

## Countering Terrorist Use of the Web as a Weapon

By Bruce Hoffman

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TERRORISM HAS LONG been understood to be a violent means of communication. The terrorist act itself is thus deliberately designed to attract attention and then, through the publicity that it generates, to communicate a message. Indeed, nearly a quarter of a century ago, Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf observed that, "Without communication there can be no terrorism."<sup>1</sup> But communication is essential for a terrorist movement not just to summon publicity and attention, but also to promote its longevity and ensure its very survival. Without an effective communications strategy, a terrorist movement would be unable to assure a continued flow of new recruits into its ranks, motivate and inspire existing members as well as expand the pool of active supporters and passive sympathizers from which terrorism also draws sustenance.

Given this constellation of requisite sustainable resources—motivated minions, energized recruits, generous supporters and willing sympathizers—it is not surprising that terrorists today devote so much time and energy to communications. That they have fastened on the internet as an especially efficacious vehicle for this purpose—given its rapid (often in real time), pervasive geographical reach, and cost-effective characteristics—is not surprising either.<sup>2</sup> As Professor

Gabriel Weimann of Haifa University notes in his seminal study, *Terror on the Internet*, when he began studying this phenomenon nearly a decade ago, there were only about 12 terrorist group websites. By the time he completed his research in 2005, the number had grown to over 4,300—"a proliferation rate," he explains, "of about 4,500 percent per year."<sup>3</sup> And, by the time the book was published the following year, the number had jumped to more than 5,000 terrorist websites.<sup>4</sup> Today, the number of terrorist and insurgent sites is believed to have increased to some 7,000.

Thus, virtually every terrorist group in the world today has its own internet website and, in many instances, maintains multiple sites in different languages with different messages tailored to specific audiences. The ability to communicate in real time via the internet, using a variety of compelling electronic media—including dramatic video footage, digital photographs and audio clips accompanied by visually arresting along with savvy and visually appealing web design—has enabled terrorists to reach a potentially vast audience faster, more pervasively and more effectively than ever before.

The weapons of terrorism today, accordingly, are no longer simply the guns and bombs that they always have been, but now include the mini-cam and videotape, editing suite and attendant production facilities; professionally produced and mass-marketed CD-ROMs and DVDs; and, most critically, the laptop and desktop computers, CD burners and e-mail accounts, and internet and worldwide web. Indeed, largely because of the internet—and the almost unlimited array of communications opportunities that it offers—the art of terrorist communication has now evolved to a point where terrorists can effortlessly and effectively control the communication of their ideology of hate, intolerance and violence: determining the content, context and medium over which their message is projected; and

toward precisely the audience (or multiple audiences) they seek to reach. The changing face of terrorism in the 21st century is perhaps best exemplified by the items recovered by Saudi security forces in a raid on an al-Qa`ida safe house in Riyadh in late spring 2004. In addition to the traditional terrorist arsenal of AK-47 assault rifles, explosives, rocket-propelled grenades, hand grenades and thousands of rounds of ammunition that the authorities expected to find, they also discovered an array of electronic consumer goods including: video cameras, laptop computers, CD burners, and the requisite high-speed internet connection. According to 60 Minutes investigative journalist Henry Schuster, the videos

had been part of an al-Qa`ida media blitz on the web that also included two online magazines full of editorials and news digests, along with advice on how to handle a kidnapping or field-strip an AK-47 assault rifle. The videos mixed old appearances by bin Laden with slick graphics and suicide bombers' on-camera last wills and testaments. They premiered on the internet, one after the other, and were aimed at recruiting Saudi youth.<sup>5</sup>

As Tina Brown, the doyenne of post-modern media, has pointed out: the "conjunction of 21st-century internet speed and 12th-century fanaticism has turned our world into a tinderbox."<sup>6</sup>

The implications of this development have been enormous. The internet, once seen as an engine of education and enlightenment, has instead become an immensely useful vehicle for terrorists with which to peddle their baseless propaganda and manifold conspiracy theories and summon their followers to violence.<sup>7</sup> These sites alarmingly

1 Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence As Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), p. 9.

2 For a more detailed analysis of historical terrorist communications strategies and their contemporary use of the internet and other electronic and digital communications means, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 173-228.

3 Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 2006), p. 105.

4 Remarks by Professor Gabriel Weimann, book launch event held at the U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C. on April 17, 2006.

