Islamist Organizations on the Internet

Michael Whine, (Director, Defense and Group relations Division)
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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION – NETWAR DEFINED

In recent years Islamist organisations have assumed a presence on the Internet, and according to a number of indications this is set to grow. Why they are posting, the purpose and nature of their communiqués and their relevance to researchers is the subject of this paper.

It is said that cyberspace is a new arena for political extremists to project their message and through which to wage their campaigns, and Islamist militants have increasingly adopted a format which makes their use of cyberspace logical.

The sophistication of the modern nation state and its dependency on computer-based information and communication technologies makes the state more vulnerable, and information has become a strategic resource, as valuable and influential in the post-industrial age as capital and labour were in the industrial age.

In a series of important papers, published over the past two years, John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt have coined the term cyberwar to mean the conducting of, and preparing to conduct, military operations according to information-related principles. They also coined the term netwar, which they characterised as societal-level ideas conflicts waged, in part, via internetted modes of communication. Netwar is further defined as the process of disrupting, damaging or modifying what a population knows or thinks it knows about itself and the world around it. It may focus on public or elite opinions, or both. It may involve public diplomacy measures, propaganda and psychological campaigns, political and cultural subversion, deception of, or interference with, local media, infiltration of computer networks and databases and efforts to promote dissident or opposition movements across computer networks.

They suggest that netwar represents a new entry on the spectrum of conflict that spans economic, political and social, as well as military forms of 'war'. In contrast to economic wars that target the production and distribution of goods, and political wars that aim at the leadership and institution of a government, netwars will be distinguished by their targeting of information and communications. Netwars may be largely non-military although they will contain dimensions that overlap into military war.

Netwars will take various forms; between rival nation states, between governments and non-state actors (for example governments versus illicit groups and organisations involved in terrorism or criminal activities), or they may be waged against the policies of specific governments by advocacy groups and movements involving, for example, environmental, human rights or religious issues. Another kind of netwar may occur between rival non-state actors with governments manoeuvring on the side-lines to prevent collateral damage to national interests and perhaps to support one side or another.

Elements of this type of netwar have already appeared, particularly among advocacy movements around the world. Some movements are increasingly organising into cross-border networks and coalitions, identifying more with the development of civil society (even global civil society) than with nation states and using advanced information and communication technologies to strengthen their activities. This may well turn out to be the next arena for ideological conflict, and netwar may be a prime characteristic.

According to military strategist Martin van Creveld, war in the future will not be waged by armies, but by terrorists, guerrillas and criminals. In his view, war between states will diminish, and the state may even become obsolete as a major form of societal organisation.

Most modern adversaries of nation states in the realm of low-intensity conflict, such as international terrorists, guerrilla insurgents, drug smuggling cartels, ethnic factions as well as racial and tribal gangs are all organised like networks, although their leadership may be quite hierarchical. Perhaps a reason that military and police institutions often have difficulty in engaging in low-intensity conflict is because they are not configured to combat such groups. An implication therefore is that institutions may be defeated by networks and it may take networks to counter networks. The future may belong to whoever masters the network form.

In a new book, Arquilla and Ronfeldt describe how trans-national terrorists use flexible network designs that may have multiple leaders. They suggest that trans-national terrorist groups are increasingly building trans-national networks as 'force multipliers', and using all manner of old and new communication technologies to do so. The shift is from absolute hierarchies, (e.g. in Palestinian terms, Aright and the PLO) to hydra-headed networks (Hamas) which are less easy to decapitate than once they may have been.

Thus Israel's recent admission that it has not yet found a way to deal with Hamas' decentralised and internationalised command and control structure, which uses encrypted Internet messages, suggests that it is having difficulty in this area. An on-going investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation into Hamas activity in the US, indicates that part of Hamas' command and control was located in Tampa, Florida. Now this may have moved to London, where it publishes Filistine al Muslima, and allegedly has some of its fund-raising infrastructure.

