The Virtual Jihad: An Increasingly Legitimate Form of Warfare

By Akil N. Awan

IN A LETTER TO Mullah Omar in 2002, Usama bin Ladin wrote, "It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles."[1] Supporting this view, Ayman al-Zawahiri stated in 2005, "More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our umma."[2] This staggering asymmetry attributed to the "media jihad" by al-Qa`ida's leadership should be understood in the context of a fervent desire to engage with and mobilize the Muslim masses, which in turn is predicated primarily on the fear of the existential threat posed by obsolescence. Indeed, the Muslim masses, on whose behalf al-Qa`ida claims to serve as a crucial vanguard, have remained largely immune to the cajoling messages of global jihad, with large swathes of the Muslim world having repudiated the message outright.[3] As al-Zawahiri lamented in 2001, "we should realize the extent of the gap in understanding between the jihad movement and the common people."[4] As a result, the jihadists' inordinate focus on the media jihad in the 21st century has arisen as the primary vehicle to avert the patent failure of jihadist ideology to date.

The internet quickly surpassed all other media forms in becoming the principle arena for this frenetic media activity, and by extension the primary platform for the dissemination and mediation of the culture and ideology of jihadism.[5] Until relatively recently, much of this "official" jihadist media activity had been hierarchically organized and strictly regulated.[6] Yet the advent of Web 2.0 platforms such as file-sharing portals, forums, social networking sites, and the blogosphere,[7] whose egalitarian and democratizing nature are conducive to the "leveling" of hierarchies of knowledge and power, have facilitated a far more diffuse dissemination of autonomous user-generated jihadist media content outside the "official" jihadist spaces.[8]

One of the underlying factors behind this seemingly exponential increase in autonomous user-generated jihadist media content has been the changing demographic of the jihadist movement itself. Jihadism today is generally understood to be a phenomenon associated with young males,[9] and consequently many of the new generation of virtual media jihadists are "digital natives" rather than "digital immigrants."[10] Consequently, for many media jihadists, there is little "new" about the new media environment. Rather, it is the only media environment with which they are familiar. Much of their social and other interaction already takes place within this new media environment, and it is unsurprising that their political activism should similarly take place within this arena.[11]

This article explores the ascendancy of the virtual media jihad over the physical jihad, and the mechanisms through which it has become an increasingly credible and legitimate mode of conflict. In attempts to understand this paradigm shift and its consequences, the article also examines the cathartic functions of the virtual media jihad, and its impact on jihadist ideology and the movement more broadly.

Sanctioning the Virtual Media Jihad

One of the previous perennial debates in jihadist circles had focused on the status of those who fail to physically engage in the "jihad." In the past, such individuals had been reproached for limiting their contribution to words or funds rather than deeds. With the increasing recognition by the jihadist leadership of the critical need for engaging in the "media battle," however, various jihadist ideologues have attempted to legitimize this activity, often by drawing upon historical or religious precedents. Abu al-Harith al-Ansari's categorization of the types of warfare sanctioned by the Prophet Muhammad, for example, cites "media warfare" as a legitimate endeavor, whereas Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim's highly popular text, "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad," extols "performing electronic jihad" as "a blessed field which contains

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1　This document is located in the Harmony Database located at the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. The document ID is AFGP-2002-600321.

2　"Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi," GlobalSecurity.org, July 9, 2005. This document was released by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence in October 2005.

3　See, for example, "Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics," Pew Research Center, July 14, 2005; "Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World," Pew Research Center, July 23, 2009.

4　Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, 2001, available online in English at www.tawhed.11Omb.com/books/Knights_Under_the_Prophet_Banner_english.pdf.

5　The Global Islamic Media Front, a prominent media organ of al-Qa`ida, acknowledged in 2005 that it was now the only arena available to them: "half the battle of the mujahidin is being waged on the pages of the Internet – the sole outlet for mujahideen media." This was cited in Stephen Ulph, "Mujahideen to Pledge Allegiance on the Web," *Terrorism Focus* 2:22 (2005). Also see Akil N. Awan, "Virtual Jihadist Media: Function, Legitimacy, and Radicalising Efficacy," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10:3 (2007).

