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2012

# Jihadi Ideology in the New-Media Environment

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Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/akil\\_awan/9/](https://works.bepress.com/akil_awan/9/)

**Awan, Akil N (2012) 'Jihadi ideology in the new-media environment', *Contextualising Jihadi Thought*. Deol, J. & Kazmi, Z. (eds.). London: C. Hurst & Co.**

## **Introduction**

The ideological conflict underlying the global “war on terror” is almost entirely predicated on issues of legitimacy, in which each side must convince supporters, neutral audiences and even enemy publics of the justness of its cause, the morality of its strategy, the legality of its methods, and the ethical nature of its vision for the future. To this end, the global jihadi movement has employed a range of legitimisation mechanisms within the new jihadi mediascape to propound its worldview successfully and has engaged in a number of strategies in order to manufacture legitimacy amongst audiences in the Muslim world and beyond. Whilst the new media environment has undoubtedly helped to support and legitimise jihadi ideology in the twenty-first century, it has also facilitated the rise of the ‘virtual jihad’ or the ‘media jihad’, which has increasingly gained prominence and credibility as a legitimate alternative to the traditional militaristic or ‘real’ jihad.

## **The successes and failures of the jihadi meta-narrative**

When referring to a putative global jihadi movement, it is easy to inadvertently imbue the movement with an aura of ideological coherence and homogeneity that is not actually borne out by reality. Instead, the global jihad attracts a surprisingly diverse group of individuals across a range of markers including nationality, ethnicity, language, culture, age, social background, educational level, economic status, religious affiliation, religiosity, and criminality.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the aspiration of many in counter-terrorism and academia to identify a socio-psychological profile for radical Islamist terrorists has met with little success. Instead, the ideological cohesion within this eclectic cohort, which provides some semblance of uniformity, is derived from the alluring simplicity of the jihadi meta-narrative. This over-arching

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<sup>1</sup> Akil N Awan, “Transitional Religiosity Experiences: Contextual Disjuncture and Islamic Political Radicalism,” in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European comparative perspective*, ed. T. Abbas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

narrative attempts to compel Muslim audiences to view contemporary conflicts through the prism of a wider historical global attack on Islam by a belligerent ‘Zionist-Crusader Alliance’, in response to which the Jihadists claim to serve as the sole and crucial vanguard. This narrative, as Scheuer, Lawrence and others have recognised,<sup>2</sup> has remained remarkably coherent and consistent over time. Osama bin Laden’s earliest message to the world in his 1996 *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places*,<sup>3</sup> often referred to as the ‘Ladenese Epistle’,<sup>4</sup> argued that

The people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist-Crusaders alliance and their collaborators; to the extent that the Muslim’s blood became the cheapest and their wealth as loot in the hands of the enemies. Their blood was spilled in Palestine and Iraq. The horrifying pictures of the massacre of Qana, in Lebanon are still fresh in our memory. Massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, Philippine, Fatani, Ogadin, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya and in Bosnia-Herzegovina took place, massacres that send shivers in the body and shake the conscience.<sup>5</sup>

The potency of the jihadis’ alluringly simple meta-narrative is bolstered by the stark and unflinching certainty of its interpretational framework for events that might otherwise be perceived as inexplicable. Audiences perplexed by the fact that terrorist attacks on 9/11, carried out predominantly by Saudi nationals at the behest of a sub-state terrorist entity, nevertheless resulted in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq may be inclined to find coherence and meaning in the acute clarity of the jihadis’ framework for interpreting current events. The jihadis’ reading of events has only been strengthened by revelations of forged dossiers and fabrications masking ulterior motives for the invasion of Iraq or perceived Freudian slips by Western leaders, epitomised by George W Bush’s unfortunate use of the term ‘crusade’<sup>6</sup> to describe his campaign against terrorism. Exploiting these controversies in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, bin Laden argued, “...the Bush-Blair axis claims that it wants to annihilate terrorism, but it is no longer a secret - even to

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Lawrence, (ed.) *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005); Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris* (Potomac, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> While Osama bin Laden had released other statements prior to the 1996 ‘fatwa’, these earlier messages were addressed to more local Saudi audiences such as the ulama (religious scholars) or included wider appeals to Arab or Muslim constituencies.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <http://www.mideastweb.org/osamabinladen1.htm>

<sup>6</sup> In a speech given on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2001, President George W Bush stated, “This is a new kind of - a new kind of evil. And we understand. And the American people are beginning to understand. This crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while.” Available at: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>

the masses - that it really wants to annihilate Islam.”<sup>7</sup> For the undecided, the damning indictments of the United States and Coalition partners in the light of torture claims, extraordinary rendition flights and the lurid excesses witnessed at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere have further undermined trust and delegitimised the state-sanctioned interpretation of current events.

Other contemporaneous events, which ostensibly have no bearing on the Global War on Terror but nevertheless contribute to the perception of a faith under siege, reinforce the jihadis’ contention that Islam itself is being targeted. A number of recent events appear to work in favour of Al-Qaeda’s assertion of a concerted assault on the Islamic faith, ranging from European restrictions on the veil to the deliberately provocative publication of Danish cartoons of Muhammad, the withdrawal of financial and other support from the democratically elected representatives of the Palestinians in Gaza, and the rise in Islamophobia in the US and Western Europe.<sup>8</sup> The Jihadist movement has sought to gain traction from many of these incidents, for example in December 2009, al-Qaeda’s media wing *al-Sahab* released a missive entitled “Letter to My Muslim Sisters” from Ayman al-Zawahiri’s wife Umayma in which she stated, “The campaign against the veil represents the most intense battle between Islam and unbelief”, no doubt seeking to influence the sentiments of many European Muslim women. Similarly, the former head of the *Islamic State of Iraq*, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, offered a substantial reward for the assassination of Danish cartoonist Lars Vilks in an online audio-statement, calling for the “liquidation of the cartoonist Lars who offended our prophet... We announce a reward of \$100,000 to anyone who kills this infidel criminal. This reward will be raised to \$150,000 if his throat is slit,”<sup>9</sup> But perhaps the greatest strength of the jihadis’ meta-narrative, is the fact that their Manichean worldview of believers and infidels; of a ‘land of war’ and a ‘land of Islam’, is echoed, and indeed corroborated by the equally diametrically opposing dichotomy offered by their ideological opponents, from the infamous Bush dictum “you’re either with us or against us”,<sup>10</sup> to Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’

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<sup>7</sup> From the sermon “Among a Band of Knights”, 14 February 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamophobia: making Muslims the enemy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008)

<sup>9</sup> “Bounty set over Prophet cartoon”, BBC News. September 15, 2007.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/6996553.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6996553.stm).

