

POST-CLASSICAL CRIME ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM: STRATEGIES FOR LEGITIMIZING CRIME THROUGH RELIGION

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Abstract

Social media and evolving communication technologies have precipitated changes across various aspects of life, including the transformation of criminal organizations and their illicit activities. This study examines the efforts of post-classical criminal organizations, which employ methodologies akin to terrorist groups, to legitimize their criminal actions through social media activism, utilizing religious symbols and narratives. The X platform was selected as the research domain, and the social media posts of organization members, particularly their hashtag activism, were subjected to thematic content analysis and social network analysis. Additionally, the organization's websites, television programs, and print publications were examined to gather comprehensive information. The analyses revealed that organization members attempted to create an impression of being a religious community with a sanctified leader by employing popular religious narratives and symbols. This strategy aimed to establish legitimacy in the public eye, thereby concealing their criminal activities.

Keywords: Crime, Criminal Organizations, Adnan Oktar Crime Organization, Social Media Activism, Legitimization.

Introduction

In the digital era, criminal organizations are increasingly utilizing social media as a platform for legitimacy and recruitment, employing various strategies to navigate the complexities of online visibility and public perception. The interaction between social media and crime legitimization is multifaceted. These organizations utilize digital platforms both to foster a sense of community and support among members and to mitigate the stigma associated with their activities. As evidenced by the actions of gangs and terrorist organizations that employ platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to instill fear and defend their presence in society, criminal groups frequently exploit social media for propaganda and recruitment purposes (Wanja et al., 2021).

Endorsement of criminal actions and ideologies can lead to a stronger justification of crime and terrorism, embedding these elements further into specific social contexts (Intravia, 2018; Travaglino et al., 2022; Zhang, 2023). The capacity of criminal organizations to present themselves as legitimate entities is enhanced by their strategic utilization of social media to engage with the public and frame their actions within a context that often emphasizes community support or social justice (Elteren, 2024). This approach not only facilitates recruitment but also aids in cultivating a positive public image, which is crucial for operational resilience against law enforcement efforts (Elteren, 2024; Nicola, 2022). The anonymity and reach of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enable these groups to connect with potential

recruits who may be influenced by the narratives and lifestyles presented online, particularly among youth. Research indicates that the online disinhibition effect allows individuals to express themselves more freely, leading to aggressive or revealing behaviors that facilitate recruitment (Dijkstra et al., 2013). This phenomenon has contributed to the evolution of traditional criminal activities.

In particular, organized crime groups have adapted their operational models to include digital tools for logistics and communication. These groups frequently utilize encrypted messaging applications and social media platforms to coordinate activities, share intelligence, and manage supply chains for illicit goods (Garg et al., 2011). The evolution of traditional criminal activities has naturally led to the emergence of post-classical crime organizations. A post-classical crime organization synthesizes elements of a terrorist group and an organized crime group. While classical criminal organizations typically operate based on mutual benefit among members, terrorist groups operate with political, ideological, racial, or religious motivations, and economic gain is not their primary objective (van der Hulst, 2009). Post-classical crime organizations appear to operate with religious and ideological motivation; however, in the background, the interests of members—especially leaders—remain a concealed agenda. This study examines the Adnan Oktar Group, an organized crime group in Turkey with religious motivations, exploring how post-classical crime organizations attempt to legitimize criminal activities through social media activism by invoking religious narratives. The group in Turkey presents itself as an Islamic community, but its members have been arrested for organized crime. According to court records, members collaborate with terrorist organizations and disseminate information that could be considered military espionage. The group's structure, recruitment, and income generation resemble those of terrorist organizations. Thus, the group appears to be an Islamic sect while functioning as a crime organization that operates like a terrorist group. Moreover, unlike traditional criminal groups, it extensively utilizes the internet and social media for propaganda, categorizing it as a post-classical crime organization. The significance of this study lies in its exploration of such an organization in a scope that has not been previously addressed in the literature. Through this work, insights are offered into how crime and terrorist organizations use religious narratives and social media activism to legitimize their criminal activities.

1. Data and Method

Thematic analysis has been used as the primary model in this study, with social network analysis as a supplement. Data from X (formerly Twitter) were processed using NodeXL Pro, a specialized software, transforming information into statistical data and visualizations. User

accounts on X were examined, with tweets analyzed descriptively and through social network analysis.

