

BeeHive

Middle East Social Media

Editors: Dr. Harel Chorev, Smadar Shaul

Volume 6, Issue 2, February 2018

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|---|
| Is My Enemy's Enemy My Friend? Reactions on Social Media to the Israeli Attack on Syria | 3 |
| Israeli-Egyptian Security Cooperation on the Sinai Peninsula as Seen by Egyptians on Social Media..... | 6 |
| The Girls of Revolution Street: Feminist Discourse on Iranian Social Media | 8 |

From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the February issue of **Beehive**. The issue begins with an examination of the reactions on social media to Israel's attack on positions in Syrian territory. Surprisingly, the attack was welcomed by users from Syria and other Arab countries. The second article also covers reactions of users in the Arab world to Israel, in this case to news of military cooperation between Israel and Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula, which some Egyptian social media users consider being in the interest of their country's security. The issue concludes with an analysis of the way that social networking sites have been used to advance the status of women in Iran.

Enjoy!

Is My Enemy's Enemy My Friend?

Reactions on Social Media to the Israeli Attack on Syria

Adam Hoffman

On February 10, there was a significant escalation on the Israeli-Syrian border, after a remotely-controlled Iranian aircraft penetrated Israeli territory and was intercepted. Following the incident, Israeli Air Force planes attacked the Syria's T-4 airbase, in the Tadmor area, from which the drone was operated. The foray destroyed anti-aircraft batteries belonging to the Syrian regime in what a senior Israeli officer described as the most extensive attack against Syrian air defenses since 1982.¹ According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, six soldiers were killed in the attack. The fatalities included not only Syrians from Assad's troops but also non-Syrians,² apparently Iranians from the forces that operate the batteries.³ Alongside the predictable reactions praising the subsequent downing of an Israeli warplane, some Syrian users of social media called on Israel to continue acting against the Assad regime. These responses illustrate how the accepted definition of "who is an enemy" has changed in the Middle East since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. Today, an Israeli military attack against Syrian and Iranian positions has the support of various parties both inside and outside Syria.

Among the predictable reactions to the downing of the Israeli plane was the response of a Syrian user who circulated pictures showing supporters of the Assad regime in Damascus and Beirut, who seem to be distributing sweets to passersby on the street as an expression of joy. Another Syrian user shared pictures showing parts of the downed plane, and stressed that the Golan Heights are Syrian and not Israeli. Images of wreckage from the Israeli plane appeared in the tweets of other Syrian users, who wanted to portray the attacks against Syria as a failure, and thus to damage Israel's image.⁴

However, Israel's action against the Assad regime also received surprising support from many Syrian users, in part because it forced a temporary interruption in the bombing of the towns Ghouta and Idlib by Russian and Syrian planes. These attacks have increased considerably recently, with 500 civilians killed last week in eastern Ghouta alone. Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer described the situation well: "Syrian civilians there are being allowed a few, rare hours of peace."⁵ Similar responses were received from other users, such as one from Aleppo who tweeted after the attack: "Good news from Ghouta. There are no air strikes over our heads today." Regarding the question of Syrian citizens' support of attacks against the Assad regime, he wrote, "We are unconcerned with other countries' reasons. We want our

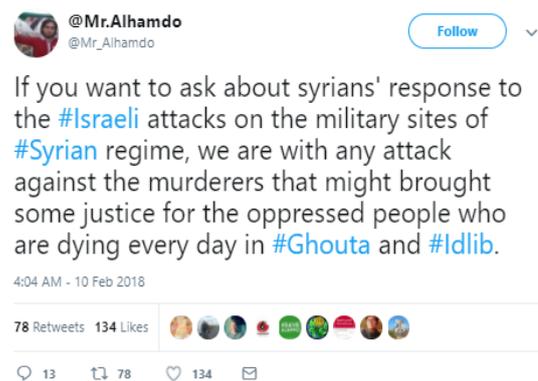


Figure 1: Tweet from a Syrian user, supporting the Israeli attack on Syrian positions, [from Twitter](#)

children to live in peace.”⁶ In another tweet, he declared, “We are with any attack against the murderers that might brought [sic] some justice for oppressed people who are dying every day in Idlib and Ghouta”(figure 1).⁷ Another Syrian user, who presents himself as a political and media activist and a supporter of the Syrian revolution, tweeted in response to pictures shared by the regime’s supporters who were happy about the downed Israeli plane: “As Syrians, we welcome any Israeli air or naval attack against the [Syrian] regime or Iran in Syria.”⁸ These expressions of joy are very reminiscent of the responses to the American attack on Syria in April last year, when US President Trump ordered the launch of cruise missiles at a Syrian army base in response to the chemical attack carried out by the Assad regime in the town of Khan Sheikhun. Many Syrian users thanked President Trump for his military action, using the hashtag, “We love you.”⁹

