Terrorist Chatter
Understanding what terrorists talk about

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A Working Paper by: Lorenzo Vidino, Joshua Kilberg, Josh Lefkowitz, and Evan Kohlmann

Working Paper No. 03
Issued May 2015

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Executive Summary

Since the early 2000s the Internet has become particularly crucial for the global jihadist movement. Nowhere has the Internet been more important in the movement’s development than in the West. While dynamics differ from case to case, it is fair to state that almost all recent cases of radicalization in the West involve at least some digital footprint. Jihadists, whether structured groups or unaffiliated sympathizers, have long understood the importance of the Internet in general and social media, in particular. Zachary Chesser, one of the individuals studied in this report, fittingly describes social media as “simply the most dynamic and convenient form of media there is.” As the trend is likely to increase, understanding how individuals make the leap to actual militancy is critically important.

This study is based on the analysis of the online activities of seven individuals. They share several key traits. All seven were born or raised in the United States. All seven were active in online and offline jihadist scene around the same time (mid- to late 2000s and early 2010s). All seven were either convicted for terrorism-related offenses (or, in the case of two of the seven, were killed in terrorism-related incidents.)

The intended usefulness of this study is not in making the case for monitoring online social media for intelligence purpose—an effort for which authorities throughout the West need little encouragement. Rather, the report is meant to provide potentially useful pointers in the field of counter-radicalization. Over the past ten years many Western countries have devised more or less extensive strategies aimed at preventing individuals from embracing radical ideas or de-radicalizing (or favoring the disengagement) of committed militants. (Canada is also in the process of establishing its own counter-radicalization strategy.)

Radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors. It is no surprise then that counter-radicalization initiatives are equally complex.

Even among the seven subjects in this project there are only limited commonalities in terms of interests and views. While all seven subjects share a common background, based on the evidence of their online activities, their interests, views and approaches remain highly diverse. Some are focused mostly on religion; others are more interested in political issues. Some immediately adopt a jihadist mindset; others seem to undergo a long radicalizing trajectory. Given this diversity, it becomes obvious that any counter-radicalization needs to be tailored to the specifics of the case. Flexibility is the name of the game.

Another key finding is that, at least in the beginning of their trajectories, the individuals studied here are all avid seekers of knowledge and information on religion. All refer to religious concepts and frames throughout their posts. Jihadism is a complex ideology that mixes religion and politics. But this study confirms the importance of its religious aspect for many of those who embrace violence—a fact some studies have dismissed. Any counter-radicalization effort, while not ignoring other aspects, should take into consideration the centrality of religious issues.
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for those embracing jihadism. While for legal, political and cultural reasons it might be difficult to replicate in the West some of the religion-based counter-radicalization efforts adopted in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Singapore, the religious aspect should take a central role.

The study also shows that those interested in religion are extremely inquisitive during the first stages of their radicalization trajectories. In the first months or even years of their posting life, in fact, these individuals constantly engage with fellow posters for sources and opinions on religious matters. They seem to be constantly searching for validation of their opinions. Over time, this openness seemed to slowly decrease, and by the end of the posting trajectory, there are only limited traces of questions. In the late stages, instead of questions, statements appear, often filled with confident pronouncements of their own knowledge. This attitude provides an enormous opportunity for counter-radicalization. It is arguable that it is in this phase that any kind of intervention might be more likely to succeed.
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1. Introduction

“More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our umma [community of believers].”\(^2\) With these words, spoken in 2005, current al-Qaeda top leader Ayman al-Zawahiri openly stated what has long been obvious to any observer of the jihadist: that the global jihadist movement, of which al-Qaeda still represents the guiding star, considers the so-called battle “for hearts and minds” a crucial component of the war it has been waging against its enemies and that the media are the main venue in which this battle is fought.

Since the early 2000s the Internet has become a crucial space in which the global jihadist movement operates. As countless studies argue, the World Wide Web has come to fulfill all of the movement’s needs, from providing the first introduction, to jihadist ideology to non-radicalized individuals browsing online, to constituting a fast way of communicating for hardened operatives planning attacks, and everything in between.

Unsurprisingly, given its high levels of digital literacy, the Internet has been particularly important in the movement’s development in the West. Many studies highlight the fundamental role online activities play in the radicalization process of those European and North American Muslims who radicalize and eventually become involved in violent activities. While dynamics do differ from case to case, it is fair to state that almost all recent cases of radicalization in the West involve at least some digital footprint.

This study seeks to better understand the role played by Internet during the radicalization phase. In order to do so it studies the online activities of seven US-based individuals with proven terrorist ties, all of whom were active in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The researchers collected thousands of pages of their online conversations from web forums, blogs, and personal websites. This online trail can provide tremendous insights into the mindsets of those whose actions crossed from the “virtual” world to the “real” world.

In order to better understand this online trail we conduct a detailed and in-depth content analysis of the conversations the seven individuals had online. The study categorizes the nature of the individuals’ postings, labeling them as either: political, religious, social, or as hybrid categories (political/religious, social/political and social/religious). For each category, we examine what issues (topics of discussion) seem to interest each individual, drawing similarities and differences among them. The study, in substance, seeks to do what its title says – understanding what terrorists talk about. It goes without saying that the results of this work a) cannot claim to provide a complete analysis of the views of the seven individuals b) cannot even remotely claim to provide a complete overview of what all terrorists talk about.

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\(^1\) The authors would like to thank Public Safety Canada for generous funding through the Kanishka Project. We’re also very grateful for the valuable research assistance from: Sean Conlon, Yasmeen Hassan, Alexandra Kassirer, and Max Marder.

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As detailed below, this kind of analysis has many inherent limitations, ranging from the small sample analyzed to the difficulty in making assumptions based on inevitably incomplete evidence. Yet the study aims to provide a contribution to the literature on the role of the Internet in radicalization processes. Many studies, in fact, examine how extremists use the web but few look at what they actually say on it. Moreover, even fewer look at the relation between online and offline activities. This study seeks to provide a modest contribution to fill these gaps.

1.2 Methodology

The study is based on the analysis of the online activities of seven individuals identified as case studies. The seven individuals were selected for several reasons:

1. All seven were born or raised in the United States
2. All seven were active in online and offline jihadist scene around the same time (mid- to late 2000s and early 2010s)
3. All seven were either convicted for terrorism-related offenses (or, in the case of two of the seven, were killed in terrorism-related incidents.)

These common traits do not undermine the fact that the seven individuals have extremely diverse profiles, personalities and radicalization trajectories. As discussed below, one of the main findings of this report is the wide diversity of views and interests - even among a sample of individuals that at first glance present a similar background.

Another reason why these seven individuals are selected is the abundance of material on them in possession of the researchers. The individuals admittedly constitute a convenience sample. The primary source material on these individuals is drawn from Flashpoint Partners' data archive, one of the largest digital databases of open source intelligence on contemporary terrorist organizations, financiers, recruiters, and associates dating back over two decades. Flashpoint’s archive includes an extraordinarily robust library of tens of thousands of public forum messages published on jihadi chat rooms and social networking hubs, which provide researchers with invaluable access into the interactive discussions many of these individuals engaged in during their most formative years. This archive is the result of Flashpoint’s focus on monitoring online extremist channels since they first emerged in the late 1990s. The analyzed content in this study represents an expansive collection of the messages posted by the individuals in question.

It should be noted that the material examined in this study does not represent a comprehensive archive of every single message the seven individuals authored. The researchers

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are aware that the seven individuals had posted in other venues and that some of the posts on the forums and websites that were analyzed could not be retrieved for technical reasons.

Moreover, the researchers limited their analysis to open sources: blogs, personal sites and non-password protected forums/chat rooms. For ethical and legal reasons, in fact, the researchers decided not to analyze password-protected sites and private conversations. An analysis of these sources would make the study significantly more complete. The researchers are aware that, for example, there are differences in both subject and tone between what the individuals said in open forums and what they said in private conversations. Yet a clear decision was made not to include these sources in the study.

The online materials have been supplemented with other publicly available sources such as court documents and media reports, which were instrumental in tracing the profile of each of the seven individuals. Moreover, such information was crucial to trace a timeline for each in order to compare online and offline behaviors. Yet, it goes without saying that it is virtually impossible to piece together an even remotely accurate picture of an individual’s life and views based exclusively on third-party accounts of events related to his life.

Despite all these limitations the study seeks to enhance our ability to study extremist speech directly, unobtrusively. Rather than making inferences about what terrorists talk about and how their radicalization process took shape, the project seeks to provide (admittedly partial) answers to these questions based on direct evidence---their own words. It goes without saying that the trajectory of the seven individuals analyzed here is theirs alone. It does not reflect the way in which other individuals related to the Internet during their own radicalization process and no sweeping generalizations on the subject should be made based on them. But there are some useful and unique insights that can be gleaned from this kind of work.
2. Radicalization in the West

Before delving into the substance of the study it is important to briefly analyze certain related phenomena. Despite its frequent use in recent years in relation to political extremism and terrorist activities, the term “radicalization” does not have a commonly accepted definition. In order to avoid the confusion that such a general and often politically loaded term can generate, it has become common within academic circles and the Western counterterrorism community to distinguish between violent and cognitive radicalization. Cognitive radicalization is the process through which an individual adopts ideas that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refutes the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure based on a belief system that is completely different.

Violent radicalization occurs when an individual takes the additional step of employing violence to further the views derived from his cognitive radicalism. Or, in the words used by the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) in a 2010 report, violent radicalization is “the process by which individuals come to believe that their engagement in or facilitation of non-state violence to achieve social and political change is necessary and justified.”

Over the last few years terrorism literature has seen a remarkable growth in the study of radicalization, with experts borrowing frames and concepts from social sciences, psychology, sociology, theology, anthropology, and security studies. Yet few issues have proven more divisive and controversial among experts, both within and outside government, than trying to identify the reasons that drive a small number of people to embrace radical views and then to act upon them in violent ways.

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6 Radicalization Dynamics: A Primer, unclassified report by National Counterterrorism Center, September 2010. Page 5. Alternatively, Danish scholar Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen defines violent radicalization as “a process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts” (see Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know,” Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 33, no. 9 (2010): 797–814).
The literature has tended to disaggregate the components of the radicalization process, dividing them in broad categories that can be identified as: (1) preconditions; (2) ideology; and (3) mobilization. Preconditions are those pre-existing factors, often subdivided into structural and individual components that can lead a person to radicalize. Ranging from political factors to historical grievances, structural factors are those related to the role of state and society. Individual factors, on the other hand, pertain to the more personal sphere, and could be, for example, reactions to real or perceived injustice, shocks caused by life-changing events, or the search for identity.

Structural and/or individual factors trigger what is commonly referred to as “cognitive opening,” an internal crisis that, in the words of Quintan Wiktorowicz, “shakes certainty in previously accepted beliefs and renders an individual more receptive to the possibility of alternative views and perspectives.” It is often argued that in most cases a simple causation-based approach is incorrect; rather, it is the complex interaction of various structural and individual preconditions that leads people to radicalize by having a cognitive opening and subsequently embracing a certain ideology. Ideology can be defined as the set of ideas which provides the individual with a new outlook and explanation for the world around him. Finally, mobilization is the process by which the radicalized/radicalizing individual is integrated into a community of like-minded individuals.

One of the few things over which the majority of scholars agree is that radicalization is a complex and highly individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors. There is no grand theory of radicalization, no one path to it, no catch-all explanation and no common “terrorist profile.”

2.2 Jihadist ideology

It goes without saying that radicalization is a phenomenon that can take place within all sorts of social, ethnic and religious groups and can be supported by a wide range of ideologies. In the case of the seven individuals analyzed here, the ideology of reference is jihadism. The term jihad is contested by some scholars. Jihad is an Arabic word meaning “struggle” that is used in Islamic theology with various significances. Arguably the most common usage is when referred to the inner struggle that every good Muslim has to fight to follow God’s path and avoid sinful behaviors (often referred to as internal or greater jihad). But jihad (often referred to as...
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as *jihad fil sabil Allah*—*jihad in the path of God*—also signifies physical struggle against the enemies of Islam.

Over the last thirty years the term “jihadism” (with its variants of jihadi-Salafism or takfirism) has been commonly used by academics, policymakers and, notably, jihadists themselves, to define an ideology that unites a global yet loosely connected—and occasionally internally divided—political movement. While it is impossible here to precisely outline the complex origins and beliefs of jihadism, it can be said that it is, in essence, a political ideology that claims to base itself on a literalist interpretation of Islam (more precisely, the Quran and the Sunnah).¹² Jihadism believes that Islam is the only true religion, that the word of God should be followed strictly and that the formation of an Islamic state applying Islamic law is a religious duty. It also argues that “true Muslims” are oppressed by a conspiracy orchestrated by the Christian West and Israel who, with the complicity of corrupt leaders of Muslim-majority countries, prevent the formation of authentic Islamic states in order to keep Muslims in a state of military, economic, political and cultural subjugation.

These views are shared, to some degrees, by other political movements that can be described as Islamist (such as, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood). But, jihadists differ from other Islamists in the identification of the solution to this situation; to them, the solution is violence. Over the last fifty years several jihadist scholars have provided arguments legitimizing the use of violence against all those they deem as “enemies of Islam,” ranging from Western powers to Muslim rulers who do not enforce Islamic law. Opinions have been formed in order to provide an allegedly religious-based justification for acts of extreme violence, from the killing of unarmed civilians to the death of Muslims accidentally killed in terrorist attacks.¹³

The “jihadist movement” is not a monolithic block, but rather a global movement characterized by constant debates and divisions over issues ranging from politics to strategy and theology. It should be noted that the vast majority of Muslims worldwide reject jihadist ideology and the actions of those who espouse it. Nevertheless, jihadist ideology finds small pockets of adherents worldwide, from Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and South Asia to Muslim communities in the West.

Adopting jihadist ideology does not mean simply adopting a highly conservative or politicized version of the Islamic faith. Although these are in many cases preconditions to the embrace of jihadism, they should be seen as separate phenomena. According to most Islamic scholars, in fact, jihadism distorts key tenets and teachings of the Islamic faith. It is, in essence,

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a radical political ideology that makes of extreme violence its cornerstone and relegates religious aspects to a secondary position.

Over the last twenty years phenomena of radicalization and embracement of jihadist ideology have been witnessed with increasing frequency among young Muslims living in Europe and North America. While affecting only a statistically insignificant percentage of the overwhelmingly law-abiding Muslim populations of both continents, the phenomenon has been monitored with understandable apprehension on both sides of the Atlantic. Consequently, several theories have been formulated to explain the radicalization patterns of Western Muslims, ranging from a search for identity to anger over relative economic deprivation.14

2.3 Radicalization as a precondition to terrorism

Many academics and experts argue that radicalization is a process and that violence and terrorism are its ultimate consequence. It must be said that not all those who undergo the radicalization process engage in acts of violence, as indeed the majority of cognitive radicals will never make the leap into becoming violent radicals. But it is equally true that all violent radicals were at some point simply cognitive radicals.

Although it is widely understood that it is not always linear and it does not always have the same timeframe or sequencing, most experts and governmental agencies describe the radicalization process as a process taking place in phases.15 The first phase can be defined as pre-radicalization, and it occurs before the individual adopts radical views or is exposed to them. The second phase takes place when the individual, for reasons that vary from case to case, begins to express an interest in jihadist ideology and associate himself with individuals that express a similar interest. In this phase the individual starts to question his previously held views on society, religion and politics, often challenging those around him for holding them.

During the third phase the individual comes to fully embrace jihadist ideology. He will immerse himself in texts and other materials that will reinforce his views. A more experienced individual might play a crucial role in this phase of the process by helping the individual navigate the world of jihadist ideology. Contact with this guide and with like-minded individuals will solidify his views, as group-think will prevent the individual from being exposed to alternative views.

Finally, the fourth phase takes place when the individual—whether on his own or together with other like-minded individuals—decides to spring into action. In many cases (but not always) the final consequence of the process of radicalization is the use of violence. This outcome can occur in different ways, according to the characteristics and preferences of the

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individual, and the circumstances in which he finds himself. Springing into action can mean traveling abroad and joining a terrorist group in order to fight with them or to obtain training to carry out attacks back at home or in another country. It could also entail carrying out attacks independently. Or it could mean providing logistical support for the global jihadist movement. In any case, the fourth phase of radicalization takes place when the individual decides to translate his cognitive radicalism into actions that he deems advancing the jihadist movement’s goals, whatever form they might take.

Although this quadripartite analysis is used by the FBI and other law enforcement and intelligence agencies inside and outside the United States, it must be said that these stages are neither necessarily linear nor sequential and that there are multiple pathways into radicalization and eventually political violence.  

2.4 Al-Qaeda 2.0: How terrorism works today

The growing role of the Internet, which has allowed jihadist ideology to spread well beyond areas where jihadist groups have a physical presence, is one of the factors that have determined a radical shift in the kind of terrorist threat facing Western countries from jihadist groups. As Mitchell Silber, Senior Intelligence Analyst for the New York Police Department, explained in testimony before the U.S. Senate, “while the threat from overseas remains, most of the terrorist attacks or thwarted plots against cities in the West since 9/11 have fit a different pattern. The individuals who plotted or conducted the attacks were generally citizens or residents of the countries in which the attacks occurred. Although a few may have receive training in al-Qaeda camps, the vast majority did not. While al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for each attack, these attacks were not under the command and control of al-Qaeda central, per se, nor were they specifically funded by al-Qaeda central. Rather, they were conducted by local residents and citizens who used al-Qaeda as their ideological inspiration. This is a homegrown threat, and it is driven by radicalization.”

The terrorist threat from jihadist inspired actors against the United States—the country of origin of the seven individuals analyzed here—and all other Western countries has evolved significantly over the last ten years, becoming significantly more decentralized. Until mid-2003 virtually all of the terrorist intended to take place on American soil had been planned, albeit with varying degrees of involvement, by al-Qaeda’s central leadership. The arrest or killing of several senior al-Qaeda leaders, al-Qaeda’s loss of the Afghan sanctuary after the U.S. invasion of 2001, and the significant improvement in homeland security measures triggered a shift that began to materialize in late 2003. With the exception of the 2006 transatlantic plot, a plot hatched by UK-based militants apparently directed by al-Qaeda members in Pakistan to detonate liquid explosives on board several US-bound flights, every single attack against the American homeland thwarted by US authorities since then appears to have been conceived by

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17 Testimony of Mr. Mitchell Silber, Senior Intelligence Analyst, NYPD, before the U.S. Senate, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, hearing on The Role of Local Law Enforcement in Countering Violent Islamist Extremism, Oct. 30, 2007.
individuals living in the United States and acting more or less independently from al-Qaeda’s leadership.

Tellingly, FBI director Robert Mueller has identified “self-radicalized, homegrown extremists in the United States” as the main terrorist threat to the homeland. “While not formally affiliated with a foreign terrorist group,” added Mueller, “they are inspired by those groups’ messages of violence, often through the Internet, and because they lack formal ties they are often particularly difficult to detect.” Similarly, in 2010 US Attorney General Eric Holder stated that the terrorist threat “has changed from simply worrying about foreigners coming here, to worrying about people in the United States, American citizens – raised here, born here, and who for whatever reason, have decided that they are going to become radicalized and take up arms against the nation in which they were born.”

This evolution of the jihadist movement from hierarchical to diffuse has been partially determined by events beyond al-Qaeda’s control. But several jihadist theoreticians and strategists had long advocated such a shift. Foremost among them is Abu Musab al Suri, one of the global jihadist movement’s most important ideologues over the past twenty years. Until his capture in Pakistan in November 2005, al Suri disseminated his vitriolic yet sophisticated teachings through books and other writings that circulated widely throughout the jihadist underworld. Among the many subjects he analyzed, al Suri paid close attention to the future of the jihadist movement and al-Qaeda’s role in it. Al Suri envisioned al-Qaeda as almost a temporary entity, whose very existence was only propaedeutic to the creation of independent jihadist movements throughout the world.