6　Indeed, specific actors (such as the Islamic State of Iraq), producers (such as al-Furqan), distributors (such as al-Fajr), and specific jihadist forum administrators control virtually every stage of the media production and dissemination process. See, for example, Akil N. Awan and M. al-Lami, "Al-Qaeda's Virtual Crisis," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 154:1 (2009); Daniel Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message," 2008.

7　Web 2.0 refers to a wide range of second generation services on the internet that has signaled a paradigm shift in which web users contribute as easily as they consume.

8　A roster of Arabic forums (*muntadayat*) have served as semi-official mouthpieces for the global jihadist movement over the years, including a number of forums sponsored by the al-Fajr Media Center (al-Qa`ida's media wing) such as al-Ikhlaas, al-Firdaws, and al-Buraq, as well as others such as al-Hesba, al-Faloja, Shumook al-Islam, and al-Ansar.

9　Jihadists (ignoring the leadership and ideologues) are generally found to be under the age of 25. See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); and Akil N. Awan, "Antecedents of Islamic Political Radicalism among Muslim Communities in Europe," *Political Science & Politics* 41:1 (2008).

10　Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9:5 (2001).

11　Whether it is social networking, shopping, dating, playing videogames, watching movies, reading news, listening to music, learning—in fact, any activity in the "real" world now has a virtual counterpart that may appear to be more appealing to a certain age cohort that represents this "digital native."

much benefit."[12] This, he suggests, includes

> following and spreading of news between the people, in addition to a chance to defend and stand up for the mujahidin and spread their ideas and their requests to the people. This effort can be divided into two major parts: discussion boards and hacking methods.[13]

Perhaps the most infamous recent jihadist ideologue, Anwar al-`Awlaqi, suggests "fighting the lies of the Western media," "following the news of jihad and spreading it," and "spreading the writings of the mujahidin and their scholars."[14] Yet perhaps al-`Awlaqi's most interesting contribution is number 29 on the list: "WWW Jihad." According to al-`Awlaqi,

> Some ways in which the brothers and sisters could be "internet mujahidin" is by contributing in one or more of the following ways: establishing discussion forums that offer a free, uncensored medium for posting information relating to jihad; establishing e-mail lists to share information with interested brothers and sisters; posting or e-mailing jihad literature and news; and establishing websites to cover specific areas of jihad, such as mujahidin news, Muslim prisoners of war, and jihad literature.[15]

The contemporary jihadist strategist and a key proponent of a decentralized, leaderless jihad, Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, even acknowledged the underlying reasons why this mode of action may be appealing in his seminal *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*.[16] Al-Suri conceded the existence of large numbers of individuals within the jihadists' ideological support base who are unwilling to engage in violence themselves. Addressing these individuals directly, al-Suri proposed a number of alternative modes of non-violent action to support the jihad, one of which entailed the "media or informational battle."[17]

As a result of these varying legitimizing mechanisms, the "media jihad" has gradually gained respectability and has become a legitimate endeavor in itself. In some instances, it has even been held on par with "martyrdom" operations.[18]

The Catharsis of the Virtual/Media Jihad

The sanction provided to the "media jihad" has proven to be particularly important as it also helps assuage cognitive dissonance in the media jihadists themselves: the internal conflict arising from an inconsistency between the jihadist's beliefs and actions. Thus, a jihadist who wishes to contribute to the conflict, but is unable or unwilling to partake in actual warfare (for any number of reasons, ranging from inaccessibility to the theaters of conflict, to indolence or cowardice) is given a vindicatory rationale for this alterative, entirely legitimate mode of action. Media jihadists, for their part, have responded to these overtures with enthusiasm and unsurprisingly great relief—particularly in the knowledge that they are no longer relegated to their previous roles of voyeuristic passivity.

This cathartic function of the jihadists' new media spaces, which allows aspiring jihadists to be part of the broader global jihad but crucially without engaging in direct violence, cannot be overstated. Indeed, the virtual or media jihad has served an increasingly important function in subsuming diverse strains of political activism, unrest, and dissent, thereby providing a conduit and framework for its non-violent expression. Audiences can vent their anger and frustration at the various ills plaguing the Muslim world, or perhaps more importantly re-direct their energies in an ostensibly useful way without resorting to violent means.

