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Al-Qaeda's Virtual Crisis

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AL-QA'IDA'S VIRTUAL CRISIS

AKIL N AWAN AND MINA AL-LAMI

The fight Al-Qa'ida has waged against the West has been fought on a virtual as well as physical battlefield. Recently, many jihadist strongholds and hiding places on the web have been shut down. This article charts the growth and the current crisis of Al-Qa'ida's 'media jihad'.¹

Over the last five years, the ideological conflict that underlies the 'Global War on Terror' has been conducted almost entirely on the Internet's battlefield. As early as 2001, prominent jihadist ideologues like Ayman Al-Zawahiri, acutely aware of their increasingly marginalised status *vis-à-vis* the mainstream media as a consequence of 'the media war on terrorism',² appealed:

we must get our message across to the masses of the nation and break the media siege imposed on the jihad movement. This is an independent battle that we must launch side by side with the military battle.³

Bemoaning this 'media siege', they increasingly turned to the Internet, which quickly surpassed all other media forms in becoming the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of the culture and ideology of jihadism.⁴

Background

The history of jihadism on the web can be traced back further still to the early 1990s, with the Bosnian War (1992–95) providing the initial impetus and *raison d'être* for the nascent jihadist web presence. As revelations of pervasive war crimes committed by Serbian forces against Bosniak civilians began to emerge, foreign volunteers flocked to Bosnia and fought alongside the Bosnian army as part of the El-Mujahid Brigades. The popular perception of an iniquitous UN arms embargo preventing the Bosniaks from defending themselves,

starkly juxtaposed with the altruistic actions of young Muslim men from across the globe, perceived as having forsaken families, careers and even their lives in order to defend their Muslim brethren from further Serb atrocities, generated immense public support for these 'Mujahideen freedom fighters'.⁵ The renewed vigour of a popularly conceived *legitimate defensive jihad* necessitated media organs that would publicise and convey

Early jihadist websites catered specifically to a thirst for news media

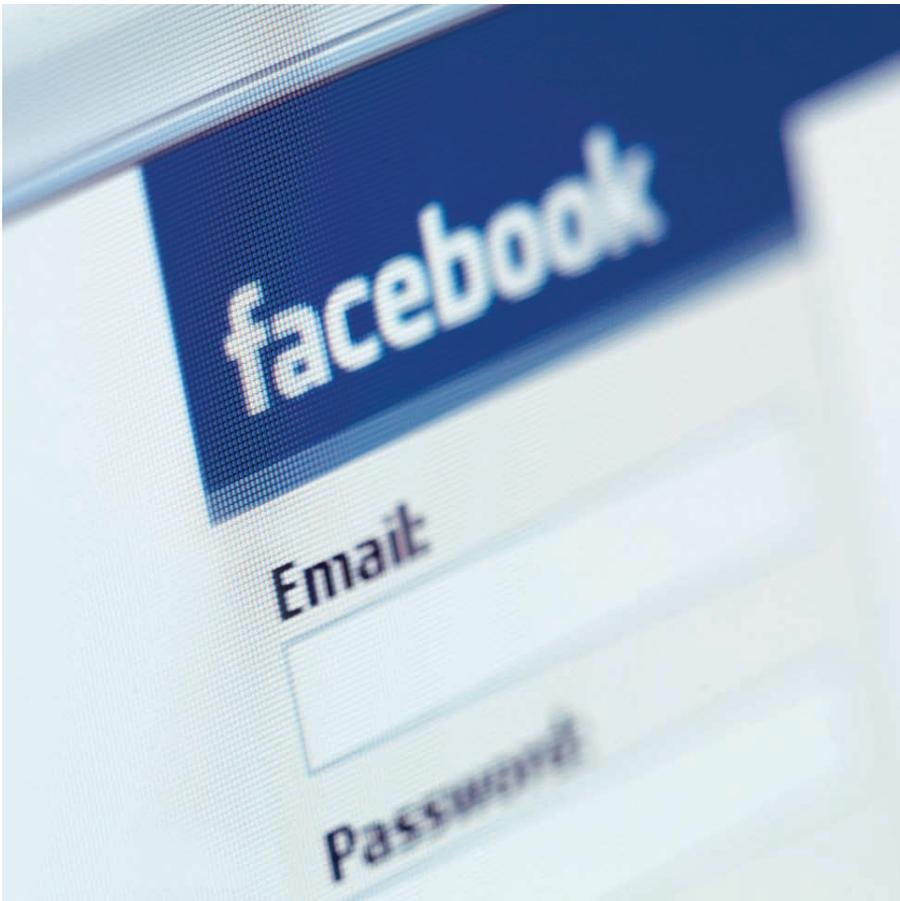
news of the 'heroic exploits of the Mujahideen' to sympathetic Muslim audiences around the world. Indeed early jihadist websites catered specifically to this news media need, as epitomised by the English language Azzam.com,⁶ which described itself solely as 'an independent media organisation providing authentic news and information about Jihad and the Foreign Mujahideen everywhere'.⁷ The virtual media jihad continued to gain momentum throughout the 1990s despite the denouement of the Bosnian conflict in 1995, as by this time the jihadist media front had simply diverted its gaze to the First Chechen War (1994–96) and other nascent peripheral conflicts in the Muslim world. The developments of the jihadist media apparatus during this period were truly groundbreaking, with independent media groups such as the seminal Islamic Media Center (IMC) not only producing and distributing online material,⁸ at a time when the Internet

was still in its infancy,⁹ but also employing e-mail distribution lists to disseminate material to a diffuse but highly targeted audience. These pioneering developments laid the groundwork for the ascendancy of the later media jihad, and are recognised and lauded as such by contemporary jihadist strategist Abu Musab Al-Suri in his *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*.¹⁰ Nevertheless, despite being ahead of their time, jihadist media websites during this period inevitably adhered to a Web 1.0 paradigm, in some cases as a result of their avowed limited remit of news provision, but principally due to technological limitations of the time.

