

THE STATE OF GLOBAL JIHAD ONLINE

A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis

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It is only a matter of time before terrorists begin routinely using Twitter, Instagram, and other services in ongoing operations. We have already seen this in a limited manner from al-Shabaab, which tweets its #JihadDispatches on recent battles. But those delivery mechanisms are unlikely to replace the forums as the main environment for conversation and information distribution among jihadis. Twitter and the like provide a more public platform than a password-protected forum, but one critical utility of forums for jihadis is the ability to have relatively private conversations.

Introduction

More than 11 years after the attacks of 9/11 and nearly a decade since the rise of popular online jihadi Internet forums, there is strikingly little empirical research on the manner in which jihadi 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 testimony in December 2011 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.”ⁱ

This paper begins to fill that gap. First, it quantifies the use of English-language jihadi forums, which rose in prominence with the emergence of American-born Sheikh Anwar al-Awlaki within the jihadi propaganda enterprise. Second, it measures the use of Twitter by online jihadis. This baseline is limited; it would also have been fruitful to systematically assess the activity in other virtual spaces used by jihadis, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Archive.org, and to do so over a longer period. Nonetheless, this paper assesses:

- (1) the most prominent English-language forums;
- (2) the English-language sections within prominent Arabic-language jihadi forums;
- (3) how the English-language forums compare to the Arabic-language forums; and
- (4) the current status of the nascent rise in Twitter activism.ⁱⁱ

Findings

- The English-language forums are far less active than Arabic-language forums, which suggests that jihadi ideological penetration into the West is limited.
- When more prominent jihadi forums go down, activity increases on smaller forums, which suggests that the overall jihadi communications enterprise is durable in the long term.
- While many have worried about the rise of jihadism in the West, the online architecture is far less active in the English-speaking universe of jihadis than in the Arabic-speaking community. This suggests that the global jihad movement is still very much attached to the Arab heartland in terms of the majority of individuals active online.
- A wide range of individuals, organizations, and Web forums have established Twitter feeds to promote their activities. This trend is likely to continue, but Twitter is unlikely to supplant the forum architecture because it cannot replace the sense of authenticity and exclusivity created by the forums.

The data from this study are from a limited, three-month time frame. Therefore, one must keep in mind that more information in the future can provide a more comprehensive picture. Reading too much into such data could result in misleading analyses.

Comparatively, the jihadi forum ecosystem is not as large as it once was. From 2004 to 2009, there were five to eight popular and functioning global jihadi forums. In the past year, there have been three to five. There are three possible reasons for this decline: (1) global jihadism no longer has the same appeal as in the past; (2) social media platforms are more popular with the younger generation and jihadis have moved their activism to those fronts; and (3) the cyber attacks against the forums over the past six years have degraded online capacity and deterred individuals from joining new forums.

A coherent policy to counter jihadi activity online should be twofold:

1. Use the forums and social media platforms only for intelligence. If counterterrorism analysts use the forums exclusively for intelligence-gathering, individual online jihadi grass-roots activists will, on their own, become burned out and quit the movement in disillusionment over its failures in battle and because of fighting among activists online. There is also more benefit in keeping such forums up, since analysts will then not be in the dark about who's who and what these individuals are up to.
2. Show the jihadis that it is the intelligence community that really keeps their sites up. Every once in a while, conducting cyber-attacks to keep the forums down for a week or two would show the sites' administrators and participants that the intelligence community is really controlling their enterprise. This might jostle individuals into being more wary about their online footprint. It also could deter individuals from joining the movement or convince them that being involved is no longer worth the risks.

One drawback to this strategy may be that driving individuals into more diffuse networks would also complicate intelligence-gathering going forward. This could lead them to search for other venues to propagate their ideology, specifically to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. They would no longer be in one spot to follow.

On the one hand, individual online jihadis freelancing on Facebook and Twitter are no longer as controllable as they are under a semi-centralized system like the forums. This may lead to an unorganized and less coherent message put out to the rest of the Web. On the other hand, there are upsides for jihadis when they leave exclusive Web arenas. Since they can interact with non-jihadis, they have more opportunity to recruit new individuals to the cause. This more diffuse nature, though, makes it harder for intelligence analysts to track the movement, since the activists are no longer centralized in a forum. At the same

time, there are potential benefits that outweigh the need to monitor more platforms: Social media networks provide more clues about the circles in which these online jihadi activists are traveling, through their Facebook friends or Twitter followers.

Attacking the forums directly would eliminate an important aspect of grass-roots supporters' interactions, but it would also remove a source of valuable intelligence on the zeitgeist of the movement. While leaving the sites active is not ideal, it is better to live with an awkward symbiotic relationship with al-Qaeda, whereby law enforcement and intelligence as well as al-Qaeda benefit from keeping the forums up. It also creates a false sense of security for al-Qaeda and provides its leaders with an excuse or opportunity not to evolve their authenticity mechanisms.ⁱⁱⁱ Choose the devil we know.

Methodology

The data for this study were gathered over a three-month period from February 2012 through April 2012. The forum data were collected without any interaction between forum users and the researchers.

This project tracked a variety of empirical information about threads and posts created on jihadi forums, including the types of threads posted: news, jihadi media releases, theological content, and many other categorizations. This not only allowed for comparison across subsections, but also helped the researchers assess the relative strength of various forum subsections: for example, the Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum to its Arabic counterpart. For Twitter accounts, we tracked the number of followers, the number of accounts it was following, the number of tweets made by each account, the number of lists on which an account was included, and whether an account interacted with or responded to others. This research analyzed the jihadi movement's well-known and popular individuals, websites, and organizations. It did not attempt to identify unverifiable accounts.

Several unexpected factors impeded data collection for this study, though even those setbacks offer insight into the jihadi virtual environment. First, the login account used to gain access to the Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum (AMEF) was banned by the site administrators a month into the research. A public version of the site remained available but did not show as many sub-forums within it. This illustrates the effort by online jihadis not to expose certain information to the outside world. In other words, jihadis have one version of their forums for public consumption and another accessible only to the actual community of certified users. You cannot gain a full picture of what is happening on a forum without a username and password.

Additionally, there was a major disruption to the jihadi forums for approximately two weeks in the midst of the data collection period in late March and early April. During that time, data could not be retrieved. Nonetheless, this disruption offered an opportunity to see how jihadis react to perturbations in their virtual environment.

History of the Online Jihad

The specter of jihadi online radicalization came dramatically to the fore in 2010, largely because of jihadi plots linked to American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who at the time resided in Yemen.^{iv} But the importance of al-Qaeda communications long precedes Awlaki. Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden remarked in a 2002 letter to Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar that: "It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles."^v Documents uncovered at bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, only reiterated al-Qaeda's focus on the media.^{vi} Much of that media battle now occurs online.

Four Phases of Jihadi Media

There have been four different phases in which jihadi media have been disseminated since 1984. The dates

roughly correspond to the adoption of a new medium for distributing information:

Phase 1 – 1984: Khutbas (sermons), essays/pamphlets, printed magazines/newsletters, and videotaped lectures and/or battle scenes.

Examples: Abdullah Azzam’s tours in Europe and the United States at mosques; a variety of old VHS tapes that came out of Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya; and al-Jihad magazine.