<sup>10</sup> From a speech given by George W Bush on November 6 2001. <  
<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>>

thesis.<sup>11</sup> Indeed bin Laden alluded to this incongruous synergy in his 2004 *Message to the American people*: “it seems as if we and the White House are on the same team”, which “truly shows that al-Qaida has made gains, but on the other hand it also shows that the Bush administration has likewise profited.”<sup>12</sup> This reciprocity of legitimation is helpful in understanding why the jihadis might have welcomed President Bush’s election to a second term or would endorse Republican Senator John McCain in the 2004 US Presidential election.<sup>13</sup> The jihadis’ success in promulgating their ideology rested not only on the coherence and cogency of their ideas but also on the corroborative reciprocal legitimation afforded by their ideological opponents in the West. Bearing all of this in mind, it is not difficult to see why Bin Laden’s emphatic challenge to the *Ummah* (community) to recognise the assault upon their faith, lands, and people might strike powerful emotional chords with Muslim audiences everywhere. The carnage wrought by al-Qaeda and associated groups in places as far afield as New York, Bali, London, Madrid, Casablanca, and Riyadh demonstrates the irrefutable power of this message; this then has been the resounding success of the ideology so far.

However, although the jihadis may have enjoyed considerable success over the years in recruiting and mobilising hundreds of *individuals* to take up the banner of global jihad, they have proven themselves unable to persuade the Muslim ummah at large to accept and endorse this polarising worldview. Instead, the Muslim masses have remained largely immune to the messages of global jihad, with many in the Muslim world in fact having repudiated the message outright.<sup>14</sup> As Zawahiri laments “...we should realize the extent of the gap in understanding between the jihad movement and the common people.”<sup>15</sup> This then has been the patent failure of the jihadi ideology to date.

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Transcript available at; <http://english.aljazeera.net/archive/2004/11/200849163336457223.html>

<sup>13</sup> For example, one message, posted on the al-Hesbah forum in October 2008 wrote: “if the mujahideen want to exhaust the US economically and military, then victory for the impetuous Republican candidate would be an advantage because McCain would continue the failing march of his predecessor Bush.” See also, Tim Reid, “Al-Qaeda supporters back John McCain for president”, *The Times*, October 23, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center, *Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2005); *Pew Research Center Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2009)

<sup>15</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner* [Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi], trans. and serialized in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, London, December 2-10, 2001.

Jihadis themselves have long been cognisant of the potential ramifications that a lack of popular support would have for their movement's longevity and indeed survival, as Zawahiri argues:

The victory of Islam and the establishment of a Caliphate in the manner of the Prophet... will not be accomplished by the Mujahid movement while it is cut off from public support. In the absence of this popular support, the Islamic Mujahid movement would be crushed in the shadows, far from the masses who are distracted or fearful. Therefore, our planning must strive to involve the Muslim masses in the battle, and to bring the Mujahid movement to the masses and not conduct the struggle far from them.<sup>16</sup>

This desire to engage with and mobilise the Muslim masses in order to combat the grave existential threat posed by obsolescence has been the principal underlying factor behind the rise of the media jihad. Al-Qaeda and global jihadis have focussed on the media as the primary vehicle to avert failure, in much the same way as the doctrine of 'winning hearts and minds'<sup>17</sup> has been deployed to shore up counter-terror efforts. Al-Zawahiri has argued that "[m]ore than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah"<sup>18</sup> These sorts of sentiments certainly help to explain the staggering asymmetrical power often attributed to the media jihad: in 2002, Osama bin Laden wrote to Mullah Omar that "[i]t is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles."<sup>19</sup>

In fact jihadis have been remarkably prescient in recognising the centrality of the media to this battle - and indeed to their very existence - arguably far more so than their opponents.<sup>20</sup> This profound awareness of the power of the media also emerged

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<sup>16</sup> Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, July 9 2005, The Office of the Director of National Security, available at <[http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter\\_9jul2005.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm)>

<sup>17</sup> The phrase 'hearts and minds' is most famously associated with the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya (1948-60) and President Lyndon B Johnson's use of the term during the Vietnam War. However, the phrase has been increasingly invoked by politicians, commentators, security services and governmental organisations in the current conflict with radical Islamism. See for example the 2007 report from the UK Dept. for Communities and Local Government entitled Preventing Violent Extremism - Winning hearts and minds <<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/preventingviolentextremism>>

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Osama bin Laden to Mullah Omar, June 5, 2002, US Military Academy Counterterrorism Center Website, Document AFGP-2002-600321.

