

JIHAD ONLINE: THE PUBLIC FACE OF AL-QAEDA?
Elena Pavlova, Institute For Defense And Strategic Studies (IDSS)
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
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Even prior to September 11, websites propagating *jihadist* rhetoric and ideology abounded on the global information highway. Postings included books by famous Islamist authors, communiqués by Islamic group leaders, interviews with prominent *mujahideen* [Islamic fighters], up-to-date news from around the globe ‘lands of jihad,’ and pictures of victims of US and Israeli aggression.

What changed in the post-September 11 environment? Without exception, the opinion of terrorism experts and academics is that Al-Qaeda has taken its struggle online, becoming a ‘virtual university of global jihad.’ Communiqués claiming credit for attacks by unfamiliar sounding entities are published and often double published on Internet sites that appear and disappear in the split of a second. Jihadist forums circulate opinions, interviews, pictures, jihad strategies, and terror manuals. Flash photography and 3 D toolkits are used to create vivid pictures of conflict zones, Al-Qaeda’s training camps, and the last wills of suicide bombers. Recruitment videos, outlining training techniques and the local guerrilla campaigns of various Islamist groups, are widely circulated. Media outlets, in the rare occasions that they actually pick up on this jihad chatter, invariably characterize it as Al-Qaeda’s latest word and its threat for upcoming attacks.

The position outlined here is that the ‘jihad online’ phenomenon goes beyond the organizational aspects of Al-Qaeda. Undoubtedly, certain facets of it present grave risks for national security and public safety worldwide. As evidenced by the most recent quadruple suicide bombings in Istanbul, Turkey – planned from an internet café in the town of Bingol (Southeastern Turkey) and carried out as a direct continuation of a ‘global jihad’ website in Turkish www.cihad.net – the propaganda, recruitment, and mobilization potential of such ‘mass-media’ vehicles can end up in ‘mass-casualty’ outcomes. Nonetheless, viewing such public manifestations of pro-Bin Laden rhetoric solely for their ‘terrorizing’ value tends to miss the mark.

For one, the same forces that gave rise to the Al-Jazeera and the Al-Arabiya TV networks are at play with jihadist web sites worldwide. In contrast to the pre-September 11 pro-Bin Laden Internet pages – the majority of which were hosted and maintained from within Europe and the United States – the recent trend is that such web sites are more ‘localized.’ They are hosted in countries as far apart as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, Bosnia, and Great Britain, and cater to domestic audiences in their respective languages. The second fact to be observed is the astounding technological advancement and professionalism of their authors and creators. Graphical design is put to maximum effect, and often pictures and videos – taken from their original web sites of appearance – are refurbished into new formats and styles to evoke utmost possible emotional response.

Islamic militants on the World Wide Web are in search not only of alternative viewpoints, but also of alternative histories. The uncensored 'public space' of the Internet provides a way out of the usual government supervision and reprimand, which usually characterizes other forms of media in the Muslim world. The globalization effect of our time has created simultaneously both the possibility *and* the necessity for the selective sourcing of information. It is this peculiar perspective that these web sites present – one of Muslims 'betrayed' by their governments, punished and overlooked by US foreign policy, and constantly denied their place in the 'global village' of modernity. Such information presents a dire contrast to the official position presented in government-controlled newspapers and TV networks.

Such portrayal echoes proverbially with the sentiments of ordinary Muslims. Even when visitors disagree with the web sites' proposed method of response – namely, *jihad fi sabillullah*, or jihad by the sword – they are attracted to and compelled to feel 'right in their assumptions' by bloody pictures, videos, and interviews of Muslims from Iraq, Palestine, Chechnya, Indonesia, Bosnia, and Afghanistan. They compare their own feelings of marginalization and persecution with that of other Muslims of the global *umma*, or Muslim nation. If anything, the commonality of their religion and suffering – in an ever more constrained space for political action and economic opportunity – is what evokes empathy and a search for common ways out of the situation.

It is for this propaganda and selective viewing purposes – as well as for the unofficial barometer of Muslim 'street' attitudes – that these web sites need to be studied and analyzed.