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Online Territories of Terror –
Utilizing the Internet for Jihadist Endeavors

I. Jihad and the Internet – An Introduction to jihadism *oline*

Despite all its setbacks and failures, al-Qa'ida (AQ) nevertheless remains resilient within its virtual spaces and niches on the Internet. It established a *jihadist* cloud where a massive corpus (filmed and written) clearly issues parameters for users and consumers, visitors and sympathizers to (re-)enact and enforce. Besides propagating and depicting extreme forms of violence, the *jihadist* corpus validates, legitimizes and sanctions violence as asserted *sharia*-law-admissive rulings (*hukm*) and by citing historical Islamic scholars and religious references out of its original context.

Within these Online Territories of Terror, the *jihadists* assume the role of authoritative religious scholars, who define what is legal and who the "enemies of Islam"[1] are. By using abrogation (*mansukh*) of the Quran and by employing a specific interpretation (*ta'wil*), the jihadists aim at competing on a scholarly basis with mainstream Islamic schools and scholars.

AQ continues to radicalize and indoctrinate its sympathizers and followers on a global level – with the clear calling by the AQ leadership to strike by all means against such defined "enemies of Islam", including Islamic scholars who renounce *jihadists*' interpretations, and by providing the allegedly authoritative theological basis to do so. The remote online territories of AQ are active and productive – independent of the actual conditions in the arenas of *jihad* in the offline world. The virtual outlets imply unison with all its affiliated and loyal (sub-)groups[2], and that AQ as an ideological bearing is actively fighting worldwide for a specific religious habitus, based on common rituals and traditional settings, for the defense and the restoration of elements such as "honor" (*ird*), the protection of the "inviolable" (*hurma*) or the freedom of mistreated Muslim prisoners. The genre of online *jihad* seeks to assume an authoritative role over specific interpretations, derived from a proclaimed religious-historical connotation. This propagated unity manifests via the Internet, where most *jihadist* groups, for example, reacted by commemoratory statements to the death of Osama bin Laden, expressing loyalty not only to AQ as a common denominator but by pledging the continuation of militant-*jihad* as defined by al-Qa'ida, its senior leadership and ideologues on all levels.

I.1 Open-Source *Jihad*

AQ has established a worldview and a frame of reference ('Referenzrahmen') that, in its open advertised fashion – open-source *jihad*, as it entitles itself[3] –, may and perhaps even worse, could affect individual and newly converted Muslims at any time worldwide. This frame of reference provides ideological and habitual guidance and portrays violent solutions to narrated grievances present in the Muslim world. With its massive and immense online presence, consisting of both videos and writings, *jihadist* materials seek to incite and inspire (*tahrid*) violence by its assumed religious-authoritative role, whereas the only "true believer" is the one fighting for one's creed (*iman*) and religion (*din*) based on the jihadist methodology of faith (*manhaj*).[4]

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[1] This rhetoric includes Shiites and especially local governmental members like Sunni Muslim members of the police who are simply termed "apostates" (*murtaddun*) and hence legitimate targets.

[2] The *jihadi* media outlets frequently propagate the common struggle, fighting for the same cause, pledging allegiance and unity. This partly explains how various militant movements consider themselves by their official naming (emirate Afghanistan/Somalia or Islamic State of Iraq) as an integral part for a future entity, the imagined "Caliphate". Furthermore, media outlets such as *al-Furqan* (Iraq) have published a video-series entitled *Fursan al-shahada* ('Knights of Martyrdom') that mostly portrays suicide-bomber attacks and their testimonies (*wasiyya*). Massive explosions, embedded in both a religious-authoritative as well a military context (targeting US and Iraqi military installations), rock the consumers computer-screen. A 'mini-sub-series' is dedicated as help and support for brothers suffering in hotspots such as Turkistan (China), Nigeria or, most recently, Chechnya. The suicide-bomber (*istishhadi*) clearly speaks out to act for his brothers suffering injustice, tyranny and occupation elsewhere while committing his act in the proclaimed name of "Islam" for freedom and purity of belief in Iraq.

[3] As is the case for the English-language *jihad*-magazine *Inspire* in a special section where "individual terrorism *jihad*" suggests possibilities of singular attacks (bomb-making, running over people with cars, destroying buildings). Concepts are derived and/or translated from older *jihadist* materials (*The Encyclopedia of Jihad*) or simply refurbished in a modern, pop-cultural colorful way for its potential readers and followers and taken from recent Arabic writings (for instance Abu Mus'ab al-Suri).

