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The Facebook Jihad

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Synopsis

While the world remains engrossed in debates triggered by Wikileaks, a new threat from cyberspace is emerging. Social networking sites have now become a potential space for recruiting extremists. We may call this the Facebook Jihad.

Commentary

On 4 JANUARY 2011, the governor of Pakistan's Punjab Province Salman Taseer was killed by one of his body guards, Malik Mumtaz Qadri. Qadri confessed to the murder because of Taseer's vocal opposition to the country's blasphemy law. Within a few hours of this assassination, a Facebook page for the alleged killer was created. The page gathered nearly 2000 fans in an hour and hundreds of people wrote messages, praising the killer. Although the page was removed shortly afterwards, this incident represents an emerging scenario where social networking in cyberspace could become a tool of radicalisation at a much faster pace, and with less control than through conventional websites.

It has been quite some time since the world came to know that a large number of extremists are tech-savvy. They know how to use the cyberspace for pursuing their goals. Social networking sites are now a potential space for recruiting urban jihadists.

A Social Network for Jihad?

In recent years, Islamist extremists have been increasingly active in the social networking sites. These social websites create and foster online communities organised around shared affinities and affiliations that connect people based on interests and relationships. In most cases, social networking sites are openly accessible to any participant on the site. The social networks have a paradoxical role and influence in today's world. They provide a new freedom of expression which we cannot deny. Social networks play a useful role when there is a clampdown by the authorities on traditional means of news dissemination; for example in Iran and Myanmar they have played a vital role for the democratic movements. But there is a high potential of its misuse.

How ideological extremism is spreading through the social networks is indeed an enigma. It can be claimed that cyber radicalisation is a safer, faster and high yielding strategy for the globalised extremists. Although the social networking groups seem to be loosely knit and often seem to lack a concerted ideological pattern, one thing is common: they all use extremist interpretation of Islam in their rhetoric for attracting the Muslim youth. Involvement in violence, it is often argued, needs to be preceded by a prolonged process of 'socialisation' in which perceptions of self-interest diminish and the value of group loyalties and personal ties increases. And social networks like Facebook provide an ample opportunity to socialise in the extremist circles.

The cyberspace today is as important as the real world to counter and pre-empt the threat of terrorism and ideological extremism. Terrorists and their supporters have already been using the Internet to disseminate propaganda, raise funds, procure supplies, plan and prepare operations. Both governments and their partners in the private sector should collaborate to deny terrorist and extremist organisations from harnessing this new medium. The newest face of terrorist and extremist exploitation of the Internet is the use, misuse and abuse of the social networking sites like Facebook. Unless governments and their partners act responsibly, terrorists and extremists will exploit the Facebook to divide rather than unite ethnic and religious communities.

The Power of Facebook

In terms of the number of active users social networking sites have tremendous influence. Facebook alone has 500 million (as of July 2010) active users globally. In Asia, it is fast becoming one of the region's leading social networks. Currently it has 59.6 million users in the region. With 24 million users in April 2010, Indonesia has become the country with the second largest number of Facebook users. Pakistan, the country which has just recently experienced the Facebook phenomenon, has 1,803,860 Facebook users.

With 43 languages and 60 more in the pipeline Facebook is becoming the biggest social network in the world. There are also other popular social networking sites (like Twitter, YouTube, and MySpace) which have become a tool of cyber radicalisation. Online social networks seem to have been preferred by the new radicals who want to create a new culture of jihad while taking the full advantage of information technology. The target group is the young Asian Muslims and their counterparts in the diaspora community in the United States, Europe and Australia.

Facing the New Challenge

Pakistan's example is a wakeup call to the world to not underestimate the threat of rapid radicalisation through social networking sites. Monitoring and evaluation of potential threats on these sites is extremely difficult. The reasons include the vast size; linguistically and culturally diverse user base; and lack of verification of user supplied biographical information on the social networking sites. An in-depth research on social networking might be useful for demystifying the sociology of radicalisation within the Asian Muslim communities as well as their diaspora in the West. Such research initiatives will play a valuable role in developing our understanding of the Facebook Jihad so that it can be addressed with foresight and in an enlightened manner.

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