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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the March issue of Beehive. The first article in this issue reviews the positions of Egyptian social media users regarding the publicized arrest of an opposition leader, and the threat of arrest against students accused of having contact with him. This discourse reveals many sides of the frustration felt by young people over the regime's violation of the freedom of expression. We will then be introduced to the discourse surrounding the intention of the Tehran City Council to name a street after former Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, reflecting the tension between an Islamic-religious identity and a secular-national identity that characterizes Iranian society. Finally, we will follow the online activities of al-Qaeda, with an emphasis on its presence on the encrypted messaging network Telegram, as part of its preparations for again becoming a leading player in the global jihad arena.

Enjoy!

"Black February" – Suppressing Freedom of Expression of Egyptian Students as Seen on Social Media

Dr. Michael Barak

On February 22, the Egyptian Criminal Court published a list of individuals and organizations associated with terrorism, which included the names of four Egyptian students, members of the Islamic Strong Egypt Party (*Misr al-Qawiyya*), who were claimed to have participated in the plot of the party's leader, 'Abd el-Moneim Abu al-Fotouh, to incite the street and harm Egypt's national security. The classification of the students as terrorists sparked strident discussion among religious and left-wing students on social media. The discourse was characterized by revulsion and disgust at the Egyptian government's policy of suppressing freedom of expression, and the opposition's that its voices are being silenced. The discourse also brought to the surface young leftists who declared that they are no longer willing to accept the existing situation, and are seeking ways to replace the regime, including by means of inciting the Egyptian street.

The Strong Egypt Party was founded in 2012 by al-Fotouh, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood who ran for president in 2014, and was arrested by Egyptian security forces on February 14, 2018 upon his return from London. According to a statement from the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior, al-Fotouh is accused of having links with terrorist elements in London and elsewhere, belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, spreading lies about the regime in interviews with hostile media, and attempting to exacerbate the rift in Egyptian society.[1] He was arrested because of an interview he gave to al-Jazeera in London, in which he criticized the policy of the Egyptian regime that does not allow for democratization. Most likely the arrest was a result of the regime's heightened sensitivity to critical voices prior to the presidential elections held in late March, when al-Sisi was re-elected.

Figure 1: A picture of 'Abd el-Moneim Abu al-Fotouh with the caption, "Charge: Criticizing the Elections," #Elections under Threat, from Twitter

Supporters of the regime backed the arrest and hurled a variety of accusations at al-Fotouh. For example, one user wondered how he dared describe himself as an Egyptian patriot while "sitting with people plotting to destroy Egypt and the homeland."[2] In contrast, al-Fotouh's supporters and family refuted the accusations, and launched a campaign for his release. For example, they claimed that the purpose of his trip to London was to participate in a conference on Islam rather than meeting with subversive elements.[3] Human rights groups joined in demanding his release and were, in turn, accused by al-Sisi's supporters of working on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood.[4] Surprising reinforcement was received from left-

wing activists who expressed solidarity with al-Fotouh, despite their disagreement with his path, and demanded his release immediately.[5] In the eyes of these users, the policy of oppression showed the weakness of the regime, and its fear of losing of power in the upcoming elections.[6]

The inclusion of the four students on the terror list was also met with broad opposition. In response, the Strong Egypt party announced a freeze on its activity at all universities until further notice. Omar Khattab, one of the four listed students and secretary-general of the party's university branches, noted on his Facebook page that he has been involved in lawful political activity on campus for five years, and was surprised by the court's decision to include him in the terrorism lists. He also stressed that he was willing to face the legal authorities and clarify the issue, declaring: "I am not running away."[7] In this case, too, the left joined the protest, which included a petition condemning the regime's activity against the students, signed by 129 activists, including journalists, students and lecturers, as well as five left-wing parties, among them the Stream of Honor (*Tayyir al-Karama*), Bread and Freedom" (*Al-'Aysh Wal-Hurriya*), and the Socialist Revolutionary Party (*Al-Ashtrakion al-Thawrion*). It was distributed using the hash tags "Political activity is not a crime" and "Freedom for students."[8] The petition stated, "The organizations and individuals who signed this proclamation condemn the security attack... carried out

