Chapter 11
Pornification of the Cyberspace During Intrastate Conflicts:
VNSAs, Recruitment Strategies, and the Changing Role of Women in the Turbulence of Violence

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the physical world around us, a deeply penetrating digital world or cyberspace began to bring about new opportunities and threats for national and international actors. The violent non-state actors (VNSAs) are not exempt from this development. Above all, the age of cyberspace changed the propaganda and recruitment strategies of the VNSAs. Armed groups acting in intrastate wars that want to recruit individuals and increase their supporters now reach people more effectively through cyberspace. Women play an important role at this point. Numerous studies explain various dimensions of the changing role of women in intrastate wars. Rather than a simplistic division of roles between men and women, some organizations began to present women as respected members rather than baits and sexual objects. By observing propaganda made by the VNSAs in cyberspace, this study shows how women are used differently to recruit new members and receive international support comparatively. In this sense, the study focuses on female fighters' role and representation in cyberspace.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid change in information and communication technologies resulted in a more interconnected global system. A profoundly penetrating cyberspace began to surround the physical world with new opportunities and threats. VNSAs also benefited from this development, especially in reaching out to target audiences.

Forum pages, social media channels, and the metaverse have made it easier for the VNSAs to reach out to people. The covid-19 pandemic has also accelerated this process. Especially during total lockdown and quarantine days, children and young people have started to spend more time on social media and computer games. In particular, online games that provide a higher degree of virtual interactions began to provide more effective interaction and recruitment opportunities for the VNSAs. The tempting presentation of violence through cyberspace attracted people's attention and encouraged VNSAs to play a more active role in this virtual field. Limited control of the state over cyberspace also led VNSAs to focus on this field.

Defined as a wide range of actors with different motives, from fundamentalists to racist militant groups, from freedom fighters to revolutionary armed opposition groups (Yeşiltaş & Kardaş, 2018, p. 33), VNSAs seek to achieve a variety of political and territorial goals. They need two critical resources to achieve these goals: material and human resources.

In order to survive, VNSAs need to recruit new members constantly. Various ways are used to encourage recruitment. Ideological motivation, provision of financial means, and social status are among the methods used to recruit new members to the organization (Faulkner & Doctor, 2021). Women are also used to attract new members. Using women as marketing tools or baits in cyberspace has become very common in recent years.

Numerous qualitative studies provide examinations of the role of women in intrastate wars. Cohen (2013) analyzed the active participation of women in the Sierra Leone civil war rather than just function as cooking, cleaning, and sexual enslaved people. MacKenzie (2009) deals with the women's role in the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process, in which women are titled as females associated with the war," "dependents," or "camp followers." On the other hand, studies by Cockburn (2001) and Wilson (2002) emphasized the role of women in war in terms of sexuality and gender, social, political, and economic aspects of the organization. They also highlight how studies used to portray a simplistic division of roles between aggressor (man) and victims (woman) and depict the characteristics of changing their roles during such circumstances. On the other hand, with the increasing sensitivity towards women's rights globally, some organizations prefer to present women as respected members rather than as baits and sexual objects.[1]

Departing from the increasing prominence of cyberspace for VNSAs in facilitating new recruitments, this study will examine how women are projected in cyberspace to attract recruits in different organizations. This study primarily deals with the female fighters of YPG, who played a foreground role in the fight against ISIS militants, and the female suiciders of the BH, who are sent into the crowd to blow themselves up. By observing propaganda made in cyberspace, this study aims to show how women are used differently to recruit new members in different organizations.

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