Al Suri argued that jihadists throughout the world should engage in what he referred to as “The Jihad of Individualized Terrorism.” Summarizing it with the phrase nizam, la tanzin: (system, not organization), Al Suri advocated an operative system in which various small groups of like-minded individuals operate autonomously, without developing links to other networks. What would bind all these networks together is simply “a common aim, a common doctrinal program and a comprehensive (self-) educational program.”

Citing various examples of terrorist attacks carried out against Western targets by individuals with no formal affiliation to any terrorist organization, such as the 1993 World Trade Center bombings or random assassinations of Westerners during the height of the 1991 Gulf War, al Suri highlights how such “spontaneous operations performed by individuals and cells

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18 Testimony of Robert S. Mueller, III, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, before the U.S. Senate, Select Committee on Intelligence, hearing on Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment, Feb. 5, 2008.
here and there over the whole world, without connection between them, have put the local and international intelligence apparatus in a state of confusion.”\textsuperscript{22}

In al Suri’s vision, al-Qaeda and other groups have outlived their relevance and usefulness. In the post-9/11 environment there is no longer space for them and their presence would only hamper the freedom of operation of individual networks. In al Suri’s mind, the loss of centralized control and even the demise of al-Qaeda’s leaders would not represent a setback for the global jihadist movement. Indeed, he argues that al-Qaeda should be a selfless organization; one that does not seek its own self-preservation. As its name (“the base” in Arabic) suggests, al-Qaeda is simply a launching pad for other groups, an umbrella organization that brought together jihadist groups from around the world so that they could develop a global outlook. Al-Qaeda’s role was to link regional groups and provide them with training, expertise, money and, most importantly a common ideology and agenda. Once that mission was accomplished, al-Qaeda’s work was done: it is now up to jihadists worldwide to continue the jihad in their local battlefields. “Al-Qaeda is not an organization, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be,” explained al Suri in a lecture he gave in 2000, it “is a call, a reference, a methodology.”\textsuperscript{23}

Al Suri’s interpretation of the scope of al-Qaeda seems to be similar to that of the organization’s founders. Al-Qaeda founder Abdullah Azzam often referred to the mujaheddin fighting in Afghanistan and to al-Qaeda as a vanguard, the first fighters and enablers of a larger movement that was to encompass the entire Muslim world. “Every principle needs a vanguard to carry it forward,” wrote in 1987 Azzam, “this vanguard constitutes the strong foundation [al-Qaeda al sulbah] for the expected society.”\textsuperscript{24} Al Suri simply re-contextualized Azzam’s view given the 2001 loss of the Afghan sanctuary, the Tanzim method has become obsolete, and the vanguard, having done its job, can be replaced by the myriad of individuals and localize networks throughout the world.\textsuperscript{25}

The global “leaderless resistance” envisioned by al Suri can only be achieved if the individuals and small clusters of jihadist sympathizers spread throughout the world are exposed to jihadist ideology. That could be achieved only through a massive propaganda effort, a “media or informational battle” in al Suri’s words. Al Suri understood that there are large numbers of individuals within the jihadists’ ideological support base who are unwilling or unable to engage in violence themselves. Yet their role in disseminating propaganda and therefore contributing in the formation of a global movement was considered equally important.

As seen, over the last few years U.S. officials have repeatedly identified in unaffiliated, homegrown jihadists the biggest threat to the U.S. homeland. In many cases the individuals involved in plots against the U.S. had undergone most or even their entire radicalization process online with little or no face-to-face interaction with likeminded individuals. In the vast majority

\textsuperscript{23} Tape of Abu Musab al Suri, 2000. Parts of the tape are available at www.elmundo.es/documentos/2006/02/01/mustafasetmarian/index.html
of those cases, in fact, the absorption of the ideology that drove them to engage in acts of violence came from texts, videos and conversations found on the Internet. The Internet is the main means through which the glue of the global jihadist movement, jihadist ideology, is disseminated.

2.5 The role of the Internet

The importance of the Internet in modern terrorism cannot be overemphasized, as it plays a crucial role in virtually every phase of contemporary terrorist groups’ activities. From an operational point of view, for example, the Internet allows terrorists to freely communicate among themselves, exchange information on issues ranging from bomb-making techniques to how to avoid detection, and acquire information about potential targets.

But if the operational aspect is crucial, even more important is the role of the Internet when it comes to spreading propaganda and attracting new adherents - arguably any terrorist group’s core interest. In the words of Bruce Hoffman, America’s foremost expert on terrorism “a terrorist movement’s longevity ultimately depends upon its ability to recruit new members as well as appeal to an expanding pool of both active supporters and passive sympathizers.” And in this respect the Internet plays a fundamental role, allowing terrorist groups to carry out propaganda and recruiting activities on a scale that would have been unimaginable only twenty years ago.

A 2009 report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation at London’s King’s College perfectly summarized the importance of the Internet in the context of radicalization and recruitment. This report states that “[t]he Internet,” argues the report, “can be used by extremists to illustrate and reinforce ideological messages and/or narratives. Through the Internet, potential recruits can gain near-instantaneous access to visually powerful video and imagery which appear to substantiate the extremists’ political claims.” Moreover, argues the report, “the Internet makes it easier to join and integrate into more formal organizations. It provides a comparatively risk-free way for potential recruits to find like-minded individuals and network amongst them, enabling them to reach beyond an isolated core group of conspirators.” Finally, “it creates a new social environment in which otherwise unacceptable views and behaviour are normalised. Surrounded by other radicals, the Internet becomes a virtual ‘echo chamber’ in which the most extreme ideas and suggestions receive the most encouragement and support.”

The importance of the media and the Internet is not lost on al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups. In a 2002 letter to Taliban leader Mullah Omar, Osama bin Laden wrote: “It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles.” Also in 2005 the Global Islamic Media Front, an

26 Bruce Hoffman, The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists, testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, May 4, 2006
28 Harmony Database located at the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. The document’s ID is AFGP-2002-600321.
al-Qaeda-linked media organ, stated that “This is the Internet that Allah has enlisted in the service of jihad and of the mujahideen [Islamic fighters], which has come to serve your interests—given that half the battle of the mujahideen is being waged on the pages of the Internet—the sole outlet for mujahideen media.”

One of the most ardent advocates of the importance of the media and, in particular, of the Internet for the jihadist movement was Anwar al Awlaki. Al Awlaki was the New Mexico-born cleric who became the spiritual leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen and was in direct contact with several individuals involved in acts of violence inside the United States, from Fort Hood shooter Nidal Hassan to failed Christmas underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, before being killed in a US drone strike in September 2011. Al Awlaki wrote several treatises about how jihad can be conducted. In many of them he has analyzed the importance of propaganda and, more specifically, the Internet. In his widely disseminated 2009 booklet *44 Ways of Supporting Jihad*, for example, al Awlaki listed “WWW Jihad” at number 29. According to al Awlaki:

> Some ways in which the brothers and sisters could be ‘Internet mujahidin’ is by contributing in one or more of the following ways: establishing discussion forums that offer a free, uncensored medium for posting information relating to jihad; establishing e-mail lists to share information with interested brothers and sisters; posting or e-mailing jihad literature and news; and establishing websites to cover specific areas of jihad, such as mujahidin news, Muslim prisoners of war, and jihad literature.

Similarly, it is not surprising that, in August 2011, in his first speech as head of al-Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri devoted significant attention and particular praises to jihadist sympathizers who disseminate jihadist ideology online. Bin Laden’s successor stated that “modern communications technology has provided many opportunities to spread the word and inform people,” and praised the “knights of the media jihad,” as “hidden soldiers are not known by many people but despite this they have made their mark across the globe... It is on them to pool their efforts and expend all their energies, make perfect their plans, and organise their work and exert as much effort as they can. The war is at its peak and god does not forget those who earn their reward.”

The process by which some Western Muslims have their first contact with and subsequently embrace jihadist ideology online has been witnessed by intelligence agencies throughout Europe and North America. The process has been described with remarkable clarity by the Netherlands’ domestic intelligence agency (AIVD) in an extensive report which calls the Internet “the turbocharger of the jihadi movement.” There is a large group of Muslims,” the

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terrorist chatter report states “mostly young people, in non-Muslim western countries, who feel isolated within the societies in which they live. Because these youngsters see their future in the West, unlike their parents, while at the same time experiencing a strong element of distrust for Western society, they are looking for their own identity and for a position to adopt in Western society...When hunting for answers to these questions, they may end up in an environment with which they are familiar and which is easily accessible, namely the Internet. Not only can they find a great deal of information there, but they can also become part of a virtual (Muslim) community, exchanging ideas and blowing off steam by expressing their frustration with other like-minded individuals who share their fate.”

Over the last few years officials in the United States have expressed virtually identical concerns. The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate, entitled The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland, observes that “the spread of radical – especially Salafi – Internet sites, increasingly aggressive anti-US rhetoric and actions, and the growing number of radical, self-generating cells in Western countries indicate that the radical and violent segment of the West’s Muslim population is expanding, including in the United States. The arrest and prosecution by US law enforcement of a small number of violent Islamic extremists inside the United States – who are becoming more connected ideologically, virtually, and/or in a physical sense to the global extremist movement – points to the possibility that others may become sufficiently radicalized that they will view the use of violence here as legitimate.”

In May 2008, the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs published a report entitled Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat in which it warned about the increased frequency with which U.S.-based militants were active online. A 2010 report by the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center argues that “the Internet and related information technologies---such as Web forums, blogs, social networking sites, and e-mail—that serve as platforms for extremist propaganda and discourse can enable and advance the radicalization process and help mobilize individuals who may not be geographically near key extremist figures or significant events.”

As most contemporary terrorist groups of any ideological leaning, al-Qaeda and most other jihadist groups fully understand the huge potential of the Internet and possess their own websites. Characterized by varying but ever increasing degrees of sophistication, these sites display the group’s official communiqués and other forms of propaganda. But over the last few years the advent of Web 2.0 platforms such as file-sharing portals, forums, blogs and social networking sites have triggered the growth of user-generated media content outside the “official” jihadist spaces. Today, most of jihadist propaganda available online does not come from the official websites of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups but, rather, from an ever growing

34 Jihadis and the Internet, report by the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, February 2007. Page 91.
36 Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, May 2008.
multitude of private forums, blogs, YouTube channels and other outlets run by individuals with no official connection with any group but that simply embrace jihadist ideology.

This phenomenon is even more evident in the West, where the initiative of creating various online spaces to disseminate jihadist ideology in Western languages (French, German, Dutch, but, more than any other, English) that could be understood by second-generation Western Muslims has been left largely to individual, unaffiliated jihad enthusiasts.
3. Terrorist use of the Internet

Studies of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups’ use of the Internet are divided and based on two theoretical perspectives: (1) the instrumentalist perspective, which views cyberspace as a ‘means’ or a new channel of communication; and (2) the sociological perspective, which views cyberspace as a distinct ‘social space.’ Much of the research discussed below is on the role of the Internet in violent jihadist radicalization as there is currently very little academic research on the online activities of ‘old’ terrorist groups (i.e., national and ethnic separatist and the radical right). 39

The Canadian Centre of Intelligence and Security Studies (CCSIS), based at Carleton University, estimates that by 2006 there were about 5,000 active terrorist websites and that all active terrorist organizations (including US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization) had some sort of online presence. As part of an eight-year study on terrorist uses of the web, Gabrie Weimann proposes a comprehensive typology that considers both the communicative and instrumental uses of the web. 40 Weimann arguably provides the most exhaustive survey of terrorist websites, categorizing terrorist uses of the web with detailed analysis: psychological warfare; publicity and propaganda; data mining; fundraising; recruitment and mobilization; networking; sharing information; and planning and coordination. 41 Weimann argues that the fundamental characteristic of terrorism is the use of communication as a tool for psychological warfare; describing the rhetorical tactics of terrorism as a means of ‘moral disengagement.’ He examines the ‘chatter’ between extremists and their supporters and, through content analysis, tries to determine the scope and reach of their communication. 42 Bowman-Grieve argues that if Weimann to use discourse analysis, he would have been able to extend his analysis beyond the scope of moral disengagement and consider such factors as the “meaning of support, process of identity negotiations … [and] the specific propaganda dissemination by different movements or factions within the movement”. 43 Weimann’s policy proscriptions include the “golden path”; the need to protect civil liberties with the need to counter terrorists’ use of the web.

Focusing on the communicative use of the Internet by terrorist organizations, Ogun identifies four target audiences for terrorist messaging: supporters, the population that the organization purports to serve, the enemy and international public opinion. 44 To provide theoretically sound advice on preventative measures, Ogun examines the exploitation of the

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
Internet by terrorist organizations. The study supports Weimann’s finding that terrorist organizations use the Internet to engage a wide audience and for various purposes. Ogun found that the dissemination of terrorist propaganda was a salient function that serves to broaden the opportunities of terrorist organizations.

Drawing from Weimann’s proposed typology, Gray and Head compare the communicative and instrumental uses of the web with the functions and opportunities of geographic safe havens as defined by Kittner. The authors argue that the “capabilities offered by the Internet afford many of the benefits of traditional safe havens,” including communication, training, planning/coordination, fundraising and recruitment. Kittner’s definition of “safe havens” is derived from the context of Islamist terrorism, accounting for both the organizational and operational functions of geographical spaces in a “post-modern” context.

In a review of jihadist use of the Internet, Netherlands’ National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTb) found that beyond the dissemination of propaganda, jihadist use forums and other interactive communication to exchange ideas, provide instructions, and promote specific techniques of ‘e-jihad.’ This in-depth study examined the Internet as a resource for terrorist, as a weapon and as a target (i.e. cyber-terrorism). The NCTb concluded that although it is improbable for jihadist to use the Internet as a weapon or as a target, these considerations are important for a proper evaluation of the dynamic threat environment. This study was reviewed in 2009 to account for any changes. In an evaluation of ‘Jihadis Online’, Weisburd identifies eight categories of activity: agitation and propaganda; intelligence collection and dissemination; communications; training; indoctrination; identity shaping; community building; and crime (for terrorist purposes). The author recognizes that limitations of tracking jihadist online activities and proposes that counter-terrorism efforts focus on the “human element” in data collection by exploiting the vulnerabilities of Internet users. Weisburd concludes by providing a list of “seven deadly sins,” the common activities of online jihadists and the opportunities and implications for counter-terrorism.

3.2 Models of Radicalization

In a study examining the psychological dimensions of radicalization, Silke (2010) suggest that the Internet provides terrorists with the ‘opportunity to convince opponents or neutrals to

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45 Ogun, “Terrorist Use of Internet”, 203-217.
46 Weimann, Terror on the Internet
49 Gray and Head, “The Importance of the Internet to the Post-Modern Terrorist”
50 Kittner, “The Role of Safe Havens”
51 Jihadis and the Internet, report by the Netherlands’ National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, February 2007.
52 Jihadis and the Internet: 2009 Update, report by the Netherlands’ National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, May 2010.
54 Ibid.
become soft supporters and to convince soft supporters to become hard supporters (and then, if desired, to turn hard supporters into active terrorists)’. The NYPD study on the ‘homegrown threat’ also considers the Internet as a driver and an enabler in the process of violent radicalization. Using a comparative case study method, Silber & Bhatt identify four distinct phases through which homegrown terrorist progress to violent action. Focusing on jihadist ideology as the principal motivator for radicalization, the four phases: ‘pre-identification’, ‘self-identification’, ‘indoctrination’ and ‘jihadization’ were supported by selected case studies and the role that Internet played was briefly outlined for each phase. Silber & Bhatt argue that the Internet along with “cafes, cab driver hangouts, flophouses, prisons, student associations, nongovernmental organizations, hookah (water pipe) bars, butchers shops and book stores” are “radicalization incubators” that can create the opportunities for individuals to progress in each stage. Beyond its problematic methodology, this model assumes that there is a linear and sequential progression of violent radicalization and that religion and religious behavior is a crucial element. Based on Islamist radicalization in Europe, Precht’s phase model shifts the focus from the individual to the influencer or “radicalizer”, adopting a “top-down” approach in understanding processes of radicalization. Studies that have adopted a sociological and relational approach to the study violent radicalization have also challenged the NYPD model by highlighting the importance of offline elements in the radicalization process.

Moghaddam’s “staircase to terrorism” model outlines the psychological dimensions of terrorist radicalization by categorizing the social conditions (i.e. social and global context) and the necessary individual transformations (i.e. identify formation) that move a person to engage in terrorism. Moghaddam’s model describes terrorism as an endpoint in a six-step narrowing staircase where individuals face an increasingly limited set of alternatives for action. The author describes six metaphorical floors: on the ground floor, the subject encounters and interprets their material conditions; on the first floor, the individual searches for solutions to their unjust treatment; on the second floor, the individual identifies an out-group to blame and engages in displaced aggression; on the third floor, the individual identifies with the group’s moral code and their justifications for violence. Between the third and fourth floor is a critical stage whereby the individual is recruited into joining the terrorist organization and begins to adopt an adversarial “us-versus-them” view; and on the fifth and final floor, the individual is motivated and psychologically prepared to commit a terrorism act. While Moghaddam’s aim was to use this model to explain terrorist acts perpetrated by Islamist terrorist organizations, this model is

56 Ibid.
useful and can be applied to an assessment of Internet radicalization. In a review of Moghaddam’s model, Mealer found that the all-inclusive ground floor and the first floor in this model represent pre-radicalization conduct, which identifies those vulnerable to terrorist messaging. The progression to the first floor is characterized by “knowledge seekers” who might use the Internet to learn about societal issues and their own relative deprivation or injustices in distant locals. The Internet’s role in facilitating global communication and the hyper-personal dimensions of computer-mediated communication can facilitate group identification and moral disengagement. The second and subsequent floors in this mode describe the psychological processes that lead individuals to become entrenched in extremist ideology and activity. Moghaddam concludes by outlining the policy implications of his study and reviewing some promising preventative measures applicable to Internet radicalization.

Weisburd explores the reductive assumptions of media effects on radicalization and through content analysis found that contextual differences in the ‘real world,’ could result in what the author termed ‘Differential Jihadization.’ As a concept derived from criminological research this theory borrows from Sutherland’s Differential Association theory and ‘seeks to explain how otherwise similar individuals living in similar circumstances will become involved in crime at dissimilar rates’. Based on the observations of jihadi websites and chat rooms, the author argues that no matter the motivation of extremists and the nature of their online presence, their opportunities and association in the ‘real world’ determine their likelihood in becoming involved in terrorist activities. While the limits of analyzing online content are noted, the author is careful not to suggest that the “silent majority” (or the ‘Jihobbyists’) of the online jihad community is absent from the process of radicalization. In fact, Weisburd considers the ‘presence of an individual on a radical Islamist website to be evidence that they are in the midst of a process of radicalization’. The 11 March 2004 Madrid Bombers are offered as an example as some of perpetrators of the attack were identified as “passive” consumers of jihadi material. In a case study of Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, Turcan & McCauley offer support to Weisburd’s mode by identifying two distinct phases in the trajectory towards violent action: the ‘radicalization of opinion’, where individual and group grievances shape motivations and commitment, and the ‘radicalization of action’, which depends on the means and opportunity afforded to the individual. The findings of this study serve to caution academic researchers on the limits of
analyzing extremists content and encourage them to consider alternative explanations for online radicalization that may not be found online.

