The strategic importance of the Internet for armed insurgent groups in modern warfare

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We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence of conformity.
John Perry Barlow, ''Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace'' (1996).

Abstract

In modern times the Internet has become the only tool which can be used to spread information instantaneously and free of charge to anyone in the world who has an Internet connection. The ability to spread information is vital for any party engaged in an armed conflict. This article will show that groups engaged in a jihad *have made the Internet their main outlet to the world. It will further examine the content of Islamic and* jihadi *websites, their main objectives and the communication strategies used. However, and with a particular focus on Iraq, the author will argue that the Internet does not serve as a platform of recruitment for jihad but is rather the most effective way for armed insurgent groups to win the ''hearts and minds'' of Muslims worldwide.*

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States (9/11), the threat of being attacked by Islamic groups declaring *jihad* became the

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primary security concern of most Western countries. This threat was personified in Al Qaeda, ''led'' by the Saudi Osama Bin Laden and his ''deputy'', the Egyptian doctor Ayman Al Zawahiri.[1] Through different types of measures (financial restrictions, military operations), the US-led ''global war on terror'' sought to destroy Al Qaeda and its affiliates. In its efforts to dismantle Al Qaeda, the United States launched military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan in October 2001. In March 2003, it invaded Iraq and ousted the government there led by Saddam Hussein. While many experts believe that the military operations against the Taliban had severely damaged Al Qaeda (many important members were either killed or arrested),[2] the US-led invasion of Iraq gave the network a new haven from which it could reorganize its struggle against the ''Crusader'' Western forces. Indeed, the quick fall of the Iraqi Baathist government, the internal strife that ensued to secure power and the security vacuum that emerged provided an ideal ground for any *jihadi*[3] who wanted to confront the US forces and their allies on Muslim soil.

The information war

This struggle against the ''Crusaders'' in Iraq is too often reduced by international media (especially Western) to its military aspect, thus neglecting the information ''battle'', of the utmost importance, that is taking place. Every day news bulletins report on suicide attacks or road bombs that are causing casualties among Iraqi civilians and Western, mostly US, troops. Many Western think tanks have extensively discussed the operational resources of different groups in Iraq and their ability to fight the technologically far superior US military.[4] However, the means used to make known the political outlook and operational achievements of these groups have been less thoroughly studied.[5] In that respect, the Internet has

1   The author does not share the views that currently portray Al Qaeda as a pyramidal organization, with a leader (Bin Laden), a deputy leader (Al Zawahiri) and so on. He understands Al Qaeda as a reference for global *jihad*, materialized in the grievances and requests that Bin Laden has addressed to the world since the mid-1990s: the departure of US and Western troops from Muslim soil; the termination of US support for Arab ''apostate'' regimes; and the termination of support for Israel, which is oppressing the Palestinian people. However, we shall refer in this article to the ''Al Qaeda network'' to designate in a general way those individuals, groups and cells supporting the global *jihad* – against both the ''infidel Crusader–Zionist'' alliance (the Western world in general) and the ''apostate'' Muslim rulers – and claiming to be part of ''Al Qaeda''.
2   Alain Chouet, former head of security intelligence of the French Secret Services (DGSE), claimed that Al Qaeda as an operational group had ''died'' with the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. His full interview with the French magazine *Le Point* of March 2004 is available at http://alain.chouet.free.fr/documents/faq03.htm (last visited 7 December 2007).
3   The term ''*jihadi*'' is used in this article to denote any individual or group that has declared *jihad*, i.e. war, on occupiers of Muslim land, Muslim or non-Muslim rulers, or any ''unbelievers''. The declared war may comply with the strict criteria of Islamic law or it may be an individual interpretation of that law.
4   For instance, the US think tank Stratfor has published many articles related to that particular aspect.
5   A notable exception is the report of Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, ''The war of images and ideas: how Sunni insurgents in Iraq and their supporters worldwide are using the media'', RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, Washington DC, 2007.

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become a tool of primary importance. The freedom of expression offered by it remains unequalled. Even if some governments keep its use under strict surveillance – for instance, by banning access to certain websites – the Internet remains the largest available platform of expression throughout the world. Any material can be found today on the Internet, and the diverse servers hosting websites have a hard time filtering the enormous amount of information present. This has allowed groups engaged in a *jihad* to post on various websites their video footages, audio recordings and written statements. Furthermore, at a time when there is a strict surveillance of these armed groups, the security concerns for their members have considerably increased. The groups must use safe channels to communicate with the outside world. The Internet offers extended protection to its users when it comes to anonymity and traceability, especially when these users are professionals in the use of modern technologies.[6]

For these reasons and others that we shall examine more closely, the use of the Internet by armed groups confronting the Western forces in Iraq and their local allies is constantly growing. It has become virtually impossible to count the number of websites dedicated to the *jihad* cause against US troops in the Muslim world, especially in Iraq. All these websites are a key to understanding the political, social and economic reasons that have drawn many Muslims from around the world to fight the foreign troops in Iraq. The subjects discussed in *jihadi* forums[7] cover a broad spectrum of issues, from the religious justification of fighting foreign troops in Iraq to the assured rewards awaiting every "martyr" of this fight in the afterlife. The anger of Muslims is freely expressed on these websites, giving anyone studying such forums a front-row view of the motives inspiring the global *jihad* universe.

This article will show why has the Internet become a substantial part of the armed (and especially *jihadi*) groups' arsenal. The article will focus on Sunni *jihadi* groups in Iraq for two reasons. First, as myriad groups are engaged in an armed struggle against the American troops and their allies in Iraq, the focus on Sunni *jihadi* groups offers clarity and simplicity to the study. Second, these groups are the most active on the Internet today. In order to grasp fully the importance the Internet has assumed for them, we shall first study the content of these *jihadi* websites; this will be followed by an analysis of their communication strategies. Finally, we shall show that these websites target specific audiences in the dissemination of their grievances. We shall begin with a preliminary study of the availability of the Internet in the Muslim world, and more specifically in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). This will allow us to provide factual data highlighting the growing base of Internet users in the Arab world, who constitute the primary targets of the global *jihad* rhetoric.

