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**Abstract:** This is a series of papers that translate and analyze articles, reports, religious decrees, and other documents, written primarily in Arabic by Islamist scholars, clerics, operatives, or intellectuals.

## **Reading Their Lips: The Credibility of Jihadi Web Sites as ‘Soft Power’ in the War of the Minds\***

**By Reuven Paz**

### **Introduction**

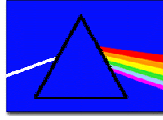
In recent years, the term ‘Soft Power’ has been used in relation to the war of the minds within the global war against global [Jihadi] terrorism. Soft Power is the ability to achieve goals by attracting and persuading others to adopt them. It differs from ‘hard power’ -- the ability to use economic and primarily military steps and power to impose one’s will. The success of soft power heavily depends on the actor’s reputation within the international community, as well as the flow of information between actors. Thus, soft power is often associated with the rise of globalization and/or neo-liberal international relations theory. Popular culture and media is regularly identified as a source of soft power, as is the spread of a national language, or a particular set of normative structures; a nation with a large amount of soft power and the good will that engenders it inspire others to acculturate, avoiding the need for expensive hard power expenditures.<sup>1</sup>

Both hard and soft power are important in the war on terrorism, but attraction is much cheaper than coercion, and an asset that needs to be nourished. Attraction, by both sides, depends on credibility. However, contrary to the use of soft power in the context of the war against Jihadi global terrorism, few scholars deal with the other side – the goals and

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\* This paper is based on two presentations at the international conference on “Salafism as a Transnational Movement,” organized by the Department of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East (TCMO), Radboud University, Nijmegen, and the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden, in Nijmegen/The Netherlands, 28-30 September 2007; and the international conference on “The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Soft Power in the Struggle against Global Jihadism,” organized by CEAS/Italy, Link Campus University, The Gino Germany Center, and Arcipelago Italia, in Rome/Italy, 28-30 November 2007.

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft\\_power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_power)



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credibility of the soft power of the Jihadi militants. Most security services, intelligence communities, and most other experts, tend to occupy themselves with the Jihadi hard power in the form of terrorism.

The credibility of information obtained from open sources has always been a problematic issue for intelligence and security communities. Intelligence communities—some of which had served totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany or Stalinist Soviet Union—were often known also as ‘masters of disinformation.’ Therefore, they suspected that open sources of their rivals were disinformation too. Western intelligence communities and security services have not always granted much more credibility to open sources than the KGB and its former Eastern block sister services. Not only were Western agencies well aware of the complicated relations between intelligence and the media, but they frequently utilized the media for psychological warfare. Hence they too were suspicious towards the credibility of open sources, as well as the tricky process of distinguishing between information and disinformation.

### **Jihadi Soft Power**

The culture of militant Global Jihad is a young phenomenon in the Islamic world, which thus far, is advocated only by a small minority of Muslim groups, movements, scholars, and sympathizers. Various factors however, have widened the rank and file of supporters and sympathizers of this culture. These include the extensive use of terrorism, primarily by suicide/martyrdom operations; the insurgency in Iraq; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; growing anti-American and anti-Western sentiments; social and economic frustrations among Muslims; and growing multinational integration among Muslim communities in the West or in regions of conflict in the Muslim world. Global Jihad is deeply rooted in the interpretations of the earliest sources of Islam and Islamic history, and adheres to the strictest doctrines of Salafist scholars; it is primarily a doctrinal development that requires legitimacy on the part of clerics and scholars, in the form of interpretations, rulings, and preaching. It embodies the Islamists’ struggle to revive the Islamic civilization through global united solidarity and brotherhood on one hand, and the demonization of the eternal enemy, on the other. Most importantly, however, this process **takes place in public**. Since we deal with movements and groups that are persecuted everywhere, and since they have no forms of formal media, the Internet is their only alternative, and they use it in the most efficient way they can.

