

1 August 2005

The Daily Telegraph

The website warriors COMMUNICATION

By Hugh Miles in Cairo

MILITANT groups have always been quick to embrace new information technology to achieve their goals. Now that a video can be shot, edited and uploaded on to the internet from a laptop computer at minimal cost, it is no surprise that terrorist film-makers should use this new technology to reach a global audience. The internet's full potential in the Arab world was first realised at the start of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000. Besides the leading protagonists all maintaining websites, including the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, Hizbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, external groups quickly seized upon the internet as their chance to rally for the cause of Palestine. Many of these were in the West, where the Palestinian cause remains a central issue for human rights advocates, trade unionists, students, environmentalists and "peace" activists. The most successful of these websites was Electronic Intifada, dubbed the Palestine cause's "weapon of mass instruction". Electronic Intifada's founding members are based in the Netherlands, Canada and Chicago, as well as in the Palestinian territories. Five years on and the ease of access to the internet makes it particularly well-suited to the kind of "asymmetric" warfare waged by Islamist groups rallying under the al-Qa'eda banner. Websites are cheap to set up, free to access, largely anonymous, widely available and hard to censor. Islamist groups see no contradiction in using modern technology to spread their message of hate, and since al-Qa'eda's real-world base in Afghanistan was destroyed, cyberspace has perfectly fulfilled the needs and capabilities of its offshoots. Only in cyberspace can statements of policy be issued, responsibility for terror attacks be claimed, funds raised, weapons and explosives training given, and methods of manufacturing everything from suicide vests to germ warfare agents be laid out in great detail. Propagandists working under the al-Qa'eda banner produce a biweekly online magazine, a biweekly online training manual, and, since August 2001, a regular online magazine for women mujahideen. The internet is not just an invaluable tool for extremists. It is also one of the best tools for western security services to monitor and learn about what is by and large an invisible phenomenon. As militants shy away from mosques they know to be under observation, websites are one of the few places security services can link terrorists with their supporters.

