

# Turkey-Pakistan: Secret Army of Mercenary Journalists

## *A Strategic Report*

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In a shocking expose, Turkish sources have disclosed about creation of a propaganda team by Turkey and Pakistan through mutual collaboration.

The sources revealed that in the new paradigm, prominent Turkish state news outlets have shifted from recruiting Western journalists and to hire Pakistani and Indian Kashmiri journalists in large numbers. The source suggested that the recruitments are so rapid that around one-fourth of top and middle-range posts in TRT World have been occupied by journalists from the Indian sub-continent.

It was found that Turkish intelligence agency MIT was aggressively working with Pakistani agency ISI to build up a new propaganda network with TRT World and Anadolu Agency as the focal points. The work has kept intensifying with the passage of time.

We verified the facts with other sources to confirm these facts presented to us. Conclusively, after cross checking and investigating for two months, we are presenting our findings here in the report.

### **The Propaganda Army was Created through a Gradual Process:**

Erdoğan began to aspire to claim the leadership of the Muslim world in 2013-14. It was then when he instructed TUGVA to create a propaganda team to boost his image globally. Though the team was efficient in fuelling “Ottoman nationalism” and Erdoğan as its leader, it proved largely inefficient in promoting Erdoğan internationally.

The new plan was to take the help from the ISPR (Inter-Service Public Relations) of Pakistan through a joint initiative. TRT world was deputed as the nodal agency to convene the top-secret programme.

When TRT World initiated a recruitment drive in Pakistan in 2015, it was quite astonishing for Pakistani citizens to see job opportunities directly coming from a media giant who earlier recruited citizens speaking English preferably in the British or the US accent.<sup>1</sup> However, it has been recently reported by the press that Turkey is collaborating with Pakistan by hiring ISI proxies as journalists in the top two state owned media houses as it wants to emerge as the base of the 'information warriors' of the Caliphate.<sup>2</sup>

However, it wasn't the very first step of creating a militia of disinformation as the Western media has reported that as the initial step, Erdogan brought Turkey's electronic communications center directly under the MIT, a center which was located outside Ankara.<sup>3</sup>

Sources also said that the last known visit of the Pakistani Ambassador to Ankara Syrus Sajjad Qazi to Anadolu Agency took place on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2020. A source suggested that the meeting was regarding launching a propaganda campaign to bulwark the developments taking place on constitution of the Philia Forum, intensify #BoycottFrance campaign, and to augment the ongoing campaign on Kashmir.

We found that a report of the Anadolu Agency had itself partially verified the claims.<sup>4</sup> The report mentioned that Anadolu's International News Editor Faruk Tokat and Acting Editor at English News Desk Satuk Bugra Kutlugun joined the meeting to brief the Pakistani Ambassador on developments.

### **Who are the Key Information Warriors?**

According to the disclosure, the TRT World has alone employed at least 50 Pakistanis out of 300 odd staff, collectively comprising of correspondents, producers, and editors based in Istanbul. The number of

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1 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/988699/turkish-state-broadcaster-kicks-off-recruitment-drive-in-pakistan>

2 <https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/kashmir-invites-khalafat-in-its-new-avatar/>

3 <https://www.dw.com/en/report-turkeys-mit-agency-menacing-german-turks/a-19490657>

4 <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/corporate-news/pakistan-ambassador-visits-anadolu-agency-headquarters/2060681>

Indian Kashmiri citizens is also significant and goes beyond a dozen. From the background of most of these journalists, it doesn't appear that qualification was the only criteria to hire them.

Our source has shared the names of journalists from TRT World and Anadolu Agency who have been tasked with carrying propaganda favourable to Turkey-Pakistan combine. The list includes prominent names like Shaheryar Mirza, Faisal Aziz Khan, Usman Mir, Ravale Mohyidin, Mehboob Geelani, Baba Umar, Riyaz ul Khaliq, Iftikhar Gilani, Ruwa Shah, Mehnaaz Yaseen, Mohsin Mughal, Imran Garda, Faisal, and Ahmed Bin Qasim.

### **Their Operations have been Undermining Journalistic Principles:**

Another source who works with TRT World affirmed about a shocking trend. He argued that in order to evade scrutiny by foreign ministries of Philia Forum countries, TRT World journalists have visited these countries and reported from there by applying for travel visas on the basis of reasons like 'recreational trip' and 'honeymoon'.

During our investigation, an official of the Turkish Foreign Ministry also acknowledged that most of these journalists have already received Turkish citizenship and plan to settle permanently here. However, most of them have not intimidated their countries to ensure that they keep visiting their countries to carry out their propaganda activities.

