

The PKK/YPG's Utilization of Social Media

Social media has become a tool used by organizations involved in terrorist activities, from leftist's to ultra-right wing and finally religious based terrorist groups. Historically, terrorism has been an act of engagement in violent activities for an ideological cause, an example being the propaganda of the deed in the nineteenth century central to the anarchist theory. Terrorism has currently shifted and took a different paradigm with the creation of the internet. Terrorism, in addition to the initiation of violent attacks for ideological reasons, has also become an act of communication with means of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The PKK has demonstrated this point even further.

The utilization of social media for the PKK, a terrorist organization in Turkey and possessing arms in Syria, Iran, and Iraq, has been for the dissemination of deeds and propaganda online. The PKK firstly aims at 'revolution' in what it calls the 'Kurdistan' region and then further on aims to spread this globally. The PKK for 'global revolution' purposes has also utilized social media like DAESH and others.

Platforms like the ones stated above, in addition to forums, chat rooms and mobile platforms such as Telegram have been used for three primary reasons by the PKK. Firstly, cyber-space and platforms serve as a means to conduct tactical and operational planning, and for operational efficiency as well. Militants are able to plan attacks and communicate via mobile messaging platforms stated earlier, or magnify the effects of an attack performed in the eyes of its sympathizers. In addition to social media platforms, cyber-space also serves to provide information for intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE) for the PKK with means of open-source data present such as satellite and geospatial imagery, pinpointing the locations of potential targets with means of social media 'check-in's and locations given, collating data regarding the region where the attack is intended to take place.

Secondly, cyber-space as seen in Operation Olive Branch presently taking place against the YPG; an arm of the PKK in Syria, also serves to disseminate propaganda and form an echo-chamber to 'wave-out' narratives being disseminated by the organization. Online users are brought together and used to echo-out messages currently employed by the PKK. An inside-out approach is used whereby PKK news agencies such as the Fırat News Agency (ANF) publish white propaganda of fake images and information regarding Operation Olive Branch and the Turkish state. This propaganda is then echoed out by the first ring present in the echo-chamber. These users are generally people who either work for the ANF or other PKK news agencies such as Sterk TV. As these narratives are echoed out by the first ring, narratives then reach the second ring of users, these primarily consisting of followers of the first ring present in the echo-chamber.

Bots are also utilized in the first and second rings as well to magnify the reach of propaganda published. Bots are generally apps or lines of code that perform highly repetitive tasks by automatically gathering and posting information from a central source based upon a set of algorithms. Bots can also be executed by hijacking social media accounts of users without them noticing. These lines of code are used for what is called 'trolling' and 'flaming' to heighten PKK/YPG/PYD narratives executed by forming hashtag's and lifting these up to trend topics on social media platforms as the latest hashtag's of 'TurkeySupportsIsis' and 'DefendAfrin' have shown.

Trolling and flaming can be also observed to being performed by not only bots, but accounts used by humans themselves. These users tend to generally hijack government social media feeds with propaganda and false messages. Flaming is a different form of trolling whereby harsher language is employed by the account operator. This technique is mostly utilized for psychological warfare and also aiding in recruitment, and potential radicalization into violent extremism.

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The utilization of social media and the internet by the PKK/PYD/YPG within Operation Olive Branch is highly strategic. The internet facilitates for continuous communication between PKK handlers and attackers. Skills transfer such as instructions for making bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) can be found on online PKK platforms. Cyber-space for the PKK allows a radical milieu to come about whereby according to Peter Waldmann, 'a collective of people sharing certain perspectives and a unitary identity come together', and in this sense form an imagined community online. It could also be observed the PKK among its sympathizers creates what John Horgan and Mia Bloom call 'a fear of missing out' (FOMO). This fear is generated with regards to missing out on new publications and content generated by the terrorist organization as most channels or links used to share the content with its sympathizers self-destruct in a given amount of time. For this reason, PKK sympathizers can be seen as being constantly online, waiting for new propaganda, and being bombarded constantly with PKK narratives and ideology.

Finally, the anonymity and de-individualization that social media brings about allow for a feeling of empowerment of PKK sympathizers. Andrew Silke argues that extreme anonymity online can also bring about extreme aggression. Twitter feeds show narratives of extreme aggression such as threats towards one's family and the 'annihilation of Turks' used by the PKK and YPG. Aggression online is additionally utilized in an attempt to water-down Turkish governmental narratives and its matters of national security to whitewash PKK narratives.

In conclusion, the initiation of Operation Olive Branch has shown that the nature of war and international security have changed. National security issues currently not only exist on the ground but in fact upon virtual space as well. Operation Olive Branch has shown us the strategic importance of social media and the internet, and the counter-measures that should be employed upon the internet towards terrorist organizations such as the PKK/YPG.