The online jihadist community has always taken pride and believed in the significance of the Internet as a powerful weapon for global jihad, next to explosives and firearms. However, a report published by RAND Corporation on 6 December 2011 that was also presented before the United States House Committee on Homeland Security, has put the online community on the defensive.

The RAND report by terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenkins titled “Is Al Qaeda’s Internet Strategy Working?” assessed the threat and development of Al Qaeda’s Internet strategy in the global Jihad and how to tackle it. Jenkins found that Al Qaeda shifted its strategy from organizationally-led jihad to individual jihad made possible through online jihadism. However, he argued that the decline of terrorist violence in the United States suggests a failure of Al Qaeda’s Internet strategy. Nevertheless it could still lead to cyber terrorism and should not be over-
looked, and that the Internet must be monitored continu-
ously for signals of new dangers.

Online Jihadists Respond

RAND’s reports and articles have been the subject of
discussion among members of online Arabic jihadi fo-
rums in the past. A week after Jenkins’ report was pub-
lished a forum member at the Shumukh Islamic Network
called “Chahed” cited a number of points made in the
report. Chahed’s comments were titled “Do you believe
in RAND’s report?” In it, Chahed firstly emphasized that
statistics shown in the report did not concern him but the
author’s analysis on the psychology of cyber jihadists
grabbed his attention. Among the points that Chahed
highlighted were that cyber jihadists encourages others
to conduct attacks without exposing themselves to per-
sonal danger, and that a virtual jihadist cannot differenti-
ate between the real world and virtual reality. Chahed
also took note of Jenkins’ advice on the counter produc-
tivity of shutting down the jihadist websites, and the
need to continue monitoring them.

Chahed’s post can be found in the three popular
jihadi forums (Shumukh, Ansar Mujahideen and Global
Jihad) and had garnered more than 30 responses. It is
not surprising that curses and insults were hurled at
RAND, and Jenkins in particular, as verbal attacks and
hateful comments are the jihadists’ generic response to
any western counterterrorism efforts and analyses. A
number of forum members also wrote that they will not
offer any comments which the “parasites” i.e. analysts
monitoring the forums, can use against the jihadists.
However, there are some who did comment on certain
points made in the report. For instance, a member
known as “Da’wah and Jihad” challenged Jenkins’ sug-
gestion not to shut down jihadi websites as they serve
as a source of intelligence, since many jihadi websites
and forums such as Fallujah, Hisbah and Al-Ikhlas have
already been taken down. According to the forum mem-
ber, this is a sign of fallacy in Jenkins’ analysis. Others
commented that even if the jihadi websites and forums
were to be taken down, the “dissemination workshop”
will ensure that jihadi media and propaganda will still
reach Muslims. On virtual jihadists who became real-
world jihadists, another member, “Abu Bakr Al-Qahtani”
commented that the report disregarded more cases that
indicate the influence of jihadi websites on online ji-
hadists to carry out attacks. For example, CIA double
agent Humam Al-Balawi and Jordanian Al-Qaeda opera-
tive Haythem Al-Khayat aka Abu Kandahar who was an
administrator at the Hisbah forums, carried out opera-
tions before they were killed. Another forum member
“Abuhamza” also reiterated this point.

The reactions to the RAND report did not stop
with Chahed’s thread. Other forum members posted
their reactions. In his forum post, Abuhamza argued that
Jenkins failed to understand and accurately analyze the
psychological profile of a virtual jihadist as “he [Jenkins]
doesn’t understand the reality of a jihadist who has iman
(faith).” This discredits Jenkins’ report as well as other
research and studies that seek to analyze jihadists and
jihad. The response in this thread is generally agree-
able with Abuhamza’s argument and supportive of his
theory of RAND analysts’ incompetency in studying the
jihadists.

Another forum post titled “Sufficient and ade-
quate response to the latest RAND report: intellectual
setbacks and obsolete theses” is a more structured and
lengthy analysis compared to the first two. “Abu Hafs As
-Sunni As-Sunni” who is a regular writer at many of the
jihadi forums, divided the content of the report into 4
sections; discouragement, sarcasm and disparagement,
attack, and contradiction. He then debunked the argu-
ments categorized in each section. The first section of
the report seeks to discourage people from participating
in online jihad through the claims it made, dispute the
idea of online jihad and expose its ineffectiveness. To
this, As-Sunni retorted that the US is seeking to disrupt
jihadists from going online because it fears the power
and impact that the internet and social media have on
people, particularly the jihadists. He explained that
online jihad is not the opposite of combat jihad but is
actually the other side of combat jihad.
Al Qaeda’s Internet Strategy A Failure? Online Jihadists Disprove
(Continued from Page 2)

The second section includes the argument on the lack of genuine links between online recruitment in jihadi websites and real combat arenas, and the assertion that only by learning tactical instructions on the ground, and not online, can the jihadists launch terrorist attacks. As-Sunni elaborated that Al Qaeda did not devise online jihad in order to evade combat jihad but explained that online jihad is a part of the ongoing war between the forces of iman and kufr (infidelity). Hence, Al Qaeda will never call to abandon combat jihad for online jihad. As-Sunni affirmed that jihadists know the difference between the cyber world and the real world, as they know that their online jihad is part of the bigger global jihad. They do not favor one over the other as both are equally important and significant.

