

Terror on the Internet

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The New Arena, the New Challenges

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I dedicate this book with admiration and love to my father,
Tibor Weimann, a real hero who survived two world wars in Europe
and six wars in the Middle East and who now celebrates
the hundredth year of an adventurous life.

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Foreword

ONE OF THE ENDURING AXIOMS of terrorism is that it is conceived specifically to attract attention and then, through the publicity it generates, to communicate a message. The terrorist must parlay this illumination (i.e., publicity) into a more effective vehicle of elucidation (i.e., propaganda). The centrality of propaganda to this communications process and its importance to terrorists is as long-standing as it is self-evident. What is different today is that the weapons of terrorism are no longer exclusively guns and bombs; the modern terrorist's arsenal now includes laptop and desktop computers, CD burners and e-mail accounts, and the Internet and the World Wide Web. Indeed, in recent years, the Internet has allowed the art of terrorist communication to evolve to a point where terrorists are able to control the entire communications process: they can determine not only the content and context of their messages but also the means by which their messages are projected into cyberspace and targeted toward specific audiences.

The implications of this development are enormous: the terrorists are challenging the monopoly over mass communication long held by conventional commercial and state-owned television and radio broadcasting

outlets and by the state- and privately owned press. But, as Gabriel Weimann alarmingly notes in *Terror on the Internet*, “the story of the presence of terrorist groups in cyberspace has barely begun to be told.” Nonetheless, there is no one more qualified or better suited to initiate this process and begin to tell this story than Weimann. The author of such previous, pathbreaking books as *The Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism* (1993), *The Influentials: People Who Influence People* (1994), and *Communicating Unreality: Modern Media and the Reconstruction of Reality* (1999), Weimann brings to this subject both fresh insight and well-established scholarly credentials.

Weimann argues that, while considerable concern has arisen in recent years because of the threat of cyberterrorism, comparatively little attention has been paid to the threat posed by terrorist use and exploitation of the Internet. *Terror on the Internet* thus fills a conspicuous gap in the literature. Based on his findings from eight years of monitoring and archiving terrorist Web sites, Weimann sheds important light on terrorist use of the Internet for fund-raising and recruitment, training and instruction, and propaganda and psychological warfare, and for gathering open-source information with which to plan attacks.

One of the book’s main arguments is that, despite the multiplicity and diversity of terrorist Web sites, there are nonetheless core, common characteristics that terrorist groups with a presence on the Internet share. As Weimann explains, most terrorist sites are particularly notable for their colorful, well-designed, and visually arresting graphic content, selective presentation of information, and effective message. Other common elements include descriptions of the given terrorist group’s history, its aims and objectives, and the depredations inflicted by an enemy state(s) or people(s) upon the constituency that the terrorists purport to represent. The terrorist sites also often contain biographies of the group’s leadership, founders, and key personalities; up-to-date news and accompanying feature stories; and speeches, ideological treatises, and, especially, the organization’s communiqués and other important statements. Ethnonationalist and separatist movements will also typically post maps of the contested territory they claim to represent or be fighting for. Virtually without exception, all terrorist sites studiously avoid focusing on or drawing any attention to either the violence or the death and destruction that they are responsible for. Instead, issues such

as freedom of expression, human rights, and the plight of imprisoned comrades are emphasized. In the case of the more sophisticated organizations, multiple sites are often maintained in different languages.

In addition to providing a thoroughly compelling and trenchant analysis of the content on terrorist sites and terrorist exploitation of the Internet for psychological warfare purposes, Weimann also considers the salience of the cyberterrorist threat itself, outlining the appropriate responses to such a threat and emphasizing the critical importance of striking the proper balance between security and civil liberties. He also discusses how such a balance can best be achieved. His approach to all these issues is characteristically comprehensive, thoughtful, and sober. Weimann's conclusions are firmly rooted in the vast empirical evidence he presents in support of his arguments. Moreover, the policy recommendations he proposes are as practical as they are sensible.

Many books published on terrorism aspire to be described as "cutting edge" or "must read." *Terror on the Internet* unquestionably has earned these accolades. Indeed, it is destined to become the seminal work on this subject.

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Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK SUMMARIZES MORE THAN eight years of research that was collected mostly in the darkest alleys of cyberspace. This research could not have been conducted without the contributions of many individuals and institutions all over the world. Several grants and foundations contributed directly and indirectly to this project, but the most important hosting and funding organization for this work was the United States Institute of Peace, where I was a Senior Fellow from October 2003 to July 2004. The Institute and its devoted team served as both a home and a family for me during my year in Washington, D.C., and have continued to be a great source of support for me. Many individuals among the Institute's excellent staff deserve my gratitude, but I would first like to single out Joseph Klaitz, former director of the Institute's Jennings Randolph Fellowship Program. Without him this book would never have seen the light of day: Joe was a counselor, a friend, a source of advice and guidance, and a spiritual and intellectual mentor. I know that many other scholars and past USIP Fellows owe him a similar debt of gratitude.

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This project, despite its relevance for counterterrorism, was not supported by any security, military, or federal agency. Yet, in my presentations and lectures about my research, I noted the presence of representatives from such agencies and organizations. I hope they learned from my work in this new arena—cyberspace and terrorism—and fully under-

stand the need for democracies to apply limits and boundaries to the war on terrorism in the virtual arena.

Finally, I wish to thank my family, Nava, Oren, and Dana, who provided encouragement and support to me, a husband and parent who was perhaps at times more attentive to his research than to them.

