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Assessments

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Return of Al Qaeda's Inspire Magazine

A screenshot of the most recent issue of Inspire

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Summary

Two new editions of Inspire, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP's) English-language propaganda magazine, were published May 2. The online magazine was dealt a serious blow Sept. 30, 2011, when a U.S. airstrike in Yemen killed Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S.-born Yemeni cleric and a contributor to Inspire, and Samir Khan, the magazine's editor. The recent editions were the magazine's first since the airstrike.

The new releases of Inspire indicate that AQAP is continuing its heavy focus on engaging and radicalizing Muslims in the West. Despite these efforts — and the fact that grassroots jihadists will continue to pose a threat for some time — the few Inspire-motivated attacks attempted in the West have been operationally unsuccessful and demonstrate the difficulty of carrying out such an attack.

ASSESSMENTS Jan 16, 2012

Jihadism in 2012: A Persistent, Low-Level Threat

Like other ideologically motivated groups, Islamist militant groups have always relied on the proliferation of their beliefs to shape public perception and to recruit new members. In the mid-1990s the Internet came into use as a way for jihadists to provide inspiration, news and instruction to current and aspiring members on websites such as azzam.com.

AQAP released the first edition of Inspire magazine, which was intended to encourage Muslims in the West to carry out attacks at home, in July 2010. Subsequently, a new edition was posted online every few months and contained information and how-to guides on bombmaking techniques, security measures, guerrilla tactics and weapons training. The magazines also provide messages of encouragement and email addresses and websites through which the reader could become involved with AQAP.



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Inspire has seen moderate success in rallying extremist Muslims in the West to plan attacks, though those attacks have not been operationally successful. For instance, the magazine motivated the July 2011 attempted attack on Fort Hood, Texas, and the November 2011 plan to attack police, post offices and returning military service members in New York, though security forces thwarted both plots.

But publication of the magazine stopped with its seventh issue, which was published in September 2011, just days before the [unmanned aerial vehicle strike that killed al-Awlaki and Khan](#). Both native English speakers, al-Awlaki was a prominent ideological leader in AQAP and a regular contributor to Inspire, and Khan was the magazine's creator and editor and possessed crucial graphic and editorial skills that are hard to come by in Yemen. The loss of al-Awlaki and Khan was apparent; for more than seven months there were no statements from AQAP in English and no new editions of Inspire magazine.

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New Editions of Inspire

A new editor by the name of Yahya Ibrahim, likely a pseudonym, released the two new Inspire editions May 2. "Fall of 2011" is printed on the cover of Issue 8, the issue following the final release last year, suggesting that its compilation may have been under way with the help of al-Awlaki and Khan but that its release was delayed by their deaths. In addition to messages encouraging readers to commit jihad, Issue 8 contains instructions in its "Open Source Jihad" section on how to properly hold a gun and how to build a remote-controlled detonator.

Unlike Issue 8, it is clear that al-Awlaki and Khan were not involved in the making of Issue 9, which bears a glaring spelling error on the cover. Other grammatical errors in the ninth edition indicate that the issue's editor was not a native English speaker. These mistakes are minor and are unlikely to affect the success or failure of the magazine in motivating its readers, but there is a subtler problem. The Inspire issues produced by Khan employed a vernacular that was culturally relevant to young Muslim men living in the West. By contrast, the language in the recent issues is often stilted, which could dampen its appeal to its target audience.

Like Issue 8, the cover of Issue 9 is not current – it reads "Winter 2012," meaning it was likely created in January 2012. This further indicates that the deaths of al-Awlaki and Khan greatly hampered AQAP's efforts to find someone able to publish the magazine online.

Issue 9 includes a letter from Ibrahim that states that Inspire will continue despite the loss of al-Awlaki and Khan. Ibrahim also claims that AQAP has been flooded with emails from young Muslims in the West offering their services – likely an exaggeration, like other pieces of propaganda in the magazine. In addition, the issue contains instructions on how to build a timed incendiary device (TID) – referred to as a firebomb in the magazine – and how to become a good assassin.

The inclusion of details for building a TID is particularly alarming. TIDs are quick and easy to build and can be very effective. Moreover, the acquisition of the necessary materials for a TID – which can be made with items as simple as gasoline, a nylon bag, a plastic bottle, a clock and sulfuric acid – is less likely to raise suspicion than it would for an improvised explosive device. This makes it more likely that an individual could prepare for an attack without detection.

The Threat in Perspective

The return of Inspire magazine is a call to arms for extremists seeking to join the jihadist movement. Coming at a time when the al Qaeda core is largely marginalized, the latest editions of Inspire draw attention to the Yemeni branch of al Qaeda, which has shown itself [capable of facilitating deadly attacks overseas as well as waging an insurgency](#) and controlling ground in Yemen. The revitalization of Inspire could demonstrate the confidence within AQAP

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necessary to bring radical Muslims to join the group. At the very least it could motivate grassroots jihadists to attempt attacks of their own.

It is important to remember that of the several attempted attacks in the West by extremist Muslims encouraged by Inspire, all have been prevented by security officials. Though AQAP has continued its focus on radicalizing Muslims in the West, the distance between intent and execution is vast.

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