The internet and Al Qaeda how bin Laden uses technology for his cause

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RECENTLY, Al Qaeda in Iraq, led by Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, released a 16-minute videotape and posted it on a Jihadist website. The video showcases the top ten operations carried out by Al Zarqawi's group, the Base of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers (Iraq) and another group known as the Iraqi Islamic Army. The targets were the Americans and their soldiers and facilities in Iraq. The video pictures the destruction of cars, soldiers and building with Islamic songs (*nashid)* in the background, praising jihad and promising the Ummah of victory. A statement that accompanies the video says: "This videotape will be a storm for the Americans and will put the Americans in shame as it will show their soldiers injured, killed and their sophisticated weapons destroyed."

The video carries enormous propaganda value for Al Qaeda in Iraq and its supporters, because it depicts a view of how effective the insurgents on the ground are. It also offers evidence of how sophisticated their media efforts have become. Instead of sending a tape of a single operation, Al Qaeda has posted a complex video on the Internet. The "tape" has high production value, similar to any American movie, including posting the name of the producer right at the start. The music and montage of footage from several battles underscore the message that victory is close. It is intended to simultaneously be intimidating and challenging.

The other interesting element is the title of the video "Top 10". The American public especially is used to "top 10" programmes, whether it is about art, movies, songs or sports. The insurgents in Iraq are utilising this same technique to increase its resonance with the audience. The video starts with the least important operation, gradually building towards the dramatic unveiling of the most critical operation against the Americans. By the time the person watching the video witnesses the final operation, he or she may end up believing that the insurgents are increasingly successful in their operations in Iraq; after all the evidence is on tape.

A picture says a thousand words

Al Qaeda is an organisation that believes in history and wants to make history. Its arguments are grounded in its interpretation of history, and thus have a wider resonance within the Islamic world. From the strategic and operational view, it is quietly aware of the power of the media and actively seeks to develop operations to exploit the wide range of mass communication tools available. Al Qaeda has stated that the mass media is "one of the most

important weapons in the modern wars" and it knows the power of the visual media to both inspire and demoralise. Jihadist websites regularly discuss the ability of the local authorities to either censor, downplay or ignore stories. However, when there is a video capturing an attack on film, there is no way to deny the existence of such an operation.

Al Qaeda has always prided itself as innovative and capable of striking America on its soil. It has repeatedly challenged American power and has destroyed the symbols of its dignity and pride. The September 11 attacks were designed to accomplish those goals -- and carried out with a keen understanding that the media would cover the attacks. The West has generally focused on the formalities rather than characteristics of the organisation. Al Qaeda is not just a formal structure and organisation; it is an ideology with a physical and virtual existence. In the war on Afghanistan in 2001, President George W. Bush and much of the rest of the world were expecting a near defeat of Al Qaeda. But what was missing at that time was that, while America was destroying the Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, bin Laden and his followers were planning a shift towards becoming a world movement that goes beyond geographical borders. In fact, Al Qaeda has already decided to take a further step by moving from the ground to the Internet.

The Internet has been more than just a powerful communication tool for Al Qaeda and its affiliate groups. There are many websites created and used to host publications, news and messages. More importantly, the websites work as mobile training camps offering training materials, manuals for the making of explosives and even the potential future targets. In other words Al Qaeda has created a virtual Afghanistan. In January 2004, while launching the online military magazine "Al Battar", the Saudi branch of al Qaeda wrote: "This bulletin will be very useful if it is implemented by the young Muslims. We hope they take it seriously, instead of passing their time doing other things that do not serve the Jihad. The time is Jihad's time, it must be devoted to Jihad and its preparation."

The message calls upon the magazine's readers "to understand and implement them while you are carrying your sword. Remember these groups of infidels, living now (in) the Arabian Peninsula, remember all the time and target them." Al Qaeda and its supporters have been spreading the ideology and capabilities to act across the world. Cells could be created and activated with the stroke of a key.

What is Al Qaeda after?

One wonders why Al Qaeda and its affiliate groups choose the Internet to communicate with their audience – the majority of whom are Arabs – and the Internet being a communication tool that is not yet pervasively used among the population. The first connections to the Internet in the region were made in the early 1990s. However, the rapid spread of technology familiar to the West has not been replicated in the Arab world. This is however changing today; the Internet is winning both space and members on a daily basis. Because many youths do not have their own computers, Internet cafes are mushrooming all over. Hence, Al Qaeda has an amazing tool that is developing itself to serve the next generation of jihadists. After the attacks of September 11, President Bush said that America is facing an unseen enemy. Today, the Internet had made that enemy more unseen -- and even almost invisible.

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