

The YouTube Jihadists: A Social Network Analysis of Al-Muhajiroun's Propaganda Campaign

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Abstract

Producers of Al-Qaeda inspired propaganda have shifted their operations in recent years from closed membership online forums to mainstream social networking platforms. Using social network analysis, we show that behind the apparent proliferation of such sources, YouTube account holders associated with incarnations of the British al-Muhajiroun collude to post propaganda and violent content. European groups commonly use American platforms and domain names registered with American companies. Seeking shelter under speech rights granted by the First Amendment, they evade European laws against incitement and hate speech.

Introduction

The successes of the popular uprising of the Arab Spring have been credited, at least in part, to social networking media, and in particular to *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and *Twitter*. Relatively unnoticed, certainly uncelebrated, is the fact that closer to home the same mainstream social networking media platforms have been exploited by radical Islamists. They feature again and again in a series of recent terrorism indictments involving jihadists.

After following a number of recent cases in which material broadcast on *YouTube* inspired violence, we noticed that many accounts appeared to be incarnations of the same online entity. Is this the result of deliberate coordination, even a virtual representation of a political organization? Or are like-minded people simply finding one another by chance on the Internet?

Over a three-month period in early 2011, we identified 41 *YouTube* accounts—technically known as “channels”—that posted jihadist content and carried brand names with a family resemblance to incarnations of the British-based banned organization, *al-Muhajiroun*. Twenty-one used some version of the *Shariah4* label, playing on the name of Islam4UK, a banned organization in the *al-Muhajiroun* clan.

A remarkable feature of these channels is that although they are generally authored in Europe they are legally based in the US, and therefore enjoy protection under the First Amendment. In an earlier attempt to steer clear of law enforcement, jihadist groups migrated from open online forums to invitation-only sites. The strategy was unsatisfactory, because invitation-only sites limited access to potential recruits. In contrast, the social networking sites reach an unrestricted audience. Anyone can link up at the click of the mouse and dissemination is easily amplified by means of automatic reposting. Operators can also hide potentially illegal material in the mass of online postings on the sites.

The legal shield given to mainstream platforms compels law enforcement and service providers to close down sites and remove extremist videos on an ad hoc basis, one by one. First Amendment considerations make this a delicate matter if sites are registered in the US. In 2008,

Dynadot, an American domain name registrar and webhost, faced pressures over its hosting of *Wikileaks* following a complaint from a Swiss bank. Judge Jeffrey S. White of the Federal District Court in San Francisco temporarily ordered the company to cease hosting the *Wikileaks* website. A coalition of free speech groups filed a court brief protesting the restraining order on First Amendment grounds.[1] The judge later reversed the decision, commenting that his judgment had raised “serious questions of prior restraint (on speech) and possible violations of the First Amendment.”[2] *Dynadot* retains the right in its customer agreements to terminate accounts associated with “morally objectionable activities.”[3] The company is one of the webhosts frequently used by jihadists.

Taking Online Jihadism onto Social Networking Platforms

The new internet-based technologies lower the bar for participation in the global jihadist movement. On the web, one can proselytize for the jihad all day and night with friends from around the world by posting and cross-posting content on social networking platforms linked to a website with a domain name that allows the projection of an online brand.

Domain names are hostnames that are identified with a specific location on the Internet known as an Internet Protocol (IP) address. The right to use a particular online domain name, such as *RevolutionMuslim.com*, can be obtained from hosting service providers for a fee. The companies also act as web hosts by providing bandwidth on the Internet and remote storage space for subscribers on servers they own or lease.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) delegates the registration of domain names to hosting companies. The companies are responsible for keeping a registry of the name and number systems of Internet domains. Registrants must submit personal contact information to the hosting companies. This is posted on the searchable WHOIS database. (We used it to determine the hosting companies and domain holder identities of websites linked to the *YouTube* channels.)

YouTube is an Internet portal specialized in video sharing. It was launched in 2005 but usage did not catch on until spring 2006. Anyone can watch posted videos, but only registered users can upload videos. To increase traffic, *YouTube* account holders often place links to their uploaded videos on a personal webpage or on their *Facebook* profile. Google acquired *YouTube* in 2006, and the portal has recently been adapted to other languages, including Arabic. Known as “localization,” the foreign-language platforms provide user access in local languages but do not affect the engineering or hosting. *YouTube*’s hosting server is located in Mountain View, California. The portal has become the chosen vehicle for the posting of jihadist videos and other content for the obvious reason that the multi-lingual and audio-visual format suits the purpose.

Facebook is also an Internet portal. Launched in 2004, it has an estimated 800 million users worldwide. The United States leads the way with more than 150 million users, which means that close to 50% of the American population has a *Facebook* profile.[4] The United Kingdom ranks fourth with about 30 million users. (Second and third are much more populous Indonesia and India.) Users register to set up their own profile on the portal and add other users as “friends” to allow content to cross-post.

Twitter, the most recent and the smallest of the three platforms, was created in 2006. It is designed as a phone-based application and limits users to text-based postings of messages composed of a maximum of 140 characters, the standard length of a SMS. Celebrities use it to broadcast their doings and thoughts to followers. The *emirs* associated with the *Al-Qaeda*-inspired *YouTube* accounts analyzed in this article started “tweeting” in March and April 2011. *Twitter* is used to post instant observations on current affairs (e.g. “The rise of Muslims in Syria will be the end of Israel [...]”) and redirecting adherents to new postings on other platforms (e.g. “The US constitution & its laws are not even worthy for the US President to abide by & to respect www.Shariah4America.com has some solutions”).[5]

American hosting servers are a popular choice for practical and legal reasons. A domain name can be registered for as little as \$11.99 per year. Hosting services with global bandwidths can be rented for four dollars and less per month from companies like GoDaddy.com and Dynadot.com. The *Dynadot* server, located in San Mateo, California, offers a privacy service, which allows registrants to mask their identity by listing addresses as “care of” the company, a convenience that has made it particularly popular with jihadists and Internet activists hoping to elude the authorities.

