

No threat at first sight: Invisible terrorist environments on Facebook and Youtube

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The Internet creates a massive culture of self-display and networking. Putting oneself into scene and furthering agendas of interest groups is the major topic on social networks and video sharing websites. The effectiveness has been proven by demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain, which were organized via Twitter and Facebook. Also jihadists have been using blogs and social networks for several years.

But recently, hundreds of jihadist accounts on Facebook and other social service providers were shut down. The jihadist online community reacted immediately. As a result to the closures, jihadists are thinking about ways how to tap this channel of social agitation more effectively. In line with the genre of “jihadi strategic studies”,¹ a detailed strategy paper on the infiltration of social networks appeared on the jihadist discussion forum “Shabakat Sanam al-Islam” (Hump of Islam Network). A so far unknown contributor by the name of “Abu Hafs al-Sunni al-Sunni” is the author. Abu Hafs criticizes mistakes and proposes solutions how to use social networking platforms.² Jihadists should create invisible and “lite” terrorist environments on mass-user websites, is the baseline of Abu Hafs’s strategy paper. They should not openly propagate terrorism, but win sympathizers, who initially do not even know that they are consuming jihadist propaganda.

“Abu Hafs” argues that nowadays jihadists must comprehend that their extremist messages do not reach broader audiences, but remain largely encapsulated in consensual environments like jihad forums. To convince participants who already agree is like taking candy from a baby. The attempt to create larger consensual milieus is considerably harder, but only logical in regards to the successes of other light-topic groups on the Internet. In this sense, jihadists should try to be adaptive and flexible. The goal is to create mass follower networks on the basis of propaganda that touches broader Muslim grudges.

Metaphorically speaking, jihad forums are just the peak of the iceberg. The iceberg leaps out of the water, but underneath its body dissolves and mixes with the surrounding salt water, drawing ever wider circles. The dissemination of jihadist propaganda on the Internet

¹ This form of strategic jihadist literature has increased since the start of the Iraq-War in 2003 and treats theological and ideological questions only marginally. See Siehe Brynjar Lia und Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaeda Policy Preceding the Madrid Bombings”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 (2004).

² Abu Hafs al-Sunni al-Sunni, „Kaifiyat muwajahat hamlat ghalaq al-hisabat al-jihadiyya“ (How to fight the closure campaign of jihadiaccounts [on Facebook]), *Sinam al-Islam forum*, accessed March 14, 2011, <http://www.snam-s.Net/vb/showthread.php?t=5203>.

resembles this process and creates virtual terrorist milieus. I speak about a “milieu” when a number of people form a network or cluster around a certain Youtube account, for example, that disseminates propaganda. Virtual terrorist milieus influence real terrorist actors and are a form of leadership in cyberspace. They influence the thinking and actions of individuals. As a matter of fact, shared-activity groups on jihad forums have the task to actively create such milieus by “raiding” the Net and spreading propaganda material as far as possible. Thus, hardcore propaganda is flowing out from jihad forums and into mainstream social media.

The new strategy papers, however, argues, that jihadists should make smarter use of their propaganda possibilities. They should create several accounts on popular social network services and video-sharing websites. As part of a new strategy, jihadists should offer broader audiences a “lite-version” of terrorist propaganda, “Abu Hafs” argues, which excludes gruesome scenes of executions and beheadings. Instead, the task is now to reach the masses by slowly integrating them into an extremist environment. What helps are simple Islamic names and Islamic profile-images on Facebook accounts, such as “The one who loves Islam”, or a picture of the Qur'an, however, without betraying the clear jihadist inclination of the user.³ The material should first and foremost strengthen the Islamic identity of consumers, and only in a second step introduce consumers to an extremist interpretation.