Section 3 comprises the attacks on jihadi websites, the hunt for jihadi instigators and bringing them to justice. In this section, the RAND report claimed that online jihad is easy, convenient and accessible. It gives the illusion that jihad behind a computer is jihad on the ground, but when a jihadist log out from the network, his link to the jihadi world is cut off. As-Sunni refuted that it is not easy for jihadists to go online because there is always the danger of being tracked down by western and Arab intelligence agencies. On the option of disconnecting from the online jihad, As-Sunni rebutted that a jihadist goes online to vent his frustration of being separated from the jihadi scene and wanted to know about the news of his brothers and sisters elsewhere. As-Sunni challenged that if a jihadi can disconnect and does not pose any real-time harm, he would not have been detained and imprisoned like many administrators, moderators and members of jihadi forums.

The last section exposed the contradictions found in Jenkins’ analysis. Jenkins advised the disruption and closure of jihadi websites but suggested to leave them as they provide a valuable source of information. At one point, he urged organizations to assess the actual threat from the jihadi forums but asserted that the websites have not produced any significant result and recruitment. As-Sunni repudiated the claim that jihadi websites are counterproductive and listed the results achieved with the websites namely the forums. They have become the subject of study in many universities in the west, opened the door to support and recruitment even if it’s virtual as it will lead to real membership to jihadi groups, and connect leaders to supporters through open questions and interviews. On the decline of recruitment, As-Sunni insisted that recruitment is ongoing and that analysts would not have known of any information because of the “Asrar Mujahideen” encryption tool used only between jihadists. As-Sunni also mentioned that RAND report failed to consider the Arab Spring as a result of a form of online jihad. As a closing remark, As-Sunni urged others to repost his article at other Arabic and Islamic forums.

Conclusion
The jihadists’ response can be broadly summarized into four points. Firstly, they seem to be unconcerned with the decline of violence or attempted terrorist attacks in the US as they believe there are more cases that were not mentioned in the report. Secondly, they repeatedly emphasized that cyber jihad is just as important and significant as conducting violence and terrorist attacks.

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on the ground or participating in the real-world combat jihad, as they are both two sides of the same coin. Therefore, remaining virtual is not a weakness and having the intention to act is jihad. Moreover, jihadists agreed that non-believers like Jenkins are incapable of understanding jihadists’ behavior or giving sound analysis on jihad. This explains the jihadists’ rejection and dismissal of any western counterterrorism analyses which they deem deceptive and fallacious. Finally, they are confident that the “dissemination workshop”, an online workshop that urges members to repost jihadi media on mainstream online forums, would ensure that online jihad will persist. As-Sunni’s closing remark exemplifies this point.

All in all, Al Qaeda’s internet strategy may or may not be a failure depending on which side of the coin, whether its terrorism or counterterrorism, one is looking at. From a counterterrorism perspective, the threat of online jihad today might be low as there is less real-time impact especially in the US. Online jihadists on the other hand are insistent that remaining online is still jihad that can pose real-time danger. With the dissemination workshop, Al Qaeda’s call for cyber-jihad, increasing instructions and tutorials on internet science, cyber warfare and security in the jihadi forums, may suggest that Al Qaeda’s internet strategy is not only individual terrorism but also cyber-terrorism.

GLOBAL PATHFINDER II

The ICPVTR Terrorism Database – Global Pathfinder - is a one-stop repository for information on the current and emerging terrorist threat. The database focuses on terrorism and political violence in the Asia-Pacific region – comprising of Southeast Asia, North Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and Oceania.

Global Pathfinder is an integrated database containing comprehensive profiles of terrorist groups, key terrorist personalities, terrorist and counterterrorist incidents as well as terrorist training camps. It also contains specific details and analyses of significant terrorist attacks in the form of terrorist attack profiles.