The late 1990s also witnessed Al-Qa'ida's first official foray into the virtual realm with its now infamous Alneda.com, which also sought to provide news coverage from Muslim conflict zones, but crucially located this reportage within a broader jihadist ideological framework with a conspicuously proselytising bent. To this end, they published key statements, communiqués, works, and treatises from leading jihadist ideologues, including Osama bin Laden's infa-

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mous twin 'fatwas' upon which the new global jihad was crucially predicated.¹¹ More insidiously, Alneda.com is also believed to have held steganographi-



cally encrypted operational information online, in addition to surreptitiously directing trusted members to more clandestine websites.¹² Concomitantly, this evolutionary phase of the jihadist media front also witnessed the appropriation of early Web 2.0 capabilities, with the development of rudimentary online forums and blogs, where users not only passively consumed online content but actively contributed to its creation too.

Post 9/11

Whilst the 1998 twin terrorist bombings of US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi focused greater attention of security services on the communicative and operational uses of the Internet by Al-Qa'ida and affiliated groups, it was only following the momentous events of 9/11 that the jihadist media presence really became an object of intense international scrutiny. Indeed Alneda.com, was shut down at least three times in 2002 alone due to denial-of-service (DoS) attacks.¹³ On each occa-

sion a major news agency had investigated the website in relation to a story and contacted the Internet Service Provider (ISP) for comment, who then balked at the prospect of continuing to host

It was only following the momentous events of 9/11 that the jihadist media presence really became an object of intense international scrutiny

the 'terrorist content' in the new security climate.¹⁴ Shortly thereafter, Alneda.com's subsequent incarnation was then famously usurped by American porn-site owner Jon Messner for five days in August 2002 before site administrators became aware of what had transpired, at which point he replaced the site with

the slogan 'Hacked, tracked and now owned by the USA'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Alneda.com proved remarkably resilient, and despite losing its domain name, continued to operate until at least 2003 as an Internet parasite by furtively embedding itself deep within the seemingly innocuous sub-directories of multiple oblivious host websites.¹⁶ Messner's tentative successes inspired others to follow suit and anti-jihadist cyber-vigilantes and amateur sleuths, unfettered by official governmental qualms over the infringement of constitutional guarantees for freedoms of speech, and occasionally employing illegal methods, emerged in the renewed patriotic vigour of the post-

Many sites were fleeting and disappeared within weeks or months

9/11 milieu. Notable amongst these was the 'Internet Haganah' which, describing itself as a 'global intelligence network dedicated to confronting internet activities by Islamists and their supporters, enablers and apologists',¹⁷ employed a 'name and shame' strategy by identifying site hosts and administrators and then informing the ISP on the nature of the material in question. Jihadist sites were often then suspended by their ISPs on the basis of unearthed content that violated their terms of service, sustained lobbying campaigns from other site visitors, or even implied threats of prosecution for materially aiding and abetting terrorists. In other cases, jihadist sites were frequently hacked, usurped using programmes like 'Snapback', or experienced incessant DoS attacks. In the three years since its inception in 2002 until 2005, the Internet Haganah alone claimed to have been responsible for, or assisted in, the shutdown of more than 600 sites it claims were 'linked to terror'.¹⁸ Indeed, so pervasive was this sustained assault that it resulted in perhaps one of the most enduring features of virtual jihadist media, namely their almost ephemeral nature. Many sites were fleeting and disappeared within weeks or months, resurfacing

shortly thereafter under different names and guises, and with different ISPs. US security officials, who had adroitly monitored key websites over prolonged periods for intelligence purposes, were often exasperated by these Internet vigilantes, whose reckless actions inevitably drove the groups further underground and away from surveillance.¹⁹

During this period, security services also began to take an active interest in those suspected of running jihadist websites and in December 2003, thirty-one year old British IT support specialist, Babar Ahmad, was arrested under the UK Terrorism Act 2000 in connection with Azzam.com.²⁰ Highlighting the inadequacy of existing terrorism legislation that was unable to prosecute against an inchoate offence of 'glorifying terrorism' (controversially later remedied with the Terrorism Act 2006), he was released six days later without charge, albeit after allegedly being severely brutalised in police custody.²¹ Nevertheless, the gravity with which governments began to view the jihadist media threat warranted Ahmad's re-arrest eight months later, following a US extradition request on charges of providing material support to terrorists and conspiring to kill persons in a foreign country.²² In a damning indictment of British justice, as of February 2009, and still awaiting potential extradition, Babar Ahmad had been held for over four years without trial or charge by British authorities, as the UK Extradition Act 2003 did not require the US to provide *prima facie* evidence when requesting the extradition of UK residents.

