

## The Washington Post

### Correction to This Article

The article reported that a Taliban Web site uses the services of Free Web Town to host its Web site. Officials of Free Web Town's parent company, Tulix Systems Inc., say Free Web Town did not host the site.

### Extremist Web Sites Are Using U.S. Hosts Ease and Anonymity Draw Taliban, al-Qaeda

By Joby Warrick and Candace Rondeaux  
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On March 25, a Taliban Web site claiming to be the voice of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" boasted of a deadly new attack on coalition forces in that country. Four soldiers were killed in an ambush, the site claimed, and the "mujahideen took the weapons and ammunition as booty."

Most remarkable about the message was how it was delivered. The words were the Taliban's, but they were flashed around the globe by an American-owned firm located in a leafy corner of downtown Houston.

The Texas company, a Web-hosting outfit called ThePlanet, says it simply rented cyberspace to the group and had no clue about its Taliban connections. For more than a year, the militant group used the site to rally its followers and keep a running tally of suicide bombings, rocket attacks and raids against U.S. and allied troops. The cost of the service: roughly \$70 a month, payable by credit card.

The Taliban's account was pulled last week when a blogger noticed the connection and called attention to it. But the odd pairing of violently anti-American extremists and U.S. technology companies continues elsewhere and appears to be growing. Intelligence officials and private experts cite dozens of instances in which Islamist militants sought out U.S. Internet firms -- known for their reliable service and easy terms that allow virtual anonymity -- and used them to incite attacks on Americans.

"The relatively cheap expense and high quality of U.S. servers seems to attract jihadists," said Rita Katz, co-founder of the Site Intelligence Group, a private company that monitors the communications of Muslim extremist groups. Even al-Qaeda has sometimes paid American companies to serve as conduits for its hate-filled messages, said Katz, who has tracked such activity since 2003.

Militants' use of U.S. Web hosts has sparked occasional spats between the United States and its allies, as well as endless debates over whether it is better to shut down the Web sites when they're discovered or to let them continue to operate. By allowing them to remain online, intelligence analysts can sometimes discover clues about the leadership and structure of terrorist groups, some analysts say.

"You can learn a lot from the enemy by watching them chat online," said Martin Libicki, a senior policy analyst at the Rand Corp., a nonprofit research organization. Libicki said the bloggers rarely spill secrets, and most are "probably using this more for public affairs rather than recruitment."

"Public affairs," in many cases, means blatantly anti-Western invective and propaganda.

For instance, the Afghan group that rented Web space from ThePlanet offered daily updates on skirmishes between Taliban fighters and U.S. "invaders" and Afghan "puppet army" troops. The Web site, <http://www.alemarah1.com>, frequently claimed that the group's forces had killed coalition troops and even destroyed warplanes and tanks -- accounts that bear little resemblance to coalition field reports on those dates.

Another Taliban Web site, <http://Toorabora.com>, continues to operate, using the services of Free Web Town, a user-friendly template service run by Atlanta-based Tulix Systems. The group's site features regular updates about purported attacks on U.S.-led coalition forces and occasional interviews with Taliban leaders and commanders in English and the regional languages of Dari and Pashto.

The site is associated with a Taliban group known as the Tora Bora Front, a hard-line faction operating in the remote mountainous region between northeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan where fighting this year has been especially heavy.

Representatives of Tulix and ThePlanet say their policies prohibit the airing of violent or hateful messages by ordinary Americans, and certainly by terrorists. Both companies say they act quickly to shut down any site that breaks the rules.

The user-friendly American services are especially popular with groups like the Tora Bora Front. "It kind of makes it an ideal target for people who want to use it for nefarious reasons because not only is it easy to access and easy to use, it's easy to lie about your identity," said Thomas Burling, Tulix's chief financial officer.

Burling said the company has "routinely" been contacted by various federal agencies tracking the use of the Free Web Town sites, but he declined to go into further detail or identify the agencies.

Under federal eavesdropping laws passed last year, U.S. intelligence officials can legally monitor communications between foreign groups without a warrant, even if the transit lines pass through the United States.

The firms acknowledge that it is not always easy to spot militants' activity. Tulix boasts more than 1 million clients, while ThePlanet is the country's biggest supplier of Web-hosting services, with nearly 16 million accounts. Yvonne Donaldson, spokeswoman for ThePlanet, said the firm cannot afford to monitor every site and instead reacts to complaints, as it did in the case of [alemarah1.com](http://alemarah1.com). "If the complaint is credible, we notify the authorities," she said.

In some cases, the complaints come from governments. Pakistan has been venting to U.S. officials about militants' use of North American Internet services since last fall, when an investigation of the Mumbai terrorist rampage, which involved Pakistanis, revealed that the attackers had communicated using Internet phone calls routed through another server based in Houston.

American and Pakistani officials say the issue has raised tensions within diplomatic and intelligence circles in both countries and has reignited a high-level internal debate over the legality and efficacy of shutting off or restricting access to such services.

A senior Pakistani official said repeated requests to Washington to shut down controversial sites have gone unheeded -- and American authorities' seeming reluctance has become "an irritant." The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he is not cleared to discuss the issue, said Pakistani intelligence experts are convinced that Washington prefers to keep the sites running for intelligence purposes.

"They're very reluctant or very slow to deal with this. We're saying at least if you monitor them, then share with us the information so we can take them out," the official said.

U.S. intelligence officials acknowledge the dispute but note the futility of trying to turn off Web sites completely. Domain names can be easily changed, they say, and sites are so easy to relocate that a new site usually opens within weeks after the old one is shut down.

Or sometimes even sooner. The Taliban's alemarrah1 site, which disappeared from its old location Friday, appeared again on Tuesday under a slightly altered name. In a matter of days, it was sending messages worldwide and routing them once again through ThePlanet's servers, based in the same leafy corner of downtown Houston.