

Al-Qa`ida's "MySpace": Terrorist Recruitment on the Internet

By Evan F. Kohlmann

IT HAS BEEN CLEARLY established that terrorist organizations have adopted unusual and innovative ways of using cutting-edge online technologies to expand their movements. Al-Qa`ida's principal media wing, al-Sahab Media Production, has recently released a flood of new audio and video recordings over Arabic-language internet chat forums, and has even solicited open questions from forum participants to be addressed by al-Qa`ida's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Yet, while much time and thought has been dedicated to studying the physical content broadcast over these chat forums, there has been far less attention focused on studying the individual users who populate them. In fact, during the past three years, these extremist forums have not only been used as a cover for al-Qa`ida's propaganda war, but have evolved into a disturbing MySpace-like social-networking hub for homegrown extremists around the world intent on becoming the next generation of terrorists, hijackers and even suicide bombers.

Muntada al-Ansar's Role in Recruitment

Arguably, no single such forum has achieved greater infamy than the now-defunct Muntada al-Ansar (The Supporters Forum)—the brainchild of, among others, a 21-year-old resident of London, Younis Tsouli (known as "Terrorist 007"). The Ansar forum's user database included an elite assortment of recruiters from multiple terrorist organizations affiliated with al-Qa`ida, including the actual head of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi's media wing, Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi. Under the careful watch of Tsouli—and with the assistance of such figures as Abu Maysarah—the Ansar forum became a virtual matchmaking service for budding Islamic militants searching for a path to jihad, and particularly for the emerging mujahidin frontline in Iraq. In December 2004—in private messages sent over the Ansar forum—a user from Morocco contacted Tsouli and begged him for help in establishing direct contact with Zarqawi's network

in Iraq: "I want to remind you that we would like to depart to the land of jihad. We await your call as though on the hottest of embers."¹ Upon learning that his travel arrangements had been brokered on his behalf (over e-mail), the Moroccan became ecstatic and gloated,

Praise be to Allah, we are going to go in over there at the time when the Shaykh Usama has given the official attestation to the amir [Zarqawi]...The timing couldn't be better for us!!!...it is serious, we have taken the bags [and] we can't go back.²

These men were far from being alone. Another frequent participant on Muntada al-Ansar was a young Sudanese national named Hassan Abdel Rahman. On the web, Rahman had assumed the nickname Zaman al-Hawan (The Era of Shame)—a decision which was inspired

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by the title of an article published in al-Qa`ida's *Sawt al-Jihad* online magazine. Rahman first registered on the Ansar forum in April 2004; in only seven months, he authored at least 178 different messages. Later, one of his comrades on the forum wrote about him, stating, "Zaman al-Hawan was a hero of Islam who used to write in these forums, just like the rest of us...at first, he sat still and stayed behind, until Allah called him to join his brothers."³ In June 2004, Rahman posted a note on the forum which admonished fellow Muntada al-Ansar users,

who will step forward to defend the honor of Muslim women? O' young men of Muhammad, men of al-Tawhid...arise and aid your

Muslim sisters in Iraq now that their honor has been assaulted by the filthy Christians...Where is your pride? Where are all the real men?⁴

In November 2004, at the height of the second battle for control of Falluja in Iraq, Rahman suddenly disappeared from the forum. Months later, in March 2005, his fate became clear when another Sudanese national broke the news to the community on Muntada al-Ansar: "Allahu Akhbar...O' brothers, I have just come from the house of our brother Zaman al-Hawan...[he] executed the martyrdom operation in Ba`quba last Wednesday, may Allah accept him." Phone numbers were posted for Rahman's father and brother back in Sudan so that users could contact them and offer their congratulations.⁵ A well-known face on the forum—Saqr al-Jihad al-Afriqi (The African Falcon of Jihad)—offered more details about the final moments of Rahman's life:

Twelve minutes before the operation in Ba`quba, he called his family and explained his intentions. He told them that, in 15 minutes, news of his death would be delivered to them—and then he vanished in the cause of Allah... Twenty minutes later, another brother called his father to inform him of his son's departure to meet the virgins of paradise.

Even senior Muntada al-Ansar administrators contributed eulogies in honor of Rahman, such as the notorious Saif al-Islam al-Athari. In an open address to his departed comrade, al-Athari mourned,

you left people behind you heartbroken and went to achieve martyrdom. We thank Allah, the Islamic nation, the mujahidin, and all of the supporters of jihad for inspiring you...May Allah accept you in paradise.⁶

Indeed, forum administrators such as al-Athari were eagerly encouraging faithful users to follow the path of online martyrs like Hassan Abdel Rahman. In

1 *Regina v. Tsouli, Daour and Mughal*, Woolwich Crown Court, London, prosecution exhibit FK-5, 2007.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Posted on www.inn4news.net, April 19, 2005.

