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The Web as Weapon

Zarqawi Intertwines Acts on Ground in Iraq With
Propaganda Campaign on the Internet

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Last of three parts

The jihadist bulletin boards were buzzing. Soon, promised
the spokesman for al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers,
a new video would be posted with the latest in mayhem
from Iraq's best-known insurgent group.

On June 29, the new release hit the Internet. "All Religion Will Be for Allah" is 46 minutes of live-action
war in Iraq, a slickly produced video with professional-quality graphics and the feel of a blood-and-guts
annual report. In one chilling scene, the video cuts to a brigade of smiling young men. They are the only
fighters shown unmasked, and the video explains why: They are a corps of suicide bombers-in-training.

As notable as the video was the way Abu Musab Zarqawi's "information wing" distributed it to the world: a
specially designed Web page, with dozens of links to the video, so users could choose which version to
download. There were large-file editions that consumed 150 megabytes for viewers with high-speed Internet
and a scaled-down four-megabyte version for those limited to dial-up access. Viewers could choose
Windows Media or RealPlayer. They could even download "All Religion Will Be for Allah" to play on a
cell phone.

Never before has a guerrilla organization so successfully intertwined its real-time war on the ground with its
electronic jihad, making Zarqawi's group practitioners of what experts say will be the future of insurgent
warfare, where no act goes unrecorded and atrocities seem to be committed in order to be filmed and
distributed nearly instantaneously online.

Zarqawi has deployed a whole inventory of Internet operations beyond the shock video. He immortalizes his
suicide bombers online, with video clips of the destruction they wreak and Web biographies that attest to
their religious zeal. He taunts the U.S. military with an online news service of his exploits, releasing tactical
details of operations multiple times a day. He publishes a monthly Internet magazine, Thurwat al-Sinam
(literally "The Camel's Hump"), that offers religious justifications for jihad and military advice on how to
conduct it.

His negotiations with Osama bin Laden over joining forces with al Qaeda were conducted openly on the
Internet. When he was almost captured recently, he left behind not a Kalashnikov assault rifle, the
traditional weapon of the guerrilla leader, but a laptop computer. An entire online network of Zarqawi
supporters serves as backup for his insurgent group in Iraq, providing easily accessible advice on the best
routes into the country, trading information down to the names of mosques in Syria that can host a would-be
fighter, and eagerly awaiting the latest posting from the man designated as Zarqawi's only official
spokesman.

"The technology of the Internet facilitated everything," declared a posting this spring by the Global Islamic Media Front, which often distributes Zarqawi messages on the Internet. Today's Web sites are "the way for everybody in the whole world to listen to the mujaheddin."

Little more than a year ago, this online empire did not exist. Zarqawi was an Internet nonentity, a relatively obscure Jordanian who was one of many competing leaders of the Iraq insurgency. Once every few days, a communique appeared from him on the Web. Today, Zarqawi is an international name "of enormous symbolic importance," as Army Lt. Gen. David Petraeus put it in a recent interview, on a par with bin Laden largely because of his group's proficiency at publicizing him on the Internet.

By this summer, Internet trackers such as the SITE Institute have recorded an average of nine online statements from the Iraq branch of al Qaeda every day, 180 statements in the first three weeks of July. Zarqawi has gone "from zero to 60" in his use of the Internet, said Michael Scheuer, former chief of the CIA unit that tracked bin Laden. "The difference between Zarqawi's media performance initially and today is extraordinary."

As with most breakthroughs, it was a combination of technology and timing. Zarqawi launched his jihad in Iraq "at the right point in the evolution of the technology," said Ben N. Venzke, whose firm IntelCenter monitors jihadist sites for U.S. government agencies. High-speed Internet access was increasingly prevalent. New, relatively low-cost tools to make and distribute high-quality video were increasingly available. "Greater bandwidth, better video compression, better video editing tools -- all hit the maturity point when you had a vehicle as well as the tools," he said.

The original al Qaeda always aspired to use technology in its war on the West. But bin Laden's had been the moment of fax machines and satellite television. "Zarqawi is a new generation," said Evan F. Kohlmann, a consultant who closely monitors the sites. "The people around him are in their twenties. They view the media differently. The original al Qaeda are hiding in the mountains, not a technologically very well-equipped place. Iraq is an urban combat zone. Technology is a big part of that. I don't know how to distinguish the Internet now from the military campaign in general in Iraq."

The Videotaped Atrocity

After Abu Musab Zarqawi swung the curved blade of his sword and decapitated Nicholas Berg, he picked up the bloodied head of his victim and screamed out praise to Allah. The camera lingered on the dead man's wild eyes.

The exact date of this atrocity is unclear. The date the world came to know about it is not.

On May 11, 2004, a posting with a link to the video appeared on the al-AnsarWeb forum. Soon, it had been downloaded millions of times, freezing up servers from Indonesia to the United States. A wave of copycat beheadings by other groups followed. Zarqawi became a household name.