6   Sometimes *jihadis* have hacked into other websites to spread certain messages without being traced by the authorities. This can only be done by people with in-depth knowledge of modern technologies.
7   The expression ''*jihadi* forum'' or ''*jihadi* website'' designates any forum or website where *jihad* is advocated against what is perceived as an enemy of the *Umma* (Muslim Nation).

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The presence of the Internet in the Middle East and North Africa region

The presence of the Internet in the Arab world is a relatively new phenomenon. In 1991, Tunisia became the first Arab country to provide Internet services. It was followed by Kuwait, which logged on in 1992 after the Iraqi invasion. Egypt, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed in 1993, while Jordan linked to the net in 1994. Public access to the Internet was available last in Syria and Saudi Arabia (late 1990s).[8]

Since 2000 Internet usage has grown considerably in countries of the Middle East region. According to Internet World Stats, a website specializing in the study of Internet usage and world statistics, the number of Internet users in the MENA region in December 2000 was 3,284,800.[9] Seven years later, it appeared that the number of Internet users in the same region had reached 33,510,500. As of September 2007, the countries with the greatest and fastest increase in Internet users are Iran (from 250,000 users in 2000 to 18 million in 2007), Saudi Arabia (from 200,000 in the year 2000 to 4.7 million in 2007), and Syria (from 30,000 in 2000 to 1.5 million users in 2007). This increase in Internet users in the Middle East is an ongoing phenomenon, as the UAE-based research centre Madar Research has forecast that by the end of 2008 the number of Internet users will have risen to 52 million.[10] In North Africa, the same boom in Internet use is observed. The total number of Internet users in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt was 710,000 in December 2000. By late September 2007 this number had risen to over 16 million individuals, with Morocco having the highest growth rate (from 100,000 users in 2000 to 6.1 million in 2007). The number of Internet users in Egypt is almost the same (6 million).[11] Conversely, Iraq is the country with the lowest number of Internet users in the MENA region, with 36,000 users registered in September 2007, and is the only country in the region that has witnessed a decrease in the number of Internet users in the last years. The main reason for this development is, without any doubt, the war in Iraq.

Although access to the Internet is closely monitored by the governments in the region,[12] which operate complete bans on numerous websites considered as threatening internal security, the people in the Arab world continue to show an increased interest. While many might use the Internet for primarily social reasons (chats, use of social networks, etc.), people wanting to convey a message to the

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8   Deborah L. Wheeler, ''The Internet in the Arab world: digital divides and cultural connections'', Royal Institute for Inter-faith Studies, Amman, Jordan, 16 June 2004.

9   The study included the following countries: Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine (West Bank), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, UAE and Yemen. It is available at http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm (last visited 29 November 2007).

10 Internet World Stats published the results of the Madar Research forecast at http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/reports.htm (last visited 29 November 2007).

11 These results are available at http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm (last visited 29 November 2007).

12 Gamal Eid, ''The Internet in the Arab world: a new space of repression?'', Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, 2004.

Arab masses have understood that the Internet is becoming ever more present in their daily lives. This has led many religious leaders and institutions to establish their own websites. Some websites discuss Islam and its teachings in a broad way ("Islamic websites"). Among these, a distinction must be made between websites portraying the armed opposition in Iraq as a resistance to occupation ("mainstream Islamic websites") and those referring to the struggle of the Iraqi insurgents as a legitimate *jihad*. The latter are usually administered by scholars or groups opposed to Muslim governments. A third category of websites, which we will refer to as "*jihadi* websites", not only justify acts of violence and indiscriminate attacks against the "enemies of Islam", but are also active in broadcasting video and audio footages of the fighters, as well as official communiqués of the armed opposition groups in Iraq.

The content: from Islamic to *jihadi* websites

Like all academic bodies, religious institutions or figures have developed their presence on the Internet. The Islamic websites, generally supervised by Sunni institutions or religious leaders, explain Islamic morals, principles and teachings to the public. These websites also display an impressive "*fatwa* bank",[13] where scholars answer numerous questions from Muslims all over the world. While these are usually personal queries from Muslims wishing to live in compliance with their religion, topics such as *jihad* and relations with non-Muslims are also often discussed. Unlike the *jihadi* websites, such topics are explained from a strict doctrinal point of view. The scholars explain their meaning as presented in the Qur'an, the Sharia (Islamic law) or the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), without showing video footage, audio messages or other communiqués of *jihadi* groups designed to give form to the concept of armed *jihad*.

The *fatwa* delivered depends on the school of thought to which the scholar supervising the website adheres, as *jihad* or relations with non-Muslims have been subject to different interpretations on these websites. There are websites run by scholars close to Muslim governments (the so-called "official" religious establishment, because they are officially recognized by the governments) and those supervised by religious figures hostile to Muslim rulers and/or advocates of violent means (if necessary) to build a pious Muslim society. One thing both types of Islamic websites have in common, however, is their support for the resistance against foreign troops in Iraq.

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13 "A fatwa is a considered opinion embodying an interpretation of the Sharia, the Islamic Law." John L. Esposito (ed.-in-chief), *Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 10.

