

## **The Terror Network: How Al-Qaeda Uses the Internet**

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### **Introduction**

Prior to 9/11, Al-Qaeda enjoyed the benefits of physical sanctuary that Afghanistan provided. The Taliban, the de facto rulers of Afghanistan, allowed al-Qaeda to construct training camps and other facilities that enabled the terrorist group to plan, communicate, coordinate, train, indoctrinate, and spread its message to the world in a secure environment. Each one of these activities and the Afghan sanctuary in general were enabling factors that allowed the core of al-Qaeda to grow into a formidable terrorist group and execute a number of devastating attacks.

In response to the attacks of 9/11, the US military removed the Taliban from power and ejected al-Qaeda from its Afghanistan stronghold. As a result, al-Qaeda has had to search for new sanctuaries. There has been speculation in the media regarding the location of these new sanctuaries. According to terrorism expert Peter Bergen, al-Qaeda has sought out new sanctuaries in Pakistan along the Afghan border, in Saudi Arabia, and finally on the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

It is the hypothesis of this paper that al-Qaeda and its broader ideological movement use the virtual sanctuary of the Internet to disseminate propaganda, wage psychological warfare, recruit potential operatives, raise funds, train members and sympathizers, and exercise command and control over its amorphous network. This research is important for the following reasons. First, a brief survey of the literature covering how terrorist groups use the Internet reveals important contributions, but it also reveals important gaps that this paper will attempt to address. A number of authors believe that the major threat presented by terrorists' use of the Internet lies in the ability to exercise command and control over operational cells. Michael Whine's piece, *Cyberspace: A New Medium for Communication, Command, and Control by Extremists*, summarizes this school of thought very well. Whine argues that modern terrorist groups make use of the Internet to

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Bergen, "Al Qaeda After September 11<sup>th</sup>," Presentation at Georgetown University, February 2, 2005

plan and coordinate terrorist attacks securely. Whine's insight is certainly valuable; however, it underestimates the utility of the Internet to terrorist group by narrowly focusing on command and control. Whine fails to account for other activities carried out by terrorist groups in cyberspace. Moreover, Whine neglects to consider that there are other high-tech and low-tech means to exercise command and control available to terrorists groups.<sup>2</sup>

Gabriel Weimann's piece, *www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*, builds on Whine's contribution by further analyzing the myriad of ways that modern terrorist groups use the Internet. According to Weimann, terrorists use the Internet to wage psychological warfare, to seek publicity, to distribute propaganda, to mine data on potential targets, to raise funds, to recruit sympathizers and operatives, to enable networking among and between terrorist groups, to share information, and to plan and coordinate operations.

While Weimann also analyzes the benefits that terrorist groups can reap from the Internet, he does not provide a great deal of depth in his analysis. Weimann only points out that terrorists benefit from the ease of access to the Internet, the lack of regulations in cyberspace, the potential for large audiences, the anonymity of communication online, the fast flow of information on the information superhighway, the decreased cost of communication in cyberspace, the rich multimedia environment of the Internet, and the ability to shape content used by the media. Weimann does not offer a great deal of compelling evidence or case studies to support the claims that terrorist can, in fact, realize the above benefits through the use of the Internet. Moreover, Weimann fails to question if there are drawbacks from the terrorist perspective in using the Internet. Finally, Weimann casts a wide net by studying how all modern terrorist groups use the Internet. While this is a useful contribution, from a US government policy-makers perspective, a singular focus on al-Qaeda would be extremely valuable. As the author of the 9/11 attacks and still an ongoing threat to the American homeland, al-Qaeda represents the face of global terror to the American public and, therefore, deserves a unique analysis on how it uses the Internet.

In *Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of "Cyberplanning,"* Timothy Thomas picks up where Weimann left off by focusing precisely on how al-Qaeda uses the Internet. Thomas presents a detailed list of the ways that al-Qaeda has and could use the Internet. Thomas concludes that al-Qaeda uses the Internet for many of the same reasons that Weimann outlined. Thomas, like Weimann, did not attempt to analyze the weaknesses in al-Qaeda's use of the Internet. Understanding the benefits of al-Qaeda's cyber strategy is important, but it does not address the equally important question of how the US should respond to al-Qaeda's cyber strategy. This question can only be answered when the liabilities of al-Qaeda's strategy are understood.

While there are important benefits that al-Qaeda accrues from its use of the Internet, this paper posits that there are also important drawbacks. The following methodology will be

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Scheuer, "They Still Don't Get it: The Danger of Ignoring Reality in the War on Terror," Roundtable Discussion at the Terrorism Research Center, March 2, 2005

used throughout this paper. Section I will establish a working definition for al-Qaeda in an effort to avoid confusion. In addition, al-Qaeda's goals will be examined. Understanding al-Qaeda's evolution and its goals are important because it will help inform the analysis of al-Qaeda's use of the Internet and the strengths and weaknesses of this strategy.

In Section II, this paper will present a brief historical overview of how past terrorist groups have used technology with particular attention on how these previous groups used technology to disseminate propaganda. This brief outline will show that al-Qaeda's use of the Internet is merely a second-generation innovation when compared to previous terrorist groups' use of technology. This is important to understand because it will prevent an overreaction from policy makers and create an environment that allows for the construction of a reasonable counter-terrorism policy.

Section III, which will contain the major focus of this paper, will detail with as much evidence as possible how al-Qaeda uses the Internet. A selection of case studies will be used to show how al-Qaeda disseminates propaganda, wages psychological warfare, recruits potential operatives, raise funds, trains operatives and sympathizers, and exercises command and control via its use of the Internet.

Finally, Section IV will identify major strengths, and Section V will identify the weaknesses of al-Qaeda's use of the Internet. An understanding of these strengths and weakness will ultimately help to form a strategy for defeating al-Qaeda's in both the virtual and the physical world.

## **I. Evolution of al-Qaeda**

### ***From the Afghan War to a Global Ideology***

In the aftermath of the Afghan War, a handful of Arab Afghan coalesced around the charismatic leadership of Osama bin Laden and the ideological vision of Abdullah Azzam. Azzam penned the following as the Afghan war drew to a close:

Every principle needs a vanguard to carry it forward and to put up with heavy tasks and enormous sacrifices. There is no ideology, neither earthly or heavenly, that does not require ... a vanguard that gives everything it possesses in order to achieve victory ... It carries the flag all along the sheer, endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifest itself. The vanguard constitutes the strong foundation for the expected society.<sup>3</sup>

This quote illustrates the intentions of al-Qaeda's founding leadership that its core members work toward inspiring a wider ideological movement. Through these lenses al-Qaeda can be seen as consisting of three separate, but loosely connected, entities. First, there are the hard core members of al-Qaeda; they are mainly composed of veterans of

