

ROAD TO JIHAD

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ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO REGULATE, THE WEB IS A GIFT
FOR A NEW GENERATION OF YOUNG EXTREMISTS

The conviction of five men for terrorist offences last July gives a stark insight into how a new breed of potential terrorist is being recruited. The ring of would-be martyrs was arrested in Bradford, where three of the men studied, after convincing 17-year-old schoolboy, Mohammed Irfan Raja, to join them. Raja was first introduced to the other men, Aitzaz Zafar, then 18, Usman Malik, 19, Akbar Butt, 18, and Awaab Iqbal, 20, through an Internet chatroom by another student, Ali, from America. He hoped to join them in Pakistan where they all planned to join a training camp in the country's lawless Frontier Province.

Raja's radicalisation through the Internet is the first case to be tried in British courts centring on cyber-recruitment. 'You were intoxicated by the extremist nature of the material that each of you collected, shared and discussed – the songs, the images and language of violent jihad. So carried away by that material were you that each of you crossed the line,' the judge noted.

Herein lies the problem: with the Internet proving almost impossible to regulate, it is increasingly difficult to identify and stop young men from being radicalised and 'crossing the line'. Although their plot seems fanciful, the men in this case were no paper tigers. Raja eventually ran away from home to join the other men in Bradford leaving his parents a note explaining, 'If not in this [world] we will meet in the Garden of Paradise, Inshallah [God willing].' The letter also told of his intention to go abroad. Computer records later confirmed that the men were in contact with a fixer in Pakistan who was planning to facilitate their passage into one of the Frontier's camps.

Al Qaeda is acutely aware of the advantages the Internet has to offer. Recent videos by its leader, Osama bin Laden, have directly addressed the American public on everything from the volatility of sub-prime lending markets to the Kyoto agreement, which Congress refuses to ratify. It's an area where London-based Islamists, frustrated at their distance from al Qaeda's primary arena of activity, have also found their calling by offering technical skills for its cyber jihad.

Between 2003 and 2005, a young Moroccan, Younis Tsouli, ran sophisticated websites for the Iraqi insurgency, broadcasting their videos and messages around the world. Operating under the pseudonym 'Irhabi 007', which means terrorist 007, from his flat in west London, his efforts drew praise from Abu Maysara,



Cyber jihad: bin Laden speaks, 8 September 2007

Credit: Rex Features

leader of al Qaeda's media arm in Iraq. 'In the name of Allah I am please with your presence, my beloved brother. May Allah protect you,' he wrote.

Shortly before his arrest, Tsouli was busy paving the way for a future generation of jihadists. In June 2005, he published a 20-page document about hacking websites on an al Qaeda forum. When cartoons satirising the Prophet Mohammed were published the following year by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, its servers were systematically bombarded by hackers causing them to overload. A further 578 Danish websites are also estimated to have been knocked offline that week.

Islamists celebrated their pyrrhic victory on al Qaeda forums where one member acknowledged, 'I am certain that I see his [Younis Tsouli's] fingerprints on numerous projects.' Despite his arrest a year before the controversy, Tsouli's influence continued to be felt.

But the distribution of extremist material among British Muslims is not a recent phenomenon. It first started during the Balkan war in the mid-1990s when videos were produced and mailed to sympathisers around the country. This kind of hardcopy propaganda was inherently problematic. Recipients were limited and had to be already known, leaving an easy trail to follow.

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The Internet radically changed this. Online material simultaneously achieves three objectives for al Qaeda propagandists: it informs their activists around the world of developments; encourages supporters and sympathisers; and is designed to ultimately undermine public opinion in 'enemy' countries. The latter is a strategy the Iraqi insurgency has used to devastating effect against the American public with its ritual beheadings of US contractors.

This psychological dimension offered by the Internet is unparalleled in its ability to achieve mass penetration and create the impression of a sustained terror threat. Since 9/11, al Qaeda has continually warned of a repeat 'spectacular', prompting a flurry of increased security measures and fear across America. In London, the suicide video of Shehzad Tanweer was similarly delayed for release until the one-year anniversary of the atrocity in 2006 to ensure maximum publicity and insult.