The mainstream Islamic websites

The Islamic websites run by members of the "official" religious establishment can be labelled as mainstream Islamic websites. Sunni authorities recognized worldwide, such as Youssouf Al Qaradawi[14] or Salman Al Awda,[15] have websites where they primarily express their views on religious matters, but also on political issues affecting the Muslim world. On his website, Al Awda, for example, has stated, "Islam prohibits targeting innocent people such as women, children, and others like them even when there is actually a war being waged between the Muslims and the disbelievers. Disbelief, in and of itself, is not a justification to kill someone."[16]

Concerning Iraq, he also told his followers, "we certainly do not call for clashes between Sunnis and Shiites whether in Iraq or elsewhere, because clashes are not even destined to the infidel, but we call for mutual understanding and dialogue".[17] One can thus argue that scholars like him have taken a clear stance against sectarian violence in Iraq. However, at the same time both the aforesaid scholars adopt positions and issue statements inciting Muslim anger against the US troops and their allies in Iraq. During his visit to London, Al Qaradawi supported "the right of Iraqi people to resist foreign invasion". His choice of words is significant. Even if he does not use the word *jihad*, Islamic law and tradition view foreign invasion of a Muslim land (in this case Iraq) as a clear justification for *jihad*.[18] Al Qaradawi's rhetoric points out that there is foreign aggression on Muslim land, and regardless of whether he calls it a *jihad*, his followers will perceive it as their "religious duty" to support the Iraqis fighting against the "aggressors". Al Awda has written many articles on the situation in Iraq. In 2003, in an article entitled "After Iraq: Part II" published on his website, the Saudi scholar wrote,

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14 Born in Egypt, Al Qaradawi was a follower of Hassan al-Banna (the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) in his youth and was imprisoned three times in Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century for his involvement in Islamist activism there. Although he is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Qaradawi has several times turned down offers to lead the organization. After relocating to Qatar, he was appointed dean of the Islamic Department at the Faculties of Sharia and Education in Qatar and was also made chairman of a council overseeing Islamic education in Algeria. He is also the chairman of the European Council for Fatwa and Research. During a visit to London in July 2004, Al Qaradawi clearly opposed suicide operations in Iraq.

15 Al Awda was born to a rich and respected Saudi family. He first joined the Faculty of Arabic at the University Ibn Saud in Riyadh, then enrolled two years later in the Faculty of Sharia of the same university and got his degree there. He continued his studies at the Al Buraida University Institute, before being transferred to the Sharia section of the "Ousoul al Dine" (Principles of Religion) Faculty of the Ibn Saud University. He obtained his Ph.D. from this faculty.

16 This information is available at http://www.islamtoday.com/show_detail_section.cfm?q_id=310&main_cat_id=15 (last visited 1 December 2007).

17 Ibid.

18 A number of Qur'anic verses can be quoted that expressly justify armed struggle against the "unbelievers" on the grounds of aggression. For instance, "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; For God loveth not transgressors" (Sura *Al Baqara* (The Heifer), Verse 190).

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Those in America who proclaim freedom are making vicious attacks against Islam and its Prophet (peace be upon him), accusing him of bloodlust, violence, and terrorism. We, however, can challenge them with the fact that the number of people killed during the lifetime of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was fewer than the number killed by the allied forces during a single day of their unjust war against Iraq.[19]

Such statements, issued on these websites, have a considerable impact on Muslims worldwide, as they give voice to the theory of an ongoing "war on Islam"; the websites have become a major vector of this grievance, even those supervised by clerics affiliated with Arab regimes close to the United States. These clerics do not openly support suicide operations or groups in Iraq labelled by the United States and its allies as "terrorists" (such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic Army in Iraq, etc.), but their constant reference on their websites to the "foreign invasion of Iraq" or to the "aggression against Muslims and Islam" swells the ranks of those providing moral support to the groups fighting the foreign troops in Iraq. Al Qaradawi and Al Awda can express these opinions freely on the Internet, knowing that their sermons are closely followed by the authorities of their country of residence. Moreover, as their websites are available in English, their ideas will reach a far greater number of Muslims than would have been possible through local sermons. The Internet is used as a communication tool by these scholars, enabling them to address Muslims throughout the world and escape strict government restrictions. As stated on islamonline.net, during 2006 alone visitors from 213 countries visited 159 million pages on the website.[20]

The Islamic websites opposed to Muslim governments

Another type of Islamic website exists, supervised by scholars tagged as "fundamentalists", "radicals", "extremists", and all sorts of other denominations. We qualify these scholars as those who are strongly opposed to the Muslim governments in power, as they believe that they are not fully implementing the Qur'an or Islamic law (Sharia) which they see as the indisputable pillar of any pious Muslim society. They have also proclaimed their support for violent attacks against both these Muslim governments and their foreign allies (mainly the United States). Some of them, like the Kuwaiti Hamed Al Ali,[21] supervise popular websites where they freely express their support for the Iraqi armed insurgents and their

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19 This article is available at http://www.islamtoday.com/showme_weekly_2003.cfm?cat_id=30&sub_cat_id=541 (last visited 7 October 2007).

20 Information available at http://www.islamonline.net/english/mediakit/Index.shtml (last visited 26 November 2007).

21 He was born in Kuwait around 1940 and is a graduate of the Medina University, Saudi Arabia. From 1998 to 2001 he was secretary-general of the Scientific Salafi Movement in Kuwait (*Harakat al Salafiya al Ilmiya fil Kuwait*). This movement is criticized by other Islamic parties in Kuwait as being "extremist and dangerous". The secretary-general of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (the political front of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait and the biggest Sunni political force) has stated that the Scientific Salafi Movement is "a parallel to the Wahhabis and the Taliban".

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fight against the US-led troops. The popularity of these websites is clear from the large number of questions addressed to such scholars by Muslims all over the world.[22] Al Ali, who runs the www.h-alali.net website, repeatedly claims that there is a plot by the Shiites and the United States to oppress the Iraqi Sunni population. He calls upon all Muslims to support the mujahideen in Iraq, and describes the perpetrators of suicide operations in Iraq as ''martyrs'' and ''fighters of Islam''. The ''*fatwa* bank'' of his website contains a multitude of religious rulings. Al Ali refers to the ''mujahideen in Iraq'' in his latest *fatwa*, ''Statement to the Islamic Nation and to the Mujahideen in the occasion of the month of Ramadan 1428 (September 2007)''. He calls them ''the armed free men who are standing with utmost dignity, the fighters of justice, the defenders of their Umma (Islamic Nation) who are pushing away the forces of oppression''. As a scholar with known religious credentials (Medina Islamic University in Saudi Arabia), Hamed Al Ali's support for the armed Sunni insurgency in Iraq offers these groups a religious backup that will help enlist additional popular support from Muslims.

