Expert Report on the ~AQCORPO Website

August 2006

Between April 2004 and April 2005, the Muntada al-Ansar web forum (hosted at various domains over the space of its two year existence, including http://www.al-ansar.biz, http://www.ansarnet.ws, http://www.inn4news.net, and http://www.ansary.info) served as the primary mechanism used by Al-Qaida commander Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's militant organization in Iraq to disseminate its propaganda material on the Internet. Starting in the spring of 2004, communiqués attributed to Zarqawi began to appear as messages posted on Muntada al-Ansar by a mysterious user known as "Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi" (later identified as the director of Zarqawi's "Media Wing"). Zarqawi's communiqués delivered care of Abu Maysarah were posted as regular participant messages on the forum, the first of which appeared on Muntada al-Ansar on approximately April 26, 2004. Several days later, on May 2, Abu Maysarah followed up by posting "Communique #2" from Zarqawi's followers on the Ansar forum, claiming responsibility for twin suicide bomb blasts in Baghdad carried out respectively by a Syrian and a Tunisian.[1]

Naturally, there was some initial skepticism over whether Abu Maysarah was really a credible spokesperson for Zarqawi. However, any doubts as to the authenticity of these postings faded quickly less than ten days later when Abu Maysarah distributed download links on the Ansar forum to an online video recording showing a masked Zarqawi and a cabal of his top advisors beheading American businessman Nick Berg.[2] Following a spate of hoax threats spread by Zarqawi imposters on the Internet in June and July 2004, Abu Maysarah posted a new message from Zarqawi's movement in late July emphasizing that "all our statements are spread by means of the brother Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi—therefore, we draw the attention of our Iraqi brothers to follow what is published on the [Ansar] forum."[3]

The proliferation of the aforementioned hoax communiqués highlighted one of the major weaknesses of using open forum-based messaging systems like Muntada al-Ansar as a distribution mechanism for Al-Qaida propaganda—and it wasn't the only one. Forums like

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[1] http://www.al-ansar.biz/vb/showthread.php?s=9823. May 2, 2004.

[2] http://www.al-ansar.biz/vb/showthread.php?s=10700. May 11, 2004.

[3] http://www.ansarnet.ws/vb/showthread.php?t=11920. July 20, 2004.

Muntada al-Ansar running VBulletin web software were designed primarily for farming out limited-bandwidth text content, not for hosting the comparatively enormous video recordings being rendered by Zarqawi's Media Wing in Iraq. The solution devised by Al-Qaida was fairly simple: to include HTML web links within messages posted on the forum allowing web surfers to click over and download large multimedia files that were being hosted separately on free temporary webhosting providers such as http://www.yousendit.com.

Video of the Beheading of Ken Bigley Posted on the Ansar Forum – 10/10/04

Yet, even this patchwork solution had its own set of problems. In mid-2004, most (if not all) of the free hosting providers and file transfer services on the Internet upheld strict size and bandwidth limits, keeping individual data files no larger than 5 or 10 megabytes each. This posed a significant challenge to Al-Qaida's Media Wing and, in July 2004, Abu Maysarah was forced to serialize the Internet release of Zarqawi's first full-length propaganda film "The Winds of Victory" because Al-Qaida did not have the capability on its own of mass distributing a single

90 megabyte video file.[4] In some cases, Al-Qaida's Media Wing was forced to break videos into chunks for distribution that were originally as small as 6 megabytes in size, such as the beheading of Bulgarian hostage Georgi Lazov.[5] The file transfer service Yousendit.com—long preferred by Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi and other online jihadist representatives—suffered from an additional weakness: any websurfer could permanently disable the download link without using a login or password. When Zarqawi's group posted only a single Yousendit.com download link to a video of British hostage Ken Bigley locked in a cage and pleading for his life, I downloaded a copy of the video and disabled the Yousendit.com link before any other user on the Muntada al-Ansar forum was able to access it. Within minutes, irritated participants on the Ansar forum posted urgent responses, "Brother, the link does not work. Please add a new link."[6] It took several hours for online Al-Qaida representatives to create and post new download links on the Ansar forum—a significant disruption in their media schedule. It was another reminder that for Zarqawi to use the Internet most effectively, his publicists would need a sturdy and reliable base on the Internet from which to disseminate communiqués, magazines, training manuals, audio recordings, and full-length video productions. Already by late July 2004, Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi announced in a post on the Ansar forum that "our movement is near to opening its own website so that all the Muslim faithful can read and keep-up with events here, and you have our prayers, mercy and forgiveness."[7]

In the meantime, as the promised website was being constructed, Zarqawi still lacked a reliable Internet distribution mechanism for his growing library of multimedia. Whether by direct request or on his own independent initiative, one of the Ansar forum administrators who went by the online alias "Irhaby 007" (a.k.a. "Terrorist 007") quickly stepped forward with dozens of mirrored download locations and new distribution sites—including hacked file directories unwittingly hosted on the Internet server of the Arkansas State Department of Transportation.[8] Irhaby 007's expert contributions were eagerly welcomed by the typically reserved Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi. In an unprecedented public statement in October 2004, Abu

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[4] http://www.gameroom.com/tawheed3. September 2004.

