

Social Media Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century: The Present Threats to the World

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Abstract: *The social media terrorism has become the most concerning issue to the world. Defining terrorism is a controversial issue to the scholars. The international terrorist groups are found behind the increasing number of the terrorist incidents across the world. There is interplay between home ground terrorist groups and international terrorist organizations and social media has central role in accelerating the situations. Through qualitative analyzing this paper will examine the present threats of the social media terrorism in the 21st centuries. The close relationship between social media and terrorism is another reason of frequent terrorist incidents across the world. Terrorist organizations are, including especially Islamic State, preferring to use social media platforms for recruiting, training and communicating with their followers, supporters, donors as it is cheaper, easier, faster and effective method of communication. The members of the terrorist organizations are spreading their ideological thoughts, propaganda, and their activities to the world by using social media platforms. Without having any effective international regulatory mechanism on the social media, the social media terrorism is threatening the peace and security of the world.*

Keywords -Social Media, Terrorism, Islamic States, 21st Century

Research Area: Law and Social Science

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1. INTRODUCTION

Away from the physical battlefield, the terrorist organisations are creating virtual one in the cyber arena to spread their ideology across the world. The use of the social media platforms by the terrorist organisations have been significantly increasing, which became one of the important ways of communicating, recruiting, and trading with the members and followers of such terror organisation across the world. As a result of this, the terror groups are becoming more organised, and dangerous threat to the world's peace. In the recent years, the massive number of terrorist incidents is the warning sign of the future threats of the Terrorism. The aim of this paper is to identify the threat of terrorism in the twenty-first century. While doing so, this paper will describe the concept of terrorism in the light of scholarly opinions and legal provisions. This paper will also evaluate the threat of terrorism that exists in this present time and the relationship between the uses of social media. While doing that, this paper will analyse the benefits of using social media by the terrorist groups and the way they use the social media as a weapon to operate their terrorist activities. As the ISIS is the most organised and active terrorist groups, thus this study will particularly emphasise on the strategies and technique of terrorist activities by using social media platforms.

2. TERRORISM THREATS IN 21ST CENTURY

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon to the world but the modern era of terrorism has begun at the end of the twentieth century onwards. Since then the terrorist groups have frequently started their terror activities around the world and beyond the territorial boundaries. The countries like Syria, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan became the most highlighted countries as a home ground of terrorist organisations, and from where those terrorist organisations operate their activities. After the deadliest attack on 9/11 by the Al-Qaida, world leaders have realised the threats of the terrorist in the world. Moreover, the World also came to know that the members of the terrorist organisations are using hi-tech technologies and new technique in their missions or operations. In recent days, after the invention of the IS, the threats to the world became more significant, as they are better organised and desperate terrorist group. They are using suicide attacks to their enemies and using advanced technology in their missions, including the various internet platforms. Through various social media platforms, a terrorist group are recruiting people, train the groups, communicate with their followers and donors, and updates their activities which can be treated as unconventional terrorism. Thus, it is essential to discuss what terrorism actually means to the scholars.

There are different thoughts and opinion in defining terrorism. ‘Who is a terrorist?’ is also a matter of controversy. One school of thought believed that it depends upon the ‘subjective outlook of the definer.’ An objective definition of terrorism is necessary to combat terrorism. Therefore, the role of the international law is crucial to provide a correct and objective definition of terrorism. Although a terror organisation cannot claim to be freedom fighters under the normative principle of law. Claude Berrebi, however, considered that the word “terrorism” as wide and it is may be difficult to define terror in the view of one country. Claude Berrebi than referred definition provided by the US State Department as, “the term ‘terrorism’ means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”.

According to Section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000 terrorism means, “the use of threat of action where, the use or threat is designed to influence the government (or an international governmental organisation) or to intimidate the public or a section of the public, and the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious (racial) or ideological cause...” The interpretation of terrorism seems wider under this section. However, the terrorist organisation frequently occurring incidents across the world, as their followers present almost all over the world. The notable recent incidents are the Westminster attack in United kingdom where 4 people died including police officer and injured 50 people by a single terror, the Orlando Shooting in the USA where 49 people died, Brussels Bombings in Belgium where 32 people were slaughtered, Paris attack 129 people died, the Sehwan suicide bombing in Pakistan killed at least 75 people, the Kabul hospital attack ISIS militants disguised as doctors and killed 38 people in Afghanistan, the Lio beach attack gunmen slaughter 20 in Somalia, Gulshan attack 20 hostages killed in Bangladesh and others. In the most of the incidents of the terror attack, the IS was found behind that. However, those members of the terrorist organisation found to communicate through the social media. Therefore, there is a close relationship between the social media and terrorist organisation.

3. RELATIONSHIP OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA AND TERRORISM

While scrutinising the relationship between the social media and terrorism it is important to know, what the term ‘social media’ means. This part will also analyse why and how the terrorist organisations are using social media, which is another concerning issues for this paper.

