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“Return sons to their borders:”

**Social networking campaign for the liberation of the
five abducted Iranian soldiers**

Dr. Raz Zimmt

The abduction of five Iranian soldiers on the border between Iran and Pakistan in early February was a focus of discussion on Iranian social networks in (SNS) for the last two months. The five were abducted by the Army of Justice (*Jaysh al-Adel*) a Balochi extremist organization, which has claimed responsibility for several operations against Iranian security forces in Sistan-Balochistan province (in southeastern Iran) since its founding in 2012. The Balochi minority, which accounts for two percent of Iran’s population and belongs to the Sunni branch of Islam, is concentrated in this region.¹ On March 23, The Army of Justice announced the execution of one of the five soldiers, Jamshid Danaee-far, and threatened that if the authorities refused to meet its demand for the release of Sunni prisoners being held in Iranian prisons, another soldier would be executed within ten days.² On April 4, the organization released the four surviving soldiers following negotiations mediated by senior Balochi religious leaders.

Shortly after the kidnapping, a wide-ranging public campaign for the captives’ release was launched on SNS. Thousands of online users launched Facebook pages, distributed images, posted messages of support for the struggle, and signed a petition calling for their release. As part of the campaign, the hashtag

#FreeIranianSoldiers was introduced, in order to raise awareness of their fate (see the captioned image displayed to the right).

The execution of Jamshid Danaee-far provoked a lengthy discussion on SNS, which became the main media arena, largely because of the kidnapping's timing during the Iranian New Year festival (Norouz), when the traditional media in Iran is almost entirely shut down for the holiday. The soldier's death quickly led to expressions of both grief and anger. His pictures were widely distributed on



SNS, and social media emphasized that he was the father of an infant who was born only ten days before he was executed. At the same time, many online users directed their fury at the Army of Justice, as well as towards Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, who were accused of aiding the organization. A Facebook page entitled “Demonstrate in front of Pakistani embassies around the world” amassed thousands of followers, and became a focal point for coordinating protests in front of Pakistani missions in Iran and abroad.³

However, most of the public criticism was directed at the helplessness of the Iranian authorities in obtaining the release of the hostages. Some internet users blamed the death of the soldier directly on President Rouhani and his government, arguing that their efforts had been deficient. One user wrote that it would have been better if the president had concentrated on freeing the soldiers, instead of texting New Year's greeting to Iranian citizens.⁴ The Facebook page of Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was flooded with thousands of comments from citizens who complained that the diplomatic efforts invested in resolving the crisis were insufficient. One user cynically demanded the minister act to free the “5-1” (five minus one) instead of conducting the nuclear negotiations with the group of countries known as the “5+1” (five plus one). Another surfer said that Iranians were willing to be patient with their difficult economic situation, but would not tolerate the indifference of government officials to the fate of kidnapped soldiers.⁵ The harsh criticism prompted the foreign minister to post a comment that highlighted the government's commitment to the release of the soldiers. In addition, the foreign minister wrote that while he understood the criticism of the government, people ought to be careful about sloganeering, which would not help the soldiers and could even complicate the situation.⁶

The criticism on the SNS was also directed against the security forces, and especially the Revolutionary Guards. Many users claimed that if the kidnapped soldiers had been members of the Revolutionary Guards rather than “ordinary soldiers,” the



authorities would have exerted more effort to obtain their release. To support this argument they mentioned the extensive efforts Iran had made to secure the release of 48 Iranians, including some members of the Revolutionary Guards, who were kidnapped by Syrian rebels in summer 2012. One user wrote sarcastically that Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force

(the elite unit of the Guard Revolutionary operating outside of Iran) is capable of releasing only Revolutionary Guards held prisoner in Syria.⁷

It was interesting to see that in an attempt to highlight the government's inability in this case, some users mentioned positively the efforts that Israel invests in releasing kidnapped soldiers, especially Gilad Shalit. Shalit's picture was distributed hundreds of times on social networks, while emphasizing the government's commitment to bring about his release. "Sometimes I say, the Israelis are much better than we are," wrote one user. "Even though they do not pity the Palestinians, they are willing to exchange hundreds of Palestinians for a single Israeli soldier."⁸ It should also be noted that some surfers did express some reservations about the strong criticism of government institutions. They argued that internal criticism, before the soldiers were released, might weaken Iran and serve the interests of the terrorists.