[4] *Jihadists* are fighting in a cosmological war between "truth" (*haqq*) and "falsehood" (*batil*), where the latter is a violation of fundamental principles such as the "unity/oneness of God" (*tawhid*). Nico Prucha, "Notes on the Jihadists' motivation for suicide-operations", http://www.univie.ac.at/jihadism/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Prucha_1.pdf, pp. 60-62.

The main ideological writings and especially the movies of *jihad* are offered sometimes on a daily basis within the dwellings of the *jihadi* virtual by various *jihadist* groups worldwide – mostly of those who are engaged in combatting their enemies.[5] Subsequently, a specific religious habitus is propagated as an audio-visual frame of reference that includes vital cornerstones of an ideology put into action with the perception of fighting for both justice and defense. The intersection of real-life and online, virtual worlds – accessible for anyone, unlike the real-life scenarios – lead to questioning the effects of the accessibility to the *jihadist* propaganda for consumers sometimes thousands of miles away. But in close emotional, spiritual and politicized proximity with the fear, anger and the cognition of being 'persecuted' because of one's faith. Thus, it would be deceptive to understand the intention as well as the desired effects of radicalizing and inspiring the audience as a singular process. By studying and monitoring the written and filmed *jihadist* online propaganda, one must also find an "understanding of online practices and spaces not as distinct and isolated pursuits, but as closely linked with the everyday and offline milieu."[6] The *jihadist* online territories on the Internet are public spaces, which on a first glimpse may seem to be a pure online feature, a fantasy. However, these online territories are "a variety of intersections between the online and the offline. This includes virtual spaces that are anchored offline, or extensions of online entities, as well as those social territories that may emerge when online activities are 'lived out' or re-enacted in other parts of everyday life."[7]

I.2 The Frame of Reference

This intersection construes and fertilizes the *jihadists*' frame of reference and the motivati-

ons that have consequently led to both individual and collective actions. While "the question, however, is always about how 'Weltanschauung' and 'ideologies' translate into individual perception and interpretation, and how the acts of individuals are affected,"[8] the *jihadist* media groups and battalions are in place to enforce guidance and to reproduce not only high-ranking ideologues but rather portray common fighters or suicide-bombers as much as renown *jihadist* figures. The written and filmed statements of *jihadist* groups "are given credibility by their social context (…) [and] the power of performative speech – vows and christenings – is rooted in social reality and is given currency by the laws and customs that stand behind it."[9] Hence, *jihad* videos, as the most lively manifestation of *jihadist* propaganda, not only portray legitimized violence within its frame of reference but rather seek to propagate general habitual denominators (praying *Mujahideen*, recitations of the Quran, singing *nasheed*, poetry, burial ceremonies etc.) that may simply affect the consumer by its commonality. The *jihad* videos are a derivate of the written and literal corpus and can be understood as habitual-motivational factors in motion, presented by role models who are the product of the *jihadi* mindset. Where the corpus of online *jihadism* may seem ineffective of assuming an authority, it re-formats rituals, norms and actions accordingly to its frame of reference.[10]

I.3 Virtual Entities and Personal Affections

AQ considers itself avant-garde[11], an icon (*ramz*) and, in parts of its rhetoric, even *awliya*' (friends/saints)[12] of God who are fighting against injustice, suppression, occupation, imprisonment, or the distortion of "Islam". Anyone is invited to tap into this freely available culture on the Internet and be part of it, eit-

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5 Regular publications are dominantly Arabic- and Urdu-language movies, ranging from Afghanistan to Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq but also filmed statements and clips from the Caucasus.

6 Miyase Christensen, André Jansson, Christian Christensen, Online Territories – Globalization, Mediated Practice and Social Space, Peter Lang Publishing Inc.: New York 2011, p. 2.

7 ibid.

8 Sönke Neitzel, Harald Welzer, Soldaten – Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben, S. Fischer Verlag: Frankfurt am Main 2011, p. 17.

9 Mark Juergensmeyer, Terror in the Mind of God – The Global Rise of Religious Violence, Third edition, University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angelos 2003, p. 127. Juergensmeyer references Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power, Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1991.

10 Philipp Holtmann, Leadership without Leaders – How jihadists guide each other in cyberspace, in: Rüdiger Lohlker (ed.), Studying Jihadism, Vienna University Press: Göttingen 2011 (forthcoming).