Much of the content of the jihadist sites would be deemed illegal in Europe. The passage of two laws in the UK (Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 (c. 1) and Serious Crime Act 2007 (c. 27) target hate speech or incitement to violence.[6] The German Penal Code (Section 13) prohibits hate speech and “utterances capable of instigating violence, hatred, or discrimination.” The shift to American host servers exploits the First Amendment protection allowed to US-based Internet providers.

This is not a new development, nor is it limited to media-savvy European jihadists. The main *Al-Qaeda* forum, *Shmukh al-Islam*, was hosted in the United States through Domains by Proxy, Inc., but moved to an Indonesian server. The domain name is registered in the US. *Salafi Media* is hosted by HostMonster. *Authentic Tawheed* was hosted by an American server but is now hosted by a Syrian server, while *The Tawheed Movement* was previously hosted by Bytehost but recently moved to *Dynadot*.

Al-Muhajiroun’s Online Media Productions

Based upon the similarities in content and design, we suspected that many of the *YouTube* channels that feature *Al-Qaeda*-inspired proselytizing are incarnations of the same organization, albeit designed to appear independent. They are calculated to be resilient to disruption, so that if one is taken down the others are able to continue to post the same material, or new ones can be easily created to replicate them.

We found that indeed there was a single production entity behind most of the propaganda: *Al-Muhajiroun*.

Al-Muhajiroun (the Emigrants) was created in 1986 by Omar Bakri Muhammad as a shell organization for Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), a pan-Islamic extremist organization created in the 1950s. When Bakri Muhammad left HuT in 1996, he declared it independent and the organization

functioned as his vehicle until 2004 when he disbanded it to forestall proscription. Bakri Muhammad was exiled from the United Kingdom in 2005 when the UK Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, revoked his residency permit. Some of Britain's most notorious jihadists have been *al-Muhajiroun* members. Britain's first suicide bomber, Bilal Ahmed, who blew himself up in Kashmir in December 2000, allegedly was a member. Asif Hanif and Omar Khan Sharif, who carried out suicide actions at a bar in Tel Aviv in 2003, and Omar Khyam, the ring-leader of the so-called "fertilizer plot" who was convicted in 2006 on charges of wanting to blow up Parliament and targets in London, were also members.

Bakri Muhammad allegedly formed over eighty front organizations in at least six countries. He continues to play a role, logging on from Lebanon, where he now lives. He was sentenced to life in prison in Lebanon in November 2010 for training *Al-Qaeda* operatives at a camp in northern Lebanon. Lebanese authorities arrested Bakri Muhammad shortly afterwards, but he is at present free on bail pending a retrial.

In 2009, one of Bakri Muhammad's disciples, Anjem Choudary, re-formed *al-Muhajiroun* in the UK. *Al-Muhajiroun* and several aliases of the group have been banned. Most recently, another incarnation reconstituted under the banner of *Islam4UK* was banned in January 2010. The names and aliases have acquired a second life as online domains. Today what remains of the group has shrunk to less than a hundred members. It now operates primarily under the alias of *Muslims Against Crusades* (MAC).

Choudary's boundary-pushing stunts have created an outcry in the United Kingdom. He received much publicity in 2009 after he declared that Buckingham Palace should be turned into the seat for the new Caliph.[7] The reaction encouraged Choudary. His subsequent releases targeting the American media market included mock-up photos indicating a jihadist take-over attached to articles on "The White Masjid," which is an allusion to the White House. The Islamic Demolition of the Statue of Liberty is dramatized by draping a *burqa* over the monument. Another posting announces the creation of the International Sharia Court of Justice to replace the United Nations in New York City. One photo shows Choudary in front of the White House with a black flag of Islam.

The content of the *YouTube* channels is strikingly similar. Over images of Muslims suffering at the hands of Western military forces, the sound track broadcasts *anasheed* (a vocal musical genre favored by jihadists) and texts from the Koran, or a voice-over explaining the righteous path. Anjem Choudary, Omar Bakri Muhammad, and Abu Hamza al-Masri are the most frequently used speakers. Videos featuring Osama Bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki are also popular. Programs addressed specifically to particular national audiences feature local celebrity emirs and activists. Choudary officially endorsed one of the channels, *Sharia4Belgium*, in March 2010: "We support our brothers in Belgium under the banner of *Sharia4Belgium* and we are ready, whatever they need to send more people to support them in their activities, in their duty, and fulfilling their responsibility." [8]

The *YouTube* channels in the *Shariah4* network also cross-post many of the same videos. Some *Shariah4* channels are created, with content uploaded, and then rarely updated. The most active channels include *Sharia4Belgium* (and its successor channels), *Shariah4Holland*, *Shariah4Australia* (and its successor channel), *Shariah4Poland*, *Shariah4Pakistan*, and

Shariah4AlAndalus. The recent uprisings in the Arab world produced a proliferation of new channels with similarly themed content: *Shariah4Tunisia*, *Sharia4Egypt*, and *Sharia4Yemen*.

