Al Qaeda's Internet Strategy A Failure? Online Jihadists Disprove
Nur Aziemah Binte Azman

The online jihadist community is abuzz with reactions over the latest RAND Testimony on online jihadism. The points published in the report have put the online jihadi community on the defensive. Members of jihadi forums have posted their thoughts on the article and offered a rebuttal to the points made in the report.

Screenshot of the Shumukh online jihadi forum. Image Credit: ICPVTR Informatics Team

The online jihadist community has always taken pride and believed in the significance of the Internet as a powerful weapon for global jihad, next to explosives and firearms. However, a report published by RAND Corporation on 6 December 2011 that was also presented before the United States House Committee on Homeland Security, has put the online community on the defensive.

The RAND report by terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins titled "Is Al Qaeda's Internet Strategy Working?" assessed the threat and development of Al Qaeda's Internet strategy in the global Jihad and how to tackle it. Jenkins found that Al Qaeda shifted its strategy from organizationally-led jihad to individual jihad made possible through online jihadism. However, he argued that the decline of terrorist violence in the United States suggests a failure of Al Qaeda's Internet strategy. Nevertheless it could still lead to cyber terrorism and should not be over-

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looked, and that the Internet must be monitored continuously for signals of new dangers.

Online Jihadists Respond

RAND's reports and articles have been the subject of discussion among members of online Arabic jihadi forums in the past. A week after Jenkins' report was published a forum member at the *Shumukh* Islamic Network called "Chahed" cited a number of points made in the report. Chahed's comments were titled "Do you believe in RAND's report?" In it, Chahed firstly emphasized that statistics shown in the report did not concern him but the author's analysis on the psychology of cyber jihadists grabbed his attention. Among the points that Chahed highlighted were that cyber jihadists encourages others to conduct attacks without exposing themselves to personal danger, and that a virtual jihadist cannot differentiate between the real world and virtual reality. Chahed also took note of Jenkins' advice on the counter productivity of shutting down the jihadist websites, and the need to continue monitoring them.

Chahed's post can be found in the three popular jihadi forums (*Shumukh*, *Ansar Mujahideen* and *Global Jihad*) and had garnered more than 30 responses. It is not surprising that curses and insults were hurled at RAND, and Jenkins in particular, as verbal attacks and hateful comments are the jihadists' generic response to any western counterterrorism efforts and analyses. A number of forum members also wrote that they will not offer any comments which the "parasites" i.e. analysts monitoring the forums, can use against the jihadists. However, there are some who did comment on certain points made in the report. For instance, a member known as "Da'wah and Jihad" challenged Jenkins' suggestion not to shut down jihadi websites as they serve as a source of intelligence, since many jihadi websites and forums such as *Fallujah*, *Hisbah* and *Al-Ikhlas* have already been taken down. According to the forum member, this is a sign of fallacy in Jenkins' analysis. Others commented that even if the jihadi websites and forums were to be taken down, the "dissemination workshop" will ensure that jihadi media and propaganda will still

reach Muslims. On virtual jihadists who became real-world jihadists, another member, "Abu Bakr Al-Qahtani" commented that the report disregarded more cases that indicate the influence of jihadi websites on online jihadists to carry out attacks. For example, CIA double agent Humam Al-Balawi and Jordanian Al-Qaeda operative Haythem Al-Khayat aka Abu Kandahar who was an administrator at the Hisbah forums, carried out operations before they were killed. Another forum member "Abuhamza" also reiterated this point.

The reactions to the RAND report did not stop with Chahed's thread. Other forum members posted their reactions. In his forum post, Abuhamza argued that Jenkins failed to understand and accurately analyze the psychological profile of a virtual jihadist as "he [Jenkins] doesn't understand the reality of a jihadist who has *iman* (faith)." This discredits Jenkins' report as well as other research and studies that seek to analyze jihadists and jihad. The response in this thread is generally agreeable with Abuhamza's argument and supportive of his theory of RAND analysts' incompetency in studying the jihadists.

Another forum post titled "Sufficient and adequate response to the latest RAND report: intellectual setbacks and obsolete theses" is a more structured and lengthy analysis compared to the first two. "Abu Hafs As-Sunni As-Sunni" who is a regular writer at many of the jihadi forums, divided the content of the report into 4 sections; discouragement, sarcasm and disparagement, attack, and contradiction. He then debunked the arguments categorized in each section. The first section of the report seeks to discourage people from participating in online jihad through the claims it made, dispute the idea of online jihad and expose its ineffectiveness. To this, As-Sunni retorted that the US is seeking to disrupt jihadists from going online because it fears the power and impact that the internet and social media have on people, particularly the jihadists. He explained that online jihad is not the opposite of combat jihad but is actually the other side of combat jihad.

