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# Radicalization on the Internet?

## The Virtual Propagation of Jihadist Media and its Effects

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### Introduction

The spectre of a retrograde, puritanical and belligerent ideology may seem anachronistic in the twenty-first century. However, Jihadism (as opposed to the classical reified conception of Jihad) is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. The Internet, that most contemporary of media, is increasingly its medium of choice: Jihadist websites, forums and blogs flourish. Prominent Jihadist ideologues like Ayman al-Zawahiri argue that:

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

The Jihadists' marginalized status vis-à-vis the mainstream media is a consequence of what Phillip Hammond refers to as 'the media war on terrorism'.<sup>1</sup> Bemoaning this 'media siege', they have turned to the Internet as their principal ideological battlefield. Virtual propagation of Jihadism proceeds apace, with an exponential growth in Jihadist websites from fourteen to over 4,000 between 2000 and 2005 alone.<sup>2</sup>

The audiences of this virtual corpus of Jihadist media are extremely difficult to ascertain, unless users willingly disclose this information. Audience demographics are however dictated to a large degree by extraneous factors pertaining to accessibility of the medium itself such as age, gender, location, socio-economic status, and so on.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the audience profile is further limited by the content available,

in particular its linguistic demands. The overwhelming majority of virtual Jihadist forums are published in Arabic alone<sup>4</sup> and so inaccessible to a large proportion of Muslims as well as other Internet users. British Muslim audiences are predominantly (74 per cent) South Asian<sup>5</sup> and are therefore more likely to speak Urdu, Punjabi, or Bengali, than Arabic. This article focuses on English-language Jihadist fora, as these are readily accessible to British Muslim audiences.

### Functions

Jihadist fora serve four key interrelated functions:

1. *News*: Many Jihadist forums consider their news coverage to be an important part of their raison d'être, particularly as existing coverage of Muslim conflicts is deemed to be unrepresentative and skewed towards their opponents' viewpoints. A number of sites, such as *Jihadunspun.com* and *Islammemo.cc*, operate principally as news outlets.
2. *Propaganda*: Perhaps the most important role of virtual forums is the uncensored publication and dissemination of the ideology and culture of Jihadism. This ranges from the ideological treatises and theological 'evidences' underpinning the culture of Jihad, and 'official' statements and communiqués from Jihadist groups and leaders, to the circulation of 'acts of Jihad' such as graphic 'beheading' videos, or IED attacks on Coalition targets in Iraq.
3. *Training*: Aside from propagating ideology, virtual forums also provide the means through which those with the

inclination may actualize their Jihadist aspirations. A plethora of technical and military manuals cover topics as diverse as hostage kidnapping, weaponry manufacture and deployment, guerrilla warfare, training and tactics and bomb-making. For example, the manufacture of acetone peroxide, the substance allegedly used in the 7 July and 21 July attacks in London, is comprehensively treated in the online *Al-Aqsa Encyclopaedia*.

4. *Expression*: The relationship between some users of Jihadist fora and the pursuit of violence or terrorism-related activities is incontrovertible in some cases (The 2004 Madrid train bombings, 21 July 2005 London 'bomb plot', and 2006 Canadian bomb plot are all prime examples). However, less often recognized is that for other, less hard-line audiences, Jihadist fora may serve an important function in subsuming diverse strains of political activism, unrest, and dissent, and so providing a conduit and framework for its non-violent expression. Consequently they can have a cathartic function, allowing audiences to vent their anger and frustration without resorting to violent means, similar to the role played by Al-Jazeera with Middle Eastern audiences as posited by Mohamed Zayani.<sup>6</sup> Relevant forms of expression include engaging in dialogue and debate with other members (such as the perennial debates over the legitimacy of targeting civilians or other Islamic sects), or even venting one's frustration through creative means such as poetry, which can highlight to other members one's empathy with the Ummah as a victim of oppression, whilst alluding to the moral quandary of being unable to match humanistic aspirations with actions.

