



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

CTC SENTINEL

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About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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A Beacon for Extremists: The Ansar al-Mujahideen Web Forum

By Evan Kohlmann



DURING THE LAST DECADE, a virtual revolution has quietly taken place in the world of international terrorism. The traditional hubs of logistical activity—radical mosques, bookstores and guesthouses—have been strictly monitored by law enforcement and intelligence agencies. As a result, in a strategy pioneered by eager cyber-savvy youth such as London resident Younis Tsouli (known as “Irhabi 007”),¹ aspiring

terrorists have taken to the internet in force, employing jihadist-themed social networking forums as a new base for propaganda, communication, and even recruitment. It was only in retrospect, years after this phenomenon began, that governments recognized the degree to which al-Qa`ida's leadership was aware of the existence of these social networking forums—and the extent of their interest in using them to harness the power of the web.

¹ In July 2007, Younis Tsouli and two co-defendants pled guilty to charges filed by British prosecutors accusing them of “inciting another person to commit an act of terrorism wholly or partly outside the UK contrary to Section 59(1) Terrorism Act 2000.” The charges stemmed from, among other activities, Tsouli's high-profile online role as the internet media coordinator for al-Qa`ida in Iraq. Part of this mission included using web social networking forums to help link up prospective jihadist recruits with al-Qa`ida contacts based in Damascus, Syria. For more, see “Three Men Admit to Using Internet to Incite Terrorism in First British Case,” United Kingdom Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), press release, July 5, 2007.

Although official scrutiny initially focused on Arabic-language websites with clear connections to al-Qa`ida, recent events have forced a reappraisal of this relatively limited approach. Whether it is Fort Hood shooter Major Nidal Malik Hasan's passion for the English-language blog of Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-`Awlaqi, or conversely the online ramblings of the failed Christmas Day airline bomber Umar Farouk

Abdulmutallab,² it is increasingly second- and third-tier extremist social networking forums managed by unaffiliated fringe activists—many of them offering dedicated English-language chat rooms—that appear to play pivotal roles in the indoctrination and radicalization of some of today’s most notorious aspiring terrorists. This is a significant shift that has yet to be fully understood, as it could herald in a new generation of English-speaking or Westernized violent extremists.

Indeed, while certain discussion forums receive substantial endorsements and patronage directly from al-Qa`ida, many others are the product of independent efforts by loyal, web-savvy grassroots supporters who simply possess an overflowing passion for Usama bin Ladin and the subculture of jihad. Occasionally, this self-selecting form of internet-based terrorism can become so significant as to arguably even rival that which has been blessed by al-Qa`ida itself. These websites may not rank at the top of the conventional online jihadist hierarchy, but understanding the methodology and mindset of the idealistic web entrepreneurs behind the forums has nonetheless become essential in countering a new wave of international terrorism—both the organized and disorganized variety.

This sobering lesson is clearly reflected in the brief yet meteoric rise of one contemporary jihadist discussion forum in particular: the Ansar al-Mujahideen website. The website began in 2008 as a rather low-frills, Arabic-language clone forum with questionable credibility and a membership of mostly silent observers. Today, however, the Ansar al-Mujahideen forum has blossomed into a prolific, multi-language enterprise with an enviable following of skilled and highly-motivated English-speaking members. These men and

women dedicate countless hours of their own personal time—often with little reward or acknowledgement—to translating and redistributing jihadist propaganda and instructional materials, promoting the mission of al-Qa`ida, and establishing new online sanctuaries for jihadist activists.

As a result of the tireless efforts of its administrators, in less than two full years of operation the Ansar al-Mujahideen Arabic-language forum has accumulated 3,784 registered users, 13,845 discussion threads, and nearly 57,000 individual message posts.³ Beyond these already impressive numbers, Ansar al-Mujahideen administrators enjoyed further viral success upon the launch of mirrored Ansar forums dedicated exclusively to English- and German-language users. Unveiled months after the Arabic parent site was already active and open for business, its English-language Ansar cousin has rapidly closed the distance, amassing nearly 15,000 threads and 60,000 individual message posts. As such, the multi-layered Ansar al-Mujahideen network has become a key beacon for lone wolf extremists originating from a wide array of communities, including Asia, the Middle East, Western Europe, and North America.

