Virtual Indoctrination and the Digiihad

The Evolution of Al-Qaeda's Media Strategy

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Despite the colossal amount of resources the United States has devoted to dismantling al-Qaeda since September 11, 2001, the organization remains a global threat. Al-Qaeda has evolved from a loosely connected network of terrorist actors into a dynamic social movement adept at exploiting new technologies and contextualizing the jihad to make it relatable to a majority of the Muslim world. The United States’ aggressive counterterrorism campaign, meanwhile, plays directly into al-Qaeda’s narrative of Western oppression and allows its followers to defiantly—and dramatically—take the defensive. Al-Qaeda seeks to use the mass media to perpetuate this image and, ultimately, to inspire a revolution capable of dislodging a superpower and toppling apostate Arab governments.

To decisively defeat al-Qaeda, the United States must look beyond the group’s sensationalist tactics and carefully examine its media strategy, which illuminates the true nature of al-Qaeda’s appeal. While Al-Qaeda’s desire to establish an Islamic caliphate administered by Shariah law is clear, this goal must be viewed in the context of a larger grand strategy. Abu Bakr Naji is one of several well-known Jihadi strategists who has closely examined the process of creating a caliphate. In his 2006 book, The Management of Savagery, Naji claims that superpowers’ support of proxy governments in the Middle East—and superpower media domination, which convinced the Muslim world of their invincibility—prevented Jihadi movements from overthrowing oppressive Arab governments in the past.

In this article, I will trace the evolution of al-Qaeda’s media strategy and demonstrate that its ability to control its own narrative made al-Qaeda immensely popular in the years leading up to and directly following the September 11 attacks. Al-Qaeda today is not concerned with planning new grandiose operations but with ensuring that the Jihadi movement can survive the loss of its current leadership and ultimately become a multi-generational struggle. However, as this article will show, al-Qaeda’s contemporary decentralized media strategy has given too great a voice to its own extreme elements who will eventually push the Jihadi movement to a point at which its only adherents will be the most fringe elements of Muslim society. While proponents of the Digiihad celebrate its capacity to indoctrinate new Jihadists, these uneducated recruits may unwittingly become a liability for a movement so concerned with appealing to the mainstream Muslim population.

The Roots of Al-Qaeda’s Media Strategy

Al-Qaeda’s attacks on September 11 successfully shattered the perceived invincibility of the United States as a superpower. However, after losing its operating base in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda was forced to reinvent itself as the mouthpiece for global jihad. Suddenly unable to plan operations from their remote sanctuaries in the mountains of Pakistan, bin Laden and his lieutenants turned their energy to indoctrinating the next
generation of Jihadis. This is what noted Jihadi scholar Abu Musab al-Suri has referred to as breeding a “culture of preparation.”[2] A reading of al-Qaeda’s doctrine suggests that it does not expect to achieve its goals in the short term; for any chance of success, the movement must become multigenerational.

In the aftermath of September 11, the United States sought to frame the imminent confrontation as a war between the United States and al-Qaeda. However, the intentionally vague phrasing of the “Global War on Terror” implied that other Muslim nations could fall victim to the same fate as Afghanistan. This opened the door for bin Laden to seize upon the American invasion of Afghanistan as proof that Islam was, in fact, under attack from the West. Al-Qaeda aims to convince the average Muslim citizen of this narrative through a comprehensive propaganda campaign broadcast over the Internet and television. Ayman al-Zawahiri has framed al-Qaeda’s confrontation with the West as a battle for the “hearts and minds of the Ummah”[3] most of which is occurring “in the battlefield of the media.”[4]

Jihadist scholar al-Suri is also the senior al-Qaeda strategist who first recognized the enormous potential of the Internet and satellite television as instruments of propaganda. Suri writes that jihad is best understood “as a comprehensive war, where its soldiers employ military, political, media, civil and ideological tools.”[5] In his latest 1,600-page book, *A Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, Suri suggests that al-Qaeda has graduated from operations to management of the global jihad. In this new role, al-Qaeda is responsible for framing the jihad in a way that will garner mass appeal among Muslims. Al-Qaeda’s narrative of global Islamic resistance is the strongest weapon in its arsenal and, according to Suri, the key to winning broad support.

Al-Qaeda has spent the last twenty years perfecting a media campaign that allows potential recruits to indoctrinate themselves and encourages their transformation from consumers to producers of Jihadi rhetoric. However, al-Qaeda operates on a fine line between wanting to be seen as a legitimate Islamic social movement and employing religious justifications for mass murder. Al-Qaeda believes that preceding Jihadi groups were unsuccessful in overthrowing oppressive regimes because they could not control their own media spin.