### Legitimacy

Legitimacy is crucial for any media source which aspires to credibility. This holds particularly true for Jihadist sources which exist primarily to challenge the hegemony of mainstream media. Jihadist websites attempt to gain legitimacy in diverse ways. Aware of the ease of access to opposing viewpoints and alternative accounts, and the

increasing competency of media-savvy audiences, many ostensibly champion impartiality and audience discretion. Despite the patent propaganda of some of its articles, *Jihadunspun* (JUS) highlights its impartiality by presenting mainstream media reports in an unbiased way and then contrasting them with Jihadist reports (backed up by selective photographic or video evidence), inviting its audiences to differentiate between its 'truth' and others' 'censored accounts'. This leaves JUS less open to accusations of bias and propaganda, ironically shifting the onus for objectivity onto the mainstream

conflict, failing to admit real Muslim suffering, or at worst, is somehow complicit in the events. Many Jihadist and insurgency groups in Iraq shrewdly exploit this glaring absence of coverage by collecting and compiling data and footage (for example, by dispatching cameramen alongside combatants) in order to back up their own claims and refute those of the Coalition and mainstream media.<sup>8</sup>

Sophisticated design and production values often contribute disproportionately to perceptions of the quality and legitimacy of content. Recent developments include streaming



Leading Jihadist Ayman al-Zawahiri.

news media outlets which fail to represent Jihadist viewpoints, and are depicted as towing the official Coalition line, as is the case with embedded journalism in the Iraq war.<sup>7</sup>

This more sophisticated brand of Jihadist media receives further boosts to its potency and legitimacy from the conspicuous absence of commensurate reports from 'Islamic conflict' zones within the mainstream Western media. Where there is such coverage, it usually lacks graphic portrayals of violence and its aftermath, reinforcing the perception that the Western media presents, at best, a censored, sanitized version of

video news programs, such as the weekly *Sawt al-Khilafah* (Voice of the Caliphate); a highly professional fifteen-minute news round-up with accompanying studio anchor. Similarly, indications of popularity and prestige also help to ensure claims are accorded greater credibility: thus a search for the term 'Jihad' on Google (16 May 2007) returns search results that feature *Jihadunspun* at position five, no mean feat. Indeed, *Jihadunspun* has even been included in Google News as a bona fide 'news provider', much to the chagrin of US officials and anti-Jihadist civic groups. *Jihadunspun's* professionalism



extends to appearing to take great pains in determining the authenticity of the material they publish. They elected not to print an alleged US casualty photograph from the Al-Ansaar news agency, which had been circulating on a number of Jihadist forums, on the grounds that it was falsely 'doctored'. Not content with 'proving' the falsity of the image by drawing attention to its incorrect perspective and multiple resolutions, they generated their own composite image based on the same original, presenting it alongside both Al-Ansaar's image and the original photograph from CNN, illustrating how easily such manipulation could be achieved.

### Radicalizing Efficacy

Whilst a number of studies have attempted to describe the varied contours of virtual Jihadist media,<sup>9</sup> their use in actual radicalization is extremely difficult to ascertain in most cases. Much of the material they produce constitutes propaganda and aims at indoctrination, and some Jihadist groups are well aware of the Internet's potential radicalizing efficacy and appear to be explicitly focusing their energies upon virtual radicalization and recruitment. The Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) recently wrote:

*This is the Internet that Allah has enlisted in the service of jihad and of the mujahideen, which has come to serve your interests – given that half the battle of the mujahideen is being waged on the pages of the Internet – the sole outlet for mujahideen media.*<sup>10</sup>

A recent posting on the *al-Hesbah* forum by the GIMF, entitled the 'Pledge of Death in God's Path', went further and requested a pledge of allegiance (*bay'ah*) from site visitors, in the hope that they might be prepared to engage in jihad and swear 'allegiance to death . . . in the very near future . . . so that Osama bin Laden will have an army in Afghanistan, an army in Iraq, and a huge army on a waiting list on the Internet pages'.<sup>11</sup> This recruitment drive is not solely militaristic: in response to the

'media war' and the ideological battle being waged, the GIMF recently advertised 'vacant positions' for those wishing to help with the 'media Jihad' by producing videos and assembling footage of Jihadists in Iraq.<sup>12</sup>