Since mainstream social network and sharing-services are more accessible than hardcore forums, messages get liquefied and the in-group cohesion of members is lower. At the same time, mainstream networks create open thought milieus, which can easier influence actual attackers. Therefore, from a propagandist perspective the advantages of mainstream networks outweigh the disadvantages. Jihadists are also making peace with the idea that the age of hardcore forums may be over. Abu Hafs says that integrating and influencing larger milieus must be the top priority.⁴

Abu Hafs guidelines point to creating more “invisible” terrorist environments. There are thousands of sports- and leisure time groups on Facebook, he says, which can be infiltrated by jihadist media activists for this purpose. Undercover jihadists are advised not to attract the attention of the administrators of these groups. Suitable, for example, are videos which display the suffering of Muslim prisoners and women at the hand of westerners and Muslim collaborators. Luring subtitles like “You must see it!” or “Best video on Facebook!” shall attract possible addressees to click on the links without awakening any suspicion in regards to

³ Abu Hafs al-Sunni al-Sunni, „Kaifiyat muwajahat hamlat ghalaq al-hisabat al-jihadiyya“ (How to fight the closure campaign of jihadiaccounts [on Facebook]), Sinam al-Islam forum, accessed March 14, 2011, <http://www.snam-s.Net/vb/showthread.php?t=5203>.

⁴ Ibid.

terrorist propaganda and recruitment. This makes it also possible to circumvent the closure of accounts under the accusation of propaganda. Further possibilities to create invisible terrorist environments from a jihad perspective are Islamic websites that deal with salafi Islam, but actually laude global jihad.

While invisible terrorist environments shall attract large numbers of jihad supporters, a further goal is to steer radicalization processes through these environments, says Abu Hafs. “So what is better, [...] raising the number of jihad supporters and lovers, or reducing them? Jihad supporters on Facebook are growing and the wicked website makes their lives hard. They will embrace jihad forums which are suffering from a lack of members, then go to closed chat rooms and finally some of them will join jihad fronts, such as Abu Dujana al-Khorasani and Abu al-'Ina' [two venerated suicide attackers who were first active in the Internet].”

As a matter of fact, the effectiveness of virtual terrorist milieus was illustrated by the suicide attacker Taimour al-Abdaly, an Iraqi national who blew himself up in Sweden's capital Stockholm in December 2010. He was a former DJ, seemed well integrated in Great Britain, and was married to an attractive and intelligent woman with three children. Online-jihad researcher Aaron Weisburd pieced together cross-connections of al-Abdaly's Facebook account. In cyberspace al-Abdaly was not a loner, but a member of a virtual terrorist network whose thought-milieu he tapped for inspiration.

Al-Abdaly's Facebook account showed that he was a Facebook-friend of a Facebook friend of Samir Khan. Khan is a U.S. citizen currently hiding in Yemen and one of al-Qaeda's most important media operatives.⁵ There were three degrees of separation between al-Abdaly and Khan in cyberspace. Moreover, al-Abdaly and Arid Uka from Kosovo, who killed two U.S. soldiers at Frankfurt airport in March 2011, shared a common Facebook friend.⁶

According to social network theory, social influence works to distances less than or equal to three tiers or mediators.⁷ Indirect links can have a significant influence on people. Actors in social networks seem to be influenced in their behavior, attitudes, and performance by other actors to whom they are tied. Intermediaries, mediators and middlemen pass on thoughts and

⁵ As of yet, the case of Taimour al-Abdaly is anything but clear. In how far he was involved into a physical network remains unclear. His wife Mona seems still of interest to British and Swedish authorities. A man was arrested in Scotland for allegedly being in contact with al-Abdaly, which could mean anything. Al-Abdaly allegedly received explosives training in the Mosul area of Iraq. If this is true, he must have had physical contacts to hardcore jihadists.

⁶ Aaron Weisburd, “Friends in common: Salahudin Ibn Ja'far and Abu Reyyan/Arid Uka,” accessed March 14, 2011, <http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007204.html#007204>.

