

Prominent Jihadist Forum Appears Again Online

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The top-tier Shumukh al-Islam jihadist forum has come online once again after being offline for nearly a week and a half, though it is unclear whether its appearance is only temporary.

There had been much speculation surrounding the cause behind some jihadist forums, including the two most prominent websites Shumukh al-Islam and Al-Fida', being offline. Beginning on March 22, 2012, the Shumukh al-Islam forum went offline, followed shortly thereafter by its sister forum al-Fida' on March 25. Both terrorism analysts and jihadists themselves have speculated it was a cyberattack of some kind, while others have argued they were taken down purposefully by the forums' administrators.

Though it is unusual for the forums to be offline for such an extended period of time, there is no hard evidence to determine conclusively the cause behind it. In many ways, the source of the disruption is immaterial, as it is highly unlikely that a pause of this kind will create any long-term difficulties for the online jihadist movement. Indeed, since the late 1990s, jihadist forums have undergone continual cycles of going offline before returning, either as the same websites or as new websites replacing the old ones.

Within the last five years, the top-tier jihadist forums have all experienced downtime, sometimes very briefly and other times permanently. In September 2008, the largest and most important jihadist forums of the day, Ekhlās and al-Hesbah, went offline for good. At that time, jihadists on secondary and tertiary forums expressed their concern and frustration, and confusion permeated the online jihadist community. Yet, within weeks, new forums rose to replace Ekhlās, notably the Fallujah forum.

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Subsequently, in August 2010, the Fallujah forum - then the most influential jihadist website - went offline permanently. Again, jihadists on secondary and tertiary forums responded with confusion, leaving the online jihadist community in mild disarray. And once again, another jihadist forum replaced Fallujah: Shumukh al-Islam. Furthermore, when the administration of the top-tier forums, al-Fajr Center, chooses to do so, they have created new forums, as was the case when it chose to create the second most prominent forum, Al-Fida' in July 2011 at the same time that Shumukh al-Islam was still online.

Should Shumukh al-Islam not remain online, a new forum or forums will take their place. The Ansar al-Mujahideen Arabic forum, a highly respected website within the online jihadist community, remained online during Shumukh al-Islam's absence, giving al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups an outlet for releasing their material should they desire to do so. Some jihadist groups, such as the Taliban and the Shabaab al-Mujahideen, have not skipped a beat, continuing to post their material to their own websites and Twitter, while they waited for Shumukh al-Islam or al-Fida' to return or for their successors to come online.

Because this pattern has repeated itself for as long as jihadist forums have existed, the discussion surrounding the precise reason as to why the forums are offline, while certainly interesting, is in one sense irrelevant because the online jihadist community will not be dismantled simply by taking two websites offline.

Al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Shabaab al-Mujahideen, and numerous other jihadist groups will not stop releasing their propaganda just because the forums that usually distribute their material are offline. Likewise, the forum members of Shumukh al-Islam and al-Fida' may have had their discussions stifled temporarily, but they will adapt and move to other jihadist websites should Shumukh al-Islam go offline again. Since jihadists are usually members of multiple forums, members can easily communicate through other forums, such as the Ansar al-Mujahideen Arabic forum.

The decentralized and redundant nature of the internet ensures that it will be extremely difficult to disrupt the jihadists' online networks. Taking down the online jihadist community's primary source websites will not render jihadist groups mute nor prevent the communication and collaboration between online jihadists. Already, Shumukh al-Islam has shown resiliency in coming back online; however, even if it does go offline again permanently, another website will appear to take

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its place.