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Al-Qaeda Central and the Internet

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Al-Qaeda's media strategy in 2009 reflected the group's attempts to meet the triple challenge of a shifting media landscape, its enmeshment in the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus, and the global jihadist movement's failures over the last several years. The results are ambiguous. Al-Qaeda appears to be holding the attention of the faithful, but it faces a rising din of competing voices, an Internet that is more and more of a mixed blessing, and less resonance in mainstream Arab media than in years past.

After the 1998 announcement of the formation of the Global Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders, al-Qaeda seized the world's attention with a series of terrorist attacks that culminated in the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York. But after 2001, mayhem gave way to media presence. Al-Qaeda continued to plot and attack, but none of the group's successful operations came close to 9/11 in scope or impact. By 2006, Marc Lynch wrote that "Al-Qaeda the organization has increasingly become indistinguishable from Al-Qaeda the media phenomenon."[1]

Today, al-Qaeda—the media phenomenon and the organization—faces grave challenges. The media landscape has changed, and the medium that Osama bin Laden and his most active supporters exploited so brilliantly to spread their message—the Internet—has evolved in ways that make it harder for al-Qaeda to dominate. Polls suggest that the group's ideology and violence is increasingly less appealing to its supposed target audience.[2] And, with the evident demise of the jihadist project in Iraq and dimming prospects for the global jihadist movement on other fronts,

al-Qaeda's remaining physical assets—its leadership and core cadres—find themselves embroiled in a variety of complex local struggles in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Al-Qaeda's media strategy in 2009 reflected the group's attempts to meet the triple challenge of a shifting media landscape, its enmeshment in the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus, and the global jihadist movement's failures over the last several years. The results are ambiguous. Al-Qaeda appears to be holding the attention of the faithful, but it faces a rising din of competing voices, an Internet that is more and more of a mixed blessing, and less resonance in mainstream Arab media than in years past.[3] Al-Qaeda's leadership clearly recognizes that the group's fate is now bound up with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, yet the leaders seem unsure how to present and package this relationship for its Arabic speaking audience. As for the jihadist cause writ large, al-Qaeda's media strategy speaks volumes even as it tries, at times, to say as little as possible: Al-Qaeda refuses to concede the existence of inconvenient realities, such as its continued predilection for killing Muslims, let alone explain them.

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Al-Qaeda the Media Phenomenon

Three elements aid the emergence of a successful media phenomenon: content, conduit, and context. Something must find its way to someone who is ready to react. Al-Qaeda's content came in the form of a radical revolutionary ideology and spectacular terrorist attacks. The conduit was a mix of mainstream media—especially satellite television news—and the Internet, both of which were transforming the media landscape in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The context, while trickier to encapsulate, can be described as the virulent resentment among a group of mainly Arab intellectuals toward Western political and cultural encroachment on the Arab-Muslim world, the ability of these radicals to mobilize and deploy foot soldiers to mount terrorist attacks against the United States, and, finally, the willingness of the United States to respond to provocation.

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In attempting to gauge the fortunes of al-Qaeda's media outreach—and, to some extent, al-Qaeda's overall health—this study looks primarily at the contents and conduits of the group's media efforts in 2009. It examines the public relationship between al-Qaeda and the as-Sahab Institute for Media Production, al-Qaeda's prominence on today's Arabic-language jihadist forums, and al-Qaeda's overall media strategy. The analysis reveals weaknesses in the connective tissue between the constituent parts of the al-Qaeda brand. As-Sahab is developing an identity independent of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden outshines al-Qaeda, and the increasing association of as-Sahab, al-Qaeda, and bin Laden with Afghanistan and Pakistan is not playing well with al-Qaeda's constituency of Web-savvy, Arabic-speaking jihadist supporters. The study closes with modest recommendations for those who wish to accelerate what the author believes is a definite downward trend in al-

Qaeda's ability to win converts through strategic communications.

Al-Qaeda's Media Strategy

Al-Qaeda's media strategy in 2010 might be broadly described as one of association and co-optation. With little operational muscle to flaunt, al-Qaeda associates itself through as-Sahab with operationally active groups in ideological and geographic proximity, such as the Taliban groups on either side of the Afghan and Pakistan border. And with no regionally specific struggle of its own to pursue, al-Qaeda seeks to co-opt whatever ongoing conflicts—"from Kabul to Mogadishu," as the title of a February 2009 statement by Ayman al-Zawahiri put it—fit into the global jihadist narrative of its leaders.

The Quetta Shura Taliban, by contrast, conveys a far more geographically rooted and self-sufficient presence, even as it vies with al-Qaeda in global reach.[4] The Quetta Shura Taliban maintains several dedicated Web sites with materials in the most widely spoken languages of Afghanistan and Pakistan (Pashto, Dari, Urdu, and English), while publishing a high-quality, Arabic-language online periodical with its own Web site and inundating Arabic-language jihadist forums with daily press releases. The electronic versions of Quetta Shura press releases provide contact information for actual spokesmen who can respond to media queries [see Figure 1].

Figure 1. Contact information for Taliban spokesmen as listed on a jihadist forum.

The message is primarily local and operational, with most press releases detailing the progress of the insurgency within Afghanistan. Leadership statements and pronouncements on geopolitical issues are rare, but at least some recent statements have adopted a sober nationalist tone at odds with jihadist orthodoxy and suggestive of ideological independence.[5] At its most effective, the Quetta Shura Taliban combines global media resonance and local perspective, as in the widely covered 2009 release of a Pashto-language manual for Taliban field commanders that echoed the U.S. Army's 2006 counterinsurgency doctrine of population-centric warfare.[6]

Meanwhile, a curious, if only anecdotally attested, imbalance emerges in al-Qaeda's references to the Taliban. Osama bin Laden made a single passing reference to the Taliban in 2009, but Ayman al-Zawahiri last February urged the Afghan people to "join your brothers and sons of the Taliban in the jihad against the US Crusader occupation." In April, al-Zawahiri obsequiously described a routine quote by Mullah Omar—"Bush promised us defeat and God promised us victory"—as "words that should be recorded in the history of Islam and humanity in gold letters." And in September, in a eulogy for Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, al-Zawahiri once again made glowing mention of the "Islamic Emirate and its mujahid, the Emir of the Believers, Mullah Muhammad Omar, may God protect him."[7] In response, the Taliban does not appear to have referred to al-Qaeda or bin Laden at all.