Scholars such as Al Ali cannot be labelled as ''marginal'', especially when it comes to the situation in Iraq. The US-led offensive of March 2003 has drawn near-unanimous opposition in the Muslim world. The majority of Muslims around the world perceived that war as being unjust and serving US oil interests.[23] As the ''official'' religious establishment could not openly and vigorously condemn US activities in Iraq because of the pressure applied by local US-allied governments, many Muslims found echoes of their frustration in the words of outspoken scholars such as Al Ali. Today these scholars have a growing popularity base because of the various crises between the Western and the Islamic world, the most concrete examples being Iraq and Palestine. However, the activism of these Islamic websites in supporting the Sunni insurgency in Iraq does not have the same impact on Muslims who visit them and take part in the forums as that of *jihadi* websites. This is due to the lack of operational ''proof'' that the *jihad* is being ''victoriously'' waged, especially video footages of *jihadi* operations. This element distinguishes *jihadi* websites from Islamic websites.

The *jihadi* websites

The *jihadi* websites are a phenomenon that has developed considerably in the post-9/11 era. According to Gabriel Weimann, whereas in 1998 the US Department of State counted no more than fifteen websites maintained by groups labelled by the US government as ''terrorists'', in 2005 there were more than 4,000

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22 The *fatwa* bank on Al Ali's website runs for dozens of pages. It is impossible to know precisely how many *fatwas* are available, but there are several hundred displayed in the *fatwa* bank alone. Most of them are a reply to a direct question addressed to Al Ali.

23 ''Muslim public opinion on US policy, attacks on civilians and al Qaeda'', World Public Opinion, Program on International Policy Attitudes of the University of Maryland, Maryland, 24 April 2007.

such websites supporting terrorist activities.[24] In the post-March 2003 era, Iraq has become the main subject of discussion on these websites.

The "graphic" activism of jihadi websites

Day by day videotapes are posted on protected forums that show roadside bombings of US military convoys, the training of *jihadi* operatives and even direct confrontation between the US military and the *jihadis*.[25] However, these websites are not only intended to show the *jihadi* groups' military operations against the foreign forces in Iraq. They also include much video footage destined solely to provoke Muslim anger around the world. For instance, in November 2006 the *jihadi* website www.tajdeed.org.uk released a videotape (allegedly filmed by the Islamic Army in Iraq) of an air raid on a mosque on the outskirts of Baghdad. The video showed a missile striking the mosque and completely destroying it. For the same purpose, videotapes showing excessive and unnecessary use of force by US soldiers against Iraqi civilians (including women and children) are posted. As the Iraqi population's daily suffering due to the war is causing frustration in the Islamic world, such images have a considerable impact on Muslims. That suffering provides strong arguments for the *jihadis* claiming that the US-led offensive in Iraq is a "war on Islam and Muslims", thus rallying additional popular support for the Iraqi Sunni insurgency that is perceived as "resisting" foreign occupation. These videos are available only on *jihadi* websites, as they would not be aired by conventional mainstream media outlets or by the Islamic websites, because of their focus on more religious than "operational" issues.

Jihadi messages through operational videos

The distinction between "ideological *jihadi* websites" and what can graphically be referred to as "Rambo" websites (showing only operational videos) is obsolete. The *jihadi* websites are active both in disseminating *jihadi* rhetoric and in advertising the operational effectiveness of the Iraqi Sunni insurgency: while they offer the possibility of reading *fatwas* praising violent *jihad*,[26] video footage of military operations conducted by *jihadis* is also always present on them, and not always in protected forums. The administrators of these websites have understood a vital element, namely that in order to be spread, the *jihad* theories need illustrations and "proof" of their application on the ground. For instance, throughout the summer of 2006 and until late October, *jihadi* websites were actively reporting news from "Juba", a sniper in Baghdad who allegedly killed

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24 Gabriel Weimann, "Terror on the Internet: the new arena, the new challenges", United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington, DC, 2006, p. 15.
25 The Islamic Army in Iraq has been very active in this respect. The group is thought to be the largest militant Sunni organization in Iraq. Its ideology is a mix of Islamism and nationalism, as the group is composed of many former Baathists. The Islamic Army in Iraq has posted numerous small videotapes on various *jihadi* websites showing the group's military activities against the foreign forces in Iraq.
26 Hamed Al Ali is often cited on these websites; see note 22 above.

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more than 600 US soldiers in that short period. Each time a ''Juba'' video was to be released, there was increased activity on the *jihadi* forums: many people logged on (some forums even hosted over 50 participants) just to see the new ''achievements'' of their favourite sniper. On 24 October 2006, the *jihadi* website www.minbar-sos.com hosted a large forum offering great praise of ''Juba'', who, according to the website, had killed 668 US soldiers in Iraq since July 2006. The forum showed pictures of the sniper, his face invisible, writing a letter to the Muslim nation and preparing his rifle. A series of other video footages showed US soldiers walking around Baghdad before being gunned down by the sniper. Statements were also made in Arabic, such as ''Participate in financial support for the *jihad*, don't be late!'' and ''Juba's successes were achieved using an old sniper rifle. Imagine what he could do to the Crusaders with a new rifle. Support Juba!''[27] According to Abdul Hameed Bakier,[28] a counter-terrorism expert writing for the Jamestown Foundation, ''the most effective *jihadi* propaganda videos are currently the two clips of Baghdad's sniper, nicknamed Juba''.[29]