<sup>20</sup> Steve Tatham, *Losing Arab Hearts and Minds: The Coalition, Al Jazeera and Muslim Public Opinion* (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2006); Lisa Blaydes and Drew Linzer, "Winning Muslim Hearts and Minds: Mapping Entrenchment of Anti-American Sentiment in the Islamic World" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association 67th Annual National Conference,

from their grudging acknowledgement fairly early on that they were destined to an increasingly marginalised status within the mainstream media, a problem endemic to all terrorist or revolutionary organisations.<sup>21</sup> As early as 2001, al-Zawahiri pleaded that ‘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.’<sup>22</sup>

To Western audiences inured to depictions of Jihadists as medieval luddites whose religious zealotry heralds only self-immolation and destruction of the West, there must be something inherently incongruous and deeply unsettling about al-Qaeda extolling the virtues of 21<sup>st</sup> century mass media campaigns, or exhibiting anxieties over being misrepresented by the Press. However, these apparent anachronisms are perhaps rendered a little less strange if one considers the fact that Jihadism is a thoroughly modern phenomenon,<sup>23</sup> the rise of which has coincided with a revolution in information and communication technologies, particularly the world-wide web.<sup>24</sup> In the early 1990s, these technologies and the new media environment more broadly enabled the Mujahideen, heady from victory over the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, to coalesce around radical new, but yet inchoate goals, establishing a loose and decentralised transnational network of sorts. Key events such as the Bosnian War (1992-95), the first World Trade Center bombing (1993), the First Chechen War (1994-96) and the publication of bin Laden’s infamous twin ‘fatwas’ (1996 & 1998) helped not only to strengthen the burgeoning jihadi community but also to provide the impetus for the gradual migration of these networks to the new virtual havens offered by the emerging world-wide web. The loss of a physical sanctuary in Afghanistan following Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001-2 simply expedited al-Qaeda’s metamorphosis into a diffuse virtual network, aptly named “Al-Qaeda 2.0.” by a number of commentators.<sup>25</sup>

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The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, IL, January 22, 2010; Manuel R. Torres Soriano, “Terrorism and the Mass Media after Al Qaeda: A Change of Course?”, *Athena Intelligence Journal* 3, No 1, (2008).

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism Revised and Expanded Edition* (Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Ayman Al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed some commentators have even suggested it is a distinctly modern Western phenomenon, a product of globalisation and modernisation that is far removed from traditional Muslim societies and in many ways reminiscent of the Protestant Reformation, see Roy (2004).

<sup>24</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004)

<sup>25</sup> Peter Bergen, and L Footer, ‘Defeating the Attempted Global Jihadist Insurgency: Forty Steps for the Next President to Pursue against al Qaeda, Like-Minded Groups, Unhelpful State Actors, and

Unsurprisingly, the Internet quickly became the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of jihadi culture and ideology.<sup>26</sup> The Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), a prominent media organ of al-Qaeda, even acknowledged in 2005 that it was now the only platform available to them: “This is the Internet that God has enlisted in the service of jihad and of the mujahideen, which has come to serve your interests – given that half the battle of the mujahideen is being waged on the pages of the Internet – *the sole outlet* for mujahideen media.”<sup>27</sup>

A newer generation of “web 2.0” spaces, including social networking sites and file-sharing portals, helped to consolidate the ascendancy of jihadi media whilst simultaneously raising the spectre of virtually-mediated self-radicalisation: the idea that previously unaffiliated individuals could be drawn to the ideology espoused by global jihadi groups in a largely autonomous manner through the mediation of the Internet.<sup>28</sup>

### **The media jihad: providing an evidentiary basis for meta-narrative**

Today the jihadi sub-culture flourishes in the new media environment, with the virtual propagation of jihadi thought proceeding apace. The functions of jihadi media in this arena are manifold and include communication, mobilisation, recruitment, training, media production and dissemination.<sup>29</sup> However, the principal function of jihadi media, and indeed its *raison d'être*, has always been (depending on one's perspective) news provision or propaganda: to furnish information about Muslim oppression and grievances, and document the activities of the Mujahideen in order to mobilise the masses and rally others to the cause. Indeed, the earliest jihadi media to emerge (during the Afghan jihad against the USSR in 1979-89) did precisely this. The *al-*

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Radicalized Sympathizers', The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 618, no. 1 (2008); M Lynch, 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies', The National Interest, March 1, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Akil N Awan, 'Virtual Jihadist media: Function, legitimacy, and radicalising efficacy', European Journal of Cultural Studies 10, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Stephen Ulph, 'A Guide to Jihad on the Web', Global Terrorism Analysis: Terrorism Focus 2, no. 7 (2005).

<sup>28</sup> Akil N Awan, 'Radicalization on the Internet? The Virtual Propagation of Jihadist Media and its Effects', Journal of the Royal United Services Institute 152, no. 3 (2007); Tim Stevens and Peter R. Neumann, Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action (London: ICSR, 2008); Anthony Bergin, Sulastri Bte Osman, Carl Ungerer, and Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, Countering internet radicalisation in Southeast Asia, Special report 22 (Singapore: RSIS-ASPI, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Awan, Virtual Jihadist Media; Gabriel Weimann, Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges (Washington DC, United States Institute of Peace, 2006).

*Jihad* magazine edited by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam for example,<sup>30</sup> focused on the humanitarian plight of Afghan civilians, denouncing the atrocities committed by Soviet forces and simultaneously extolling the virtues of jihad in defence of Muslim lands - all of which greatly facilitated the steady influx of donations, equipment and volunteers, particularly from within the Arab world.

In short, from the very outset, the role of the media jihad has been to provide an evidentiary basis for the jihadi meta-narrative. If we understand this as the principal - even defining - function of jihadi media, then it is not difficult to appreciate its early limitations, too. *Al-Jihad* magazine was one of the most successful early examples of jihadis' own media organs; it was, however, plagued by serious problems. The publication required substantial financial resources to keep it afloat,<sup>31</sup> which naturally affected its circulation, thereby further circumscribing an already limited potential readership. In addition, *al-Jihad's* circulation was further hampered by problems created by countries in which its message was considered to be illegal or incendiary.<sup>32</sup> So although *al-Jihad* could control its message very strictly, and thus tailor the evidentiary basis for its claims, the medium itself proved to be the limiting factor in terms of audience size, scope, reach and the provision of audio-visual content.