Al-Qaeda's media strategy bespeaks a virtual and parasitic movement, with little operational substance of its own and an eagerness to appropriate the successes of real or perceived allies. The Quetta Shura Taliban prioritizes its local environment but is aware of a global audience. The Pakistani Taliban is more purely local. Its leaders have spoken to the press, and the movement's use of radio has drawn notice, but it has only a minimal presence on international jihadist Web sites and no stable system for distributing its media products outside Pakistan.[8]

Al-Qaeda and as-Sahab

The As-Sahab Institute for Media Production is not 20th Century Fox. As-Sahab is a virtual entity for audio, video, and graphic production, all distributed online. It has no address and no brick-and-mortar headquarters. As-Sahab does not maintain a constantly updated catalog detailing its various offerings; instead, they are scattered over the forums, blogs, and file-hosting Web sites that serve as the virtual distribution network for its productions.[9] Nevertheless, as-Sahab has some similarities to a conventional studio. It has a schedule of yearly releases, its offerings break down into identifiable genres, and the viewing preferences of forum participants are a rough guide to the box office appeal of as-Sahab's productions among a core audience of Internet users sympathetic to al-Qaeda Central and the various movements allied and associated with it.[10]

As-Sahab released about 70 original productions in 2009.[11] With the exception of a 65-page book by bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and a seven-page letter by al-Zawahiri's wife, all of as-Sahab's 2009 releases fit into one of three categories: statements by specific individuals, documentary films, and attack videos. Some are tied to specific events, as in the response of al-Qaeda rising star Abu Yahya al-Libi to President Barack Obama's Cairo speech, or to calendar dates, such as al-Libi's address on the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr. Others have a thematic focus, like Osama bin Laden's "Practical Steps to Liberate Palestine." Some feature a single individual, while others show more than one, such as a message from Pakistani Taliban leaders Hakimullah Mehsud and Wali ur-Rehman released to jihadist forums in October 2009. Still others take the form of an interview conducted by an as-Sahab representative, like a dialogue with Quetta Shura Taliban/Haqqani network commander Mullah Sangeen. Some statements are video; others are audio. Most are in Arabic, but some are in Pashto, English, German, and Urdu.
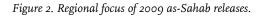
Statements predominated among as-Sahab's 2009 releases, accounting for 51 of the approximately 70 items. Remaining items included nine documentaries (often featuring clips of the same individuals showcased in individual statements), 11 short videos showing attacks, and the above-mentioned book and article. Of the 51 statements, 40 were video and 11 were audio. Appendix 1 provides an overview of 2009 as-Sahab productions, showing the title, month of release, a brief description, regional focus, and featured individual. The most frequently featured individuals in as-Sahab's 2009 releases that focused on specific leadership figures were al-Libi (13 releases), al-Zawahiri (12 releases and one book), and bin Laden (6 releases).
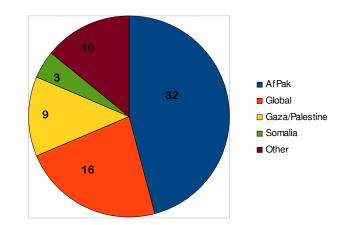
Figures who made fewer than five individual statements in 2009 included the two most prominent Western members of al-Qaeda, American Adam Gadahn (Azzam al-Amriki) and German Bekkay Harrach (Abu Talha), as well as Egyptian Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, al-Qaeda's commander in Afghanistan. A notable minority of the statements were made by Afghan and Pakistani Taliban figures, who accounted for at least six statements. In general, however, the face of as-Sahab—as demonstrated by the individuals who spoke in individually focused releases—remained largely Arab from traditional al-Qaeda figures. After the Arabs, al-Qaeda members from Western countries and the Taliban were a significant, if secondary, presence.

But if Afghan and Pakistani Taliban figures were relatively minor contributors to the individual statements produced by as-Sahab in 2009, the region they represented was a major presence. An analysis of the 70-odd as-Sahab releases by geographic focus reveals the following breakdown (for regions that were the focus of more than two items):

- Pakistan: 19
- Global (more than one regional focus): 16
- Afghanistan: 13
- Gaza/Palestine: 9
- Somalia: 3

If the Afghanistan- and Pakistan-focused releases are combined into a single "AfPak" category, they account for more than 30 of the roughly 70 releases in 2009, or nearly half of as-Sahab's production [see Figure 2]. Also striking is the almost complete lack of attention to Iraq. Some releases in the "global" category mentioned Iraq, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri's April 2009 address titled "Six Years Since the Invasion of Iraq and 30 Years Since Signing a Peace Agreement With Israel." But no single video focused entirely on Iraq, where the jihadist project has been on the wane since al-Qaeda in Iraq trumpeted the foundation of the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006, only to see a combination of Sunni Awakening movements, U.S. military efforts, and a stronger central government throw the jihadists back on their heels in 2007-2009.

Figure 2. Regional focus of 2009 as-Sahab releases.

At the same time that as-Sahab is focusing so intently on Afghanistan and Pakistan, it does not try to explicitly link events to al-Qaeda. The following indicators are noteworthy:

- As-Sahab sometimes produces statements by individuals clearly affiliated with organizations distinct from al-Qaeda. For example, a September 2009 interview with a man identified as the Taliban military commander in Afghanistan's Paktika province has no discernible tie to al-Qaeda. The presence of Mullah Sangeen, who is linked to both the Quetta Shura and the Haqqani network, in an as-Sahab production may indicate a link between al-Qaeda and the Quetta Shura Taliban, but viewers would

have to rely on outside knowledge—of as-Sahab's long-standing association with al-Qaeda—to draw the connection.

- Videos produced by as-Sahab that feature al-Qaeda leadership figures are not explicitly branded as al-Qaeda. The only logo and brand associated with the videos are those of as-Sahab. The al-Qaeda link is implicit. By contrast, when Afghan and Pakistani Taliban figures appear on as-Sahab videos, they are often directly linked; their explicit organizational affiliation is present alongside as-Sahab's logo.

- As-Sahab videos of attacks in Afghanistan have no identifying markers linking them to al-Qaeda. Viewers may draw a connection, but the link is implicit. This marks a departure from standard practice by other groups, where the branding of attack videos is almost always explicit.[12] For example, attack videos by the Islamic State of Iraq (the current iteration of al-Qaeda in Iraq) are produced by the virtual media production entity al-Furqan but are also branded with the name and logo of the Islamic State of Iraq.

