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Although there can be no disputing the success that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) has reaped as of late by using the Internet to inspire and mobilize online followers in the United States, the underlying reasons for that success remains poorly understood within the American counterterrorism community. This is largely due to the fact that most analytical attention is being paid to the tactical dimension of AQAP’s media releases – stylistic elements, the Americans who are mentioned by name or specific threats made – while relatively little focus is given to the mechanics underlying AQAP’s online mobilization strategy. It is as if the counterterrorism community has been so fixated on the latest bells and whistles of AQAP propaganda that few analysts have actually popped the hood.

My testimony today will concentrate on examining why AQAP’s media products and personalities have found so much resonance with English-speaking individuals outside of the Gulf region of the Middle East, paying specific attention to the threat it poses to the U.S. homeland. From Texas to Virginia to New York and beyond, AQAP’s American supporters seem to be finding self-actualization in consuming and reproducing AQAP’s Internet messaging, both in the virtual world and, increasingly, in the physical world.

I argue that AQAP’s strategic approach to online media has allowed the organization to deliver more than just information to its online supporters. AQAP now provides its online community with a compelling, comic book experience, one that equips individuals with the tools they need while demystifying the path they must take, to become their own al-Qaeda superhero.

AQAP provides an arena for escapist fantasy and role-playing by empowering their audience with new knowledge, skill-sets, role models and incentives for actualizing that knowledge. AQAP’s role models, like any comic superhero, are portrayed as average men who discover that they have superhuman abilities. These ‘ordinary guys turned superheroes’ who comprise AQAP’s dominant media personalities must then wield their superpowers to triumph over evil (the Crusaders) and save damsels in distress (Islam).

Just as kids in the United States trade comic books and baseball cards, Tweets and Facebook comments, American supporters of al-Qaeda now can trade AQAP media products and insights. They can play along online or try to replicate AQAP’s adventures at home. AQAP is not just about an abstract fight against a faceless enemy for their American online cheerleaders. Thanks to its clever use of English-language media, AQAP has been able to put those American supporters on a noble quest to vanquish injustice and save the world from the invading evil.

The Al-Awlaki Effect

Shaykh Anwar Al-Awlaki, an American-born hardline Islamic cleric who now serves as a senior member of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has managed to become the most likeable terrorist among Western al-Qaeda supporters. Although al-Awlaki has been focused on quietly desensitizing his audiences to a hardline reading of Islam through his prolific Internet-based video and audio lectures for over a decade, al-Awlaki's recent shift to openly and directly calling for violence against the United States has meant new challenges for America's counterterrorism professionals.

Al-Awlaki offers AQAP something that few al-Qaeda personalities have been able to do: speak persuasively to an English-speaking audience without a deep knowledge of Islamic history or interest in complex theological arguments. To the contrary, al-Awlaki speaks as a populist about everyday challenges that Muslims face. This inclusive approach has helped to brand al-Awlaki as one of al-Qaeda's most user-friendly personalities – he has become an al-Qaeda gateway drug so to speak.

Now that he is formally aligned with AQAP, al-Awlaki has focused on using the Internet to repackage al-Qaeda's often elitist, esoteric and inhospitable message into something that more individuals in more geographical locations who hold a wider range of beliefs are able to both understand and, importantly, aspire to replicate on their own.

Al-Awlaki's accessibility is a function of his stylized persona: he is a caricature of previous generations of hard-line clerics. He has replicated all of their surface attributes: he carries himself like them, preaches like them, and addresses similar issues. But the difference between al-Awlaki and the legendary jihadist cleric, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, for example, is that al-Awlaki lacks depth, both in knowledge and expertise. Ironically, however it is his lack of religious knowledge that he trades on. In other words, al-Awlaki is a replica of the real thing that sells precisely because he is perceived as being more authentic for *not* being an al-Maqdisi.

Seeing al-Awlaki in video form allows his fans to better comprehend the difference between who they are and who they want to be—embodied in him. Thanks to the Internet, an army of young individuals who want to be the next al-Awlaki are now doing their own al-Awlaki impersonations. The more that they have seen al-Awlaki perform, and the easier that celebrities like al-Awlaki make it for anyone to act like them, speak like them, and preach like them, the more these individuals begin to identify as – and occasionally acting like – these al-Qaeda celebrities themselves. The line between their physical self that is performing and the virtual self that they have constructed in the image of their favorite caricatures begins to blur.