The only real alternative to the shortcomings evident in the jihadis' own media organs was to attempt to manipulate and exploit the mainstream media as unwitting means of communication for the message. As we have already noted from al-Zawahiri's lament over the 'media siege imposed on the jihad movement', this was rarely possible either. To illustrate this point, we might consider one of the earliest attacks by al-Qaeda; the twin US embassy bombings in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi in 1998. Whilst these attacks convincingly displayed al-Qaeda's competence, technical prowess and a certain flair for the 'theatre of terrorism',<sup>33</sup> they also displayed how

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<sup>30</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Azzam was a highly influential Palestinian scholar and advocate of defensive jihad, particularly during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He also served as an early mentor for Osama bin Laden in Pakistan.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, *al-Jihad* magazine was launched in 1984 as an amateurish black-and-white mimeograph and could only evolve into a full-colour glossy from 1986 after a substantial increase in public interest injected funds and resources into the publication.

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that at the height of its popularity, around half of *al-Jihad's* readership was to be found not in the Gulf States, as one might assume, but instead in the United States, where its dissemination was protected by constitutional freedoms; Brynjar Lia, 'Al-Qaeda online: understanding jihadist internet infrastructure', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Jan 01, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Stohl, "Demystifying Terrorism: The Myths and Realities of Contemporary Political Terrorism" in *The Politics of Terrorism*, ed. Michael Stohl (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1988).

utterly reliant terrorists remained on the symbiotic relationship with mainstream news media identified by Schmid and De Graaf.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, jihadi media organs had made little effort to consolidate their ‘propaganda by the deed’ or to communicate their actions to international audiences who had witnessed the spectacles of violence onscreen. In hindsight, damning critiques from within the jihadist movement lambasted the “horrible informational and political shortfall regarding these events”, decrying the fact that audiences resorted to “western foreign media to quench their thirst for the true news.”<sup>35</sup> Here, while jihadis had managed to temporarily usurp the medium, their message was controlled by myriad factors outside of their control; editorial prerogatives, news agendas, media frames, governmental pressure, censorship, and audience sensibilities, among other factors. If we understand terrorism to be ineluctably political and assume that “without communication, terrorism would not exist”,<sup>36</sup> then the abstract mass-media depictions of spectacular terrorist acts did little to politicise jihadi violence or communicate the underlying reasons behind that violence. Surprisingly, jihadis did not countenance the possibility that the message itself might be at fault or admit that indiscriminate violence was inevitably counter-productive and unable to secure support from the masses. Instead the responsibility for this and other public relations failures arising from terrorist atrocities was placed firmly with the medium, and in particular with the pernicious effects of the mainstream media’s supposed complicity with the jihadis’ enemies, leading al-Zawahiri to conclude “that amongst the tools that Western powers use to fight against Islam” are “the International news agencies and satellite television”.<sup>37</sup>

### **The power of the image and the hyperreal**

If the role of the media Jihad has been to provide an evidentiary basis for the meta-narrative, then the power of the image has proven to be absolutely central to this endeavour and is aptly demonstrated by the *Ladinese Epistle*. The potency of bin Laden’s discourse, replete with visceral imagery of ‘Muslim blood being spilled’ may be undeniable; however, it is only when it is substantiated by the power of the image

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<sup>34</sup> Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Abu Huthayfa, Memo to the Honorable Sheikh Abu Abdullah, June 20, 2000, pp. 9–11. Harmony database, AFGP-2002-003251.

<sup>36</sup> Marshall McLuhan, Interview with the Italian newspaper *Il Tempo*, January 24, 1978.

<sup>37</sup> al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*.

that it takes on any tangible meaning in the minds of audiences. Bin Laden, cognisant as ever of the power of the image, pointedly alluded to the “horrifying pictures of the massacre of Qana”, which only four months earlier had shocked audiences worldwide. Bin Laden was well aware of the startlingly graphic reports of the carnage wrought in Qana by the Israeli Defense Force, which had been widely circulated in the news media at the time. Horrendous images, like that of a Fijian UN peacekeeper silently holding aloft a decapitated baby or of residential apartment blocks in Beirut being levelled by F16s, were immediately and indelibly seared onto audience memories, eliciting strong and angry reactions in parts of the Muslim world, not least of which was the radicalisation of Muhammad Atta.<sup>38</sup>

For bin Laden these images helped corroborate the massacre, evoking sufficient moral indignation in his potential audience and thereby giving credence to his narrative in a way not possibly for the list of other exotic-sounding Islamic conflict zones that formed his litany of grievance. He did not (and could not) point to “horrifying pictures” of “Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, Philippine, Fatani, Ogadin”, and without an evidentiary basis to substantiate these claims he was vulnerable to accusations of propaganda and empty rhetoric. This is not to dispute or deny that massacres or serious human rights violations may have occurred in these places; rather, many of the conflicts occurring on the peripheries of the Muslim world<sup>39</sup> have been conspicuously and - in jihadis’ views<sup>40</sup> - wilfully neglected by the mainstream Western news media. The absence of images and reportage from these contexts has the potential to attenuate the potency of the narrative in a staggeringly disproportionate manner. Taylor commenting on the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, identifies the same asymmetrical relationship between the effects of pictures and words.<sup>41</sup> Taylor contrasts the unprecedented furore over the photos of prisoner abuse with prior imageless reports of torture and serious human rights violations from Amnesty International which went virtually unheeded. Consequently, it is the mediated image that is the most authentic indicator of reality.

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<sup>38</sup> According to Lesch, Atta, the ringleader of the nineteen hijackers on 9/11, committed himself to ‘martyrdom’ after witnessing these images from his dorm room in Germany, choosing to write his ‘martyrdom will’ the very same day. David W. Lesch, *The Middle East and the United States: a historical and political reassessment* (Boulder, CA: Westview Press, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> Historically the regions that demarcated dar al-Islam from dar al-harb, and therefore the realm that animates bin Laden and other global jihadis most strongly.