The advantages of the web for transmitting *jihadi* speeches

The Internet offers greater advantages to the supporters of armed *jihad* than do mainstream media operators, even those like Al Jazeera that have not hesitated to broadcast speeches of Osama Bin Laden or Ayman Al Zawahiri. First, mainstream media operators work to a precise schedule that does not allow them to broadcast *jihadi* messages in full (such messages often last more than 30 minutes). Furthermore Al Jazeera, owned by the Qatari Prince, cannot air messages that would be threatening to the government. In that regard there have been accusations on behalf of the *jihadis* that Al Jazeera broadcasts messages in a way that best suits its own agenda. With reference to Bin Laden's audio speech of 22 October 2007, the following criticism on a *jihadi* website was levelled against Al Jazeera:

> We have seen how Al Jazeera has manipulated the speech of our Sheikh Osama Bin Laden, may God protect him, and the way they distorted his message from its original meaning … The directors of Al Jazeera have chosen to support the Crusaders, the defenders of the Hypocrites and the thugs and traitors of Iraq … The directors of Al Jazeera presented wrong facts making the speech seem as if it was focused solely on the brothers and sons inside the Al Qaeda organization. This happened as if the speech was admitting the group's errors, as if it was renouncing their jihad and their loyalty towards it … We strongly ask from all journalists, media experts, satellite TV networks, new media and especially those in Arabic to adhere to the principle of

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27 My translation.
28 Abdul Hameed Bakier is an intelligence expert on counter-terrorism, crisis management and terrorist–hostage negotiations. He is based in Jordan.
29 Abdul Hameed Bakier, ''Islamist websites succeed in recruiting Muslims for jihad'', Jamestown Foundation, 28 November 2006.

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neutrality by publishing messages as they are delivered with no omissions …
We also ask from our supporters and sympathizers to be patient and cautious,
and to not accept media releases unless they come from a credible source
which will not change their content according to its desires.[30]

These constraints do not exist on the Internet, where the running time of
a video or audio message does not matter. The *jihadi* websites pass on the full
message, which allows the viewer to grasp the ''true meaning'' of the *jihadis*'
words.

The objectives of the *jihadi* websites

To grasp fully the importance of the Internet for the Iraqi Sunni insurgency, it is
necessary to consider the ultimate goal of the *jihadi* websites. It has been said on
various occasions, in media reports or in think-tank analyses, that the *jihadi*
websites have been successful in recruiting a large number of volunteers to fight in
Iraq. According to Michael Doran, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence,
networks such as al Qaeda use the Internet for a variety of organizational
purposes, including recruitment and fund raising.[31]

Recruitment

We do not share this viewpoint. When reports cite recruitment by ''Al Qaeda in
Iraq'', they are usually referring to non-Iraqi fighters joining the ranks of Al Qaeda
in that country (or Tanzim Al Qaeda fi balad al Rafidayn – Al Qaeda Organization
in the Land of the Two Rivers (as Iraq is sometimes called)). Even if Al Qaeda is
supposedly still an active operational group, such recruitment, especially on the
Internet, does not make any sense security-wise. Indeed, at a time where there is
tight surveillance of the al-Qaeda ''group'' all over the world, the ''leaders'' of Al
Qaeda will not jeopardize their safety or their operations by recruiting *jihadis* on
the basis of their participation on websites. Security services, especially Western
ones, are actively trying to infiltrate *jihadi* groups and these groups are fully aware
of it. Such websites issue multiple warnings that the forums are being ''watched''.
When Al Qaeda emerged in the late 1980s,[32] the ''group'' was composed of
veterans of the Afghan *jihad* against the Soviet occupation. Al Qaeda's recruitment
was extremely selective and *jihadis* joining the network were accepted because of
strong personal ties with Al Qaeda veterans, family links, tribal guarantees and so
on. There was no recruitment based solely on the person's motivation and

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30 This information was found on the protected forums of www.minbar-sos.com on 5 November 2007.
31 Michael S. Doran, untitled statement, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, US
    Senate, 3 May 2007.
32 It is believed that Al Qaeda emerged from the Peshawar-based Maktab Al Khidamat (Services Bureau),
    founded by Abdallah Azzam (the main ideologue of the Afghan ''*jihad*'' of the 1980s). However, the
    term ''Al Qaeda'' was first used to describe Bin Laden's *jihadi* followers in a report compiled by the US
    State Department in 1998. See Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*, I.B. Tauris, London,
    2003.

declared support for the *jihadi* cause. The Iraqi *jihadi* groups were very wary of accepting unknown Muslims, especially those based in the Western world and willing to fight in Iraq, and suspected them of being agents working for foreign intelligence. Recruitment on the Internet carries high risks that the *jihadi* groups in Iraq will seek to avoid. However, the Web is used as an integral part of these groups' confrontation strategies.

The *jihadi* websites as media outlets for armed insurgent groups in Iraq

The armed insurgent groups in Iraq (and elsewhere) use the *jihadi* websites as vectors for their struggle, since the Internet constitutes their only means of communication with the outside world. It is, in a certain sense, their media outlet – with minimal censorship – to communicate with Muslims around the world. The videos portraying military "accomplishments" of the *jihadi* groups are presented to gather popular support for the Iraqi Sunni insurgency. But their aim is *not*, as is said in various media and reports, to gain support by recruiting future *jihadis* and suicide bombers. The insurgent groups, in addition to popular "moral" support, seek financial aid. As the Internet hosts video footages, audiotapes or communiqués on a daily basis showing the vulnerability of the US army faced with the guerrilla-style warfare of insurgent groups in Iraq, the *jihadi* websites constitute the latter's main "weapon" in their communication policies, which are in line with specific strategic concerns.

Adjusting the balance in an asymmetric war

The main goal of *jihadi* websites is to create a parallel universe where *jihadi* groups are able to communicate – through relatively safe channels – with the Muslim world. Wars are usually conducted on two main fronts: the battlefield and the sphere of information or propaganda. The Sunni *jihadis* in Iraq, well aware of US military superiority, have sought to adjust the balance of power in the conflict. The use of guerrilla-style warfare, to which the US conventional army finds it difficult to respond, has enabled the Sunni insurgency to sabotage reconstruction efforts and any plans to establish and maintain security in Iraq, as well as any post-Saddam normalization of a political process there.

