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Anti-Semitism and Terrorism on the Internet: New Threats

Interview with Rabbi Abraham Cooper

The explosive rise in Internet usage over the past few years has brought with it a new way of transmitting a wide range of well-known anti-Semitic messages. Terrorist, racist, bigot and anti-Semitic sites have emerged in large numbers and are sometimes linked. Traditional hate groups, such as neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan and skinheads proliferate on the web. Very different activist groups have built coalitions in the name of anti-globalization, anti-Americanism and attacks on Israel. The Internet is also a tool used to raise money, recruit new terrorists and coordinate terrorist communications for such groups.

Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC) based in Los Angeles, has been a pioneer in analyzing these developments. Each year the SWC publishes a CD examining the development of this phenomenon. The Center has identified over 3,000 problematic websites.[1]

Cooper explains the chaotic nature of hate on the Internet: "Firstly, we must ask what it is used for. One can put up any website on the Internet, resurrecting and dressing up any idea, while focusing one's message on specific audiences. In this medium one can even say that the Jews drink the blood of their victims and not be challenged or rebuked by anyone. Major anti-Semitic themes are September 11 mythology, Holocaust denial and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The Internet provides a new face for well-known anti-Semitic themes and forms part of a much bigger problem.

"If we want to confront this type of anti-Semitism, we have to understand the nature and scope of its challenge. Lies are difficult to fight on the Internet because it's not a fair game. One could spend 10 million dollars on a website proving that the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are fraud, without necessarily reaching any of the people who are swayed by the book's fraudulent allegations. The diffusion of the protocols' theme, especially via the Internet, is so vast that our Center is publishing a book confronting all points and explaining why they are lies. It will seek to address a mass audience, in print and online, and will be made available in various languages."

A Propaganda Tool Par Excellence

"Secondly, we have to understand who uses the Internet for hate purposes. It is a propaganda tool par excellence to get one's message out to supporters and potential recruits, as well as a powerful way to denigrate one's enemies. Thus, the Internet is a natural venue not only for amateurs, but also for organized extremist groups and terrorists. The latter category, in particular Al Qaida, utilizes the Internet not only for propaganda, but also for the transmission of messages.

"A number of factors make the Internet attractive to hate promoters. It is cheap, difficult to monitor and virtually impossible to keep a message off the Internet. Furthermore, it knows no borders; so consequently, a minor local player in a hate movement can now become a global operator.

"From a propaganda point of view, there is no quality control on the Internet, no librarian, no censorship and no analysis. In some attractive web sites, racist groups aim at women's hearts and minds - and if possible, their money. Others are targeting Moslems, whites, children or frustrated young Algerians in France. Messages can be tailored specifically to the market one is trying to reach. If one is clever enough to get a site listed in a search engine by putting in important key terms, the site may get considerable traffic from unsuspecting individuals, at least once."

The Hate Message's Empowerment

"One of the cleverest racist operators on the Internet is American Nazi, Gary Louck, whose earlier hate activities landed him in a German jail for a number of years. One of his Internet activities was to make a website link in the U.S. so that people in Germany trying to contact a government ministry for information on other issues, instead would find themselves at a German language neo-Nazi site posted in the U.S., outside the jurisdiction of the German laws.

"Thus, by using the Internet, hate messages have become much more powerful and unassailable than before. In the past, an individual such as Ahmed Rami from Sweden set up Radio Islam there. He was a refugee from Morocco where he had been involved in a plot against the late King Hassan. He spent time in a Swedish jail when caught using taxpayers' funds to broadcast Mein Kampf in Arabic over Swedish public radio. More than five years ago he tried to bring together the global 'Who's Who?' of anti-Semitism - including the American Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan - for a conference in Sweden. Under pressure from the local Jewish community and international Jewish organizations, this meeting was canceled at the very last moment.

"Today, the Internet also attracts skinheads and solidifies their structures and actions. These sites generate a great sense of empowerment when one sees, for instance, links of racist groups that claim branches in 23 countries - even if in reality, their numbers may be insignificant."

Transnational Hate Alliances

"As a result of the Internet, a rather simple technological tool, a much greater scope of communication is created between individuals and groups with nothing in common except their hatred. After September 11, one could read in Arabic and other languages of Islamic countries, articles by the American racists David Duke and the late William Pierce. This occurred despite the fact that these American bigots have promoted a 'pro-white' agenda, which domestically is anti-immigrant, anti-black and anti-minorities.

"The shared hatred of Jews encourages these individuals and movements to overcome great differences in their worldviews. Alliances and coalitions are created virtually on the Internet, which is speeding up the connections of our enemies. In this way, transnational hatred evolves, creating new alliances and initiatives.

"For instance, David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan leader in Louisiana, was invited to lecture in one of the Gulf States during Ramadan. Some years ago he took off his white sheet and eventually got elected to the Louisiana state legislature. He put on a three-piece suit and now heads the National Association for the Advancement of White People, which he created.

