BeeHive
Middle East Social Media

Editors: Dr. Harel Chorev, Smadar Shaul

Volume 6, Issue 4, April 2018

Table of Contents

From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the April 2018 issue of Beehive. The first article in this issue reviews the responses on Turkish social media to the West's military attack on the Assad regime, following the chemical attack on Duma. Next, we discuss the farmers' protest in the Isfahan province of Iran, which erupted because of the growing water shortage in that province, a crisis that exposes the Iranian authorities' helplessness in addressing the water crisis, and which is one of the most significant challenges now faced by the Islamic Republic. The issue concludes with an article on how countries around the world and especially in the Middle East use technologies, mostly developed in the West, for monitoring and surveillance of internet users.

Enjoy!

Turkey's Ambivalent View of Syria

Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

The chemical attack carried out by the Assad regime in Duma and the military counter-attack by Western forces under the leadership of the United States made their mark on the public discourse within Turkish social media. Turkey shares 911 kilometers of border with Syria and currently houses more than 3 million Syrian refugees, so it is deeply affected by events within its neighbor's territory. Furthermore, Turkey's foreign policy, led by President Erdoğan, is acting to position Turkey as a leading, active player in the Middle East politically and militarily, in contrast to the country's traditional policy of regional non-interference. The discourse on social media reveals the underlying issues in the dispute between the different camps in Turkey regarding the Syrian issue.

In general, secular users disapprove of Erdoğan's support of the Free Syrian Army, whose members they consider to be religious extremists. They prefer to emphasize secularism as a common denominator connecting them to the Assad camp. Moreover, they oppose the wave of Syrian refugees that have entered the country, which they claim has led to the "conquest of the Turkish cities" and an increase in the unemployment rate among Turkish citizens due to the availability of

Figure 1: A poster disseminated by opponents of Erdoğan, depicting the proposal to grant citizenship to Syrian refugees as a deal between Erdoğan and the refugees. The title reads, "Take citizenship, take the vote," from Twitter.

cheap manpower provided by Syrian refugees. In addition, the issue of granting the refugees citizenship, which was first raised as a possibility in July 2016,[1] was perceived by secularists as one of Erdoğan's many maneuvers in preparation for the planned April 2017 referendum, which was intended to create additional electoral support for himself (figure 1). The proposal was finally shelved following the failed coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2017.

However, secular users' sharpest criticism focuses on the losses suffered by the Turkish army during its military operations in Syria. Secular users, who were not convinced of the necessity of military intervention in northern Syria, launched an online campaign against the government's decision under the slogan "The Turkish soldier at the front and the Syrian refugee in a cafe." Their demand, which is shared by extreme nationalists, is to change Turkish foreign policy, as a way of normalizing relations with Syria in order to, among other things, formulate an arrangement for the refugees' return home. This is, apparently, the reason why they have mostly refrained from criticizing Assad for using chemical weapons against his own people, and which was excused as being part of his effort to protect Syrian soil from ostensibly 'imperialist' intervention. Therefore,

these users denounced the Western response to the attack and the countries involved, under the hashtag "We are with Syria" (figure 2). Users described the attack as an imperialist move that serves "only the arms dealers."[2] Some even drew a parallel between the Western attack and the false claims made by former US President George W. Bush against Saddam Hussein, which led to the conquest of Iraq and many casualties in the region.[3]

Erdoğan was also criticized on social media under the hashtag "No to War," which secular users used to accuse him of cooperation with the West, against the backdrop of his support of the military action against Assad's regime.[4] Some even cynically used Islamist terms like "crusaders" to describe Western countries, adopting the style of discourse used by Erdoğan's supporters in the opposing

Figure 2: A poster disseminated by the Nationalist Party, titled: "Against the imperialist attack, [we] stand with Syria," from Twitter

camp. From the perspective of secular users, this is proof how important relations with the West are for Erdoğan, even more than his relations with the "Islamic nation," in their words, which is being targeted by the West. They also quoted past statements made by Erdoğan, in which he sharply criticized the Western presence in Syria, which in turn has earned him the label "two-faced."