However, the use of the Internet is what has transformed the apparently asymmetric conflict into a symmetric "battle". As *jihadi* groups, by their very nature, work underground, they do not have access to mainstream media operators, which would in any case censor most of their messages. The websites offer these groups the opportunity to divulge information and send out messages at a speed and on a scale that only powerful states would have been able to achieve before the Internet era.

The worldwide dissemination of messages on these websites has yet another significant advantage. Not only are the groups' military successes "proved", but the *jihadi* websites allow every Muslim around the world who sympathizes with the struggle of the Iraqi Sunni insurgency to feel part of the

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"*jihad*". Indeed, and contrary to what might be believed, most *jihadi* websites are not run or supervised by the Sunni Iraqi groups, even if it is safe to say that some websites have established links with the insurgency. There are many hundreds of websites administered by individuals who support the "*jihad*" in Iraq, probably without ever having met a single Iraqi insurgent. In the Internet era, these individuals are just as important as any *jihadi* fighting the foreign troops. Indeed, by actively helping to propagate those groups' videos or audio statements, the people behind the *jihadi* websites are making a substantial contribution to their struggle in two ways.

First, they make sure that the message gets through to the Muslim people. As security services are constantly shutting down websites suspected of being *jihadi*, the distribution of messages from Iraq to a maximum number of forums and sites makes their work much harder. In that regard, administrators of *jihadi* websites have shown their impressive skills at adaptation. When a *jihadi* website is shut down, it often reappears (after a variable period of time) under another address or via another server. If the administrators do not use the same Internet address for the site, other *jihadi* forums refer to its new address. In any case, "*jihadi* material" always remains available on the Internet, due to the work of the "cyber-*jihadis*" behind these websites.

Their second major contribution to the struggle in Iraq is their perpetuation of the *jihadi* ideal. As stated above, these websites spread certain information with the sole aim of arousing anger and frustration in the hearts of Muslims worldwide. The Iraqi war is a strong case in point. Scandals such as Abu Ghraib, the Mahmudiya massacres[33] and so on are still resonating throughout the Muslim world. The *jihadi* websites post almost daily reports of such scandals and other atrocities committed against Iraqi civilians. As this helps local Iraqi Sunni groups, especially in terms of financial support, individuals such as Ayman Al Zawahiri who advocate a broader international *jihad* are also benefiting from this activism. The perpetuation of the theory of a "war on Islam" and of the *jihadi* rhetoric creates a base of angry Muslims perceiving it as their religious duty to defend their Nation (*Umma*, the Islamic world) against foreign "aggressors". Some of them might decide to carry out violent attacks, either against Arab regimes allied with the United States and deemed incapable of defending Muslims (in Iraq or elsewhere) or against Western powers accused of causing suffering to Muslims. These individuals will act as independent cells, with no operational ties to "Al Qaeda". The attacks of 11 March 2004 in Madrid are a good illustration: to this day there is no solid evidence linking the perpetrators of that terrorist attack to "Al Qaeda", but their goal seems clear. Influenced by the theory of global *jihad* and frustrated by the situation in Iraq, the attackers wanted to "punish" Spain for its involvement in that country. A few days later, the Spanish governing party was

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33 On 12 March 2006, Abeer Qassim al-Janabi, a 14-year-old Iraqi girl, was raped and then killed by four US soldiers as her parents and sister were shot in the other room of her house. The attack took place in Mahmudiya, about 20 miles south of Baghdad. All soldiers were convicted by US courts and sentenced to prison terms of up to 110 years.

defeated in elections and the country's politics in Iraq changed. The ideology that drove these individuals to commit mass murder is the same ideology widely disseminated, almost entirely without censorship thanks to the Internet, by *jihadi* websites.

The specific audience targeted by *jihadi* websites

Two prominent examples of websites actively involved in the dissemination and presentation of news from Iraq and other ''*jihad* fronts'' will serve to illustrate the audiences targeted.

Websites targeting Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern Muslims

One such website is www.tajdeed.org.uk. This is a UK-based website that is exclusively in Arabic. ''*Tajdeed*'' means renewal, and the official name of the website is Al Tajdeed Al Islami, meaning ''the Islamic renewal''. The website is up to date on news of the Iraqi Sunni insurgency, but also has close links with other ''*jihad* fronts'' such as Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia. Muslims participating in the forums are considered as being adherents to the Wahhabi trend of Islam.[34]

The person behind this website is Mohammad al Masaari.[35] It is a platform for criticism of Arab regimes and the fact that they are governed by ''apostate'' rulers, with a special focus on Saudi Arabia. Many videos of the Iraqi insurgency can be found on it, like the one previously mentioned showing the destruction of the mosque in Iraq. Under each video or audio reference a brief discussion between members of the website follows, in which *jihad* is advocated. In these discussions senior members of the website give an analysis of the general situation in the Muslim world. They are blaming the suffering of Muslims worldwide on the ''Zionist–Crusader'' alliance, but also on the ineffectiveness of Muslim regimes when it comes to defending their people. Given that the website is in Arabic and contains strong criticism of Middle Eastern governments, the targeted audience is primarily Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern Muslims (living both in the Middle East and elsewhere). Furthermore, since many anti-Shiite items are posted on its forums, the website clearly wishes to attract Sunni Muslims.

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34 Founded by Mohammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab in the eighteenth century, the Wahhabi movement is a conservative branch of Islam which is also the ''official'' Islamic tradition in Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism advocates the strict application of Sharia and Qur'anic principles as non-negotiable elements for the establishment of a Muslim society. It is close to the Salafi ideology, as it refuses innovation (*bidah*) in Islam and believes that the true Islam is the one practised by the *salaf*, i.e. the Prophet and his close companions.

