

Analysis by the Vienna-based International Press Institute on the digital manhunt of Turkish journalist NEDİM TÜRFENT:

BACKGROUND

In July 2015, negotiations between the Turkish state and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) aimed at ending decades of armed conflict broke down, leading to the resumption of full-scale hostilities.

Turkish security forces have implemented measures preventing independent assessments of the conflict's toll, according to human rights groups. Human Rights Watch said [in a statement](#) on July 11, 2016:

“During security operations since August, the authorities have imposed blanket, round-the-clock curfews on 22 towns and city neighborhoods, prohibiting all movement without permission. The curfews also prevent non-governmental organizations, journalists, and lawyers from scrutinizing those operations or any resulting abuses by security forces or armed groups. Authorities have blocked rights groups – including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights – from trying to document abuses even after curfews and operations ended”.

In addition to these government-imposed obstacles to the free flow of information, mainstream Turkish media have largely followed the official narrative. Claims of human rights abuses, violations of the rule of law and decaying conditions of Kurdish cities under curfew are ignored or downplayed by pro-government media. Even Turkish news outlets that are generally critical of the government tend to align with the state agenda regarding the Kurdish conflict, under the arc of nationalism.

Kurdish journalists have been largely left to fill this information vacuum. Pro-Kurdish media have taken on a critical role in reporting from the conflict zones in the southeast; allegations of mass civilian killings, for instance, were covered only by a few Kurdish outlets with relatively small outlets – these represent an important source of information nonetheless. This role, however, comes with a clear price: Those who challenge the official perspective, are labelled as ‘enemies of the state’, both online and offline.

The collapse of peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2015 also inaugurated a new phase of military combat. In contrast to the 1990s, when fighting took place mostly in rural areas, the PKK and its affiliates have now brought the conflict into cities, thus moving the Turkish army's response to civilian-populated areas. Two Turkish counter-terrorism units, the Gendarmarie Special Forces (Jandarma Özel Harekat-JÖH) and the Police Special Forces (Polis Özel Harekat- PÖH) play a key role in operations in cities. On June 23, 2016, the Turkish Parliament voted to give members of these elite forces immunity from prosecution, a move that “could make it harder to investigate allegations of rights abuse”.

This most recent flare-up of the Kurdish conflict is also notable for the changing nature of the parallel 'information war', with social media, particularly Twitter, becoming an important new front. There are numerous anonymous accounts within the Turkish twittersphere with names that are borrowed from special forces units or that make reference to arbitrary killings against Kurds conducted during the 1990s or to ultranationalist and racist narratives.

These Twitter accounts frequently disseminate images ostensibly from the front lines against the PKK and its affiliates or inside Turkish military encampments. They include messages received from government offices and provide confidential insight into the workings of Turkey's special forces. For these reasons, it is widely believed that many of these accounts are run by members of these forces.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ATTACK

Nedim Türfent is a reporter with the now-shuttered Dicle News Agency (DİHA) based in the town of Yüksekova in far southeast Turkey, close to the Iranian and Iraqi borders. Türfent is known to be supportive of the Kurdish cause. He was targeted in an online harassment campaign consisting of death threats, insults and verbal smears that began in early April 2016 and lasted until his arrest on May 13, 2016. Evidence suggests that this campaign was a coordinated effort carried out by social media accounts ostensibly run by Turkish special forces operatives.



*Main picture: Emekli Polis Özel Harekatçılar Derneği (Retired Police Special Forces Association)
"The traitors set houses afire to hide themselves from drones and keep their ammo from being confiscated"*

Nedim Türfent: Here is a "public order" mise-en-scène by JÖH [Gendarmerie Special Forces] and a very obvious example of manipulation. The reality is in my next post...

Data collected from these accounts during April and May 2016 suggest that the online campaign against Türfent consisted of two elements.

