



Information Warfare Watch No. 26

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TIKTOK SHAPES THE DEBATE OVER ISRAEL AND HAMAS...

Is China's most popular – and notorious – social media app driving discourse about the Israel-Hamas war? Since the atrocities carried out by the Palestinian terrorist group against Israeli civilians on October 7th, and the subsequent start of large-scale Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip, the platform has been awash with content regarding the conflict. That content, however, has been overwhelmingly one-sided, with pro-Palestinian videos, text, and narratives significantly eclipsing pro-Israel ones. This has led to charges that the TikTok algorithm is amplifying the former over the latter, with a number of leading politicians and officials accusing the platform of aiding the dissemination of "pro-Hamas propaganda." It's a charge that TikTok denies. According to TikTok officials, its algorithm is not skewed. Rather, the app's core user base – overwhelmingly young, media-savvy, and more often than not politically liberal – is simply "pro-Palestine." (*Washington Post*, November 2, 2023; *Axios*, November 16, 2023; *Doha News*, November 20, 2023)

...AND SPREADS AL-QAEDA'S CREED...

Likewise against the backdrop of Israel's conflict with Hamas, young social media users have unexpectedly rediscovered a notorious Islamist manifesto. In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States, Al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden issued a "Letter to America" laying out his reasons for waging *jihad* against the United States and other Western societies. The "Letter" has been freely available for years, with London's *Guardian* newspaper hosting a copy on its website, but in recent days it has garnered massive new attention, with a deluge of TikTok users posting videos commenting on the letter – and urging others to read it. The platform has since moved to limit the topic, removing the hashtag "#lettertoamerica," but not before the videos became wildly popular, garnering millions of views and "likes." (*Rolling Stone*, November 15, 2023)

...GARNERING NEW SCRUTINY IN THE U.S.

All of the above has reignited worries within the Washington Beltway about the national security threat posed by the wildly influential social messaging app. "While Congress stopped short of enacting legislation last spring, it's time lawmakers recognized the existential risk TikTok poses to U.S. security interests and take action accordingly," Jacob Helberg, who serves on the Congressionally-appointed U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission, recently wrote in *The National Interest*. "At no point in U.S. history has a foreign entity owned such an unprecedented platform for the mass dissemination of potent personalized propaganda and the mass collection of private American user data. TikTok has all the hallmarks of the most extensive intelligence operation a foreign power has ever conducted against the United States."

"No matter the topic, TikTok is invariably skewed against American security interests, consistently mirroring CCP talking points while promoting self-destructive behaviors among America's youth," Helberg continues. "Far from being a 'public square' that promotes free speech, TikTok is more analogous to a 'megaphone for the CCP.'"

The remedy Helberg advocates is growing attention – and regulation. As the China Commission's most recent annual report to Congress, issued earlier this month, lays out, the U.S. government needs to "urgently consider legislative restrictions on Chinese social media companies." (*The National Interest*, November 20, 2023)

SILENCING TIKTOK IN NEPAL

Nor is the United States the only country worried about TikTok. A growing number of nations have imposed limitations on the use of the platform within their borders. Nepal is the most recent one to do so, citing concerns that TikTok was "disrupting social harmony" within the South Asian state. The ban, announced following a recent Cabinet meeting, is being supported by Foreign Minister Narayan Prakash Saud, who has emphasized the need to regulate the platform in order to combat the spread of indecent content. (Associated Press, November 13, 2023)