

# Mapping the electronic jihad : an outline of the virtual jihadi community

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## **Mapping the Electronic Jihad: An Outline of the Virtual Jihadi Community**

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*IN THE* wake of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, as al-Qaeda and other Jihadist groups lost their physical centre, they turned to the Internet to provide a virtual hub of communications, coordination, exchange and outreach. Simultaneously, a wave of radicalism surged through the Muslim world. Those swept up by it searched for portals into the world of radical Islam. The Internet provided the access they sought.

Jihadists stoked this support from hideouts and battlegrounds, flooding newly-created web forums with propaganda, statements, interviews, and news from the field. What arose was an online Jihadi presence, dynamic and energetic, which served to fill part of the gap left by the loss of a physical centre and to satisfy the new requirements of the burgeoning worldwide ideological movement.

### **Core of the virtual Jihadi community**

A small, exclusive group of Arabic-language websites now forms the core of this virtual community. These forums serve as the point of interaction for active members and passive supporters worldwide. A crucial sense of community is fostered within these spaces, with members signing on daily to discuss the ongoing trials and tribulations of the international Jihad, develop consensus on current events, engage in theological debates, and even plan hypothetical attacks. This presence, dubbed “the Electronic Jihad” by its members, is fast coalescing into a virtual community of believers, steadily growing in strength, influence, and technological sophistication, and now proving as indispensable to the global Jihadi movement as are guns and bombs.

While it was possible to identify this community in virtual space, the physical distribution of its membership remained a mystery. Some analysts speculated that the community was likely concentrated in European countries, where there are large Muslim communities and high Internet penetration. Others pointed to the religiously conservative but technologically modern Persian Gulf states. Meanwhile, content analysis hinted at the possibility of a far-flung global distribution of membership. But speculation and content analysis had extensive limitations, and hard data on the geographic distribution of Jihadi website visitors remained elusive.

A new, publicly available online tool now allows for a better assessment of where the members of this virtual Jihadi community are physically located. This tool – the traffic-tracking website [www.alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com) – extrapolates from a smaller sample a general approximation of the distribution of the visitors to a given website. Running this tool against the URLs of the primary websites of the Electronic Jihad provides a basic breakdown of their traffic.

## Debunking old theories

Analysis performed using *alexa.com* debunks previous theories. It shows that the bulk of visits to Jihadi websites come from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – not the Diaspora communities of Europe. Nor are they significantly concentrated in the Persian Gulf states. However, the data also show that, though the majority may be located in the MENA region, at least forty countries on every inhabited continent have some representation in this truly global virtual community.

In an analysis of ten of the most influential and important Jihadi web forums, we observed that 78.1 percent of visits came from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Visits from nations in the Americas were at a distant second, at around 5.9 percent. Visits originating in European countries made up 4.8 percent of the total. Only 1.4 percent of visits to Jihadi websites came from East Asia. Roughly 1.5 percent came from Pakistan, and another 1 percent from Australia (the remaining came from countries whose visit numbers on each site were too small to produce data in the alexa.com program).

Because data were unavailable for a significant portion of the traffic (see text box), this picture of distribution represents only a rough approximation. Still, it is more information than has been available previously, when analysis of the visitors to a given website was a painstaking matter of mining content for colloquialisms specific to the dialects of certain regions, or references to specific locations, currencies, or commercial products – a process which failed to yield enough data for an overview of distribution. The data gleaned from the Alexa analysis, rough though it is, lends some contour to the fuzzy image of this mysterious community, even if it cannot provide a precise picture.

In addition to analyzing the distribution of extremist website traffic, we also studied the relative user activity for individual countries. To do so, we calculated an estimate of the total number of unique visitors per country for each website. Numbers of visits to different websites were summed up by country to obtain a number of total visits to all the included extremist websites for each country. (Because unique users to one website could access multiple included sites, this activity metric is a measurement of visits, not visitors). We divided each number by the total amount of Internet users for the same country, in order to obtain that country's measure of activity. This measurement of activity is presented as number of visits to extremist websites per hundred users, or visits/100 users. (The calculation of this activity metric relies on estimated Internet populations of different countries, and because of this our presented activity measurements should be treated as estimations.)

### Tracking the Electronic Jihad: Global Distribution of Visitors to Ten Significant Jihadi Websites:

Middle East & North Africa.....	78.1 %
North & South America.....	5.9
Europe.....	4.8
East Asia.....	1.4
South Asia (Pakistan).....	1.5
Australia.....	1.0
Data Unavailable.....	7.3

## Intensity of users

The results of these measurements were illuminating. The Palestinian Territories displayed an activity level of 15.72 visits per 100 users. This level of activity is extraordinarily high; no other country exhibited a level higher than 11 percent of this amount. This finding is startling given that the Palestinian Territories lack an established Salafi-Jihadi organization.

The activity measurements for most MENA countries were high. Only Israel, Libya and

Turkey exhibited activity levels of less than .1 visits/100 users (or 1 visit per 1,000 users). For comparison, this threshold of 1 visit per 1,000 users was broken only once by a country outside the MENA region (in Panama, which exhibited 2.2 hits per 1,000 users).

In addition to the Palestinian Territories, high activity measurements were found in Jordan (1.72 visits/100 users), Qatar (1.05 visits/100 users), Kuwait (1.02 visits/100 users), Bahrain (.88 visits/100 users), Saudi Arabia (.65 visits/100 users), United Arab Emirates (.59 visits/100 users), Yemen (.51 visits/100 users) and Algeria (.48 visits/100 users).

The Palestinian Territories also topped the list in terms of absolute number of visits, in spite of their small population and relatively low Internet penetration. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan follow the Palestinian Territories in contributing the most visits to the websites analysed. In East Asia, Indonesia, followed by Malaysia, has the most visitors to Jihadist sites, followed by China and Japan. The United States and the United Kingdom both showed significant traffic for non-Muslim countries, comprising 3.97% and .97%, respectively, of total traffic to extremist websites.

The near exclusive use of the Arabic language in these significant Jihadi websites likely accounts for the concentration of activity in the Middle East and North Africa. But with a reach to more than 40 countries, the virtual community within these ten influential sites assumes a global significance. The international Jihadi movement's use of the Internet to fuel the exchange of ideological expansion and its corresponding influx of support will increase the vulnerability of many countries to the appeal of extremism.

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