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Insurgent-Generated Content and Framing of "The New Internationalist Commune" of Rojava

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Of all the insurgent groups competing to win the hearts and minds of Western populations through digital media campaigns, the Rojava Commune in Northern Syria has been one of the most successful. This group has been able to portray itself as the only legitimate and credible actor in the Syrian conflict, generate support for its cause, and draw thousands of foreign fighters and transnational volunteers from the West. We have coined the term *insurgent-generated content* (IGC) to describe its elaborately produced media content, sophisticated message, and skillful use of digital media, which reduces its dependence on the mainstream media. Because this genre has not received comprehensive analytical attention, our study explores the YouTube videos of the *internationalist* volunteers in Rojava to demonstrate the semi-journalistic qualities of IGC and illustrate the public relations aspects for the insurgent group. Our frame analysis demonstrates that these insurgents utilize a securitization frame to justify the use of extraordinary measures, including violence, in their activism. Perhaps more important, the group's appeal seems congruent with broader Western sensibilities, despite its communist leanings.

Keywords: insurgent-generated content (IGC), Syrian conflict, Kurdish movement, foreign fighters, Rojava, YouTube, framing, securitization, public diplomacy

Post–Arab Spring Syria has become home to an incredible array of nonstate actors, from local militias and foreign mercenaries to battle-hardened jihadists and left-wing revolutionaries—all of whom are

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vying for attention, power, and control. The exact number of leftist transnational volunteers in the Syrian conflict is unknown, but studies indicate that *thousands* of ideologically motivated volunteers without kinship, religious affiliation, or other direct ties to the region (Hegghammer, 2010; Malet, 2015) have joined the ranks of the Kurdish militias in the Rojava region of Northern Syria (Tuck, Silverman, & Smalley, 2016). Journalistic and autobiographical accounts suggest that most volunteers finance their trips themselves and expect no material benefits in return (Schmid, 2015).[2]

While the foreign fighter phenomenon is not new in the Syrian context, the term is commonly associated with jihadi extremists (Benmelech & Klor, 2018; de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 2016; Hegghammer, 2013), and relatively little attention has been given to transnational volunteers and fighters on the other end of the political spectrum (Fritz & Young, 2020; Koch, 2019; Malet, 2020). As a result of the nearly exclusive focus on the "Islamic State" (IS/ISIS), media studies literature and theories have largely ignored how other insurgents have used digital media to draw attention to their causes, recruit sympathizers, and shape public opinion. Moreover, because the research on "anti-ISIS" volunteers has been limited to establishing their identities and motivations for the most part (Larsson, 2021; Tuck et al., 2016), scholars have not developed a comprehensive understanding of the features, strategies, and potentialities of insurgent-generated content (IGC) across the various media and political affinities.

This study aims to address this gap in the literature by explaining how insurgents with different ideologies and tactical practices manage to attract international sympathizers, including Western supporters, transnational volunteers, and even combat-ready foreign fighters. After all, over the past 100 years, far "more people have volunteered to be foreign fighters for Marx than for Mohammed" (Malet, 2020, p. 33). The "internationalists" working with the Kurdish insurgents in Rojava, Northern Syria, constitute a useful case study for this purpose, not just because of the local commune members' leftist ideologies and revolutionary aspirations, but also because of the media attention they have received in recent years and the number of foreign Western fighters and volunteers they have been able to recruit during this process.

Our study of the strategic communication of the Rojava Commune demonstrates that the media material produced by these insurgents (a) serves a semi-journalistic function, given that it is frequently the only source of information about an insurgency; (b) offers content that is shared, remixed, and generally functions like online user-generated content (UGC); and (c) fulfills a public relations role for the insurgent group. To understand this new genre better, we examine the framing in the Rojava insurgents' original English-language content on YouTube and track the elements of this IGC that convey the emergency requiring international supporters to embrace the cause in Northern Syria. We then demonstrate that securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998) explains the persuasive edge of the frames within this IGC and the strategic communication of nonstate actors in non-Western settings. Insurgents rely heavily on speech acts designed to construct an issue as an existential threat so as to justify otherwise unacceptable

[2] In this sense, these insurgents are both "volunteers," because they travel, of their own volition, to another country "without expectation of pay" (Fritz & Young, 2020, p. 450), and "foreign fighters," because they do so to join conflicts "outside their home country" despite "lacking citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions" (Hegghammer, 2010, p. 57).

responses. Accordingly, they "define a problem," "offer a moral evaluation," and "recommend a solution" (Entman, 1993, p. 52) within that securitized frame.

The enthusiasm and praise for Rojava's progressive and emancipatory character attest to the success of these frames, as does the overwhelmingly positive image Rojava has in the West (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016; Savran, 2016; Schmidinger, 2016). Western scholars and journalists often refer to Rojava as an experiment in "radical democracy" that offers a "participatory political system" (Jongerden, 2019, p. 67), minority representation, and a general tolerance for other cultures (Knapp & Jongerden, 2016; Potiker, 2019). Many draw attention to the group's efforts to foster gender equality (Toivanen & Baser, 2016) and "sustainable, ecologically aware society" (Hunt, 2109, p.12), which can serve as models for other countries in the region and across the world. However, these works rarely take a critical look at the Rojava project to see if the reality on the ground matches the Commune's claims about its successes. More often than not, scholars and laypeople alike treat the Commune's pronouncements as objective reports from the region, glossing over the problematic aspects of communal life there and ignoring the ethnic, social, and political experiments taking place on the ground (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016; Leezenberg, 2016).

