

The Sakinah Campaign and Internet Counter-Radicalization in Saudi Arabia

By Christopher Boucek

THE PROMINENT ROLE of the internet in propagating and perpetuating violent Islamist ideology is well known. The speed, anonymity and connectivity of the web have contributed to its emergence as a powerful source of knowledge and inspiration; it is an unrivaled medium to facilitate propaganda, fundraising and recruitment efforts. The vast scope of information available, coupled with the absence of national boundaries, facilitates ideological cohesion and camaraderie between disparate and geographically separated networks.¹ A broad spectrum of individuals turn to the internet to seek spiritual knowledge, search for Islamist perspectives and attempt to participate in the global jihad. As such, identifying methods to short-circuit internet radicalization has become an urgent goal for numerous governments.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has quietly supported initiatives to combat internet radicalization. One of the most developed programs is the Sakinah Campaign, which began several years ago to fight online radicalization and recruitment. Named after the Arabic word for religiously inspired tranquility, the Sakinah Campaign operates as an independent, non-governmental organization, supported by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Similar to other counter-radicalization and demobilization strategies in the kingdom, the Sakinah Campaign uses Islamic scholars to interact online with individuals looking for religious knowledge, with the aim of steering them away from extremist sources.

The Internet in Saudi Arabia

Internet access first arrived in Saudi Arabia in January 1999.² In 2000, there

were an estimated 500,000 internet users in the kingdom; by the following year those numbers doubled. They doubled again in 2004 to 2.325 million users, and by 2007 the number of users increased to an estimated 4.7 million.³ Internet access in the kingdom is routed through the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), which is also home to a sophisticated national internet filtering and monitoring system, located in Riyadh. At KACST, the Internet Services Unit is responsible for administering web filtering, based upon the directives of a security committee led by the Ministry of Interior. By far, the vast majority of blocked sites relate to illicit, illegal, or immoral content, including sites featuring pornography, gambling and drug and alcohol use.⁴ Security officials estimate that less than five percent of blocked sites relate to terrorism and extremism.

According to Saudi officials, extremist websites have multiplied in recent years, from only 15 sites in 1998 to more than several thousand today.⁵ Sites often appear faster than they can be identified and blocked. The introduction of the internet in Saudi Arabia greatly expanded the distribution of jihadist literature and propaganda in the kingdom, a development which set the stage for the onset of the al-Qa`ida campaign in 2003.⁶ Saudi authorities assert that many extremist sites are hosted by servers located overseas in such locations as Europe, the United States, China and Southeast Asia. Moreover, they add that obtaining cooperation to

cal service providers were permitted. See Human Rights Watch, "The Internet in the Middle East and North Africa: Free Expression and Censorship," July 1999.

3 Internet usage data is based on personal interviews in Riyadh in May and June 2008 and on official Saudi government figures available at www.internet.gov.sa.

4 Based on Saudi Ministry of Interior data, it is estimated that approximately 35% of all websites are blocked in Saudi Arabia.

5 This data is based in part on personal discussions with Ministry of Interior officials. At the Information Technology and National Security conference organized by Saudi intelligence in December 2007, it was stated that there are 17,000 sites that "fuel al-Qaeda ideology." See Raid Qusti, "Experts Recommend Special Laws to Combat Terror," *Arab News*, December 5, 2007.

6 Thomas Hegghammer, "Islamist Violence and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia," *International Affairs* 84:4 (2008): p. 707.

shut them down is extremely difficult.⁷ It should be noted that many of these Internet Service Providers are often unaware of either their clients or the content of their clients' sites; some data is hidden clandestinely on unrelated sites, further complicating matters.⁸

Extremist Use of Internet in Saudi Arabia

Before the recent counter-terrorism crackdown, extremist materials were often obtained from bookstores and record shops. Saudi authorities now monitor these outlets closely. As a result, many texts, videos and audio recordings were uploaded to the internet. This contributed to the establishment of the internet as both a source of information and inspiration. Despite the publication of many jihadist journals focused on strategy and tactics, such as *Mu`askar al-Battar*, one of the internet's greatest strengths arises not from providing training guidance, but as a source of inspiration. Despite popular analysis, "the internet does not function as a 'virtual training camp' organized from above, but rather as a resource bank maintained and accessed largely by self-radicalized sympathizers."⁹

The introduction of more comprehensive security measures has driven many dedicated extremists to avoid the internet and other potentially compromising technologies altogether. Dedicated militants in the kingdom now often avoid using the internet to transmit sensitive information, and instead meet in person to exchange data on CDs and increasingly on USB flash drives.¹⁰ While some sources have cited the internet's role in recruitment, it is believed that few hardcore jihadists are recruited online. Much of the face-to-face recruitment is now allegedly conducted in coffee shops and clubs, avoiding conspicuous locations such as mosques.¹¹

7 Some reluctance comes from the desire of authorities in other countries to keep a particular site open so that they can monitor user traffic.