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<sup>3</sup> Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (I.B. Tauris: New York), 2003

the wars is Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya.<sup>4</sup> Second, there are the dozens of localized militant Islamic groups scattered around the world. While it is fashionable to label these local groups as al-Qaeda, a closer examination of these groups reveals that while they may be inspired by the same ideology, they do not consider themselves subordinates of al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden.<sup>5</sup> Although these local militant groups consider themselves independent and many times have divergent goals and interests from al-Qaeda, there are still occasions in which the local group may find it strategically expedient to ally itself with al-Qaeda and carry out operations that serve the interests of both groups.<sup>6</sup> The third layer of al-Qaeda is the wider ideological movement of anti-US and anti-western resistance that has proliferated throughout the Muslim world.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Ideology***

The core of al-Qaeda believes in the sanctity of the land of Islam, and their primary enduring principle is the protection of Muslim territory from Western influence and ultimately the restoration of the Islamic Caliphate<sup>8</sup> – a rule of pure Islam over traditional Muslim lands, governed by Sharia, without recognition of colonial-imposed national boundaries. Their strategic goal is to overthrow all corrupt Muslim governments by driving out Western influence from those countries. Al-Qaeda thinks the west, principally the United States, provides the necessary support that keeps corrupt Muslim regimes in power. Therefore, Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants believe the only way for al-Qaeda to achieve its goal is through the use of force against the west first and the apostate regimes in the Middle East second.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Al-Qaeda's Use of Violence***

Al-Qaeda's use of violence prior to 9/11 was aimed at achieving the above objective through direct attacks on the Western presence in the Muslim world and through the support of local insurgencies fighting against apostate regimes. The tactical objective of this strategy was threefold. First, al-Qaeda sought to inflict pain on apostate governments in the Middle East and the US government in the hope that the US would withdrawal from the Muslim world. Second, al-Qaeda hoped to provoke a heavy-handed response from apostate governments and the US government that would further alienate Muslims and increase its pool of support. Third, al-Qaeda sought to attract the attention of the media and the international community in an attempt to elicit sympathy and elevate the profile of its cause.

### ***A Means to an End: Attacking the US Economy***

The 9/11 attack's principle objectives remained the same. An unintended but readily accepted consequence of the attack, from al-Qaeda's perspective, was the degree of economic damage suffered by the US. It has been estimated that the attack caused

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, "Through Our Enemies Eyes", Washington, DC, Brassey's, Inc, 2002

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

damages upward of \$83 billion.<sup>10</sup> This impact did not escape al-Qaeda's attention, as evidenced by statements from its leaders subsequent to the attacks. For example, bin Laden has spoken about the need to target the US economy as a means to sap the US government's resources in the Global War on Terrorism.<sup>11</sup> It, therefore, appears that al-Qaeda seeks to push the US out of the Muslim world through a war of attrition in which targets with economic value will be targeted. Currently, it appears that al-Qaeda favors a strategy of conventional<sup>12</sup> and WMD attacks as evidenced by its previous operations and past statements. This current preference does not preclude the use of an Internet-based propaganda campaign in a supporting role.

## **II. History of Technology & Terrorism**

The advent of the information revolution has made the power of technology apparent to even the layman. The Internet and other associated advanced communication technologies have enabled individuals to distribute ideas to an ever-expanding audience. However, it would be a mistake to think that prior to the information revolution individuals could not promote their ideas. To illustrate this point, it is useful to examine how terrorist groups have used technology over the years to distribute propaganda efficiently. For example, 19<sup>th</sup> century anarchists used posters to spread propaganda in an attempt to influence a particular audience. Anarchist John Most was quoted as saying,

In order to achieve the desired success in the fullest measure, immediately after the [terrorist] action has been carried out, especially in the town where it took place, posters should be put up setting out the reasons for the action in such a way as to draw from them the best possible benefit.<sup>13</sup>

In the post-World War II era, Marxist revolutionaries, such as Brazil's Carlos Marighela, used technologies such as copy machines and printing presses to mass-produce propaganda.<sup>14</sup> In the early 1990s Hizbollah started Al-Manar, a satellite television station, to broadcast regular programming to its core constituency of Shiite Muslims.<sup>15</sup> These brief examples outline how the decreased cost and increased availability of communication technology, such as the printing press, radio, and television transmitters have enabled terrorist groups to distribute propaganda to an ever-increasing audience. Accordingly, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, terrorist groups have leveraged the opportunities afforded by the Internet to create and distribute propaganda.

## **III. How al-Qaeda uses the Internet**

The subsequent section of this paper will document how al-Qaeda and its broader ideological movement use the Internet. Moreover, this section will demonstrate that al-

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<sup>10</sup> "Review of Studies of the Economic Impact of September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks on the World Trade Center," GAO, May 29, 2002 available on-line @ [www.gao.gov/new.items/d02700r.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02700r.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Associated Press, "Bin Laden's Message: A call to bleed the US economically," USA Today, November 2, 2004 available online @ [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2004-11-02-bin-laden-economy\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2004-11-02-bin-laden-economy_x.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Conventional attacks are defined as bombings, hijackings, kidnappings, and hostage takings.

<sup>13</sup> Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism* (Rowman & Littlefield) New York: 2002

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

Qaeda's online propaganda and psychological warfare campaign are of primary importance as it prepares the ideological battlefield so that al-Qaeda can more easily achieve its goals.

### ***Propaganda***

Propaganda is defined as the propagation of a philosophy or a point of view. The aim of propaganda is to influence people's opinions. In theory, al-Qaeda seeks to motivate and inspire two key target audiences. First, it seeks to promote its ideology to its own members and affiliated terror groups. Messages targeted at these two groups will be designed to boost morale<sup>16</sup> and maintain a cohesive strategy. In practice, al-Qaeda's desire to influence its own members and other local franchise groups is evidenced through the numerous Arab language message boards that espouse its ideology. For example, al-Qaeda's main site, [alqaeda.com](http://alqaeda.com), run by the mysterious Centre for Islamic Studies and Research, is entirely in Arabic.<sup>17</sup> The content published on the site includes rhetoric exacerbating the idea that the West is at war with Islam, essays justifying the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, and the use of violence in general.<sup>18</sup> According to Paul Eedle, al-Qaeda's online presence is designed to quash Muslim oppositions to its battle with the West and to ensure its continuity by broadening and deepening its support throughout the Muslim world.<sup>19</sup>

It is important that al-Qaeda aggressively target audiences in the Muslim world because Muslims have traditionally been quietest in the realm of politics.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, al-Qaeda must not only act as a vanguard for the broader Muslim world, but it must actively disseminate its ideology in order to build a broad base of support. Messages to the wider Muslim population will be designed to engender sympathy and build a consensus for al-Qaeda's cause. The above evidence and the data gathered in Appendix A -- 30 al-Qaeda affiliated websites that endorse its ideology -- illustrate al-Qaeda's effort to engender sympathy and support in the Muslim world. Over 50 percent of these sites are currently active, presumably the rest have been targeted by Coalition intelligence services and possibly moved to a new domain. It is important to note of these documented active sites all but one are accessible in Arabic. It is reasonable to conclude from this dataset that influencing the wider Muslim world is of primary importance to al-Qaeda's broader ideological movement.

