in many ways to resemble the websites of legitimate political organizations.[51]

The central issue when analysing any communication on behalf of a modern terrorist entity is the pressing and constant need to justify and legitimise violence. This requirement to provide context to violent actions distinguishes the approaches by traditional media coverage and terrorist websites on three main categories: how they portray violence, the amount of information conveyed and the capacity to mobilise the audiences.

Traditional media news coverage of terrorism is almost always related to violence and to the exposure of violent acts whereas the Internet demands greater sensibility regarding the characteristics of the audiences – receptors are international and more educated, oriented towards a human rights culture, thus justifying messages of a more pacifist nature.[52] The websites allow the organisations to mask or even hide all violent acts, while shifting the focus towards political legitimizing and issues such as freedom of speech or political prisoners. The main purpose behind the exploration of these matters is the establishment of a climate of embarrassment and discomfort towards authorities, particularly insidious in democratic societies. It is a skilful move, considering the Internet is the ultimate symbol of free communication.

Al Qaeda websites, unlike traditional media, offer extensive information regarding the historical background of organisations and the possibility of divulging pertinent documentation. They generally include information about the movement's history, biographies of their leaders, scholars, founders and other important figures. Sites also include information about their positioning and political and ideological goals. The majority of these websites also offer detailed records of activity, examining past deeds and presenting new aims, featuring updates similar to conventional news coverage.[53] Considering the time and space limitations inherent to traditional media, it is to all intents and purposes unrealistic to dispense all this information or divulge full contexts unless the medium was owned/operated by the terrorist organization itself.

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[51] Tsfati and Weimann, "www.terrorism.com," p. 328.

[52] See Yariv Tsfati and Gabriel Weimann, "www.terrorism.com: Terror on the Internet", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25:5 (2002), 326-327. doi: 10.1080/10576100290101214

[53] For an exhaustive study of the characteristics of the sites, see Daniel Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message", An Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Special Report, Washington, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2011.
http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/kimmage2_0.pdf

Lastly are the features that allow organisations to rally potential supporters and prospective recruits. The maintenance of these sites is the equivalent of maintaining an open door – those who are interested in the message or desire to know more are welcome to contact the movement directly and request further information or enrol in more active forms of participation. Traditional media, bound by the existence of regulating mechanisms such as journalistic standards and deontological codes, make it impossible to appeal to any particular standing on presented matters.

1.3 Online Terror Rhetoric

Mastering communication technologies serves as part of a concerted strategy whose main goal is to persuade Muslims to resist and act in the defence of their *umma*[54] while simultaneously creating new ways in which they can participate in this resistance. Al Qaeda has sought to adjust its message to western or westernised audiences. It is not just only about managing how they are perceived, as Hoffman[55] describes, it became particularly important to illustrate how they perceive the world and convey that to the Diaspora and western public in general.

Daniel Kimmage, in his prescient analysis of the Al-Qaeda media nexus[56], identified the main axes of their perspective on the conflict. Kimmage, after an extensive examination of jihadist media outlets, he concluded that it

> "*espouse*[s] *a harshly monolithic interpretation of Islam, divides the world into believers and unbelievers, frequently defines Muslims who do not accept this ideology as unbelievers, advocates "jihad" to impose a new world order, interprets "jihad" as violent struggle, and legitimizes virtually all forms of violence against those defined as unbelievers."*[57]

However, one of their main challenges – common to all modern terrorist organisations across the spectrum – is that of justifying the use of violence to an increasingly pacifist audience. Therefore, terrorist rhetoric online is devoted to presenting organisations as victims, forced to employ violence in order to assure their

[54] Global community of believers.
[55] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism,* 202.
[56] Daniel Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message", An Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Special Report, Washington, 2008. Accessed February 20, 2011. http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/kimmage2_0.pdf
[57] *Ibidem,* 3.

objectives in facing brutal enemies, merciless and with no moral constraints. In al Qaeda's case, that brutal and oppressing enemy is primarily the United States of America's imperialist stand in global politics.

Tsfati and Weimann have, through careful analysis of the discursive strategies of terrorist groups, recognized four rhetorical structures around which terrorist messages are constructed in online media outlets. The first rhetorical configuration identified is the argument of *"no choice"* argument. Terrorist organisations online frequently argue that they do not reject a peaceful solution but that they are left with no choice but to be violent and bear arms. Violence is presented as an inevitable necessity for it is the only means that is available to the weak in its fight against the strong. This is particularly evident in the case of Islamic terrorist movements: their main adversary, the United States of America, has repeatedly claimed never to negotiate with terrorists and has, throughout the years, adopted military solutions when faced with political issues in the Muslim world.

A second rhetorical tendency consists of demonizing and de-legitimizing the enemy. The opposing party is presented as the real terrorist, intolerant, devoid of moral control or clemency towards a culture it does not understand. Nothing the insurgency movement does will be comparable to the cruelty of the opponent. This argument is usually accompanied by visual aids such as photographs or videos of the enemy committing violent acts. In comparison, the members of the terrorist movements are presented as freedom fighters, forced to resort to violence in order to defend their dignity and their rights, tramped on by the enemy. Tsfati and Weimann believe it is an attempt to shift the responsibility to the opponent, evidencing his brutality, his inhumanity and depravity.[58]

Another recognizable trend is emphasizing the movement's weakness in contrast with the enemy's strength in the armed struggle. Terror is highlighted as the only possible weapon of the so-called resistance. This rhetorical construction is made evident by a conscientious decision to omit any reference as to how the terrorist movement might have victimized others. This is particularly important considering that one of the chief challenges of Islamic terrorist movements in recent years has been the justification of the indiscriminate killing of innocent Muslims, a dispute that has become

[58] Tsfati and Weimann, "www.terrorism.com," 325.

increasingly public on the Internet. Weimann, in his analysis of virtual disputes between Islamic terrorist organizations and leaders, points to this debate in particular

> *"Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi, leader of Al Qaeda who was recently killed in Iraq, was often criticized on Jihadi websites as well as in the Arab media. The first criticism came form on of the most important and influential clerics of the Jihadi-Salafi part of the global Jihad movement: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdesi, the Jordanian-Palestinian Islamist scholar and spiritual guide of Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Jordan and Iraq. In an online interview, he criticized the Islamist insurgents in Iraq, led by Abu Mu'sab al-Zarqawi, for the mass killing of Muslims in Iraq. On 5 July 2005, he repeated his criticism. His most important statement was that "the indiscriminate attacks might distort the true Jihad." This criticism generated a wave of responses by Jihadi scholars, clerics and youngsters."*[59]

However, there is also some degree of consideration in the choice of vocabulary used to describe enemy actions in this context. As such, it is frequent to see overstressed expressions such as "slaughter", "genocide" or "murder", projecting an image of the insurgents as helpless victims that are hunted down by their immoral enemies.

Tsfati and Weimann identify a fourth rhetorical structure that rests on the premise that these movements are, in their nature, pacifist and seek peaceful, diplomatic solutions and arrangements through international pressure. This study does not associate this discourse with al Qaeda: though direct appeals to violence may not be evident at all times, al Qaeda has not presented itself as a peaceful movement nor has it privileged diplomatic arrangements over military solutions or armed responses. It would be highly incoherent, considering their purpose has always been the reestablishment of a caliphate and, ultimately, the conversion of all *kufr.*[60] Democracy is not a solution, nor is it a desirable regime for Islamic radicals, hence the *jihad.*

Al Qaeda has also adopted a media strategy roughly described as one of association and co-optation[61], particularly effective on the Internet. In the media, al Qaeda associates itself to any group operationally active in ideological or geographic

[59] Weimann, "Virtual Disputes," 628.
[60] Qur'anic term for *Infidels.*
[61] Daniel Kimmage, "Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet", 2.

proximity and co-opts any and every ongoing regional conflict that fits its leaders' *global jihad* narrative. By creating these implicit ties, al Qaeda links itself to other entities insinuating a synergy with a much larger movement. Nevertheless, Kimmage defends there is some degree of relational consistency to these links

> *"*[t]*he ties are not purely virtual. While Internet-based media do not provide the best basis for inferring operational links, the constantly reinforced and carefully supervised associations between MPDEs* [Media Production and Distribution Entities] *and jihadist groups must at some point involve concrete individuals (...)[therefore] the ties exist. However ephemeral they may be, and whatever form they may take as they package messages from actual theaters of operations to Internet forums, groups as geographically distant as fighters in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq could not make information, true or false, about their exploits available through a limited number of consistently branded distribution channels without coordination and contact in some form."*[62]

Even though it is difficult to determine the consistency of these ties, the mere suggestion of their existence is significant insofar as it projects an image of grandeur of a movement operating in a much larger scale. This creates an atmosphere of virtual fear, amplifying the possible consequences of a terrorist attack.