⁷ For example, see Jeroen Bruggeman, “network Diversity and Economic Development: a Comment”, Cornell University Library, online article, accessed January 17, 2011, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1011.0208v2>. “We should therefore constrain betweenness to paths shorter than or equal to three ties in a row, and call it 3-betweenness for short. It thereby fits squarely into Fowler and Christakis' “three degrees rule,” a stylized fact that various sorts of social influence do not reach further than path lengths of three.”

culture within a network. Taimour al-Abdaly's case seems to illustrate that this also applies to cyberspace.⁸ Al-Abdaly surrounded himself with a culture of martyrdom, which was enhanced by his virtual connections to a broader jihadist milieu on Facebook.

The number of terrorists whose most visible links to extremism were virtual milieus has been growing over the last few years.⁹ Khalid al-Dawsari, a Saudi national who studied in the United States, planned to attack several high profile targets in the U.S. in 2010. He had no operational ties to a terrorist group, but was guided by ideas which he obtained online.¹⁰ The army psychiatrist Nidal Malik Hassan shot more than ten U.S.-soldiers at Fort Hood in November 2009. Hassan was influenced by the Internet as well as traumatic stories of U.S.-veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. Arid Uka was a loner, but surrounded himself with jihad supporters in cyberspace. The action-guiding effects of online radicalization are especially visible in "lone wolf"-type of attackers such as al-Abdali, al-Dawsari, Hassan and Uka. But one tends to overlook that also members of terrorist cells and groups are heavily influenced by virtual terrorist milieus and networks. They then pass on their ideas and influence others. All European jihadists that planned or executed attacks in the last years watched jihadist propaganda movies. This goes for the German suitcase bombers 2006 as well as the Sauerland-network that planned large-scale attacks in Germany and was arrested in 2007. German jihadists who migrated to Pakistani training camps since early 2009 were strongly influenced by online jihadist propaganda.¹¹ For, example, 25 years old Rami Makanesi from the "Hamburg travellers-group" had drug-problems and was violent as a teenager, but then found back to faith during Ramadan 2007. In this very sensitive situation, where a believer undergoes a kind of spiritual and physical cleansing, Makanesi watched jihad videos on the Internet. „Those propaganda videos, I would say, do not cast a spell over