Prior to the advent of the Internet, it would have been nearly impossible for al-Qaeda to shape and disseminate unique messages that inspire one target audience while at the same time terrorize another target audience. Like Black September and other terrorist groups from the pre-information revolution era, al-Qaeda would have had to rely on the

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<sup>16</sup> Gordon Corera, "A Web Wise Terror Network," BBC News, October 10, 2004

<sup>17</sup> Paul Eedle, "Terrorism.com," The Guardian, July 17, 2002 available online @ <http://www.guardia.co.uk/print/0,3858,4462872-108920,00.html>

<sup>18</sup> Paul Eedle, "Al Qaeda takes fight for 'hearts and minds' to the web," Jane's Intelligence Review, August 1, 2002

<sup>19</sup> Paul Eedle, "Terrorism.com," The Guardian, July 17, 2002 available online @ <http://www.guardia.co.uk/print/0,3858,4462872-108920,00.html>

<sup>20</sup> Carl Brown, *Religion and the State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (Columbia University Press) New York: 2000)



international media to present its message to its allies and enemies alike. However, through direct control of its online propaganda campaign al-Qaeda has a better opportunity to boost morale in its ranks and rally sympathy for its cause in the Muslim world. Certainly, other technologies like fax machines, satellite television, and audio cassettes are also capable of distributing propaganda, but the unique characteristics of the Internet allow al-Qaeda more quickly to disseminate richly designed propaganda to a larger potential audience without incurring a large financial burden and without the fear of detection.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Psychological Warfare***

Al-Qaeda also seeks to intimidate the United States and its allies. It will, therefore, design messages to this audience to be as gruesome and terrorizing as possible.<sup>22</sup> While the overwhelming majority of al-Qaeda affiliated websites are limited to rhetorical intimidation, this should not be seen as evidence that al-Qaeda does not use the Internet to harass its enemies in the West. Aside from the standard website, there are many other Internet-based technologies that al-Qaeda can use to influence its target audience in the West. Abu Maysara, an operative for Abu Musab Zarqawi, utilized the file sharing software YouSendIt to distribute haranguing communiqués and disturbing multimedia images.<sup>23</sup> This software enables a user to create a free and anonymous website and upload large data files to that site. In the case of the Berg video, Maysara created numerous redundant sites for the video and then proceeded to send the links to chat rooms across the Internet.<sup>24</sup>

The website barsomyat.com further illustrates al-Qaeda's use of online psychological warfare. According to media reports barsomyat.com tracks Christians who engage Muslims in debate via the Internet chat service PalTalk.com.<sup>25</sup> Hossam Armanious, a Coptic Christian who resided in New Jersey, was found murdered with his family in his home; he often engaged Muslims in debate on PalTalk.com. Although, it is unclear whether Armanious was murdered for his rhetoric on PalTalk.com, there were numerous death threats against him posted online.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, there were also numerous posts on barsomyat.com praising the murder of Armanious and his family. Additionally, users of barsomyat.com have posted the personal information of "Joseph," a Syrian Christian. These posts clearly indicate that users of barsomyat.com are trying to track down "Joseph's" current address.<sup>27</sup> This type of harassment appears to be an attempt by al-Qaeda's broader ideological movement to strike fear into its enemy. Whether the users of barsomyat.com are responsible for the death of Hossam Armanious and his family or the users intend on hunting down "Joseph" are somewhat irrelevant. The fact that these

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<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Weimann, "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet," United States Institute of Peace Special Report, March 2004

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Corera, "A Web Wise Terror Network," BBC News, October 10, 2004

<sup>23</sup> Ariana Eunjung Cha's, "From a Virtual Shadow, Message of Terror," The Washington Post, October 2, 2004

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Christians on PalTalk Chat Service Tracked by Radical Islamic Web Site," New York Sun, January 31, 2005

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

threats are levied by the users of barsomyat.com and highlighted by the traditional mass media works to intimidate al-Qaeda's enemy.

Just as the Internet offers unique advantages, compared to other high-tech and low-tech means, to al-Qaeda's propaganda campaign, the Internet is also uniquely suited to increase the efficacy of al-Qaeda's online psychological warfare campaign. The Internet allows al-Qaeda operatives and sympathizers to terrorize quickly and easily select individuals or large audiences without much fear of detection or capture.<sup>28</sup> It would be very difficult to achieve these same ends through other means without incurring a large financial cost or exposing valuable operatives and sympathizers.

### ***Recruitment***

Recruitment is an important tactical objective for al-Qaeda. In order to survive and continue to grow, al-Qaeda and its broader ideological movement need volunteers willing to engage in violence and individuals willing to provide logistical and ideological support. Al-Qaeda's online propaganda campaign allows it to conduct recruitment more effectively. Online propaganda enables al-Qaeda to build a constituency within specific and unique target audiences and thereby conduct an effective recruitment drive.

Specific evidence of al-Qaeda's use of the Internet for recruiting purposes is given by Gabriel Weimann of the US Institute of Peace in his report *www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*. Weimann details an al-Qaeda recruitment effort launched in 2003 to enlist volunteers to fight with the resistance in Iraq.

In one particularly graphic exchange in a secret al-Qaeda chat room in early September 2003, an unknown Islamic fanatic, with the user name "Redemption Is Close," writes, "Brothers, how do I go to Iraq for Jihad? Are there any army camps and is there someone who commands there?" Four days later he gets a reply from "Merciless Terrorist:" "Dear Brother, the road is wide open for you—there are many groups, go look for someone you trust, join him, he will be the protector of the Iraqi regions and with the help of Allah you will become one of the specific instructions on how to make the journey to Iraq. Mujahidin." "Redemption Is Close" then presses for more specific information on how he can wage jihad in Iraq. "Merciless Terrorist" sends him a propaganda video and instructs him to download software called PalTalk, which enables users to speak to each other on the Internet without fear of being monitored.<sup>29</sup>

Other evidence of al-Qaeda affiliated groups using the Internet to enlist recruits includes the London-based group Al-Muhajiron. Al-Muhajiron was founded by Omar Bakri and is a splinter group of Hizb ut-Tahrir, another al-Qaeda affiliated group.<sup>30</sup> Al-Muhajiroun

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<sup>28</sup> Gabriel Weimann, "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet," United States Institute of Peace Special Report, March 2004

<sup>29</sup> Gabriel Weimann, "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet," United States Institute of Peace Special Report, March 2004

<sup>30</sup> Michael Whine, "Al-Muhajiroun: The Portal for British Suicide Terrorist," International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, May 21, 2003



has expressed praise for the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks,<sup>31</sup> a noted disdain for Israel,<sup>32</sup> and a desire for the return of the Islamic Caliphate.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Al-Muhajiroun's website has instructs Muslims in the west to act as a "fifth column" in support of al-Qaeda's broader ideological movement.<sup>34</sup>

While al-Qaeda's use of the Internet to identify and recruit potential operatives is a worrying trend, it is important to acknowledge that al-Qaeda's ability to recruit operatives is not dependent upon the Internet. There are a number of other technical and non-technical means that al-Qaeda can utilize to disseminate training material. For example, al-Qaeda operatives can utilize its network of contacts that extend into radical mosques throughout the world. There are numerous examples of potential recruits that are identified through their attendance of radical mosques.<sup>35</sup> As an example, Zacharias Moussaoui, the alleged 20<sup>th</sup> hijacker, and Richard Reid, the failed shoe-bomber, both attended the Finsbury Park mosque in London.<sup>36</sup> Finsbury Park is notorious for the preaching's of Sheikh Abu Hamza, who has long supported radical Islamic causes and has alleged connections to al-Qaeda.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Fundraising***

Another vital resource from al-Qaeda's perspective, in addition to a pool of recruits, is money. Just as al-Qaeda uses the Internet to recruit, it also uses the Internet to raise funds. For example, the al-Qaeda affiliated Sunni extremist group, Hizb al-Tahrir, posts account numbers on a website maintained in Germany so that its supporters can make donations.<sup>38</sup> According to Gabriel Weimann, Hizb al-Tahrir uses a number of web sites registered to raise funds.