The discourse on SNS about the kidnapped soldiers also revealed differences of opinion about the strategy the Iranian authorities adopted to end the crisis. While some users expressed support for negotiating with the Balochi organization for a prisoner exchange, others rejected any possibility of negotiations and demanded the government to take military steps to liquidate the Army of Justice. A note published on the Facebook page of human rights activist Negin Bank called on citizens to demonstrate outside the offices of the Judiciary and the Supreme National Security Council to demand the release of Sunni prisoners imprisoned in Iran and prevent the execution of another soldier.⁹ Yet others argued that releasing prisoners would encourage terrorist organizations to kidnap more soldiers in the future, and that the only way to end the affair was an assault on the Army of Justice and its supporters.

On the margins of this discourse, there was also discussion of the ongoing discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities in Iran generally, and the distress of the Balochis specifically, which creates fertile ground for sprouting extremist separatist organizations. Some users called on the government to improve the situation of minorities and residents of the periphery, who suffer from prolonged neglect, poverty and unemployment. Shortly after the release of the soldiers

journalist Behrouz Shojaei noted the role of Balochi religious leaders in obtaining the soldiers' release, and called on the government to establish a Sunni mosque in Tehran and allow Sunnis to conduct Friday prayers in accordance with their religious beliefs.¹⁰

The campaign to liberate the kidnapped soldiers is further evidence of the Iranian public's readiness to mobilize around issues it considers to have great national value. In this case, the discourse on SNS expressed a strong, shared national consciousness, despite differences about the policy best used to solve the crisis. The struggle to free the soldiers managed to unite citizens with different political views in Iran and the Iranian diaspora. It became a channel for expressing Iranian patriotism and solidarity around a common purpose, similar to the campaign by Iranian surfers against calling the Persian Gulf the "Arabian Gulf," or opposing expressions of separatism in Iran.¹¹ The campaign demonstrates the great potential of SNS to exert public pressure on authorities. Mobilizing tens of thousands of social media users in the struggle for abducted soldiers left the government without the option of ignoring public pressure, and forced it to act to resolve the crisis. It became clear that SNS have the power to force even non-democratic regimes to take domestic public opinion into account, especially when the public demonstrates sensitivity to a particular issue.

Moderates versus radicals: Shi'is in Saudi Arabia as seen on SNS

Nachum Shiloh

The Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where approximately one-quarter of the world's oil reserves are located, is home to a large Shi'i population of more than two million people. From 1913 (when Saudis conquered the district from the Ottomans) until 1929 (when the founder of the Saudi kingdom Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud suppressed the Ikhwan (a militant Wahhabi movement) the Shi'i population was politically, culturally, and economically oppressed, in part because many clerics considered them heretics who should convert to the Wahhabi Sunna. Tough measures including limiting Shi'i rituals, expropriating the assets of Shi'ilandowners, heavy taxation, and violence were employed and many Shi'a fled to Iraq and Bahrain, while others declared a rebellion that sometimes deteriorated into an armed struggle.

Ibn Saud, who wanted to establish a modern, progressive state, led a change in the state's attitude to the Shi'a beginning in the 1930s. King Saud (1953-1964) and King Faisal (1964-1975) also made limited attempts to integrate them in the country's administrative and economic systems. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1978-79 reshuffled the deck, and in November 1979 violent riots broke out in the Saudi cities Al-Hasa, Al-Qatif, Dammam, Al-Khobar and Saihat in the Eastern Province. During

this period King Khalid (1975-1982) and heads of the Saudi government considered the Shi'a an Iranian "fifth column," rather than a persecuted Saudi community subject to ongoing discrimination, and so they responded to the riots with unprecedented force. From 1979 to 1983, dozens of Shi'a were killed in clashes with Saudi security forces and many more were arrested. Saudi authorities forbade the Shi'a to practice their rituals, such as the observance of the Ashura holiday. Leaders of the Shi'i community had no choice but to keep a low profile and avoid expressing either overt criticism of the Saudi authorities or support for Iran.¹² They adopted the principle of *taqiyyah* (dissimulation; or concealing their Shi'i identity for the sake of survival in hostile conditions) that many Shi'i communities throughout history have adopted when living under Sunni regimes. Until recently, it seemed that the moderate, cautious voices of religious leaders was the dominant voice in Saudi Shi'i communities. Other than exceptional local events, most prominently the Al-Khobar attack in 1996 attributed to the Hezbollah Hijaz, no violent incidents were recorded.