The social media is a group of the internet or cyber-based applications that allow the creation of user-generated content, like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp etc. However, blogs are the earliest form of social media. Social media help to create ‘volume and diversity of available platforms’ for a country. Thus social media, since the Edward Snowden disclosures about the various platforms and messaging system, it has opened new frontiers across the world regarding the fast and rapid communication with one people to another, even in groups. As a result, the use of social media became popular among individuals and groups all over the world and it is also evident that various terrorist groups are also using the social media to communicate with each other, including with their followers. International terrorist groups like so-called ISIS or IS, Jabhat al Nusra, Al-Qaida etc. are using social media to communicate with their followers, other groups, and even publish their missions and activity in the name of “*Jihad*” through the internet, which is a very frightening trend in recent days. The increasing involvements of the social networks with the jihadist are increasing the risk of terror attacks around the world. Because of the increasing number of the use of the social media by the extremist and terrorist groups, however, the social media companies are under tremendous pressure from the governments or other international organisations to remove, monitoring and other activities in their platforms. Police and other intelligence organisations of the world also work actively and remove offending accounts or material more effectively, which leads to frequently change the account and the online habits of the terrorist groups.

3.1. WHY SOCIAL MEDIA?

With the increasing number of internet users in the world, social media is becoming the most favourite communication tools, as forproviding one’s views or comments, share information whether personally or in a group. Moreover, there are lots of privacy issue available for the user, like ‘closed group’ or ‘private conversation’ in different social media platforms. On the other hand, ‘open group’ or public pages on social media, where different people can share their views, opinions and discussions. Thus, it also became one of the best and attractive ways for the terrorist to make new followers or/and communicate with their followers, always keep in touch with each other from any part of the world.

However, the most favourite and well known social media platforms are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Google + and YouTube. Till 7 March 2017, there are 1.86 billion users across the world and 29.7% users are aged between 25 to 34 years old. Moreover, there are 400 million Instagram users till 2015, 320 millions Twitter users since 2016, and 300 million Google+ users till 2013. Furthermore, total 1300 billion users of YouTube till January 2017. Those social networks provide different facilities, regarding language, culture, linguistically etc. which makes things easier to communicate with one another. Other social media platforms are, like Reddit (400 million visitors in 2012) and Tumblr (100 million blogs), also crucial to express the people's interest and opinions in the social media platforms. Because of these facts, terrorist and terror groups are very much interesting to use the social media platforms to communicate across the world faster, cheaper and easier than any other means. Apart from that, the social media platforms are more user-friendly to distribute information

and other resources among the extremist and terrorist and even from the foreign conflict zone they can provide advice, training manuals and videos and operational security information.

3.2. HOW TERRORIST GROUPS USE SOCIAL MEDIA?

Terrorist and terror groups have been using social media and other internet or cyber platforms in many ways, especially for the purpose of operational communication, intelligence gathering, technical information sharing, recruiting, training etc. Since 1999 the existence of the terror groups on the internet has been observed and after that their activity on the forums (i.e. al-falluja, al-fidaa, al-shmukh etc.), blogs, and other social media platforms, as consistently increasing. In 2014 the Simon Wiesenthal Centre on their report identified there are more than 30 thousands forums, websites and social media accounts that promoting terrorism in the US and abroad. They also found the increasing numbers of the social networking by the extremists regarding the purpose of recruitment “the enemy”. Often in the social media platform, extremist groups seem to create a strong relationship with new profiles users, which also work as a public facing gateway to forums. It is also notable that many right wing groups in the social media redirect audience towards their forums, continuously delectation of their pages or account on Twitter, Facebook, as a result of this. Many Islamist and extremist forums seem to communicate each other regarding ideological discussions and propaganda sharing. IS and Al-Shabaab are the high profile users of social media, especially on the Twitter. Moreover, Ogaden National Liberation Front in Somalia, Uyghur Militants in China, Patani Separatists in Thailand, Chechen terror groups in Caucasus etc. are also considered as significant users of social media. Islamist extremists in the UK and White Nationalists in Sweden are using YouTube to share speeches, propaganda, political events and distribute videos. Although there is a crucial difference exists between the White Nationalist Groups and Islamist Terrorist Groups. White Nationalists are marketing extremist material as a key propaganda and revenue function. On the other hand, the Islamic terrorists with their ulterior intention through social media activity targeted the Arabic and European language speakers, by using English and most of the time they are targeting the vulnerable individuals.

However, in a particularly sophisticated manner Al-Muhajjoun, the Mujahideen Youth Movement, Al-Qaeda uses their international networks of YouTube channels, especially targeting western social media users. In an analysis of the of using a combination of these measures and community found the interconnection and activities by the members of the terrorist groups, which exist within the network, along with the level of influence of different members. A study on the Al-Nusra on Twitter in 2013 has provided insight into the extent to which an organisation can benefit from being re-tweeted by specific regional broadcasters. However, Weimann identified that the terrorist who were involved in the recent terror attacks in the Western countries somehow used the social media to gather information before the incidents. Evan Hohlmann, a cyberterrorism expert, argued that “ninety percent of the terrorist activity on the internet takes place using social networking tools”.