[5] http://www.gameroom.com/tawheed3. September 2004.

[6] http://www.ansarnet.ws/vb/showthread.php?t=15907. September 29, 2004.

[7] http://www.ansarnet.ws/vb/showthread.php?t=11920. July 20, 2004.

[8] ftp://www.ahtd.state.ar.us/incoming/GIS/ALQA3EDAH. July 2004. See also:
http://www.ansarnet.ws/vb/showthread.php?t=11264. July 12, 2004.

Maysarah expressed his deep gratitude to Irhaby 007: "Bless the terrorist, Irhaby 007. In the name of Allah, I am pleased with your presence my beloved brother. May Allah protect you."[9]

But even as Muntada al-Ansar forum users celebrated the successes of the talented Irhaby 007, complaints grew about the lingering irregularities in accessing Al-Qaida's web-based propaganda materials. On March 6, 2005, user elhazen_elbake posted a message on the forum explaining that he was interested in obtaining copies of "all the speeches of Shaykh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi." Eighteen minutes later, Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi himself responded to the request: "O' lovers of Allah and O' sons of our dear Islamic nation, rejoice… Allah willing, soon we will inaugurate the official website for Al-Qaida's Organization in Mesopotamia on the Internet… Allah willing, you will be able to find there all the speeches of commander Shaykh Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—may Allah protect him."[10] Abu Maysarah's unexpected announcement was greeted with much excitement, with various users replying and proclaiming, "Allahu Akhbar, Praise be to Allah… may Allah bless you in your fight, brother Abu Maysarah" and thanking Abu Maysarah for bringing great "rewards" to Islam and Muslims.[11]

By late 2004 and early 2005—as Zarqawi officially joined Al-Qaida and his Internet media campaign grew more complex—Abu Maysarah's daily set of press releases would sometimes be posted in his stead by authorized online facilitators. On April 14, 2005, one of Abu Maysarah's couriers, "Jihad Correspondent", posted a message on the al-Ansar forum advertising a new communiqué from Zarqawi's Al-Qaida faction claiming responsibility for an April 8 suicide bombing targeting U.S. forces in Iraq. The message contained a link to a video of the operation hosted separately at http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/MI.rmvb.[12] At the end, in small English text, the message added, "With the compliments of Terrorist007, Moheb Al shaykhayn and Abu Maysara al 3iraqi." Within less than 60 seconds after the initial message was posted on the forum by "Jihad Correspondent", user Irhaby007 wrote back a response, "Allahu Akhbar! Allah is merciful!"[13] This reply helped served to confirm the legitimacy and authenticity of material distributed via the "Jihad Correspondent" account and revealed how Irhaby007 had become an unapologetic asset of Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi.

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[9] http://www.ansarnet.ws/vb/showthread.php?t=16792. October 11, 2004.

[10] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=29206. March 6, 2005.

[11] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=29206. March 6, 2005.

[12] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31616. April 14, 2005.

[13] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31616. April 14, 2005.

The following day, on April 15, 2005, user "Jihad Correspondent" posted another communiqué to the Muntada al-Ansar forum on behalf of Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi claiming responsibility for an Al-Qaida Grad rocket attack on a U.S. base in Mosul.[14] Like the previous message, this communiqué again contained a web link to video of the operation hosted separately at http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/Grad.rmvb (in Real Media format) and http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/Grad.3gp (in .3GP mobile phone video format). According to information provided by the Ansar forum, within forty-five minutes of the initial message being posted, it was manually edited by user Irhaby007.[15] This edit process indicated that Irhaby007 was likely in possession of "super-user" administrator rights on the Ansar forum, allowing him to modify the messages of others. It also demonstrated how Irhaby007 was playing a central role in overseeing the distribution of Al-Qaida video material on the Internet.

Once again, on April 16, 2005, user "Jihad Correspondent" posted yet another communiqué to the Muntada al-Ansar forum carrying news of Al-Qaida military operations near the Iraqi city of Mosul.[16] The communiqué contained a link to an online video showing an

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[14] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31643. April 15, 2005.