In other recruitment bids, many forums list the exploits and 'glorious' martyrdoms of those slain in the 'global arena of Jihad'. Messages from leaders, such as the following from Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi (d. 2006), also attempt to stir audiences into action, and are disseminated widely on Jihadist forums:

*Awaken from your slumber, and arise from your apathy. You have slept for a long time. The wheels of the war to annihilate the Sunnis have not and will not halt. It will reach the homes of each and every one of you, unless Allah decides otherwise. If you do not join the mujahideen to defend your religion and honor, by Allah, sorrow and regret will be your lot, but only after all is lost.*<sup>13</sup>

This recruitment drive is proving fruitful as there is clear evidence of the role played by virtual Jihadist forums in radicalization in a limited number of cases. The 2004 Madrid train bombings are prime examples. The Internet text 'Iraqi Jihad: Hopes and Dangers' suggested that strategic bombing of trains would compel Spain's withdrawal from the US-led coalition in Iraq, and is thought to have been seminal to the actions of the perpetrators.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Hussein Osman (a defendant in the 21 July 2005 London 'bomb plot' trial) told Italian investigators that his group regularly watched videos of the conflict in Iraq and used the Internet to 'read up' on Jihad. He denied any direct links to Al-Qa'ida but admitted to utilizing their online platforms.<sup>15</sup> Official reports on the 7 July London suicide bombings also noted (in a general way, not directly referring to those attacks) that the Internet was becoming a valuable tool for extremists, being used for propaganda as well as training and for grooming potential recruits through chat rooms.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, a terrorist plot involving seventeen young Canadian

Muslims was foiled by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service after surveillance of a chat room in 2004, where inflammatory anti-Western rhetoric is thought to have precipitated a 'home-grown' bomb plot.<sup>17</sup> Yet even in such cases, where the use of Internet communication appears as *prima facie* evidence of its role in radicalization, in fact the Internet only seems to have provided the initial impetus: the plot quickly became more conventional in terms of planning and actualization after the group meetings at a 'training camp' in Northern Ontario.

### ***In diaspora Muslim communities in Britain and elsewhere, the consumption of alternative news media is often based upon mistrust and cynicism towards 'Western news'***

Despite limited evidence for Internet radicalization in such cases, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which virtual Jihadist fora influence wider audiences and users. For all we know, they may be proverbially 'preaching to the converted'. For example, Omar Bakri Mohammed's Internet relay chat sessions on the Paltalk network in January 2006, where he publicly exhorted to violence and Jihad, were solely targeted at the small coterie of his followers, with little attempt to reach a wider audience.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the vast majority of messages posted on the Mujahedon.net forums originated with a very small core group of active users: 99 per cent were passive or casual users. Some analysts doubt whether exposure to the Internet can 'turn anyone into a terrorist', arguing that as an elective medium, it is more likely to reinforce existing worldviews than to radicalize.<sup>19</sup> It is alluringly simple to blame the Internet, but Jihadist material has long been widely available in other media formats. For example, Azzam Publications, one of the

most prolific and well-known Jihadist media producers on the Internet prior to its closure in 2001, operated for many years as a print publishing house in London. Similarly, the Maktabah Al-Ansaar bookshop in Birmingham, which also doubles as an 'Islamic news agency', has been providing Jihadist videos since as early as 1999, providing evidence of Muslim persecution around the world, and chronicling its corollary: the rise and exploits of Mujahideen in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Palestine, Kashmir and Chechnya.<sup>20</sup>

### Virtual Jihadist Media as part of the Alternative News Paradigm

Jihadist media often fulfil some of the same functions as particularistic ethnic media. If one ignores the extreme and sometimes violent tone and content of Jihadist sources, they are often concerned with the same issues and topics deemed important by mainstream and moderate British Muslim news media such as the Islam Channel, and publications such as *Muslim Weekly*, *Muslim News* and *Q-News*. In diaspora Muslim communities in Britain and elsewhere, the consumption of alternative news media is often based upon mistrust and cynicism towards 'Western news',<sup>21</sup> and thus motivations for production as well as content converge in both cases.

