

## Grandpa the Hacker

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Grandpa, patriot who goes by 'The Raptor,' claims credit for taking down Al Qaeda websites

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An American hacker, who calls himself “The Raptor” and claims to be a grandfather waging his own war on terror, is taking credit for a series of takedowns of online forums used by Al Qaeda sympathizers, FoxNews.com has learned.

Calling himself a patriot acting on behalf of U.S. troops serving overseas, The Raptor claims to be behind last month’s attack on Al Qaeda’s main online forum, Shamukh Islamic Network, and a handful of other sites and forums, including Ansar al-Mujahideen, where jihadists gather online to issue threats and exhort one another to acts of terror. The sites went down on March 22, and most remained dark for nearly two weeks. As the websites stayed offline, The Raptor taunted his targets on Twitter, daring them to “bring it.”

“Bow. Wave. Exit Stage Right. Curtains. Applause,” he tweeted after Shamukh, the main site used to blast out Al Qaeda content, was taken out of commission, only to return days later with a message blaming the outage on “Enemies of Allah.”

In the online world, where posters and hackers alike take on false personas and play a virtual game of cat and mouse, it is difficult to know if The Raptor is who he says he is, someone simply claiming credit, or if the hack attacks are part of some larger, government-related operation.

“Who is taking it down is an interesting question, but does it matter?” asked Jeff Bardin, cyberterror expert and former Air Force Arabic linguist who is now a principal at the private intelligence firm Treadstone 71.

If experts can’t be sure who is taking the jihadist sites down, it is unlikely the extremists who run them and post on them can, either. But it is all but certain they’ve been stung by the taunts of someone calling himself The Raptor, or as his Twitter handle is spelled, “the3raptor.”

“Just another infidel defending cyberspace for God and country,” The Raptor describes himself on Twitter.

A man who FoxNews.com contacted through The Raptor’s Twitter page reluctantly described himself as a grandfather and retired military man with a child serving active duty. These details could not be confirmed independently by FoxNews.com, and he declined to provide any other details about his identity.

While The Raptor is cagey about his true identity, he makes no effort to hide his agenda. He tweets frequently, and maintains a blog. Recently, he corresponded at length with FoxNews.com via Twitter direct messaging.

“Our kids keep getting killed because jihadists make better bombs than they do cupcakes,” The Raptor said. “Anything I can do to disrupt and demoralize the enemy is worthwhile and on the table.

“Some say I and others like me are Crusaders; that we hate Islam or desire to offend Allah,” he continued. “That is absolutely and fundamentally wrong. Some of my best friends are Muslims, and I love them. They don’t wish me harm, and I would give my life to defend them. This has only to do with violent criminals who cloak themselves in the wool of a good and peaceful religion to bring death and destruction to the world.”

Whoever is behind the latest attacks on jihadist sites appears to be following in the tradition of a hacker who calls himself “The Jester,” and has been a thorn in the side of online extremists for years.

“It used to be just The Jester, taking down these terrorist sites, but he’s gotten really popular and people look up to him and now he has this whole following of people,” said one source close to the pro-American hacking group.

Another source familiar with the online front of the government’s war on terror said the methods employed in the recent takedowns suggest the work of more than one person, and speculated the Jester's following could be working together as a group.

“[The Raptor] claims to have taken down the sites but, of course, it could be anyone. It could be the government, spooks, or even the site administrators themselves,” the source said.

The Raptor claims he got interested in disrupting jihadist sites after realizing their power to radicalize and inspire Islamic extremists to acts of barbarism.

“The realization that some punk could get knowledge or inspiration from one of these sites to send my child home in a coffin,” he said. “It’s time to shut those sites down and get this war over with.”

The Raptor would not say whether he works with The Jester, but did acknowledge that he is part of a small group that took down the jihadist sites last month.

“You could count them on one hand and that is all I will say,” he said. “I worked alone for a while, but sometimes it really does take a village.”

He downplayed the technical savvy required to do the work he claims to have done.

“People place too much emphasis on these so-called skills,” he said in the exclusive online dialogue with FoxNews.com. “Most sites aren’t as well defended as one might believe -- and that includes legitimate sites we all use every day.”

Bardin agreed that taking down the extremist websites does not require extraordinary computer skill. He said most of the websites frequented by Al Qaeda members and sympathizers use a content management program called vBulletin, one of the first to offer Arabic language support. But Bardin said the system is easy for a skilled hacker to penetrate. Running a vulnerability scan will illuminate weaknesses and another option could be that vBulletin, which was recently purchased by a U.S.-based company, comes with built-in software that facilitates data mining.

“I have no evidence of such activity, but the question must be asked: If you were the government in need of root access to a system that is used to proliferate jihadist information and one that is used in approximately 90 percent of the jihadist online sites, wouldn’t you approach the new U.S. owners to provide such functionality?” Bardin said.

Finally, the Raptor and other hackers could “drop” sites, or deny or take over online command.

“vBulletin is not built for security but for rapid deployment and ease of use,” Bardin said. “I am actually surprised that the sites have not been taken down by others and done so more frequently.”

While federal investigators decline to endorse or denounce The Raptor’s methods on the record, the hacker believes he’s helping the government wage its war on terror. And he has no desire to step forward and bask in the light of heroism.

“Credit is for banks -- I don't care about credit,” he told FoxNews.com. “I care about our kids surviving, and innocent people living in distant lands being able to go about their lives without fearing being blown up or being hacked into pieces. People can attribute actions to whomever or whatever they like, I don’t care.

“When the blood stops flowing, the historians can make of it what they wish,” he said. “I’ll just smile and play with my grandkids.”

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