On compiling the numbers shared by our sources, we came across the fact that these journalists are fighting various cases against media houses in at least three continents in attempts to pressurise them for deleting the content about their connections with the ISI and the MIT. TRT World and Anadolu Agency have deployed a strong team of attorneys to fight the cases and threaten journalists across the world for filing stories against the gang. Yildirim Attorney and Advocacy is one of similar law firms deployed by Erdogan to defend the gang.

### **Paradigms and Modus Operandi of the Army:**

A research on Turkish intelligence's information operations by Ali Can Kucukozyigit has indicated that the objectives of Electronic Warfare and Information Warfare by the Turkish intelligence depend on two aspects:

limiting and interfering and reinforcing and supporting.<sup>5</sup> An intelligence expert argued that Erdogan believes that Turkish intelligence is doing fairly well in the domain of ‘limiting and interfering’, largely due to the electronic and surveillance technologies. However, he still feels that he is unable to counter the global opposition to his Caliphate programme and hence has collaborated with its partner Pakistan for boost its operations on ‘reinforcing and supporting’ aspect. The mercenary journalists have been invited, recruited, and settled in Turkey to reinforce and support the operations of Turkish intelligence in projecting Erdogan as the undisputed champion of the region as well as of the Ummah.

An analysis of social media imprints on #BoycottFrance campaign launched in October last year by Erdogan highlighted that most of the handles promoting the campaign were either from Turkey or Pakistan. The Anadolu Agency had itself reported about the campaign becoming a huge success in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> It also gained a considerable traction in certain pockets of India as well. This shows that the team working at TRT World and Anadolu is certainly helping Erdogan in ‘reinforcing and supporting’ his ideas.

We also came across countless tweets made by journalists mentioned in the list, urging the world to boycott France. Similarly, the band of these journalists also helped Pakistan to trend the #BoycottUAE, which apparently became number one trend in the country.<sup>7</sup>

About the development, a diplomatic expert asked – “What makes a Pakistani or an Indian boycott France on the call of Turkey? Why has the world not pondered over this? This is certainly an outcome of the mercenary army of info-terrorists being recruited by both the countries. A similar campaign to ‘Boycott Turkey’ was launched by the civil society of Saudi Arabia as well, but it miserably failed. The only reason is the lack of collaboration with like-minded countries, all those who oppose the neo-Ottoman dream.”

“The series developments that have taken place post-2018, when Imran Khan rose to power, point towards an organised chain that is an outcome of an institutionalised effort. Let us take this example – Turkish cyber army

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<sup>5</sup> <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA457350.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-boycott-french-products-drive-gathers-pace/2019709>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.brandsynario.com/boycottuae-takes-over-pakistani-twitter-as-the-no-1-trend/>

attacked the India and hacked social media handles of eminent personalities by brazenly confessing to have attacked India as it was 'Pakistan's enemy'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Pakistani hackers attacked the UAE for not conforming with Erdogan's policies.<sup>9</sup> These are not random developments and hint towards constituting a part of institutionalised collaboration in information warfare", commented a professor with expertise in cyber warfare.

Several activists including Pakistani activist Naila Inayat have highlighted that Turkey-Pakistan combine has efficiently used series like Ertugrul Ghazi, which projects the grand Ottoman dreams, to fan hatred in countries like India and incite them for rising against their own countries. Most of the journalists mentioned in the leaked list in some way or the other endorsed the series and promoted it across the world.<sup>10</sup>

### **Content Analysis by Our Team on Names Revealed:**

Following the disclosure by our source, we also did a content analysis to reaffirm the authenticity. A content analysis of online articles published over TRT World by us explained that the top five topics covered by these journalists with a biased approach towards the Caliphate allies included: Ottoman symbols Hagia Sophia and Kariye Museum; Saudi Arabia's role in Syria and Yemen; Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; Non-Arab Islamic bloc consisting Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia; and Jammu and Kashmir.

Our analysis disclosed that TRT World did at least 31 articles praising Erdogan's decision to convert Hagia Sophia.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, it produced at least 972 stories on Yemen crisis with an anti-Saudi Arabia line.<sup>12</sup> In few articles, TRT World has been openly alleging Saudi Arabia and UAE about denting Ottoman's reputation.<sup>13</sup> We also came across 65 news pieces on Nagorno-Karabakh and 30 odd pieces on Turkey-Pakistan-Malaysia alliance. TRT World published over 30 long stories while India abrogated Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution related to Jammu and Kashmir and interestingly, 14 of them were also recommended by the

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/indian-twitter-accounts-hacked-because-india-is-enemy-of-pakistan-say-turkish-hackers-1165552-2018-02-09>

<sup>9</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/512891/hrcp-website-taken-down-by-hackers>

<sup>10</sup> <https://theprint.in/opinion/letter-from-pakistan/imran-khans-ertugrul-love-was-going-well-until-a-pakistani-tiktoker-joined-the-party/568674/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.trtworld.com/news/hagia-sophia>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.trtworld.com/news/yemen>

<sup>13</sup> <https://eurasianimes.com/saudi-uae-nexus-spoiling-turkish-image-ottoman-reputation/>

Pakistani Foreign Ministry.<sup>14</sup> Strikingly, the largest number of article as well as TV productions on the above five topics were by the Pakistani and Kashmiri journalists mentioned in the list accessed by us.

