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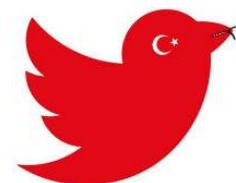
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Social Networks, Released Generals, and Loaves of Bread: Where is Turkey heading?

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Approaching the final stretch of the race for local elections of March 30, three separate issues incited public opinion, creating a tense atmosphere in Turkey: Prime Minister Erdoğan's decree blocking access to Twitter, the release of prisoners from the Ergenekon affair, and protests following the death of Berkin Elvan, a young boy injured during the riots in Gezi Park last June. Whether the government moves to grab power from web surfers, the judiciary, or 'the street', social networks provide avenues for citizens to express their views, and opportunities for the mobilization of political forces that may eventually challenge Erdoğan's rule.

The February issue of Beehive discussed the new laws initiated by Erdoğan, which gave the government unprecedented power to control cyberspace.¹ Due to the pressure that the Turkish government applies on mainstream media, SNS were the only channels available to voice independent opposition. For instance, SNS



EBERT

Blocking free speech

enabled the exposure of corruption allegedly involving Erdoğan and many leaders of

the AKP. This undoubtedly led to Erdoğan's attempts to limit cyberspace in Turkey. Despite intense public criticism of this move, both domestically and internationally, Erdoğan shows no signs of wavering, and last month took an even stronger stance. In a television interview, Erdoğan declared that he plans to block access to YouTube and Facebook networks after the election, arguing that they threaten the national security of Turkey. His statements provoked a storm of activity on social networks.² His opponents were quick to accuse him of doing serious damage to Turkey's international image, while trampling civil liberties at home. Some surfers even threatened to harm to the Prime Minister, with tweets reading: "If you block Twitter, we'll 'click on you.'"³ Erdoğan's declaration caused waves overseas, leading to sharp criticism from the White House, which labeled the move a severe blow to freedom of expression.⁴ Erdoğan initially refrained from responding, but after six days he stated that he does not intend to completely block SNS, but only to subordinate their usage to the national security needs of the country.

At the same time, as a sign of his true intentions, Erdoğan instructed the Supreme Council for Television and Radio, the RTÜK, to implement the new regulations. In a speech in Bursa on March 20, he announced his intention to "eradicate" Twitter, which is a major channel of activity against him. Shortly after the speech, the Turkish Telecommunications Authority (TIB) used the authority to block websites it was given in February, to block access to Twitter, and on March 27th, to YouTube as well. The timing of the decision is not coincidental. According to rumors circulating on SNS for the past several weeks, Erdoğan's opponents had planned "doomsday leaks" before the elections concerning the Prime Minister's alleged marital fidelity.

Although the Prime Minister has moved to attempt to takeover of the leading media channels in the country, it should be noted that the Turkish government cannot impose hermetic control over the Internet, as it has done with the traditional media sources. Surfers have already found ways to circumvent the ban by either changing the country of origin in their browsing settings or by using applications such as Hotspot or Hola that offer anonymous networking. Online comments continued to flow after the blockage of Twitter, comparing it to barriers imposed in China, and

referring to Erdoğan as a “dictator.”⁵ Despite the outrage due to the blocking of Twitter, tweeters cautioned each other not to demonstrate on the streets, in order not to give Erdoğan a pretext to delay the elections.⁶

Despite the ban, even Erdoğan’s supporters have been observed tweeting. They point a finger at the Sunni cleric, Fethullah Gülen and his followers, accusing that their *Hizmet* movement, which allegedly controls the legal system, initiated the ban in an attempt to harm the reputation of Erdoğan.⁷

Another major issue that occupied Turkish public opinion last month is the common phenomenon of long detentions without sentencing. Since 2007, Kemalist military officers and numerous journalists have been jailed on charges of “subversive activities” against the government without trial. After growing public protest following the rapid release of those at the center of the recent high-level corruption scandals, the parliament voted on March 10 that the maximum period of detention without sentencing will be shortened from ten to five years. The new law led to the release of 53 Kemalists from Silivri prison, who were all officers identified with the Ergenekon case,⁸ which symbolizes the power struggle between Erdoğan and the country’s military-secular establishment, headed by the former Chief of Staff, İlker Başbuğ.