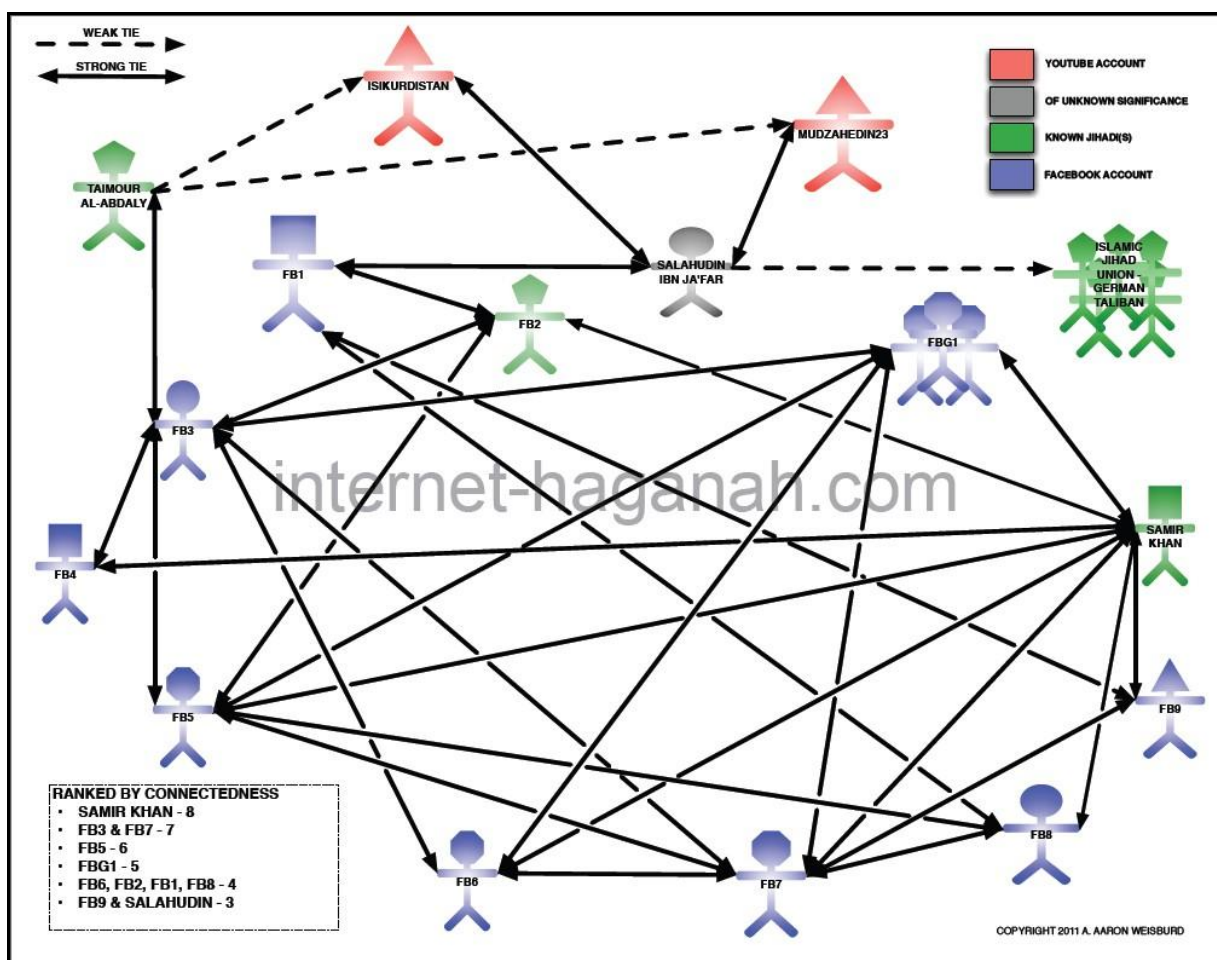
⁸ Indirect links can have a significant influence on people. Actors in social networks seem to be influenced in their behavior, attitudes, and performance by other actors to whom they are tied. They "choose relation partners on the basis of their behavior and other characteristics." See Tom A.B. Snijders, "Statistical Methods for Social network Dynamics", University of Oxford/University of Groningen, April 2010, accessed January 17, 2011, <http://www.stats.ox.ac.uk/~snijders/siena/>.

⁹ To be fair, in most cases several factors play a role in an individual's radicalization. Military, criminal or extremist social environments, as well as psychological, family or drug problems often co-influence decisions to plan and perpetrate terrorist attacks. Thus, the possibly dis-inhibiting influence of criminal milieus must be taken into consideration as well. For example, Arid Uka may have been influenced by a criminal environment; a large amount of drugs and a weapon were allegedly found in his flat.

¹⁰ „Saudi Arabian College Student Arrested by FBI for Attempted Use of a Weapon of Mass Destruction; Allegedly Planning to Attack Hardened and Soft Targets", Arlington Police Department Homeland Security / Special Events Unit – Situational Advisory February 24, 2011, Bulletin No.1102-069-H.

