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The State of Global Jihad Online

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An in-depth analysis of past and present chatter on prominent jihadist internet forums, including its implications for extremist ideological penetration in the West.

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More than eleven years after the 9/11 attacks and nearly a decade since the rise of popular online jihadist internet forums, there is strikingly little empirical research on the manner in which jihadist activists use the web to propagate their cause. Whereas researchers and policy analysts have systematically collected and analyzed the primary source material produced by al-Qaeda and its allies, very little work has been done on the conduits through which that information is distributed -- and even to what extent anyone is accessing that propaganda other than counterterrorism analysts.

As William McCants asserted during December 2011 testimony before the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, "There is little research to go on, which is striking given how data-rich the internet is. In hard numbers, how widely distributed was Zawahiri's last message? Did it resonate more in one U.S. city than another? Who were its main distributors on Facebook and YouTube? How are they connected with one another? This sort of baseline quantitative research barely exists at the moment."

This paper begins to fill that gap. First, it quantifies the use of English-language jihadist forums, which rose in prominence with the emergence of American-born Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki within the jihadist propaganda enterprise. Second, it measures the use of Twitter by online jihadists. Third, it assesses the most prominent English-language forums, the English sections within prominent Arabic jihadist forums, how the English forums compare to the Arabic forums, and the current status of the nascent rise in Twitter activism.

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