Erdoğan's supporters, on the other hand, expressed their support for the Syrian refugees, while harshly criticizing Assad, whom they called "a murderer." They claimed that the Turkish president is the only leader to speak with the voice of justice, and did not spare criticism of the West, which they claim distinguishes between blood and blood, and does not respond adequately when the blood of innocent Muslims is shed.[5] Erdoğan himself expressed similar criticism, as shown in the posters that his supporters shared on social media. In their posts, the term "two-faced" is used to describe Western countries. Erdoğan's supporters also acted to justify the Turkish military presence in northern Syria, which they claim provides the only possibility for returning the Syrian refugees to their homes. Support for the Syrian refugees is also found in Turkish textbooks printed in recent years, in which the refugees are referred to as "brothers," like the "*Ensar Kardeşliği*" - an historical term referring to the behavior of the hosts who welcomed the immigrants from Mecca who migrated to Medina under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad.

Despite the critical stance expressed by Erdoğan's supporters towards the West, they welcomed news of the military attack against Assad. These contradictory reactions expose their ambivalent position towards the United States. On one hand, Erdoğan's supporters demand US withdrawal from Syria because of the pro-Kurdish stance of the Trump government. On the other hand, they ask the US to take decisive action against Assad. It seems, therefore, that hatred of Assad is now surpassing hatred of the Kurds among many of Erdoğan's supporters. After the offensive ended and its results became clear, users became even more frustrated by the limited scope of the

damage done to what they called "real estate" targets, because of the United States' reluctance to provoke Russia. Russia was also the subject of ambivalent responses, including praise for its cooperation with Turkey in the negotiations regarding Syria, and its assistance in building the first Turkish nuclear reactor in Akkuyu in southern Turkey, while pointing an accusing finger at Putin for his support of Assad.

The discourse on Turkish social media reveals, once again, the ideological rift in Turkish society, which has also spread to the foreign policy issues that have themselves become an inseparable part of domestic politics. It is clear that the secular worldview is becoming more extreme in opposition to the pan-Islamic identification of supporters of the administration. Despite the disagreement between the secular-nationalist camp and Erdoğan's supporters regarding the preferred foreign policy toward Syria, the discourse reveals that many people in both camps share anti-American positions. This finding is supported, *inter alia*, by a Pew survey showing that 72% of Turks view the United States as a major threat, while historical enemies like Russia and China are now considered lesser threats, 54% and 33% respectively.[6] The Turkish users' support for the American attack was therefore motivated less by love for the US, than it was by hatred of Assad.

Iran is Drying Out: Network Discourse on the Protests
by Farmers in Isfahan Province

Dr. Raz Zimmt

Last March, farmers in Isfahan Province in central Iran took to the streets to protest the province's increasingly severe water shortage. This is not the first time that protests have erupted in Isfahan because of issues related to water. In March 2013, farmers from the region clashed with security forces, following the government's decision to reduce the water quotas allocated to Isfahan, and reassign them to the neighboring Yazd province. The authorities' failure to provide a solution for the farmers' demands provoked intense discourse on social media, which gave voice to the public's criticism of the regime's weakness, as well as growing awareness of the water crisis that has, in recent years, become one of the greatest threats faced by the Islamic Republic.

