



**Intelligence and Terrorism  
Information Center  
at the Israel Intelligence Heritage  
& Commemoration Center (IICC)**

July 14, 2008

**Terrorism and Internet: a US Senate report<sup>1</sup> analyzes the extensive use made by Al-Qaeda of the Internet in its war for hearts and minds. The report voices concerns over the exposure of American citizens to the websites of Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic organizations.**

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A poster produced by the Global Islamic Media Front, Al-Qaeda's media center, published on Maktoob, an online forum not affiliated with Al-Qaeda (April 18, 2008). The poster reads: "The nation of Islam still stands since it was founded upon the skulls of Crusaders and infidels".

Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy:

**"We are in a battle and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our people"**  
(The Senate Report, p. 6)

<sup>1</sup> For the complete report, see: <http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/files/IslamistReport.pdf>.

## Overview

1. Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic organizations in the Middle East and elsewhere have managed to harness the media revolution which has taken place in the last decade. Those terrorist organizations massively exploit such media as Internet and television for the battle for hearts and minds which takes place alongside the ongoing fighting on the ground. Using an extensive infrastructure of websites and other media, they disseminate their ideology and political messages, generate public interest in their activities, and try to win support and sympathy for their cause.

2. In our age, Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic terrorist organizations have come to realize that the Internet is just as important as the Kalashnikov, the rocket, or the roadside charge. Therefore, those terrorist organizations make extensive use of the Internet, both in the intensive battle for hearts and minds and to advance operative needs: maintaining contact between terrorist organizations and their operative infrastructures, at times separated by considerable distance; transferring such know-how as manufacturing explosives and building rockets; and collecting donations either directly or through Islamic charitable societies affiliated with the various terrorist organizations. Those uses are described in detail in the US Senate report (analyzed below) and in Information Bulletins published in recent years by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center.<sup>2</sup>

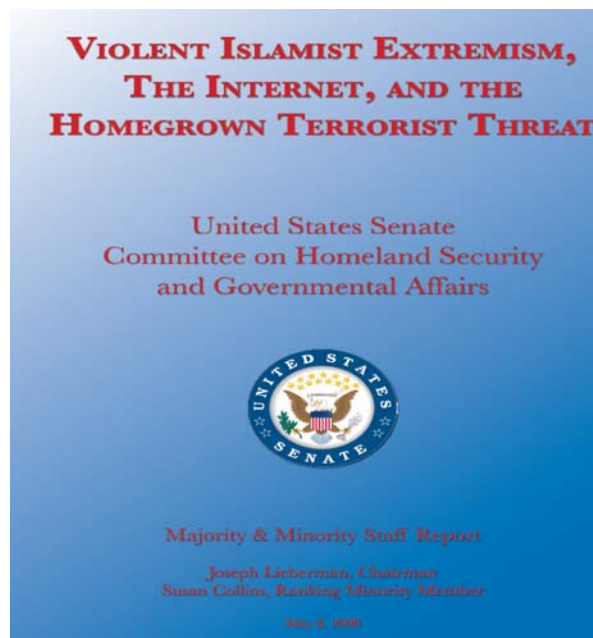
3. Using the Internet, Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations can overcome geographic distances and quite easily circumvent the restrictions imposed by the international community. They do so by exploiting the freedom of speech (the First Amendment to the United States Constitution) and the commonly held public view that the Internet should remain free of censorship, also taking advantage of the fact that Western countries do not take effective measures against terrorist organizations' websites. Thus, the Internet remains a medium in which radical Islamic ideology is distributed virtually undisturbed, preaching hatred, violence, and terrorism, and transferring operative instructions to terrorist networks across the globe.

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<sup>2</sup> The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center has published several Information Bulletins on the extensive use made by Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad of the Internet. See for example: [“The Internet as a battleground used by the terrorist organizations: How Hezbollah and Hamas exploit the Internet in the battle for hearts and minds, and how to combat them”](#) (August 1, 2007).

