General Intelligence and
Security Service
*Ministry of the Interior and
Kingdom Relations*

Jihadism on the Web

A breeding ground for Jihad in the modern age

Summary

A wide variety of counter-terrorist measures and actions have been taken in the past decade to ensure that jihadist organisations are left with fewer possibilities to target the West. Nonetheless, the appeal of the jihadist ideologies adhered to by these organisations remains as great as ever. These ideologies continue to inspire and incite particularly young Muslims worldwide to violence. The Internet has become the most important medium for the dissemination of these ideologies.

Core forums: driving force behind Jihad movement

A number of influential jihadist Internet forums are the *de facto* core of the global virtual Jihad movement, propelling it like a turbo. The AIVD estimates that approximately 25,000 jihadists originating from over 100 countries belong to this group of core Internet forums. Most of them operate on the so-called invisible Web, a part of the World Wide Web that has not (yet) been indexed and cannot be found by readily accessible search engines. The core forums hidden inside this invisible Web are constructed and maintained by fanatical jihadists. Within the confines of these virtual gathering places, all members can participate in interactive group discussions that lay the foundation for radical discourse , paving the way for legitimised violence against the enemies of 'true' Islam. Jihadist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, do not 'own' core forums, but simply make convenient use of their infrastructure and followers.

Highest threat caused by two core processes

Core forums are characterised by two important interactive processes, both of which lead to (the facilitation of) violence, i.e. *adicalisation* or '*jihadisation*' and *netwo k fo mation*.

Radicalisation is a social phenomenon that often takes place in both real and virtual life. The AIVD has found that people who radicalise under the influence of jihadist websites often go through a number of stages. As their radicalisation progresses, their virtual activities increasingly shift to the invisible Web. The radicalisation process is like a funnel causing people to go further down towards core forums: a self-created ideological ghetto created for the virtual jihadist elite, in which all processes are mutually reinforced and focus on violent action (jihadisation).

The radicalisation and jihadisation processes that take place partly or sometimes entirely online ensure a continues influx of new individuals eager to fight for the jihadist cause.

The process of network formation also focuses on violent action. The AIVD has established that the ideological and organisational development of jihadist networks and individuals is increasingly taking place on or with the help of the Internet. Such online networks can emanate a serious threat and they are often more internationally oriented and much bigger than physical jihadist networks. In addition, they are characterised by a non-hierarchical, 'flat', interactive organisation made up of fanatical jihadists that, in general, do not have any direct affiliations to jihadist organisations. They do have an informal power structure.

The communication possibilities offered by core forums and the available (technical) means used to shield and hide parts of this communication, or keep it anonymous, promote the intensive interaction among network members. (Self) censorship and (self) discipline ensure that these networks do not tolerate 'deviant' messages. Above all, they are a powerful social movement capable of inspiring jihadists from different backgrounds across the globe to forge alliances. Here they find new like-minded friends and role models. An essential factor is the great mutual trust on core forums, even though most members have never actually met. The 'virtual trust' among members can be so unconditional that they may decide to meet offline and discover each other's true identity. The AIVD has found that such a transition can generate a heightened threat .

Actor groups within these core processes

In other words, Jihadist core forums offer the best possible conditions for the processes of radicalisation, jihadisation and network formation to reach full maturity. Various individuals (actors) play an important role in these processes. Depending on their influence and the threat they generate, the AIVD distinguishes five actor groups:

1. 'Members' of jihadist organisations, such as core Al-Qaeda or Al Shabaab. This very small, hardly identifiable group emanates a serious threat as it can use the Internet to get in touch with Western jihadists and help them to participate in Jihad or mount an attack.
2. Informal 'representatives' of jihadist organisations, who act as middlemen between jihadist organisations and internet forums. Even though this group is small in size, it can generate a substantial threat.

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[1] The word 'discourse' has several meanings. In this report the AIVD uses it in the sociological sense: statements made by a certain group at a certain level, used by that group to structure reality and thereby (implicitly) recording what it considers to be morally right and true.

3. Jihadist 'producers' set up, maintain and (ideologically) 'feed' core forums. This medium-sized group therefore holds considerable informal power and their activities can pose a substantial threat.
4. The large group of jihadist 'consumers' taking in all the activities undertaken by producers. (As yet) most consumers lack the specific jihadist knowledge, expertise and/or connections to turn their Jihad dreams into action. Some of these consumers merely crave virtual attention.
5. Jihadist 'lone wolves', who single-handedly and autonomously make the leap to the use of (violent) action on jihadist grounds. In the aftermath of such events, it is often discovered that lone wolves hardly had any contact with like-minded individuals in real life, but did maintain active contact with people on the Internet.

Online Jihadism boosted by two developments

These five actor groups are active on the virtual marketplace where jihadist supply and demand meet. The dynamic interaction that takes place between these five actor groups on this marketplace focuses on and/or leads to violence or the facilitation thereof. Nowadays a prominent part of these activities are initiated on jihadist websites. Two developments have caused online Jihadism to become a powerful catalyst for international violent Jihad in the past decade.

First of all, the AIVD has found that the worldwide growth of the number of Internet users has led to a *globalisation of vi tual Jihad*. The Internet is causing a growing number of people from a growing number of countries to be touched and inspired by jihadist ideas. Jihadist organisations such as Al-Qaeda merely play an inspiring and hardly a (central) guiding role in this development. A whole new group of jihadist consumers has gone online, particularly in the Islamic countries in the Middle East, Northern and Eastern Africa and South Asia. In addition, more and more experienced jihadists are also coming online, driving and enriching the dynamics of online Jihadism with their knowledge, expertise and connections, thus bridging a knowledge and experience gap. In other words, the threat to the West has become more diffuse.

The second development that has contributed to the growth of online Jihadism is the *p ofessionalisation of vi tual Jihad*. As a result, more and more jihadist actor groups are capable of concealing their identity, their whereabouts and the content of their communications. Furthermore, the production of propaganda has become much more professional over the past decade and has enabled a strong increase and proliferation of jihadist ideology on the Internet. Such high-quality propaganda is focusing increasingly on specific target groups and seems to incite and inspire particularly local Muslims to commit terrorist attacks in the West.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the globalisation and the professionalisation of virtual Jihad have boosted the effects of online Jihadism, allowing it to become a breeding ground for new jihadist networks and individuals. According to the AIVD, the virtual pool of new jihadists offered by online Jihadism may be a lifeline for jihadist organisations, such as Al-Qaeda, whose physical manoeuvring space has been increasingly reduced over the past ten years.

The AIVD has also established that the 'virtualisation' of violent Jihad is particularly essential in the current jihadist threat to the West. In the past three years a considerable number of (foiled) attack plots against Western targets had a prominent virtual component, for example. The anonymous discourse and professional propaganda posted on jihadist websites inspire a growing number of jihadist actor groups to take (violent) action.

The AIVD expects that online Jihadism will continue to play an important role in national and international threat assessments in the short and medium term. It is expected that in years to come online Jihadism will be a crucial, binding and organising factor in a substantial part of attack plots against the West and Western citizens, and their interests abroad. The AIVD endeavours to counter this threat, for example by informing and mobilising (inter)national partners at an early stage.