First, users – primarily on Facebook – sought to track down Türfent's whereabouts beginning in early April and up to two days prior to his detention. These efforts made use of fake and/or anonymous Facebook profiles, according to one of Türfent's own Facebook posts. Türfent wrote that unknown accounts had been sending him private messages inquiring as to his location and announced that he would block any such account.



Nedim Türfent
April 7 · 🌐

Dikkatimi çeken bir şey var...?

Son 3 gündür sürekli "yerimi" soran birtakım kişiler var..! Genellikle yeni açılmış Facebook hesapları ve daha önce hiç konuşmadığım ve tanımadığım bu kişilerin hangi amaçla "Heval Neredesin", "Nedim abi neredesin" veya "Nedim arkadaş tam olarak neredesin" gibi sorular sorması hem düşündürüyor hem de komik geliyor.

Gever'deyim, bu soruyu soran HERKES ENGELLENECEKTİR.

*Nedim Türfent: There is something catching my attention
There are people asking about my "location" frequently for the last three days. These are newly opened Facebook accounts from people I have never known or spoke to before. The reason why these people ask me "Where are you friend," "Nedim brother where are you?" and "Nedim friend what is your exact location?" makes me think and makes me laugh.
I'm in Gever[Yüksekova in Turkis], everybody asking this question WILL BE BLOCKED.*

In addition, our research noted the appearance of a number of Twitter posts trying to locate Türfent on May 11, 2016. The first tweets started in the early morning:

@bestanuce6: Köyü basan timler Nedim Türfent nerede? - 11/05/2016 06:55:10
@bestanuce6: The police special operations team invaded a village: Where is Nedim Türfent?
@rojname_com: Köyü basan timler: Nedim Türfent nerede? (DIHA) - 11/05/2016 07:24:50
@rojname_com: The police special operations team invaded a village: Where is Nedim Türfent? (DIHA)

Then, Twitter users started announcing that Yüksekova was being raided by Turkish special forces in order to arrest Türfent.

@kaplancagdas: Yüksekova'da köye baskın düzenleyen özel hareket timleri, muhabirimiz Nedim

Türfent'i aradı.Akrabalarına 'Onu bulmamız lazım' dedi. - 11/05/2016 07:42:01

@kaplancagdas: The police special operations team, which invaded a village in Yüksekova, searched for our correspondent Nedim Türfent. They told his relatives that they need to find him

@sosyaldevrimci_: Özel hareket timleri köy bastı, #DİHA muhabiri için: Nedim Türfent nerede? #NedimTurfentNerede 11/05/2016 07:47:38

@sosyaldevrimci_: The police special operations team invaded a village: Where is Nedim Türfent?#NedimTurfentNerede

@128nilgun: Nedim Türfent'in başına bir iş gelirse, sorumlusu onu arayıp, onu bulmak için köy bile basan güvenlik güçleridir. - 11/05/2016 07:53:40

@128nilgun: If something happens to Nedim Türfent, the police team, who invaded a village to find him, is responsible

@encudiha: Gever'e bağlı Kertinis köyüne baskın düzenleyen özel hareket timleri, köyde DİHA muhabirimiz Nedim Türfent'i aradı - 11/05/2016 08:12:19

@encudiha: The police special operations team invaded Kertinis village of Gever and searched for our DIHA correspondent Nedim Türfent.

The military operation finally led to Türfent's arrest on May 13. A picture of the journalist in handcuffs was disseminated by an anonymous Twitter account. Türfent was eventually charged with membership in a terrorist organisation and brought to a high security prison in the city of Van.



Second, users – particularly on Twitter – launched a campaign of verbal attacks and threats against Türfent that appear to be aimed at intimidating Türfent and stopping his coverage on the ground. Indeed, Türfent's reporting on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter constituted one of the few non-military sources of information from Yüksekova while the town was subject to a [Turkish special forces-imposed curfew](#) from March 13 to May 29, 2016 amid large-scale operations against the PKK.

