

The Global Jihad Network: Why and How al-Qaeda Uses Computer Technology to Wage Jihad

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BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

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One might have thought that without a state to provide sanctuary, money, open-space for training grounds, and a constant influx of like-minded fighters, al-Qaeda after the fall of the Taliban was finished. But following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, Hamid Mir, Osama bin Laden's biographer, "watched 'every second al Qaeda member carrying a laptop computer along with a Kalashnikov' as they prepared to scatter into hiding and exile."¹ What they had in mind at that exact moment is impossible to tell; what's for sure is that the organization has transformed into a loosely-connected affiliation united by a devotion to jihadist ideology, and is now increasing its membership through the use of the Internet.

One of the main architects of the *new* al-Qaeda is a man named Abu Musab al-Suri. He put down his vision for the future of jihad in a book entitled, "Call for Worldwide Islamic Resistance," a one-thousand six-hundred page manifesto published on the Internet in 2004.² Suri is described as one of bin Laden's ideological mentors. According to Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who met with Suri, bin Laden, and other radicals in the nineties, "[bin Laden] joined these men, rather than the other way around. His organization became the vehicle for their thinking."³

Al-Suri is analogous to a professor of jihadist theory, and had always viewed al-Qaeda as a mere transitional point in the evolution of jihad. After the fall of the Taliban, which he viewed as a crushing blow⁴, he sought:

...to transfer the training to each house of each district in the village of every Muslim... making appropriate training materials available to more than a billion Muslims... Taking advantage of information technology like the Internet, Suri contends that anyone interested can access military and ideological training in any language, at any time, anywhere. Muslim homes, as envisioned by Suri', not only become the new training camps, where families can recruit, educate and train, but also serve as staging grounds from which ideological adherents are able to consolidate their strength and wage terrorism. Further complicating matters, Suri articulates expanded opportunities [for] participation in jihad for the large numbers of Muslims who may agree with the ideology he advances but are reluctant to engage in acts of violence.⁵

This strategy is the impetus of al-Qaeda's resurgence. Even though Suri is now in U.S. custody, his legacy lives in the hearts and minds of the many Muslims who have instant access to his long-winded manifesto on the Internet.

¹ Steven Coll and Susan B. Glassner, "Terrorists Turn to the Web as Base of Operations." *Post-Newsweek Business Information, Inc., Newsbytes*, August 7, 2005.

² Lawrence Wright, "The Master Plan." *New Yorker*, September 2006, 48-59.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Wayne A. Downing and Michael J. Meese, "Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities," *Combating Terrorism Center*, Department of Social Sciences, United States Military Academy (February 14, 2006).

Suri envisioned that the “next stage of jihad will be characterized by terrorism created by individuals or small autonomous groups (what he terms ‘leaderless resistance’), which will wear down the enemy and prepare the ground for the far more ambitious aim... an outright struggle for territory.”⁶ He describes al-Qaeda’s role as ideological vanguard: “Al-Qaeda is not an organization...nor do we want it to be...It is a call, a reference, a methodology.”⁷ Many groups have recently joined or pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. Others act in its name, whether the al-Qaeda leadership knows it beforehand or not. An example of al-Qaeda’s new role as vanguard of jihadist ideology came in late 2006 and early 2007 when the SITE Institute, an online think tank that monitors jihadist websites, found two official statements posted by the Algerian Salafist Group for Call and Combat, reaffirming the group’s allegiance to al-Qaeda and announcing it was changing its name to “al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” This is one of many signals of a strategic alliance among sundry jihadist organizations using the Internet as their principle means of communication.⁸

If we look at the Internet from the point of view of someone like Abu Musab al-Suri, we can easily see its appeal as a conduit for spreading the ideology of jihad to every Muslim home for the reasons that follow.

First, there is anonymity. Posters

on message boards leave no paper trail, and although IP addresses are traceable, the process of tracing them is fraught with obstacles and thus often fruitless. Most al-Qaeda operatives have laptops, anyway, so even if the specific computer could be traced, it easily could be transported. And the proliferation and popularity of cyber cafes means poor civilians and foot soldiers have easy access, too. They log on anonymously and frequent different cafes at random times to hide their identity.⁹

Second, there is editorial control. As long as you operate your own website – which doesn’t cost much and requires only a little technical expertise – you do not have any journalistic standards to live up to, or advertisers to please, or mainstream audience’s tastes to satisfy. You have a target audience, many of whom are already predisposed to your point of view. Those who are not will only visit your site once they have already become curious about your cause. It is at this point when a site’s content can begin radicalizing an individual.

