



Islamist websites

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Before discussing Islamist websites, the very term 'Islamist' needs qualification. In general, it refers to modern political movements in which Islam plays a central ideological role. However, the term often holds a pejorative connotation. It implies that Islamist movements are, in fact, distinct from Islam itself, that they superficially invoke Islam for political ends, without any real understanding of, or commitment to, the religion. With this usage, the term 'Islamist' drips from a variety of tongues and pens. It appears in Islamophobic polemics as well as intersectorian Muslim debates. Still, the term remains useful for a more neutral designation of Muslim groups and individuals that directly engage the issue of politics.

The Islamist internet embodies many traditional characteristics of on-line media. It displays a geographic fluidity that bypasses national borders and controls. Nonetheless, it remains bound by the imbalances of the global information infrastructure. Its relatively low costs of entry and production allow a diversity of voices. Yet, powerful institutions and governments offer innovative attempts to restrict content and monopolize discourse.

Islamist websites tend to fit within identifiable clusters – united by a common political focus, even though the specific content, location, and format may differ. The following list of clusters identifies major themes and notable examples of the Islamist internet.

Religious modernism

Key examples: islamonline.net, islamicity.com

These websites reflect a willingness to participate in western political culture and encourage a more active civil society within the Muslim world. Additionally, both sites maintain a strong religious component, such as online access to core Islamic texts, fatwa and counselling services, and Q&A sessions with Muslim scholars. These sites attempt to strike a balance that often lands them in controversy. Many Muslims may find the sites overly accommodating to western culture and discourse. Islamonline.net, for

instance, used to carry weekly film reviews and often engages with elements of popular culture that other Muslims find distasteful. Other visitors may view the sites as modern facades for extremist positions. For example, the online 'bazaar' on islamicity.com displays contemporary leftist anti-war and media activist books alongside the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Saudi opposition

Key examples: cdlr.net, islah.tv

The Committee for Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) and the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) represent the exiled, Islamist opposition to the Saudi monarchy. These organizations pioneered the use of 'small' media to expose corruption in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Reminiscent of the Zapatista movement's use of the internet to mobilize global support, the Saudi opposition has courted human rights organizations in the West. Much like the religious modernists, this strategy can lead to a range of controversy. Where Islamist principles and human rights discourses fail to connect, this strategy appears to be a marriage of convenience.

Pro-Saudi traditionalists

Key examples: salafipublications.com, troid.org, salafitalk.net

These sites focus on reform of the Muslim world based on careful adherence to core Islamic texts and practices. They promote the *Salafi manhaj* – the methodology of the early Muslims – and rigorously oppose *bid'ah* – innovated religious beliefs and rites. Although politics is not a central component of site content, they actively discourage rebellion against rulers, particularly the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Critics allege a clear Saudi sponsorship of these sites and dismiss them as pro-government apologists. This is, at best, an oversimplification. There is much in Islamic scholarship and history to discourage rebellion, even against heavily corrupt rulers like the Saudi monarchy. Moreover, geographically and ethnically diverse communities form the constituents of these groups. In the United States, for instance, these sites connect to several urban, African-American Muslim communities on the East coast.

Jihad participants and enthusiasts

Key examples: as-sahwah.com, azzam.com (not active), shareeah.org, almuhajiroun.com (not active), jihadunspun.com, www.kavkaz.org.uk

Probably the most notorious and contested cluster of the Islamist

internet, these sites offer news, analysis, and discussion forums that focus on jihad. To some degree, all the current and recent conflict points in the Muslim world (Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kashmir, etc.) establish valid conditions for jihad. However, the ideological orientation, sectarian allegiance, and combat tactics of various groups lead to a great deal of controversy.

These websites, as a whole, reflect the broad parameters and positions within that debate. Some consistently cheer for every kidnapping, hijacking, beheading, and suicide bombing. Others, while supporting the general cause, heavily criticize terrorist tactics. Indeed, a crucial effort, one often ignored by both radical Islamists and Western policy makers, is to define the border between jihad and terrorism. Among these sites, *as-sahwah.com* contributes most effectively to that effort. The site provides audio and articles that connect religious and political issues, along with a discussion forum that reflects ideological diversity.

Perhaps more than any other form of web content, jihadi websites illustrate the fragility of the internet as a truly open medium. *Azzam.com* provided news, analysis, and religious arguments to support jihad for many years before September 11, 2001. Afterwards, the site took a radical position against the United States' war effort and was forced offline. In many cases, these sites use internet service providers in Western countries or other locations where governmental pressure can easily shut them down.

Moreover, some of the classic social qualities of the internet, such as flexible identities and anonymity, emerge on jihadi sites. The internet allows virtual mujahids in the West to transform themselves into online warrior personalities. Similarly, many question the sincerity of various websites, suggesting that Western intelligence agents, among others, may use them to draw out radicals, spread disinformation, and accomplish other nefarious ends.

Conclusion

The Islamist internet embodies a wide range of views on the place of politics in Islam. However, it is important to recognize the general limits of the internet as a source of information. Despite its ideological diversity, the Islamist internet may not offer a comprehensive library of Muslim thought. Rather than an accurate indicator of Islamic sentiment and scholarship, the internet often distorts Islamic discourse through the prisms of sectarian Muslim technophiles.