COMMENTARIES

Truth Is a Human Right: Türkiye's Stance on the Fight against Disinformation

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ABSTRACT *We are experiencing the rise of unprecedented opportunities as a result of the digital revolution, but regrettably this has also been accompanied by a number of novel threats. One of the most visible manifestations of these threats is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. The implications of this threat extend from the individual to the national and international levels, where misinformation and disinformation bring the risk of hybrid warfare and power competition closer to home. Needless to say, the breadth of these implications makes dealing with digital misinformation even more difficult. This commentary focuses on several global events where misinformation and disinformation were used as a tactical tool, including the 2016 U.S. elections, Brexit, and COVID-19. Then, we discuss the situation involving Türkiye, one of the nations that serves as both a target and a focal point of regional disinformation campaigns. The commentary then shifts to some of the Communication Directorate's most significant initiatives, such as the creation of the Earthquake Disinformation Bulletins, the Law on the Fight Against Disinformation, and the Center for Fight Against Disinformation. Finally, above all, this commentary aims to raise awareness of the dangers of online misinformation and urges international cooperation to ensure that the truth always prevails.*

Introduction

The ongoing digital revolution, fueled by rapid advancements in technology, has brought about unprecedented opportunities for people to connect and share information. However, this has also led to the emergence of new threats, particularly in the form of misinformation and disinformation.[1] With the ease and speed of information dissemination, false or misleading information can quickly spread to large audiences and create serious social and political consequences. From fake news to deep fakes as well as propaganda, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation is increasingly challenging to address. It is crucial for individuals, organizations, and governments to be aware of these threats and take proactive measures to combat them by promoting media literacy and fact-checking while holding accountable those who spread deliberate falsehoods. We must insist that citizens' access to the truth is a fundamental human right, and it should be our duty to wage a war against disinformation that violates that right while causing irreparable damage to security and peace in our societies.

The digital transformation has implications for the private as well as public sectors, as it has profound impacts on products and services throughout the economy worldwide. Just as information and data represent power today, disinformation and misuse of data are also a major threat to the health and safety of public life. World Economic Forum reports[2] have repeatedly underlined the risks emanating from digital misinformation. Such risks bring along with them the risk of hybrid warfare and power competition between states in the long run. The classic propaganda wars have transformed into much subtler forms of information warfare, the dynamics of which are difficult to understand for average citizens. This reality has a particularly destructive impact in times of global events, during which accessing timely and accurate information can be a vital matter for society. Individuals must be armed with the knowledge and capabilities to save themselves from the enormous harm that disinformation can cause. In that sense, our commitment to the truth must be unshakable, and our struggle must sustain itself in the long run through our common efforts. We must all say, "long live the truth."

Influencing Elections and Spreading Hate

During the U.S. presidential elections in 2016, the issue of misinformation and disinformation on social media became an important topic for debate.[3] Various reports and studies found that fake news stories and propaganda were being shared widely on social media platforms, often with the intent of influencing public opinion and swaying the election in favor of a particular candidate. These false narratives ranged from completely fabricated stories to misleading headlines and selectively edited videos. Paid ad campaigns and social media algorithms, which prioritize engagement

over accuracy, further amplified the reach of these false narratives. The scale of this problem became apparent when it was revealed that bad actors had created fake social media accounts and groups to spread misinformation and sow discord among the American electorate. This was a stark example of the dangers of misinformation and political influence campaigns, with broad implications for election security and national sovereignty.

This phenomenon transpired in several other elections throughout the world. During the debates on the Brexit referendum and the critically important general elections in a few European countries, the treacherously effective use of disinformation and fake news became a hotly debated issue. The problem became more acute and apparent with the rise of the extreme right political discourse and parties that were finding supporters and spreading their message online. Misinformation and disinformation operations played a significant role by amplifying hate speech, strengthening anti-refugee rhetoric, and spreading Islamophobic as well as anti-Semitic content. Stereotypes and false claims about foreigners became some of the best propaganda tools of xenophobic political parties and opportunist politicians.