¹¹ Philipp Holtmann, "Folgt der Karawane der Märtyrer: Mit Internet-Propaganda werben deutsche Jihadisten in Waziristan um neue Mitglieder" (Joint the Caravan of Martyrs: The Internet Propaganda of German Jihadists), SWP-Research Paper 58/2010.

someone, but draw you right into it.”¹² Makanesi’s Net-radicalization started with jihad lectures on Paltalk, where other participants directed him to jihad videos on Youtube. Walid Othmani, a French national was member of a European jihad group that travelled to Pakistan in 2008. After his arrest he told French interrogators: “I don’t think I would have left to fight jihad without reviewing these videos [jihad propaganda videos on the French language pro al-Qaeda Website Minbar SOS]. Until shortly before the gruesome murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, the perpetrator Muhammad Bouyeri was posting hundreds of extremist contributions on the forum marokko.nl.¹³ Also the German Pakistani Aleem Nasir, who provided logistical help and recruited for al-Qaeda, was deeply entrenched in the terrorist milieu on the Internet and an avid collector of jihadist videos.



Taimour al-Abdaly-network-Diagram. Source: Aaron Weisburd, Internet -hagana.com, accessed March 8, 2011, <http://Internet-haganah.com/harchives/007103.html>

¹² According to an interrogation protocol by the German police that was obtained by the German broadcast network Südwestrundfunk (SWR). See “ReportMainz”, November 22, 2010, „Wie deutsche Islamisten in den heiligen Krieg ziehen“, accessed November 25, 2010, <http://www.swr.de/report/-/id=233454/did=7198346/pv=video/nid=233454/1n4t4xa/index.html>.

¹³ Albert Benschop, “Chronicle of a Political Murder Foretold - Jihad in the netherlands”, accessed December 16, 2010, http://www.sociosite.org/jihad_nl_en.php#ontremming.

As we can see in the graph above, Taimour al-Abdaly and Samir Khan were separated by only three degrees on Facebook. Up to a separation of three degrees the level of influence of central actors on network members remains strong. They had no direct contact, but shared a similar thought milieu and ideology like all individuals of the network. Al-Abdaly's virtual links must be seen under the aspect of their communicative influence. "SALAHUDIN IBN JA'FAR" (centre-right in grey) was also a Facebook-friend of Frankfurt attacker Arid Uka.¹⁴ In the upper left-side of the network diagram by Weisburd there is a Youtube account by the name of "isikurdistan" (islamic sword in Kurdistan-channel), from which the attacker al-Abdaly used to upload videos to his own Facebook account. The isikurdistan-account is the picture book example of a hidden extremist milieu in cyberspace. This account literally represents the guidelines of the new strategy to use of broader social networks. If one enters this Youtube account, it looks like an unsuspecting environment at first sight. The account has 477 subscribers and 338 friends, who can be clicked at and share their own videos. The main topic of the isikurdistan-account is Islam and Islamic identity. One finds hundreds of videos with anashid (poetic hymns), as well as videos that laude the conversions of non-Muslims to Islam, or criticize the racism against Muslims. Among the videos on the account, however, one can also find scattered pieces of semi-propagandistic material, such as a link to a Youtube account that exclusively features speeches of the leaders of Somalia's Shabaab movement (www.abushabaab.wordpress.com). The user is a "friend" of isikurdistan. The cross linking of accounts creates a radicalizing network.

On the first level, a clearly defensive, but also victorious interpretation of Islam is created. Many displayed links lead the viewer further and deeper into an Islamist and jihadist milieu. However, on the second level, the interested viewer is led swiftly into a hardcore jihadist milieu. Under the German headline "Über mich" (about me) on the isikurdistan account, one finds a tiny graphic that resembles a switching circuit. Underneath the graphic the unsuspecting URL www.fivewes.com appears. "Fivewes" is a hardcore jihadist propaganda website and media department. Its graphic publications appear on major jihadist websites, such as www.hanein.info/vb/ ("longing [for martyrdom]).¹⁵ Below, several screenshot will illustrate the levels one and two of an "invisible" extremist environment at the example of the isikurdistan account.

¹⁴ "Friends in common: Salahudin Ibn Ja'far and Abu Reyyan/Arid Uka," <http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007204.html#007204>.