The Israeli attack also engendered expressions of support from Arab users outside Syria. The answers to a question posed by the one of the most influential and popular journalists in the Arab world, Faisal al-Qassem, who presents “Another Opinion” on Al-Jazeera television, are but one example. On the day of the Israeli attack, he asked his five million followers on Twitter, “If war broke out... between Israel on one side, and Iran and its militias in Syria on the other, who would you support?” Of the more than 23,000 users who responded, 56% of them said they would support Israel, while 44% said they would support Iran and its militias (figure 2).¹⁰ Although such support for Israel is purely hypothetical, it reflects the strong opposition among large parts of the Arab public to Iranian involvement in the Middle East generally, and Syria especially.



Figure 2: Results of a survey conducted by Faisal al-Qassem, who asked followers if they would support Israel or Iran, in the event of a war between them, from Twitter

The Israeli attacks in Syria received further support when Saleh al-Hamawi, one of the founders of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, tweeted that, “We welcome any Israeli air or naval attack against the [Syrian] regime and Iran in Syria and implore them [Israel] to do more.”¹¹ Al-Hamawi’s account has more than 64,000 followers, and his tweet supporting Israeli attacks was “liked” by more than 200 followers, many of whom are, it would appear, other jihadists.

Although Israel attacked Syria purely for military reasons, the Israeli attack gave Syrian civilians in Ghouta, Idlib and elsewhere in Syria a temporary respite from the frequent bombardments mounted by the Assad regime and its Russian supporters. Moreover, the attack met a need for taking revenge on the murderous regime that is perpetrating what was recently dubbed “another Srebrenica,” referring to the well-known massacre of Bosnian Muslims in 1995. All this is happening at a time when the international community, despite its ostensible condemnation of the Assad regime, refrains from taking any real action to stop or punish it. It is not surprising, then, that bombed-out civilians long for any external military response against the regime of Assad and

Iran, even if it comes from Israel. Although these expressions of joy over the attack are utilitarian, the very fact that Syrian users' publicly support the Israeli action is evidence of a change in mood, and subverts the conventional perception in the Arab world that Israel is an enemy.

Israeli-Egyptian Security Cooperation on the Sinai Peninsula as Seen by Egyptians on Social Media

Dr. Michael Barak

On February 3, the New York Times reported that Israel and Egypt are cooperating in the fight against terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula. In this context, Israel has carried out more than 100 air strikes, with Egypt's consent.¹² Reports about this cooperation sparked extensive online discourse among Egyptian social media users, who expressed mixed reactions. On one hand, supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and leftists condemned the Israeli involvement, and accused the Egyptian regime of treason. In their view, the Egyptian army is nothing but a tool that Israel is using to advance its interests in the region. On the other hand, supporters of President 'Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi and anti-Islamists expressed their support for the cooperation, and stressed that it is a welcome process that contributes to Egypt's national security.

News of the cooperation was denied by a spokesman for the Egyptian army, shortly after it was published: "The Egyptian army and the civilian police are the only forces fighting terrorism in northern Sinai, without the assistance of others."¹³ al-Sisi's supporters endorsed this claim and proposed several possible sources for the false report, first and foremost the Muslim Brotherhood or, alternatively, its traditional patrons. One user from Kufr al-Zayyat who took this stance wrote, "This newspaper is false and unreliable because it is funded by Ibn Muza [the wife of the former Emir of Qatar]."¹⁴ Others claimed that the paper's editors-in-chief are Zionists who work for Israel.



Figure 3: Poster distributed on Twitter, with the caption "Sinai in Zionist hands"

Juxtaposed with such denials, many Egyptian social media users responded to the army spokesman's denial by making it clear that they do not believe the official version of events. Rather, they claimed that there has been security cooperation between the two countries in Sinai for some time. A user from Cairo asserted that the Egyptian people aren't stupid, and it would be better for the army not to underestimate their ability to understand the situation.¹⁵ Other users described the Israeli aid as an insult to Egypt's honor, and wondered whether the Egyptian army's power had diminished, using the situation on the eve of the 1973 war as a comparison. Bahey Hassan, an Egyptian human rights activist, pointed out several possible reasons for its failure: "The soldiers are poor and the officers arrogant. They are not skilled in urban warfare. There is discrimination against residents of Sinai who consequently feel no need to be loyal to al-Sisi." Therefore, he claimed, some of them chose to maintain a positive relationship with ISIS.¹⁶ Users

affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and left-wing activists criticized al-Sisi and his regime directly, using the hashtag, “Sinai in Zionist hands” (figure 3).¹⁷ They contended that this is an additional expression of the president’s treachery: just as he sold the Tiran and Sanafir Islands to Saudi Arabia, he now intends to hand the Sinai Peninsula over to Israel. Hossam el-Shorbagy, an Egyptian journalist for al-Jazeera wrote that security cooperation with Israel is a violation of Egyptian sovereignty, and paves the way for Egypt to spill the blood of the residents of Sinai.¹⁸

