

Countering Radicalism with a “Virtual Library of Freedom”

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POLICY BRIEF

Terrorist organizations use the internet as a tool for spreading their ideology. The absence of an equivalent moderate presence online gives radical groups a significant advantage in the virtual war of ideas. To respond to this radical threat, this brief proposes the creation of a “Virtual Library of Freedom” to empower moderate voices. The Library would contain historical and contemporary documents in a variety of languages addressing topics such as good governance and human rights. It would be targeted toward young, well-educated people – also the object of terrorist propaganda online - who have not yet chosen to turn to terrorism. The site would allow people to form networks and initiate discussion, giving them the tools to contest terrorist ideologies.

Radical Groups’ Use of the Internet

The majority of the forty-five groups designated as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) by the U.S. Department of State use the internet as a principal tool for spreading and collecting information, networking, and recruitment.¹ Between 1998 and 2006, the number of terrorist-supported websites increased from 12 to over 4,300.² The most popular sites receive tens of thousands of visitors each month from around the world.³ The sophisticated technology incorporated into these sites resembles the technology employed by large Western corporations. For example, HAMAS’s website and Microsoft.com share “over 20 highly valuable design features, including search engines, mission statements, a ‘what’s new’ section and a frequently-asked-questions page.”⁴

Terrorist websites have four main purposes:⁵

1. Information Dissemination: The internet is used to spread radical messages, and terrorist groups gain credibility with well-maintained websites.
 - a. *Advantages*: Well-designed websites can make groups appear more powerful than they are in reality. By using the internet as an outlet, terrorist groups can also circumvent the censorship of the mainstream media.⁶

- b. *Example*: “Al Battar Training Camp,” al Qaeda’s online training magazine, is “devoted to practical instructions in specific terrorist practices, including assassinations, intelligence gathering, kidnapping, bombs and explosives, guns and ammunition, fighting in cities, use of poisons, and so on.”⁷
- 2. Information Gathering: Knowledge gathered online through search engines, e-mail distribution lists, chat rooms, and discussion groups can be critical to the development of terrorist operations. Groups use these tools to “data mine” for information on schedules and locations of targets, such as transportation facilities, nuclear power plants, public buildings, and airports.⁸
 - a. *Advantages*: Terrorists can gather information on a range of topics, including instructions for constructing a bomb and blue prints to certain buildings.⁹
 - b. *Example*: Al Qaeda maintains a large internet database that contains information about potential targets in the U.S. This information, combined with advanced software, allows them to predict the impact of an attack on a target in terms of human lives and structural damage.¹⁰
- 3. Networking: The internet flattens the organizational structure of terrorist groups by facilitating communication and planning while simultaneously requiring minimal resources. According to a special report from the National Communications System, “Many terrorist organizations have undergone a transformation from strictly hierarchical organizations...to affiliations of...semi-independent cells. Through the use of the Internet, loosely interconnected groups without clearly designated leaders are able to maintain contact and communication.”¹¹
 - a. *Advantages*: Communication can be achieved anonymously through online encryption services, short term email accounts, anonymous logins to chat rooms, and public wireless networks. The internet also eliminates the need for a physical meeting place, the risk involved in personal contact, and the chances of an individual being targeted for terrorist activity.¹²
 - b. *Example*: In his article “Al Qaeda and the Internet,” T.D. Thomas notes that a website used by Chechen separatists in Russia contains links to jihad activists in Afghanistan and Palestine, creating the impression that these groups are united globally against the West.¹³ As a result, the internet fosters connections not only within groups, but also across different terrorist organizations.¹⁴
- 4. Recruitment: Using the internet, terrorist groups can tap into pools of potential recruits that were previously unreachable through traditional means. Internet technology has also allowed radical groups to reach people globally at a much lower cost. This technology can change site content to cater the message to different groups. Users can be redirected to customized versions of an organization’s site once their computer’s default language is detected. Interactive technology is then utilized on these customized sites to find the users who seem receptive to the terrorist message, the ideal candidates for recruitment.¹⁵