The protest by farmers in Isfahan erupted against the backdrop of the authorities' decision to cut the water quotas for agriculture. Iran has been suffering a grave water crisis in recent years caused, *inter alia*, by a severe drought that has afflicted the country, inadequate planning of the water economy, population growth and flawed water policies, including uncontrolled use of water for agriculture, using outdated and inefficient irrigation systems, and constructing dams of dubious feasibility that have caused some reservoirs to shrink or dry up altogether. In the absence of adequate media coverage, social networks became the major channel for updates on the protest, in a manner similar to other protests in Iran. Users uploaded videos and pictures showing hundreds of demonstrators protesting the water crisis (figure 3), and chanting slogans condemning the authorities. The social media discourse that followed the demonstrations included harsh criticism of the government, including President Hassan Rouhani, who failed

Figure 3: Farmer's protest, as documented on Twitter

to fulfill promises made to help solve the crisis. Users stressed that the worsening crisis cannot be blamed on the drought alone; they assigned most of the responsibility for the crisis to the government's poor management and corruption. According to the farmers in Isfahan, the government gives preferential treatment to other provinces when allocating water quotas, and does not leave them sufficient water for irrigation. One user accused the government of setting up heavy industries in the center of the country while ignoring environmental conditions and natural resources. He noted that this policy created both the water crisis and severe air pollution, and accused the authorities of "treason," in his words, against the citizens of Iran.[7]

Social media discourse was also used to increase citizens' awareness of the growing water shortage in the country as a whole. Journalist and social activist Ebrahim Garavand warned that the water shortage is turning into a severe social, human and employment crisis that is expected

to cause serious harm to farmers and industrial workers, given that 93% of Iran's water consumption is currently used for agriculture and industry.[8] Another user reminded his followers that the war in Syria broke out as a result of a water crisis. "Whether we want it or not, believe it or not, or whether an outside party is involved or not, we have a water problem and it is dangerous," he tweeted, pointing to the farmers' protest in Isfahan as a living testimony that proves his point.[9]

Similar to the wave of protests that broke out in Iran at the end of 2017, criticism was also directed towards the relocating? of the country's resources to places and causes beyond its borders, such as Syria, which exacts a heavy economic price, rather than dealing with the hardships faced by Iran's citizens. The slogans carried by the demonstrators were echoed quickly on social media. At one demonstration, protesters shouted, "Our enemy is not America, our enemy is here." Shortly thereafter users launched a hashtag: "Our enemy is here" (#همینجاست_ما_دشمن) which they used to tag updates on additional protests throughout Iran, and criticism of the regime that allegedly favors confrontations with foreign enemies over solving the problems of citizens at home.[10]

As protests expanded in April, the authorities dictated aggressive conduct against the demonstrators, which was manifest in the aggressive dispersion of protests by security forces, who used repressive means including tear gas and water cannons. These tactics were documented in videos distributed on social media. The representative of Iran's Supreme Leader in Isfahan province, senior cleric Ayatollah Yousef Tabatabaeinejad, accused the farmers of incitement, and warned them against creating further disturbances. He noted that the water shortage in the province is so acute that this summer it will be necessary to consider rationing drinking water as well. The allocation of additional water to agriculture under these circumstances is neither possible nor reasonable, he declared.[11]

Tabatabaeinejad's remarks provoked anger and frustration because he did not take the citizens' side, and presented the demonstrators as inciters.[12] This highlights the growing alienation the public feels towards their religious leaders, who are now identified as representatives of the regime rather than representatives of the citizenry. Another expression of this trend, also in the context of the farmers' demonstrations, occurred in March when residents of Isfahan turned their backs on the preacher at Friday prayers in the mosque to express their protest against the authorities.[13]

The discourse surrounding the farmers' demonstrations clearly reflects the mounting protests against the performance of the Iranian authorities on environmental issues, especially those relating to the water crisis and air pollution. These issues have persisted for several years, with social media serving as a main arena where the public can protest, because other media outlets do not allow dissent. The protests in Isfahan show that the struggle is no longer restricted to the online realm, but has in fact moved onto the streets, thus posing a growing political challenge to the authorities. Expressions of dissent, both on social media and in physical space, testify to the

growing frustration of the Iranian public as it faces growing distress in all areas of life, and the authorities' failure to provide them with an answer.