11 An avant-garde that understands itself as a chosen, a victorious, group (*al-ta'ifat al-mansura*) as the *ansar*, the supporters, of Muhammad and his companions had been. For a reaction of the Saudi AQ leader, Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, to a speech of Osama bin Laden outlining the definition and understanding of avant-gardist *jihadist* endeavors: Nico Prucha, *Sawt al-Gihad* – Die Stimme des Dschihad – al-Qa'idas erstes Online Magazin, Verlag Dr. Kovac: Hamburg 2010, p. 24.

12 The *awliya' allah*, "the friends of God" as stated in Quran 10:62 is an expression used by *jihadists* for describing themselves and elevating their deeds for God. A prominent Saudi ideologue, Abdallah al-Rushud, who was killed by security forces close to the Iraqi border in 2006 and whose death was commemorated by al-Qa'ida in Iraq, defined the 9/11 hijackers as such "*awliya' allah*, as we deem them to be, when they destroyed the two towers". Muhammad al-Rushud, "*wa-harrida al-mu'minin*",

her as a passive or active consumer – by various means within the shared space of the inclusive online territories. This has led to the construction of a virtual sense of a real (global) community, where individuals may feel compelled to commit acts of terror by themselves out of a presumed personal responsibility for the "Islamic" collective[13] in the West or by seeking to join the *Mujahideen* within Islamic territories deemed as occupied by Western nations.

The *jihadist's* inhabited virtual territories, consisting of mostly online forums, sympathizers on *Facebook* with appertaining groups and profiles as well as professionally utilized *YouTube* channels, are fueled by active *jihad* groups who are composed of real-life role-models: real *Mujahideen*, who are fighting in reality against, for example, US troops in Iraq or raiding army outposts in Algeria, speaking about missions against the Yemeni Army or showing military training camps in the forests of Chechnya. Armed groups provide filmed materials of highly violent content (kidnappings, beheadings, suicide-operations, attacks on convoys [including the so-called "road-side bombs"[14]], sniping enemy soldiers, etc.). Such violence on display is subsequently embedded in sequences of religious tutoring and ideological speeches and sermons validating and sanctifying the depicted violence; underlying fundamentals are determined as being a divine obligation and the publication online is partially a media-campaign and, most importantly, a form of missionary work (*da'wa*). These materials can be highly appealing, particularly when sympathizers can interact in online forums with proclaimed real-life *Mujahideen* and ask for advice about

what one would need to do prior to joining.[15]

II. Responding to the Death of Osama bin Laden

Nearly ten years after 9/11, Osama bin Laden was killed by a US-Special Forces Commandos in Abottabad, Pakistan. At first the *jihadist* communities online reacted skeptically and awaited a response by AQ's central command (*al-qiyadat al-amma*) via its official media outlets, such as the Global Islamic Media Front or *al-Fajr*.[16] In a statement entitled "you lived praiseworthy and died as a martyr", dated May 3rd, 2011 and published on May 6th on the *jihadist* forums posted by the administrators, AQ central command confirmed the death of bin Laden.[17] Following the usual tradition of congratulating for attaining martyrdom, bin Laden is praised as an outstanding believer who "wasn't a prophet sent in the 21st century, but rather just a Muslim man of this noble Islamic community (*ummah*)." And as such Osama bin Laden serves as being perhaps the ultimate role-model, who, as he always promised, would not be captured alive. The first statement regarding his death highlights bin Laden's organizational capabilities and his culpability of establishing a new generation of *jihadi*-warriors, including the role of online *jihadism*. Osama bin Laden, "the sheik of jihad in this era" remains through his legacy consisting of "his blood, his speeches, his stances and his final end which are a lively spirit that will give generation after generation of our Islamic *ummah* due" to continue the cause (*qadiyya*)[18]. And even if bin Laden was killed, "will America be able, by its media, its agents, its machinery, its military and intelligence agencies to wipe out for what *sheik* Osama lived

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[13] As had been the case with Arid Uka, a Kosovar living in Germany who shot two US-airmen bound for duty in Afghanistan in the head in Frankfurt, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/09/world/europe/09frankfurt.html. For an assessment of Uka's online relationships and activities: Philipp Holtmann, "No threat at first sight – Invisible terrorist environments on Facebook and Youtube", http://www.univie.ac.at/jihadism/blog/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Philipp-Holtmann-No-threat-at-first-sight-Invisible-terrorist-environments-on-Facebook-and-Youtube.pdf, pp. 3-6.

[14] IED – improvised explosive devices; the fabrication and deployment of such devices is a vital ingredient of most contemporary *jihad* videos. Filmed explosions sometimes show in great detail the devastating effect on both passengers and vehicles.