<sup>40</sup> al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Taylor, “The Pornography of Violence and the Pornography of the Image”, in *Media and Political Violence*, ed. H Nosseck, A Sreberny, and P Sonwalkar (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007)

The beguiling notion that images embody truth (or put differently, the old adage that ‘the camera does not lie’), also reassures audiences that we may somehow avoid the obfuscation of reality provided by common media tropes: contractors as opposed to mercenaries; collateral damage as opposed to dead civilians; regime change as opposed to invasion and occupation. Of course, this is not to suggest that the camera does not distort the truth in even more mendacious ways. Instead, as Bracewell, commenting on the contemporary status of the image, suggests “...there is now the sense that authenticity itself can be sculpted to suggest veracity as an image, in which truth remains ambiguous”.<sup>42</sup>

It is against this backdrop that the true power of the new media environment in buttressing jihadi ideology and grand narrative is revealed in all its glory. The unique multimedia environment of the world-wide web in particular lends itself to the construction of a hyperreality: the paradoxical notion of a mediated phenomenon that appears more real than the reality itself.<sup>43</sup> This hyperreality can be envisaged as an enhanced reality that places the participant in a wholly mediated environment concocted from a surfeit of images, texts and videos, all filtered through a jihadi lens and through which the individual unwittingly experiences reality by proxy. This cloistered yet highly immersive environment ‘cocoons’ individuals from alternative realities and interpretational frameworks, leading to an insular community that venerates the jihadi ideology at the expense of everything else.

### **Framing the Ideological Narrative**

It is this hyperreality’s cocooning effect that has enabled jihadis to assuage the discordance between the classical views of jihad (as mediated by Azzam among others) and the jihad espoused by al-Qaeda and other global jihadis, particularly with respect to the nature and form that the jihad can legitimately assume. Morally repugnant actions such as the wanton killing of fellow Muslims, the targeting of non-combatants more generally, the instigation of bloody sectarian strife (as in the case of Iraq), the use of suicide bombings, despicable strategies of recruitment,<sup>44</sup> and

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Bracewell, *The Nineties: When Surface Was Depth* (London: Flamingo, 2002): 66.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotexte, 1983); Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Picador, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> Such as using Down’s Syndrome sufferers, or women raped by Jihadists as suicide bombers; See Deborah Haynes, “Female suicide bomb recruiter Samira Ahmed Jassim captured”, *The Times*,

internecine feuds amongst the Jihadists themselves cannot easily be subsumed under the sanctifying rubric of a legitimate ‘holy struggle’. Indeed, these actions are the most likely to be impugned by opponents and thus pose the greatest legitimation challenge to jihadi ideology today.

Jihadis must therefore mitigate the moral dissonance engendered by these contradictions if they are to legitimise their movement and ideology, and the hyperreality engendered by the new media environment has provided the means through which this might be accomplished, primarily through mechanisms of framing. Framing or frame-setting refers to media practices of disseminating and presenting information in certain ways, through preferential selection, emphasis and exclusion, that furnish an internally coherent interpretation and evaluation of events, texts, acts or discourses and therefore aid in the manipulation of audience opinion. According to Entman, to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in such a way as to promote a particular moral evaluation.<sup>45</sup> These practices have long been recognised as part of the news media paradigm, being particularly associated with the shaping of public opinion.<sup>46</sup>

The least sophisticated strategy is to simply divert attention from major failings by reference to successes. The practice, often known as ‘priming’, is well understood within political circles, for example referring to attempts by politicians to be associated with issues on which they have the strongest reputation.<sup>47</sup> Politicians and their ‘media proxies’, can thus ‘prime’ opinions and evaluations of political leaders and policy through the preferential selection of news stories, to the detriment of others. Through this process of priming, jihadis can also gloss over contradictions and inconsistencies by focusing efforts instead on highlighting only those acts and discourses that are deemed to be free of controversy and consequently display without equivocation the integrity, strength, and success of the jihadis. For example, a video

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February 3, 2009; Michael Howard, “Bombs strapped to Down's syndrome women kill scores in Baghdad markets”, *The Guardian*, February 2, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Robert M. Entman, ‘Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.’ *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4: 52 (1993).

<sup>46</sup> Robert M. Entman, *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and U. S. foreign policy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2004); Hsiang Iris Chyi and Maxwell McCombs, ‘Media salience and the process of framing: coverage of the Columbine school shootings’, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>47</sup> Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987)

of Juba the sniper<sup>48</sup> posted online by the Islamic State of Iraq in 2005, which cleverly mimics the reticule of a sniper's telescopic sight shows the highly adept killing of a heavily-armed US marine while he stands beside an Iraqi traffic policeman, who is intentionally left unharmed. The message imparted to audiences is clear: the jihadis are professional soldiers who only engage legitimate enemy combatants in legitimate theatres of conflict, and in a highly discerning and even humane manner. Juba in fact is renowned for his highly accurate 'one-shot' kills in which the victim dies relatively quickly - a particularly pertinent point if juxtaposed against the excruciatingly slow and painful deaths of the unfortunate victims of 'video beheadings' as popularised by the likes of Zarqawi. Even the jihadis' harshest critics would grudgingly concede that this is not an unfair depiction of events in this particular instance. Generally, most jihadi acts and operations carried out against occupying military forces and employing conventional modes of warfare can potentially be framed and portrayed in this manner. These actions represent the pinnacle of jihadi operations (particularly if the jihadis are killed during the course of battle and can be hailed as 'martyrs'), in which the valour, upright conduct and self-sacrifice of the jihadists becomes patently manifest and incontrovertible, even by their enemies' standards. Unsurprisingly, the propagandistic value of productions of this nature is immense; while this may constitute the least sophisticated strategy, it is nevertheless the most difficult to counter as the actions depicted are largely beyond censure.