"I Don't Want Blood on My Code:" Western Technology
Serving Middle Eastern States

Dr. Tal Pavel

Many countries, including some in the Middle East, have worked to restrict their citizen's free access to the Internet since its inception. They do this both in response to crises and instability, but also as a routine means of protecting their culture and users' morality. These operations are carried out using advanced technology, usually of Western origin, for monitoring and shadowing Internet users in a way that undermines basic Western values, and often contradicts the declared policy of the companies that developed the software and that of their countries of origin.

There are many different ways to limit users' use of the Internet. These include, *inter alia*, restrictive legislation; religious rulings and prohibitions; economic restrictions, setting high prices that prevent citizens from purchasing computers and other equipment or a regular Internet connection from their homes; enforcement and arrest of Internet users; preventing development of human capital by maintaining a low level of literacy in the local language and English; and preventing basic technological training. In addition, there are also a variety of technological methods, including banning the deployment of the requisite technological infrastructure throughout the country, technical limitations on bandwidth and internet speed, blocking the use of various online services, and monitoring the users' online activity. These limitations are implemented using Western, mostly American, technologies that are also marketed to rival countries such as Iran.

In early March, Citizen Lab, at the University of Toronto in Canada, published a study surveying the activity of Turk Telekom, considered one of the largest telecommunications providers in Turkey.[14] The company holds 80% of Turkey's optical fiber networks, and owns the largest internet provider in the country, which also provides Internet services to northern Syria. According to the study, the company deliberately directed hundreds of users in Turkey and northern Syria to download spyware onto their computers while trying to download other applications. The researchers claim that they did this, *inter alia*, in order to spy on users on the Syrian side of the border who belong to "The Kurdish Army in Syria" (YPG), which is fighting Turkish forces for control of the Afrin district in northwestern Syria. The study also mentioned that the Egyptian company Telecom Egypt has taken control of its users' Internet traffic by routing them to various sites. The research shows that the technology used in both countries was PacketLogic, which was developed by the Canadian company Sandvine, and which was originally designed intended to improve online traffic services, and to detect malicious software ("malware").

Reports of Turk Telekom's involvement in monitoring user activity in Turkey began to spread as early as October 2016, following an e-mail sent by a senior engineer at the company to other employees. "I do not wish to spend the rest of my life with the regret of having been a part of Erdoğan's insanity, so I'm out."[15] The employee declared, "We sell a solution that can extract

usernames and passwords from encrypted traffic," and the declaration, "I don't want blood on my code." His act let to an internal protest in the company during which anonymously leaked documents and internal correspondence revealed that this technological solution allows monitoring a users' IP addresses, the sites they visit users and how often. The company's capabilities are essentially similar to those of the National Security Agency (NSA).[16]

Another company named in this context was the Israeli firm NSO. NSO suppliers Pegasus spy and surveillance software, which is activated by clicking on a link and which allows the sender to access all content on the target's cellular device, as well as to conduct ongoing digital espionage against the target and its environment.[17] The software was sold worldwide, but the name of the company reached the headlines after a previous report released by Citizen Lab in August 2016 claimed that its product was used against Ahmed Mansour,[18] a human rights activist from the United Arab Emirates, who received text messages on his cell phone that included links to malicious software.

NSO and Sandwin were both acquired by the American company Francisco Partners, which invests in various companies, some of which have been involved in selling technologies to countries throughout the Middle East for years. Francisco Partners also invested in the American company Blue Coat Systems,[19] which is known to have supplied the technology to many countries in the Middle East and elsewhere,[20] including to the Syrian authorities before and during the conflict therein.[21] Because of this, the firm's systems were hacked by activists belonging to Anonymous.[22]

Supplying products to countries that may misuse them against their own citizens often contradicts the policies of the companies or the countries in which they operate, which sometimes finance the companies' activities. An example of this is Websense, the current name of Forcepoint, whose activity in Yemen was identified as early as August 2009,[23] despite the company's statement that it would not to sell products to governments or ISPs "involved in any type of government censorship."[24] Another example is the Canadian company Netsweeper, which is funded by the Canadian government,[25] and which is known to provide technology for restricting and monitoring online activity across the Middle East and the Muslim world.[26]

The online realm offers a wealth of opportunities for direct communication, exposure to unlimited information, a platform for expressing opinions, and a host of other invaluable advantages. However, its nature as a digital space also supports the use of technological tools that limit freedom of use. The way countries employ these technologies for monitoring and spying on internet users poses ethical questions about the need to restrict and control the marketing of products, and may even lead to a broad international effort to address the issue. However, we should not ignore the fact that the American NSA and other government agencies throughout the western world also use similar technologies to monitor their own citizens.