Figure 2: A poster showing Al-Sisi executing a man whose shirt reads "Human Rights." He is standing on a ballot box labelled "Democracy." This picture was shared with the hashtag "#Election under threat," from Twitter.

by the regime against students, parties, and student associations in order to silence any opposition voices. This is one many measures taken to control thought and politics at the university...."[9]

Along with the frustration with the regime, the discourse also featured self-flagellation. Left-wing students expressed remorse for voting for al-Sisi in the 2014 presidential elections, and accused themselves of having helped "the birth of a dictatorial regime." They warned that continuing to stifle freedom of expression would be detrimental to al-Sisi, who would have to deal with the silenced, suppressed voices that would eventually mobilize to defeat him.[10] Other users severely criticized the media for its silence on the issue, and for not accurately depicting reality. For example, a user from Sohag denounced the mobilization of the Egyptian media to the regime's propaganda apparatus, and complained that it was violating its true role and had become nothing more than a tool of the government.[11] Users joked that the authorities might soon order their arrest.[12]

In addition to denunciations and expressions of anger, several young students from the left-wing party *Tayyir al-Karama* stood out by making operative proposals to change the *status quo*. They proposed forming a mechanism for coordination between the opposition groups to facilitate varied responses to the government's oppressive actions, including the joint publication of a black poster; flying black flags at all the institutions of opposition parties across the country as a sign of mourning for the existing political situation; announcing that asylum would be granted in party buildings; establishing a joint committee of political organizations to examine developments and ways of responding to the regime and its acts of oppression; as well as trying to instigate popular protests by declaring civil disobedience as a first step toward provoking the Egyptian street.[13] The young people expressed concern that they might be imprisoned for these statements, but made it clear that they are willing to take that risk and act to change the existing order.

The discourse on social media points to an atmosphere of gloom among young Egyptians faced with the regime's continued suppression of freedom of expression, which made the headlines with al-Fotouh's well-publicized arrest. It is evident that the arrest awakened young people's desire to oppose this policy by uniting the ranks of the opposition forces, and investing efforts in mobilizing Egyptian public opinion against the regime. However, it appears that this initiative is currently limited to the online realm.

From Worker Street to Mosaddegh Street: The Struggle over the Collective Memory of Iranian Prime Minister Mosaddegh

Dr. Raz Zimmt

A recent proposal by the Tehran City Council to rename a street in the city in memory of former Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh (1951-1953) generated a vociferous debate on social media, rekindling a decades-long dispute over his character and legacy. Mosaddegh led the historic struggle to nationalize the petroleum industry in the early 1950s, and this discourse is part of the public debate on the path of the Islamic Republic, reflecting a characteristic tension in Iranian society between Islamic-religious identity and national-secular identity.

In early March 2018, Hojjat Nazari, a member of Tehran's city council, announced that the city's Culture and Society Committee had decided to change the name of Worker Street (خیابان کارگر) to Mosaddegh Street.[14] This decision may well be an outcome of the municipal elections held together with the presidential elections in May 2017. For the first time in 14 years, the list of candidates affiliated with the reformist camp won a landslide victory, and now holds all 21 seats on Tehran's city council.

The proposal to name a street in Tehran in honor of Mosaddegh reawakened the historical debate over the legacy of the former prime minister. Mosaddegh was deposed in August 1953 in a military coup instigated with assistance from the CIA, and the debate over his legacy is rooted in the Islamic Revolution. Several leaders of the revolution, some of whom had been his students during the period of the National Front in the 1950s, promoted Mosaddegh as a national hero, and the main street of Tehran, previously named for the royal house of Pahlavi, was renamed in his honor. However, when the clerics took power in the early 1980s, the attitude toward Mosaddegh, his character and legacy changed. The clerics blurred his presence in Iran's historical memory, in order to highlight their own contribution to the movement for nationalizing the petroleum industry. In 1981, Ayatollah Khomeini, leader of the revolution, declared that Mosaddegh was not a Muslim;[15] shortly thereafter the name of Mosaddegh Street was changed to Vali Asr Street to honor the Hidden Imam of the Shi'i tradition.