The legislation of March 10th was enabled by Erdoğan's comprehensive reform of the judiciary, which gave the executive branch greater powers. Erdoğan has, moreover, attempted to rid the judicial branch of public officials associated with his political rival, Fethullah Gülen. In response, Gülen’s supporters sharply criticized the government’s reforms on SNS and banded together under the slogan, “The judiciary controlled by the executive branch.”⁹ However, Kemalists and other opponents of Erdoğan, who are not allied with Gülen's *Hizmet* movement, consider the release of the Ergenekon prisoners a positive step for the future of Turkey. Those supporting the military-secular political wing have called on ex-Chief of Staff, İlker Başbuğ to run in the presidential election this coming August.

The above issues made headlines, but it was the death of a 14 year-old boy, Berkin Elvan, that directly charged the atmosphere of the Turkish street. Elvan sustained a head injury when hit by the casing of tear gas canister during the riots in Gezi Park, while on an errand to buy a loaf of bread.



I brought the bread.

His age played a key role in the messages spread by opponents of Erdoğan on SNS. They published cartoons stressing his youth and the fact that he was an innocent victim of random violence by security forces (pictured). Through his tragic death, a loaf of bread, long a symbol representing the staple food for the poor, has now become a political symbol for the opposition, whose meaning is effectively the inverse of the shoe boxes that are a symbol of the recently exposed government corruption.



Immediately after Elvan's death, many surfers changed their profile photo to an image of a boy with angel wings and a loaf of bread in his hand (pictured), and uploaded slogans like "Berkin is immortal."¹⁰ In response to these, supporters of AKP distributed alleged images of Elvan throwing metal marbles at

the police, and claiming that he was not innocent (pictured). Nevertheless, huge demonstrations in Elvan's memory took place in 32 districts across Turkey, most prominently in Istanbul's Okmeydanı neighborhood, where the Elvan family lives. Tensions peaked with a street brawl, in which a supporter of Erdoğan was shot to death. Despite the violent incident, demonstrators carrying protest signs and loaves of bread continued to appear in town squares.



Governmental attempts at blocking of access to Twitter and YouTube are further proof of central role played by SNS in public discourse in Turkey. Candidates on all parts of the political spectrum face potentially damaging leaks, rumors and attacks on the web, in local and national elections. For Erdoğan in particular, his showing in

the March 30 local elections will reflect on his strength going into the August national elections. upcoming elections will constitute an important crossroads. Various polls have predicted that his camp will be supported by 33-41% of the voters. The accepted evaluation is that if Erdoğan is supported by more than 40% of the voters, he has an increased chance of being elected in the presidential election scheduled for August this year. However, he probably will not demand extended presidential powers for himself, as he had planned before the riots in Gezi Park and the conflict with the *Hizmet* movement of Fethullah Gülen. Erdoğan may even try to advance the date of the general elections (now scheduled for June 2015) in order to maintain the high proportion of support. On the other hand, support lower than 40% in the local elections, which constitutes a representative sample, and will translate into weakness for Erdoğan in the upcoming general elections. In that case, if the opposition forces are wise enough to establish an effective alliance capable of forming a government in Erdoğan's place.

Social Networks in the Struggle of Sufi Dervishes against the Regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In recent years, Iranian authorities have stepped up their struggle against Sufi Muslim mystical orders,¹¹ particularly that of the Nematollahi-Gonabadi, which is considered the largest order with approximately two million adherents among Shi'i Muslims. Repressive actions by state authorities against members of the order include, but are not limited to: summoning members for interrogation, arrests, restrictions on educational activities and centers associated with the order, including police raids, pressure on workplaces to dismiss adherents, and the blocking of websites used by the order. The intensified confrontation between the regime and members of the Sufi orders (dervishes) in Iran recently led them to expand their struggle into the online arena.

Suppressing the activity of certain Sufi orders, is one example of a comprehensive campaign conducted by the regime to control the country's religious life by suppressing all popular Islamic streams that promote alternative forms of religious expression, including messianic Shi'a movements. Popular interpretations of Islam, which challenge the orthodox religious establishment and its exclusive, official interpretation by undermining the "rule of the religious jurist" as practiced in the Islamic Republic since 1979, is a significant theological, ideological, and political threat to the regime.¹²

In recent weeks, the confrontation between the authorities and the Sufi orders was reignited after a dervish of the Nematollahi-Gonabadi Order, who is imprisoned in Tehran's Evin prison, began a hunger strike to protest the denial of medical treatment to other imprisoned members of the order. Another eight members, held in four prisons around Iran, soon joined the strike. In a letter sent to Ali Younesi, President Rouhani's advisor for religious and ethnic minorities, the hunger strikers demanded an end to oppression of the dervishes, and to the discrimination practiced against them by the authorities.¹³ Following the hunger strike, thousands of Sufis in Iran and abroad launched an extensive publicity campaign, culminating in protest marches held on the 8th and 9th of March in front of the prosecutor's office in Tehran (pictured).