Yet, the somewhat amateurish origins of the Ansar al-Mujahideen network have also become an unwitting Achilles heel. During their path to success, the forum’s administrators made a litany of costly software installation errors, allowing outsiders brief access to the website’s user database. Along with various Internet Protocol (IP) addresses—and much heated invective and rhetoric—the data stored in the forum offers a clear picture of how Ansar al-Mujahideen was created, and what purpose it serves in the greater context of terrorist activity on the internet.

The Rise of the Ansar al-Mujahideen Forum

Created in 2008, Ansar al-Mujahideen was established by a group of “ordinary members” from the well-known al-Ekhlaas forum. In a private retort sent to an online critic of Ansar al-Mujahideen, the self-declared “Media Amir” of the forum, Abu Omar al-Maqdisi, explained

³ This information, drawn from www.as-ansar.com/vb/, was accurate as of February 2010.

its creation. “I am one of those so-called ‘New Muslims,’” wrote Abu Omar al-Maqdisi.

For years of my life I was living in ignorance and God guided me so I gave myself to Him after I understood the meaning of how God graces and puts faith in someone’s heart, and since I originally work in the media, I thought about starting some work for the victory of the mujahidin... All that we want is the glory of this religion, and to encourage the believers to fight, and to spend money and offer victorious words for the mujahidin... We were ordinary members at the al-Ekhlaas forum and we learned a lot from the brothers who took charge of jihadi media work before us—and it is only normal for us to start our own active campaign at the first chance we got. And that’s what we did, so we established this site, and told everyone we knew from the al-Ekhlaas network about this forum... We went outside the usual jihadi media route, but we terrorize in the real world as much as we terrorize online, so whoever wishes to join is welcome, and those who don’t should hold their tongues about us and go away. And although low in number, we are strong in determination, and anyone who joins us will realize that immediately.⁴

The ruffling of Abu Omar’s feathers came amid a torrent of online gossip in late 2008 concerning the trustworthiness of the Ansar al-Mujahideen forum, and rumors that the al-Fajr Media Center—the official group responsible for media distribution and other online logistical tasks on behalf of al-Qa`ida—was questioning its legitimacy.⁵ Abu Omar haughtily rejected these charges and the perceived backstabbing by the “snobs” at al-Fajr: “None of us is more privileged than any other, except through his zeal for his religion and supporting the mujahidin. Our work serves as testament to our credibility.”⁶

⁴ This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=502.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

² Under the username “Farouk1986,” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab posted scores of messages to at least one third-tier English-language Islamic forum, the “Gawaher Network,” in 2005 and 2006. The postings included expressions of sympathy for the Guantanamo Bay detainees, anger at the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, descriptions of travel to Yemen, and his lamentations about leading the life of a solitary bachelor. For details, see Philip Rucker and Julie Tate, “In Online Posts Apparently by Detroit Subject, Religious Ideals Collide,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 2009.

He admitted,

maybe some of my productions have some basic mistakes...but that doesn't mean I am on an untruthful path...We are located in al-Ansar room on PalTalk alongside the jihadi Shaykh Abu Abdulrahman, may Allah protect him, one of the commanders in Somalia—so why would he trust us and allow us to record and broadcast his interview? We also have brothers from the Islamic State of Iraq, Chechnya, and Dagestan.⁷

Abu Omar professed his growing “boredom” with online “work” and his desire “to join the battlefields to fight with my weapon, and with my camera and computer so I ask God to grace us. All I want now is a strong and solid media network operating at an elite level in order to terrorize our enemies and uncover the truth.”⁸ Abu Omar further scoffed:

Why have the brothers become scared of their own shadows? If you really perceive yourself to be in danger here [on the Ansar al-Mujahideen forum] according to what these brothers have told you, then don't come in here again...We don't need you or anyone else...just ask the brothers at the al-Tahadi forum to vouch for us...I say, if any of the brothers at al-Fajr Media wishes to receive assurances about us and if you are in communication with them, then inform them that we would like to meet with them. We ask them to come here and distribute a bulletin outlining the action plan for the al-Ansar network—and we are willing to blow ourselves up near the infidels at any moment, and if they have enough resources to provide us with the necessary financing, then a terrorist is ready.⁹