Islamists may be said to fit the network ideal; many supportive expatriate communities are based in sympathetic or neutral states enabling political activists and terrorists to operate within a safe-haven that modern democracies provide. Islamists often come from the politically repressed, but educated sectors of Muslim societies, or as in the West, are the product of a reaction to societal racism.

Another example which illustrates the network form among Islamist organisations may be the Algerian Armed Islamist Group, the GIA, which appears to have had a command and control centre in Britain for some years and untouched by the British authorities.

It is not here intended however that the use of the term 'Islamists' should refer only to terrorist organisations, but rather to those Muslim militants who believe that Islam is incomplete without its own state in which Shariah provides the system of governance, and who campaign for its imposition. In particular the followers of Hasan al Banna and Abdul Ala Maududi and the organisations they founded, Ikhwan al Muslimoon and Jamaat-i Islami, and the in ideological off shoots these have given rise to which are spread widely in the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and elsewhere, constitute a potential threat to moderate regimes and the West.

INTERNET USAGE – COMMUNICATION TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Islamist groups appear to use the Internet for two purposes: propaganda, that is, spreading their message to the outside world; communication, that is, primarily to their own people. They may

sometimes provide open information available to all, but some sites also appear to be passworded, suggesting a private or even clandestine communication.

An example of the first use is the site of the Iranian-backed Hizbollah which has launched a web-site on the Internet and an e-mail service to inform the world about its anti-Israeli resistance activities in Lebanon. The homepage has a graphic of the organisation's former Secretary General, Sheikh Abbas Mussawi, who was killed by Israeli forces in South Lebanon in February 1992. The site also urges anybody with any opinions about the group's anti-Israel activities in South Lebanon to get in touch.

A spokesman said 'The service is very important for the morale of our resistance fighters. They are always very happy to know that people around the world are backing them'.

Other examples include 'news agencies' which take in postings from other Islamist sites and reproduce them. Foremost amongst them is MSANews, originating at Ohio State . On their site one can see communiqués from the FIS, GIA and Yakub Zaki, among others. (It should be noted however that MSANews also posts articles and communiqués from non-Islamist Muslim and non-Muslim originators). A few examples:

A posting on 25 June 1996 advertised a FIS Rally to take place in London's Trafalgar Square on 7 July, on behalf of 'FIS leaders unjustly detained in Algeria and all prisoners of faith'. The contact address was given as the Algerian Community in Britain, operating from a west London post office box. The speakers were advertised as Tahir De La Nive of the Islamic Council for the Defence of Europe; Dr Amaniar, spokesman for the Afghan Mujahedeen; Dr Abdelbari of the Islamic Forum in Europe; Br. Fezal Khan, leader of Al Muhajiroun in Mauritius; Prof. Francois Burgat, Institute of Research and Studies of the Arab World and Muslims.

A second posting reproduced 'selected parts of the official Armed Islamic Group Newsletter AL-QITAL, Issue No. 32'.

'Date: 12 May 1996 - URGENT - PLEASE READ, Theater of Operation: MUSLIM ALGERIA. Following is an account of operations of the only legitimate (sic) leadership of Muslim resistance

in Algeria: The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) or Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyyah Al-Musalaha which united under its wings both Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and The Movement for Islamic State'.

In this particular case the posting was forwarded by The American Islamic Group.

A third example, an antisemitic article by Yaqub Zaki, the former James Dickie, a convert to Islam who is the Assistant Director of the London-based and sometime Iran-aligned Muslim Institute for Research and Planning, was entitled 'Satanic Affinities: Zionism and the Second Coming.'

Unlike other postings on MSANews, this was a direct submission. It also carried the following cautionary note:

 ...'we would welcome responses to the claims advanced below, some of which (notably the arguments about the Russian and French revolutions) obviously lead to the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' conspiracy theory. Full - text of the 'Protocols' is available at "Be Wise As Serpents: THE PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDERS OF ZION site." Visit URL:http://users.one.se/~chribesk/sects/zog/protocol.htm'

Another 'newsagency' is Quds Press which advertises itself as 'the first Arabic on-line news agency' reproducing communiques in English and Arabic, and it appears to have offices in both London and Amman.

