



## **Jihad Online: Radicalization and the Internet**

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The Arab media environment has become so diverse that it has displaced Al Jazeera from its central place in Arab political life, Professor Marc Lynch told a Capitol Hill group on June 18, 2007. The Internet, with its chat rooms, blogosphere, and streaming video, has become the most important node of intellectual expression. Lynch, an associate professor at George Washington University, spoke to Congressional staffers as part of the CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam in a talk entitled “Jihad Online: Radicalization and the Internet.” He explored the ways in which Internet chat rooms and websites have become the new loci for debates in the Arab world, including many on the justifications and accepted tactics, targets, and goals for jihad.

Lynch began by noting the growing importance in recent years of Internet forums, often at the expense of broadcast media. As an example, Lynch pointed to the Islamic State of Iraq’s declaration of sovereignty last October, which was announced solely online. Although Al Jazeera and other mainstream Arab media outlets dismissed the declaration as a mere media stunt, as the online debate over the move became more heated the broadcast media felt obliged to report on it. Furthermore, the resultant online debate ultimately forced the Islamic State of Iraq to clarify its objectives, revealing a deep schism between its vision of jihad for national liberation versus al Qaeda’s vision of Iraq as a springboard for global jihad.

Unique to this dynamic is that anyone with access to the Internet—including American academics and intelligence officials—can witness the discourse in real time. Lynch argued that these forums are quickly becoming the regional common knowledge that Al Jazeera’s reporting once provided.

Lynch posited an organic link between the cyberworld and actual violence on the ground. Insurgents’ web-based videos, for instance, provide tangible evidence of which groups executed attacks as well as providing them with political capital in the jihadist community. Such videos were once tailored for the television market (and often Al Jazeera), and had to be passed from one hand to another before they ended up in Al Jazeera’s Doha newsroom. Their appearance on the Internet was secondary. Now, many are created specifically for Internet download, where reporters and activists alike pick them up.

Lynch argued that this process has shown that the top-down structural models once favored by groups like al Qaeda have become defunct. Rather, local groups have

become the primary drivers of events by initiating independent actions and producing their own media clips. The jihad has become so decentralized that calls have emerged from some corners of the Arab world for al Qaeda to intervene and declare its intentions and identify its true clients openly.

Looking to future trends, Lynch predicted that jihadists will adopt many of the communication technologies now popular in the social sphere. He argued that jihadist groups have a two-stage process of radicalization and recruitment. Television, he said, remains the most important means for building mainstream attitudes. Still, it is unlikely that individuals will radicalize based solely on television. Instead, its graphic images and reporting serve as a catalyst for seeking further information online, and such explorations link potential recruits ever more intimately into a larger jihadist universe. He cited Youtube.com as a model that jihadists may point to in forming their own video site in the near future. Looking forward, networking databases like Facebook.com may be adapted to jihadist purposes. Previous examples of Islamists' rapid embrace of new technologies includes their use of the Short Message Service (SMS), once used to spread Saddam Hussein's hanging via cell phones, as well as the popularity of Paltalk, the face-to-face live video software.

The rapid spread of technology has also made it impossible for governments and jihadis to control messages reaching Arab publics. Lynch criticized the U.S. boycott of Al Jazeera from 2001-2003 despite the station's overwhelming popularity and influence in the Arab world. Whereas al Qaeda could rely on nearly universal viewership of its tapes in the region, the United States essentially removed itself from public discourse altogether.

This, in turn, partially explains the U.S. inability to contribute to the regional media market on its own terms. Al Hurra, the U.S. government-run Arabic satellite station, has failed to garner any significant popularity. Yet ironically, Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya has largely promoted the American worldview in the Arab world because of the two countries' many shared foreign policy goals. Still, Al Arabiya seems to have fewer viewers in many key countries in the Middle East, and any support for U.S. positions is a consequence of the current convergence of U.S. and Saudi interests. Where those interests diverge, Al Arabiya's coverage is likely to follow the Saudi lead.

Lynch suggested that this fragmentation has meant that all parties—governments, broadcast networks, and jihadists—have lost control of the public debate, yet the United States and some governments seem to still want to play by the old rules.

Lynch concluded by noting that the United States has fared poorly in the war of ideas. Polling has repeatedly shown Arabs' distrust for U.S. intentions. At the same time, however, al Qaeda has fared little better. Although over 90% of respondents in a recent poll supported attacks on U.S. soldiers in Iraq, a similar percentage now oppose attacks on civilians. Lynch attributed this massive shift to the backlash against the al Qaeda hotel bombings in Amman.