5 Henry Schuster, "Studios of Terror: Al-Qa`ida's Media Strategy," CNN, February 16, 2005.

6 Tina Brown, "Death by Error," *Washington Post*, May 19, 2005.

7 See, for instance, the "Iraq" tab at [www.kavkazcenter.com](http://www.kavkazcenter.com) and the "Iraqi Resistance Report" tab at [www.jihadunspun.com](http://www.jihadunspun.com) as well as sites such as [www.islammemo.cc/taqrer/one\\_news.asp?Idnew=292](http://www.islammemo.cc/taqrer/one_news.asp?Idnew=292); [www.la7odood.com](http://www.la7odood.com); [www.balagh.com/thaqafa/O604ggpz.htm](http://www.balagh.com/thaqafa/O604ggpz.htm); and [www.albasrah.net](http://www.albasrah.net). All of the preceding sites were ac-

present an increasingly compelling and indeed accepted alternative point of view to the terrorists' variegated audiences. This was of course precisely al-Qa`ida's purpose in creating its first website, [www.alneda.com](http://www.alneda.com), and maintaining a variety of successor sites ever since: to provide an alternative source for news and information that the movement itself could exert total

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control over. Identical arguments—claiming distortion and censorship by Western and other mainstream media—have also been voiced by sites either created by the Iraqi insurgent groups themselves or entities sympathetic to them.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the internet has become for terrorists a “virtual” sanctuary to compensate for the loss of their physical sanctuaries and continue to provide information on training and instruction in the means and methods of planning and executing terrorist attacks. Finally, the internet's power to radicalize—to motivate, inspire, animate and impel radicals to violence—has been repeatedly demonstrated in the United States, Europe and elsewhere.

In these respects, al-Qa`ida's capacity to continue to prosecute its war against the United States and the movement's other assorted enemies is a direct reflection of both the movement's resiliency and the continued resonance of its ideology and effectiveness of its communications. Al-Qa`ida may be compared to the archetypal shark in the water that

cessed on July 6, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> “Western Propaganda Media try to shut down albasrah.net! [sic],” the banner on one such site, [www.albasrah.net](http://www.albasrah.net), asserted in 2005. “Once again,” it argued, “the propaganda media have begun to spew stupid accusations against al-Basrah, the true aim of which is to smother the voice of Iraqi people and smother one of the few sources of information on the unprecedented massacres that are taking place inside occupied Iraq in the name of ‘international law,’” [www.albasrah.net](http://www.albasrah.net), accessed on July 6, 2005.

must keep moving forward—no matter how slowly or incrementally—or die. In al-Qa`ida's context, this means adapting and adjusting to even our most consequential counter-measures while simultaneously searching to identify new targets and vulnerabilities and continuing to replenish its ranks with new recruits as well as sympathizers and supporters.

In sum, defeating al-Qa`ida requires a strategy that relies on effectively combining the tactical elements of systematically destroying and weakening its capabilities alongside the equally critical, broader strategic imperatives of countering the continued resonance of the movement's message and breaking the cycle of terrorist recruitment and replenishment that has both sustained and replenished al-Qa`ida. But, today, Washington has no such strategy in the war on terrorism. America's counter-terrorism campaign continues to assume that America's contemporary enemies—be they al-Qa`ida or the insurgents in Iraq—have a traditional center of gravity. It also assumes that these enemies simply need to be killed or imprisoned so that global terrorism or the Iraqi insurgency will both end. Accordingly, the attention of the U.S. military and intelligence community is directed almost uniformly toward hunting down militant leaders or protecting U.S. forces—not toward understanding the enemy we now face. This is a monumental failing not only because decapitation strategies have rarely worked in countering mass mobilization terrorist or insurgent campaigns, but also because al-Qa`ida's ability to continue this struggle is ineluctably predicated on its capacity to attract new recruits and replenish its resources.

The success of U.S. strategy will therefore ultimately depend on Washington's ability to counter al-Qa`ida's ideological appeal and thus effectively address the three key elements of al-Qa`ida's strategy:

- The continued resonance of their message.
- Their continued ability to attract recruits to replenish their ranks.

- Their stubborn capacity for continual regeneration and renewal.

To do so, we first need to better understand the mindset and minutia of the al-Qa`ida movement, the animosity and arguments that underpin it and indeed the regions of the world from which its struggle emanated and upon which its hungry gaze still rests. Without knowing our enemy we cannot successfully penetrate their cells; we cannot knowledgeably sow discord and dissension in their ranks and thus weaken them from within; we cannot effectively counter their propaganda and messages of hate and clarion calls to violence; and, we cannot fulfill the most basic requirements of an effective counter-terrorist strategy: preempting and preventing terrorist operations and deterring their attacks. Until we recognize the importance of this vital prerequisite, America will remain perennially on the defensive: inherently reactive rather than proactive, deprived of the capacity to recognize, much less anticipate, important changes in our enemy's modus operandi, recruitment and targeting.

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