The host site might not always publicly agree with the views it publishes. For example MSA News carries a disclaimer that its postings do not necessarily represent those of the MSA News' editors, and it is perhaps understandable given the inflammatory nature of some of the postings. For example, a posting by the American Islamic Group on 28th June 1996, provides a report of operations by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA:(

'The American Islamic Group has received the following communiques/documents concerning the execution of seven French monks who worked as Christian missionaries in Muslim Algeria'.

Another posting under the name Islam Report contains a disclaimer that:

'Islam Report aims to expose and analyse threats against Islam and Muslims worldwide ... This service is meant for Muslims from Mujahideen authenticated media outlets ... AIG is not connected in anyway form or fashion with any Mujahideen groups. AIG is proud to be a media voice to relay authentic Muslim news reports from its original sources'.

The site of the Campaign for Defence of Legitimate Rights (CDLR), the Saudi opposition group also contains postings from groups not directly connected with it, as does Global Media Monitoring, the site of the London-based journalist, Parvez Sayed.

An Islamist site that particularly aims its message to the outside world is that connected to Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Liberation Party. Their first UK-based site was hosted by Imperial College London, but following complaints to the College authorities the site was closed down temporarily until a new host could be found. They now post in their own name as Hizb ut-Tahrir, and as Khilafah, providing Internet-based access to their hard-copy material, their literature and their regional activities. Al Muhajiroun (The Emigrants) whose UK leader, Omar Bakri Mohamed, was the founding leader of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Britain, and from which he split claiming differences with the Middle East-based leadership, also provides details of its activities as well as lists of its hard-copy publications and contacts.

Another 'evangelical' Islamist organisation, Al Murabitun, also posts regularly providing details of its activities and its historical development.

Communication to own side:

Among Islamist organisations posting material to inform its members of its activities are the previously noted Hizb ut-Tahrir whose postings provides details, including time and date of its regular meetings around the UK.

A number of Islamist sites provide passworded communications to members and close sympathisers. The United Islamic Student Association in Europe, provides a site for members only, suggesting possibly that instructions for militant student activity is included in the postings.

Hamas' use of passworded and coded messages clearly presents problems for security agencies and a recent article in Jane's Foreign Report suggested that the Israeli security services have been unable to crack the codes used by Hamas.

'According to the Israelis, the unidentified terrorists are using the Internet. Without offering evidence, investigators in the security service, Shin Beth, assert that a full range of instructions for terrorist attacks, including maps, photographs, directions, codes and even technical details of how to use the bombs, are being transferred through the internet. They suspect that many of the instructions are sent from Britain, where they say that the Islamist/Palestinian organisation, Hamas, has its main European base'.

Hamas has been amongst the most prolific users of the Internet although its postings are mostly from sympathisers rather than the organisation itself. Its opening page on MSANews, provides a list of Internet resources including copies of its covenant (verbatim English official version), its communiqués (at Assabeel Online) and communiqués of its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Kassam brigades, including a day by day diary of their terrorist activity. Hamas in fact may also be accessed in various different ways: via MSANews, via the Palestine site and via the Islamic Association for Palestine.

Hizballah also now post on the Internet, and as with Hamas, it is possible to read their postings in both Arabic and English and access their diary of 'resistance activities.'

CONNECTIVITY AND INFORMATION GATHERING

While the Internet may provide Islamist groups with new and previously undreamed of benefits, such as connectivity to like-minded groups, it also provides researchers with a new and easily

accessible information gathering tool, although care must be taken with the accuracy of some information. However, while cyberspace provides an openness and an accessibility that other information gathering tools do not, it also possesses a transitory nature, and that therefore information gathered at one point in time may not always be there later. Internet sites have a habit of closing down particularly those of the more extreme organisations. This may be a consequence of interdiction, or because the organisation wishes to evade scrutiny, or because it is poorly organised or resourced generally.