¹⁵ For example, "FiveWes presents # Tehreek-e-Taliban # Mansour Studio -- Darrah Adam Khel 3", accessed March 17, 2011, <http://www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=223669>.

isikurdistan
 Abonnieren
 Als Freund hinzufügen | Nutzer blockieren | Nachricht senden

Letzte Aktivität
 Es gibt keine neuen Aktivitäten.

Abonnenten (477)

Freunde (388)

Kanalkommentare (224)

Über mich:

www.fivewes.com

The Noble quran 8:36: Verily, those who disbelieve spend their wealth to hinder (men) from the Path of Allah, and so will they continue to spend it, but in the end it will become an anguish for them. Then they will be overcome. And those who disbelieve will be gathered unto Hell.

see how those kufars made islam evil by their media, see how many muslims think that jihadi fighters are terrorist while they are doing what allah has told us, they are those heroes who free us from the occupants, but the kufars use all their wealth (spending billions in media) to make mujahideen evil and most muslims fall for it, allah has warned us 1400 years ago about today

TheAkurd47 (vor 1 Tag)
 Allahu' ackbar brother.God have mercy on us.

khurramshahzafar (vor 1 Woche)
 Assalamu-Alaikum Wa Rahmatullah

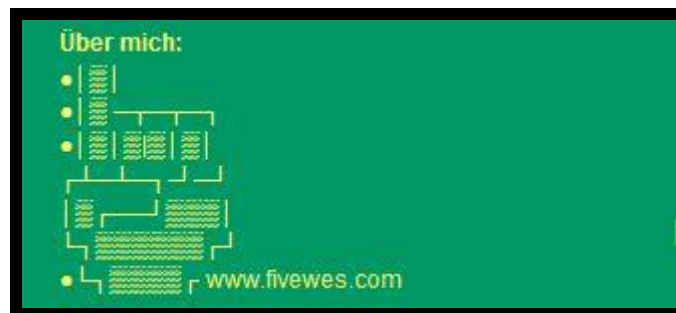
Brother I was watching your nasheed collection. It is very regrettable that in the map of the Ummah that you have put in the video did not include the map of Bangladesh my country, the third largest muslim population .. 150 million muslim brothers and sisters Alhamdulillah.

Brother, it is very painful to see that the muslim world seems to forget their brothers and sisters in Bengal where we are surrounded on all sides by the great Kuffar Hindustan (India).

So I hope that you put more care in including your brothers and sisters all over the world. P.S. you also failed to include Malaysia and Indonesia and Brunei and the muslim population of Arakan-Rohingya (Burma), south thailand and the south Phillipines.

May Allah bless you.
 Jazakallah.

The "isikurdistan"-account on Youtube from which the Stockholm attacker al-Abdaly uploaded videos to his Facebook account.



The link to the www.fivewes.com jihadist network on the isikurdistan account.



The entrance to the fivewes-website. The picture gallery and lecture-sections above are accessible without password