[15] As the following thread on the *Shumukh al-Islam jihad* forum highlights: http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=126040. Foremost, responding to the member Abd al-Hakim's question, (i) a sincere intention and (ii) faithfulness are required. Other members, such as Osama Hakim, reply in length by copying-and-pasting a "methodology to construct a Mujahid-terrorist personality" including listing important ideological writings next to basic information on various weapon-types.

[16] *Markaz al-Fajr li-l i'lam* is one of the major jihadi online publication centers for written statements and lengthier writings by AQ ideologues.

[17] A section by the title of this statement on Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's renowned *jihadist* website offers several statements regarding the death of bin Laden, http://www.tawhed.ws/c?i=422.

[18] The term *qadiyya* is renown in its explicit meaning of the "Palestinian Cause" for which the global *jihadists* struggle as much.

and was murdered for?" Bin Laden "built an organization, that won't die with his death, that won't pass with his passing. 'They wish to put His light out with their mouths. But He will complete His light, even though the disbelievers hate it. It is He who sent His messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to show that it is above all [other] religions, even though the idolaters hate it.'[19] These verses will always persist like an arrow piercing the throats of the deaf and the dumb that have no intellect. The religion of God, exalted is He, will persist. And part of this religion is the *jihad* on the path of God, always existing, its creed carried by those with pure hearts, striving to be revived by those with hands of chastity (*tahira*)."

The *jihadists* applaud the martyr-death of bin Laden[20] and advertise their clearly drawn lines of demarcation as the only true believers. Anyone adhering to the *jihadist* cause and accepting the assumed authoritative role of guidance can thus be a role-model as bin Laden was.

II.1 A Message to the *Mujahideen*

In a following *al-Fajr* statement[21], by the media-group itself, the role of the *jihadi* media is emphasized in practical matters. "By the death of heroes, the *ummah* lives" and the heroes after all remain alive within the *jihadist* online-pop-culture of fandom and the (re-) production of videos and pictures by its sympathizers – for the "Internet is a battlefield for *jihad*, a place for missionary work, a field of confronting the enemies of God. It is upon any individual to consider himself as a media-*mujahid*, dedicating himself, his wealth and his time for God." In unison, *jihadist* forums regularly offer media training courses and provide handbooks on how to use *Adobe Photoshop*, how to infiltrate *Facebook*, *YouTube*, and how to establish blogs. But, on top of such practical technical manuals, theoretical and theo-

logical writings are issued as well that sanction the massive usage of the Internet by all means as directly advertised by the *al-Fajr* media group after bin Laden's death. While this is not a new *modus operandi*, the direct calling to individuals online to contribute by all means to the ongoing *jihadist* endeavor in such a dimension certainly is. Advice for those who want to help the *jihadist* media is not new, and regular brothers with lingual capacities are still sought to join the media-battalions,[22] but *al-Fajr* now clearly implicates the work of 'lone wolf media *mujahid*' types as another potential factor in the *jihadists*' endeavor to remain heard and to be taken seriously.

The hierarchies of online materials are clearly set by *jihadist* media groups like *al-Fajr*, who issue videos and statements in the name of groups. And as a common functionality of Internet users who are fans of a genre, fan-made films and clips, pictures and user-generated-content in general are placed in proximity to the original content by the sympathizers and followers as equals on the forums. With the death of bin Laden and the failure to conduct a *jihadi* attack within a western country, perhaps, the media strategists of AQ fear they have a less prominent role nowadays, with the Arab spring wiping out tyrannical regimes in the Middle East that AQ had vowed to violently remove.[23]

While *jihad* is considered an individual obligation (*fard ayn*), a new frontier has been established on the Internet. Unlike when the first *as-Sahab* videos had been published online to commemorate the 9/11 hijackers and in order to let them speak and justify their actions in their words, anyone nowadays – theoretically – can prepare a terrorist attack and be sure to gain prominence later, including his *Facebook* profile entering mainstream media and the media of *jihad*.[24] Any pictures of, for example Arid Uka, or the aftermath of the shooting at Frankfurt airport are consumed