Third, there is the potential to reach out to millions of people *instantly*. Television had long played this role but is now moribund. The Internet, on the other hand, is interactive; nothing bonds a community better than two-way communication. This is a new development in the terrorist group/public relationship, but the Internet continues to serve old functions, such as influencing

⁶ Lawrence Wright, “The Master Plan.” *New Yorker*, September 2006, 48-59.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Rita Katz, “Global Terrorist Threat.” *CQ Congressional Testimony*, February 14, 2007.

⁹ Shitanshu Mishra, “Exploitation of Information and Communication Technology by Terrorist Organisations,” *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA* Vol 27, No. 3 (2003).

public opinion, in new, more effective ways.¹⁰ The posting of beheadings of men like Nicholas Berg, the assassination of journalist Daniel Pearl, and other such savage acts are meant to taunt and intimidate enemies and to inspire and galvanize the base, or show members of the community sitting on the fence which side is stronger.

The information age has given rise to what John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt of the RAND Corporation call “Netwar,” a term for “an emerging mode of conflict (and crime) at societal levels, short of traditional military warfare, in which the protagonists use network forms of organization and related doctrines, strategies and technologies attuned to the information age.”¹¹ Put simply, information age technology is why al-Qaeda has been able to stay relevant: The U.S. military may have dismantled al-Qaeda, but the Internet has allowed it to metastasize and leaderless resistance has become more likely. According to Arquilla and Ronfeldt, the information age strengthens loosely-connected networks over hierarchical ones: “Transnational terrorists organized in widely dispersed, networked nodes have shown how it is possible to swarm together swiftly, on cue, then pulse to

the attack simultaneously.”¹²

Al-Qaeda has been busy exploiting this comparative advantage. An article in the Toronto Star notes, “The scope of Al Qaeda's migration to cyberspace has dramatically outpaced the ability of Western intelligence and security services to formulate responses.”* In eight years, the number of terrorist-related websites has proliferated from under 20 to 4,500. Moreover, the House Report notes that most Muslim youth today do not trust print or television news – not even al-Jazeera – and that they “exclusively get their information from the Internet.”¹³

Some of the many jihadist activities done online are recruiting, communicating with fellow jihadists, sharing news, training, conducting reconnaissance, gathering intelligence, fundraising, and even playing jihad-themed video games, a propaganda device befitting the digital age. Al-Qaeda turns the beauty of the Internet ugly, using open-source information they can access with a click to research potential targets,¹⁴ understand Western laws, customs, public opinion, etc., and learn terrorist tactics, such as designing “multiple shaped charges” that are “detonated along ...convoy routes in Iraq.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the communal

¹⁰ “9/11 Five Years Later: Gauging Islamist Terrorism,” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 109th Congress, 2nd Session. Serial No. 109–212, September 7, 2006; U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE; Washington, 2006.

¹¹ David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla, “Osama bin Laden and The Advent of Netwar,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* Vol. 18, No. 4 (2001).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ “9/11 Five Years Later: Gauging Islamist Terrorism.”

¹⁴ “9/11 Five Years Later: Gauging Islamist Terrorism.”

¹⁵ U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy Update: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation of the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, First Session (2005).

nature of the Internet makes it much easier for jihadists to “globalize regional conflicts,” a feat they have accomplished with “astounding ... efficiency.”¹⁶

Digital technology also makes it easier to transmit and transport hundreds of thousands of documents and data on tiny disks, CD’s, or USB flash drives. Terrorists make use of encryption technology in order to store vital information on their hard drives. When Ramzi Yousef, who is currently in jail for plotting and executing the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, was arrested, authorities found encrypted files stored on his laptop, which turned out to be plans to blow up 11 American commercial airliners over the Pacific Ocean.¹⁷

Indeed, the ability to store mass quantities of information on tiny disks or in virtual space is a terrorist like al-Suri’s dream – especially because via the Internet you can teach terrorist tactics. Al-Suri himself posted an online manual on “how the pneumonic plague could be made into a biological weapon.”¹⁸ Other lessons include: how to mix ricin poison; how to make a bomb from commercial chemicals; how to pose as a fisherman and sneak through Syria into Iraq; how to shoot at a U.S. soldier; how to navigate by the stars while running

through a night-shrouded desert¹⁹; which are the best targets to attack; how to attack them; how to make sure that the attack will be inline with the overall jihadist strategy²⁰; 218 ways to make a bomb, including tennis ball bomb, napalm bombs, letter bomb, underwater bomb, smoke bombs, cigarette pack bomb, etc.; hacking tools...including manuals for breaking into computer systems, evading detection, stealing phone service, listening in on phone calls, and cracking locks, along with the programs and command scripts²¹; how to make suicide vests.²²