These verbal attacks and threats were difficult to detect network-wise, both because

many were written as subtweets by quoting and commenting on another tweet (these variations are not always detected accurately by data collection tools unless they contain a Twitter handle) and because Türfent's name was frequently not mentioned even though it was clearly implied.

	<p><i>"Take it easy resisting Nedim. You are a journalist like Mahsun, aren't you?" (7 April 2016). The user is likely to mention Mazlum Dolan, another detained DİHA journalist, mistakenly as 'Mahsun.' (Last active in March 2016)</i></p>
	<p><i>"Nedim, when you will be arrested like your friends, don't shout like "but where is the press freedom". One would make swallow that word of 'traitor'. (12 April 2016).</i></p>



“Nedim, what happened to your civil defense? Why did you run away from Yüksekova? @nturfent I looked for you within the ones who have surrendered.” (21 April 2016)

Türfent, as a reporter, had shared the photos of trenches digged for “civil defense”, PKK’s inner city wing, YDG-H’s tactic to proclaim and maintain self-ruling areas.

In order to unveil the network behind the attacks on Türfent, we used the open-source software NodeXL to collect 2,742 tweets mentioning him between April and May 2016, including those posted two days prior to his arrest on May 13.



We then ran a manual content analysis on this initial sample to select for tweets that contained particularly harsh insults/verbal smears, ethnic slurs and death threats directed against Türfent. It should be noted that because Türfent is a politically engaged journalist, and given the delicate nature of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, Twitter interactions with Türfent are often temperamental in tone. For this reason, this selection

process excluded messages with general overtones of Turkish/Kurdish nationalism and those containing light accusations or insults of the kind frequently found online as it would be inaccurate to classify all exchanges of harsh language with Türfent as threats to him.

This content analysis yielded 16 Twitter accounts that had harshly insulted or threatened Türfent. Significantly, most of these accounts claimed to belong to members of Turkish special forces units (the previously referenced JÖH and PÖH as well as JITEM, the Turkish Gendarmerie’s Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism unit) carrying out

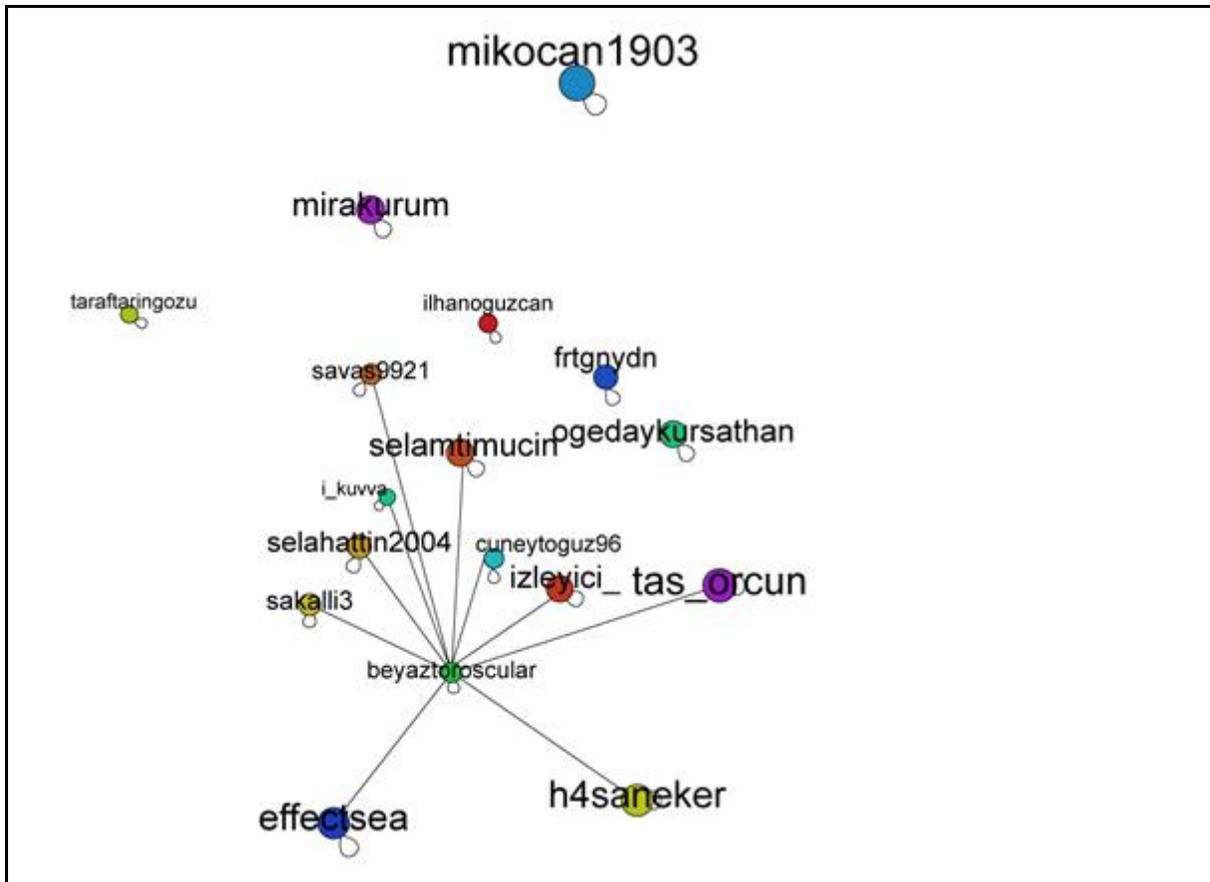
military operations in Yüksekova and other locations in the Kurdish theatre. Tweets from these accounts support those claims: Visuals disseminated by some of these users depict day-to-day life in military facilities and contain first-hand accounts of special forces operations.