3.3 Virtual Dimensions of Radicalization

There is substantial disagreement among counter-terrorism experts on the extent of influence the Internet has on the process of violent radicalization. In a report published by the Nataratnam School of International Studies and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (2009), the authors examine the role of the Internet in the radicalization process of Southeast Asians and its impact on neighboring regions. The study found that “the Internet has contributed to radicalization, will probably grow in regional significance and might become a dominant factor in radicalization in the region.” The authors support these claims by highlighting the self-reports of Yonis Tsoul (aka ‘Irhabi007) and Ifran Rafa, two well-known online extremists in Europe who for the authors demonstrate the culpability of the Internet and its important facilitative role. The online activities of these young men and the thousands of hours they spent downloading and disseminating extremist content from jihadi websites are pointed to as evidence of the real threat posed by online extremists and dangers of ‘self-radicalized’ individuals. In “Countering Online Radicalization: A Strategy for Action,” Tim Stevens and Peter Neumann argue that ‘Irhabi007’ represents an exception and should not be used to support such lofty conclusions. For Stevens and Neumann, the Internet is not the culpable or dominant force in violent radicalization, as the process is highly dependent upon the establishment of ‘real world’ social relationships. The authors present the case of Hamad Munshi, ‘Britain’s youngest terrorist’ as a case more representative of the phenomenon. According to Stevens and Neumann, while much of Munshi’s ‘extremist activism took place online’ his ‘radicalization [was] initiated in the real world,’ through face-to-face interactions. While the authors make mention the ‘echo-chamber effect’ of political communication, they do not refer to the literature on the utility of mediated communication. According to Joseph Walther’s hyper-personal model, computer-mediated communications (CMC) can intensify relationships and can even create stronger bonds than those formed in face-to-face interactions. Although, the authors insist that the virtual dimensions of radicalization be evaluated in the context of the real world, their analysis is based on the assumed primacy of ‘real world’ interactions.

In a study evaluating the communication and media strategies of Islamists operations, Corman and Schiefelbein found that computer-mediated communication (CMC) intensifies the attitudes and determination of extremists through mutual affirmation. Studies of online hate groups demonstrate this quite remarkably but often attribute it as merely a function of the anonymity provided by the web. Using the social identity model of de-individuation, Geeraerts provides

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid. p.14.
an alternative view on roots of conformity in online communities.\textsuperscript{73} Geeraerts explains that although anonymity provides individuals with space to freely share their opinions, individuals who participate in online extremist forums often conform to group opinion as they ‘come to see themselves and each other as representatives of the group, and less as individuals’.\textsuperscript{74} Geeraerts uses this theory to explain how individuals might come to embrace extremist ideologies on the web and argues that youth are particularly vulnerable to this process of ‘digital radicalization’ because of their vulnerable stage of development and their increased exposure to political messaging on the web.\textsuperscript{75} The arguments used to support these claims rely heavily on traditional psychological models and offer very little insight into the actual influence process exerted by the Internet.\textsuperscript{76} There are currently no studies that detail a profile of youth recruited to hate groups and terrorist movements and while individual cases may suggest that young people are often targets of recruitment by extremists, the role the Internet plays and the assumed vulnerability of youth require further investigation.\textsuperscript{77} The effects of ‘echo-chambers’ and computer-mediated communication provides an explanation for how the process of violent radicalization might be facilitated by the Internet but does not explain why this occurs and why some virtual communities are more vulnerable than others.\textsuperscript{78}

Conway uses Waldman’s conception of ‘Radical Milieus’ to describe the distinct qualities of radical online spaces.\textsuperscript{79} In this article, Conway discusses the emergence of ‘violent radical milieus, the “segment of a population that sympathizes with terrorists” and explores whether the Internet could be regarded as a new form.\textsuperscript{80} Conway argues that the Internet has cultivated a new social space (‘milieu’) that can facilitate the formation of emotional and personal bonds, not unlike ‘traditional radical milieus’.\textsuperscript{81} The author supports these claims by highlighting the ‘affordances of the cyberworld’, its potential radicalizing effects and the number of terrorist cases involving the Internet (i.e. Hussein, Osman, Arid Uka, the 2009 Fort Hood Shootings, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, the 2004 Madrid bombings and attacks by the Hofstad Group, Younis Tsouli (i.e. ‘Irabi007’) and the Balkan Plotters and Colleen LaRose (i.e. ‘Jihad Jane’)). The author discusses the difference between al-Zarqawi and al-Awlaki’s communication and recruitment strategies as reflecting an emerging trend. While Zarqawi committed terrorist acts and used the Internet to brand himself and magnify the impact of his violence, Al-Awlaki used the web primarily to encourage others to carry out attacks. This article underlines an important debate in the literature regarding whether the ‘violent extremist cyber-world’ is a ‘staging posts for real world’ violence.’ Conway argues that while more empirical research is required, there is

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., p.26.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Christopher J. Lennings et al., “Grooming for Terror: The Internet and Young People”, Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, 17, no.3 (2010): 424-437.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{81} Conway, “From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki”
sufficient anecdotal evidence that suggests that the Internet plays a significant role in violent radicalization. By exploring the ‘inescapably social nature of radicalization processes’ and the role of the Internet beyond its provision of new means, this article provides a more granular analysis of the phenomenon. The author concludes by discussing the utility of the conceptual framework used and its potential for advancing research in three important directions widening the scope through comparative research, deepening it through ethnographic research, scaling it up towards with big data analytics.

Using a grounded theory approach, Torok proposes an explanatory model for online radicalization based on Foucault’s analytic framework on psychiatric power. This explanatory model attempts to illustrate the mechanisms of online radicalization in an effort to contribute to our understanding of lone wolf terrorism. Data gathered from terrorism cases and social media were used to evaluate the discourse and network power relations that normalize and reinforce the behavior and actions of extremists. The model is explained with three interrelated observations: (1) online extremist environments are self-imposing isolating environments (or ‘virtual institutions’) (2) extremists seek out normalized radical thinking; (3) the power exercise is not coercive but intrinsic and discursive. Torok found that ‘social media was used to propagate a relationship between religion and terrorism’ and through an analysis of group pages found a number of common discursive schemas: the idea that extremists are not aggressors but victims; that terrorist figures should be well regarded; that unity in Islam is vita and that restoring the glory of Islam is the ultimate goal; that Islam (not terrorism) is being attacked by the West; and that death in Islam is regarded differently than in the West (concept of ‘dunya’). These discourses allow for the power to remain dispersed and intrinsic by normalizing radical thoughts and behaviors. Torok found that those particularly vulnerable to these ‘virtual institutions’ were marginalized and disaffected individuals who are often socially isolated. The author uses this explanatory model elsewhere to examine the strategies and discourses used to recruit Western women into the global jihad via Facebook. Discourse analysis has become an increasingly popular method used in case studies of ‘online extremist institutions’. Torok’s explanatory model could be strengthened through an analysis of comparative qualitative research on the developmental processes of extremist behavior (i.e. ‘communities of practice’ and ‘social mobilization’).

Thompson provides a policy oriented risk assessment of social media by examining how social media sites (Facebook and Twitter etc.) are becoming effective tools for radicalization and

82 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
87 Bowman-Grieve, “Exploring ‘Stormfront’: A Virtual Community”
88 Torok, “Developing an explanatory model”
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recruitment. Evolving from what Kohlmann described as a ‘Myspace-like social networking hub’ for extremists, this article argues that social media can be used as a tactical weapon to encourage homegrown terrorism. In addition to the ubiquity and reach of social media, Thompson argues that it is the “perfect voice” for radicals, who have become increasingly enabled by the Internet to rally support for their cause. To demonstrate the changing nature of radical political engagement, this article briefly examines the important role that social media played in the 2011 Arab spring movements. Thompson refers to a study that measured the radicalizing effects of social media in the Egyptian revolution by examining the density of social connections, the density of information and the density of emotional perceptions. The findings highlight the most problematic feature of social media; although everyone becomes a ‘sensor and an intelligence collector,’ information (and thus ‘emotional perceptions’) are mediated, filtered and increasingly defined by our social networks. Thompson explains how these ‘echo-chambers’ can facilitate and intensify the radicalization process but beyond highlighting its impact on the Arab spring movement, her recommendations do not consider the unique features of social media. The article assumes that if social media can play a role in radical political movements then it can also play a similar role in violent political radicalization. Recent academic work on the marketing strategies of terrorists, the challenges of this new digital terrain, and the utility of social media analytics would have extended the authors analysis, informing more nuanced policy prescriptions.

3.4 Internet as a dissemination (communication) tool

Studies that examine terrorist use of the web have viewed the Internet as a convenient communication tool and have placed a great amount of emphasis on the radicalizing potential of extremist propaganda. A report published by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue provides a review of current research on the role of the Internet in violent radicalization. The article found that although online extremist content such as video and images could be “powerful sparks” used to accelerate and intensify radicalization, it could not be attributed as a cause for violent radicalization. The authors also found limited evidence for the recruitment utility of the Internet given the significance of ‘real world’ interactions. This article frames the threat posed by the Internet not by whether one accepts extremist beliefs but by whether violence results from radicalizing content. By identifying the threat in this way, radicalization is assumed whenever a ‘terrorist’ is found to have accessed extremist content, an assumption favored by policy makers weary of the homegrown threat. As a policy piece, this paper identifies the

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91 Thompson, “Radicalisation and the use of social media”
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
emerging debates within the literature but it also contributes to the incoherent picture of the current threat environment.

Rogan argues that the Internet has been and will likely continue to be an important instrument for the global jihadist movement. In a study of the online activities of Al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist groups, Rogan found that the main objectives of jihadist were communicate ideas and disseminate information. In addition to the dissemination of propaganda, training and recruitment, the Internet has also increased the effects of certain methods, supporting the use of some methods rather than others. The author uses the wave of abductions of foreigners in Iraq in 2004 as an example, relating it to the popularity of self-made videos that brought publicity to this terrorist action.

Stenersen provides an extensive survey of Al-Qaeda training material available online including instruction manuals and encyclopedias, instruction videos, lessons, and other periodicals. Although, the author recognizes that this content can offer extremists training and technical expertise, she argues that this material cannot be understood as intentional preparation and that these virtual communities have not yet replaced the need for physical contact. For Stenersen ‘the Internet is not a “virtual training camp” organized from above, but rather a resource bank maintained and accessed largely by self-radicalized sympathizers’. Jenkirs concurs with this finding, stating that while Al-Qaeda might create ‘virtual armies’ these armies have remained virtual.

3.5 Internet as a recruitment tool

In a study on virtual jihadist media strategies, Akil Awan found that the radicalizing potential of the Internet was difficult to ascertain as much of jihadist online material is for propaganda purposes aimed at indoctrination and publicity. While jihadist groups are actively exploring the radicalizing potential of the Internet, the author found that Jihadis ultimately use the Internet to recruit the already converted. Despite the distinction made between radicalization and recruitment, the author uses case studies that conflate these terms. A brief account of the 2004 Madrid train bombings was used to illustrate the ‘radicalizing efficacy’ of online recruitment tools. Awan found that the Madrid bombers were inspired by online texts that called for these attacks in an attempt to cause Spain’s withdrawal from Iraq. Recognizing the distortion, Awan later demands that clear links be made to the radicalization process to determine whether ‘virtual radicalization’ has occurred. While describing a Canadian bomb plot foiled by intelligence agencies through surveillance of online chat rooms, the author asserts

97 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
that ‘even in such cases where the use of Internet communication appears as prima facie evidence of its role in radicalization, in fact the Internet only seems to have provided the initial impetus: the plot quickly became more conventional in terms of planning and actualization after the group meetings at a ‘training camp’ in Northern Ontario’.\textsuperscript{104} As a part of an integrative comparative study exploring the discourses of radicalization in new media environments (see Hoskin, O’Loughlin & Awan, 2009), it is important to note that the analysis presented was based on initial findings.

Conway & McInerney further contribute to the literature by seeking to understand what leads ordinary individuals to embrace violent extremism.\textsuperscript{105} Rather than exploring access-controlled jihadist web sites, the authors studied jihadi-promoting video content on YouTube to examine the trajectories of online supporters and the potential for online radicalization. This study found there to be ‘potential for online radicalization of those with no apparent prior links to jihadist’.\textsuperscript{106} The authors describe an individual who ‘went from browsing a generic website to suddenly being integrated into a specific network by virtue of a single posted comment;’ and then describe how this individual was embraced by very motivated extremists, stating that “he was targeted by heavy users, with radical links, whose aim at minimum was religious conversion”.\textsuperscript{107} The aggressive recruitment described could have accelerated the trajectory of this individual’s online radicalization. Even so, given that he was not an already “made-up mind,” the authors conclude that his exposure to radical material and thinking via the Internet was a factor in his radicalization. The findings of this study are consistent with Hoffman’s top-down terrorist organization theory where individuals without prior interest are targeted and recruited into joining the cause. Conway & McInerney also present the case for Sageman’s bottom-up network theory, which for the authors is part of an overlapping process in which those recruits already willing to join consume radical online material and become active participants in their own indoctrination.\textsuperscript{108}

Most experts in the field of terrorism studies are well aware of the fierce debates between Sageman and Hoffman regarding the nature of the terrorism threat, but often disregard the important claims made by Sageman on the role of the Internet in violent radicalization.\textsuperscript{109} In his book \textit{Leaderless Jihad}, Sageman argues that the Internet “has dramatically transformed the structure and dynamic of the evolving threat of global Islamist terrorism by changing the nature of the terrorists’ interaction...Starting around 2004, communication and inspiration shifted from face-to-face interaction...to interaction on the Internet”.\textsuperscript{110} Given the broad implications of...
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these claims, it is a surprise that Sageman offers very little to advance his own arguments.\textsuperscript{111} Sageman defines the Internet threat by the potential of global social networks and not by the radicalizing effects of online extremist content.\textsuperscript{112} He discounts the effects of online propaganda by arguing that images and videos merely reinforce already “made-up-minds.” Although it may be correct to assume that the process of radicalization and the influence of online extremist content depend on the individual, Sageman provides no evidence to support these claims.\textsuperscript{113} Instead, he refers to a handful of case studies to explain how the interactivity of the web has revolutionized human relationships, an interesting method considering his lengthy defense of the “scientific approach.” King and Taylor offer support to Sageman’s radicalization model by discussing various functions of the Internet and its role in facilitating group dynamics.\textsuperscript{114} A more elaborate discussion on the transformative functions of global social networks (i.e. ideological support, social reinforcement, networking) would have served enhance Sageman’s central claims about the nature of the terrorism threat.

In a case study of the “London Bombers,” Aiden Kirby explains how that Internet has produced a new type of terrorism lead by “self-starters.”\textsuperscript{115} Focusing on the aftermath of the 2005 London Bombings, Kirby describes what he calls the ‘analytical impulses’ of counter-terrorism experts who desperately sought to identify the operational networks of the attackers.\textsuperscript{116} He discusses this ‘analytical confusion,’ and describes how the emergence of autonomous “self-starter” terror cells heightens the risks posed by the homegrown threat.

Kirby argues that addressing this new phenomenon would require paradigm shifts in conventional understandings of radicalization.\textsuperscript{117} Drawing heavily from Marc Sageman’s 
\textit{Understanding Terror Networks}, Kirby offers a framework that focuses on social dynamics and the facilitative role of the Internet.\textsuperscript{118} Beyond the vast amounts of radicalizing content on the web, Kirby argues that the Internet ‘removes practical barriers that once limited entry into the formal jihad.’\textsuperscript{119} He describes the Internet as a tool and a ‘democratizer of violence’ where ‘a once Al-Qaeda sympathizer now enjoys a radically enhanced opportunity to become a fully-fledged jihadist.’ By relying on the British Government’s official account, a significant limitation of this case study is that it does not provide a detailed profile of the bombers. A more in-depth analysis of the bombers and the domestic (or social) context that influenced them would provide a more complete picture of the dynamic threat environment. Although the “London Bombers” were not found to have received any formal training or financial support, since publication, some evidence exists supporting the links made between the “London Bombers”

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
- Kirby, ”The London Bombers as ‘Self-Starters’...”
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
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and Al-Qaeda in Pakistan.120

Halverson and Way discuss the nexus between social margins, new media and online radicalization.121 Using a case study of Colleen LaRose, an American terrorist, the authors argue that the online radicalization of marginalized individuals could be explained through persona histories and social context rather than the appeal of a ‘nefarious ideology.’ In a detailed profile of LaRose, dubbed ‘Jihad Jane’ the authors describe how her troubled personal history, (which included a number of failed relationships, addiction and mental health issues) cultivated a sense of victimization. The Internet provided LaRose with a space to ‘share her scorn [and dissatisfaction] with American society’ and helped her construct a new powerful identity (‘Fatima LaRose’) ‘as a member of a community that valued her participation.’ The authors describe LaRose’s religious conversion as a superficial one, where her embodied identity as a ‘participant of a worldwide struggle’ subverted her troubled reality. The authors compare LaRose with other white Americans who similarly came to embrace violent extremist ideologies (i.e. Columbine shooters and the Oklahoma city bomber). By holding all other factors constant (temporal, socioeconomic, cultural), the comparisons serve to illustrate how perceived injustices (personal histories) could make an individual more receptive to extremist narratives. A major shortcoming of this study however is that while it aims to examine the influence of local context on the process of online radicalization it overlooks the importance of its virtual dimensions. The authors describe the Internet as a ‘contact point,’ ‘that facilitate the formation of social relationships’ just as any other physical relationship. While it was not in the purview of this study, comparing the LaRose case with other “White Moors” and exploring the functions of discourses in online communities would have enhanced the findings of this analysis by placing the willingness to appropriate messages in proper context.122

3.6 Online and Offline Radicalization

The literature reviewed so far has examined the Internet as both a tool that facilitates the process of radicalization and a ‘social space’ whose culture, narratives and symbols can influence the trajectory towards violent action. RAND Europe recently published a report entitled “Radicalization in the digital era,” examining the prevailing assumptions on the influence process of the Internet by testing hypotheses and assertions found within the literature against the primary data.123 The report examined the role of the Internet in 15 terrorist and extremist cases in the UK and found that contextual factors and offline behaviors were essential for understanding the process of Internet radicalization. This study found that

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while the Internet may “expand the opportunities for radicalization” and provide the “means through which to filter material that is consistent with one’s belief [e.g. echo-chamber effect]”. The Internet does not accelerate the process of radicalization, allows for radicalization to occur without physical contact and or permit ‘self-radicalization.” The results of this study suggest that while Internet might have a facilitative role in the process of radicalization, it is not the sole driver of the process.

In “You too can be Awlaki,” Brachman & Levine describe the complex mechanisms involved in al-Qaeda mobilization by focusing on the interplay between online and offline radicalization. The article presents a dynamic model that outlines the “double socialization” process in violent radicalization based on a synthesis of three bodies of thought: Friedrich Hegel’s theory of alienation and self-consciousness, Jean Baudrillard’s writings on replication in cyberspace and Judith Butler’s work on the performativity of social roles. The article explains how the Internet has ‘lower[ed] [the] barrier for entry to becoming a practicing extremist’ by not only inspiring supporters to action but by also enabling them to ‘replicate themselves or at least virtual projections of themselves’ in the image of Al-Awlaki and other al-Qaeda personalities. The online mobilization of Western youth who have very little knowledge of Islam and the al-Qaeda ideology are explained as an outcome of the replicated online identity of these ‘role models.’ The appeal of jihad is not the principle motivator of most online extremists but rather it is the appeal of a diluted form of extremist ideology that produces online extremism. The authors argue that at some point, these online extremists will recognize the difference between their online mobilization and their physical mobilization and some will inevitably strive to become their avatar to ‘relieve the pain of their dissonance.’ The implication here is that the process of violent radicalization is more of a relational process where both online and offline environments present the necessary opportunities for violent radicalization in the real world.

Ducol captures the multi-dimensional process of radicalization through a career-oriented framework. In this working paper, Ducol examines what he calls the “radical sociability” of individuals in both online and offline environments. He illustrates the interactions between “online sociability” (i.e. online practices and interactions) and “offline sociability” (i.e. peer group and family socialization) by measuring the degree of belief and practice on a continuum. Through an analysis of terrorist cases in France and Belgium between 2002 and 2008, the author found that the online radical trajectories of individuals were not diverse from their offline trajectories. These preliminary conclusions were based on primary sources (i.e. trial documents, terrorist testimonies and interview) but do not account for issues of temporality. Using this framework to evaluate whether individuals were actively or passively radicalize could provide a more nuanced model for understanding the process of violent

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124 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
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radicalization.

