

THE HIDDEN FACE OF JIHADIST INTERNET FORUM MANAGEMENT: THE CASE OF ANSAR AL MUJAHIDEEN

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Abstract

This paper offers a descriptive analysis of the private interactions which took place on the jihadist Internet forum known as Ansar Al Mujahideen between 2008 and 2010. The analysis of the non-visible part of the forum contributes to a more robust underpinning of some current assumptions regarding the jihadist Internet infrastructure and its hierarchical dependence on, and subordination to, formal terrorist organisations and charismatic leaders. In addition, it offers a new perspective on other aspects such as the many conflicts and rivalries between the different forums, the operational constraints caused by the lack of human and material resources, and the considerable vulnerability of the forums to cyber-sabotage and infiltration attempts.

Keywords: Al Qaeda, cyber attacks, Internet, propaganda, radicalisation

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Internet forums are the most important manifestation of the jihadist presence in cyberspace. Following multiple cyber-attacks and instances of sabotage, Al Qaeda and its affiliates abandoned their aim of maintaining an “official” website to act as a meeting point for the group and its followers and instead looked to forums as an alternative strategy to mask their role in the online dissemination of radical propaganda. Platforms of this type draw their inspiration from the Web 2.0 philosophy, where the Internet user is no longer just a passive consumer but participates in a virtual community, while also producing content. An extensive transnational community of radical web users meets and

interacts on these platforms, which are increasingly used for terrorist radicalisation, recruitment and coordination¹.

The forums offer, more or less openly, quantitative and qualitative information on the communications, priorities, topics of interest and relations between the various component parts of the international terror network. Unsurprisingly, they have attracted considerable interest as a source of information for operational intelligence as well as for academic researchers. Recent years have brought studies focused on, for example, the increased communications actions of jihadist groups², the subject matters that attract greatest interest among the virtual communities³, the dynamics behind the creation, development and disappearance of forums⁴, the roles played by the platforms⁵, the

¹ Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006).

² Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, *Iraqi Insurgent Media: The War of Images and Ideas* (Washington, D.C.: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2007); Daniel Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message," RFE/RL Special Report (2008). Available at http://docs.rferl.org/en-US/AQ_Media_Nexus.pdf; Daniel Kimmage, "Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet," Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper – New America Foundation (March 2010). Available at <http://counterterrorism.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/kimmage2.pdf>; Benjamin Ducol, "Uncovering the French-speaking jihadisphere: An exploratory analysis", *Media, War & Conflict* 9, no. 1 (April 2012): 51-70

³ Edna Erez, Gabriel Weimann and Aaron Weisburd, "Jihad, Crime, and the Internet. Content Analysis of Jihadist Forum Discussions", National Institute of Justice (October 2011). Available at <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/236867.pdf>; Gilbert Ramsay, *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013)

⁴ Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, "The Dynamics of the Creation, Evolution, and Disappearance of Terrorist Internet Forums", *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 7, no. 1 (2012): 164- 178; Manuel Cebrian, Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, Ramon Huerta and James Fowler, "Violent extremist group ecologies under stress", *Scientific Reports* 3, no.1544 (March 2013): 1-18; Evan Kohlmann, "A Beacon for Extremists: The Ansar al-Mujahideen Web Forum", *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 2 (February 2010): 1-4. Available at: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-beacon-for-extremists-the-ansar-al-mujahideen-web-forum>; Nico Prucha, "The Rise of Al-Ekhlaas", *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor* (May 2008): 14-15.

⁵ Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group (JWMG), "In the Depths of Jihadist Web Forums: Understanding a Key Component of the Propaganda of Jihad", *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT)* (2012) Available at <http://www.ict.org.il/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=w8IXa95zve0%3D&tabid=320>; Rüdiger Lohlker (Ed.) *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism: Online and Offline* (Vienna: V&R Unipress, 2012); General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), *Jihadism on the Web: A Breeding Ground for Jihad in the Modern Age* (Den Haag: Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2012); Mohammed Ali Musawi, *Cheering for Osama: How Jihadists Use Internet Discussion Forums*, (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2010) ; Hanna Rogan, "Al-Qaeda's Online Media Strategies: From Abu Reuter to Irhabi007", *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment* (2007). Available at <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2007/02729.pdf>

relations between them⁶, the problems they encounter in managing anonymity and interpersonal trust⁷, and the interactions between forums and Internet social media⁸.

Despite notable advances in scientific knowledge of jihadist Internet forums, an important gap still exists which conditions our understanding of the phenomenon. The interactions on such sites are not confined to the content that is published openly or restricted to community members. The forums are also used for numerous two-way confidential communications between users which can be accessed only by those involved. It is only logical to assume that this is the format chosen to discuss “sensitive” matters, although we also find in these communications a greater degree of sincerity and self-criticism than is seen in the content of the “visible” part of the forum, which is prepared with terrorist propaganda and glorification in mind. However, information on this secret face of jihadist forum activities is scarce and fragmented, tending to come mainly from partial leaks in the media who cite intelligence or court sources.

The present work aims to make a substantial contribution to remedying the current gap in knowledge on the less accessible side of jihadist Internet forums. The contribution has been made possible thanks to an exceptional documentary source which has permitted a comprehensive analysis of the confidential interactions on the Ansar Al Mujahideen forum between 2008 and 2010. The interactions came to light during the criminal trial in Spain of the forum webmaster, Faisal Errai.

An analysis of the information provides a more robust underpinning of some of our assumptions concerning the jihadist Internet infrastructure while also offering a new

⁶ Gabriel Weimann, “Virtual Disputes: The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Debates”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 7 (2006): 623–39.

⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, “Interpersonal Trust on Jihadi Internet Forums,” in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Fight, Flight, Mimic: Identity Signalling in Armed Conflicts*, (forthcoming). Available at: http://hegghammer.com/files/Interpersonal_trust.pdf; Stephen Ulph, “Intelligence War Breaks out on the Jihadi Forums,” *Terrorism Focus* 7, no. 1 (April 2006)

⁸ Aaron Y. Zelin, “The State of Global Jihad Online. A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis”, *New American Foundation*, (February 2013). Available at http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/the_state_of_global_jihad_online

perspective on some of the main players, their capacities, and the problems they face. By way of conclusion, it can be said that, although the main forums see themselves as “independent initiatives” supporting the mujahideen cause, a clear hierarchical dependence on and subordination to formal terrorist organisations and charismatic leaders can be detected. Nonetheless, the different jihadist forums on Internet become embroiled in multiple conflicts and rivalries which they endeavour to handle discreetly without letting their follower base know. Moreover, the conversations between those in charge of the forums evidence their lack of human and material resources, their vulnerability to cyber attacks and the negative impacts these have on the day to day management of the platforms.

Information sources and methodology

The principal source of information for the present work is the comprehensive trial document known as Sumario 38/2011-C (commenced on 8 August 2011), which contains all the paperwork from the police and judicial investigation into Faisal Errai, a Moroccan living in Spain who was arrested in late August 2010 and charged with being the webmaster (“general administrator”) of the Ansar al Mujahideen Arabic Forum (AMAF). Although access to the documentation is restricted, the present author has been able to consult it in its entirety in his capacity as an academic researcher.

The case was exceptional for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the National Criminal Court (“Audiencia Nacional”), which has exclusive powers to try terrorism cases in Spain, set an important precedent in officially classifying AMAF as a terrorist organisation⁹, equating the Internet forum with terrorist organisations that waged violence directly.

Secondly, after a brief period in which he denied the charges, the defendant changed his mind and cooperated openly with investigators, probably influenced by the prospect of

⁹ According to the sentence, the court described Ansar Al Mujahideen as “an organised structure operating on the Internet since 2005” and dedicated to creating “propaganda consisting of ideas promoting the use of violence for political and religious ends, in line with the actions and methods of Al Qaeda and similar groups”. Audiencia Nacional. Juzgado Central de Instrucción nº 2. (2013). “Sentencia nº 47/2013”, (2/07/2013). Available at <http://static.presspeople.com/attachment/b5880a6291dc41c69f1dabaa6f028c18>

extradition to his country of birth¹⁰. Such collaboration is rare among those accused in the West of membership of a jihadist organisation and this was acknowledged by the court in imposing a lower prison sentence of six years following his conviction. Sumario 38/2011-C includes the verbatim transcripts of the various voluntary statements given by Errai, together with handwritten papers he provided to the authorities, including data, graphics and drawings of the workings of jihadist Internet forums.

Thirdly, the trial papers include the results of months of intercepts of traffic from the Internet connection used by the AMAF webmaster in the course of his work. These include not just actual forum communications but also details of his participation in instant messaging services and jihadist chat rooms on platforms such as Paltalk¹¹.

However, the most important information source for the present work are the periodic backup copies made by the defendant of the forum content, including both open content and the private messages of the different users. The files are stored on an SD memory card hidden by Faisal Errai in his bedroom which was not found (even during the police search on his home) until its exact location was disclosed by the defendant as a gesture of goodwill¹². The card holds 10 backups made at various times¹³ and most of the content is in Arabic, Somalian, Turkish, English and German. The data base comprises 13,018 entries covering the period 16 November 2008 and 26 January 2010. An extensive selection of the content was translated by investigators and included in the trial papers. The approximately one thousand pages offer a hitherto inaccessible glimpse of the day to day running of a leading jihadist forum.

The present paper offers a descriptive analysis of the corpus of documents and uses content analysis to evaluate the frequency and relevance of the different subject matters covered in private communications on the Ansar al Mujahideen forum, which occupied a prominent place in the league table of pro-jihadist websites, its pages being used to distribute the propaganda prepared by armed groups as well as for recruitment, funding

¹⁰ Manuel R. Torres-Soriano. *Al Andalus 2.0. La ciber-yihad contra España* (Granada: Biblioteca GESI, 2014): 243.

¹¹ Paltalk is a video group chat service that enables users to communicate via video, internet chat and voice. It offers chat rooms and the ability for users to create their own public virtual chat room. www.paltalk.com

¹² Statement by Faisal Errai (17/1/2011). Sumario 38/2011-C: 3255

¹³ Directorate General of the Civil Guard. "Transcript of the private messages of the different data bases of the "Ansar Al Mujahideen" forum" (3/2/2012). Sumario 38/2011-C: 3687.

and planning of terrorist attacks. To a large extent, the conclusions obtained can be extrapolated to other major platforms, not just for reasons of ideological affinity but also because such platforms tend to operate in similar fashion and their members often participate simultaneously on the different ones available at a given time.

Brief history of the Ansar Al Mujahideen forum and its webmaster, Faisal Errai

Spain's Civil Guard (one of the country's two law enforcement agencies) detained 26-year-old Moroccan Faisal Errai in a small town in Alicante on 27 August 2010. He was accused¹⁴ of being a "leader" of the Ansar al Mujahideen network since at least 2008, specifically the person who registered and paid for some of the domains that hosted the influential forum¹⁵ and subsequently became its webmaster. The site was considered by experts to be one of the main distribution channels for the propaganda of jihadist organisations¹⁶, as well as a space for the socialisation and radicalisation of hundreds of web users. At the time of Errai's arrest, it boasted approximately 5500 registered users who had posted over 100,000 entries in the different forum sections.