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

FiveWes

presents
تقدم



Tehreek-e-Taliban
تحريك طالبان

Mansour Studio
منصور ستوديو

Darrah Adam Khel 3
درة آدم خيل 3

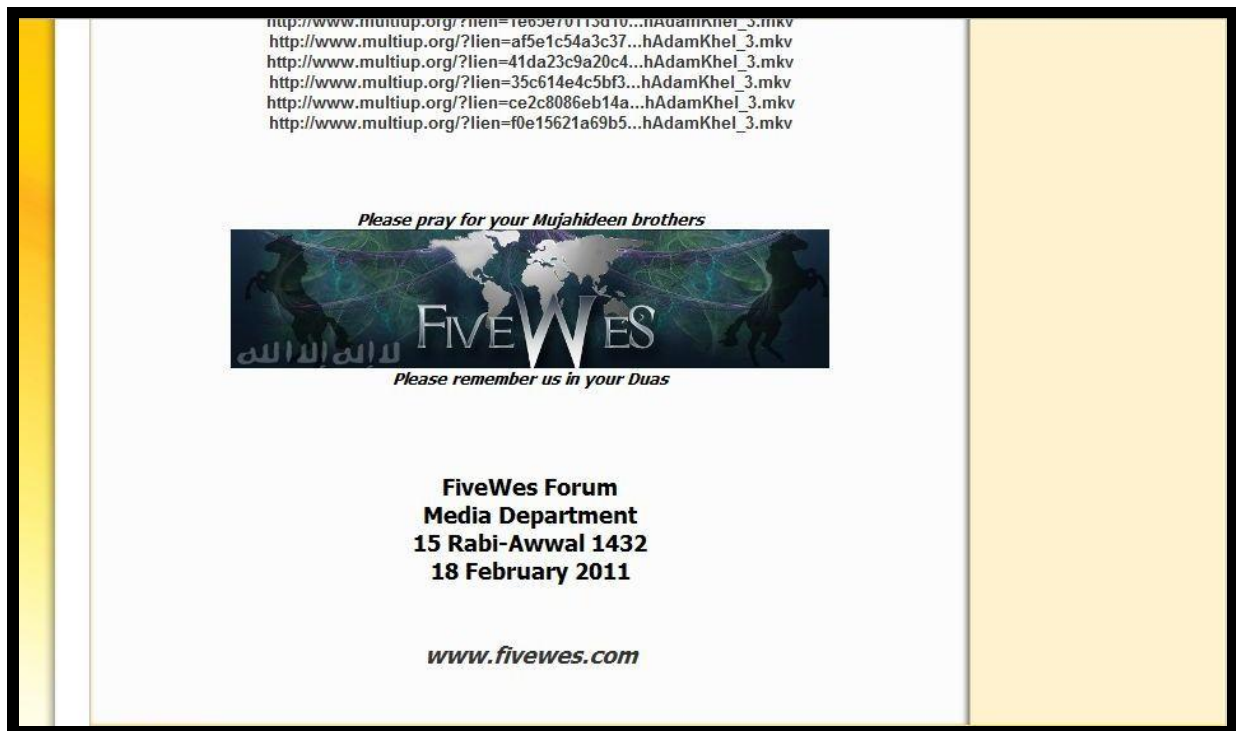


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Promotion of a jihadist video by fivewes on the jihadist website www.hanein.info/vb



Authenticity signature of the fivewes-media department underneath the product on the jihadist forum www.hanein.info/vb

As yet, the exact effects of extremist propaganda on the Internet have not been sufficiently researched. This may also be related to substantial difficulties in coming to terms with the real meaning of modern media and its influences on human life. One of the major effects of virtual social networking is that people create for themselves virtual identities. Cyber-jihadists are *threshold people* by virtue of having extremist online identities, yet at the same time living quite normal lives. The average “armchair-jihadi” is caught in a liminal state between the virtual and the physical world and thus develops a *liminal persona*.¹⁶ This creates tension and a longing to fill the gap between thought and action.¹⁷ Liminality is created at the margins of society; or in the information age, at the margins of what we perceive as real. Liminality therefore exists, where individuals leave the structured and (artificially created) orderly social states. For example, adolescents experience a liminal state during their puberty, when they are

¹⁶ The concept of liminality was first introduced to the field of anthropology by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal work, *Les rites de passage*. Van Gennep described rites of passage such as coming-of-age rituals and marriage, which have the following three-part structure: 1. Separation; 2. Liminal Period; 3. Re-Assimilation. See Arnold van Gannep, *Übergangsriten (Les rites de passage)* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus-Verlag, 2005). The U.S. anthropologist Victor Turner utilized van Gennep’s model “rites de passage” and Clifford Gertz’ concept “thick description” for his own concepts of “liminality” and “communitas.” See Victor Turner, „Liminality and Communitas,“ in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed Michael Lambek (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 333.