In his book *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*, Ayman al-Zawahiri relates how the Egyptian government was able to delegitimize his group “Islamic Jihad” after its failed assassination of Prime Minister Atif Sidqi. The car bomb that was intended for the prime minister’s motorcade instead killed a twelve-year-old girl named Shayma. Within days, the Egyptian government had launched a media campaign claiming that the girl had been the target of the attack all along. Zawahiri insists that his inability to publicly respond to these claims severely reduced mass support for Islamic Jihad and even caused many of his top lieutenants to resign.[6]

In what is now known as the *Shayma Effect*, terrorist groups that lack discretion in their choice of targets and tactics risk losing legitimacy and mass appeal. In their 2006 paper “Stealing Al-Qaeda’s Playbook,” Jarret Brachman and William McCants argue that Jihadis must be viewed as righteous liberators and not mass murderers. “Killing Muslims—even when undertaking legitimate operations against members of an unpopular local regime or symbols of Western occupation is damaging to the Jihadi movement because it inevitably leads to a loss of support among the Muslim masses.”[7]

Al-Qaeda’s fear of the Shayma Effect explains why it withdrew its support for the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi after al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) bombed three prominent Amman hotels in November 2005. The deaths of mostly Muslim members of a wedding party dealt a serious blow to al-Qaeda’s ability to cultivate mainstream support in Jordan. According to a Pew survey conducted several months prior to the bombings, 60 percent of Jordanians polled had expressed admiration for bin Laden, with less than 50 percent describing al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization. However, after the Amman attacks, 94 percent
described the bombings as terrorist acts.\[8\]

While attacks against Muslims threaten to undermine al-Qaeda’s base of support in the Arab world, al-Qaeda often deems it an acceptable risk. Al-Qaeda believes that the greatest threat to its movement comes from popular religious leaders whose moderate version of Islam siphons away the youth that comprise al-Qaeda’s foundation. Jihadi groups like Al-Qaeda encourage intellectual isolationism amongst their followers in order to shield recruits from worldviews counter to its own. In the past, this required recruits to be part of intensely bonded social networks that consistently reinforced the group’s collective worldview.\[9\] However, the proliferation of independent Arab television networks and the growth of the Digihad have made it easier for potential Jihadis to reinforce their worldview without ever leaving home.

**Al-Qaeda Takes to the Airwaves**

In the twentieth century, terrorist organizations’ biggest problem was their inability to directly communicate with the masses short of claiming responsibility for their attacks. Governments had a monopoly on media coverage, limiting the ability of groups like Zawahiri’s Islamic Jihad to respond to attacks on their reputation. Distinct from the multitude of Jihadi groups that emerged in the post-Soviet chaos, al-Qaeda is adept at tailoring its message to fit the narrative of a particular television network: Al-Jazeera.

After taking to the airwaves in 1996, al-Jazeera became the first independent satellite news channel in the Arab world in more than fifty years. The network had broad appeal, championing the Palestinian cause and highlighting Muslim suffering around the globe, with special emphasis on the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Al-Jazeera reports portrayed the United States as a supporter of Israel and of the sanctions depriving Muslims of food and medicine in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Seeking maximum exposure, bin Laden consciously chose to emulate al-Jazeera’s narrative in his earliest speeches. Although al-Qaeda has never been directly linked to attacks on Israel, the Jewish state and its supporters continue to feature heavily in Al-Qaeda’s propaganda. As Zawahiri writes in *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, “the slogan that [has] been well understood by the [Muslim] nation and to which it has been responding for the past fifty years is the call for the jihad against Israel.”\[10\] By echoing themes commonly repeated in the Muslim world, al-Qaeda was granted access to the Arab mass media and, over time, began to introduce its own narrative of the Far Enemy (the United States). Bin Laden’s 1996 *fatwa*, first published in the London-based newspaper *Al Quds Al Arabi* and later broadcast on al-Jazeera, vilifies the United States for maintaining a military base in Saudi Arabia and for supporting apostate Arab regimes. Bin Laden’s *fatwa* closely echoes Naji’s work, claiming that the Far Enemy’s defeat will enfeeble the puppet Arab regimes it supports and clear the way for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate.

Al-Jazeera, however, has not always been a consistent ally for Al-Qaeda. The philosophies of al-Qaeda and al-Jazeera differ in several fundamental areas. For instance, al-Jazeera slants its coverage decidedly in favor of democracy and women’s rights, as exemplified by its many unveiled female news anchors. Competing satellite networks such as al-Arabiya, Abu Dhabi TV, and Dubai TV have forced al-Jazeera to abandon much of its anti-Western narrative in its race to the political middle. Since 2003, al-Jazeera has increased its analysis of al-Qaeda statements and has even popularized Islamist figures like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a fierce critic of terrorist tactics who is frequently cited on al-Qaeda web forums as one of the most dangerous enemies of jihad.\[12\] While al-Jazeera was instrumental in launching al-Qaeda onto the world scene, the airwaves have become too filtered and congested to suit the global Jihadi movement. In turning its primary focus to the Internet, al-Qaeda can now enjoy a direct line of communication to the Muslim world.
The Jihad Goes Digital