Many countries were caught unawares, and they did not take the dangers of misinformation and disinformation seriously. It took a while for most to recognize and come to terms with the threats against sociological

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texture and social peace. However, the political campaign activities and elections have shown the ugly side of things in terms of communication and information technologies. It was not simply influencing the behavior of voters like in the 2016 elections in the U.S., but this phenomenon had a deeply destructive and destabilizing effect on the democratic institutions and processes. It undermines faith in the institutions, and people are more easily manipulated and swayed by fringe opinions.

Once the realization of these facts became more commonplace, a more honest conversation acknowledging the detrimental effects of social media and the internet has begun.[4] Moreover, the fact that misinformation and disinformation could be utilized by foreign actors made this a national security matter.[5] Unfortunately, however, no genuine cooperation effort on election and information security emerged at the regional and global levels. Every country ended up taking temporary and haphazard mea-

The sophistication and expansiveness of the threat of disinformation require countries like Türkiye to develop national capacity to address this challenge in an age of increasingly complex and hybrid conflicts

sures[6] to secure internal stability and protect electoral processes. It must be clear that we need a much more expansive and comprehensive debate about misinformation and disinformation's overall negative impact on the political process, democratic institutions, and polarization.

The COVID-19 Infodemic

Misinformation and disinformation have played a large role in undermining democratic practices and institutions in the eyes of the public. Diminishing trust in experts, bureaucrats, officials, and institutions became a vital issue when the COVID-19 virus started to circulate around the world in early 2020. False claims and conspiracy theories about the origin, transmission, and treatment of the virus circulated widely on social media, leading to confusion and distrust among the public.[7] Some of these false claims included the belief that the virus was a hoax, that it can be cured by ingesting certain household prod-

ucts, or that it is a bioweapon created in a laboratory. These false narratives led to behaviors that endanger public health, such as refusing to wear masks, avoiding vaccinations, and gathering in large groups. The spread of misinformation about COVID-19 has also eroded trust in public health experts and institutions, making it more difficult to communicate accurate information and implement effective public health measures.[8]

The U.S. and China have been engaged in an information war[9] over the COVID-19 virus, which illustrates how information can be used for political purposes, even at the expense of public health. The two countries have been trading accusations about the origin and spread of the virus, with each side seeking to deflect blame and protect its own reputation. For example, the U.S. has accused China of concealing information about the virus and mishandling the early stages of the outbreak, while China has accused the U.S. of using it as a political tool to damage China's reputation. This information war has undermined efforts to control the spread of the virus by promoting confusion and distrust among the public. It also highlights the need for greater transparency and collaboration in global health crises and the danger of using information for political gain or instrumentalizing it as a foreign policy tool.

Disinformation as a Strategic Tool

Social media platforms have played a critical role in creating and enabling

spaces for the easy dissemination of disinformation, misinformation, and false news.[10] At the same time, these companies have failed to prevent the negative impact of the information pollution environment they helped create in the first place. Especially following the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the public expected these global companies to adopt a more effective role in fixing the problem. Their failure to assume more responsibility for creating a fairer, more transparent, and more democratic social media environment contributed to deepening the problem. When the private companies did not develop a strong response to assure the public, partly because their business model is based on amplifying negative content to some extent, both sub-state actors and states were more emboldened to use disinformation as part of their operational repertoire. This essentially meant a green light to disinformation campaigns, and most social media companies have failed to acknowledge and address the issue in a serious manner.

As disinformation and information warfare began to be used as strategic weapons, the war in Ukraine has added a whole new layer to the complexity of the challenge. Up until this war, the focus was on the role of information wars in geopolitical competition and crises. Especially after 2016, increasingly tense relations between Russia and the U.S. had been impacted by disinformation processes. Afterwards, disinformation and information pollution played a role in trade wars between China and the U.S. as well as the COVID-19 crisis. As such, up until the Ukraine war, information wars functioned as part of a broader competition and so-called cold wars between states. However, with the Ukraine war, we have learned that disinformation and information wars can function as a critically important part of active conflicts with real life-and-death consequences.

