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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is pleased to present you with the October edition of **Beehive**. This issue turns its attention to the recent show of mass-surrender among ISIS combatants as seen in Hawija and al-Raqqah that fell into the hands of local forces, and how images of the defeat serve efforts against the organization. We shall follow the online discourse of Iranian reformists trying to stir public opposition to the political oppression of activists against the regime in light of the new restrictions on former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. Finally, we use the Taliban's take on the 16th anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan to introduce our readers to the movement's successful online drive to reestablish itself as a force to be reckoned with, despite the ongoing military efforts in the Afghan arena.

Enjoy!

The Crumbling Caliphate: Responses on Social Media to the Collapse of ISIS

Adam Hoffman

Recent weeks have seen the continued collapse of the 'Islamic Caliphate'- the grand state-building project declared by ISIS in June 2014- as the result of ongoing efforts by the international coalition and local forces in Iraq and Syria to drive the jihadist organization from the territories under its control. In July 2017, Iraqi security forces wrested control of Mosul, and in October they took over Hawija, a town in central Iraq that had been the last remaining ISIS urban stronghold in recent months.¹ Later the same month, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), together with a US-backed force of Kurdish and Arab rebels, seized the so-called ISIS capital of al-Raqqah, in a battle that they called a "defeat for the forces of darkness."² The evolving online discourse on the dramatic turn of events for the organization that has lost most of its territory in recent months is employed by elements associated with the international coalition in their campaign against the jihadist organization.

The ongoing defeats and loss of territory, in particular the key strongholds of Huwija and al-Raqqah, spurred a wide-spread surrender of ISIS militants. More than a thousand ISIS combatants turned themselves over to Kurdish Peshmerga forces after fleeing Hawija.³ This move appeared to follow the order of the local ISIS commander, who feared that any ISIS militants captured by the advancing Iraqi army or the Shi'i Popular Mobilization Forces [*al-Hashd as-Shaabi*] militias would be promptly executed.⁴ A similar scenario played out in al-Raqqah, where 100 ISIS militants turned themselves before the SDF had completed the



ISIS militants after surrendering to Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Source: Twitter

takeover of the city.⁵ While the territorial rollback of ISIS had been underway for two years, cases of mass-surrender appear to be a new development, evident offline and in the social networks, which attests to the eroding morale of fighters and command-and-control difficulties on the part of ISIS leaders.

As ISIS lost al-Raqqah, images and clips were disseminated on social networks, showing hundreds of exhausted, defeated and humiliated ISIS prisoners, some hobbling on crutches, following their surrender to the SDF.⁶ Such images stand in marked contrast to the organization's fear-instilling iron grip on al-Raqqah since January 2014, which included mass public beheadings in the city's central Naim Square, and draconic enforcement of Sharia law (as ISIS interpreted it) on its residents. In one prominent tweet, US Presidential envoy for the anti-ISIS Coalition Brett McGurk tweeted photographs of ISIS captives and wrote that "ISIS has lost nearly 6000 terrorists in Raqqa, then surrendered in large numbers. Once purported as fierce, [ISIS is] now pathetic and a lost cause."⁷ His tweet was retweeted 4,600 times and was 'liked' by more than 10,880 Twitter users.

Unsurprisingly, the mass-surrenders and the liberation of cities from ISIS' rule were widely celebrated on social networks. Photographs posted after the liberation of Hawija showed smiling men smoking and openly sporting packs of cigarettes⁸- which had been strictly banned by ISIS, who had beheaded violators of the decree.⁹ Another example came from the YPG, the Kurdish militia comprising the main contingent of the SDF in northern Syria, which tweeted from its official account the image of a woman rescued from the newly-liberated al-Raqqah tearing off the Niqab she had been forced to wear, and kneeling thankfully to kiss the ground.¹⁰

