Al Qaeda Has Sent You A Friend Request:
Terrorists Using Online Social Networking

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Introduction

“My dear brothers in Jihad,” wrote a surfer who identified himself as Abu Jendal, “I have a kilo of Acetone Peroxide. I want to know how to make a bomb from it in order to blow up an army jeep; I await your quick response.” About an hour later the answer came: “My dear brother Abu Jendal”, answered a Hamas supporter who called himself Abu Hadafa, “I understand that you have 1,000 grams of Om El Abad. Well done! There are several ways to change it into a bomb.” (“Om El Abad”, the mother of Abad, is the Hamas nickname for the improvised explosive TATP-Tri Acetone Tripe Oxide). Abu Hadafa goes on to explain in detail how to change the homemade explosive into a deadly roadside bomb, and even attaches a file that teaches how to make detonators for the bomb.1 Abu Jendal and Abu Hadafa are two anonymous Palestinians who, it seems, never met one another. The exchange was not encoded or concealed, but was published completely openly on the Internet site of the Izz al din al Kassam Brigades, the military faction of the Hamas.

This form of online exchange of guidance, advice and instructions has become very frequent in various terrorist chatrooms and online forums. Post-modern terrorists are taking advantage of the fruits of globalization and modern technology - especially the most advanced online communication technologies – to plan, coordinate and execute their deadly campaigns. No longer geographically constrained within a particular territory, or politically or financially dependent on a particular state, they rely on advanced forms of communication - including the Internet. The Internet has long been a favorite tool for terrorists.2 Decentralized and providing almost perfect anonymity, it cannot be subjected to controls or restrictions, and anyone can access it. The Internet has enabled terrorist organizations to research and coordinate attacks, to expand the reach of their propaganda to a global audience, to recruit adherents, to communicate with international supporters and ethnic Diasporas, to solicit donations, and to foster public awareness and sympathy for their causes. The Internet also allows terrorists to convey their messages to international and distant audiences with whom it would otherwise be difficult to communicate. The Internet provides a means for terrorist groups to feed the mass media with information and videos that explain their
mission and vision. Thereby, the group’s message can reach a greater audience and more easily influence the public agenda.\(^3\)

In addition to launching their own websites, terrorists can harness the interactive capabilities of chatrooms, instant messenger, blogs, video sharing-websites, and self-determined online communities and social networks: “Today, 90% of terrorist activity on the Internet takes place using social networking tools, be it independent bulletin boards, Paltalk, or Yahoo! eGroups. These forums act as a virtual firewall to help safeguard the identities of those who participate, and they offer subscribers a chance to make direct contact with terrorist representatives, to ask questions, and even to contribute and help out the cyberjihad.”\(^4\)

By now, all active terrorist groups have established at least one form of presence on the Internet and most of them are using all formats of up-to-date online platforms - e-mail, chatrooms, e-groups, forums, virtual message boards, and resources like You-Tube, Facebook, Twitter, and Google Earth. This report examines the use of interactive online communication by terrorists and their supporters – from chatrooms to Twitter Facebook.

**Terrorist chatrooms**

Chat rooms and electronic forums enable terrorist groups to communicate with members and supporters all over the world, to recruit new followers and to share information at little risk of identification by authorities. The free chatroom service PalTalk, which includes voice and video capabilities, has become particularly popular with terrorist cells. In one PalTalk chat room, British Islamic militants were found to have set up support forums for the killed leader of the insurgents in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In one chatroom, Arabic-speaking users are sharing personal experiences of fighting Arab-Afghans. In another, relatives of Iraqi insurgents were praising the “martyrdom” of the terrorists.\(^5\) On the alneda.com forum, al-Qaeda members posted comments praising Osama Bin Laden, such as “Oh Allah! support your fighting slave Osama bin Laden.” Other message boards included threats against global security and reference to the 2005 London bombings. The website and forum were hacked into and
closed down. But that did not stop al-Qaeda members. They simply started a new forum.

In addition to being used to generate support, chatrooms are used to share tactical information. Jihadist message boards and chatrooms have been known to have “experts” directly answer questions about how to mix poisons for chemical attacks, how to ambush soldiers, how to carry out suicide attacks and how to hack into computer systems. One chatroom on the PalTalk index, with a name that is slightly altered each time but still identifiable, has been routinely advertised on Jihadi web forums and has been used on a daily basis to post the links for al-Qaeda propaganda videos and terrorist instruction manuals. The forums Qalah, Al-Shamikh, Majahden, and Al-Faloja are especially popular among terrorist cells and new recruits are encouraged to refer to the sites to read the jihadist literature. These chatrooms also aim to convince prospective members to join or to stage personal suicide attacks.