1.4 Who's listening in?

Despite the range of terrorist websites online, they all share key characteristics. Every website's language is an indicator of who are its intended recipients. So does the choice of products made available online. In terms of appearance, the sites are often notable for their colourful, well-designed, and impressive graphic content, apparently intended to appeal, predominantly, to the computer-savvy, media-saturated, video-game-addicted generation.[63] This confirms the efforts of AQ in adapting to the new technologies, particularly for a radical Islamic movement that is, paradoxically, forced

[62] Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus," 16.
[63] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism,* 206-207.

to abandon its iconoclastic beliefs[64] if it wishes to keep up with the demand for visual novelty online.

The fact that most terrorist websites are available in a multitude of languages is also a sign that the organisations are targeting audiences beyond their host nations and cultures. Sites are often either translated into other western languages or allow the user to access services such as Google Translate, translating text automatically.

Although it is not possible to determine exactly who are the visitors or users of these sites, it is estimated that terrorist websites aim at several audiences simultaneously. The first segment of its audience is its current supporters. This is evident, primarily, by the use of local dialects and the specificity of the local or regional information that is shared. Not only is there much more in-depth information about the organisations' recent activities, the sites also elaborate in detail on the subject of internal politics or the relationship between local factions. This is also noticeable in the types of products that are made available online. Most of the sites have an online gift shop where supporters can find several items such t-shirts, badges, flags, and audio or video recordings of prominent figures and spokesmen.

Another relevant target audience is the international public. International web-surfers not involved in the conflict but cognizant of current affairs and human rights issues are targeted. The translation of the contents of these sites to most western idioms is, as mentioned above, a clear indication that there is an interest in reaching western or westernised audiences. The type of information made available is unequivocally directed towards broader audiences not necessarily familiar with the movement or the cause. The sites feature extensive packages of basic information about the organization and far-reaching historical background.

Western journalists are also targeted as recipients of information. The extensive background historical information is clearly aimed at persons in charge of putting events in context. Organizations frequently publish their press releases online and some of them even invite reporters to connect directly to the movement's press office.

It is also expected that the information that is publicized in these websites reaches the audiences the movement labels as its enemies, making it plausible to assume

[64] There is a general consensus based not on Qur'anic scripture on various Traditions of the Prophet – the Hadith – regarding the prohibition of all representations that have shadows (whose defacement is mandatory). The opposition to figuration in Islam is primarily concerned with the possible usurpation of divine creative powers and the fear of polytheism and idolatry. The proscription is a relevant factor in the promotion of aniconism (the eschewal of figural imagery).

that the enemy too constitutes a target audience. Posting images of enemy combatants perpetrating acts of violence, holding women and children at gunpoint or proof of torture of detainees is expected not only to mobilise support and promote sympathy amid neutral visitors, but also to provoke feelings of unease, guilt or remorse among audiences belonging to the opposing political or social group.[65]

Presumably, the aim is to incite public debate and, consequently, weaken public support for military interventions in Islamic countries. There is an underlying attempt to demoralize the enemy by repeating threats of new attacks.

Targeting the youth as an audience is a high priority when using the Internet as a vehicle for extremist proselytising and recruitment. Young people constitute valuable assets as operatives for they are free of paper trails and, therefore, are not signalled by the authorities. They are also Internet-savvy, which contributes to their value as operatives. They are easily motivated by innocent idealism and religious devotion and are more likely to embark in terrorist activities as a way to play out a fantasy, with no real concern about possible consequences. In the case of Islamic terrorist organisations, the Internet's capacity to establish solidarity and brotherhood bonds is very important, as it substitutes the loss of bases and/or territories, making this particularly significant amongst the Diaspora.[66] One of the most revealing ventures in the targeting of younger demographics is the recent development of jihadi video games. Jarret Brachman, the Director of Research at the Combating Terrorism Centre at the United States Military Academy, reminds us that video games have been available in the West for long now and most of them are more violent than jihadi versions. Nevertheless, and even though the researcher does not admit playing these games is a direct link to the perpetration of violent acts, Brachman cautions

> *"what makes jihadi games uniquely problematic is the nature of the assumptions it asks players to make (...) children who play this game are supposed to accept that, at some point in history, Muslims conquered the world and killed or converted all those who opposed them. While players may understand that such games are based on fiction, the act of playing them arguably increases their*

[65] Tsfati and Weimann, "www.terrorism.com," 326.
[66] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet," 120-121.

propensity to accept ideologies that consist of extreme goals, such as the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate."[67]

Al Qaeda is also interested in recruiting young followers. It established two divisions within the movement whose mission is the integration of children and teenagers: "Lion Cubs of Al Qaeda" and "Birds of Paradise".

A growing tendency to target women is also noticeable: women, like youngsters, do not undergo the same kind of scrutiny that men are subjected to, making them a newly found interest in recruitment efforts. Women are usually associated to long histories of personal and financial struggles, making them very empathic to society in general. This grants them somewhat of a *card blanche* when it comes to their involvement in illegal activities – their participation is almost always regarded as the product of intimidation and never as a voluntary deed, allowing their engagements to go by unnoticed. In the discourse adapted to appeal to female participation, religion plays an obvious and paramount role: they are told that obeying their husbands is just like obeying God and that if they do not obey, their destiny is hell. Since their husbands are involved in a so-called holy war against the enemies of Islam, their duties are adjusted accordingly. Yet, the wives of terrorist operatives aren't the only ones being targeted. The recruitment efforts have spread to include all women. Several terrorist organisations including al Qaeda have developed specific contents for women, such as magazines or forums. These platforms usually offer advice on educating children for jihad, providing first aid for a family member injured in combat and physical training needed to prepare for combat. In an article for the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, Weimann wrote

"Opposed to the Western desire to make a "cheap commodity" of women, the message advocates the role of a woman as a mujahid, citing examples of female mujahideen in Muslim history. Abu Omar [a leading Muslim writer] *writes that a Muslim woman should feed her sons "gunpowder with milk," adding "we want from her to be a factory of heroes and her house to be a lion's den.""*[68]

[67] Brachman, "High-Tech Terror," 156-157.
[68] Gabriel Weimann, "Online Terrorist Pray on the Vulnerable", *YaleGlobal Online Magazine,* 5 March 2008, 3. Accessed November 4, 2011. http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/online-terrorists-prey-vulnerable

Al Qaeda's tailored approach, its polishing of messages according to carefully outlined audiences is likely to lead to a relatively high level of success. It is not expected that propaganda alone would be enough to convert or enlist individuals as terrorists. However, the role of the Internet as a medium of propaganda and radicalisation can function as an enabler and must be considered a central tool in effective recruitment.