Wojcieszak examines the link between participation in online groups and political engagement (e.g. movement support and movement promotion) to assess whether politically dissimilar social contacts in offline environments encourage, thwart or moderate the mobilizing influence of the online extremist communities.\(^{130}\) Through an analysis of survey data from members of neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist groups, Wojcieszak found a positive correlation between political engagement and their participation in online discussion forums.\(^{131}\) This study controlled for confounding factors such as ideology, extremism and news media exposure and found that this relationship was particularly pronounced in movement support activities such as fundraising and volunteering. Wojcieszak also found variations depending on the political dissimilarity of offline social contacts; the positive relationship between online participation and political engagement was weaker for those individuals whose core ties (i.e. friends and family) were “like-minded” and for those whose core ties were oppositional.\(^{132}\) This study illustrates the importance of assessing the interplay between online and offline environments in the radicalization processes and provides an interesting predictive model that can be applied to other extremists groups to test its empirical validity.

In a short commentary about the failures of current risk management approaches to counter-terrorism, Atran examined the challenges posed by the global Jihadist ‘market,’ highlighting what he calls the ‘failures of imagination.’\(^{133}\) Atran argues that to address the risks posed by “decentralized, self-organizing and self-adjusting” groups, would require a “paradigm change.”\(^{134}\) A paradigm shift in conventional understandings of radicalization was reiterated throughout the literature. In fact prominent academics that have firmly opposed current notions about the evolving terrorism threat have recognized a rapidly changing landscape. Following the Fort Hood shootings, Bruce Hoffman reportedly stated: “I used to argue it was only terrorism if it were part of some identifiable, organized conspiracy...” but that this definition has changed because “This new strategy of al-Qaeda is to empower and motivate individuals to commit acts of violence completely outside any terrorist chain of command”.\(^{135}\) While there is a growing body of knowledge on the processes of radicalization and dynamics of Internet-based mobilization techniques, there remains a dearth of academic research on the extent of influence the Internet has in violent radicalization.\(^{136}\)

Many researchers have acknowledged the role of the Internet as a convenient communication tool for extremists but fail to offer empirically sound support for their often highly politicized assessments. Studies that completely disregard or underestimate the influence of the Internet in violent radicalization support their position by demanding a more critical examination the

\(^{131}\) Ibid.
\(^{132}\) Ibid.
\(^{134}\) Ibid.
\(^{136}\) Conway, “From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki”
Terrorist Chatter

influence process exerted. The simple argument is that linking extremist content to violent radicalization is illogical given that not all consumers of the same content go on to commit violent acts.\textsuperscript{137} Research that supports this claim often view the consumers of online extremist content as ‘dilettantes’ who largely use the Internet as an alternative avenue for violent action in the ‘real world’ (Awan et al 2011).\textsuperscript{138} By considering the Internet as a distinct ‘social space’ the implications of new communicative platforms and Web 2.0 could be evaluated beyond the spread of radical material. The literature reviewed here was divided reflecting both the complexities of questions posed and the limitations of anecdotal evidence.

4. What terrorists talk about

The main aim of this study is to analyze the content of the thousands of posts written by the seven individuals analyzed that were available to the researchers. The content analyzed here is part of a content analysis is a social sciences method that aims at studying, categorizing and interpreting the contents of texts. It is also the most immediate method to achieve what this study sets forth: understanding what terrorists (or, in this case, seven US-based militants) talk about.\(^{139}\)

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Categorize all posts in three main categories (social, religious and political) and three hybrid sub-categories (political/religious, political/social, and religious/social).
2. Observe the nature of the posting activities of each of the seven individuals analyzed. In particular for each individual the study sought to observe posting patterns and issues of interest.
3. Observe what common themes appeared to interest the most the seven individuals and what their opinions on them were.

4.2 The seven individuals analyzed

The individuals analyzed here are all US-based jihadist militants who were active in the mid-2000s to early 2010s. These are their profiles.

Daniel Maldonado

A former Houston resident, Daniel Maldonado is a Muslim convert and a former administrator of various Islamic web forums. In November 2005, Maldonado moved with his family to Egypt to further his studies of the Arabic language and Islam. Maldonado eventually traveled on with his family to conflict-plagued Mogadishu, Somalia “in search of a country where he could practice true Islam” and “because he believed that he [would be] fighting for a legitimate Islamic government.”\(^{140}\) He was captured by Kenyan army soldiers in early 2007 and subsequently flown to the US.\(^ {141}\) He later pled guilty to the charge of receiving training from a foreign terrorist organization. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

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Zachary Chesser

Born in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1989 from upper-middle class parents, Zachary Chesser converted to Islam shortly before graduating from high school.\(^{142}\) He almost immediately embraced a radical interpretation of his new religion and became very active online, regularly contributing to at least six militant forums and managing several blogs, Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts.\(^{143}\) He was arrested in July 2010 after being prevented from leaving the country directed to Somalia.\(^{144}\) He was initially charged with “provid[ing] material support to Al-Shabaab, a designated foreign terrorist organization” but prosecutors later added charges related to his online activities.\(^{145}\) In October 2010, he pled guilty and was later sentenced to 25 years in prison for “communicating threats against the writers of the South Park television show, soliciting violent jihadists to desensitize law enforcement, and attempting to provide material support to Al-Shabaab, a designated foreign terrorist organization.”\(^{146}\)

Samir Khan

Born in Saudi Arabia, Samir Khan grew up in Queens, New York. At a very young age Khan became involved in various Islamist activities. He continued these activities when he moved with his parents to Charlotte, North Carolina, from where he operated several high-profile websites from his parents’ middle class house.\(^{147}\) In 2009, Khan left the United States and reportedly joined al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, where he edited the organization’s official English-language magazine *Inspire*. He was killed by a US drone strike that also targeted Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki in a remote part of Yemen in September 2011.

Tarek Mehanna

Born in Pittsburgh in 1982 to Egyptian parents, Mehanna grew up in an affluent Boston suburb.\(^{148}\) Embracing radical views from a very young age, Mehanna— even before the September 11, 2001 attacks— stated that Osama bin Laden was, “the reason [he] started practicing [his religion]” and that Bin Laden was his “real father.”\(^{149}\) While studying pharmacy at a local college, Mehanna became active in both online and offline jihadist sympathizing scenes. After a failed attempt to join al-Qaeda militants in Yemen, Mehanna returned to Boston and intensified his online activities. He was arrested in October, 2009. In 2012, he was convicted of


\(^{143}\) Senate report

\(^{144}\) DOJ Press Statement on Arrest

\(^{145}\) DOJ Press Statement on Arrest


\(^{149}\) *Ibid*
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conspiracy to provide material support to al-Qaeda, providing material support to terrorists (and conspiracy to do so), conspiracy to commit murder in a foreign country, conspiracy to make false statements to the FBI, and two counts of making false statements. As a result Mehanna was sentenced to 17.5 years in federal prison followed by seven years of supervised release.150

Jesse Curtis Morton

A New York City-born convert to Islam, Jesse Curtis Morton graduated from Columbia University with an MA in International Affairs and a concentration on the Middle East and management and institutional analysis.151 Morton was a key member in a small New York-based extreme Salafist scene; in December 2007 he co-founded the radical website Revolution Muslim along with Joseph Cohen (aka Yousef Al-Khattab).152 Morton was arrested in Morocco in May, 2011 in relation to Chesser’s arrest.153 In February 2012, he pled guilty in federal court to “using his position as a leader of ‘Revolution Muslim Organization’s Internet sites to conspire to solicit murder, make threatening communications and use the Internet to place others in fear.'”154 He was sentenced to 138 months in prison.

Omar Hammami

Omar Shafik Hammami was born in 1984 in Daphne, Alabama, from a Syrian Muslim father and Irish-American mother.155 After being initially raised as a Christian, Hammami chose his paternal faith and by the last years of high school reportedly showed signs of radicalism. After dropping out of college and marrying a Canadian-Somali woman, Hammami moved to Egypt; from there he traveled to Somalia, where he reportedly joined al Shabaab. He became the group’s de facto English language spokesperson, building a large media persona. He was indicted in December 2007 for providing material support to al Shabaab (a terrorist organization) in Somalia. He was reportedly assassinated by fellow al Shabaab militants in Somalia on September 12, 2013 after a falling out with the group’s leadership.

Emerson Begolly

Emerson Winfield Begolly was born in New Kensington, Pennsylvania in 1989.156 An active sympathizer of Nazism in his teens, Begolly converted to Islam while a student at Pennsylvania State. Begolly became a prominent member of various jihadist forums and an

154 Ibid.
156 United States. United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. INDICTMENT OF EMERSON WINFIELD BEGOLLY. 2011, pg. 1
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administrator of the Ansar Al-Mujahideen English Forum.\textsuperscript{157} According to the Department of Justice, Begolly “systematically solicited jihadists to use firearms, explosives and propane tanks against targets such as police stations, post offices, Jewish schools and daycare centers, military facilities, train lines, bridges, cell phone towers and water plants.”\textsuperscript{158} He was arrested in January 2011 and later pled guilty to charges of “soliciting others to engage in acts of terrorism within the United States and to using a firearm during and in relation to an assault on FBI agents.”\textsuperscript{159} He was later sentenced to 102 months in prison.\textsuperscript{160}

4.3 Description of Blog Posts

Over several years, Flashpoint amassed 1,871 posts written by these seven individuals. Some are as short as one single word or a link, while others are essays longer than 10,000 words. The researchers analyzed and divided all posts in three main categories: social, religious and political. These three categories are described below.\textsuperscript{161}

All Internet posts have an inherent social nature, as the poster has an intention of communicating his views to other individuals. Yet a post is considered \textit{social} if interaction is the predominant goal of the post and/or the topic of the post is not religious or political. Posts in this category are those in which the poster, for example, congratulates another poster for the birth of a new baby, provides advice on how to download certain software, or warns fellow posters about the real identity of other poster in the chat room. In some cases, certain religious or political elements might be part of a post that is largely social, and if such elements are strong the post is categorized in one of the hybrid sub-categories (political/social and religious/social). But a post is categorized as purely social if its author’s apparent key motivation is interaction with other individuals not driven by religious or political reasons.

A post is categorized as \textit{religious} if its predominant theme is related to religion. Six of the seven individuals analyzed outlined their thoughts on various Islamic matters, ranging from how to make ablutions, to the authenticity of various hadiths (sayings or anecdotes from the life of the prophet Mohammed). In many cases posts that had a clear religious theme had also social purposes (when the post was part of a conversation/discussion with one or more fellow posters) or political undertones (in the non-rare event, for example, that the individuals discussed concepts like that of jihad, interlinking a religious discussion of the concept with an analysis of current geo-political events). If the social or political element in the post is significant then it is categorized as one of the hybrid sub-categories (religious/political and religious/social). A post is categorized as purely religious if the theme is exclusively or predominantly centered on religious issues.

\textsuperscript{158} United States. Department of Justice. Press Release. August 9, 2011.
\textsuperscript{159} United States. Department of Justice. Press Release. August 9, 2011.
\textsuperscript{161} All posts are published in this study in the exact form they were written online by the individuals analyzed. Many of them are therefore filled with typographical errors, misspellings and grammatical mistakes. The researchers decided for accuracy reasons to leave them in the original form.
Finally a post is labeled political when its main subject is a political matter. In many cases a political post can have social purposes (being part, for example, of an exchange among posters) or religious undertones. If the social or religious element was of significant nature the post is categorized in one of the hybrid sub-categories (political/social and political/religious). A post is categorized as purely religious if the theme is exclusively or predominantly centered or religious issues.

As with most aspects of content analysis, obviously such exercise is inherently arbitrary and the lines between the different categories and subcategories are often times blurred. Despite these inevitable difficulties it is nonetheless possible to draw some conclusions and make some observations.

The first is that, unsurprisingly, each individual seemed to have different interests and priorities when they utilized the Internet. Some, like Morton, did not seem particularly interested in religious matters, focusing instead, almost exclusively, on political issues. 140 of Morton’s 160 posts (87.5%), in fact, have a political nature (99 categorized as purely political; 41 as hybrid, that is political/religious or political/social). Only 18 of his posts (11.2%) have a religious nature (12 pure and 6 hybrid, that is religious/political and religious/social). The ratio is basically reversed in the case of Maldonado. Only 23 of his 251 posts (9.1%) have a political nature (16 pure and 7 hybrid, that is political/religious and political/social). Conversely, 180 (71.7%) have a religious nature (62 pure and 118 hybrid, that is religious/political and religious/social).

Below are the statistics for seven of the eight individuals analyzed:

- 136 posts have a social nature (58 purely social and 78 hybrid): 51.7%
- 63 posts have a religious nature (39 purely religious and 24 hybrid): 23.9%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Chesser (263 total)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social; 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious; 15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political/Religious; 3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social/Political; 23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious; 15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social/Religious; 6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political; 31%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**CANADIAN CENTRE OF INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY STUDIES**
• 149 have a political nature (81 purely political and 68 hybrid): 56.6%

Table 2: Maldonado (251 total)

- Social; 22%
- Political; 6%
- Religious; 25%
- Social/Religious; 45%
- Religious/Political; 2%
- Political/Social; 0%

• 180 have a religious nature (62 pure and 118 hybrid): 71.7%
• 167 have a social nature (54 pure and 113 hybrid): 66.5%
• 23 have a political nature (16 pure and 7 hybrid): 9.1%

Table 3: Khan (204 total)

- Social; 35%
- Religious; 17%
- Political; 27%
- Social/Religious; 7%
- Social/Political; 11%
- Political/Religious; 3%
- Political/Social; 0%

• 79 posts have a political nature (52 pure and 27 hybrid): 38.7%
• 52 posts have a religious nature (33 pure and 19 hybrid): 25.4%
- 113 posts have a social nature (79 pure and 34 hybrid): 55.3%

**Table 4: Morton (160 total)**

- 140 posts have a political nature (99 pure and 41 hybrid): 87.5%
- 18 posts have a religious nature (12 pure and 6 hybrid): 11.2%
- 47 posts have a social nature (4 pure and 43 hybrid): 29.3%

**Table 5: Mehanna (520 total)**

- 97 posts have a political nature (16 pure and 81 hybrid): 18.6%
- 421 posts have a religious nature (286 pure and 76 hybrid): 80.9%
• 142 posts have a social nature (78 pure and 63 hybrid): 27.3%

Table 6: Hammami (127 total)

- Social; 13%
- Social/Political; 26%
- Social/Religious; 14%
- Religious; 24%
- Political; 20%
- Political/Religious; 3%

• 62 posts have a political nature (25 pure and 37 hybrid): 48.8%
• 53 posts have a religious nature (31 pure and 22 hybrid): 41.7%
• 67 posts have a social nature (16 pure and 51 hybrid): 52.7%

The seventh individual analyzed, Emerson Begolly, is somewhat of an outlier in terms of posting habits (at least for what it concerns the posts in possession of the researchers). The researchers analyzed 346 of Begolly’s posts, nine dating back to his teenage years before converting to Islam; 336 of which took place after he had already embraced jihadist ideology. The overwhelming majority of posts from this latter era are posts in which Begolly either posts links to Islamic/jihadi nasheeds (chants) or seeks them. Aside from a handful of posts in which he writes the lyrics to his own nasheeds, which are characterized by extremely radical and gory tones, Begolly’s posting life is virtually devoid of any comment on political or religious issues.

Based on this analysis, the study’s first finding is that, therefore, patterns of interest vary from subject to subject. As Table 7 shows (below), even though they are all active for the most part on the same non-password protected forums, the seven individuals analyzed display very different priorities. Maldonado and Mehanna seem to be interested predominantly in religious matters. Those of course can vary from benign issues regarding their Islamic faith (how to perform ablutions, sharia ruling on inheritance and so on) to matters closely connected to violence (such as the legitimacy of killing civilians during jihad). Others, such as Morton, seem almost uninterested in religion and the overwhelming majority of his posts are of purely political nature. In some cases his reading of political events is framed through Islamic lenses but in many cases there is no reference whatsoever to any religious concept. Finally, individuals like Hammami seem to be equally interested in political and religious matters.
These disparate results underline the fact that quantitative analysis has limits. For example, assessing an individual’s interest based on the number of posts can be highly deceiving. An individual can express the same thought in ten separate shorter posts or in one single, longer post. Either option does not necessarily indicate a stronger or weaker interest in the issue but multiple short posts on the same topic will be interpreted differently compared with one single long post. While quantitative analysis can help visualize some of the results, for more granular investigation, we must also examine each of these individuals as separate case studies.

4.4 A Narrative of Posts by Each Individual

The seven individuals examined have some characteristics in common. All seven, in fact, were young men who had grown up in the United States. All except Khan—who, in any case, moved to the US as a child—were born and raised in the United States. All grew up in the country and became radicalized there. They were all active in online and offline jihadi sympathizing scenes in the mid-to-late 2000s (and most of them, unsurprisingly, knew each other, either in person or online).

But the similarities end there. Each individual’s trajectory is characterized by different dynamics that are unique to the individual. Each, for example, differs in the starting point of his radicalization trajectory. In that regard, for example, four are converts, two were born Muslims and one was somewhat of a hybrid (Hammami, being born from a Muslim father and Christian mother and having practiced aspects of both religions from an early age). Each, of course, had his own sociological and personal background, which ranged from being the son of wealthy Egyptian immigrants to being the son of Caucasian parents with an interest in white supremacist groups to being an African American from the Bronx. And each, of course, had unique personality traits that made him be interested in certain subjects rather than others or...
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interact in certain ways rather than others. It is therefore useful to analyze the content of the online activities of each subject individually.

Daniel Maldonado

Daniel Maldonado’s known posting activities started on April 15th, 2005. His last known post was on September 15th, 2006. The researchers were able to gather 251 of Maldonado’s postings on publicly accessible online platforms.

Maldonado was an administrator for the online forum Islamic Networking and therefore most of his posts were on said forum. Given his position as administrator, many of his posts are meant to trigger a debate among users. That arguably explains the very large number of his posts that have been categorized as social/religious (112 out of 251, corresponding to 44.6%). A common pattern, in fact, of Maldonado’s posting activity is that of starting a thread on a religious subject and try to stimulate a debate among users on it. In the vast majority of cases the subject of these posts is a question about faith, an exhortation to be better Muslims, or a religious-based interpretation of life events.

Some examples might clarify this pattern. On January 7, 2006, for example, Maldonado started a thread by asking: “Is our Islam a big claim that we wear when we go out? Where is our action? Where is our Islam (submission)? It is like I said: This book was revealed for you! You who is reading this at this very moment. If you don't think that it was revealed to you then prove it and we can talk…” On January 25, 2006, he wrote: “Our problem is; we want to choose what parts of the Quran we act on and what parts we just believe in.” On February 3, 2006: “The muslims have become totally pleased with their little deeds to the point that they have lost their major deeds!” On April 19, 2006: “Ask your self, ‘do I really love Allah more than anything else?’” On May 2, 2006: “You expect sharee’ah in the street, yet you don't practice it in your own house!?!?”

These somewhat preachy posts tended to focus on various topics, but Maldonado showed a preference for some. Marriage was one of them. Some of the posts on the subject read like writings from a self-help book with an Islamic twist. On December 30, 2005, for example, Maldonado wrote: “Marriage is like a job: You can have a job and not love it, yet you still work there all your life and benefit from it. Or You can have a job and love it, yet you are only there for a time. Or vice-versa. Neither are guaranteed but one is easier on the soul than the other.” Most posting urge spouses to be kind and respectful to each other and most of Maldonado’s advice comes from his own personal experience, which he is happy to share. He is also a firm defender of polygamy, arguing that the institution is misunderstood by both non-Muslims and Muslims. “I think men as well as woman are to blam” he wrote on January 15, 2006, “for us growing up with this warped understanding that polygamy is bad.”