In the past decade the global war on terrorism and the exceedingly access to Islamic and Islamist media through the Internet, have produced a synergy that has affected the attitude towards open sources of information. The highly intensive and efficient use of the Internet by Islamic movements and groups in general, and the wide scope of Islamist terrorist groups in particular, provide us with an extremely wide range of information, that also affects intelligence communities. In addition there is some “competition” with the Western media, which is relying on information from Jihadi web sites as well, and thus provides them with an enormous exposure. Yet, it seems that Western intelligence and security services have still a long way to go before they will fully rely upon the information available on Jihadi web sites. Two main obstacles stand in their way of exploiting the information available on these web sites:



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First, the global Jihadi phenomenon is still new and unfamiliar to many Western analysts. The number of Western analysts who can fully understand this phenomenon is quite small, even though there are many “so-called experts” for terrorism. Furthermore, it is a very dynamic phenomenon and controversial even among the various Jihadi groups and trends themselves. It is admittedly difficult to understand the differences, argumentations, disputes, and mindset of the Jihadis in all its complexities. The modern global Jihad movement, including Al-Qaeda, is more akin to an “ideological umbrella” than to a homogeneous movement, which makes swimming in this deep ocean a challenging task. The dynamic nature of the Jihadi phenomenon is also a function of the Jihadists’ “relationship” with the “enemy”—whose definition is flexible—and a response to its “aggressive nature,” especially since 2001. In the eyes of most of the militant Jihadis, their Jihad is a struggle within an **asymmetric war of self-defense**.

Secondly, despite its global nature and aspirations, the Jihadi phenomenon developed from within the Arab world and is subsequently exported to the larger Muslim world. The Jihadi militancy is therefore, almost entirely directed in Arabic and its content is intimately tied to the socio-political context of the Arab world. The American and Western occupation in Iraq and the Jihadi insurgency that followed, increased the importance of the Arab element in this phenomenon. Likewise, the majority of the supporters of global Jihad involved in forms of terrorism among Muslim communities in the West are Arabs or from Arab origins too. Most of the Western intelligence and security analysts are still unable to read the information in the original Arabic language, and lack the knowledge, insights, and tools, required to analyze Islamist radical groups and their mindset.

### **The Open University for Jihad Studies**

There are several main reasons why Jihadi movements, groups, clerics, and scholars, turned the Internet into their main, and sometimes only, vehicle for propaganda, indoctrination, publicity, and teaching of their messages. Their “soft power” is the Internet. Besides the known advantages of this medium of communication, several factors should be noted:

- Most Arab and Muslim countries face oppositions that are oppressed and groups that are persecuted, rendering the Internet their only alternative to spread their messages. Citizens and groups are prevented from freely publishing books and newspapers, or from giving open lectures. Moreover, in most Arab and Muslim countries they have no access to the traditional means of Islamic religious indoctrination, such as mosques, Friday sermons, religious universities and colleges, or religious ceremonies.
- The nature of the Jihadist ideology and doctrines, as well as the core of Jihadi mission is to create a transnational global solidarity and brotherhood, within the entire Muslim nation (*Ummah*). To that end the Internet is nowadays the best means to promote this goal cheaply and rapidly, while reaching the broadest possible audience.
- The Internet is the best means available today to create and consolidate a spectrum of doctrines, new interpretations, and a multitude of new groups, but also to create an image of a larger volume of activity.
- The Internet is intensively surfed and read by the global media. Every Jihadi event or message is instantly exposed to the world, circulated by news agencies, and cited in Muslim countries, whose populations do not read Arabic.



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- The past decade, has witnessed a heightened significance and weight of this medium in the eyes of Jihadis, due to a number of highly important events. These include the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent global war on terrorism; the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq; Jihadi terrorist operations all over the globe; the image of a global clash of religions and civilizations; the sense among large segments of Muslim publics that they face “a war against Islam” in the cover of fighting global terrorism; and the rise of Jihadi terrorism as a global strategic factor in the West. There is a growing dynamic in the mutual relationship between the Jihadi groups that use the Internet, and the global media.
- The first priority of the strategy of the global Jihadi doctrines is to target the Arab and Muslim youth—the largest, most educated—and in terms of the Internet—most connected segment of Muslim societies. Besides, the use of the Internet for various goals, and the access to it in many Arab and Muslim countries is growing rapidly, alongside the growing development of education in many of these publics, including of females.

Most importantly, these groups are above all targeting their own societies and not Western regimes and their citizens, in order to fight what they perceive as “Western cultural on-going colonialism.” The Internet may be used occasionally to intimidate Western publics, knowing the audiences’ wide exposure to the global media and the huge effect that exposure has upon the sense of security in the West. Jihadis know that the widely circulated video clips of beheaded and executed foreigners and Muslims in Iraq or Afghanistan, and numerous suicide or martyrdom operations, terrorize Western publics. Even so, the main reason why Jihadis circulate these clips, photos, audio material, books, articles, or military manuals, is to **indoctrinate** their own Arab and Muslim audiences; plant feelings of pride, a sense of belonging, and a new identity in their minds; and recruit their support. The Internet provides by far the best means to achieve the desired goal of virtual **nation-building** of the Muslim nation—*Ummah*—an aspiration anchored in the doctrines of the Jihadi-Salafi currents. In other words, the Internet is the global Open University for Jihad Studies.