According to SITE’s special report on Western Jihadist Forums, during 2009 several notable technical changes occurred in many of the jihadist forums. Thus, for example, the long offline, prominent English-language jihadist forum, al-Firdaws English, returned on May 24, 2009. The newly resurrected al-Firdaws English forum is open to the public, rather than password-protected. Permitting non-members to view discussion and content on the forum is a significant departure for al-Firdaws style, as previous iterations of the forum have been both completely-password-protected and not open to new membership. The forum administration’s decision to open the forum to public observation suggests that they may envision the forum containing less sensitive information in the future. Despite allowing forum visitors to access threads and read content, al-Firdaws English remains closed to new and prospective members.

The case of Younes Tsouli is especially demonstrative of the resourceful uses of the internet by Internet-savvy terrorists. As one journalist put it, Tsouli, more commonly known by his internet pseudonym Irhabi 007, “illustrated perfectly how terrorists are using the internet not just to spread propaganda, but to organize attacks.” Between 2003 and the time of his arrest in December, 2007, Irhabi 007 engaged in several instrumental activities on the internet. In 2003 he began joining
various terrorist internet forums, where he uploaded and published pictures, videos, and instruction manuals on computer hacking. Shortly thereafter his skills were sought out by al-Qaeda leaders who wanted him to provide logistical support for their online operations, and in 2005 Tsouli became the administrator of the extremist internet forum al-Ansar, where he began publishing bomb making instruction manuals and details related to suicide bombing operations. He helped Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda faction in Iraq and became a central figure in enabling Zarqwi to reestablish the links between al-Qaeda affiliated groups after the fall of the Taliban. *Irhabi 007* eventually hacked his way into an unprotected file directory on an Arkansas state government website. He then posted propaganda and beheading videos. Cyber-tracking Intelligence immediately noticed *Irhabi 007*’s perfect English and questioned the cybercriminal’s nationality. Younis Tsouli was caught in 2006. On his home computer British investigators found photos of locations in Washington D.C. that had been emailed to him by colleagues which suggested that he was helping to organize a terrorist attack on Capitol Hill. Of course, after Tsouli was caught, other cyberterrorists learned from his mistake.

**When terrorists "tweet"**

An intelligence report released in October of 2008 by the Army’s 304th Military Intelligence Battalion included a chapter entitled the "Potential for Terrorist Use of Twitter," which expressed the Army’s concern over the use of the blogging services. The report says that Twitter could become an effective coordination tool for terrorists trying to launch militant attacks. The Army report includes references to several pro-Hezbollah Tweets.

The report also highlights three possible scenarios of terrorist usage of this online format. The first scenario is that terrorists can send and receive near real-time updates on the logistics of troops’ movements in order to conduct more successful ambushes. The second is that one operative with an explosive device or suicide belt uses his mobile phone to send images of his or her location to a second operative who can use the near actual-time imagery to time the precise moment to detonate the explosive device. The third is that a cyberterrorist operative finds a soldier’s account
and is then able to hack into his account and communicate with other soldiers under the stolen identity. Although the last two options seem a bit far-fetched and difficult for terrorists to carry out successfully, the first option is a very viable threat. The instantaneous update capabilities could help the terrorists organize more precise and detrimental ambushes.

According to the SITE report, despite the utility of Twitter forum, members continued to be wary of networking sites such as Facebook. In response to a forum members’ suggestion to become friends on Facebook, Ansar al-Mujahideen posters envisioned such a network of friends as a danger to Western jihadists. In a thread begun on May 4, 2009, Ansar al-Mujahideen members attempted to dissuade a member (called “islamic jihad union”) from connecting with other jihad supporters on Facebook. Soon, other Ansar al-Mujahideen participants were warning against utilizing Facebook. Several forum members opined that the risks of having their real identity tied to their online personas outweighed the potential gains from networking with other jihad supporters.

Social networking

Popular social networking websites are another means of attracting potential members and followers. These types of virtual communities are growing increasingly popular all over the world, especially among younger demographics. Youths are especially targeted for propaganda, incitement and recruitment purposes by jihadist terrorist groups. Predominately-Western online communities like Facebook, MySpace and Second Life and their Arabic equivalents are being used more and more by terrorist groups and their sympathizers. Counter-terrorism expert Anthony Bergin says that terrorists use these youth-dominated websites as recruitment tools, “in the same way a pedophile might look at those sites to potentially groom would-be victims”.