In addition, Chechen rebels, an insurgency historically supported by al-Qaeda, have used the Internet to raise funds. In order to raise funds via the Internet, the Chechen rebels published bank account numbers online and encouraged sympathizers to donate funds to the jihad.<sup>39</sup> One of the publicized bank accounts was located at a bank in Sacramento, California.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> No Attribution, "Dot-Com Terrorism: How Radical Islam uses the Internet to Fight the West," The New Atlantis, Spring 2004, pg. 91-93

<sup>32</sup> Michael Whine, "Al-Muhajiroun: The Portal for British Suicide Terrorist," International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, May 21, 2003

<sup>33</sup> No Attribution, "Dot-Com Terrorism: How Radical Islam uses the Internet to Fight the West," The New Atlantis, Spring 2004, pg. 91-93

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Peter Ford, "Piercing Al Qaeda's camouflage," Christian Science Monitor, January 24, 2002

<sup>36</sup> No Attribution, "Mosque in the Spotlight," BBC News, January 20, 2003 available @ [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/2675857.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2675857.stm)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Gabriel Weimann, "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet," United States Institute of Peace Special Report, March 2004

<sup>39</sup> Timothy L. Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of Cyberplanning," Parameters, Spring 2003, pp. 112-123

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates use of the Internet to raise funds is a troubling trend. However, it is essential to comprehend that al-Qaeda's ability raise funds is not contingent on the Internet. There are a number of other and non-technical means that al-Qaeda can utilize to raise money. For example, al-Qaeda operatives have used a network of charities, non-governmental organizations, and wealthy patrons from the Middle East to keep its purse full.

### ***Training***

The loss of Afghanistan forced al-Qaeda to seek out other ways to train its operatives and sympathizers. Cyberspace has shown that it can be an adequate vehicle for training in place of the physical sanctuary of Afghanistan. There have been at least 21 publications of Al-Qaeda's online training manual, known as Camp Al-Battar, accessible via the Internet. Abdulaziz al-Muqri, was the head of Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, was the editor of Al-Battar until Saudi security forces killed him in June 2004. Al-Muqri was gunned down for his part in the kidnapping and beheading of American contractor Paul Johnson in June 2004. The continued publication of Al-Battar after al-Muqri's death is evidence that not only are a number of individuals involved in the creation and editing of each issue, but also other individuals are involved in the online production of the training manual.

A closer look at an individual issue of Al-Battar reveals the level of detail and instruction contained in each edition. Issue seven, published in March 2004, of Al-Battar contains guidance on target selection.<sup>41</sup> The training manual outlines when it is appropriate to strike religious, ideological, economic, and human targets. This particular issue is evidence of the Al-Qaeda's goal of distributing operational guidance to its dispersed network of cells and operatives around the world in an efficient and secure manner. From a broader perspective Al-Battar allows al-Qaeda to retain a certain level of operational control over the broader ideological movement.

It is also interesting to note the chronology of the release of Al-Battar issue number eight and the spate of kidnappings and beheadings that followed. Al-Battar issue number eight was published online in April 2004. This issue continued instructions on assassinations, kidnappings, and the use of propaganda. Shortly after this training manual was made available American contractors Nick Berg and Paul Johnson were kidnapped and beheaded.<sup>42</sup> It has been shown above that the link between the Al-Battar and the kidnapping of Paul Johnson is both direct and obvious because the leader of the Johnson kidnapping operation was also the editor of Al-Battar. However, the connection between Al-Battar and the kidnapping and Berg is less obvious, especially considering Berg was kidnapped before Johnson. It is, therefore, possible, that cells in Iraq with access to Al-Battar utilized its instructions or merely followed its guidance to kidnap Americans.

While al-Qaeda's use of the Internet to disseminate training material is disconcerting, it is important to recognize that al-Qaeda's ability to train operatives and sympathizers is not

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<sup>41</sup> The cover of Al-Battar issue #7 can be seen in Appendix B

<sup>42</sup> Eric Lipton and Eric Lichtblau, "On-line and Even Near Home, and New Front Is Opening in the Global Terror Battle," The New York Times. September 23, 2004

reliant upon the Internet. There are a number of other technical and non-technical means that al-Qaeda can utilize to disseminate training material. For example, al-Qaeda operatives can create pamphlets or compact discs, such as the Encyclopedia of Jihad, and distribute these materials through face-to-face meetings.

### ***Command & Control***

While the Al-Battar online magazine can be construed as evidence of Al-Qaeda's ability to exercise loose operational control through the Internet, the 9/11 attacks offers evidence that the Internet played a direct role in Al-Qaeda's ability to exercise command and control over its operatives. For example, according to Philip Zelikow, "the conspirators used the Internet, usually with coded messages, as an important medium for international communication."<sup>43</sup> One such example of coded communications was the code names assigned to the targets of the 9/11 operation. The hijackers referred to the World Trade Center as the faculty of town planning, the Pentagon was called the faculty of arts, and Capitol Hill was known as the faculty of law.<sup>44</sup> Further, Abu Abdul Rahman posted the following message to a chat room monitored by Al-Qaeda operative Ramzi Binalshibh, "The first semester commences in three weeks. Two high schools and two universities. ... This summer will surely be hot ...19 certificates for private education and four exams. Regards to the professor. Goodbye."<sup>45</sup>

This singular example illustrates how Al-Qaeda used the Internet to communicate operational information between operatives in the field and members of the core leadership cadre. It is also worth noting that intelligence officials found nearly 2,300 encrypted messages downloaded from an Islamic web site onto al-Qaeda operative and 9/11 planner Abu Zubaydah's computer.<sup>46</sup> The messages and files were dated from May 2000 until September 9, 2001. While the contents of most of the messages are unknown, it is not unreasonable to assume that they contained at least some operational planning.

Further evidence of command and control can be found in al-Qaeda's online propaganda magazine Sawt al-Jihad. The second issue of the magazine contains editorials advocating a strategy of engaging Jews and Americans on the Arabian Peninsula, while avoiding clashes with the Saudi security forces.<sup>47</sup> Presumably, the leaders of al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula realize that the citizens of Saudi Arabia are deeply opposed to the killing of other Muslims; therefore, the leaders are utilizing the online magazine to instruct sympathizers and operatives to be wary of engaging other Saudis in battle.