	
<p><i>Şırnak Special Forces "Have a good iftar (breaking fast) Turkey"</i></p>	<p><i>"Here's the PKK mountain squad surrendered. These were the ones the HDP people aimed to save by lifting the blockade in Sur."</i></p>

At first glance, these users were not visibly connected with one another during the attacks on Türfent – i.e., they did not mention one another or re-tweet one another's comments (except possibly through direct messages, to which we do not have access).

Nevertheless, the content posted by these 16 users was remarkably similar, suggesting a certain level of connection or coordination. In order to more fully investigate the possibility of a network behind these users, we thus undertook a further level of data analysis.

Concretely, we collected the last 200 tweets posted by each of these 16 users using the NodeXL software, looking for patterns of interaction among these users. We then built a network graph based on these interactions using the visualisation platform Gephi. Since these users had interacted with one other one-directionally or mutually, in both negative and positive context, we needed to select the users that interacted more often. After using the Degree Filter on Gephi to omit the nodes with low In-Degree and Out-Degree – in other words, the users that send and receive fewer messages to and from other users within the network – we were able to see that 10 of the 16 users were connection to one single account: @BeyazToroscular.



The social network graphic above summarises the main finding: Although most of the 16 accounts do not outwardly interact with one another – e.g., retweeting one another’s posts – what most of them do have in common is that they react to the account @BeyazToroscular, helping to disseminate the messages that this account creates. The following sequence shows one example of how this dissemination unfolds.

	<p><i>JITEM: “So Nedim how are you? We told already we would find you wherever you go. We kept our promise :)”</i></p>
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This finding suggests that even if this group of users may not be highly coordinated, it does follow a leader, which this research project has observed to be a frequent pattern in pro-government networks.

Our analysis shows that @BeyazToruscular was among not only the most active accounts in terms of publishing threats against Türfent, but also the most influential, playing a central role in propagating the online campaign. Its tweets were quickly picked up by special forces-connected accounts in the twittersphere.