One of the documents of indoctrination published in 2003, and recently re-circulated by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF)<sup>2</sup> is talking about the nature of the university of global Jihad.<sup>3</sup> The author, nicknamed Ahmad al-Wathiq bi-Allah, “deputy director” of GIMF, presents Al-Qaeda as an “organization, state, and university”:

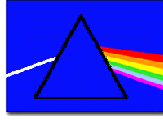
“Since the operation of USS Cole [November 2000] and the glorious events of Manhattan [September 2001] until the present events of this blessed month, [Ramadan 2005] hundreds of Muslims from all over the world join this global Jihadi university, in which they study all the branches of the Jihad, its rules and kinds... This is a non-central university, with no geographic borders, which has its presence everywhere and each person zealous for his religion and nation can join it... This university has its own presidency, whose role is to incite, guide, indoctrinate, and encourage the awareness of the Mujahidin. Its presidency is the leadership of the Mujahidin headed by Osama bin Laden... The university includes several faculties, among them for electronic Jihad, martyrdom, and the technology of side bombs and car bombs.”

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<sup>2</sup> An organ of Al-Qaeda and global Jihad with a growing intensive virtual activity in the past two years.

<sup>3</sup> The article was published in most of the Jihadi forums. See on-line in:

<http://www.al-farouq.com/vb/showthread.php?t=2682>; <http://www.alquma.net/vb/showthread.php?t=179668>



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The article bears propagandist overtones, but it clearly summarizes the indoctrinative nature of global Jihad, and thus, the center of gravity of this phenomenon, i.e. the Muslim audience. If this is the main audience then there is almost no room for disinformation. An intensive reading of these web sites, and especially of the most radical 15-25 Jihadi forums<sup>4</sup> and dozens of blogs and message groups, reveals the highly serious approach and attitude of their participants, i.e., those who are targeted by this global indoctrination. In some Muslim communities in the West, but especially in the Arab world, we can trace a growing role of this indoctrination in the willingness to support, justify, and volunteer to join Jihadi terrorist groups. Since 2001, these Jihadi web sites have gradually replaced the old institution of the Madrassa as a tool for the recruitment of the first generation of Jihadis in the 1980-90s. The Internet in fact, has become **one global madrassa**.

Another example of a publication by GIMF—an analysis of the global strategy of Al-Qaeda—is even more lucid. Under the title “Al-Qaeda’s War is Economic not Military,”<sup>5</sup> the author, a Saudi scholar and supporter of global Jihad, analyzes the significant role that indoctrination plays in the global movement:

“We should direct some of these efforts to other targets that could serve another goal, namely to promote the glory of the Muslims, especially among the youth, who are swimming in the oceans of pleasures and lust. Those youth are in fact unused petrol, while many efforts are dedicated to confront those clerics who are selling their minds to the dictatorships, and who are useless too. These moral attacks would have a tremendous impact on the souls of the defeated youth.

Many idle youngsters were motivated to join the Jihad by a photo or a video such as of the USS Cole, or Badr al-Riyadh, or by watching the crash of the planes into the high buildings [of Manhattan]. Those youngsters, even though they were not fully aware of the impact of the attacks upon them, turned their minds and bodies towards the Jihad. Here comes the role of indoctrination and developing the thinking of these people. It is a mistake to leave these youngsters with their superficial understanding of the nature of the war.

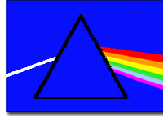
Whoever listens to the calls of Osama bin Laden senses in his words his care for the indoctrination of the supporters of the Jihadi current, like for example in the Gulf States, in order to target the oil fields. The Sheikh, I think, could direct the Mujahidin through personal secret messages. However, he wanted the indoctrination to be public, in order that the crowds of people, who wait for his speeches through the TV channels or the Internet, would internalize his targets and follow them. If these messages would be clandestine and then the oil fields would be attacked, the masses of sympathizers might not approve it and might even turn to the opposite side and withdraw their support. Public statements by the Sheikh or the many videos of the Mujahidin can avoid such a negative impact of such an attack.”

The huge number of new interpretations, doctrines, debates with other Islamic Sunni currents or scholars—Salafis, Brotherhood, Tawhid, Wahhabi reformism, and others—and lot of innovations in the field of terrorist *modus operandi*, in addition to their widespread public presence on the Internet, brought about two contradicting developments. The first was a tendency of Jihadis—scholars or laymen supporters—to view it as a current found under a process of consolidation, with the unifying goal, doctrines, and means of Tawhid.