[15] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31643. April 15, 2005.

[16] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31710. April 16, 2005.

improvised explosive device attack on an American supply truck hosted separately at http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/tadmeer3.rmvb (in Real Media format) and http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/tadmeer3.3gp (in .3GP mobile phone video format).

On April 18, 2005, user "Jihad Correspondent" posted another message to the Muntada al-Ansar forum concerning an Al-Qaida mortar attack on U.S. forces in the Iraqi city of Baqubah.[17] The message contained a web link to download a video hosted separately at http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/kasf.WMV (in Windows Media format) and http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/kasf.3gp (in .3GP mobile phone video format). According to information provided by the Ansar forum, within 38 minutes of the message being initially posted by "Jihad Correspondent", it was manually edited by user Irhaby007.[18] On April 19, 2005, user "Jihad Correspondent" published yet another message on the Muntada al-Ansar forum containing a web link to a video supposedly depicting an Al-Qaida rocket attack on a U.S. base in Al-Taji, Iraq.[19] The video was hosted separately online at http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/eathis.rmvb (in Real Media format) and http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/videos/eathis.3gp (in .3GP mobile phone video format). Once

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[17] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31840. April 18, 2005.

[18] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31840. April 18, 2005.

[19] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31926. April 19, 2005.

again, according to data recorded by the Ansar forum, the message from "Jihad Correspondent" was manually edited by user Irhaby007 within three hours of it being initially posted.[20] This behavior fits into the pattern of Irhaby007 acting as a facilitator and ensuring that Al-Qaida video download links were properly pasted and formatted in forum messages. If filenames were improperly capitalized or compressed in zip files, it appears that the responsibility fell to Irhaby007 to fix the problem.

On approximately April 25, 2005, upon closely studying the series of above web links and the apparent connection with Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi (the director of Al-Qaida in Iraq's Media Wing), I realized that "aqcorpo" from the above web video links was likely shorthand language for "Al-Qaida Corporation." The videos linked to on the Ansar forum were merely being stored in a sub-directory of a larger commercial web account hosted by the Delaware-based Internet company, Tenamax.net.[21] Given the consistent pattern of exclusive use by cyberfacilitators associated with Al-Qaida in Iraq over several days, I concluded that the entire ~aqcorpo account on Tenamax.net was being designed as a long-term online storage space for propaganda and recruitment materials related to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. With this in mind, I attempted to determine whether any further unadvertised material was available on other file directories stored under the ~aqcorpo account, starting with the so-called "root directory" (i.e. http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/).

Inside the root directory, I discovered what appeared to be a partially-constructed Internet website for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's group, formerly known as Al-Tawheed wal-Jihad, and now operating under the name of "Al-Qa'eda in the Land of the Two Rivers" (i.e. Mesopotamia, or Iraq). The website was flagged with both the logos of Al-Qaida in Iraq and its corporate predecessor, and contained such sub-sections as "ideology", "fatwahs", "communiqués", "reports", "video", "audio", and "magazines." In fact, the website appeared to be a work-in-progress effort at establishing an online Al-Qaida presence in the exact same manner promised by Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi on several occasions over the Muntada al-Ansar forum in discussions with Al-Qaida supporters.

Though not yet complete, the website did contain some preliminary text material for download[22] along with thumbnail images depicting other multimedia material that would be
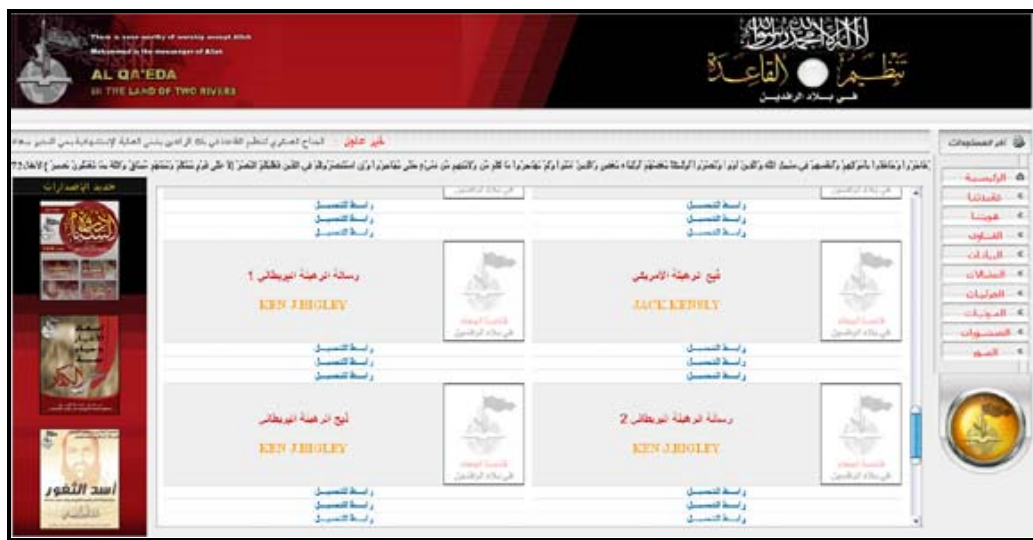
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[20] http://www.inn4news.net/inn/showthread.php?t=31926. April 19, 2005.

