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# An Internet Jihad Aims at U.S. Viewers

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Michael Moss/The New York Times

Samir Khan, 21, silhouetted in a video, spreads the message of Osama bin Laden in the blog he writes from his parents' house in North Carolina.

By MICHAEL MOSS and SOUAD MEKHENNET  
Published: October 15, 2007

When [Osama bin Laden](#) issued his videotaped message to the American people last month, a young jihad enthusiast went online to help spread the word.

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### Al Qaeda's Web Allies and Acolytes

### Ask the Writer

Ask a question or make a comment on the issues raised by this article to Michael Moss, who interviewed Mr. Khan, will be answering selected questions.

Ask a Question

"America needs to listen to Shaykh Usaamah very carefully and take his message with great seriousness," he wrote on his blog. "America is known to be a people of arrogance."

Unlike Mr. bin Laden, the blogger was not operating from a remote location. It turns out he is a 21-year-old American named Samir Khan who produces his blog from his parents' home in North Carolina, where he serves as a kind of Western relay station for the multimedia productions of violent Islamic groups.

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### Multimedia



In recent days, he has featured "glad tidings" from a North African militant leader whose group killed 31 Algerian troops. He posted a scholarly treatise arguing for violent jihad, translated into English. He listed hundreds of links to secret sites from which his readers could obtain the latest blood-drenched insurgent videos from Iraq.

His neatly organized site also includes a file called "United States of Losers," which showcased a recent news broadcast about a firefight in Afghanistan with this added

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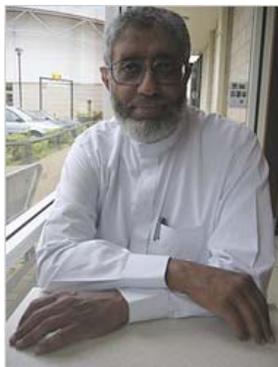
The global jihad is as close as YouTube, which features videos like an ode to suicide attacks (top), a message "to black Americans" from a bin Laden lieutenant (center), and an Iraq insurgency promotional message (bottom).

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Bryan Denton for The New York Times

Abu Omar, a former insurgent in Iraq, said the insurgent leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi recognized the power of the media and ordered that every group of fighters carry a video camera, and that "every operation should be taped."



Michael Moss/The New York Times

commentary from Mr. Khan: "You can even see an American soldier hiding during the ambush like a baby!! AllahuAkbar! AllahuAkbar!"

Mr. Khan, who was born in Saudi Arabia and grew up in Queens, is an unlikely foot soldier in what [Al Qaeda](#) calls the "Islamic jihadi media." He has grown up in middle-class America and wrestles with his worried parents about his religious fervor. Yet he is stubborn. "I will do my best to speak the truth, and even if it annoys the disbelievers, the truth must be preached," Mr. Khan said in an interview.

While there is nothing to suggest that Mr. Khan is operating in concert with militant leaders, or breaking any laws, he is part of a growing constellation of apparently independent media operators who are broadcasting the message of Al Qaeda and other groups, a message that is increasingly devised, translated and aimed for a Western audience.

Terrorism experts at [West Point](#) say there are as many as 100 English language sites offering militant Islamic views, with Mr. Khan's — which claims 500 regular readers — among the more active. While their reach is difficult to assess, it is clear from a review of extremist material and interviews that militants are seeking to appeal to young American and European Muslims by playing on their anger over the war in Iraq and the image of Islam under attack.

Tedious Arabic screeds are reworked into flashy English productions. Recruitment tracts are issued in multiple languages, like a 39-page, electronic, English version of a booklet urging women to join the fight against the West.

There are even online novellas like "Rakan bin Williams," about a band of Christian European converts who embraced Al Qaeda and "promised God that they will carry the flag of their distant brothers and seek vengeance on the evil doers."

Militant Islamists are turning grainy car-bombing tapes into slick hip-hop videos and montage movies, all readily available on Western sites like YouTube, the online video smorgasbord.

"It is as if you would watch a Hollywood movie," said Abu Saleh, a 21-year-old German devotee of Al Qaeda videos who visits Internet cafes in Berlin twice a week to get the latest releases. "The Internet has totally changed my view on things."

### An Internet Strategy

Al Qaeda and its followers have used the Internet to communicate and rally support for years, but in the past several months the Western tilt of the message and the sophistication of the media have accelerated. So has the output. Since the beginning of the year, Al Qaeda's media operation, Al Sahab, has issued new videotapes as often as every three days. Even more come from Iraq, where

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Dr. Muhammad Massari, who runs a jihadi Web site in London.