- Statements by top al-Qaeda leadership figures are released by as-Sahab, sometimes with no mention of al-Qaeda, but statements explicitly marked al-Qaeda Central Command are released independently of as-Sahab. The reasons for the division are unclear, but it has the effect of further blurring the connection between as-Sahab and al-Qaeda. While Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Yahya al-Libi appear to release statements exclusively through as-Sahab, since 2007 at least four written statements marked al-Qaeda (Qa'idat al-Jihad) Central Command (al-qiyadah al-ammah) have appeared separately, without any link to as-Sahab. These statements—in three of the four cases signed by Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, identified in other contexts as al-Qaeda's military commander in Afghanistan—deal mainly with events in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Abu al-Yazid is also

the only high-ranking al-Qaeda member who gives interviews to mainstream media outlets like Al-Jazeera.[13] Even as the relationship between as-Sahab and al-Qaeda is clearly more complex than a one-to-one correspondence, Osama bin Laden's individual inspirational presence further confuses al-Qaeda's organizational brand. The emphasis on bin Laden personally is not a new phenomenon, of course—bin Laden has been a superstar in jihadist circles since before 9/11. The relative paucity of spectacular operations plausibly conducted by al-Qaeda Central since 2001 and the concurrent profusion of al-Qaeda affiliates from Iraq to North Africa has dimmed and refracted the al-Qaeda light, but bin Laden's ongoing evasion of capture has burnished his personal luster. Admittedly initial evidence suggests that bin Laden attracts more direct references than the organization he created:

- Jihadist statements of support for Osama bin Laden frequently fail to mention al-Qaeda, although mainstream media often report them as statements of support for the group. For example, the Wall Street Journal reported in early February that Somalia's al-Shabab movement had allied itself with al-Qaeda.[14] But the Arabic text of the movement's statement is titled "Announcement of unification of the Young Mujahidin [Shabab] movement and the Ras Kambuni Camp."[15] It does not mention al-Qaeda but cites bin Laden, and that reference comes only in the fourth point of the declaration, which vows to "challenge the fierce crusader campaigns and connect the jihad in the horn of Africa with the global jihad that Shaykh Abu Abdallah Osama bin Laden is leading."

- A slickly produced, 46-minute Uzbek-language documentary titled "Usoma" and available on the Web site of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan presents the history of al-Qaeda through the prism of bin Laden's biography.[16] The documentary does not mention al-Qaeda, although it refers several times to "Mullah Omar, commander of the faithful (amir al-mu'minin)" and to the Taliban as the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan." The

film describes the 9/11 attacks only as the work of "self-sacrificing brothers." An Uzbek-language IMU account of the battle of Shah-i-Kot, in which the IMU fought alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda, refers to "al-Qaeda" only in translated excerpts from Western news reports and quotes from U.S. political and military figures. The IMU account refers to other fighters as "brothers," "mujahids," or "mujahirs" (emigrants).[17]

- In his videotaped testament, suicide bomber Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi (Abu Dujana al-Khorasani), the double-agent suicide bomber who attacked a CIA base in Khost in December 2009, refers in both English and Arabic to Baitullah Mehsud as the "emir of Tehrik-i-Taliban," or the leader of the Pakistani Taliban. When al-Balawi mentions Osama bin Laden in his Arabic remarks, however, he makes no mention of al-Qaeda.[18] In a subsequent interview as-Sahab released in late-February 2010, al-Balawi sits before (and partially obscures) a banner that says "al-Qaeda," but he refers to al-Qaeda only in passing, and not once to Osama bin Laden.[19] A short documentary preamble to the interview includes an old clip of Osama bin Laden making a well-known statement about the United States and the plight of the Palestinians.

- A motivational poster on the Arabic-language jihadist forum Majahden proclaims that the forum and "its team" are "renewing" their vow of allegiance to Osama bin Laden [see Figure 3]. The poster describes bin Laden as the "pride of the Islamic community" but makes no mention of al-Qaeda.

Long-term processes are at work here. A 2007 IntelCenter analysis shows as-Sahab's movement away from a vehicle for al-Qaeda leadership statements.[20] If statements by leadership figures accounted for more than 90 percent of as-Sahab releases in 2002-2005, by 2005 the category of "other" had grown to over 70 percent of as-Sahab's total production, an increase IntelCenter attributed to "recent efforts by as-Sahab to release shorter operational videos

from Afghanistan as well as video statements by other al-Qaeda figures such as Abu Nasir al-Qahtani, Omar al-Faruq, and Abu Laith al-Libi." And, as noted above, al-Qaeda has generally highlighted bin Laden.

Figure 3. The Majahden jihadist forum "renews" its vow of allegiance to Osama bin Laden.

But taken together, these factors—daylight between as-Sahab and al-Qaeda, the atomization of al-Qaeda into leadership figures, and the personal prominence of Osama bin Laden—suggest a significant blurring of the al-Qaeda brand. Its main media entity produces and distributes content developed outside al-Qaeda's control and maintains a geographic focus far from the group's Arab homeland. Al-Qaeda lacks organizational heft in the form of rank-and-file fighters or corporate identity in the form of a logo. The group appears almost exclusively in the guise of individual leadership figures, and the most famous of them is himself a more powerful and frequently referenced brand than the organization he commands.

Finally, as-Sahab's focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan does not seem to be firing the hearts of al-Qaeda's core constituency of Arabic-speaking jihadist forum participants. A survey of the 10 most heavily viewed items as of January 2010 on five heavily trafficked jihadist forums reveals only one Pakistan-focused item—the Pashto-language version of

a "Message to Our Brothers in Pakistan" by bin Laden, which ranked ninth. Of the eight items with higher view counts, three were focused on Gaza or Palestine, and the remainder on global jihadist issues. In genre, they were either documentary films or statements by bin Laden (two items) or Ayman al-Zawahiri (one item, but the most viewed: "Truths of the Jihad and the Lies of Hypocrisy"). Al-Qaeda and as-Sahab may have refocused their activities on Afghanistan and Pakistan, but their Arab supporters do not appear especially eager to follow suit.

Al-Qaeda in the Jihadist Media Landscape

Ascertaining al-Qaeda Central's place and significance in today's jihadist internet landscape is not simple. Al-Qaeda was at the forefront of early efforts to spread the jihadist message over the Internet, and its supporters laid the groundwork for the system of forums and file-hosting sites that now functions so effectively. But al-Qaeda's quantitative presence—the total number of media items it releases as compared to those released by all other jihadist and militant groups—has shrunk as other jihadist voices have proliferated. Al-Qaeda's qualitative presence, however, remains significant.