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162 As stated above, all posts are published in this study in the exact form they were written online by the individuals analyzed. Many of them are therefore ridden with typos, misspellings and grammatical mistakes. The researchers decided for accuracy reasons to leave them in the original form.
Several of Maldonado’s posts focused on two religion-related issues that were common to most of the individuals analyzed. The first is the debate about which religious scholars should be seen as reliable authorities and which should not. The issue is very common among most Muslims, as Sunni Islam is, by nature, a religion without a universally accepted clerical hierarchy. All Muslims, therefore, are free to choose what clerics to follow when looking for opinions on religious matters. Determining who has the credentials to be a legitimate and respected cleric is therefore a very important but extremely subjective and controversial matter.

The issue of respect is felt by most of the seven individuals analyzed, particularly at the beginning of their trajectory. In the case of Maldonado, and of some others, it is quite common for the subject to ask other posters if a certain scholar is worth respect, or if a certain opinion should be followed. This pattern is quite common in the first phases of these individuals online activities. Towards the end of their participation online these individuals seem to have made up their mind as to who they think is a reliable source. But, in the early stages, their doubts are epitomized by Maldonado’s July 22, 2006 post: “How do you really know when someone is knowledgeable???”

The second religion-related topic that triggers several of Maldonado’s posts is the issue of fitna, that is, divisions within the Muslim community. Some twenty posts revolve around his concerns over diatribes among individual Muslims and among various groups or trends within Sunni Islam and how such divisions hamper the future of Islam. In most posts, Maldonado seems to advocate peaceful reconciliation among the various trends and a middle way of eschewing extremes on all sides. In a June 14, 2006 post he argues:

*It seems that the youth have this problem with sticking in the middle. It would seem that you are either way over on that side or way over on the other. Ever the people who are on the 'moderate' path seem to have there own issues when it come to extremes to a particular side. You have the political groups who think that politics are a way to get Islam established. Then on the other side you have Takfeeri groups who thinks that if you so much deel with any legislative situation, weather you are legislating or not(like defending your self in court) ir darul kuffr you are a kaffir. Both have their problems and I am not going to get into which is worse and explain them (I am not fit to do so anyway). Why is it that we can not go in the middle and not work with a problem and yei not deny that it exists as well?...... I find that if I (and I say this only in theory, am too salafi for the sufis and too sufi for the salafis and too takfeeri for the murji‘ah and too murji’ for the takfeeris and too academic for the jihadis anc too jihadi for the academics then I am doing pretty well."

Many of Maldonado’s posts are related to various religious matters that range from the debate over wearing the hijab (veil) to the issue of tawhid (oneness of God), from arguing why Islam is superior to Judaism and Christianity to asking an Islamic ruling over the martial art tai-chi. Unlike other posters (i.e, his close friend, Mehanna), Maldonado does not refer often to religious scholars. In the vast majority of cases he asks and gives advice about Islamic matters.
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without referring to any source, be it in the Quran or in some fatwa. In many cases, particularly when he addresses issues of morality or family life, his approach is somewhat reminiscent of pseudo-psychological, self-help books rather than Islamic scriptures.

Many of his posts straddle the line between religious and social. Some are purely social in nature. In several posts he expresses and explains his passion for books and asks other posters to share their views on the subject. Many posts discuss life in Egypt, from its charms to its dysfunctional aspects. Many social posts relate to the Maldonado’s activities as administrator of the Islamic Networking forum and in them the New Hampshire native outlines the forum’s rules, advertises some of its new features or deals with administrative issues.

Maldonado’s interest in political matters appears to surface only a few months after the beginning of his posting career on Islamic Networking. Until January 2006, in fact, all of Maldonado’s posts were of social or religious nature. The latter betrayed a deep conservatism, but there were no hints of any radicalism, strong political views or attraction to violence. On January 14, 2006 Maldonado posted in a thread about women’s obligation of wearing the hijab “When will they realize that the woman in there country wear it out of choice?!?! Not out of force(like some Taliban brother is gonna beat them with a stick or something). Equal rights?!?! Thats a laugh...Then give her the right to wear it or not, cause men seem to have the right to wear a ski mask in the Netherlands when it gets cold. Men in the US can take off there shirts when it gets hot. So where is the equal rights there!?!?! EXACTLY...Stupid Kuffar.”

The post is not particularly incendiary but the usage of expressions such as “Taliban brother” and “stupid kuffar” display a certain worldview. Similarly, on February 2, 2006 Maldonado seem to relish the fact that, according to him “Many muslims are now understanding Al Wala' Wal Bara'!” Al Wala' Wal Bara' is a concept, espoused by most Salafists, that argues that Muslims should show friendship only to Muslims while displaying only enmity towards non-Muslims. In the same post Maldonado rhetorically asks: “Why would the muslim youth want to act western when the west hates everything about them?”

Strictly political matters did not seem to attract Maldonado and, in fact, only 23 of his posts have a political nature (9.1% of the total). In them he clearly displays an Islamist outlook. He is, for example, happy to see that “youth came out after Danish cartoons, the more they attack us the stronger we get. This was a great sign to me that we are regaining our Ummah through the pushing of the kuffar.” He sees many of the West’s actions as unfair and part of a conspiracy to attack or undermine Islam and Muslims.

But Maldonado displays virtually no interest in jihadist issues. Unlike all the other six individuals analyzed, he never posts jihadist videos, endorsements of jihadist figures or glorifications of actions carried out by jihadist groups. In the rare cases in which Maldonado comments on politics, he takes a strong Islamist views. But in none of his posts did he ever openly express any support for violence or an interest in jihadist activities.

To the contrary, on August 22, 2006, he even openly rejected the views of Sheik Faisal, a well-known Jamaican-born cleric with strong jihadist sympathies whom several of the other individuals analyzed (including Maldonado’s close friend Mehanna) held in high esteem. “I
remember hearing a tape of his wherein he made Takfeer of all the ‘Saudi Salafis’ as he called them,” wrote Maldonado. “I heard that he changed, does anyone know if this is true? Anyway I truely hope that he has changed from his Takfeeri tendencies.”

The only exceptions to the apolitical nature of Maldonado’s posting career are three posts from early June 2006. All, interestingly, are related to developments in Somalia. On June 5 he posts an article about the Islamic Courts Union’s takeover of Mogadishu, highlighting the sentence: “[t]heir stated goal is to restore a system of Sharia law in the city.” The following day he posted a BBC article profiling the group. Finally, on June 7, he wrote a post in his typical personal style but, for the first time, introduced a political element in it: “I booted up the ‘laptop and al humdulillah the Internet is working! Somalia may have an Islamic state inshaAllah! My kids are asleep and the birds are singing thru the banging of the hammers that I hear from the new apt they are bulding next door.”

Other than these references to Somalia (which, it is noteworthy, predate his journey to the country by five months), there were no indications in Maldonado’s public posting behavior of any interest in joining al Shabaab to fight. His known posting activity is relatively short spanning a year and a half. But throughout this time, unlike for some other individuals analyzed, there is no visible indication of any progression towards more radical views, of further politicization or of increasing desire to use violence.

Zachary Chesser

Zachary Chesser’s known posting activities started on April 24th, 2007. His last known post was on July 2nd, 2010. The researchers were able to gather 263 of his postings on publicly accessible online platforms. Chesser was active on several online platforms and posted under a variety of pseudonyms.

What characterizes Chesser’s publicly available online activities is his strong politica focus (57% of all posts) and the strong radicalism that is detectable from the beginning; his first known post is quite telling. On April 24, 2007, he posted an open letter on Islamic Awakening “Our Open Challenge to Kamal Nawash, President of ‘The Free Muslim Coalition’.” “We (www.moderatesrefuted.wordpress.com),” wrote Chesser,

...openly challenge you to a debate regarding the Islamic stance on [d]emocracy. The debate may be held over e-mail, messenger, or paltalk, anc the debate will be posted on our site (regardless what outcome is). We also challenge you to refute our upcoming articles Refuting the misconception ‘...You cannot target civilians...’ and Answering ‘...but you cannot Judge’ We believe democracy is that it is kufr and shirk, and we base it on the follow (all of which we can elaborate).

Chesser only occasionally displays some interest in acquiring information about his new religion. In most cases, when he does display an interest in acquiring new information, he asks questions strictly related to jihadist matters, such as the legitimacy of killing civilians. Most of his questions, in reality, seem aimed at making a point rather than obtaining an answer. On
March 28, 2008, for example, he asked another poster on a thread on Islamic Awakening about attacks that had taken place in Algeria: “dear akh, let me ask you a question; let us assume that on the day that these attacks occurred, it resulted in the killing of 30 muslims, and two lawmakers. Please, tell me, is this legitimate?”

Yet, it is only in April 2009 that Chesser begins writing openly jihadist posts. Most of these posts are not made on Islamic Awakening but, rather, on his personal blog (the Mujahidblog) or on the more radical forum al Faloja. Arguably his first openly jihadist post is dated April 5, 2009, when he posted on al Faloja an essay titled “The Apostate Sharif Succeeds the Apostate Yusuf as Head of the Apostasy Government” and describing the current situation in Somalia through lenses that were identical to al Shabaab’s.

It can be said that, by December 2009, the vast majority of Chesser’s posts, particularly on the Mujahidblog, were of open jihadist nature. On December 30, for example, he wrote the post “Nidal Hassan Did The Right Thing,” calling the US Army psychiatrist who carried out the 2009 deadly Fort Hood shootings “a hero.” The next day he penned the analysis “What Can The Western Governments Do To Protect Their Civilians.” By 2010 all his (few) religious posts were strictly jihadist and either start conversations such as “When Can A Muslim Raid The Kuffar?” (January 24, 2010), the “The Difference Between Offensive Jihad And Defensive Jihad” (January 21, 2010) or, if they were strictly religious, such as Quran recitations, they were done by the “brothers and sisters of Islamic Emirate” (i.e. the Taliban) (April 7, 2010).

In several posts Chesser seemed to display strong passions through very heated tones. On August 5, 2009, for example, he rhetorically asks on Islamic Awakening:

How often is it that there is an injustice committed and it is the Muslims who hide the haqq? How often is it that the kuffar are more supportive of our mujahideen than our own brothers? How often do we complain about the mujahideen who are protecting their sisters and mothers from being raped by the kuffar? From being tortured by the kuffar? From being killed by the kuffar?

But his tone is significantly more heated nine months later on May 3, 2010 when, on the forum al Qimmah, he writes:

Allah flatten the skylines of the Crusaders. For every father and mother they have taken from our children take one from them. Let American refugee camps be established in Mexico and Cuba. Break the backs of those whose bombs fall upon the oppressed. Let their final breaths be from the flames of this dunya and let every breath after that be from the flames of Jahannam.

In other circumstances Chesser is considerably more level-headed. Indeed one of his main concerns is in crafting sets of coherent tactics and strategies for individual jihadists and for the whole global jihadist movement. Several of his posts provide guidance to fellow American jihadists active online. For example, in his February 5, 2010 post entitled “A call to action” he argues that “one of the biggest problems facing the American Muslims is the fear of speaking the Haqq. So many Muslims are afraid of saying what is true, what is right, and what is most in
need of being said.” “The first thing you should know,” he continues “is that when the FBI knock on your door, it probably does not mean anything except that they want to intimidate you. Unless they are holding guns and handcuffs, then you should probably just tell them, “Worship none but Allah and testify that Muhammad, salaa Allahu ‘alayhi wa salam, is His slave and messenger, or you will burn in Hell for forever.” Then you should shut the door.” Similarly, or February 10th he posts the following guidelines: “Do Not Be Afraid To Talk About Jihad: about how to stand up to FBI.”

In other posts Chesser outlines a comprehensive strategy for the jihadist movement, which is based on his studies of the current situation and of Western counter-terrorism debates. Using a dry, somewhat pseudo-scientific and public-policy-influenced language, Chesser posts long essays that identify sets of tactics that, in his view, would lead the jihadist movement to success. His first post of the kind is entitled “How To Propagate & Call To Jihad” (February 16, 2010) and builds on his previous posts about informing fellow online jihadis about what is permissible and what is illegal in terms of online postings. “The reader needs to know,” wrote Chesser “is that you cannot be arrested anywhere except in the Muslim countries themselves for discussing and propagating jihad (so long as you do not directly threaten an individual or group of individuals).”

On March 6 Chesser posts a long essay entitled ”Open Source Jihad.” “A mujahid at the time of 9/11 was typically someone who was extraordinarily motivated and well versed in Islamic studies,” writes Chesser. “Today the support for jihad is so great, al-hamdu lillah, that someone who simply wants to please Allah, but has done little studying can be easily motivated to go and fight.” The post proceeded by listing various ways to do so.

Other posts provide fellow Internet activists with linguistic tools to frame their discourse. In a May 22, 2010 post “Counter Counter Terrorism #1” Chesser argued: “Anytime the kuffar have something which is perceived as a success it must be hidden. Successes of the mujahideen must be emphasized.” Three days later he argues that certain pieces of jihadist propaganda should be spread as widely as possible. He argued that “the lecture ‘Battle of the Hearts and Minds’ by Anwar al-Awlaki is probably the single greatest ‘radicalizing’ piece in the English language maa sha’a Allah.”

Yet, despite his professed knowledge of what to post in order to avoid arrest, Chesser ends up being arrested; partially, this is because of his April 15, 2010 post on the website Revolutionmuslim.com. Written in response to the airing of an episode of the cartoon show South Park that shows the prophet Mohammed, Chesser writes:

We have to warn [South Park creators] Matt [Stone] and Trey [Parker] that what they are doing is stupid and they will probably wind up like Theo Van Gogh for airing this show. This is not a threat, but a warning of the reality of what will likely happen to them. Maybe they have not listened to this lecture before. You can contact them, or pay Comedy Central or their own company a visit at these addresses:.....
Part of Chesser pseudo-academic approach to jihadism is his socio-economic analysis of America’s decay. Interestingly, the long essays in which Chesser outlines his critique of American social and political life, rather than adopting an Islamist perspective, seem to borrow many terms and frames from the fringes of the American conservative and libertarian movements. Chesser, for example, argues that America’s constitutionally sanctioned system of checks and balances and system of individual rights has been encroached by an overpowering executive. In a November 18, 2009 long essay posted on Islamic Awakening he argues:

"I have come to the conclusion that ‘American Exceptionalism’ is dead. Furthermore, you are about to see an internal collapse of democracy in sha’Allaahu ta’ala. The United States of America’s system of checks and balances is about to be shot execution style by a new healthcare bill. Some Republicans see the reality of the situation, but most do not (most view it as socialism/communism vs. capitalism). If one was to analyze America honestly, they would see that the legislative branch has almost completely shifted to organizations known as "agencies." Examples of some agencies are the IRS, FDA, FBI, DHS, FAA, and DOT. All of these organizations have usurped duties of Congress and the executive. Some of them pass legally binding legislation while others ignore it altogether (when it contradicts their goals). Yet none of them are influenced in any significant way by election: (no agency head is elected). Most agencies take a judicial role as well interpreting laws as they please. In all reality even the United States military is an agency, but it is still more or less headed by the United States President. Right now there is a bill pending in Congress that will more or less divert 10% of (a year's worth) of America's GDP into a (new) healthcare agency. Taxes are going to increase and representation will decrease in sha’Allah. Thus, you have the birth of the American oligarchy."

On April 20, 2010, Chesser posts a long analysis of the Value Added Tax, arguing that its very existence was one of the indicators that America was moving towards socialism. “Socialism,” argues Chesser,

"... by its nature, creates a culture of dependency which is nearly impossible to defeat unless some cataclysmic event occurs. There is a difference between communism and a welfare state in that the people can be forced to work in a communist system. In a welfare state you slowly turn large portions of formerly productive people into parasites who live off of the government and the wealthy. In addition to destroying America’s productive industrial attitude, this tax will likely destroy the economy as well.

Chesser’s economic analysis, while simplistic, borrows heavily from libertarian and right-wing views. This perspective seems to be diametrically opposed to that adopted by Jesse Curtis Morton who, as it will be seen later, adopts a very left wing analysis in his critique of American politics and economics. Whereas Chesser bemoans socialism, Morton argues against capitalism."
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Yet both men, who were good friends and co-editors of the radical website RevolutionMuslims, despite leveraging harsh criticisms of America inspired by opposite schools of economic thinking, reach the same conclusion. They both, in fact, argue that an Islamic economic system will correct the inefficiencies and inequities of the current system.

Yet, neither seems to provide extensive information about what this Islamic system should look like. Both provide many arguments to their criticism of capitalism using as evidence predominantly, if not exclusively, Western sources and very little Islamic ones. This criticism is well documented and laid out. The second part of their argument, on the other hand, is significantly less extensive. Both Chesser and Morton argue that an Islamic system will be better than capitalism but fail to indicate the main features of this system and why it will be better. Chesser, for example, indicates that the Islamic economic system he wishes to see implemented “relies on free trade principals, low taxes, and a ban on gambling and usury.” No further specifications are given. Moreover, while their arguments against capitalism are full of scholarly sources, their writings advocating an Islamic system are virtually devoid of sources.

Chesser’s posting trajectory displays a clear move towards radicalization. Already in his first posts he clearly and openly adopted a jihadist mindset and worldview. But his tone became visibly more militant as time progressed. The many questions he asked about religion were quickly supplanted by dogmatic statements and very aggressive attacks against anybody who challenged his views. The increasingly assertive and confrontational nature of his posts is indeed one of the main characteristics of Chesser’s online activity. If during the first months he would often call himself out of disputes and admit his ignorance over issues, by July 2009 he seemed to cherish every possibility to attack those that disagreed with him. “May Allah cut off your tongue and your fingertips if you slander the mujahidiin again,” wrote Chesser to a poster that suggested al-Qaeda had killed civilians in an attack in Iraq in a May 2010 thread on Islamic Awakening.

His tone also differs depending on the site upon which he posts. On Islamic Awakening, a relatively mainstream forum frequented also by many Muslims who did not embrace jihadism, the tone of many of Chesser’s posts can be described as aggressive and condescending. On the other hand his tone is significantly more subdued in openly jihad forums like al Qimmah, where Chesser address some fellow posters with absolute respect and, in many cases, in a way that gives the impression he was trying to ingratiate them.

Samir Khan

Samir Khan’s known posting activities occurred between November 1st, 2004 and May 17th, 2009. The researchers were able to gather 204 of Khan’s postings on publicly accessible online platforms.

From the beginning, Khan’s posts to display a strong Islamist outlook. In his early days of online participation he expresses admiration for Abul Ala Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, two of the most prominent figures of 20th century’s Islamism. On January 12th, 2005, he writes about the tsunami that had hit the Indian Ocean arguing that “Without a doubt, was the Tsunami a form
of Allah (The Most High) communicating to the world, His unmatched power.” Several of his posts in this phase focused on religion and were characterized by a deep conservatism.

Khan is also very interested in sociology. Many of his posts during the fall of 2005 are short essays about Western and Islamic sociology which he says are taken from the notes of the “Introduction to Sociology” class he was taking in college. Many of them include a critique of American society from various perspectives, including (but not exclusively from) an Islamic point of view. Many of his posts, for example, are against the use of alcohol and while some quote the religious reasons for his opposition to drinking, others (October 17, 2005) report data indicating that “alcohol is a leading cause of traffic accidents and family disintegration in the United States.”

