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The Role of Social Media in the Evolution of Al-Qaeda Inspired Terrorism

NIJ-sponsored analysis compares online networks that mobilize and direct Americans for jihadist action.

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Opportunity, access, and persuasion all play a role in the current process of jihadist recruitment.

Today, all three can be found online.

Through research sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), homegrown terrorism in the United States has been linked to a global terrorist movement that relies on modern communication technologies, media, and a globalized social consciousness to push its belief system into every corner of the world.

Jihadist recruitment has reached into small and mid-sized cities in every state of the country and attracted followers from some 40 different ethnicities and every race in America.

Given the diversity of American homegrown terrorism offenders, there is no common denominator, no common grievances, nor even common motivations, that can predict who may opt to join groups espousing violent jihad.

In this NIJ-sponsored study, the researchers conducted an analysis that compared the network structure of American terrorism offenders inspired by Hezbollah, Sunni extremist groups aligned with Al Qaeda, and ISIL. The analysis included the networks and organizations that mobilize and direct Americans for jihadist action, or that raise money in the country for Hamas and Hezbollah.

“Rarely does a homegrown militant go at it alone,” according to the researchers. Radicalization to violent political extremism is more likely to occur in a group setting where the adoption of extremist ideas is reinforced by shared emotions, particularly if the process is accompanied by positive external reinforcements.

Watching online extremist videos and chatting with online avatars from the Islamic State is not sufficient to make someone take a life-changing decision to join a terrorist group. But with the added effect of group reinforcement and a deepening involvement with the extremist networks, both off-line and online, becoming a terrorist can come to seem a desirable cause of action for an individual.

“The importance of social media may be explained in part at least by the ease with which it bridges the gap between home and the new life,” the researchers noted. Young men and women have joined the Islamic State in patterns similar to chain migration, following in the footsteps of others from their town or neighborhood and settling with friends and family or newfound peers.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, and until recently, most American Islamist extremists have been connected to a core network of jihadist organizations and recruiters based abroad, either through travel or direct personal relationships with middle-men acting for the terrorist organization. The contemporary network configuration may be described as “glocal” – globally connected and inspired, but taking shape locally in peer groups and small cells.

In conclusion, the researchers provided seven recommendations for addressing the use of social media to recruit individuals to embrace terrorist ideas:

- Focus on community education.
- Establish a duty to report.
- Develop court-enforced treatment programs.
- Disrupt and prevent the development of localized extremist hubs.
- Watch for cumulative influence networks.
- Continue to disrupt and intercept travel to foreign terrorist organizations and insurgencies.

- Suppress producers rather than consumers of terrorist propaganda online.

[About This Article](#)

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