Inspiring Action

Perhaps no AQAP media product has been better for blurring the virtual and physical worlds than its English-language magazine, *Inspire*. Since releasing their first issue of *Inspire*, AQAP has continued to pioneer creative ways for empowering and motivating their online supporters. Although the magazine's kitschy tactical advice and slick graphical featurettes has made for compelling headlines, most public discussions about the magazine have yet to provide an adequate explanation for why *Inspire* actually matters.

Certainly the *Inspire* series has helped to make al-Qaeda's personalities and ideology more accessible to more people. But such intense focus about the magazine's engaging tone and stylistic attributes reflect the general low-level of theoretical sophistication in the counterterrorism field today. *Inspire* is far more than just another propaganda junket released by al-Qaeda: it is not just about getting kids to blindly follow *Inspire's* recipe for building "a bomb in the kitchen of your mom."

The real reason that *Inspire* should be considered such an achievement for al-Qaeda is that it lowers the proverbial wall that has deterred most online al-Qaeda supporters from actually going operational. Until recently, most of al-Qaeda's Internet cheerleaders, or "jihobbyists" as I have referred to them previously, have confined their participation to the bounds of their online communities. It was the exception to the rule that an Internet supporter would actually log off their computers and pick up a weapon to go kill in the physical world.

Before individuals like Zachary Chesser, Nidal Hasan – both of whom were in direct contact with al-Awlaki, there had been few 'Internet supporters turned real world terrorists' because the gulf between thought and action has been too great. The incentives for bridging that gulf were not compelling enough to entice a mass migration of online jihadists to the physical world. Political scientists might refer to this as a free-rider problem, where individuals benefit off of the work being done by others without paying their share.

With the barriers so high and the incentives for martyrdom so seemingly distant – most online supporters al-Qaeda kept running into a glass ceiling. No matter what they did, their global online supporters remained, by and large, part-time jihadists, logging on to their favorite websites after work or on weekends. These armchair enthusiasts who put on their al-Qaeda costumes when it is convenient for them do not get al-Qaeda to where they want to go. *Inspire*, al-Awlaki and AQAP is trying to change all that.

Nobody understood that challenge of prodding jihadist supporters down radicalization road better than Anwar al-Awlaki. The American-Yemeni born cleric now spearheading AQAP's English-language outreach division and the *Inspire* initiative had been trying to incrementally radicalize his fan club for years. But since joining AQAP, al-Awlaki's approach shifted from sowing seeds of long-term jihadi radicalization - as he had been doing historically – to harvesting as many crops as possible.

Al-Awlaki's personal website, which went down in the aftermath of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, served as the virtual home to hundreds of al-Awlaki's devotees. Many of their web postings reflected a desire to live up to themselves - to attain in the physical world the kind of power and influence that they had earned in the virtual world.

As these individuals read *Inspire* and watch AQAP videos, as they register on al-Qaeda web forums and build avatars on social networking sites, they become increasingly "real" within al-Qaeda's virtual space. For some users, these online personas, or avatars, are close mirrors of their physical lives. Individuals may use their own images on their profile pages or openly discuss things that happen in their physical lives. Others, however, create stylized personas that differ significantly from the physical lives they lead. These personas are generally bad replicas of stylized caricatures of their heroes, such as al-Awlaki.

Individuals begin interacting within certain online environments and try to replicate identities and attributes that they find ideal. In the process of registering, programming, uploading, and interacting with others by posting, tagging, and instant messaging, they gain a sense for the behavioral norms and expectations within that context. It is this communication of the kinds of social markers--attributes, accoutrements, and vernacular--that are common and acceptable among their peers that *Inspire* has been able to offer.

Whereas al-Qaeda supporters clamor for authentic experiences, they embrace what Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood refer to as the "ironic mixture of factitious and the spontaneous." In other words, al-Qaeda online users have created a world premised on aspiring to the authentic but they do so in the most inauthentic of places: the Internet. Achieving real-life authenticity online is, by definition, not authentic at all. Rather, it is a fictionalized, stylized version of authenticity that online participants can believe is authentic because it is as close as most of them will ever come to living up to their virtual selves.