While al-Qaeda's use of the Internet to exercise command and control is a worrying trend, it is important to understand that al-Qaeda's ability to exercise command and control is not solely dependent on the Internet. There are a number of other technical and

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<sup>43</sup> David Talbot, "Terror's Server," Technology Review, volume 108, number #2, Feb. 2005, pp. 46-53

<sup>44</sup> "Al-Jazeera offers accounts of 9/11 planning," CNN.com, September 12, 2002 available on-line @ <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/09/12/alqaeda.911.claim/>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Jack Kelley, "Militants wire web with links to Jihad," USA Today, July 10, 2002

<sup>47</sup> No Attribution, "2<sup>nd</sup> Issue of 'Voice of Jihad' Al-Qa'ida Online Magazine: Strategy to Avoid Clashes with Saudi Security Forces, Convert the World to Islam," Middle East Media Research Institute, Special Dispatch Series – No. 601

non-technical means that al-Qaeda can utilize to exercise command and control. For example, al-Qaeda operatives can use cell phones, satellite phones, faxes, and human couriers.<sup>48</sup> While the Internet may allow al-Qaeda to conduct command and control quickly and more easily, al-Qaeda has shown that it is not always interested in achieving goals quickly, as evidenced by the multi-year long planning cycle of the 9/11 operation.

The evidence above indicates that al-Qaeda utilizes the Internet to disseminate propaganda, wage psychological warfare, recruit sympathizers and operatives, raise funds, train sympathizers and operatives, and exercise command and control over its core members, affiliated groups, and the broader ideological movement. It appears that the Internet, in some ways, compensates for al-Qaeda's loss of its Afghan sanctuary by allowing the group to continue to inspire, support, train, and direct operatives and sympathizers alike. However, when designing a counter-terrorism strategy, it is valuable to note al-Qaeda only appears to rely exclusively on the Internet to disseminate propaganda and wage psychological warfare. All of its other tasks can be accomplished by other high-tech and low-tech means.

#### **IV. Al-Qaeda's Net Gains**

The following characteristics of increased anonymity, decreased cost of communication, increased speed of communication, increased available audience size, ease of use and the ability to create and publish content are all important strengths that al-Qaeda derives from its use of the Internet. Al-Qaeda takes advantage of each of these strengths to more effectively disseminate propaganda, wage psychological warfare, recruit potential operatives, raise funds, train operatives and sympathizers, and exercise command and control over its global network via the Internet.

##### ***Anonymity***

The anonymity provided by the Internet's architecture is best understood from the perspective of the intelligence official. For example, with the address of an al-Qaeda affiliated website, it is possible to perform a search to identify to whom the website is registered.<sup>49</sup> As an example, it is useful to examine the websites cataloged in Appendix A. Of the 30 sites cataloged, only 22 have registration information available. Without access to classified information, it is difficult to determine the value of some of this registration information. It would not be outlandish to surmise that some of the registration information may be faked. The registration procedures for some of the listed ISPs can be easily faked. For example, the ISP Everyone's Internet, a favorite ISP of al-Qaeda sympathizers, only requires contact information and a valid credit card in order to secure server space.<sup>50</sup> It is unclear whether Everyone's Internet attempts to verify the legitimacy of the contact information.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Scheuer, "They Still Don't Get it: The Danger of Ignoring Reality in the War on Terror," Roundtable Discussion at the Terrorism Research Center, March 2, 2005

<sup>49</sup> Mark Memmott, "Internet's Many Layers Give Terrorists Room to Post, then Hide," USA Today, June 28, 2004

<sup>50</sup> Everyone's Internet Sign-up procedures can be found at <https://signup.ev1.net/english/hosting/signup.asp>

In some cases, an al-Qaeda sympathizer or operative may not even go through the trouble of registering and paying for server space at a legitimate ISP. There are numerous cases of al-Qaeda sympathizers stealing or hijacking vulnerable server space from unwitting accomplices. For example, the pro al-Qaeda hacker "Irhabi 007" hijacked an unsecured FTP site of the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department and posted al-Qaeda propaganda in the form of videos, anthems, and speeches.<sup>51</sup> In these cases, it will be difficult to trace little more than an IP addresses or a screen name back to the individual stealing the unsecured server space.

It was shown above that tracking the identity of the individual who registered or stole server space is difficult. It is equally difficult to track the identity of individuals posting content such as images, multimedia content, or threads on a message board to an al-Qaeda affiliated website. For example, an al-Qaeda operative may simply stroll into an Internet café and purchase the use of a terminal for a specified period of time. Assuming the operative was not under surveillance, he or she will travel cyberspace and post content online anonymously.

Anonymity is important to al-Qaeda because it allows its global network of operatives to communicate with each other without the fear of detection and, therefore, husband its most valuable resources – operatives and sympathizers. Moreover, anonymity increases the ease of participation and makes it more likely that latent al-Qaeda sympathizers will contribute to the network. While not every operative will volunteer for a suicide mission, the anonymity provided by the Internet makes it more likely that al-Qaeda sympathizers will feel comfortable posting propaganda or donating funds.

### *Cost of Communications*

The decreased cost of communication is important to al-Qaeda because it does not have to spend an excessive amount of scarce resources on communications. The money and manpower saved can be spent on direct action that furthers al-Qaeda's strategic objective. When al-Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, bin Laden utilized the services of a satellite phone to coordinate activities among different al-Qaeda cells across the globe. The estimated cost of the cell phone and the associated service charges was \$7,500.<sup>52</sup> Conversely, the cost of communicating through the Internet is next to nothing. The only costs incurred are the cost paid to host an al-Qaeda website and the cost to purchase the use of terminals at an Internet café. It is important to note that al-Qaeda does not always pay a service provider to host one of its websites. In some cases, they have simply placed their content on an unsecured web server of an unsuspecting host. The example of Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department cited above illustrates this point. Another low-cost communication option is the use of a free email services or a chat rooms. As an example, the case study of the user "Redemption is Close" online recruitment by "Merciless Terrorist" presented above details how al-Qaeda utilizes the services of free chat rooms to achieve its strategic and tactical goals.

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<sup>51</sup> David McGuire, "Al Qaeda Message posted on US Server," Washington Post, July 13, 2004

<sup>52</sup> Dan Verton, *Black Ice* (McGraw-Hill), New York, 2003

Decreased cost of communication is important to al-Qaeda because it allows the terrorist group to transfer expenditures to other valuable endeavors. For example, via its use of the Internet as a communications medium al-Qaeda can save up to \$7,500 in cell phone charges if it so chooses. This money could then be put toward operational resources, such as fertilizer for a truck bomb.

### ***Speed of Communication***

The increased speed of communication offered by the Internet enables al-Qaeda to proliferate its message as quickly, and in some cases, more quickly than the US government. This increased speed allows a terrorist group to intensify and magnify the effectiveness of its propaganda campaign. As an example, the Nicholas Berg beheading video proliferated around the world in a matter of hours.<sup>53</sup> Without the Internet, al-Qaeda would have had to rely on human couriers and other face-to-face connections as a means of disseminating the video. Human contacts may be appropriate for disseminating information within a contained audience, but propaganda is not as effective when its distribution is limited or slowed. The Internet provides a quantum leap in speed when compared to traditional methods of face-to-face and communication via the media employed by vintage-era terrorist groups. Al-Qaeda's quantum leap in speed helps negate the US government's advantage in information dissemination. Traditionally, only governments through their ownership of the airwaves could reach a large audience in a timely fashion. However, the ubiquitous access of the Internet enables al-Qaeda to get its message out in a timely fashion.

