Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad
Virtual Battlefronts from Iraq to the Horn of Africa

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Since the 9/11 attacks and the launch of the U.S.-led War on Terror, the media has become an increasingly important battlefield between the West and the global jihadist movement. Both sides of the conflict acknowledge the media's importance. According to al-Qaeda's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri, "We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our *umma* [community of Muslims]."[1] Likewise, the 2006 U.S. Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review stated that "victory in the long war [on terrorism] ultimately depends on strategic communication by the United States and its international partners."[2]

  In less than two decades, the global jihadist movement has established a pervasive media presence, moving quickly from print to satellite broadcasts to the Internet. The mid-1990s information revolution in the Arab World and the simultaneous growth of Islamic political activism and extremism provided the backdrop for this new development. Despite the fact that al-Qaeda's leadership predates the information age, the group has embraced the advantages of the new communication technology, creating a global and, to a certain degree, anonymous

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reach. Operational security is critical to the way the jihadists use media. As the bounty on bin Laden's head increased, he stopped giving interviews to Western and Arab media and quit using satellite-based communication. Today, he rarely appears even on jihadist-produced and -distributed media broadcasts. Other prominent members of the global jihadist movement, however, continue to make frequent appearances in the news. Moreover, the phenomenon of a jihadist online media, which saw a peak in Iraq under the guidance of al-Zarqawi, is spreading to new regions, including the Horn of Africa.

This article analyses the global jihadist online media landscape; it examines a number of media establishments, such as those affiliated with the al-Qaeda leadership and with insurgents in Iraq, and moves on to the revitalized North African media scene and new developments in the Horn of Africa. It explores the news distributed by these media outlets and seeks to determine the role of new media within the global jihadist movement. The article argues that the jihadist online media, similar to traditional media in times of war, promotes the goals of intimidating the enemy, legitimizing activities, and propagating support. Unlike traditional media, it also fulfills the need for education and internal communication and contributes to the creation of a virtual community of like-minded individuals. The impact of the jihadist media on the general public is difficult to assess. While opinion polls generally show that only a minority in both the West and the Middle East supports the al-Qaeda movement and its ideology, it is unclear where that minority finds its inspiration. However, the abundance of media issuances circulating

on the web and the many discussions they generate on jihadist forums are important indicators. Keeping in mind Sun Tzu's maxim, "know your enemy," opponents of jihadism should also take a careful look at the media jihad in order to better understand an increasingly important aspect of global jihadism in the twenty-first century.[3]

Afghanistan: The Jihadist Media Authority.

In Afghanistan, the production of printed magazines supporting the Afghan-Arab mujahideen (Islamic guerilla fighters) had long been a characteristic of the jihadist campaign. Bin Laden's movement, today referred to as al-Qaeda, early established a Media Committee headed by a jihadist with the catchy nom de guerre Abu Reuter. The Media Committee was mainly in charge of handling traditional Western and Arab media, and an online media presence was primarily established through the appearance of the multi-media company as-Sahab (the Clouds) in 2001. Khaled Sheikh Mohammad, the alleged mastermind behind the 9/11 and other al-Qaeda attacks, claimed that he was "the Media Operations Director of as-Sahab [...] under Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri."[4] This statement, in addition to the fact that as-Sahab is the producer of the entire body of bin Laden and al-Zawahiri audio and video tapes, demonstrates how much authority the media organization has within al-Qaeda. As-Sahab also promotes other prominent jihadists to the public and produces documentary-like films about the jihadist movement as well as operational videos from Afghanistan. Its productions are known for their technological sophistication, cinematic effects, and unique footage, as well as for efforts to reach a Western public with

translations and subtitles in foreign languages.

As-Sahab's operational videos, serialized in "Pyre for Americans in Khorasan [Afghanistan]," depict jihadist attacks on Western troops in Afghanistan and seek to propagate the movement by boosting morale among its supporters. The al-Qaeda leadership speeches, however, seem to have a number of strategic goals of communication, including propagation, legitimization, and intimidation. Propagation of the movement appears as a recurring topic in bin Laden and al-Zawahiri tapes. Particular political situa-

trates a steady growth in publications until 2005, with respectively six, eleven, twelve, and sixteen issuances a year. There was an explosive increase in 2006, which saw a total of fifty-eight distributed tapes.[5] It seems that 2007 will also become a banner year: seven al-Zawahiri tapes have already been published as of mid-March. It is worth noting, however, that bin Laden has remained silent since July 2006.