"Duke is also occupied with pan-European activities, which mainly involve communists in Germany, Russia and Austria. This is yet another example of new relationships in the post-Cold War era between extremists of all kinds. Even if today Duke is in trouble with the Internal Revenue in the United States, he will return in one way or another."

Music Web Sites as a Source of Income

"William Pierce, who died a few months ago, also thought globally and strategically on the Internet. He pondered how to attract younger people to the racist movement. For this purpose he bought music websites such as Resistance Records, with revenue of about a million dollars per annum. Hate has become big business for others also, as Hate Music CDs,[2] books, videos and even T-Shirts are marketed on line, bringing both profit and potential recruits.

"Racist activities on the Internet are combined with other activities. Pierce was a guest speaker of the extremist far right NDP party in Germany in 1998. He was allowed to speak inside a hall to their political convention, but when he wanted to address an outdoor rally in Frankfurt, he was expelled from Germany.

"Pierce was also one of the scheduled speakers at the first Holocaust denial conference planned in Beirut in March 2002. A few days before, due to multiple pressures - including from the SWC - it was canceled. This meeting would have brought together Hizbullah and neo-Nazis from Germany as well as other professional haters and apologists for terrorism. One was Ahmed Huber who converted to Islam more than 30 years ago and lives in Switzerland. He is a former journalist and was a member of the board of Al-Taqua bank in Switzerland. The CIA considers the latter an Al-Qaida front. Huber made a major effort to bring Islamic extremists together with Germans whose bread and butter domestic hate is anti-Turkish, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam.

"Huber also frequently came to the United States to speak for the Islamic Association of Palestine, a Hamas cover organization. This shows that the truly committed racists and anti-Semites are thinking creatively and globally. Law enforcement agencies, therefore, must develop conceptually new counter approaches.

"The single player can now become very powerful; for example, Don Black, who was insignificant before the rise of the Internet. He had originally succeeded David Duke in the Ku Klux Klan in Louisiana. Then he moved to Florida, and seven years ago built a website called 'Stormfront.' Black invites anybody with anti-Semitic, anti-black or other hate messages to come under the sponsorship of his site. Suddenly this 40-year-old man is a worldwide player without ever having left his computer."

Anti-Israel and/or Anti-America

"Similarly, in the U.S., the main forces for the anti-war movement, remnants of Marxists and Trotskyites, are wearing a new cloak. One of the main organizing groups, ANSWER, supports the Palestinian refugees' 'right of return' and focuses on demonizing Israel. They have a number of links to virulently anti-Israel sites on their website.

"Thus far, the anti-Israel forces on U.S. campuses are frustrated at their inability to ignite the grass-root support which some of their colleagues have won in Europe. They are, however consistently shopping for other ways to hook up with mainstream American political dissent.

"This mixed array of forces also includes some who rioted a few years ago in Seattle against the World Trade Conference. The so-called 'Third Way' is a cover for neo-Nazis who line up with communists, and anarchist groups. One cannot say that there is a conspiracy among them. They may come together naturally. For example, at Concordia University in Montreal, the main instigators of the anti-Semitic attacks were professional anarchists known to the university and police. They hijacked the student organization together with local activists committed to the Palestinian cause.

"In the U.S., the extreme right, generally speaking, did not overtly express admiration for Osama Bin Laden, as they understood that doing so would have been insane in view of the outburst of American patriotism after 9/11. Yet one group based in Florida, Aryanweb.com, had on its website, 'Death to ZOG; support the Taliban.' ZOG means 'Zionist Occupation Government,' a codeword for many anti-American government groups and others opposed to 'big brother' in Washington.

"These people were searching, after the end of the Cold War, for an enemy, and decided it was their own government.... What has caught on worldwide on the Internet is the canard that the United States and Israel had advance knowledge, or were involved in making September 11 happen. This mythology has taken root in the hearts and minds of tens of millions of people in the Arab and Muslim world. It has also become the calling card for anyone who hates America, the American government, George Bush, Israel, or simply doesn't want to face reality."

The Islamic World and the Internet

"New worldwide players have also emerged in the Islamic Middle East. There are much greater scholars in Islam than Sheikh Yussef al-Qaradawi, who lives in Qatar. Yet he and others operate in the classical way by getting money from the government to set up schools for students of the Koran. Those who finance them influence their teachings of the oral traditions. In this way, governments like Saudi Arabia and Iraq can use religious symbolism and thought for their political ideology.