8 Hanna Rogan and Anne Stenersen, "Jihadism Online: Al-Qaida's Use of the Internet," *FFI Focus*, May 2008, p. 7; Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of al Qaeda* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

9 Rogan and Stenersen, "Jihadism Online: Al-Qaida's Use of the Internet."

10 Personal interviews, Ministry of Interior officials, Riyadh, March 2007.

11 Huda al-Saleh, "Saudi Arabia: Internet Most Popular

1 Hanna Rogan, *Jihadism Online: A Study of How al-Qaida and Radical Islamist Groups Use the Internet for Terrorist Purposes* (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2006), p. 8.

2 While the internet has been available since 1994, it was restricted to official institutional users; in 1999, lo-

Sakinah Campaign¹²

The Sakinah Campaign is an independent, non-governmental organization that was created to engage in dialogue online as a way to combat internet radicalization. It targets individuals who use the internet to seek out religious knowledge, and aims to prevent them from accepting extremist beliefs. It seeks to refute so-called deviant interpretations of Islam and rebut extremist arguments, including the ideology of *takfir*. While the campaign is supported and encouraged in its work by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Interior, it is officially a non-governmental project. There are in fact other governmental internet-based efforts to combat internet radicalization, although many of these programs are kept from public view in order to be effective. The independence of the Sakinah Campaign helps contribute to its relative legitimacy and results in more people being willing to work with them in their efforts to combat extremism online.

The Sakinah Campaign is the combination of what were originally two separate programs. One program was designed to collect, catalogue and analyze extremist material found online. This effort resulted in the creation of a large database of books, pamphlets and magazines, as well as a number of video and audio recordings. Not all of the materials included in the collection were available in the public domain. Some documents, such as letters and other private communications, were collected for the insights they offered into the thinking within the movement. The database featured materials used to justify and support the ideology of extremism, as well as the reactions of others to this material. Political events and important dates were also assessed for their importance to the extremist community. All of this material was being collected—and still is by campaign workers—to document and better understand the thinking of extremists and terrorists. According to the campaign, such information is

Terrorist Recruitment Method-Official," *Asbarq Alawsat*, May 2, 2007.

¹² Data in this section is based on personal interviews with Shaykh Majid al-Mursal, Ph.D., head of the Islamic science section at the Sakinah Campaign, and Umar Issa, Sakinah worker, Riyadh, November 2007.

critical to its success. They must be able to speak in a language that those familiar with the material will understand and accept. This effort was joined with another program that focused on using the internet to dialogue with those who have questions about Islam. Together they form what is known today as the Sakinah Campaign.

As of November 2007, there were approximately 45 people formally working with the Sakinah Campaign, including a separate women's section comprised of 10 volunteer workers.¹³ Of this total, approximately 15 workers focus on online discussion, while a separate 15 surf the internet to collect the documentary materials. The Sakinah workers who dialogue online are *ulama* and other religious scholars proficient

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with modern computer technology, all with highly developed understandings of extremist ideologies, including the religious interpretations used to justify violence and terrorism. Also working with the campaign are some volunteers who have renounced their former extremist beliefs. While currently only a few such volunteers work with the campaign, according to Sakinah workers it is hoped that eventually others will join their efforts. Most of these individuals were not hardcore extremists, but rather people with questions about what was permissible in Islam and eager to have their questions answered by knowledgeable scholars. This demonstrates in part the potential of the program to expand. Workers

¹³ Ibid. For more on the organization of the campaign, see Abdullah F. Ansary, “Combating Extremism: A Brief Overview of Saudi Arabia’s Approach,” *Middle East Policy* 15:2 (2008): p. 121.

also acknowledge, however, that some individuals will never work with the Sakinah Campaign.¹⁴

Sakinah in Practice

Once online, after initially chatting with an individual, a Sakinah worker will usually suggest that they move into a private chat room.¹⁵ Although some individuals have no problems dialoguing in public, others prefer to initially engage in private. These online conversations take place in both real time and in the form of a series of back-and-forth posts. In the latter case, typically the person with whom they are chatting will post a question, and then the Sakinah worker will respond. These chats can take place over the span of a few hours, but they have also been known to continue for months. The transcript of the dialogue is then posted online for others to read, multiplying the program’s reach.¹⁶

In addition to collecting and cataloguing material and engaging in dialogue, another aspect of the campaign involves infiltrating known extremist and al-Qa`ida-affiliated or inspired websites. This is done to both collect new information, as well as to sow dissent within the websites and internet forums used by extremists.

Similar to how the country’s counseling program seeks to help detainees abandon extremist beliefs through face-to-face discussions, the Sakinah Campaign works to erode the intellectual support for extremism online. By entering chat rooms and engaging people in discussions about their beliefs, the Sakinah Campaign strives to demonstrate fallacies and help internet surfers renounce “corrupted” understandings of Islam.