- a. *Advantages*: Sites tailored to different audiences can enhance the odds of recruiting non-traditional group members. Interactive technology also allows terrorist groups to respond to criticism or certain events, and then, adjust site content to maximize the group's appeal.¹⁶
- b. *Example*: Ziyad Khalil, a student at Columbia College in Missouri, became an al Qaeda procurement officer in the United States due to his internet activity. He caught bin Laden's attention through his website, which was supported by HAMAS, and his virtual links to many other radical groups.¹⁷

Lack of Response to Radicalism Online

Public Diplomacy Perceived as Western Propaganda: U.S. government policies are broadly focused on governmental change, specifically democracy promotion. The Bush Administration attempted to spread democracy with a military approach to public diplomacy. Due to the administration's stated objective of advancing U.S. national interest, it was perceived abroad as a form of U.S. propaganda.¹⁸ The Obama Administration has changed this tactic, but the U.S. image has yet to recover. The open source features, translation capabilities, and contextual information available on the "Virtual Library of Freedom" will avoid this aura of propaganda. By allowing for discussion and user input, the site does not force a monolithic conception of democratic ideals.

Minimal Technological Innovation: U.S. public outreach methods are rooted in a Cold War mentality: slow to change and unable to catch up to the capabilities of advanced communications technologies. For example, Voice of America, the largest international broadcaster in the United States, only dedicates 6% of its budget to the internet, with a majority of its efforts focused on traditional media outlets. The internet, however, is a key tool when trying to reach terrorist groups' target demographic: the youth of the middle class.¹⁹ Although current U.S. policy largely overlooks this group, the "Virtual Library of Freedom" targets this demographic specifically.

Insufficient Non-Governmental Initiatives: Non-governmental organizations that promote moderate political ideals have an online presence, but have not directly addressed the online threat of terrorist groups. The International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) work with local partners worldwide to provide training for groups that seek to advance democracy in their countries. NDI's website also contains a limited list of documents from international organizations. This online space is a one-dimensional resource: the documents are not available in many relevant languages, and there is no interactive feature. The "Virtual Library of Freedom" provides such a forum and also contains an extensive database of documents in multiple languages.

Technological Barriers to Fighting Radicalism Online: It is impossible to prevent terrorist organizations from using the internet. First, the internet is mainly unregulated, with minimal restrictions on usage.²⁰ Second, many web hosting sites provide free or inexpensive services and

have no incentive to track their subscribers. Finally, due to extremely low operating costs, websites can be moved easily when detected or hacked. Due to the sheer size of this electronic space, it is difficult to track sites that are constantly moving.²¹

Solution: Creation of a “Virtual Library of Freedom”

Terrorist groups have effectively brought the war of ideas to the internet. Thousands of radical sites exist in comparison to the very small number of sites that support moderate political ideals.²² This situation creates an exaggerated perception of the radicals’ power and discourages moderates from challenging this seemingly insurmountable force.²³ Creating a “Virtual Library of Freedom” provides a positive resource for moderates and reformers in the online fight against radical ideas. It transcends current governmental and non-governmental methods by providing a space for discussion about human rights, good governance, organization of political campaigns and parties, and other topics.

This database will receive funding and support from private donors and NGOs, but remain unconnected to government organizations. It will be hosted at an educational institution that is independent from the government and perceived as ideologically and value neutral. The site will also seek partners in the Islamic world. Partners could include the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy or an Islamic research center.

The structure of the “Virtual Library of Freedom” capitalizes on the same advantages that terrorist groups gain by using the internet. The development of the site can be divided into four steps:

1. Collect Documents: The first step is to compile documents from around the world to populate a database. Historically significant and contemporary documents will be chosen by a review board of academics and NGO employees, who will also evaluate suggestions from users. Documents will be chosen with the aim of informing moderates and providing them with textual sources to support them in debates against terrorist organizations. [See Appendix A for the list of suggested preliminary documents, categorized by topic.]
 - a. *Strategic Goal*: Posting these documents will give readers the ability to form and support moderate ideas.
2. Translate Documents: The database will be available in many languages to ensure a broad reach to the same audiences targeted by terrorist websites. Arabic will be the primary focus. Other priority languages, which will be incorporated later, will include those spoken in areas considered vulnerable to terrorist recruitment, such as Farsi and Urdu. Additionally, the general content of the website will also be translated into these priority languages.