But without funds, little would be possible, and the Internet is now the jihadists’ main venue in which to fundraise. The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence report states, “In the past, terrorists have used their Websites to advertise bank account numbers... [to which] supporters can send money.”²³ Al-Qaeda also uses e-banking to collect, transfer, and hide funds.²⁴ Moreover, jihadists have come up with elaborate ways to hide the money trail: “Many of the sites direct funds to the Taliban in Afghanistan, or

¹⁶ Editorial, “Al Qaeda's virtual sanctuary,” *The Toronto Star* 2005, pg. A18.

¹⁷ Shitanshu Mishra, “Exploitation of Information and Communication Technology by Terrorist Organisations,” *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA* Vol 27, No. 3 (2003).

¹⁸ Steven Coll and Susan B. Glassner, “Terrorists Turn to the Web as Base of Operations.” *Post-Newsweek Business Information, Inc., Newsbytes*, August 7, 2005.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Rita Katz, “Global Terrorist Threat.” *CQ Congressional Testimony*, February 14, 2007.

²¹ Shitanshu Mishra, “Exploitation of Information and Communication Technology by Terrorist Organisations,” *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA* Vol 27, No. 3 (2003).

²² U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy Update.

²³ “9/11 Five Years Later: Gauging Islamist Terrorism.”

²⁴ Shitanshu Mishra, “Exploitation of Information and Communication Technology by Terrorist Organisations,” *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA* Vol 27, No. 3 (2003).

to banks and trust accounts in Pakistan.... The web sites are also created under aliases, designed to prevent audit trails and lead investigators to 'proxy servers', sites that can disguise the actual user'.²⁵ It is, therefore, very difficult to find any definitive evidence of how much money has been donated and where it goes exactly. But CIA estimates put al-Qaeda's yearly expenditures at \$30 million and al-Qaeda's low-tech tactics aren't very expensive: The September 11 attacks are estimated to have cost between \$200,000 and \$500,000.²⁶

Most ominous, however, is that jihadists are encouraged to train alone or in small groups, and then carry out large scale attacks with other recruits whom they have never met: "nobody will know the identity of each other in the beginning... Once 'harmony and mutual trust' are established, training conducted and videos watched, then 'you can meet in reality and execute some operation in the field'."²⁷

The web address for al-Qaeda's online magazine, Sawt al-Jihad ("Voice of Jihad"), is <http://www.sawtaljihad.org/>. It came online in 2003²⁸ and is run by al-Qaeda's

Committee in Saudi Arabia.²⁹ On May 6, 2007, its headline read, "The Islamic State of Iraq/Destroying two National Guard Centers and killing twenty of their soldiers in al-Tahreer region in Dyala province." Every post began with "In The Name of Allah The Most Gracious The Most Merciful." Discussion topics varied from "News Reports," to video clips (such as one entitled "Allah's rule on the members of the Interior Ministry in Dyala province," which shows at least 15 men, bound and blindfolded, being shot in the back of the head in a ditch), to a copy of a Canadian Department of National Defence document entitled "11 Steps to Survival," which outlines what Canadian citizens should do in case of an emergency, such as a nuclear weapons attack against North America. Under the far right column entitled "Categories," are links to posts filed under "Sheikh Abu Musab Syrian" (who I assume is Abu Musab al-Suri who is from Syria), and Osama Bin Laden, as well as other links, such as "Islamic Video" and "Jihad Video." The website is written in English. If you visit it today, you will get an error messaging saying "Site Temporarily Unavailable."

Administering websites, however, is not the only way al-Qaeda and other jihadists utilize the Internet. They are also fans of message boards, e-groups, instant messaging, blogs³⁰, e-mail, and Yahoo! groups. Jihadists share

²⁵ *Ibid.* (Quoting *The Washington Times*, September 26, 2001.)

²⁶ "9/11 Five Years Later: Gauging Islamist Terrorism."