The *Shariah4Tunisia* channel, for instance, highlights four videos of demonstrations in which members of *al-Muhajiroun* call for an Islamic state in Tunisia. Two of the videos show a British Tunisian. The other two videos feature Anjem Choudary. Choudary also makes an appearance in a video titled “Shariah 4 Libya” that was uploaded to *YouTube* by *londondawah*, another channel of British jihadists that is loosely affiliated with *al-Muhajiroun*. The *Sharia4Egypt* and *Sharia4Yemen* channels had only one video each. Both videos have *anasheed* in the background with pictures from the protests and text of the Koran in Arabic and English calling for the establishment of Shariah.

Recent Incidents Involving YouTube Channels Linked to Al-Muhajiroun Affiliates

These *YouTube*-based jihadist channels promote violent acts, broadcast threats, and announce and direct events and demonstrations. Counter-terrorism strategies are geared to pick up cues from surveillance of radical environments. Online extremism has moved the radicalization process into suburban living rooms, and made it possible for *Al-Qaeda* agents to recruit “homegrown” terrorists over the Internet.[9]

Violent Acts

We identified three violent acts involving the same network of *YouTube* and *Facebook* contacts, including channels from the *al-Muhajiroun YouTube* network that we analyze here. In each case law enforcement was taken by surprise. Cues indicating a need to put these individuals on watch list were either missed or non-existent.

Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly, a 30-year old Iraqi-born Swedish citizen who had lived in Luton, England since 2001, set off two bombs in downtown Stockholm on December 11, 2010. One was a car bomb and the other a pipe bomb that went off in his backpack, possibly prematurely. Al-Abdaly was killed and two bystanders injured. A Glasgow man was arrested three months later in connection with the attack, but little is known of his role. Al-Abdaly was an avid user of *Facebook* and *YouTube*. He sent an email to newspapers just before he blew himself up and may have been trying to film and broadcast his martyrdom. Al-Abdaly’s *Facebook* profile and *YouTube* viewing habits were captured by *Internet Haganah*, an online investigative project. One video al-Abdaly watched shortly before his violent act was uploaded by *videomuslim*, a subscriber account to *Shariah4Holland*, one of the main *al-Muhajiroun* channels in this study. We identified six account holders in the second wave of subscriber channels in our sample of *al-Muhajiroun* related channels, which were also on al-Abdaly’s viewing list.[10]

On March 2, 2011, Arid Uka, a 21-year old Kosovo Albanian who grew up in Germany, fatally shot two U.S. soldiers who were boarding a bus at Frankfurt airport. Uka told prosecutors that he had been motivated by a video of U.S. soldiers raping a Muslim woman. The video—in fact a scene from Brian De Palma’s fictional anti-Iraq War movie *Redacted* [11]—was uploaded on at least two *Shariah4* channels days before the shooting.[12] Uka, whose *Facebook* name was “Abu Rayyan”, added the German Jihadist group *Dawa FFM* as a friend on February 25.[13]

Uka was not a known member of local jihadist networks and was not under surveillance prior to his attack, although he was deeply enmeshed in online jihadist social networking. Uka was a *Facebook* “friend” of several well-known jihadists who also were on the Stockholm bomber’s list of *Facebook* friends.[14]

On June 22, 2011, authorities arrested two men in Seattle, USA, on charges of planning an attack on an Army recruiting center. The leader, Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif, an African-American convert, also known as Joseph Anthony Davis, was an active online propagandist. He has said that he wanted jihad in America to be “physical” and not merely “media jihad.”[15] A second man, Walli Mujahidh (a.k.a. Frederick Domingue Jr.), also a black convert, was arrested after he traveled to Seattle on a bus from Los Angeles. It was apparently the first time the men had met in person. Abdul-Latif’s *YouTube* account (*akabdullatif*) included videos of himself preaching and giving advice on Islam. His account had only a couple of thousand views, but a search of his *Facebook* and *YouTube* accounts turned up first-degree connections to a dozen sites related to Anwar al-Awlaki’s Western-based supporters and the *al-Muhajiroun YouTube* proselytizing network.[16] A third man who agreed to become an informer alerted the police to the conspiracy. The investigation was initiated on June 2, 2011, only twenty days prior to the arrests.

We caution that it is premature to conclude that online self-radicalization was involved in those cases. Radicalization involves a prolonged and gradual descent into an alternative world. Terrorist action rarely occurs without some personal contact with extremist facilitators. A perpetrator may say “the video made me do it” when in fact it was no more than a catalyst for actions for which the person was primed by others. Neighbors, prison radicalization, and family members may be powerful influences. Nonetheless, it is becoming apparent that the expansion of online proselytizing means that much of that process occurs through virtual communities outside the reach of traditional counter-terrorism prevention strategies.

The Communication of Threats

Jihadists are quick to describe their propaganda and barely veiled (or unveiled) incitement to violence as a free speech right. The First Amendment does not protect speech acts involving imminent threats but preventive removal of online content rarely meets the legal standard for “imminent.” The key question is often whether the speech act under consideration, however offensive it might be, is criminal. An ongoing instance is a prosecution in connection with online threats against an episode of *South Park*, a cartoon show on Comedy Central. On May 13, 2011, the U.S. government filed an indictment against Jesse Curtis Morton (a.k.a. Younus Abdullah Mohammad) on charges of communicating threats. Morton was arrested in Morocco.

