

STATEMENT BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOSEPH H. FELTER, PHD,  
UNITED STATES ARMY  
DIRECTOR OF THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER  
AT THE UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

FIRST SESSION, 110TH CONGRESS

THE INTERNET: A PORTAL TO VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

MAY 3, 2007

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

UNTIL RELEASED BY THE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS, UNITED STATES SENATE

STATEMENT BY  
LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOSEPH H. FELTER, PHD, UNITED STATES ARMY  
DIRECTOR OF THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY  
THE INTERNET: A PORTAL TO VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM

Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, Distinguished Members of the Committee, it is an honor for me to provide testimony to you on the topic of Jihadi use of the Internet. It is also an honor to sit next to Mr. Frank Cilluffo, whose work on cyber terrorism is used at our Center, and Mr. Michael Doran. Mr. Doran trained one of our Center's most gifted scholars on the Jihadi Movement.

Coalition Forces have had great success interdicting al-Qa`ida worldwide. Indeed, a significant number of the organization's senior leadership have been killed or captured since the 9/11 attacks. Despite our military success neutralizing key commanders and safe havens, however, the al-Qa`ida organization and its associated movements continue to actively target and execute terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel, our interests and our allies around the world.

It is important to bring operational commanders like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Abu Ayyub al-Masri to justice; indeed this is a key component of our overall effort to combat terrorism. However, the existence of men like Zarqawi should be seen as more of a symptom, than a cause, of the global epidemic that needs to be contained. The real center of gravity of the violent movement that sustains al-Qa`ida are the ideas of radical Jihadist thought. It is these ideas, not necessarily the individual leaders, which insulate al-Qa`ida against U.S. pressure and enable the movement to spread even as its leaders are captured or killed. The internet facilitates the dissemination of these ideas and, perhaps more importantly, offers like-minded would-be terrorists the ability to network around these dangerous concepts.

It is not possible to capture, kill, or incarcerate ideas. We should not think of al-Qa`ida in terms of organizational charts and bureaucratic hierarchies that typify a conventional military enemy. Al-Qa`ida has become a brand name, a way of seeing the world. This global movement would not be possible without the pervasiveness of Internet accessibility and the capability it offers al-Qa`ida's thought-leaders to define the way disillusioned youth think about the world. The Internet allows thousands of disenfranchised and displaced individuals to build a virtual community of followers bound together only by a body of shared ideas and digital relationships. We cannot prevent all of these relationships from forming or stop the generation of these ideas, but we can do a better job of understanding how the Internet facilitates these processes so we can monitor and thwart those who join the Jihadi Movement.

In this testimony, I will first describe how violent extremists think about how to use the internet to spread their radical ideology; second I will discuss some of the ways these extremists use the internet to meet their goals and finally I will recommend more effective ways to combat extremist efforts on the internet. The specific recommendations which I will explain in detail at the conclusion of my testimony are to:

- 1) Establish and support dedicated programs to translate and analyze jihadi strategic texts that are proliferated online;
- 2) Exploit vulnerabilities and divisions identified by the terrorists themselves online;
- 3) Harness more diverse communities of expertise and bring greater resources to the fight using similar web enabled techniques developed by terrorist's themselves.

To provide context for these recommendations, it is first important to understand how violent extremists are using the internet to spread their radical ideology in a variety of ways and with great effect. I will highlight several of these

which include education and expanding opportunities to participate and support global jihad.

### *1. The Ideological Basis for Al-Qa`ida*

The most important thought leaders in al-Qa`ida are not Usama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qa`ida's most well-known operational leaders. Rather, they are people unknown to most Americans, people like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Basir al-Tartusi, Abd al-Qadir ibn Abd al-Aziz and Abu Qatada al-Filistini.

There is clear evidence that the grand ideas developed by these scholars and other ideologues lesser known in the West informs and inspires terrorist attacks worldwide. For example, the Spanish indictment of the Madrid train bombers identifies more than 50 electronic books that had been downloaded from the internet and were found on the hard drives of the bombers' computers. The authors of those books track very closely with the list of the most influential Jihadi authors developed by our researchers at West Point. Their writings are being exported around the globe thanks to the internet. Thus, an electronic book by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the most influential Jihadi ideologue based on our empirical assessment, is one the most translated texts in Indonesia today.

Many of the Jihadi Movement's most important books are housed on a website that serves as al-Qa`ida's library.<sup>1</sup> This online library serves as a repository for over 3,000 books and articles written by Jihadi authors on various dimensions of ideology and strategy. These texts have been downloaded tens-of-thousands of times and copied on CD-ROM exponentially more. These texts have been found in the possession of both dead and aspiring terrorists. And we know that these texts are being actively translated from their original Arabic into a variety of languages so that the ideology gains global exposure.