As a result, the Internet has helped level the playing field between state and non-state actors in the dissemination of propaganda. Governments are no longer guaranteed a distinct advantage on the ideological battlefield. Al-Qaeda can distribute its propaganda on its own and no longer has to rely on the mainstream media to get its message out to its target audiences.

### ***Size of Audience***

The ability to communicate with a large and diverse set of target audiences without having to rely on a third party enables al-Qaeda to further its cause. According to terrorism expert Brian Jenkins, "terrorism is theatre."<sup>54</sup> Prior to the introduction of the Internet, terrorists may have been able to choreograph violence to meet a political objective, but they had to trust the media to distribute its message accordingly. Conversely, the Internet allows al-Qaeda to tailor both its violence and its message. Moreover, the Internet enables al-Qaeda to repackage a single message in subtle ways to resonate with its various target audiences. For example, the beheading video of Nick Berg served to motivate the hard-core members of al-Qaeda and its affiliated network in Iraq as well as terrorize al-Qaeda's enemies in the West.

The ability to reach a large audience is important because it allows al-Qaeda to motivate more Muslims to join its cause and terrorize more Westerners. The ability to speak to a

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<sup>53</sup>Ariana Eunjung Cha's, "From a Virtual Shadow, Message of Terror," The Washington Post, October 2, 2004

<sup>54</sup>[http://cfrterrorism.org/terrorism/introduction\\_print.html](http://cfrterrorism.org/terrorism/introduction_print.html)



large number of Muslims is important because al-Qaeda relies on its operatives and sympathizers to carry out attacks and spread its message. The Internet is uniquely capable of reaching massive audiences with unfiltered content in a low cost manner when compared to other high-tech and low-tech means. Moreover, the traditionally quiet attitude of Muslims is a roadblock to al-Qaeda's goal over upheaval of the current political system.<sup>55</sup> The use of the Internet aids al-Qaeda in its quest to overcome this roadblock and motivate its audience in the Muslim world to follow its vanguard.

### ***Ease of Use and Richness of Content***

Finally, the Internet's ease of use allows relatively unsophisticated al-Qaeda operatives to post rich media content such as multimedia files without much difficulty. As a result, al-Qaeda is able to franchise its ideology out to multiple terrorist groups operating on the local level and multiply the effectiveness of its propaganda dissemination campaign. A few hours of training should provide a suitable baseline for those operatives without a breadth of technical capability. The previous example of Abu Maysara illustrates this point. Abu Maysara is a purported to be a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq and is able to utilize the Internet and al-Qaeda's brand name to further the particular goals of al-Qaeda's presence in Iraq.

Moreover, due to ubiquity of the Internet, it is relatively easy for the eager operative to find an Internet café or some type of public connection anywhere in the world. For example, Fazul Mohammed, a member of the al-Qaeda cell responsible for the US Embassy bombing in Nairobi, communicated with al-Qaeda leadership from Nairobi via email.<sup>56</sup> This ubiquity of access when combined with the ease of use and the richness content further multiplies the effectiveness of al-Qaeda's propaganda.

Rich multimedia content, such as graphic beheading videos, colorful online propaganda magazines, and speeches from key al-Qaeda figures, is important to al-Qaeda because it drastically increases the effectiveness of its Internet-based propaganda. It enables al-Qaeda to influence more effectively each of its target audiences. As a result, al-Qaeda's ability to use the Internet to create its own brand of rich multimedia and reach a potentially massive audience in a timely and low cost manner without much fear of detection or capture creates a tremendous force multiplier for the terrorist network.

## **V. Al-Qaeda's Net Losses**

While the above advantages empower al-Qaeda in its campaign against the west, it is important to note that under the wrong circumstances some of these advantages can become debilitating weaknesses. The following section will analyze a number of potential weaknesses of al-Qaeda's online propaganda that can be exploited by the United States and its allies.

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<sup>55</sup> Carl Brown, *Religion and State: The Muslim Approach to Politics* (Columbia University Press) New York: 2000

<sup>56</sup> On April 19, 2001 Robert Windrem on NBC News reported that Fazul Mohammed, a member of the Al Qaeda cell responsible for the Nairobi embassy bombings, communicated with Al Qaeda leadership from Nairobi via email.

***Distrust and Disruption***

The least obvious, yet potentially most devastating, weakness of al-Qaeda's cyber strategy is the potential for distrust to be injected into its network. The Internet presents a rare opportunity for the intelligence community to disrupt al-Qaeda's network. Al-Qaeda is a social network comprised of an assortment of ideologies and goals.<sup>57</sup> These types of social networks -- the mafia is a comparable example -- are based on high degrees of in-group trust. In this instance, trust is developed through a shared experience or a shared ideology. Al-Qaeda was able to cement a shared experience and indoctrinate a shared ideology through the anti-Soviet jihad and the subsequent establishment of training camps in Afghanistan<sup>58</sup>. As a result of the loss of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda no longer has a base of operations that it can use to fuse this shared experience and ideology into its operatives.

Without a physical base, al-Qaeda has been forced to use the Internet to create trust among its operative. The Internet by its very nature is not a good mechanism to establish trust because it removes the bond created via face-to-face meetings. Rather, the Internet relies on largely impersonal and sometime anonymous communication and does not create the same degree of trust that personal interaction creates.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, if the US government can spread disinformation effectively through jihadist chat rooms and websites, it will serve to inject a level of distrust among al-Qaeda operatives. Simply stated, the terrorist operative may become less certain about the authenticity of the messages posted on-line. This is important because it allows the US government to attack al-Qaeda's strengths of dispersion and redundancy.

***Opportunities for Penetration***

The permanent nature of on-line communications creates a trail of evidence that can be used to track al-Qaeda operatives. The arrest of Muhammed Naeem Noor Khan illustrates the vulnerability of Internet-based communications. Shortly after Khan's capture, US, British, and Pakistani intelligence operatives searched Khan's computers and email account and found a trail leading to another al-Qaeda operative: Issa al-Hindi.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, if western intelligence officials were able to turn a communication hub like Khan into a double agent, al-Qaeda would be severely compromised for two reasons. First, all ongoing communications through the compromised hub would be tainted and all of al-Qaeda's exposed operations would likely have to be shelved. Second, as discussed above, a double agent would have the larger impact of introducing distrust into the terrorist network. Communications would be stunted, and important messages would have to be passed through human couriers. This would slow the pace of al-Qaeda's operations and possibly its online propaganda and psychological warfare campaigns.