Morton’s indictment followed the prosecution of Zachary Adam Chesser (a.k.a. Abu Talhah al-Amrikee), who pleaded guilty in October 2010 to posting threats and to providing material support to al-Shabaab, an *Al-Qaeda* affiliate in Somalia. The threats were posted on *RevolutionMuslim.com* and a number of other websites including the *al-Qimmah Forum*, which is the official forum of al-Shabaab.[17]

Morton created *RevolutionMuslim.com* in collaboration with Joseph Cohen (a.k.a. Yousef al-Khattab) in late 2007 after splitting from an older group, The Islamic Thinkers Society. The latter

was created in Queens, New York, in 1998 as a branch of the British *al-Muhajiroun*. It still exists and mainly carries out proselytizing from *dawah* (mission) stalls in Times Square. When Cohen split from the group in late 2009, Morton and Chesser started to run the *Revolution Muslim* website together. They allegedly met in person only once.[18] The Morton indictment alleges that Chesser expressed hope that his campaign against *South Park* would mobilize Muslims in the US the same way the *fatwa* (ruling on a matter of Islamic religious law) against Salman Rushdie in retribution for his book, *Satanic Verses*, had galvanized British Muslims.[19]

After Chesser was arrested in July 2010, and after Morton disappeared, Britons took over the management of *RevolutionMuslim.com*. On November 3, a *fatwa* with a “hit list” of UK parliamentary members who voted for the war in Iraq was posted on the website. [20] The posting cites a *hadith* stating: “Whoever dies and has not fought or intended to fight [Jihad in the path of God] has died on a branch of hypocrisy,” and called on the faithful to “raise the knife of jihad” against the MPs. The locations and hours of constituency open-house of the parliamentarians were listed together with a picture of a large knife and a link telling readers where to obtain one. The website was taken down following requests from the British authorities. [21]

Bilal Zaheer Ahmad, a 23-years old man from Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom who posted the hit list, was arrested and pleaded guilty to soliciting murder.[22] Ahmad is also held responsible for an Internet posting from May 2010, which was cited as an inspiration by Roshonara Choudhry, a 21-year old Briton who stabbed and nearly killed a Member of Parliament, Stephen Timms. Choudhry also cited as her inspiration videos featuring Anwar al-Awlaki that circulated on *YouTube* channels linked to *al-Muhajiroun*. The videos have now been removed. The incident bounced back and forth in the online echo chamber created by the jihadist proselytizing sites. After the attack, Choudhry was praised as a heroine on *RevolutionMuslim.com* and hailed as a victim of government suppression after she was convicted.

In January 2011, another self-styled *fatwa* targeted the UK Home Secretary, Theresa May. It was also printed as mocked-up “Wanted” posters plastered up overnight in Tooting, South London. [23] There was little doubt about the paternity of the May *fatwa*. In an interview given just days earlier, Anjem Choudary, the leader of the present incarnation of *al-Muhajiroun*, anticipated the message to come: “I can envisage people issuing *fatwas* against people like Theresa May and David Cameron.”[24]

Online Recruitment and the Broadcasting of Extremist Propaganda

The *Shariah4* online network generated a string of national spinoffs in the past year, most of which use domains that are hosted by American companies, and which offer IP addresses outside the jurisdiction of the European authorities. It started organizing events through social networking platforms. More often than not, demonstrations have been announced and then canceled in the last minute. Anjem Choudary took his *Shariah4* brand to the United States, under the banner of *Shariah4America*, and announced a demonstration in front of the White House to take place on March 3, 2011 (the anniversary of the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924). No demonstration was held but Choudary was invited onto both CNN and Fox News as a result of

his American campaign.[25] On March 29, *Muslims Against Crusaders* posted a new *fatwa* entitled “Muslims to Disrupt Royal Wedding.” The post threatened a “nightmare” on the April 29, 2011, the day of the royal wedding of Prince William should the British military not withdraw from Muslim lands. It featured a live countdown of days, minutes, and seconds to the wedding day. The police did not permit the demonstration.

In April 2011, a new French offshoot called *Jamaat Tawheed* posted an online invitation in halting French to Choudary and two other leaders in the *al-Muhajiroun*-inspired network to attend a demonstration in Paris against the French ban on the public wearing of the *niqab* (face veil). The two other *emirs* invited were Abu Izzadeen (Trevor Brooks), a Briton, and Abu Imran (Fouad Belkacem), the leader of the Choudary-linked Belgian group *Shariah4Belgium*. [26] In this case the plans for a demonstration went ahead but Belkacem was arrested by the French police on a warrant from the Moroccan authorities. He was returned to Belgium where he is awaiting trial on charges of communicating threats. Choudary was turned back and permanently banned from French territory. The Belgian prosecutor has also charged Choudary, along with Belkacem, with hate speech.[27]

RevolutionMuslim.com was originally registered in December 2007 with GoDaddy, an American hosting service, and later made the rounds of other hosting companies. The Theresa May *fatwa* was posted on an American-based website (*theresamayfatwa.com*) registered with *Dynadot.com*. The *Shariah4* website domains are often also registered with *Dynadot.com*. The same server has hosted the *Muslim Against Crusades* website.[28] *Jamaat Tawheed's* website, where a call was posted to join the *niqab* ban protests in France, was also hosted by *Dynadot*.

AnjemChoudary.com was previously hosted by *Dynadot.com* but is today hosted by a Canadian server and has an IP address in Montreal. Another channel, German Dawa FFM, which has numerous online aliases, has an IP address listed in Orem, Utah.[29]

Methodology and Findings

Our thesis is that *YouTube* proselytizing accounts linked to the jihadist-inspired online groups constitute an integrated and centrally directed network. Although the *Shariah4* channels and the other channels in the jihadist media network are presented as independent set-ups, created by like-minded but unaffiliated administrators, we suspect that they are part of the same operation, and are designed to make removals by the *YouTube* administrators or government officials ineffective.