It was, said Kohlmann, "the 9/11 of jihad on the Internet -- momentous for them and momentous for us. For years, people were saying how the Internet would be used by terrorists. And then all of a sudden somebody was beheaded on camera and it was, 'Holy smokes, we never thought about the Internet being used this way!' "

Televised beheadings were not uncommon in Saudi Arabia. But Zarqawi did not use the long executioner's

sword of Saudi government-sanctioned beheadings. Instead, he invoked the imagery of his American captive as an animal.

"They take what anyone who's ever been to a halal butcher shop would recognize as a halal butcher knife and they cut the side of the neck and saw at it, bleed him out, just as they do when they're killing sheep," said Rebecca Givner-Forbes, who monitors the jihadist Web sites for the Terrorism Research Center, an Arlington firm with U.S. government clients. "Originally, they used the word for 'sacrifice,' which suggests the death has some kind of meaning, and then they used the word they use to butcher animals."

Khattab, a Jordanian-born commander of foreign fighters in Chechnya, videotaped graphic attacks on Russian forces in the 1990s and packaged them together as videotapes called "Russian Hell," which sold in Western mosques and Middle Eastern bazaars and now circulate on the Internet.

The immediate precursor to the Berg video was the 2002 execution-style killing of journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan, which was taped and distributed electronically when mainstream news outlets refused to show it. But even the horrific scene of Pearl's throat being slit failed to gain the audience that Zarqawi commanded two years later, coming as it did before widespread availability of broadband Internet to play back the video.

Zarqawi, a veteran fighter who had run his own training camp in the western Afghan city of Herat before fleeing to northern Iraq during the 2001 U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, had never been known as an Internet innovator. His first statement from Iraq that gained wide circulation did so not because it was online but because it was intercepted and released by the U.S. occupation authority. The January 2004 letter to al Qaeda urged creation of "armies of mujaheddin."

On April 9, 2004, a short video clip was posted on the Internet, the first attributed to Zarqawi's group, according to Kohlmann. It was called "Heroes of Fallujah," and it showed several black-masked men laying a roadside bomb, disguising it in a hole in the dusty road, then watching as it blew up a U.S. armored personnel carrier.

Later that month, on April 25, Zarqawi issued his first written Internet communique, asserting responsibility for an attack near the southern city of Basra. "We have made the decision and raised the banner of the jihad," it said. "We have taken spearheads and javelins for a boat in our cruise toward glory."

And then it cited a verse from the Koran: "Fight them, Allah will torture them at your hands. . . . "

Winning Prominence

"The Winds of Victory" opens with footage of the American bombing of Baghdad. It is nighttime, and the screen is dark except for the violent orange explosions and the wry captions "Democracy" and "Freedom" written in Arabic.

The film was the first full-length propaganda video produced by Zarqawi's organization, complete with scenes of mutilated Iraqi children and the horrors of Abu Ghraib prison -- and it hit the Internet in June 2004, a month after Berg's killing.

For the first time, the video put names and faces on the foreign suicide bombers who had flocked to Iraq under Zarqawi's banner, showing staged readings of wills and young men from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Libya and elsewhere in the Arab world looking alternately scared and playful. Video footage of their explosions

followed their testimonials, often filmed from multiple angles.

But the hour-long film was too big to send out all at once online and had to be broken into chapters released one a week. "Hardly ideal for a propaganda video," Kohlmann said.

That same summer, as copycat beheaders circulated footage of their attacks in Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Zarqawi was fully exploiting his electronic distribution network. In early July, he released his first audio recording, putting it directly on the Internet -- unlike the tapes of al Qaeda leaders bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri, which still go directly to Arab satellite television. His beheading of Berg was completely justified, Zarqawi said, and those Muslims who disagreed were just "slaves."

Later that month, "astonished" at mistaken reports about the group's activities, Zarqawi's organization urged its audience "not to believe this false information." Henceforth, Zarqawi said, "all of our statements are spread by means of the brother Abu Maysara al-Iraqi," making him an official Internet spokesman.

At the same time, Zarqawi was in negotiations in a series of online missives with al Qaeda about pledging allegiance to bin Laden. For months, a main sticking point was Zarqawi's insistence on targeting representatives of Iraq's Shiite majority as well as the U.S. military, bin Laden's preferred enemy.

But Zarqawi had acquired huge new prominence through his Internet-broadcast beheadings. The once-wary al Qaeda leadership seemed to take a new attitude toward him, and the online magazine of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia hailed him as the "sheikh of slaughterers."

On Oct. 17, 2004, the deal was struck and announced in cyberspace as the U.S. military was launching an offensive in Fallujah, determined to drive Zarqawi's men out of their sanctuary. Zarqawi pledged fealty to bin Laden and spoke in his online posting of eight months of negotiations, interrupted by a "rupture." Experts believe their contact was almost exclusively in the open space of the Internet.

Two days later, Zarqawi put out his first statement in the new name of his organization. Once called Tawhid wal Jihad (Unity and Holy War), it was now the Al Qaeda Committee for Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers.

Instant Communication

For 26 minutes, the instructional video lays out in precise detail how to construct the item that more than any other has come to symbolize the Iraq insurgency -- a suicide bomber's explosive belt.