A self-taught computer specialist, Errai ran the forum using multiple aliases such as "Al Ekhlass" and "Abu Hafs" and devoted a significant part of his time to it. He maintained regular contact on Internet with representatives designated by terrorist organisations, who sent him their latest propaganda. His network of virtual contacts and privileged position on the forum enabled him to create travel itineraries for future combatants to reach conflict scenarios such as Afghanistan, Chechnya and Somalia. The young Moroccan was also an active online recruiter of future "martyrs". Once he had established the credibility of a candidate, he would provide information on routes to be used to avoid interception and contacts who would facilitate access to the armed groups operating in the aforementioned scenarios. Errai also made his extensive list of contacts available for

¹⁴ Audiencia Nacional. Juzgado Central De Instrucción nº 2. "Diligencias Previas 120/09-F. Faiçal Errai", (31/08/2010) Available at http://estaticos.elmundo.es/documentos/2010/08/31/auto_audiencia_nacional.pdf

¹⁵ <http://as-ansar.com/vb/index.php>

¹⁶ Society for Internet Research, "Top Ten Jihadi Forums, as of 14 February, 2011", *Internet Haganah*, (February 2011) Available at <http://internet-haganah.com/harchives/007162.html>

several terrorist projects within Europe, using the Internet to connect individuals with complementary skills to help form teams capable of perpetrating a successful attack.¹⁷

The case of Faisal Errai is of particular interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, because his apparently “normal” profile and daily routines stood in marked contrast to his “virtual alter ego” and his opinions on what made a “good Muslim”. Like other economic migrants from North Africa, he had entered Spain illegally more than 7 years previously. At the time of his arrest he was unemployed although he had held several unskilled jobs, including some in the tourism sector on the Spanish coast. The young Moroccan lived with his mother, who had recently married a Spanish Christian, a reproachable decision from the radical jihadist standpoint but one that did not meet with reprobation from Errai. After learning of his arrest, his mother denied he was a radical, insisting that he “never prayed”¹⁸. Faisal helped out as a Civil Protection volunteer¹⁹, had learnt a regional language, was a familiar face in bars and clubs, and took alcohol and hashish daily. He rationalised this apparent contradiction on the grounds that he needed to act undercover in a hostile environment. In a conversation with a forum collaborator, he had no hesitation in drawing a parallel between his approach and that of the leader of the cell responsible for the 9/11 attacks: “This is exile. I am like Atta, ... I don’t like to draw attention to myself. I have two faces”²⁰.

A further aspect deserving of mention is the speed with which Errai rose through the ranks in the jihadist Internet infrastructure. His “five years at the computer screen supporting the mujahideen”²¹ sufficed to make up for his lack of religious instruction and combat experience and enabled him to reach the summit of Internet terrorist support networks and become an interlocutor for several of the main international jihadist organisations.

¹⁷ For example, his efforts to coordinate a cell which planned to strike in Belgium. See: Gilbert Dupont, “Le terroriste souffre de folie”, *La Dernière Heure*, (20/9/2011). Available at <http://www.dhnet.be/infos/faits-divers/article/369102/le-terroriste-souffre-de-folie.html>; Jochen Vandenberg, (2010) “Terreurverdachten gelinkt aan Sharia4Belgium”, *Nieuwsblad*, (24/11/2010) Available at <http://www.nieuwsblad.be/article/detail.aspx?articleid=8A32NIOT>

¹⁸ EMV, “La madre de Errai Faical: «Yo, sin mi hijo, me muero»”, *El Mercantil Valenciano*, (29/08/2010). Available at <http://www.levante-emv.com/comunitat-valenciana/2010/08/29/madre-errai-faical-hijo-muero/734622.html>

¹⁹ Civil Protection is a public service organisation in Spain which intervenes in situations of collective risk and in disasters.

²⁰ Conversation between Al Ekhlash and x-elbasri-x (25/02/2010) Sumario 38/2011-C: 2213.

²¹ Messenger conversation between Faisal Errai and Ghazwan Al Yemeni (24/2/2010) Sumario 38/2011-C: 5595.

This rapid rise can also be explained by the high degree of mobility in positions of responsibility on such forums. The arrests or deaths of activists, or their departure for a jihadist front, meant that lower-ranking activists capable of earning the trust of platform bosses were constantly promoted. Errai's definitive promotion to the position of AMAF general administrator occurred in June 2009 following the departure of the previous incumbent, a Jordanian known as Abu Qandahar²². After a successful track record as a distributor of jihadist propaganda on Internet, Abu Qandahar travelled to Waziristan to join the armed groups fighting international troops in Afghanistan.

Although Errai began to suspect he was under investigation by police, he was unable to finalise plans for someone to succeed him as forum head²³. As a result, Ansar Al Mujahideen ceased to operate after his arrest and did not reappear for seven months²⁴.

