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Terrorists Use Cyberspace as Important Communications Tool
Allied states must strategize, pool resources to rebut terrorist propaganda
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Washington – Hostile adversaries in the global war against terrorism are using cyberspace as an effective communications tool, a senior civilian Defense Department official says.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Peter Rodman told members of Congress May 4 that as many as 5,000 Web sites around the world are being used for propaganda purposes to create speeches, graphics, sermons, posters, training manuals, slides, blogs, web casts and video games as well as compact and digital video discs. The Internet also is being used by terrorists to carry out tactical command-and-control functions and to raise money and recruit foot soldiers.

Rodman made his observation during an unclassified House Intelligence Committee hearing on how terrorists use the Internet to disseminate strategic messages including spreading false rumors that rapidly gain currency as they bounce from one medium to another.

Terrorists have no problem finding outlets for their video messages in mainstream media, Rodman said, adding that messages are crafted carefully and translated rapidly into targeted languages including Russian, Arabic and Turkish.

There are even messages designed to appeal to those seemingly removed from the battleground, Rodman said, pointing to a program pitched to domestic households. The message says: "You can support the jihad from your kitchen" by raising children that support the cause." The message further conveys: "You don't necessarily have to directly support us, just don't interfere. . . . Remain neutral. Don't turn us in."

Rodman said terrorists also are using the Internet effectively to spread a message of intimidation aimed at journalists (through beheadings captured on video), in some instances, and local civilian audiences in places like Iraq and Afghanistan where they have sought to justify violence in the name of an Islam under siege.

Terrorists' Internet messages have become increasingly sophisticated with the hiring of a cadre of Internet specialists who serve the cause and operate computer servers worldwide. Ron Roughead, a contractor who accompanied Rodman to the hearing, said al-Qaida relies on its Global Islamic Media Unit for its outreach efforts.

Dan Devlin, a public diplomacy specialist in Rodman's office, showed the committee unedited, multimedia examples of terrorist disinformation on the Internet. "We're continuously amazed at how they're able to . . . snag multimedia products or images, repackage it to fit their own goals and objectives," he said, and distribute them rapidly on a global scale.

Devlin said the strategy of the terrorists is to propagate simple messages, quickly and to repeat them until they have saturated cyberspace. The messages are also loaded with an emotional appeal to their target audiences that are youth aged 7 to 25, he said.

Devlin said the messages dwell on two themes: victimization and a call to action that can mean taking up

arms or delivering suicide bombs. These messages "distort the truth . . . use selective pieces of the truth . . . distortion, or, in some cases they create new truth," he said.

The theme of victimization is exploited through false accusations that the United States and its allies are trying disgrace or humiliate Muslim society and culture, Devlin said.

As an example of how terrorists distort the truth, the analyst said their call to action often is framed in the context there is a crusade under way against Islam. Calls to action exhort recruits to fight to restore dignity to their people, according to the Web sites analyzed.

The committee also heard testimony from terrorist expert Bruce Hoffman of the RAND Corporation. He said "the weapons of terrorism today are no longer only the gun and the bomb, but . . . the mini-cam and video tape, the editing suite and attendant production facilities."

He said "the most critical accouterments for terrorists . . . have become laptop and desktop computers, CD burners, e-mail accounts and access to the Internet and the World Wide Web."

Terrorists are challenging "the monopoly over mass communications that both state-owned and commercial media have long exercised," Hoffman said.

Unfortunately he said, the Internet has equipped terrorist groups "to engage in an endless repetition of the most base and coarsest conspiracy theories." With their ability to refresh Web sites several times daily, he said, terrorists are "competing with established, traditional news wire services like the Associated Press, UPI, Agence France-Presse" and others.

Hoffman said it is important for U.S. allies and coalition partners to rebut falsehoods. "It's not only how we direct and . . . conceive and create our messages of public diplomacy and information," he said, "but how we enable, facilitate, encourage and resource our allies and coalition partners to do the same [kind of rebuttals] from their own websites and . . . media and information sources, [so] that they, too, can counter the terrorist and insurgent propaganda that's directed as much against themselves as it is against us."

For more information on U.S. policy, see Response to Terrorism.

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