It was not possible to identify the user behind @BeyazToruscular. Moreover, this account was closed following the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016. However, circumstantial evidence suggests that this account, like many of the others, may have been run by a member of Turkish special forces units.

Most significantly, content analysis run on some of @BeyazToruscular's tweets show that the account regularly posted first-hand pictures portraying military operations in Hakkâri province, where Yüksekova is located.



	<p><i>JITEM: "And the final touch in Yüksekova. The curtain falls on the treason of 200 years."</i></p>
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It is also worth mentioning that the name "BeyazToroscular" has strong historical connotations. "Beyaz Toros" was the name of an old Renault car in Turkey. It later became an iconic image associated with Turkish special forces and paramilitary groups as these groups frequently used this type of car to carry out extrajudicial murders, executions and kidnappings of Kurdish citizens in Turkey's east and southeast in the 1990s. A group called "Beyaz Toroscular" was long believed to be part of JİTEM. The existence of this unit was long denied by the Turkish government. It was granted legal status in 2005, but its unofficial history stretches back to the 1980s, when it was known for its counter-guerilla methods and equipment.

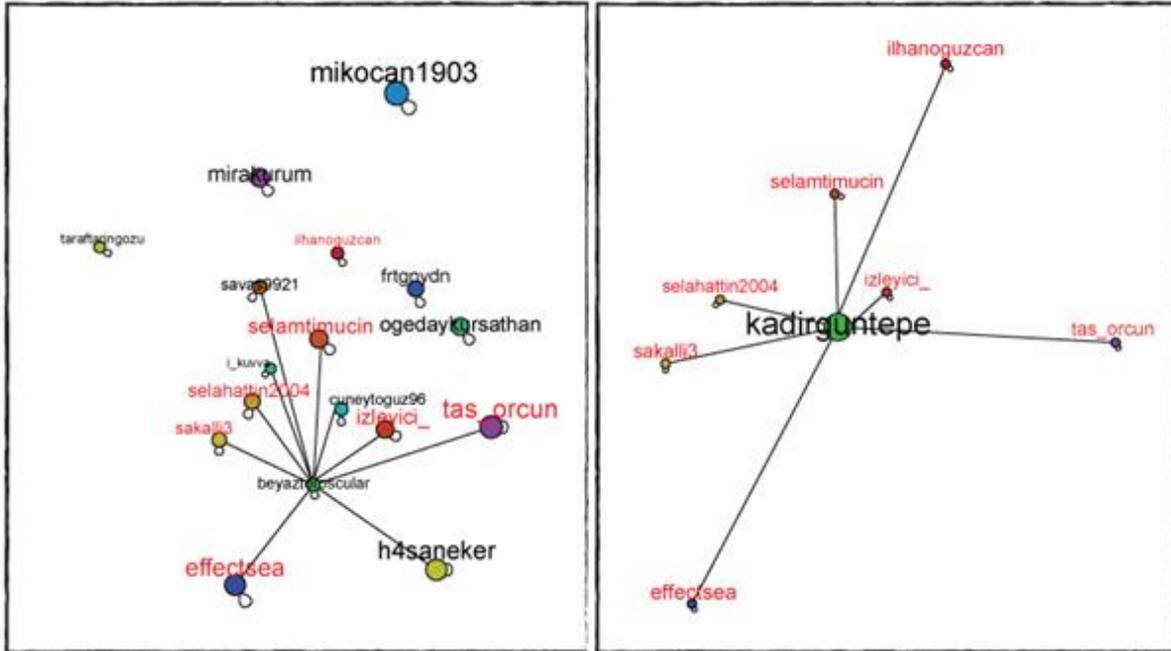
Interestingly, our social network analysis also showed that some of the accounts in online attacks on Türfent had links to accounts run, or alleged to be run by, officials from Turkey's ruling AKP party. One of these officials is Kadir Güntepe, the AKP district official in Beytüşşebap, Şırnak Province. Güntepe's Twitter account has been suspended. Before that, however, he had long used his account to promote Turkish special forces.