Although the Internet has been commercially available to the public for more than two decades, only in the past five to ten years has it become a useful tool for the jihad. The proliferation of cheap computer technology has helped global levels of Internet connectivity rise exponentially in the new millennium. From 2000 to 2005, the global Internet community grew by 126.4 percent to reach an estimated 817.5 million people. Cheap cellular phone technology has since caused this number to explode; in 2011, more than 2.2 billion people reported having Internet access. The Middle East has enjoyed a growth rate of 1,675 percent over the past decade, considerably outpacing any other region except Africa, which has seen slightly higher growth rates.[13]

The Internet’s appeal to extremist groups is readily apparent. It offers anonymity and redundancy and, most importantly, it cannot be censored. In 1971, when Gil Scott-Heron wrote, “the revolution will not be televised,” he could not possibly have imagined the situation that we find ourselves in today; the revolution is not only broadcast on the web but is also professionally edited for maximum appeal. The first website extolling the virtues of Islamic extremism, Azzam.com, was reportedly launched in 1996. Palestinian-born Babar Ahmad, who was then studying in London, created the website and named it after bin Laden’s mentor and famed Palestinian Jihadist Abdullah Azzam. Azzam.com is believed to be the first website that offered instruction on the nature of jihad. More important than the site’s actual content were its links to external message boards such as Qoqaz.net and Waqqiah.com, where users could connect with actual Jihadis and learn how to attend terrorist training camps.[14]

While one might be hard-pressed to find a cassette recording of Ayatollah Khomeini inciting revolution in Iran, bin Laden’s message of global jihad is guaranteed to echo across the Internet long after his death. The Internet is redundant by design and once content has been uploaded, it is nearly impossible to remove. This is illustrated by a 2004 study conducted by the Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (ITIC), which found that the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas was operating twenty official websites in seven different languages off of servers located in Russia, Ukraine, Malaysia, Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[15] Many other terrorist groups follow a similar practice of maintaining websites on multiple servers to safeguard against site takedowns. If an unfriendly government pressures one internet service provider (ISP) to remove a group’s content, the group can be back up and running in a matter of hours on a another server on the other side of the world.

In his 2004 study, Understanding Terror Networks, psychiatrist and former CIA operative Marc Sageman found a complete absence of top-down recruitment in al-Qaeda operations. Al-Qaeda recruitment, he said, tended to be a “bottom-up and self selecting” process that typically involved the formation of tight-knit friendships before induction into any formal terrorist organization.[16] Sageman claims that these friendship networks serve as an incubator for Jihadis; within the networks, “their beliefs [spiral] upward in an apparent game of one-upmanship.”[17] While all of al-Qaeda’s pre-September 11 operatives appear to have become radicalized through personal relationships formed with members of their community, there is growing evidence that online communities now serve a similar role. A psychological study conducted by John A. Bargh and Katelyn Y.A. McKenna found that online relationships are capable of rivaling those developed offline.[18]

Over the past decade, the number of Jihadi websites has grown from less than 100 at the turn of the century to more than 4,800 today.[19] The main purpose of these sites is to introduce potential recruits to the narrative of jihad and to legitimize al-Qaeda’s mission and tactics. The key to understanding the Digiihad is to break down the types of websites that comprise the online Jihadi community’s infrastructure. It is this online world that men like Major Nidal Hasan, the infamous Fort Hood shooter, turn to for answers and are eventually introduced to extremist ideology. Indoctrination is a gradual process beginning
with websites that introduce users to basic information concerning Islam and its core tenets. These sites more often than not feature message boards where curious visitors can ask questions. It is here where visitors are directed to websites known as “distributors,” which assume four forms:

1) Directories of Links to External Sites

A prominent example is the Meshawir Directory, which until a few years ago was the most visited Jihadi website. It offered updated lists of the top twenty Jihadi forums and featured links to downloadable audio and video files.[20]

2) Mailing Lists and Message Boards

The Yahoo!Groups platform has become the most reliable source for online Jihadi content. Users subscribe to one of these lists, which are usually indicated by some misspelling of “jihad,” such as Jeehaad. Subscribers then receive an email directing them to websites where they can register for usernames and passwords. These sites will typically disappear in a matter of days or weeks either by design, government intervention, or being pulled by server administrators, who tend to object more to the sites’ traffic than their actual content. However, within a few days of a site’s launch, enough users download its content and copy it onto other websites to ensure that the information will never disappear. This is a process known as mirroring.[21]

3) Non-Interactive Homepages of Sympathizers

These websites typically float under the radar of server administrators and government agencies, though they may serve as portals to more scrutinized sites. Sympathizer homepages are generally rife with content copied from larger “producer” websites, such as al-Qaeda’s As-Sahab media company. The degree to which personal homepages serve as on-ramps to the Jihadi information highway may rely entirely upon the site administrator’s level of involvement in the Jihadi movement.