The systematic disruption or removal of important jihadist websites, and the pending prosecution of individuals responsible for key sites, was so successful that websites which appeared unscathed by the campaign inevitably faced suspicion. For example, the jihadist news provider Jihadunspun.com, had been so credible in its stated role that it was at one point appearing within the top five search results on Google for the term 'jihad', and included in Google News as a bona fide 'news provider', much to the chagrin of US officials and anti-jihadist civic groups.²³ Moreover, Jihadunspun.com had continued to publish content with apparent impunity

since its inception, and in spite of the fact that the site owner was surprisingly candid with her own personal details.²⁴ Consequently, this observation combined with the sophisticated and high-end production values led some jihadist sites, such as Azzam.com and Maktabah Al-Ansaar, to cast aspersion on the site's authenticity in 2002, claiming that it was a CIA front designed to monitor and even entrap potential jihadists.²⁵

Transition to Web 2.0

The sustained assault on the jihadist media front resulted in a climate of anxiety amongst Al-Qa'ida and jihadist website administrators, precipitating the realisation that the virtual jihadist presence needed to be decentralised in the same way that it was becoming physically,²⁶ such that attacks on any one node would not render the entire system defunct. Moreover, the change of strategy would also need to ensure they would be sufficiently buffered from any potential legal ramifications of hosting jihadist content

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in future. The glaringly obvious solution to both circumventing culpability *vis-à-vis* online content, and decentralising media efforts entailed little more than completing the transition to Web 2.0, thus delegating responsibility for user-generated content to a suitably large and diffuse body of anonymous web users instead, who would ensure the longevity of the message irrespective of attacks on any single node. Although Internet access did leave a 'digital signature' of sorts, issues of traceability of users were easily overcome through various means such as the use of anonymous peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, 'anonymising' software that masked a computer's actual IP address, and the use of proxy servers which acted as intermediaries between users and host servers thus masking users' identities. Consequently, employment of such methods effectively rendered users

untraceable and indeed many jihadist web forums actively encouraged users to employ many of these methods as a safety precaution before engaging in any potentially incriminating virtual activity.²⁷

The transition to Web 2.0 precipitated the ascendancy of public and semi-public, password-protected forums (*mundadayat*), which implicitly shifted the onus of responsibility for content from administrators to users. Site administrators further absolved themselves of liability by posting disclaimers such as this one from the Al-Hesba forum which, somewhat conspicuously on an Arabic forum, was offered in English: 'The postings in the discussion forums do not undergo monitoring, and do not necessarily reflect Alhesbah's views. Alhesbah claims no responsibility or liability to third party links or images contained within users' posts.'²⁸ The disclaimer from the Mujahedon.net forum was even more guarded: 'The postings in the discussion forums do not undergo monitoring, and do not necessarily reflect Mujahedon.net views. Mujahedon.net claims NO responsibility or liability to third party links or images contained within users' posts. We do not encourage any kind of "terrorism" and we follow Swedish law and order i.e. freedom of speech.'²⁹

For many years a select clique of Arabic, password-protected forums provided the key arena for jihadist media, with important communiqués, statements, interviews, books, manuals and audiovisual content appearing first and (sometimes exclusively) on them. In addition to the provision of content, forums also served as an important communications medium for the global cadres of jihad and their wider audiences, which aside from facilitating the discussion and dissemination of new material, also allowed 'outreach' facilities through which the uninitiated were able to express discontent and discover a channel for its expression.³⁰ Despite the presumed egalitarian nature of Web 2.0 spaces, Jihadist media production on key forums was hierarchically organised and strictly regulated, with actors (e.g. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq – ISI), producers (e.g. Al-Furqan), distributors (e.g. Al-Fajr), and specific forum posters controlling



Al-Qa'ida's second in command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri.

every stage of the process.³¹ Thus users on these forums were often more akin to traditional categories of passive media consumers that appeared inimical to the revolution in audience roles heralded by Web 2.0.

The meteoric rise and growth of jihadist forums was also accompanied by the rapid adoption of other Web 2.0 tools that fostered more genuine collaboration and participation, including file-sharing portals, podcasts, personal spaces, social networking sites, virtual worlds and the blogosphere. This was hardly surprising considering that Web 2.0 applications increasingly became the most popular sites on the Web during this period.³² Mainstream file-sharing platforms like YouTube.com, which hosted jihadist videos, such as statements from Al-Qa'ida leaders and IED attacks on Coalition forces, were instrumental in facilitating the wider dissemination of jihadist content, and significantly, outside of its traditional ambit too. For example, the video beheading of Nick Berg was downloaded from Ogrish.com (a popular 'gore' site) a staggering 15 million times upon release,³³ which granted the material a considerably higher publicity profile than could have possibly been envisaged

by either perpetrators or subsequent disseminators of the act. Moreover, the dissemination of the culture, ideology and media of jihadism across communities on social networking sites like Orkut.com and Facebook.com, and virtual worlds like Second Life was significant in that these constituted novel arenas that appeared to be beyond the scope of official jihadist media organs. Consequently, the jihadist message, intended for, or only available to, smaller parochial audiences was increasingly granted much more diffuse audience penetration.