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2006, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point used this library to map the Jihadi Movement's most influential ideologues. The results are now available online: <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/atlas.asp>.

Take for example the book written by Jihadi strategist, Abu Bakr Naji, called the *Management of Savagery*. Writing as a high-level insider, Naji explains in painstaking detail how al-Qa`ida plans to defeat the U.S. and its allies in the Middle East, establish sanctuaries in security vacuums around the world and create more resonant propaganda. It has become essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the strategic thinking of al-Qa`ida's leadership and the future of the Jihadi Movement.

Or consider the 1,600 page treatise written by Jihadi historian, Abu Musab al-Suri, a man who claims that he is "one of the few Jihadis who understand the Western culture and mentality." In his book, Suri walks readers through an in-depth discussion of America's global war on terror. He spells out the operational and strategic lessons-learned by Jihadi groups over the past century. He highlights the present obstacles that current Jihadi participants need to overcome and he articulates a number of strategic goals for the Jihadi Movement's aspiring leadership to understand, most of them focused on swaying public opinion. Suri's analysis provides the operational framework for Jihadi webmasters, software programmers, graphics designers, movie producers, and translators, tying them together with frontline soldiers in an increasingly coherent narrative of resistance.

## *II. Turning Consumers into Producers*

The web enabled ideas that drive al-Qa`ida do not come from a single source, nor are they intended to be received by small cadre of supporters. The Movement's chief priority seems to be giving more people from more places more ways and more reasons to join their Movement. In so doing, they have pioneered new tactics, techniques and procedures on the battlefield and they have learned to leverage technology in more creative and sophisticated ways online. In one extraordinary example, an Iraqi insurgent group held a website design contest among its worldwide supporters. The prize for the winner was to

launch a rocket attack against a U.S. base in Iraq simply by clicking the mouse on their computer from the comfort of their own home.

Jihadi thinkers see themselves waging a series of insurgencies that are linked intellectually by a shared ideology. The key to their victory, they argue, is winning the hearts and minds of various Muslim constituencies. The two primary ways in which Jihadi thinkers have sought to do this is by: 1) indoctrinating successive generations of Muslim youth with the Jihadi value-system; 2) creating as many possible new avenues for Muslims to participate in the Jihadi Movement.

The terrorists are taking advantage of the web's potential to greatly expand opportunities for their followers and sympathizers to support this deadly movement. For example, one book available online, entitled *39 Ways to Participate in Jihad*, spells out a variety of options to aid and abet the terrorists' cause short of overt participation in terrorist attacks and many facilitated by the internet. For example, the book urges supporters to spread news about jihadis fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Today we see thousands of websites springing up to distribute information created by terrorists and insurgents in those countries. The book also encourages parents to teach their children about the path of jihad. It urges mothers to socialize their children with a Jihadi mindset from an earlier age by reading them bedtime stories of the great Jihadi fighters or showing them videos of successful Jihadi attacks against American forces. Today we see video games distributed online that focus on killing effigies of President Bush and teaching a distorted version of history that emphasizes the role of terrorists.

Other ways in which Jihadi thinkers have sought to increase participation is by encouraging members to study anthropology, sociology and public administration using online distance learning opportunities for those who cannot attend formal schooling. Having this knowledge, one author argues, will help the Movement be more effective in exploiting and co-opting local tribal politics

throughout the Middle East. It will also help them know how to provide social services and establish governing institutions in destabilized areas.

In short, these trends represent a large-scale effort by the Jihadi intelligentsia to harness the power of the internet and maximize the vibrancy of their movement by including new and diverse participation. By doing this, our enemy hopes to transform the various local insurgent and revolutionary efforts into an organic, global social movement, one that transcends organizational limitations, adapts to changes on the ground and allows for anyone to support these efforts at any level of commitment or knowledge-level.

Today, a new generation of technically capable jihadis is building tools to enable other supporters to build websites, translate videos, and use encrypted communications. Even more traditional jihadi propaganda has grown more sophisticated. Videos and audio tapes are now translated into English, Kurdish, French and German. Jihadi propagandists, whom we still know comparatively little about, spin the unpopular aspects of their Movement – attacks that kill Muslim women, children and the elderly, for instance – while drawing attention to their confrontation with American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. The jihadis understand that the best way to indoctrinate people is to enable them to easily participate in the movement and this is made possible through the power of the internet.