Phase 2 – Mid-1990s: Top-down websites: These were completely centralized endeavors in which an individual owning a Web domain (often connected directly with jihadi organizations) held complete monopoly over what content was important and would be distributed.

Examples: al-Neda and Azzam Publications.

Phase 3 – Mid-2000s: Interactive forums: Administrators of the forums help facilitate and disseminate content on behalf of jihadi organizations, but they are not necessarily directly linked. They post important news items and have

the power to delete threads and ban users, allowing them to help steer the online community in a certain direction by preventing users from being exposed to particular content or dissent. At the same time, users can play a role in posting a variety of materials, including their own views on events, and have the ability to converse with like-minded individuals across a wide geographic area.

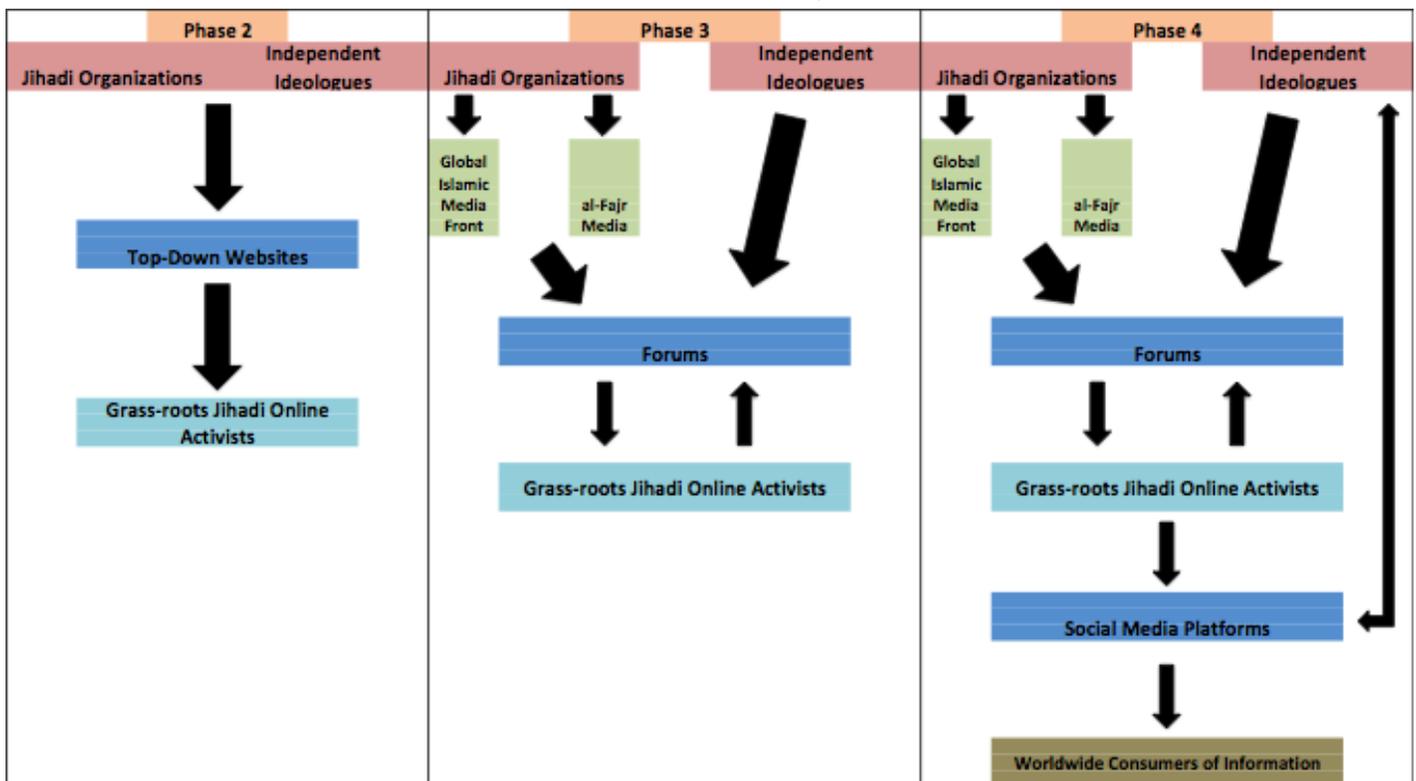
Examples: al-Hesbah, al-Ikhlās, al-Fallujah, Ansar, and Shamukh.

Phase 4 – Late-2000s: Social media platforms. A particular individual is in control of the content. One can post news articles on Twitter and Facebook, create videos on YouTube, and write articles or essays on one’s blog. Individuals, not an organization, decide what is important and what they believe should be given the most attention.

Examples: Blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

Defining the Different Types of Online Media

Diagram 1. The arrows refer to information flow through the system



Brief History of These Tools

Top-Down Websites



Picture 1. al-Neda Website Logo

While the first known jihadi presence on the Internet can be traced back to 1991, with the Islamic Media Center (IMC), al-Qaeda's official debut dates to February 2000, with the creation of maalemal Jihad.com. This was followed in March 2001 by alneda.com, which was active through mid-July 2002.^{vii} In the summer of 2001, al-Qaeda created a media arm, As-Sahab Media Production Establishment, and released its first video, "The Destruction of the American Destroyer [USS] Cole." Several other websites at the time were not directly connected with al-Qaeda, but sympathized with its jihadi worldview, including Azzam Publications, At-Tibyan Publications (which had one of the earliest jihadi-leaning, English-language, interactive forums), and Sawt al-Qawqaz.^{viii} This top-down phase allowed al-Qaeda and other jihadis to control who produced and disseminated jihadi materials online, which maintained al-Qaeda as an elite and exclusive organization.

Mustafa Setmariam Nasir, better known by his nom de guerre Abu Musab al-Suri, heavily criticized this so-called elitist approach. In his 1,600-page treatise *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, which was released online in January 2005, al-Suri called for producing jihadi media in languages other than Arabic, including English, and devising messages that appealed more to the masses.

Forums

The onset of interactive forums in the mid-2000s, concurrent with the rise of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as the world's most notorious jihadi, shattered the elitist nature of jihadi communications. Web forums still offered administrators (who were often directly connected with al-Qaeda) extensive influence over what was posted because

they could delete threads or ban members. But individual forum members, not directly connected to al-Qaeda, could not only view what was posted by administrators, but also comment and post their own content as well.^{ix}



Picture 2. al-Fida al-Islam Forum Banner

The popularization of the online jihadi movement empowered organizations dedicated to translating material, most of which was still produced in Arabic. The Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), established in August 2004, was a key innovator in this regard, and could trace its roots all the way back to June 2001.^x

Social Media Platforms



Picture 3. Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin's Twitter account

The most recent Web 2.0 innovations and creation of social media platforms (blogging, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) have flattened control over the production of online jihadi media. Social media platforms have enabled global jihadi entrepreneurs to share news items, original articles and essays, tribute videos, and anashid (Islamically-sanctioned music sung a cappella). The newer technologies lowered the bar for participation, making the involvement of low-level or non-jihadis in the online conversation a new feature of the global jihadi movement. Those so inclined can talk about jihad all day on the Web, even if they are geographically dispersed. This was not possible beforehand.