In addition to providing the latest information on terrorist attacks and pronouncements, Global Pathfinder also includes over a hundred terrorist training manuals, counterterrorism legislations and conventions, analytical papers on terrorist ideologies, commentaries on terrorist trends and patterns, transcripts of landmark cases, interviews with terrorists as well as photographs from different conflict zones across the world. Further, Global Pathfinder also has a huge collection of jihadi websites, the contents of which are routinely translated and analyzed by our analysts. This analysis helps develop an understanding of the developments in the ideological spectrum and trajectory of the terrorist threat, in both in tactical as well as strategic space.

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Al Qaeda in Post-Occupation Iraq
Eric Tope*

With the withdrawal of the United States military from Iraq, there have been concerns about the possible resurgence of the Al Qaeda offshoot in the country.

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The withdrawal of all United States military personnel by the end of 2011 provoked many questions with regards to the future of post-occupation Iraq. Among the concerns is whether or not the Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) will be able to reprise the dominant role it once held in certain regions of the country circa 2005-2006. Addressing this question requires an examination of what facilitated AQI’s initial rise and an assessment as to whether or not such variables are likely to be present in Iraq following America’s extrication.

A Q I, S unni s, and S afe H avens

In early 2006, the AQI approached the apex of its authority in many of Iraq’s Sunni regions, primarily Anbar province. Ramadi, Anbar’s capital, was the site of approximately half of all attacks on coalition forces throughout 2006. In August 2006, Colonel Peter Devlin, a senior Marine intelligence officer, drafted an assessment of the province in which he lamented that all government institutions had either “disintegrated or been thoroughly corrupted and infiltrated by Al Qaeda in Iraq…,” which had become “the dominant organization of influence in al Anbar.…” Upon his arrival in Ramadi, Colonel Sean MacFarland similarly noted that “Al Qaeda was calling the shots.” Other Sunni provinces experienced comparable infiltrations by AQI. It is tempting to attribute the organization’s success to inadequate administration by the Coalition Provisional Authority which facilitated Iraq’s drift toward state failure, but there is more to it.

In order to advance their agenda, transnational insurgents, like the Al Qaeda, often establish sanctuaries such as the one they developed in Iraq. The freedom of movement offered by failed states does assist in this undertaking; however sustaining operations in one location definitely requires more than a piece of ungoverned territory. Survival and progress is also dependent upon access to supplies, new recruits, communications, finances and protection, which cannot be secured in a remote hideout secluded from the local infrastructure and populace. To ensure the provision of such necessities, non-state interveners must embed themselves within the host-state’s society to some degree. Ideally, these groups need the proactive support of local citizens providing them with new followers, money and supplies. At a bare minimum they need the complicity of a citizenry they can hide amongst who will not collaborate against them with government or counterinsurgency forces. Thus the indigenous population, or some segment of it, is the center of gravity for insurgents if they are to flourish. This type of relationship is precisely what AQI sought, and temporarily achieved, with Iraq’s Sunnis.
Prior to 2007, AQI managed to saturate several Sunni provinces, inter-marry into their tribes and execute a potent asymmetric warfare campaign against which coalition troops were largely ineffective. A critical component of AQI’s ascendancy was the onset of sectarian conflict that accompanied the demise of the Ba’ath government. The emergence of lethal Shiite militias, the creation of the predominantly Shiite Iraqi Army and the advancement of Shiite parties in national politics all stimulated Sunni fears of injustice and brutality in post-Saddam Iraq. This state of affairs rendered the Sunni minority receptive to AQI’s intrusion, and led them to view the foreigners as valuable allies against Shiite aggression. As Fred Kagan contends, “the hostility within Iraq’s Sunni Arab community to the prospect of a Shia-dominated government sparked an insurgency, of which AQI quickly took advantage.” Andrew Phillips likewise avers that, “The jihadists’ opportunistic insertion into the Iraq conflict was made possible by the fears of a recently disenfranchised Sunni minority in the face of Shiite political ascendancy.” In sum, Iraq’s civil conflict allowed AQI to firmly embed itself in the country’s Sunni areas under the guise of protecting their religious brethren. Given the Sunnis’ predicament AQI constituted a tactical asset, which facilitated an uneasy but necessary alliance.

The preceding argument is evidenced by several observations. Most tellingly is the strength AQI managed to achieve throughout Iraq’s Sunni provinces. In addition to Anbar, Diyala and Salah al Din became AQI havens as well. At the height of activity, these two provinces averaged between twenty five and thirty insur-
gent attacks daily, just below Anbar’s peak of forty. Prior to his demise, Abu Musab al Zarqawi conspired to establish Diyala as the capital of the Islamic State of Iraq. This acceptance of AQI by the Sunnis would seem unremarkable except for the fact that the Iraqis resented the foreign presence. Despite a common religious identity Iraq’s Sunni population remained largely indifferent to AQI’s agenda against the West and sought neither to create a caliphate in Iraq, nor to employ it as a base for global jihad. Moreover, AQI disrupted commerce by stealing profits from tribal leaders’ businesses and, deeply offended tribal mores by intermarrying with local women and by executing local sheikhs. AQI’s infiltration proved so unsavory that the Iraqis revolted the moment the Americans proved more capable of protecting them; an event that culminated with the tribal “Awakening.” Therefore the alliance with AQI was strictly one of necessity against the Shiite community.