¹⁴ The campaign has been attacked by extremists, and those involved have been accused of “betraying the Sunnis and of [being involved in] deception and greed.” See OSC, “Jihadist Forum Participant Criticizes Saudi ‘al-Sakinah’ Youth Initiative,” February 29, 2008. See also Ansary, “Combating Extremism: A Brief Overview of Saudi Arabia’s Approach,” p. 123.

¹⁵ Personal interviews, Shaykh Majid al-Mursal and Umar Issa, November 2007, and Dr. Abdulrahman al-Hadlaq, Riyadh, March 2007 and May 2008.

¹⁶ For an example transcript, see Y. Yehoshua, “Reeducation of Extremists in Saudi Arabia,” *Middle East Media Research Institute*, January 18, 2006.

Sakinah Web Launch

In October 2006, the campaign announced the creation of its website to complement its activities.¹⁷ According to reports at the time, the website was intended to serve the global online Muslim community with both Arabic and English sections. To date, however, much of the material is available only in Arabic. Plans called for the site to develop into a clearinghouse for information about extremism, radicalization and counter-radicalization and to serve as a central location for people to turn to online with questions about Islam. Khalid al-Mushawwah, one of the campaign's founders, stated at the website's launch that the intention was not to target extremists, but rather those individuals using the internet to learn more about Islam.¹⁸ It was also planned that the site would serve as a learning resource for imams, shaykhs, and other *da`wa* activists. Their education in current trends in extremist thinking was perceived by the site's organizers as an essential step in the effort to combat internet radicalization.

The site serves as a repository for a wide range of material, including a large number of studies and reports focusing on the work of the campaign, information about other initiatives combating extremism, numerous audio and video files (including clips of extremist recantations), as well as media coverage of the Sakinah Campaign's efforts. Other sections of the site are focused solely on *fatawa* issued by leading clerics on a number of relevant topics. There will also be a section devoted to interviews with individuals who have renounced violence and extremism. Most important, the website will host the transcripts from the campaign's online dialogues so that others can read them and thereby spread the campaign's efforts.

Criminalization and Other Recent Efforts

A new information security law enacted in 2008 established severe penalties for anyone involved in spreading extremist or radical material online. Those found who have created a terrorist website, or who have used the internet to communicate with terrorist leaders,

raise funds, spread extremism, or distribute tactical information useful for terrorists will be subject to a maximum of 10 years in prison and/or a fine of up to five million SAR (approximately \$1.3 million). This is 10 times the punishment for other non-terrorism related internet offenses; crimes such as hacking are punishable by a one year sentence and a 500,000 SAR fine.

Other recent steps have been taken to curb the issuance of unsanctioned *fatawa*. Presently, only clerics associated with the state-sponsored Council of Senior Islamic Scholars may issue *fatawa*.¹⁹ Moreover, in October 2007 the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta created an official *fatawa* website to serve as the only source online for legitimate and authentic—and importantly, legal—*fatawa*.²⁰ These were both important steps to codify the process of issuing religious rulings and combat the spread of extremist *fatawa*, such as those advocating participation in unsanctioned jihad. It will remain to be seen whether such steps will have the desired impact of preventing the spread of independent and “unauthorized” religious opinions.

Conclusion

The popularity of the internet and its central role in spreading violent Islamist ideologies has led to international interest in Saudi Arabia's Sakinah Campaign. One of the program's greatest assets is its ability to interact with people not only residing in the kingdom; Sakinah workers, for example, interact with an increasing number of non-Saudis. Since word of the campaign has spread, it has been approached by several other countries asking for assistance in creating similar programs to combat internet radicalization. The United Arab Emirates and Kuwait both have sought to work with the Saudis to create national versions of the Sakinah Campaign. A number of other nations—including Algeria, the United

Kingdom and the United States—have also expressed interest in creating web-based counter-radicalization platforms.

The importance of the internet will only increase in the future, and programs such as the Sakinah Campaign are similarly bound to multiply. Any strategy to combat the spread of extremism must also offer viable options for the religiously observant. Engaging with that segment of the population and offering alternatives to violent extremism is a critical necessity in the war of ideas. Encouraging local partners to take up this approach is vital, and the Saudi experience will be useful for others to study as they consider strategies to curb internet radicalization.

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¹⁹ For more information, see Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, “Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 19, 2005, p. 15.

²⁰ Available at www.alifta.com. See also Habib Shaikh, “Fatwas Will Be Made Available on Internet,” *Khaleej Times*, November 2, 2007; Andrew Hammond, “Fatwas' on Rise but Believers Don't Always Listen,” Reuters, December 10, 2007.

¹⁷ The campaign's website can be accessed at www.as-skeen.com.

¹⁸ *Ar-Riyad*, October 8, 2006.