Currently, the forums are the hubs where the al-Qaeda organization meets its grass-roots supporters in a relatively

safe and exclusive environment. It is a place where the global jihad is headquartered online. The social media platforms are where the product or ideas are sold. Social media can expose the global jihadi message to anyone, whereas before, one had to knowingly want to be directly exposed to the message by going to the forums. With the ability to replicate their message multiple times, individual entrepreneurs have created a golden age of online da'wah (propagation or call to Islam) for the global jihadi social movement. The interactive nature of social media technologies and their early adoption by online jihadis have exposed a new generation to the global jihad.

This raises the question of whether easy access to jihadi social media platforms will lead to more individuals joining the global terrorist movement, or whether the social movement will dilute or moderate the global jihadi message by legitimizing the idea that it is okay to cheerlead at home instead of fighting, especially for individuals in the West. As the past has shown, some individuals will be zealous no matter what; therefore, even if a portion of the global jihad is confined to one's computer, the message is still spreading, and there will be some people who will go out and attempt an attack.



Picture 4. al-Fajr Media's Logo

The Process: From al-Qaeda to Your Laptop

It is not easy for a senior al-Qaeda figure to release information online. Before a video from al-Qaeda's emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri, appears on the Web, numerous steps must occur. Most likely, it happens something like this: First, somewhere in Pakistan, Zawahiri records a video. Couriers then take it to the safe house of al-Qaeda's media outlet, As-Sahab. There, Adam Gadahn and his colleagues edit the video, adding graphics and anashid, along with any necessary voice-overs. Following this, As-Sahab sends the

completed product to al-Fajr Media, a transnational online network that is the official distribution arm of al-Qaeda and its branches. Al-Fajr then connects the release to online jihadi forums such as Shamukh al-Islam. Here's an example of how the process might proceed. The Shamukh forum's administrators obtain the release and then upload the file(s) to online sharing and downloading services such as MediaFire, RapidShare, MegaShare, zshared, Bandango, and FileFlyer, among many others. Usually the file(s) are encrypted and a random numeric and alphabetical password is attached to the file(s), which are then included in the actual forum thread where the Zawahiri video is posted. The thread will also usually point to several download options for the quality of the video: high, medium, low, and mobile version. If the propaganda release is a statement, it will usually be offered in both Microsoft Word and PDF formats.

In addition, the forum is then responsible for promoting the new release. Accordingly, the forum administrators either receive from As-Sahab or al-Fajr, or create themselves, PhotoShopped .gifs that include the media outlet's name, the name of the individual whose release it is (sometimes including a picture), and the title of the release. The same .gif is then used in all other forums when they post it themselves. Once this whole process is complete, an administrator of the forum, usually using the name Mirasil al-Shamukh (correspondent of Shamukh), will create a thread and post it live to the forum (as shown in the above screen grab) with a special promotional banner placed at the top of the forum's front page. In the subsection of the forum where the release is posted, the administrators will also usually make it a "sticky," meaning it will remain as the first post at the top of the subsection, even after regular posters create new threads, so it is easier to find. From there, anyone who has a password to the forum can download the file(s) and save the release to a computer. With the formal process complete, individual online jihadi entrepreneurs can download this content and then afterward upload the release to services such as Archive.org, YouTube, and Dailymotion to spread the message to

individuals who lack access to the forums. In more recent years, it has not been uncommon to see grass-roots supporters repost content to their Facebook pages and Twitter accounts.

How Can the Byproduct Be Assessed in Raw Numbers?

An Example: The Merger



Picture 5. Promotional banner for a new release

On February 9, 2012, al-Qaeda’s media outlet As-Sahab released a new audio-visual message from Ayman al-Zawahiri and the emir of the Somali-based group Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin, Sheikh Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr.^{xi} In it, Zubayr pledged baya’a (allegiance) officially to al-Qaeda, which Zawahiri accepted. On the Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum (AMEF), this release had 19 responses (or posts) and 3,715 page views; on the Shamukh al-Islam Forum, it attracted 183 responses and 5,947 page

views; and on the al-Qimmah al-Islamiyyah Somali Forum, there were 7 responses and 1,600 page views. This again highlights the primacy and importance of Arabic in the jihadi milieu—even on a topic deeply relevant to the Somali community. Although the merger involved a Somali insurgent group, online activity among those who know the Somali language was still low due to scarce Internet penetration within Somalia. It is also worth noting that some of the page views attributed to AMEF were the result of analysts and researchers viewing the forum. This could explain why there was a high number of page views for AMEF in comparison with al-Qimmah, yet at the same time both forums had relatively few overall responses to the thread on the merger.^{xii}

The case of the merger announcement also highlights one of the weaknesses of Twitter for jihadi organizations. Al-Shabaab’s Twitter account did not mention the merger until three days after it was publicized on the jihadi forums.^{xiii} This shows that jihadi organizations’ media enterprises are not necessarily highly coordinated.

Overall Forum Data

A key finding of this report is that Arabic-language jihadi forums are far more active than their English-language counterparts. Table 1a compares the Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum (AMEF) and the Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic

Table 1a. Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum vs. Arabic Forum

Month	Forum	Posts per day	Forum	Posts per day
February	AMEF (before the ban)	81.23	AMAF	239.68
March	AMEF (before the ban)	88.4	AMAF	309
	AMEF (after the ban)	56.8		
April	AMEF (after the ban)	43.86	AMAF	497.2
		New threads per day		New threads per day
February	AMEF (before the ban)	17.83	AMAF	43.92
March	AMEF (before the ban)	21.4	AMAF	48.77
	AMEF (after the ban)	15.5		
April	AMEF (after the ban)	12.8	AMAF	63.23

Forum (AMAF), clearly showing the gap in usage between English- and Arabic-speaking online jihadis or other participants. In February, the average number of posts and threads per day by Arabic speakers was around three times that of English speakers. There are complications when comparing the data for March and April because of the ban at AMEF, as explained in the methodology above, and because the top two al-Qaeda forums, Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida al-Islam, were down for two weeks during this period, which likely increased the usage of AMAF.

related to the “ummah,” or transnational Islamic community, AMEF has 767 total posts to AMAF’s 5,251. That is almost seven times as many in the same three-month period. Another critical finding is that both English-language and Arabic-language participants are more interested in news and new jihadi releases than in topics related purely to religion. All of the subsections on religious topics have far less discussion and activity than subsections devoted to political questions.^{xiv}

Table 2. Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum vs. the Top-Tier Forums

Month	Forum	Posts per day	Forum	Posts per day
February	Shamukh al-Islam	1,933	al-Fida al-Islam	732.67
March	Shamukh al-Islam	1,511.12	al-Fida al-Islam	976.5
April	Shamukh al-Islam	1,530.76	al-Fida al-Islam	738.3
		Threads per day		Threads per day
February	Shamukh al-Islam	172.07	al-Fida al-Islam	100.74
March	Shamukh al-Islam	153.55	al-Fida al-Islam	124.83
April	Shamukh al-Islam	153	al-Fida al-Islam	95.3

Table 2, comparing the top-tier Arabic forums Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida al-Islam with AMAF, which can be considered a second-tier forum, underscores the enormous gap between Arabic-language and English-language forum usage.