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The second section includes the argument on the lack of genuine links between online recruitment in jihadi websites and real combat arenas, and the assertion that only by learning tactical instructions on the ground, and not online, can the jihadists launch terrorist attacks. As-Sunni elaborated that Al Qaeda did not devise online jihad in order to evade combat jihad but explained that online jihad is a part of the ongoing war between the forces of *iman* and *kufr* (infidelity). Hence, Al Qaeda will never call to abandon combat jihad for online jihad. As-Sunni affirmed that jihadists know the difference between the cyber world and the real world, as they know that their online jihad is part of the bigger global jihad. They do not favor one over the other as both are equally important and significant.

Section 3 comprises the attacks on jihadi websites, the hunt for jihadi instigators and bringing them to justice. In this section, the RAND report claimed that online jihad is easy, convenient and accessible. It gives the illusion that jihad behind a computer is jihad on the ground, but when a jihadist log out from the network, his link to the jihadi world is cut off. As-Sunni refuted that it is not easy for jihadists to go online because there is always the danger of being tracked down by western and Arab intelligence agencies. On the option of disconnecting from the online jihad, As-Sunni rebutted that a jihadist goes online to vent his frustration of being separated from the jihadi scene and wanted to know about the news of his brothers and sisters elsewhere. As-Sunni challenged that if a jihadi can disconnect and does not pose any real-time harm, he would not have been detained and imprisoned like many administrators, moderators and members of jihadi forums.

The last section exposed the contradictions found in Jenkins' analysis. Jenkins advised the disruption and closure of jihadi websites but suggested to leave them as they provide a valuable source of information. At one point, he urged organizations to assess the actual threat from the jihadi forums but asserted that the websites have not produced any significant result and recruitment. As-Sunni repudiated the claim that jihadi websites

Screenshot of jihadi forum post by online user "Chahed"
Image Credit: ICPVTR Informatics Team

are counterproductive and listed the results achieved with the websites namely the forums. They have become the subject of study in many universities in the west, opened the door to support and recruitment even if it's virtual as it will lead to real membership to jihadi groups, and connect leaders to supporters through open questions and interviews. On the decline of recruitment, As-Sunni insisted that recruitment is ongoing and that analysts would not have known of any information because of the "Asrar Mujahideen" encryption tool used only between jihadists. As-Sunni also mentioned that RAND report failed to consider the Arab Spring as a result of a form of online jihad. As a closing remark, As-Sunni urged others to repost his article at other Arabic and Islamic forums.

Conclusion

The jihadists' response can be broadly summarized into four points. Firstly, they seem to be unconcerned with the decline of violence or attempted terrorist attacks in the US as they believe there are more cases that were not mentioned in the report. Secondly, they repeatedly emphasized that cyber jihad is just as important and significant as conducting violence and terrorist attacks

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on the ground or participating in the real-world combat jihad, as they are both two sides of the same coin. Therefore, remaining virtual is not a weakness and having the intention to act is jihad. Moreover jihadists agreed that non-believers like Jenkins are incapable of understanding jihadists' behavior or giving sound analysis on jihad. This explains the jihadists' rejection and dismissal of any western counterterrorism analyses which they deem deceptive and fallacious. Finally, they are confident that the "dissemination workshop", an online workshop that urges members to repost jihadi media on mainstream online forums, would ensure that online jihad will persist. As-Sunni's closing remark exemplifies this point.

All in all, Al Qaeda's internet strategy may or may not be a failure depending on which side of the coin, whether its terrorism or counterterrorism, one is looking at. From a counterterrorism perspective, the threat of online jihad today might be low as there is less real-time impact especially in the US. Online jihadists on the other hand are insistent that remaining online is still jihad that can pose real-time danger. With the dissemination workshop, Al Qaeda's call for cyber-jihad', increasing instructions and tutorials on internet science, cyber warfare and security in the jihadi forums, may suggest that Al Qaeda's internet strategy is not only individual terrorism but also cyber terrorism.