In this regard, our research contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, by shifting attention to left-wing foreign fighters and transnational volunteers, we demonstrate that jihadi networks are not the only ones that recruit volunteers to join global movements and fight against both real and perceived enemies in remote countries. Second, by analyzing the primary artifacts of IGC, we illustrate the methods used by foreign fighters and their local allies to frame conflicts and strategically adapt their messages to suit the sensitivities of potential supporters. Finally, by investigating the relatively understudied case of the Rojava Revolution, we increase the overall understanding of the Syrian conflict and the actors involved in the region's geopolitical transformation. In general, Kurdish film, cinema, and audiovisual content remain underrepresented in international media studies literature (albeit with a few notable exceptions, such as Smets, 2015, and Smets & Akkaya, 2016), and we believe that an exploration of the experimental polity in Rojava can offer novel insights for new media, political communication, and strategic framing scholarship.

After providing a brief overview of Kurdish aims and demands in the region,[3] we begin our analysis with a depiction of the Rojava Commune and its revolutionary appeal. As we analyze the group's strategic messages, we introduce *insurgent-generated content* as a distinct form of communication used to increase the visibility of the insurgent group, draw attention to its cause, and recruit foreign fighters and transnational volunteers. We then describe our methodological approach for analyzing the YouTube videos of Rojavan insurgents. Drawing on specific examples, we trace the *securitized* features of the detected framing and discuss the public diplomacy function of these *frames* within the broader context of IGC in the end.

[3] Detailed descriptions can be found in the works of Gunter (2011) and Tezcür (2020).

The Rojava Commune

Also known as "West Kurdistan," or "the land where the sun sets" (Enzinna, 2015, para. 2), Rojava is a self-proclaimed "democratic confederation"[4] established in the northern sections of Syria when Assad forces withdrew from the region in 2012. Inspired by the ideas of American anarchist Murray Bookchin as interpreted by Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, the Rojava Commune was designed as an autonomous, democratic, ecologic, and antipatriarchal system meant to replace the nation-state model in the Middle East (Öcalan, 2011).

Even though Rojava emerged as a political and physical entity during the Syrian Civil War, the concept behind it has existed for years on the other side of the border, in Turkey. The commune's ideological leader, Öcalan, began his political career as the president of the Marxist/Leninist Kurdish Workers' Party (Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê [PKK]) and actively engaged in guerilla warfare against Turkey throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Öcalan's ideological conversion during the insurgency from Marxist to ethnonationalist (Yarkin, 2015) resulted in the PKK's development into a militant organization fighting for a nation-state for the Kurds. However, his subsequent capture and imprisonment on terrorism charges in 1999 created another substantial shift in his thinking, transforming him from a "Stalinist caterpillar into a libertarian butterfly" (Enzinna, 2015, para. 27). Declaring that "all borders are acts of state violence, inscribed in landscape" (as cited in Potiker, 2019, p. 80), Öcalan encouraged his supporters to create a radical democracy that combines a stateless society, gender equality, and ecological awareness. Following Turkish President Erdoğan's "democratic opening" in 2005, an umbrella organization known as the Kurdistan Communities Union tried to implement this program and put Bookchin's (1995) "libertarian municipalities" into practice in Southeastern Turkey.

When this project failed because of intra-Kurdish rivalries and changes in Erdoğan's policies (Kolokotronis, 2014), the group turned its attention to Syria. Accordingly, the Democratic Union Party organized and mobilized in the cantons of Cizire, Afrin, and Kobanê, adopting a hybrid military strategy with a proto-state structure and self-proclaimed sovereignty (Cemgil & Hoffmann, 2016). Though initially successful (Savran, 2016), the Rojava Commune project was disturbed by the rapid rise of ISIS in Syria. Fighting against a formidable and brutal enemy for their survival, Rojavans began emphasizing military operations that would halt ISIS expansion into their territory. In 2015, their security/self-defense structures, known as People's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel [YPG]) and Women's Defense Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Jin [YPJ]), won a surprising victory in Kobanê.[5] As the YPG and YPJ shattered the myth of ISIS invincibility, moral and monetary support began to pour in. Foreign fighters went to Syria to help fight ISIS, and transnational volunteers joined to build a Syrian version of the famous Paris Commune in Rojava. Soon, as "the most effective local partners" (Federici, 2015, p. 86) of the United States in Syria, the YPG and YPJ

[4] While the term *democratic confederalism* is contested, it refers to a form of stateless democracy influenced by Bookchin's (1995) "libertarian municipalism" (para. 4). Öcalan (2011) defines the goals as "the establishment of democracy in all spheres of life of Kurdish society, which is based on ecology and equality of the sexes, and struggles against all forms of reaction and backwardness" (p. 21).

[5] Unlike national militaries, YPJ is a women-only force because the group believes that women will not reach their full potential if they serve alongside men (The New International, 2018b).

began to receive Western military aid and support and formed alliances with Coalition forces fighting ISIS (Federici, 2015).[6]

Meanwhile, the YPJ and its female fighters were getting considerable media coverage in the West (Kollárová, 2016). International media outlets such as the BBC, and women's magazines such as *Marie Claire* sensationalized the "Kurdish angels of Kobane" (Smith, 2014, para. 2), juxtaposing images of armed, violent, and hypermasculine ISIS fighters with those of "beautiful Kurdish fighters" in full combat gear with flowers in their hair, looking like a "Kurdish Angelina Jolie" (Gol, 2016, para. 4; Toivanen & Baser, 2016). These YPJ fighters also stood in stark contrast to stereotypical depictions of Middle Eastern women and produced narratives of emancipation against a backdrop of political violence and the restrictive gender norms of the region (Leezenberg, 2016; Mohammadi, 2019).

While portraying women militants as agents of Westernization in the Middle East, however, Western media outlets largely ignored the historical and political context of the insurgency. They downplayed the "Kurdishness of the struggle" (Toivanen & Baser, 2016, p. 303) and almost completely overlooked the revolutionary aspirations of the YPJ fighters, producing "depoliticized" depictions (Simsek & Jongerden, 2021) and oversimplified explanations instead. When its voice was drowned out in the cacophony of the Syrian Civil War, the Rojava Commune adopted a new strategy and generated its own content (hence the term *insurgent-generated content*) to control the narrative and draw attention to its revolutionary struggle. IGC not only allowed members of the Commune to reassert their agency but also helped them resist attempts by outsiders to hijack their struggle and frame it through the lens of a "hegemonic liberal-secularism" from an Orientalist perspective (Simsek & Jongerden, 2021).

