Militants, 'hacktivists' exploit Web, eye recruits

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Terrorist groups that have long used the Internet to spread propaganda are increasingly tapping the Web to teach Islamic extremists how to be hackers, recruit techies for cyberwarfare and raise money through online fraud, U.S. officials say.

A senior defense official said intelligence reports indicate extremist groups are seeking computer experts, including those capable of breaching government or other sensitive network systems.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information, said the extent and success of those recruiting efforts are unclear.

But jihadists' interest in hacking is evident in forums across the Internet. Law enforcement officials say terrorists are branching out into Internet fraud to raise money for their operations.

One Internet forum, the Mujahedeen Electronic Net, offers hacking instructions in a number of postings. A lengthy posting markets a weekly course and limits it to regular contributors to the Web site who confirm they are committed to Islam. The author of the offer claims the course will be taught by "experts in the electronic jihad," according to a translation of the posting.

Last week, U.S. and Italian authorities broke up an international telephone fraud ring that had roots in Italy and employed hackers in the Philippines. The operation is believed to have funneled thousands of dollars to terrorist groups in Southeast Asia.

Italian officials drew a fragile link to Osama bin Laden. They said one of the men charged with financing the hacking scheme had close ties to members of the International Islamic Efforts Foundation, a Philippines-based group linked to an Islamic charity organization once headed by one of bin Laden's brothers-in-law, Muhammad Jamal Khalifa. Khalifa was reported killed in 2007 during a burglary in Madagascar, where he had a sapphire business.

To date, experts say extremists largely have engaged in "sport hacking" _ defacing or taking down Web sites belonging to groups they consider enemies, such as sites featuring Shiite, Jewish or Christian beliefs.

"It's more for propaganda value than for tactical value," said Jarret Brachman, a former West Point researcher who is an expert on jihadist groups.

These "hacktivists" prefer to use the electronic media for advertising and spreading their beliefs. Internet sites that promote Islamic extremism abound, as do sites that

instruct followers how to build bombs or conduct other types of attacks.

But some recent activity suggests there may be an aggressive push among extremists for expertise such as engineering and technical backgrounds that could be used against the U.S. government or other vital systems.

A senior counterterrorism official, who also requested anonymity in order to speak on the sensitive matter, said al-Qaida is known to seek out followers with scientific knowledge, and computer ability is a logical step.

Adam Raisman, a senior analyst at the Washington-based SITE group, an organization that monitors militant Web sites, said he has seen pitches for people adept at photo or flash video programs that can be used to build propaganda Web sites or take down sites considered offensive.

But, he added, "It's very difficult to gauge what they will do if they have the ability to penetrate a network and realize the damage they can create."

Brachman described a growing network of people in the U.S. who go online and "cheer from the sidelines. They will never do anything violent, but they have the skill sets to do low-level hacking and this is a way they can play."

The challenge for extremist organizations, he said, is to find those people and then "get them to take the step from being a consumer to actually being an active participant" in the jihad.

Terrorist groups lack the skills to match the abilities of sophisticated governments such as the U.S., China and Russia in launching widespread Web attacks, but they could hire someone who does, Steven Chabinsky, assistant deputy director of cyberissues for the Obama administration's director of national intelligence, recently told a technology conference.

Reaching out to hackers with equipment and expertise could enable those groups to transmit viruses or worms to take over computers and direct them to send spam, carry out identity-theft or take down Web sites.

Some officials contend that extremists don't have to take down a critical network or system to have an impact. Even the ability to penetrate and deface a well-trafficked Web site could shake public confidence in the government.

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