However, this diffuse dissemination of jihadist content across Web 2.0 platforms outside of the ambit of forums, was not necessarily welcomed by Jihadist media organs. Indeed, in September of 2006, Al-Boraq Media Institute published a detailed policy document entitled 'Media Exuberance' which sought to curtail the unsanctioned and 'exuberant' proliferation and production of unattributed jihadist media by freelance amateurs, which it felt was divesting key jihadist media organs (As-Sahab, Al-Fajr, Global Islamic Media Front etc.) of control over production, mediation and dissemination of jihadist content. The principal concerns appeared to have

been fears of unpolished and unprofessional content undermining the credibility of jihadist media and diverting attention from 'official' sources.³⁴

Growing unease over the popularity and apparent ubiquity of jihadist media in Web 2.0 arenas, and its putative role in processes of radicalisation amongst young Western Muslim diasporic audiences,³⁵ caused disproportionate alarm amongst not only Western governments and security services, but also within the media and thus broader society. Often with little understanding of the nature or function of jihadist content or the role of the Internet,³⁶ attempts were made to curtail the 'media exuberance' of jihadist sympathisers on mainstream Web 2.0 fora. For example, in 2006 following alerts from anti-jihadist groups, *USA Today* investigated some of the 'jihadist' communities hosted on the social networking website Orkut.com.³⁷ In light of this unwanted scrutiny, Google (who owned Orkut.com) felt compelled to symbolically delete some of the 'terrorism-related content' alongside a number of the more avowedly jihadist communities hosted there.³⁸ Indicative of the floundering uncertainty characteristic of this period, in another case from 2006,

The meteoric rise and growth of jihadist forums was also accompanied by the rapid adoption of other Web 2.0 tools

the very same organisation – Google – chose not to censor content on its leading weblog hosting service Blogspot.com, after it was accused of hosting several sites for actual terrorist groups such as Al-Qa'ida in Iraq.³⁹ In the wake of persistent complaints, Google responded by maintaining its policy of free expression, accepting that some of their blogs may be unpopular or deemed offensive and instead posted disclaimers and warnings before flagged blogs that read: 'Some readers of this blog have contacted Google because they believe this blog's content is hateful. In general, Google

does not review nor do we endorse the content of this or any blog.⁴⁰

Lieberman Campaign

The most high profile campaign to curtail the activities of jihadist media on mainstream Web 2.0 fora emerged in May of 2008, when US Senator Joseph Lieberman wrote to Google urging them to 'immediately remove content produced by Islamist terrorist organizations from YouTube', which he suggested Al-Qa'ida and 'Islamist terrorist organizations use to disseminate their propaganda, enlist followers, and provide weapons training – activities that are all essential to terrorist activity'.⁴¹ His lobbying campaign was predominantly based upon the findings of the 2008 report 'Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Home-grown Terrorist Threat' by the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, which he himself chaired.⁴² He further pressed, 'this should be a straightforward task since so many of the Islamist terrorist organizations brand their material with logos or icons identifying their provenance. In addition, please explain what changes Google plans to make to the YouTube community guidelines to address violent extremist material and how Google plans to enforce those guidelines to prevent the content from reappearing'. Google initially refused to honour Lieberman's request of removing all such material, defending the decision on their blog: 'While we respect and understand his views, YouTube encourages free speech and defends everyone's right to express unpopular points of view. We believe that YouTube is a richer and more relevant platform for users precisely because it hosts a diverse range of views, and rather than stifle debate, we allow our users to view all acceptable content and make up their own minds.'⁴³ However, this statement was somewhat premature as Google appeared to acquiesce to Lieberman's relentless lobbying only four months later,⁴⁴ with the announcement that YouTube had in fact revised its community guidelines to dissuade the uploading of material that would fall under Lieberman's new 'potentially radicalising' terrorist rubric.⁴⁵ While many videos advocating or depicting violence

were removed, and a number of users with usernames explicitly lionising jihad or jihadist leaders had their accounts suspended,⁴⁶ most jihadist videos which did not contain 'violent or hate speech content' were not removed as they did not violate community guidelines.

Forum Closures

Despite this new security environment in which growing concerns over virtual radicalisation and recruitment came to the fore, jihadist forums continued to operate, at least superficially, with apparent impunity. Behind the scenes however, the innate nature and liability disclaimers of jihadist forums, which provided some protection from potential incrimination, failed to furnish immunity from the ongoing anti-jihadist web assault. Consequently the roster of top forums used by Al-Qa'ida changed on a regular

'CIA agents and Al-Fajr experts engaged in one of the fiercest electronic battles in the history of cyberwar'

basis, subject to site closures, transfers and hacking attempts. Nevertheless, as a genre, jihadist forums survived and continued to wholly dominate the virtual jihadist landscape. In fact, the stark juxtaposition of the jihadists' success in propounding their narrative, and the dismal failure of the Global War on Terror to either silence or counter this message, engendered an aura of invincibility around these forums. In terms of propagandistic value alone, they became the bane of governments everywhere, and apparently little could be done to mitigate their effects. However, contrary to all expectations, the jihadist forums suffered a momentous reversal on 10 September 2008, when, without warning, the three main forums sponsored by Al-Fajr Media Centre (Al-Qa'ida's key media wing), Al-Ikhlaas, Al-Firdaws, and Al-Buraq, suddenly ceased to operate. The immediate antecedent to the forums' disruption appeared to have been the imminent release of Al-Qa'ida's latest video production by As-Sahab,