Jihadist websites may also converge with non-Muslim sources, although in more limited ways. Many mainstream websites (such as *welfarestate.com*, *truthseeker.co.uk*, and *loosechange911.com*) support 'conspiracy theories', a staple of some Jihadist media. Another shared aspect is extreme audio-visual content, such as the images and videos of beheadings, civilian casualties, and other graphic violence, also a staple of 'gore sites' like *Ogrish.com* and *Rotten.com*. The video beheading of Nick Berg was downloaded from *Ogrish* a staggering 15 million times,<sup>22</sup> granting the material a far higher profile than could possibly have been envisaged by the perpetrators and immediate disseminators.

Content-sharing platforms can also contribute to the wider availability of

Jihadist media. The popular Jihadist-inspired rap video, *Dirty Kuffar*, by the UK group 'Sheikh Terra and the Soul Salah Crew', has been hosted on a very small number of Jihadist forums including *Tajdeed*.<sup>23</sup> The video has not gained widespread acclaim or notoriety through the Jihadist community, who most likely consider it to be amateurish and perhaps even offensive in using Western-style rap music. Instead, it has relied upon more mainstream platforms such as Putfile, Google Video, and Youtube to gain a fairly high profile.

### *Images of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's bloodied corpse are paraded in mission briefings and relayed in the mainstream media, while images of dead Coalition soldiers on Al-Jazeera spark moral outrage*

However, perhaps the most important aspect in which Jihadist media converge with non-Jihadist sources is in their presentation of alternate narratives and paradigms to those of the mainstream media, and particularly those originating with Coalition forces or the US administration. Many websites and blogs are intensely critical of mainstream media 'collusion' with the Coalition, which they see exemplified by the statement of CBS news anchor Dan Rather: 'When my country's at war, I want my country to win; there is an inherent bias in the American media'.<sup>24</sup> Sites claiming to present the 'fuller picture', where many stories bear some resemblance to Jihadist media reports, include *Whatreallyhappened.com*, *Thetruthseeker.co.uk*, *Iraqbodycount.net*, and *Informationclearinghouse.com*. For example, in December 2004 a number of Jihadist websites reported that an insurgency attack against Abu Ghraib

prison had been sparked by a letter from a female inmate named Fatima, having been written in her own blood and smuggled out of the prison. The now infamous 'Fatima's letter', in which she reported having been raped repeatedly, along with thirteen other girls, was subsequently circulated via many other sites and e-mail lists. The US State Department continues to deny the allegations, claiming that no sexual assault upon female detainees ever occurred at the prison, and that the letter was a complete fabrication.<sup>25</sup> However, rape of female detainees at Abu Ghraib is well documented.<sup>26</sup> The US military's official investigation into the Abu Ghraib scandal, the Taguba Report, identified rape as one of the many abuses that had taken place, disconcertingly opting to describe it as 'a male MP guard having sex with a female detainee'.<sup>27</sup> A collection of 1,800 photos and video stills depicting abuse at Abu Ghraib, never released to the public but shown to members of Congress, holds further evidence of sexual abuse of female detainees.<sup>28</sup>

Whether or not Fatima's specific story is apocryphal is less significant than the fact that sexual abuse of women prisoners had taken place, and thus the story was quickly able to gain currency in the context of growing mistrust of news and propaganda originating with the US Administration and Coalition forces, and disseminated by what are viewed as its proxies, the mainstream news agencies.<sup>29</sup> This mistrust has many roots. As well as suspicions over the true motives for the invasion of Iraq, and damning indictments of the United States and Coalition partners in the light of the lurid excesses witnessed at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, evidence of falsification, concealment, or infiltration of untrue 'news' into the mainstream media has undermined trust. Examples include the Pentagon's fictitious account of the 'heroic rescue' of Private Jessica Lynch from al-Nasiriyah,<sup>30</sup> false Coalition claims with respect to the 'uprising' in Basra,<sup>31</sup> the claim that white phosphorous was only used for illumination purposes in the assault on



Fallujah (and subsequent admission that it was used indiscriminately as an incendiary weapon<sup>32</sup>), or the denial that napalm was used in Iraq (and subsequent admission of the use of MK77 bombs, the more deadly successor to napalm<sup>33</sup>).