Social networking websites allow terrorists to disseminate propaganda to an impressionable age bracket that might empathize with their cause and possibly agree to join. Many users join interest groups that may help terrorists target users whom they might be able to manipulate. Many social network users accept people as friends whether or not they know them, thereby giving perfect strangers access to personal
information and photos. Some people even communicate with the strangers and establish virtual friendships. Terrorists apply the narrowcasting strategy to social networking sites as well. The name, accompanying default image, and information on a group message board are all tailored to fit the profile of a particular social group. The groups also provide terrorists with a list of predisposed recruits or sympathizers. In the same way that marketing groups can view a member’s information to decide which products to target to your webpage, terrorist groups can view people’s profiles to decide whom they are going to target and how they should configure the message.

Yet, terrorists are well aware of the risks involved. A member of a Jihadi forum in English issued a warning, reminding readers that a Facebook network would allow security agencies to trace entire groups of jihadists, arguing:

Don’t make a network in Facebook...Then Kuffar will know every friend you have or had in the past. They will know location, how you look, what you like, they will know everything! Join Facebook if you want and use it to keep in touch with friends and brothers far away but not as a network.  

As a strategy to distribute jihadist propaganda to a wide range of Muslims and overcome counter measures, a jihadist posting suggests that administrators of jihadist forums and media organizations create e-mailing groups. This suggestion was posted on the al-Fallujah jihadist forum on March 16, 2009. The mailing group is patterned after the Ansar Mailing Group, an inactive jihadist media distributor that dispatched news of the mujahideen to users via e-mail. He suggests that other jihadists, too, create such groups to reach the largest possible number of users, and that they should remove any obstacle in the registration process that hinders distribution. To this end, the jihadist, in a later posting, provides instructions for creating groups on Google. Another forum participant, pleased with the suggestion, instructs how to create a user account on Yahoo, and adds that groups may be created on that service.

You have a friend request: Facebook

Membership within the international Facebook community has boomed in recent years. Facebook is currently the world’s most popular social networking website with an estimated 222 million users worldwide, which includes a 66% membership
increase within the Middle East and a 23% increase in Asia.\textsuperscript{13} Terrorists have taken note of the trend and have set up profiles as well. There are numerous Facebook groups declaring support for paramilitary and nationalist groups that the U.S. government has designated as terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Turkish Revolutionary People’s Liberation Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The majority of these groups have open pages and anyone interested can read the information, look at the discussion boards, clink on links to propaganda videos and join the group.

Deputy Director for Intelligence at the National Counterterrorism Center Andrew Liepman recently reported to Congress that the Federal Bureau of Investigations is tracking a few Somali-Americans from the Minneapolis area who were reportedly recruited for the purpose of starting a U.S. terrorist cell of the Al-Shabaab faction through Facebook.\textsuperscript{14} The FBI is keeping a close eye on one Facebook user who posted a photo of a man wearing a black mask over his face and is holding what appears to be the Koran in one hand and a grenade launcher in the other. Although some might argue that aforementioned posting is probably in violation of Facebook's terms of use, which bans posting "threatening," "harasing," or "hateful" messages, the FBI is finding it difficult to regulate terrorist activity on the Internet because of First Amendment right issues. It is also nearly impossible to track down individuals involved in these sorts of instances because of the international nature of the websites. Social networking websites do not always have very identifiable information about users; all that is needed to register for the websites in an email address and users often set up their accounts under false names and details.

Terrorists can use these social networking sites to monitor military personnel. In 2008, the Canadian Defense Department and the British Secret Service M15 requested troops to remove personal details from social networking sites because of alleged monitoring by al-Qaeda operatives. U.S. personnel are also warned about posting certain details or photos on their profile pages. Even if the information does not give details about the logistics of troop movements, it could potentially endanger the friends and relatives of the military and security personnel. Many soldiers unwittingly post detailed information about themselves, their careers, family members, date of birth, present locations and photos of colleagues and weaponry.
Canadian troops have been asked to exclude any information from their profiles that might even link them with the military. A report from the Lebanese capital of Beirut later that year stated that Hezbollah had been monitoring Facebook to find potentially sensitive information about Israeli military movements and intelligence that could be harmful to the national security of Israel. The report quoted an Israeli intelligence official saying that "Facebook is a major resource for terrorists, seeking to gather information on soldiers and IDF [Israel Defense Forces] units and the fear is soldiers might even unknowingly arrange to meet an Internet companion who in reality is a terrorist."\textsuperscript{15}

A group for supporters of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and al-Qaeda is also using Facebook.\textsuperscript{16} Members of al-Ekhlâas, a password-protected al-Qaeda-affiliated forum, were notified about it in a posting dated August 21, 2008. It briefly describes the pictures found in this Facebook group, which include shots of Usama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and ISI mujahedeen. One of the members commented on the utility of such a group: “these sites can be exploited to post our ideas and what we owe Allah to those who do not carry our ideology.”