Errai himself described in detail the recruitment and promotion process within the Internet community to the police officers who questioned him. The Moroccan revealed how, like other young Muslims, he visited a number of the most popular Internet chat rooms in Arabic on music and other leisure topics²⁵. The chat rooms were also visited by radical preachers who challenged users and deliberate set out to generate controversy as to what made a good Muslim. The aim of the preachers was to channel their targets towards other chat rooms controlled by them which focused essentially on religious discussion. The

²² Abu Qandahar was the pseudonym used by Jordanian medical student Haitham Bin Muhammad al-Khayat, who became one of the most notorious authors in the Internet jihadism subculture. This young man was obsessed with the person of Humam al-Balawi, the suicide bomber who attacked a CIA station in Afghanistan. He considered him a soul mate: both were Jordanian, had studied medicine and had acquired for themselves a reputation on jihadist Internet forums. Abu Qandahar used Internet to praise the virtues of his compatriot, holding him up as a role model: "Writers can create great things, on one condition: they must die for their thoughts to live on. Do not forget his will (in reference to al-Balawi) and follow his path". His desire for "martyrdom" was realised when he was killed by an American missile in late 2010. See: Florian Flade, "Death of an Online-Jihadi – From Cyberspace to Battlefield", *Jih@d. News Of Terrorism, Jihadism & International Politics*, (December 2010). Available at <http://ojihad.wordpress.com/2010/12/21/death-of-a-online-jihadi-from-cyberspace-to-battlefield/>

²³ A few days after his arrest, Ansar al Mujahideen issued a release entitled "Concerning the news of the arrest of our brother Abu Hafs". The message urged Muslims to pray for their brother and also called for calm among the forum's followers, insisting that "Abu Hafs" did not possess information that might compromise the site or the security of users. It also warned "the crusaders of Spain and the intelligence dogs of Morocco and Jordan" that "the forum's mission will not end until Al Andalus reverts once more to the lands of Islam and God's rule is established over the apostates and those who help them". Ansar Al-Mujahideen. "Clarification concerning the news of the arrest of brother Abu Hafs" (in Arabic) (4/9/2010). Available at <http://www.as-ansar.com/vb/archive/index.php/t-27892.html> [Accessed 11/03/2013]

²⁴ Torres-Soriano (see note 4 above)

²⁵ According to Errai, the most popular were those on the Camfrog video chat site: <https://www.camfrog.com>.

chat rooms were used also to share an extensive range of graphic and audio materials, “especially on the Palestinian conflict, with pictures of dead children women who had been raped, etc.”²⁶ Once there, users were then invited to visit sites offering highly radical content, including the main jihadist forums of the day. For access to all the sections of these sites, the recruiter allocated user names and passwords which had been created specifically to be passed on to web users undergoing radicalisation. This indeed was Errai’s own experience: he was contacted in 2007 by a Saudi recruiter known as Hamman²⁷, who gave him access to the Al Ekhllass (“network of Islamic devotion”) forum. Errai was particularly interested in one of the site directories, known as the “Electronic Faculty of the Jihad”, which helped him “increase his IT knowledge by 75%”²⁸. A number of the most prominent users of this forum also met to discuss “more operational issues” in some of the restricted-access chat rooms on Paltalk. The chat room known as Ansar Al Mujahideen was a gathering of various activist followers of Jordanian preacher Abu Muhamad Al Maqdisi²⁹. They included Hamman, Errai’s recruiter, who in early 2008 decided to create a new jihadist forum as an extension of the Paltalk chat room, retaining the same name. The new site sought to defend “tawhid salafism” and drew its content from information published on other jihadist sites. Given Errai’s experience in buying internet domains, his help was enlisted by his recruiter to help launch the new platform. The Moroccan bought a domain called ansaraljihad.com using his personal contact details, a mistake that was to lead to his identification and arrest several years later.

September 2008 saw the closure of Al Ekhllass, one of the most prestigious jihadist forums of its day, sparking an exodus of part of its leadership to the new forum in Arabic, Ansar Al Mujahideen, which later began to publish content in English and German also, a decision which led to a sharp rise in its registered users, not to mention an exponential increase in visibility among the pro-jihadist Internet community, much to the jealousy of more established forums who did not hesitate to spread rumours of all kinds concerning the credibility of the new initiative³⁰.

²⁶ Statement by Faisal Errai (17/01/2011), Sumario 38/2011-C: 3253

²⁷ According to Errai, this nickname and others such as MR_56 were used by a Saudi called Otaibi Al Katimy Aaid Mohkald, who was later arrested by police in his home country and tortured to death. See: Statement by Faisal Errai (18/3/2011) Sumario 38/2011-C: 3357.

²⁸ Statement by Faisal Errai (29/08/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 2213.

²⁹ Statement by Faisal Errai (12/01/2011). Sumario 38/2011-C: 3251.

³⁰ Kohlmann (see note 4 above)

Sponsors and hierarchy

Although AMAF presented itself as an initiative by a group of “ordinary members”³¹ under the slogan “In support of the struggle by pen and sword”, its success cannot be understood without the backing received from its earliest days from one of the most important ideologists in the jihadist universe: the Jordanian-Palestinian Abu Muhammad Al Maqdisi³². In a quantitative study by the Combating Terrorism Center of the United States Military Academy, this preacher was identified as “the most influential living Jihadi Theorist”³³. Although there is no disputing his influence over members of the jihadist movement, his operational ties to groups and individuals who wage violence is less evident. Maqdisi has been questioned, detained, imprisoned and released by the Jordanian government on numerous occasions, thus indicating that there is insufficient clear proof of his terrorist links to secure a lengthy conviction. This is largely due to the care taken by Maqdisi to be perceived as an independent ideologist with no affiliations to an organisation. He has thus avoided crossing the “red lines” of what might be viewed as constituting explicit advocacy of terrorist violence.

The private messages and conversations on AMAF highlight the decisive role played by Maqdisi in the birth and consolidation of the forum, a support that extended far beyond purely symbolic endorsement. At the same time, they also evidence the care taken by the preacher and his immediate circle to ensure that this involvement did not land him in trouble with the authorities.

The group of Internet users who created AMAF were part of the Jordanian-Palestinian preacher’s network of close contacts and he gave them their blessing to create the new site, thus enabling the forum to be perceived by radical users as a “legitimate” initiative. When it became embroiled in controversy with other jihadist Internet platforms over its credibility and the support received from leaders of the jihad, Maqdisi intervened further and sent a letter setting out his explicit support. The letter was posted as a banner on the forum by its administrators:

³¹ Ibid.

³² Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

³³ William McCants (Ed). *Militant Ideology Atlas* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006): 8.

“Verily I invite my brothers the members and the administrators from the jihadi forums to support and encourage and increase the group of this blessed forum (...) we knew that their honored staff who are well known from within us with their love for jihad and their desire for supporting the mujahideen (...)”³⁴

Such explicit backing, along with “endorsement” from the Taliban, who requested help from AMAF to edit some of their audiovisual materials and provide translations into European languages³⁵, were the main arguments used by those in charge of the forum to demonstrate that the site had the approval of the “true leaders of the jihad”. The connection between Maqdisi and the forum leadership went much deeper than their similar ideologies, however. The private messages reveal that AMAF bosses offered technical and graphic assistance for the design and maintenance of the personal website of Sheikh Minbar Al Tawhid³⁶. The cooperation was so extensive that, at one stage, they suggested merging the two sites. However, the proposal was rejected by the sheikh on the grounds that the AMAF home page included numerous advertisements and banners promoting materials from jihadist groups. This was one of the red lines the sheikh avoided crossing on his website in order not to “lead to interrogation or arrest”³⁷.

The backing received from Maqdisi was treasured as a key asset by forum chiefs, who - during one particularly quiet period of activity on the site - even contemplated asking him to pen another exclusive text to “fill the forum with users once again”³⁸.

The private conversations also show how the leadership exerted by Maqdisi overlapped with a more operational external leadership which coordinated the work of the different pro-mujahideen websites. The forum administrators realised that having the support of the Al Fajr platform, which had exclusive responsibility for distributing propaganda produced by the main jihadist groups, equated to having the “blessing” of the mujahideen leadership. Those in charge of AMAF were in no doubt that behind Al Fajr lay Al Qaeda, more specifically the “Grand Sheikh”³⁹ Atiyah Allah⁴⁰ who, at the time of the

³⁴ Available at <http://www.ansar1.info/supportMaqdisi.gif> [01/06/2010]

³⁵ Message from insurgent to Palestinian_8 (8/6/2009). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5209

³⁶ <http://www.tawhed.ws/>

³⁷ Conversation on Paltalk between Al Ekhlass and Algareeb (1/2/2010), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5128.

³⁸ Conversation between ASD and Ekhlass (26/12/09), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5197.

³⁹ Statement by Faisal Errai (17/1/2011). Sumario 38/2011-C: 3255.

⁴⁰ Atiyyatullah Abu Abd al-Rahman, a Libyan national, was a prominent Libyan Islamic Fighting Group leader who joined Al Qaeda and rose through the ranks to take on responsibilities at the highest level. He was one of the organisation’s leading ideologists and propaganda makers until he was killed in an American

conversations, was the Al Qaeda member responsible for coordinating the jihad support network on Internet.

The backing received from Al Fajr not only conferred legitimacy on the forum and ensured a regular supply of propaganda materials. It took the form also of technical and “artistic” support network which provided IT help for forums in the event of problems and assistance with the editing and creation of new audiovisual materials. Moreover, Al Fajr had its own server infrastructure which it used to enable forums to remain operational when they faced difficulties maintaining their online presence through their own means.

The AMAF leaders were aware of the fact that Al Fajr support carried with it submission and acceptance of a hierarchy in which the Al Qaeda leadership occupied the top rung of the decision process: “when Al Fajr supports a forum, it ends up controlling it completely”⁴¹.

The ties between AMAF and Al Fajr grew and became explicit when the Al Qaeda platform rushed to help it and other jihadist forums targeted by cyber attacks shortly after they disseminated a video claiming responsibility for the suicide bombing by Hammam Khalil Abu Malal al-Balawi, a prominent Internet forum user⁴²: “The sabotage was stepped up after the Abu Dujana strike”⁴³. Al Fajr offered the forums its network of servers to ensure they could continue to operate. One senior Al Fajr figure told Faisal Errai: “the Grand Sheikh has given me the green light to provide all the support you need in terms of domains, hosting, etc, after your Internet activities and the blessing by the sheiks were drawn to his attention”⁴⁴.

Coping with constraints

drone strike on 22 August 2011 in North Waziristan. See: Christopher Anzalone, “Al-Qaeda loses its “renaissance man””, *The South Asia Channel- FP*, (9/9/2011). Available at http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/09/09/al_qaeda_loses_its_renaissance_man

⁴¹ Statement by Faisal Errai (1/2/2011). Sumario 38/2011-C: 3278.

⁴² This “triple agent” used a suicide vest bomb to kill intelligence officers whom he had arranged to meet in Camp Chapman (Afghanistan). The blast killed 7 CIA employees, a security contractor and a Jordanian intelligence officer. Balawi, aka “Abu Dujana”, is particularly admired by users of jihadist Internet forums, who identify with the Jordanian doctor. He had a long track record of inciting support for the jihad on the Internet prior to joining the jihadist groups that helped him carry out his suicide attack. See: Joby Warrick, *The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA* (New York: Doubleday, 2011)

⁴³ Conversation on PalTalk between Al Ekhlass and swat-wazerstan (12/1/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5164.

⁴⁴ Conversation on PalTalk between Al Ekhlass and Algareeb (01/02/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5165.

Beyond the triumphalism and the ostentation of technical prowess manifested by jihadist forums, which constantly emphasise that their message cannot be silenced by their enemies, in reality the day to day management of the AMAF forum evidenced a marked lack of human and material resources, constraints which had a highly adverse impact on its functioning and continued Internet presence.