Before we analyze how the Rojavans framed the Syrian conflict, the Kurdish struggle, and the revolutionary movement through a new discursive framing strategy—*insurgent-generated content*—it is important to define this term and explain its purpose.

Insurgent-Generated Content

Digital technologies and platforms give contemporary insurgents the opportunity to set a public agenda or increase the media salience of certain issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014). It has also been demonstrated that second-level agenda-setting and framing[7] can further influence responses to a given story (e.g., Rill & Davis, 2008) and shape public opinion, impacting political behavior in some instances (e.g., Dardis, 2007). However, a communication designed to achieve a political goal of a transformation of attitude or behavior first needs to capture the attention of the target audience through the use of new frames or the reframing of existing ones (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) so that

[6] With the encouragement of the United States, both groups were later combined and renamed the Syrian Defense Forces.

[7] Several authors make strong cases that framing is a process that essentially goes well beyond agenda-setting. For instance, Weaver (2007) and Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) note that framing involves more complex, conditional, and culturally specific processes, both in the creation of the media frames and in the interpretation of those frames by target audiences.

they congruently correspond to the values held by the target audience and elicit the desired response (Entman, 2003).

This means that insurgents have to compete for attention and sympathy in the radically democratized landscape of online platforms and the proverbial digital marketplace of ideas (Harris, Rowbotham, & Stevenson, 2009; Ward, 2014). It also means that insurgents are often under enormous pressure to outbid their rivals, mobilize the support of "distant publics," and retain international media attention to sway international public opinion in their favor (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). That they must do all this while engaging in dangerous combat, supplying fighters on the ground, and soliciting funds to maintain their operations makes their jobs even more difficult.

We argue that insurgents meet these targets by creating their own content (IGC), using effective communication strategies, and harnessing the power of the Internet through the skillful exploitation of information warfare techniques. IGC helps them advance an effective strategic message that projects its power, attracts otherwise disinterested parties, and defines their obligations (Malet, 2013). While the gatekeeping practices of traditional media outlets often restrict the ability of insurgents to control the narrative, IGC helps them disseminate information, frame the conflict as they see fit, appeal directly to their audiences, and create virtual communities. In some respects, IGC resembles UGC, which is usually produced by amateurs and enthusiasts outside of professional settings (Dylko & McCluskey, 2012). However, IGC shares certain characteristics with professional/journalistic content and public relations/persuasive communication content as well, given that it provides a comprehensive narrative and a deeply ideological, but easily understandable, picture of the actors on the ground. Regardless of whether the accounts are authentic and objective, they often shape perceptions and affect the audience's political views on a subject, especially given that the decline in professional journalistic coverage of armed conflicts means that content produced by the insurgents themselves has become one of the main sources of the overall journalistic narrative (Høiby & Ottosen, 2019).

This project analyzes the ways in which IGC can be used to frame a conflict or as a persuasive appeal/public diplomacy directed at prospective fighters, volunteers, and supporters across the world. It does so by asking how the Rojava Commune defines and interprets the Syrian Conflict, morally evaluates the combatants, and proposes solutions. The next section details our employment of qualitative content analysis in exploration of this research question.

Analytical Approach

The main online "flagship" of the Rojava Commune is the Internationalist Commune (https://internationalistcommune.com/) website—which offers content in 12 world languages, from Hindi to Suomi. In conjunction with the website and other online materials, the group's channel on YouTube conveys messages about the revolutionary/Kurdish struggle and the war in Syria.

Our data for this project came from The New International YouTube channel and the 14 videos uploaded between December 2018 and June 2019 to appeal specifically to an English-speaking audience. Although the channel did not interact with viewers or consistently offer new content, it boasted more

than 2,770 subscribers and more than 148,000 views at the time of the study. As of January 10, 2022, the number of views for its individual videos varies from 39,000 for the most watched to 2,000 for the least viewed.

Our frame analysis falls under the broader spectrum of methods that were labeled *qualitative content analysis*, which bears some similarities to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory method in its early stages. In contrast to the broad and open inquiry approach of grounded theory, qualitative content analysis makes it possible to both use "the inductive and deductive approaches" (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 4) in data analysis and detect the patterns in the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). It also allowed us to interpret the video content that is inherently multilayered and complex (Hameleers, 2019) and answer a specific research question by "selecting the unit of analysis, creating categories, and establishing themes" (Cho & Lee, 2014, p. 10).

To understand how the Rojavan IGC frames "interpret the world out there" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21), we viewed the entire body of video content and designated each segment that began and ended with the song "Bella Ciao" as a meaningful finite unit of analysis that "naturally" occurs in the analyzed content. In this stage, we also took notes of frequently occurring or noteworthy concepts and references in the content. Then, we deductively applied the frame elements scaffold by relying on Entman's (1993) definition of framing and applying Matthes and Kohring's (2008) methodological approach, both of which include "a problem definition, a causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). To complete the frame element coding, we rewatched the videos and read the transcripts that were created by four undergraduate student research assistants.[8] We also revisited our notes to outline the "theoretically meaningful relationships between categories" (Hameleers, 2019, p. 812). To increase the reliability and validity of the data analysis process, we relied on "representative quotations" (see Table 1) and "peer debriefing" (Cho & Lee, 2014), and we consulted our undergraduate research assistants. Because they were unaware of the theoretical underpinnings of the study, this practice allowed us to check our findings against different perspectives and ensure the integrity of the process.