Nonetheless, experts are not unanimous on the subject of al Qaeda's online achievements. Daniel Kimmage, senior fellow at the Homeland Security Policy Institute at The George Washington University, analyzed two polls[69] that suggested the group's ideology and violence had become increasingly less appealing to its supposed target audiences. Indeed, Kimmage believes

> *"al-Qaeda - the media phenomenon and the organization - faces grave challenges. The media landscape has changed, and the medium that Osama bin Laden and his most active supporters exploited so brilliantly to spread their message—the Internet—has evolved in ways that make it harder for al-Qaeda to dominate (...) Al-Qaeda appears to be holding the attention of the faithful, but it faces a rising din of competing voices, an Internet that is more and more of a mixed blessing"*[70]

It is a question of equivocality. Most of what is discussed and communicated online is public domain. This is particularly applicable in the case of jihadi websites and forums, with the Internet also serving as a battlefield between factions, who make use of the Net to conduct ideological debates or even personal disputes.[71] This mounting commotion of competing voices makes it particularly difficult to stifle a lack of cohesion that becomes more and more evident as the excuses for several errors begin to disappoint. Besides enjoying less and less resonance in Arab media outlets[72], al Qaeda

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[69] For poll results, see September 2007 polling in Pakistan: http://www.usip.org/resources/pakistani-public-opinion-democracyislamist-militancy-and-relations-us; Pew Research polling in 2009: http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1338/declining-muslim-supportfor-bin-laden-suicide-bombing (Found declining support for suicide bombing and bin Laden in several Muslim countries).

[70] Kimmage, "Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet", 1.

[71] Weimann, "Virtual Disputes," 624.

[72] See Marc Lynch, "Whether it's AQ or not, nobody in Arab media cares", *Foreign Policy,* December 27, 2009. Accessed October 12, 2011. http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/12/27/whether_its_aq_or_not_nobody_in_arab_media_cares

is now being forced to deal with the successive failures of the jihadi movement and with the strain of having to explain to the Arab and Muslim audiences why the fates of the movement are increasingly tied to those of the Afghani and Pakistani Taliban, as well as having to justify the death of innocent Muslims caught in the line of fire or by careless attacks.

Kimmage argued that the quantitative presence of al Qaeda was weakened by the multiplication of voices of other jihadi groups and militants. Between December 2009 and January 2010, he recorded a few hundred thousand visitors to five of the main jihadi forums and, considering the Internet's global reach and aggregating power, described these as fairly less than awe-inspiring totals.[73]

The success of this strategy is impossible to determine in the present day. What is possible, however, is to recognize that the Internet has become a blessing to the radical Islamist movement, as much as it has become a peril. If, on the one hand, the Internet has been an unmatched medium for propaganda effects, it has also, due to its content enmeshment features, contributed largely to endanger terrorists' control over their message. If, when contents appear attached to sources of recognizable value, it provides cross-validation of contents that might not be reliable, the attachment to false or contradictory contents results in ambiguity amongst audiences. Is al Qaeda singlehandedly capable of disentangling its message and minimizing ambiguity? Not without further development of their web capacities and even then, it will have to bypass counter-terrorism measures, which has proven rather challenging, judging by the continuous shut down of radical Islamic forums and sites. Conversely, counterterrorism will also have to adjust its strategy in order to control growing circulation of jihadi contents online. The next years will be very elucidative on how this strategic shifts play out.

1.5 The Sites

After a careful analysis of selected monitoring reports of radical Islamic sites[74], it is possible to assert they are, in structural terms, quite similar to other organisational websites. They consist of textual, graphic and multimedia elements. Functions usually permit visitors to navigate the site and chose sections from drop down lists. Most sites

[73] Kimmage, "Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet", 10.
[74] *See* Daniel Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus"; Tsfati and Weimann, "www.terrorism.com"; Stenersen, "The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?"; MEMRI, "Jihadi Tech And Military Monitor";

keep track of the regularity with which they are updated, while also featuring a visitor count. They are mainly decorated with flags or other national symbols, or simply the national colours. Most of them offer the possibility to download emblems or logos – which, despite the announced pacifist nature of some of the organizations, frequently display war symbols. Certain sites also house an online gift shop allowing their visitors to acquire items such as books, audio and video recordings of speeches or communiqués, t-shirts, stickers and badges.

The sites consist, essentially, of information in its textual form, which is, perhaps, the most analyzed feature. Most of them contain historical backgrounds on the radical Islamic movement and biographies of its founders, leaders or lead ideologists. They explore the political and ideological objectives of the organisation and describe major achievements of the past. Finally there is a section dedicated to the publication of speeches or writings by relevant figures and current news features.

However, these terrorist sites are also very rich in multimedia elements. Pictures, videos and audio files illustrate a message tailored to justify jihad. Pictures usually portray the organisation or its operations. These images showcase military equipment and training, martyrs on their way to missions, prisoners or leaders. They sometimes focus on the suffering of the population by highlighting situations of destruction or injuries.

Audio files are customarily composed of lectures by recognised figures, religious or political, which aim to motivate, inspire or even educate the audience. Another common recording is assorted chanting – someone reciting Qur'an verses or simply military and patriotic songs. Again, al Qaeda presents us with a paradox, for the truly rigid interpretations of Islamic scriptures stipulate that music is a sinful activity[75], as corrupt as *fornication* or *wine-drinking.* The most comprehensive texts clarify that all music is forbidden, be it listening to it, actually singing or procuring musical instruments. Again, this must be interpreted as a sign of the efforts in attempting to reach broader audiences.

Video postings are a preferred instrument for propaganda. And why shouldn't they be? Videos are a powerful medium to project messages even to those who can't read. There are many different types of videos, all of which aim to portray the radical

[75] The general belief is that music is a product of the devil, for it endangers one's control over one's body and emotions. Therefore, it is understood that only the ignorant perceive music as a form of entertainment without realizing its harmful nature.

Islamic movement with a triumphant aura. Videos can be informative, including lectures, interviews, and talks on jihad or individual political standings. Themes such as United States' hypocrisy, links to Israel and other reprehensive allies or the indiscriminate killing of innocent Muslims are the most tackled in these scholastic videos. On a different category are the video footages of operations, the infamous videos of beheadings and other executions and the glorification of jihad heroes and martyrs. They all aim to either shock their audiences or simply convey a different perspective of the conflict. They're also a clear attempt to inspire potential recruits. These video footages are often shared between ideologically close organisations: al Qaeda frequently posts contents produced by Hamas.

Most of the sites present with programming errors such as broken links or missing files. Most of the translations to western languages show spelling or grammar mistakes. However, most of the sites already show signs of attempting to adapt to the Web 2.0 functionalities, allowing for their contents to be downloaded, shared with friends, and subscribed, actively encouraging the maximum dissemination of the products. Subscriptions are particularly important because not only to they allow for the movement to maintain a steady flow of communication with their audiences, it also allows webmasters to redirect their public to other web addresses whenever the sites are shut down by authorities (which is specially frequent considering the nature of the contents).

2. Cybermobilisation

It is safe to say the Internet and social networks are a part of today's battlefields. The evolving character of communications today is changing the patterns for popular mobilisation, be it the means for participation or the motives one chooses to fight for. According to Cronin, most importantly *"it is enabling the recruiting, training, convincing, and motivating of individuals who are driven to engage not primarily in the high-tech cyber-attacks that many US policy makers are focused upon, but in old-fashioned violence in the physical world".*[76]

[76] Cronin, "Cyber-Mobilization,", 85.

Seduced by personal narratives of injustice and martyrdom and by the mimicking of a global community, many are the supporters and potential recruits who approach site masters and forum hosts in order to obtain further information as to how they can participate more actively. In the case of Islamic terrorist organisations, the Internet's capacity to establish solidarity and brotherhood bonds is very important, as it substitutes the loss of bases and/or territories.[77] Specially, as Marc Sageman clarifies, because this imaginary community *"is just, egalitarian, full of opportunity, unified, in an Islam purged of national peculiarities, and devoid of corruption, exploitation, and persecution".*[78]

2.1 Targeting Demographics

Much of the Islamic terrorist online content was one-directional, essentially based on text and some messages in a forum and with no apparent concern for the receiving end of the communicational process. However, technologies continue to develop and, today, Internet access and multimedia products create real contact points for both men and women to enrol in the cause, largely due to a growing conscientiousness of the existence of a differentiated audience.

With several instruments providing personal and statistical information about users worldwide, contents today are audience and language specific and so is recruitment. Current search engines allow Internet servers to know which language is set as default, creating the possibility to adapt messages not only language-wise, but culturally-wise as well. New stand-alone search engines and other web browsing software limits searches to *jihadi-approved* sites, creating an intellectual separation of site visitors from the remainder of cyberspace, always pointing them towards radical Islamic spaces. These spaces are then carefully prepared to offer visitors step-by-step instructions further linking them to the movement.