Similarly, perceptions of hypocrisy and double standards have also been detrimental both to the Coalition's claim to the moral high ground, and to the credibility of mainstream news media. Images of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's bloodied corpse are paraded in mission briefings and relayed in the mainstream media, while images of dead Coalition soldiers on Al-Jazeera spark moral outrage. The US administration extols the virtues of freedom of press and speech, while apparently unable to tolerate alternative viewpoints, as epitomized by its sustained 'war' on Al-Jazeera (the Kabul office bombed in 2001; bomb attacks on its journalists' hotel and the killing of Tareq Ayouh in Baghdad in 2003; the imprisoning of several correspondents; the attempted ban on reporting from Iraq; and the mooted bombing of the Qatar headquarters according to a leaked memo of 2004).<sup>34</sup> Beside such attempts to deter reporting from the other side, government-made television news segments have been found to constitute improper 'covert propaganda' by the Federal Communications Commission.<sup>35</sup> All such actions exacerbate distrust, and grant alternative paradigms and narratives far greater legitimacy. Overall, the 'adoption' of Jihadist stories by non-Jihadist and non-Muslim media has had a considerable effect in countering the marginalization of Jihadist voices.

## Conclusion

The ideological conflict that underlies the 'Global War on Terror' is increasingly conducted on the Internet's battlefield. Virtual forums are recognized as one of the most important 'fronts'. The exponential growth of Jihadist websites, forums and blogs with increasingly 'high end' production values, sophisticated critiques of prevailing narratives, and ostensive attempts at impartiality does not occur in a vacuum. To a great extent they are reactive, their *raison d'être*

being supplied by the mainstream media's perceived collusion with governmental misinformation or at least uncritical acceptance of it. Jihadist media are far from alone in these critiques, and there has been a growing convergence of interests with other non-mainstream media outlets. The general proliferation of sources of news, information and commentary, coupled with increasingly media-savvy audiences, who are far less likely to accept the veracity of any one narrative and more likely to evince dissatisfaction with conventional modes of mediation, is challenging 'media imperialism'.<sup>36</sup> Web 2.0 applications have also helped the Jihadist message gain wider circulation, and significantly, outside of its traditional ambit, too. This has proved crucial: Jihadist media forums are no longer the proverbial 'lone voice in the wilderness'.

Jihadist forums represent something of a challenge for Western governments. Much has been made of the radicalizing effects of Jihadism on the Internet, but this is proving to be a 'red herring'. Viewing and surfing habits are no indication of extremist proclivities or terrorist inclinations. In many cases (indeed, the vast majority of cases, in my opinion) Jihadist fora are completely innocuous, and actually serve a cathartic role. Their radicalizing effects have been vastly over-inflated by media and scholars alike, particularly in discussions of Western diasporic audiences. For one thing, websites catering to an English-language audience constitute a very small percentage of this body of media (less than 1 per cent of the total) and thus it is not easy to find high-quality English-language Jihadist sites.

More importantly, despite widespread dissatisfaction with Western foreign policy among British Muslims,<sup>37</sup> which implies sharing many of the grievances of global Jihadism, the actual resort to Jihadism is numerically negligible. The current state of Jihadism's appeal is perhaps best indicated by the title of an article on *Jihadunspun* by the Kashmiri Jihadist Abu Usama Al Mujahid: 'Our Youth Are Allergic To The Word Jihad'.<sup>38</sup>

Despite this lament, radicalization is a growing problem amongst Diaspora

Muslim youth. But this complex and multi-faceted process has numerous antecedents and causes,<sup>39</sup> and it is reductive in the extreme to assume that these complex processes and problems stem principally from media effects. More subtle and nuanced understanding of the relationships between Jihadist media and their audiences is needed. The ancient Greco-Roman practice of blaming the messenger for bearing bad tidings, without considering the nature of the message or the reasons behind its appeal, will prove to be lamentably short-sighted in the fight against radicalization. ■

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## Terrorism

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