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<sup>4</sup> The number varies since these forums are often closed by security services, Western hosting companies, or as a result of technical problems, and reappear in other addresses or names.

<sup>5</sup> Abu Mus`ab al-Najdi, *Ma`rakat al-Qaeda – Ma`rakah Iqtisadiyyah la `Askariyyah*, 3 October 2005. See on-line in: <http://www.al-farouq.com/vb/showthread.php?t=3383>



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The other was the emergence of growing number of debates, either from within on the background of the more intensive but controversial terrorist/Jihadi activity, or as a result of external pressures by Islamic establishments and institutions, governments, or parts of Muslim societies, such as Sunni tribes in Iraq.

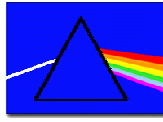
Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, this contradiction has marked also the public opinion of many Muslim publics and even governments. On one hand there was a growing anti-American sentiment, which emerged on the grounds of events in Iraq. It led into the support of many Islamic scholars, Arab officials, and majority of Muslim publics for the Jihad in Iraq, not to mention Israel and Palestine, which is a traditional axiom. Nevertheless, on the other hand many Arab and Muslim publics suffered from the indiscriminating terrorism against innocent Muslims, which received legitimacy by most of the Jihadi-Salafi scholars.

The emergence of the Internet as “the open university for Jihad studies,” with dozens of thousands of students, inflamed two significant processes:

- The emergence of militant Jihadi community with growing signs of solidarity and brotherhood. This community was intensively encouraged to take part in the debates, as the “virtual Jihad” became a legitimate branch of the “Jihadi war of the minds.”
- The emergence of a Jihadi “Internet scholars” whose main target is to indoctrinate the Jihadi-Salafis, direct them, and consolidate the Jihadi current.

Both groups of scholars and “students” developed a strong sense of the apocalypse, which hotwires the Jihadi-Salafi arena. There are permanent expectations to the defeat of the United States in Iraq; the fall of the U.S. as an empire according the model of the Afghan contribution to the fall of the Soviet Union; new spectacular terrorist attacks on American soil; terrorist attacks in Europe against countries that take part in the fight in Iraq and Afghanistan, support Israel, or so-called “oppressing” the Muslim communities in Europe by imposing new laws (the veil, immigration, limiting civil rights in the name of the “war against terrorism,” outlawing Muslim charities), or by publishing anti-Muslim propaganda, films, or cartoons; the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD); the collapse of Arab and Muslim apostate governments; the establishment of Shari’ah-ruled Islamic states, and so on and so forth. By hotwiring the sense of the apocalypse within an asymmetric war, and the growing number of Jihadi groups, scholars, supporters and sympathizers, self-radicalized youth, and laymen, whose knowledge in Islam is poor, the arena is broadened with further debates, competitions, and instinctive desires.

In the past two years, the development of a growing number of topics under open and public debates within the Jihadi-Salafi current, has been prominent. During 2007, one of the most significant controversial topics among Jihadi-Salafi scholars and groups has been over the existence of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Another on-going debate is over the killing of Muslims in general, and innocent ones in particular, or the attitude towards the Palestinian Jihad of Hamas. Nevertheless, these were in fact the most important topics, but the phenomenon of the debates over “sacred and untouchable topics,” has already started about two years ago, including by serious Jihadi-Salafi scholars. The latter probably may have also exploited the fact that the killing of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in June 2006, created a new situation in Iraq, which is still the most significant model of Jihadi struggle.



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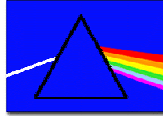
Another issue to note here is the diversity of the origins of the Jihadi-Salafi current, the flexibility of its development, and the dynamics of an emergence from a very marginal Islamic trend to the frontline of the face of Islam, primarily in Western societies. The latter tend to view now Islam as a religion whose rational is supposed to be moderate and peaceful, but in fact is moving towards the most extremist and violent indicator, in an axis where the clash with it is inevitable.

