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“Internet Terror Recruitment and Tradecraft: How Can We Address an Evolving
Tool While Protecting Free Speech?”

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We often consider al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and followers as terrorists: individuals who conduct attacks that down aircraft, destroy buildings, and murder innocents. Terrorism is a tactic, however, not an end. Al-Qa’ida’s end is ideological, an effort to spark a global revolution among like-minded individuals who see as their first goal the ouster of the United States and its allies from Muslim lands and the overthrow of regimes viewed by al-Qa’ida as corrupt. Messaging is central to this end, an end that entails reaching individuals who may never meet a formal al-Qa’ida member. This is a campaign of ideas.

The Internet is a brilliant tool for spreading ideology, and al-Qa’ida uses the tool effectively. The conversation we have today will be far more about how to stop the spread of the ideology behind al-Qa’ida -- a long-term goal -- than about how curbing Internet-inspired violence can stop attacks in the near term. We are engaged in a long campaign against an idea, not a short war against a group. And if we assume that this is an ideological battle, digital strikes may be as important as kinetic strikes. As one US general has said, this battlefield is the battlefield of the mind. And the Internet is proving, time and again, as a powerful tool to poison minds of those who then enter the battlefield.

There are balancing issues to deal with here. Is it worth attacking Internet sites that can quickly morph? Can we use Internet tracking to look for individuals who might commit acts of violence? How does the ideological benefit of blocking Internet activity balance against operational interests in watching Internet activity? And, of course, how much of what we see is legitimate free-speech activity?

We are concluding nine years of post-9/11 operations. Noteworthy are two facts that should affect our conversation:

- First, most attacks post-9/11 have been conducted by al-Qa’ida affiliates and like-minded individuals, not al-Qa’ida members themselves. This is in stark contrast to the major attacks in East Africa in 1998; in Yemen in 2000; and in the United States in 2001. The message of venom has spread.

- Second, most individuals connected to al-Qa'ida-inspired activity in this country are converts or native-born Muslims. We see very few plots linked to al-Qa'ida recruits that fit the mold we might have expected when we accelerated this campaign nine years ago. The message of venom has spread.

We can make great progress in the ideological campaign. Our adversary has clearly telegraphed their weaknesses: they fear that they are on ideological thin ice when they kill innocents, and we should talk about this. This is a long campaign, and we have many chapters to go. Historians may well write the next chapters, in years to come, with less focus on how many innocents died than on how many lives were saved as al-Qa'ida's ideology crumbled under its own weight.