Because YouTube is the primary venue for the consumption of this material, our identification of the key concepts while watching the videos meant that we were able to consider the critical visual elements that reinforced the key verbal messages and increase the ecological validity of our analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Our research assistants recorded instances when certain types of audiovisual elements (e.g., a flag or an insignia) were present. Thanks to their notes and transcripts themselves, we were able to keep track of mentions of specific words and phrases, and establish the dominance of certain framing tendencies. This approach allowed us to triangulate the findings through a multilayered process and reduce bias, while meaningfully employing a critical qualitative approach.

[8] Because the removal of information (initiated by either individuals or the platforms themselves) is common (and, in fact, Episode 5 seems to have been removed from the platform since our analysis), we asked our students to transcribe the content. The accents and frequent use of Kurdish words made automatic transcription processes unreliable, so human transcription was necessary.

Insurgent-Generated Videos of Rojava on YouTube: A General Description

All New International videos begin with an intro showing photos of famous revolutionaries alongside images of Rojava fighters, while the antifascist Italian partisan song "Bella Ciao" plays in the background. Each episode comes with a video description, which summarizes the production information and gives a preview the particular foreign fighter/transnational volunteer interviewed in the episode:

> The New International is a biweekly, bilingual show broadcast on Kurdistan's Stêrk TV. Each episode follows a day in the life of an internationalist revolutionary who has travelled to Rojava, Northern Syria, to work in solidarity with the democratic-confederalist, women-led revolution. Our fifteenth episode follows the life of Heval Agit, who's leading military education at the YPG academy. (The New International, 2019f)

The videos are in English, reflecting the group's desire to communicate with a broad audience, but they also have Kurdish (Kurmanji) subtitles to connect the Commune to local viewers. Each episode runs for approximately 40 minutes and features an *insurgent-journalist* interviewing the internationalists on the site. The interviewer, Rojhat Baran, a fair-skinned man in his mid-20s, has a European appearance and a British accent. Although he wears civilian clothing, both the tone of the interviews and the information he provides suggest that Rojhat is an insider and actively participates in the creation of insurgent-specific content.

Overall, the videos employ documentary filmmaking practices, blending edited interviews with a combination of action and B-roll footage depicting everyday life in the Commune. This documentary format offers an "authentic" experience to the viewer (Ramsay & Holbrook, 2015)—almost as if Rojhat's interview or the presence of the cameraperson do not alter the ongoing activities in Rojava. This format clearly goes against the tendency of mainstream media to glamorize and sensationalize the insurgents (Nacos, 2005); even though Rojhat gives the viewer an intimate glimpse into the daily lives of the Rojavan female fighters, the camera shows them doing mundane things—without drawing attention to their figures, hairstyles, outfits, or overall look (Figure 1). In fact, these episodic stories seem to be designed to encourage the viewer to sympathize with the interviewee's experience and with the revolutionary cause in general.

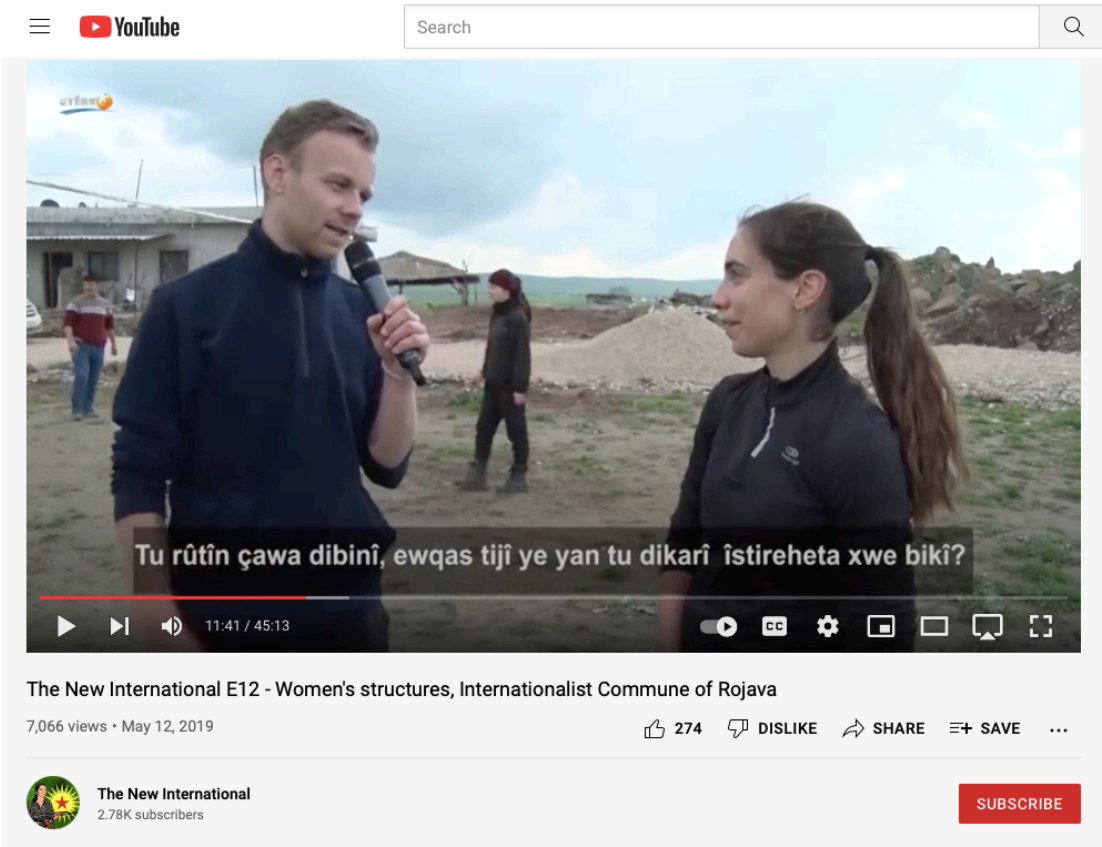

Figure 1. The screenshot of Rojhat Baran interviewing Heval Zelal, a French revolutionary, in Jinwar (women's village) as a ball game takes place in the background (The New International, 2019c, 11:41).