An example of the information gathering potential provided by the Internet was recently given in a leaflet distributed at Leicester University announcing a meeting on 'Occupied Palestine'. The organisers, the Muslim Student's Website were previously unknown, but the website address (http:\\www.acgnet.co.uk\islam.htm) was the same as that given on a recently distributed student pack produced by the Muslim Student Home Page at Birmingham University. This included literature from Hizb ut-Tahrir thus estaba link, albeit unproven, between the organisations. However subsequent investigation showed the Birmingham meeting turned out to be a front for Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is effectively banned in most universities and therefore if it is to hold meetings, it does so under the name of other organisations.

A second example was that of the connection established between Palestine Times and Hamas. The Palestine Times Internet site gives their address in Leeds. This is also known to be the address of the Islamic Association for Palestinian Youth. Their Internet site gives the addresses of the Islamic Association for Palestine in the USA, in Dallas, Texas and Ontario and Canada. Thus it is possible to build up an international picture of pro-Hamas or Hamas front organisations. Again, Murabitun provides information on its site of its contacts around the world. One of the opening pages gives a listing of Murabitun's world-wide movement. The Americas' posting provides the address for Murabitun of North America in Charleston, South Carolina. Again with Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Khilafah publications site not only gives a list of their forthcoming meetings and the contact names of their organisers, but a recent MSANews posting on Kamran A. Bokhari lists him as the 'official US spokesman of the London-based Al Muhajiroun'.

SIGNPOSTS

Given the emergence of Islamist propaganda and militant activity around the world, it is useful therefore for researchers to look for particular 'sign-posts' which would indicate activity in their

country or interconnectivity to known militant and even terrorist groups abroad. These act as pointers to the Islamists' intentions, strategies and connections.

Among the most important are the connections to and with Iran. The Iranian government's policies of spreading the Islamic revolution, and their history of adopting covert means and political extremists to further their strategic aims constitute a continuing threat to western interests. It is interesting to note that according to a recent Islamist posting, the Iran-aligned Muslim Parliament has 'instructed' all mosques in Britain to get wired up to the Internet, along with Muslim and non-Muslim schools.

'Project Cafe Medina' is a scheme to link all mosques and Islamic schools in the UK to each other and to the Internet. Negotiations have already begun with a commercial Internet Service Provider (ISP) which would be responsible for the technical work… The agreement is such that the mosques would not have to pay a penny to the ISP as all the central service costs would be met by the Muslim Parliament… This project of linking up mosques is not exclusive to the UK but is occurring world-wide. A similar project is beginning in Singapore.'

Although clearly a project of potential benefit to the Anglo-Muslim community, it is nevertheless one which should be watched with caution given the Muslim Parliament's closeness to the Iranian regime and the known anti-western attitudes of some of its leading members.

A second pointer are those sites promoting Da'wah and Jihad. Traditionally Da'wah refers to the preaching of the Koran and the Sharia but with Islamist militants it is now associated more with militancy and propaganda activity.

'Militancy strictly speaking results more from religious preaching than from political training; the term used is Da'wah 'call', 'invitation', in fact 'militant preaching'. Hasan al-Banna wrote a tract titled Da'watuna (Our militant preaching). We find here the old tradition of the Ismaili da'i or of the Sufis, preachers of combat. But in this case the preaching emanates from the mosques, although it reflects a sensitivity to social questions, and the influence of the Marxist model'.

Sites promoting Jihad are of interest, although the concept of Jihad may be interpreted on different levels. However, when applied to Islamists it appears often to refer to armed opposition.

'The ultimate experience is of course Jihad, which for the Islamists, means armed battle: against communists (Afghanistan) or Zionists (Palestine) or, for the radicals, against renegades and the impious'.

Jihad, in the modern Islamist sense, knows no political space, or state; its space is that of the Umma, the community of Muslims, wherever they may be.