4 Posted on www.inn4news.net, April 19, 2005.

5 Posted on www.ekhlaas.com, March 24, 2005.

6 Posted on www.inn4news.net, April 19, 2005.

August 2005, Saif al-Islam al-Athari was again the one who broke the “good news” to Muntada al-Ansar users about a “meeting of Ansar forum members” inside Iraq:

This story is fascinating and emotional because it is closely linked to...the Ansar forum...One of our brothers who was a member on the Ansar forum and was originally from a country adjacent to Iraq decided to leave and fight in the cause of Allah. Allah made it possible for him to meet with an additional five brothers from other countries who had all come to fight in the cause of Allah...Later, after talking with one another, they all realized that they were fellow users on the Ansar forum, and that made them very happy. They began crying and their love for Allah increased...I also inform you that one of the brothers who is a member on the Ansar forum will soon rejoin his beloved comrades in the land of jihad and martyrdom, the land of Mesopotamia, and he will also participate in a suicide operation.⁷

Muntada al-Ansar's Legacy

Unfortunately, the shuttering of Muntada al-Ansar in late 2005 and the subsequent arrest and conviction of Younis Tsouli have done almost nothing to deter this disturbing trend. In the wake of the Ansar forum's disappearance, other online chat

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venues have taken over and, once again, are serving as an active recruiting ground for al-Qa`ida—including the ubiquitous al-Ekhlaas forum. Although the al-Ekhlaas site has actually been in existence since the era of Muntada al-Ansar, it has particularly gained in public prominence and notoriety during the last year, as other similar sites have

been forced to deal with intermittent service blackouts. Al-Ekhlaas has become so sophisticated that it now posts slick, animated advertisements for upcoming recordings of Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri. As such, it serves as one of al-Qa`ida's most important public mouthpieces.

In late May 2007, a widely-admired administrator on the al-Ekhlaas forum—using the handle “Mujahid1988”—posted a new message, declaring,

I say goodbye to you, I loved you all. Dear brothers, I say farewell to you and I thank Allah who has enabled all of us to follow the path of jihad. I am filled with joy. Soon my humble will, that I sent a few days ago to one of the brothers, shall be posted to you all...may all of us meet in paradise. You should keep on the path of jihad and do not forget to pray for us. All I ask you, dear brothers, is to pray to Allah that I may achieve martyrdom.⁸

The notion that even the al-Ekhlaas forum elite were setting forth on their own personal jihad missions was particularly inspiring to other members. Mujahid 1988's initial farewell received a torrent of responses from other users. A second administrator wrote back,

Allahu Akhbar...believe me, my friend, the words are frozen in my mouth as I stammer and do not know what to say. I am happy and sad at the same time, joyful for you and for all the mujahidin, and pleased because you have put your knowledge into action and you were not merely content with staying on the internet forums without entering the real world, where killings and death truly are.

Other users offered a chorus of prayers that Mujahid 1988 be granted martyrdom “and receive it in a hail of bullets.”⁹

The example set by Mujahid 1988 was a powerful signal to other aspiring cyber-terrorists about the necessity of gathering useful information over

the internet and then “putting it to good use” on the battlefields of the mujahidin. One such user was a North African militant operating under the pseudonym Abu al-Hijja al-Maghribi. In his various posts on the al-Ekhlaas forum, Abu al-Hijja explored a range of topics—including sharing ideas for new graphic designs with al-Qa`ida fighters in Iraq and discussing the best methods to destroy U.S. Apache helicopters and Abrams tanks. After a curious absence, he reappeared in November 2007 with a message titled, “The Will of Brother Abu al-Hijja al-Maghribi, Member of the al-Ekhlaas Forum”:

Dear brothers...I did go suddenly to Iraq, praise be to Allah for his blessing. The brothers here have allowed me to get on the internet for one hour and I have used it to send a message to you all. I am full of happiness for coming here and...I am a member in all the jihadist forums under various names...I ask Allah to use these forums to glorify Islam...Saying farewell to all of you brothers is indeed a hard thing to do...I would like to thank you personally...the brothers in al-Nusrah forum. I also send my regards to...all al-Ekhlaas forum members. I promise you that I will fight every infidel and crusader, and may Allah grant us martyrdom. I also inform you that our brother Mujahid 1988 is safe and sound, praise be to Allah for his blessing.¹⁰

Conclusion

In the same way that traditional terrorist training camps once served as beacons for would-be jihadists, online support forums such as Muntada al-Ansar and al-Ekhlaas now operate as black holes in cyber-space, drawing in and indoctrinating sympathetic recruits, teaching them basic military skills and providing a web of social contacts that bridges directly into the ranks of al-Qa`ida. Rather than simply using the web as a weapon to destroy the infrastructure of their enemies, al-Qa`ida is using it instead as a logistical tool to revolutionize the process of terrorist enlistment and training. Ironically, these chat forums are based on the same viral methodology behind

⁸ Posted on www.ekhlaas.ws, May 31, 2007.

⁹ Posted on www.ekhlaas.ws, May 31, 2007.

¹⁰ Posted on www.ekhlaas.ws, November 15, 2007.

⁷ Posted on www.ansary.info, August 21, 2005.

the success of many contemporary American high-tech enterprises. This is the hidden dark side of online social-networking—as a virtual factory for the production of terrorists.

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