Tables 1b and 1c, located in the appendix, examine the differences between AMEF and AMAF in total posts found in subsections. Again, one can see that the Arabic-language Ansar forum is far more active than its English counterpart. For example, when comparing discussions on the news

In Table 3, the data on the al-Jihad al-Alami Arabic Forum and its thread-to-post ratio, which is higher than the two other forums listed above, suggest that al-Jihad al-Alami are prioritizing English-language communications at a higher rate than they can find an audience. In other words, they

Table 3. English Subsections on Arabic and Somali Forums vs. AMEF

Month	Forum	Percentage of English-language posts	Number of English-language posts	Overall number of posts
February 1	AMEF	N/A	N/A	108, 313
March 1	AMEF	N/A	N/A	110, 750
April 1*	AMEF	N/A	N/A	87, 185
April 30	AMEF	N/A	N/A	88, 471
February 1	Shamukh al-Islam	0.32%	4,100	1,260,814
March 1	Shamukh al-Islam	0.31%	4,132	1,316,878

*The data collected for April 1 and 30 include the period after the research user account had been banned and therefore reflect only the data available publicly without a user account.

want more engaged English-speaking followers than they are able to attract. Compare that to the much lower ratio at al-Qimmah al-Islamiyyah and to the Islamic Awakening table (see Table 4 below), where the percentage of threads is very close to the percentage of posts, showing that the threads are being engaged by average users at about the same pace they are being created by significant active users.

Table 4. “Politics, Jihad and Current Affairs” Subsection of Islamic Awakening

Date	Forum	Percentage of the “Politics, Jihad and Current Affairs” subsection posts in the forum	Percentage of the “Politics, Jihad and Current Affairs” subsection threads in the forum
February 1	Islamic Awakening	33.78%	34.50%
March 1	Islamic Awakening	33.81%	34.48%
April 1	Islamic Awakening	33.90%	34.45%
April 30	Islamic Awakening	33.90%	34.37%

Of particular note is the higher percentage of English-language posts and threads at the al-Qimmah al-Islamiyyah Forum, which is predominantly in the Somali language, unlike the two other mainly Arabic sites. What this tells us is that jihadi commentators looking at Somalia are more often conversing in English than are individuals engaged in Arabic-language forums. In other words, the community conversing online about jihad in Somalia is more likely to be in the West.

Islamic Awakening is not a jihadi forum, but it has a subsection dedicated partially to jihad, so it was worthwhile to determine the relative importance of this subsection. The

forum contains 26 subsections in total, but the “Politics, Jihad and Current Affairs” subsection is the largest, containing the most posts and threads. The data in Table 4 show that this subsection represents about 34 percent of the new posts and threads at the Islamic Awakening forum, indicating that these threads are the most discussed.

The Great Forum Takedown

Between late March and early April 2012, most of the major jihadi forums were shut down for a period ranging from three to 16 days. It is not clear why the forums went dark in such a coordinated manner, but the outage provided an opportunity to assess how jihadi forum use evolves when specific forums are no longer available. Two key findings emerged from this: (1) al-Qaeda’s distribution network al-Fajr did not release anything during this time period, and (2) lower-tier forums filled the vacuum of the top-tier forums.

Table 5. When the Forums Went Down

Forum	Dates Down	Days Total
Shamukh al-Islam	March 23-April 4	13
AMAF	March 24-26	3
al-Fida al-Islam	March 25-April 9	16
al-Jihad al-Alami	March 28-April 4	8
al-Qimmah al-Islamiyyah	March 30-April 10	12

The Distribution Network

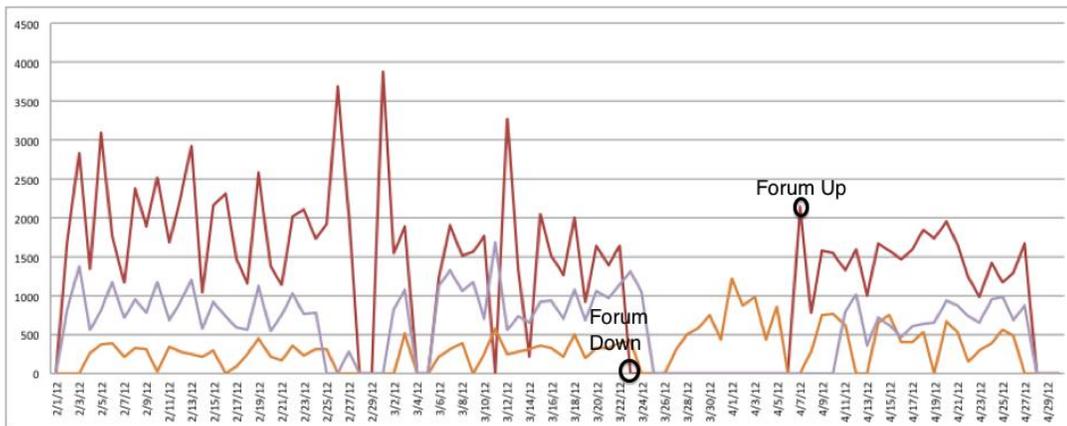
One of the primary reasons al-Qaeda continues to release content via online forums is authentication: By distributing its messages through accredited venues, it assures viewers that the information is truly an official statement. Because al-Qaeda has accredited the forums Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida al-Islam as content providers, these are the first locations where new releases will appear. As a result, when the Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida al-Islam forums went down in March 2012, neither al-Qaeda nor its affiliates distributed any new products. Nothing was officially released from al-Qaeda until Shamukh al-Islam came back

up on April 4, 2012.^{xv} It was unprecedented to not hear anything for such a long time from such a wide range of jihadi groups. But within six hours of Shamukh al-Islam being back online, a new release from the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) had been posted,^{xvi} and within nine hours there was a new release from al-Fajr.^{xvii}

Filling the Void

Although al-Qaeda’s official media stopped during the forum takedown, the group’s grass-roots supporters continued to look for environments to discuss jihad. The biggest winner from this process was AMAF, the largest second-tier forum, which was dark for only three days, far less than Shamukh or al-Fida. As Chart 1 illustrates, AMAF activity surged significantly during the period when AMAF was live but Shamukh and al-Fida remained dark.^{xviii}

Chart 1. Comparing the Number of Posts Per Day



Red: Shamukh al-Islam; Purple: al-Fida al-Islam; Orange: AMAF

During this period, al-Qaeda’s distribution network did not add AMAF to its stable of accredited forums. While AMAF filled an important stopgap until Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida al-Islam came back online, it did not completely replace the full functionality of the two top-tier forums. It remains to be seen how long it would take al-Qaeda and its affiliates to establish a new authenticated forum, or confer legitimacy on an already running second-tier forum, since

their longest-running trusted forums had been down for only two weeks.

Table 6. Before, During, and After the Takedown: Posts Per Day, on Average

Forum	Before: 02/01- 03/22	During: 03/22- 04/04	After: 04/05- 04/30
Shamukh al-Islam	1,751.18	N/A	1,530.76
al-Fida al-Islam	851.02	N/A	738.3
AMAF	276.61	603.3*	471.28

*Does not take into account the three days it was down.

Table 6 illustrates that AMAF filled some of the vacuum left by Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida al-Islam while the latter two forums were down. It also shows that when those

two forums did come back, they did not completely regain their previous levels of activity. AMAF lost some of the audience it had gained while Shamukh and al-Fida were down, but it was still more active than it had been previously.