The production quality is not immaculate, but clear attempts have been made to make it appear professional. For example, the camera framing and the use of equipment such as microphones and multiple cameras suggest some familiarity with video content production (Figure 2). The videos are not designed to resemble the homemade or vlog-style videos produced by ISIS fighters (Atwan, 2015); however, some elements of amateurism are present, including poorly captured footage and low-quality editing of frame transitions (Smets & Akkaya, 2016). There is no mention, by the interviewer himself or in the information on YouTube, of the production team or its level of professionalism, so it is not clear how these different levels of filmmaking come together or whether this mixture of styles and levels of quality is intentional.

Figure 2. Rojhat Baran introduces the new episode in front of a poster that features Öcalan and the "martyrs" who "defended Rojava against ISIS and Turkish fascism" (The New International, 2019f, 1:03). Both the Kurdish flag colors and the communist red star are clearly visible.

The interviews in the videos generally start with introductions in Kurdish, after which Rojhat and the interviewee switch to English and discuss the reasons that the latter joined the commune. At this stage, interviewees talk extensively about their personal grievances and revolutionary aspirations, and they often criticize the failure of their own countries to create egalitarian structures and serve the interests of the people. The general tone of these conversations tends toward idealism, resilience, and a determination to succeed against the odds. Both Rojhat and interviewees emphasize the transnational solidarity of the internationalist commune and local Kurdish populations, and their discourse targets communists, anarchists, and other leftists from the West, offering them a step-by-step guide to revolution.

After each approximately five-minute interview segment, the audience gets an additional glimpse into the everyday routines of the fighters and volunteers. As the antifascist Italian song "Bella Ciao" (Silverman, 2008) plays in the background, a series of master scenes shows commune members drinking tea, practicing yoga, playing chess, and learning Kurdish, all of which contribute to the aforementioned

"continuous real-life" format (Vergani & Zuev, 2011, p. 215) and create a sense of authenticity, rather than choreographed performance.

The visuals in the videos also demonstrate the commune's Marxist roots and its leftist aspirations (Figure 3). To the untrained eye, they may be hard to spot, but ideological cues are present in popular symbols of communism (such as the red star) and local/national references to the Kurdish irredentism (such as the colors of the Kurdish flag). Even when the focus is on the interviewees themselves, cameras occasionally zoom in on the posters of fallen soldiers that adorn the walls of most of the interview spaces. Such images seamlessly transform photos of Kurdish leader Öcalan into broader communist symbols, illustrating the commune's multilevel messaging strategy.

Figure 3. The camera zooms in to a framed picture that commemorates the Şehîds (martyrs) of the MKLP- Marxist-Leninist Communist Party (The New International, 2019d, 46:44).

Frame Analysis Findings

While each episode features a different insurgent, the general frame across all the narratives makes three main claims: (1) unlike its rivals in the region, the Rojava Commune consists of secular and modern political actors who are respectful of women's rights, (2) their resistance is morally justified as a struggle against Islamism and fascism in the Middle East, and (3) it has the capacity and skill to resist and challenge not only terrorists, but also the Turkish Army on the battlefield. Securitization, in other words, emerges as an *overarching theme* in the discourse.[9]

Securitized Framing

In this context, *securitized framing* refers to a specific type of persuasive communication that aims to convince people in distant parts of the world to spend time, money, and energy to support or join a group of insurgents with whom they share neither history nor culture (Hegghammer, 2013). By moving an issue outside the realm of ordinary politics, securitized frames construct it as an existential threat to gain support for responses that would otherwise be considered unacceptable (Buzan et al., 1998; Vultee, 2010). In this regard, securitization "operates as a distinct master frame" (Watson, 2012, p. 280), encapsulating the antagonistic discourse around a referent object or reframing a local conflict as a global concern by securitizing the issue at hand. This approach fits quite nicely into Entman's (1993) understanding of framing as "selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52) to elicit a response in the target audience.

In other words, IGC makes it possible for The New International to "politicize the issue" by establishing Rojava as an institution that operates "beyond the established rules of the game" and by framing "the issue as a special kind of politics or as above politics" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 23). It then clearly distinguishes between friends and enemies, and encourages *friends* to take action against *enemies* because normal courses of political action cannot effectively deal with the *existential threat* they face. That the Turkish state already views the Kurdish movement and Rojava through the lens of national security reinforces that frame; Turkey neatly replaces ISIS as the internationalists' archenemy after the Turkish incursion into Syria and Operation Olive Branch of 2018 (Yeşiltaş, 2018).

Table 1 presents a descriptive overview of the security frame elements employed by the Rojava Commune members, and the following section illustrates these points with quotes from the interviews, element by element.

[9] We thank our anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.

Table 1. Frame Elements.

Problem Definition	Causes Attribution	Moral Evaluation	Solution
"*Ce cœur qui haïssait la guerre,* the poem written by this guy who in the end fell *sehid* in a concentration camp in the Second World War . . . we continue this work as internationalists, like, to fight fascism everywhere, everywhere we can, as the Kurdish people are doing it here with the blood of their sehids . . . I see the struggle here and so it means that we are not too far away from each other." (*Heval Zelal, France*; The New International, 2019c, 43:05)	"I already had a notion that capitalism was messing things up, but then I started to connect the dots, and it really just made me uncomfortable, seeing how people were living lavishly in America and buying new things all the time. . . . That just doesn't sit right with me." (*Heval Azad, USA*; The New International, 2018a, 08:11)	"Especially for me, as a German, with the history of my society, I want to stop this—let's say this circle, devil's circle [vicious cycle], this circle of madness. I don't want to see any more people for nothing in prison people for their origin imprisoned. I don't want to see genocides I don't want to see that the same class is winning and winning and winning again and again." (*Heval Agit, Germany*; The New International, 2019f, 11:59)	
"The main point that every international must be, must have it clear is that the liberation of Kurdistan, the liberation of Rojava, of the Middle East, it is also our liberation. And to feel it also as yours. If you don't feel it as yours, you cannot do a lot of stuff. So, this is really important." (*Heval Welat, Argentina*; The New International, 2019e, 06:38)	"I think the bigger terrorists at the moment is the Turkish regime: they come with jets which blow people in pieces. Now, what they do in Bakur [Kurdish name for the southeast Turkey] is even worst, so when they [the Americans] want to fight terrorists they should fight more against the Turkish State." (*Heval Elefteriya, Germany*;	"[Seeing the houses ISIS kept women captive] was not a comfortable feeling but at the same time, it definitely hardens your resolve to continue fighting against them. Yeah, that was one of the reasons that brought me here in the first place was knowing the kinds of things that ISIS was doing. And then to sort of see evidence of it, they really yeah just	"I primarily came here to learn . . . what kind of strengths had this new society that was being built for the last couple of years, and at the same time defending each other and themselves from the attacks of Daesh and Turkey. . . . So I wanted to learn from this approach: how is this possible, with what kind of approach [is this] towards life?" (*Heval Nûjîn, Germany*; The