 <p>kadir güntepe @kadirguntepe · 46 dk. 2 SİZE BU ÜLKEYİ BÖLDÜRMEYECEĞİZ! SİZE BU ÜLKEYİ BÖLDÜRMEYECEĞİZ! SİZE BU ÜLKEYİ BÖLDÜRMEYECEĞİZ!</p>	 <p>kadir güntepe @kadirguntepe · 33 dk. 10-İYİ DİNLEYİNİ! NE KADAR YAKARSAÑIZ YAKIN NE KADAR YIKARSAÑIZ YIKIN NE KADAR SIKARSAÑIZ SIKIN #BÖLDÜRMEYECEĞİZ ULANI HDP Önlme, Salıhatın Demirtaş, Figen Yüksekbağ ve diğer 7 kişi</p>
<p><i>Kadir Güntepe</i> "WE WON'T LET YOU DIVIDE THIS COUNTRY WE WON'T LET YOU DIVIDE THIS COUNTRY WE WON'T LET YOU DIVIDE THIS COUNTRY"</p>	<p>"10- LISTEN UP WELL NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU BURN NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU DESTROY NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU SHOOT WE WON'T LET YOU DIVIDE, DAMN IT" (Note: Twitter accounts belonging to the co-presidents of the HDP party are mentioned here.)</p>

A content analysis of tweets sent by some of the accounts thought to belong to special forces operatives yields messages clearly praising Güntepe. One such user tweeted at Güntepe: "You just send a signal and we will fill buses, give us weapons so we can make a kebab out of that PKK bastard coming for you."



Moreover, Güntepe's account received interactions from seven users that were part of the network led by @BeyazToroscular targeting Nedim Türfent.



Also worth noting is an incident on May 24, 2016, in which a pro-Special Forces account that glorified violence against Kurds, @pohjoh2, tweeted a picture of Guntepe along with a caption at 08:48h. This tweet was deleted seconds later and then later posted to Guntepe’s official account at 18:45h, raising the question as to whether the @pohjoh2 account was directly run by Guntepe or by one of his aides.

<p><i>"We promised our children we came across in Beytüşşebap bicycles if they study well. They became really happy."</i></p>	<p><i>"We promised our children we came across in Beytüşşebap bicycles if they study well. They became really happy."</i></p>

Güntepe claimed that the time stamp on the tweet from the PohJoh02 account was manipulated. Like @beyaztoruscular, @pohjoh02 was closed following the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016.



IMPACT ON THE JOURNALIST

The DİHA news agency, Nedim Türfent's employer, came under severe pressure since the resumption of hostilities between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2015. Its website was [blocked more than 40 times](#) before finally being shut down following the attempted coup in July 2016. As of April 2018, 11 of its reporters [have been imprisoned](#) on terrorism-related charges, including dissemination of terrorist propaganda.

On August 8, 2016, Turkey's telecommunications regulator (TİB) blocked access to DİHA's Twitter account, which boasted over 280K followers. The regulator did not offer an official explanation to either DİHA or Twitter itself.

The attacks on DİHA are a microcosm of the overall environment for Kurdish journalists, who undoubtedly face the harshest conditions of all media professionals in Turkey. According to the independent news site Bianet, which monitors press freedom developments in Turkey, April 2016 alone saw the arrests of 10 journalists and 10 delivery staff from Kurdish news outlets.

In comparison to this wave of jailings, it can be easy to dismiss digital attacks against

Kurdish journalists as trivial. On the contrary, these attacks constitute a key component of a campaign led by actors with links to the Turkish state to suppress and control information from the Kurdish theatre. Online harassment of journalists, a problem in all of Turkey, is at its most intense here, as it is here where coverage challenging the official narrative is most unwanted.

