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Online "Curriculum" of Jihad:
Four Broad Themes

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There are four broad themes that can be found from the jihadist's online ideological materials to elicit support and indoctrinate symphathisers and subsequently transform them into recruits or freelance radicals. Some practical ideas for counter-ideological work can however also be extracted from them.

IT HAS been widely accepted by analysts that the Internet today is an important media platform for jihadist propaganda. The open nature of the Internet, which makes it difficult to regulate, allows jihadists to propagate their ideology, disseminate propaganda materials, and offer their own narratives to events and news. This has enabled jihadists to win sympathy from certain segments of Muslims who could be radicalised and subsequently recruited into the struggle. The result is a continuing jihadist threat especially from the elusive and self-radicalised but unaffiliated individuals, such as those who succeeded in launching attacks like the London train bombing on July 2005.

The Jihadi curriculum

Since the understanding of jihadist ideology is an important aspect in counter-ideological work, it is important then to have an understanding of jihadist online materials. This begins with an understanding of what Stephen Ulph calls the "jihadi curriculum".

There is no single coherent curriculum to train a person as a jihadist. But according to Stephen Ulph, a senior fellow with the Jamestown Foundation and founder and editor of Terrorism Security Monitor, jihadist ideological materials on the Internet are so vast and comprehensive that they could be regarded as an undergraduate course on jihad.

One needs only to look at the site dedicated to Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdese, a leading Jihadi theorist. Many observers recognize it as the largest repository of jihadist ideological and doctrinal materials. It contains thousands of materials written by past and present ideologues and works of classical *ulama* on jihad. The only aspects that are profoundly lacking from this site, unlike other jihadist sites, are technical knowledge about weaponry and military combat tactics and videos that show military

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operations.

Testifying to the importance of this site, it was used as a main research source for The Militant Ideology Atlas, a study published by the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point to identify the most influential thinkers in the jihadi movement. The study identifies Al-Maqdese as "the most influential living Jihadi Theorist" because his site provides an easy one-stop centre for jihadist materials -- virtually functioning like an open online university for aspiring jihadists.

The Four Broad Themes

Ulph identifies four broad themes or objectives from the online "curriculum" of jihad. First is the undermining of the present cultural order. This is achieved by targeting democracy, secularism and pluralism. The jihadists argue that these are man-made ideologies that not only fundamentally contradict Islamic teachings, but are constructed by a global conspiracy against Islam to deviate Muslims from their religion. Muslims who adhere to them therefore fall into a trap that will nullify their faith.

Second is the undermining of the current order within Muslim society and the world. This is achieved by removing any kind of legitimacy for Muslim regimes, state systems, political conduct, and pro-establishment Muslim scholars and those who do not strive against those regimes, systems and political conduct. By undermining the two said orders, jihadists have effectively created a vacuum that their alternative worldview is easily positioned to fill.

Rejecting the current order in the world and in Muslim society, however, will not change the reality or guarantee that the jihadist order prevails. It requires some sort of action or struggle. In that respect, the third theme observed by Ulph comes to prominence and that is instilling the duty of jihad in Muslims.

Jihadists construct four main arguments to fuel the spirit of jihad. Firstly, it is "the forgotten obligation" that needs to be revived. Its neglect is the cause of Muslims' current humiliation. Secondly, it is an individual duty for every single Muslim that is equal to their daily prayers, and does not require the permission of parents, authority or anybody to perform. Thirdly, it means first and foremost an armed struggle, before other meanings. Fourthly, due to the sorry state of Muslim society, jihad as armed struggle has the ultimate priority above all other obligations.

Jihadists do not live in a vacuum. They are constantly challenged by their critics from within the Muslim society and without. This requires them to reiterate their position and refute criticism. Thus the fourth theme in "the online curriculum": maintaining the authority to speak for Islam and Muslims. In order to maintain doctrinal authority, jihadists will invoke a "holier-than-thou" position towards others in all doctrinal issues. The objective is to maintain morale as well as the moral high ground.

Ulph's identification of these four themes underlying the "jihadi curriculim" deserves greater study. For instance, he is right that jihadists take the legitimacy of their authority very seriously. No serious criticism against them by important figures is left unanswered, and no ambiguous action is left unclarified. Illustrating this tendency are such works as Imam Samudra's book *Aku Melawan Teroris* (I am fighting the Terrorist) and Az-Zawahiri's recent reply to a leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad's ideological revision and criticism of Al-Qaeda.. Al-Maqdese's site itself is a testimony to this too.

Opportunity for counter-ideological work

While the proliferation of jihadist online "curriculum" through websites, chat rooms and forum boards is a source of concern, it also offers great opportunity for counter-ideology research. The "curriculum" allows deep understanding of the intricacies of the ideology. Ulph calls attention in particular to

jihadist polemics and self-analysis. Polemics, self-analysis, and dissension from jihadists themselves provide analysts with points of tension, controversy and weaknesses. These are useful to weaken the appeal of the ideology and to de-legitimise its tenets.

Although jihadist ideology is an aberration to true Islamic teachings, this does not necessarily mean that its proponents are simplistic, naïve, and unsophisticated ideological adversaries that can be taken less seriously. On the contrary, jihadist materials on the Internet are testimony to their commitment and dedication. Thus, they are a serious foe who can only be defeated by serious efforts and equal dedication from those who are in the mainstream.

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