Social networks like Facebook, MySpace or Second Life have also become particularly prolific in terms of incitement and recruitment. Despite being tailored for the youth, these online communities welcome millions of users from all age groups. Many users accept new friends without necessarily knowing who is behind the standard photo miniature and general profile information, granting total strangers access to very sensitive data. The same happens in regard to interest groups that provide terrorists with

[77] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet".
[78] Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks,* 161.

a list of potential recruits. Terrorists naturally capitalize this wellspring of information, adjusting all their messages and general interaction to whomever they believe can be easily manipulated.

Social networks can also be used to monitor or track military personnel. Gabriel Weimann mentions that the Canadian Defence Department, British Secret Service MI5 and the US military have warned all personnel to remove personal details from public profiles due to alleged monitoring by al Qaeda

> *"Even if the information does not give details about the logistics of troop movements, it could potentially endanger the friends and relatives of military and security personnel. Many soldiers unwittingly post detailed information about themselves, their careers, family members, date of birth, present locations, and photos of colleagues and weaponry."*[79]

Chatrooms and discussion forums are also an important part of terrorist communications online. *Jihadis* take advantage of these public bulletin boards to communicate with supporters around the world, recruit new members and share general information. Every member, when joining the forums, is given a personal email account. Chatroom hosts monitor their participation and if they seem open for recruitment, they are then contacted through private emails. The forums and chatrooms act as a virtual barrier that protects the identities of those who participate, while simultaneously offering subscribers a chance to establish direct contact with terrorist representatives, to ask questions, contribute and even help out the jihad movement on the web.

Users and members of forums and chatrooms are also encouraged to create email groups/listings to where they can dispatch news of the *mujahedeen.* The goal is to create as many groups as possible, in an attempt to reach increasingly larger audiences.

2.1.1 Irhabi 007

Irhabi 007[80] was first observed in 2003 on two jihadi forums. The sites, amongst other information, featured instructions on how to commit cybercrime and disseminated

[79] Weimann, "Terror on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube", 51.
[80] *Irhabi 007* was the screen name of Younis Tsouli, a 22 year old of Moroccan ancestry charged by British authorities in 2005 with conspiracies to commit murder, to cause an explosion, to raise money for

pages of the *Jihad Encyclopaedia.*[81] An analyst quoted by Nadya Labi on her article on Jihad on the Web[82] mentioned the general belief that Irhabi 007 was a male teenager acting primarily as a "cheerleader" for global terrorism – presumably male for *irhabi* in Arabic means "terrorist" and refers to a single male. The two sites would eventually disappear and Irhabi 007 moved on to al-Ansar – al Qaeda's media arm where Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's infamous video of the beheading of a kidnapped American contractor, Nicholas Berg, was originally posted. This video would become one of the most successful online terrorist campaigns to this day.

Initially, his skill set seemed limited and he would even receive a warning on behalf of a more experienced member about detection through IP address. However, soon after that, Irhabi was the one dispensing advice and distributing anonymizing software. *"Right from the start Irhabi was determined to make himself useful",* Labi mentions.[83]

The contents he published included maps of Israel, Navy Seal guides on sniper training, CIA manuals on making explosives and other intelligence. His dedication went as far as scouting personal blogs of soldiers stationed in Iraq, where they published photos and videos. One of his sites was registered under the name, phone number and address of an America lieutenant deployed in Iraq.

He also posted videos of attacks and beheadings and other content released by al-Sahab (al Qaeda's media arm). Soon Irhabi's reputation preceded him. In 2005, the Terrorism Research Center published a report on Irhabi where he was described as being heavily involved in maintaining al Qaeda's online presence.[84] One of his techniques consisted in finding vulnerabilities in servers that other organisations used to move/transfer files around and using them to dump al Qaeda files, free of charge and free of risk. One of these servers belonged to the Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department.

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terrorist purposes and conspiracies to obtain property belonging to others. All, without ever leaving his desk, in a basement apartment in a middle-class section of West London where he lived with his father.

[81] The Jihad Encyclopaedia is a manual on Jihad, released in eleven volumes dedicated to everything from planning and carrying out general terrorist acts, to how to build homemade explosives and other weaponry. It continues to circle around the Web in several digital formats, even though known links to the publication are frequently broken.

[82] Nadya Labi, "Jihad 2.0", *Atlantic Magazine* July/August 2006. Accessed April 17, 2012. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/jihad-20/304980/

[83] Nadya Labi, "Jihad 2.0", 2.

[84] *Ibidem,* 2.

Exultations for his work in spreading al Qaeda propaganda online multiplied and Irhabi's relationship to Zarqawi deepened – he was now a central figure in al Qaeda's transition into online. By the spring of 2005 the once teenaged cheerleader was playing a vital role in Zarqawi's public relations network. Kohlmann labelled him 'the AT&T of al Qaeda'.

This case is particularly illustrative of how terrorists use the Internet not just to spread propaganda but also to reach potential recruits and even assign them tasks.

The jihadi movement has also embraced the full potential of YouTube, 'the world's most popular video community', as a platform for the dissemination of their propaganda. In fact, YouTube is largely pointed out as an alternative to television as a way to reach younger demographics and global audiences. It is not uncommon to find, on demand, videos praising the martyrs and encouraging others to follow in their footsteps. YouTube is also considered to be an important tool in *jihadi* online training. However, the value of this platform and its similes is still not agreed upon. Kimmage considers it a less than ideal environment for jihadi content

> *"For one, it is chaotic and competitive. As-Sahab productions have to fight for viewers in public, generating at best a few hundred thousand views, an average of a few thousand, and at worst an embarrassing handful. They are also jumbled in with content that is, from a jihadist perspective, either offensive (like music videos with scantily clad singers) or undesirable (like parodies of jihadist videos). Finally, the comments on YouTube differ starkly from those of the self-selecting supporters on jihadist forums: Contributors are as likely to curse bin Laden as to praise him."*[85]

What is known, however, is that this type of video and imagery in general hold immeasurable power in reinforcing a particular world view and somewhat substantiating the extremists' claims, acting as a catalyst for the radicalisation process.[86]

[85] Kimmage, "Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet", 15.
[86] *See* Silber, Mitchell D. and Arvin Bhat. 2007. "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown". A New York City Police Department Report, NYPD Intelligence Division. Accessed June 6, 2012. http://www.nypdshield.org/public/SiteFiles/documents/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf

2.1.2 *I want to be a Terrorist!* – Adam Gadahn also known as *"Azzam the American"*

In 2004, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) signalled Adam Yahiye Gadahn – also know as "Azzam the American" – as wanted for possible involvement in plots against the United States. He was later indicted on federal charges of treason and providing material support to a terrorist group and was added to the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists list. According to the intelligence agency Gadahn is the first person to be charged with treason against the United States since the World War II.[87]

Early Life

Adam Yahiye Gadahn was born on September 1st 1978 in Oregon. Born to parents of Jewish and Catholic tradition, Gadahn was raised as an agnostic in a goat farm in outlying Riverside County (California) in austere isolation and self-sufficiency conditions, where he was homeschooled alongside his three siblings.

His father, born Phillip Pearlman, changed the family name to Gadahn for business purposes, after having learned to slaughter goats according to Muslim strictures so he could sell the meat at an Arabic market.