Where al-Qaeda is least evident is in the daily churn of jihadist forums, which are dominated by discussions of current events or operational and political statements by various groups [for more on the forum environment, see Appendix 2]. The Fallujah jihadist forum is probably the most vibrant jihadist forum currently in operation, with over 300,000 posts on its current events section and over 100,000 posts on its jihadist media section.[21] Hanein is a smaller and more Iraq-oriented forum. Appendix 3 and Appendix 4 show in English translation what the media sections of these two well-trafficked jihadist forums looked like on November 28, 2009; Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the originals. These are snapshots of the forums on a single day, but they are representative of the situation on popular sections of well-trafficked forums, and they provide a sense of what ordinary users actually see when they turn to

forums for the latest media releases from al-Qaeda and other groups.

Figure 4, left. Al-Fallujah media section on November 28, 2009.
Figure 5, right. Hanein media section on November 28, 2009.

The first page of Fallujah's media section on November 28 offered viewers 68 items, or about three days' worth of jihadist media production; the last item on the page is marked as posted "four days ago." Seven items were banner ads, 16 were posts that the administrator deemed sufficiently important to "thumbtack," making them "sticky," and the remaining 45 posts were simply the normal turnover of media statements posted to the board.

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"Sticky" threads and banner ads

Banner ads. Promotional messages, often formatted with animated graphics, that come at the top of the page on most forums. Only administrators can post banner ads, which usually link to recent jihadist video releases.

Sticky threads. New threads normally displace existing threads on forums, pushing them farther down on the page and eventually off the front page altogether and onto a second page. When forum administrators "thumbtack" a thread, it becomes "sticky" and remains at the top of the page in a special section for "sticky" threads.

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The media items focused primarily on Afghanistan (24 items), followed by Iraq (18), the North Caucasus (15), Somalia (3), and Yemen (2). The most prominent organization was the Quetta Shura Taliban, which generated all of the Afghanistan-focused media items. Text predominated, as is normally the case on jihadist Web sites, with only 10 videos on offer among the nearly 70 items.

Al-Qaeda's presence on the Fallujah forum came in the form of a single video statement by Abu Yahya al-Libi, seen by some as a rising star in al-Qaeda and perhaps even an eventual successor to Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri. The As-Sahab Institute for Media Production, which has traditionally produced leadership statements by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, appeared as the producer of al-Libi's speech and two other videos. One was an Urdu-language statement by Tariq Azzam, spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, on explosions in Peshawar; the other showed an attack on an "apostate center," jihadist jargon for

a government facility, in Afghanistan's Zabul province.[22] It should be noted that nothing linked these two videos to al-Qaeda aside from as-Sahab's historical association with the group. In fact, both videos have organizational affiliations distinct from al-Qaeda. Tariq Azzam represents the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan, and the attack video appears to represent the handiwork of the Quetta Shura Taliban.

The situation on Hanein, a somewhat smaller forum than Fallujah in terms of overall volume, was much the same, albeit with Iraq eclipsing Afghanistan as the primary focus and video entirely absent. Not one of the 44 media items on Hanein had an obvious link to al-Qaeda in the form of a prominent individual, branding, or other reference.

Of course, al-Qaeda's absence from the daily churn reflects a trend that has been evident on the media sections of jihadist forums since the beginning of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq: Insurgent groups carry out almost daily operations and produce a corresponding flow of statements and videos boasting of their exploits.[23] The most numerous items in Fallujah's media section are statements from Afghanistan, Iraq, and the North Caucasus, all regions with ongoing insurgencies. For all its attempts to associate itself with the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda cannot compete with the Taliban—or any other insurgent group, for that matter—in the quantity of operations it carries out and subsequently publicizes.

Al-Qaeda's qualitative place in the jihadist media landscape is harder to gauge. However, the built-in counters in vBulletin forum software, which powers nearly all jihadist forums, make it easy to identify the most viewed and most commented upon items in any section of a forum, permitting an analysis of users' tastes and reactions.[24]

The data collected for this portion of the study consist of two samples, one gathered in December 2009 and the other in January 2010. The samples consist of the top five most viewed and top five most commented threads from 12 key sections on five relatively stable and well-known jihadist

Table 1. Snapshots of the forums, December 2009 and January 2010.

Forum	Sections Surveyed in December 2009 and January 2010
Medad (http://almedad.com/vb/)*	Politics
	Statements
	Audiovisual
Majahden (http://majahden.com/vb/)	Issues
Fallujah (http://alfaloja.org/vb/)	Issues
	Archived Audiovisual
	Statements
	Archived Statements
Hanein (http://www.hanein.info/vb/main.php)	Issues
	Statements
	Video
Shamikh (http://www.shamikh.net/vb)	Archived Releases**

URLs were active at the time of data collection (November 2009-January 2010). Most forums operate simultaneously at numerous URLs.

** The term "release" (isdar) on jihadist forums generally refers to videos.*

forums: Medad, Majahden, Fallujah, Hanein, and Shamikh. The most viewed and most commented items were frequently, but not always, the same. The data sets include "sticky" items, which forum administrators mark as especially important and which remain among the top items displayed even as new items appear, and ordinary "floating" items, which are displaced as new items are posted to the forum and which reflect only the viewing and commenting preferences of ordinary users.[25]

For each of the five most viewed and most commented

threads, the following information was recorded: title, organizational affiliation (if any), number of views, number of comments, forum, forum section, date posted, regional focus (if any), featured individual (if any), as-Sahab production (yes/no), and sticky (yes/no).

Sections were selected to provide an overview of users' viewing and commenting tastes in the forum areas where jihadist media most often circulate—namely, statements by jihadist groups and discussions of current events. Table 1 presents the sections surveyed for each forum in each sample.

Table 2. Forum activity, late January 2010.

Forum	Threads	Posts	Members	Oldest post in most popular section
Medad	11,569	39,893	4,136	03/22/06
Majahden	35,450	168,636	13,664 (2,283 active)*	11/10/07
Fallujah	96,275	678,947	14,131	09/19/06
Hanein	45,625	409,455	3,654 (333 active)*	06/09/09
Shamikh	54,240	327,405	11,034	NA**

*VBulletin software allows administrators to mark registered members inactive if they fail to log in after a certain time period. The gap between logins that would render a member inactive on the jihadist forums is not apparent. ** Shamikh went offline before this data could be collected.*

Table 2 presents statistics of forum activity as of late January 2010, along with the date of the oldest post in the section with the largest number of threads (to provide a rough sense of how long the forum has been in operation in its current incarnation).