[21] The IP address 209.51.152.42 resolved to the domain SERVER.TENAMAX.NET.

[22] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat.htm. April 2005.

presumably made available by the time the website would go live on the Internet. The text material already available for download included: Arabic-language transcripts of eleven important speeches given by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi from 1991 to 2005[23], the Arabic-language transcript of an Al-Jazeera television program documenting the life of Zarqawi[24], the biography and assorted Arabic-language writings of Zarqawi's former top deputy in Iraq Abu Anas al-Shami[25], and six other documents on the jihad in Iraq attributed to Abu Maysarah al-Iraqi.[26]

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[23] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/001.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/004.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/005.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/007.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/008.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/009.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/010.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/011.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/028.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/029.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/030.htm.
April 2005.

[24] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/002.htm. April 2005.

[25] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/006.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/017.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/018.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/020.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/021.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/024.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/025.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/026.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/027.htm.
April 2005.

[26] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/003.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/012.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/013.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/014.htm; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/015.htm;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/pages/mqalat/016.htm. April 2005.

As noted above, the website also contained thumbnail images and several other miscellaneous links advertising other material not yet uploaded to the domain hosted on tenaxmax.net, but expected to be available in the near future—including the following:

- At least fourteen Arabic-language audio-recorded speeches by Al-Qaida commander Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.[27]

- Two Arabic-language audio-recorded speeches by Abu Anas al-Shami.[28]

- A commemorative publication from the Media Wing of Al-Qaida in Iraq containing all text communiqués issued by Al-Qaida in Iraq during the Hijri month of Ramadan 1425 (approximately mid-October to mid-November 2004).[29]

- A commemorative publication from the Media Wing of Al-Qaida in Iraq containing all text communiqués issued by Al-Qaida in Iraq during the Hijri month of Shawwal 1425 (approximately mid-November to mid-December 2004).[30]

- A commemorative publication from the Media Wing of Al-Qaida in Iraq containing all text communiqués issued by Al-Qaida in Iraq during the Hijri month of Dhul Qadah 1425 (approximately mid-December 2004 to mid-January 2005).[31]

- A commemorative publication from the Media Wing of Al-Qaida in Iraq containing all text communiqués issued by Al-Qaida in Iraq during the Hijri month of Dhul Hijjah 1425 (approximately mid-January to mid-February 2005).[32]

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[27] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_01.jpg;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_02.jpg; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_04.jpg;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_05.jpg; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_06.jpg;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_07.jpg; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_08.jpg;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_09.jpg; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_10.jpg;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_12.jpg; http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_13.jpg;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_14.jpg. April 2005.
[28] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_03.jpg;
http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/a_11.jpg. April 2005.
[29] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/by_ramadan1425.jpg. April 2005.
[30] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/by_shawwal1425.jpg. April 2005.
[31] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/by_thu_alqeeda1425.jpg . April 2005.
[32] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/by_thu_alhejjah1425.jpg . April 2005.

- A commemorative publication from the Media Wing of Al-Qaida in Iraq containing all text communiqués issued by Al-Qaida in Iraq during the Hijri month of Muharram 1426 (approximately mid-February to mid-March 2005).[33]

- Two separate multimedia presentations on the beheading of hostages in Iraq, including "The Slaughtering Operations"[34] (seen at right) and "The Slaughtering of the Infidels", a commemorative publication from the Media Wing of Al-Qaida in Iraq paying homage to the execution of Western hostages in Iraq in 2004.[35] The under construction ~aqcorpo site also contained direct download links for most if not all of the actual beheading videos released by Zarqawi over the Internet in 2004, including the complete trio of recordings depicting the agonizing captivity and subsequent execution of British hostage Ken Bigley.

