

Understanding The Tools of Radical Action: The Jihadi Web Sites

Dipak K. Gupta

The killing of bin Laden, the figurehead and the symbol of al-Qaeda will certainly not eliminate the threat of terrorism in the world. Unfortunately, it is far easier to kill a person than to kill his ideas. The ideas that bin Laden and his radical followers have espoused will continue to inspire others to take up arms against their perceived enemies. In their endeavor, the biggest recruitment tool will be the Internet. Today, the world is threatened not by the core group of al-Qaeda. After the capture or killing of most its top officials, al-Qaeda is almost totally decimated as an effective organization. However, during the course of its three decades of existence, it has transformed itself as a social movement, which has been able to infect the minds of many around the world. The Internet has become the primary tool through which the extremist groups recruits fresh volunteers – particularly from the Western nations -- and raises money for violent operations. The Internet, however, is more than simply a tool. As people communicate, they create virtual societies, where some develop social capital and assume leadership. In sum, they create their own virtual communities connected only by high-speed Internet connections.

In this world, the job of recruitment for terrorist organizations is done through the virtual network of like-minded individuals, spread over many countries and continents. Thus, an event such as the burning of the Koran by a fringe group in Florida electrified many around the world. It certainly added fuel to the fires of hatred in countries such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. We can be sure that its transmission through the Internet may have prepared some in the Western nation ready for future action. Therefore, the task of understanding the process by international events, filtered through the prism of ideologies, can ignite passion all over the world remains one of our greatest challenges.

The difficulty in monitoring the radical web sites is that there are many kinds of people who engage in discussions of issues that evoke intense emotion. Some of these may even espouse political and religious ideologies that are repugnant to us. However, these views are protected under the freedom of speech amendment, one of the most defining characteristics of who we are as a nation. What, however, is not protected is pronouncements that are designed to harm our citizens or the objects of our national interest. Therefore, given the threat that it poses to our collective welfare, the project aims at finding the paths through which such web sites filter news reports and events that are framed to call the faithful to arms. In effect, by tracing this path, the project also aims at identifying some of the root causes of terrorism. This project contains a number of segments, which bring various disciplines together.

My position paper will concentrate the first segment, which attempts to identify the “true” extremist web sites that go beyond simply discussing the issues. This part of the project will bring together, perhaps for the first time, research into the motivational factors of potential participants in terrorist activities with those of computational linguistics.

I argue that the web sites that we would like to track as a part of our goal of tracing the global spread of extremist ideas must contain the following five parts.

Any participation in a violent movement is part of a collective action. A collective action must be preceded by the construction of a strong enough collective identity of “us” and “them.” For the jihadi groups, the “us” factor would entail the reinforcement of the Islamic community with words such as, *ummah* and *al-Wala wal-bara* (roughly, meaning an unquestioned loyalty to Allah and the Shari’a and a disavowal of anything that contradicts them). On the other hand, the “them” factor must include the evocation of images of the non-believers (*kfir*) or the apostates (*takfir*).

It is, of course, not enough to identify the contours of the in and out-group membership. It is of paramount importance for a jihadi web site to impress upon the readers the presence of existential threat the community faces from its enemies. This existential threat can be transmitted by reminding the readers of the West’s continuing plot to attack and subjugate the Islamic nations.

A web site that simply discusses the perils of the Islamic community should not fall within our radarscope of “extremist” groups. For that, we would like the web site to seek revenge or call to avenge some specific aspect of perceived injustice. This is truly a call for action. Under Islamic religious discourse, there are terms that signify the duty of observing Muslims to slay certain apostates and non-believers. The invocation of such terms and phrases would signify a defining language for jihadi web sites.

Finally, we should concentrate on those web sites that call for volunteers or donations to further their cause. The presence of all these five factors would help us identify the site that we are truly concerned about.

I argue a proper search for jihadi web sites can be designed by working with computational linguists, terrorism experts, and experts on Islamic religious discourse. This combined effort should make a significant addition in many of these academic disciplines.