Some preliminary conclusions about the forum environment emerge from the data above. First, the forums are a rather limited affair if one looks beyond the gross totals of posts and threads. The difference between the number of members and active members on Majahden and Hanein—the only forums that distinguish between members and active members—suggests that jihadist forums generally conform to the 90-9-1 rule of participation inequality in online communities.[26] The 90-9-1 rule holds that 1 percent of users (active members) are responsible for 90 percent of postings, 9 percent (members) are responsible for 10 percent of postings, and 90 percent (visitors) are "lurkers" who read available content but post nothing themselves. Using the 90-9-1 rule as a rough guide, we multiply the total number of members (active and inactive) listed above for each forum by 10 to estimate the number of non-contributing visitors. Adding up the numbers for all forums yields an estimate of 466,190 lurkers for the five forums surveyed here. Even though several other jihadist forums exist that were not surveyed here, the estimate of nearly 500,000 "jihadist lurkers" is probably inflated, as it does not account for overlap between the forums, which is almost certainly extensive. Intelligence services are also likely to account for some fraction of traffic. A conservative estimate might put the total number of single-instance and occasional viewers of Arabic-language jihadist forums in the low hundreds of thousands, the number of individuals sympathetic or interested enough to participate from time to time in the tens of thousands, and the number of individuals committed enough to contribute to forums on a regular basis in the single-digit thousands. Given the Internet's global reach and aggregating ability, these are somewhat less than awe-inspiring totals. By way of comparison, the mainstream current affairs Arabic-language forum ArabsGate had

172,031 threads, 1,550,396 posts, and 302,466 members as of February 21, 2010.[27]

Second, repeated shutdowns and stoppages of popular forums have biased the survivors and successors toward the present. None of the five forums surveyed here has an archive that extends back beyond 2006. Most taper off in 2007 and 2008. The forums have been around for much longer in various incarnations, but the vast corpus of jihadist discussion and media that surged through the Internet before 2006, while sometimes accessible through Google's cache function or in independent online archives, is for all practical purposes lost to the current enthusiast or new visitor.[28]

Finally, while the forums are similar in structure, they are not uniform. Some put audiovisual and text statements into separate sections, while others group them together. Some keep threads older than a few days in special "archive" sections, while others lack archives entirely. They also differ slightly in the arrangement of sections, size of archive, level of participation, and dates of continuous operation. The differences preclude a statistically exact comparison or analysis. The data collected for this study—the most read and most commented items in a variety of sections as of December 2009 (totaling 154) and January 2010 (totaling 158)—are intended to provide a general overview of forum users' viewing and commenting behavior.

The two data sets contain the most viewed and commented items for each of 12 important sections on five jihadist forums as of December 2009 and January 2010. The forum sections differ in the amount of time they cover; some contain threads going back several years, others a few months or weeks. In all cases, when a section is examined for the most viewed or commented items, vBulletin software shows the most viewed and commented items over the entire time the section has existed. Thus, the data sets contain the most viewed and commented items for each of the 12 sections over the entire life of that section as of December 2009 and January 2010.

A side-by-side comparison of the December and January data sets shows that the most viewed items are relatively stable. Only two items differ among the 20 or 21 most viewed items—those with more than 10,000 views at the time. Both were released to the forums after the December data were collected. They are a January 10, 2010 Al-Qaeda Central announcement congratulating Humam Khalil al-Balawi on his suicide bombing against the CIA in Khost, and a December 28, 2009 statement from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claiming responsibility for Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's failed attempt to blow up a trans-Atlantic jet.[29]

Events in Gaza are clearly of great interest to forum participants.

Events in Gaza are clearly of great interest to forum participants: The three most viewed items as of January are all Gaza-related, and their view counts are significantly higher than all other items. The items themselves—a crowd-sourced thread to follow breaking developments during the December 2008 fighting between Hamas and Israel, and two items on the conflict within Gaza between non-Salafi Hamas and local Salafi jihadists—point to the ongoing, and unfulfilled, jihadist desire to play a greater part in the struggle against Israel. None of the items is an official release by a well-known jihadist group.

Yet as-Sahab continues to occupy an important place in the jihadist media landscape. No fewer than seven of the 21 most viewed items as of January 2010 are as-Sahab releases. (The figure is virtually identical as of December 2009: seven out of 20 items with more than 10,000 views.) Equally notable, however, is the breakdown of as-Sahab releases that made it into the most viewed items. Only three of them are clearly associated with al-Qaeda the organization through the presence of well-known leadership figures: an address by al-Zawahiri on "The Truths of Jihad and the Lies of Hypocrisy" and two by bin

Laden, both on Palestinian issues. The four other as-Sahab releases are documentary films about Gaza, martyrs, and global jihad.

Interestingly, none of the as-Sahab releases among the most viewed items focuses on the region where, by all accounts, al-Qaeda's remaining leaders are holed up and where, according to its own propaganda, the group hopes to inflict on the United States the stinging defeat that slipped from reach in Iraq: Afghanistan and Pakistan. The apparent lack of interest in South Asia extended to the most viewed items as a whole. Among the 21 items with more than 10,000 views as of January, the sole Afghanistan-focused item among the 13 with an identifiable geographic focus was the above-mentioned al-Qaeda statement celebrating the December 30 suicide bombing that killed seven CIA personnel in Khost. As-Sahab, incidentally, did not produce the statement. The remaining geographically linked items focused on Gaza and Palestine (6 items), Germany (3), Somalia (1), the United States (1) and the United States and Yemen (1). The results would seem to reflect the biases of cosmopolitan Arabic-speaking jihadists, for whom the West remains the second most important front after the Arab world, where Gaza is the top concern.

The "top 21" list also reveals a significant bias toward Fallujah, the most heavily trafficked forum. Threads from Fallujah account for 16 of the 21 threads with over 10,000 views, and for all of the as-Sahab items on the list. Sorting initially by forum and reducing the view count threshold to 5,000 produces a broader picture of the most popular items on forums as of January 2010. Fallujah is still prominent, with 23 items that garnered over 5,000 views, but other forums appear as well: Medad with 10 items, Hanein with eight, Majahden with five, and Shamikh with two.