The discourse on SNS in response to the proposal to rename Worker Street for Mosaddegh gave voice to the political debate in Iran between supporters of the regime on the conservative right and its opponents, including advocates for change from the reformist camp. While the former continue to take a reticent stand toward Mosaddegh, and blame him for the rift between himself and the clerics who supported him at the beginning of the struggle to nationalize the petroleum industry, reformists and opponents of the regime present him as a national hero and symbol of the historical aspiration of Iranian citizens for freedom and democracy.

Indeed, Iranian users identified as critics of the regime referred to the Tehran City Council's proposal as a positive step aimed at restoring Mosaddegh's status in collective memory.

Nevertheless, some of them were reluctant to rename Worker Street for Mosaddegh and suggested, for example, renaming either the street honoring Ayatollah Sayyid Abu al-Qasem Kashani, the senior cleric who was a political partner of Mosaddegh in his early days, or the one named for Khalid Islambouli, who assassinated former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat.[16]

Objections to the proposal came from users affiliated with the conservative right, who shared their responses with the hashtag: "Mosaddegh Dead End (مصدق_بست_بن#)." They claimed that the Tehran City Council's proposal contradicted the position of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic revolution, and its sole purpose was to cover up the failures of the Tehran municipality. Several users argued that it would have been better for the city council to devote its efforts to solving the severe hardships of the city's citizens rather than changing street names. "After the city council renames Worker Street to Mosaddegh Street, the problem of air pollution and transportation in Tehran will be solved," one user tweeted.[17]

Figure 3 : Mosaddegh Dead End, from Twitter

The conservative camp also took advantage of the Tehran municipality's proposal in order to attack the reformist opponents who control the city council, claiming that this proposal reflects their ostensibly elitist and bourgeois tendencies and their supposed identification with the middle and upper classes over the weaker and working class. One user argued that the proposal was another instance of "crushing the poor and workers under the wheels of development by the liberals and technocrats among the reformers."[18] Television presenter and radical blogger Vahid Yaminpour tweeted that the decision to rename the only street honoring workers reflects the intellectual tendencies of the reformists, a statement designed to emphasize the gaps between them and the working class.[19] In response, some users accused Yaminpour of cynically exploiting the decision of the Tehran City Council for political purposes. One argued that if Yaminpour really supported the workers, he would protest the violation of their rights and oppression by the authorities.[20] Another user wondered whether the critics of the decision would have defended the workers in the same way if the street's name was being changed to honor a casualty of the Iran-Iraq war or one of the Iranian fighters killed in the Syrian military campaign.[21]

Supporters of the regime on the conservative right also took advantage of the renewed public debate over the former prime minister to express their anti-American outlook, and claimed that the United States cannot be trusted because it turned its back on Mosaddegh after initially supporting him. This claim is frequently made by leaders of the Iranian regime and its supporters, especially in view of the escalation of rhetoric between the US and Iran since Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. "Instead of naming a street for Mosaddegh, name a dead end alley for him, so that no one forgets that the path of trusting in the US leads to a dead end," tweeted one user.[22]

The public discourse on the legacy of Mohammad Mosaddegh is a good reflection of the internal differences in Iran between supporters of the regime on the religious-conservative right, who object to him and seek to continue blurring his memory in order to emphasize the centrality of the religious establishment in national memory, and supporters of the reformists, who regard him as a symbol of national freedom, the rule of law, and democracy. The discourse also reflects the tension between the national-secular identity and the religious-Islamic identity that characterizes Iranian society, and is revealed in the ways the various sides attempt to shape collective memory. In the meantime, it is clear that someone is attentive to the discourse on social media: the Tehran City Council recently decided to rename Petroleum Street for the former prime minister, rather than Worker Street.