## The US Senate report on the extensive use made by Al-Qaeda of the Internet

4. On May 8, 2008, the United States Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs released a report titled **Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat**. The report deals with the use made by Al-Qaeda, global jihad elements, and groups affiliated with radical Islam of the Internet and voices concerns about the exposure of American citizens to Al-Qaeda's websites (the complete report is available on the Senate website).<sup>3</sup> Those issues should also be of concern to other countries facing an increase in the number of "homegrown terrorists" inspired by the violent ideology of radical Islam, distributed through the Internet and other media.



The cover page of the Senate report

5. According to the report, Al-Qaeda and radical Islam have at their disposal a **widespread media system** operated by the organization's media committee, making extensive use of the Internet both directly and through Islamist websites that are not affiliated with Al-Qaeda (according to the report, such Islamist websites number in the thousands). Al-Qaeda has four major production centers which produce its messages through the Internet:

- a. **As-Sahab** ("the clouds")—affiliated with **Al-Qaeda's high command**. That production center distributes, among other things, the audio tapes of Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/\\_files/IslamistReport.pdf](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf).

b. **Al-Furqan** (an Arabic word which means distinguishing between truth and falsehood, salvation, proof, and divine revelation; commonly used to refer to the Quran)—belongs to Al-Qaeda in **Iraq**.

c. **Al-Lajna al-I'lamiyya** (“The Media Committee”)—the organization’s information branch in **North Africa**.

d. **Sawt al-Jihad** (“Voice of Jihad”)—affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the **Arabian Peninsula**.

6. Those production centers produce a wide variety of information, including news and ideology: updates and official statements on Al-Qaeda’s activity, videos of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda and global jihad elements, image archives, songs, translations, animations and graphic designs, online newspapers, and even poetry. It should be noted that in addition to those centers, there are also organizations which support Al-Qaeda’s media activities, even though they are not directly affiliated with it.<sup>4</sup>



A tape of Ayman al-Zawahiri distributed by As-Sahab, a production center affiliated with the Al-Qaeda leadership



A tape of Bin Laden produced and distributed by As-Sahab, a production center affiliated with the Al-Qaeda leadership



An Al-Qaeda poster published on an online forum belonging to popular TV channel Al-Jazeera (September 15, 2007). The text reads: “We are at your command, Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi [the leader of the ‘Islamic State of Iraq’, i.e., the Al-Qaeda leader in Iraq]; we are at your command, the Islamic State of Iraq”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Al-Qaeda also makes extensive use of **Western** media websites (such as **YouTube**) as well as Islamic and Arab forums that are not directly affiliated with the organization (such as Maktoob, an Islamic online forum, and the forums of the Al-Jazeera channel).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/forum/showthread.php?t=71139>.

7. According to the Senate report, those web surfers who visit Al-Qaeda's websites may undergo a **process of Islamic radicalization** and, later on, initiate contact with radical Islamic operatives worldwide and join operative activities or raise funds, maintaining a significant degree of anonymity. The report details **four typical stages** which characterize the process of Islamic radicalization which an anonymous surfer may undergo while visiting Al-Qaeda's websites, as laid out by the NYPD report. The stages are:

- a. **Pre-radicalization:** the stage which precedes the exposure to radical Islamic ideology on the Internet.
- b. **Self-identification:** the stage in which web surfers gradually lose their previous identity and start embracing radical Islamic ideology.
- c. **Indoctrination:** the stage where the web surfer is re-educated (or brainwashed) until he has completely identified with the new ideology.
- d. **Jihadization:** the final stage of the radicalization process, which can eventually lead to operational planning for and participating in a terrorist attack.

8. According to the report, the Internet plays an important role in the process of radicalization and shaping a new self-identity. This process takes place, inter alia, in the US, where it is reflected in the growing willingness of American citizens to take part in terrorist activity out of radical Islamic motives.<sup>6</sup>

9. Following are some of the report's insights into the contribution of the Internet to the process of Islamic radicalization:

- a. **Encouragement of terrorist activities:** the report provides several examples of cases in which American citizens who underwent a process of Islamic jihadist radicalization (in which the Internet played a key role) planned terrorist attacks in the US. The report stresses that even in cases where planners of radical Islamic terrorist attacks were not given specific instructions by Al-Qaeda, the contents which appear on the Islamic websites, including the justification of terrorist attacks against Western targets, were a source of inspiration for the terrorist attacks' planners. The Internet is therefore a firm ideological platform for the emergence of radical Islamic ideas which lead to violence and terrorism.

