

## The Internet: A virtual training camp?

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## Introduction

In this short presentation I will talk about how the al-Qaida network makes use of the Internet for training and instruction. For the purpose of this study, I have used a broad definition of al-Qaida, including both the 'traditional' al-Qaida as well as loosely affiliated groups and individuals who share Osama bin Laden's ideology of a global jihad. When I use the term 'established jihadi groups' I refer to regionally based groups with a clear affiliation to al-Qaida, such as Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia), al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (Algeria), and others, but not nationalist-separatist groups such as Hizbollah or Chechen mujahedin. This study has only considered Arabic-language training material produced by jihadists themselves, and has therefore not covered al-Qaida's general use of the Internet in finding open-source information.

I will make three main points during this presentation:

1. The Internet is used as a 'library' of training material, and, to a lesser extent, as a 'classroom' where trainers and trainees interact.
2. Jihadi discussion forums are used to transfer basic knowledge, not to proliferate new technologies.
3. As of today, the al-Qaida network and its affiliates are not making an organized effort to train potential recruits online. Virtual training is, largely, initiated from below rather than organized from above.

### **The Internet is used as a 'library' and a 'classroom'**

The Internet has at least two functions with regards to jihadi training and the transfer of knowledge. The main function of the Internet is as a 'library' where training manuals and handbooks can be easily accessed from anywhere in the world. To a lesser extent, the Internet also functions as a 'classroom', or an interactive environment, where people can discuss training-related issues, exchange personal experiences and communicate with online 'trainers' who can explain and clarify problematic subjects.

#### *The Library*

There is an abundance of written and audio-visual training material on jihadi web pages, covering almost any topic considered relevant for training and preparation. Some of the most common topics are: conventional weapons, improvised weapons and explosives, field tactics, guerrilla warfare, organisational and field security, and physical training. The sources of the manuals vary; some of them are based upon English open-source literature such as US Army Field Manuals or various 'explosives cookbooks,' while others appear to be written by experienced jihadists, field commanders or trainers, or are based on notes from jihadist training camps in Afghanistan or elsewhere.

Written training manuals are often issued in larger collections called 'encyclopaedias' (*mawsu'at*), the most prominent of which is the voluminous Encyclopaedia of Preparation. It was regularly revised and updated until late 2004, and the 4<sup>th</sup> and newest edition contained around 300 Arabic-language documents and manuals of various lengths, adding up to some 10,000 pages. In addition to the written training material, some 30-40 instructional videos have also been circulated on jihadi web pages. 20 of these are of considerably better quality than the others, and stand out because of their slick format and detailed step-by-step instructions on how to make various home-made

explosives and weapons. However, these videos are not originally produced by al-Qaida; most of them are in fact produced by the Lebanese Hizbollah.

The mere existence of military instruction manuals or paramilitary handbooks on the Internet is not a new phenomenon, nor a very significant one. Yet, it is not until this training material is being organized in some way that we can start talking about a ‘virtual training camp’. Such an attempt was made by a media organization supportive of al-Qaida, the Global Islamic Media, in early 2003.<sup>1</sup> Over a certain period, it issued a series of 19 training lessons entitled ‘The Series for Preparation to Jihad’ (*silsilat al-i‘dad lil-jihad*). The series provided lessons on both religious and ideological subjects as well as practical military skills. The course had a natural progression, in that it started with the very basics (‘why fight jihad’, lessons on security and physical training, etc.) and moved towards more advanced subjects (weapons, explosives making). The series did not only become popular online, but was also reportedly downloaded by operational jihadi cells. Most notably, the series was among the documents found on a computer belonging to the so-called Madrid cell, which was responsible for the train bombings in Spain in March 2004.

Such initiatives are the exception rather than the rule. Although Internet jihadis have made attempts to compile and organize the training material, the ‘information overflow’ on jihadi web pages generally makes it hard to distinguish good-quality training material from the rest.

### *The Classroom*

To some extent, the Internet also functions as a classroom for jihadi training. Some of the jihadi discussion forums have specific sub-forums dedicated to ‘training and preparation’, where forum members can post questions on a specific topic and receive answers from other, more experienced members. However, due to the security risks associated with participating in such discussions and sharing potentially lethal information, in most cases, the ‘virtual trainers’ do not appear to be experienced jihadis, but rather amateurs with limited field or technical experience. For example, when asked about his background, one ‘explosives expert’ on the *al-Firdaws* discussion forum admitted that he had learned his skills from reading manuals on the Internet. However, there are also indications of more experienced jihadis posing as online trainers. According to a short ‘martyr biography’ published after his death, the Palestinian jihadi Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Maqdisi was not only an instructor in Palestinian training camps, but had also been an active member of several jihadi discussion forums, answering questions and offering advice to other forum members. Yet, what seems clear is that whoever these ‘virtual trainers’ are, they appear on the forums as individual volunteers, and not as representatives of any established jihadi group that has decided to run an ‘online training camp’.