The doctrinal sources of Jihadi-Salafism require a separate presentation. Nevertheless, their diversity is part of the issue at stake. They include three different branches, whose connection to classical, pure, political, or reformist Salafism can be questioned:

- Egypt through the radical parts of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood—mainly Sayyid Qutb and Abd al-Qader Odeh, and Egyptian exiles in Saudi Arabia—and the self radicalized fathers of the Egyptian Jihad and Gama`at Islamiyyah—the Palestinian Saleh Sariyyah, the Egyptian engineers Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj and Shukri Ibrahim, and in a later period the physician Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri.
- Saudi Arabia, through its Neo-Wahhabism led by the prominent Sheykh Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz and a huge class of his disciples, which created among other issues, the “Movement of Awakening” (*Harakat al-Sahwah*), led by the two Sheykh Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali. During the 1990s, they were legitimized by two other classes of Neo-Wahhabi scholars. Older clerics, such as Muhammad bin `Uthaymin, Abd al-Aziz bin Jarbou`, or Saleh al-Fawzan; and younger clerics, who in part participated in the Jihad in Afghanistan, such as Ahmad al-Khaledi, Naser al-Fahd, Yousef al-Uyeri, Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, Abu Jandal al-Azdi, and many others.
- The “Palestinian Trio” of Abdallah Azzam, Omar Abu Omar Abu Qutadah, and above all Issam al-Burqawi Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. The later is the spiritual father of the fusion between the Wahhabi Tawhid and the violent Takfiri Jihad. They used an inspiration to a new generation of Jihadi clerics who graduated Saudi Islamic universities, primarily Jordanian-Palestinians, such as Abu Omar Seyf or Abu Anas al-Shami, whose role has been significant in both Chechnya and Iraq.

The most important element of this Jihadi “texture” of principles and doctrines is that they lost any sign or remains of the original reformist Salafism. They turned the Jihad into a dynamics that purifies the Muslim society through a small elitist fighting group and by following the exact steps of the Prophet and his companions—the “Pious Generation” (*Al-Salaf al-Saleh*). Being a Jihadi-Salafi means above all creating an as much as possible exact copy of the first ideal generation of Muslims, but primarily in the militant dimension.

However, this target created another greenhouse of Jihadi doctrines – the principle of *Takfir* (ex-communication) of every infidel what so ever, but also every Muslim who does not follow the Jihadi-Salafi doctrines. There is a kind of a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary touch with the signs of the destruction of the “old society” in favor of building the new type of Muslims and Muslim society. Such a society is found and will be found for a long time in a permanent war with a variety of enemies. The enemies are a growing list of “others,” all of whom do not approve the present-day Jihadi doctrines. This element comes primarily from the teachings of Abdallah Azzam, but also from the original Wahhabi zealotry, which



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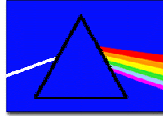
dominates the Saudi part of the sources of Jihadi-Salafism and many of the Jihadi scholars and terrorists.

The apostasy of the rest of the Muslim society in Jihadi eyes created a process in which in a very short time of only one decade—1995-2005—the definition of the “enemy” of Islam and the “true believers” has been widened, to include now even the vast majority of the Muslim society. Doctrines that have been used to develop some of the ideas of Jihadi-Salafism, such as the social justice of Sayyid Qutb, were neglected in favor of the “magic touch” of violent Jihad. The Takfiri element of the Jihadi-Salafis is the main one in creating the diversity and controversy between the search for unity/Tawhid and the purification of society from apostate elements, even by killing innocent Muslims, not to mention Shi’is, Sufis, Yazidis, or Sunni Muslims, whose sole sin is for example, employment in companies that provide services to the Americans in Iraq or the Iraqi and Afghan governments.

During 2005-2006, there have been several cases of harsh criticism over Zarqawi himself, his anti-Shi`ah policy, and his violent and extremist *Takfir*. Some of this criticism came from leading scholars of Al-Qaeda and global Jihad, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Basir al-Tartousi in London, and Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdesi, Zarqawi’s mentor in Jordan. In the case of the latter, who is imprisoned, the criticism was made in public through interviews in the media. However, Zarqawi and his followers in Iraq enjoyed high prestige and popularity to receive full support in Jihadi forums, based on the principle that “the Mujahidin in the field know best how they should behave and act.” It was almost like the Islamic principle of “*Allahu A`lam*”—Allah knows best—and in this case – “the Mujahidin know best.” The so-called but respected “Saloon scholars,” were asked politely to keep silent and respect the wish and strategy of the fighters in the field. The killing of Zarqawi in June 2006, did not change much the strategy of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, primarily in the field of anti-Shi`ah, the terrible violence against civilians, and the principle of *Takfir*.

