CARBONDALE, Ill. -- A. Aaron Weisburd slogged up to his attic at 5 a.m. to begin another day combing through tips he had received about possible pro-terrorist activity on the Internet.

It did not take long for one e-mail to catch his attention: Ekhalas.com was offering instructions on how to steal people's personal information off their computers. It was a new development for an Islamic discussion site accustomed to announcing "martyrdom operations," or suicide bombings, against U.S. troops and others in Iraq.

Weisburd quickly listed the discovery in his daily log of offensive and dangerous sites, alerting his supporters. A few days later, Ekhalas experienced an unusual surge in activity, the hallmark of a hacker attack, forcing the company hosting the site to take it down.

It was another small victory for Weisburd, one of a new breed of Internet activists. Part vigilantes, part informants, part nosy neighbors, they search the Web for sites that they say deal in theft, fraud and violence.

Weisburd said he and his supporters are responsible for dismantling at least 650 and as many as 1,000 sites he regards as threatening, especially Islamic radical sites.

"I'm sort of like a freelance investigator," Weisburd said.

Like the foes they pursue, online crusaders like Weisburd are adept at using the Internet's unique characteristics -- its anonymity, speed and ability to reach across nation-state boundaries. Some work alone and in secret; others like Weisburd have managed to put together well-organized operations that run almost like companies. Their causes can vary widely, be it stopping spam or holding large corporations accountable for poor products or service. There are groups that investigate murders and those that fight terrorism and other crimes.

The activists often operate at the boundaries of what is legal and illegal. For his part, Weisburd insists that he uses only legal means to go after his targets. A posting on his site explains that in fighting crime he does not think it proper to commit one, but he admits he cannot always control the actions of those who help him.

Government agencies and others are not sure what to make of him. Some law enforcement officials praise his efforts. Kenneth Nix, a police detective from Missouri who is on the Internet Crimes Task Force, said Weisburd often provides information that "we didn't have before."

But others say that he is making more trouble than he is doing good. Some U.S. officials think that they can learn more about terrorist operations by monitoring suspicious sites as they operate. Weisburd said an analyst from a federal agency recently wrote him a scathing letter calling him a "grave threat to national
security" because his work was interfering with its investigations.

Marshall Stone, a spokesman for the FBI, said that while the agency encourages citizens to report alleged wrongdoing, it believes any attempt to stop criminals should be left to the government.

Without due process, evidence could be tainted and become unusable in court cases or, worse, targets could be condemned as guilty when they are really innocent, said Paul Kurtz, executive director of the Cyber Security Industry Alliance, a coalition of tech company chief executives. "When we all become 'law enforcement officers' justice becomes very blurry," he said.

Armed with three aging computers, Weisburd hunts what he describes as terrorists from his home.

Weisburd, 41, a half-Irish, half-Jewish New Yorker, said that like other Americans he was deeply affected by the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. He wanted to enlist in the military, but his age and health issues made that impossible.

Then, about a year later, he saw a news story about a Web site that showed what appeared to be a kindergarten class in the Gaza Strip acting out terrorist attacks. He was outraged and went to his computer to do some research, eventually discovering the name of the company hosting the site. He e-mailed the owner of the Web-hosting company at 6 a.m. By 8 a.m. the site was down.

From that success, the former philosophy major from George Washington University set up "Internet Haganah," -- the latter word in Hebrew means "defense" and was the name of the underground Jewish militia in British-controlled Palestine from 1920 to 1948. The site, dedicated to fighting back against Islamic terrorist sites, has more than 30,000 unique visitors each month.

On another morning that same week in early April, Weisburd called up an e-mail informing him that someone on a Yahoo bulletin board was soliciting donations to go on a "jihad" somewhere. Within a few minutes, Weisburd is able to find three of the messages and trace their origin -- from cable modems at someone's home and at a New England school district. He hit the forward button and sent the information off to a law enforcement contact.

Another message urged Weisburd to check out a Web site in Arabic rallying readers to pray to Allah for a volcanic eruption on the Canary Islands. The site surmised that, if large enough, the vibrations could trigger a tsunami that could wipe out the Eastern seaboard of the United States. The site even contained a map of the potential destruction. A bit absurd, Weisburd thought. He summarized the information, posted it on his site, and moved on to the next e-mail.

The site consumes so much of Weisburd's time that he gave up a steady job as a computer programmer. He now works part time as a high-tech consultant and he said he and his wife, who is a graphic artist, are just scraping by.

He said he has received thousands of dollars in donations, as well as some ominous death threats. One warning came in a handwritten letter mailed to Weisburd's house. Another letter on a Web site declared that he should be beheaded and it listed his address. For his protection, Weisburd keeps a loaded 38mm pistol in the house.

Weisburd is helped by a loosely organized group of volunteers. Among them are techies from Silicon Valley, Middle East experts, and more than a few women he described as "young grandmothers with high-speed Internet in rural areas."

In one case, Weisburd identified an Atlanta-based Web provider that appeared to be hosting a site that
advocated attacks against the United States and its Western allies. The provider, however, seemed to be ignoring requests to remove it. So some Weisburd supporters figured out which church the owner went to and got his personal cell phone number and began lobbying him non-stop until he took down the site.

"I sometimes feel like I'm in that scene from [the movie] 'Young Frankenstein': I am the enforcer and there is an angry mob in back of me," Weisburd said.

Some Web hosting providers who have dealt with Weisburd and his supporters said such groups place them in an awkward position. If they keep the sites up, they are in danger of being labeled as supporting terrorism. If they take down the sites, they could become targets of free speech advocates, and lose paying customers.

T. Griffin Conrad, vice president of marketing for iPowerWeb Inc., the Santa Monica, Calif., company that hosted Ekhlaas, said the company shut down the site because it feared the surge in activity was in danger of triggering a ripple effect that could shut down the company's other clients. Conrad would not speculate on what caused the excess traffic and said he was unaware of the nature of the content on the site until contacted by a reporter.

Perhaps the most difficult question Weisburd faces is determining which sites qualify as promoting "jihad." Even some of his supporters are torn.

Brian Marcus, director of Internet monitoring for the Anti-Defamation League, said Weisburd deserves "a lot of praise." Marcus added that the line between a terrorist-support site and a discussion forum is often nebulous. "We are a civil rights group and freedom of speech means to lot of us," he said.

Weisburd does not read Arabic but uses a computer translator and relies on other volunteers who are fluent in other languages to assist him with more difficult text. But he said it is often clear from just the images and a few words on sites which ones deserve to be kept up and which ones should be made to disappear from cyberspace.

"I understand enough of what they say to know they are my enemy, and that's all I need to know," Weisburd said.

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