

Workshop Review: “Digital Media, Islam, and Politics in the Middle East”, University of Basel, September 28-29, 2018

On September 28-29, 2018 the Middle Eastern Studies Department of the University of Basel (Switzerland) held its 6th Annual Doctoral Workshop in Late- and Post-Ottoman Studies. Entitled ‘Digital Media, Islam, and Politics in the Middle East’, the workshop was structured around four thematic sessions: (1) radical Islamist groups and their online communication strategies, (2) digital surveillance and censorship in the Middle East, (3) organised diversions, fake news, and ‘trolls’, and (4) online radicalization. The workshop was directed by Assistant Professor Akin Ünver from Kadir Has University in Istanbul. Prof. Ünver is currently a Robert Bosch Foundation Visiting Fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute. He is an expert on cyber surveillance in democratic and undemocratic regimes, and has been conducting research on radicalization and mobilization through geospatial and geopolitical tools.

The workshop gathered advanced PhD students from Switzerland, Germany, and other countries. It provided them with a unique opportunity to discuss emerging topics and methodologies in history and political science. In particular, the workshop focused on the latest trends in academic research on information and online technologies as tools for social mobilization. Under the supervision of Prof. Ünver, participants talked about the role of social media as tools used by radical Islamist groups in the Middle East and around the world, as well as specifically about issues having to do with online radicalization of youth from western countries. At the same time, the workshop analysed the role of new technologies as means for social mobilization and counter-mobilization in the Middle East during the Arab Spring, but also in its aftermath in countries such as Egypt and Turkey.

With regard to these various topics, Prof. Ünver presented two of his current research projects, giving examples of what political science research using data from social media may look like. The first project was thus an analysis of how information circulated in Istanbul during the attempted *coup d'état* in July 2016. Prof. Ünver’s research notably mapped the diffusion of calls for prayer and recollection by mosques in Istanbul during the coup, and how these may have had an impact on mobilization or its absence during the events.

A second research project presented by Prof. Ünver had to do with the mapping of messages on social media posted by fighters from armed groups and formations in Syria and Ukraine. The research provided several interesting preliminary findings with regard to how fighters understood the use of social media. For instance, the research argued that, depending on how they perceived the strength of their position, fighters in Syria would be more or less willing to geolocalize themselves. In fact, it was perceived among armed groups that if a fighter did not geolocalize himself when posting on social media that meant that he was unsure with regard to his group’s strength. This in turn meant that even weak armed groups would paradoxically tend to geolocalize themselves in fear that they could invite an attack if they don't. At the same time, the research pointed to the fact that fighters who were on the verge of engaging in a confrontation would tend to immediately post their locations on social media so as that they could be found after the battle.

The workshop proved an interesting experience. For many participants, including this author, it was a unique occasion to discuss collectively and then in separate meetings with prof Ünver how their own research could benefit from the new methods available to gather information from social media such as Twitter and Facebook. Part of the discussions thus centred on the technical ways that could be used to extract useful data from social media when conducting research on such topics as political mobilization, radical Islamist armed groups' networks, as well as internet regulations in undemocratic regimes.

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