



IRAQI INSURGENTS SPREAD MESSAGE VIA INTERNET

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Insurgent groups in Iraq are using the Internet to spread propaganda, share information about enemies to target and try to influence media around the world.

The free and fast flow of information on the Internet has become a weapon wielded by insurgents in Iraq.

Last year, a report about weaknesses with an armored vehicle called the Stryker used by U.S. forces in Iraq that was originally posted on a U.S. Web site ended up on an al-Qaida Web site within hours, according to Rita Katz, director of the SITE Institute, which tracks and investigates terrorist Web activity for government agencies and corporate clients.

The terrorist group used the Web to get the information to fighters in Iraq.

Shaping propaganda

The Internet also provides an international platform for fund raising, propaganda and recruitment.

Hackers use stolen credit card numbers to buy weapons and supplies, and terrorist groups have created media production branches to create and post videos that glorify violence against U.S. troops and Iraqis.

The largest producer is the Islamic State of Iraq, an umbrella organization for Sunni insurgents affiliated with al-Qaida in Iraq, which releases a video almost every day, said Laura Mansfield, a terrorism analyst who runs a blog of terrorist Web activity and translates Arabic material for Western media outlets.

The group released a video in June that claimed it had custody of two missing U.S. soldiers. The video showed the soldiers' ID cards and insurgents planning the kidnapping. It was picked up and used in Western media outlets.

Expanded reach

Mainstream Arabic media have been the preferred outlet for jihadists and insurgent

videos for years, but increasingly, videos are released with English subtitles aimed for viewing by Western audiences.

"They are very media savvy and they are manipulating the heck out of the media," Mansfield said. "The videos are more flashy and the graphics are better ... some of them could be network documentaries. ... The software has really improved over the last few years."

Iraqis are not necessarily the target audience for online insurgent materials, rather the propaganda is often aimed at attracting foreign fighters to Iraq, according to Mansfield.

With ideological writings and videos available online in many different languages, the Internet can act as a virtual madrassa, or school for extremists, according to terrorism expert Michael Doran, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense.

Jihadist games

There also are popular online jihad-based video games and interactive features.

Lt. Col. Joseph Felter, director of the Combat Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy, described at a Senate hearing one example of a jihadist group holding an online competition in which the prize was to be able to launch a rocket at a U.S. base via a computer.

Meanwhile, those working to shut down terrorist sites face an ever-shifting target.

"There are a whole series of people that go around trying to find all these [Web sites] and shut them down," Mansfield said. "They will be back up in 24 hours somewhere else anyway, it really doesn't slow things down."

-- *By Talea Miller, Online NewsHour*

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