As-Sahab represents a much smaller share in this expanded list of 48 items,. It accounted for seven of the 21 items with over 10,000 views, but only nine of the 48 items with over 5,000 views. Eight of those as-Sahab releases were on Fallujah, and one on Shamikh. The most viewed items on

Hanein, Majahden, and Medad contained no as-Sahab releases.

The trend of as-Sahab's decreasing prominence continues as the list is broadened to include more items with lower view counts. Arranging items first by forum, then by section within each forum, setting the view count threshold to 1,000, and sorting by view count produces a section-by-section picture of the most viewed items on each forum as of January. Table 3 summarizes the results.

The percentage of as-Sahab releases among items with over 1,000 views across all forums (14 percent) is close to the percentage of as-Sahab releases among all of the most viewed and commented items in the five forums as of December 2009 and January 2010. In December, 20 out of 154 items (13 percent) were as-Sahab releases; in January, there were 18 out of 158 items (11 percent).

In sum, as-Sahab's releases make up a significant percentage of the most viewed threads on Arabic-language jihadist forums. Fallujah, the most heavily trafficked Arabic-language jihadist forum accessible at present, accounts for most of as-Sahab's materials among the most viewed threads. Beyond the 20-odd threads viewed more than 10,000 times on the five forums studied, however, the percentage of releases from as-Sahab declines sharply. Overall, as-Sahab releases seem to account for somewhat more than 10 percent of the widely viewed threads on forums.

Table 3. As-Sahab on the forums, January 2010.

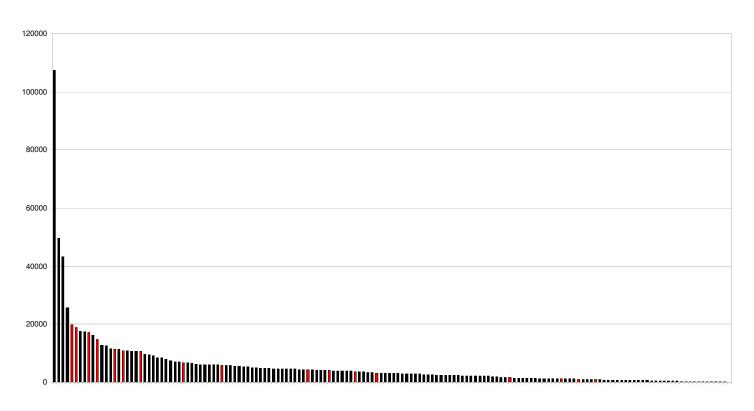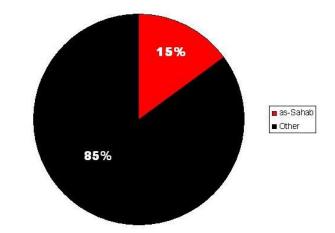| Forum	Section	# of items, view count greater than 1,000	# of items produced by as-Sahab	% of items produced by as-Sahab
Fallujah	Archived Audiovisual	12	8	67
	Archived Statements	10	1	10
	Issues	14	0	0
	Statements	5	0	0
	All Sections	41	9	22
Hanein	Issues	8	0	0
	Statements	7	0	0
	Video	10	0	0
	All Sections	25	0	0
Majahden	Issues	11	0	0
	All Sections	11	0	0
Medad	Audiovisual	13	0	0
	Political	14	0	0
	Statements	10	2	20
	All Sections	37	2	5
Shamikh	Archived Releases	11	5	45
	All sections	11	5	45
All forums	**All Sections**	**115**	**16**	**14**

Figure 6a. Most popular jihadist forum threads by view count, January 2010, as-Sahab in red.

The most viewed and most commented threads often overlap, but they are not identical. A review of the presence of as-Sahab releases among the most commented threads as of January 2010 suggests that while these releases remain popular among forum users, they are less important as drivers of discussion. Not a single as-Sahab release was among January's top 10 most commented items, and only two were in the top 20. Selecting threads that generated at least 100 comments—a respectable number on the forums—produces a list of 46. With this broader scope, as-Sahab releases account for seven items, or 15 percent, which is in line with a similarly broad sample arranged by view count.

It is important to remember that even if releases from as-Sahab garner high view counts, most of what forum users are looking at is not as-Sahab. One can imagine as-Sahab releases at the head of a "long tail" of views consisting primarily of items not from as-Sahab. If we arrange every

item across all forums by view count, as-Sahab releases are more likely to occur near the head among the items with large view counts. But the bulk of the views across the forums in general—the largest numbers of "eyeballs"—are in the "long tail" of items with smaller view counts. Figures 6a and 6b illustrates this with the material collected in January 2010.

Figure 6b. Jihadist forum views for as-Sahab products vs. other: January 2010.

Two additional observations about the Arabic-language jihadist forum environment emerge from the data presented here. The first concerns general levels of activity. Table 4 gives the top 10 most viewed threads as of January 2010, showing the title of each thread, the date it was originally posted, the number of views it had in December 2009, the number of views it had in January 2010, and the change between the two dates.

Table 4. Top 10 most viewed forum threads, January 2010.

Thread title	Date posted	Views as of 12/08/09	Views as of 1/21 or 2/1/2010	Change
We follow the latest events in Gaza here	12/27/08	106,359	107,335	976
Allahu Akbar: Announcement of an Islamic State in Gaza	08/14/09	49,423	49,597	174
Urgent: Gaza – Call to attend the Friday sermon by Shaykh Abu al-Nur al-Maqdisi at the Ibn Taymiyyah Mosque	08/12/09	43,151	43,409	258
For the infidel people of Germany: For the third time we give you the date of the promised day	10/03/09	25,202	25,749	547
Surprise about 9/11: Al-Sahab presents The West and the Dark Tunnel (in two parts)	09/22/09	18,201	18,954	753
Convincing the Community: Al-Sahab presents Truths of the Jihad and the Lies of Hypocrisy in an interview with Ayman al-Zawahiri	08/03/09	17,212	19,827	2,615
Creativity and Eulogy – Al-Sahab presents Winds of Paradise 3	02/08/09	17,050	17,140	90
Jihadist and Islamist songs in MP3 format	03/22/06	16,972	17,421	449
Young Mujahidin Movement: Media section presents the visual releases, We will do your bidding, Osama!	09/20/09	15,262	16,119	857
Earthquake: Al-Sahab presents a call for jihad to stop the aggression against Gaza by Shaykh Osama Bin Laden	01/14/09	14,788	14,870	82
Average Change				**680**

The average change in view count of a top 10 thread over at least a month and a half was 680, or, dividing by 45, approximately 15 views a day.[30] Trending threads that draw more than 15 new views a day are also present among the most viewed items. The two items that were posted after the December 2009 snapshot and went on to make the top 20 list in January—al-Qaeda's statement on the Khost bombing, posted January 10, and the statement by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula on the Nigerian "underwear bomber" Abdulmutallab, posted December 28—garnered, respectively, 11,253 views (or approximately 560 a day) and 10,653 views (approximately 313 a day) by February 1. Still, seen in the context of a medium that can rapidly generate millions of views for viral sensations, the overall picture of the jihadist forums is one of rather tepid activity.