By the fall of 2006 Khan’s writing clearly shows a jihadist mindset. In an October 10th, 2006, post about a controversy in Great Britain over the niqab (integral veil), Khan writes:

*Shaytan today can only be defeated by the sword; because Shaytan is not going to give in peacefully. Our Brothers and Sisters who are residing in the West must make Hijrah to the lands of jihad [illegal]. Hijrah and Jihad is fard al 'ayn on all of us, especially those who are living in the enemies territory. The Ghuraba don't fear the blame of the blamers nor do they bow down their head to any superpower except Allah, and they wage Jihad for the sake of Allah so that the globe is engulfed in Tawheed.*

Following this post, the vast majority of his posts are somewhat jihad-related. Some of them discuss the issue of jihad in general or express and exhortation to contribute to it. On March 1st, 2007, for example, Khan writes to a fellow poster:

*I find it very funny though that you’d rather sit back from Jihad and just give wealth when it’s nearly impossible to give wealth (from the West) to the Mujahideen today than marching forth when you are able to.* On April 8, 2008, he writes: “the greater the enemy numbers, the greater was his hope in Allāh for martyrdom.

Several posts deal with insults to the prophet Mohammed. In March 2008 he actively participates in a debate on Islamic Awakening about the subject and attacks with remarkable aggressiveness those posters that argue that those who attack the prophet Mohammed should not necessarily be killed. In most cases he seeks to undermine his opponents’ arguments by pointing out their lack of sourcing. “Please provide a quote from the Salaf where he gives a Shari’ ruling based on this hadeeth stating that we are allowed to forgive the Kaafir who insults the Messenger(s),” Khan tells one fellow poster. “Then you clearly don’t have any knowledge of the science of hadeeth,” he tells another who made an argument Khan did not agree with.

Khan’s confrontational nature was visible in many posts. In some he directly threatens fellow posters. On February 8, 2007 he wrote: “I see that you’re the kind of disbeliever that likes to talk a lot. If I were to come up to your face and shove you around a little bit, you would run away like a school girl. So keep talking. Our Religion tells us to act on our words.” Scholars and
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experts have long debated whether personality traits are a significant factor in explaining why certain individuals radicalize. It is obviously very difficult to make a complete judgment based on this limited evidence, but it seems apparent that Khan possessed a very strong and confrontational personality, which was quite evident in his posting life. It is debatable whether or not these traits constitute an indicator of potential radicalization. It must be said, in that regard, that other individuals examined in this study do not. Maldonado’s posts, for example were consistently characterized by the kindness and seemingly mellow nature he displayed in them. Yet, both Maldonado and Khan at the end made the identical decision of joining an al-Qaeda-affiliate In Somalia and Yemen respectively).

Khan’s fascination with anything jihad-related is visible throughout his postings from 2007 and 2008. He frequently starts threads seeking to trigger debates on issue related to jihad, such as his February 2007 thread “What takes Jihad to the status of fard al 'ayn” which he intersperses with various rulings sanctioning jihad as an individual obligation. By the end of March 2008 Khan’s views seem to further radicalize. On March 27, 2008 he wrote a post on the website Muslimpad that clearly read as a direct threat to Dutch politician and Islam-critic Geert Wilders. The post was written as controversy arose around the release of Wilders’ movie Fitna, which sought to directly link Islam to violence and terrorism. “Congratulations Geert,” wrote Khan, “Your ‘fitna’ movie has created more Mujaahideen amongst the Muslims. We are not interested in condemning this or condemning that, but we are interested in letting you know that Islaam will dominate all of Europe, including your hometown, and the Jizyah will be established upon your Country, leaving all of the disbelievers in humiliation until they come to Islaam. Let us remind that there are thousands of Muslims living near you; so always expect the unexpected.”

The following day he began posting, for the first time, videos and news originating directly from jihadist group: a link from Ansār al-Islām’s “Attack on HQ of the US & Murtadeer in al-Mosul” and Islamic State of ‘Irāq’s “Largest Martyrdom Operation ever on tape!” From that day on Khan posted many such links, in most cases accompanied by short sentences expressing his admiration for the group carrying out the attack. The videos come from jihadist groups from various regions, with a slight predominance of groups operating in Iraq.

His postings on Islamic Awakening become increasingly aggressive in both subject and tone. As in the case of Chesser, though, Khan’s tone is substantially tamer when he posts on a Qimmah, a prominent jihadist forum focusing mostly on Somalia. On al Qimmah Khan not only addresses all his interlocutors with utmost respect and reverence, but he actually offers his services to al Shabaab. On May 19, 2008, in fact, Khan wrote a long post:

*I would like to address a topic That brother Jundallah proposed which was to gather some questions and to pass them on to the leaders of alshabaab mujahideen my position is that brother Jundallah has put forward one the of the most important ways of allowing us to interact with the mujahideen in Somalia and getting answers to questions we otherwise wouldn’t know if we are not in the land of jihad.It will dispel some of the myths and lies that some people spread. Personally i also believe that the mujahideen media in Somalia needs a
massive boost. I would also take like to take this opportunity to thank the brothers/sisters who have made a massive impact in this crucial field. Nevertheless Compared to other mujahideen media such as Iraq we are behind. Thus I would just like to add brother Jundallah my opinion that we also improve the mujahideen media in biladil somal.

I would put forward that the purpose of this short term would be to boost the capacity of the current one in broadcasting to the Umma: Asalaamu Alyakum brother Abu Zarqawi aki thanks for your support and translating my words i will keep you informed about this at all times. Your right ir. saying this will only be worth anything if it is implemented thats why i am bringing to you this proposal my brothers and sisters as to how we can go about this matter. I have come up with what i believe will be the cost of setting this up.

Here is a list of equipment needed to open up and expand the mujahideen media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laptop (Toshiba satellite L350d)</td>
<td>$800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Camcorder (SONY HVR-A1E)</td>
<td>$3000.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera shoulder strap</td>
<td>$140.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camera carry case</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tripod</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lights</td>
<td>$300.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microphone</td>
<td>$50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Editing Software</td>
<td>$800.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Approx.</td>
<td>$5440.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brothers and sister please give me your opinions on this list and what extra equipment you think might be needed or if you can get any of this equipment for cheaper. I would also like you to share any ideas on how we could go about gathering funds for this project once we agree on equipment needed our budget and where to buy them Inshallah. Personally I belive once we agree on a budget and have all the participants we should raise the funds individually and send it to the brothers who run the forum. There are many things we need to put in place and all are effort is needed in sourcing these products, gathering funds and delivering it to appropriate destination wa jizakamalauhu kahyran walaku wa salam wa rahmatulahi wa barakatuhu.

In this post, Khan, in substance, offers his services to establish a media operation for a Shabaab. Nothing comes out of this attempt; but just a few months later Khan is recruited to start a similar venture for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula out of Yemen. This underscores the enormous potential for intelligence gathering that even public forums offer, as clues of Khan’s desire to take the step from independent online activist operating out of his parents’ basement.
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to full-fledged militant in charge of the media department of a major jihadist organization operating abroad were publicly available.

Khan is quite open in discussing also other personal issues. In October 2007 the New York Times publishes a long article, entitled “An Internet Jihad Aims at U.S. Viewers,” profiling Khan and his online activities. This article triggers a flurry of comments among the users of Islamic Awakening, one of the forums on which Khan was particularly active. Some posters went so far as to doubt Khan’s true role, arguing that the reason he had not been arrested was that he was actually working with the US government to lure and entrap fellow Muslims on his website.

These charges led Khan to defend himself on the forum. On March 7, 2008, Khan gave a long explanation as to why he had not been arrested and explaining why that had nothing to do with him working with the FBI:

I may not be arrested (simply because I haven’t gone against the law yet and I have spoken in detail with my lawyer about this) but I can tell you for sure that am under their radar, carefully watched. If you saw the life I now live, you migh hate to be in such a difficult position. So holding ones tongue will be wiser for him. Finally, a brother who I personally know that is constantly being followed by the FBI (and this brother is trustworthy and I have known him for years) gave me advice to tell others just in case he gets locked away. And this advice i: concerning the tactics of the FBI. Just to let you know, this brother has been questioned by the FBI for countless hours and days and he can be locked up a any moment. Even though he's not locked up yet, I know that he’s not a spy (and have my reasons and of course, Allah knows best). So his advice is: don’t let the idea of "so-and-so is perhaps a spy because he is not arrested yet" because verily, this is one of the goals that the FBI wishes to achieve.

More criticism of him surfaced after he appeared on American media. Posters’ accusations ranged from aiding the enemy to violating an alleged Islamic violation on appearing on camera. Khan responded to the criticism by pointing out that many other jihadists had done so and that there is no sharia ruling violating to so:

What’s fishy about appearing on an Internet Recording (which was then televised on many television channels) telling the Kuffaar that they are the people of Hellfire, that the Mujaahideen are winning the war, and that the Muslims could careless about the state of the [Kaafir] soldiers’ families? There have been many before me who were on national television channels (and not Internet recordings for a newspaper). Look at Abu Izzadeen (fakkAllahu Asrah); he was interviewed on CNN by Christiane Amanpour. Look at Abu ’Abdullah (fakkAllahu Asrah); he too was interviewed on CNN. Look at Yousef al-Khattab (hafidhullaah), who is on this forum; he was interviewed by quite a few. Look at Anjem Choudhury (hafidhullaah); we see him defending the Deen on live discussions/debates. Look at even the Mujaahid in Lebanon, Abu ‘Umar (hafidhullaah); he was interviewed
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"a few times and made headlines here in America. The list goes on. So please consider your words. And as you know well, there is no ruling in the Shari'ah saying that if you appear in an interview by the Kaafir media, you are deemed suspicious.

Omar Hammami

Omar Hammami’s known posting activity is quite short, starting on June 9th, 2006 and ending on October 31st, 2006. Flashpoint have 127 of Hammami’s postings on publicly accessible online platforms from that time period. From the evidence collected Hammami seems to undergo a process of radicalization, the nature and tone of his posts becoming more politicized and supportive of jihadist causes over time. Yet, there are few indications of a committed support for these causes or a vivid desire to join any jihadist group.

As most of the other individuals analyzed, Hammami’s known posting trajectory begins with posts about religion. As is common practice, Hammami often asks fellow posters for opinions and reference on Islamic matters that range from whether music is forbidden in Islam (August 19, 2006) to more militant subject such as the religious ruling on beheading (June 15, 2006) or the interpretation of chapter 9, verse 5 of the Quran, the so-called Verse of the Sword, which relates to the concept of jihad (August 14, 2006). As most others he is also particularly concerned with determining who is a reliable source of religious rulings and who is not. And on several occasions Hammami rejects arguments made by fellow posters whose religious foundations are, in his opinion, weak. On June 11, 2006, for example, he writes: “Jihaaad is an issue for ahl al‐hill wal ‘aqd [otherwise known as the rabbani scholars]. Its not for just anyone to talk about. This is especially the case when the person has not even read Bukhaari or the umahaat of Islaam.”

Many of Hammami’s posts have a lighter touch though. Some have the purely religious and an inspirational tone that is typical of many of Maldonado’s posts. On August 7, 2006, for example, Hammami started a thread entitled “Make Something of Yourself,” which started by arguing: “You can never fully thank Allaah for even the air in your lungs. Hammami also composed fifteen poems of questionable poetic value, most (but not all) of which had a strong Islamic theme.”

As other individuals analyzed, Hammami devotes some of his attention to the issue of unity among Muslims, bemoaning the infighting between different groups and sub-sects of Sunni Islam. On August 17, 2006, for example, Hammami wrote:

_Muslims in general need to get up and actually practice their deen. I don’t care if you are a Deobundi or a Sufi or a Salafi or a Madkhali. This is a time for getting off your rump and acting on what you believe. This nation will be 73 sects and it will be victorious as 73 sects but it will never be victorious with one single sect of lazy bums across the board._

Hammami’s social interactions display neither the extreme kindness of Maldonado nor Khan’s or Chesser’s consistently aggressive tones. He exchanges anecdotes and jokes about life
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in Egypt, recommends books and sends greetings. He rarely engages in spats, but when he does his words are extremely harsh. On September 20, 2006, in fact, Hammami rebuffed another poster on Islamic Networking, saying that “an unrestricted statement like that is kufr. its not just small kufr. and it doesn’t come from the mouth of someone who believes in Allaah and the Last Day.” Such a statement can be seen as takfir, a declaration of apostasy punishable with death, against the fellow poster.

Hammami did not display a particular interest in political issues. He posted various stories about arrests against jihadist networks in the West. He was particularly interested in the so-called Toronto 18 case, possibly because around the time of their arrest Hammami was living in Canada. Some posts are in support of Western jihadists who have been arrested, like Babar Ahmed (July 7, 2006). Other posts link to articles about Western counterterrorism measures and have short commentaries written by him. On June 28, 2006, for example, he posted a link to American broadcasting network ABC’s analysis of al-Qaeda’s strategy with his own short remark: “The Kaafirs Do Their Homework.”

Hammami’s jihadist sympathies were obvious but, unlike other individuals analyzed, he did not post jihadist videos, open endorsements of jihadist groups, or sweeping statements openly advocating violence. In a few cases he defended the actions of some jihadist groups, including al Shabaab, the group he later joined. But, in his defense, he still condemns certain abuses of violence and employs a very careful language. On July 7, 2006, for example, he intervenes in a conversation on Islamic Networking about al Shabaab’s bombing that killed several civilians, observing: “I do agree its wrong to push things with brute force all the times but I think we have to really refrain from judging the situation with little knowledge of the details.”

Jesse Curtis Morton

Morton’s known posting activities occurred between December 7, 2008 and May 24, 2011 during which time he made 160 posts on publicly accessible online platforms. The main characteristic of Morton’s posting activities is the predominantly political nature of his posts (87.5%). In the vast majority of his posts Morton seems determined to make a case against America and its capitalist economic system. The evidence used to make this case is taken largely from Western sources ranging from Western media reports to sophisticated economic treatises.

Morton was a highly educated individual who graduated from Columbia University with a Masters in International Affairs and a concentration on the Middle East and management and institutional analysis. He also pursued a doctorate in shariah-compliant economics from Trisakti University in Indonesia. This background is visible in his posts. Morton, in fact, often indulges in very intellectual and erudite critiques of America’s social structure and, in particular, capitalist economic system. Some of these critiques are rooted in Islamic concepts. And indeed, the solution advocated by Morton to correct the inequities caused by capitalism is the

164 Ibid.
introduction of a sharia-based financial system. But the Islamic aspect is somewhat secondary in Morton’s writings, as the New Yorker rarely cites Islamic scholars or texts. Rather, his sources are mostly left wing publications like Counterpunch, scholarly lectures and mainstream Western media outlets. And, somewhat consequently, Morton’s critique is not steeped in an Islamic narrative. Rather, it uses frames and concepts that are typical of a militant left wing narrative.

Morton’s main theme is that America has an unjust social and economic system that is rapidly collapsing. The topic was quite popular in left wing milieus around the time Morton was posting (2008-11), as those years were characterized by the height of the financial crisis Morton’s posts reflect these left-wing (rather than Islamic/Islamist) positions. Morton, in fact, writes or re-publishes articles by the telling titles including: “Is America ‘Yearning For Fascism?’” (March 29, 2010); “Relax, the Empire’s in Safe Hands” (from Counterpunch, March 14, 2010), and “Greece’s crisis could presage America’s” (March 11, 2010).

Some of Morton’s posts are vitriolic critiques of American political elites, such as his March 11, 2010 post about US President Barack Obama: “What a Failure: Change only a Sucker would Believe in.” Others are somber economic analyses, like his August 30, 2010 posts in which he argues that:

[T]he problem with calling contemporary policy Keynesian, is that Keynesian stimulus is meant to utilize what has been saved from better times in an effort to uplift an economy during times of recession. The policy of the printing press is best learned when analyzing Germany’s Hyper-inflationary policy of the Wiemar Republic. However, the Quantitative Easing of the Federal Reserve is producing a deflationary environment in America and creating conditions similar to Japan’s lost decade.

Morton’s interest in combining left-wing and Islamic economic analysis and critiques of capitalism are seen not just in dozens of posts but also in an “Open Letter to the Left Establishment” he wrote on December 18, 2010. In the letter Morton tries to build a bridge and establish an alliance between the two political movements, building on common interests Morton hopes that the effort will represent an “important step toward creating a real, conscious movement that can end American Empire.”

Another ambitious goal that Morton set out for himself was that of developing a methodology of policy analysis to advance the Islamist cause. In several posts and documents, some of them almost 30 pages long, Morton attempts to pen a strategic vision for the Islamist movement, arguing that all other Islamist organizations have failed to be systematic in their vision—a fact that is highly debatable. The main document condensing Morton’s vision was published on the website Islampolicy.com on November 15, 2010 and entitled On Crafting Islamic Policy: The Methodology of Social Science.

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165 It is arguable that several Islamist groups, such as, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood, have crafted extensive policy documents aimed at strategically analyze their aims, possibilities and challenges.
The document outlines Morton’s critical view of the established, Western-dominated world order. “The secular order that has predominated affairs has stagnated and its alleged principles of enlightenment continue to fail in reaching the majority of humanity,” writes Morton. “An oligarchic and powerful establishment clings to control working diligently to preserve the dominant order” and “it is in the spread of Western ideas and concepts throughout the world that we realize a new expression of hegemony.”

Morton continues by making the case “the religion of Islam represents perhaps the most comprehensive of all radical alternatives” to the established order. He then proceeds to argue that Islam is making inroads worldwide but that Islamic movements have failed to develop a strategic plan of action. “Policy analysis is a key component of the world today. Yet, there is virtually no example of policy being crafted through an Islamic lens. Where political groups do exist that call for an increased role for Islam in social, economic and public affairs there is a very limited array of detailed, specific information. In fact, there are more examples of blatant adulteration of the true intention of Islam when it comes to its worldly implementation. Many groups have documented the principles upon which Islamic policy is crafted, but for diverse reasons little has been said with regard to specifics.” Morton tries to compensate for this alleged dearth, yet his documents provide only very broad and vague suggestions on how to develop such strategic thinking.

Morton displays an Islamist outlook (albeit, as discussed, heavily influenced by left-wing politics) but for a long time seemed to be interested neither in religious nor in jihadist matters. As for the former, Morton, unlike most of the other individuals analyzed, never asks for advice, opinions or sources on religious matters. He never posts about spiritual life. He does occasionally quote some Islamic figures such as Ibn Taymiyyah or Abdullah Azzam but they tend to be quoted on purely political matters and not on religious ones. Morton is, in substance, interested almost exclusively in politics.

During the first two years of his known posting career Morton also did not seem to express jihadist sympathies. He obviously espoused Islamist ideology and sympathies with some jihadist groups. On April 14, 2010, for example, he openly defended al Shabaab, arguing: “The Hypocrites say Shabaab is bringing harm to Somali civilians. Looks like here is another case of the Shabaab engaging in legitimate war on what they consider an occupying fortress and in retaliation the government troops, "indiscriminately" fire back. We pray that the Shabaab get to capture the apostate Sharif Ahmed some day and give him justice under the shariah, Amin!”

Yet, until December 2010, Morton does not post any open endorsement of violence or openly jihadist material. It was in a series of posts on Christmas Day in 2010 that endorses violence, included a statement from al Shabaab, an article supporting Boko Haram, a letter from Gamaa Islamiyah’s leader Abu Bakar Ba’asyir calling Indonesian counter-terrorism unit Densus 88 “Enemies Of Allah,” and a statement from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. A few posts of similar nature were made in the following months. Yet, Morton never posted any of the gory jihadist videos or wrote passionate endorsements of jihadist groups that characterized other individuals analyzed.
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Tarek Mehanna

Tarek Mehanna’s 520 publicly available posts took place between November 15, 2004 and April 4, 2009.

The main characteristic of Mehanna’s extensive known posting career is his intense interest in religious matters. More than any of the individuals analyzed Mehanna is constantly seeking or imparting knowledge on religion, discussing religious matters and finding religious justifications for his arguments. He does so in a very erudite way (despite often writing in a very colloquial tone) and by consistently referring to as many religious sources as possible.