Prior to the Ukraine war, advances in information technologies and the information space played a role in the struggles between states by enabling information wars and traditional propaganda that could enable victory for one side or the other. In recent years, however, disinformation and media manipulation have become part of a new kind of conflict that we have come to call 'hybrid' wars. The most recent and serious example of this transpired during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Both in the lead-up to and during the Ukraine conflict, both sides attempted to conduct information wars with the aim of framing a narrative for global audiences. Social media became a very important venue for people to struggle against one another and was utilized by both state and non-state actors. Both Russia and Ukraine sought to tell their stories to international audiences and prove the righteousness of their stances.

From the very beginning, both countries used traditional and social media to present their cases to domestic and international audiences. Each narrative was starkly different and op-

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Director of Presidential Communications for Türkiye, Fahrettin Altun addressed the Stratcom Summit 2022 in İstanbul.

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posed to one another, which included mutual accusations and defenses.[11] Influential agents of both countries tried to amplify their voices through the dissemination of documentation, videos, and photographs to help their cause. Just as they sought to present their case, they also created defense mechanisms against the other side's critiques and accusations. At a time when nation states had not yet been able to create mechanisms to cope with disinformation campaigns in an effective manner, state-sponsored information wars became the norm with the Ukraine war, resulting in a seriously challenging barrier for the international community to receive accurate and truthful news.

In Europe, many countries supporting Ukraine became worried that these disinformation and election in-terference campaigns could be used against them, which shows how this problem has become a national security concern. Disinformation campaigns, as a strategic tool, became such a national security concern that NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept[12] spends a good amount of space discussing readiness against this threat. The transatlantic alliance's 2030 vision has called for strengthening the alliance's readiness and taking joint action against hybrid wars and disinformation operations. The nature of the challenge has drastically altered, as exemplified with the Ukraine war, and NATO will have to continue to pay serious attention to this challenge in the years ahead. NATO's efforts will not be sufficient, and individual states must increase their national capacities to deal with this threat as well. The sophistication and expan-

siveness of the threat of disinformation require countries like Türkiye to develop national capacity to address this challenge in an age of increasingly complex and hybrid conflicts.

Türkiye's Fight against Disinformation

As Türks, we embrace new technologies that provide benefits to our society, but we also understand the unique ways in which they can have detrimental effects on social and economic institutions. Our policy choices are designed around addressing the national and global threats against healthy debate and deliberate campaigns to impact our people's choices through disinformation campaigns. We believe that citizens' access to truth and accurate information must be considered a fundamental human right that needs to be fiercely protected, even if it might be at the expense of profits for technology companies. Our country's approach has been guided by this principle, and we strongly believe that the true stifling of technological innovation comes from the abuse of the power of the technological platforms deeply embedded in our lives.

We live in an age where the internet and social media have penetrated all aspects of our lives, and Türkiye is no exception. Some 80 percent of Turkish citizens use the internet, and 82 percent are social media users.[13] 95 percent of Turkish citizens own smartphones, and we have a young population that is heavily using the

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latest apps and communication platforms readily available in their palms. While these are truly astonishing rates of penetration of information technologies in the daily lives of our citizens, they also increase the risks of exposure to disinformation operations, especially in times of crises when everyone is seeking the latest news updates. Situated in a geopolitical hotspot, so to speak, Türkiye is one of the countries that is both a target and a hub of disinformation campaigns in the region. Various conflicts in the region result in both state and nonstate actors waging such campaigns in our country, targeting our citizens as well as dissidents of other countries living within our borders.

Türkiye is determined to increase its national cybersecurity capacity to prevent disinformation campaigns from influencing its citizens. We also seek to collaborate with international stakeholders, including other governments, given the fact that legislation by itself is not sufficient. Government agencies must have an active role, but bad actors are often ahead of

We are also working to ensure that correct information and true news issued by either government agencies or credible sources are circulated more widely on these platforms

the game since they organize globally over the internet. As like-minded governments are increasingly concerned about the abuse of the internet and disinformation for political purposes, it is imperative that they coordinate their efforts. Beyond this, the most important aspect of our fight against disinformation is to support civil society by increasing awareness about disinformation among our citizens, strengthening media literacy, and supporting journalists as well as fact-checkers. We also seek to work with tech platforms, most of which are intent on creating a safe experience for their users.