***Brand Corruption***

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<sup>57</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*, (University of Pennsylvania Press) Philadelphia: 2004

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, (Simon & Schuster) New York: 2000

<sup>60</sup> Associated Press, "Senior al-Qaeda operative nabbed in United Arab Emirates," USA Today, August 8, 2004 available online @ [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2004-08-08-al-qaeda-arrest\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2004-08-08-al-qaeda-arrest_x.htm)

As stated above, al-Qaeda as the broader ideological movement is comprised of a variety of interests and ideologies. In some cases, the interests of the various regional terrorist groups' coverage with the core of al-Qaeda and in other cases the interests of the core and movement diverge. As a result, a regional group that may claim to act in the interest of the broader ideological movement may undertake actions that damage al-Qaeda's reputation both inside and outside the Muslim world.

In the world of online propaganda, any one group can post grisly videos and inflammatory statements online. In certain cases, these images and statements may harm al-Qaeda's reputation and damage its ability to spread its ideology across the Muslim world. For example, the kidnapping of aid worker Margaret Hassan and the subsequent posting of videos of Hassan pleading for mercy harmed Iraqi insurgents' reputation across the Muslim world.<sup>61</sup> The actions, like the Hassan kidnapping, of "loose cannons," operating in the name of al-Qaeda, increases the possibility of damage to al-Qaeda's brand. Therefore, al-Qaeda is vulnerable to the corruption of its brand as fighters for Muslim solidarity and freedom. This is important because al-Qaeda relies on its image to recruit volunteers, raise funds, and engender support from the Muslim world. A tarnished brand will negatively impact al-Qaeda's ability to achieve these goals.

Therefore, there is the potential to use al-Qaeda's online presence as a weapon against the terrorist network. The arrest of Muhammed Naeem Noor Khan illustrates that al-Qaeda's use of the Internet makes it uniquely vulnerable to penetration and disruption. Moreover, the US has the capability of tarring al-Qaeda's image in the Muslim world by engaging in Internet-based black psychological operations.<sup>62</sup> For example, if the US successfully created content similar to the Hassan video and was able to attribute the content to al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda's reputation in the Muslim world might suffer.

### **Conclusions**

The obvious response to al-Qaeda's cyber strategy is to engage legal and technical mechanisms designed to keep al-Qaeda out of cyber space. For example, the United States can work within its national legal framework to create and enforce laws that will prevent al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda sympathizers from hosting websites through Internet Service Providers registered in the United States. Moreover, the United States government can also encourage its coalition partners to take similar legal actions aimed at keeping al-Qaeda offline in other countries. The US government may also enact extra-legal technical means, such as a denial of services attack, when faced with a country unwilling or unable to prevent al-Qaeda from establishing a cyber sanctuary within its borders.

In a perfect world, there would be no denying the usefulness in keeping al-Qaeda offline. However, such a strategy of legal and extra-legal efforts appears unlikely to be

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Galpin, "Iraqis voice revulsion over killing," BBC News, November 17, 2004 available @ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4020159.stm>

<sup>62</sup> A black psychological operation disseminates propaganda that purports to be from one source in a conflict but is actually from the opposing side.

successful. A legal strategy designed to keep al-Qaeda offline will fail because al-Qaeda will most likely be able to find sanctuary in a country that either will not partner with the US in its War On Terrorism or does not have an interest in establishing the legal framework necessary to keep al-Qaeda off its Internet address. The data gathered in Appendix A seems to confirm this point, as it contains sites registered in a variety of countries. Simply put, the US will have difficulty shutting down sites hosted by services providers outside the United States.

In addition, an extra-legal strategy of denial of services attack is unlikely to work. While it would not be difficult for the US to target Internet Protocol Addresses of known al-Qaeda websites, this strategy will not be successful in the long run because al-Qaeda operatives are sure to enact technical counter-measures that will guarantee continuity in its Internet presence. For example, the technically savvy al-Qaeda operative could easily take the defensive measures.

First, the operative could scout out vulnerable websites across the Internet and if necessary create 'backdoors' at these vulnerable locations for future access. The example of the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department illustrates how easily al-Qaeda operatives and sympathizers can take advantage of a vulnerable web server.

Second, the operatives could very easily create digital archives off all the digital propaganda in his or her control and make a full back up of a website if necessary. In the event of a denial of service attack, an al-Qaeda operative could easily refer to the list of vulnerable websites and proceed to re-launch the digital archive of the compromised website at an entirely new location. A simple posting on a sympathetic al-Qaeda discussion board will quickly spread the new address of website and minimize the disturbance to al-Qaeda operations in cyberspace.

An example from another terrorist group illustrates this point quite well. The web site Euskal Herria, aka the Basque Country Journal, advocated the political views of the Basque terrorist group ETA and was hosted by the Institute for Global Communication (ICG) a San Francisco-based Internet Service Provider.<sup>63</sup> ETA's opponents threatened ICG with spam and other forms of denial of service. Eventually, ICG responded by taking Euskial Herria offline but not before it made an archived copy of the site that allowed ETA supporters to establish mirrors of the original Euskial Herria web site.<sup>64</sup> This example illustrates how easy it is for determined and technically savvy al-Qaeda operatives and sympathizers to take technical counter-measures that serve to ensure the continuity of operations of al-Qaeda's Internet presence.

Finally, not only can al-Qaeda take defensive measures to ensure continuity of its online presence, but it can also rely on other high-tech and low-tech means to recruit sympathizers and operatives, raise funds, train sympathizers and operatives, and exercise command and control. Therefore, it is unlikely that a strategy of cyberspace denial will

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<sup>63</sup> Maura Conway, "Reality Bites: Cyberterrorism and Terrorist 'Use' of the Internet," First Monday, November 2002

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

prove effective in hampering al-Qaeda. The only tasks that al-Qaeda appears to rely on the Internet for are propaganda dissemination and psychological warfare. Therefore, any policy must first be designed al-Qaeda's online war of ideas.

### **Policy Implications**

It is vitally important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of al-Qaeda's online propaganda dissemination campaign in order to design an effective counter-terrorism strategy. A failure to understand the potential assets and liabilities will make it difficult for policymakers to respond to al-Qaeda's battle for hearts and minds. The following policy recommendations are designed to maximize al-Qaeda's propaganda's weaknesses and minimize its strengths.

#### ***Let them surf***

Conventional wisdom dictates that the US and its allies in the Global War on Terrorism should attempt actively to disrupt al-Qaeda's sanctuary in cyberspace. For example, intelligence agencies should launch denial of service operations against sites, or the US government should exert pressure on Internet Service Providers to remove from their domain those sites known or thought to be sympathetic to al-Qaeda and its cause. However, this perspective deserves serious reconsideration for the following reasons.

As discussed above, it would be very difficult, if not impossible from a technical and legal perspective, to keep every al-Qaeda affiliated web site offline. The data gathered in Appendix A confirms this point. Appendix A shows that a number of al-Qaeda affiliated sites are still active. Of the 30 sites surveyed, 20 are still active. Moreover, al-Qaeda operatives and sympathizers are likely to follow the example of previous terrorist groups and establish digital archives of al-Qaeda propaganda. Moreover, these operatives and sympathizers are likely to use vulnerable web servers as unwitting hosts. Therefore, engaging in a total effort to attempt to eject al-Qaeda from its cyber sanctuary will result in nothing more than an expensive digital game of cat and mouse.