The Strengthening of al-Qaeda in the Global Jihad Arena:

Online Activity as a Test Case

Dr. Ariel Koch

Beginning in 2013, pushing al-Qaeda out of the global jihad movement was one of the more conspicuous ramifications of the Islamic State's rise to power in Syria and Iraq, even though that organization was originally known as al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq.[23] As a result, security, political, media, and academic attention focused on IS and its online and conventional activities,[24] while al-Qaeda was neglected. However, al-Qaeda is actually growing in strength, and even increasing its online activities as part of its 'media jihad' (*al-Jihad al-'Alami)*, by its own definition, in preparation for the day when it will again play a central role in the global jihad arena. The organization is working to reinforce its connections with its various affiliates in Asia, Africa and the Middle East,[25] which continue to pose a threat to other countries in the Arab and Islamic world and beyond.[26] For this purpose, the Telegram encrypted messaging network is al-Qaeda's platform of preference. [27]

In the past, al-Qaeda operatives and other jihadist groups operated online groups based on text messaging software like ICQ, chat rooms, forums, and blogs,[28] but these were targeted by cyberattacks, and were frequently shut down. Jihad propagandists were forced to find an effective and accessible solution. Eventually, the jihadists settled on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter;[29] with a preference for Twitter.[30] However, public pressure on the services' corporate owners led to increasing disruption of the jihadists' routine functioning, and they therefore turned to other channels, including Telegram.[31] Recently, Telegram has also begun to combat the jihadists' activity on the platform and close their accounts, but their activity nevertheless remains steady. From web content, we can learn about other platforms al-Qaeda uses to disseminate propaganda, including Justpaste.it and Risala.ga.

One of the most prominent Telegram channels operated by al-Qaeda was opened in July 2017, and is affiliated with the official media channel, *al-Sahab* (The Clouds), which accumulated over 3,100 followers by the end of August. Most of the content on the channel is in Arabic, but English and other languages are also used. Content includes the daily magazine *al-Nafir* ("call to arms/mobilize"), and video and audio clips of current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.[32] Over time, more than 2,000 additional followers joined the channel,[33] which not only exposes its followers to current content published by the organization, but also shares links to other Telegraph channels operating on behalf of al-Qaeda, including *Ansar Qaedat al-Jihad fi Jazirah al-Arab* (Supporters of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) that serves al-Qaeda in Yemen, and *Ifrikia al-Muslima* (Muslim Africa), which serves al-Qaeda in North Africa.[34]
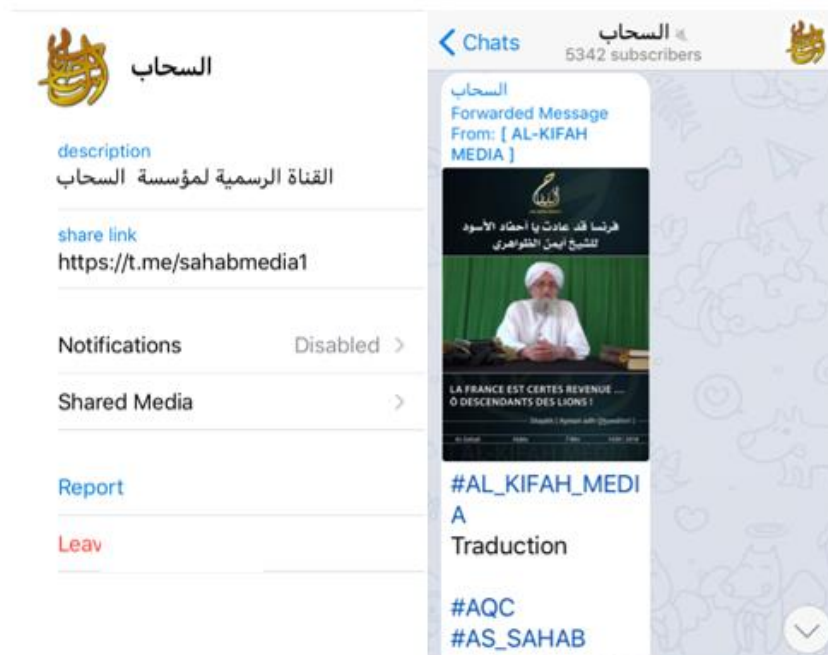
Figure 4: Telegram Channel of *Al-Sahab* Media

Alongside the official channels, there is a network of al-Qaeda-affiliated media agencies, such as the *al-Kafah* channel, which is responsible for translating and disseminating propaganda in French.[47] On the third anniversary of the attack on the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris, the channel published a statement taking responsibility for the attack. This message was disseminated by the al-Qaeda branch in Yemen. Another channel, *al-Tamkeen* ("Change and Consolidation"), is charged with translating and disseminating propaganda in English.[48] Its recent publications include a transcript of Al-Zawahiri's latest video, in which he attacks the United States and reminds his audience that it is "the first enemy of the Muslims."[49]