An initial constraint were the poor Internet connections of the majority of its members in countries in Asia and the Middle East, which hampered effective performance of tasks requiring high data transfer capacity, including uploading large files, making back-up copies or participation in video conferences. Faisal Errai had to coordinate via Internet a group of collaborators whose identities and exact geographical whereabouts were unknown to him, although he assumed that if a user had a good connection that allowed programmes and pages to be downloaded it was because they were somewhere in Europe. This was his assumption in the case of a user called sami123, whom he considered to be a “very reserved person (...) who spends long hours connected to the Internet every day”⁴⁵. The Civil Guard later arrested sami123, a Saudi called Mudhar Hussein Al Malaki⁴⁶ who lived a mere 100 km from Errai. Officers found at his home over 30,000 computer files with jihadist materials, a discovery which earned him the nickname “Al Qaeda’s librarian”.

The most pressing constraint, however, was the lack of money to cover the cost of keeping the forum running. The little money available came from small donations (usually from individuals in the Gulf countries) in the form of pre-paid cards⁴⁷ purchased anonymously in shops and whose codes were sent to the forum leaders to enable them to buy and top up, using fake personal details, a range of virtual credit cards used to pay for the servers that hosted the forum. According to Faisal Errai, a “good server”⁴⁸ cost around \$250 monthly, a sum they considered beyond their reach and which obliged them to explore less robust but cheaper alternatives. The few donations received did not arrive regularly and the forum was forced to “seek financial support” every time a new server payment had to be made. The procedure was completely dysfunctional as the requests for money,

⁴⁵ Statement by Faisal Errai (18/3/2011). Sumario 38/2011-C: 3356.

⁴⁶ Audiencia Nacional. Juzgado Central de Instrucción Nº 5 (2012). “Diligencias Previas 26/2011” (30/3/2012) Available at <http://ep00.epimg.net/descargables/2012/03/30/d61bac3fc1fa90da6d87e2edd6e1f4e4.pdf>.

⁴⁷ According to the court papers, one of the services used most for this purpose was CashU: <https://www.cashu.com/>

⁴⁸ Conversation between Al Ekhlass and Asd alansar (26/2/10). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5220.

card purchases, sending of codes and contracting of a new server could take several days, during which the forum could not be accessed by Internet users.

This situation was recurrent due to the frequent cyber attacks suffered by the forum, which continually forced its leaders to find new hosting possibilities, even if they realised that they could not continue to spend the little money available on what might well be a short-lived service. One of Errai's closest collaborators admitted, for example, that he did not want to contract a server "just for one month" as he was afraid to "spend the money on a server that will come under attack"⁴⁹. Prior to the sabotage campaign waged against the main jihadist Internet forums following the dissemination of the Balawi suicide attack video, servers that hosted such sites would be contracted for "one or two years" at a cost of several thousand dollars. The cyber attack forced the sites "back to square one". One private conversation reveals, for example, that Abu Al Maarek, the Al Fajr website member responsible for contracting and administering the servers, "was so psychologically depressed that he has stayed off the forum since"⁵⁰.

The AMAF administrators identified a correlation between the popularity of the forum (particularly in the western media) and the likelihood of being targeted by a cyber attack. One preventive step taken was to switch the forum from an "American" server to one located in "Malaysia", on the grounds that "they can access any server to copy the content and block the forum easily"⁵¹. The best option, in the opinion of the administrators, was to rent servers from China it was "at war with the US over the issue of Internet"⁵² and, presumably, the United States were less able to gain access to Chinese servers. However, they were aware that the "migration" did not render them totally immune, not least because the alternatives to the western servers were less robust against cyber attacks: "the American dogs know that Asian servers are not up to the task"⁵³. The administrators expressed concern that the frequent disruptions suffered by the site were causing a fall in the number of daily visitors to the forum⁵⁴.

⁴⁹ Conversation between Al Ekhllass and Asd Alansar (28/2/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5520.

⁵⁰ Conversation on Paltalk between Al Ekhllass and Swat Waziristan (28/2/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 2526.

⁵¹ Message from Omar al-Sarim to ansar007 (30/12/2009). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5218.

⁵² Conversation between as-ansar and hafs_1 (28/2/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5222.

⁵³ Conversation between Al Ekhllass and Asd alansar (26/2/10). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5220.

⁵⁴ Conversation between abu.qutada and ansarsuna (25/2/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5162.

A further serious constraint that hampered the management of the forum was the lack of activists willing to take on responsibility for day to day tasks. As a result, some of the most committed forum leaders admitted to being “tired” due to their workload and they asked their contacts in jihadist organisations to make their work easier by sending, in addition to uncut materials, various graphic materials and slogans to make editing and disseminating the propaganda easier. The dissatisfaction triggered by his work to support the jihad on the Internet led one administrator known as Mushrif11 to ask his interlocutor in the Somali terrorist group Al-Shabab whether he could join them in Somalia or whether he was “more useful continuing to provide support via Internet?” The conversations also evidence his wish for his efforts to be recognised by the mujahideen. For this reason he asked them to make explicit mention of AMAF members in some of their communiqués, as this would be very important to “keep moral high among the new brothers”⁵⁵.

The same user confessed to being snowed under with tasks that bore little resemblance to the idealised image he had of being a mujahideen. The tasks included editing videos to erase the female faces appearing in fragments of documentaries accompanying jihadist propaganda: “I cannot do all this on my own (...) if I have to look after all the videos I will be spending my whole life blanking out faces (...) and that is totally illogical”. He acknowledged the difficulties encountered in obtaining more help given that “everyone is afraid they will end up in jail if they upload a video or a photo”⁵⁶.