In a world of increasingly complex modes of communication and virtual interactions, it is practically impossible to police misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Of course, security agencies must go after bad actors, and they should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. However, the larger fight, on which our Communications Directorate is focused, is to realize that this challenge requires a societal response driven by civic engagement and awareness. For exam-

ple, on many platforms, like-minded interest groups can create their own unique spaces to interact with people of similar interests. However, they must be made aware of the potential dangers of creating echo chambers in their digital corners, so to speak. Such spaces can eventually be operationalized to serve as digital ghettos where misinformation and disinformation campaigns can be effective with little to no effort. While it can allow groups to be created and strengthened among people with similar interests, they can also serve as spaces for post-truth content to run rampant. Citizens' proactive fight against such tendencies is the most effective way to counter malicious content and create a healthy space.

Systematic misinformation and disinformation generate threats against individuals as well as societies on various fronts, such as national security and global stability. The dizzying pace of change in communication technologies has created many positive developments by bringing distant ideas, services, and people together. At the same time, they have enabled the rapid spread of malicious activities at an unprecedented rate of speed. Every government has the right and the obligation to take the necessary steps to protect the rights and freedoms of its citizens as well as national security. We have seen political systems and governments destabilized because of widespread disinformation efforts, resulting in political polarization, misinformation over health recommendations, abuse of children and young adults, financial

crimes, and misleading information in general.

In August 2022, our government established the Center for Fight against Disinformation to monitor and prevent disinformation efforts against our country. The center seeks to monitor and counter activities such as psychological warfare, propaganda, perception operations, manipulative content, and domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns.[14] The center operates as a fully transparent organization and distributes a weekly "Disinformation Bulletin" to call out specific misinformation and disinformation incidents aimed at our citizens. To increase the effectiveness of this organization, we are working on projects such as mapping the information irregularities, misinformation sources, and disinformation nodes.[15] The Center has also started to provide cybersecurity awareness and training workshops to public servants and interested private sector managers. In October 2022, the Law on the Fight Against Disinformation came into force, and this is one of the most important steps taken by our government against disinformation.[16] The law deals with regulations on new and emerging communications technologies and platforms. It provides broadcasters and content creators with certain rights, imposes responsibilities on service providers, and seeks to protect children, among other measures. For instance, the content creators on the internet media platforms will be able to receive journalist badges if they meet certain requirements, which used to be re-

stricted only to the TV and written media organs in Türkiye.

Internet news sources will now have the same rights and responsibilities as traditional news sources. Additionally, social media platforms, which are economic actors doing business in Türkiye, will now have to maintain an office and a representative in the country to interact with our government agencies and law enforcement. With an article added to the Turkish Criminal Code, it is now considered a crime to "openly spread false information to mislead the public." Through these measures, our government is trying to safeguard our citizens, social peace, and national security by strengthening fundamental rights and freedoms. One of the most serious threats created by disinformation activities around the world is the spread of Islamophobic content[17] on a global scale. Our President, Erdoğan, called for March 15 to be remembered as "International Fight against Islamophobia Day." This date is meant to raise global awareness about Islamophobia and commemorate the victims of the terror attacks against Muslims in New Zealand in 2019. Türkiye continues to seek international cooperation and solidarity in confronting the threat of Islamophobia, just as we collaborate with like-minded governments and organizations on several other issues.

During the COVID-19 infodemic, we learned from experience that our fight against disinformation had to entail virtual platforms, including social media. Unfortunately, social

media platforms are places where misinformation spreads quickly. It is crucial for these platforms to design their institutional policies to prevent disinformation that can have deadly results. Our government has been developing relationships with these companies in a constructive manner to develop policies in line with international law as part of its determination to fight against disinformation. Our government is now requiring social media platforms to provide regular reports on their strategy and actions against disinformation. We are also working to ensure that correct information and true news issued by either government agencies or credible sources are circulated more widely on these platforms. Social media platforms need to increase their informative and educational tools against disinformation available to users. The platforms will be given more responsibility to provide healthy information and fact-checking. They will need to report to authorities organized groups intent on creating and disseminating malicious content on their platforms.