Bin Laden's latest media speech was dedicated to the Muslim umma in general and the mujahideen in Iraq and Somalia in particular. While bin Laden did not

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tions, for example in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, and Somalia, urge the umma to participate in the jihad in different regions. Indeed, many of bin Laden's and al-Zawahiri's comments are linked to international political events, including the U.S. elections in 2004, or, more recently, the secret CIA prison imbroglio and the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. Perhaps the most important goal of communication is legitimization of the movement and its activities. This is articulated through religious justification and by presenting the movement as a rightful resistance group within the context of Islamic history. Finally, when addressing the West, the goal seems to be to warn and remind of the truce offered by bin Laden and ignored by the West—certainly a form of intimidation.

A statistical analysis of as-Sahab's issuances from 2002 until 2007 illus-

mention the "jihad of the pen" in his statement, both Iraq and Somalia are already fronts for media jihad. Iraq has been a jihadist online media stronghold since 2003. As for Somalia, it is the most recent source of jihadist Internet news.

Iraq: a jihadist online media success. The conflict in Iraq has been the catalyst for the general surge in the number of jihadist online media outlets observed since 2003. Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad, later al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers [Iraq]), took the crucial step of mobilizing computer-savvy allies to fight against the U.S. occupation. His use of media benefited the propagation of the jihadist movement globally and also promoted the recruitment of foreign fighters to his ranks. Al-Zarqawi's first communiqué

appeared on a jihadist web forum in April 2004, amidst a flurry of other audio-visual propaganda, including video clips of military operations and photographs of suicide attacks. In particular, al-Zarqawi gained notoriety for videotaping beheadings of foreign and Iraqi hostages. While this practice spread to other groups in Iraq, al-Zawahiri reprimanded al-Zarqawi for these gruesome tapes. The rebuke stemmed from concerns about the reaction of their supporters: "...the general opinion of our supporters does not comprehend that [it is justified], and this general opinion falls under a campaign by the malicious, perfidious and fallacious [Western] media."[6]

Al-Zarqawi himself appeared openly in only one video, in April 2006, less than two months before he was killed by U.S. forces in Iraq. By that time, he had already transferred authority to the Mujahideen Shura Council (MSC), an umbrella organization for a number of jihadist insurgent groups in Iraq. One of the main administrative activities of the MSC was the maintenance of a blog that posted daily statements about military operations effected by its partner groups. The site also had links to newly released jihadist videos, ranging from amateur recordings of ambushes to technologically sophisticated audio-visual material.

In October 2006, the "Islamic State of Iraq" was announced on the web, with support from "al-Qaeda in the land of the two rivers [Iraq]," the MSC, and other insurgent groups. This new "state" soon established a Ministry of Information, and al-Furqan Media Establishment was announced as its official multi-media agent. The Ministry of Information releases regular news reports from the provinces of the "Islamic State of Iraq" as well as other religious, political, and strategic messages.[7] Examples include comments on the Baker-Hamilton report, calls for revenge on specific "crusader" operations in Iraq, and judgments by the state's Sharia court. Al-Furqan Media has produced videos of attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq. The quality of these videos is increasingly high and rapidly approaching the technological sophistication demonstrated by as-Sahab.

In addition to the media war from within Iraq, other jihadist media organizations without a specific national affiliation have focused on the cause of their compatriots in Iraq. These groups provide, among other things, educational material to the already multi-faceted media jihad. Media outlets such as the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) and al-Fajr Media Center have issued copious religious lessons, military training manuals, and, recently, a new periodical entitled "The Technical Mujahid" that focuses on Internet security and the use of software. Other interesting online publications include the "Know Your Enemy" and the "Foreign Pen" series. Focused on the importance of understanding the enemy's society and its political and intellectual trends, these include, for example, translations of American academic texts and policy recommendations for countering the Iraqi insurgency. Finally, by offering support and advice to the Iraqi mujahideen, these outside media groups contribute to the creation of a virtual, global community of jihadists.

A New Focus: North Africa and the Horn.
Over the last year, the al-Qaeda leadership has clearly articulated an effort to incorporate a new and more distant geographical area, North Africa

and the Horn, in the global jihadist community. Speeches by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have repeatedly urged mujahideen to "go to Sudan" and "defend Islam in Darfur," or to "support [your] brothers in Somalia." The Islamic State of Iraq also called for "Muslims to stand with the brothers in Somalia" in December 2006.[8] In parallel, a prominent al-Qaeda ideologue released a document entitled "The greatest hopes of doing Jihad in Somalia."[9] In Kuwait, the well-known radical cleric Sheikh Hamid al-Ali issued a *fatwa* (legal decree issued by an Islamic religious leader) for "jihad against the hateful Christian Ethiopia."[10] This period has also seen a revitalization and new role for the jihadist media in Algeria, a country suffering from a protracted Islamist insurgency.