- The first issue of Al-Qaida in Iraq's official Tharwat al-Sanam online magazine, released publicly via the Muntada al-Ansar web forum on March 4, 2005.[36] The inaugural issue of Tharwat al-Sanam was principally a rehash of letters, communiqués, and other Al-Qaida documents that have previously appeared on the Internet—such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's November 2004 oath of loyalty to Usama Bin Laden and excerpts of a letter conversely written by Bin Laden praising Zarqawi and his fighters in Iraq.

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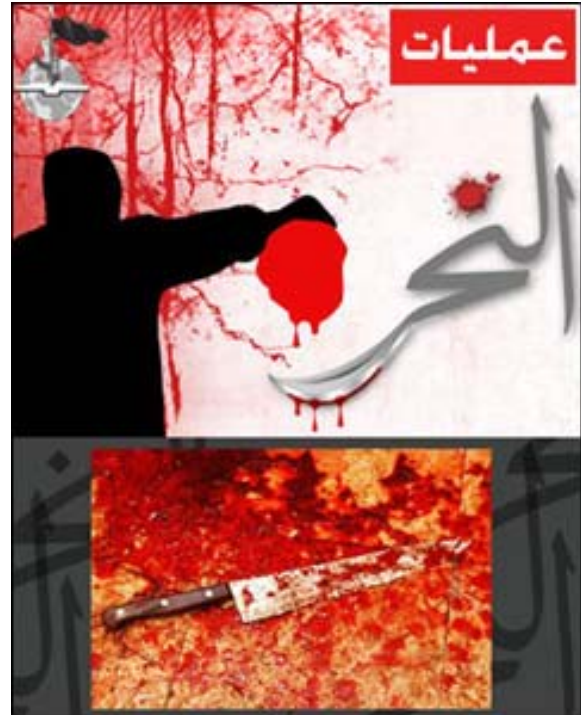
[33] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/by_moharram1426.jpg. April 2005.

[34] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/v_04.jpg. April 2005.

[35] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/b_01.jpg. April 2005.

[36] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/th_01.jpg. April 2005.

- Al-Qaida in Iraq's first full-length propaganda film, "The Winds of Victory."[37] The video principally pays homage to various suicide bombings carried out by Al-Qaida against Western and Iraqi government targets in 2003 and 2004, including the devastating truck bomb attack on the United Nations compound in Baghdad and the attempted seaborne attack on an oil terminal in the Arabian Gulf off Basra. The video contains footage of senior Al-Qaida leaders, martyrdom wills read by suicide bombers of Iraqi, Kuwait, and Saudi origin, and footage of several actual suicide attacks carried out inside Iraq. The ~aqcorpo website also separately offered another download link for arguably the most memorable single clip from the entire "Winds of Victory" film: a nighttime suicide truck bomb attack carried out by Iraqi national Abul-Harith al-Dosari on a U.S. checkpoint at Khaldiya Bridge in early 2004.[38]

- Two other full-length propaganda videos from Al-Qaida in Iraq—namely, "The Great Attack in Karbala," which dealt with various insurgent attacks on U.S. and Polish forces in central Iraq[39]; and, "The Lion of the Frontiers", a detailed biographical look at Zarqawi's late deputy in Iraq Abu Anas al-Shami.[40]

Several days later, after news of Al-Qaida's online security breach became public, administrators of the ~aqcorpo account eventually realized their error in leaving their root file directory unprotected. The administrators quickly removed public access to the root directory

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[37] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/v_01.jpg. April 2005.

[38] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/v_02.jpg. April 2005.

[39] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/v_03.jpg. April 2005.

[40] http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/other_images/v_05.jpg. April 2005.

and instead left a simple message in English for any further visitors: "move along, nothing to see here."

I have been provided a compressed file named "AQ.I.website.zip" by Detective Inspector Keith Verralls of New Scotland Yard's Metropolitan Police Anti-Terrorist Branch. I understand that identical copies of this ZIP file were discovered on two separate accounts under the names "deadzionists" and "abanasalshaamy" (a clear reference to Zarqawi's former deputy Abu Anas al-Shami) hosted on the British Internet company Netpivotal. The zip file contains a compressed executable (.EXE) file created with Ada99 Inc.'s eBook Workshop software for the Windows operating system, which allows users to produce "professional eBooks." Typically, such eBooks are built from either .HTML (web) pages or quite similar .CHM (Windows Help) files. In this case, the eBook appears to contain a preview of the exact same "Al-Qa'eda in the land of the Two Rivers" website that I stumbled across at http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/. The two sites are virtually identical—they contain the same graphics, the same color scheme, the same sub-sections, and the same multimedia links. It is my conclusion that the eBook .EXE file contained in AQ.I.website.zip was highly likely created with the same original HTML and image files that were also briefly posted online at http://209.51.152.42/~aqcorpo/.