- a. *Strategic Goal*: By providing this information in key languages, the Library's message can potentially reach the same number of people that terrorist organizations reach with their sophisticated sites.
3. Contextual Information: Historical background information will be available for every document and author, as well as general information on each topic. This feature will help users who are unfamiliar with the site's subject matter. Additional user resources will include links to similar documents and critiques of the topics, documents, or authors, and links to other websites that promote similar ideas.
 - a. *Strategic Goal*: The ideas and theories of these documents will not be presented as absolute fact. Background information will allow better understanding of the development of these ideas and will assist users to apply these ideas to their own situations.
4. An Interactive Site: Users will be able to engage in discussion and debate through a blogging feature. The blog will include Google translation capabilities to allow communication across languages. The website will also have a wiki feature. This feature will allow users to suggest new documents and languages, comment directly on posted documents, or assist in the translation process. A professional review process by a staff translator will be included for suggested translations.
 - a. *Strategic Goal 1*: Interactive technology builds connections. Creating networks between like-minded moderates provides them with the support and courage to reject terrorist ideologies.
 - b. *Strategic Goal 2*: The open-source feature of the site allows the Library to gather information from its users. By understanding what type of documents and languages are in demand on the site, it can cater to its audience's needs.

Logistics and Costs of the "Virtual Library of Freedom"

The costs required to develop the "Virtual Library of Freedom" are minimal. Initial costs can be divided into four main categories:

1. Translation: Translating documents is the first and largest step in developing the website. Before the website can be developed, an initial set of core documents must be translated. The most critical documents will be chosen and translated into Arabic first. Users will then be encouraged to contribute to the translations and suggest additional documents to be translated later, or languages to be incorporated. Students with academic language experience or a native language other than English could be hired for the initial translation work. With sufficient funding, a professional translation agency could be hired to review initial efforts or initiate translation.
 - a. Cost: \$8/hour for undergraduate translators.²⁴

- b. Cost: \$0.16 per word for professional translation.²⁵
 - i. Example: United Nations Charter \$1,425.28 (8,908 words)
 - ii. Example: Mahatma Gandhi, “Quit India” speech \$175.20 (1,095 words)
2. Website Development: Translated documents and website content will be given to a web developer. The developer will set up a domain name (\$10 per year) and work with a shared web hosting provider (\$5-10 per month). Use of a content management system, such as Drupal, will decrease web development time and enable non-technical staff to manage content without the help of the developer. A website developer could be hired at a rate of \$10-20 per hour, or a flat project rate. The hardware for the site, the server that would connect it to the internet, will be provided by a company like DreamHost. This provider charges \$69/month to rent a dedicated server with 100-200 GB of storage space, enough space for approximately 100,000 documents.
- a. Cost: approximately \$50,000 for design and initial fees.
3. Marketing: Marketing can be divided into two sub-categories: traditional marketing methods and social media. The marketing campaign would target young, well-educated people, who are politically undecided, and who are looking for a choice other than radicalism.
- a. *Traditional marketing* would include Google ads, spots in newspapers, and travel for a staff member to spread the word about the site.
 - i. Cost: \$10,000 per year for traditional marketing.²⁶
 - b. *Social media* has emerged as a new outlet for inexpensive marketing and for spreading ideas. Social networking sites and video uploading technology will be used to reach the target audience. Websites such as “The Hub” post video submissions and encourage discussion of global human rights issues.²⁷ Some social networking sites include: Drupal’s open source system; Orktu, networking in India and Brazil; Muxlim, networking for Muslims; and KalamArab, popular in Arabic speaking countries.²⁸ Blog sites can also be utilized for outreach. Use of these social media sites for marketing will then encourage users to initiate discussion once they have entered the “Virtual Library of Freedom.”
 - i. Cost: \$45,000-55,000 per year for social media director.²⁹
4. Staff: A small staff would be needed to initiate development of the website. Two entry-level staff members and up to six research assistants would be needed to draft text for welcome pages and contextual information. The staff would need to review documents for posting and monitor the blog portion of the site. Technical staff would need to be hired on an ad-hoc basis for general website upkeep.