Increasing use of the Internet and the development of social networks (SNS) have reversed the tide. The Arab Spring spread like wildfire across the Middle East starting in December 2010 and did not spare the Eastern Province. Other, more radical voices began to emerge, taking cover under the anonymity provided by SNS and remote Web servers. Beyond the reach of the Saudi government's long arm, the deep polarization between moderate and radical Shi'a was exposed. Representatives of the moderate wing include the website of Sheikh Hassan bin Musa al-Saffar, a leader of the Shi'a in the Eastern Province. The site's content, presented his name and the names of other religious leaders, relates mostly to theological issues. The sections dealing with society and politics express moderate messages: calls for the adoption of the principle of citizenship rather than ethnicity; support for rapprochement between Shi'is and Sunnis; complete rejection of violence of any kind and statements about the importance of maintaining the security and stability of the Saudi homeland.¹³ Similar messages can be found Facebook pages of Shi'i clerics including Sheikh Abdullah al-Hanizi, Sheikh Abdul-Karim Al-Hobail and others who concentrate on theological content and avoid political issues.¹⁴

A completely different picture emerges from websites maintained by radical Shi'a who unceasingly decry the tyrannical regime they claim oppresses its citizens and violates their basic human rights. For example, awamia.net is identified with the large Shi'i population in Al-Awamiyah, the site of frequent clashes between the security forces and Shi'a. It features slogans like the "Intifada of Honor" and "Karbala of the Gulf."¹⁵ Photos and videos on the site show grim scenes of the dead and wounded in clashes with security forces, as well as arrests



Homeland without rights.
Picture from awamia.net

and funerals.¹⁶ The writers on these sites express complete solidarity with the Shi'a in Bahrain and their struggle against the Sunni regime.¹⁷

The radical Shi'i movements also transmit their messages using Facebook and Twitter accounts that can be used to map Shi'i opposition groups in Saudi Arabia, and measure the impact of militant movements. For example, the limited impact of the Revolutionary Movement of Al-Qatif is apparent when you consider that its Facebook page has only some 600 fans. Conversely, the Advocates of Freedom for Saihat has approximately 8,000 fans, while the Revolution of the Eastern Province has accumulated, as of this writing, nearly 29,000 fans.



Logo of the
Advocates of Freedom for Saihat

In the transition from virtual space to local politics, Internet browsing statistics are an indication of moods among the Shi'i population of the Eastern Province, since opinion polls are rare in Saudi Arabia, especially on sensitive political and social issues. Browsing data indicates, for example, that the website of Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, a moderate cleric, has about 2,700 visitors per month, while the radical awamia.net has approximately 3,000 visits per month.¹⁸ This small difference is evidence that the Shi'i public in Saudi Arabia is currently split in its positions towards the regime. A change in this delicate balance might be a sign of shifting moods and indicative of another wave of uprisings in the region.

Can the Cat Guard the Cream ?

Deepening polarization in Turkish society in light of the municipal elections

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Last month, Turkish-language social networks (SNS) were occupied with the municipal elections, not only because their political importance, but also in light of the accompanying turmoil surrounding the government's blocking access to Twitter and YouTube on the one hand and allegations of fraud on the other. Together, these issues illustrate the growing political polarization in Turkish society today.

As explained in previous issues of Beehive, SNS have recently become the major channel for expressing criticism against Erdoğan and his government. A few days before the elections, his opponents leaked a recording revealing the intentions of government officials, including Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the head of the Turkish intelligence organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan, to foment a military confrontation with the Syrian regime. Following the leak and attempts to prevent

further dissemination of the recording, the government ordered the Turkish Telecommunications Authority (TİB) to block access to YouTube.¹⁹ This move aroused a firestorm on SNS. Erdoğan's opponents were quick to accuse him of silencing the opposition and even raised the possibility that Prime Minister was seeking adventure in Syria solely in order to postpone the municipal elections.²⁰ Conversely, supporters of Erdoğan justified the move by arguing that it was necessary for protecting Turkey's national security.

However, predictions that the recording and corruption scandals exposed in recent months would weaken Erdoğan²¹ proved wrong when the polls closed. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) won an overwhelming victory with 44.19% of the vote.²² Moreover, Erdoğan again managed to win in the important Istanbul and Ankara districts, which are considered a reflection of the prevailing political winds in Turkey as a whole.

However, Erdoğan's feeling of victory was overshadowed by allegations of electoral fraud and intentional disruptions in the electrical supply throughout Turkey on election day. Against this background, the Republican People's



Party (CHP)'s supporters on Twitter (despite it being officially blocked by TİB) called for an appeal on the results in some districts, notably the capital Ankara.²³ In response to these accusations, the Minister of Energy Taner Yıldız explained that the power supply was interrupted around the country because a cat had infiltrated the main power distribution unit, and Yıldız called on the opposition to stop making excuses for its defeat.²⁴ The social networks quickly responded to the minister with a "cat map" showing the locations across Turkey where power outages occurred on election day (see the image displayed above).