4. ISLAMIC STATES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

ISIS is the most active terrorist group in the social media and they use various platforms of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Viber etc. The Brooking Centre for Middle East Policy found that between September to December in 2014 around 46 thousand to 70 thousand Twitter accounts were active of the IS supporters, having average one thousand followers in each account. By using social media IS spread propaganda

across the world. They also recruit and communicate to their follower and fund donors through social media in different countries, emphasising the ‘physical frontier of the holy war’. Shiraz Maher explained, a study from the International Centre of Radicalisation, that IS are active to find possible recruits on the social media platforms and before the recruitment they invite them to join in the more private and closed forum for the further instructions.

In this regards, in 2011 Al-Qaeda had launched ‘Jihadist Cloud,’ and members of the jihadist forums encouraging the development of ‘media mujahidin’ since then. Every day a huge quantity of propagandas is posted on Twitter and Facebook from UK, USA, Saudi Arabia, India and Russia apart from Syria, and Iraq. According to Berger and Morgam, at least 46 thousand Twitter accounts had been used in between September to December 2014 by the IS supporters. However, the main purpose of the terrorist or extremist groups on the social media, especially on Twitter, is to strengthen group unity and spread the propagandas among the public. The IS also is using video content in recent years to telecast propagandas and inhuman activity, like beheading their enemies head, on the media. In the middle of 2014, Al-Hayat released the war flame that was about an hour long. Thought the video contents on the social media the IS expressing their brutality on the name of Islam. The most surprising insight is the online behaviour of the IS across the world, as for how they are operating and maintaining their activity on the social media, which can be treated as a challenge to the peace loving nations. If the authority shut down any suspected Twitter or Facebook account of the terrorist group, immediately after that they open another account and all their friends and followers move to the new account. However, the accounts of the IS members are being monitored under an operation, called ‘swarmcast’ in order to disseminate content across multiple platforms and dispersed networks that actively react to account deletions by creating new accounts and reconnecting rapidly with other members of the community.

The report of JM Berger and J Morgan on IS’s Twitter account activity is that account suspensions do have concrete effects in limiting the reach and scope of ISIS activities on social media. This report also indicated the success of suspension of the terrorist group's social media and other internet platforms that significantly reduced their supporting networks across the world, but failed to prevent re-assembling the networks again and again. As a result of this, they remain active and online with a small amount of audience. In addition to that, the terror groups are tampering the social media networks, called social engineering, which helps them to undetected several conversations and discussion to the network provider authorities.

This Strategic tempering of the internet platforms helps terror groups to continue their operational discussions on any terrorist incidents or attacks across the world. In many video clips IS share their arms, arsenals and other weapons in order to demonstrate their strengths and powers to the international community, which also inspires their supporters and followers. It has found that the IS’s online campaigns, messages or comments are for the intended audiences, whether domestic or international. For example, the Norwegian terrorist, called Anders Breivik, who murdered 77 people in 2011, has written down a manual to his followers in the intent platform which is a hidden internet platform. A Tor Hidden Service is also believed to have been used by Al-Qaeda leaders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Nasir al-Wuhayshi to discuss high-level strategy, a communication that, when detected, led the US to temporarily close down 21 embassies. There is also some evidence that IS sympathisers are familiar with the various opportunities of encryption software. Thus, in many other ways, the

terrorist organisations are tempering the internet platforms including the social media platform in order to communicate for their terror activity to the other members of the group.

5. FUTURE THREATS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA TERRORISM

With the increasing numbers of the home ground terrorists, inspired by the international terrorist organisations, the threats of the terrorist incidents have significantly been increased in last few years and social media is accelerating these situations. Because of the social media, the terrorists are getting more organised and frequently the occurring terrorist incidents, especially targeting the western world. As there is no universal convention or regulation that may control the cyber world, especially in the fight against social media terrorism that lead the world to uncountable increasing numbers of enmities all across the world. The home grown small terrorist groups are joining with other international terrorist organisations and involving in the various terrorist activities and social media has central role in this process. Governments need to work side by side with the social media companies in order to prevent and control the threat of the social media terrorism. However, it will never possible to prevent and control the social media terrorism without the help of the general people. Therefore, the proper initiatives need to take by the relevant authorise of the states to aware people against the social media terrorism, and if we work all together it is possible to prevent and control the present threats of social media across the world.

6. CONCLUSION

The social media plays a vital role in spreading terrorist with increasing numbers of the terrorist activities. By using and tempering different social media platforms, the terrorist groups are, especially the ISIS or IS or ISIL, communicating with their followers and donors, recruiting the new members from across the world, providing training material as this the faster, easier, cheaper and most effective communication methods in the development of the technology. The increasing number of the terrorist activates, by using social media, is threatening the world's peace and security of the world. An international regulatory mechanism is essential to control the social media terrorism. Without raising awareness among the people against the social media terrorism, it will not possible to win in the fight. Finally, collaborate work with the social media companies, government, and general people can bring a remarkable change in the society in order to uphold the peace and security of the world.

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