Users posited several reasons for Israel’s readiness to cooperate with Egypt on security matters, including its desire to win Egyptian support for the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem;¹⁹ tightening the siege on the Gaza Strip and disarming Hamas as part of the preparations for an Israeli invasion of Gaza;²⁰ ensuring that al-Sisi serves another term as president of Egypt because it serves Israeli interests;²¹ and Israel’s desire to purge the Sinai Peninsula of the local population in order to implement al-Sisi’s 2014 plan to transfer Sinai to the Palestinians, as a way to expand the Gaza Strip and establish a Palestinian state.²²

Alongside such harsh criticism, some voices did favor cooperation and stronger ties with Israel. Egyptian users noted that although Israel was once an enemy, it can no longer be considered as such now that it has signed a peace agreement with Egypt. These users cited Israel’s contribution to cutting off the financial support that Qatar and Turkey had provided for ISIS personnel.²³ For example, one young man from Alexandria wrote: “Since the peace treaty, it has been in our interest as Egyptians to have a strong relationship with our neighbor Israel, unlike the dogs of Hamas.” He further said that Egypt does not benefit from defending the Palestinian people, and therefore: “We as a people and as a state must focus on our own interests and [cooperation] with Israel is definitely one of them.”²⁴ A user from Cairo noted, “I don’t have a significant problem cooperating with Israel against the black terrorism” and proposed “using the mindless Muslim Brothers and Jihadist-Salafis as human shields in Sinai.”²⁵ Still another user claimed that Egypt needs assistance from Israel because Israel has advanced technology that the Egyptian army lacks, such as surveillance equipment and missile-carrying aerial drones.²⁶

Other users chose to support al-Sisi and pointed accusing fingers at the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Turkey. One user from Ismailia remarked that al-Sisi is trying very hard to improve Egypt’s situation in every field, and the real enemy is Brotherhood movement and its supporters, who are waging a widespread propaganda war against him.²⁷ Some of these users noted that Arab solidarity is “bankrupt,” and also accused Qatar and Turkey of interfering in Egyptian affairs, and being responsible for the appearance of ISIS in Sinai.²⁸

The security cooperation between Israel and Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula is criticized harshly by many Egyptian citizens, mainly from the Muslim Brotherhood and the political left. However, it is impossible to ignore the voices who seek to present the benefits of this cooperation. The discourse reveals a certain shift in the perception of Israel among some non-Islamist youth, who now consider it not an enemy but rather a supporter of Egypt’s national security while Turkey, Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood are perceived as subversive.

The Girls of Revolution Street: Feminist Discourse on Iranian Social Media

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In recent years, social media have become a central arena wherein Iranian women have conducted their struggle against discrimination of various types. Women's issues have returned to the agenda with the outbreak of the hijab protests in January, which began with a defiant act by an Iranian young woman who removed her hijab and waved it in front of security forces. Her protest, which expanded to several major cities in Iran, again illustrates the potential of social media to raise public awareness of women's rights, and their ability to exert pressure on the authorities to adapt to the social and cultural changes occurring in Iranian society.

The public protests that erupted in Iran at the end of December 2017 initially focused primarily on the economic and social distress of the weaker sectors of Iranian society. However, shortly thereafter, a young Iranian woman by the name of Vida Movahed stood bareheaded in front of policemen on Enghelab (Revolution) Street, as protest against the mandatory hijab imposed by the Islamic Republic. Movahed quickly became a role model for dozens of women who took to the streets in several major cities in Iran, mainly Tehran, and removed their hijabs. The women's protest was significantly strengthened when the pictures of bareheaded women were shared thousands of times in social media, under the label "The Girls of Revolution Street" (#دختران_خیابان_انقلاب; figure 4). In several instances, men and religious women who expressed their opposition to the imposition of the hijab joined the protest, although they themselves were careful to dress according to the mandatory Islamic dress code. Movahed was arrested, and released a few weeks later.