'Result of Seven Years of Crusades', which was designed to coincide with the commemorations of 9/11 and had been eagerly anticipated on jihadist forums. The wave of unprecedented closures may also have been linked to the arrest of five key individuals on the same day by the Saudi Ministry of Interior for propagating terrorist thought over the Internet, using numerous pseudonyms and accounts to promote and disseminate Al-Qa'ida's ideas on multiple jihadist forums.⁴⁷ It is entirely feasible that these individuals were key forum administrators whose physical incarceration not only spelt the end of their virtual personas, but also the ability to resurrect the forums for which they were responsible. Whilst a statement from the Al-Fajr Media Centre rushed to assure its followers that the downing of the three sites was due to 'technical problems', members on other forums fulminated against the 'vicious attack', which they claimed originated variously with the 'Anglo-Americans, Zionist-Crusaders or Saudis'.⁴⁸ One prominent article posted on numerous forums, entitled 'The film that downed the three sites' suggested that: 'While 9/11 2008 seemed to be a quiet and normal day to many, there was turmoil behind the scenes. CIA agents and Al-Fajr experts engaged in one of the fiercest electronic battles in the history of cyberwar'.⁴⁹ Moreover, it suggested the attack had been prompted by the release of the video to the CIA from Al-Jazeera, who had been sent a copy ahead of its release in the expectation that they would broadcast the video in full.⁵⁰

Despite the setback, the delayed video did eventually surface on other forums and file-sharing platforms (including YouTube), albeit after the all important commemorative date of 9/11 had passed. While this strategic blow to Al-Qa'ida's media capabilities was widely lauded, it was not accompanied by attendant claims of responsibility. Consequently, speculation was rife over who might be responsible, with a number of potential culprits including state bodies (mainly USA, UK, Israel and Saudi Arabia), counter-terrorism groups, anti-jihadist vigilantes, Shia groups, and even Al-Qa'ida itself, who, it was suggested, felt that their media was proving far

too revelatory in terms of intelligence information.

The disruption of these three key forums severely curbed the Jihadists' communication and dissemination capabilities, leaving only the veteran Al-Hesba forum to maintain Al-Qa'ida's official web presence. However, Al-Hesba, one of the earliest and by far most credible jihadist forums, proved incapable of absorbing the influx of virtual refugees from the closed forums, particularly as its strict security measures would only grant membership upon recommendation from a credible current member. Other less popular forums, such as Al-Faloja, and Shumookh Al-Islam⁵¹ attempted to fill the void by accepting the mass of virtual jihadist refugees, and consequently, both grew considerably in popularity and stature in subsequent weeks. Despite the availability of these alternative platforms, forum members were cognisant of the fact that jihadist media itself was now facing its gravest existential threat, and that lesser forums would inevitably be targeted next. Rather than meekly await the inevitable, they turned their attention to proactively countering the assault instead, and with the motto 'today your sites, tomorrow your lands and homes', *ad hoc* groups like the Internet Invasion Brigade of Al-Maghreb and Al-Nusra Media Brigade were formed specifically to engage in a virtual counter-initiative. This info-war would be conducted principally along three fronts:

- 1) by disseminating jihadist content through Web 2.0 file-sharing portals (focusing on uncensored sites like Megavideo.com, and Tubemogul.com, following YouTube's increasing censorship of jihadist content);
- 2) by identifying and invading sites in order to spread the jihadist ideology, with a particular focus on moderate Arabic forums and popular social networking sites like Facebook;
- 3) by hacking 'Western' sites.

However, whilst these plans were being formulated, more jihadist forums suffered closure and by late November 2008 Al-Hesba, Shumookh Al-Islam, Hanein and the English site Infovlad.net

were also rendered offline. The only credible jihadist forum still extant was now Al-Faloja, which quickly became oversaturated with new members and material. Still reeling from the loss of their virtual sanctuary and anticipating the imminent closure of Al-Faloja, members frantically searched for viable alternatives.

Facebook

The most popular solution propounded was the 'Invasion of Facebook' project, with key members stating, 'we shall start using Facebook as a new jihadi media tool and to counter the ongoing cyber-attack on jihadi websites. Through posting our productions and news on Facebook, we will be able to reach the American public opinion and make it see the facts its administration is trying so hard to hide'.⁵² The campaign stressed its unique advantages as an effective networking tool of global reach, illustrating this point with reference to Barack Obama's prolific use of Facebook during his successful election campaign. Members advocating this strategy argued that it was entirely inconceivable that intelligence agencies could close Facebook, and in the event of specific Facebook group closures, would simply persist in constantly creating new groups and new accounts, in addition to invading other non-jihadist groups. The purpose of creating a group on Facebook, suggested one member on Al-Faloja, 'is not to introduce jihadi forum members to Facebook, but to introduce Facebook users to jihadi forums'.