4) Mother Sites

Key nodes or “mother sites” constitute an additional category of Jihadi websites; these official sites are typically professionally designed, available in a variety of languages, and home to the largest depositories of propaganda videos, Jihadi religious doctrine, and statements from al-Qaeda leaders.

Mother sites are the most visible and well-known category of Jihadi sites, which makes them particularly vulnerable to attack and infiltration by government agencies.[22] However, their web administrators usually maintain mirrored versions of the site on redundant servers spanning multiple continents. Furthermore, if a group should suspect that their site has been infiltrated, they can quickly shut down one URL and email their distribution list of trusted users instructions for applying for new usernames and passwords. While government efforts to bring down these key nodes have been mostly unsuccessful, the capture of webmasters like Irhaby007 has proven effective at removing certain content permanently, or at the very least, degrading the quality of certain sites.

While Western audiences tend to overemphasize the more sensational aspects of al-Qaeda’s media strategy, most key insights into the organization can be found in its more mundane outputs. Once potential recruits have been exposed to the more mainstream Jihadi offerings found through mother sites and their associated directories, they tend to focus on the discussion boards, which are the mainstay of practically every Jihadi website. Anyone is free to read or post to the public message boards, which feature discussions ranging from current events to fatwas on everyday matters. These public areas are often fronts for password-protected forums, which particularly passionate users are later invited to join.[23] Within this inner community of online Jihadis unfolds such tactical discussions as how to join the physical jihad
and how to build explosives at home.

Isolationism is at the core of all online indoctrination. Over time, recruits are conditioned to regard all information that does not comply with the Jihadi narrative as lies propagated by the West and Israel. Conspiracy theories are particularly pervasive in the Arab world; in 2008, 46 percent of Egyptians and 31 percent of Jordanians claimed that Israel was behind the September 11 attacks, despite all evidence linking the hijackers to al-Qaeda.[24] This contradiction offers a key insight into al-Qaeda’s media strategy. Bin Laden portrayed himself as the embodiment of a righteous Muslim and his rhetoric about religion and geopolitics resonated with much of the Muslim world. However, the majority of Muslims also tend to agree that the September 11 attacks were morally wrong. To skirt this apparent contradiction and maintain his broad appeal, bin Laden normally refrained from directly claiming credit for the September 11 attacks in his public statements.[25] Instead, he praised the bravery of the hijackers and explained why the United States deserved to be attacked.

**Taking the War to the Web**

Al-Qaeda leadership (also known as AQ Central) seems to cling to the communication tactics of the television and fax generation; leaders produce timely statements designed for distribution through the mass media. However, the bottom-up support they have generated has allowed the next generation of Jihadis to take the movement digital. While AQ Central has not been the driving force behind the Digiihad, its icons were among the first terrorists to realize the Internet’s potential as a propaganda tool. In the past, al-Qaeda had to tailor its message to fit al-Jazeera’s narrative, but in cyberspace, al-Qaeda has become its own moderator; it can now ensure that only certain views are expressed on its online forums.

Al-Qaeda’s first official website, Al-Neda, was launched in the late 1990s by Sheikh Yousef al-Ayyeri and quickly became one the most heavily trafficked Jihadi websites. In intelligence circles, Al-Neda is renowned for producing the first viral terrorist video on the Internet in early 2001. The video, entitled *The Destruction of the USS Cole*, showcases unprecedented footage of terrorists performing training and surveillance operations prior to the attack and includes near-perfect English subtitles. While Al-Neda’s website was removed from its servers in Singapore, Malaysia, and Texas at the request of the U.S. government in 2002, the Cole video’s popularity foreshadowed the Jihadi movement embracing the Internet as its primary medium.[26]

Al-Qaeda now operates more than fifty websites in approximately nine languages. These sites seem to collectively serve five distinct functions, as detailed below.

1) Issuing Statements

Osama bin Laden was one of the few modern terrorists in the world who did not need the Internet to be heard. While alive his status as the most wanted man on the planet was enough to get him airtime on every major news network whenever he wished. However, these videos overtime became relatively commonplace; in the six years after September 11, bin Laden issued more than twenty video statements. Dr. Zawahiri, known for being al-Qaeda’s most prolific spokesman, has appeared in more than forty video productions. As the public became more exposed to these videos, the shock value of their content began to wear off and, as a result, major networks gave them less airtime. Thus Al-Qaeda supporters increasingly turned to the Internet to view video statements in their entirety.

By broadcasting its own official statements online, al-Qaeda can deny or issue corrections to unfavorable media reports, ensuring that it will never again be left vulnerable to the Shayma Effect. At a minimum, this provides a consistent and reliable platform for al-Qaeda to attempt to explain its actions and offer counter-critiques. Beyond employing online media to defend its own reputation, many of al-Qaeda’s official
statements are designed to encourage the self-starters on whom al-Qaeda now relies to carry out operations in its name. By publicly applauding the actions of lone wolves like the London bombers and Major Nidal Hasan, al-Qaeda helps online sympathizers feel connected to the larger Jihadi movement.