Some of Mehanna’s posts are purely religious and unrelated to any political issue or not characterized by a connection to violence. In some, Mehanna asks religious questions such as “The Mustache: Shave or Trim? Various schools (madhabs)” (May 29, 2007), where he lists the opinion of the four traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence on the issue and asks other posters for their opinions. Others are questions or statements about moral and spiritual issues, like his January 13, 2005 post about Hellfire (“Do you know if your sins will be forgiven at all?”), or his January 18, 2005 post about faith (“Honestly... when I think about how many times (don't) cry from fear of Allaah, I am alarmed. Something is wrong with our level of faith”) or his January 16, 2005 thread about caring for old parents.

A relatively large number of Mehanna’s posts focus on women. The attitudes expressed by Mehanna on the subject are very strong, characterized not just by a strong Islamic conservatism but by attitudes that is not unfair to characterized as chauvinistic. On March 21, 2005, Mehanna comments on a thread about marrying older women and argues that “Age is one of those things that I think a man should have over his wife to re‐enforce his dominance and his being a maintainer of her.” On January 6, 2005, he argues: “No doubt, the righteous wife has to be beautiful in order to please a husband such as I. I want to wake up every morning next to a face that I will enjoy looking at. Deen is the primary issue, but that doesn’t mean it has to be the first thing to look for.”

But the vast majority of Mehanna’s posts were focused on the religious aspects of jihad, clearly viewed as a military endeavor. In them, Mehanna expresses an interest in outlining and, to a lesser degree, discussing all religious interpretations and implications of fighting. Mehanna occasionally mentions current political events such as the war in Iraq or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where, according to his interpretation, a jihad is taking place. But in doing so he always seeks to find the scholarly opinion on specific aspects of the conflict.

One of the jihad-related topics that seem to interest Mehanna the most is the killing of civilians. Mehanna consistently produces scholarly sources on the subject, most of them to show that the sharia condemns the practice. Mehanna’s very first known post (November 15, 2004) shows his position, as in it he undermines another poster’s opinion that killing civilians in jihad is acceptable by saying that “someone should send another poster Ibn ‘Uthaymeen's fatwa

166 It is noteworthy in this regard that Mehanna disregards the fact that the prophet Mohammed’s first wife, Khadija, was 15 years his senior.
about killing infidel women and children.” Similarly, on May 23, 2007, he started a thread entitled “Regarding the Explosions In the Lands of the Muslims” and argued: “causing these explosions in the lands of the Muslims is tantamount to committing deadly and major sins, as it is rare that such events spare those who outwardly profess Islam, or at least those whose kufr is impossible to confirm.” In other posts he used opinions of scholars of very different backgrounds, from mainstream Saudi cleric Muhammad ibn al-'Uthaymeen to jihadist theoretician Abu Basir al-Tartusi, to demonstrate that the sharia states that it is not Islamically acceptable to target women and children.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given his interest in scholarly opinions, many of Mehanna’s posts - more than any of the individuals analyzed - is interested in the issue of assessing who is a legitimate and trustworthy Islamic scholar/cleric and who is not. Mehanna quotes approvingly a large number of scholars/clerics (50) and many of his posts are collections of posts of a certain scholar/cleric on a topic after Mehanna writes an introductory note praising him. Mehanna refrained from commenting with regularity on current political affairs but frequently posted religious sources closely related to topics of actuality. In February 2006, for example, when the controversy over Danish cartoons portraying the prophet Mohammed was at its height, Mehanna does not directly express his views on the matter, but simply started a thread reporting the opinions of Ibn Taymiyyah on the subject (which argue that those who slander the prophet should be killed).

The predominantly religious nature of Mehanna’s posts does not mean he did not also indulge in many online social interactions of a much more trivial nature. Mehanna, in fact, often interacts with other posters by exchanging greetings and well wishes, asking or providing information about issues such as telescopes (June 6, 2006), cheap subscriptions to National Geographic magazine (September 1, 2007), Stephen King novels (September 25, 2005) and martial arts (on many occasions).

The friendly tone of his interactions quickly changed when Mehanna was challenged on religious grounds or encountered religious positions from other posters he disagreed with. In a October 2007 thread on whether participating in activities created by non-Muslims is prohibited in Islam, for example, Mehanna lashed out at a fellow poster that had a differing opinion and, in substance, accused him of being a non-Muslim. “Going by the maniacal standards laid out in this garbage document you have posted, you have yourself have left the fold of Islam, since you had to refer to the conditions placed by your kafir Internet service provider, you clicked the 'Agree' box, etc,” wrote Mehanna, who, interestingly, took the more moderate position and believed that it is not un-Islamic to participate in any activity organized by non-Muslims. After another exchange Mehanna continued: “thankfully, we have already been informed by the Prophet what state your kind will be in on that Day: the dogs of Hell.”

Mehanna’s harsh tones and passion for jihad were, for the most part, tempered by his suspicion that his activities were potentially monitored by the FBI—a fact of which he later had confirmation. That informed the way Mehanna wrote about certain subjects and, as the evidence introduced at his trial showed, there is a clear discrepancy between the substance and
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tone of what he posted on public forums and what he shared privately, thinking (incorrectly) that authorities had less chances to intercept those communications.

Most of Mehanna’s posts on jihad were, as seen, of religious nature. He clearly endorsed a worldview that saw jihad as an individual obligation for all Muslims, the cornerstone of jihadist ideology. But he did so mostly in scholarly tones, avoiding for the most part sweeping endorsements of violence and expressing the desire to directly participate in such activities (as other individuals analyzed did). It is noteworthy that Mehanna’s trail showed that he did hold that behavior in private online conversations and on some password protected sites.

But there are some exceptions. On January 4, 2005, Mehanna wrote a post on Islamic Networking that was highly unusual in the bluntness with which the Pittsburgh native was openly asking practical information about how to purchase military gear for jihadist purposes:

> Where if, if you have the knowledge, can I get the black colored ghurah like the one in your picture. I would like to attain one of those for the real thing inshallah. Actually I was wondering if they got any camouflage ones to Well, unless there’s an online store called AlQaida-Gear.com, I think you can just use some black cloth that can be purchased at any fabric place and tied into that covering. The brothers themselves didn’t use anything too fancy.

Emerson Begolly

Emerson Begolly’s 346 publicly accessible posts occurred during the period of February, 2003 and March 3, 2011. Begolly, as described above, is somewhat of an outlier among the seven individuals analyzed, as his known posting career on public forums is characterized almost exclusively by a focus on nasheeds (Islamic religious songs), which Begolloy fanatically posted, searched for, and composed.

Nine of the posts collected by the researchers actually date back to Begolly’s teenage days, before he converted to Islam. In those days Begolly was an ardent sympathizer of white supremacist and Nazi ideology, an interest he shared with his father. The younger Begolly was the head of the Pennsylvania division of the white supremacist National Socialist Movement’s youth wing, the Viking Youth Corps, and later stated that refuge in Nazism was the “answer to all my problems.” In February 2003, at age 14, Begolly joined the Axis History Forum, a web forum devoted to exchanges of Nazi-era military memorabilia. Begolly introduced himself with these words: “My name is Emerson (Em. for short) and I live near Pittsburgh, PA. I was born in March ’89. I have a brother (Shea), mom (Joni), and dad (Sean).... I collect Third Reich Militaria from gun and militaria shows. I am part German, Slav, and Polish.”

In some posts on the Axis History Forum Begolly expressed open sympathies for Nazi leaders. On June 8, 2003, he wrote: “Hess should have been acquitted. He was a relatively harmless man who, during most of WW2, was in the Tower of London. That seems like it should have been punishment enough for a man who was not directly involved in any War Crimes.”

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the same day he expressed an interest in tracing his ancestry to Nazis: “I am interested in doing some research on my family name Begolly. I believe that some Begollys came from Europe before World War 1. But, here are my questions. Does anyone know if there was anyone in the Third Reich with the last name Begolly? If so, what did they do? Were they in the NSDAP or SS, Heer, Luftwaffe, etc?”

Begolly’s online activities before his conversion and his radicalization are very important. First, they show a predisposition for extremist ideologies. Second, Begolly’s sympathies for Nazism possibly partially explain the extreme anti-Jewish sentiments he displayed once he embraced jihadist ideology. Obviously each case is different, but it can be argued that online activities predating the radicalization can potentially disclose important information about an individual’s personality and attitudes.

Begolly’s first known post after converting dates September 23, 2008 and is from the al Faloja forum. Using the nickname Asadullah Alshishani, Begolly introduces himself misrepresenting his ethnic background as Chechen while, in reality, he is of European descent “I am not a native Arabic speaker because I am a Chechen heritage. So please bear with me, insha’Allah. Ramadan Mubarak to all Forum members.”

The post is the first of hundreds devoted almost exclusively to posting and requesting nashfeeds, most of them with jihadist tones. Begolly only rarely made any commentary regarding the lyrics or context of the nashfeeds. Nor did he ever write anything about religion or politics. His comments were only about technical advice (both given and sought) on computer matters and exchanging information about nashfeeds. These are some examples:

- On March 18, 2009, in the Ansar al Mujaheddin forum: “I went here today and saw the merger, and I was like "Wow! Alhamdullah!" Is this going to be the English Ansar al-Jihad forum or is there going to be an Arabic added on? I hope this means exclusive videos, nashfeeds, etc.”; and
- On October 6, 2010, in the Jamia Hafsa Forum: “Video "Intiqam" (Compilation of Martyrdom attacks) I was searching about martyrdom attacks over the Internet and found a link that TTP has launched a video named by "INTIQAAM" (revenge). It is the compilation of martyrdom attacks in Pakistan.”

Begolly’s radical views were even more evident in the handful of nashfeeds he himself wrote, produced and posted online. On June 1, 2010, Begolly published an original English-language a capella song on Ansar al Mujaheddin English Forum (AMEF) titled “Tribute to Sheikh Mustafa Abu Al-Yazid Written & Sung by Asadullah Alshishani.” Al-Yazid was a former top Egyptian al-Qaeda commander, one of the group’s co-founders, and a leading Shura Council member who was reported killed in a May 21, 2010 drone missile strike in a remote area of Pakistan. Using his “Asadullah al-Shishani” account, Mr. Begolly indicated he wished to offer a “humble tribute” to the “martyred commander”:

*You are a real hero, O Mustafa Abu Yazid
You spent your whole life fighting, Until you fell down Shaheed*
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You are a real terror, Against America
You sent their soldiers running, With shots of your Pee-Ka
You are a real Mujahid, To Allah you belong
Never did you give up, You were firm and you were strong
You are a Freedom Fighter, A Lion of Islam
You finally left this Dunya, And joined the Caravan
You are very lucky, To gain the Shahadah Married to
the Hooris, In the Gardens of Jannah With the Lions
that have fallen, In Kitaeb-ul-Qassam Chechnya and
Kashmir, Iraq and Afghanistan
Asadullah Alshishani salutes you, And he prays for the day
That he meets you in Jannah, And is killed as a Fidaye
And I pray, For the day, O that day
When I’m killed as a Fidaye.

On June 3, 2010, Begolly published an original English-language a cappella song on AMEF titled “When the Jew’s Blood Reds My Knife, Then My Life is Free From Strife” under his alias Asadullah al-Shishani. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

When the Jew’s blood reds my knife, Then my life is free from strife.
Hiding behind rocks and trees, I’ll find them with greatest ease.
Make them get down on their knees, Slaughter them despite their pleas.
Throw them in the ovens hot, Soap and lampshades sold and bought.
Made of the Jews that we shot, Mercy’s something I have not.
With the bomb and machinegun, Blast at them and watch them run.
We will have a lot of fun, Shoot and kill Jews one by one.
Rise up, O Salahuddin, Great and brave Mujahideen.
Like the Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, For the Love of Filistine.
At Al Aqsa we shall meet, After Israel’s defeat.
Their dead bodies at our feet, Taste of victory is sweet.
Jerusalem is calling me, Asadullah Alshishani.
Jihad’s where you’re meant to be, Come and set the captives free.

4.5 Common issues

The analysis of the postings of the seven individuals examined reveals several differences and commonalities among them. While the balance of how many religious, political and social posts each penned varies significantly, several common issues arise.

Some individuals (including Mehanna, Maldonado, and Khan) focus heavily on religious matters; others, such as Begolly or Morton, hardly ever post on the subject. What is common among those who do display an apparent interest in religious matters is the fact that, at least at the beginning of their trajectory, they seemed to be seekers of knowledge. In the first months or even years of their posting life, the individuals constantly, albeit with different intensity from
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one case to the other, fellow posters for sources and opinions on religious matters. They seemed to already possess strong views and in some cases challenged those whose opinions differed with theirs. But they also seemed in constant search for validation for their opinions. This openness seemed to slowly decrease and by the end of the posting trajectory of each of the “seekers” there are only limited traces of questions but, rather, statements made often with full conviction in their own knowledge.

4.5.1 Which Scholars to Trust?

One issue that is particularly debated among many of the individuals analyzed is that of what Islamic scholars to trust. The researchers have listed all the Islamic clerics/scholars mentioned positively by each of the seven individuals analyzed and counted every time they were mentioned each. This master list included only Islamic clerics/scholars that were mentioned in a favorable way, that is: (a) openly endorsed by the poster; (b) the poster mentioned their works or posted a link to them and there is no indication that that was done in any disparaging way. In substance, the researchers are interested in what Islamic clerics/scholars are considered reliable by the seven individuals examined here. As for most other aspects of the posting behavior of the seven individuals analyzed, there are some commonalities and some differences.

Some mention many Islamic clerics/scholars. Of the seven individuals analyzed Mehanna appears to be one most interested in religious matters and in citing sources for almost every opinion he posted. A great deal of his posts are simply translations of pieces from various Islamic clerics/scholars or indications of what Islamic texts to read. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Mehanna is the poster that references the largest number of scholars: 50 other individuals analyzed in our study do not seem to have much interest in Islamic clerics/scholars. Begolly never mentioned one and Hammami only mentioned two (Abdulaziz Bin Baz and Ṭaqî ad-Dîr Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah) twice each.

Most of the individuals analyzed seem more interested in classic, medieval Islamic clerics/scholars rather than contemporary jihadist clerics/scholars. Unsurprisingly the classic Islamic scholars most often cited with admiration are conservative/literalist figures. The one scholar that all posters (except Begolly) cited with admiration is Ibn Taymiyyah (cited 35 times by Mehanna, 6 times by Morton, 4 times by Maldonado, twice by Chesser, Hammami and Khan).

Some of the individuals seem to have a particular preference for certain Islamic clerics/scholars. Maldonado, for example, openly stated his admiration for Muhammad ibn ‘Abc al-Wahhab (which he cites 12 times, more than any other Islamic clerics/scholars) in various posts. In a May 1, 2006 post Maldonado states: “I just decided to call it a day and just come tc terms with what I have always been: a full blown Najdi [from Najd, the most conservative part of Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabism was born] Wahhabi.” In another post (dated May 19, 2006) he calls himself a “Die Hard Wahhabi.” Similarly Mehanna seemed to have a predilection for Ibr al Qarni, Taymiyyah and Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, even though the one he quotes the most is al-Qaeda founder Abuallah Azzam (60 times).
A pattern observed in various cases is that of a progressive “jihadization” of the Islamic clerics/scholars. At the beginning of their known posting career several of the individuals analyzed frequently reference (with admiration) Islamic clerics/scholars who can be categorized as either soft-Islamist or mainstream but very conservative. Belonging to the first category are Islamic clerics/scholars like Hassan al Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Abul Ala Mawdudi, individuals that were among the founders of modern Islamist thinking and who occasionally sanctioned the use of violence to achieve the movement’s goals but that cannot be considered “jihadist.” They are, in substance, the minds that shaped the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamist groups that, while occasionally resorting to violence, do not make of its use the cornerstone of their philosophy and modus operandi.

The latter category, mainstream but very conservative Islamic clerics/scholars, includes those individuals, whether from the early days of Islam (Ibn Taymiyyah) or from the contemporary era (Albani), that do espouse views that are often very rigid and in some circumstances do support violence, but whose thought cannot be reduced to or does not center on the concept of jihad. Several posters, like Mehanna and Khan, seem to be particularly interested in these scholars at the beginning of their (known) posting career. Yet, with time, their views seem to progressively lean towards more rigid, literalist and violent-prone sources—that is “purely” jihadist scholars like Abdullah Azzam first and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Anwar al Awlaki. The initial sources of references appear to be progressively supplanted by jihadist scholars. Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyyah appears to be an exception to this process and to be immune from replacement: all posters quote him frequently throughout their posting life, from the beginning to the very end.

The trajectory of progressive jihadization of sources does not touch all the individuals analyzed. Maldonado never mentions openly jihadist clerics/scholars, just some medieval and contemporary ones. Chesser, on the other hand, references almost exclusively jihadist scholars/clerics from the very beginning of his (known) posting life.

4.5.2 Hijra

Another issue that is discussed by several of the individuals analyzed is that of hijra. Traditionally, this term indicates the migration of the prophet Mohammed and his early disciples from Mecca to Medina in order to avoid the persecution under which they were subjected by the Meccans. Among many Salafists living in the West, the term has come to be used also with another meaning, indicating the migration away from lands where Muslims live as minorities to Muslim-majority ones. For some Western Salafists, living in countries were Islam is not implemented to the degree they deem necessary and where they perceive to be persecuted no less than the prophet Mohammed and his early followers during the early days of Islam is intolerable. They therefore advocate or consider a religious imperative leaving the West and settling in Muslim-majority countries where they can live in a more wholly Islamic environment.

The issue is discussed by four of the seven individuals analyzed. Chesser discusses it several times and, on January 15, 2010 he posts a lecture by US-based Iraqi scholar Ali at
Tamimi on the issue with the headline: “This is Perhaps the Most Compelling English Lecture Regarding Hijra.” Morton posts a short essay about hijra on the website Islampolicy on February 28, 2011. The essay’s title was “The Importance of Making Hijrah From The Lands of Disbelief.”

Mehanna devotes significant attention to the issue. In some posts he talks about his personal desire to leave the United States for Saudi Arabia, framing his decision in religious terms. As it is typical for Mehanna, the Boston resident uses many religious sources to encourage people to make hijra or indicate that it is a religious duty to do so. On September 12, 2005, for example, Mehanna writes: “There are many narrations regarding the Companions asking each other what types of persecution they saw the Prophet (peace be upon him) experience at the hands of the polytheists of Quraysh in the early days of Islam. So, I wish to ask those of you living in the West: what persecution have you ever experienced at the hands of those around you because of your faith?” On other occasions he posted a Tabyan Publications book entitled “A Call to Migrate” (March 16, 2007) and an E-Book entitled “Clarifying the Obligation of Migration.”

But, of the seven individuals analyzed, the one that more than any other seemed interested in the subject is Khan. He first expresses his strong views on the subject on October 10, 2006, when he writes: “Our Brothers and Sisters who are residing in the West must make Hijrah to the lands of Jihad [illegal]. Hijrah and Jihad is fard al 'ayn on all of us, especially those who are living in the enemies territory.” He expanded on the topic on February 21, 2007 when he penned a long essay entitled The condition of the Muslim that doesn't intend on making Hijrah from the West. In it Khan argues: “if you ever meet a Muslim in the West that tells you that Hijrah is not an obligation or that our real obligation is Da'wah in the West, then let him study the sayings of these Shuyookh on living in the land of the Mushrikeen and the land which is at war with your Religion and people. since the West no longer allows freedom of speech for those that support this Noble Millah that they are at war against. Many of the brothers in the UK, for example, have tested the patience of the Government through their verbal support of the Mujahideen and their insults at the Kuffar.”