Our team of linguist experts underlined an alarming fact. They believe that besides the articles with by-lines, writing style suggests that a countless number of articles with strong lines against different countries have been authored by the same set of journalists, but without mentioning their names. This can certainly be one of the ways to ensure deniability and free access to parts of the world.

According to Turkish sources, it has been Erdogan's part of systematic efforts that a lot of these content have been published by TRT World and Anadolu without by lines of these journalists. For example: a journalist with Kashmiri origin working with TRT since 2016 has penned down only 28 articles during his entire career. This is quite unbelievable. It implies that either he is too unproductive or has authored articles without by lines, which are certainly bashing the leadership of Saudi Arabia and India over Kashmir issue.<sup>15</sup> Our content analysis suggested that he went on to call Saudi Arabia a 'toothless tiger' and whereas promoted Erdogan's campaign song at the same time.

"You need to be nuanced when to deal with the idea of Turkey-Pakistan collaboration for promoting Caliphate project. These are not the friends of Turkey, but foot soldiers of Erdogan's Caliphate campaign. Erdogan's idea is to provide refuge to everyone who believes in the project and the ISI is just helping in spotting such individuals and their recruitment", commented an expert on Ottoman history on the expose.

On background check of these journalists, we found that even before landing up in Turkey, they used to intensely oppose the influence of Saudi Arabia on Islam in Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan. At the same time, they were promoting Erdogan as the supreme leader of the Muslim Ummah and working towards the realisation of the grand Ottoman dream.

We realised that since early December 2020, a number of the productions/articles authored by these journalists began to rapidly disappear.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://mofa.gov.pk/recent-developments-iojk/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://umarblogs.blogspot.com/2013/05/who-is-benefiting-from-kashmir.html?q=saudi>

However, we had saved most of them. In terms of magnitude, the top journalist who deleted the content was from Jammu and Kashmir. We are working on reconstructing the content removed and shall soon present it in public domain through an exclusive report on the individual.

The source working in the Turkish Foreign Ministry also confessed that the plan of creating a new media house by Turkey-Pakistan-Malaysia for tackling 'Islamophobia', is nothing else but a plan of building up a grand propaganda tool to advance the bandwagon of 'Caliph' Erdogan. Another reason behind the journalists coming up with very less productions could lie in the fact that charge of setting up of this channel has been entitled to the same ISI-MIT team. There is a very strong possibility that journalists from Malaysia would soon get recruited in TRT World and Anadolu Agency.

Though names of the Malaysian journalists have not been mentioned in the list, but we came across the names of quite a handful of journalists working in TRT World, including a top producer who hails from Malaysia. Sources have suggested that the recruitments from Malaysia shall soon surge as the Covid-19 restrictions would begin to be lifted and the work of setting up the news channel would progress.

An Arab media expert highlighted that 'A Place Called Pakistan' and 'Strait Talk' series by TRT World are nothing, but reciprocation of the support tendered by Pakistan and Malaysia to propagate the neo-Ottoman ideas to the world as these two shows have been started by the same gang of propagandists created by ISI-MIT with an objective to project the two countries as ideal destinations in the world.

### **What is Coming Up Next?**

The source conceded that the after the series of successful operations, the new task assigned to the team is attacking the 'Philia Forum' countries by projecting it an utter failure and an 'anti-peace' initiative. The campaign to attack the Forum began with the statement by the Spokesperson of Turkish Foreign Ministry. However, the larger goal is to ensure the failure of the group through efficient use of propaganda armies of both the countries. It is a notable fact that the members of the forum have always been targeted by the Turkey-Pakistan nexus. The only difference is that previously the attack was at an individual level and now the plan is to collectively attack them.

“This should also be seen as a consolidation of power by coming together of like-minded countries. It would be interesting to see how these countries cope up with the long-time nexus by attacking their silos”, argued a geopolitical expert.

We also received the information that MIT has appointed a couple of close confidantes of Erdogan to convene the group of propagandists and includes names like Mustafa Ozkaya and Ali Keskin.

Few observers of Turkish intelligence have stated that there cannot be a better person than Ali Keskin who is equally loved by the Turkish as well as Pakistanis and has contributed to the common narrative of both the countries by redundantly attacking Greece, UAE, Saudi Arabia, India, France, Armenia, Egypt and every country that wishes to challenge the Turkey-Pakistan nexus.

