

Virtual Jihad: Analysis of the Internet Communication Strategy of the Jihadi War

Dr. Maria Alvanou

ITSTIME Research Team, Catholic University of Milan

Email: mariaalvanou@yahoo.gr

Abstract

Jihadis place great importance on internet communication as an element of their overall activity. There are three strategic goals for this:

1. To **legitimate** their movement by establishing its social and religious viability while engaging in violent acts that on their face seem to violate the norms of civilized society and the tenets of Islam. Violent methods inevitably harm innocent people, so there is a built-in drag on the organization's legitimacy. Not only is there a huge need to establish and maintain social and religious legitimacy, there is also a rich source of contradictions to complicate this effort. Jihadis recognize this and have been concerned with legitimating their efforts "from the start".

2. To **propagate** their movement by spreading messages to sympathetic audiences in areas where they want to expand. This prepares the way for political efforts that precede establishing actual operations. Clearly then the jihadis do not want to merely legitimate their actions but also to spread their movement to other areas and groups, linking their efforts to a wider struggle involving Muslims everywhere. Information activities spread the message to Muslims worldwide, which provides the basis for political activities that form relationships needed to spread the movement. The ultimate goal is the fight, and everything else is simply part of a "supply chain" that prepares for battle. In this sense, then, legitimating and propagating the movement are themselves part of the intimidation strategy.

3. To **intimidate** their opponents. This applies not only to existing enemies but to sympathizers in the Muslim world who might think of turning against them. Yet jihadis also seem to make more direct use of internet communication in an attempt to scare and intimidate their opponents, a function closer to what we traditionally think of as propaganda. One consistent theme is putting the enemy on notice that there can be no room for compromise.

Jihadis are technically savvy and push jihad into the sphere of electronic communication and information technologies, other than traditional broadcast methods of radio and television. The marriage of jihad with e-communication represents a dangerous development for several reasons. First, the Internet is, by design, decentralized and not subject to easy control by authorities. Second, laws have not yet caught up with it or are inconsistent across countries, so there are many opportunities to operate outside regulation (e.g. offshore Internet gambling operations). Third, there are still many people in governments who have little experience with new communication and information technologies and/or avoid using them. Fourth, any period of rapid development is chaotic, so new and unpredictable applications appear all the time. The result is an environment where jihadis can be anonymous, operate outside the law, exploit shortcomings. The jihadi movement is not simply using technological tools to recruit new members, receive donations and plan attacks – all very real and serious threats. Rather, its membership is actually seeking to catalyze a computer-linked global social movement emerging from the very use of this technology.