Bryan Denton for The New York Times

Abu Omar made bombmaking videos in Iraq.

insurgents are pumping them out daily.

That production line is the legacy of one man: [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi](#), the former leader of [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#) who was killed in June 2006 by American bombs.

Mr. Zarqawi learned the power of the Internet in prison, according to a former associate who was imprisoned with him in Jordan a decade ago. Mr. Zarqawi's jailhouse group of 32 Islamists sought to recruit other prisoners by handwriting a newsletter, Al Tawheed, when it discovered a larger audience.

"We sent them outside, to brothers in Europe and England," who posted the newsletters on militant Web

sites, the associate said, asking not be identified because he said he is involved with Islamist activities.

In Iraq, Mr. Zarqawi embraced the video camera as a weapon of war. "He made the decision that every group should have a video camera with them, and every operation should be taped," said a [Palestinian](#) militant who went to Iraq in 2005 to teach foreign fighters from Morocco and parts of Europe how to build bombs and stage roadside attacks.

Two Lebanese intelligence officials confirmed that the Palestinian, who goes by the nom de guerre [Abu Omar](#), had worked with Mr. Zarqawi in Iraq, and he played a video of foreign fighters in Iraq for reporters of The New York Times.

Abu Omar, 37, a muscular man who carried a Glock 21 pistol tucked into the belt of his camouflage pants during an interview at his home in Lebanon, said Mr. Zarqawi also had him tape his bombmaking classes so his expertise would not be lost if he were killed.

"We had two cameramen, people who learned how to do this before they came to Iraq," Abu Omar said. "And after filming, we had different houses in the area where we made the videos."

Dahia al-Maqdassi, 26, a Palestinian who said he produced insurgent videos in Iraq two years ago, said, "In every city in Iraq they had a little office where someone did film operations." He described his "media section" as a house near Falluja where 6 to 10 people worked. "We finished the film and then sent it to jihadi Web sites," Mr. Maqdassi said.

### Propaganda Rap Video

One of the most influential sites is Tajdeed, which is based in London and run by Dr. Muhammad Massari, a Saudi physicist and dissident. Over lunch at a [McDonald's](#) near his home, Dr. Massari said Mr. Zarqawi's insurgent videos from Iraq inspired local productions like "Dirty Kuffar," the Arabic word for nonbeliever. The 2004 rap music video mixed images of Western leaders with others purporting to show American troops cheer as they shot injured Iraqi civilians.

Dr. Massari, who helped promote the video, said similar crossover productions soon followed and made their way to his Web site.

"I never touch the videos that are on my forums," said Dr. Massari, who wears a long white Arabic robe. "Someone with Al Qaeda uploads them, probably at Internet cafes, to password-protected sites. Then they call a friend, say, in Australia or Brasilia, and say, 'Hi Johnny, your mom is traveling today.' That is the code to download the video. It goes up and down like that a few times, with no trace, until someone posts a link on my site."

Last spring, Al Qaeda made what analysts say was a bold attempt to tap potential supporters in the United States. In a videotaped interview, [Ayman al-Zawahri](#), a bin Laden lieutenant, praised [Malcolm X](#) and urged American blacks and other minorities to see that "we are waging jihad to lift oppression from all of mankind."

The tape quickly found an audience. Mr. Zawahri “cares about black people,” wrote a blogger with Vibe, the American hip-hop and urban culture magazine, which claims 1.6 million visits a month. “At least, I think that’s why he’s quoting Malcolm X in his latest mix tape, which dropped last weekend.”

Umar Lee, a 32-year-old Muslim convert from St. Louis, offered a stinging critique of Mr. Zawahri on his blog for Muslim Americans, criticizing “the second-class status many blacks live in right in the Arab World.” Soon, Mr. Lee’s blog churned with commentary on the parallels between Arab and black American radicals.

A four-minute version of the hourlong Qaeda video, entitled “To Black Americans,” has logged more than 1,800 views on YouTube in the four months since it was posted.

Among those who posted a link to the YouTube version was Mr. Khan, the North Carolina blogger who said he was struck by the simplicity in the messages of both Al Qaeda and Malcolm X. “They are geniuses for having the ability to mold their ideology into simple yet influential messages that can reach the grass-roots level,” he said.

Mr. Khan produces his blog anonymously, but was identified by The Times through the e-mail account he used in previous online discussions. (Pictures he had posted online helped The Times distinguish him from another, unrelated North Carolina resident, about 10 years older, who has the same name.)

In an interview at a local mosque, where he sat on a prayer rug wearing a traditional Arabic robe, Mr. Khan traced his increasing militancy.