“Many Pakistanis have reiterated that it was the ISPR who first noticed information warfare skills of Keskin when he helped Pakistan to trend the #BoycottUAE campaign. He was soon roped in by both the countries and dedicated himself to the joint mission”, told a source familiar with the ISPR.

The pattern deduced by us strengthens the argument that both the countries are rapidly working towards institutionalising the process of information warfare through a common set-up.

Leaks by our sources direct us towards an interesting as well as dangerous pattern in which Erdogan has diluted the boundaries between private and public entities when it comes to fighting the information warfare in his behalf. From the Cyber Defence Command to TUGVA – every institution and every individual is a potential information warrior for him. It seems that Pakistan is learning quickly from its friend as the ISPR has now successfully converted a large number of Pakistanis, especially youngsters, as foot soldiers of information warfare.

Under Erdogan, Turkish media houses, especially TRT World, has become a massive pro-Caliphate channel. The criticality and degree of the propaganda campaign suggests that media watchdogs across countries should start filtering the content of these news networks and



governments should start coming up with mechanisms and tools to combat the disinformation campaigns.

### **Milestones of Turkey-Pakistan Information Warfare Programme:**

- **2013:** Erdogan brainstorms with the Cyber Defence Command and Cyber Defence Center on ideas to project himself globally.
- **2013:** Erdogan constitutes 'AK Troll Army' to promote his Caliphate desires through social media under the charge of TUGVA.<sup>16</sup>
- **2013-14:** Collaboration on social media campaigns by staff/interns of ISPR and 'AK Troll Army' begins.
- **2015:** Turkey and Pakistan enter into an understanding of collectively fighting information warfare and mutually helping each other with TRT World as the coordinating agency.
- **March 2015:** TRT conducts a mass recruitment drive in Pakistan.
- **2015-2017:** Journalists from Pakistani and Kashmir relocate to Turkey in large numbers.
- **March 2018:** Pakistan's Advisor to Prime Minister on National History and Literary Heritage Irfan Siddiqui and Turkish Ambassador Ihsan Mustafa Yurdakul enter into agreement to launch joint projects to propagate narratives through arts and culture.<sup>17</sup>
- **14 March 2019:** Anadolu Agency opens its bureau in Pakistan for coordinating the movement of media professionals between both the countries.
- **19 September 2019:** Turkey sends a team of journalists to Indo-Pak border to attack India through their coverage.

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<sup>16</sup> [https://jsis.washington.edu/news/cybersecurity-strategy-advice-trump-administration-us-turkey-relations/#\\_ftn15](https://jsis.washington.edu/news/cybersecurity-strategy-advice-trump-administration-us-turkey-relations/#_ftn15)

<sup>17</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/11-Mar-2018/pak-turkey-to-expand-cooperation-in-art-literature>

- **September 2019:** Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia declare to set up a new TV channel together under the leadership of Turkey.<sup>18</sup>
- **14 February 2020:** Turkey-Pakistan sign Joint Declaration during ‘6th Session of Pakistan-Turkey High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council’ to launch ‘joint initiatives’ in the field of ‘print, audio-visual & electronic media, the Internet, as well as entertainment media such as movies, videos and digital games’.<sup>19</sup>
- **30 November 2020:** Pakistani Ambassador Syrus Sajjad Qazi visits Anadolu Agency and meets top office bearers to analyse the success of the team.

### **Suggestions:**

- The security agencies of the Philia Forum countries as well as France and India need to collaborate and launch a joint investigation into the influence of the propaganda army created by the nexus and uncover the influence operations being carried out by them.
- In addition, the democratic powers should conduct an audit on visits of these journalists to respective countries to find out whether they misused their tourist visas to build networks to feed information and carried out reporting or not.
- The Philia Forum should also set up a counter disinformation centre to counter the impact of this team and other possible groups waging an information war against the geopolitical interests of the group.
- If found guilty on the basis of evidence, sanctions on both the countries should be imposed by regional and international forums.
- The Islamic world needs to ensure that the order of the Ummah continues to be maintained and the elements trying destabilize the peace of the fraternity through an information warfare should be warned.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-pakistan-malaysia-joint-tv-project-to-fight-anti-muslim-sentiment-30372>

<sup>19</sup> <http://mofa.gov.pk/joint-declaration-6th-session-of-pakistan-turkey-high-level-strategic-cooperation-council-towards-an-ever-closer-strategic-partnership/>

- A campaign should be launched to ban TRT World and Anadolu Agency in democracies across the world.
- Philia Forum countries plus India and France can come together to set-up a news channel to counter the propaganda by TRT World, Anadolu Agency, and the news channel being planned by Turkey-Pakistan-Malaysia as well as to present the authentic information.