However, not all jihadi acts appear to be so idealistic or free from reproach, and thus propagandists must find alternative modes of legitimation for actions that may invite criticism or contestation, particularly those that might fall under the rubric of terrorism. In such cases, Jihadists may for example conveniently omit events and facts that might depict their actions in a pejorative light in order to obscure facts and thus manipulate public opinion, focusing instead on what they perceive to be the more laudatory or commendable aspects. We might illustrate this practice by examining a recent as-Sahab video production documenting a suicide bombing by the Islamic State of Iraq. The video begins with a biographical focus on the persona of the 'living martyr' (*al-shaheed al-hayy*), highlighting his piety, steadfastness, calm demeanour and composure prior to the operation. The camera follows his final preparations, recording a brief but stirring valedictory message before he bids farewell to his

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<sup>48</sup> Juba is the *nom de guerre* of one (or possibly more) highly trained sniper involved in the Iraqi insurgency who claims to have killed hundreds of US soldiers; <http://www.baghdad sniper.net>

colleagues. The camera then switches to an eerily quiet scene only to be abruptly punctuated by a tremendous explosion, which is then replayed from multiple viewing angles and accompanied by stirring devotional songs. The video ends without revealing the true consequences of the bombing, save for an exultant message informing the audience that their ‘brother achieved martyrdom’ in a ‘heroic operation against the apostate regime’. The video and attendant commentary, however, do not reveal the rather inconvenient fact that the bombing claimed the lives of scores of civilian bystanders alongside the intended victims: new recruits to the Iraqi police. Nor does the video show the aftermath of the attack, a grotesque carnage in which the faintly discernible body parts of civilians litter the streets amid the burning wreckage of the destroyed vehicle. Thus the as-Sahab video employs a highly distorting prism to depict the event in a manner that omits important factual elements which would no doubt present profound challenges to the legitimization of such actions.

The jihadis’ attempts to propound their narrative, ideology, acts and discourses through subterfuge, framing and various other means is also aided by the hierarchical and strictly regulated spaces of prominent or ‘official’ jihadi forums and blogs.<sup>49</sup> Despite the presumed egalitarian and democratising nature of the web,<sup>50</sup> these spaces actively stifle almost any form of debate, discussion or dialogue, instead acting as ‘echo chambers’ or rhetorical amplifiers<sup>51</sup> which predispose audiences towards unreservedly accepting the jihadis’ rendition of events, thereby inculcating blind obedience to the jihadi cause. Part of the reason why these mechanisms have proven so successful in legitimising jihadi ideology in the new media environment has much to do with Festinger’s classical theory of cognitive dissonance which suggests that individuals seek out information confirming beliefs or behaviours while actively avoiding contrary information, in order to mitigate uncomfortable psychological tension.<sup>52</sup> Jihadis ensconced within the reaffirming hyperreality of the new jihadi

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<sup>49</sup> A roster of Arabic forums (muntadayat) have served as semi-official mouthpieces for al-Qaeda over the years, including a number of forums sponsored by the al-Fajr Media Centre (al-Qaeda’s key media wing) such as al-Ikhlaas, al-Firdaws, and al-Buraq, as well as other such as al-Hesba, al-Faloja, Shumook al-Islam and al-Ansar. See Akil N Awan and Mina Al-Lami, ‘Al-Qaeda’s Virtual Crisis’, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 154, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>50</sup> Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Alali and Eke first used this term in suggesting that journalists act as ‘rhetorical amplifiers’ for either terrorists or government officials when reporting on a news story on terrorism; A. Odasuo Alali and Kenoye Kelvin Eke, *Media Coverage of Terrorism: Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 1991)

<sup>52</sup> L. Festinger, *A theory of cognitive dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson, 1957)

mediascape are therefore deliberately and consciously immersed in content that is congruent with their existing beliefs.

### **Unregulated ideology in Web 2.0 & the Rise of the Virtual Jihad**

Increasingly, the growth of jihadist media has also been shaped by the revolution in audience roles heralded by Web 2.0, in which a wide range of second-generation services on the Web have allowed users to contribute as easily as they consume.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, in the new media environment ‘jihadi’ media efforts are increasingly focused on autonomous user-generated content, often without official jihadi sanction.<sup>54</sup> These media efforts have avoided the niche and strictly regulated platforms of ‘official’ jihadi web-fora, instead appearing on a range of new (more mainstream) platforms and relying far more on emotive imagery and other affective content in engendering solidarity and allegiance to the jihadi counterculture. Instead of presenting cogent theological or ideological arguments designed to appeal to reason, they constitute polished montages of jihadi images and video clips accompanied by stirring devotional songs, rendering issues of theological or ideological legitimation far less important and even obsolete. This virtually-mediated imagery and propaganda of the deed is crucially important to young web-savvy audiences and non-Arabic speaking, diasporic Muslim audiences, both of whom contribute disproportionately to the jihadi demographic.<sup>55</sup> Indeed imagery does not respect linguistic barriers and has itself become part of the message.<sup>56</sup>

This has enormously important repercussions for jihadi ideology in the twenty-first century, too. The nexus between the new media environment and the autonomous media jihadi has not only facilitated the wider dissemination of jihadi ideology but has also, significantly, allowed it to circulate outside of its traditional ambit. Mainstream file-sharing platforms like YouTube, which host jihadi videos such as statements from al-Qaeda leaders and IED attacks on Coalition forces, have

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<sup>53</sup> This is the most widely accepted definition of Web 2.0; See <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

<sup>54</sup> This diffuse dissemination of Jihadist content across web 2.0 platforms outside of the ambit of forums, has not necessarily been welcomed by Jihadist media organs, who have even sought to curtail the unsanctioned and ‘exuberant’ proliferation and production of unattributed Jihadist media by freelance amateurs, which they feel divests key Jihadist media organs (as-Sahab, al-Fajr, Global Islamic Media Front etc) of control over production, mediation and dissemination; See Awan & Al-Lami, Al-Qaeda’s Virtual Crisis.

<sup>55</sup> Awan & Al-Lami, Al-Qaeda’s Virtual Crisis.