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<sup>6</sup> The report also shows the danger in exposure to radical Islamic ideology on the Internet not only among young Muslim Americans but also among non-Muslim US citizens, who convert to Islam and embrace radical Islamic ideology. It may be assumed that such a danger doesn't exist only in the US but also in **Europe and other countries** which do not take effective measures to combat the phenomenon.



Scenes from a video produced by Al-Furqan (Al-Qaeda's production center in Iraq) documenting a terrorist attack against the American forces in Iraq. The video was published on the Al-Jazeera online forum (updated on September 15, 2007).<sup>7</sup>

b. **The nature of the messages which contribute to radicalization and anti-Western terrorism:** the report mentions that radical Islamic websites are replete with anti-Western rhetoric. That rhetoric is based on several key messages: the West wages a war against Islam; the Muslims must protect their religion as stipulated in Islamic religious law; therefore violence is the way to protect Islam from its enemies.

c. **Virtual schools:** the report states that the websites of radical Islamic elements have turned into virtual schools of sorts. The learning materials are radical Islamic texts, including those written by the Al-Qaeda leaders, used as a source of inspiration for the perpetrators of terrorist attacks. This is reflected in a US Army report dated May 2007, which shows that the computers of the perpetrators of the Madrid train station terrorist attacks (March 2004, 191 killed) **contained some 50 downloaded books written by radical Islamic ideologists** and used as a source of inspiration by the terrorists.

d. **Virtual training camps:** the report notes that radical Islamic movements have come to rely on the Internet as somewhat of a virtual substitute for training camps. They use it to transfer operative information between various geographic locations, easily disseminate their ideology, and prepare new operatives both ideologically and operatively. It can be argued, therefore, **that the Internet has replaced the training camps in Afghanistan, turning the whole world into one big virtual training camp.**

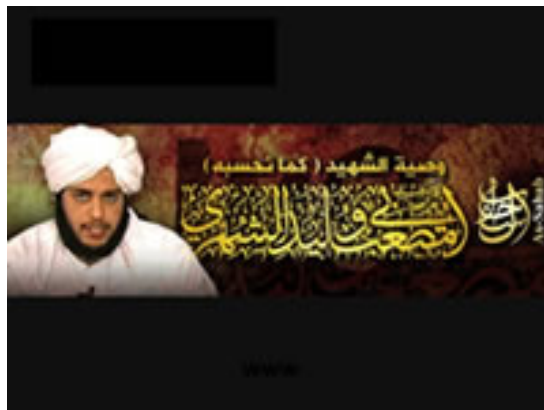
e. **The US and English speaking countries as a favorite target:** the report states that in the past year, Al-Qaeda has made a decision to increase the number of its **English-language** publications **(including original materials in English and translations from Arabic)** to directly address English-speaking target audiences. One clear example is Bin Laden's tape from September 8, 2007, titled "Message to the American Nation", in which he addresses his target audience directly. Following that tape, Ayman al-Zawahiri released a tape in English addressing the American audience.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.aljazeeraatalk.net/forum/showthread.php?t=71139>.

f. **Improving the connection with the target audiences:** in December 2007 Al-Qaeda conducted **a first of its kind interactive activity**, in which Al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy, released a video tape asking for questions from web surfers on Islamic online forums. On April 2, 2008, he gave detailed answers to some of those questions. **This evolving trend means that direct contact is now possible** between the organization's leadership and web surfers across the world.

g. **Virtual mosques:** according to the report, radical Islamic operatives are highly active on forums and in chat rooms, which have become a virtual substitute for gatherings in mosques and in community centers where their extremist messages occasionally meet with resistance. Those are usually **young web surfers, and there is a constant rise in the number of women participating in chats and online forums**. It should be noted that the chats make it possible for Islamic terrorist operatives to bond with each other, exchange e-mails and cellular phone numbers, and continue their relationship outside of the Internet.



**Adam Gadahn—an American Jew who converted to Islam and is now considered Al-Qaeda's chief spokesman for the American target audience. He is wanted by the American authorities having been convicted for treason in absentia.<sup>8</sup>**

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorists/gadah\\_n\\_a.htm](http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorists/gadah_n_a.htm),  
<http://www.nationalterroralert.com/updates/2007/09/10/as-sahab-another-osama-bin-laden-tape-to-be-released-soon>.

