

“An Analytical System Using Internet for Understanding the Terrorism”

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Abstract – This brief outlines how the internet is being used by terrorists to more effectively recruit and fund and plan their activities. The brief outlines key concepts, current modes of activity and emerging issues. An annotated bibliography is included as an appendix.

The risk of terrorism is of great concern to many countries and significant resources are spent to counter this threat. A better understanding of the motivation of terrorists and their reasons for selecting certain modes and targets of attack can help improve the decisions to allocate resources in the fight against terrorism.

The fundamental question addressed in this paper is: “What do terrorists want?” We take the view that terrorists preferences for actions are based on their values and beliefs. An important missing piece in our knowledge of terrorists’ preferences is an understanding of their values. This paper uses a novel approach to determine these values and state them as objectives, using principles from decision analysis and value-focused thinking.

Instead of interviewing decision makers and stakeholders, as would be normal in decision analysis, we extract the values of terrorists by examining their own writings and verbal statements. To illustrate the approach, we extract the values of Al- Qaeda and structure them in terms of strategic, fundamental, and means objectives. These objectives are interrelated through a means-ends network. This information is useful for understanding terrorists’ motivations, intent, and likely actions, as well as for developing policies to counter terrorism at its root causes.

INTRODUCTION

On 1 May 2010, Faisal Shahzad, a naturalized U.S. citizen, tried to detonate a car bomb in the heart of New York’s Times Square. Thanks to the vigilance of local witnesses and to technical shortcomings, the bomb was detected and failed to explode. The investigation surrounding Shahzad’s case, like other, more recent cases, shows that the Internet played an important role in his violent radicalization and the planning and execution of the attempted attack. For example, he drew spiritual inspiration from lectures and videos circulated online by Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S.-Yemeni cleric, who helped to convince Shahzad to take up the cause of al-Qaida. Shahzad accessed Web sites for operational and planning purposes. He viewed “real-time video feeds of different areas of Times Square” to help determine which areas attract a large crowd and would result in a high casualty rate if attacked. Shahzad also used the Internet to discuss his plans with militants based in Pakistan.

Terrorist operatives such as Shahzad often draw inspiration, reinforcement, support, and guidance from a variety of on- and off-line sources. Some clerics; experts; scholars, such as al-Awlaki; and virtual communities use the Internet to promote violent extremism on their blogs, social network pages, discussion forums, or through the streaming of videos on multimedia platforms such as YouTube. This brief provides an overview of challenges posed to stakeholders by the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes. It argues that the Internet is not the problem and that the online platform can be employed to counter terrorism efforts.

Specifically, models of violent radicalization processes off-line offer an important and useful framework for the development and implementation of policies to counter online use of the Internet for terrorist purposes. The brief concludes by offering multilateral institutions, states, civil society organizations, the media, and the private sector examples of how they can use the Internet more effectively as a counterterrorism tool to prevent and counter the use

of the Internet for violent radicalization. Four intervention points are suggested: (1) weaken cult personalities, (2) challenge the extremist doctrine, (3) dispel the glory of the “terrorist lifestyle,” and (4) offer a street-smart and locally developed and communicated counter narrative.

METHODOLOGY FOR IDENTIFYING AND STRUCTURING TERRORIST OBJECTIVES

Objectives specify what one hopes to achieve, and hence reflect the values and preferences that guide decisions. Objectives are usually expressed as preferred directions of achievement or desired end states. For example, an expressed objective of the United Nations is to reduce poverty in the world (desired direction: less poverty). One of the World Health Organization’s objectives is to eradicate AIDS (desired end-state: No more AIDS cases in the world). A terrorist group’s objective may be to kill Westerners (preferred direction: larger number of deaths) or to destroy the US economy (preferred end state: crippled economy).

Objectives can be grouped into three categories: Strategic, fundamental, and means objectives. Strategic objectives provide guidance for all decisions. They serve as the mechanism by which leaders can guide decisions made by different individuals and groups within an organization. As Keeney states: “If strategic objectives are not carefully defined and communicated, the guidance is minimal and some separate decisions simply won’t make sense in the larger context of the organization’s affairs.” Fundamental objectives provide guidance for specific decisions that are usually carried out over the medium to long-term. If fundamental objectives are routinely accomplished, this will lead to the eventual achievement of the strategic objectives. Means objectives are the short term, day-to-day actions, which promote the achievement of fundamental and strategic objectives. Some means objectives pertain directly to strategic objectives, but most are a direct means to achieve fundamental objectives.

Decision analysts usually elicit objectives in interviews with decision makers and stakeholders. Keeney describes the interview process and the types of questions that decision analysts ask in order to elicit objectives. This process is, of course, not possible without access to terrorist leaders, who are willing to express their objectives honestly. However, there exists a large body of writings by terrorists and their spiritual leaders that can be used as source material for developing a set of objectives for terrorists. These are good sources of information because the statements have likely been reviewed and refined to best describe the terrorist’s core feelings and reasons for action. The theologians and strategists of extremist groups are

often educated at a much higher level than the rank and file members of the organization and one can assume that their statements have been given a significant amount of thought. We also reviewed web sites and transcripts of publicly available audiotapes.

Terrorism and the Internet: Building Support Before moving on to describe specifically the operation of terrorist groups in these activities, it is important to first note why the internet has become the medium through which terrorism carries on into the 21st century. Essentially, the roots of the modern internet are found in the desire of US Department of Defense (DOD) to reduce the vulnerabilities of its communication infrastructure to a Soviet nuclear attack. By designing and creating an interconnected web of computer networks, DOD achieved two important goals for the maintenance and perpetuation of its security and defense communications infrastructure: decentralization and redundancy. Ironically, these two features now play an important strategic role in the re-organization, maintenance and perpetuation of the proclaimed ‘greatest foe’ of Western security services in the 21st century: international terror.