	The New International, 2019a, 35:16)	strengthened my resolve." (*Heval Nubar, Canada*; The New International, 2019b, 13:11)	New International, 2018b, 06:31)

Definition of Problem and Attribution of Causes

According to The New International videos, the key problem is the right-wing (fascist and fundamentalist) forces that oppress left-wing and progressive movements, on the one hand, and the ethnic Kurdish peoples of the Middle East, on the other. The definition of the problem as such outlines certain layers of meaning, connections, and causal schemes, which in turn invite a particular set of moral evaluations and preferred responses (Entman, 1993, 2003).

Whereas the group's ideology and organizational plans acknowledge the complex reality on the ground, the videos rely on previously established black-and-white narratives of sacrifice and victimhood, and use words and phrases that clearly delineate friend and foe. The Rojavans explicitly link themselves to other leftist organizations across the globe and associate their actions with the broader struggle against fundamentalism and fascism, connecting ISIS and global terrorism with Turkey and Turkey's incursion into Northern Syria. In this narrative, ISIS becomes the "oppressor," and it, together with its alleged ally Turkey (the "fascist state"), constitutes the enemy—an existential threat to the community (Buzan et al., 1998; The New International, 2018a, 26:50; Watson, 2012). The Rojava Commune emerges not only as a victim of the unjust policies of these powerful enemies but also as a legitimate actor (perhaps the only legitimate actor) representing the interests of both the local population and the global (transnational) community and working toward stability and peace in the region. Interestingly, this frame makes no reference to Assad's Syrian regime or to other factions of the Syrian opposition as enemies or allies in this conflict.

As mentioned earlier, The New International's messages and visual cues rest on an important overarching securitization frame, which posits the need to take extraordinary action to restore order and foster the implementation of progressive ideas, such as feminism and environmentalism, in the region. By outlining this web of connections, the insurgents' content frames the immediate security danger looming over the Rojava community not as the idiosyncratic plight of a particular group of people in a particular place, but as the symptom of broader (even global) security concerns. The menace is presented as complex and multidimensional: Fundamentalism, fascism, crony capitalism, patriarchy, and environmental degradation merge to create an entire edifice of existential threats. The current referent object of securitization is Rojava—and its immediate existence is in danger. Because the implications are presented as significantly more widespread, it follows that a global revolution is a correct and appropriate response.

Moral Evaluations

The discourse of the insurgents is inherently selective, focusing on issues that serve their purposes and ignoring the ones that do not, and "necessarily normative," following a strategy that "builds a specific understanding of the past" and "a particular set of preferences for the future" (Baele, 2019, p. 710). Against the backdrop of the complex local and global struggles so fundamental to The New International's frame, the narrative strategy depends on a carefully constructed Manichean scaffold that portrays the conflict as a struggle between good and evil.

With references to antifascism, the group portrays its fight against ISIS and the Turkish Army as the ultimate struggle. According to this narrative, the innocent, brave, and noble Kurds, presented as a monolithic group, eradicate the ISIS threat and stand up to the "fascist" Turkish state and its "barbaric" Islamist allies in the region. The only true help that they receive is from transnational volunteers and the fighters of the Rojava Commune, who merit respect as the true heroes in the narrative. In contrast, the "brutal dictator" Erdoğan, who rules over Turkish forces, and his alleged Islamist allies in Syria deserve the audience's condemnation and the group's vengeance. In this sense, the narrative justifies the violent tactics of the Rojava Commune as self-defense against a powerful and immoral enemy.

This Manichean approach helps the Rojavans frame their struggle as a moral one that "impact[s] outsiders and requires intervention by individuals because state regimes will not act" (Malet, 2013, p. 18). The target audience is expected not only to accept the threat construction, but also to see the conflict as a contest over "universal values, rather than local power arrangements" (Malet, 2013, p. 18), and, at the very least, proactively demand that their governments take punitive actions against Turkey.

The group appeals to its audience's "global consciousness" (Olesen, 2004) and deliberately mimics the International Brigades of the Spanish Civil War. This approach is designed to confer legitimacy on its efforts and persuade the international community that its coalition of communists, anarchists, and democrats is fighting the fascists like their predecessors did in Spain almost a century ago. Within that framework, President Erdoğan fits the role of Franco, with "blood on his hands," and the Turkish state replaces the existential threat once posed by the ISIS (The New International, 2018a, 26:30). This allows the group to co-opt the symbolism of earlier antifascist struggles and use song "Bella Ciao" (Silverman, 2008), as well as photographs of Argentinian-Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, in its strategic communication.