The AQI’s modus operandi of exploiting civil conflict is further evident by their efforts to exasperate sectarian warfare in Iraq, most notably by desecrating the Golden Dome Mosque in Samara provoking severe Shiite retaliation. As long as the Shia roamed the streets for blood, AQI “benefited from this struggle, which it helped to produce, posing as the defender of the Sunni against the Jaysh al Mahdi.” Outside Iraq, Al Qaeda has utilized similar tactics in Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen. In all of these cases al Qaeda exploited internal conflict with the aim of acquiring sanctuary within local communities.

Assessment

So, will AQI be able to replicate this tactic after the withdrawal and disengagement of US troops? Given that their success in Iraq was primarily facilitated by Sunni insecurity and disenfranchisement, AQI’s capacity to reconstitute a dominant role will be determined by the degree to which the Iraqi national government can maintain balanced representation among Iraq’s sectarian communities and constrain rouge Shiite elements. The results of the March 2010 national elections were somewhat encouraging. The nonsectarian, and heavily-Sunni, Iraqiya party won the most parliamentary seats with 91; over Nouri al -Maliki’s Dawa party which claimed 89. Broad Sunni political participation is critical to prevent the type of disunity that AQI desires. Even more crucial than electoral representation is the physical security of the Sunni populace. Perhaps the most positive move taken by the central government in this regard was Maliki’s decision in March 2008 to cease support for Muqtada al Sadr and initiate military operations against the Jaysh al Mahdi. This move significantly bolstered Maliki’s legitimacy with the Sunnis and undermined much of the basis of AQI’s presence. Similar policy decisions will be necessary in the future if Iraq’s religious minority is to feel adequately insulated from sectarian militias. However Maliki’s move against Sadr was probably more about neutralizing a challenge to himself than winning over the Sunnis. It is also vital that sectarian violence not be used to secure political authority. This may prove difficult. The central government recently initiated a crackdown on suspected Ba’athists in a preemptive operation to counter an anti-government plot. Unsurprisingly, many Sunnis perceived the move as a politically motivated endeavor to secure Shiite domination in light of the American withdrawal. Whether or not an insurrection was in the works the government must tread carefully. If the Sunnis feel targeted and the US is absent another alliance of convenience with AQI may be an attractive option.

In sum, Al Qaeda’s past and future in Iraq must be viewed in the context of the nation’s sectarian divisions. Their previous success was made possible only by the Sunnis’ quest for security amongst civil warfare, and not by any innate amenability to AQI’s salafist ambitions. As long as the Sunnis receive sufficient representation and protection, AQI is unlikely to recover from its setbacks. The foreigners will maintain a presence, but with none of Iraq’s communities willing to embrace them, their effectiveness will be marginal at best.
The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) is a specialist centre within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

ICPVTR conducts research, training, and outreach programs aimed at reducing the threat of politically motivated violence and at mitigating its effects on the international system. The Centre seeks to integrate academic theory with practical knowledge, which is essential for a complete and comprehensive understanding of threats from politically-motivated groups.

The Centre is staffed by academic specialists, religious scholars, as well as personnel from the law enforcement, military and intelligence agencies, among others. The Centre is culturally and linguistically diverse, comprising of functional and regional analysts as well as Muslim religious scholars from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

Events and Publications

- **Terrorist Rehabilitation:**
  The US Experience in Iraq (CRC Press Taylor and Francis Group, 2011) by Dr. Ami Angell and Dr. Rohan Gunaratna

- **Pakistan: Terrorism Ground Zero** (Reaktion Books, 2011) by Dr. Rohan Gunaratna and Mr. Khuram Iqbal

- **International Aviation and Terrorism: Evolving Threats, Evolving Security** (Routledge 2009) by Dr. John Harrison

- **Ethnic Identity and National Conflict in China** (Palgrave Macmillan 22 June 2010) by Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, Dr. Arabinda Acharya and Mr. Wang Pengxin

- **Targeting Terrorist Financing: International Coopera-**
  **tion and New Regimes** (Routledge 2009) by Dr. Arabinda Acharya

Watch this space for upcoming events at ICPVTR