

Jihad's Social Media Trend

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Although more jihadis continue to be attracted to Twitter and Facebook, they still prefer al-Qaeda's tried and true method of authentication using approved online forums.

From December 5, 2012 to January 29, 2013, al-Qaeda's top-tier forum Shamukh al-Islam was down (with a brief return for a few days after December 17). The suppression of the forum is likely the work of an intelligence agency, but no claim of responsibility has been announced. It has also accelerated an already growing trend: the migration of jihadi propaganda from web forums to social media.

In response to the blackout, many jihadi groups, media outlets, and individuals created new accounts on Twitter (and to a lesser extent Facebook). Others have likely migrated to popular second-tier forums like Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum (AMAF), which occurred the last time the al-Qaeda approved forums went down in late March/early April 2012. During that period, I was in the middle of collecting and analyzing data (from February 1, 2012 to April 31, 2012) on a number of jihadi forums spanning multiple languages and Twitter accounts for a New American Foundation paper, which showed empirically for the first time that lower-tier forums did indeed fill the vacuum created by the main forum's absence.

Both of these forum takedowns -- in March and April, as well as in December and January -- exposed the limits of al-Qaeda's official online media procedures, which are headed by its distribution network al-Fajr Media. Al-Fajr is responsible for coordinating between al-Qaeda Central (AQC), its affiliates' media outlets (As-Sahab Media for AQC, al-Malahim for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Furqan for al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and al-Andalus for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)), and the forum administrators. In both takedown cases, al-Fajr could not deliver content from the al-Qaeda affiliates, at least in an official capacity, to the online masses.

Media outlets, groups, and ideologues that, while not expressly affiliated, are inspired by al-Qaeda's worldview have not been hindered by this process, and therefore have not evolved mechanisms for releasing their content.

Previously, popular online jihadi essayists like Abu Sa'd al-Amili wrote articles when the forums went down, encouraging readers to be patient and to understand that the forums would persist and would not be defeated. On December 23, 2012, however, Abdullah Muhammad Mahmud, a writer for the jihadi news agency Dawa al-Haqq Foundation for Studies and Research, which is disseminated via a Wordpress blog, provided guidance to online jihadi activists. Mahmud told his comrades that going forward, it was legitimate to use Twitter and Facebook as sources of information for jihadi-related issues. This advice was in a sense revolutionary, as jihadis had previously emphasized the importance of the forums as a method for authenticating materials, to prevent forgeries of official group content. At the same time, though, many grassroots activists had already been active on online social media platforms for a few years on an individual basis.

If the dissemination of official releases is no longer to be done centrally, it has the potential to make the forums obsolete, and usher in a new era whereby jihadi activists primarily rely on social media platforms to interact with one another. It could also force groups that are part of al-Fajr's distribution network to evolve and change their methods of content dissemination. There is already some evidence that this shift has started during the ongoing forum takedown.

Evan Kohlmann, an expert on online jihadism, noted on December 10, 2012: "Due to the absence of top jihad chat forums, al-Shabab (formerly @HSMPress) in Somalia has been forced to rely on Twitter to distribute its latest video release. This may be the first time that any terrorist group allied with Al-Qaeda has ever used Twitter as the exclusive point of release for media." It should be highlighted that unlike other al-Qaeda affiliates, al-Shabab releases its content through the distribution network Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF). Al-Qaeda in Iraq's creation in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (@jbhatalnusra), has also over the past few weeks used Twitter as the first point of release of its content, outsourcing what would be a forum thread with a 'justpaste.it' page.

On January 25, Twitter shut down al-Shabab's extremely active account, which had some 20,000 followers and often featured pithy, tongue-in-cheek tweets attacking Western governments or other adversaries. Twitter said the ban was in response to a tweet sent by al-Shabab announcing that they would kill French hostage Denis Alex, and then saying they had done so, violating Twitter's rules against violent messages. But just yesterday, al-Shabab opened a new account, from which a tweet was issued that read, "For what it's worth, shooting the messenger and suppressing the truth by silencing your opponents isn't quite the way to win the war of ideas."

AQI and AQAP also used alternate methods to release their content. Instead of going through al-Fajr, AQI used the independent Iraqi-focused al-Yaqin Media to post its content to Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum. AQAP sent its content through Abdullah bin Muhammad, a rising jihadi star online, through his Twitter account. The only group that seems to have been left behind in this brave new world is al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan.

It is possible during the takedown in March/April 2012 that some of the forums learned by creating backup 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' ways of communicating with the public and delivering content.

Since the formal period of my study on the state of the jihadi forums and some Twitter accounts ended at the end of April 2012, others have also joined Twitter - though unsurprisingly, none that use al-Qaeda in their official name. They include -- in the order that they joined -- Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen's media outlet Madad News Agency (@W_mdd); Asad al-Jihad2 (@AsadAlJehad2), a prominent online jihadi essayist; Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (@MinbarTawhed), a library of jihadi scholarly materials; Jabhat al-Nusra (@JbhatALnusra), the premier jihadi organization active in Syria; Muhammad al-Zawahiri (@M7mmd_Alzawahiri), the brother of AQC's leader and an influential Egyptian jihadi in his own right; Jihad Archive (@jehadarchiv), a website that archives old jihadi

organization videos and statements; Abu Sa'd al-Amili (@al3aamili), a popular online jihadi writer; Fursan al-Balagh Media (@fursanalbalaagh), a jihadi translation and transcription service for official al-Qaeda and affiliated content; and Dr. Iyad Qanibi (@EYADQUNAIBI), a popular jihadi ideologue from Jordan.

There is some evidence that use of Facebook is also growing at the expense of the forums, and that individuals are moving jihadi content to invitation-only Facebook groups and pages. The nature of this activity is unclear at this point without further study. Additionally, some jihadi organizations - Jabhat al-Nusra, Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), Jaysh al-Umma, and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia - have even gone so far as to establish their own personal forums.

But while more jihadis continue to be attracted to Twitter and Facebook, al-Qaeda's official distribution route through al-Fajr media has yet to replace its tried and true method of authentication using its approved forums. Also, online jihadis' reactions to the return of Shamukh after it was down for more than seven weeks illustrated that they were still attached to using the forums. In the future, it is possible that if Shamukh were to be suppressed again, al-Qaeda could confer legitimacy on the second-tier forum Ansar al-Mujahidin, which is already seen as trustworthy by online grassroots activists. In the past, after al-Fallujah Forum was permanently taken offline, it conferred legitimacy on Shamukh. AMAF like others forums, though, uses the same tools and is almost certainly vulnerable to the same kind of takedown tactics. And although Twitter provides a more public platform than a password-protected forum, one crucial utility of forums for jihadis is the ability to have relatively private conversations among themselves. At the very least, now more than ever, there is a hybrid ecosystem for online jihadis.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow fellow at The Washington Institute. Read his [just-released, in-depth study](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-state-of-global-jihad-online) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-state-of-global-jihad-online>) on this subject. ❖

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