How the Jihadis Reacted

When the forums went down, one of the leading online jihadi essayists, Abu Sad al-Amili, wrote two articles to rally the online troops and to call out whoever attacked the forums: “He [the attacker] resorts to these childish methods and he knows with certainty that it is not a solution to stop the march of the media jihad.”^{xix} Amili also explained that while the online media jihad was vital, there were other ways to do da’wah for the cause of global jihad, specifically noting offline recruitment.^{xx}

When Shamukh al-Islam finally came back online after its two-week hiatus, it echoed Amili in announcing its return:

“And here we bring glad tidings to the Muslims in all countries and places that the forum has returned to work ... in order to complete the march [to victory] alongside its sisters [other websites] ... may Allah reward the hands that sought and still seek to safeguard one of the media trenches, and may Allah reward the lions of the jihadi media.”^{xxi}



Picture 7. Logo created by AMAF for its Twitter account

Since the top-tier forums did end up coming back online, al-Fajr and GIMF did not need to change how they release content from al-Qaeda and its affiliates. It is possible some learned from this incident that they should have other options. Both the Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum (@as_ansar) on April 13 and the Somali al-Qimmah Islamic Network (@AlqimmahNetwork) on April 9 created Twitter accounts once they returned. Both now feature links to their Twitter accounts prominently on the front page of their forums. This may be an effort to diversify the forums’ vectors for communicating with the public and delivering content. Since the formal period of this study ended in April 2012, others also joining Twitter have included Ansar al-Shariah in Yemen’s media outlet Madad News Agency (@W_mdd); Asad al-Jihad2 (@AsadAljihad2), a prominent online jihadi essayist; Minbar at-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (@MinbarTawhed), a library of jihadi scholarly materials; Jabhat al-Nusra (@JbhatAlNusra), the premier jihadi organization active in Syria; and Muhammad al-Zawahiri (@M7mmd_Alzawahiri), the brother of Ayman al-Qaeda central’s leader and an influential Egyptian jihadi in his own right .

The migration of jihadis to Twitter is happening, but Twitter is unlikely to replace the forums because it cannot supplant the authentication function of the elite forums,

which remains critical. Twitter, however, offers flexibility and security for times when the forums are under attack or groups are looking to put out information in breaking news situations.

Controlling the Message



Picture 8. Screen grab of American Omar Hammami in a video message

Following the deaths of Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan in an airstrike in Yemen in September 2011, Omar Hammami (also known by his nom de guerre Abu Mansur al-Amriki), al-Shabaab’s American commander and English-language propagandist, was poised to become the most important and influential English-speaking jihadi in the world. This all came crashing down, though, on March 16, 2012, when Hammami uploaded a video to YouTube titled “Urgent Message,” stating: “To whomever it may reach from the Muslims ... I record this message today because I fear my life may be endangered by [al- Shabaab] because of some differences that occurred regarding matters of the Sharia and of strategy.”^{xxii}

While this sent shock waves through the counterterrorism field, online jihadis were either silent or censored. A.R. Sayyid, the editor and writer of the Somali War Monitor, confirmed that there were no conversations in Somali on the al-Qimmah Islamic Network.^{xxiii} Further, any

discussion of the controversy surrounding Hammami was taken down from the Islamic Awakening Forum on at least two occasions.^{xxiv} Conversation on the subject was also completely banned at the Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum.^{xxv} The only content allowed on the forums regarding this matter was the official response and statements from al-Shabaab, which downplayed the controversy by claiming the group was surprised by the video and looking into its content, and maintaining that Hammami was safe.^{xxvi}

The urgency of the Hammami controversy does seem to have affected al-Shabaab's mechanism for releasing information: Instead of a posting to the forums, the group's initial response to Hammami's pronouncement came on Twitter, a much faster way of releasing information. This change in procedure is likely because Hammami is American and a figure widely covered by the Western media. Twitter's global and open nature allowed al-Shabaab to broadcast information to a larger audience more quickly than if it had coordinated with a forum administrator. This illustrates the unique utility of Twitter for jihadis when they find themselves in rapid response situations that are controversial, fast-moving, and hold the interests of a Western audience.^{xxvii}

Twitter: Online Jihadis and Organizations

Jihadis have been highly innovative in their use of the Internet, but their use of Twitter and social media has lagged behind the general public, a fact that has drawn several explanations from specialists analyzing jihadi propaganda: (1) vulnerability; (2) "if it ain't broke [the forums], don't fix it"; and (3) loss of authenticity.^{xxviii}

To investigate jihadi use of Twitter accounts, this study examined a convenient sample of jihadi organizations, ideologues, blogs, online personalities, and media outlets. Unlike with the forums, there is difficulty in picking particular Twitter handles to study because they are not

authenticated and some may be based in the West. Further, not all of the individuals who distribute jihadi material through Twitter are active al-Qaeda supporters or self-proclaimed jihadis. One example is London-based ideologue Anjem Choudary (@anjemchoudary).

The data summarized in Table 7 indicate that both English-language (@anjemchoudary) and Arabic-language (@Hamed_Alali) ideologues have major audiences, while some bona fide militant organizations (the Taliban and al-Shabaab) have major Twitter followings, too.

There are reasons to expect that some jihadi forums will be able to use Twitter effectively. For example, the Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum (@as_ansar), which joined Twitter on April 13, 2012, had almost 400 followers only a few weeks later. But this success varies from forum to forum. The Qimmah Islamic Network (@AlqimmahNetwork) Twitter account had a very low following. This is most likely because of the language gap, as well as Internet and Twitter penetration differences between the Arab-speaking and Somali-speaking worlds. One also sees this difference when comparing the three al-Shabaab Twitter accounts: @HSMPress, @HSMPress_arabic, and @HSMpress_Somali. The English language @HSMPress is by far the most popular, with more than 12,000 followers as of April 30. It is possible that part of this is a result of media coverage of al-Shabaab's English account, but it also hints at an interesting dichotomy in the jihadi Web world. Whereas Arabic remains the primary language of jihadi forums, English seems to be more important on Twitter.

Table 7. Popularity: Number of Twitter Followers (in order of when they joined Twitter)

Account	Who Are They	Feb 1	Mar 1	Apr 1	Apr 30
@anjemchoudary	Anjem Choudary	1,084	1,396	1,485	1,617
@alemarahweb	Afghan Taliban	6,884	6,961	7,020	7,153
@ansaruddin	Ansaruddin Blog	143	190	221	247
@islamawakening	Islamic Awakening Forum	252	291	322	367
@abusuleiman2011	Forum Activist	76	138	151	171
@HSMPress	Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin	10,615	11,326	12,088	12,499
@Censored31	Belgian Blogger	80	85	83	87
@ShuraAlMujahid	South African Blogger	207	255	284	313
@AMEF3	Unofficial: Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum	36	63	86	104
@forsanealizza	French Group Forsane Alizzza	388	393	412	438
@Al_nukhba	Jihad Media Elite	836	1,041	1,196	1,359
@Hamed_Alali	Kuwaiti Hamid bin Abdullah al-Ali	20,879	23,519	26,427	28,728
@Alvizier	Taliban spokesman	314	462	544	609
@alfaroqmedia	al-Faruq Media	0	0	41	94
@HSMPress_arabic	al-Shabaab in Arabic	N/A	N/A	644	752
@HSMpress_Somali	al-Shabaab in Somali	N/A	N/A	128	146
@AlqimmahNetwork	Al-Qimmah Islamic Network	0	0	0	17
@as_ansar	Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum	0	0	0	372