Adam Gadahn was described as a bright child, studious, shy, gentle, and a very typical teenager. He experimented in several extracurricular activities, ranging from Christian support groups for the homeschooled, to Little League baseball, and though they were more of an obligation, he honoured all of his duties.[88] However, when he turned fifteen, he had developed an abiding interest in death metal music. Albeit unclear when his interest arose, Adam Gadahn had decided to learn everything he could about this musical subculture. His obsession put him in contact with hundreds of people around the world that described him in interviews as a generally polite, cult and deep person, concerned with the future of the world. He exchanged albums and mixed tapes through the mail and frequently reached out to people whom he thought played an important role in the scene. He also made some recordings of his own music and in one

[87] FBI, 2006. "Most Wanted Terrorist – American Charged With Treason". Accessed August 13, 2012. http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2006/october/gadahn_101106

[88] Raffi Khatchadourian. "Azzam the American: The Making of an Al-Qaeda Homegrown", *The New Yorker,* January 22, 2007, 53. Accessed May 21, 2012. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/01/22/070122fa_fact_khatchadourin

of the cassettes that survived time and reached the hands of Raffi Katchadourian, Gadahn can be heard saying he was *"not really into the killing-people thing"*. [89]

In 1995, at the age of 16, Adam Gadahn was sent to live with his paternal grandparents in suburban Santa Ana (California), where he soon found a job at a computer store and became interested on the Internet – *"my grandmother, a computer whiz, is hooked up to America Online and I have been scouting the information superhighway"*.[90] The access to computers with Internet services was a turning point for Gadahn, as his web browsing led him to Islamic discussion forums. Following in the footsteps of his family's tradition of personal and spiritual exploration, he found these discussions most intriguing and read extensively on the subject. Michael discovered Gadahn found that *"the Islamic principle of God as a non-anthropomorphic deity, beyond human comprehension, was more plausible than the Christian conception of God"*.[91]

Conversion to Islam

Later that year, Gadahn began attending the Islamic Society in Orange County, where he manifested his intentions to convert to Islam and was promptly served with reading material and other preparation items.

Thimothy MacVeigh (Oklahoma City bombing) had unknowingly sired up the political atmosphere at the Islamic Society, for the explosions had been attributed to Muslim extremists. At that time - contemporary to developments in Bosnian, Afghani Israel-Palestine conflicts where Muslims were widely seen as victims - the word *jihad* became more frequent. Though the mosque's Imam did not define jihad as a violent or even military approach, some defended it was the only way to fight unspecified enemies united against Muslims.[92]

Shortly after his profession of faith, Gadahn joins a discussion group at the mosque constituted by seven or eight men - mostly Middle Eastern and in their twenties and thirties - and very rigid in their interpretations of Islam. He became particularly close to Hisham Diab and Khalil Deek, two extremists who ran a charity front believed

[89] Khatchadourian, "Azzam the American," 55.
[90] *Ibidem.*
[91] George Michael. "Adam Gadahn and Al-Qaeda's Internet Strategy", *Middle East Policy Council Journal,* Fall 2008. Accessed May 16, 2012. http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/adam-gadahn-and-al-qaedas-internet-strategy
[92] Khatchadourian, "Azzam the American,", 56.

to be part of a focal point for al Qaeda in the United States. Both men belonged to a cell based in Canada believed to be involved in the plot to bomb Los Angeles International airport and some targets in Jordan and Deek is suspected to be the link between Gadahn and al Qaeda.

Adam Gadahn then began to adopt radical political views, grew a long beard and began wearing a *gallabiya* (Saudi-style robe). A year later he was living in a small apartment close to the mosque, alongside five or six other men – most likely a safe house, as a witness recalls, for several men would spend a few days there and then leave.[93] As he got deeper into Islamist extremist underworld, he grew apart from non-Muslim family member, as part of his attempt to block out the Western World.

In 1997, he makes his first trip to Pakistan. The trip was allegedly paid for with funds from the front charity, according to Diab's ex-wife.[94]

According to accounts from his family, Gadahn moved to Pakistan between 1997 and 1998, where he married an Afghani refugee. Having spoken to his mother on the phone three years later – and for what would be the last time – he mentioned he was working as a journalist and that he and his wife were expecting a child.

FBI reports associate Adam Gadahn to Abu Zubaydah, a top operative of bin Laden's, responsible for arranging transportation into al Qaeda training camps. This association was only clarified after 9/11, when both Zubaydah and the mentor of the attacks, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, in official interrogations, mentioned his name.

He then moved to an al Qaeda training camp (Al Faruq, near Kandahar, Afghanistan), where he was in charge of translating al Qaeda manuals into English.

Gadahn is believed to be a member of al Qaeda's media committee and responsible for making the organisation's propaganda more sophisticated.[95] His responsibilities are thought to include those of a translator, video producer, and cultural interpreter, though primarily he is a spokesperson. His media-savvy is attributed to having spend a part of his youth chaperoning for aunt Nancy Pearlman, who was a journalist and frequently recruited Gadahn's help for interviews, radio shows and other media productions.

[93] *Ibidem,* 59.
[94] Khatchadourian, "Azzam the American,", 61.
[95] George Michael. "Adam Gadahn and Al-Qaeda's Internet Strategy", 3.

"Azzam the American"

The first tape featuring Adam Gadahn was released in October 2004. He had on sunglasses and whore a headdress around his face but people close to him such as Haitham Bundakji, chairman of the mosque at the time of Gadahn's conversion, claim to be "100 percent" sure it was him.[96] Under the alias of "Azzam al-Amriki" ("Azzam the American"), Adam Gadahn stated his affiliation with al Qaeda and doomed the streets of America would *"run red with blood".*[97] Others on which he predicted future strikes in numerous cities around the world and praised the 9/11 attacks soon followed this video.

In July of 2007 a new video was released in which Gadahn appeared without his mask and accompanied by a high rank member of al-Qaeda – this member was al-Zawahiri, chief lieutenant of Osama bin Laden and recognized leader of insurgents and al Qaeda in Iraq. In the video, Zawahiri referred to Gadahn as a brother and as *"a perceptive person who wants to lead his people out of the darkness",* urging people to follow his example.[98] Michael considers this video particularly significant for al Qaeda's leadership had never given one of its members such a direct and intimate endorsement.[99]

Several videos followed in which he appeared to gain confidence, building up to the moment in which he began addressing George Bush directly, with recommendations for the Bush Administration to undertake in order to prevent future terrorist attacks.

In 2008 there was speculation on whether Adam Gadahn was still alive. There was rumour that he had succumbed to an air raid on a safe house in North Waziristan (Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Pakistan) in the beginning of the year, supported by an apparent media silence – traditionally, since 2004, Adam Gadahn released a video message on the anniversary of the events of September 11, 2001. In addition, experts noted that the quality of media output was greatly diminished, which raised doubts given that Gadahn had been involved in as-Sahab's productions and its refinement since 2001.[100]

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[96] Amy Argetsinger, "Muslim Teen Made Conversion to Fury", *The Washington Post,* December 2, 2004. Accessed May 7, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26447-2004Dec1.html
[97] Michael, "Adam Gadahn and Al-Qaeda's Internet Strategy", 3.
[98] Khatchadourian, "Azzam the American,", 50.
[99] Michael, "Adam Gadahn and Al-Qaeda's Internet Strategy", 4.
[100] Bill Roggio, "Adam Gadahn Rumored Killed in North Waziristan Strike", in *The Long War Journal,* February 8, 2008. Accessed July 15, 2012.
http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/02/adam_gadahn_rumored.php#ixzzoGRtnmlKB&A

Nevertheless, in October 2008 a new video featuring Gadahn was released and the contained information suggested he had not perished in the air strike.

The fact that Adam Gadahn is a native born American and his rapid elevation in al Qaeda ranks was a perfect fit to conspiracy theories from left to right. The far left speculated that Adam Gadahn was a CIA recruit instructed to infiltrate al Qaeda and allow the agency to build up the threat that Americans are involved with al Qaeda, hence justifying a *carte blanche* under the homeland security banner. In the meantime, the far right depicted Gadahn as a Jewish agent placed in al Qaeda to favour Israeli intentions.[101]

Nonetheless, evidence supports Adam Gadahn is, in fact, a true jihadist

> *"As Gadahn adopted a legalistic interpretation of Islam, his more experienced instructors in the faith lectured to him also about the evils of the United States and Western society. He developed a violent disdain for all who propounded a more moderate vision of Islam (...) and came to believe that Islam and modern society were irreconcilably opposed".*[102]

His journey to the heart of al Qaeda may strike as the result of adolescent incomprehension or unguided religious experimentation and, considering Sageman's findings, it would have been a valid radicalisation process. Michael considers Adam Gadahn to be a sincere jihadist and observed an evolution - "[i]*nitially*, *his words were full of vitriol, delivered with an angry demeanor. Later, he appeared more soft-spoken and pious. And in his recent appearances, he comes off as a seasoned political analyst".*[103]

Adam Gadahn's whereabouts remain unknown. His last appearance was in a documentary film produced by al Qaeda titled "Knowledge Is for Acting Upon", which narrated the organisation's story since its creation up until the events of September 11, 2001 - the film is seen as a recruiting tool designed to appeal to Western-born Muslims.