### **The Internet is used to transfer basic knowledge, not to proliferate new technologies**

My second observation is that the jihadi discussion forums are mainly an arena for beginners and aspiring jihadis to learn the fundamentals, not a tool for more experienced jihadi groups to proliferate newly developed technologies on a wide scale. An obvious reason for this is that jihadists are well aware that their forums are being monitored by

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<sup>1</sup> Global Islamic Media was a precursor to the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF).

Western and Arab intelligence services. Any information revealed on these forums could potentially be used for counter-terrorist purposes, making the forums unsuitable places for jihadists to divulge new ideas or innovative technologies. This might explain why there is not so much *new* jihadi training material appearing online. The majority of training manuals published today are re-issuances of old jihadi manuals dating back to the early 1990s- c.2004. For example, new IED technologies from the battlefields of Iraq do not appear to have proliferated jihadi forums today (such information may, of course, be distributed through private e-mail communication or in forums and chatrooms open to selected members only, but these have not been investigated in this study). It appears that the transfer of new knowledge between jihadi groups still takes place in relatively 'traditional' ways, such as through personal contacts and face-to-face encounters.

On the other hand, the discussion forums are seen as being suitable for transferring basic knowledge that in any case is openly available. During an online Q&A-session on explosives, for example, the forum's 'expert' stated that the lesson would be based on available jihadi and foreign literature, noting that "this [information] has been known to the enemy for more than 20 years, so even if we explain it or discuss it in public, the enemy will not care..." When the information transferred is kept at such a fundamental level, it is perhaps more descriptive to call the Internet a 'pre-school of jihad' rather than a 'university of jihad' as it has sometimes been referred to. This also reflects the fact that many of those pursuing knowledge from jihadi forums have little or no previous jihadi experience.

### **Virtual training is initiated from below, rather than organized from above**

My last observation is that al-Qaida's 'virtual training', as of today, is initiated from below, rather than being organized from above. As already mentioned, most of the training material available online today is being produced, compiled and distributed by individuals with no strong connection to established jihadi groups. So far, there are few examples of *established jihadi groups* who have made an organized effort to train potential recruits online.

The clearest example of a jihadi group that has actively produced training material intended for study on the Internet is Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP), which, in 2004 turned to the Internet after the security situation in Saudi Arabia made traditional training difficult. They launched their online magazine, al-Battar Camp (*mu'askar al-battar*), in order to facilitate training and preparation for individual mujahedin, and encouraged supporters to use the information provided in the magazine to start their own training camps, and, after a while, small operational cells, to operate primarily in Saudi Arabia. The bi-weekly publication came in 22 issues, and covered everything from physical training and wilderness survival to the making of explosives. The 'students' of al-Battar Camp were encouraged to communicate with the editors through e-mail during the course, and to submit questions and contributions, which were sometimes included in later issues of the magazine.

However, apart from the QAP, there are few other known attempts by the central al-Qaida, or by established jihadi groups, to utilize the Internet for training potential recruits, although great efforts have been made by the same actors to use the Internet for propaganda and communication. It is illustrative that al-Qaida's own media company, *al-Sahab* (The Cloud), has not issued any instruction videos. Although other individuals and media companies have made attempts to spread these, groups such as Hizbollah and

Hamas are still way ahead of al-Qaida in terms of the quality and sophistication of audiovisual training material. Moreover, while there is an abundance of written training material available online, it is hardly ever organized into more systematic ‘training courses’, and individuals who act as ‘virtual trainers’ appear to organize the material on their own initiative, and on an irregular basis.

## **Conclusion**

Today I have argued that the Internet functions both as a ‘library’ and a ‘classroom’; that it is mostly used to transfer *basic* and open-source knowledge, but that the al-Qaida network and its affiliates are, as of today, not making an organized effort to train potential recruits online.

In other words, the Internet does not function as a ‘virtual training camp’ organized from above, but rather a resource bank maintained and accessed largely by self-radicalized sympathizers. My conclusion is that al-Qaida is *at the present stage* not utilizing the full potential that the Internet has in this area. However, continued development of the Internet as an alternative training ground may facilitate a continued decentralisation of the al-Qaida network.