In a September 2006 as-Sahab interview with al-Zawahiri entitled "Hot Issues," the joining of the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) with al-Qaeda was announced. A few days later, the leader of GSPC, Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wudud, responded in an Internet-issued statement, confirming GSPC's incorporation into al-Qaeda. This development culminated in January 2007, when the group announced a change of name from GSPC to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib. Around this time, the Algerian Islamist group launched a wave of attacks, all properly documented by the group's media organization. The best-documented attack was the "Bouchawi raid" on Halliburton subsidiary employees in Algeria; the videotape depicted the attack and preparations for it, including manufacture of explosives and physical and electronic (Google Earth) reconnaissance. Other important media issuances from GSPC include an ideological video

speech by Abd al-Wudud, "We are coming," which was issued in January 2007. It contains three messages: one to the Emir of al-Qaeda, bin Laden, requesting guidance; the second to the Algerian President Bouteflika, with advice on *sharia* governance; and the third to Muslims of Algeria, urging them to join and support the mujahideen. Al-Wudud justifies the jihad in the "war on Islam" waged by the West, links the Algerian cause to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, and sends his greetings to the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia.

Somalia, indeed, makes a fascinating study in the evolution of online jihadist media activity. Last year's calls for support to the "brothers in Somalia" by prominent jihadists were first picked up by members of jihadist forums and instigated widespread Internet chatter. The forum members provided general information about the country and the situation of Muslims there, which finally manifested itself in a "Comprehensive file on Somalia." It is a slide show presented as an electronic textbook—with information about Somalia's geography, history, religions, ethnicities, and languages—published online by the Media Jihad Brigade. A propaganda film was also released by al-Fajr Media Center, entitled "Apostate Hell in Somalia," that contains interviews with Somali jihadists, training of fighters, preparation for attack, and actual operations. While this video was distributed to Arabic language jihadist websites, the language used in the film was Somali. However, the visual propaganda ensured that the basic message of the film was not lost. Since the start of 2007, more Somali groups have entered the online media arena. An establishment named the Friends of Somalia Brigade operates an Arabic lan-

guage website where it communicates attacks by Somali resistance groups, such as the Popular Resistance Movement in the Land of Hijrateen, the Youth of al-Qaeda Organization in Somalia, and Somalia Liberation Brigades. These groups have claimed responsibility for attacks and threatened African Union (AU) forces, and the latter recently pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Other

from Iraq and the African continent. Calls for participation addressed directly to a group of people, such as the message to Muslims in Algeria, seek mass recruitment, but the call has little value without the ideological and political message that accompanies and legitimizes it. Thus, ideological material contributes to both propagation and legitimization of the movement. Yet, the most powerful legit-

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supporters of the Somali "brothers" include the Mujahideen Brigades in Eritrea, which have issued a short video with clips of ambush operations and photographs of Somali martyrs killed in southern Eritrea.

Sudan and the conflict in Darfur have not generated the same level of online jihadist media activity. Repeated comments by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri from April to October last year—"encouraging the *mujahideen* and their supporters to prepare to manage a long-term war against thieves and Crusaders in western Sudan"—resulted in emerging interest in Darfur on the jihadist web forums, as in the Somali case.[11] However, no other online media presence seems to have established itself in Sudan so far.

Strategic goals of communication.
The strategic goals of communication mentioned in the above analysis of as-Sahab, the al-Qaeda leadership's media outlet, emphasized three main points—propagation, legitimization, and intimidation. These are also recurring themes in the media material distributed

imizing force is media material offering opinions of Muslim clerics, such as the one by Hamid al-Ali on Ethiopia, or the rulings by the Sharia Courts of the Islamic State of Iraq. Finally, intimidation of the enemy is evident in the stated threats against the AU peacekeepers in Somalia or in the extremely violent beheading scenes from al-Zarqawi.