The writer researches Internet and cyber issues in the Middle East, is head of the Cyber Studies program at Tel Aviv-Jaffa Academic College and is the editor and owner of MiddleEasternet.com.

[1] Erdoğan'dan Türkiye'deki Suriyelilere vatandaşlık açıklaması, BBC Türkçe, July 3, 2016: http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/07/160703_erdogan_suriyeliler

[2] #SuriyeninYanındayız, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23SuriyeninYan%C4%B1nday%C4%B1z&src=typd

[3] @ermancimen, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/ermancimen/status/984095058906492929

[4] #SavaşaHayır, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23Sava%C5%9FaHay%C4%B1r&src=typd

[5] #ÇocukGözüyleGUTA, #DoğuGuta , #Katilesed. Twitter.com.

[6] Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats, PEW, August 1, 2017 http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/01/globally-people-point-to-isis-and-climate-change-as-leading-security-threats/

[7] @HampaHa, April 19, 2018, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/HampaHa/status/985945723370958849

[8] @ebi19730, April 19, 2018, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/ebi19730/status/985943091986169856

[9] @trigimo, April 19, 2018, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/trigimo/status/984413100622471168

[10] #دشمن_ما_همینجاست, April 19, 2018, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/search?q=%23%D8%AF%D8%B4%D9%85%D9%86_%D9%85%D8%A7_%D9%87%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA&src=typd

[11] "Response of the Friday Preacher in Isfahan to the Farmers' Protests: There isn't Enough Water." IRNA, April 13, 2018.

[12] @DrHadiyazdani, April 19, 2018, Twitter.com. https://twitter.com/DrHadiyazdani/status/984773008979095552

[13] "Protesting Farmers Turn Their Back on the Preacher during Friday Prayers in Isfahan," Radio Farda, March 16, 2018.

[14] Bill Marczak, Jakub Dalek, Sarah McKune, Adam Senft, John Scott-Railton, and Ron Deibert, "BAD TRAFFIC Sandvine's PacketLogic Devices Used to Deploy Government Spyware in Turkey and Redirect Egyptian Users to Affiliate Ads?", The Citizen Lab, The Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, 9 March 2018. https://citizenlab.ca/2018/03/bad-traffic-sandvines-packetlogic-devices-deploy-government-spyware-turkey-syria

[15] Thomas Fox-Brewster, "Is An American Company's Technology Helping Turkey Spy On Its Citizens?", Forbes, 25 October 2016. https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2016/10/25/procera-francisco-partners-turkey-surveillance-erdogan/#210a75844345

[16] Su Herring, "Timeline of Internet Censorship and Declining State of Media Freedom in Turkey", iGmena, 11 November 2016. https://www.igmena.org/Timeline-of-Internet-Censorship-and-Declining-State-of-Media-Freedom-in-Turkey--

[17] Lily Hay Newman, "A HACKING GROUP IS SELLING IPHONE SPYWARE TO GOVERNMENTS", Wired, 25 August 2016. https://www.wired.com/2016/08/hacking-group-selling-ios-vulnerabilities-state-actors

[18] Bill Marczak and John Scott-Railton, "THE MILLION DOLLAR DISSIDENT; NSO Group's iPhone Zero-Days used against a UAE Human Rights Defender", The Citizen Lab, The Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, 24 August 2016. https://citizenlab.ca/2016/08/million-dollar-dissident-iphone-zero-day-nso-group-uae