In contrast to the violence associated with ISIS videos (Melki & Jabado, 2016), The New International videos show only the "training" and "planning" segments of potentially violent acts. Filled with diagrams and technical details, the videos imply that violence is only a last resort for this leftist insurgency. Instead of presenting images of violence, the videos paint a romantic picture of comradery, reinforced by footage showing communal activities and posters of fallen soldiers (*Şehîds*), as well as praising minor but nonetheless heroic acts, such as growing organic foods or feeding stray dogs. In this highly idealized representation, commune members are shown as a tightly knit group of people who are united by their revolutionary fervor and who participate in activities that strengthen communal bonds. Such a narrative rests on firmly established understandings of right and wrong, and presents an idyllic collectivistic utopia

with pronounced stripes of a "heroic" armed opposition and "oppressive" and ultimately "evil" enemies. At the same time, however, it appeals to the same essentialist notions and dominant "mono-cultural mode of thought" (Simsek & Jorgerden, 2018, p. 7) that the group criticizes, decontextualizes the Rojava movement, and profoundly oversimplifies the actors involved in the Syrian Conflict.

The insurgents are aware that traveling to the self-proclaimed democratic confederation of Rojava and joining an armed struggle against a sovereign state could be perceived as an ethically problematic proposition, so they highlight the broader ethical goals that have motivated people to take part in this struggle. Their focus on democratization, women's rights, and environmentally friendly practices mirrors frequently securitized values in Western societies. More important, this set of values extends beyond national boundaries and citizenship. Using this frame, the internationalists' militant activism is not merely excusable, but potentially even morally superior—a "just war" that should be fought wherever and whenever the threat materializes. This just war constitutes a response to the appeal of "just securitization" (Floyd, 2011), which is also an element in the insurgents' discourse.

Proposed Solution/Remedy

The previously outlined frame elements clearly foreshadow the remedy. The group skillfully creates a "moral shock" (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995) that helps it mobilize internationalist activists and recruit new members, and then encourages them to do something, or anything, to stop the atrocities. Within the employed frame, the absolute evil—the "fascists" and fundamentalist terrorists—can only be stopped by force (military defeat) and by massive opposition (global revolution).

Although the concept of "revolution" is promoted both verbally and visually in The New International videos, no reference is made to either a systematic overhaul, or destruction of the capitalist system and the existing world order. It is not clear if this is because the Rojava Commune does not embrace this specific element of the Marxist-Leninist framework, or because the videos strategically exclude it from the main narrative for fear of alienating the Western audience. Instead, the videos use the revolutionary theme to portray Rojava as the cornerstone of a utopian future, consisting of a stateless society, direct democracy, and an eco-friendly participatory economy. Both "*Jin-Jîyan-Azadî*" (Women, Life, Freedom) and "Make Rojava green again!" emerge as prominent slogans, which are reinforced by video segments showing foreign female fighters and volunteers planting trees and creating organic farms all over Rojava (The New International, 2018b). All this conveys the message that the Rojava Commune shares many of the values and beliefs of its Western audiences.

It is important to note that the solution clearly underscores the necessity of embracing the Kurdish irredentists' nationalist project, which the commune upholds, among other honored values. Instead of negotiating, or resolving, the potential contradiction between nationalism and leftist internationalism, however, The New International ignores the ideological dissonance altogether and repeatedly makes assertions promoting both. For foreign fighters and transnational volunteers in Rojava, the immediate existential threat of violence on the ground is obvious. This *threat* to the territory of Rojava and the *universal values* it stands for is great enough to require extraordinary measures such as leaving one's homeland and fighting in a distant country to protect the political community, regardless of who is in this community.

By broadcasting their ability to rule over these previously hard-to-govern regions of Syria and highlighting their public works projects, The New Internationalists promote their political authority to justify their control of territory. *Jinwar* (women's village) volunteers showcase the progress allegedly brought to Northern Syria by the commune's implementation of democratic confederalist ideas. In a significant percentage of the videos, the extensive footage of meetings with Western members of the Rojava Commune, who also voice satisfaction with the system and their concern over the return of ISIS or Turkish troops, illustrates these democratic confederalist ideas. Interviews with local residents who also praise the stability and safety the group has brought to their villages demonstrate the success of the insurgents' outreach campaigns. Even the stray dogs that make guest appearances during the interviews seem happy and content, completing the feel-good depiction of the commune.

Discussion

The case of The New International demonstrates both the importance and the potential of the newly emerging genre of insurgent-generated content. IGC not only fills the void left by the decline in professional journalistic coverage, but also "illuminates the inner nature of the war itself" (Vlahos, as cited in Betz, 2008, p. 514) and influences the perceptions of multiple key stakeholders.

Our analysis demonstrates that the Rojavan insurgents frame their appeal in accordance with broader Western sensibilities, including women's emancipation and environmentalism. They rely heavily on securitized frames (Buzan et al., 1998; Vultee, 2010; Watson, 2012) that depict the groups they are fighting as existential threats to the Rojava Revolution and the territory the commune controls. Rather than simply focusing on the threats and referent objects, however, these depictions incorporate all four of Entman's (1993) frame elements: *problem-definitions*, *problem-causes*, *moral evaluation*, and *solution* (Matthes & Kohring, 2008). In fact, the videos analyzed here collectively depict a type of securitized master frame complex in which several *problems*, arising out of interlinked *causes*, are consistently presented as rather simplistic right-or-wrong *moral evaluations*. Despite this simplicity, Rojava, as a referent object, comes to represent more than a battlefield in the Syrian Civil War: It embodies a cluster of leftist values. The physical destruction of Rojava is equated with a complex oppressor's broader ideological victory: hegemonic state structure over democratic confederalism, patriarchy over gender equality, fascism over internationalist participatory democracy, Turkish state over marginalized Kurdish ethnos, and so on. A Manichean glue ties the various arguments into one neat bundle and proposes an overarching solution: *revolution*. This *solution* calls for the use of various ordinary and extraordinary measures for the protection of the threatened values. This is a persuasive securitized appeal to an audience that has the freedom to listen, sympathize, and even join in and take up weapons to fight for the cause—or, alternately, do nothing but browse social media and get exposed to other glossy PR appeals.