There are also Telegram channels serving the media arms of the jihad organizations identified with al-Qaeda, which publish and disseminate propaganda. They include channels operated by or affiliated with the Islamic party of Turkmenistan;[50] the Taliban in Pakistan[51] and Afghanistan;[52] *Ansar al-Islam wal-Muslamin* (Supporters of Muslims and Islam) identified with al-Qaeda in northwest Africa;[53] *Anṣār Ghazwat al-Hind* (Supporters of the Raid of India) identified with al-Qaeda in Kashmir; [54] *Al-Shabaab Al-Mujahideen* identified with al-Qaeda in Somalia; [55] and the official channel of *Tanzim Hurras al-Din* (Guardians of Religion) identified with al-Qaeda in Syria.[56]

Figure 6: Telegram Channel of *Al-Sahab* Media

To these, we would add *Minbar at-Tawḥīd wa'l-Jihād*,[57] named for the website established by Sheikh Essam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi (also known as "Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi"), who is considered one of the senior Salafi philosophers supporting the idea of global jihad as promulgated by Bin-Laden and his followers.[58] The site formerly served as the most important online collection of radical Salafi literature.[59] The channel has more than 2,400 followers and serves as a platform for the several publications by al-Barqawi and his colleagues, who remained loyal to the Al-Qaeda and are leaders of the organization today.

The content produced by al-Qaeda and disseminated by the various channels helps create a trans-national jihadi community, and spread the organization's ideology regarding global jihad. Take for example, an Arabic text on *al-Sindh*, one of al-Qaeda's media outlets in the Indian subcontinent, attributed to Zakir Musa, the current leader of *Ansar Ghazias al-Hind*,[60] in which he discusses whether the connection between jihad in Kashmir and the global jihad will harm the struggle of Muslims in the region. In the text, Musa presents his negative position, and argues that the struggle is not only against India or Pakistan, which signed a cease-fire agreement with India and closed Mujahidin training camps in the country, but also against the United States. For Salafi-Jihadists, this statement stands, regardless of any territorial dispute. As al-Zawahiri put it: "America is the first enemy of the Muslims."

The claim that al-Qaeda is gaining strength, as reflected in its online activity, is consistent with the position of researchers, including Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Bar, who claim that despite the challenges the organization has faced in recent years, including its defeat in Iraq (2007-2009) and the rise of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda has emerged with the upper hand. [61] This is further supported by Bruce Hoffman, who claimed that the events of the Arab Spring and the subsequent revolutions in other countries, especially the war in Syria, helped al-Qaeda restore its status. [62] He claims that al-Qaeda and its affiliates now have tens of thousands of loyalists around the world, with the ability to undermine local and regional stability, and mount attacks in many countries in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Europe, and Russia. According to Hoffman, al-Qaeda now has more influence than the Islamic State, in part because of the high level of its manpower and cohesion. Although the Islamic State is now capable of carrying out deadly attacks in the West, that does not mean that al-Qaeda is not also itself planning terrorist attacks in the West. Evidence for this includes past reports received about people from al-Qaeda who travelled from Afghanistan to Syria to train and prepare terrorists for such attacks.

Al-Qaeda's activities on Telegram demonstrate the importance it assigns to the varied technological tools that aid its efforts to remain relevant to its supporters around the world, especially among the younger generation, particularly in light of the apparent decline of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. While it seemed that al-Qaeda had been defeated and the Islamic State had replaced it as the main organization in the global jihad arena, it has actually grown stronger, especially considering the war in Syria. The online activity and geographical distribution of the Telegram channels operated by various organizations identified with al-Qaeda and its affiliates testify to the organization's far-reaching global deployment, and its role as an important factor for jihadists. All of the above heightens our understanding that the threat of jihad remains active, coming not only from ISIS, but also from al-Qaeda, which continues to prepare for the day when it will again play a significant, leading role in the arena of global jihad.

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