35 Al Masaari is a Saudi scholar in exile well known for his opposition to the Saud regime, and is the leader of the Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights in Saudi Arabia (Lajnat al Difaa aan Al Huquq al Shari'ya). The group was founded in 1992 in Saudi Arabia and consists largely of academics and lower-level Muslim clergy. It considers itself a pressure group for peaceful reform and for improving human rights in Saudi Arabia, but also agitates against what it perceives as the political corruption of the Saudi government and ruling family. In 1994, after experiencing government repression, the group moved its headquarters to London. Al Masaari still lives in London.

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Websites targeting Muslim immigrants in the Western world

On the other hand, there are *jihadi* websites exclusively targeting Muslims living in specific parts of the Western world. One example is the website www.minbar-sos.com, which is exclusively in French and actively concentrates on North African affairs. It therefore primarily appeals to French-speaking European Muslims of North African origin. The website is run by Malika El Aroud,[36] who issued a statement in one of the forums explaining why journalists are being killed in Iraq. In it she claimed that "there are only two explanations: either they are spies, and therefore their killing is blessed; or they are being killed by American forces who are scared of what they might reveal. Either way, the mujahideen in Iraq are not to blame, and they are not doing anything that is contrary to Islamic rules". The website displays a lot of similar rhetoric, but unlike the one supervised by Al Masaari, there is no significant emphasis on the religious arguments justifying the global *jihad.* As the "Minbar" website first and foremost addresses European French-speaking Muslims of North African descent, the arguments used on it to justify global *jihad* are focused more on the poor social status of the Muslims in Europe, many of whom belong to the working class, live in "ghetto" neighbourhoods and therefore feel marginalized by European society. The website's explanation is that European governments are rejecting them because of their Muslim identity. In addition, the website constantly shows videos from Iraq with heartbreaking images of suffering Iraqi women and children. This undeniably spurs Muslim anger and supports the theory of a "war on Islam".

Conclusion

The Internet, in its everyday use, has made the worldwide *Umma* or Islamic Nation a sort of village, in the sense that everything seems within reach. Geographical distances are no longer a major obstacle to communication and information sharing. This "village" is portrayed today as being under attack. The accusations of a "war on Islam", fuelled by many scandals (especially in Iraq), are widespread on many websites. The *jihadi* websites capitalize on the frustration caused by these events and provide graphic proof of what they call the "evil nature of the West". By performing this work of "counter-information", the *jihadi* websites have made it possible to readjust the balance of power in an asymmetric conflict. The Internet helps the *jihadis* to counter the international Western media and their perception of groups such as Al Qaeda. In other words, the Net offers *jihadis* the opportunity to show "their side of the story". In times of war the importance of communicating messages is paramount. While many entities

36 Malika El Aroud is no stranger to *jihadi* circles. Born in Tangier (Morocco) in 1959, she lived in Belgium, where she married Abdessattar Dahmane in 1999. Her husband is one of the two men disguised as journalists who killed the anti-Taliban Afghan leader Ahmed Shah Massoud in September 2001, two days before the 9/11 attacks.

engaged in a conflict have the ambition and the means to create their own conventional channels of communication (such as television), they often seem to be confronted by legislation that does not permit them to do so.[37] The Internet definitely does not pose that kind of problem. No special licence is required, and even if cyberspace remains under supervision by every country in the world, *jihadi* websites are always finding new servers to host their pages.

In addition, *jihadi* websites offer a level of interaction between sympathizers that makes everyone feel part of the ''*jihad*'' without participating in the actual fighting; it is no longer necessary to be physically in Iraq in order to become a *jihadi*. The websites help the "brothers" by spreading their messages and by attracting maximum popular support, which may lead to financial aid. There is no doubt that, to this extent, the *jihadis* have succeeded in making the Internet the vector for their voice, which is now heard throughout the world instantly and free of charge. The battle for the "hearts and minds of the Muslims" is definitely raging, and cyberspace is the main battlefield.

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37 For instance, the ban on Hezbollah airing its ''Al Manar'' television channel in France in 2004 (as well as in other European countries and the United States).
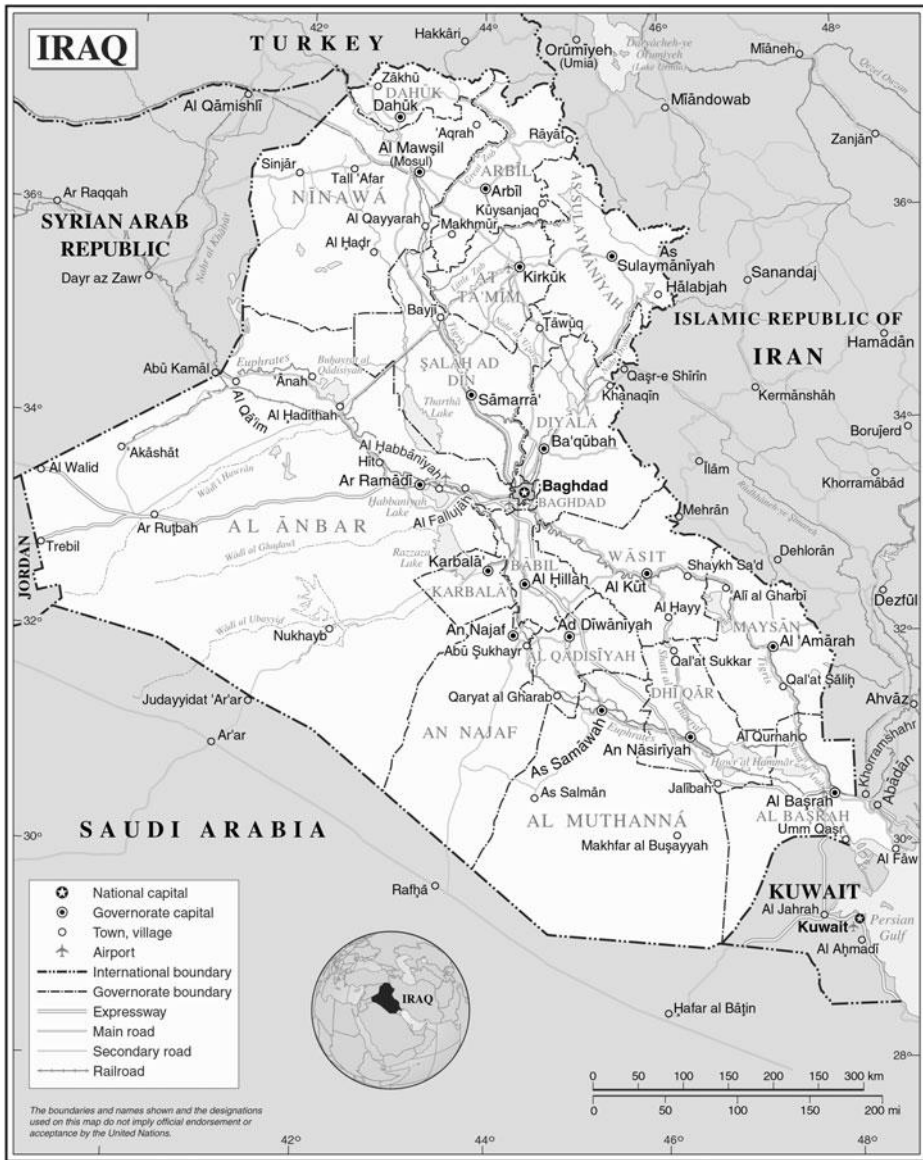
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Countless Iraqis have died since the beginning of the war there in 2003. They have fallen victim to military operations, terrorist or criminal acts or clashes between armed groups. It is very difficult to determine their exact numbers.