2) Communication and Planning

Following the United States’ invasion of Afghanistan and al-Qaeda’s reported relocation to the mountainous regions of Western Pakistan, AQ Central’s detached leadership has had no choice but to communicate with the majority of its followers in open forums. Al-Qaeda’s supporters do, however, require secure communication to share tactics and coordinate operations worldwide. In January 2007, an al-Qaeda forum called Al-Ekhaaas released an encryption program called “Mujahideen Secrets 1.” The program provides users with a choice of five different cryptographic algorithms with which to encrypt their files and email messages, including 256-bit symmetric encryption (secret-key) and 2,048-bit asymmetric encryption (public-key). In 2008, the same group released “Mujahideen Secrets 2,” which offers a more user-friendly interface and the ability to encrypt chat conversations.[27]

Terrorists without access to the more high-end encryption software have developed many other methods to disguise their communications including stenography, email dead drops and spam mimicking.

Ø  Stenography: An online coding technique that allows users to hide messages within other messages or online images. Extremist groups have been known to communicate using messages hidden within images posted on pornographic or sports websites.[28]

Ø  Email Dead Drops: Are a simple and effective tactic used by terrorists to avoid having their messages intercepted. Instead of sending emails from one account to another, terrorists will set up a single anonymous email account and distribute the username and password to other members of the cell. Users can then save unsent messages to the draft folder to be viewed later by their associates. Because no messages are ever sent, it is nearly impossible for them to be intercepted.[29]

Ø  Spam Mimicking: Is one of the newest versions of low-tech encryption to be adopted by the jihadi movement. According to a study conducted by the SANS Institute, visitors to the Spam Mimic Website (http://www.spammimic.com) “embed encrypted messages in spam in order to disguise the fact that confidential data has been exchanged.”[30] The process is as simple as typing out a short message and clicking the “encrypt” button. A realistic piece of spam is then sent to the designated recipient who can then return to the same website to decode the communiqué and view the original message.[31]

3) Training

After losing its training camps in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda has attempted to preserve its institutional knowledge by posting training documents online. The most well-known of these manuals is al-Qaeda’s Encyclopedia for the Preparation of Jihad (mawsu’at al-I’dad), which was compiled during the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation. The manual has recently been overhauled and is now available as a 700-megabyte download from many al-Qaeda websites. The Anarchist Cookbook, written in 1971 by Vietnam activist William Powell, is another popular volume and a favorite among groups ranging from Jihadis to ecoterrorists.[32]

While written manuals have proliferated on the Internet, instructional videos have lagged behind with one notable exception. In 2004, the online terrorist monitoring group Search for International Terrorist Entities (SITE) discovered the video “Construction of an Explosive Belt” on a number of militant Islamic Internet forums. The meticulous 26-minute video details material requirements for the belt, illustrates its construction, and demonstrates its proper position on a suicide bomber. The video concludes by
detonating the explosive belt on a bus filled with dummy victims to demonstrate its power.

Some figures in the counterterrorism community argue that the proliferation of online training manuals has compensated for al-Qaeda’s loss of its training camps in Afghanistan. However, most terrorism experts, including Peter Bergen, stress that terrorists like those who attacked Mumbai in 2008 “didn’t sit around reading how to do attacks on the Internet. They actually went to a training camp in Muzaffarabad for several months.”[33] Online training is not yet an effective substitute for real-life experience, as indicated by the number of young Scandinavian criminals who have killed or maimed themselves while trying to construct explosives using online manuals.[34]

4) Recruitment

Al-Qaeda relies mostly on bottom-up recruitment in which sympathizers indoctrinate themselves and then either attempt to contact the organization for training or choose to carry out attacks on their own. For the most part, al-Qaeda has not turned to the Internet for recruitment purposes; Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), or “al-Tawhid wal-Jihad,” and Adam Gadahn are, however, two notable exceptions.

AQI, which was led by the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi until his death in 2006, relied heavily on foreign recruits for martyrdom operations. To meet his manpower needs, Zarqawi revolutionized terrorist media affairs. He was the first to recognize that Iraq had the technological infrastructure to support a large-scale media campaign and could mobilize a cadre of tech savvy supporters to attract foreign Jihadis to join the fight against the U.S. occupation.[35]

AQI elevated terrorism as theatre to new heights by staging and filming almost all of its attacks for maximum dramatic effect. These videos, employing the latest in video compression software, could be downloaded in high-definition using high-speed Internet connections or as 4-megabyte segments on cell phones.[36] Raids on eight of AQI’s media labs in the summer of 2007 netted more than 23 terabytes of unedited footage.[37]

AQI’s media campaign appears to have been a resounding success in attracting foreign fighters to Iraq. However, Zarqawi’s overly violent tactics put him at odds with AQ Central and may have resulted in his death. Al-Qaeda is primarily concerned with legitimizing itself in the eyes of the average Muslim; AQI’s apparent indifference for killing Muslim civilians eventually caused Arab public opinion to turn decidedly against al-Qaeda.[38]