X provides significant advantages as a research field for organizations. Through fake or real accounts, organizations manipulate target audiences, legitimizing themselves and their actions in the public eye. As seen during the Arab Spring, these methods can even direct masses toward the organization's goals (Asongu et al., 2019).

For this study, Turkey's trending hashtags on X were monitored regularly. Hashtags opened by Adnan Oktar Group members were identified and examined. At least one daily hashtag trend in Turkey is initiated by Oktar's followers on X, with most promoting him as the Mahdi. Accounts determined to be associated with the Oktar Group were monitored, and their shares on related hashtags were analyzed both thematically and through social network analysis.

To illustrate the evolution of hashtag activism, users who participated in the trending hashtag “cubbeli tapes” over three days on X were selected as a sample. Social network graphics were created using NodeXL Pro's Fruchterman-Reingold Algorithms, and layout features were used to simplify visuals.

Some data for analysis were also obtained from court records in open sources, with key sources being the group's website, “Technical and Scientific Research Foundation” (TBAV), and their blog, “iddialaracevap.blogspot.com.” Observations were made from these manually collected data, and publications and TV programs by the group's leader, known as Harun Yahya, were reviewed.

1 Literature review

1.1 The dual nature of social media activism: empowerment and exploitation by malicious actors

Social media has empowered individuals and groups by providing a platform for expression and mobilization. Studies show that social media enhances access to information and enables collective action, empowering marginalized communities politically and socially (Hamid et al., 2016). This empowerment is particularly notable in contexts where traditional advocacy routes are limited, allowing users to organize protests, share resources, and raise awareness on critical issues. The ability to connect with like-minded individuals across geographic borders further strengthens these movements, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose (Pacheco et al., 2021).

However, the same features enabling empowerment also make social media vulnerable to exploitation. Malicious actors can manipulate public discourse by spreading misinformation, creating fake accounts, and organizing coordinated campaigns (Nwala, 2023; Nwala et al.,

2022). For example, bots can flood social media posts with misleading information, suppress legitimate voices, and distort public opinion (Lou et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). This manipulation, as seen in various political contexts where misinformation campaigns have influenced elections, can undermine the integrity of social movements (Badawy et al., 2019; Ferrara, 2017). Thus, social media platforms increasingly resemble battlegrounds for competing narratives, blurring the line between genuine activism and malicious manipulation (Bessi et al., 2016; Giglietto, 2023).

1.2 Religious manipulation in the context of crime

The exploitation of religious sentiments by criminal groups is particularly prevalent in social media, where religious symbolism and rhetoric are utilized to legitimize violence and criminal activities. Criminal organizations frequently adopt religious symbols and rhetoric to construct a narrative that frames their actions as divinely sanctioned or as part of a greater religious struggle. This strategy is evident in various contexts where groups justify violence against perceived adversaries or recruit individuals motivated by religious duty. Research indicates that many armed conflicts involve religious overtones, highlighting the role of religion in shaping motivations and justifications for violence (Basedau et al., 2015). This exploitation is particularly potent in regions where religious identity closely aligns with social and political grievances. The proliferation of social media has expanded the scope and impact of these strategies. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram allow crime groups to disseminate messages widely and rapidly, reaching audiences who may sympathize with their cause (Matthews et al., 2011). Sharing content that evokes religious sentiments can foster a sense of community and belonging among followers, strengthening their commitment to the group's objectives (Tufail et al., 2021). Additionally, social media enables the rapid dissemination of propaganda that can distort public perception and legitimize violent actions under the guise of religious obligation (Johnson et al., 2014).

1.3 The role of sacred figures in legitimization

Criminal organizations frequently employ religious symbolism and rhetoric to construct narratives that position their leaders as divinely sanctioned figures. This strategy is observed in various contexts, where leaders are portrayed as defenders of faith or advocates of a religious cause, thereby legitimizing violent actions against perceived adversaries (Corcoran et al., 2012). These narratives resonate profoundly in communities where religious identity intersects with social and political grievances, enabling these groups to cultivate a devoted following that perceives their actions as part of a larger divine mission (Asiamah, 2024). The legitimacy

conferred by religious approval can transform criminal leaders into venerated figures, obscuring the distinction between faith and criminality. Furthermore, the psychological impact of religious symbols is substantial. Research indicates that religious symbols can elicit strong emotional responses, which criminal organizations exploit to manipulate followers' motivations and legitimize violent actions (Samar, 2019; Tufail et al., 2021). This emotional attachment leads individuals to perceive their involvement in criminal activities as a form of religious expression or duty, further obscuring the distinction between belief and violence (Pahlen et al., 2018; Wright, 2016). The utilization of religious rhetoric in this manner serves not only to recruit new members but also to maintain loyalty and commitment among existing ones.