However, despite the success of his violent anti-Shi`ah policy and operations and its ongoing application by his successors, there seems to be a decline in the religious position, prestige, and legitimacy of this policy. The shift from “Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers” to the “Islamic State in Iraq” in October 2006, increased the anonymity of the present leadership of the Iraqi Al-Qaeda on one hand, and the independence of other Jihadi insurgent groups, on the other. Zarqawi’s successor “Abu Hamza al-Muhajir” is in fact totally anonymous. The same with the “Imam” of the ISI, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. His only prestige, if at all, comes from his so-called Qurayshi origin. The other prominent “Amir al-Mu`minin”—Mulla Omar in Afghanistan—is not regarded a serious religious cleric or scholar, despite his or his commanders’ success since early 2006, in leading the Taliban and supporters of Al-Qaeda into a growing insurgency in Afghanistan, using the same *modus operandi* of Iraqi Al-Qaeda. For the vast majority of supporters of global Jihad on the net, he is more a symbolic model of the sense of the Jihadi apocalypse, the same as Osama bin Laden, who still pays his loyalty to him.

In the absence of dominant personalities such as Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq, and the anonymity of his successors, some of the other Jihadi or Islamic groups of the Sunni insurgency allowed themselves to either criticize Al-Qaeda or even enter into clashes with its members, which were followed by some violent attacks by Al-Qaeda. The position of



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Al-Qaeda as the leading force of the Jihadi insurgency has been challenged and the attempt to impose the ISI upon all Iraqi Sunni Jihadis, has so far failed.

The absence of dominant scholars such as the Saudi Yousef al-Uyeri, the Jordanian Abu Omar Seyf, or the Saudi Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, who are all dead, and the Saudi Abu Jandal al-Azdi, the Jordanian/Palestinian Abu Qutada, and the Jordanian/Palestinian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdesi, who are imprisoned, created a big vacuum. This vacuum leaves the door open to more public criticism and debates within the Jihadi-Salafists on one hand, and makes them more vulnerable to outside criticism and attacks by Saudi anti-Takfiri Salafists and affiliated scholars, on the other. The whole process of criticism and debates is done in public on the Internet.

### **Towards Jihadi-Salafi Pluralism?**

These debates and criticism find a fertile ground in the E-Jihad, and it should be noted that supervisors of the various sectors of Jihadi forums do nothing to block or hide them. By doing so, they allow the development of more **pluralism** among the community of the E-Jihad and kind of “**virtual democracy**” within this growing community. It also enables the emergence of “semi-parties” of pro- and anti- positions on very significant issues, crucial for the Jihadi global arena – the ISI, Sunni-Shi`ah conflict, Iran, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi, Suicide bombings outside of Iraq or against civilian Muslims, Saudi Arabia, extremist *Takfir*, other trends of Salafism, and the authority of Islamist scholars, including Jihadi-Salafi ones.

It is hard to say if there is a directing hand of this “virtual pluralism,” is it a result of the growing use of the Internet, or the “competition” between different Jihadi forums, which want to serve as greenhouses of the widest platforms for Jihadi ideas. In some cases it might also be a result of confusion and lack of clear position of the supervisors themselves. From few cases of such Jihadi supervisors and webmasters who were arrested and tried—such as the Moroccan Younis al-Tsouli in London (“Irhabi 007”), or the Tunisian Mohamed Ben El Hadi Messahel (“Tunisian Admirer of the two Shaykhs” – *Muhibb al-Shaykhayn al-Tunisi*), who was sentenced in March 2007 in Morocco to 12 years in prison for a terrorist plot—we can learn that their religious knowledge was poor. They were mainly devoted to the cause, self-radicalized, and proud to be Jihadis, but with poor understanding of Jihadi doctrines. However, Saudi webmasters such as the late Yousef al-Uyeri or the one nicknamed “*Al-Muhtasib*,” who was recently released from a two-years arrest in Saudi Arabia, were serious Islamic scholars, even though with no formal Islamic education. It is also difficult to say if this phenomenon is harmful for the Mujahidin in the long-run, or not. Publicity can be a source for both weakness and strength. In fact, it seems that the Jihadis and their leadership do nothing to hide the debates or criticism nor to ignore them, what means that in their eyes this is power not inferiority.

Furthermore, from reading between the lines of some posts in Jihadi forums, we can come to the conclusion that many of these supervisors know each other, if not in person at least through email links. Hence, it seems to be there a directing hand behind the policy of this pluralism. It is obvious that at least in the field of publishing statements, declarations, video and audiotapes, and other material of propaganda nature, there is in the past year, a well-organized order, no competition or rivalry but respect for each other, and a good



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cooperation under the leadership of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF). This order might also be a result of the fact that there has been a growing awareness of the importance of this mission in the Jihadi “war of the minds” and its legitimacy as integral part of Jihad.