Having been denied, for the most part, geographical space in which to operate effectively, terrorist groups and networks have undergone a reorganization of sorts in cyber-space, using the aforementioned virtues that the internet provides to de-centralize their operations, all the while allowing for the information revolution to supply a redundancy in the system that ensures its survival and perpetuation.

The modern terrorist network, particularly in its ‘global jihad movement’ incarnation, is no longer hierarchical. A more accurate portrayal is a loose association of nodes and hubs, at some point in time directly connected into the network, and at other times operating independently. Hence, there is no option of decapitating the administrative head of the network as it no longer exists, increasing the ability of the organization to persist.

Moreover, while several nodes and hubs may be taken out at times, the organization continues to operate, and because of the built-in redundancy in the system, the activities of any given node or hub can be relocated and replaced in time, allowing for a regenerative quality to the organization that it did not possess prior. Accordingly, an understanding of the relationship between terrorist groups and the internet must recognize the centrality of the communications and technological revolution. As non-state actors, denied or lacking a physical territory from which to operate, today’s terrorist groups seek to carve out a virtual territory (or virtual sanctuary) from which they can base,

plan, coordinate, and carry out their agenda. The reconstitution of the internet as a type of central nervous system for organizations such as Al Qaeda is critical to their viability as an organization and as a movement.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

We identified five strategic objectives of Al-Qaeda that are listed in Table. Each strategic objective is discussed here with the main sources that helped us identify and formulate this objective.

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| 1) Inspire and incite Islamic movements and the Muslim masses of the world to attack the enemies of Islam. |
| 2) Expel Western Powers from the Middle East. |
| 3) Destroy Israel |
| 4) Establish Islamic religious authority in the Middle East (Caliphate). |
| 5) Extend Islamic authority and religion into new areas of the world |

Table : Strategic Objectives of Al-Qaeda

1) *Inspire and incite Islamic movements and the Muslim masses of the world to attack the enemies of Islam.* Osama Bin Laden believes that America's actions during the Persian Gulf War were an informal declaration of war on Islam for the following reasons:

- The occupation of the Arabian Peninsula: specifically, using it as a launch pad for other operations within the Middle East.
- The Americans intended to kill countless Iraqis and humiliate them. (This includes deaths that Bin Laden attributes to the blockade, including an increased infant mortality rate, which supposedly killed close to a million Iraqis.)
- The Americans desire to help the Jews while intentionally hurting the Muslim world and contributing to violence in the Levant.

2) *Expel Western Powers from the Middle East.*

Al-Qaeda believes that they will not be free to rule over the Middle East with impunity until it is free from all interference from western powers.

"Killing the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can carry it out in any country where it proves possible, in order to liberate Al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy sanctuary [Mecca] from their grip, and to the point that their armies leave all

Muslim territory, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim."

CAPITALIZING ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERNET FOR COUNTERTERRORISM PURPOSES

In September 2007, a senior member of al-Qaida presented a specific set of guidelines and strategic advice on how to exploit the weaknesses of al-Qaida to diminish its operational capabilities and ideological appeal and attraction.³² In his video message, Abu Yahya al-Libi explicitly challenged the U.S. and other governments interested in countering the appeal of al-Qaida to "degrade the resonance of the jihadist message" and to turn the jihadist movement's own weaknesses against itself. Among other ideas, he specifically emphasized that no single government is able to implement a strategy to defeat the movement on its own and that exjihadists should be used, particularly in the Western media, to expose the weakness of al-Qaida's ideology and message of "anti-Muslim oppression and global jihad." He advises his audience to amplify the voices of victims of terrorist activities, to emphasize the harming of "the innocent." He particularly emphasizes this strategy as a way to resonate with religious communities worldwide and therefore delegitimize the use of violence. Despite al-Libi's al-Qaida membership and affiliation, his strategic advice essentially aligns with what multiple stakeholders have been trying to implement and achieve in past years. The Internet can be used to implement some of these ideas effectively.

CONCLUSION

Recently a dispatch from the Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada described the activities of an internet forum member, who goes by the name 'Ayaf' and is a prolific contributor to the Islamic Renewal Organization (IRO) website. In an October 3, 2005 statement on the website, 'Ayaf' announced that he had direct contact with an Al Qaeda affiliated person and was instructed to convey orders to the Al Qaeda division in the US, led by Abu-Azzam al-Amriki, to destroy a nuclear reactor.

Violent extremists are advocating on and offline for the use of violence as a legitimate tool of struggle. This trend is on the rise. Of particular concern is the prevalence of these types of messages on the Internet in multiple languages. Stakeholders around the globe are concerned that these multilingual materials are contributing to the sympathizer and activist base of al-Qaida and its affiliates, perhaps even having a direct impact on the rise in individual lone wolves and homegrown terrorism around the globe. Also, multimedia materials, visual illustrations, and texts

glorifying the use of violence as a legitimate tactic of “struggle” are increasing in availability and quality and contributing to the establishment of the underdog status for which terrorist organizations aim. Of particular concern is a “slowly growing number of internet sites publishing documents on strategic thought, specifically war-fighting strategies,” which can offer valuable insight to practitioners or pose a significant threat if ignored or underestimated.

The five strategic objectives we identified define the ultimate vision of Al-Qaeda in a natural sequence from gaining a foothold in form of a Caliphate in one nation to destroying Israel and expelling the infidels from the Middle East to expanding the influence of Islam throughout the world. It is important to understand these ultimate strategic objectives. They are likely to be much more stable than the fundamental or means objectives that we identified. Broad and long-term policies to counter Al-Qaeda should be built with recognition of these strategic objectives.

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