This type of securitized argument differs from the tactics employed by the other key nonstate actor in the region—ISIS (Melki & Jabado, 2016). ISIS tends to prey on lonely teenagers (Ben-Israel, 2018) and disenchanted religious believers (Monaci, 2017) who are ready to resort to an apocalyptic war to put an end to the *decadent world*. The Rojava Commune, on the other hand, depends on a "coalition of the willing"—fighters and volunteers who would be willing to support the revolutionary effort, and even come to Rojava and join in the fight. In other words, The New Internationalist videos target ideologically motivated *hevals*

(comrades) and aim to recruit combat-ready adults from the West who are prepared to help build the envisioned brave new world. As such, the Rojavan IGC employs frames that are culturally congruent with positions embraced in the West and engages in a type of PR—specifically public diplomacy (Entman, 2008)—to raise its visibility and create a positive image.

The use of public diplomacy as a strategic tool represents perhaps the most theoretically important difference between the IGC of ISIS and that of the Rojava internationalists. While ISIS offers Arabic and English versions of its materials and features various types of messages for different audiences (Abdelzaher & Essam, 2019; Winkler, ElDamanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2019), the cluster of ideas in this discourse does not align with the mainstream value system of the West or with that of international community in general (Mahood & Rane, 2017). Furthermore, ISIS is rather clear about instigating and encouraging violence on a global level. In contrast, the pro–radical democracy, pro–women's rights, and pro-environment leftists of Rojava portray themselves as the champions of a liberal/secular order in the Middle East and offer a modern utopia as an alternative to the global society. As such, the Rojava Commune operates on the opposite end of the political spectrum, emphasizes values that are far more acceptable to a Western audience, and appeals to insurgents and mainstream viewers alike. Perhaps more important, while the Rojava narrative appears to be more moderate, it also comes with a degree of ambivalence: Insurgents are trying to increase the visibility of the commune and improve international perceptions of Rojava—the typical approach of international public diplomacy—but nonetheless, the flavor of militancy is omnipresent (Melki & Jabado, 2016).

While the online propaganda and mobilization techniques of Islamist militants have been scrutinized and discussed at length in the literature, similar efforts by left-wing groups to target Western populations and recruit volunteers to their causes do not seem to have attracted much attention. When scholars in the past tried to understand the radicalization process and sought ways to reverse it, they mostly focused on the "demand" side of this transaction. They largely ignored the "supply" side (Malet, 2013) that deals with the question of exactly how anti-ISIS groups present themselves to their supporters and what kind of frames they use in that process. Our findings, on the other hand, indicate that it is imperative to understand the supply side as well, and study ideologically different movements to assess the full spectrum of IGC features and capacities more holistically. This type of research must be applied to other contemporary separatist insurgencies, such as the self-proclaimed People's Republics in Donbass and Nagorno-Karabakh, to determine the degree to which the findings of this study reflect the general phenomenon of IGC as a tool of public diplomacy to deploy messages of securitization.

It must also be noted that the actual contributions of The New Internationalists to the global struggle and to the Kurdish cause are difficult to determine at this point. We do not know, for instance, whether and to what extent their audience formed (or changed) its opinions based on the securitized videos and how many people traveled to Syria and joined The New International as a result of their consumption of this content. Because this type of decision involves many *push* and *pull* factors, measuring the impact of the information disseminated by the Rojava Commune is difficult, if not impossible. However, preliminary analysis of the YouTube comments and our focus group discussion with the undergraduate research assistants suggest that the videos successfully achieve their goal of introducing the Rojava Commune to the Western audience and gaining its sympathy. In fact, several users in the comments section of almost every

video contemplate their own roles in the revolution and ask for specific directions on how to join the struggle. Future research should study this phenomenon and establish "the effects that securitizing discourse has on the targeted audience" (Watson, 2012, p. 298). The group's multilayered message and the adaptability of revolutionary ideas to local contexts indicate that such messages are here to stay and that "it is worth paying attention to this unfamiliar potential threat" (Koch, 2019, p. 18).

Furthermore, even though our examination of the audiovisual content primarily focused on verbal aspects of framing, further analyses of visual, aesthetic, and audio elements may yield a more in-depth understanding of the Rojava Commune's IGC. To illustrate, leftist/nonreligious martyrdom is a prominently occurring theme among the foreign fighters and transnational volunteers of Rojava, but our analytical framework does not allow us to fully address this complex and extremely interesting phenomenon. Because relatively little is known about nonjihadist foreign fighters, further research into the local and global factors that successfully mobilize communist volunteers is also necessary to illuminate the transnational alliances and movements in play.

Conclusion

This analysis has illustrated several important points that contribute to theoretical conversations at the intersection of contemporary studies on political communication and international relations. By examining the four frame elements (Entman, 1993; Matthes & Kohring, 2008) and the securitized framing as a strategic communication tool (Vultee, 2010; Watson, 2012), we have demonstrated how the commune members portray their movement as a revolution and a battle against an existential threat, weaving together radical leftist ideas with the ethnonationalist, irredentist goals of the Kurds in the region.

The extensive focus on ISIS's media has skewed the overall perception of IGC in the Middle East. For this reason, public discussions of the issue of militants on the Internet have been overwhelmingly centered on victimization narratives (Kollárová, 2016) and the potential responses frequently championed include regulation, censorship, and punishment (Ben-Israel, 2018; Shaban, 2020). The presence of ideologically and tactically diverse insurgencies, such as the one in Rojava, and the findings in our analysis illustrate that militants and their IGC represent a pluriform phenomenon. ISIS is, in many ways, more of a peculiarity than a representative type of IGC. Specifically, the ISIS-type lure is not culturally congruent with most international public sensibilities, and securitized appeals like those of the Rojavan leftists are likely to resonate more broadly. Thus, empirical, analytical, and normative works should encompass the broader complexities of the IGC phenomenon, particularly as the descriptions and theories contribute to the formation of overarching conclusions and important policy recommendations.

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