Not all trusted members who were in a position to monitor and moderate interactions on the forum participated to the degree the forum leaders would have liked and this was a constant source of frustration for the AMAF webmaster, who confessed to the only qualified user who was online at that moment that “there are times when I feel like shutting down the network: what can I do without supervisors? (...) visitors are participating but there is no-one to monitor them”⁵⁷.

Brothers and rivals

One aspect of great concern to the AMAF administrators was the dispute in which they became embroiled with some of the main jihadist Internet forums. Private conversations reveal that the true relations between the virtual platforms were a far cry from the

⁵⁵ Message from Mushrif11 to Abu Muhammad Al-Somali (04/07/2009). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5124.

⁵⁶ Message from Mushrif11 to Ibn Sham Alansari (26/5/2009). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5142.

⁵⁷ Conversation between Al ekhlass and Mowahid_007 (02/2/2010). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5201.

solidarity one would expect among players harassed by a common enemy and with shared goals, methods and ideological inspiration. However, the cyber-jihad world is hampered by the same impassioned conducts that hinder cooperation among terrorists when interacting “face to face”⁵⁸. From the outset, the Ansar Al Mujahideen forum sparked jealousy and ill-will on the part of established forums, which soon became the main source of rumours concerning the intentions of the rising star in the cyber-jihad universe.

The initially cool reception given by the senior forums turned to open hostility when two of the main forums of the day, Al Faluja⁵⁹ and Al Tahadi⁶⁰, expelled the AMAF representatives from their communities. This attitude disconcerted the leaders of the new forum, who sought to rationalise the behaviour of their “brothers” by blaming the “new Obama policy” for “enlisting thousands of vassals and spies”⁶¹ to sow discord among the different jihadist Internet platforms given the failure to close the forums down.

However, the conspiracy theory was not subscribed to by many among the AMAF leadership, where the general view was that the clashes with forums such as Al Faluja were a direct result of the “envy”⁶² generated by the impressive audiovisual output of the new forum, which was considerably greater than more veteran forums with larger followings.

The conflict even dictated the type of initiatives undertaken by AMAF. For example, in an attempt to capitalise on the recently-failed plot by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian “Underwear Bomber”, who tried to blow up a commercial airliner on Christmas Day in 2009, Faisal Errai suggested to one of the forum leaders that the New Year should be used to launch a “hoax threat (...) a type of “psychological warfare” (...) which will heighten fears and worries and will destabilise them and cause them economic losses”. His interlocutor dissuaded him, not just because of the damage false threats cause to the mujahideen but, in particular, because rival forums “will use this to stab us in the back”⁶³.

⁵⁸ Jacob N. Shapiro. *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013)

⁵⁹ <http://www.al-faloja.info> [no longer exists]

⁶⁰ <http://www.atahadi.com/vb/index.php/> [no longer exists]

⁶¹ Conversation between Abu Hafs and Abd Allah al-Wazir (26/6/2009). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5123.

⁶² Message from Muchrif11 (supervisor11) to insurgent (13/6/2009). Sumario 38/2011-C: 5141.

⁶³ Chat room conversation between Al-Ekhllass and Asd alansar (26/12/2009). Sumario 38/2011-C: 1046

Faisal Errai, who had openly accused the general coordinator of Al Faluja of instigating the rumours against his forum, decided to take the dispute to a higher level for settlement (“we have lodged a formal complaint so it reaches our superior brethren”⁶⁴) in a move that further demonstrated that forums accepted subordination to and arbitration by Al Qaeda via its media platform Al Fajr⁶⁵.

Although AMAF heads complained bitterly about the boycott suffered at the hands of other forums, they themselves did not hesitate to apply the same harsh treatment against other Internet sites which they viewed as “deviates”. For instance, they banned the publication on their pages of any content from the Hanein Network⁶⁶, which had links to the Sunni insurgency in Iraq: “May God save us from this network, whose people have a mixture of doctrines including Baathist, Suffist and apostate (...) in their eyes everyone is mujahideen”⁶⁷.

AMAF members were even more intransigent than the leaders of Al Qaeda with respect to the Palestinian Islamist movement, Hamas. Users who dared make positive comments on Hamas received immediate warnings and their posts were deleted⁶⁸. The conversations between administrators were filled with contempt for the “Hamamis” (a pejorative term they used frequently). Their obsession with the group even led them to launch an initiative to translate into Russian the publications of Al Sahab, the propaganda wing of Al Qaeda, “because many [of our brothers in Chechnya] are mistaken about the wise men and Hamas”⁶⁹.

Disciplining the Ummah

A reading of the public content of a jihadist forum could give the impression that Internet supporters of jihadist terrorism comprise a cohesive community whose members are very much in tune with the ideological principles and strategic guidelines laid down by Al Qaeda. Forums rarely contain debates on key issues, while self-criticism is conspicuous by its absence. However, this uniformity of opinions is the direct result of the constant work of a small group of administrators and moderators who scrutinise all user

⁶⁴ Message from Ekhllass to Alpraa (13/3/10), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5167.

⁶⁵ Conversation between Al Ekhllass and Asd Al Ansar 813/3/10), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5166.

⁶⁶ <http://www.hanein.info/vb/>

⁶⁷ Message from Asheq Al Firdaws to Sahib Al Haq (09/03/2009), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5130.

⁶⁸ Message from BentBnladn to Filistini (17/08/2009), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5135.

⁶⁹ Conversation between Ekhllass and ASD ALANSAR (5/1/2010), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5141.

contributions to detect and delete any content that might undermine “morale” among community members. The surveillance is conducted discreetly, with messages sent only to the individual concerned to ensure that others do not learn of the existence of dissident voices.