Through the process of "doing" online extremism, one gains a sense for the available cast of roles to perform. In the act of performing, individuals further entrench those roles within their social context, making the roles all the more real. It is this acceptance of the stylized, faux reality that allows AQAP to flourish. Virtually everything about their propaganda, most notably the *Inspire* magazine itself, is comic-book like, cartoonish or caricatured in nature. But that disdain for authenticity in its traditional understanding is what has allowed AQAP to snatch the proverbial megaphone away from Al-Qaeda's Senior Leadership.

Implications

Since at least 2005, al-Qaeda's global movement has tried to transform itself from an elitist, exclusive, hierarchical organization into an increasingly inclusive global movement. More populist figures like Abu Yahya al-Libi helped engage much of al-Qaeda's Arab audience, but the Western, English-speaking part of the movement fell behind. Al-Qaeda's English-language

world needed a role model that it could call its own: someone who instinctively understood the challenges of being Muslim in the West.

Anwar al-Awlaki, with his charismatic demeanor and simplified approach to the issues he discusses, has strategically and systematically made painted the notion of joining al-Qaeda a natural progression next step from becoming more religious. In other words, he has lowered the expectations of what it means to be a member of al-Qaeda. Today, anyone can be an al-Qaeda propagandist, and al-Awlaki's job is to narrow the distance between non-violent propagandist and violent al-Qaeda activist. More people than ever are being called to al-Qaeda, not through the clenched fists of Ayman al-Zawahiri, but through the open arms of Anwar al-Awlaki.

Al-Awlaki has been so successful in winning the hearts and minds of Westerners because he made his path to al-Qaeda a step-by-step program that anyone could emulate. Western Muslims have listened to his audio recordings over and over. Many have heard him preach in person and some have even taken him out to lunch. His books have been read, his videos watched. When al-Awlaki joined al-Qaeda, he took the next step. Now his droves of supporters scramble to download the latest issue of *Inspire* to see how they can be al-Awlaki better.

The biggest challenge for governments given this new situation is that it means law enforcement will have a harder time distinguishing between legitimate security threats and those who may be doing legal activities in the name of al-Qaeda, such as making graphics or websites. If they over police those individuals who may not be operationally supporting al-Qaeda, governments may actually be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, where their search for terrorists is actually the catalyst for the emergence of operational terrorists, not just virtual fantasy ones.

Unfortunately, there remains no consensus about how far is too far when talking about using the Internet to advocate on behalf of al-Qaeda. Is uploading a photo of AQAP's Anwar al-Awlaki as one's Facebook avatar a cause for concern? Or is this just a way to blow off steam? Could it actually be cathartic – and therefore good for us - in that it helps individuals release the frustration and anger they hold in the real world? Or is it a slippery slope: one day uploading al-Awlaki images, the next taking up arms against the United States.

That said, the al-Qaeda organization will face its own challenges in steering and guiding this movement of wannabes. By appealing to the lowest common denominator in making al-Qaeda so open and accessible, individuals operating in the name of al-Qaeda will invariably do things that are actually counterproductive to their strategic objectives.

Al-Qaeda has taken a gamble by flattening their movement. In the short term, thanks to charismatic personalities like al-Awlaki, it has created an influx of individuals who can now see themselves jumping across a lower fence over to al-Qaeda's side. But in the long-term it may actually be a dilution of that which made al-Qaeda so exclusive, and therefore alluring in the first place.