10. The report indicates that there are also Al-Qaeda websites **which target teenagers** from around the world in order to recruit them to the violent Islamic movement. One of the most prominent organizations which distribute radical, violent Islamic ideology is the **Global Islamic Media Front** (GIMF).<sup>9</sup> The materials disseminated by those websites are used to inspire particularly young people to perpetrate violent activities. One example is a rap song released in August 2007 titled **Dirty Kuffar** (“kuffar” being the Arabic word for “nonbelievers”), which was downloaded by millions of web surfers worldwide. The video for the song, which is sung in English, praises Bin Laden, Hamas, and Hezbollah, and features a masked Muslim rapper who carries a rifle and a Quran and lashes out at US President George Bush and former British PM Tony Blair.



From the video of Dirty Kuffar

## Weak points in the Senate report

11. The Senate report points out several incidents where US citizens have planned terrorist attacks after going through a process of Islamic radicalization in which the Internet played a key role. However, the report does not thoroughly explain **why** US citizens find themselves in a process of losing their identity, why they are persuaded by the radical Islamic messages on the Internet, who are the civilians which may potentially fall victim to the process of radicalization and jihadization, and what steps must be taken, educationally and socially, to deal with the phenomenon. The report also does not indicate what **operative measures** are necessary to combat the use made by Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic terrorist organizations of the Internet (frequently assisted by Western and even American Internet companies).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For more information on GIMF, see: [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/html/final/eng/eng\\_n/memri\\_10\\_05\\_e.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/html/final/eng/eng_n/memri_10_05_e.htm), [http://msl1.mit.edu/furdlog/docs/washpost/2005-08-07\\_washpost\\_www\\_weapon\\_01.pdf](http://msl1.mit.edu/furdlog/docs/washpost/2005-08-07_washpost_www_weapon_01.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Noteworthy in this context is Terrogence, a private Israeli company which acts against Islamic terrorist organizations as part of the battle for hearts and minds. See: Ronen Bergman, “Jihad Dot Com” (in Hebrew), *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Shiv’a Yamim Supplement, 2304, March 21, 2008, pp. 16-22; Eric Silver, “Meet the Cyberspies Living among the World’s deadliest Terrorists”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 20 June 2008, p. 20.



## Similarities and differences between the websites of Al-Qaeda and those of Hezbollah and Hamas

12. Hamas and Hezbollah are radical Islamic terrorist organizations, the former Sunni and the latter Shi'ite. They too have managed to harness the Internet revolution for the battle for hearts in minds, albeit to a lesser extent than Al-Qaeda. Both organizations have created an extensive Internet infrastructure over the last decade, based on a unified propaganda policy. They have invested considerable resources in their websites and upgrade them on a regular basis.

13. At the same time, they have created satellite TV stations (Hezbollah's Al-Manar and Hamas's Al-Aqsa) which, together with the Internet, spearhead the battle for hearts and minds. It should be noted that the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center has been monitoring the "media empires" founded by those organizations. The Information Center's website contains a wealth of information on it and on the countries and companies which assist it.

14. **A global view of target audiences:** even though Hezbollah and Hamas are Islamic terrorist organizations of Lebanese and Palestinian character (respectively), their ideology is aimed at worldwide target audiences. As a result, their Internet infrastructure (as well as their TV stations) **caters to broad target audiences in the Arab and Muslim world, in the Middle East, and elsewhere in the world.** In this context:

a. **Hezbollah's** Internet infrastructure consists of some 15-20 websites in **five** languages: **Arabic** (first priority), English (second priority), French, Persian, and Hebrew (third priority). There are also blogs written by the organization's supporters across the globe, such as in South America, who do not belong to Hezbollah but still sympathize with the organization.

b. **Hamas's** Internet infrastructure consists of **over 20 websites in eight languages:** Arabic, English, French, Russian, Urdu, Malay, and Turkish. While Shi'ite Hezbollah is basically hostile towards Al-Qaeda, Hamas's websites occasionally show support for Bin Laden and radical Islamic terrorist organizations worldwide. On the other hand, Al-Qaeda antagonizes Hezbollah and Hassan Nasrallah in particular, all the more so in recent times. Al-Qaeda's attitude towards Hamas ranges from sympathy to criticism.