Jihadis now use information widely available online to gather operational and strategic intelligence. Google Earth, which creates easy to use maps based on widely available satellite photos is used to plan attacks in Iraq. Jihadi intelligence operatives gather information from U.S. websites to analyze the weaknesses of the U.S. intelligence community. Jihadis gather specifications on U.S. tactical vehicles used in Iraq based on the manufacturer's websites.

All of these tactics speak to the internet's capability to transfer information farther and faster than ever before. The United States benefits tremendously

from this trend, as business and government become more efficient. The downside, however, is that we cannot control who accesses this information and some of it can and will be used against us.

### *III. Recommendations:*

Given what we know about how radical Islamic extremists are harnessing the power of the internet, the CTC believes efforts to combat the threats posed by these terrorists can be enhanced through 1) developing a more comprehensive understanding of the ideology fueling Islamic radicalism which is exported online; 2) better exploiting the terrorists organizational rifts and network vulnerabilities that they expose online and 3) expanding opportunities to support our collective efforts to combat the terrorist threat harnessing more diverse communities of expertise that can contribute to the fight.

1. Know your enemy – read what the terrorists are telling us online. At West Point, we are very familiar with Sun Tzu's maxim stressing the critical importance of knowing your enemy. In this war, the enemy has often been characterized as the hostile ideology responsible for extremist Islamic radicalism. We must continue to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this ideology and what is driving it. Our center's systematic mapping of jihadi Salafi ideological influence is one example of such an initiative. Increased efforts and programs designed to translate and analyze the jihadi strategic texts proliferated online are needed to expand our understanding of this hostile ideology further.

2. Exploit enemy vulnerabilities made publicly available on the internet. There are many opportunities to exploit vulnerabilities and divisions identified by the Jihadi's themselves – and often made conveniently available online. One of the most effective ways to hurt the Jihadi's is to use their own writings, discourse and web postings against them. The CTC in support of the US Special Operations Command, is mining the terrorist's internal documents captured in the course of operations supporting the GWOT and stored on the Department of Defense's



Harmony data base to identify fractures and fault lines in the jihadi salafi movement in general and al-Qa'ida in particular. However, we don't need access to classified data bases to find and exploit such internal fractures and network vulnerabilities. Much more information is available online. Areas of disagreement, ideological fault lines, internal rifts and power struggles are all described in great detail on various internet sites. We have at our disposal an online repository of jihadi literature, chat room postings and other materials –all primary sources and updated in real time- and it is a resource we must better exploit.

Because of its speed, anonymity, and accessibility, the internet has created a phenomenon unprecedented in human history: a globally-connected community of terror. But the struggle with al-Qa`ida will only be the first in a series of struggles against the new generation of globally-connected terrorist organizations, both Islamic and non-Islamic. Regardless of their ideology, terrorist groups that use the Internet share similar capabilities. They also share the same weaknesses. The internet helps us take advantage of these weaknesses. We can monitor them to follow the networks and assess their operational capacity. We can sabotage them by infiltrating their networks and flooding the web with bogus information. And we can anticipate their attacks by reading their strategic literature and following trends on their web forums and discussion boards.

3. Harness broader resources and bring them to bear in the fight. Attempts to shut down websites have proven as fruitless as a game of whack-a-mole. An open society in the information age offers opportunities for asymmetric warfare that cannot be taken away, only countered. A more fruitful response to extremist Islamic terrorist use of the internet is to bring a greater diversity and breadth of resources into the fight. Just as there are *39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad*, we must create opportunities for Americans with a wide array of expertise to quietly participate in the fight against terrorism.

The CTC does this already. We rely on a wide network of academics to do much of our analytical work. Many of these individuals would be unwilling to work openly with the government because of disagreements over politics or policy. Nevertheless, they have critical expertise on Jihadi theology and the history, sociology and political context of the current fight. They will work with West Point because we are an academic institution and rigidly defend the academic integrity of our products. We need to create more mechanisms for the vast array of American expertise to be deployed against this enemy.

At West Point we see how the creative and internet savvy potential of our younger generation is particularly adept at identifying opportunities to enlist the power of the internet to combat the terrorist threat. One of our cadets in the terrorism studies program for instance, analyzed hundreds of online videos of attacks against American troops in Iraq to identify more effective counter measures and tactics that can increase survivability of our forces. His analysis is being used in the field.

Douglas MacArthur during his farewell address to the Corps of Cadets in 1962 admonished that, "Through all this welter of change, your mission remains fixed, determined, inviolable—it is to win our wars." This maxim remains true today. At the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, we appreciate that the internet is being used as a weapon in this long war we are waging with radical Islamic extremism. We are committed to preparing our nation's future military leaders to respond effectively to this threat and to use this same weapon to take the fight back to the enemy. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee. I look forward to answering your questions.