It shows how to estimate the impact of an explosion, how best to arrange the shrapnel for maximum destruction, how to strap the belt onto the bomber's body, even how to avoid the migraine headache that can come from exposure to the recommended explosive chemicals.

The video -- all in Arabic -- appeared on the al-Ansar forum, where it was found one Sunday in December 2004 by the SITE Institute. The forum where Berg's beheading had also first appeared was one of Zarqawi's preferred Internet venues, among the dozens of password-protected jihadi Web forums that have proliferated over the last few years.

This and other Arabic-language forums hosted discussions on the latest news from Iraq, provided a place for swapping tips on tradecraft, circulated religious justifications for jihad, and acted as intermediary between

would-be fighters and their would-be recruiters. Most of the sites prohibit postings from unapproved users, but they can be accessed in the open and rely on widely available software called vBulletin ("instant community," promises the software's maker).

Many postings to the boards were not official statements from al Qaeda but unsolicited advice, such as the recent notice called "the road to Mesopotamia" posted on an underground Syrian extremist site, in which one veteran offered a detailed scouting report, down to advice on bribing Syrian police and traveling to the border areas by claiming to be on a fishing trip.

The bulletin boards also make information quickly available from Iraq, where fighters are gaining combat experience against the U.S. military. In one case cited by John Arquilla, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in California, would-be insurgents in the Sahara Desert were able to ask for -- and receive -- information from the ground in Iraq about how best to build bombs.

And the bulletin boards keep track of Zarqawi's corps of suicide bombers, with long online lists of the "martyrs" compiled from various sources. Israeli researcher Reuven Paz has a list gleaned from the postings of more than 400 Zarqawi recruits who have died in Iraq. Paz said the biographies are an informal census very much in keeping with the profile of an Arab Internet user -- middle class and highly educated, "people with wives and kids and good jobs," Paz said, "going, as if by magic, after the virtual leader."

In March, one of the al-Ansar forum's own members became another entry. For the previous 11 months, Zaman Hawan had confined his jihad to 178 online postings to the forum. But on March 24, 2005, according to another forum member's announcement, he "carried his soul on his hand, and went to jihad for the sake of Allah," dying in a suicide attack in Baqubah, Iraq. The posting went on to list phone numbers in Sudan for forum members to call Hawan's father and brother and congratulate them on his "martyrdom."

By April, the al-Ansar bulletin board had become too well known as Zarqawi's outlet. The forum closed without notice. Alternatives quickly appeared. For a while, "mirror" sites emerged featuring many of the same users, with the same logins and passwords. They, too, disappeared. The al-Masada forum briefly took up the banner. Then participants began to warn that it had been breached by Western intelligence -- and the jihadists abandoned it, as well.

The upheaval has resulted in a much more decentralized system for disseminating the bulletins from Iraq, with new boards constantly cropping up. As soon as a posting from Zarqawi's group appears now, dozens of new links to it are copied to the other jihadist sites within minutes, making for an intricate game of Internet cat-and-mouse. And even if the forums or fixed Web sites are temporarily out of commission, other ways still exist -- such as mass e-mails sent out several times a day with the latest in Iraq guerrilla videos, communiques and commentary from Yahoo e-groups such as ansar-jehad.

While Zarqawi's group has moved away in recent months from videotaped beheadings of foreigners, the shock value of the Berg beheading has created a race for more and more realistic video clips from Iraq. Filming an attack has become an integral part of the attack itself. In April, a cameraman followed alongside an armed insurgent, video rolling, as they ran to the scene of a helicopter they had just shot down north of Baghdad. The one member of the Bulgarian crew found still alive was ordered to stand up and start walking, then shot multiple times on film as the shooter yelled, "This is Allah's judgment." The three-minute video from the Islamic Army of Iraq came at a time when many of the bulletin board sites were down; SITE Institute's Rita Katz found the link through the ansar-jehad e-group.

"It's the exact reason why we built the Internet, a bargain-basement, redundant system for distributing information," said Kohlmann. "We can't shut it down anymore."

Indeed, just last week, a notice went out on the jihadist bulletin boards: The Ansar forum that had disappeared in April was back up and running.

The Information Battle

A few weeks ago, al Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers released the third version of its online magazine, Thurwat al-Sinam. This latest issue lectured on the recipe for a successful raid, an almost-scientific procedure involving six steps for planning and executing, with five groups of fighters designated by tasks such as "protection," "gap-making" and "pushing in."

The magazine also held up a model for the Internet campaign that has built Zarqawi's reputation, provided his recruits, served as his propagandist and his carrier pigeon. In an essay aimed broadly at the Muslim world, the magazine claimed the 7th-century Koran as a useful blueprint for today's wired warriors in Iraq, calling its story of the prophet Muhammad's pitch to the people of Mecca "a very good example of how to conduct an information battle with the infidels."

Battles can be won in Iraq but then ultimately lost if they are not on the Internet. "The aim is not to execute an operation, which is followed by complete silence, but telling the reason why it was executed," the magazine advised. "It is a must that we give this field what it deserves. . . . How many battles has this nation lost because of the lack of information?"

Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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