One of the most important capabilities needed in the fight against disinformation is to increase and strengthen the fact-checking mechanisms. Both civil society and the government's fact-checking initiatives can prevent misinformation from spreading in times of crises. Unfortunately, such initiatives remain very few, and our citizens' consultation of these mechanisms remains very low. This creates a situation where citizens do not make the active effort

to seek authoritative information, especially because of the low public awareness of fact-checking institutions and personalities. We need to empower fact-checking institutions by regularly highlighting their public profile and circulating content with true information. We also need to strengthen the government agencies' mechanisms for timely information sharing. If we can educate our citizens to develop a reflex to consult fact-checking sources, that would be a big boost to our fight against misinformation and disinformation.

To raise public awareness about misinformation and disinformation, we are working to include media literacy content in school curricula. We are working with universities and communication faculties as well as relevant departments to improve their teaching materials to keep them current within the context of emerging technologies and recent industrial trends. We are working with local authorities and organizations to organize public conferences, ateliers, and seminars on media literacy and the fight against misinformation and disinformation. We are trying to increase our citizens' awareness about how to reach credible sources and information provided by public and private institutions. We also undertake public diplomacy efforts around the world to support civil society actors in providing credible and true information regarding the developments inside our country as well as in the region. As we embark upon these activities, our strategy is always informed by and in line with funda-

mental human rights and freedoms as well as democratic principles.

Disinformation during the February 6 Earthquakes

Just as the pandemic taught us some critical lessons, we have had to experience once again during the February 6 earthquakes in Türkiye how disinformation can pose a threat to public security. The most destructive earthquake on land in modern memory, the 'disaster of the century,' has taken more than 50,000 lives and caused more than $100 billion in material damage. In the wake of these devastating earthquakes, we have been confronted with a different dimension of information security. During the forest fires in Antalya and Muğla in recent years, disinformation on social media spread fake news at the local level and caused a lot of problems. As the Communications Directorate, we worked to ensure that the public was properly informed and referred those who purposefully shared misleading information that aimed to disrupt emergency efforts to the relevant authorities for investigation and prosecution. At the time, we created special units within our Directorate to deal with disinformation in times of emergency response. The purposefully disseminated misinformation during the February 6 earthquakes has proven the importance of our work against disinformation prior to the latest crisis.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, our government spokespeople warned the public that all gov-

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ernment information was going to be shared through our Directorate and that they should be careful about outside sources in such an emergency. As we had experienced in prior disasters that some influential accounts could, knowingly or unknowingly, spread misinformation, we immediately got to work. Some of the first examples of disinformation, both spontaneous and coordinated, had to do with search and rescue teams being sent to the wrong addresses through social media posts at a time when literally every second counts. We were disappointed to find that many social media posts were calling for help from the wrong locations during a disaster that had impacted 11 cities, and search and rescue teams were heroically doing their best to provide relief as soon as possible.

In addition to these misinformation instances that slowed down relief

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efforts and wasted precious time, some politically provocative and hate-filled messages were shared on social media, claiming that help had not arrived in the region even days after the earthquakes. As our President Erdoğan indicated, there were, of course, serious challenges due to weather, road, and travel conditions that made reaching some areas difficult in the first two days, but all our agencies had been mobilized to help the earthquake victims even as social media posts claiming otherwise were circulating. There were also images and videos of other earthquakes from around the world that were shared on social media as if they were current messages from the earthquake region. We were able to find the sources of this misleading and fake content, and many people shared it without knowing the truth of the matter. We were reminded once again of the critical importance of media literacy to confront disinformation.

Just as relief efforts progressed with many challenges along the way, disinformation operations grew at a much faster pace. Two separate instances of disinformation regarding the

earthquakes underline the seriousness of this matter. The first was the spread of fake news that threatened social peace and tranquility. Despite repeated denials from our Interior Ministry, the fake news that claimed widespread looting in the region increased concerns for the safety and security of aid teams being deployed to the region. Moreover, some social media accounts and politicians tried to spread anti-refugee and anti-migrant fake news. The common sense of our people was our biggest weapon against this disinformation campaign, and we avoided any major incidents; however, this showed once again the possibility for dangerous tensions. These groups, just like those in Europe, share xenophobic and anti-migrant messages regularly. But the spread of messages promoting violence during the earthquakes has reminded us of the fact that this kind of disinformation is simply a crime against humanity.