To test our hypotheses we subjected the channels and their subscribers to social network analysis. A chief advantage of this methodology is that information about communication points can be coded in a formalized manner and subjected to statistical analysis. We created two datasets, one consisting of jihadist channels, and a second dataset made up of *YouTube* channels linked to the Texas *Tea Party* movement. To avoid biasing our results, the channels were selected based upon name resemblances to the aliases used by *al-Muhajiroun* and the group's leaders. The *Tea Party* data serves as a case-control. By comparing the channels propagandizing jihadism to the online activism of another political movement, we are able to test the null-hypothesis that the jihadist-inspired network is *not* centrally managed. The Texas *Tea Party* nodes were selected as a comparison because the postings represent political online activism and in this regard have a

superficial resemblance to the online jihadists. We can reasonably assume that their postings are not centrally directed, and the channel owners have no reason to evade anti-terrorism laws.

All but seven of the 41 channels we identified as *Al-Qaeda*-inspired account holders with some name resemblance to the know aliases of the *al-Muhajiroun* clan were created between September 2010 and March 2011, when we finished compiling the data (listed in Table 1). Of these, twenty-one were created between December 2010 and March 2011. Three were taken down, all in February 2011, after complaints were made about the content to the hosting service. The rest was still active when we stopped collecting information. The two oldest channels are vehicles for Anjem Choudary and *Izharudeen*, a website created by Omar Bakri Muhammad. Four of the channels selected had no available subscriber information, either because they did not have any subscribers or because they did not disclose the information, and were therefore not used in the analysis.

Table 1. Jihadist YouTube Channels Used in Network Analysis

Account	Creation	Terminated	Date Data Compiled
<i>Sharia4Belgium</i>	2/9/10	2/9/11	11/22/2010; 2/9/11
<i>ShariahMedia</i>	2/4/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariahforBelgium</i>	2/13/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariahChannel</i>	2/10/11	2/25/11	2/11/11
<i>ShariahTube</i>	2/22/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Yemen*</i>	2/3/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>GlobalSharia</i>	3/9/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariahForEarth</i>	1/8/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>GlobalShariahGroups*</i>	1/4/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Egypt</i>	2/1/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4NewMexico</i>	2/3/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4America</i>	10/28/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Nebraska</i>	1/4/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4WVirginia</i>	1/5/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>ShariaForKentucky</i>	1/2/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Holland</i>	12/13/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Australia</i>	10/19/10	2/9/11	1/25/11
<i>Sharia4Australia</i>	2/13/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Poland</i>	12/19/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4Indonesia</i>	9/12/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Pakistan</i>	12/1/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4UK</i>	1/26/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Sharia4AlAndalus</i>	2/16/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Tunisia</i>	1/22/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4TheVatican</i>	1/18/11	Active	3/14/11
<i>Shariah4Bangladesh</i>	11/8/10	Active	3/14/11
<i>Izharudeen</i>	1/29/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Izharudeen</i>	N/A	N/A	3/15/11
<i>Izhrudeen*</i>	9/10/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Islam4UK*</i>	5/11/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Islam4USA</i>	N/A	N/A	3/15/11
<i>MuslimsAgnstCrusades</i>	N/A	N/A	3/15/11
<i>MuslimsVsCrusades</i>	1/18/11	Active	3/15/11
<i>MuslimsAgstCrusaders</i>	11/16/10	Active	3/15/11
<i>IslamPolicy</i>	1/5/11	Active	3/15/11

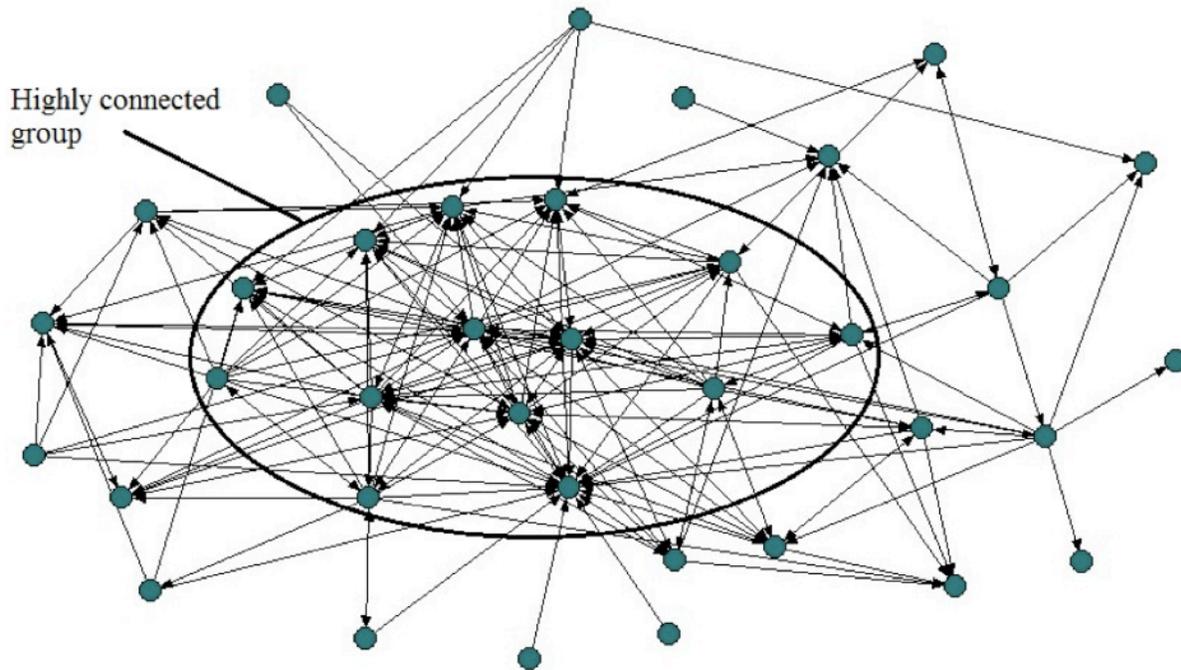
Account	Creation	Terminated	Date Data Compiled
<i>AlMuhajiroun</i>	8/31/09	Active	3/15/11
<i>SheikhOmarBakri</i>	5/15/10	Active	3/15/11
<i>AnjemChoudary</i>	10/30/08	Active	3/15/11
<i>Islamicthinkers</i>	2/28/09	Active	3/15/11
<i>IbrahimSiddiqConlon</i>	10/26/10	Active	3/15/11
<i>Londondawah</i>	8/26/07	Active	3/15/11