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[101] Kurt Nimmo, "Adam Gadahn: Domesticating the Fake al-Qaeda Threat", September 13, 2005. Accessed May 24, 2012.
http://www.prisonplanet.com/articles/september2005/130905fakethreat.htm

[102] David Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman. "Homegrown Terrorists in the U.S. and UK", FDD's Center for Terrorism Research, April 2009, 34. Accessed June 6, 2012.
http://www.defenddemocracy.org/stuff/uploads/documents/HomegrownTerrorists_USandUK.pdf

[103] Michael, "Adam Gadahn and Al-Qaeda's Internet Strategy", 5.

Gadahn's story helps to illustrate another dimension of the recruitment efforts: the self-radicalisation processes. When individuals, carried by their own personal curiosity, find their way closer to structures and people who have to capacity to make their aspirations real. The Internet plays an important role in the radicalisation process in most cases, as it intensifies and expedites radicalisation. It provides individuals with the information they may be looking for to confirm their beliefs, as they contact with like-minded individuals they were probably not capable of finding in the real world. This becomes more evident since terror-related sites began moving away from just espousing ideologies to more tactical references like how to make a bomb or how to hack websites. Peter Neumann classifies this role of the Internet as resonance

> "[T]*he Internet creates a new social environment in which other-wise unacceptable views and behaviour are normalised. Bringing together like-minded individuals, the Internet becomes a virtual 'echo chamber' in which the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support.* (...) *Much of this may be theatre - a competition between 'armchair jihadists' - but it may equally create an environment of hyper-radicalisation in which - akin to the phenomenon of 'group-think' - the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support."*[104]

There is less evidence about the role of this medium in recruitment for the direct commitment to violent activity. In the majority of cases, whatever is found on the Internet is often complemented by offline contacts and/or influences. Marc Sageman argues that these social relationships are a necessary step of the radicalisation process, as terror networks are built upon a mixture of online and offline elements.[105]

This 'lone wolf' phenomenon is aggravated by the vast amount of information available on the Internet regarding preparation for violent and terroristic acts. Adding the increasing ease with which individuals can build viable devices and the potential operational support online, it becomes all too easy for an individual to develop a sense of belonging and wanting to participate. Raffaello Pantucci, Associate Fellow at the

[104] Neumann, "Chapter Five: The Internet", 55.
[105] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad – Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 121.

International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR), in his analysis of the typology of lone wolves points to this new tendency stating

> *"within an Islamist context, it is possible to discern a growing importance and emphasis being placed by influential ideologues like Abu Musab al-Suri and Anwar al-Awlaki on individual jihad and of small cells taking up action wherever they are able to in furtherance of Al Qaeda's more general global ambitions."*[106]

The key issue however appears to be the vast amount of training-related literature online. In the case of Jihad, the Internet has served as library, not just of religious literature or ideological/political material, but also of detailed instruction manuals and videos on technical and tactical issues such as the assembling of explosives, guerrilla war, hostage taking, and general operational and field safety. In regard to jihadi training, besides this function of posing as a library where training manuals and handbooks are easily accessed from anywhere in the world, the Internet also serves as an interactive environment where individuals discuss issues related to training, swap personal experiences and communicate with their 'online trainers' in order to clarify any doubts that might arise.

There are still reservations amongst experts over whether this is an organised effort on behalf of Al Qaeda operatives or the Internet is just a way to store and distribute training material. Gabriel Weimann's work has long described the Internet an interactive arena, where prospective terrorist can take detailed courses on several subjects

> *"The Internet can also serve as virtual training camp. The American attacks on al Qaeda terrorist training camps in Afghanistan forced the terrorist to move some of their operations to the Internet. As a result, al Qaeda uses the Internet not just to coordinate operations and launch attacks, but also to train,*

[106] Raffaello Pantucci, "A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorist", Developments in Radicalisation and Political Violence Series, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, March 2010, 7. Accessed 20, 2012. http://icsr.info/publications/papers/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf

indoctrinate, and recruit, turning the Internet into what experts call an "online terrorism university"".[107]

This appears to be in line with lead al Qaeda strategist, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's theory that training and general education should be a global enterprise and, therefore, should be moved to every household in every village, as opposed to taking the recruits to refuges and training camps. In his 1600-page volume *The Global Islamic Resistance Call* (2005), al-Suri defended al Qaeda needed to spread a culture of preparation and training by all methods, specially the Internet.[108]

Anne Stenersen, research fellow at the Terrorism and Political Violence at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), disagrees with Weimann, having concluded, from a thorough analysis of the material available online, that it is not an organised effort – the majority of the material is produced and/or distributed by al Qaeda sympathizers and not al Qaeda operatives.[109]

Despite the difficulty in proving whether there is, in fact, an organised effort towards online training and preparation of potential recruits and homegrown terrorists, available data indicates that, such as it is used today, the Internet is best described as a resource bank for self-radicalised individuals and autonomous cells, procured alongside other traditional training methods.[110]

3. Fundraising

Contradicting the layman belief that terrorist organizations are just *groups of unsophisticated ruffians,* the use of the Internet as a fundraising tool is just another indicative of the savvy of these organisations, as well as of their technological capabilities, who like many others take advantage of the Internet for their fundraising activities. Online terrorist fundraising has become so commonplace that some organizations even offer the possibility to donate via PayPal. According to Gabriel Weimann, al Qaeda has been one of the organisations more heavily dependent on donations - it has a global fund-raising network that is set upon a foundation of

[107] Weimann, *Terror on the Internet,* 127.
[108] Stenersen, "The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?", 216.
[109] *See* Stenersen, "The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?".
[110] *Ibidem.*

charities, nongovernmental organisations and other financial institutions that solicit and gather funds through Web sites, Internet based chatrooms and forums.[111]

3.1 Charities

For terrorist organisations, charities are a perfect cover for fundraising in a large scale, allowing them to gather large amounts of money or arms for their operations. Due to issues such as the concern with freedom of speech or expression and the general public's reluctance regarding the scrutiny of these organisations, charities operate rather freely. This means, amongst other things, they enjoy benevolence on behalf of the IRS, having even, on occasion, been granted financial assistance from government-sponsored grant programs.

Al Qaeda has largely cashed in on these freedoms enjoyed by the charities. A good example is the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO). Established in 1978, in Saudi Arabia, the charity's mission is to provide humanitarian assistance. According to Steven Emerson's testimony before the USA's House Committee on Financial Services[112], the IIRO is considered an operative arm of the Muslim World League and there is documentary evidence that the charity serves as a conduit for terrorism and has links to al Qaeda and its late leader Osama bin Laden.

Their website is populated by images and videos of the humanitarian actions. The text can be translated to English but the videos are all in Arabic. One of the videos is entirely dedicated to the charity's theme song and there is even a commercial advertisement. Even though there are no direct appeals to donations on the site, their vision statement clearly states they aim to be the "donors' first choice".[113] The IIRO is a member of the Economic & Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC).

3.2 Corporations/Profitable Entities

While charities are excellent cover-ups for terrorist financing, the use of profitable corporations and similar entities is also very advantageous. They serve as a channel through which to funnel the money to international support infrastructures.

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[111] Weimann, *Terror on the Internet,* 134.

[112] Steven Emerson (Executive Director, The Investigative Project), "Fund-Raising *Methods and Procedures for International Terrorist Organization",* Testimony before the House Committee, on Financial Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. February 12, 2002. Accessed February 12, 2012. http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/congress/021202se.pdf

[113] http://www.egatha.org/eportal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=2

Internet ventures are an example of how terrorists use profitable entities to fund their activities and transfer funds around, virtually undetected. Ventures such as advertising on their websites or pay-per-click contents are perfectly innocuous ways to generate revenue without drawing attention.