The 30 year old California-born Muslim convert Adam Yahiye Gadahn (aka Azzam al-Amriki) is an unlikely spokesman for Al-Qaeda; however, he very well may be one of Al-Qaeda’s most effective propaganda tools. Born on a goat farm without running water, Gadahn converted to Islam in 1995 after having read about it on the Internet. Shortly after his conversion, he joined a small discussion group of radical Islamists at the Islamic Society in Orange, California where he befriended Hisham Diab and Khalil Deek who together ran an Al-Qaeda front organization called Charity Without Borders.[39] These men would eventually pay for Gadahn’s travel to Pakistan where he is believed to have been recruited by 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.[40]

Today, Gadahn is believed to be a senior member of Al-Qaeda’s media committee. Since he joined the organization sometime in 2001, there has been a significant improvement in the quality of the English subtitles in Al-Qaeda’s videos. Al Qaeda’s media production company, As-Sahab, has even begun to produce propaganda videos entirely in English aimed at recruiting Western sympathizers. Gadahn features heavily in these videos, even appearing with Ayman Zawahiri on one occasion. Gadahn preaches that Islam transcends race and nationality and that defense of the faith through jihad is the duty of all Muslims. His message appeals particularly to people like himself; young Muslims living in Western societies who
feel marginalized and discriminated against in their own countries. Proof of Gadahn’s Western appeal is indicated by the fact that videos featuring him have been found in the homes of virtually every homegrown terrorism suspect arrested in the UK since 2006.[41]

5) Propaganda

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the abuse of prisoners by U.S. soldiers at Abu Ghraib, and the sheer number of Muslim civilians killed as a result of war have catalyzed al-Qaeda’s narrative of Western oppression. This narrative has come to be defined by three central themes: dissemination, legitimization, and intimidation.[42] From her analysis of al-Qaeda speeches, terrorism scholar Hanna Rogan concluded that for Jihadis, “the most important goal of communication is legitimization of the movement and its activities. This is articulated through religious justifications and by presenting the movement as a rightful resistance group within the context of Islamic history.”[43] Broadcasting shock videos of snipers and suicide bombers has also proven to be an effective method of intimidating U.S. troops.[44]

In early 2007, Iraqi insurgents launched a media campaign highlighting the exploits of “Juba the Baghdad Sniper,” claiming that he had killed 143 U.S soldiers. CNN ultimately aired insurgent-provided footage of sniper attacks, which immediately prompted networks like FOX and MSNBC to carry the story as well. However, while this footage was snowballing across the airwaves, sniper attacks accounted for only 1.3 percent (41) of all American deaths in Iraq, as opposed to the 36.3 percent (1,134) of Americans who had died as a result of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).[45] While it is unlikely that Juba ever actually existed, this fact did not prevent the American media from extensively covering his purported exploits. These kinds of stories not only pervert the facts but also exert an acutely demoralizing effect on U.S. troops.

The methods by which terrorist groups seek to manipulate the media have evolved significantly since the 1950s when Algerian separatists employed a strategy known as Directive Number Nine, which centered on the belief that “it [is] better to kill one man where the American press [will] hear of it than nine where no one will find out.”[46] Contemporary Jihadi groups have taken this principle to heart by today filming many of their own attacks in an effort to increase the entertainment value of terrorism. Chechen rebels demonstrated the power of these videos to serve as both tools of recruitment and intimidation by becoming the first Islamic terrorist group to generate its own propaganda video series, entitled “Russian Hell,” which featured gruesome atrocities against Russian troops set to Arabic music.

Although al-Qaeda was not the first group to videotape its attacks, it has perfected the art of video propaganda, much of which it delivers through As-Sahab, its media production company. To the unsuspecting viewer, As-Sahab appears to be like any other Arabic-language news network. It features professional camera work, news tickers, and its own omnipresent logo in the right-hand screen corner. After As-Sahab’s content has been edited, it is encrypted and transferred to al-Qaeda’s propaganda distribution wing, the al-Fajr Media Center, which is responsible for uploading the video to specified mother sites and informing the Jihadi movement through various online distribution lists.