* Channels with no subscriber information

The data on subscribers - other *YouTube* channels that sign up to follow a particular channel - is best suited to an analysis of the interconnections between related channels. This is because a subscriber actively seeks a connection with the channels it follows, and hence presupposes a willingness to interact. *YouTube* channels can also have “friends”, but unlike subscribers, account holders need not approve “friends.” A third category is subscriptions—the other channels an account holder has signed up to—but privacy settings allow channel administrators to keep such information offline. Our analysis is restricted to the relationships between the *Shariah4* channels and their channel subscribers. Including “friends” in the study might have reinforced our conclusions but proved unmanageable in terms of size.

Using a “snowball” method, we coded a first wave of subscribers to the original “starter” channels and then a second wave of subscribers’ subscribers. For the purpose of social network analysis, the channels and accounts are “nodes” and subscriber links between them are “edges”. The sampling method produced a jihadist-inspired dataset of over 41,000 accounts and 76,000 subscriptions. The set was too large for effective social network analysis. The solution was to remove all the subscribers with just one connection to the network, which produced 37 starting nodes with a total of 9,331 nodes and 43,576 edges (links). Chart 1 shows the subscriber links between the starting nodes in the jihadist *YouTube* dataset. Arrows indicate the direction of information flowing from “uploader” channels to subscribers downloading material.

Chart 1. Diagram of Subscriber Links between the Starting Nodes in the Jihadist *YouTube* Dataset



For the *Tea Party* network, our control dataset, we also removed all subscribers with just one connection. This left six starting nodes (listed in table 2) and a total of 6,480 nodes with 16,159 edges.

Table 2. Texas *Tea Party* Channels Used as Control Case in Network Analysis

Account	Creation	Terminated	Date Compiled
<i>sateaparty</i>	3/25/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>hlteaparty</i>	9/5/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>WacoTeaParty</i>	4/5/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>rgvtpweb</i>	8/29/09	Active	3/23/11
<i>lonestarteparty1</i>	4/16/10	Active	3/23/11
<i>dallasteaparty</i>	4/15/09	Active	3/23/11

Using likenesses of known *al-Muhajiroun* incarnations as a selection criterion netted channels that perhaps did not belong in the clan. One account holder noted on his profile, in capital lettering, “Attention: this is not RevolutionMuslim’s site (a prominent member of the *al-Muhajiroun* clan), [...] so spamming my channel will not help you get at them.” The branding is

not always transparent, and we probably missed channels in the empire in our first wave sampling. Our intuitive selection did not detect some of the most prolific *YouTube* channels in the network, which entered the study in the second-wave of data sampling of subscribers. This is a good thing, methodologically speaking. We did not inadvertently bias the study by sampling “on the dependent variable”; starting by selecting the channels most likely to support our argument. The second wave subscriber accounts also included some with no jihadist content. We identified a number of bot channels (“zombies”) presumably designed to function as “listening” devices, one of which was our own, as well as channels that we guessed belonged to non-adherents, e.g. an account belonging to *TheKuffarKid*.^[30]

The number of subscribers to the starting nodes ranged from only three (*Sharia4Egypt*) to 525 at the high end (*Izharudeen*). The average was 93.22 subscribers per starting node. The top-viewed videos were watched between thirty and forty thousand times, but as viewers can watch the same video many times the statistic does not tell us anything about the number of unique viewers. Overall, these are not impressive numbers for *YouTube* videos. A sermon about why Michael Jackson should become a Muslim by a South African preacher whom we identified as one of the second-wave subscribers had over eighty thousand viewings.

Different algorithms are used to measure various properties of networks: the probability that by chance a particular pattern of subscribers relations would occur, the hierarchy (or lack thereof), density, and structural duplication or redundancy. Hierarchy indicates the difference, at the extremes, between a network clustering around a central “celebrity” channel (e.g. Lady Gaga telling her fans how fabulous she is but uninterested in the non-fabulousness of her fans) and one that is “flat” because channels repost content through mutual subscriptions. Density is a measure of integration and an indication of coordination. Structural duplication suggests the existence of a planned architecture.

a. Probability:

In the case of channel subscribers, a subscription by channel B to channel A is an outward directed edge from A to B, representing the flow of information from A to B. We tested our assumption that the *Shariah4* channels and the other *Al-Qaeda*-inspired channels have many mutual subscriptions in order to make them resilient against disruption. This was accomplished by comparing the actual number of out-degree edges within the starting node group to the number of edges we would find by chance by taking a random sample of the same size from the entire network. In fact, the nodes in the jihadist network have indeed far more outward-directed relationships amongst each other (an average of 212) than one would statistically expect by chance (8.74). It is highly unlikely that this large number of cross-subscriptions could be obtained by chance (>.0000). In contrast, the starting channels in *Tea Party* network do not subscribe to each other at all. This outcome was less than what one might expect by chance, that half of the channels would subscribe to another channel.

b. Hierarchy:

Degree centrality is a count of the number of edges connecting a node to another node. It measures popularity by rank-ordering nodes in term of the number of subscribers. The single most popular channel was *Izharudeen*, a vehicle for Omar Bakri Muhammad and *Muslims Against Crusades*. No single node stands out as controlling the network but each of them has a medium-high number of connections. None of the jihadist starter channels were on the top ten list of nodes based upon popularity. The most popular channel in the relatively flat landscape of the jihadist network was *ShiismRevealed*, which entered our study as a second-wave channel subscriber to the *al-Muhajiroun* channels. In contrast, a celebrity “uploader” channel (*DontBeObamaZombies*) dominated the *Tea Party* network with 3.5 times the number of subscribers of the second most popular channel in the network.

Betweenness centrality measures the number of nodes that a particular node is connecting through indirect links. It is a so-called “shortest path” analysis, which identifies the gatekeepers in a network. Rather than rank-ordering nodes by the number of links, it is a measure of the degree to which a starting node controls the dissemination of content through strategic placement in the network. The higher the betweenness centrality the greater the number of unique “shortest paths” pass through the node. If our thesis that the jihadist-inspired starting nodes are duplicates is correct, we would expect the key nodes to have relatively low betweenness centrality scores compared to the *Tea Party*. The normalized (weighted) network scores were relatively similar -- .00139 for the *Tea Party* network and .00126 for the jihadist-inspired network. However, the normalized betweenness score for the starting nodes in the *Tea Party* network was on average more than two and a half times higher (.06544) than that of the jihadist-inspired network (.02499). The controlling nodes in the *Tea Party* network are individually more important to the flow of information through the network.

The finding that the betweenness centrality values are relatively low for the starting nodes in the jihadist-inspired network and the concomitant findings that multiple medium-sized channels form a core in the network and a consistent pattern of redundant reposting by means of mutual subscriptions are consistent with our expectation that the network is designed to be resistant to disruption by turning the nodes into redundant bullhorns for proselytizing. This suggests that the *Al-Qaeda*-inspired channels’ owners have a high degree of coordination, which is consistent with the hypothesis that they form a single organization.

c. Density:

A *k-core* is a sub-network (cluster) in a network where all of the nodes are connected to k number other nodes within the cluster. The letter k here indicates the unknown value. This enables us to compare groups within the network with respect to density and the degree of integration. We can measure how many nodes in a network belong to a cluster and by how many threads. *K-core* values measure how many connections a member has to other nodes in the sub-network and enables us to compare groups with respect to density and degree of integration. A 5-core group, for example, is a cluster where all the members have ties to at least five other members. Relaxing the criteria to 4 ties (4 core) adds more members but also makes the cluster less dense. If the hypothesis is correct we expect the starting nodes in the jihadism-inspired network to be in high k -value core clusters indicative of an anticipated need to resist disruption.

We found that 18 of the starting nodes in the jihadist-inspired network belonged to highly integrated sub-networks where each node had 20 or more subscriber ties to other members. Most of the network had at least two or three ties to other nodes. 4,033 (out of over 9,000) had at least two links to other subscribers (2-core). 2/3 of the network had at least double or triple subscriptions. Only 7 of the starting nodes in the jihadism-inspired network belonged to sub-networks with a k -value below 10.

In contrast, the *Tea Party* network had two sub-networks of over 2,000 people comprising the majority of the network but with low k -values. Only two of the starting nodes were members of a core with a k -value equal to or above 10. The clear difference supports our hypothesis that the jihadist-inspired network is pooled and highly interlinked. The *Tea Party* network in contrast is hierarchical, a pattern consistent with a lack of collusion or little concern over the consequences of a starting node being taken down.

d. Redundancy:

Structural equivalence is a measure of how similar the nodes in a network are to each other. If two nodes are structurally the same they are likely to fulfill similar roles in the network so the measure can be used to test for channel redundancy in the network. Strictly, two nodes should have identical lists of subscribers to be structurally similar, but a more relaxed definition compares nodes based upon their patterns of connections. We found that only 9 of the 37 jihadist starting nodes did not share a structurally similar cluster with at least one other starting node in our initial sample of channels. 13 of the 17 clusters in the jihadist-inspired network of more than 9,000 nodes were “fed” by one of the 37 starting nodes. This means that the majority of the *Al-Qaeda*-inspired channels could be replaced by at least one other node in the network. In contrast, the *Tea Party* starting nodes did not have a single cluster of structurally similar node configurations.

A real-life test of our thesis that the architecture of the jihadist *YouTube* network is designed to resist occurred in mid-September 2011 when hackers took down one of the channels (*westlondondawah*) run by the *al-Muhajiroun* media production outfit, SalafiMedia. (The channels were included in this study as part of the second-wave data collection.) The content was immediately uploaded on a previous idle *YouTube* channel (*salafimediaHD*). Over ten hours, 34 videos were re-uploaded to the reserve channel. In quick time, the entire archive from the hacked channel was transferred. In less than a month thousands of hours of videos were uploaded; two-thirds of the content transferred during the first ten days after the *westlondondawah* channel was hacked.[31]

Conclusion

Our findings are consistent with the hypothesis that *al-Muhajiroun* is the single organizing entity behind a network of related *YouTube* media channels. Redundancy is one of the critical features of the network and indicative of a coordinated effort to build an online proselytizing network resistant to disruption. The reliance on US-based hosting companies adds a legal barrier to British counter-terrorism efforts against the group.