¹⁷ See for a similar approach also Jarret Brachman and Alex N. Levine, “You Too Can Be Awlaki!”, in *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 35 (Winter 2011), accessed March 3, 2011, <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/forum/archives/pdfs/35-1pdfs/Brachman-Levine.pdf>.

neither kids, nor have entered adulthood fully. By the same token, the Internet is neither perceived as totally real, nor as an illusion. Terrorism supporters on the Internet leave the orderly mental structure of civil society, when they go online. But (extremist) virtual identities cause a tension between the way their owners present themselves in cyberspace and their real physical lives. Intuitively, terrorist agitators feel this effect and try to exploit it: If sympathizers identify with terrorist ideology online, they are much more likely to support it offline.

The growing number of users of the Internet leads to an ever decreasing number of influential opinion leaders. The only groups where opinion leadership is still effectively exercised are “Geek-cultures”.¹⁸ From a terrorist perspective, this has disadvantages and advantages. Firstly, it is much more difficult to create interpretational sovereignty and opinion leadership in larger groups. Secondly, extremist virtual groups themselves still have opinion leaders. The internal cohesion of smaller virtual terrorist networks facilitates their coordinated infiltration of larger web communities. A factor of cohesion and coordination to realize such planes is given. Inside these communities, extremist agitators then apply ideological leverage by creating radical “milieus.”

Conclusion:

Jihadists are trying to exploit larger social networks for the hidden radicalization, indoctrination and guidance of individuals. They are planning to hijack a very dangerous lever for this purpose, namely Islamic culture. By hijacking common Islamic concepts and integrating them into an extremist virtual milieu, the border between a terrorist and civil interpretation of Islam blurs. This is extremely dangerous in the light of the debates around Islam, integration and extremism that are presently taking place in the West. Jihadists try to further incite and polarize this debate, and to gain interpretational sovereignty on Islamic issues. If the E-strategy described above works out, any social network account with Islamic issues may be a hidden extremist milieu. The integrity of Muslims who have a right to display their religion peacefully is thus threatened. Another factor in cyberspace that may foster such a phenomenon is the monopolization of social networks among a few popular platforms. A fragmentation of social networks into thousands of sites would also split extremist milieus

¹⁸ „Wem läuft die Netzsavantgarde nach, Herr Lovink?“, Interview with Faz.net, March 17, 2011, accessed March 17, 2011, <http://www.faz.net/s/Rub475F682E3FC24868A8A5276D4FB916D7/Doc~E79AF944A362840EFA2F82611380740ED~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>.

into smaller units, thus preventing them from possibly acquiring popular status. The smaller and more sub-culture-like extremist milieus are, the less they have to say.

However, the Internet is nothing but a “mirror of culture”, states the media-theorist Geert Lovink. “So, if we want to have another discussion-culture, we need to lead by a good example ...we need to post more. The stupid screaming of people who have no say must be marginalized.”¹⁹ But therefore, it is first necessary to hear them. The problem with invisible networks is that one only sees them at second sight. Thus, dealing with them requires two strategies, which are both extremely difficult to realize. First, one needs to detect and predict the dangers that emanate from certain accounts. Secondly, the culture of extremism and terrorism must be treated at its roots. As long as the dialogue between Muslims and Non-Muslims is poised by mutual accusations, detrimental policies and lack of peaceful cooperation, any solution remains a long way away.

¹⁹ Talk with Geert Lovink on the occasion of the „VI. Bielefelder Ideenwerkstatt“, November 27-28, 2010, topic: "Die Informations- und Wissensgesellschaft – Zwischen Risiken und neuen Möglichkeiten" (Information and Knowledge-Society – Between Risks and New Possibilities), www.bielefelder-ideenwerkstatt.de, accessed March 18, 2011, http://www.bielefelder-ideenwerkstatt.de/media/BIW2010/2010-12-04_Gespraech_Lovink_Bielefelder-Ideenwerkstatt.pdf.