There is little doubt that the media jihadists in these new roles have proven immensely useful to the growth of the movement and the dissemination of its ideology. One of the most celebrated virtual jihadists, Younis Tsouli (also known as Irhaabi 007, or Terrorist

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007), whose contributions to the global jihad may have been confined to media production efforts from a bedroom computer in the United Kingdom, nevertheless received considerable acclaim from jihadists around the world, including from prominent individuals such as Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq. The important role played by media jihadists is acknowledged candidly in Tsouli's exchange with a fellow forum member, "Abuthaabit," who attempted to convince a self-effacing Tsouli of his immense contributions to the jihad:

> This media work, I am telling you, is very important. Very, very, very, very…Because a lot of the funds brothers are getting is because they are seeing stuff like this coming out. Imagine how many people have gone [to Iraq] after seeing the situation because of the videos. Imagine how many

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12 Abu al-Harith al-Ansari, *Irshad al-Sa'ul ila Hurub al-Rasul*, 2008.

13 Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim, "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad," 2003.

14 Anwar al-`Awlaqi has gained recent prominence due to his implication in the potential radicalization of the Ft. Hood shooter, Major Nidal Hasan; the Christmas Day bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab; and the Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad. These quotes are drawn from his popular work, "44 Ways of Supporting Jihad." Al-`Awlaqi's work is in fact based upon al-Salim's text, with large portions of the text having been plagiarized outright without any sort of acknowledgement or attribution.

15 Anwar al-`Awlaqi, "44 Ways of Supporting Jihad," 2009.

16 Abu Mus`ab al-Suri is perhaps best known for this theory of decentralized "leaderless terrorism," which he describes as *nizam la tanzim* (system, not organization).

17 Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, "Theory of Media and Incitement in the Call to Global Islamic Resistance," in *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, 2005.

18 For example, the prominent media jihadist Younis Tsouli (also known as Irhaabi007) is frequently lionized by fellow forum members for spreading jihadist videos and messages, which have been highly instrumental in the successful radicalization and indeed "martyrdom" of many others. The implicit suggestion of course is that although Tsouli has not "achieved martyrdom" himself, he has been of far greater benefit to the jihadist cause in enabling the martyrdom of many others in his stead. See "A World Wide Web of Terror," *Economist*, July 13, 2007.

of them could have been *shahid* [martyrs] as well.[19]

Virtual media jihadists have also increasingly understood that immersion in the virtual conflict does not necessarily render them immune to repercussions in the real world, such as arrest and prosecution under charges of materially abetting terrorism, encouraging or glorifying terrorism, or disseminating terrorist publications.[20] The successful arrest and prosecution of a number of individuals in Europe on such charges have shown these to be genuine concerns that must be considered by media jihadists before engaging in any potentially incriminating activity.[21] Similarly, jihadists online have also long been cognizant of the threat posed by the presence of security agencies and civilian "spies" within the new media spaces of the jihad. Many jihadist forums dissuade individuals from communicating sensitive information over the internet and encourage users to employ methods for masking their identities online. For some, these elements of danger provide further justification that they are engaging in a legitimate aspect of the conflict, evident from the "enemy's" usage of the very same spaces and from the personal hazards to which they are themselves exposed.

The Transition to the Real Jihad
Nevertheless, despite the considerable means employed to legitimize the media jihad, it would be imprudent to assume that the media jihad has the power to completely supplant the physical jihad,

which has curiously continued to prove irresistible to some. Despite garnering considerable acclaim in the virtual world, and being greeted on the forums as "The hero – God salutes you," Tsouli nevertheless harbored yearnings for "martyrdom" on the "real" battlefield. Tsouli lamented to his fellow virtual jihadists, "Hero? I am only half a man now…my heart is in Iraq."[22] In fact, Tsouli's desire for "real" jihad appears to have led to his eventual demise; he was sentenced to 16 years imprisonment in 2007 for his involvement in a decentralized web of terrorist plots.[23]