It seems that the effective and easy use of the E-Jihad helps in creating a kind of a “Jihadi virtual state” that allows itself a growing openness to pluralism of views and positions, within the joint Jihadi mission of *Tawhid*.

### **Internet Jihadi Scholars**

On the above mentioned background, the openness for variety of positions and debates created another developing phenomenon of “Internet Jihadi scholars” who appear by real names or nicknames, but gain a growing respect from their audience. This is also a new phenomenon, which seems to be more influential upon the “laymen” supporters of global Jihad. Some of the “Internet scholars” are known to their public, such as the Kuwaiti Jihadi-Salafi Hamed al-Ali, the Saudi Hussein bin Mahmoud, the Libyans Hasan al-Qaed “Abu Yahya al-Libi” and “Abu Layth al-Libi,” the Moroccan Sheykh Atiyyat Allah, and others. However, they are accompanied in recent time by a growing group of scholars who post their positions by nicknames, and have a growing respect by the Jihadi members of the E-Jihad. Among these anonymous scholars are several females. The latter take part in this activity with no sense of inferiority, and their positions target the entire community of Jihadis, not the female part of them. Some of them appear to have Islamic high education and might be graduates of Islamic universities.

Some of these “Internet scholars” have significant contributions to the analysis and understanding of the strategy of global Jihad, especially following audio and video tapes of known Jihadis, such as Bin Laden, Zawahiri, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, or various declarations by GIMF. These scholars follow the “legendary” Al-Qaeda Saudi scholar Lewis Atiyyat Allah, who in the period 2002-2003 used to publish long analyses of the organization’s strategy. A good example from the last six months or so, is a new such “Internet scholar” by the nickname of Abd al-Rahman al-Faqir. Al-Faqir is trying to outline a scientific methodology for the Jihadi strategy in variety of fields, including the field of propaganda and indoctrination through the media. In an article he posted in 31 July 2007, in Al-Hesbah forum, titled “Scientific Methodology in Analyzing the Jihadi Campaign,”<sup>6</sup> he wrote:

The enemy has huge institutions for propaganda. In order to fight them we need to study these institutions, their points of weakness, and how to infiltrate into their ranks or attack them from outside. As I see it, this issue is bigger than what I can handle for now. So, I move to the next element to see that I can influence some of the operatives in those American institutions by personal contacts, by providing them with true information about Islam, and by interpreting our points of view, which they are not familiar with. Hence, we can find a chance to affect their propaganda by affecting the people who work for them. It could have been through getting rid of them [killing them - RP] or threatening them. Nevertheless, this is beyond my power as an individual, because it derives a group of people or I need to be a member of a group, what will make me do much more individual work...

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<sup>6</sup>*Al-Minhaj al-`Ilmi fi Tahlil al-`Amaliyyah al-Jihadiyyah*, See on-line in:

<http://www.al-hesbah.org/v/showthread.php?t=143415>



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Everybody can determine any problem and follow this series of steps in minimizing the problem and setting the targets and then the solution. He might not need to reduce the problem much if he is highly skilled. Let us take for example Al-Qaeda, which did not need to reduce much of the problem when it defined its target as fighting the Jewish-Crusader alliance. However, it has set a group of long-term and short-term targets. The long-term target was defeating the enemy. The short-term ones were for example, to draw him to the region [the occupation of Iraq – RP] then fight him on our soil while reviving the duty of Jihad among the Muslims; then to expand the battleground in accordance with the growth of the basis of the Mujahidin, so the Jihad will be an existing duty. Hence, the general problem of the organization was the fight against the Jews and the Crusaders, and the specific problem were drawing the enemy to our lands, expanding the basis of Jihad, making him drown in the swamp, and encircle him. All these are gradual problems and targets that should be solved through the theoretical framework that guarantees their success. If the methods the organization takes would defeat the enemy it means that the theoretical framework or the steps taken by him are successful and can be implemented in other regions or times. If they fail, it means that he should build a new theoretical framework and plan other steps to reach the target.

As said above, the E-Jihad or the so widespread use of the Internet by Jihadis and sympathizers, seem to create a process of pluralism, which results in growing number of topics under debate, even those of the nature of a “sacred cow,” within a framework that is seeking a maximum of doctrinal unity. However, this pluralism remains so far, within the “family,” even though in public. It does not cause major splits or gaps in the ideological umbrella of the Jihadi-Salafi current, as long as the fight looks promising and successful, especially with the sense of the apocalypse that characterizes it.

