Propaganda and incitement of Hamas organization on the internet: case study - Hamas organization on the shadow of escalations in 2011 / Yair Sade

Abstracts

The present study investigates the question of **how the Hamas organization uses the internet to disseminate propaganda and seditious messages to its target audiences**. To this end, the following questions are explored: What are the goals of Hamas' internet platforms? Who are Hamas' target audiences on the internet? What rhetoric does Hamas use on the internet? How should a virtual internet war with a terror organization be dealt with?

The assumptions underlying the study were: 1. The volume of posted texts is expected to increase during security events such as terror attacks or rocket and missile fire incidents. 2. International audiences are addressed openly, supportive audiences are addressed covertly, and enemy audiences are addressed implicitly. The study investigated web platforms in English that typically addressed English reading audiences, i.e. international ones. 3. Hamas uses on the internet a rhetoric that is characteristic of a terror organization. 4. Hamas uses a textual and visual style that is typical of terror organizations, such as frequent use of terminology borrowed from the world of crime and war. 5. Hamas is interested in maintaining on the agenda topics it considers important. These topics include the Israeli occupation, Israel's crimes, the issue of Palestinian prisoners and Palestinian resistance against Israel.

This is a case study that used a combined qualitative and quantitative methodology. The **qualitative aspect** was based on a content analysis of texts from a predetermined timeframe – 1 March 2011 to 31 October 2011. This specific period was selected because it was characterized by numerous security events such as terror attacks, rocket fire incidents, mass demonstrations, and calls to organize flotillas and liberate Palestinian prisoners. All the materials posted daily on Hamas's internet platforms were collected: Reports, posters, photos and virtual debates. These materials were read, processed and categorized according to recurring topics: The occupation, views on terror attacks and opening fire on Israel, clashes with the IDF and threats against the enemy, security prisoners, glorification of *shahid*s (martyrs), Israel's inhuman

conduct towards the Palestinians, flotilla events, Israel in the eyes of the world, the Nazi paradox, and the abducted IDF soldier Gilad Shalit.

A representative sample of Hamas internet sites in English was selected: the websites http://www.palestine-info.co.uk/en, and http://www.qassam.ps, the forum http://www.almoltaqa.ps, and the twitters http://twitter.com/AlqassamBrigade and http://twitter.com/HAMAS.

In addition to analyzing the texts of the web platforms, interviews were held with three Israeli terror researchers specializing in the cyber war launched by Hamas on the internet. Most of the issues that came up in the interviews supported the basic assumptions of the study.

For the **quantitative aspect,** a text analysis program, IBM SPSS Modeler 14.2, was used. It quantified textual data and translated them into numbers and statistics. The software produced automatically frequency scales of terms/expressions, created word categories, and generated graphs that displayed associations between certain words or expressions. The results were then processes manually by the researcher. Another program, SpiderNetPN, produced graphs that displayed existing connections between online Hamas platforms and other internet platforms. In addition, the researcher counted manually the number of words collected every day from each of the internet platforms, to find out if there was a connection between ongoing events and the volume of written materials.

The findings of the research led to several interesting conclusions. The internet platforms of the Hamas organization were found to have characteristic **rhetoric patterns** that recurred throughout the research period. It emerged that **supportive audiences** were addressed **covertly** using expressions such as **comrades-in-arms**, and enemy audiences were addressed by using, among other**, disinformation** and **distorted facts**. Hamas was also found to openly use **emotionally arousing stories** directed at **international audiences,** which **de-humanized Israel and delegitimized its conduct towards the Palestinians**. Of these topics, the most characteristic were, by descending order: **Israeli occupation, Israel's crimes, the issue of Palestinian prisoners and Palestinian resistance against Israel.** It also came up that supportive and enemy audiences were only addressed during special events, such as the firing of missiles at Israel and terror attacks**.** In contrast, the international audience was continuously addressed throughout the researched period.

The assumption that during significant security events the number of texts posted on Hamas' online platforms would increase was also investigated, but the results were not unequivocal. It was found that the number of words posted in each of the platforms during specific events was inconsistent. One common characteristic of all the Hamas web platforms was that they featured pictures, caricatures, and news items that were updated at short time intervals, and included posters and links to other websites. Hamas' web platforms were also found to contain virulent and scathing propaganda and seditious messages, especially during noteworthy security events.

The experts interviewed for this research predicted that Hamas would improve its technological web capabilities, and might cause damage to critical infrastructures in the future. They also claimed that it was possible to predict, at least partially, future initiatives of terror organizations, such as launching terror attacks and inciting for violent demonstrations. The experts were in agreement that Hamas used the internet to post virtual posters, recruit supporters and raise funds, as well as for documentation and intelligence collection purposes, and even for religious guidance. They maintained that Hamas used Western internet infrastructures with the permission of the involved governments. They also stated that sedition and propaganda were even more virulent and hateful in Hamas' web platforms in Arabic than in the English language platforms.

The present study recommends ways to handle the ongoing virtual war with terror organizations on the internet: Setting up an international internet inspection body that would be capable of gathering significant intelligence information and alerting about planned terror attacks and other security events. Israel, for its part, should create a worldwide online information system to face and respond to the anti-Israeli propaganda of terror organizations.

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