Right: Here's the cat who did it!!!
Left: Friends, I'm off to the power

Moreover, many surfers expressed their lack of confidence in the minister's explanation by distributing a wide variety of cat pictures on SNS (see the image displayed below), each allegedly showing the cat who damaged the electrical system in Turkey. Two of the most popular showed a cat in dressed as a suicide bomber, and another as a Jew. The creators of the latter

sought to ridicule the new habit in Turkey of blaming Israel for any matter that does not have an immediate solution.²⁵ Thus, a cat has become a symbol of no-confidence

in the government in Ankara, and represents the growing polarization in Turkish society.

However harsh the criticism of the election procedures, the results – starting with the fact that none of the opposition parties crossed the threshold of 30% – are conclusive proof that the Turkish opposition is bankrupt. Against this background, a group of young people who recently began to show an interest in politics joined CHP. They initiated a campaign with the slogan #OccupyCHP and held meetings aimed at formulating a strategy to strengthen the position of the party in Turkish society, as an alternative to AKP. Although the party leadership was roundly criticized by the new group at these meetings, they publicly backed the new campaign and expressed support for the young party members.²⁶

The election results also show that the Turkish people have again made a powerful statement against any attempt at external intervention in the political system. If the people once punished the army for involvement in political life, it is now punishing the Hizmet movement for seeking to influence public opinion by leaking embarrassing recordings of national leaders on SNS. Nevertheless, even in the face of Hizmet's failure, SNS still reflect the prevailing winds in Turkish society, and recent efforts to block them did not actually limit their functioning and effectiveness as a platform for expressing social and political attitudes. Rather, the problem is that SNS have become the arena for clashes that contribute to the deepening polarization in Turkish society, polarization that is quintessentially symbolized by a cat.

¹ For additional information on the increased struggle between the Iranian authorities and the BBB organizations, see Raz Zimmt, "New Government, Old Conflict: Renewed Escalation In Iran's Balochistan Province," Iran Pulse No. 53, December 5, 2013.

<http://humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/previous-reviews/10-iran-pulse-en/266-iran-pulse-no-62>.

² <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%88%D8%B2/224122577778684> ; <https://twitter.com/jaishaladl> ; http://edaalatnews.blogspot.co.il/2014/03/blog-post_8549.html.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%AA%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%BE%D8%A7%DA%A9%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%86/1405722353029192>

⁴ https://www.facebook.com/ebrahim.nabavi1/posts/10152178409606865?comment_id=29681466&offset=0&total_comments=45

⁵ https://www.facebook.com/izarif?ref=br_tf.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/izarif/posts/776295132381937>.

⁷ <http://alef.ir/vdcgnz9xtak9x34.rpra.html?220654>.

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<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=850924438254551&set=a.419359904744342.112700.418014398212226&type=1>.

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/negin.bank> March 25, 2014.

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/behrouzshojaei>, April 4, 2014.

¹¹ See for example, Raz Zimmt, "Conference in support of Khuzestani Arabs convenes in Cairo during Foreign Minister Salehi's visit to Egypt, provoking anger from Iran" Spotlight on Iran, January 14, 2013, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20462>.

¹² For more on the history of the Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia, Fuad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London & San Francisco: Saqi Books, 2006).

¹³ <http://www.saffar.org/?act=artc&id=3319>

<http://www.saffar.org/?act=artc&id=3309>

<http://www.saffar.org/?act=artc&id=3301>

<http://www.saffar.org/?act=artc&id=3303>.

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/Hobail>

¹⁵

<https://www.awamia.net/index.php/%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A9/index.1.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.awamia.net/index.php/video/index.1.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.awamia.net/index.php/permalink/8252.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.domainsigma.com/whois/saffar.org>

<http://www.domainsigma.com/whois/awamia.net>

¹⁹ "YouTube Kapatıldı", Yeni Şafak, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/gundem-haber/youtube-kapatildi-28.03.2014-630245>

²⁰ [#youtubeblockedinturkey](#) [#İtibarımızıSIFIRLADILAR](#) [#TurkeyBlockedYoutube](#) [#SavasaHayır](#)

²¹ See: Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, "Return of Religion to the Internet: Fethullah Gülen against Erdoğan," Beehive vol. 1, issue 4 (December 2013)

<http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/Beehive%20142013.pdf>

²² <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yerel-secim-2014/>"Seçim 2014", Hürriyet,

²³ [#oyTutanaklari](#)

²⁴ "Enerji Bakanı Taner Yıldız: Trafoya kedi girdi", Hürriyet

²⁵ [#kedilobisi](#) [#KedidirKedi](#)

²⁶ [#occupyCHP](#)