Recommendations

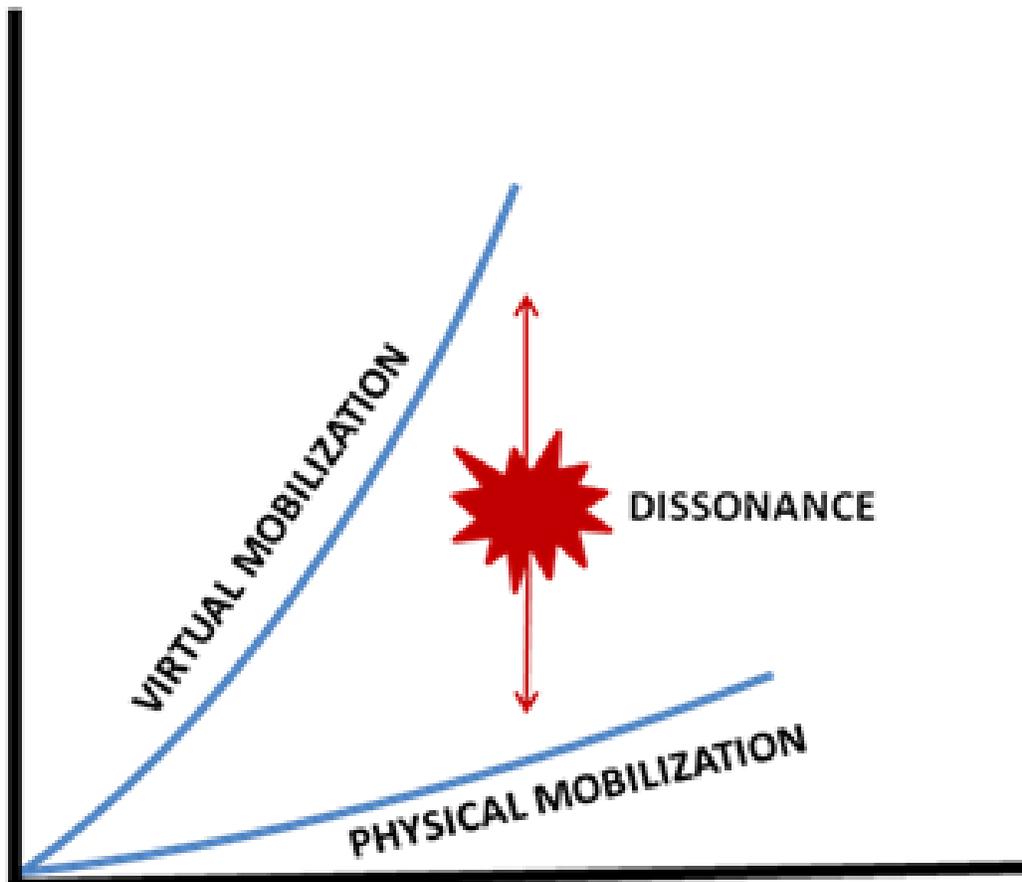
The U.S. government is missing the boat on AQAP's use of the media because it continues to view the problem through typically bureaucratic lenses and relying on outmoded ideas for how to combat this threat. What has the now decade long government conversation about empowering "alternative voices" and developing "positive counter-narratives" actually achieved? More Americans today have more opportunities to support al-Qaeda in more ways than ever before.

A breath of fresh air has long been needed in this field, one that approaches al-Qaeda's pioneering efforts to recruit, radicalize, mobilize and operationalize Americans via Internet propaganda through their eyes, not ours.

The U.S. government ought to do two things immediately on the topic. First, the appropriate government agency ought to sponsor a series of out-of-government academic studies that examines the underlying mechanism of AQAP's English-language propaganda. To be effective, and depart from the conventional analysis being delivered on this topic, this series must reach into bodies of literature and subject matter experts who have not been previously engaged, most notably "gamification," social community development, online viral marketing, film and literary theory on superheroes.

Second, once developed, the insights from these studies – which must interweave its theoretical concepts and frameworks with real-world examples of AQAP's recruitment, radicalization, mobilization and operationalization in order to be effective - must be fed back into the government. An effective vehicle for doing that would be to develop a series of training modules for state intelligence fusion centers to empower those professionals on the front-lines with an updated strategic level understanding of AQAP's efforts and familiarity with the kinds of tactics they are using and marketing.

Appendix 1 - Why *Inspire* Actually Matters



The innovative ways that Al-Qaeda now uses the Internet allows supporters to mobilize online far faster and easier than they could in the real world. Some of these ways include ‘gamifying’ the online experience and offering more accessible role models to emulate. At some point, these al-Qaeda online supporters begin to understand that their physical world self is a far cry from the hero-like status of their online avatar. It is this cognitive dissonance that AQAP has sought to foment because it is in this feeling of instability that individuals are most susceptible to external influence.

Products like *Inspire* offer tangible, incremental and accessible ways for American supporters to resolve that dissonance. It gives them sure-fire, do-it-yourself advice. It offers them cultural insights and road maps. *Inspire* helps make the process of living up to your virtual self that are less scary than it might seem at the outset.