Al-Qaeda's Challenges: Geography, Media, and Message

Al-Qaeda faces the triple challenge of a shifting media landscape, enmeshment in the Afghanistan-Pakistan nexus, and the waning fortunes of the jihadist movement worldwide. Media strategy would seem to be the natural place for the organization to marshal its proven skill at external communications to confront these challenges. But only on one front is al-Qaeda making a concerted effort to adjust its strategy to new realities: Afghanistan and Pakistan are now central to the group's media messaging.

On the remaining fronts, al-Qaeda has largely stood its ground as conditions around it have changed. Recent years have seen an explosion of blogging, microblogging on sites such as Twitter, user-generated content on YouTube, and social networking on sites like Facebook. Smart phones offer yet another platform with networked communications functionality.

Despite the alluring prospects of greater connectivity, new media have generally offered more pitfalls than benefits for jihadists. User-generated content imperils message control. Social networking renders jihadists vulnerable to detection,

surveillance, and arrest. Mobile phone applications that connect like-minded users in real time and space might sound attractive to jihadists in theory, but in practice could open the door to disastrous security risks. For now, jihadists appear set on maintaining the distinction between external and internal communications that new media are so adept at breaking down.[31]

YouTube, an ideal platform for distributing user-generated video, would seem to offer an acceptable compromise between connectivity and security. Indeed, it increasingly acts as a secondary distribution channel for al-Qaeda videos already disseminated through forums and file-hosting services. YouTube searches for as-Sahab, al-Sahab, al-Qaeda, or bin Laden in Arabic or English bring up numerous videos. But the environment is less than ideal for jihadist propaganda. For one, it is chaotic and competitive. As-Sahab productions have to fight for viewers in public, generating at best a few hundred thousand views, an average of a few thousand, and at worst an embarrassing handful.[32] They are also jumbled in with content that is, from a jihadist perspective, either offensive (like music videos with scantily clad singers) or undesirable (like parodies of jihadist videos). Finally, the comments on YouTube differ starkly from those of the self-selecting supporters on jihadist forums: Contributors are as likely to curse bin Laden as to praise him.

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All of this comes after several years of a broadly perceived decline in support for al-Qaeda's message in the Arab-Muslim world, not to mention the marked absence of any progress toward achieving the group's stated goals. If al-Qaeda is aware of these trends, its media strategy betrays

few hints. In a nod to the issue of civilian casualties, Adam Gadahn (Azzam al-Amriki) released a 17-minute video statement in December 2009 titled "The Mujahidin Do Not Target Muslims." But most of the statements by leadership figures in 2009 were firmly in the tradition of parasitic virtuality—trumpeting nonexistent victories and seeking potential proxies, from the Pakistani Taliban to the Palestinians.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Any study of terrorist media strategies confronts a central question: Is there a link between a group's external communications and its overall health?

Al-Qaeda's overall health is the sum of its operational capabilities and inspirational capacity. The media strategy surveyed here provides no direct insight into the operational capabilities of a group that has plotted, and surely continues to plot, in secret. The virtual and parasitic turn in al-Qaeda's external communications may suggest weakness, but al-Qaeda does not need to mobilize the masses to remain a viable terror group even if it fails as a movement.

But it was precisely al-Qaeda's ability to position itself as the leading edge of a movement that made it more than a terror group to begin with. For a time, the group's operations and media strategy appeared to be working in tandem: al-Qaeda struck the "far enemy" of the United States in 2001, setting off a chain of events that led to the appearance of al-Qaeda-inspired affiliates fighting the "near enemy" of apostate regimes under the banner of Osama bin Laden, who articulated global goals. If the al-Qaeda brand was diffuse, this merely aided the diffusion of the jihadist idea, which reached its apex when Iraq's Sunni insurgency was strongest, and al-Qaeda in Iraq its strongest element.

Today, the movement that once benefited from diffusion now seems at risk of dissolution. The blurring presentation of the al-Qaeda brand may represent a conscious choice by the figures behind as-Sahab to emphasize that they and their ilk are a broad movement, not a single group; or they may be following Abdallah Azzam's advice from the first Afghan jihad for the Arabs to serve as force multipliers for other groups. Today al-Qaeda Central is in uncertain straits, al-Qaeda-branded affiliates are mainly in retreat, al Qaeda is widely criticized in the Muslim world—mostly for killing Muslims—and highly idiosyncratic non-Arab insurgencies in Afghanistan and Somalia are leading the operational charge. The reasons for al Qaeda's blurring brand are not clear, but the effects are—the fuzzy brand highlights the discrepancies, displacements and disparities that afflict the jihadist cause.

This study offers several lessons for al-Qaeda's enemies:

- Al-Qaeda's external communications have become less effective mainly because of a changing media environment, al-Qaeda's focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan, growing concern over al Qaeda's murder of Muslims, and the general worldwide failure of the jihadist movement to achieve radical social and political change. Overt countermeasures, including strategic communications efforts, appear to be a lesser factor in these processes.

- The al-Qaeda organization is no longer fighting a coherent communications war, a skill at which it was supposed to excel. Contrary to the frequent dire statements about al-Qaeda's communications prowess, the U.S. should not assume it is fighting al-Qaeda from a position of weakness.

- Jihadist ideology will continue to appeal to a core constituency even as it fails as a mass movement. The gradual decay of al-Qaeda's external communications capacity may make us safer, but it will never make us perfectly safe.

- The final stages of the struggle to reduce al-Qaeda to irrelevance will involve undermining the appeal of the

jihadist narrative in specific communities, not strategic communications on the grand scale. As al-Qaeda's external communications capacity continues to degrade, the center of gravity in fighting al-Qaeda will shift to niche habitats where the organization's narrative survives and thrives. In each case—from Somalia to the FATA to European and U.S. communities—understanding the local information environment and how it intersects with global information flows will be necessary to fashion effective strategies for abetting the further decline of jihadist propaganda efforts.