Indeed, rather than turn to al-Qa`ida for essential guidance and support, the Ansar al-Mujahideen administrators relied on the pooled volunteer efforts of their membership and each other. During another private chat accidentally revealed to the world during fumbling

attempts at website maintenance, an English-speaking deputy administrator nicknamed “Insurgent” explained to up-and-coming forum contributor “Terrorist 001” that

we need a lot of brothers who are ready to do something fisabieallah, and of course you can look out for more brothers who can cut videos and audio too. We need to develop our skills and this cannot be achieved when every one of us working alone, no discussions, no ideas...We need to adopt the way of thinking of our enemies and we need each other to strengthen each other...our mission is very long and dangerous...It's not just about copying and pasting...we need to develop our media skills, produce more videos and audio releases in arabic and also in english, and other languages if it possible. Doing this is gonna improve the quality and the professionalism [sic] of the brothers and sisters and you know very well how important media is.¹⁰

His statement reflects the decentralization of online jihadist propaganda. It is also evidence of the continued attraction of al-Qa`ida's narrative, and the efforts of propagandists to influence Muslims living in Western countries.

Providing Propaganda in Multiple Languages

The Ansar al-Mujahideen forum administrators have recognized the utility of providing jihadist propaganda in multiple languages. In his own messages to other users, the administrator known as “Insurgent” repeatedly emphasized the importance of making hardcore al-Qa`ida content available to English-speaking Muslims:

i think a very important problem our english readers today have is, lack of english subtitled videos and if we make subtitles to important videos, that will be a great help to the mujahideen, by spreading their words to the West. mujahideen releases more deserved to be watched by the West than arabs... it will help the muslims [sic]

youths in West to awake and take the path of glory-jihad. Our forum should do the maximum it can, to achieve this...i hope by the grace of allah we can bring the english forum to a better position and thus providing a great service to the mujahideen in spreading their words, and making the audience aware of what is happening [sic] in the ongoing global jihad.¹¹

These sentiments square neatly with the ever increasing demand by al-Qa`ida and its global affiliates for Westernized operatives who defy traditional stereotypes and are capable of evading heightened security measures.

To put their plan into action, Ansar al-Mujahideen administrators such as “Insurgent” and Abu Omar al-Maqdisi began to systematically identify and recruit individuals within their immediate social network to help contribute in spreading the word of jihad in alternative languages. Abu Omar sent a private message over the forum to one such user, inviting him to support the mission:

Dear brother, i guess i know you from several jihadi forums and i realized your activity to support our brothers on jihad fronts and therefore I am inviting you to join me on the chat program...to discuss with you the responsibility of the english german section on our forum, if you are ready to make more differences in this important historical time which we are living in. I am waiting for you now if you are ready. We speak arabic, english, spanish, german.¹²

The “work” that Abu Omar al-Maqdisi spoke of extended far beyond merely translating Arabic-language propaganda. When Abu Omar expressed his desire to identify potential volunteers willing to create advertising banners and promotional material for the Ansar al-Mujahideen forum, his aide-de-camp “Insurgent” suggested, “i know a sister in another forum who is capable in graphic designing. but i have to contact

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=121.

¹¹ This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=62.

¹² This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=15.

her through the administration of that forum.”¹³ As promised, “Insurgent” sent a message to the “sister” asking her for help, effusing, “im really very happy that you came forward to help us. May allah reward you greatly for that...Good luck in your studies.”¹⁴

Offering Assistance and Facilitating Jihad

Abu Omar al-Maqdisi has also identified emerging opportunities to work with nascent mujahidin organizations in the field that lack established ties to major pre-existing online jihadist logistics groups (such as the al-Fajr Media Center or the Global Islamic Media Front). In this sense, Abu Omar envisions Ansar al-Mujahideen not merely as a fixed online discussion forum, but as a multi-tiered rival to al-Fajr and the GIMF in the competitive jihadist media market. He contacted a representative of a fringe Palestinian militant faction in Gaza known as “Jaish al-Ummah” and reported back that “they are in need of support to produce their productions, and they ask us for this.”¹⁵ Abu Omar forwarded an excerpt from their formal request to other forum administrators: “Brothers, we ask you to prepare an introductory segment for our films, and a conclusion...while leaving suitable space in the introduction to write on it the name of each new operation we undertake.”¹⁶

