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No. 208/2013 dated 8 November 2013

Online War in Syria: Fighters Take to Twitter and Facebook

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Synopsis

Fighters in Syria have Twitter and Facebook accounts where they post journal-like entries updating friends and followers of their daily lives. These accounts are open to the public without any privacy settings. Why are they exposing their covers and what are the implications?

Commentary

ONLINE ACCOUNTS of fighters in Syria are as heterogeneous as their real-world profiles. They are in a variety of languages: English; Arabic; Chinese and Japanese to name a few. Some disclose all information without any restrictions, while others maintain its traditional clandestine nature. Despite these differences, all bear resemblance with one another, releasing contents on the atrocities in Syria.

The materials are a mixture of originals as well as those already disseminated in the social media or the mainstream media. They show the plight of Syrians; portray an oppressive Assad regime; compare information from the mainstream with personal accounts and experience; and more often than not, share latest personal developments and daily activities.

Why expose all information online?

Fighters especially foreigners are aware that they would have to stay vigilant against the authorities. This is observed as fighters would decline to answer questions on their locations. When asked if their operational leaders allowed their online presence, some fighters have been observed to reply that they were allowed to reveal anything except information on their checkpoints and bases. Hence the conspicuous question as to why most of these individuals readily expose their personal details such as their personal profile pictures before Syria and in Syria, pictures of their homes, families and friends online. Sometimes the information is so detailed such that it creates doubt on the credibility of the account and the fighter's identity.

Straight from the horse's mouth, the fighters explain to their Twitter and Facebook followers and friends that they maintain online accounts for the purpose of disseminating news, one that they refer to as 'da'wa' or missionary work; and helping the general public with inquiries on Syria. Some post images of fighters training with the purpose of motivating others to join the ranks. Some answer a myriad of questions posed to them, ranging from topics on the nationalities of fighters in Syria to how fighters get internet access.

Observations of the online accounts suggest that fighters just 'don't care' and were prepared to die in Syria. Such connotations are observed in some accounts where fighters 'laughed' when followers of their Twitter accounts advised that they avoid divulging too much information as they are being watched. These fighters also talked about death and posted messages before going on a mission, requesting that followers pray for their martyrdom to be accepted by God.

Secondly, like in the case of the anti-Soviet multinational Afghan fighters campaign in the 1980s, the international community is generally unsure of its stance against those fighting the incumbent regime. Today, in Syria, the international community neither condemns nor hails the fighters, hence the absence of stringent restrictions on travel, flow of funds and dissemination of propaganda. This could be one of the reasons as to why fighters are not afraid to bare it all online.

Lastly, the truth for many is that sharing one's identity online is second nature. Europe has over 240 million Facebook users while Asia has over 230 million, and there are over 500 million Twitter accounts since June 2012. Many accounts belonging to fighters show that they have had the accounts even before they came to Syria.

Implications

These online accounts have a considerable amount of following. Online followers and friends of the fighters are usually in the thousands. They include right-wing extremists who condemn the fighters and view them as fanatics; adherents of the Al Qaeda ideology; supporters from the general public; individuals who are either silent or are following fighters for the access to information. Security concern will be ones pertaining to the first three types of online followers.

Some analysts have pointed out the idea of co-radicalisation between different extremist communities. In these online accounts, the two extremist communities at conflict are the right-wing extremists and adherents of the Al Qaeda ideology. Both believe that the other is a threat to their survival and feed on each other's extremist views. However, these online accounts are neither the primary factor of the radicalisation of extremist individuals, nor the only source of information for such extremist communities. These communities would exploit any form of information there is to frame their views and agenda.

There is also worry that these fighters would be influential public figures. If this was the case, arresting or detaining fighters who return to their home countries would cause ripples that would agitate the public and the different communities. In addition, there is also the issue of fighters influencing the public with extremist ideology which would advocate the use of violence.

Although these are possible scenarios, they cannot be used to justify an increased tolerance for violence. Currently, the only certainty about the support from the general public for these fighters is the shared grievance between both groups. The general public and the fighters support the struggle against oppression in Syria. However, it is uncertain whether both parties agree that violence can be used to conduct acts of terrorism.

What next?

The issue here is not on curbing people from supporting the fighters. It is not about setting the moral grounds in Syria. It is about keeping radicalisation at bay and ensuring that security is in check post- Syria. If these are kept in focus, then strategies would be needed to tackle the predicament. Counter ideological efforts coupled with community engagement remain imperative to protect the mainstream from the extremist ideology.

Technology should be used to trawl and document fighters' online accounts for counter-radicalisation efforts. Such efforts will ensure that counter terrorism strategies remain effective in building public vigilance against the different radicalisation outlets at play today.

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