"Al-Qaradawi is a major exception, as he is on the Internet and often appears on Al Jazeera television. From his beginning as a local teacher, he has become somebody who is quoted worldwide. Al-Qaradawi is now both independent and tremendously empowered. On the front page of the *New York Times,* he said women should have the right to vote in local elections in Bahrain.[3] Yet the same man also wrote a fatwa allowing a Palestinian woman to become a suicide bomber without telling her husband. He thus provides broad religious sanction for individuals to volunteer for mass murder of civilians. By now his voice can no longer easily be turned off by an Arab government.

"The Internet has been touted as a great democratizing tool, which is far from being its only

aspect. The Iranian regime, for instance, invested in very sophisticated websites, as have other Middle Eastern forces. Consequently, even members of the narrow elite, which use the Internet in these countries, are more likely to visit these sites in local languages, rather than seek views from the outside. As a result, there is a reinforcement of those who promote hate and terrorism and do not want a Jewish presence in the Middle East."

Rapid Change

"To counter this, the Jewish world will have to put on the Internet at least some basic information directly in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu and other languages. We must take a page out of the anti-Semites' handbook. People who believe in democracy and diversity have to enter the Internet. This is one of the big challenges confronting us.

"It is even more important given that change is very rapid. Our Center's 2002 CD focused on extreme neo-Nazis. Among the sites it showed for France were those that infected the mindset of Maxime Brunerie, the French neo-Nazi who tried to kill French president Jacques Chirac on the country's national holiday of July 14, 2002.

"The new SWC 2003 CD will document many Islamic sites as well as references to the broader anti-American community. It will also contain some references to Asia, for the first time. As the technology migrates in that direction, the tensions between India and Pakistan are spreading throughout the Internet. The most important development from our point of view, however, is that terrorism has replaced hate as the number one Jewish concern on the Internet."

Raising Money and Recruiting Terrorists

"There are many other Internet uses which can be dangerous to Israel. and the U.S. Pro-terrorist groups such as Hamas are trying to raise money from Americans, even after many of their charities in the U.S. have been indicted. There are attempts to recruit youngsters as suicide bombers. Al-Qaida members have used chat groups to advance their goals.

"In November last year the murderous attack on Israeli tourists in the Kenyan town of Mombasa took place. Western intelligence only afterward deciphered that the Internet played a role in the concealed communications of the terrorists. A new word has been coined for this activity: 'Steganography,' which means imbedding messages on a normal looking website. Only those holding the required code can decipher these.

"This is an additional dimension of the iceberg character of the Internet. Corresponding to the tip of the iceberg, above the waterline, there is hate, propaganda, fundraising and recruitment of suicide bombers. One can also download personal information of one's supporters or opponents or start cyberwars and disable others' websites. When the second Palestinian uprising erupted, it sparked hacking into pro-Israel sites by supporters of the Palestinians.

"A much bigger headache though for law enforcement, is the underwater portion of the Internet iceberg. It has become a cheap and fairly safe method of coordinating terrorist attacks. The Internet has empowered extreme professional terrorist movements while making it very difficult for intelligence agencies to intercept the messages telling terrorists how to deploy."

Lone Wolves

"The dangers are also shifting in another direction. Some hate groups on the Internet no longer encourage people to join them. Originally they thought that if they built attractive sites, thousands of youngsters would adhere to neo-Nazi movements. They got the web traffic, their messages were read and their music sold, but their membership did not increase. They now have a virtual recruitment by identification with ideas, instead of membership. This minimizes their risks of being prosecuted when someone puts these ideas into practice.

"Some 'lone wolves' develop their plans by looking at links on how to deploy in a terrorist fashion. Even if only a few people have the courage to act, they can cause much damage because they cannot be identified beforehand. Brunerie was an example of this. Nobody else got arrested for his murder attempt.

"To meet these challenges, law enforcement agencies need better communication with domestic and foreign police. Intelligence services of different countries must collaborate much more. At the U.S. Department of Justice, the FBI, and Homeland Security, a revolution is taking place. It brings with it government actions which before were illegal, as a reaction to the McCarthy era of the 1950s. Now such coordination has become a fundamental requirement for every local police agency worried about a particular skinhead, or an intelligence service which is concerned about an individual terrorist."

Rethinking Societal Values

Cooper emphasizes that rethinking societal values far exceeds what people usually realize. "Before September 11, the debate was about free speech on the Internet. American public opinion wished minimal government intervention. In the United States, market forces - rather than government regulation - dictated the limits of content. One could say whatever one wanted as long as one was not involved in a conspiracy to hurt or kill someone. Meanwhile, in the United Nations, UNESCO and the European Council, discussions were held, which were mainly a migration of the venue of the classical debate as to where to draw the line on free speech.

"September 11 served as a wake up call in the United States. The main issue is no longer freedom of speech or personal life but rather basic communal safety. There used to be more than 50 terrorist and anarchist 'cookbook' websites providing instructions on how to make a bomb. Before September 11, whether or not to remove them was considered an issue of free speech. Now it is considered a matter of preventing disaster. Many have disappeared because the groups themselves have removed them, or Internet providers have decided to eliminate them.