²⁷ Steven Coll and Susan B. Glassner, "Terrorists Turn to the Web as Base of Operations." *Post-Newsweek Business Information, Inc., Newsbytes*, August 7, 2005.

²⁸ Northeast Intelligence Network, "Internet Magazine Sawt Al-Jihad ("Voice of Jihad") Return Announced," <http://www.homelandsecurityus.com/VOJ012807>.

²⁹ Evan Kohlman, "Al Qaeda and the Internet," *Washingtonpost.com* August 8, 2005.

³⁰ Katz, Rita, "Global Terrorist Threat," Capitol Hill Hearing Testimony, House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, *Congressional Quarterly*, 2007.

e-mail account information on, say, a message board or through personal contact, and write “draft” e-mails, which leave no trail and can only be accessed by other people who are trusted associated to whom the e-mail account information has been made available.

People like Abu Omar, a young Jordanian man dedicated to spreading jihadist ideology online,³¹ are on a direct e-mail list comprising sympathizers to the cause whose task is to disseminate information from field commanders to the general populace using “code and special software to circumvent official scrutiny of their Internet activity.”³² In addition to online magazines, al-Qaeda has created an online media production team whose sole purpose is to produce videos of, and about, jihadist leaders and post them on the Internet.³³ When the videos and messages get sent down, Omar gets an e-mail alert and sympathetic Internet café owners allow him, friends of his, and new curious members of the community to go online, download them, and remain *virtually* anonymous.³⁴

According to Rita Katz, director of the SITE Institute, “Only a handful of primary source jihadist websites distribute the media of the leaders of al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups.”³⁵ Most

of the Internet providers that host jihadist websites are in the United States, even though the majority of the webmasters reside in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia.³⁶ According to “Internet Haganah,” a website dedicated to “Confronting the Global Jihad Online,” the geographic distribution of jihadists who are active on the most prominent of Salafist/Jihadist websites is as follows: 25.65% in the Persian Gulf; 19.88% in Europe; 13.26% in Egypt; 12.68% in the Maghreb; 11.53% in the Levant; 9.37% in the Americas; 3.60% in Asia-Pacific; 1.73% in Turkey; 1.15% in Iran; 0.58% in Africa; 0.29% in the Indian Subcontinent; and 0.14% in both Central Asia and Iraq.³⁷

The virtual world of online jihad very much reflects the shadowy world of a transnational terrorist. It is not as easy to find these websites and shut them down or track down their source. The network that puts these sites up is a complex web interacting in a way that resembles the informal *hawala* system of interconnected money handlers, which al-Qaeda uses to keep its cash out of sight as well.³⁸ In addition to hacking into other websites to avoid being shut down by government intelligence agencies like the NSA, the fact that the files containing jihadist material are

³¹ Hassan M. Fattah, “Growing Unarmed Battalion in Qaeda Army Is Using Internet to Get the Message Out,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2006, A6.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Katz, Rita, “Global Terrorist Threat,” Capitol Hill Hearing Testimony, House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism,

Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, *Congressional Quarterly*, 2007.

³⁶ Evan Kohlman, “Al Qaeda and the Internet,” *Washingtonpost.com* August 8, 2005.

³⁷ Internet Haganah, “Who will you believe, alexa.com, or your own lying eyes?” <http://www.haganah.org.il/harchives/006018.htm> 1 (accessed May 6, 2007).

³⁸ “9/11 Five Years Later: Gauging Islamist Terrorism.”

located on foreign web servers out of the jurisdiction of the U.S. government makes shutting them down problematic: “In such cases, access to these logs is difficult and requires use of multilateral law enforcement assistance treaties.”³⁹ Moreover, jihadists use “Internet proxy servers to obscure their locations... [and] layer their communications internally to provide additional cover.”⁴⁰ If and when sites do get shut down, jihadists turn again to people like Abu Omar by sending out new web addresses to those on their direct e-mailing lists.⁴¹

Just as in Iraq and Afghanistan when U.S. coalition forces successfully destroy and take down a terrorist network only for another one just like it to pop up somewhere not too far away, so too do jihadist websites have an uncanny tendency to reappear as strong or stronger than before. Both phenomena stem from the power and appeal of the ideology of jihad. To defeat this ideology the West must similarly utilize the Internet to spread an ideology that values democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and socio-economic justice. But its words cannot be belied by its actions.

³⁹ Evan Kohlman, “Al Qaeda and the Internet,” *Washingtonpost.com* August 8, 2005.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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