Users are aware of this permanent monitoring and indeed occasionally submit preliminary queries concerning the appropriateness of some of their contributions. It is striking to note, for example, that one woman who described herself as “a widow with children” sought advice on whether she was acting properly in writing and publishing poetry in order to “attract her women readers to the jihad and jihadists”. She was taken to task by a moderator for praising the mujahideen using words such as “love, passion and ardour”, since these were “expressions that can be misinterpreted and the reputation of a woman must always be beyond reproach”⁷⁰.

However, it was not moral or doctrinal issues that prompted most interventions by forum leaders but rather a whole range of “preventive” actions aimed at blocking “enemy infiltration” and to ensure the security of the platform was not compromised.

The messages from those in charge of the forum reflect constant suspicion, which extended to all conducts. One user, for instance, had his access to reserved directories withdrawn because of suspicions surrounding his questions. He was considered to be seeking “too many explanations”, with questions that resembled “those typical of an intelligence service”. The individual concerned was invited to enter a chat room to “listen to your voice” and be quizzed by several forum bosses⁷¹.

Many users found that their contributions were deleted because they contained links to websites considered suspicious despite their jihadist content. The explanation given was that “we know nothing about them” and there was always the risk that “a trap is being laid for us”. This veto extended also to “free web hosting servers”⁷².

In an environment where anonymity was a requirement, any slips were severely punished. For example, a post by one user was deleted on the grounds that “you indicated your country”, something the forum leaders considered very dangerous because it jeopardised

⁷⁰ Message from Sheikh Abu Mohamed Almaqdesi to al-ghareba (18/10/2009), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5145.

⁷¹ Message from Abu Hafs al Maghrabi to Asheq Al Firdaws (25/9/2009), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5174.

⁷² Message from Omar Al Sarem to Abdullah (26/9/2009), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5175.

not just the individual's security but also that of his brothers: "the world of Internet is not safe".⁷³

Among the procedures adopted for admitting new members was a Google search of applicants' e-mail addresses and pseudonyms to check if they were "members of the Intelligence Services, journalists or spies"⁷⁴.

Administrators also gave careful thought to delaying the activation of new users in order to allow verification of all their chosen nicknames, given that some might be pranks or a trolling technique to disrupt the forum⁷⁵.

Conclusions

The analysis of the private interactions on the Ansar al Mujahideen forum (AMAF) is extremely important for deepening our understanding of the jihadist infrastructure on Internet. The knowledge gained affords evidence enabling us to further consolidate existing theories concerning the phenomenon, while also allowing some of these to be reviewed and new perspectives to be offered on the workings of web-based jihadist communities.

The main conclusions to be drawn from the analysis of the information are as follows:

- a) The jihadist Internet forum system is hierarchical and pyramidal, with "Al Qaeda Organisation" at its apex. In 2010, the organisation created by Osama Bin Laden guided, coordinated and provided operational and technical support for the various forums that merited its "endorsement" as platforms qualified to support the mujahideen. This finding challenges theories that view Al Qaeda as a minor player, which - despite its major symbolic importance and significant propaganda activity - played a purely token role in coordinating the global jihadist movement. As the private conversations of the heads of AMAF show, Al Qaeda was permanently involved through its media wing, Al Fajr, and exercised effective authority, which was willingly accepted by the different Internet platforms supporting the jihad. Although such platforms may indeed emerge at the initiative of a group of supporters with no ties to a formal organisation, the ultimate aim of

⁷³ Message from Musarel Al-u to Al-Muhajer Al-Falaji (23/7/2009), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5170.

⁷⁴ Conversation on Paltalk between Al Ekhllass and Asd alansar 89/3/2010), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5186.

⁷⁵ Message from Mushrif1 to Mushrif (18/3/2009), Sumario 38/2011-C: 5204.

those in charge is to accrue merits to become a platform endorsed by the “leaders of the jihad”

- b) Cyber attacks and infiltration actions disrupt the normal functioning and capacities of jihadist Internet forums. Successive attacks demoralise those responsible for the sites, leading them to question whether their efforts to keep the sites operational in the mid-long term are even useful. The climate of mistrust generated by “enemy infiltration” of sites and the frequent arrests of collaborators discourage many community members, who are reluctant to take on more responsibilities or raise their level of engagement for fear of discovery. This constitutes a serious limitation as regards the number of activists available to manage the platform. The actions put in place to neutralise hostile actions can end up paralysing the sites. Access by new members is slowed, as are the creativity and spontaneity of members of the communities, who are intimidated by the inquisitorial attitude of those in charge of the websites.
- c) Participation in jihadist forums affords sufficient credentials to be admitted into groups that wage violence. The network of contacts built up through the platforms enables participants not just to travel and make contact with armed groups but also to join their ranks without being formal members of the organisation. Many of these activists retain their Internet pseudonyms and play the role of “battle field” representatives of the forum. The transition from “pen to sword” is a frequent process among cyber-jihadists. It is set in motion not just by their perception that their security has been compromised and their need to flee, but also by their growing dissatisfaction⁷⁶ with run of the mill forum administration tasks, which are a far cry from the idealised warrior image projected by the propaganda they constantly consume and distribute on the forums.
- d) The day to day running of a forum is conditioned to a large degree by the shortage of human and material resources, which is an endogenous cause of one of the main sources of the unstable Internet presence of such platforms.

⁷⁶ Manuel R. Torres-Soriano. “Between the Pen and the Sword: The Global Islamic Media Front in the West”, *Terrorism & Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (November 2012): 769-786.