Table 8. Twitalyzer

Account	Type	Impact	Influence
@anjemchoudary	Ideologue	8.7%	13.6%
@alemarahweb	Organization	1.9%	0.3%
@ansaruddin	Blog	2.1%	0.4%
@islamawakening	Forum	N/A	N/A
@abusuleiman2011	Forum Activist	N/A	N/A
@HSMPress	Organization	6.8%	6.8%
@Censored31	Blogger	0.1%	0.1%
@ShuraAlMujahid	Blog	N/A	N/A
@AMEF3	Online Activist	0.4%	0.1%
@forsanealizza	Organization	N/A	N/A
@Al_nukhba	Media Outlet	1.1%	0.8%
@Hamed_Alali	Ideologue	55.5%	77.9%
@Alvizier	Organization	0.6%	0.5%
@alfaroqmedia	Media Outlet	0.2%	0.1%
@HSMPress_arabic	Organization	1.8%	1.3%
@HSMpress_Somali	Organization	N/A	N/A
@AlqimamahNetwork	Forum	0.1%	0%
@as_ansar	Forum	5.5%	7.9%

Table 8 shows whether a Twitter account has impact and influence, according to Twitalyzer, a social media analytics application.^{xxix} The accounts with higher follower counts generally also have higher impact and influence. There are two exceptions, though: the Taliban’s English-language account (@alemarahweb) and the media outlet Jihad Media Elite (@Al_nukhba). This suggests that having a high follower count does not necessarily mean one will make a difference, and that content and messaging may be important, too. Ideologues have the highest impact and influence. This is possibly a result of them being human beings, rather than organizations, allowing individual recipients to feel as if they have a more intimate relationship with the tweeter. The impact and influence statistics also confirm the above hypothesis that the Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum, while new to Twitter, was gaining popularity and reach at the time of this study, even at such an early stage.

This would suggest that top jihadi forums, organizations, and ideologues might increasingly join Twitter and communicate beyond the password-protected forums. It also highlights potential losses in influence and reach for local organizations, media outlets, bloggers, online activists, and accounts that are not in English (or to a lesser extent, Arabic). Because of the publicity that al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and popular jihadi ideologues would likely get from joining Twitter, they could gain a following, as well as impact and influence, similar to that experienced by al-Shabaab.

Imagine how much more of a spectacle it would have been if the Mumbai attacks and hostage-takings had been live-tweeted alongside instantly uploaded pictures and video of the events.

Compared to al-Shabaab or Jabhat al-Nusra, the name al-Qaeda evokes a more visceral reaction, which might mean al-Qaeda would not use its formal name as an account since it likely would be taken down. Using the names of its media outlets might be a loophole. At the same time, al-Shabaab and the Jabhat al-Nusra, both designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) under U.S. law, are still online with their Twitter accounts. Twitter has never publicly commented on this.^{xxx} Further, as of December 12, 2012 there is nothing in Twitter’s terms of service related to terror organizations using its platform.^{xxxi} It remains to be seen whether al-Qaeda or its leaders would risk their security to do use Twitter, when their time-honored process for releasing information may not be worth changing or evolving.

#Hashtags

Jihadis, like other Twitter users, use hashtags. Hashtags are a popular way for Twitter users to follow tweets about specific topics and for tweeters to expand their audience. Al-Shabaab uses a custom hashtag (#JihadDispatches) to draw attention to events in Somalia. Unsurprisingly, other favorites of jihadis are #jihad and **#الجهاد** (jihad in Arabic).



HSM Press Office
@HSMPress



Mujahideen ambush #KDF convoy between Kudhaa & Kulbiyow, Lower Jubba, destroying 3 vehicles and killing 11 #Kenyan soldiers #JihadDispatches

Reply Retweet Favorite



شبكة أنصار المجاهدين
@as_ansar



حركة #الشباب المجاهدين | إلقاء قنبلة يدوية على مقر عسكري في دركيلى - as-
as-ansar.com/vb/showthread... #جهاد #أخبار
ansar.com/vb/showthread...
#jihad #Somalia

Reply Retweet Favorite

Pictures 9 and 10. Screen grabs of jihadis using hashtags in English and Arabic

Future Utility of Twitter to Jihadis



Picture 11. Custom art created by online jihadis in remembrance of Merah's attack

The morning of March 19, 2012, will be remembered with horror and sadness in France. That was the day Mohamed Merah, a French-Algerian, opened fire and killed four people, including three children, at the Jewish Ozar Hatorah school in the southern city of Toulouse.^{xxxii} For jihadis, though, this was a day to celebrate. They lauded Merah, who had killed three other people in previous days, as the “Knight of Toulouse” and pointed to him as an example for others to follow. In particular, jihadis marked this “raid” with celebratory PhotoShopped artwork (as in the example above) and poems (see the appendix).

The episode also highlighted the utility of Twitter for ongoing attacks.^{xxxiii} As Merah was holed up in his apartment, awaiting the final assault by French security forces that killed him, he allegedly created a Twitter account (@mohamed_merah) and was live-tweeting. He eerily tweeted, “I changed my life ... on video.”

It is only a matter of time before terrorists begin routinely using Twitter, Instagram, and other services in ongoing operations. We have already seen this in a limited manner from al-Shabaab, which tweets its #JihadDispatches on recent battles. Twitter offers a useful communication mechanism for events in progress. Imagine how much more of a spectacle it would have been if the Mumbai attacks and hostage-takings had been live-tweeted alongside instantly uploaded pictures and video of the events.

Conclusions

This study suggests several conclusions about the nature of jihadi activity online:

The Arabic-language online “jihadosphere” far outpaces similar activities in other languages.

When top-tier jihadi forums are shut down, usage on lower-tier forums fills some of the vacuum. This suggests that coordinated intervention strategies combining attacks on leading forums while tracking the migration of users elsewhere could be useful.

If accredited al-Qaeda forums—currently only Shamukh al-Islam and al-Fida al-Islam—are shut down, then content from al-Fajr Media and the Global Islamic Media Front distribution networks will not be released online, thus hindering al-Qaeda, its branches, and affiliates from putting out official releases in a credible manner. Al-Qaeda does not currently appear to have a reliable backup mechanism.

More jihadis continue to be attracted to Twitter, but that distribution mechanism is unlikely to replace the forums as the main environment for conversation and information distribution among jihadis. Twitter provides a more public platform than a password-protected forum, but one critical utility of forums for jihadis is the ability to have relatively private conversations.

Twitter does, however, provide a means for jihadi organizations and individuals to provide information when breaking news occurs. Jihadis are likely to turn to Twitter for rapid response and to live-tweet extended violent events.

Area for Future Study

This study has established some basic techniques for quantitatively assessing jihadi Web forums, but it is adequate in neither breadth nor duration. It would be worthwhile to build upon this study for a longer time period as well as to take a closer look at the Arabic-language forums and their contents. Further, there should be a more systematic review of jihadi Twitter accounts and #hashtags, which have proliferated since these data were collected. It would also be useful to incorporate information from Facebook, YouTube, and Archive.org. Another important area where study would be beneficial for both academic and policy perspectives is the jihadi translation networks online. These provide vital services to individuals who cannot understand Arabic, the lingua franca of the movement. Understanding how these networks bring the movement to broader audiences could provide crucial clues about the ways individuals in the West are recruited and ultimately join the global jihad.