The Sufis' struggle against the authorities has been completely ignored in Iranian media, except for several websites affiliated with the reformist opposition that operate outside Iran. This is not the first time that the establishment media in Iran has disregarded Sufi protests. For example, it almost completely ignored the long hunger strike



Protest march in front of the General Prosecutor's Office in Tehran

several members of the order conducted in Adel Abad prison in Shiraz last year (March 2013), to protest the conditions under which dervishes and their attorneys were being held in Evin prison. In February 2014, the persistent neglect caused Sufis to demand that President Rouhani put an end to “news blackout” the media had imposed on their cause.¹⁴ In any case, the absence of traditional media coverage of their struggle means that social networks (SNS) have become the main platform for transmitting the Sufis’ messages and protest.

Since early March 2014, members of Nematollahi-Gonabadi, human rights activists and activists in the reformist opposition have used Facebook pages and Twitter accounts to report the Sufi hunger strikers’ struggle. In the days preceding the protest rally in Tehran, SNS were the main means for recruiting protesters and supporters. Regular updates about the protest activities were shared by hundreds of people on SNS. During the violent clashes that erupted between the protesting Sufis and security forces, SNS became the nearly exclusive source for transmitting regular updates about events in Tehran. Facebook pages affiliated with the Sufi website *Majzooban Noor* (literally, “drawn to the light”) were a key source of information about events near the public prosecutor’s office in Tehran, especially when the site itself was down for several hours, probably as a result of activity directed by the authorities.¹⁵

Surfers posted real-time images and reports about clashes between demonstrators and security forces. During these clashes, over two hundred members of the Sufi order, including several dozen women, were arrested. Throughout the two days of protest marches, personal testimonies were uploaded by participating human rights activists, including Sedigheh Khalili, the wife of Hamid Reza Moradi, a jailed dervish lawyer, and Reza Khandan, the husband of attorney Nasrin Sotoudeh, a human rights activist, who was released in September 2013 after serving three years as political prisoner in Evin prison. Khandan and Khalili testified about the security forces’ brutal treatment of protesters, which included the use of tear gas and batons, pulling demonstrators’ hair, and beatings.¹⁶

In their comments on SNS, users strongly criticized the continuing violations of rights of Sufi dervishes, and demanded that President Rouhani fulfill his election promise to halt discrimination against religious minorities and religious groups in the Islamic Republic. In a response on the Facebook page of BBC news in Farsi, one surfer wrote that the Sufis are considered a religious minority in Iran and infringement of their rights must not be allowed, stating that, “I am not a dervish, I am not a Sunni Muslim, neither a Christian nor a Jew, but as a human being, I must be attentive to the pain of my fellow-citizens, at least on Facebook.”

In short, while the Islamic regime is working to impose its exclusive interpretation of Islam and preserve the status of its official clergy, the Sufi orders continue to function openly, thus expressing clear defiance of the theological and political authorities. The activism of members of the Nematollahi-Gonabadi Order on SNS has contributed greatly to raising awareness and garnering public support for their struggle, thereby strengthening, even slightly, their position against the regime. It can be assumed that SNS will continue to function as the principle publicity tool of Iranian Sufis in the future, helping them to offer a religious and political alternative to the existing religious establishment.

Victims of the Syrian Civil War Portrayed in Social Media: Children in the Eye of the Storm

Joel D. Parker

In the past year, Syrians using social networking sites (SNS) have shared a number of graphic images of suffering children as victims of the civil war.¹⁷ These locally sourced images have generated a strong reaction around the world, with a number of non-governmental organizations releasing reports drawing particular attention to the plight of children.¹⁸ One such, report released this month by Amnesty International, accuses the Syrian government of using forced starvation as a war tactic—an accusation that could impact on future trials against regime figures.¹⁹ Although graphic images of violence against children have been circulated on the

web since the beginning of the civilian uprising and the regime's crackdown in March 2011, images of the suffering of children in recent months have begun to generate humanitarian sentiment around the world.