3.3 Fundraising Through Websites

Whether it is on general news sites or the organisations' own websites, there are direct appeals to donations, including listings of bank accounts in several currencies, to which the money can be transferred. Besides openly advertising for the cause, some sites also display pop-up windows asking users to support their Muslim brothers in the fight against Zionist and crusaders.

The Global Jihad Fund - a London-based organisation, whose aim, according to recounts of what has been on the website[114], is to facilitate the creation and flourishing of various jihad movements worldwide, by providing them with the necessary funds for weapons and training[115] - has been one of the most active in online fundraising. According to Steve Emerson, this organisation maintained a relatively sophisticated fundraising network in London, allegedly to aid international Islamic "holy warriors" and its website still offers "jihad military training" in several undisclosed locations.

There are other ways to gather money on the Internet. Criminal activities such as credit card fraud or trafficking are amongst the most common. In an article written by Michael Elliot for Time Magazine (US), one of France's top investigators in anti-terrorism research, Jean-Francois Ricard, was quoted saying *"many Islamist terror plots in Europe and North America were self-financed through criminal activity--mainly stolen-car trafficking and, above all, credit-card fraud."*[116]

The detention of Irhabi 007, al Qaeda recruit mentioned earlier, was, in part, possible due to a trace of stolen credit cards. In July 2005, Irhabi 007 placed an order for a domain site with a web provider in Los Angeles (USA) using a credit card stolen from someone with a Paris address. The domain designation consisted of a string of

[114] Even though the address has been listed in several works, it was not detectable at the time of the redaction of this chapter.
[115] Emerson, "Fund-Raising *Methods and Procedures for International Terrorist Organization",* 24.
[116] Michael Elliot, "Al-Qaeda: Reeling Them In", Time, 23 September 2002, 6/6. Accessed August 29, 2012. http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1003277,00.html

thirty-seven digits, all zeroes and ones. Two days later, he places a similar order, now using a credit card in the name of a woman in Britain. The person who ran the service provider suspected fraud and began to look into the files backed up from the first site. He recognized the names of some files as city names featured in news about Iraq. Though he couldn't read any for they were in Arabic, he watched the videos and soon realized they depicted the attackers point of view in strikes happening in Iraq. As he ran a trace on the IP addresses used to upload the sites he discovered they came from Saudi Arabia and United Kingdom. The information was forwarded to the FBI, the CIA and the Department of Homeland Security, leading to Irhabi's detection and later arrest.

4. Cyberplanning and Data Mining

Evidence gathered by several authorities and experts since 9/11 suggests terrorists use the Internet to plan their operations and al Qaeda, according to Jarret Brachman, has increasingly looked to the Internet as a way of shaping military operations in the battlefield.[117] Computers used by terrorist operatives seized by authorities since then show the organisation had been collecting intelligence on possible targets and sending encrypted messages. The Internet allows them to anonymously communicate, command and control resources, as well as coordinating attack options.

Timothy Thomas defines this *cyberplanning* as *"the digital coordination of an integrated plan stretching across geographical boundaries that may or may not result in bloodshed"*[118] and considers it might even constitute a more important terrorist tool than cyberterrorism. This has not gone unnoticed by the authorities who nowadays monitor all possible *jihadi* movement online such as the use of email, chatrooms, online magazines, cell phone videos, CD-ROMs, videogames, and even the deployment of remote triggered improvised explosive devices (IEDs). However, Brachman alerts jihadi web users are more and more aware of attempts by governments to monitor their behaviour. In order to heighten operational security in the use of technology, jihadis have started posting protocol about safe ways to use technology.[119]

[117] Brachman, "High-Tech Terror," 154.
[118] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet," 113.
[119] Brachman, "High-Tech Terror," 156.

4.1 Planning online

One of the key elements of using the Internet as a planning tool is anonymity. And not just the possibility of creating email accounts with false information or even creating them to use them once and deactivating them afterwards. The Internet allows for the transfer of huge amounts of information, virtually undetected by those who are not expecting to see it. The Steganography Analysis and Research Center (USA) has detected over 1,100 steganography applications.[120] These applications allow, amongst others, to hide text in spam messages, sound files, coding of images, tampered executable files or fragmented text in blog postings. There is also software that permits users to exchange encrypted messages amongst themselves, whose encryption keys are extremely hard to break for they are constantly changing.

And, when all else fails, psychological warfare works. One of the most explored tactics in cyberplanning is the creation of an atmosphere of virtual fear as it can be used to spread disinformation. Considering the dimension of web audiences, the mere suggestion that something might happen is enough to generate panic. News reports alone are capable of making a terrorist organisation much larger and more capable than it really is, leading audiences to believe that several thousands of operatives are still active in the al Qaeda network on a daily basis just because al Qaeda says so.[121] It may also be used to divert attention from an actual attack.

The Internet is a superior command and control mechanism, enabling planning, coordinating and executing operations, even if the operatives are geographically dispersed. Zanini and Edwards, exploring the role of the IT in command and control activities, clarify

> "*Using the Internet for communication can increase speed of mobilization and allow more dialogue between members, which enhances the organization's flexibility, since tactics can be adjusted more frequently. Individuals with a common agenda and goals can form subgroups, meet at a target location, conduct terrorist operations, and then readily terminate their relationships and redisperse."*[122]

[120] http://www.sarc-wv.com/news/press_releases/2012/safdb_v314.aspx
[121] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet," 115.
[122] Zanini and Edwards, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age", 36.

A relevant aspect of this method of coordination is the fact that it geographically distances those planning the attack from those executing it and, ultimately, from the targets.

4.2 Data Mining

Like most of us, terrorists also have access to all information made available online. And, in societies that fully enjoy their freedom of speech, that information is often too much. The difference lies in the intent with which one procures said information – that which is not sensitive to us may reveal to be very useful to a terrorist. Therefore, it is not difficult to assume the Internet is used to gather information on potential targets such as imaging data, maps, diagrams, schedules or employee listings, amongst others, for crucial facilities and networks. And that which can't be freely consulted, can be hacked – theft and manipulation of sensitive data by terrorist organisations are a grave concern for most authorities involved with cybersecurity and data protection, especially when considering the hypodissertation of the integration of cyber and physical attacks. This also enables terrorists to evaluate and ascertain counterterrorism measures in place – as an example, Thomas recounts *"one captured al Qaeda computer contained engineering and structural architecture features of a dam, enabling al Qaeda engineers and planners to simulate catastrophic failures."*[123]

Word search in online news articles and journals is another technique for ascertaining the existence of counterterrorism measures and their updates or for the detection of vulnerabilities in systems and infrastructures, like security checkpoints or contraband routes. It also allows the study of law enforcement techniques in order to better plan a given operation.

Data mining is used in demographic profiling as well. The compilation and analysis of Internet user demographics is what allows terrorist to identify those with actual sympathy for the cause and more receptive, towards whom they adjust their messages of indoctrination, recruitment and fundraising purposes.

All things considered, there is no doubt modern terrorists have embraced the fact that information is an asset and, as such, have been sparing no expenses in exploring the full potential of the Internet as a source.

[123] Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet," 118.

Conclusions

This research has sought to demonstrate the various ways in which al Qaeda employs the Internet and new media. The objective was to reveal the communicational power and strategic significance of these technologies in the progression of a dispersed but organic movement that has shown itself to be capable of adapting to changes in political and geographical environments, as well as posing an increasing threat to counterterrorism endeavours.