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Al Qaeda in Post-Occupation Iraq
Eric Tope*

With the withdrawal of the United States military from Iraq, there have been concerns about the possible resurgence of the Al Qaeda off-shoot in the country.

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The withdrawal of all United States military personnel by the end of 2011 provoked many questions with regards to the future of post-occupation Iraq. Among the concerns is whether or not the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) will be able to reprise the dominant role it once held in certain regions of the country circa 2005-2006. Addressing this question requires an examination of what facilitated AQI's initial rise and an assessment as to whether or not such variables are likely to be present in Iraq following America's extrication.

AQI, Sunnis, and Safe Havens

In early 2006, the AQI approached the apex of its authority in many of Iraq's Sunni regions, primarily Anbar province. Ramadi, Anbar's capital, was the site of approximately half of all attacks on coalition forces throughout 2006. In August 2006, Colonel Peter Devlin, a senior Marine intelligence officer, drafted an assessment of the province in which he lamented that all government institutions had either "disintegrated or been thoroughly corrupted and infiltrated by Al Qaeda in Iraq…," which had become "the dominant organization of influence in al Anbar…." Upon his arrival in Ramadi, Colonel Sean MacFarland similarly noted that "Al Qaeda was calling the shots." Other Sunni provinces experienced comparable infiltrations by AQI. It is tempting to attribute the organization's success to inadequate administration by the Coalition Provisional Authority which facilitated Iraq's drift toward state failure, but there is more to it.

In order to advance their agenda, transnational insurgents, like the Al Qaeda, often establish sanctuaries such as the one they developed in Iraq. The freedom of movement offered by failed states does assist in this undertaking; however sustaining operations in one location definitely requires more than a piece of ungoverned territory. Survival and progress is also dependent upon access to supplies, new recruits, communications, finances and protection, which cannot be secured in a remote hideout secluded from the local infrastructure and populace. To ensure the provision of such necessities, non-state interveners must embed themselves within the host-state's society to some degree. Ideally, these groups need the proactive support of local citizens providing them with new followers, money and supplies. At a bare minimum they need the complicity of a citizenry they can hide amongst who will not collaborate against them with government or counterinsurgency forces. Thus the indigenous population, or some segment of it, is the center of gravity for insurgents if they are to flourish. This type of relationship is precisely what AQI sought, and temporarily achieved, with Iraq's Sunnis.

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Leaving Iraq, U.S. Fears New Surge of Qaeda Terror

Andrea Bruce for The New York Times

Troops from Joint Base Balad left Iraq on Tuesday for the United States. Pentagon officials are arguing for a future role in Iraq.

By MICHAEL S. SCHMIDT and ERIC SCHMITT
Published: November 5, 2011

Screenshot of the 5 November 2011 article in the New York Times. The print version appeared in Page A1 of the New York Edition on 6 November 2011. The online version of the article can be accessed at the
New York Times website

Prior to 2007, AQI managed to saturate several Sunni provinces, inter-marry into their tribes and execute a potent asymmetric warfare campaign against which coalition troops were largely ineffective. A critical component of AQI's ascendance was the onset of sectarian conflict that accompanied the demise of the Ba'ath government. The emergence of lethal Shiite militias, the creation of the predominantly Shiite Iraqi Army and the advancement of Shiite parties in national politics all stimulated Sunni fears of injustice and brutality in post-Saddam Iraq. This state of affairs rendered the Sunni minority receptive to AQI's intrusion, and led them to view the foreigners as valuable allies against Shiite aggression. As Fred Kagan contends, "the hostility within Iraq's Sunni Arab community to the prospect of a Shia-dominated government sparked an insurgency, of which AQI quickly took advantage." Andrew Phillips likewise avers that, "The jihadists' opportunistic insertion into the Iraq conflict was made possible by the fears of a recently disenfranchised Sunni minority in the face of Shiite political ascendancy." In sum, Iraq's civil conflict allowed AQI to firmly embed itself in the country's Sunni areas under the guise of protecting their religious brethren. Given the Sunnis' predicament AQI constituted a tactical asset, which facilitated an uneasy but necessary alliance.