- a. Cost: \$30,000-40,000 per year for entry level staff; \$8 per hour for undergraduate research assistants.
- b. Cost: \$30,000 per year for technical consultant.

The bottom line for the start-up cost of this project is approximately \$235,700, and the maintenance costs will be around \$265,000 per year, which will decrease over time. This total is a small expense relative to the large budget dedicated to traditional forms of governmental public outreach.

Appendix A: Documents

Civil Liberties:

- The Four Freedoms by Franklin Roosevelt
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- Islam and Democracy: Toward Effective Citizenship by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy and StreetLaw Inc.
- Religious Freedom:
 - Letter Concerning Toleration by John Locke
 - An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom by Thomas Jefferson
- Self-Reliance by Ralph Waldo Emerson
- A Theory of Justice by John Rawls

Development:

- Arab Human Development Report
- Declaration on the Right to Development
- European Social Charter
- Economic Bill of Rights by Franklin Roosevelt
- International Covenant on Economic, Social, Cultural Rights
- Islam and Modernity by Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomaa
- Millennium Development Goals

Good Governance:

- Anarchy, State, and Utopia by Robert Nozick
- Anti-corruption Plain Language Guide
- Common Sense by Thomas Paine
- Constitutions
 - Constitution of India
 - The Constitution of South Africa
 - The Constitution of the United States of America, Amendments, Bill of Rights
 - The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen
 - Magna Carta Libertatum (The Great Charter of Freedoms)
- Convention Against Corruption
- Federalist Papers
- Freedom From Fear by Aung San Suu Kyi
- Inclusion and Democracy by Iris Marion Young
- The Social Contract by Jean-Jacques Rousseau
- The Spirit of the Laws by Montesquieu
- Two Treatises of Government by John Locke
- Tryst With Destiny by Jawaharlal Nehru

Human Rights:

- American Convention on Human Rights
 - Amnesty International Program for the Prevention of Torture
 - Convention on Prevention and Punishment of Genocide
 - Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson
 - Declaration on the Rights of Peoples to Peace
 - European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights
 - Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture
 - International Treaty for Children's Rights
 - Islam and Human Rights by Emran Qureshi and Heba Raouf Ezzat
 - The Last Sermon by Archbishop Oscar Romero
 - Perpetual Peace by Immanuel Kant
 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights
 - United Nations Charter
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- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
 - Gender Equality in Islam by Jamal Badawi
 - Male Domination of Women by Benazir Bhutto
 - The Rights of Women by Shirin Ebadi
 - The Subjection of Women by John Stuart Mill
 - A Vindication of the Rights of Woman Mary Wollstonecraft
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- I Am Prepared To Die by Nelson Mandela
 - I Have A Dream Speech by Martin Luther King Jr.
 - International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
 - South African Congress Alliance Freedom Charter

International Relations:

- Farewell Address to the General Assembly by Kofi Annan
- The Helsinki Agreement
- On Human Rights and Foreign Policy by Theodore Roosevelt
- Speech on Humane Foreign Policy by Jimmy Carter

Non-Violent Protest:

- Apology and Crito by Plato
- 1989 Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech by The 14th Dali Lama
- Heroes of Hellfire, a fatwa by Tahir ul-Qadri
- Letter from a Birmingham Jail by Martin Luther King Jr.
- On the Duty of Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau
- The Quit India Speech by Mahatma Gandhi
- Reflections on the Revolution in France by Edmund Burke

Organization of Campaigns, Elections, and Meetings:

- The Campaign Staff
- Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters: Venice Commission
- Declaration of Principles for International Election Observers and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers: commemorated at UN in 2005
- Developing a Campaign Plan
- For Entrepreneurs: Advice for Administrative Professionals, Running a Good Meeting
- Political Parties as Campaign Organizations by David M. Farrell and Paul Webb
- Robert's Rules of Order

¹ Office for the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations: July 7, 2009," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>.

² Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: the New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington D.C.: Endowment of the US Institute of Peace, 2006), 2.