If the US is concerned that al-Qaeda is using stenography or other types of encoded communication, such as an image of bin Laden with a Kalashnikov as a signal to attack<sup>65</sup>, then all sites should necessarily be shut down. Given the difficulty in identifying which sites utilize these types of encoded communication, it is very difficult to agree that the US and its coalition partners know which sites to shut down. Therefore, it is hard to believe that any consistent policy that identifies which sites to shut down can be developed. Without a consistent policy guiding US government efforts, it is more than likely that law enforcement and intelligence officials will waste time chasing red herrings in cyberspace. Therefore, the US and its coalition partners should attempt to exploit weakness in al-Qaeda's cyber strategies as opposed to pursuing potentially fruitless and certainly costly efforts.

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<sup>65</sup> According to Timothy Thomas in his piece "*Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of Cyberplanning*" symbols on a website, such as the color of an icon or the direction a gun is pointing, can serve as a message to operatives.

There are also potential benefits, from the US government's perspective, to be gained from al-Qaeda's online activity. For example, Martha Crenshaw has posited that terrorism is a result of the failure of other peaceful options.<sup>66</sup> Simply put, when all other means fail, a disenchanted individual may feel that violence is the only mechanism available to affect political change. From this perspective, a campaign of online propaganda can be viewed as an alternative to violence. While it is difficult to discern how many al-Qaeda sympathizers would have turned to violence if the Internet did not allow them to contribute to the cause peacefully, it is not unreasonable to assume that the peaceful outlet provided by the Internet may prevent a handful of al-Qaeda sympathizers from turning to violence. If the ability to disseminate online propaganda prevents just one al-Qaeda sympathizer from killing innocent people, then it may well be the case that al-Qaeda's use of the Internet and its online propaganda campaign benefit the US.

Coalition law enforcement and intelligence services can exploit al-Qaeda's Internet presence in a number of ways. The US can use al-Qaeda's activities as a means to gather important information about the terrorist group. For example, the arrest of Muhammed Naeem Noor Khan provided Pakistani, British, and US law enforcement and intelligence officials with a treasure trove of information.<sup>67</sup> Media reports have speculated that the data gathered from Khan's computers led to the arrest of Issa al-Hindi.<sup>68</sup> This example illustrates how al-Qaeda's activities in cyberspace leave a digital trail that coalition forces can follow.

In a similar vein, al-Qaeda's activities in cyberspace present opportunities for penetration and brand corruption. Had coalition law enforcement and intelligence officials been able to turn Muhammed Naeem Noor Khan into a double agent, there is no telling how much additional intelligence could have been gathered.<sup>69</sup> Should US or coalition forces capture a key technical operative in the future, it would be wise to hide the details of the operative's capture as long as possible and try to use the operative's online identity to lure other al-Qaeda out of the shadows. Moreover, the example of the Hassan execution, which was unpopular among Iraqis<sup>70</sup>, illustrates how easily propaganda can backfire against al-Qaeda. Therefore, al-Qaeda's online activity provides coalition intelligence officials with the opportunity to conduct black psychological operations with the aim of hurting al-Qaeda's image in the Muslim world.

### ***Fight bytes with megabytes***

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<sup>66</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "The logic of terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a product of strategic choice," in Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998) pp. 7-24

<sup>67</sup> David Johnston and David E. Sanger, "New Leaders are Emerging for Al Qaeda," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2004, pp. A1

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>69</sup> In the article "Senior al-Qaeda operative nabbed in United Arab Emirates" the Associated Press cited a source that claimed that while in custody of Pakistani officials Khan contacted other Al Qaeda operatives via email in an apparent attempt to draw these operatives out of hiding.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Galpin, "Iraqis voice revulsion over killing," *BBC News*, November 17, 2004 available @ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4020159.stm>



It has been demonstrated that al-Qaeda can achieve the goals of recruitment, fundraising, training, and command and control through other high-tech and low-tech means. However, the Internet represents a true force multiplier for al-Qaeda in the arenas of propaganda and psychological warfare because the characteristics of the Internet enable the terrorist network to shape its own message and deliver it to unique target audiences with increased speed and decreased cost.

It has been shown that attempting to keep al-Qaeda offline may prove unproductive at best and counter-productive at worst. However, the US must confront al-Qaeda's online propaganda and psychological warfare because these campaigns have proven effective. The principle manner in which the US must confront al-Qaeda is through its own propaganda campaign. Other commentators have referred to this struggle as the war of ideas. Just as al-Qaeda has crafted varying messages for its separate constituencies, the US should attempt to define its target audiences and attempt to influence each of them with a unique message. The four audiences that the US should attempt to influence are: hardcore al-Qaeda members, non-violent sympathizers of the broader ideological movement, the international public, and the US populace.

The US government should make clear through its actions and rhetoric that it will not tolerate violence against Americans. The US should also make it clear that it will kill or capture any known al-Qaeda operatives responsible for the death of Americans or those operatives actively engaged in the planning of future operations. While the threat of death or imprisonment may not deter current members of al-Qaeda's inner core, it may have the effect of deterring on-the-fence sympathizers of joining the inner core of the al-Qaeda network. Ideally, this deterrent effect will serve to thin the ranks of al-Qaeda sympathizer willing to commit violence.

Further, the US government should make clear to the broader Muslim world, which may be sympathetic to al-Qaeda's message if not its means, that violence is not an acceptable tactic. The US government should seek to open the political discourse in the Muslim world. From this perspective, the establishment of democratic principles and a broader civil society in Iraq and Palestine may have positive effects. The use of political violence may well decrease if there are real opportunities for free political discourse and the ability to participate in a vibrant civil society.

The United States cannot win the war against al-Qaeda by itself. In fact, if the US attempts to engage bin Laden on its own, without the support of the international community, it is unlikely to find bin Laden or stop the spread of al-Qaeda's ideology. Therefore, the United States must recognize that it cannot act unilaterally and that the international community has valuable resources to offer in the battle against al-Qaeda. If the US treats other countries as equal partners in the battle against Al-Qaeda, the chances of success rise exponentially. For example, France has garnered valuable experience in its battle against Islamic radicals in Algeria and no doubt can contribute valuable resources to the West's battle against al-Qaeda. As a result, the US government should continue to engage and motivate the international community to contribute intelligence, financial aid, and political support to the battle against al-Qaeda. The US can continue to

motivate its allies in the battle against al-Qaeda by illustrating that al-Qaeda does not solely target Americans, rather it will target any western in any part of the world.

Finally, it is vitally important that the US government continue to motivate the support of its citizens. Without the support of the US domestic population, it is unlikely that the successive administrations will spend the political capital necessary to fight Islamic radicals abroad. The US government should enact a campaign designed to educate the American public on the threat of al-Qaeda without resorting to fear mongering. Fear mongering, via the unexplained heightening and lowering of the color-coded threat level, will serve to exhaust the American public patience. Therefore, a patient campaign that explains the roots of Islamic radicalism will serve to motivate the public to a long term campaign designed to shatter al-Qaeda and stamp out the underlying causes of radicalism.

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