1 Marc Lynch, "Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies," National Interest Online, March 1, 2006, http://www.nationalinterest.org/PrinterFriendly.aspx?id=11524

2 See the following for the results of September 2007 polling in Pakistan: http://www.usip.org/resources/pakistani-public-opinion-democracy-islamist-militancy-and-relations-us; Pew Research polling in 2009 found declining support for suicide bombing and bin Laden in several Muslim countries: http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1338/declining-muslim-support-for-bin-laden-suicide-bombing.

3 Marc Lynch, "Whether it's AQ or not, nobody in Arab media cares," Foreign Policy, December 27, 2009, http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/12/27/whether_its_aq_or_not_nobody_in_arab_media_cares.

4 For a detailed analysis of the Quetta Shura Taliban's media strategy, see Joanna Nathan, "Reading the Taliban," in Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2009).

5 In his "felicitations" on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr in September 2009, Quetta Shura Taliban leader Mullah Omar said that the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan wants to maintain good and positive relations with all neighbors based on mutual respect and open a new chapter of good neighborliness of mutual cooperation and economic development."

6 Claude Salhani, "Taliban field manual: A kinder, gentler militant?" Washington Times, July 30, 2009, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jul/30/a-kinder-gentler-taliban/. The field manual was extensively covered by Al-Jazeera in Arabic, which dedicated an entire talk show to the issue on July 27, 2009:

http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/4A9AB0C5-CD74-459E-8AFD-3A0013379341.htm.

7 "Islamic Emirate" is the preferred jihadist term for the Quetta Shura Taliban. As-Sahab produced a total of three tributes to Baitullah Mehsud after his death.

8 "Meeting Pakistan's most feared militant," BBC, May 27, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7420606.stm. Richard A. Oppel Jr. and Pir Zubair Shah, "Radio spreads Taliban's terror in Pakistani region," New York Times, January 25, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/world/asia/25iht-25swat.19645197.html.

9 See Daniel Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 4, 2008, http://www.rferl.org/content/pressrelease/1105999.html

10 Al-Qaeda Central is understood here as consisting of individuals who speak to the world through the as-Sahab Institute for Media Production without some other affiliation. Abu Yahya al-Libi is a member of al-Qaeda Central, as are Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, while identified in some contexts as al-Qaeda's military commander in Afghanistan, is also identified in some statements with al-Qaeda (Qa'idat al-Jihad) Central Command (al-qiyadah al-ammah). By way of distinction, Mullah Sangeen, a Pashto-speaking Afghan with whom as-Sahab produced an interview in September, was introduced by as-Sahab as the Taliban military commander in Afghanistan's Paktika province. For practical purposes, the number of publicly identified members of al-Qaeda in 2009, as judged by their as-Sahab-produced appearances and the absence of other organizational affiliations, was fewer than 10 individuals. When used without additional modifiers, al-Qaeda in this paper refers to al-Qaeda Central.

11 The number is approximate: Some releases appeared in two parts, like the September audio address by German al-Qaeda member Abu Talha (Bekkay Harrach); others consisted of a brief written statement and a short video excerpt, like the November releases titled "Attack on an Apostate Post in Zabul Province [Afghanistan]." In addition to the approximately 70 original releases in 2009, as-Sahab issued a number of translations of existing releases.

12 See Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, "Iraqi Insurgent Media," RFE/RL, June 26, 2007, http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1077316.html.

13 Al-Jazeera broadcast a lengthy interview with Abu al-Yazid on June 21, 2009: http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/C8A7D29B-9DFA-414E-8A09-EB30948E2621.htm. The Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) released an English translation of the interview in July 2009: http://74.125.113.132/search?q=cache:9N0KmQUm3EMJ:shamikh.net/vb/showthread.php%3Ft%3D42282+%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%89+%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%88+%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AF+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A9&cd=7&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us.

14 Sarah Childress, "Somalia's Al Shabaab to Ally With Al Qaeda," Wall Street Journal, February 2, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704107204575038674123215854.html?mod=WSJ_hpp_MIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsTop.

15 For the Arabic text, see: http://alqimmah.net/showthread.php?p=26595#post26595; the Somali text can be found at: http://www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=155744.

16 The IMU Web site is http://www.furqon.com.

17 Shahid Abu Bakr mufi, "Shahid ko'h g'azoti," Islom ummati nashriyoti, undated.

18 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnARuwbR51Y.

19 For a translation of Al-Balawi's remarks, see: http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/Balawi0310-2.pdf.

20 "Al-Qaeda messaging statistics," Intelcenter, 9 September 2007, see: http://www.intelcenter.com/QMS-PUB-v3-3.pdf.

21 http://202.71.102.68/~alfaloj/vb/, accessed December 22, 2009.

22 "Sahab" means "clouds" in Arabic.

23 See Kimmage, "The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus," RFE/RL, April 2008, and Kimmage and Ridolfo, "Iraqi Insurgent Media," RFL/RL, June 2007. .

24 http://www.vbulletin.com/.

25 For the distinction between "sticky" and "floating" posts on forums, see the earlier text box .

26 For more on the 90-9-1 rule, see http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html.

27 See http://vb.arabsgate.com/index.php?s=9dd912487460c507c1e68a0b60336bd2.

28 The Internet Archive (http://www.archive.org/index.php) contains partial copies of some jihadist forums that are no longer accessible at present. The University of Arizona's Dark Web Terrorism Research project has full archived copies of a number of jihadist forums for use by researchers: http://ai.arizona.edu/research/terror/.

29 Some media reports termed the statement a claim of responsibility. Given the absence of operational detail in the al-Qaeda statement, which describes the bombing in glowing terms but goes no further, and the existence of a videotaped joint statement showing the bomber with Pakistani Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud, organizational responsibility for the attack appears diffuse at best. Because the most viewed and commented items appear to be relatively stable, most of the subsequent analysis is based on the January 2010 data set.

30 We divide by 45 to approximate the time difference between December 8, 2009, and January 21, 2010. Dividing by 45 somewhat overestimates the average number of additional views a day each item garnered, as Fallujah data were collected for a second time on February 1, 2010 (more than 50 days after December 8, 2009).

31 Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Taking al-Qaeda's Jihad to Facebook," Jamestown Terrorism Monitor, February 4, 2010, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36002&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=3ade289d4e.

32 These estimates are based on searches conducted by the author on YouTube in February 2010.