A few weeks later (March 13, 2007) Khan expanded on the subject, writing a longer essay outlining his views:

> **When we say “make hijrah from the West“ we are referring to those Western Countries that are currently at war with the Ummah of Islam. So let’s take America for example.**

**What is America?**

1. A nation that is at war with Islam and the Muslims
2. When we say at war with Islam, we mean the following:
   a. The Government making explicit statements against Shari’ah
   b. The Government making explicit statements against Khilafah
   c. The Government making explicit statements of their twisted version of Islam (and more).
3. When we say at war with the Muslims, we mean the following:
   a. The Government has killed 10 Million Muslims (some say slightly less and some
      say the number is increasing). Are you able to fathom this Akhee? When it was
      rumored that the Quraysh killed 'Uthmaan (ra), the Prophet (s) and the Sahaba
      got ready for Jihad in defense of 'Uthmaan (ra). That's just one Muslim. What
      about 10 million Muslims? In addition, in light of this, think about our situation
      today and the hadith, “Muslim blood is worth more than al-Ka’aba.”
   b. The Government supports Israel and without America, Israel wouldn't be
      where it is today. So the crimes of the Israeli Government are also on the hands of
      the American Government. And this Israeli Government has killed thousands of
      Muslims and raped a large amount of Muslim women and have repeatedly
      invaded Masjid al-Aqsa to hurt the Muslims and much more.

4. A nation of filth, pornography, homosexuality, alcoholism, zina, corruption,
   crime, injustice and exploitation. How can anyone’s iman be safe by living in a
   nation that is filled with this corruption? If one has the ability to make Hijrah,
   nobody should stop him. If one doesn’t have that ability, then that’s...

   It is noteworthy that Khan, like most Salafists, believes that there are two reasons that
   make America (and most Western countries) places that Muslims should leave: geopolitical and
   moral. The former relate to the policies adopted by governments which, in the perception of
   those advocating hijra, seek to attack Muslims and Islam domestically and globally. The latter
   refer to the moral deficiencies (outlined by Khan in point 4) of any society not ruled by the
   sharia.

   Khan eventually did leave the United States, resettling in Yemen, where he soon joined
   al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. It is noteworthy that other two of the seven individuals
   analyzed who did leave the United States to go live in a Muslim-majority country (Maldonado
   and Hammami) did not post, as far as the researchers know, about hijra.

4.5.3 Islam and democracy

   Several of the individuals analyzed engaged in discussions about the compatibility of
   democracy and Islam. Some of them seemed to adopt the hardline view that democracy is
   theologically incompatible with Islam and simply a Western ruse to subjugate Muslims
   Commenting on Hamas’ win in the Palestinian elections, for example, Maldonado quipped
   “Democracy is 3 wolves and a sheep deciding what is for dinner. Democracy is the horse of
   Troy.” (June 26, 2006). Similarly, in his very first known post (April 24, 2007), Chesser openly
   stated: “We believe democracy is that it is kufr and shirk.”

   Others of the individuals analyzed displayed a more nuanced position. In a November
   21, 2006, post, Khan wrote in an open letter to Keith Ellison, the first Muslim member of the US
   Congress: “What proof do you have from Qur’an and Sunnah that it is Islamic for you to
participate in the Parliament, knowing that they pass judgments that go against the Shari’ah of Allah? Two years later (March 17, 2008) though, in a thread about whether voting makes one an infidel, Khan took a less dogmatic position: “I remember Shaykh Faisal explained this in one of his lectures. He said voting for a Kaafir in a Democracy does make you an Apostate, however you are not an Apostate until the Hujjah has been established since this is an issue of Ijtihad. So if you see a person voting, you don’t call them Kaafir immediately. You first explain to them kindly why it is wrong and give him all the evidences regarding how it can take you outside the fold of Islaam.”

Morton adopted an even more nuanced position. On December 17, 2010, he argued: “As far as democracy, then voting itself we do not consider shirk and where there is benefit for the Muslims than we do recognize the opinion as ijtihad and not kufr for the one that promotes it.... As far as someone that calls for political representation based on man-made laws as a preference over Allah’s law then he is a kaffir, but even that statement is not sufficient for such a complex issue.”

On April 22, 2011, Morton expands on his views:

[D]emocratic principles like voting for elected representatives must not be conflated to mean the same thing as Democracy as rule of the majority even where it contradicts Islam... if Allah’s Messenger ordered people to appoint a leader if three go out together, then what makes you think elections to appoint leaders to rule by shariah are incompatible with Islam?

Thus you get Anjem Chaudhry style idiocy - rhetorical repetition of Hizb ut Tahriri slogan-chanting lacking in substance and giving Islam a very bad name...

That is not the situation that was described, again you are conflating voting with democracy and that is a primary problem of many... Anwar Awlaki is correct, shariah is not something that can be voted over - it is not a choice it is an obligation but that does nothing to refute the position that due to circumstances one can partake in voting and elections as a means of raising awareness and calling the people to Islam...taking part in elections does not have to entail kufr or acceptance of the kufr power structure

4.5.4. Political matters

All the seven individuals analyzed embraced jihadism, an ideology that quintessentially combines religious and political elements. And they were all interested in political matters, although all with different intensity and modalities. Some displayed a keen attention for global affairs and economics, like Morton. Others were interested almost exclusively in conflicts where jihadist groups were involved, following their activities and interpreting events through their lenses.

Some views, which are the foundation of jihadist ideology, are common to all. They all see the West as an aggressive force trying to subjugate true Muslims and authentic Islam
through cultural and military means with the assistance of Muslims who have betrayed Islam. Domestic tensions (such as controversies over the veil or caricatures of the prophet Mohammed) are as important as foreign ones (conflicts in Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine). As it is natural, each individual focuses on certain aspects of this narrative more than others.

There are two issues that, interestingly, are common to many of the individuals analyzed: their disdain for “moderate Islamists” and their position over conspiracy theories.

4.5.5 Disdain for moderate Islamists

Over the last few years scholars and experts in the West and in Muslim majority countries have often debated the relationship between so-called “moderate” Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and violent jihadist groups. Opinions on the subject vary enormously, from those who maintain that jihadism is just an extension of the brand of Islamism spread by the Brotherhood to those who believe, to the contrary, that moderate Islamists can be an “antidote” to jihadist violence. The debate as to whether to consider moderate Islamists “part of the problem or part of the solution” has significant policy implications, as governments consider what Muslim organizations to partner with in their attempts to challenge jihadism. It is therefore interesting to see what opinions the seven individuals analyzed had of the Muslim Brotherhood or groups with a similar ideology.

As for many other issues, opinions are divided, although there is a tendency to harbor a negative perception. Hammami, for example, expressed some moderate criticism of al Banna and Qutb, the Brotherhood’s two historical ideological leaders. “Al-Hasan al-Banna was not really on top of his game back in the day,” wrote Hammami in June 2006. “He had a lot of right and he was ‘Sunni,’ and he wanted to change things. But that does not mean he was right about everything. He has an excuse though. He was living during the end of the Ottoman empire where they had become kaafirs and lovers of the West. Someone who knew a little bit about Islam was doing a great job. I could say the same about Sayyid Qutub. Great man, but he comes with his mistakes. Scholars all have their slip ups.” He also added on Qutb: “Sayyid Qutb was wrong for not having a beard. Just because he did some good does not mean he is an angel Plus, sayyid qutub was not like a serious wahhaabi in his ‘aqeedah. He had ’aqeedah mistakes.”

Chesser expresses his views on the subject in an August 2, 2009 post about the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), a Virginia-based think-tank closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood: “I have two friends studying there and from what I can tell they sound like a bunch Mu'tazilah Muji'ah Jewish Christian Unitarians,” wrote Chesser, arguing that the organization had deviated from the straight path of Islam for its “Refusal to call Christians and Jews kuffar and to believe that they enter Jahannam.”

Similarly, on April 25, 2010, Morton attacked the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Washington based group seen by many as closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood:

"CAIR are Islamists who are afraid to say it, they want to play a game that we see many trying to play in this era, with one foot loving the fruits they reap from
American imperialism as citizens and not victims and the other claiming they believe in the shariah, sunnah, and way of the salaf... Hey, Ibrahim why is it Muslims like you never come and try to establish dialog with us? Just slander and baatil, indirect refutations? I think you are secretly, or more probably unknowingly, working for the Obama Administration? You are a joke - and your quote belongs with the nutball - Siraj Wahhaaj, Khalid Yassin - donate here - crowd... CAIR DOES NOT REPRESENT ISLAM.”

Mehanna and Khan seem to adopt a slightly different approach. Keenly interested in scholarly Islamic work, they both extensively cite - and profusely endorse - al Banna, Qutb, and, in the case of Khan, Mawdudi, the founder of the South Asian equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jamaat-e-Islami. Yet both, despite their admiration for the founders of Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamism, strongly disliked contemporary groups that adopt that approach. In the case of Khan this dislike is particularly evident and probably determined by direct personal experiences. Khan, in fact, devotes several posts to attacking, with very harsh tones, a group called the Islamic Organization of North America (IONA). In an interview with the New York Times Khan revealed that he had first become interested in Islamic activism at an August 2001 summer camp organized by IONA in Queens.168 “They were teaching things about religion and brotherhood that captivated me,” Khan recounted. He said that, after that experience, he knew “what I wanted to do with my life: be a firm Muslim, a strong Muslim, a practicing Muslim.”

Khan later breaks with IONA because the organization would not endorse acts of violence and, more generally, adopt a jihadist perspective. In several of his posts Khan attacks IONA and other Muslim Brotherhood-leaning organizations in the United States. On September 5, 2006, for example, Khan announced on Islamic Awakening that he was “currently working on a refutation against the Islamic Movement, ‘Tanzeem-e-Islami’ also known as, ‘Islamic Organization of North America.’ On January 1, 2007, he announced that he “opened a new blog dedicated to the book, ‘The Exposition Regarding the Disbelief of the one that assist the Americans,’ by Shaykh Naasir bin Hamad al-Fahd.” He continued:

InshAllah, this blog will serve as a research center on the subject of assisting the Kafiroon and those who ally with them. We kindly ask you to spread this website to those Islamic Movements and individuals that are active in the fields of Da’wah and/or have as its goal the establishment of Allah’s Deen. So if you know of any members from the groups such as Tableeghi Jama’at, Jama’at-e-Islami Tanzeem-e-Islami, Islamic Organization of North America, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, ICNA MAS and so on, please notify them of this blog, inshAllah. In addition, if you are associated or know of someone that is associated with an MSA (Muslim Students Association), we also tell them to direct them to this blog as it has become apparent that our Shabaab are softening their stance towards America & their allies and are even taking part in their Kufr Democratic process thinking that it will bring some sort of change.

On April 11, 2008, Khan referred to Qatar-based cleric Yusuf al Qaradawi as “the apostate,” a particularly grave insult for any Muslim, because the cleric had stated a fatwa allowing, in some circumstances, the consumption of “tiny amounts of alcohol.” The vehemence is particularly noteworthy as Qaradawi is the spiritual leader and the most eminent scholar of the global Muslim Brotherhood movement. While Khan frequently cited with admiration some of the forefathers of the movement (particularly Hassan al Banna and Sayyid Qutb), he seemed to despise the contemporary guides of the Muslim Brotherhood.

4.5.6 Conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories are a key component of extremist ideologies. Many of them, in fact, describe the group they purport to defend as victims of an arcane conspiracy often perpetrated by various forces. Similarly, those who promote and espouse extremist ideologies refute official or commonly accepted explanations of key historical and political events. Rather, they identify an alternative (and, often, more complex and darker) chain of events behind them that better suits their narrative. It should be noted that conspiracy theories are not limited to extremists and, throughout the world, large cross sections of populations in all countries shun official narratives on events that range from the Kennedy assassination to the landing on the moon, from the alleged occultation of UFO activities on Earth to the Holocaust.

Since September 11, 2001, the Internet has been buzzing with rumors about many of the aspects of jihadism: from who’s really behind attacks that are pinned by authorities to jihadist groups to who actually controls these groups. Some go as far as doubting the existence of prominent jihadists, arguing that they are just media creations of the CIA, the Mossad or other entities.

Given the prominence of these theories surrounding the jihadist movement, it is interesting to see how the seven individuals analyzed relate to them. On the forums they frequented many posters did raise various conspiracy theories on various jihadist attacks, groups, and activities. In some cases these suspicions were raised by posters as questions, in others as confident statements.

Of the seven individuals analyzed, four post about conspiracy theories related to jihadist activities. Of the four, three vehemently deny conspiracy theories arguing that the 9/11 attacks and the London July 7, 2005 attacks had not been carried out by al-Qaeda but by various Western governments. In all three a certain degree of annoyance at these conspiracy theories is quite visible. All three, in fact, seem eager to make sure that due credit is given to al-Qaeda for carrying out actions that they consider Islamically legitimate and brave.

In a December 2009 Islamic Awakening thread in which another poster argued that America and Israel carried out the 9/11 attacks, for example, Chesser responded: “Why does every Muslim desire that 9-11 be an inside job, when if it is not it means that 20+ Muslims will get the reward for fighting jihad [?]” Similarly, Mehanna, using the sarcasm that characterizes many of his posts, so responds to a September 2005 Islamic Networking post arguing that al-Qaeda did not carried out the London bombings: “There is unanimous agreement that it is not Muslims that carry out these attacks - nay - not even human beings; rather they are Martians.
who come to Earth to cause all of this havoc in preparation to take it over. Also, anyone who has the least bit of knowledge of sci-fi history knows that Martians can shape-shift and videotape these wills.”

Khan devotes several posts to attacking, often with quite aggressive tones, conspiracy theories that, in his view, undermine al-Qaeda and do not give the organization due credit. In an October 2008 Islamic Awakening thread Khan posted: “I don't have time to say much, but all I'll say is if you reject the Tayseer 'Allouni (al-Jazeera Journalist who was arrested) Interview with Usama in October 2001 (where Usama explains in depth why he did 9/11), then you are as good as a monkey.”

In a March 2008 Islamic Awakening he similarly wrote: “As for the 19 hijacker theory, then I say: it's not a theory but a fact. In addition, I am afraid you are wrong when you say that Shaykh Usama bin Laadin denied it since in one of his recent audio releases from As-Sahab Media, he stated clearly that he was behind it. And from before that, it was already clear since he released an audio (through As-Sahab Media) talking about the lives of the 19 hijackers and their piety. If you want these videos, I can direct you to them inshaa'Allah. If you then have suspicions about As-Sahab Media, then we can talk about that in detail.”

Interestingly, in a June 2006 post Hammami indicates that he, to the contrary of the others, did believe in alternative explanations to the attacks of 9/11. “No doubt I’m gonna get flack for this too,” wrote Hammami, “but I don’t believe the big 9/11 to begin with. I think Usama took the blame because he was gonna get blamed anyway and it fits his goal.” Similarly, in various posts between June 9th and 12th, 2006, Hammami repeatedly expressed skepticism about the real identity of Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Zarqawi, at the time the head of the jihadist insurgency against US forces in Iraq, was held in high esteem by all other six individuals analyzed as a valorous jihadist leader.

An explanation for Hammami’s positions might be found in the time of his postings adopting conspiracy theories. In 2006 Hammami did not probably fully identify with jihadist ideology. Various reports indicate that, at the beginning of his radicalization trajectory, Hammami had mixed feelings about the use of violence, even though he accepted a strict Salafist worldview and lifestyle. It could well be that at a later stage of his radicalization trajectory his views would have been different. Of course it could also be that the opinions he expressed in the forum did not correspond to his real views.
5. Conclusion

Jihadists, whether structured groups or unaffiliated sympathizers, have long understood the importance of social media. Zachary Chesser fittingly describes social media as “simply the most dynamic and convenient form of media there is.”[169] Understanding how individuals who made the leap from it to actual militancy use and interact with it is of crucial importance, as the trend is only likely to increase. Through an in depth analysis of the posting lives of several individuals, this study has sought to provide a glimpse into patterns that are potentially observable in many other cases.

A first reason why observing online activities, even those in the public realm, is useful is for intelligence purposes. Counterterrorism authorities throughout the world are very much aware of this and have long done so, seeking to obtain information about contacts and intentions of aspiring or committed militants. Indeed, as the cases of Chesser, Morton and Begolly showed, three of the seven individuals analyzed in the study were arrested and later convicted primarily due to information they had posted on public online venues.

In other cases, for reasons that are not known to the researchers, individuals that had expressed somewhat similar views and intentions, despite attracting the attention of authorities, were not arrested. That is the case of Khan, who himself expressed his surprise at the fact that he was allowed to leave the United States. “Throughout my experience of traveling from America to Yemen, I was expecting to be stopped and detained,” Khan wrote after reaching Yemen. “It still surprises me when I reflect on it; I mean, I was quite open about my beliefs online and it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that I was al-Qaeda to the core.”[170]

But the intended usefulness of this study is not in making the case for monitoring online social media for intelligence purpose — an effort for which authorities throughout the West need little encouragement. Rather, the report is meant to provide potentially useful pointers in the field of counter-radicalization. Over the last ten years, many Western countries have devised more or less extensive strategies aimed at preventing individuals from embracing radical ideas or de-radicalizing (or favoring the disengagement) of committed militants. Canada is also in the process of establishing its own counter-radicalization strategy.

Counter-radicalization initiatives are extremely complex in nature, as they aim to tackle a phenomenon that is as complex as poorly understood. Absent reliable supporting evidence, theories about radicalization abound. Some focus on structural factors such as political tensions and cultural cleavages. Others emphasize personal factors, such as the shock of a life-changing event or the influence of a mentor. Finally, several theories have been formulated to specifically

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explain the radicalization of Western Muslims; these range from a search for identity to anger over discrimination and relative economic deprivation. Most experts tend nonetheless to agree that radicalization is a highly complex and individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors. There is no one path to radicalism and no common profile, but each case should be analyzed individually. If there is no common trajectory to radicalization, it automatically follows that tactics aimed at preventing or reversing the radicalization process need to be equally diverse. And the foundation of any approach should be a knowledge of what issues drive radicalization.

The first finding of this study is indeed that, even among subjects that share some core characteristics, there are only limited commonalities in terms of interests and views. All seven subjects analyzed for the study share, despite important differences, a common background. Yet, based on the evidence provided by their online activities, their interests, views and approaches are very diverse. Some are very interested in religion. Some are only to a much lesser degree, seeming to be interested more in political issues. Some adopt immediately a jihadist mindset. Others seem to undergo a long radicalizing trajectory. Given this diversity, it becomes obvious that any counter-radicalization needs to be tailored to the specifics of the case. Flexibility is the name of the game.

The study also observed that many of the individuals analyzed were, at least in the beginning of their trajectories, avid seekers of knowledge and information on religion. All, albeit with different degrees, referred to religious concepts and frames throughout the posting lives. Jihadism is a complex ideology that mixes religion and politics. But this study confirms the importance of its religious aspect for many of those who embrace—a fact some studies have dismissed. It seems apparent that any counter-radicalization effort, while not ignoring other aspects, should take into consideration the centrality of religious issues for those embracing jihadism. While for legal, political and cultural reasons it might be difficult to replicate in the West some of the religion-based counter-radicalization efforts adopted in countries such as Saudi Arabia or Singapore, the religious aspect should take a central role.

The study also showed that those interested in religion were extremely inquisitive during the first stages of their radicalization trajectories. In the first months or even years of their posting life, in fact, the individuals constantly, albeit with different intensity from one case to the other, fellow posters for sources and opinions on religious matters. They seemed to already possess strong views and in some cases challenged those whose opinions differed with theirs. But they also seemed in constant search of validation for their opinions. This openness seemed to slowly decrease and by the end of the posting trajectory of each of the “seekers” there are only limited traces of questions but, rather, statements made often with full conviction in their own knowledge. This attitude provides an enormous opportunity for counter-radicalization. It is arguable that it is in this phase that any kind of intervention might be more likely to succeed.