As of 2007, As-Sahab was putting out a video every three days, with ninety-seven released in 2007 alone.[47] The network specializes in full-length documentaries such as Knowledge is for Acting Upon: The Manhattan Raid, a 40-minute, professionally edited film that chronicles al-Qaeda from its humble mujahedeen birth in Afghanistan to the September 11 attacks. The film features subtitles in impeccable English and is available in multiple languages. Another video, The Power of Truth, interweaves scenes of al-Qaeda leaders spouting a litany of accusations against the United States with clips of prominent Americans such as General Tommy Franks making statements that appear to support al-Qaeda’s arguments.
Al-Qaeda messaging from such figures as bin Laden and Zawahiri has traditionally targeted Sunni Muslims and excluded many younger Muslims in the West who sympathize with al-Qaeda but lack a conduit for joining the Jihadi movement. Anwar al-Awlaki (now deceased) and Adam Yahye Gadahn, born in the United States and fluent in English and Arabic, have transformed the movement’s ability to contextualize Jihad for Western audiences. While their sermons dilute al-Qaeda’s message, al-Awlaki and Gadahn’s target audience remains the mainstream Muslim population. Other figures have unwittingly broken from AQ Central’s messaging campaign by appealing to the fringe of Muslim society through new forms of media. This flourishing repertoire is particularly alluring to youth and may represent an insidious gateway into the Jihadi movement.

Media Targeting Islamic Youth

Terror Rap

In Selling Volksgemeinschaft: The Normality of the Extreme, Bjorn Jesse and Gabriel Matera demonstrate that most Neo-Nazi youth first encountered the right-wing scene by listening to heavy metal, oi, and punk music commonly associated with the white supremacy movement. Despite bin Laden’s own stated aversion to all music and dancing, for Western youth, “terror rap” increasingly serves as an introduction to the world of jihad. British authorities first noticed this Jihadi version of hip-hop music in 2004 when groups like “Fun’Da’Mental started posting their songs on popular websites like YouTube.[48] In the Fun’Da’Mental song “Cookbook,” a rapper in a lizard mask rhymes instructions for mixing plastic explosives in alarming detail.

The terror rap song “Dirty Kuffar” was posted to the website of the UK-based Saudi extremist Mohammed al-Massari in 2004. The video is a bewildering mix of Jihadi and Nazi symbology that weaves together images of exploding American humvees with skinheads sporting swastikas. The singer, standing in front of an Iraqi flag, holds a gun in one hand and a Qu’ran in the other and belts out a catchy mixture of English and Arabic lyrics. AQ Central would likely object to this as a bastardization of their carefully crafted narrative. The secular attitude of the video’s creators, the Soul Salah Crew, is entirely at odds with the pious reputation al-Qaeda has tried so hard to cultivate for itself. The Soul Salah Crew’s apparent affinity for the Nazis, a Western socialist organization, further illustrates the extent to which these young Jihadists have misinterpreted al-Qaeda’s message.

Jihadi Video Games

Video games represent the newest iteration of recruiting tools used by all sides to entice the next generation of combatants to join the fight. In 2002, the U.S. Army released an online multiplayer war game called America’s Army. Over the past ten years, the game has attracted more than nine million players who have logged more than 160 million hours on the Army’s website. A 2008 study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that “30 percent of Americans aged 16-24 had a more positive impression of the Army because of the game and, even more amazingly, the game had more impact on recruits than all other forms of Army advertising combined.”[49]

Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are not ignorant to the “militainment” phenomenon; they recently released a series of similar low-tech games in which users play insurgents doing battle against Western enemies. These games’ potential as a recruitment tool is clear; however, some experts claim that their effect transcends mere recruitment. According to Jarret Brachman, former director of research at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, “while players may understand that such games are based on fiction, the act of playing them arguably increases their propensity to accept ideologies that consist of extreme goals,
such as the establishment of a global Islamic caliphate.”[50] By pressing buttons that produce on-screen violence, a war game player also begins to equate “physical action with intellectual and visual cues.”[51]

In the first scene of Afkar Media’s game Under Siege, Baruch Goldstein, the Israeli settler who killed twenty-seven Muslims at the Cave of the Patriarchs mosque in 1994, laughs as he shoots at kneeling worshippers. Players then assume the personas of two boys, Maen and Ahmed, who must combat Goldstein and the Israeli army while directing ambulances to the wounded.[52] Though there may be truth to the claim that the majority of contemporary video games cast Arabs and Muslims in “bad guy roles,” replacing one extremist stereotype with another does not constitute progress.[53]

Not all Jihadi games are overtly violent. The Islamic Fun!, a collection of mini games for children, is marketed as a Muslim alternative to more secular video games. Most games in this collection feature titles like “Fishing Bear,” “Tree Hop,” and “Two Bunny Race.” However, hidden amidst these child-friendly amusements is a game entitled “The Resistance,” in which players assume the role of farmers in Southern Lebanon who join the Islamic resistance to destroy invading Israeli forces.[54] This game, recommended for children aged five and older, seeks to condition youth to consider violence the appropriate emotional response to perceived injustice.

Conclusion

The evolution of al-Qaeda’s media strategy illustrates that the organization that perpetrated the September 11 attacks no longer exists. Al-Qaeda is now best understood as the propaganda wing of the Jihadi movement, which has devoted itself primarily to indoctrinating the next generation to fight the jihad of tomorrow. Western analysts have prematurely dismissed al-Qaeda’s goal of forming an Islamic caliphate as overly ambitious and unappealing to the masses. A close reading of works by al-Qaeda’s top thinkers, including Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji, reveals a long-term strategy that, has enjoyed significant advances as a result of the U.S. invasion of Muslim lands.