The Facebook appeal received widespread support on Al-Faloja, with prominent animated advertisements and banners which read 'Al-Faloja forum invites you to invade Facebook', publicising the campaign. In a prescient move, senior members filled with a sense of foreboding asked fellow members to 'quickly subscribe to Facebook before all our forums are hacked', and on 12 December 2008, the plan finally came to fruition with the establishment of the Facebook group 'Knights of Al-Nusra Invasion'.⁵³ Barely a week later, on 19 December, Al-Faloja joined the growing list of closed jihadist forums. However, by this time the Facebook group membership had proliferated (with many members joining under their familiar *nom de guerres* from

jihadist forums), and the group provided an effective functional alternative within this otherwise censored environment. However, the tentative success of Knights of Al-Nusra Invasion was to be short-lived, and on 20 December, the burgeoning Facebook group itself was closed, leaving supporters completely bereft of exclusively jihadist virtual arenas. However, in a rapidly changing environment, Shumookh Al-Islam reopened on the same day, and was followed a few days later by the reinstatement of Al-

Whether or not jihadist forums can re-emerge remains to be seen

Faloja on 23 December 2008. Nevertheless, as of January 2009, the four key jihadist forums – Al-Ikhlaas, Al-Firdaws, Al-Buraq and Al-Hesba – remain closed in the gravest indication of the future of Al-Qa'ida's official presence on the web.

Conclusion

Whether or not jihadist forums can re-emerge remains to be seen, however, even if they were to be resurrected or replaced in the immediate future, it could not remove the tarnished image of the impotent and fickle nature of a beleaguered movement. Conversely, the sustained assault on jihadist forums has not resulted in a jihadist information blackout that many security services naively anticipated, and jihadism, albeit in somewhat attenuated form, has survived and indeed spread unimpeded across other Web 2.0 platforms. Naturally, this diffuse web penetration has displayed some limitations, particularly as other Web 2.0 fora are unable to competently fulfil all of the functions served by forums. For example, popular file-sharing platforms cannot cater for non audiovisual content,⁵⁴ or serve as a communications medium. Moreover, the media environment provided by these platforms impose their own restrictions and censorship, and so while Youtube continues to host propagandistic films like As-Sahab's 'The Power of Truth' and 'Result of Seven Years of Crusades',⁵⁵ it nevertheless actively deletes graphic violence such as beheading videos or

footage of 'Juba the Sniper'. Perhaps of greater concern to jihadists has been the evolution of a far less controlled and non-hierarchical media environment, in which the role of jihadist authorities in setting the agenda amongst supporters and framing the 'jihad' is contested, and ultimately threatens to divest Al-Qa'ida leadership of all but a perfunctory spiritual role.

Ironically, this unheralded and unprecedented disruption of jihadist media may in fact make individuals more susceptible to radicalisation (at least in the short term), as divesting potential jihadists of both cathartic spaces to vent grievances and frustration,⁵⁶ and remov-

Jihadist media have shown remarkable resilience in the past

ing online fora in which to conduct 'media or information Jihad', may lead to a resort to actual physical violence and terrorism. For example, a posting on Shumookh Al-Islam (following its reinstatement on 20 December 2008) lamented, 'with the closure of all our sites, you [the Crusaders and their agents] have left us with no choice but to physically join the caravan of jihad. With no jihadi sites through which we can support our brother Mujahideen, there is no point for us to stay behind. We shall join them. Your act has shamed us and caused us to think "what is left for us?"' One of the previous perennial debates on jihadist forums had focused on the status of those who fail to

physically engage in the jihad. Such individuals had, in the past, been shamed for remaining behind and limiting their contribution to words rather than deeds. However, the rise of the 'media jihad' legitimised this choice, and media jihadists gained a modicum of respectability. However, in the absence of this arena, it seems inevitable that more virtual and media jihadists may feel compelled to relinquish their virtual personas in favour of real-life jihadist operations.

It is difficult to foresee the long-term effects of this sustained assault in such a rapidly shifting environment, however it would be eminently imprudent and premature to characterise this episode as the tolling of the death knell for jihadist media. Jihadist media have shown remarkable resilience in the past, in their ability to utilise new technological innovations, to adapt to the restrictive measures increasingly imposed upon them, and to continue to operate with apparent impunity in a hostile socio-political context. Although jihadist media is indeed facing its gravest existential threat to date, the crisis is liable to simply expedite the evolution of jihadist media that is already well underway. This evolutionary phase is witness to the inexorable transition from strictly regulated, hierarchical media provision in exclusively jihadist virtual arenas (which stifled debate and proverbially preached to the converted), to decentralised, autonomous, diffuse media production and dissemination over unregulated, and easily contested Web 2.0 platforms, to multifarious audiences outside of the traditional jihadist

ambit. Moreover, this trend parallels the evolution of the jihadist movement itself, which has metastasized across the globe as a social phenomenon – crucially amongst a younger, unaffiliated, and increasingly diasporic demographic for whom Al-Qa'ida represents little more than a motif.