Initial enthusiasm for using social network analysis (SNA) to detect patterns of clandestine coordination between *Al-Qaeda*-inspired groups gave way in recent years to disappointment for a number of reasons.[32] Open source information with sufficient detail about relationships in large-scale networks is rarely available. When information is available, statistical testing may not be possible for lack of random sampling or an appropriate control sample. In consequence, studies using social network analysis are either highly theoretical or use the methodology for heuristic purposes.

Our study illustrates the utility of network analysis as a diagnostic tool when dealing with proselytizing for terrorism on social media platforms. SNA can be used to map communication structures and provide an intuitive understanding of different types of communication network. Quantitative analysis can be used to back up analysis. The SNA metrics also proved efficient in our study for the purpose of differentiating between *al-Muhajiroun*-related channels and seemingly similar jihadist propaganda channels, which nonetheless proved to be stand-alone platforms with a partly overlapping audience. Among the downsides are that data collection can be time-consuming. The Boolean logic of network analysis is demanding of the software. It proved impossible, for example, to analyze “friends” who ideally should have been included to obtain a full picture of the communication structures of the networks studied.

The study highlights the dilemmas faced by enforcement agencies hoping to stem the tide of terrorist propaganda online. The massive number of sites threatens to overload investigators. Removing illegal or offensive material can be like hacking kudzu weeds. A video with a sermon by Anwar al-Awlaki, “The Dust Will Never Settle”, is still easily found by surfing the channels included in this study despite having been a target for removal by the British and U.S. governments and *YouTube* administrators. On the other hand, the public platforms offer advantages. Users often assume that social media platforms enable them to obscure their identity and circumvent restrictions on permissible speech but this is only partially true. Material posted on social media sites is not private and not subject to privacy protections, and therefore the identity of the author (or authors) public information. Moreover, while postings by Britons and other foreigners on US-owned sites are protected under US law, the speakers are subject to sanctions in their country of residence. Jurisdiction-shopping will in such cases protect the speech but not the speaker.

Postscript November 2011

British Home Secretary Theresa May ordered a ban on *Muslims Against Crusades* (or MAC), starting midnight November 11, 2011. The primary website, www.muslimsagainstcrusades.com, is no longer available. A *Twitter* account by the same name was also taken offline. At the time of this writing, aliases of the now banned incarnation of *al-Muhajiroun* nonetheless continue to operate on *YouTube*, including *MuslimsAgstCrusaders* and *MuslimsvsCrusades*. The Home Office ban was a response to the group’s announcement of demonstrations in connection with Armistice Day celebrations in London but provided nonetheless a real-life test of our conclusions regarding the resilience of the social media propaganda networks against disruption. Barely three weeks after the ban, Anjem Choudary began redirecting followers to a new website and an

interlinked network of *YouTube* channels using variants of *OneUmmah* and *UnitedUmmah*. In the meantime, MAC's foreign affiliates filled the gap left by the banned sites.

In separate developments, on November 20, 2011, an indictment was filed in Manhattan criminal court against Jose Pimentel, who is accused of producing pipe bombs and seeking to blow up targets in New York City. Pimentel maintained a website named *trueislam1.com* and a *YouTube* channel under the name of *mujahidfisibillillah1*. When Pimentel's online aliases were made public we identified him as a subscriber to nine of the starting nodes in the *al-Muhajiroun*-related data set used in this study; *Sharia4Nebraska*, *ShariaTube*, *Shariah4Earth*, *SheikhOmarBakri*, *Shariah4Bangladesh*, *ShariahMedia*, *Shariah4Pakistan*, *IslamicThinkers* and *GlobalShariah*. In addition, Pimentel was "friends" with five of the starting nodes in the study; *SheikhOmarBakri*, *Shariah4Nebraska*, *Shariah4Earth*, *ShariahMedia*, and *Shariah4Pakistan*. His channel showed up a whopping 1,030 times in the snowball analysis.

The growth of cyber jihadism does not mean that the risk of attacks has similarly increased. The types of actions and the sources of recruitment to terrorist actions may change but it is too early to say with certainty. Only two conclusions can safely be made; first, Internet-based technologies have become an important activity for the contemporary Western-based *Al-Qaeda*-inspired movement and, second, would-be terrorists who are active on the Internet stand a good chance of getting arrested or have their plans disrupted.

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Notes:

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- [6] The Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006 amended the Public Order Act of 1986 by adding Part 3A, which prohibits "a person who uses threatening words or behavior, or displays any written material which is threatening, is guilty of an offence if he intends thereby to stir up religious hatred." A year and a half later, the Serious Crime Act of 2007 legislation passed, replacing the British common law crime of incitement with a statutory offense of encouraging or assisting crime.
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- [31] The new channel carries a message to hackers: "THIS IS AN ARCHIVE WEBSITE - SHOULD SALAFIMEDIA.COM GO DOWN YOU MAY DOWNLOAD ALL OUR MATERIAL FROM HERE- THE TRUTH WILL NEVER DIE AND WE WILL DEPEND ON ALLAH ALONE TO CARRY THESE WORDS SHOULD THEY EVER TRY TO SILENCE US."
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