Appendix

Table 1b. AMEF Total Posts Per Subsection

Ummah News	Jihad Publications	Muslim Captives	Jihad-Related Media	Mujahidin Press Releases
767	263	41	421	323
Purification, Manners, and Morals	Qur'an and Sunnah	News Related Media	Fiqh	Clarifications and Refutations
25	47	165	79	49
Media Posting	Martial Arts	Requests	Information And Communication Technology	Support Center
38	17	53	48	12
Prose and Poetry	Aqidah	Health and Medical	Archive	Ilm and Da'wah
14	47	6	18	42
Redeployments	Links and Activities	History and Biography	Training and Preparation	Physical Fitness
7	32	20	11	4
E-Books				
1				

Table 1c. AMAF Total Posts Per Subsection

Events and Issues of the Ummah	General	Computer Science and the Internet	Statements and Releases Correspondents of Jihad	Tawhid and Jihad
5,251	810	183	1,018	668
Images and Designs	Audiovisual	Communications and Electronic Warfare and Military	The Caucasus	Department of Languages and Translation
599	1,135	221	263	92
Department of Pictures	Literature	Archive of Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum	Technical Security	Department of Books and Shariah Research
68	151	11	161	61
Department of Distinctive Threads	Department of Martyrs and Prisoners	Archive of Foundations and Other Media Centers	Archive of the Islamic State of Iraq	Archive of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib
29	121	30	6	11
Archive of Other Jihadi Groups	Archive of al-Fajr Media Center	Archive of the Global Islamic Media Front	Archive of al-Ma'sadat Media Foundation	Bag Designer
4	5	8	12	55
Archive Jihad Media Elite	Requests for Programs and Serials	Archive of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan	Archive of Statements and Releases Correspondents of Jihad	Archive of al-Furqan Media
9	23	57	4	2
Archive of As-Sahab Media	Archive of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	Archive of al-Malahim Media		
5	1	2		

Forum Member's Poem in Honor of Mohamed Merah's Attack

You Organized in Toulouse a Martyr Wedding
You were bleeding a well smelling crimson perfume
Whom who set fighting as a must
Make your indulgent in fighting the attackers allowed
The dogs of the West assured "Kozi" [Sarkozy] every time
he bleeds
You can tell them about thousands of calamities on their
capitals coming soon and lots of loss
Damage to the Westerners may appear as a joke
We will fight those who make the Jews their God
And we will let America taste the blood of slaughter
And we will walk in the proud path of those with esteem
Who made out towers like a leafy garden^{xxxiv}

ⁱ William McCants, “Testimony,” U.S. House of Representatives: Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, “Jihadist Use of Social Media - How to Prevent Terrorism and Preserve Innovation,” December 6, 2011, <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony%20McCants.pdf>

ⁱⁱ More specifically it focuses on the Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum (AMEF), the largest English language jihadi forum, the English sections in the Shamukh al-Islam Arabic Forum, the al-Qimmah Islamic Network (which focuses almost exclusively on Somalia), the al-Jihad al-Alami Arabic Forum, the al-Fida al-Islam Arabic Forum, and the “Politics, Jihad and Current Affairs” section in the Islamic Awakening English Forum, which seems to serve as crossing point between mainstream online discourse and the jihadi facilitation media networks mentioned above.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is some evidence to suggest that jihadi organizations that are not affiliated with al-Qaeda’s al-Fajr Media distribution network are indeed adapting. For instance, when the forums were down in early to mid-December 2012, Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin and Jabhat al-Nusra released new video messages via their official Twitter accounts. See: <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/278251262678552577> and <https://twitter.com/JbhatALnusra/status/279251711565123584> (Accessed December 13, 2012).

^{iv} Thomas Hegghammer, “The case for chasing al-Awlaki,” *Foreign Policy*, November 24, 2010, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/11/24/the_case_for_chasing_al_awlaki (Accessed November 24, 2010).

^v “Letter to Mullah Mohammed ‘Omar from Usama bin Ladin,” June 5, 2002. Located in USMA’s Combatting Terrorism Center’s online Harmony Database, Document #: AFGP-2002-600321, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/AFGP-2002-600321-Trans.pdf> (Accessed May 24, 2011).

^{vi} “Unknown (probably Usama Bin Ladin or ‘Atiyyatullah Abu ‘Abd ar-Rahman) Letter to Nasir al-Wihayshi,” Date

unknown, Located in USMA’s Combatting Terrorism Center’s online Harmony Database, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/SOCOM-2012-0000016-Trans.pdf> (Accessed May 3, 2012).

^{vii} Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al-Qaeda*, London: Saqi Books, 2006, pp. 127; Patrick Di Justo, “How Al-Qaida Site Was Hijacked,” *Wired Online*, August 10, 2002, <http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2002/08/54455> (Accessed May 24, 2011).

^{viii} For more see: Hanna Rogin, “Al-Qaeda’s online media strategies- From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007,” Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), January 12, 2007, <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2007/02729.pdf> (Accessed October 6, 2010).

^{ix} One individual who excelled in this phase was Younes Tsouli, better known by his online handle Irhabio07 (Terroristo07). In 2004, Tsouli joined two prominent but now defunct jihadi forums, Muntada al-Ansar al-Islami (the Islamic Supporters Forum) and al-Ikhlās (Sincerity). Quite Web-savvy, Tsouli remotely engaged Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and became an important asset by helping AQI (al-Qaeda in Iraq) post and spread its content online. Tsouli was eventually arrested in the United Kingdom on October 21, 2005. Gordon Corera, “Al-Qaeda’s 007,” *The Times*, January 16, 2008, http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article3191517.ece (Accessed May 24, 2011).

^x Rogin, “Al-Qaeda’s online media strategies,” pp. 56. The previous names the GIMF went by were the Global Islamic Media (GIM) and the Global Islamic Media Center (GIMC).

^{xi} Dr. Ayman al-Zawāhirī and Shaykh Mukhtār Abū al-Zubayr: “Glad Tidings: Announcement of Harakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn Officially Joining al-Qā’idah,” *As-Sahab Media*, February 9, 2012. Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/02/09/as-sa%E1%B8%A5ab-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidahs-dr-ayman-al-%E1%BA%93awahiri-and-amir-of-%E1%B8%A5arakat-al->

shabab-al-mujahidins-shaykh-mukhtar-abu-al-zubayr-glad-tiding/ (Accessed February 9, 2012).

^{xii} Abdul Hameed Bakier, "Watching the Watchers: A Jihadi View of Terrorism Analysis Websites," *Terrorism Focus*, Volume 5 Issue 33, September 18, 2008, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=5159&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=246&no_cache=1 (Accessed August 24, 2012).

^{xiii} Tweets by @HSMPress, February 12, 2012, <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/168634560979009536>

<https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/168636829380259840>

<https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/168637891625496576>

<https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/168638787050684416>

<https://twitter.com/HSMPress/status/168640102032097281>

^{xiv} Based on these data, one can also point out which subsections on AMEF are not public. Since the banning at AMEF, there were no more posts from these sections: media posting, martial arts, requests, information and communication technology, support center, prose and poetry (likely shown in public, but just not discussed), health and medical, links and activities, training and preparation, and physical fitness. All these areas are apparently related to topics the forums might want to publicly hide because of their sensitive nature.