The jihadists' goal, ultimately, is to communicate a meta-narrative – a prism through which they require the Muslim masses to view contemporary conflicts

It is difficult to foresee the long-term effects of this sustained assault

as part of a wider global attack on Islam, by what they perceive to be the *Zionist-Crusader alliance*, in response to which they claim to serve as the crucial vanguard. The unsanctioned and exuberant proliferation of jihadist media over diffuse Web 2.0 fora by autonomous individuals may serve to divest Al-Qa'ida of control of the message. But the overarching narrative is so alluringly simple, and so germane to current events, that its self-perpetuation is assured, so long as 'Islamic' conflicts remain unresolved and Muslim grievances persist. ■

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NOTES

- 1 This article draws on research undertaken for the Economic and Social Research Council research project: 'Legitimising the discourses of radicalisation: political violence in the new media ecology', led by Andrew Hoskins (University of Warwick), Ben O'Loughlin and Akil N Awan (both Royal Holloway University of London).
- 2 P Hammond, 'The Media War on Terrorism', *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* (Vol. 1, No.1, 2003), pp. 23–36.
- 3 Ayman Al-Zawahiri, *Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi (Knights Under the Prophet's Banner)*, Part 11, Section 1A (2001), <<http://alarabnews.com/alshaab/GIF/28-12-2001/Zawahri.htm>>.
- 4 A N Awan, 'Virtual Jihadist media: Function, legitimacy, and radicalising efficacy', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (Vol. 10, No. 3, 2007), pp. 389–408.
- 5 This was a common and uncontested designation at the time (just as it was during the 1980s to denote Muslim fighters during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), see for example US Assistant Secretary of State and Peace Envoy to Bosnia Richard Holbrooke's use of the term in a 2005 interview with PBS <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/bosnia/july-dec05/holbrooke_11-22.html>.
- 6 Azzam.com was run by the UK publishing house Azzam Publications and eponymously named after Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a highly influential

- Palestinian scholar and advocate for defensive jihad, particularly during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He also served as an early mentor for Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan.
- 7 The website is no longer active, however, an archived version of its mission statement can be found at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20000510182502/http://www.azzam.com/>>.
 - 8 Professional audiovisual content was naturally distributed on CD-ROMs in an era prior to high speed Internet access, broadband and live video streaming, but sold online through the websites, for example Azzam Publications produced and sold a number of titles, including the renowned 'Martyrs of Bosnia', and 'Russian Hell in the Year 2000'.
 - 9 Lia Brynjar, 'Jihadi Web Media Production', paper presented to 'Check the Web: Monitoring, research and analysis of jihadist activities on the Internet', Berlin, 26–27 February 2007, <www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00092/Jihadi_Web_Media_Pro_92100a.pdf>.
 - 10 Abu-Musab Al-Suri, 'Theory of Media and Incitement in the Call to Global Islamic Resistance' in *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, Chapter 8, section 8 (2005). Available at <<http://mobasher.110mb.com/AbuMusabSyrian.htm>>.
 - 11 These were the 1996 'Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places' and the 1998 'Statement from the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders', available at <<http://www.mideastweb.org/osamabinladen1.htm>>.
 - 12 G Weimann, United States Institute of Peace Special Report No. 116 'www.terror.net – How Modern Terrorism uses the Internet' (Washington, 2004), <<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr116.html>>.
 - 13 Denial-of-service (DoS) attacks are attempts to make a computer resource unavailable to its intended users, usually by saturating the target with external communications requests, such that it cannot respond to legitimate traffic, or responds so slowly as to be rendered effectively unavailable.
 - 14 Paul Eedle, 'Al-Qa'ida Takes Fight For "Hearts And Minds" To The Web', *Jane's Intelligence Review* (August 2002).
 - 15 Mike Boettcher, 'Pornographer says he hacked al Qaeda: "I wanted to do something...I know the Internet"', *CNN.com*, 9 August 2002, <<http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/08/08/porn.patriot/>>.
 - 16 Michelle Delio, 'Al-Qaeda website refuses to die', *Wired.com*, 7 April 2003, <<http://www.wired.com/techbiz/it/news/2003/04/58356>>.
 - 17 <<http://internet-haganah.com>>; *Haganah* is a Hebrew word meaning 'defence' that stems from the name of an early Zionist militia operating in British Mandate Palestine.
 - 18 Jonathan Lasker, 'Watchdogs sniff out terror sites', *Wired.com*, 25 February 2005, <<http://www.wired.com/politics/security/news/2005/02/66708>>.
 - 19 Carmen Gentile, 'Cyber Vigilantes Track Extremist Web Sites, Intelligence Experts Balk at Effort', *FoxNews.com*, 22 March 2008, <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,340613,00.html>>.
 - 20 The actual website, Azzam.com, had been officially shut down shortly after 9/11, however a number of mirror-sites persisted for some time thereafter.
 - 21 Although the resulting Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) inquiry concluded Ahmad's complaints could not be substantiated, the 'Free Babar Ahmad Campaign' maintains allegations of systematic abuse, see <<http://www.cageprisoners.com/prisoners.php?id=1268>>.
 - 22 USA v Babar Ahmad, *Affidavit in support of request for extradition of Babar Ahmad. No. 3:04M240(WIG)*, September 2004, <<http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/ct/Documents/AHMAD%20extradition%20affidavit.pdf>>.
 - 23 Akil N Awan, 'Virtual Jihadist media: Function, legitimacy, and radicalising efficacy'.
 - 24 The site was run by Khadija Abdul Qahaar (formerly Beverly Giesbrecht) from Vancouver, BC, Canada. A lengthy biography entitled *From Ashes to Light* chronicles her conversion to Islam and subsequent activism, <<http://www.jihadunspun.com/articles/20030911-ashes.to.light/>>.
 - 25 Interestingly, the claim was iterated by Rita Katz, director of the Search For International Terrorist Entities Institute in 2003; S Shane, 'The Web as al-Qaida's Safety Net', *The Baltimore Sun*, 28 March, 2003.
 - 26 See for example, Abu Musab Al-Suri's theory of 'nizam la tanzim' (system and not organisation) which advocates a 'leaderless resistance' in his 2005 *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*.
 - 27 The now defunct mujahedon.net forum provided detailed instructions on the use of such methods for new users in the form of a sticky post featured prominently on its homepage.
 - 28 <<http://www.alhesbah.com>>
 - 29 <<http://www.mujahedon.net>>
 - 30 Akil N Awan, 'Virtual Jihadist media: Function, legitimacy, and radicalising efficacy'.
 - 31 For a detailed study of the media production process, see Daniel Kimmage, *The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message* (RFE/RL: Washington, 2008).
 - 32 As of January 2009, a search on Alexa.com revealed that seven out of its top ten websites worldwide in terms of traffic ranking (excluding search engines) could be classified as belonging to Web 2.0.
 - 33 David Talbot, 'Terror's Server', in *Technology Review*, February 2005, <<http://www.technologyreview.com/web/14150/?a=f>>.
 - 34 David Kimmage, *The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message*.
 - 35 For more on processes of radicalisation, see A N Awan, 'Antecedents of Islamic Political Radicalism Among Muslim Communities in Europe', *Political Science & Politics* (Vol. 41, No. 1, 2008), pp. 13–17.
 - 36 In the most prominent example, Judge Peter Openshaw, presiding over the 2007