Although al-Qaeda has failed to achieve broad support in the Muslim world, the Western media—owing to shrinking news budgets and the paucity of journalists willing to assume the risks of battlefield reporting—has unwittingly contributed to al-Qaeda’s perceived legitimacy and allowed Jihadi propaganda to infiltrate the American psyche. These factors have profoundly degraded the American public’s ability to conceptualize its nation’s wars. The 24-hour news cycle exerts an acute pressure on networks to obtain footage; al-Qaeda keenly recognizes this imperative and has mobilized its own cameras to meet demand.

American newsrooms increasingly turn to Jihadi websites for images of the United States at war. Footage that the networks refuse to air is labeled “propaganda,” while the remainder is played without reference to its origin. Ubiquitous “citizen journalists” have further impaired the general public’s ability to distinguish between independent journalism and terrorist propaganda. By failing to consistently label propaganda footage as “insurgent video,” news networks have surrendered control of their narrative to groups like al-Qaeda.

For the United States and its allies, understanding al-Qaeda’s media strategy—and how to dilute its appeal—is paramount. Al-Qaeda’s growing fluency with new media forms gives it a megaphone out of proportion with its resources. Over the past decade, the success of al-Qaeda’s messaging campaign has allowed the group to transform itself from a loose-knit group of multinational terrorists into the most recognizable brand in the Jihadi movement.

In the end, however, al-Qaeda’s success at disseminating its own message through the mass media may be its undoing. The more that al-Qaeda’s message is bastardized by clerics like the now deceased Anwar al-Awlaki, who preach jihad to uneducated masses on the Internet, the less control AQ Central has over its
own narrative. Similarly, the closer the Jihadi movement moves towards the radical fringe, the farther it drifts from its ultimate goal of achieving broad support in the Muslim world. The following recommendations suggest ways in which the United States might contain al-Qaeda’s media-endowed vigor and hasten it on the path toward its own demise.

1) Encourage the Media to Adopt “Visual Grammar”

While the U.S. government should not censor the American media, it should robustly encourage the media industry to voluntarily adopt what media scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson has called “visual grammar”[55]. Clips from terrorist propaganda videos should be displayed on laptops and other similar graphics that would serve as visual cues to the viewer that he or she is watching propaganda and not journalist-filmed footage. This has served as the standard method for news shows to objectively analyze political ads for more than four years. The news media cannot remain ignorant of the degree to which it has helped disseminate al-Qaeda’s narrative, nor to the part it has played in convincing the American public that its wars are unwinnable.

2) Nurture the Development of Non-Violent Media Targeting Islamic Youth

The growing popularity of Jihadi “terror rap” and video games are symptomatic of a larger problem in the Muslim world. While increased access to computers and cell phone technology has produced a new generation of Arabic-speaking youth with a demand for knowledge and entertainment, the marketplace has not reacted to fill this demand; only a fraction of Internet content is available in Arabic not to mention the shockingly low number of books that are translated into Arabic every year. Al-Qaeda represents one of only a handful of groups that are devoted to creating new media that specifically targets Arabic youth. To counter this negative influence and fill the intellectual vacuum, governments should subsidize Arabic translation of their country’s own media outputs.

3) Highlight al-Qaeda Atrocities

In the digital realm, governments lose their monopoly over the media and thus the ability to paint terrorist groups in a negative light. The Digihad has subsequently helped groups like al-Qaeda dispel the Shayma Effect. While censoring the Internet is practically impossible, governments should do more to highlight the atrocities committed by groups like al-Qaeda, especially when Muslim civilians are targeted. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates will ultimately be brought down not by force but by the words of secular Islamist voices like that of Al-Jazeera commentator Yusuf al-Qaradawi who is often listed on al-Qaeda web forums as one of the most dangerous enemies of jihad.

4) Seek to Influence Muslim Perceptions from a Distance

The battle for the hearts and minds of the Muslim world will not be won through American intervention. Instead, the United States should more emphatically deploy the art of public diplomacy and cease interfering in a manner that feeds directly into al-Qaeda’s narrative. Just as al-Qaeda has used the Internet to defend its own narrative, Western governments must also use all the media tools at their disposal to influence negative perceptions in the Muslim world and clarify the ugly true nature of terrorism. Public diplomacy officers must redouble their efforts to reach out to trusted voices within Muslim communities to speak out in favor of the truth and denounce the un-Islamic actions of Jihadi groups. In the same vein, Arabic-language news networks like Al-Jazeera should be afforded greater access to American policymakers in order to foster an atmosphere of dialogue rather than mere exchange of rhetoric. This is a long-term struggle that will ultimately be won by allowing al-Qaeda’s Muslim critics time to defeat the organization and its ideology on their own terms.
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