

Introduction

by Alex P. Schmid (editor-in-chief) & Lorraine Bowman-Grieve (guest co-editor)

The US-led 'War on Terror', launched after 11 September 2001, has consisted predominantly of military and intelligence operations abroad and police and secret service operations at home. The main goal has been to arrest, kill or otherwise incapacitate members of Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups and cut off their financial support. Given the massive employment of resources and the amount of kinetic force used to deal with no more than a few thousand jihadists, the results of this 'Global War on Terror' have been disappointing. The same is, luckily, also true for the other side: nowhere have jihadists managed to gain state power. At best, they have been able to exercise a degree of fragile control over some barren territories in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen.

However, the one field where Al-Qaeda and other terrorist and extremist organisations have gained a surprising amount of terrain is in the virtual world of the Internet. While the offline presence of many of these organisations is weak, their online presence is strong. They have used publicly available global communication structures to good effect for advertising their existence, influencing public agendas, propaganda, networking, indoctrination, incitement, fund-raising, radicalisation, mobilisation, recruitment as well as instruction and training. Ironically, the Internet, originally created by the US military, has become the terrorists' strongest weapon. Western efforts to counter, radical, extremist and terrorist propaganda, in particular jihadist rhetoric, on the Internet have so far been largely unsuccessful.

While terrorism is a combination of violence and communication [1], counter-terrorism has focused largely on the violence. It has failed to make major inroads with 'soft power'-type 'strategic communication' initiatives against terrorists and their supporters and sympathisers. Take for example, the basic message of Al-Qaeda: 'Islam is under attack from the Crusaders and Jews and Islamic territories are systematically occupied'. It has resonated far beyond the terrorists' own circles and their immediate supporters - despite the fact that many more churches and synagogues have been attacked worldwide than mosques and that more Muslims live in the West than Westerners in Muslim countries. Recasting its own provocative acts of aggression against civilians as resistance against a 'satanic' America and its allies, Al-Qaeda has had some success in portraying itself as champion of a sacred cause. It has found a sympathetic ear among sections of the Muslim community - not least among alienated young Muslims in Western diasporas. The West has been unable to counter Al-Qaeda's simple narrative with a convincing counter-narrative that has a credible appeal among those vulnerable to Al-Qaeda's rhetoric and audio-visual propaganda. Mainstream moderate Muslim organisations, in turn, have not been much more successful in reclaiming key concepts of Islamic theology, especially the concept of 'Jihad'[2], which has been hijacked and instrumentalised by Al-Qaeda like some other Islamic principles that Salafists filled with new meanings while claiming to follow the oldest interpretations.

There are several reasons for the failure of Western counter-terrorist efforts on the ideological front. For one thing, the 'West' is heterogeneous, divided and without a single, simple message.

What it preaches is also often not what it has practiced - although the gap between rhetoric and reality is not as deep as during the Cold War and, at any rate, minor compared to what exists in, and comes from, other power centers such as Iran. In addition, many in the West are opposed to countering propaganda with propaganda. Many also do not wish to interfere with the freedom of the press and the Internet. Yet perhaps the most important reason for the failure to fully engage violent extremism in words and images on the Internet is that the broader public in the West is simply not aware of the massive volume of jihadist propaganda and incitement going on online, in blogs, forums, on *YouTube* and in social media like *Facebook*. The World Wide Web is divided into numerous sub-cultures of like-minded people who communicate mainly among themselves. This has allowed real terrorists as well as ‘armchair warriors’, claiming to speak for terrorist organisations, to operate anonymously from unknown locations (because coded IP addresses are used) and create and expand an online subculture that supports and promotes extremist ideologies. The massive extremist and terrorist presence on the World Wide Web has offline repercussions in the real world: some armchair media jihadists put their online glorification of violence and Al-Qaeda’s cult of death into offline practice in the form of *lone wolf* attacks. These, in turn, are picked up and replicated by some vulnerable and impressionable young people in copycat crimes. Online incitement and offline terrorism have become a vicious circle.

This thematic issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* has been the result of a collaborative effort of guest co-editor **Lorraine Bowman-Grieve** and the editor-in-chief of PT. It brings together a number of diverse articles from researchers and experts exploring various dimensions of the Internet presence of terrorists and their supporters.

In the first article, *James Forest*, sketches the ways in which propaganda seeks to influence audience perceptions and behaviours. He then identifies a number of areas where Al-Qaeda is vulnerable because it has to hide some inconvenient truths.

Yotam Ophir and *Gabriel Weimann* take a look at the Basque ETA, examining the ways it tried to utilize the Internet to gain acceptance for its goals and win support.

Jytte Klausen and her colleagues show how Al-Muhajiroun jihadists exploit the US Constitution’s First Amendment protections to evade European laws against incitement and hate speech. Their sophisticated network analysis and their comparison of Al-Muhajiroun’s network with the one of the American Tea Party reveals that behind a seemingly large network there are, at least in this case, only a few operatives who run multiple channels of communication.

Gilbert Ramsay, in turn, takes a look at an exchange of arguments that took place on an Arabic language Web Forum in late 2009 and early 2010 between supporters and critics of Al-Qaeda. From this battleground of pro- and anti-jihadist voices, Ramsay draws some cautionary lessons on the potential of using online counter-narratives.

Bud Goodall and his colleagues explore the potential that humour and ridicule might offer for ‘disarming’ dead-serious terrorists and changing the narrative landscape within which they operate.

Finally, we conclude with a report of a Working Group of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force on Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes, held in 2011 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Notes

[1] Cf. Alex P. Schmid & Janny de Graaf. *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: Sage, 1982.

[2] According to Ruediger Lohlker five varieties of Jihad may be distinguished (i) Jihad as propaganda, (ii) modern defensive Jihad, (iii) anti-colonial Jihad, (iv) pacifist Jihad and (v) jihadist offensive Jihad . – Ruediger Lohlker. *The Forgotten Swamp Revisited*. In: R. Lohlker (ed.). *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism*. Vienna: University Press, 2011, p.137.