The latest wave of protest marks another stage in the struggle against the imposition of the hijab, which in recent years has become one of the central issues in Iranian feminist discourse, especially on social media. In the summer of 2012, a group of Iranian students launched a Facebook campaign using the slogan: "Choosing hijab is a right of the Iranian Woman." Thousands of users from Iran and abroad joined the campaign. In May 2014, the campaign against the mandatory hijab was renewed at the initiative of Iranian journalist-in-exile Masih Alinejad who launched a Facebook page called "Stealthy Freedom of Iranian Women." She called on Iranian women to take pictures of themselves without a hijab in the public sphere and to share them online. The campaign was a great success, and thousands of women uploaded pictures showing themselves in public places with uncovered heads. In the past year, dozens of women took part in another campaign initiated by Alinejad, who called on women to express their opposition to enforced hijab by wearing a white one every Wednesday, while using the slogan "White Wednesday."²⁹

However, the struggle of Iranian women does not focus solely on the issue of hijab. In recent weeks, there has been a heated debate on social media over two additional issues related to the status of women. In December, Zahra Ayatollahi, the head of the Women's Social and Cultural

Council, which is subordinate to the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in Iran, created a stir by publishing an opinion piece in the hardline newspaper Kayhan. Her article dealt with proposed legislation drafted by the Women's and Family Affairs Office of the Presidency, which was recently submitted to the Majlis for approval. The bill would expand the enforcement mechanisms and increase punishment in cases of violence against women. Ayatollahi strongly criticized the bill and argued that the best way to protect women was to place their protection in the hands of male members of their families, instead of adopting what she called a "Western style" that might harm the family as an institution and the status of men, thereby leading to the erosion of traditional Islamic society.³⁰

The article provoked strident reactions on social media, some disseminated using the hashtag "Women vs. Women," and which also included demands to oust Ayatollahi from her post. Users claimed that her remarks reflect dark, extreme positions and encouraged violence against women. One user responded to the article by sharing pictures of a young woman from Mashhad who was severely abused by her husband (figure 5), in an attempt to refute the claim that family members would protect women from violence.³¹ Amene Shirafkan, the parliamentary correspondent of the reformist newspaper Shargh, also attacked Ayatollahi and claimed that she is completely disconnected from the social reality in which she lives, and that she is not fit to serve as a manager in the public sector.³² Several female reformist members of the Majlis joined the chorus of criticism. For example, Fatemeh Sa'idi condemned Ayatollahi's remarks and cited them as an instance of women who are sometimes responsible for violence against women.³³

The other affair that agitated Iranian social media was sparked by a program broadcast on Iranian television, during which a marriage counselor suggested that women massage their husbands' feet with milk and kiss them in order to improve their marriage. She outdid herself by stressing that this was necessary even in cases where the husband is addicted to drugs and beats his wife, because it will relieve his tension. A clip including a segment from the program quickly went viral on social media, and provoked reactions of anger and ridicule that forced the state broadcasting authority to issue an apology.³⁴

The transformation of social media into a means for promoting women's empowerment is reflected in several struggles being waged in recent years which focus on the status of women. These include the legal standing of women, their rights in marriage and divorce, their entry into football stadiums, their integration in management positions in the public and government sectors, and their representation in elected legislative bodies.³⁵ It is not surprising that these struggles are conducted online, because it provides women with an arena where they enjoy equality with men, and gives them access to society at large. Moreover, human rights and civil society activists consider online activity crucial for increasing public awareness of these issues. The official policy of the regime regarding women has not yet undergone any real change, although President Rouhani previously expressed on several occasions positions that would advance the status of women. At the same time, the impact of the public discourse is evident in the gradual

improvement in the status of Iranian women, including their growing integration into local and national politics, the labor market, and institutions of higher education.

¹ Melman, Yossi and Tal Lev-Ram, "The attack against Syrian air defenses – 'The most extensive since 1982,'" *Ma'ariv*, February 10, 2018 <http://www.maariv.co.il/news/military/Article-622511>

² @syriahr, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/syriahr/status/962466467731116032>

³ Yaniv Kubovich, Jack Khoury, Noa Landau and Noa Shpigel, "Israel: In New 'Large-scale Strike,' Military Bombs 12 Syrian, Iranian Targets", *Ha'aretz*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-in-large-scale-strike-army-bombs-12-syrian-iranian-targets-1.5806621>

⁴ @Partisangirl, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/Partisangirl/status/962237523933065216>

⁵ @AnshelPfeffer, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/AnshelPfeffer/status/962265515522756613>

⁶ @Mr_Alhamdo, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

https://twitter.com/Mr_Alhamdo/status/962308387768848384

⁷ @Mr_Alhamdo, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

https://twitter.com/Mr_Alhamdo/status/962296093261422592

⁸ @halap_mansora, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

https://twitter.com/halap_mansora/status/962388595750461441

⁹ Adam Hoffman, "We Love You Trump: Syrian Users on the American Attack," *Beehive*, vol. 5, no. 4, April 2017

<https://dayan.org/content/we-love-you-trump-syrian-users-american-attack>.