^{xv} Shamūkh al-Islām Arabic Forum: "On the Return of Shamūkh al-Islām," April 4, 2012. Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/04/04/new-statement-from-shamukh-al-islam-arabic-forum-on-the-return-of-shamukh-al-islam/> (Accessed April 4, 2012).

^{xvi} Harakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn, "Killing a Number of Ethiopians With An IED in the City of 'Hudur'," *al-Kata'ib Media*, April 4, 2012; Harakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn, "Implementation of the Hadd Penalty of Stoning to a Girl's Rapist in the City of 'Dinsoor,'" *al-Kata'ib Media*, April 4, 2012; Harakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn, "A Kenyan Aircraft

Bombed an Area Near the Village of 'Fafahdun,'" *al-Kata'ib Media*, April 4, 2012; Harakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn, "Assassination of An Officer of the Militias of Apostasy in the Neighborhood of 'Laba Daqah,'" *al-Kata'ib Media*, April 4, 2012. Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/04/04/al-kataib-media-presents-four-new-statements-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-7/> (Accessed April 4, 2012).

Also see: <https://twitter.com/azelin/status/187666579872419840>.

^{xvii} Shaykh Abū 'Ubaydah Yūsuf al 'Anābī, "A Message To Our People in Syria: With the Edge of the Sword ash-Shām (Syria) Will Be Liberated," *al-Andalus Media*, April 4, 2012.

Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/04/04/al-andalus-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghrifs-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-yusuf-al-anabi-a-message-to-our-people-in-syria-with-a-sword-you-liberate-ash/> (Accessed April 4, 2012). Also see: <https://twitter.com/azelin/status/187709075419709440>.

^{xviii} Table 6 in the appendix highlights how this has happened previously as well. Forums have come and gone due to severe technical issues, cyber attacks, or administrators deciding to shut them down over security concerns. As a result of these changes, previously second- and third-tier forums started attracting new followers and eventually filled these voids, becoming the premier forum(s). The cycle has occurred a few times.

^{xix} Abū Sa'd al 'Āmilī, "Duty of the Ansār (Supporters) in Light of the Interruption of the Jihādī Forums," *Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum*, March 27, 2012. Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/03/27/new-article-from-abu-sad-al-amili-duty-of-the-an%e1%b9%a3ar-supporters-towards-the-phenomenon-of-the-interruption-of-the-jihadi-forums/> (Accessed March 27, 2012).

^{xx} Abū Sa'd al 'Āmilī, "Jihādī Media Has Abated, But It Does Not Die," *Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum*, April 1, 2012. Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/04/01/new-article-from-abu-sad-al-amili-jihadi-media-has-abated-but-it-does-not-die/> (Accessed April 1, 2012).

^{xxi} Shamūkh al-Islām Forum, "On the Return of Shamūkh al-Islām," April 4, 2012. Available at:

<http://jihadology.net/2012/04/04/new-statement-from-shamukh-al-islam-arabic-forum-on-the-return-of-shamukh-al-islam/> (Accessed April 4, 2012).

^{xxii} Omar Hammami, “Urgent Message,” March 16, 2012. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAR2srINqks>.

^{xxiii} Interview with A.R. Sayyid via Twitter, March 17, 2012. Available at: <https://twitter.com/SomWarMonitor/status/181087306097246209>.

^{xxiv} Here are the two links of threads that were taken down: <http://forums.islamicawakening.com/fi8/shabaab-may-kill-abu-mansoor-al-amriki-57239/> and <http://forums.islamicawakening.com/fi8/abu-mansoor-al-amriki-alive-and-well-58851/>.

^{xxv} Tweets by @inteltweet, March 18, 2012, <https://twitter.com/IntelTweet/status/181418575922335744> <https://twitter.com/IntelTweet/status/203531323187535872> <https://twitter.com/IntelTweet/status/203531468289490945> <https://twitter.com/IntelTweet/status/203531914043342848>

^{xxvi} Tweets by @HSMPress, March 17, 2012, <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/181029197064585218> <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/181029361552588800> <https://twitter.com/HSMPress/statuses/181029781574385664>;

Harakat al-Shabāb al-Mujāhidīn, “On the Video Attributed to the Brother Abū Mansūr al-Amrīkī (Omar Hammami),” *al-Katāib Media*, March 17, 2012. Available at: <http://jihadology.net/2012/03/17/al-kataib-media-presents-a-new-statement-from-%e1%b8%a5arakat-al-shabab-al-mujahidin-on-the-video-attributed-to-abu-man%e1%b9%a3ur-al-amriki-omar-hammami/> (Accessed March 17, 2012).

^{xxvii} Furthermore, in mid-May, an alleged spokesperson for Hammami named Abu M American created a Twitter account: @abumamerican. The individual running the account also conversed with journalists and specialists,

creating a unique opportunity for them to communicate with someone close to Hammami or perhaps Hammami himself. It was unprecedented in some respects. Since May 26, though, @abumamerican has been offline. This highlights how social media can lead to less top-down control relative to the forums. This episode also shows how the forums can shut out and control a situation that they do not want to expose to their followers. For more on this see: J.M. Berger, “Me Against the World,” *Foreign Policy*, May 25, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/25/me_aga_inst_the_world?page=full (Accessed May 25, 2012).

^{xxviii} William McCants, “Why Don’t Jihadi Orgs Tweet?,” *Jihadica*, April 11, 2011, <http://www.jihadica.com/why-dont-jihadi-orgs-tweet/> (Accessed April 11, 2011); Tweet by @webradius, February 6, 2012, <https://twitter.com/webradius/status/166564721800122368>

^{xxix} Twitalyzer calculates impact based on: the number of followers a user has, the number of references and citations of the user, how often the user is re-tweeted, how often the user is re-tweeting other people, and the relative frequency at which the user posts updates. It calculates influence as the likelihood that Twitter users will either a) re-tweet something another user has written or b) reference the user. For more information on its methods see: <http://twitalyzer.com/>.

^{xxx} Interview with Jillian C. York via Twitter, August 24, 2012. Available at: <https://twitter.com/jilliancnyork/status/239093906673897472>.

^{xxxi} “Terms of Service,” *Twitter*. Available at: <https://twitter.com/tos> (Accessed December 12, 2012).

^{xxxii} For more on Merah and the attack, see: Jytte Klausen, “France’s Jihadist Shooter Was No Lone Wolf,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304636404577299550343286104.html> (Accessed March 23, 2012).

^{xxxiii} Interestingly, one of the Twitter accounts examined in this study was run by the French jihadi organization Forsane Alizza (Knights of Pride) (@forsanealizza),

allegedly connected with Merah. Yet when the attack occurred, its Twitter account remained silent and the group did not mention anything related to the attack.

^{xxxiv} Al-Qinasah, “Wa-Aqamta fi Tuluwiz ‘Arsa Shahadatin,” *Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum*, April 2, 2012. Available

at: <http://as-ansar.com/vb/showthread.php?t=58448> (Accessed April 2, 2012). I would like to thank @Nervana_1 and @sameh_b for helping with parts of the translation.



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