The various endeavors undertaken by Abu Omar and other Ansar al-Mujahideen administrators appear to be bearing fruit and gaining momentum. An official communiqué distributed by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Afghan Taliban) on October 7, 2009 identified the Ansar al-Mujahideen website as one of only three online discussion forums recommended as suitable venues to obtain the latest statements and video from the Afghan mujahidin.¹⁷ It may not have been an official endorsement, but it was a clear recognition of how high the star of Ansar al-Mujahideen has risen, despite its rather humble origins.

Beyond the formal activities being organized by administrators, the murky sanctuaries afforded by the private chat rooms on the Ansar al-Mujahideen forum have also been used by seemingly ordinary users to craft their own elaborate plans and plots. Two such users—a Moroccan and a resident of Saudi Arabia—became enmeshed in a deep discussion of how best to travel to nearby Somalia and join the emerging al-Shabab movement. “Nasruddin at-Tamimi” wrote to “Abu Aeisha,” “My dear brother, I used to think you were from Somalia, and I ask you to contact the brothers and make sure about the journey.”¹⁸ Abu Aeisha replied:

I can arrange with one of the brothers, but I don’t know this brother well, and I don’t want to throw away what I have here without some assurances and reliability, and I am in nature very careful dealing with the security aspect, and I don’t speak about these issues until I am certain. But with you, despite the fact that I haven’t known you for more than a month or so, my heart feels warmth towards you, and I ask Allah to group me with you in the highest ranks of paradise. Brother, just as a reminder, I know one of the Somali brothers who I met in another country, and this brother resides in the city of Medina—can he transport the brothers to Somalia! And since you are a resident in Medina, I’ll send you the brother’s name and his description so you can ask him for his phone number, and so I can call him, and Inshallah he will assist us.¹⁹

Abu Aeisha added,

I give you another piece of information, that I am from Morocco, meaning from Africa, and the distance between me and Somalia isn’t easy. I had prepared for this once before with another brother, but Allah eased our fate. Yes, we have adopted the methods of high technology, and I ask you your brother for your address on [Instant] Messenger so we can

speak about this issue, and Allah knows that I am being honest.²⁰

Implications

The covert activities taking place behind the scenes on the Ansar al-Mujahideen forum reveal important lessons about how terrorists are actually using the internet, and how the growing phenomenon of decentralized, self-selecting “homegrown” terrorism has found such a resilient base for itself on the web. Even now, some analysts continue to treat the denizens of Ansar al-Mujahideen and other similar online “troll factories” as nothing more than useless “armchair jihadists.”

It is dangerous, however, to write off the threat posed by members of the Ansar al-Mujahideen forum. While their language and approach may seem immature, and even juvenile at times, the often unsung accomplishments of the administrators and users are beginning to have a measurable impact in terms of promoting terrorism and terrorist organizations—and these young men and women have repeatedly declared their intention to carry their mission into the real world. Their postings echo precisely the same language of Jordanian doctor Humam al-Balawi (also known as Abu Dujana al-Khurasani), who was once a prominent online “jihobbyist”²¹ and was likewise written off as an eccentric until he blew himself up at a Central Intelligence Agency base in southeastern Afghanistan at the behest of the Pakistani Taliban.

Certainly, the fringe threats flourishing on jihadist web forums may seem a bit overly ambitious and theatrical, but in the wake of recent troubling incidents, such as the suicide attack by Humam al-Balawi and the Ft. Hood massacre, they cannot be taken lightly.

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13 This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=74.

14 Ibid.

15 This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=166.

16 Ibid.

17 This was posted on www.alfalajaweb.info/vb/showthread.php?t=87055 on October 7, 2009.

18 This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=391.

19 Ibid.

20 This quote was available at www.as-ansar.com/vb/private.php?do=showpm&pmid=411.

21 “Jihobbyist” is a term coined by counterterrorism analyst Jarret Brachman.