2 Findings and analysis

2.1 Social media strategies of criminal organizations

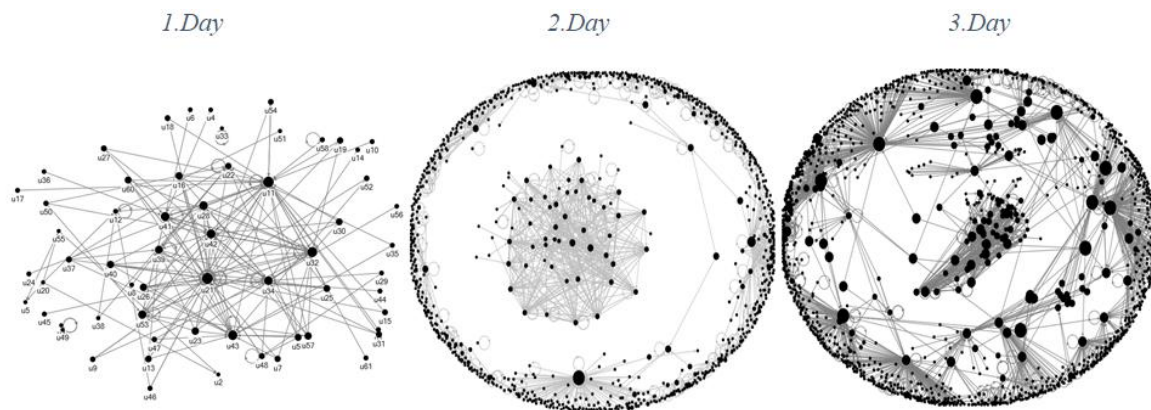
The members of the organization consistently endeavor to persuade the Turkish public on X (Twitter) through the creation of trending hashtags, asserting that Adnan Oktar is the "Savior Mahdi." Within these hashtags, they also disseminate content intended to discredit, obfuscate, and redirect public opinion regarding the police and prosecutor's allegations and evidence against the organization that is present in the court files. Upon analysis of the posts made under the hashtags by the organization's members, the following findings have been identified: A specialized group comprising 60 to 70 users, all members of the sect, has been established, and social media hashtag activism is conducted by these individuals. The profiles of these group accounts were found to be professionally constructed, presenting the appearance of authentic individuals. However, after extended observation of these accounts, it was concluded that the profiles did not correspond to real persons.

2.1.1 Hashtag campaigns

A designated group of users initially establishes a hashtag and references one another in tweets. Once the tweet count approaches approximately one thousand, the hashtags gain prominence on Twitter, thereby becoming part of the national discourse. This group initiates tweeting in the early morning hours to ensure a lower volume of tweets during this period, facilitating the trending of their posts. The designated user group comprises approximately 60 to 70 individuals. To investigate this group, data extracted from the hashtag "cübbelinin kasetleri" was analyzed, and the interconnections among the involved users were examined. The users are represented by black circles, and their connections are depicted with directional lines. An analysis of the graph from the first day of the hashtag reveals 61 users with 204 connections. On the second day, the number of users increased to 786, with connections expanding to 1440.

By the third day, the user count reached 1276, with connections totaling 2083. The first day's graph exclusively displays tweets from the organization members and their connections, while the second and third days' graphs also include other users who participated in the hashtag. However, a significant observation is the absence of connections between the organization members and the other users.

Figure 1: The progression of users and connections in tweets under the hashtag "cübbelinin kasetleri" over a 3-day period



