

Researchers examine online networks used to recruit terrorists

February 5 2013

"Lone wolf" terrorists—individuals with no apparent ties to known extremist networks or conspiracies—have inflicted casualties in recent years and have drawn increasing attention from the law enforcement community. According to Peter Forster, senior lecturer at Penn State's College of Information Sciences and Technology (IST) at Penn State, the revolution in information technologies has empowered individuals to become "networked participants" that are ultimately incited to actual violence through virtual interactions with terrorist groups and their facilitators.

"Individuals consciously seek online interactions and are identified and cultivated by online facilitators to become violent jihadists," he said. "But this process also creates a digital footprint that may be used to identify, interdict and ultimately prosecute these individuals."

According to Forster, individual jihadists' online activities, such as email communications, online searches for information on potential targets and online ideological statements create "digital exhaust" that helps to identify the perpetrators. However, he said, the digital trail left by online jihadists raises serious constitutional questions, as well as a debate over whether advocating extremism or participating in activities online are prosecutable offenses.

Forster's article, "Countering Individual Jihad: Perspectives on Nidal Hasan and Colleen LaRose," was published in November in a special issue of the peer-reviewed *Counter-Terrorism Exchange (CTX)*, *Social*

Media in Jihad and Counterterrorism. In the article, he details the case studies of two individuals, Hasan, a U.S. Army Major who went on a shooting rampage at the Soldier Readiness Center in Fort Hood, Texas; and LaRose (a.k.a. "Jihad Jane"), a Pennsylvania woman who became embroiled in a plot to kill a Danish cartoonist. Although the cases differed in many aspects, both Hasan's and LaRose's motivations to commit jihad stemmed, at least in part, from online interactions with terrorists.

In the article, Forster writes that online terrorist networks are "reducing geographic distance, improving security and accelerating the individual jihad." In addition, the internet's anonymity and accessibility provide opportunities for online vetting, training and operational direction. Potential jihadists who engage with online networks, he said, typically go through a process of self-identification, radicalization and finally, violence. Hasan and LaRose are "two people who used the Internet to make the jump from radical to violent."

"Online jihadists kind of create a virtual world around them," Forster said. "And this virtual world, in many respects, can act like the real world."

Hasan, who killed 13 and wounded 32 at the Soldier Readiness Center on Nov. 5, 2009, before being wounded himself and captured, harbored radical ideas prior to renewing communications with the extremist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. Hasan first met al-Awlaki in 2001, while the latter was an imam at the Dar al-Hijrah Mosque in Falls Church, Va., where Hasan worshipped. In December 2008, he renewed email contact with al-Awlaki, who at one point sent Hasan a copy of "44 Ways of Supporting Jihad," which urges Muslims to defend Islam through violence. Hasan responded by asking if he was allowed to kill fellow soldiers.

"It was his renewal of contact with al-Awlaki and the former's influence

at a time when Hasan was becoming more radicalized that I contend accelerated his violent action," Forster said.

While the murder evidence is the basis of the Hasan case, he added, his online interactions with al-Awlaki "provide evidence that he posed a security risk prior to the attack."

In contrast, LaRose, who pleaded guilty to 34 accounts of material support to terrorism on Feb. 1, 2011, never actually committed a violent act. Under the pseudonym Jihad Jane, LaRose posted a YouTube video in June 2008 expressing her "desperate desire" to help suffering Muslims. Islamist extremists who were searching for potential recruits on the Internet took notice, and for eleven months beginning in December 2008, LaRose communicated online with a variety of people who groomed her for terrorism.

LaRose underwent a virtual vetting process, in which she performed a series of tasks to prove her commitment and willingness to act. After a series of interactions with online jihadists, during which she expressed a desire for martyrdom, a co-conspirator convinced her to go to Sweden to marry another co-conspirator so he could travel to Europe, and to kill the cartoonist Lars Vilks, who in 2007 was embroiled in an international controversy after he made a series of drawings depicting the Islamic prophet Muhammad as a dog. Upon accepting the mission, LaRose assumed an operational role as a fundraiser and global recruiter. She also gathered intelligence on Vilks and joined his online community. However, she never traveled further than Ireland, and was arrested upon her return in October 2009.

The case of "Jihad Jane" portrays the individual jihadists as part of a "virtual network of participants with global reach and global connections," Forster wrote. The majority of the 34 "overt acts" noted in her indictment dealt with her online recruiting and fund solicitation

activities.

"The public nature of her discussions permitted extensive internet tracking that adds to our understanding of the online world's role in the individual jihad," he wrote.

While terrorists continue to exploit internet technologies, Forster said, there is a debate over whether advocating extremism or participating in activities online constitutes illicit actions. While the same internet technologies that are being exploited by terrorists offer new legal tools for combating the individual jihad, they pose serious constitutional questions, particularly regarding the First Amendment. However, according to Forster, the fact that LaRose's case was heard on the basis of digital evidence indicates that legal prosecution of an individual based upon intent rather than strictly action is gradually emerging.

"There seems to already be a legal shift to re-define laws around terrorism," Forster said. "When does online intent become a security risk?"

While the number of terrorists that are recruited and trained through online networks is not overwhelmingly large, Forster said, the potential harm that they can cause should not be dismissed. To combat those threats, inter-government, intra-government and public-private partnerships need to be forged.

"Very few people can do a huge amount of damage," he said. "It speaks for the need of the intelligence community and the legal community to interact."

More information: globalecco.org/countering-individual-colleen-larose#All

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Researchers examine online networks used to recruit terrorists (2013, February 5)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-02-online-networks-terrorists.html>

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