The anonymity of the Internet has also encouraged a new generation of armchair jihadists to offer financial support to Islamist fighters abroad, with the strength of sterling on foreign exchange markets making fundraising in Britain a priority. At present, America is seeking the extradition of Babar Ahmad, a former employee at Imperial College, who is alleged to have been fundraising for Taliban and Chechen fighters.

More than the movement of funds, the Internet has principally aided the flow of ideas. Although the government moved to proscribe the glorification of terrorism following 7/7, the Internet makes this almost impossible to prohibit. With Internet chatrooms hosting users from across the world, foreign participants are free to praise suicide attacks in earshot of British users.

One of Britain's most notorious Islamist leaders, Omar Bakri Mohammed, who fled London after the 7/7 attacks, has also exploited the opportunities for unfettered networking offered by the Internet. Bakri continues to preach to his followers from Lebanon using the Internet software Paltalk. Offering private chat forums, where access can be restricted, allows him to instruct trusted associates while beyond the reach of the law. It underscores the problem of deporting radical clerics who have an established following in Britain.

His supporters also continue to flout the law. Although the government proscribed al Muhajiroun and its successor movements, al Ghurabaa and the Saved Sect, they continue to associate through the Internet unimpeded. The government is powerless to stop them swapping videos of the Iraqi insurgency in password-protected chatrooms.

Members of these forums create time-limited accounts on 'file transfer protocol' (FTP) websites where the videos are hosted. Others are then directed to download the file from that account before it expires, typically after a few days. The effects of this have been felt over the last year, when the previously unknown Abu Omar al Baghdadi was hailed by radicals in London as the new leader of al Qaeda in Iraq.

Baghdadi succeeded Abu Musab al Zarqawi, after American troops assassinated him, and called a meeting of 19 different insurgent leaders operating in Iraq's Sunni triangle. Baghdadi used it to declare himself the Caliph of Iraq, arguing that America's control of the country was limited to the Green Zone. Members of the now defunct al Muhajiroun downloaded videos and leaflets in English from FTP sites and began promoting Baghdadi as the 'Amir al Mukmineen', leader of the faithful, to whom all Muslims – including those in Britain – should subordinate themselves.

Exploiting everyday technologies has become a hallmark of al Qaeda's low-intensity conflict against the west, offering an instant and unregulated canvas for their message. This poses unique problems for the police and intelligence services who can only monitor a fraction of the radical websites now available online.

The Bradford plot went entirely undetected by the police until Raja's parents contacted them after discovering his note. They later uncovered the cell after Raja's mother went on hunger strike, prompting him to lose his nerve and return home.

His trial, along with the other men from Bradford, provoked a flurry of condemnation from civil liberties groups who suggested that trying them as terrorists was inappropriate. Although they were glorifying terrorist acts through their web chats and expressing support for mujahideen fighters, these men had not even left their student suburb in West Yorkshire.

There are some obvious tensions. Researchers, journalists and security officials will invariably need to access radical material on the Internet when investigating a related topic. The difficulty seemingly comes in identifying those who are not accessing such material for legitimate purposes.

Yet, as it stands, this is one of the few areas where anti-terror legislation is broadly working. In a criminal trial, the prosecution must prove that the defendant committed the *actus reus*, guilty act, while in a certain state of mind. The *mens rea*, guilty mind, is also therefore required before a person can be convicted of a crime and, in the case of terrorism, requires the prosecution to demonstrate intent.

This burden of proof clearly requires the defendant's behaviour to extend so far beyond legitimate interest or even curiosity that it strays into actual intent. In the case of the Bradford plotters, Raja's actions along with his note demonstrated an obvious intention to fight jihad abroad.

The intricate balance between civil liberties and security is well supported in this sense. While the need to pursue terrorists quickly is obvious, changing organic legal protections developed over centuries without effective procedural safeguards is foolhardy. They are in place for good reason. □

Shiraz Maher is a writer and broadcaster. He is currently writing a book on the ideas behind the war on terror