The second example in this vein, at a time when the window of opportunity to save people had not yet closed, was the dissemination of fake news on social media that the dam in Hatay had collapsed. This fake news had begun to spread in the evening hours in a city that had been hardest hit by the earthquakes, and it created great panic in the city. Search and rescue teams, volunteers, and civil servants had to take a break from their life-saving activities. At this time, traffic was jammed, and the dizzying pace of traffic due to the aid vehicles traveling to the region had to be stopped. As is typical in these instances, it

took much longer to spread the truth than the viral dissemination of the fake news. Legal proceedings against these disinformation efforts have started, and our government agencies have set out to fight against other instances of misinformation. Some of the disinformation, unfortunately, found its way into the conventional media channels. As the Communications Directorate, we issued "Earthquake Disinformation Bulletins"[18] to alleviate and contain the detrimental effects of disinformation as well as fight against conspiracy theories that purported to explain the 'real causes of the earthquakes.'

Disinformation campaigns pushed the earthquake victims towards hopelessness and fear while resulting in misguided evaluations of people outside the region. Furthermore, this kind of chaotic and irresponsible dissemination of wrong information and fake news resulted in some violent incidents as well. Some websites and social media accounts imitating official agencies and civil society organizations defaulted on many citizens who were trying to send cash and in-kind donations to the region. Our government has done everything possible to combat misinformation and prevent disinformation campaigns, but they persisted and influenced many people's perceptions about the search and rescue as well as relief efforts. Surely, we will not stop but double down in our fight against disinformation, as the aftermath of the earthquakes showed once again how vital this struggle is for peace and stability in our society.

Conclusion

Our discussion in this article aims to highlight the process by which disinformation has transformed into a threat that threatens national security, social peace and tranquility, and relations between nations. Until very recently, fake news and disinformation were thought to be concerned only with communications and media, but they have become a widespread phenomenon in every crisis around the world. The ability of fake news to spread on social media at a rapid pace has made it a hard-to-control risk factor. Moreover, states began using disinformation as a strategic tool, and information wars have become an essential part of international conflicts. Unconventionally, it has left the door open for states to undermine one another's democratic institutions and processes. As the public's trust in democratic norms has weakened, disinformation operations have become tools to create perceptions inside countries that marginalize certain social groups. Viewpoints supporting xenophobia, anti-migrant attitudes, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism have been amplified by disinformation campaigns on social media. As we saw in the examples of COVID-19 and earthquakes, disinformation has taken on a quality that threatens human lives. The international community must adopt a different approach and actively fight against disinformation as part of a joint effort.

Türkiye has always advocated for a strong fight against disinformation

and brought this issue to the international agenda in numerous global forums. We have highlighted the fact that disinformation and misinformation will become an international threat quickly if sufficient control mechanisms and responsibilities are not made mandatory for social media platforms. We have always been mindful of the fact that our struggle on this front was not only about our national security but had implications for regional and global security as well. The disinformation activities experienced during the Ukraine war and the COVID-19 pandemic have elevated the profile of this topic and underlined the need for international cooperation and coordination. Misinformation and disinformation on global social media platforms can only be effectively fought against through strong cooperation among nations around the world.

Even though some countries have sought to use disinformation as a strategic tool against other nations, the 'boomerang effect' creates a situation where there are no winners but only losers. Moreover, crime syndicates and political manipulators targeting social and economic fault lines have found misinformation and disinformation very useful for their purposes as well. As a result, all concerned and responsible nations must come together around the understanding that there are no winners in this war, and this tool can be destructive for everyone along the way. States, civil society, and traditional and social media companies[19] must all come together to share the burden of fighting disin-

formation. As Türks, we are ready to support every effort to render disinformation campaigns useless. We will continue to be a part of all efforts to eradicate fake news and misinformation. Our fight will not stop until the truth reigns supreme because we believe the truth matters and is a fundamental human right. ●

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Are you concerned with the contemporary world,
where human rights are violated, human dignity is trampled, international
order is indifferent to any principle or value, and the might silences the right?
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