"This also reflects a shift in thinking which goes far beyond Internet issues. Americans are grappling with the requirement to give up some aspects of privacy and other personal liberties. They are considering whether and how to make it easier for policing agencies to search facilities and to put away suspected terrorists for a long time without guaranteeing traditional legal rights."

Being Pro-active

"A crucial policy shift is taking place - from being reactive to becoming pro-active. In the post-September 11 world, the authorities cannot afford to arrive after a terrorist event has taken place. To effectively stop terrorist acts, they must act before disaster strikes. This requires new laws and more freedom for the FBI and Homeland Security. The CIA and Agencies like the National Security Agency (NSA) will have to upgrade their Internet monitoring programs.

"This approach is developing throughout the Western world. The officials I meet regularly at the French Ministry of Interior told me they are present in every single Moslem prayer hall in the country. If they wanted to hide this, they would not tell this to a rabbi. The FBI has a list of all U.S. mosques. The sacrosanct concept of not entering a house of worship has fallen by the wayside.

"The cataclysmic threats from international terrorism have lead to a major shift in how lawmakers and opinion-makers in American society look at the Internet. Prior domestic tragedies and attacks had failed to lead to any significant sea changes. For example, in 1999 at Columbine High School, two students launched a terrorist-style attack, including the use of home-made bombs. It killed or maimed scores of their fellow classmates. The FBI later established that they had learned how to make bombs from the Internet. This tragedy, however, did not change American culture and attitudes.

"September 11 did. Before that watershed, Americans wanted law enforcement to be at a site a minute after an event had happened. It was almost impossible to be at the scene of a crime a minute before it happened, because that would imply the authorities had been able to infiltrate, phone tap, or get into a website to obtain the information. When criminality gave way to terrorism, an entire shift in thinking and legal approach to the Internet was required.

"Elsewhere in the world, attitudes about where to draw the line between free speech and the rhetoric of hate have evolved quite differently from the U.S. German authorities, for example, have complained for a long time that many neo-Nazi sites targeting German kids in German were supported by providers in the United States. The German authorities monitor over 3,000 websites, of which only a few are Islamic ones. All German governments have made a very fundamental commitment to fight Nazism and the law makes expression of it illegal.

"The first amendment of the American constitution, however, made the U.S. the offshore hate capital from which Nazi books were published and then sent to Germany. Websites bounced off German servers have since appeared on American ones. Similarly, the Canadians have complained that the U.S. is a safe haven for what is considered an illegal hate activity targeting their citizens."

What Should Jews Do?

Cooper says Jewish groups must do much more to monitor the Internet because of the dangers involved. "People who shave their heads and walk around with bats aiming to attack you can be seen from 100 meters away. If someone wants to poison your food or send out hit squads and they put postings on the Internet, you need to know about it. To do so, you must be familiar with that environment. It means putting in the manpower and getting involved with that culture. If one is not online one cannot deal with it.

"As the Jewish community pays taxes, it has the right to ask the authorities for part of that money to go into ensuring that terrorists do not tear down democracy. We also have the right to ask for specific protection. Even more so, as in addition to the political struggle against Zionism and Israel, there is a campaign to besmirch Judaism.

"And on top of that, we ourselves must defend our values against our multiple enemies. We should develop a network on the Internet so that we are informed in real time. We, however, have to take great pains to verify all information very carefully. A hate fest in Verona, Italy, was stopped because the SWC was warned by an e-mail five weeks before it went public. That gave us enough time to contact and convince the Italian authorities. The politician who stopped it was Deputy

Prime Minister Gianfranco Fini, the leader of a right-wing party, which not so many years ago was neo-fascist."

Cooper concludes: "The biggest challenge of all, however, is to make law enforcement and public officials, educators, parents, and the media grasp the scope of dangers that uncontrolled development of the Internet presents to the values of democracy."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Notes

1. *Digital Hate 2002: Internet Report and Analysis* [CD-ROM] (Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Center, 2002).
2. See, for example, RESISTANCE RECORDS, www.resistance.com.
3. *New York Times,* October 24, 2002.

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Rabbi Abraham Cooper is the Associate Dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. He was born in New York and has been extensively involved in Soviet Jewry issues, including visiting refuseniks in the 1970s, helping to open the first Jewish cultural center in Moscow in the 1980s, and lecturing at the Soviet Academy of Sciences and the Sakharov Foundation in the 1990s. For nearly a quarter of a century Rabbi Cooper has overseen the SWC's international social action agenda, which ranges from worldwide anti-Semitism, Nazi war crimes and restitution, to extremist groups and tolerance education. Rabbi Cooper delivered a lecture on this subject at the JCPA's second series of Herbert Berman memorial lectures on May 19, 2003.