- trial of 'cyber-Jihadist' Younes Tsouli (aka *Irhaabi007*) interrupted proceedings to state, 'The trouble is I don't understand the language. I don't really understand what a website is'; Lewis Page, 'Judge in tech trial says he "doesn't know what a website is"' *TheRegister.com*, 17 May 2007, <http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/05/17/judge_website_shocker>.
- 37 K Hunt, 'Osama bin Laden fan clubs build online communities', in *USA Today*, 8 March 2006, <http://www.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-03-08-orkut-al-qaeda_x.htm>.
- 38 Examples of explicitly-named jihadist communities on *Orkut* included: 'Osama Bin Laden tHe HeRo', <<http://www.orkut.com/Community.aspx?cmm=3595115>>; and 'Jihad lovers', <<http://www.orkut.com/Community.aspx?cmm=31397322>>.
- 39 These include 'The Caliphate Voice Channel', <<http://cvc-online.blogspot.com>> and the previous incarnation, 'The Mujahideen Shura Council', <<http://albayanat.blogspot.com>>.
- 40 Dana Rosenblatt, 'Cyber-spies tracking terror on Web', *CNN.com*, 29 September 2006, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/09/28/internet.spying/>>.
- 41 For a copy of the letter see <<http://lieberman.senate.gov/newsroom/release.cfm?id=298006>>.
- 42 The report can be accessed at <http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf>.
- 43 See <<http://googlepublicpolicy.blogspot.com/2008/05/dialogue-with-sen-lieberman-on.html>>.
- 44 As a triumphant statement on Lieberman's website announced, see <<http://lieberman.senate.gov/newsroom/release.cfm?id=302825>>.
- 45 See <<http://uk.youtube.com/blog?entry=YMavGxHoewU>>.
- 46 For example see <<http://www.youtube.com/user/mujahidfesabeelillah>>.
- 47 'Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, 'Saudi Arrests Five Web "jihadis"', *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* 10 September 2008, <<http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=1&id=14016>>.
- 48 See for example <<http://www.alhesbah.com>>.
- 49 Taken from the 'Al-Jazeera talk' forum <<http://www.aljazeeraatalk.net/>>.
- 50 Al-Jazeera in fact only aired a small portion of the video and were fiercely criticised by Al-Qa'ida sympathisers on Arabic forums for 'manipulating' public opinion by broadcasting only parts of the video that made Al-Qa'ida appear 'as if it's descending from loss to defeat'.
- 51 This is spelt online as Shmo5alislam.net, using the phonetic system that replaces unique Arabic consonants with Latin numerals.
- 52 See for example <<http://www.al-faloja.info>>.
- 53 The now defunct group was available at <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=56004446512>>.
- 54 A particularly pertinent point considering that text materials account for the vast majority of jihadist media production; Kimmage's 2008 study of jihadist media showed that in July 2007, text products (statements, periodicals, essays, books) accounted for 90 per cent whilst videos accounted for only 9 per cent.
- 55 Available at <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=l_ooEt-yoaA> and <<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=puecNYmQXQc>> respectively.
- 56 A N Awan, 'Radicalization on the Internet? The Virtual Propagation of Jihadist Media and its Effects', in *RUSI Journal* (Vol. 152, No. 3, June 2007).