A poster featured on the Hamas forum, supporting Al-Qaeda (updated on May 29, 2007). The poster shows photographs of Osama Bin Laden, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, and an Al-Qaeda operative holding an RPG launcher and a Quran. The text reads: "The root of humiliation will not be destroyed but by a volley of lead. The free man will not lay the [responsibility of] leadership on any infidel or bandit. Without bloodshed, there is no erasing the mark of disgrace from our forehead".<sup>11</sup>

15. Similarly to Al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah routinely use the Internet to disseminate radical Islamic ideology of **blatantly anti-Western character**. All three organizations preach terrorism and hatred (see below), but each belongs to a different brand of radical Islam: **Hamas's** is a radical Sunni ideology inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood and interwoven with Palestinian nationalism;<sup>12</sup> **Hezbollah's** ideology is of the radical Shi'ite kind, inspired by the teachings of Imam Khomeini and interwoven with Iranian characteristics;<sup>13</sup> **Al-Qaeda** has a radical Sunni ideology which does not focus on any particular country but instead operates on the global scene, as formulated by Osama Bin Laden and his supporters in recent decades.

16. As is the case with Hezbollah's and Hamas's websites, the websites of Al-Qaeda preach terrorism and violence, providing them with religious (Sunni or Shi'ite) justification and using the Internet for the **operative needs** of their terrorist activity (such as transferring know-how and raising funds). However, the target for terrorism of Hezbollah's and Hamas's websites is **Israel**, even though Hamas tends to sympathize with the activities of radical Islam across the globe. Operatively, Al-Qaeda's websites **have a much wider operative horizon**, targeting the US, the West, Israel, the Jewish people, as well as Arab and Muslim pro-West regimes.

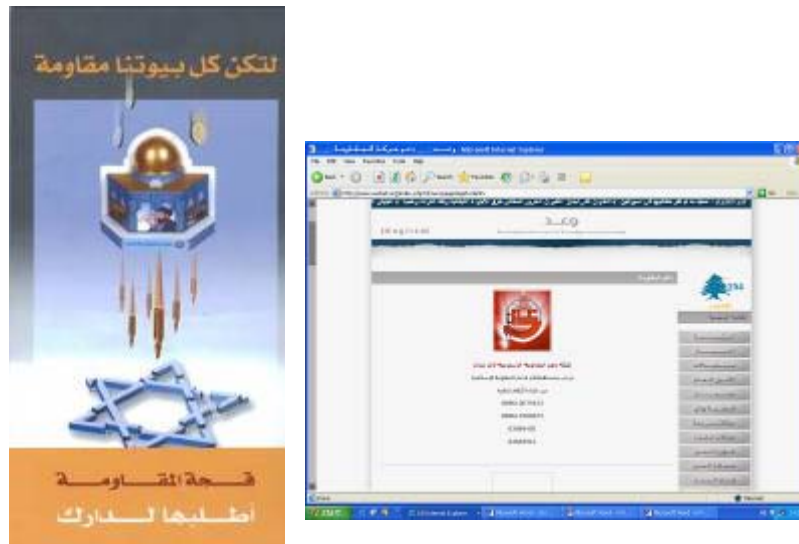
17. Hezbollah and Hamas, just like Al-Qaeda, make considerable efforts to harness advanced Western technology and use it for their own ends as part of the battle for hearts and minds. Their websites include television and radio broadcasts, downloadable Islamic literature, as well as newspapers and periodicals. Thus, Hezbollah and Hamas are able to bypass the restrictions imposed on them by the US and, to a lesser extent, by European countries. Hezbollah and Hamas, like Al-Qaeda, are assisted by Western and East European companies, as well as companies from South East Asia, Iran, Syria, etc. At the same time, Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=139650>.