2.1.2 Content creation and sharing

An analysis was conducted on the content generated in tweets under the specified hashtag and the individuals who disseminated them. The following observations were made: All accounts featured contemporary-appearing young adults. It was observed that approximately 90% of the user profiles were of women, many of whom also incorporated animals in their profile images. It was noted that, aside from the hashtags in which they participated, the shared content primarily comprised images of animals and nature. There was an absence of posts related to personal lives, families, surroundings, or even the national agenda. Approximately 70% of the accounts had fewer than 20 posts, with the oldest post dating back no more than one year. The accounts presented themselves as having elevated status by listing professions such as engineers, journalists, psychologists, and businesswomen in their profiles. The number of group members consistently making hashtags trend each day remained relatively constant. After participating in three or four hashtags, each user would create new accounts. These hashtags would remain in the national agenda for a minimum of one day and a maximum of four days. Although new hashtags were introduced daily on diverse topics, the content shared was nearly identical. All posts included content asserting that Adnan Oktar was arrested as part of an international conspiracy and that Oktar is the "Savior Mahdi." These contents predominantly consisted of narrated written image videos. The voiceovers lasted between 1:10 and 1:30

minutes. Similar images and text appeared in all the content shared by more than 60 users. The voiceovers for all content were performed by the same two individuals, one male and one female. The voiceovers were filtered.

2.2 Exploitation of religious and cultural sensitivities

2.2.1 Mahdi narratives

Adnan Oktar's writings and broadcast content suggest that he has made indirect claims to be the Mahdi, a figure in Islamic belief viewed as a religious redeemer. In his publications and programs, Oktar makes statements that align with various attributes of the Mahdi. Although Oktar does not explicitly claim this title, his adherents on social media platforms, particularly on X (Twitter), actively promote the notion of Oktar as the Mahdi. They engage in hashtag activism, generating new hashtags daily and consistently posting under them to maintain the visibility and prominence of this message on social media.

2.2.2 Framing of a sacred mission

Oktar's followers depict him as a "sacred savior" entrusted with a "holy mission," aiming to persuade society of his divine role. In Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi is prophesied to lead Muslims in a significant battle against the Dajjal (antichrist) and his army, with Jesus descending from the heavens to ultimately defeat the Dajjal. Analogous beliefs exist in Christianity and Judaism, where this battle is known as "Armageddon," but only the Messiah's arrival is mentioned in these religions (Fırlalı, 1981; Gün, 2020). According to the assertions of Oktar's followers, Adnan Oktar is positioned as this Mahdi figure who will receive the assistance of Jesus Christ.

2.2.3 Selective interpretation of religious

Texts An analysis of the group's social media content reveals references to verses from the Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, often citing sources to enhance their credibility. Oktar has published over 120 religious books under the pen name Harun Yahya, which are produced with high quality and precision. These books, which provide reliable sources and contain substantial arguments against evolution theory, have garnered him a following among Muslims. However, former members of the group have alleged that Oktar neither authored these books nor possessed knowledge of their content. Reviews of his appearances on religious-themed programs on his television channels demonstrate Oktar providing only superficial comments about the books, frequently deflecting questions on the details of the content.

2.3 Recruitment and financial influence

Court records reveal several key activities of the group: - Group members are provided with employment opportunities and encouraged to contribute a substantial portion of their earnings to the organization. All expenditures are controlled and approved by Oktar himself. - To deter members from departing and to target former members, the group allegedly disseminates information to intelligence agencies, characterizing these individuals as part of FETÖ (a network officially classified as a terrorist organization in Turkey). - Members are reportedly subjected to physical and psychological abuse, with female members systematically exploited sexually by Oktar. - Testimonies from former members include allegations that women with daughters under the age of 18 married their daughters to Oktar to gain influence within the organization. Court documents indicate that Oktar sexually abused young girls. The majority of the complaints leading to Oktar's arrest originated from former followers who alleged sexual exploitation, asset seizure, violence, and blackmail. Former followers also assert that Oktar targeted affluent individuals, employing religious persuasion or blackmail to seize assets and fund the organization. Additionally, the group reportedly collects and archives personal information of public figures, politicians, journalists, and civil servants, utilizing this information for blackmail to secure financial and political influence.

3 Discussion

3.1 Adaptation to digital spaces and exploitation of platform mechanics

Criminal organizations have demonstrably adapted to social media, incorporating digital transformation to facilitate illicit activities. Research indicates that social media enables recruitment by fostering a sense of belonging and identity among targeted youth (Ashton et al., 2020). Encrypted messaging and social media platforms afford real-time communication and planning, enabling these groups to operate with increased efficiency and reduced risk of detection (Whittaker et al., 2019). The unregulated nature of social media presents significant challenges, as these platforms can facilitate cybercrime and other illegal activities. Criminals utilize these platforms for various forms of digital fraud, harassment, and recruitment (Arab, 2023; Zhang, 2023). Hashtags, influential networks, and interactive features on these platforms reveal a sophisticated understanding of their functionality in the context of criminal activities. Hashtags serve as potent tools for categorizing content and enhancing visibility, and criminal groups employ them to garner support or disseminate information about illegal activities. Collaboration with social media influencers amplifies these narratives, enabling users to more readily locate and engage with this content (Dhanhani, 2018; Xue et al., 2023; Zahrah et al., 2020). Interactive features such as comments, shares, and live broadcasts further promote

engagement, fostering a sense of participation among followers and normalizing these activities (Zhang, 2023). This real-time engagement also enhances operational coordination, thereby increasing organizational efficiency (Afra et al., 2019).