<sup>56</sup> N. Bolt, D. Betz and J. Azari, Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon, Whitehall Report 3-08 (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2008).

granted the material a considerably higher publicity profile than could have possibly been envisaged by traditional jihadi media organs. Moreover, the dissemination of jihadi culture, ideology and media across communities on social networking sites like Orkut and Facebook and virtual worlds like Second Life is significant in that these constitute novel arenas that have thus far proven to be beyond the scope of official jihadi media outlets. Consequently, the jihadi message, intended for or only available to, smaller parochial audiences in the past, is increasingly being granted much more diffuse audience penetration.<sup>57</sup>

One of the underlying factors behind this seemingly exponential increase in autonomous user-generated jihadi media content has been the changing demographic of the jihadi movement itself. Jihadism today is generally understood to be a phenomenon associated with young males,<sup>58</sup> and consequently many of the new generation of virtual media jihadis are, following Presnky, ‘digital natives’ rather than ‘digital immigrants’.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, for many media jihadis there is little that is new about the new media environment; rather, it is the only media environment with which they are familiar. Much of their social and other interaction already takes place within this new media environment,<sup>60</sup> and so it is unsurprising that their political activism should similarly take place within this arena.

A perennial debate in jihadi circles has focused on the status of those who fail to physically engage in the ‘jihad’. Such individuals had, in the past, been reproached for remaining behind and limiting their contribution to words or funds rather than deeds. However, with the increasing recognition by the jihadi leadership of the critical need for jihadi media organs to counter ‘the media war on terrorism’<sup>61</sup> and mobilise the *Ummah*, various prominent jihadis have attempted to legitimise this activity by drawing upon historical or religious precedents. Al-Ansari’s categorisation of the types of warfare sanctioned by the Prophet, for example, cites ‘media warfare’ as a

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<sup>57</sup> Awan & Al-Lami, *Al-Qaeda’s Virtual Crisis*.

<sup>58</sup> Jihadis are generally found to be under the age of 25; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.

<sup>59</sup> Marc Prensky, ‘Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants’, *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001).

<sup>60</sup> Whether it be social networking, shopping, dating, playing videogames, watching movies, reading news, listening to music or learning – the list is endless. In fact any activity in the ‘real’ world now has a virtual counterpart that may appear to be more appealing to a certain age cohort that represents this ‘digital native’.

<sup>61</sup> Philip Hammond, ‘The Media War on Terrorism’, *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media* 1, no.1 (2003).

legitimate effort,<sup>62</sup> whereas al-Salem's *The 39 principles of Jihad* extols 'performing electronic jihad' as a 'sacred duty'.<sup>63</sup>

Undoubtedly, the most infamous recent jihadi ideologue to contribute to the debate is Anwar al-'Awlaki, who gained notoriety after being implicated in the potential radicalisations of the 'Fort Hood shooter' Maj. Nidal Hassan, the 'Christmas Day bomber' Umar Farouk Abdul-Mutallab and the 'Times Square bomber' Faisal Shahzad. 'Awlaki suggests among his *44 Ways to Support Jihad*, "fighting the lies of the Western media," "following the news of Jihad and spreading it," and "spreading the writings of the mujahideen and their scholars."<sup>64</sup> But perhaps al-'Awlaki's most interesting contribution is number 29 on the list: "WWW Jihad." According to al-'Awlaki,

Some ways in which the brothers and sisters could be 'internet mujahideen' is by contributing in one or more of the following ways: Establishing discussion forums that offer a free, uncensored medium for posting information relating to Jihad; Establishing email lists to share information with interested brothers and sisters; Posting or emailing Jihad literature and news; and Setting up websites to cover specific areas of Jihad, such as: mujahideen news, Muslim POWs, and Jihad literature.<sup>65</sup>

Contemporary jihadi strategist Abu Musab al-Suri, the key proponent of a decentralised leaderless jihad, acknowledged the existence of large numbers of individuals within the jihadis' ideological support base who were nevertheless unwilling to engage in violence themselves. Addressing these individuals, Suri proposed a number of alternative modes of non-violent action to support the jihad, one of which is the media or informational battle.<sup>66</sup> As a result of these legitimising mechanisms, the 'media jihad' has gradually gained respectability, becoming a legitimate endeavour in itself -- in some instances, even on a par with 'martyrdom' operations. The sanction provided to media jihad has been particularly important as it

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<sup>62</sup> Abu al-Harith Al-Ansari, *Irshad al-Sa'ul ila Hurub al-Rasul* (2008) Available at <http://pdfdatabase.com/download/abu-al-harith-al-ansari-irshad-al-saul-ila-hurub-al-rasul-d8a5d8b1d8b4d8a7d8af-d8a7d984d8b3d8a4d988d984-d8a5d984d989-d8add8b1d988d8a8-d8a7d984d8b1d8b3-doc-4571909.html>

<sup>63</sup> Muhammad bin Ahmad Al-Salim, *39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad*, (2003) Available at [http://www.archive.org/stream/39WaysToServeAndParticipate/39WaysToServeAndParticipateInJihad\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/39WaysToServeAndParticipate/39WaysToServeAndParticipateInJihad_djvu.txt)

<sup>64</sup> Al-'Awlaki's work is in fact based upon al-Salim's (2003) text, with large portions of the text having been plagiarised outright without any sort of acknowledgement or attribution.

<sup>65</sup> Anwar Al-'Awlaki, *44 Ways to Support Jihad*, (2009); Available at <http://www.anwar-alawlaki.com/>

<sup>66</sup> Abu-Musab Al-Suri, 'Theory of Media and Incitement in the Call to Global Islamic Resistance' in *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, (2005); Available at <http://mobasher.110mb.com/AbuMusabSyrian.htm>

also helps assuage a particular cognitive dissonance for the media jihadis themselves: the internal conflict arising from an inconsistency between the jihadi's beliefs and actions. Thus, a jihadi who wishes to contribute to the conflict but is unable or unwilling to partake in actual warfare (for any number of reasons) is given a vindictory rationale for this alterative, entirely legitimate mode of action.