\textbf{YouTube and they tube}

The uploading, downloading and viewing video tapes and segments has become very popular. YouTube was established in February 2005 as an online repository facilitating the sharing of video content. YouTube claims to be the “the world’s most popular online video community.” A 2007 report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, which put the percentage of US online video viewers using YouTube at 27%, ahead of all other video sharing sites. In the 18 to 29 year old age groups, this leadership is even more pronounced with 49% of US online video viewers using YouTube. In fact, \textit{CNNMoney} reported that in January 2008 alone, nearly 79 million users worldwide viewed more than three billion YouTube videos.

Terrorist groups realized the potential of this easily accessed platform for the dissemination of their propaganda and radicalization videos. Terrorists themselves praised the usefulness of this new online apparatus: “A lot of the funding that the
brothers are getting is coming because of the videos. Imagine how many have gone after seeing the videos. Imagine how many have become shahid [martyrs],” convicted terrorist Younis Tsouli (so-called “Ithabi007”) testified. In 2008 Jihadists suggested a “YouTube Invasion” To support jihadist media and the administrators of al-Fajr-affiliated forums. This suggestion, was posted on al-Faloja, a password-protected jihadist forum, on November 25, 2008. The posting provides a synopsis of the YouTube site and its founding, and notes its use by US President-elect Barack Obama during his presidential campaign, and by others. YouTube is argued to be an alternative to television and a medium that allows for jihadists to reach massive, global audiences. The message even instructs how jihadists should cut mujahedeen videos into ten-minute chunks, as per YouTube’s requirements, and upload them sequentially to the site. "I ask you, by Allah, as soon as you read this subject, to start recording on YouTube, and to start cutting and uploading and posting clips on the jihadist, Islamic, and general forums," said the posting on the jihadist website. "Shame the Crusaders by publishing videos showing their losses, which they hid for a long time."

Hezbollah, Hamas, the LTTE and the Shinning Path of Peru all have propaganda videos on YouTube. One LTTE YouTube user has posted over 100 videos in 2009 alone. In 2008, Hamas allegedly launched its own video-sharing website, although the group denied ownership of the site. AqsaTube, in addition to choosing a similar name, was designed to look just like YouTube and even copied its logo. Once certain Internet providers refused to host the website, Hamas launched a PaluTube and TubeZik. The Tamil Tigers have also launched TamilTube. These videos are not just aimed at Middle Eastern Muslim youths. More recent videos posted on these video-sharing websites are dubbed in English or have English subtitles.

A recent study conducted by Conway and McInerney analyzed the online supporters of jihad-promoting video content on YouTube, focusing on those posting and commenting upon martyr-promoting material from Iraq. The findings suggest that a majority are under 35 years of age and resident outside the region of the Middle East and North Africa with the largest percentage of supporters located in the United States. As the researchers concluded: “What is clearly evident however is that jihadist
content is spreading far beyond traditional jihadist websites or even dedicated forums to embrace, in particular, video sharing and social networking – both hallmarks of Web 2.0 -- and thus extending their reach far beyond what may be conceived as their core support base in the Middle East and North Africa region to Diaspora populations, converts, and political sympathizers”.

**Conclusion**

Much of the original online terrorist content used to be one-directional, text-based, either in the form of traditional websites with a heavy reliance on text and messages posted on forums. However, technological advances, particularly the increased availability of sophisticated, but cheap and easy to use video capturing hardware (e.g. hand-held digital video cameras, mobile telephones, etc.) and interactive online networking platforms (e.g., Facebook) changed terrorist online communications. The global community created by social networks and interactive forums on the Internet is advancing cultural awareness and reconciliation efforts, but it is also advancing terrorists’ goal to share its extremist messages to global audiences. By using these online communities to its advantage, not only can terrorists promote global paranoia, share their messages with sympathizers and obtain donations, they can also create more terrorists. The Internet has provided terrorists with a whole new virtual realm to conduct their sinister back-ally transactions. Terrorist groups are no longer confined to specific regional boundaries. Now terrorist networks can recruit and members located in any part of the globe.22 A person in the United States can literally take a terrorist training course within the privacy of their bedroom.

The interactive capabilities of the Internet, like chatrooms, social networking sites, video-sharing sites and online communities, allow terrorists to assume an offensive position. Instead of waiting for web-surfers to come across their websites and propaganda materials, terrorists can now lure targeted individuals to the sites. The best way to persuade individuals to support your cause is to create an emotional, psychological or intellectual bond with the victim. The perspective adherent should feel that he in part of a community. Paradoxically, the most innovative network of communication developed by the West with its numerous online networking
platforms – now serves the interests of the greatest foe of the West, namely international terrorism.

Endnotes

1 This exchange was reported by Amit Cohen, “Hamas Dot Com”, in Maariv Online, 07.02.03.


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