[19] Symantec, "Symantec to Acquire Blue Coat and Define the Future of Cybersecurity", 12 June 2016. https://www.symantec.com/about/newsroom/press-releases/2016/symantec_0612_01

[20] Morgan Marquis-Boire, Jakub Dalek, Sarah McKune, Matthew Carrieri, Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Ron Deibert, Saad Omar Khan, Helmi Noman, John Scott-Railton, and Greg Wiseman, "PLANET BLUE COAT; Mapping Global Censorship and Surveillance Tools,", The Citizen Lab, The Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, 15 January 2013. Retrieved from https://citizenlab.ca/2013/01/planet-blue-coat-mapping-global-censorship-and-surveillance-tools u/Kinost, "BlueCoat, a company that specializes in censorship, surveillance and internet infrastructure such as public/corporate wifi, has become a certificate authority, allowing it to initiate man-in-the-middle attacks without warning", reddit.com, 27 May 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/privacy/comments/4l8rfa/bluecoat_a_company_that_specializes_in_censorship

[21] "Bluecoat's role in Syrian censorship and nationwide monitoring system #OpSyria", reflets.info, 1 September 2011. https://reflets.info/articles/bluecoat-s-role-in-syrian-censorship-and-nationwide-monitoring-system-opsyria

[22] Tal Pavel, "Hackers set their sights on Syrian monitoring system," Ha'aretz, October 7, 2011.

[23] CmdrTaco, "Yemenis Should Be Incensed At Websense", slashdot.org, 10 August 2009. https://features.slashdot.org/story/09/08/10/1449206/yemenis-should-be-incensed-at-websense; John Leyden, "Websense yanks censorware from Yemen", The Register, 11 August 2009. https://www.theregister.co.uk/2009/08/11/websense_yemen_filter_row

[24] Forcepoint.com: https://www.forcepoint.com/anti-censorship-policy

[25] Jordan Pearson, "The Canadian Government Has Funded a Notorious Censorship Company for a Decade", Motherboard, 21 September 2016. https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/ezpm9w/canadian-government-funded-notorious-censorship-company-for-a-decade-netsweeper-bahrain-citizen-lab

[26] Nicki Thomas and Amy Dempsey, "Guelph-based software censors the Internet in the Middle East", The Star, 13 June 2011.

https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2011/06/13/guelphbased_software_censors_the_internet_in_the_middle_east.html ; UAE: "Websites blocked in UAE with Netsweeper", stanford.edu, 2 July 2012. https://mailman.stanford.edu/pipermail/liberationtech/2012-July/004265.html ; Bahrain: "Canadian company's software may be used to stifle freedom of expression in Bahrain", Bahrain Watch. https://bahrainwatch.org/amanatech/en/investigations/netsweeper ; Yemen: Jakub Dalek, Ron Deibert, Sarah McKune, Phillipa Gill, Adam Senft, and Naser Noor, "Information Controls during Military Operations; The case of Yemen during the 2015 political and armed conflict", The Citizen Lab, The Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, 21 October 2015. https://citizenlab.ca/2015/10/information-controls-military-operations-yemen ; Somalia: Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Jakub Dalek, Adam Senft, Saad Omar Khan, Matthew Carrieri, Ron Deibert, and Helmi Noman, "INTERNET FILTERING IN A FAILED STATE; The Case of Netsweeper in Somalia", The Citizen Lab, The Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, 20 February 2014. https://citizenlab.ca/2014/02/internet-filtering-failed-state-case-netsweeper-somalia ; Pakistan: Jakub Dalek, Adam Senft, Masashi Crete-Nishihata, Ron Deibert, "O PAKISTAN, WE STAND ON GUARD FOR THEE; An Analysis of Canada-based Netsweeper's Role in Pakistan's Censorship Regime", The Citizen Lab, The Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, 20 June 2013. https://citizenlab.ca/2013/06/o-pakistan