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19 Quran 61: 8-9; translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, The Quran, Oxford University Press: New York 2010
20 After all, in the *jihadists* interpretation of Quran 3:169 any jihadi, independent of his social standing, is deemed alive, bestowed by God with provisions.
21 Dated and published on May 6, 2011.
22 For example, *Inspire*, edition 1, pp. 44-46. Advised is the recording of live television in order to obtain quotes and to give ideas regarding hot topics. Furthermore, "images related to modern and historical occurrences" are always welcome.
23 As Brynjar Lia writes on *Jihadica*: "The current popular uprisings are just about the complete opposite of everything al-Qaida stands for: they are non-violent, mass-based, popular, all-inclusive, mostly secular, democratic, and perhaps most important: they work!", http://www.jihadica.com/jihadis-debate-egypt-3/
24 In a series entitled *Methodologies in gaining Medial Expertise*, published by *Markaz al-Yaqin* and *al-Furqan*, the Media-*Mujahid* is tutored by understanding the theological implications of "inciting for *jihad*" on the Internet and by processing such data.

and incorporated and reproduced within the *jihadists*' frame of reference.[25] The hopes and ambitions are increasingly focused on the *jihad* community as a whole, according to the *al-Fajr* statement:

> *"Do not consult anyone regarding the killing of Americans[26] and the destruction of their economy; for God's earth is wide and US-interests are spread throughout the whole world (…). We inspire you to individual terrorist operations, that will have a great impact and that do not take much preparation."*

It seems as the overall security threat initiated by the 9/11 attacks in 2001 has in the meantime transgressed into a perception of distrust against Muslims in general. AQ with its long arms of the media capitalizes on the spheres of distrust, which nevertheless are highly damaging to democratic and liberal societies, and never gets tired of celebrating any form of attack as a potential *jihadist* operation.[27]

III. Conclusion

The outlets of online *jihad* are present and functioning. With insurgent *jihadist* groups active and resisting in areas such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, the general media of *jihad* are in place to disseminate filmed operations and at the same time continue covering more and more niches and aspects of its ideology.[28]

Cleansing the Internet or permanently removing *jihadist* content seems impossible. Adam Ghadan Yahya, a.k.a "Azzam al-Amriki" – an American citizen who is a anchorman for AQ's media – advises "every brother who wants to work for this religion not to undertake any action before taking advantage of the wide range of resources available today on the Internet. Particularly, the various manuals and encyclopedias and courses which deal with the Mujahidin's operational and electronic security and security in general."[29]

But it is not all about operational and electronic security but about freely disseminated handbooks on how to build various types of bombs and how to handle weapons once individuals are clearly set on a wanna-be path of destruction as the ideological files attempt. Particularly with Western authorities thwarting *jihadist* terror cells frequently, the *jihadi*-media turned its attention to individual terrorism, which now dominantly focuses on Muslims living in the West who should now act on behalf of their suppressed and maltreated brothers.

> *"Muslims in the West are perfectly placed to do major damage; a golden opportunity to show one's blessing to fight with everything at one's disposal."*

Azzam al-Amriki will most likely commemorate or eulogize the attack, if it succeeds, guaranteeing at least 15 minutes of fame inside the *jihadist* spectrum online.

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[25] The action of Arid Uka was reproduced in the first major *as-Sahab* video production after bin Laden's death, published June 3, 2011. In this video, entitled "You are only accountable for yourself" (*la tukallafu ila nafsaka*), pictures taken from the western mainstream media showing forensic experts at the Frankfurt airport are embedded in the propagated divine command of attacking the enemies of God by all means. Historical and contemporary role-models subsequently follow, with Major Nidal Hasan Malik, the Fort Hood shooter who was allegedly guided by Anwar al-Awlaqi, being the most prominent.
[26] A popular statement introduced by the *sawt al-jihad* by Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Salim, *Sawt al-Jihad* Number 4, p. 30. He would later be known by his clear-name Aisa bin Sa'ad al-Awshin.
[27] This included, for example, the immediate approval of the car-bombing of Oslo's governmental quarter on July 22, 2011. *Jihadist* sympathizers were quick to celebrate this attack as a *jihadist* operation punishing Norway for its involvement in Afghanistan and the 'Muhammad cartoons', http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=118219. Later, Abu Sulayman al-Nasir a renown forum member, asked to wait for an official statement first, cautioning the nature of the assailants in Norway, http://www.shamikh1.info/vb/showthread.php?t=118219.
[28] For example, how can drone attacks be countered and to what extent must spies be discovered and executed? The execution of spies, who are mostly Muslims, has in the meantime been covered by jihadi ideological writings. Beheadings and executions in general are legitimized and a filmed output of this ruling is evident in the jihad videos. For further reference: Abu Yahya al-Libi, *al-Mu'lim fi hukm al-jasus al-Muslim*, *al-Fajr* 2009, http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=y34deswq (with a foreword by Ayman al-Zawahiri).
[29] *La tukallafu ila nafsaka*, *as-Sahab* video (June 2011).