3.2 Religious narratives as tools for legitimization and attributing sacred status to crime leaders

Religious narratives function as potent instruments of legitimization for groups, contextualizing their actions within a sacred framework. This approach enhances the perceived legitimacy of their activities and cultivates a sense of identity and purpose among adherents. Religious narratives possess the capacity to transform criminal acts into divine missions, thereby garnering the support of individuals who might otherwise reject such behavior. The emphasis on themes of salvation and moral purpose can resonate profoundly with those engaged in illegal activities, enabling them to rationalize their actions as components of a greater spiritual struggle (Ellis, 2020; Hallett et al., 2014). Credibility also plays a crucial role in the acceptance of these narratives. Counter-narratives from authoritative religious figures are essential in challenging extremist interpretations (Fanaqi et al., 2022). Adherents are more inclined to adopt messages that align with their beliefs, underscoring the significance of authority and authenticity in the dissemination of religious narratives. Criminal organizations may depict their leaders as divinely appointed figures, situating their actions within a broader spiritual framework. This strategy reinforces the leader's authority and fosters loyalty among followers who perceive their involvement as part of a sacred mission (Goodman, 2023; Yang, 2023). This framing can attenuate moral objections to criminal activities (Matthews et al., 2011).

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3.3 Blurring the lines between activism and crime

The phenomenon of blurring the distinction between activism and criminal activity has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary society, particularly as social media facilitates the convergence of these two domains. A significant factor in this obfuscation is social media's role in shaping perceptions and mobilizing individuals. Research indicates that social media amplifies the voices of marginalized groups, enabling them to express grievances and organize collective actions (Aminzadah, 2023). However, the same platform can be utilized by criminal organizations to frame their activities as legitimate resistance or social justice, attracting individuals disillusioned with traditional political processes (Cardelús et al., 2017). This manipulation of identity and purpose complicates the boundaries within which individuals operate, making it challenging to distinguish between activism and criminal behavior.

3.4 Economic and social impact

Criminal organizations utilize social media platforms to increase awareness and solicit financial contributions for their operations, often strategically framing their efforts to appeal to potential supporters. This approach bears similarities to traditional fundraising campaigns, with social media offering a cost-effective means to reach a broad audience. Research indicates that social media campaigns can more effectively engage specific demographics than traditional methods, thereby increasing the potential for financial contributions (Sharmila, 2024). The capacity to target specific audiences with tailored content optimizes fundraising efforts, resulting in a significant economic impact and a corresponding societal influence. Criminal organizations do not solely employ religious and cultural narratives to secure economic gains or legitimize their activities; they also exert a substantial impact on undermining legitimate religious and social institutions. When criminal organizations successfully position themselves as legitimate representatives of faith or cultural values, they can divert support from established institutions, thereby diminishing their authority and influence (Dutot et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the intersection of criminal organizations and social media activism reveals a complex landscape where traditional boundaries between legitimate activism and criminality are increasingly blurred. Criminal groups have adeptly adapted to digital tools by employing sophisticated strategies such as hashtag campaigns, influencer networks, and religious narratives to legitimize their activities and attract adherents. The dual nature of social media as both a platform for empowerment and exploitation further complicates this issue. While it provides a space for marginalized voices to be heard, it also allows criminal organizations to manipulate these narratives for their own benefit. The attribution of sacred status to crime leaders and framing their activities as divine missions can undermine legitimate religious and social institutions, creating fertile ground for recruitment and support. As criminal organizations continue to exploit the unique features of social media, it is imperative for law enforcement and policymakers to develop innovative strategies to address these evolving challenges. This may include fostering collaboration with technology companies, enhancing public awareness, and implementing targeted interventions to disrupt the narratives utilized by these groups. Understanding the complex dynamics of social media and its role in facilitating criminal economies is crucial for effectively combating organized crime in the digital age.

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