

U.S. STRATEGY FOR COUNTERING JIHADIST WEBSITES

Testimony by Christopher Boucek
Associate, Carnegie Middle East Program
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on
Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Washington, D.C.
September 29, 2010

Chairman Sherman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

As members of this Subcommittee are well aware, the issue of websites promoting and propagating jihadist ideology continues to be a major concern. In previous testimony I have highlighted the challenges presented by the internet in recruitment and radicalization. The ubiquity and global connectivity of the internet has proven to be an unrivaled source of knowledge and inspiration, as well as an unmatched vehicle for terrorist and extremist propaganda, recruitment, and fundraising.

The role of internet propaganda has received renewed attention following the rise in public prominence of Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American cleric, and his alleged role in inciting English-speaking foreigners to engage in violence and militancy. Awlaki and his reported ties to several ongoing investigations have again highlighted the power of the internet to reach large and disparate audiences.

The challenge of how to best respond to jihadi websites requires careful consideration on several points.

The Need for a Measured Response

Inaction is not a viable option. There needs to be a strong and coordinated approach to understanding how and why the internet is used by extremists before we can begin to design appropriate strategies for addressing these different factors. I would suggest that, at times, there is justification in seeking to shut-down websites advocating violence. This approach is not one that I would quickly or broadly endorse, as there is considerable value for various law enforcement, intelligence, and research communities to continue to have access to these sites. But several experts have noted that the surveillance value has decreased somewhat over time as some internet users have grown more suspicious and paranoid about using the internet.

For instance, there is a YouTube channel branded by al-Malahim, the media arm of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the resurgent al-Qaeda organization based in Yemen. This channel features almost all of AQAP's video messages, subtitled into English, including several messages from AQAP leaders, justifying terrorist attacks and railing against the Yemeni and other governments. It also includes at least one interview with Anwar al-Awlaki. As a result AQAP's message is able to reach a much broader audience, and no longer does someone need to know Arabic or need to bother with Islamist web forums to access this content. For almost three months this material has been available and not taken down. YouTube should remove this content.

However, we must be clear about the limitations of such strategies and we must also be realistic about what we can accomplish. Shutting down websites will not completely eliminate the sentiments behind them. The appeal of taking down such sites should also be weighed against all the potential unintended consequences, including driving users to other sites and social media outlets. For some users, the closing of certain sites may be enough to deter their continued online activism. For others it will not.

The Need to be Proactive, Not Just Reactive

In order to comprehensively fight extremist recruitment and radicalization, it is essential that we broaden our approach. To get ahead of al-Qaeda, and Islamist extremism more broadly, we will need to shift to be proactive, and not just reactive. We must engage on all levels, and that will involve not just counter-messaging, but challenging radical voices and narratives in a variety of forums.

On many levels, the struggle against violent radical Islamist extremist is about ideas, and unless we are active in meeting and challenging those ideas, we have all but surrendered this vital space. It is important to note that there are individuals who get involved in extremism out of a desire to “do right.” Others get involved following an inability to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources of religious scholarship.

We have yet to truly understand how we can fully take advantage of the internet to highlight fractures and wedge issues among online extremists. This can complement efforts to “disaggregate” extremists in order to make the problem more manageable, rather than operating under the false presumption of a unified and cohesive opponent.

We do not need to do this all ourselves and in some instances it may be counterproductive to be engaged in such activities. There are many voices in the Arab and Muslim world that have spoken out against violence and extremism, some official and others not, some regime-supported and others at odds with their own governments. Some voices that challenge the use of violence may simultaneously also advocate other positions offensive to U.S. policymakers. In such cases it will be important to carefully weigh the consequences and differences between countering violence and promoting alternative values.

Other nations have explored a variety of methods to engage in counter-radicalization efforts. In Saudi Arabia, the Sakinah Campaign has shown promise. Named after the Arabic word for religiously inspired tranquility, the Sakinah Campaign operates as an independent, non-governmental organization, supported by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Similar to other counter-radicalization and disengagement strategies in the kingdom, the Sakinah Campaign

uses Islamic scholars to interact online with individuals looking for religious knowledge with the aim of steering them away from extremist sources. The Sakinah Campaign was created to engage in an online dialogue as a way to combat internet radicalization. It targets individuals who use the internet to seek out religious knowledge and aims to prevent them from accepting extremist beliefs. It seeks to refute so-called "deviant" interpretations of Islam and rebut extremist arguments, including the ideology of takfir (the pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever and a key justification for violent extremism). While the campaign is supported and encouraged in its work by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Interior, it is officially a non-governmental project. There are in fact other governmental internet-based efforts to combat internet radicalization, although many of these programs are kept from public view in order to be effective. The independence of the Sakinah Campaign helps contribute to its relative legitimacy and results in more people being willing to work with them in their efforts to combat extremism online. Saudi authorities have noted that other countries have sought to create similar programs, including Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Other similar efforts have included endeavors such as Tunisia's Radio Zitouna. When it was started in 2007, Radio Zitouna was focused on broadcasting a 'tolerant' version of Islam and interpretation of the Holy Quran, including an educational call-in show. As of last year, station operators had plans to also start a television channel. Radio has also been used as a means to combat extremism in other cases in North Africa, the Sahel, and Middle East.

Looking Forward

In the struggle to combat extremism, much emphasis has been placed on the internet. While the internet no doubt has a role to play, it is important that we keep it the proper perspective. There is reasonable concern that the internet, when used as the sole lens through which extremism is viewed, can result in a distorted impression of what is actually happening on the ground. There can be no substitute for actual on the ground field research. Similarly, the internet should not be used as a replacement for examining other media and personal interactions as a means to counter radicalization.

A final crucial component that requires attention is the critical need for further research. There are many questions for which we simply do not have the answer and to comprehensively combat internet extremism it is essential to understand what we are trying to deal with exactly.

For instance, there are some individuals who are active online and violent in real life, some who are active online but do not engage in violent actions, and still others who are active on

jihadi websites who then progress to taking action. What can explain this? How does this happen and what can be done to mitigate against it? What is needed is a full-scale effort to map out the intellectual and ideological terrain of the online jihadi community.

Almost ten years into the struggle against violent radical Islamist militancy, we have not developed a better, more coherent and unified manner to systematically understand this adversary. We have not devoted the resources and attention to creating the nationwide strategy necessary to gain this understanding. By contrast, ten years into the Cold War our understanding of communism, the Soviet Union, and a whole range of other related issues was much more fully developed. Until we are better equipped to fully understand the conflict we are in, we cannot expect to make much progress.