Nida'ul Islam is a bi-monthly magazine published in Australia in English and Arabic. Its Internet site publishes its 'Goals' which include 'reflecting the views of the Jihad stream amongst the Islamic movements; standing up to the Zionist-crusade assaults against Islam and Muslims; confronting and responding to the misguidance and misconceptions promoted by the deviated sects, and which are directly supported by the international Judeo movements and the Free Masons.'

In a posting in November 1997 entitled 'The Islamic Legitimacy of the "Martyrdom Operations" Abu Riqaiyah of Nida'ul Islam argues that 'martyrdom operations/Jihad-bombing assaults' are not suicide attacks which are not permitted in Islam, but rather the highest form of self-sacrifice, which is allowed'. Other postings have included communiqués from Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, various Jihad veterans and pro-Hamas articles.

A fourth signpost may be connections with the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon, for the reasons given above. In London there appears to be a closeness, organisationally, physically and financially between Ikhwan institutions and those of the Palestinian and Egyptian violent Islamist groups. It is possible that this situation is replicated elsewhere.

Fifth, researchers should search for connections between Islamist groups and other extremists, particularly the Far Right.

Ahmed Rami's Stockholm-based Radio Islam is not strictly an Islamist site, but it also provides connection to 'Islam and the Islamic world' as well as Far Right postings and Holocaust denial material. Like other Islamist sites, Radio Islam posts in several languages, giving it a greater international reach.

Its homepage introductory messages states that "it is against Jewish racism towards non-Jews and the political aims of World Zionism … Israel constitutes by its mere existence a complete defiance to all international laws, rules and principles, and the open racism manifested in the Jewish State is a violation of all ethics and morals known to man'.

The site promotes contact between Islamists, neo Nazis and Holocaust deniers, and publishes standard anti Jewish works such as 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion'. Radio Islam was amongst the first to publish postings from the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA.(

CONCLUSIONS

That Internet usage by Islamists is growing is obvious. What is also obvious is that they will use it to promote their views, advance the strategies of the 'global Islamic movement' and organise their activities, which experience has shown are sometimes inimical to western security, and in a wider sense might also seek to subvert the security of the state. This poses clear dangers to the west in general and to Jewish communities in particular. Rigorous monitoring of their sites, and those they interconnect with will assist in building a clearer picture of these strategies and their allies.

COMMENTARY

A number of our readers called our attention to a critique of this article published by MSANews, and asked for our response. MSANews is the site of the Muslim Student's Association at Ohio University, and is a well-known and serious Islamic website. Please see MSANews' commentary on the article.

Following is the reply we sent to MSANews. This message, and MSANews comments on it appear on the MSANews site at http://msanews.mynet.net/MSANEWS/199807/19980722.3.html

To the Editors of MSANews,

We were pleasantly surprised to find the article "Islamist Organisations on the Internet" by Michael Whine reviewed on your site. We appreciate your site for its scope, seriousness and wealth of information.

We would like to convey some remarks about your comments on the article, and on ICT's site:

 *First, as noted on our home page, inclusion of published material on our pages does not imply ICT endorsement of their contents. Therefore, we won't discuss every point concerning the content of the article as raised by your editors.

 *We feel our discussion about Islamic anti-Semitism to be entirely legitimate, as this is part of the ideological premise used by Islamic terrorist organizations, like Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hizballah, to justify their attacks against Jewish and Israeli citizens and targets.

  *To better understand this aspect of the ideological use of anti-Semitism we invite your subscribers to read the research published on our site, "Anti-Semitic Motifs in the Ideology of Hizballah and Hamas." We would also like to draw attention to the extremely anti-Jewish motifs on Hamas' new website (published only in Arabic, probably in order not to offend Western sensibilities.(

*As to the insinuation that we used Prof. Kramer's article without your permission, we can inform you that we received permission to publish the article in full text from the author himself.

By the way, we do not understand why the Israeli research centers, JCSS (Tel-Aviv University) and BESA (Bar-Ilan University), appear under the item Palestine while Israel does not even exist as a country on your site! This would seem to argue against the objectivity of your site and hint at an ideological bias.

Sincerely,

The Editors of ICT Website