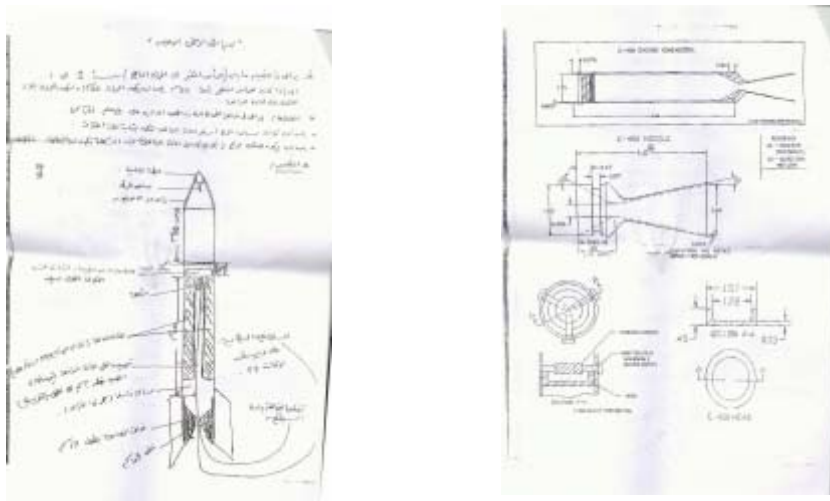
<sup>12</sup> This is reflected in the Hamas charter. See our Information Bulletin: "[The Hamas Charter \(1988\)](#)". Overtly anti-Semitic and anti-West, radical Islamic in outlook, it stresses Hamas' ideological commitment to destroy the State of Israel through a long-term holy war (jihad)" (March 21, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> The Iranian regime also operates a highly-developed website network in Arabic used as a tool to disseminate radical Islamic ideology to Arabs in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world.

Hamas oppose **Western messages** distributed through the Internet (democracy, freedom of expression, gender equality, etc.). That can be seen in Hamas's censorship of Internet websites in the Gaza Strip and the severe limitations imposed by Iran, Hezbollah's patron, on Internet access in its territory.



Hezbollah's online fundraising. Left: a leaflet published by the Support Association of the Islamic Resistance found in south Lebanon in the second Lebanon war. The key message of the cover illustration: the donations will be used to purchase arms for the destruction of Israel. Right: the Wa'ad website, asking for donations to the Support Association of the Islamic Resistance.<sup>14</sup>



Hamas transfers operative know-how through the Internet: instructions for assembling a rocket published on the Hamas/Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades forum (May 1, 2007)

<sup>14</sup> See our Information Bulletin: [“Funding terrorism: Hezbollah uses its websites to collect donations for itself and for its affiliated institutions in Lebanon and elsewhere in the world. The donations are deposited in bank accounts in Lebanon and Europe”](#) (May 26, 2008).

## Appendix

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### **A selection of bulletins published by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center on terrorist organizations' use of the Internet**

1. Terrorism and Internet: Hamas has recently upgraded the website of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, its military-terrorist wing. Upgrading the website, which incites to hatred and anti-Israeli terrorism, reflects the importance Hamas places on its website network as a central component in the battle for hearts and minds (June 22, 2008).
2. The Internet as a battleground used by the terrorist organizations: How Hezbollah and Hamas exploit the Internet in the battle for hearts and minds, and how to combat them (August 1, 2007).
3. Hezbollah as a case study of the battle for hearts and minds (June 2007).
4. Hamas recently upgraded its TV station and Internet sites. Although the Hamas government is bankrupt, the movement has invested massive sums in improving its propaganda assets, aware of their importance in the battle for hearts and minds against Israel and against its opponents in the internal Palestinian arena (February 23, 2007).
5. The Internet in the service of terrorist organizations: the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Internet network and the service providers by which the organization is supported (updated to September 18, 2007) (September 24, 2007).
6. Terrorism and Internet: Hezbollah's widespread use of the Internet as a means to distribute anti-Israeli, anti-Jewish, and anti-American incitement as part of the war for the hearts and minds (as at December 3, 2006).
7. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad Internet infrastructure and its Internet Webhosts (December 2005).
8. Terrorism and Internet: an examination of Hamas's websites and the hosting providers used by them (June 20, 2006).

9. Marketing terrorism by Internet: the Hamas terrorist movement continues using Internet Service Providers in Eastern Europe and South East Asia to operate its leading sites (October 2005).