There exist numerous other examples of successful transitions from the virtual world to engaging in physical jihad, and include the recent case of Abu Dujana al-Khurasani (the alias of Humam Khalil Abu Mulal al-Balawi), a well-known administrator of the al-Hesbah jihadist forum. Abu Dujana was at some point recruited by the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate (GID), but who instead, serving as a double-agent, conducted a suicide attack against U.S. Camp Chapman near Khost in Afghanistan in December 2009, killing seven CIA operatives and a member of the GID. In interviews given by his wife after the event, al-Balawi is portrayed as someone "obsessed with jihad," but whose considerable writings on jihadist forums left him feeling increasingly guilty over his self-induced inactivity.[24] His experiences clearly resonate strongly with many jihadists confined to the virtual or media arena, and perhaps al-Balawi's eventual transformation may provide some form of vicarious validation for the media jihadists' own current passivity. Certainly, al-Balawi's actions have been widely hailed within the virtual jihadist community, with "Abu Dujana" quickly immortalized in videos, photo montages, and even poetry, including an almost farcical ode to al-Balawi entitled "Our James Bond."

Others appear content to remain within the virtual media sphere, enjoying the catharsis afforded by virtual action, unless of course they are compelled to leave, which may lead to actual

physical violence and terrorism. The unprecedented attack on jihadist new media environments from September 2008 onward, which included the disruption of major jihadist web forums, severely curbed the opportunities for "media jihad."[25] One forum member lamented,

> with the closure of all our sites, you [the Crusaders and their agents] have left us with no choice but to physically join the caravan of jihad. With no jihadi sites through which we can support our brother mujahidin, there is no point for us to stay behind. We shall join them. Your act has shamed us and caused us to think 'what is left for us?'[26]

Ironically, individuals who may not have countenanced actual violence in the past may in the absence of these virtual arenas feel compelled to relinquish their virtual personas in favor of real-life jihadist operations.[27]

Conclusion
The virtual or media jihad has not only gained prominence and credibility as a wholly legitimate alternative to traditional conceptions of jihad, but has also progressively outpaced the militaristic or physical jihad in the modern era. While the "real" jihad continues to hold a certain level of aspirational appeal, the catharsis offered by the media or virtual jihad has proven sufficiently able to supplant traditional notions of jihad for a new generation of activists, unwilling or unable to engage in actual violence themselves. Consequently, while the occasional transitions from virtual to real actions will remain a distinct and disconcerting possibility, they are unlikely to be adopted as praiseworthy precedents by significant numbers of virtual jihadists, despite whatever rhetorical validation they might be accorded publicly. Moreover, the uncertain dynamics of these processes, typically articulated as "radicalization online" or "virtual radicalization," remain uncertain and

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19 Quoted in "A World Wide Web of Terror."

20 As proscribed at least in the United Kingdom by the UK Terrorism Act 2006, Part 1, available at www.opsi. gov.uk/acts/acts2006/pdf/ukpga_20060011_en.pdf.

21 The case of Babar Ahmad provides one of the earliest examples of the serious dangers inherent in conducting "media jihad." A British information technology support specialist, Babar Ahmad was arrested under the UK Terrorism Act 2000 in 2003 in connection with running the "mujahideen news" website azzam.com. He was beaten in police custody before being released without charge, but then re-arrested shortly thereafter following a U.S. extradition request on charges of "providing material support to terrorists and conspiring to kill persons in a foreign country." Babar Ahmad has now been held for almost six years without trial or charge by British authorities whilst awaiting his pending extradition. For details, see Richard Ford, "Babar Ahmad Awarded £60,000 Damages for Assaults by Police," *Times*, March 19, 2009.

22 Nadya Labi, "Jihad 2.0," *Atlantic Monthly* 297:6 (2006).

23 "Three Jailed for Inciting Terror," BBC, July 5, 2007.

24 Adem Demir and Christopher Dickey, "The Bomber's Wife," *Newsweek*, July 1, 2010.

25 See Awan and al-Lami for a detailed overview of this concerted assault on jihadist virtual media environments.

26 This statement was posted on www.shamikh1.net/ vb/.

27 Awan and al-Lami.

contested, particularly as the linkage between words and acts online and deeds offline is exceedingly problematic.[28]

The nexus between Web 2.0 in particular and the media or virtual jihadist has undoubtedly had important repercussions for jihadism in the 21st century, rejuvenating its ailing ideology and facilitating the dissemination of its counterculture to new audiences, many of whom are beyond the traditional scope of official jihadist media organs. Although the jihadist message is increasingly being granted more diffuse audience penetration, the ideology itself has been forced to sacrifice a significant degree of its coherency and cogency along the way. Marshall McLuhan's well-known and prescient maxim, "the medium is the message," can perhaps help explain how the promotion of a virtual or media jihad within this new media environment has fundamentally recast the ideology of jihadism in the new century to retain its relevance to a new generation of "digital natives."[29]