## Conclusion

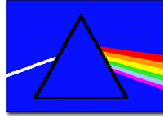
In the final analysis, global Jihad must use open indoctrination in order to sustain and broaden its audience in general, and its younger generations in particular. Open indoctrination is incompatible with disinformation. Therefore, even though we should be selective and careful in our selection of which information on Jihadi web sites we follow, once we have established the authenticity of a Jihadi web site, we can be reasonably certain that the words we read from their lips are credible. The Jihadist instigators cannot allow themselves to mislead the “Solid Base”—*Al-Qaeda al-Sulbah*—the base of the future pioneering Jihadi generations. Furthermore, we should understand the role of Jihad played by the present ideological umbrella of global Jihad. This role is not merely one of terrorism but, and perhaps more importantly so, a crucial pillar in building the current solidarity among Arabs and Muslims, as well as the nation-building process of the future Muslim Caliphate. In April 1988, Dr. Abdallah Azzam, the spiritual father of modern global Jihad, wrote so very clearly in the article in which he established the idea of Al-Qaeda (*Al-Qa`idah al-Sulbah*):<sup>7</sup>

“The Islamic society cannot be established without an Islamic movement that undergoes the fire of tests. Its members need to mature in the fire of trials. This movement will represent the spark that ignites the potential of the nation. It will carry out a long Jihad in which the Islamic movement will provide the leadership, and the spiritual guidance. The long Jihad will bring people’s qualities to the fore and highlight their potentials. It will define their positions and have their leaders assume their roles, to direct the march and channel it...

Holding of arms by the group of believers before having undergone this long educating

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<sup>7</sup> Abdallah Azzam, “Al-Qa`idah al-Sulbah,” *Al-Jihad* (Afghanistan), No. 41 (April 1988), pp. 46-49. Azzam was much influenced in developing this issue by the two Egyptian Jihadi scholars Sayyid and Muhammad Qutb, who were the first to use this term.



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training and indoctrination—*Tarbiyyah*—is forbidden, because those carrying arms could turn into bandits that might threaten people’s security and do not let them live in peace.”

In the eyes of some Jihadi leaders and senior scholars of the first generation of Al-Qaeda and Tawhid, the Iraqi insurgency might become an “arena of bandits,” as predicted by Azzam. Terrorism in Muslim lands and against Muslims is one of the “Achilles heels” of Al-Qaeda and global Jihad and a good reason for public criticism and debates. Therefore, the indoctrination through the Internet is more important. Beside the fact that the Internet is a sole alternative for the Jihadis, it also has its own advantages in spreading the messages to a wide range of public. Hence, as much as the use of the Internet was a compromise with reality, the Jihadis learned how to effectively use it despite its public nature.

However, it should be noted that for those who try to understand the mindset of the Jihadi scholars through their indoctrination over the Internet, the latter make it an easier task than the ambivalent and double-language writings of their counter-part scholars from Islamic establishments, especially the Saudis. The role of the “Internet scholars,” either the well-known among them who appear by their real names, or those who hide in Jihadi forums behind nicknames, is to back and legitimize the extreme positions, which their audience want to hear. Such writings are integral part of what has recently become a legitimate branch of the militant Jihad—the Jihadi propaganda (*Al-Jihad bil-Lisan* or *bil-Kalimah*). It provides lot of satisfaction and a sense of identity and belonging to a growing number of “students” in the Open University for Jihad Studies. Zealot scholars or numerous videotapes from Iraq or elsewhere, are part of a system that hotwires the imagination of radicalized youth, who can join Jihad starting from home. They are no longer regarded as dodgers from Jihad or *Mutaqa`idin*, the term first coined by Sayyid Qutb for those who do not join the military Jihad. The “total Jihad,” including in Muslim countries and against Muslim “apostates,” enables them to channel many emotions of frustration, personal or social stress, hatred, and fears, into a legitimate Jihad, religiously approved by real or false scholars.

The long Jihad, which the West—and indeed much of the world—is currently facing uses the Internet to provide both Jihadists and us, a wide spectrum of diversified information. Western analysts can learn more about modern Jihad by reading the lips of Jihadi clerics, scholars, operatives, commanders, leaders, as well as the response of their growing audience. Improving their ability to do so, and above all in the original language, must be a priority. The war against global Jihadi terrorism is becoming also a war of “soft powers,” in which the Jihadis are doing quite well.

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