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The "Samarra bombing" of 22 February 2006 caused severe damage to the al-Askari Mosque, also called Golden Mosque – one of the holiest Shia shrines. This has led to retaliation and a spiral of violence between Iraq's Sunni and Shia communities.

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The fall of the Saddam regime put an end to years of dictatorship. At the same time, it created a political vacuum, causing the different ethnic and religious groups to engage in a violent struggle for power in post-Saddam Iraq.

Najaf, site of the Imam Ali Holy Shrine, lies 160 km south of Baghdad and is one of the holiest cities of Shia Islam and the center of Shia political power in Iraq. It has been the scene of heavy combat on various occasions.

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In the Iraq conflict, hostage-taking has unfortunately become a method of warfare, although it is a crime under international law. The goal is either to put political pressure on the parties to the conflict or to obtain money. In some cases, hostages have even been killed in front of a camera.

Many Islamist groups from all over oppose, either violently or non-violently, the presence and influence of foreign troops and organizations in Iraq. They use the internet to support their cause and to spread their religious message. But the internet also serves as an open forum for discussion on the Iraqi conflict and hosts moderate websites that condemn violence.

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During the invasion and in its aftermath, reporting on the events in Iraq was a very dangerous occupation. Journalists, particularly those who were not ''embedded'' in military units, had to take great risks to carry out their work and were often targeted. Despite the new-found freedom of expression, journalists are still frequently attacked. According to Reporters Without Borders, there have been about 200 killings of media employees in Iraq since March 2003.

The development of a democratic political system after the formal end of occupation in June 2004 turned out to be very difficult. After the adoption of an Iraqi Constitution on 15 October 2005, the 275-member Council of Representatives met for the first time on 16 March 2006. Some of the most controversial questions in parliament are the distribution of income from oil, regional autonomy and constitutional reform.

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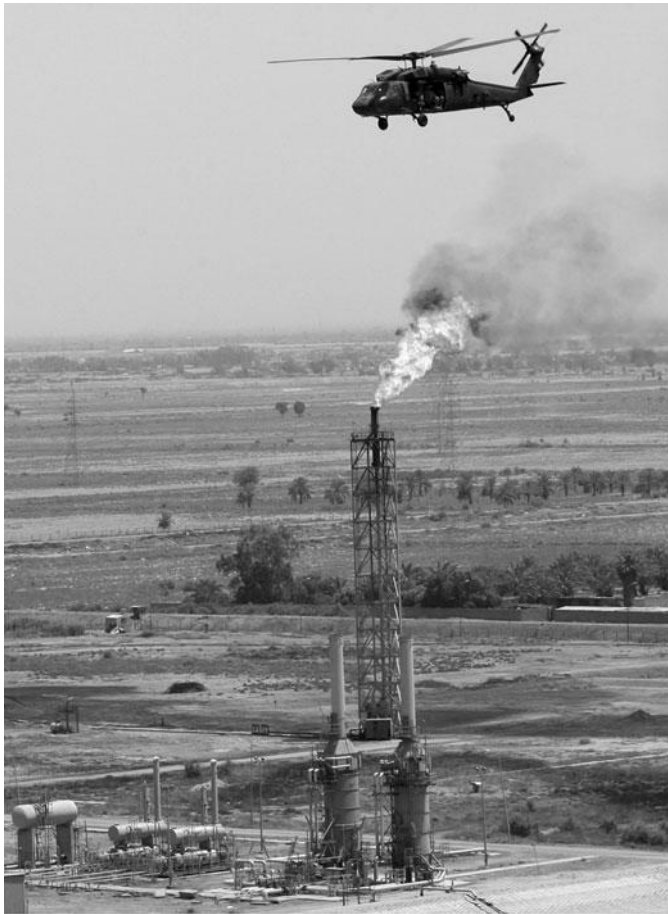
Iraq has the world's second largest proven oil reserves. According to the IMF, in 2006 crude-oil export earnings represented around 60 percent of the country's GDP and 89 percent of government revenue. It is a matter of dispute how the revenues can be distributed fairly among Iraqis and what the legal framework should be for the involvement of foreign firms in the exploitation of this resource.

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