¹⁰ @kasimf, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/kasimf/status/962237258895122433>

¹¹ @asseraaalsham, Twitter, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/asseraaalsham/status/962287399538712582>

¹² David D. Kirkpatrick, "Secret Alliance: Israel Carries Out Airstrikes in Egypt, With Cairo's O.K.", *New York Times*, February 3, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/03/world/middleeast/israel-airstrikes-sinai-egypt.html>

¹³ "الجيش المصري يرد على تقرير الضربات الإسرائيلية في سيناء", *Russia Today Arabic*, February 4, 2018.

https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/925087-سیناء-فی-الإسرائيليات-الضربات-تقرير-على-يرد-المصري-الجيش-925087

¹⁴ @Abdelrahim.Ali, Facebook, February 4, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/Abdelrahim.Ali/posts/2370737466285166>; @egyptwindow2000, February 4, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/egyptwindow2000/posts/1785083734856002?comment>

¹⁵ @Youm7, Facebook, February 4, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/Youm7/posts/2369525526451429>

¹⁶ @BaheyHassan, Twitter, February 6, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/BaheyHassan/status/960842154867339264>; #الجنرال_عاريا, Twitter. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

¹⁷ #سیناء_بقبضة_الصهاينة, Twitter. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

¹⁸ @HOSSAMSHORBAGY, Twitter, February 3, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/HOSSAMSHORBAGY/status/959962455349882885>

¹⁹ @RassdNewsN, Facebook, February 4, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/RassdNewsN/videos/1971492696261163>

²⁰ @RassdNewsN, Facebook, February 10, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/RassdNewsN/posts/1978006475609785>

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² #صفقة_القرن, Twitter. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

²³ Ahmed Bahgat, Facebook, February 6, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/ANONYMOUS.REBEL/posts/10156286076905530>; MasrAlarabia, Facebook, February 2, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/masralarabiaofficial/posts/751972181662539>

²⁴ @HuffPostArabi, Facebook, February 4, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/HuffPostArabi/posts/2048988385365926>

²⁵ Iman Bibars, Facebook, February 6, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/ibibars/posts/1738239006240568>

²⁶ @RassdNewsN, Facebook, February 4, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/RassdNewsN/videos/1971492696261163>

²⁷ Ibid., February 7, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

https://www.facebook.com/RassdNewsN/videos/1971492696261163/?comment_id=1972249609518805

²⁸ @AlAraby.ar, Facebook, February 7, 2018. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/AlAraby.ar/posts/1045818985558019>

²⁹ For more information on the mandatory hijab, see Raz Zimmt, "The Stealthy Freedom of Iranian Women: Battle of the Hijab on SNS," *Beehive*, vol. 2, no. 6, June 2014, <https://dayan.org/content/bee-hive-middle-east-social-media-vol-2-issue-6-june-2014>; and Raz Zimmt, "Iranian SNS users protest forced hijab to mark International Women's Day," *Beehive*, vol. 5, no. 3, March 2017, <https://dayan.org/content/iranian-sns-users-protest-forced-hijab>.

³⁰ "Proposed Law 'Protecting Women from Violence' or Realizing Goal 5 of the 2030 Document," *Kayhan*, December 24, 2017. <http://kayhan.ir/fa/news/121939>.

³¹ @AzamRasti, Twitter, December 15, 2017. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/AzamRasti/status/945380470472216576>.

³² @shirafkan82, Twitter, December 26, 2017. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/shirafkan82/status/945627208877518848>; @shirafkan82, Twitter, December 25, 2017. Last accessed March 8, 2018. <https://twitter.com/shirafkan82/status/945341522979053568>.

³³ @saeidifm, Twitter, December 26, 2017. Last accessed March 8, 2018.

<https://twitter.com/saeidifm/status/945721197987319808>.

³⁴ "The Broadcast Authority Apologizes," *ISNA*, January 30, 2018, goo.gl/KDHZyW.

³⁵ For more information on these struggles, see Raz Zimmt, "Campaign to Increase the Representation of Women in the Iranian Majlis," *Beehive*, vol. 3, no. 11, December 2015, <https://dayan.org/content/bee-hive-campaign-increase-representation-women-iranian-majlis>.