Media jihadis for their part have responded to these overtures with alacrity. Indeed, there is little doubt that the media jihadis have proven immensely useful to the growth of the movement and the dissemination of its ideology. One of the most celebrated virtual jihadis, Younis Tsouli (aka irhaabi007), whose contributions to the global jihad may have been confined to media production efforts from a bedroom PC in the UK, nevertheless received considerable acclaim from jihadis around the world including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The important role played by media jihadis is acknowledged candidly in Tsouli's exchange with a fellow forum member, Abuthaabit, who attempts to convince a self-effacing Tsouli of his immense contributions to the Jihad:

This media work, I am telling you, is very important. Very, very, very, very....Because a lot of the funds brothers are getting is because they are seeing stuff like this coming out. Imagine how many people have gone [to Iraq] after seeing the situation because of the videos. Imagine how many of them could have been *shaheed* [martyrs] as well.<sup>67</sup>

Virtual media jihadis have also increasingly understood that immersion in the virtual conflict does not necessarily render them immune to repercussions in the real world, such as arrest and prosecution under charges of materially abetting terrorism, encouraging or glorifying terrorism, or disseminating terrorist publications . The successful arrest and prosecution of a number of individuals in the UK on such charges have shown these to be genuine concerns that must be considered by media jihadis before engaging in any potentially incriminating activity. Similarly, jihadis online have also long been cognisant of the threat posed by the presence of security agencies and civilian 'spies' within the new-media spaces of the jihad. A post on a jihadi forum in 2005 dissuaded individuals from communicating sensitive information on the Internet, warning that "this forum, like the others, is under...surveillance; any information is obviously not secret, so any individuals you meet and correspond with on the forums cannot be trusted at all."<sup>68</sup> For some, this element of danger provides

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<sup>67</sup> A World Wide Web of Terror, The Economist.

<sup>68</sup> A World Wide Web of Terror, The Economist.

further justification that they are indeed engaging in a legitimate aspect of the conflict, evident from the “enemy’s” use of the same spaces and from the personal danger to which they are exposed.

Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to assume that the media jihad has the power to completely displace the physical jihad, which has continued to prove irresistible to some. Despite Younis Tsouli’s having garnered considerable acclaim in the virtual world, and being greeted on the forums as “The hero – God salutes you”, he nevertheless continued to harbour yearnings for ‘martyrdom’ on the real battlefield. Tsouli lamented to his fellow virtual jihadis, “Hero? I am only half a man now...my heart is in Iraq.”<sup>69</sup> In fact Tsouli’s desire for ‘real’ jihad appears to have led to his eventual demise: he was sentenced to sixteen years imprisonment in 2007 for his involvement in a decentralised web of terrorist plots.<sup>70</sup> There exist a number of other examples of a transition from the virtual world to the real world, the most celebrated of which was that of Abu Dujana al-Khurasani (the *nom de guerre* of Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi), a well-known administrator of the al-Hesbah jihadi forum. Abu Dujana was at some point recruited by the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate, but served as a double-agent, conducting a suicide attack against a CIA base near Khost, Afghanistan in December 2009. His actions were widely hailed on jihadi forums, providing vicarious validation for their own passivity. In interviews given by his wife after the event,<sup>71</sup> al-Balawi is portrayed as someone “obsessed with Jihad” who felt increasingly guilty for his inaction, save for his considerable writings on the subject on the forum.

Others appear content to remain within the virtual media sphere, unless they are compelled to leave, which may lead to a resort to actual physical violence and terrorism. The unprecedented attack on jihadi new media environments from September 2008 onwards, which included the disruption of major Jihadist forums,<sup>72</sup> severely curbed the opportunities for ‘media jihad’. One forum member 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

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<sup>69</sup> Nadya Labi, “Jihad 2.0,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 297, no.6 (2006).

<sup>70</sup> A World Wide Web of Terror, *The Economist*.

<sup>71</sup> Adem Demir, and Christopher Dickey, ‘The Bomber’s Wife’. *Newsweek.com*. January 7, 2010, available at: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/229792>.

<sup>72</sup> See Awan & Al-Lami, *Al-Qaeda’s Virtual Crisis* for a detailed overview of this concerted assault on jihadi virtual media environments.

behind. We shall join them. Your act has shamed us and caused us to think ‘what is left for us?’<sup>73</sup> Ironically, individuals who may not have countenanced actual violence in the past may in the absence of these virtual arenas, feel compelled to relinquish their virtual personas in favour of real-life jihadi operations.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the disruption of the al-Hesbah forum in late 2008 may have provided the *casus belli* for Abu Dujanah’s transition to the ‘real jihad’.

## Conclusion

The media Jihad has progressively outpaced the military or physical jihad in recent years. The rise of the new-media environment has undoubtedly had enormously important repercussions for jihadi ideology in the twenty-first century, rejuvenating jihadi ideology and disseminating the counterculture of jihad to new and much more diffuse audiences, often in novel arenas that have thus far proven to be beyond the traditional ambit of official jihadist media organs.

However, jihadi ideology has not remained unchanged either, and thus although Jihadism has survived -- and indeed spread unimpeded -- across new media platforms, it has been forced to do so in a somewhat attenuated form. Moreover, the message itself has been forced to sacrifice some of its coherency and cogency along the way. The increasing ascendancy of deed over word, of direct action over piety and learning, and of the pornography of violence over strategic religio-political goals have all encouraged a banal and indeed perfunctory reading of jihadi ideology. This interpretation of jihadi thought and action accords well with young web-savvy audiences and non-Arabic speaking, diasporic Muslim audiences for whom the virtually-mediated image and propaganda by the deed are integral to the zeitgeist.

McLuhan’s (1964) well-known maxim that ‘the medium is the message’,<sup>75</sup> helps us to appreciate how the promotion of a virtual or media jihad within this new-media environment has fundamentally recast the jihadi ideology in the twenty-first century, producing a feeble caricature in its stead in order to retain its relevance to a newer tech-savvy yet ideologically less sophisticated generation of ‘digital natives’.

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<sup>73</sup> Taken from the Shumookh al-Islam website (now offline).

<sup>74</sup> Awan & Al-Lami, *Al-Qaeda’s Virtual Crisis*.

<sup>75</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 1964).