His blog has attracted enough notoriety that vigilante groups opposed to jihadi sites have gotten him shut down a few times in recent months. He said he was somewhat surprised he had not been confronted by government authorities, although, he said, “I’ve never told anybody to build bombs.”

His early postings, beginning in 2003, promoted strengthening Islam in North America through nonviolent confrontations. But with the escalating war in Iraq, bloodshed became a recurrent theme.

He described his favorite video from Iraq: a fiery suicide-bomber attack on an American outpost.

“It was something that brought great happiness to me,” he said. “Because this is something America would never want to admit, that they are being crushed.”

Asked how he felt living among people who had sent soldiers to Iraq, Mr. Khan said: “Whatever happens to their sons and daughters is none of my concern. They are people of hellfire and I have no concern for them.”

### **A Teenage Transformation**

Born in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, Mr. Khan was 7 when his family moved to New York City and settled into the Queens neighborhood of Maspeth.

He mirrored his teenage peers, from their slang to their baggy pants, until August 2001 when, at age 15, he said, he attended a weeklong summer camp at a mosque in Queens, which was sponsored by a fundamentalist but nonviolent group now known as the Islamic Organization of North America (IONA).

“They were teaching things about religion and brotherhood that captivated me,” Mr. Khan said. He said he went back to school knowing “what I wanted to do with my life: be a firm Muslim, a strong Muslim, a practicing Muslim.”

He prayed more regularly. He dressed more modestly. He stopped listening to music except for Soldiers of Allah, a Los Angeles hip-hop group, now defunct, whose tunes like “Bring Islam Back” continue to have worldwide appeal among militant youths.

He also befriended members of the Islamic Thinkers Society, a tiny group that promotes radical, nonviolent Islam by leafleting in Times Square and Jackson Heights, Queens.

After moving with his family to North Carolina in 2004, Mr. Khan said, he attended a community college for three years and earned money selling various products, including kitchen knives.

But he began spending chunks of his days on the blog he created in late 2005, "Inshallahshaheed," which translates as "a martyr soon if God wills." The Internet traffic counter [Alexa.com](http://Alexa.com), which rarely is able to measure the popularity of blogs because they do not have enough readers, ranked his among the top one percent of one hundred million Internet sites in the world.

If Mr. Khan's extreme rhetoric has won him a wider audience, it has caused him problems at home. Last year, his father tried to pull him back to the family's more moderate views by asking an imam to intervene.

"I tried to bring arguments from the Koran and scholars, and said, 'Whatever you are thinking it is not true,'" said Mustapha Elturk, a family friend and the leader of IONA, the Islamic organization that first inspired Mr. Khan. But Mr. Khan did not budge, he said.

Mr. Khan said he separated from IONA over one matter: the organization would not support violent jihad without the endorsement of a Muslim nation's leader, which Mr. Khan argues is unnecessary.

Mr. Elturk said, "His father and family are really scared that he might do something."

### **Attempts to Shut Down Blog**

From time to time, Mr. Khan said, his father also cut off his Internet access and, to placate him, Mr. Khan recently added a disclaimer to his blog disavowing responsibility for the views expressed on the site.

He has also been fending off citizen watchdogs who are working to knock sites like his off the Internet. Twice in September his blog went dark when his service provider shut him down, citing complaints about the nature of his postings.

Mr. Khan has now moved his blog to a site called Muslimpad, whose American operators recently moved from Texas to Amman, Jordan. Their larger forum, Islamic Network, is the host of discussions among English-speaking Muslims. One of their former employees, Daniel Maldonado, was convicted this year in federal court of associating with terrorists at their training camps in Somalia.

Mr. Khan said that he had dreams about meeting Mr. bin Laden and that he would not rule out picking up a weapon himself one day. In a recent essay, he argued that jihad was mandatory for all Muslims, and he cited three ways to fulfill this obligation: join fighters in Iraq, Afghanistan or Algeria; send them money; or promote militant videos as part of the jihad media.

For now, he said, he is fulfilling his obligations by helping other Muslims understand their religion. Recently he posted a video of a news report from Somalia showing a grenade-wielding American who had joined the Islamists.

"He is an example of a Muslim who follows the Religion of Islaam," Mr. Khan wrote.

*Michael Moss reported from Jordan, Lebanon, Germany, London and North Carolina; and Souad Mekhennet from Jordan, Lebanon and Germany. Margot Williams and Hoda Osman contributed from New York.*

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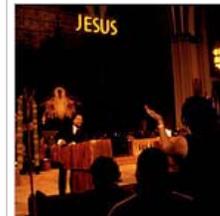
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