“These accounts belong to members of the special forces stationed in Kurdish cities and they target Kurdish journalists whom these forces consider to be a problem,” Faruk Ayyıldız, a prominent Kurdish journalist with the left-leaning newspaper Evrensel, says. “The reason for this is that journalists working for mainstream media do not cover crimes and human rights violations.”

Sedat Yılmaz, a former DIHA editor based in Diyarbakir, added: “I strongly believe that these deeds are organised within the state mechanism. These [social media] accounts existed prior to the war. With the resumption of the conflict, they became crucial tools to spread fear and intimidation. Kurdish journalists endure both physical and digital harassment from special forces, even though they change their locations.”

Interviews with a half dozen Kurdish journalists painted the picture of a highly oppressive and dangerous online atmosphere. Hate speech directed at Kurds is said to be common. Death threats are issued as a matter of course, with impunity for such threats leaving aggressors with no fear. Journalistic reporting is routinely smeared as ‘terrorist propaganda’. Reporters are labeled as ‘terrorists’ without evidence. Surveillance is routine: Nearly all the Kurdish journalists with whom IPI spoke were certain of being tapped by security forces.

Twitter and Facebook are not the online social media channels employed for purposes of harassment and propaganda. YouTube videos glorifying violence against Kurds – often featuring screen shots taken from Twitter and Facebook accounts ostensibly belonging to special forces operatives – boast hundreds of thousands of views, in some cases (examples: [here](#) and [here](#)).

“All of this,” Yılmaz concluded, “constitutes a wide, vast, overwhelming atmosphere of persecution.”

Nedim Türfent’s case illustrates how digital harassment against journalist can impact a journalist’s physical reality. After a wave of threats against him by accounts ostensibly run by Special Forces operatives, Türfent was detained without knowing what he is accused of having done.

Türfent’s experience is not unusual, according to Ayyıldız, who described a familiar routine: “Special Forces members publish the personal information of the targeted journalists or target them directly by name. This is followed by a detention or arrest on the grounds of disseminating terrorist propaganda.”

The use of social media accounts ostensibly belonging to special forces operatives to

harass Kurdish journalists “are not ordinary digital attacks or online harassment,” he said. “With the resumption of the war, the recent ten months have proven that the physical safety of Kurdish journalists is also in jeopardy.”

In December 2017, Nedim Türfent was [sentenced to eight years and nine months in prison](#), officially on charges of “membership in a terrorist organization”. The court said that it had been “disturbed” by Türfent’s articles.

Türfent has been in solitary confinement for almost two years and was transferred between six different prisons over the course of his trial. The extensive pre-trial detention and the fact that Türfent was denied the right to appear before a judge in person at any of the six hearings in his case constitute a clear infringement of Türfent’s right to liberty and right to a fair trial under articles 5 and 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Notably, Türfent was unable to face any of the witnesses against him, 18 of whom testified that they had been tortured to extract incriminating statements.

Already in June 2016, Türfent [denounced threats](#) made against him as well as poor treatment while in prison.

“For two months, from the start of the imposed curfew on March 13 to the day I was arrested, I reported human rights abuses by state forces in Geve [Yüksekova]. For my coverage I was threatened multiple times by security forces,” the letter read.

The letter cites specific example of physical abuse that Türfent says he suffered in detention: “On May 13, while travelling to Van, my car was stopped. One special forces operative took my press card given by DİHA, the other two made me lie on the ground. They put the card next to my head with a shotgun pointed to it.” Türfent concluded the telling anecdote: “They took a picture of me and told me that they would use it in their [social media] accounts.”

Read more about Nedim Türfent’s case in the IPI special feature “Nedim Türfent: One trial, countless injustices”: <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/nedim-turfent-one-trial-countless-injustices/>

Follow IPI’s campaign in Turkey, #FreeTurkeyJournalists <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/>

Note: Primary research and writing for this article was conducted between May and June 2016. While efforts have been made to update this article to reflect events since then, some details may not fully reflect recent political developments in Turkey.