The preceding argument is evidenced by several observations. Most tellingly is the strength AQI managed to achieve throughout Iraq's Sunni provinces. In addition to Anbar, Diyala and Salah al Din became AQI havens as well. At the height of activity, these two provinces averaged between twenty five and thirty insur-

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gent attacks daily, just below Anbar's peak of forty. Prior to his demise, Abu Musab al Zarqawi conspired to establish Diyala as the capital of the Islamic State of Iraq. This acceptance of AQI by the Sunnis would seem unremarkable except for the fact that the Iraqis resented the foreign presence. Despite a common religious identity Iraq's Sunni population remained largely indifferent to AQI's agenda against the West and sought neither to create a caliphate in Iraq, nor to employ it as a base for global jihad. Moreover, AQI disrupted commerce by stealing profits from tribal leaders' businesses and, deeply offended tribal mores by intermarrying with local women and by executing local sheikhs. AQI's infiltration proved so unsavory that the Iraqis revolted the moment the Americans proved more capable of protecting them; an event that culminated with the tribal "Awakening." Therefore the alliance with AQI was strictly one of necessity against the Shiite community.

The AQI's modus operandi of exploiting civil conflict is further evident by their efforts to exasperate sectarian warfare in Iraq, most notably by desecrating the Golden Dome Mosque in Samara provoking severe Shiite retaliation. As long as the Shia roamed the streets for blood, AQI "benefited from this struggle, which it helped to produce, posing as the defender of the Sunni against the Jaysh-al-Mahdi." Outside Iraq, Al Qaeda has utilized similar tactics in Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen. In all of these cases al Qaeda exploited internal conflict with the aim of acquiring sanctuary within local communities.

Assessment

So, will AQI be able to replicate this tactic after the withdrawal and disengagement of US troops? Given that their success in Iraq was primarily facilitated by Sunni insecurity and disenfranchisement, AQI's capacity to reconstitute a dominant role will be determined by the degree to which the Iraqi national government can maintain balanced representation among Iraq's sectarian communities and constrain rouge Shiite elements. The results of the March 2010 national elections were somewhat encouraging. The nonsectarian, and heavily-Sunni, Iraqiya party won the most parliamentary seats with 91;

over Nouri al -Maliki's Dawa party which claimed 89. Broad Sunni political participation is critical to prevent the type of disunity that AQI desires. Even more crucial than electoral representation is the physical security of the Sunni populace. Perhaps the most positive move taken by the central government in this regard was Maliki's decision in March 2008 to cease support for Muqtada al Sadr and initiate military operations against the Jaysh al Mahdi. This move significantly bolstered Maliki's legitimacy with the Sunnis and undermined much of the basis of AQI's presence. Similar policy decisions will be necessary in the future if Iraq's religious minority is to feel adequately insulated from sectarian militias. However Maliki's move against Sadr was probably more about neutralizing a challenge to himself than winning over the Sunnis. It is also vital that sectarian violence not be used to secure political authority. This may prove difficult. The central government recently initiated a crackdown on suspected Ba'athists in a pre-emptive operation to counter an anti-government plot. Unsurprisingly, many Sunnis perceived the move as a politically motivated endeavor to secure Shiite domination in light of the American withdrawal. Whether or not an insurrection was in the works the government must tread carefully. If the Sunnis feel targeted and the US is absent another alliance of convenience with AQI may be an attractive option.

In sum, Al Qaeda's past and future in Iraq must be viewed in the context of the nation's sectarian divisions. Their previous success was made possible only by the Sunnis' quest for security amongst civil warfare, and not by any innate amenability to AQI's salafist ambitions. As long as the Sunnis receive sufficient representation and protection, AQI is unlikely to recover from its setbacks. The foreigners will maintain a presence, but with none of Iraq's communities willing to embrace them, their effectiveness will be marginal at best.

The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) is a specialist centre within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

ICPVTR conducts research, training, and outreach programs aimed at reducing the threat of politically motivated violence and at mitigating its effects on the international system. The Centre seeks to integrate academic theory with practical knowledge, which is essential for a complete and comprehensive understanding of threats from politically-motivated groups.

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The Centre is staffed by academic specialists, religious scholars, as well as personnel from the law enforcement, military and intelligence agencies, among others. The Centre is culturally and linguistically diverse, comprising of functional and regional analysts as well as Muslim religious scholars from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

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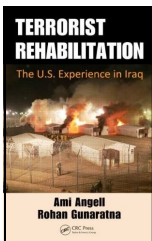
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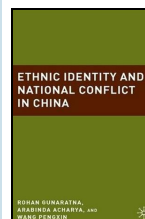
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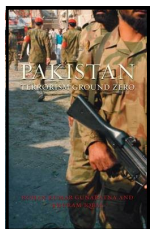
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