³ Maura Conway, "Terrorism and the Internet: New Media-New Threat?," *Parliamentary Affairs* 59, no.2 (2006):238-298.

⁴ T. D. Bailey and M.R. Grimaila, "Running the Blockade: Information Technology, Terrorism, and the Transformation of Islamic Mass Culture," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18 (2006): 523-543.

⁵ Terrorist groups differ in their tactics and uses of the internet as a tool. The four purposes listed here can be broadly applied, with some variation across various types of groups. There are also other reasons for terrorist organizations to use the internet. For example, financing terrorist activities through online donations or solicitation has become popular in recent years. See Conway 2006, 249-250; T.L. Thomas, "Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of 'Cyberplanning'," *Parameters* Spring (2003): 112-122, <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/03spring/thomas.htm>.

⁶ Conway 2006, 248.

⁷ Weimann 2006,

⁸ Weimann 2006, 9.

⁹ Thomas 2003, 118.

¹⁰ Dan Verton, *Black Ice: The Invisible Threat of Cyber-Terrorism* (New York: McGraw-Hill Osborne Media, 2003).

¹¹ "The Electronic Intrusion Threat to National Security and Emergency Preparedness (NS/EP) Internet Communications" (report by National Communications System, Arlington, VA, December 2000), 28-31.

¹² Thomas 2003, 115; Conway 2006, 252. See also David Gray and Albon Head, "The Importance of the Internet to the Post-Modern Terrorist and its Role as a Form of Safe Haven," *European Journal of Scientific Research* 25, no. 3 (2009): 396-404, http://www.eurojournals.com/ejsr_25_3_05.pdf. Gray and Head explain that the internet offers a new form of safe haven to terrorists. They can train, recruit, and carry out operations all under the veil of anonymity.

¹³ Thomas 2003, 118.

¹⁴ Weimann 2006, 117.

¹⁵ Thomas 2003; Michele Zanini and Sean J.A. Edwards, "The Networking of Terrorism in the Information Age," in *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy*, ed. John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (Santa Monica, CA:RAND Corporation, 2001), 29.

¹⁶ Gabriel Weimann, "Virtual Disputes: The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Debates," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 7 (2006): 627.

¹⁷ Weimann 2006, 119.

¹⁸ Robert Bryce, "Press 0 for Arabic: Washington Tries to Fight the War on Terror in English Only," *The American Conservative*, July 2, 2007.

¹⁹ Bruce Hoffman, "Inside Terrorism: Al-Qaeda's New Strategy," (presentation at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA, April 7, 2010).

²⁰ Benjamin R. Davis, "Ending the Cyber Jihad: Combating Terrorist Exploitation of the Internet with the Rule of Law and Improved Tools for Cyber Governance" *CommLaw Conspectus* 15 no. 129 (2006-2007): 128

²¹ Ibid.; Hinnen 2004, 18.

²² Michael Chandler and Rohan Gunaratna, *Countering Terrorism: Can We Meet the Threat of Global Violence* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2007), 182.

²³ Michael Chandler and Rohan Gunaratna, *Countering Terrorism: Can We Meet the Threat of Global Violence* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2007), 182; Office for the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “National Counterterrorism Center: Annex of Statistical Information,” Country Reports on Terrorism 2008, posted March 20, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2008/122452.htm>.

²⁴ Aneta Leska Baltés, Budget and Administrative Manager, Project-Level Aid and AidData, March 15, 2010.

²⁵ Translation Services USA, e-mail correspondence of translation quote, February 1, 2010. See <http://www.translation-services-usa.com/document.php>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “The Hub” is sponsored by WITNESS, an international human rights organization. See: <http://hub.witness.org/>.

²⁸ “A World of Connections: A Special Report on Social Networking,” *The Economist*, January 30, 2010, Print edition; “Global Swap Shops: A Special Report on Social Networking,” *The Economist*, January 30, 2010, Print edition.

²⁹ Jim Durbin, “Social Media Salaries,” Jobs in Social Media, posted November 18, 2008, <http://www.jobsinsocialmedia.com/profiles/blogs/social-media-salaries>.