It is worth noting, however, that little of the jihadist online media material reaches the enemy public. Due to the illicit nature of the jihadist movement, websites that contain its messages are not easily accessible. Password protection and frequent changes in the URLs of jihadist sites—a result of both jihadist security measures and Western counter-terrorism efforts—do not allow for wide readership. Moreover, despite an increasing effort to translate media material into Western languages, most of the material is still available only in Arabic. Finally, some of the detailed religious references may be too unfamiliar to a Western reader. This indicates that the main target audience of the jihadist online media campaign is Muslim, Arabic-speaking,

and perhaps already sympathetic toward the movement. However, a general desire to reach a Western audience is emerging. This trend is exemplified by a strategic document circulating the jihadist web in August 2006 entitled "A Working Paper for a Media Invasion of America," and a September 2006 video message called "An Invitation to Islam," narrated in English, with Arabic subtitles, by American convert to Islam Adam Gadahn, also known as Azzam al-Amriki.[12]

Yet given that the jihadist online media campaign so far primarily addresses an internal audience, it is perhaps not so surprising that three additional strategic goals of communication seem to be present in media jihad: education, internal communication, and community building. First, instruction manuals and "know your enemy" guides seek to elucidate and educate supporters of the movement. Second, several jihadist branches communicate internally through online media, though not exclusively this way, including al-Qaeda leadership and GSPC, and bin Laden and forum members interested in Darfur. Third, these communicative exchanges across borders and their messages of support, advice, and solidarity contribute to the creation of a sense of a global jihadist community.

Conclusion. The jihadist online media campaign is not so much directed at the enemy—the West and Arab "apostate" regimes—as it is at supporters and potential followers. These supporters, numerically speaking, are a marginal group in Arab and Western societies. They nevertheless represent a powerful current that finds much of its strength and capacity in a sense of unity across borders. Main-

taining this unity is imperative to the preservation and enlargement of the movement. The concern about public opinion, evident in the al-Qaeda leadership's rebuke of al-Zarqawi's appalling media campaign in Iraq, is therefore comprehensible.

Al-Qaeda also acknowledges the possible influence of other, "deceptive" media. Despite the internal debate that surrounded al-Zarqawi's beheading scenes, his media campaign was generally perceived to be a success within the global jihadist movement. One particular reason for this success was the attention al-Zarqawi's videos received in the West, which is normally not the case with jihadist media issuances. While statements by the al-Qaeda leadership previously drew vast media attention, mainstream Western and Arab audiences now seem inured to the numerous al-Zawahiri speeches that have been broadcast recently. The continuing media silence of bin Laden may therefore be interpreted not only as an operational security measure, but also as a strategic choice for increased publicity in future media appearances.

Finally, while the idea of a media war between the West and the global jihadist movement is widely acknowledged and debated, the actual content, structure, and strategies of the jihadist media campaign remain largely in the shadows. This article sheds light on some aspects of the campaign, but as the media jihad becomes an increasingly important component of a hostile strategy against the West, it merits further exploration. Additional research and close monitoring is required in order to determine the actual effects of the jihadist use of online media outlets and to reveal important

characteristics of the jihadist movement. The West, like the jihadists, needs to "know its enemy." Only educated and well-informed Western policies can reduce the power and threat of global jihadism.

NOTES

1 "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, intercepted by American intelligence," Internet, http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english (date accessed: 22 March 2007).

2 United States Department of Defense, "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," Internet, http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report2006 0203.pdf (date accessed: 22 March 2007).

3 Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, China, 6th century BC. Arabic translation widely distributed on the jihadist web forums.

4 U.S. Department of Defense, "Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN 10024," Internet, http://www.defenselink.mil/news/transcript_ISN100 24.pdf (date accessed: 20 March 2007).

5 "Intel Center. Al-Qaeda Messaging Statistics (QMS) v. 2.9," Internet, http://www.intelcenter.com/QMS-PUB-v2-9.pdf (date accessed: 15 March 2007)

6 "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, intercepted by American intelligence," Internet, http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english (date accessed: 22 March 2007).

7 The provinces announced to be part of the "Islamic State of Iraq" are Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, Nineve, and parts of the governorates of Babel and Wasit.

8 Ministry of Information of the Islamic State of Iraq, "The Islamic State of Iraq calls Muslims to stand by their brothers in Somalia," Internet, www.w-n-n.com (date accessed: 10 January 2007).

9 Lewis Atiyat Allah, "The greatest hopes by doing Jihad in Somalia," Internet: http://www.w-n-n.com/ (date accessed: 10 January 2007).

10 Hamid al-Ali, "Jihad against the hateful Christian Ethiopia," Internet, http://www.h-alali.net/m_open.php?id=252ccd52-e52f-1029-a62a-0010dc91cf69 (date accessed: 10 January 2007).

11 Osama bin Laden, "Oh, People of Islam," As-Sahab Media, April 2006. Internet, http://www.alfirdaws.org/vb (date accessed: 5 June 2006).

12 Najd al-Rawi, "A Working Paper for the Media Invasion of America," GIMF production, 11 August 2006, Internet, http://www.alfirdaws.org/vb (date accessed: 10 January 2007).