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28 See, for example, Akil N. Awan, "Radicalization on the Internet? The Virtual Propagation of Jihadist Media and its Effects," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 152:3 (2007); Tim Stevens and Peter R. Neumann, *Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action* (London: ICSR, 2008); Anthony Begin, Sulastri Bte Osman, Carl Ungerer and Nur Azlin Mohamed Yasin, *Countering Internet Radicalisation in Southeast Asia*, RSIS–ASPI, 2009.

29 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 1964).

Internet Jihadists React to the Deaths of Al-Qa`ida's Leaders in Iraq

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

ON APRIL 18, 2010, U.S. and Iraqi forces killed al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI) chief Abu Ayyub al-Masri (also known as Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) and Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) leader Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi.[1] The deaths marked another blow to AQI, which also lost its previous leader, Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, to a U.S. airstrike in June 2006. U.S. General Ray Odierno, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, said that the killings were "potentially the most significant blow to al-Qaeda in Iraq since the beginning of the insurgency."[2]

In addition to damaging the organizational capabilities of AQI, the deaths caused an immediate reaction on jihadist internet forums. Jihadist sympathizers and other forum users at first refused to believe Iraqi government claims that the two leaders were killed, especially since there had been numerous false reports of their deaths in the past. Yet when the ISI announced the martyrdom of the two men, it became clear that U.S. and Iraqi forces had succeeded in decapitating the leadership of AQI and the ISI.

This article focuses on the online reaction to the deaths of Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi, examining the initial reactions of online jihadist forum users, statements on the deaths from other jihadist groups, and how jihadist forum users viewed the future of the Iraqi jihad in the wake of the recent setbacks.

Online Jihadist Reaction to the Deaths

In response to the Iraqi government's initial announcement on the deaths of al-Masri and al-Baghdadi, online jihadists expressed disbelief. Members on various jihadist internet forums claimed that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's statement was government

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1 "U.S.: 2 of Al Qaeda's Top Leaders Killed in Iraq," CBS News, April 19, 2010; "Qaeda in Iraq 'Names Replacements for Slain Leaders,'" Agence France-Presse, May 16, 2010.

2 "Al-Qaeda in Iraq Says Leaders Dead," al-Jazira, April 25, 2010.

propaganda against al-Qa`ida, similar to past statements erroneously announcing the arrest of al-Baghdadi.

This response changed, however, after the ISI's Ministry of Religious Affairs admitted that both al-Baghdadi and al-Masri had in fact been killed. The ISI assured the Islamic world that it remained in good hands and had already appointed new leadership. The statement, signed by Abu al-Waleed Abdul Hadi al-Mashhadani, reportedly said, "If Allah fated that the two sheikhs be killed at this particular time, know that they left a unique generation behind, one that was raised before their eyes."[3] The ISI also released a separate statement that read,

> Here we accept congratulations for the martyrdom of the war lions...Amirs of Jihad. They paid their dues and raised our heads high...they put the U.S. and its collaborators in the dirt. We will continue on the same path. No backing down now. Don't turn away. Be as quiet as death and solid as steel. The world is digging its own grave.[4]

After it became clear that U.S. and Iraqi authorities succeeded in killing the heads of AQI and the ISI, jihadist forum contributors called for revenge. One forum member challenged "the infidels," warning that jihad would never stop. The user reminded readers of how even the death of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in 2006 did not quell AQI's activities in Iraq. "Will jihad retract?" he asked.

> Previously, when al-Zarqawi was killed, some thought jihad would cease in Iraq. At the time of al-Zarqawi's death, the Iraqi political situation was somewhat stable, but jihad continued. Presently, Iraq is in a political vacuum, rendering better chances for the mujahidin to carry out attacks.[5]

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3 Ibid. This statement was posted on www.alboraq.info on April 25, 2010.

4 This statement was posted on www.muslm.net on April 25, 2010.

5 This statement was posted on www.alboraq.info on April 29, 2010.