This is not a toy, this is Zein a child who died of starvation by Assad occupation in #Ghouta #Damascus #Syria pic.twitter.com/blgghMoK7h



RETWEETS 174 FAVORITES 25
6:42 AM - 17 Feb 2014

These brutal images appearing on social networks, including even dead babies with visible signs of chronic malnutrition (see picture), expose the acts of the Damascus regime to the world. Such images of children point to the fact that the reality is different than what the Assad regime is trying to present in its propaganda. There is a contradiction between images of innocent starving children in Syria, and images that attempt to portray the regime as the protector of the people, such as those published last year on Instagram of Syria's

first lady, Asma al-Assad, showing her handing out food, or ladling soup into bowls of Syrians displaced by war.²⁰

Activists and international news organizations have also published harsh images on the web describing the desperation of hungry Syrians, such as one of civilians skinning a lion for food. Such images have been accompanied by quotes mentioning fatwas by Muslim religious leaders allowing for those in besieged areas to eat even non-hallal meat from cats, dogs, and even more exotic animals if necessary.²¹ Such images tend to particularly shock pious Muslims, who have strict religious dietary laws that are only to be broken in the most extreme of situations where eating the forbidden meat is a matter of life or death.

In any case, studies have shown that images of starving humans usually evoke psychosomatic affects in viewers no matter what their background,²² though the active response may vary from culture to culture and depending on the specific situation at hand. Generally speaking however, the use of images of suffering children tends to mobilize widespread empathy by implying that these could be

"your" children (see picture). In the Syrian case, owing to the fact that adults made all the decisions to escalate violence, children are seen as caught in the middle, undeserving of the fate that has been handed them.



Another type of images circulating on SNS focuses on distraught Syrian mothers holding their emaciated child. At times however, no child is shown, but only a crying mother, or several crying women. Although the

grieving mother image might be considered to have universal appeal, it has particularly strong connotations in the Eastern Mediterranean culture, which gave birth to iconic images of Mary and baby Jesus. Moreover, these images of suffering women and children are in contrast with some pro-regime propaganda that has at times juxtaposed soldiers and civilian women and children in an attempt to show that their purpose for fighting is supposedly to protect the weak.²³

The emphasis on the suffering of those caught in the middle of a war not of their choosing indicates a shift away from images of anti-regime protests that dominated in the early days of the revolution in 2011, when snipers first began to fire on civilians. In those days children and youths were often portrayed on social networks as leading protests and calling for an end to the Assad regime. Since then, children have often been featured as victims of violence, and in particular as victims of chemical attacks in August 2013.

The universally affective nature of images of suffering children on SNS has proven itself recently to the extent that it served as part of the background of the international Geneva II conference, where the Assad regime agreed to partially lift the sieges of Yarmouk and Homs.²⁴ Even Russia, which has been a staunch supporter of the Assad regime tried at first to stall a resolution for aid to desperate civilians, and then reversed its course last month as mounting pressure helped the United

¹⁸ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/03/15/Syria-s-children-its-future-are-at-stake.html>; http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/15/syria-war-children_n_4967063.html;

See also videos by celebrities such as Stephen Hawking for Save the Children, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YKlr1Sq-jE#t=50> , and David Beckham for UNICEF, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMNe6LIWxTw> .

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26481422> ; See, "Squeezing the life out of Yarmouk: War Crimes against Besieged Civilians," Amnesty International Report, March 10, 2014, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE24/008/2014/en>.

²⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/09/05/asma-al-assad-syrian-presidents-wife-instagram-charity-work-pictures_n_3873433.html.

²¹ Steve Nolan, "Starving Syrians Butcher a Zoo's Lion...," *Daily Mail UK*, 29 November, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2515514/Starving-Syrians-butcher-zoos-LION-eat-worst-sign-desperate-civilians-food.html>.

²² Peter Lang, Margaret Bradley, and Bruce Cuthbert, "The International Affective Picture System," University of Florida, 2005, <ftp://dhcp-129-105-171-164.psych.northwestern.edu/OpenShare/ESPN/IAPS%201-16/IAPS%201-16/IAPSmanual.pdf>

²³ For instance the famous music video of 'Ali al-Deek, "Sabah al-Kheyr Suriya," [Good Morning, Syria] shows Christian and Muslim women talking at a table, and then moves to soldiers preparing for war, implying that the latter are there to protect the former.

²⁴ <http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/james-denselow/syria-from-corridor-diplomacy-to-humanitarian-corridors>.

²⁵ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/14/us-syria-crisis-humanitarian-idUSBREA2D16J20140314>