Terrorist goals are no longer achieved only through the indiscriminate killing of innocent people or merely by blowing up things: there is a very close and functioning link between terror acts and media exposure, which is no longer a secret. Manuel Castells, in his analysis of al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, observed that ultimately, the action is geared toward human minds and towards transforming consciousness. If the local and global media are the means of communication through which the public mind is formed, action has to be media oriented, it has to be spectacular, providing good footage that the whole world can see, as if it was a Hollywood movie, for this is what has trained the human mind in our times.[124]

The examples presented here are only a foretaste of al Qaeda's ability to secure a strong and increasingly menacing Web presence, that has become progressively dependent on a virtual army of *jihadi* propagandists and other skilled individuals who, upon request or voluntarily, devote themselves to mastering new technologies and devote their work to the pursuit of al Qaeda objectives. These findings also reveal a rising awareness on behalf of the global *jihadi* movement regarding the power of the Internet and, thus, a growing concern with instrumental proficiency in the use of computers and new media technologies.

As with every other media-savvy political actor, the importance of the Net lies not only in the content of the messages that are transmitted but also in the manner in

[124] Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (2nd Edition) (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 139. Also on this matter, *see* Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf. *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage Publications, 1982)

which this message is presented. Al Qaeda lead strategists, such as Abu Musab al-Suri, have long understood the importance of this[125] and have began urging propagandists not only to share the ideology but to teach others to do it themselves. Furthermore, jihadist groups devote increasingly more energy attempting to connect with a western or westernised audience, a fact that is evident in the development of new communication and media contents whose purpose is to get closer to these audiences, as well as to demoralize and evoke fear in global public opinion. This new communicative priority has been implemented through the progressive adaptation to the characteristics of the Western public. A possible explanation could be the limited effectiveness of the propaganda directed at the Muslim world. Al Qaeda is attempting to enlarge and diversify its audience and, in this manner, to expand its pool of potential recruits and sympathizers.

Nevertheless, propaganda is just one aspect of the *jihadi* machine online. Al Qaeda's awareness of the power of the Internet does not stop at the dissemination of its ideology to mass audiences and with its ability to express its views about the non-Islamic West, free from traditional media constraints. The strategic objective of the jihadi's use of the Internet is the riskiest and most concerning over the long term.

The Internet is an astounding command-and-control mechanism. It not only eliminates geographical constraints – inherent to international clandestine movements such as Islamic terrorist organisations that not only face great difficulties in securing precious state support, but also have to coordinate several dispersed cells throughout the globe – it enables these dispersed terrorist entities to communicate and coordinate their tasks, simply by reducing transmission time and operational costs. Also, having substantially increased the scope and complexity of the information that can be shared, terrorists are now able to gather crucial information about possible targets, select and adapt to several target audiences, maintain uncensored debates about ideologies and objectives, offer training sessions and extensive instructive material on how to single-handily carry jihad and even keep up with latest announcements of new counterterrorism measures.

Information technologies are, then, highly advantageous for groups whose elements are geographically dispersed – as these can be used to plan, coordinate and

[125] See Brynjar Lia. *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

execute operations, it increases the speed of mobilisation and allows for dialogue among dispersed tendencies, enhancing the organisations' flexibility and political relevance. This elasticity, according to Zanini and Edwards, allows individuals with a common agenda to form subgroups that meet at a target location and conduct terrorist operations, only to readily terminate their relationships and disperse again.[126]

This brings us to another dimension of Islamic terror's web presence: the role of the Internet as an enabler agent in a process of radicalisation. Al Qaeda, as does the *jihadi* movement in general, is not only using technological tools to recruit new members: it is using the Internet and new technologies to radicalise and empower new recruits, reshaping their general worldview and feeding them *do-it-yourself* instructions for everything one might need to carry out individual jihad, from bomb-making to urban guerrilla techniques. This means that, apart from 'traditional' recruitment of prospective members, the Internet paved the way to a new set of radicalised individuals: homegrown terrorists. A web of lone wolves who rely on the Internet to gather with like-minded individuals, compensating for the loneliness, isolation or emotional alienation provoked by their espoused ideals and worldviews. The Internet then functions as a surrogate for the estrangement of family, friends and/or territory. The Internet hypes this satisfaction for it soon creates a network of compatible individuals, available at any time, from anywhere in the world, from which it becomes possible to obtain relevant information on joining the jihad. The Internet might reveal itself to be extremely advantageous in the mobilisation of part-time terrorists – individuals who, despite not belonging to any particular terrorist movement, support their agendas and make use of malicious software and other instructions made available online.

Clearly, all of this is only possible because, apart from developing media savvy, modern Islamic terrorists have also learned to leverage the Internet's lack of regulatory mechanisms, as well as to circumvent the counterterrorism measures put in place so far. This is another aspect in which this decentralised type of organisation grants them an advantage over traditionally structured terrorist organisations: in order to act, states must first bypass all the necessary bureaucracies to put a concerted and comprehensive response in action. Intelligence sharing is a very complicated process that appears to slow down the various agencies' responses to terrorist movements, thus causing them to permanently having to settle with being one step behind terrorist organisations.

[126] Zanini and Edwards, "The Networking of Terror in the Information Age", 36.

According to Larry King, we will, in fact, always be one step behind, for terrorists are the only ones to know where attacks are going to take place.[127] Is regulating the Internet a valid option in attempting to put a halt to this surge of jihadi web presence or their exploitation of modern technologies? According to Tsfati and Weimann, it is a very problematic issue in technological terms, legally complex and ethically intricate. According to these prominent experts, such efforts would not be entirely successful and could even be counterproductive: the limitation to freedom of speech and the regulatory control of an open channel (such as the Internet) would be considerably more harmful, in terms of public relations, than the damage these sites and media outlets could ever cause. The mere fact that all attempts to deactivate these sites have, at best, been temporary constitutes a reliable indicator that further blockade attempts would not be productive.[128] And they are probably right. It would be more rewarding to take advantage of the wellspring of information made available to us by the public character of media outlets online and use these on efforts to deter terrorists. If they are pushed into anonymity and hiding again, how are we expected to gather the necessary information to prevent future terrorist acts? The dismantling of these sites would impede any and all attempts of content analysis. Nevertheless, it is not to be taken lightly that terrorists are using the Internet to very publicly indoctrinate as many possible recruits as they can and that their capacity to fully train a person sitting behind a desk anywhere in the world makes it even harder to predict where these organisations may strike next. Either way, a very important first step is indeed scrutinising just how the Internet is helping them achieve their goals. Only then will it be possible to better assess the impact of new counterterrorism measures.

Can these movements' presence on the Internet be considered a solid indicator of the actual health of the modern Islamic terrorist movement itself? Not likely. Even though it is very relevant that there are different investments being made, namely, in harnessing the power of new technologies, the Internet, due to its characteristics as a mass medium, severely amplifies events and political messages. A great deal of the contents are fished from one site, to be published in another, and some are produced by different organisations, only to be subtitled and voiced-over and re-published as Islamic terrorist productions. Even though videos and messages appear to be popping up

[127] Larry King. "Global Challenges & the Future of Democracy." Conference presented at Estoril Conferences – Global Challenges, Local Answers, Estoril, Portugal, May 4-6, 2011.
[128] Tsfati and Weimann, "www.terrorism.com," 328.

everyday unrelentingly, it is important not to overlook the fact that in the same way these contents are made public, disputes, debates and disagreements inside the movement are also very public and very exposed, raising questions about the cohesiveness of the organisations' leadership. Hence, their efforts could be undermined by potentially contradictory or even paradoxical effects. The same mechanisms and techniques that enhance al Qaeda's power may also contribute to its increased political debilitation.

Understanding virtual relationships, however, seems to be as important as knowing the actual locations and modus operandi of terrorist groups. Using the available information to establish the links between who orders and who carries out is the only way to understand the dynamics of the modern Islamic terrorist movement. Knowing their priorities is, therefore, a critical step in the evaluation of what might deter them, which is why it becomes vital to comprehend that what is being said and how it is being divulged. As the Internet and new media technologies become more sophisticated with each day that passes we must understand how Islamic terrorism is evolving and have a sense of what will happen in the future. Indeed, we need far more information than what we have today. Most importantly, we need to understand how they get their information and how their interpret it. This study addressed this urgent epistemological necessity.

The future will reveal whether this is merely an apparent strategic shift or an actual change of course and will, undoubtedly, shed a light on the strategy and direction of jihadist mobilisation efforts.

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