Among those celebrating was a journalist from the north-Iraq region of Kurdistan, who was careful to distinguish between the radical ideology of ISIS and the religion of Islam: ""#IslamicState witnessing collapsing of its own very ideas of the ideology of their copy of Islam, after [sic] loosing [sic] #Riqa."¹¹ In other words, ISIS purported to present its actions as implementation of the pure and true Islam, when in reality its claim to Islam merely served to excuse the terror and violence it waged against civilians, including Sunni Muslims, living under its control. This approach is shared by both Arab and Western senior officials , most notably former US President Barack Obama, who repeatedly stated that ISIS is "not Islamic".¹²

Various bodies affiliated with the international coalition have taken advantage of the recent events and use them to undermine the political legitimacy of ISIS and portray it as a failure. In the wake of the Hawija takeover, the Sawab Center¹³ – a joint US-UAE venture for fighting the ISIS narrative online – tweeted in Arabic that "thousands of ISIS fighters



A Kurdish YPG militia commander waves the SDF flag in al-Raqqah. Source: Twitter

are fleeing Hawija with their families, some surrendering.”¹⁴ In a separate English tweet, the center wrote that “As [#Daesh](#) is repeatedly battered in [#Iraq](#), the cowardly terrorists destroy everything of value before fleeing [#Hawija](#)”.¹⁵ These and other tweets were posted with the hashtags # and #UnitedAgainstExtremism in English and Arabic.

The YPG also used the recent blows to ISIS to advance their political message, particularly in al-Raqqah. They launched a Twitter, Facebook and Instagram campaign under the hashtag #SDFfreedRaqqah.” This campaign featured celebratory images and video from the newly free city.¹⁶ One tweet from the group showed the photograph of a female YPG commander waving the SDF flag in the streets of al-Raqqah, the caption calling it an “historic moment for humanity.” The image was retweeted by 400 users and ‘liked’ by more than 600.¹⁷ Another showed a woman purported to be the last civilian rescued from al-Raqqah by the SDF, raising her arms to the heavens with joy.¹⁸

The ongoing collapse of ISIS in Iraq and Syria is evident first and foremost in the loss of territory. By the middle of October 2017, the organization had lost 87% of the territory it had controlled in Iraq and Syria,¹⁹ an area estimated to be roughly equivalent to the total area of Great Britain.²⁰ Alongside the authentic display of joy from social media users, recent events also served the international coalition against ISIS and the Kurdish militias in Syria, who were now able to present images of victory in their prolonged war against the organization. The online discourse currently portrays ISIS as a collapsing organization, whose men are fleeing the battlefield and surrendering *en-masse*. This is a far cry from the daring, invincible image it had cultivated only three years before, using the very same online platforms.

Reactions to the Tightening of Restrictions on former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In October, new restrictions were imposed on former Iranian president and reformist leader Mohammad Khatami, prompting a stormy outbreak on social media in Iran. Well-aware of the public sympathy for Khatami in Iran, especially among supporters of the reformist opposition, the regime has long since employed restrictions to curb his popularity. However, the recent online eruption suggests that tightening these restrictions has only increased Khatami's popularity, and generates greater sympathy for reformist leaders. While the regime has succeeded in blocking reformists in the political arena, the strong reformist presence on social media has gained the movement increasing public influence.

Social media and various outlets affiliated with the opposition reported in October that new restrictions had been imposed on reformist leader Mohammad Khatami, who served as Iranian president from 1997 to 2005. Khatami was placed under severe restrictions by the regime, and denounced as a traitor by loyalists since 2009, when he sided with the opposition during the political crisis and bloody riots that erupted over allegations that the election results that year had been falsified. Unlike reformist leaders Mir- Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, Khatami has not been placed under house-arrest. However, he is nevertheless barred from leaving Iran and his travel within the country is controlled. Moreover, all official state media are forbidden from showing his picture.

Recently, Khatami attended several public events, and in one case was photographed alongside conservative politician Ali Larijani, speaker of Iran's Parliament [*Majlis*]. His public appearances and calls to release reformist leaders from their house-arrest angered the regime. According to the reformist website Kalemeh, the Special Clerical Court, headed by the conservative Ebrahim Raisi, banned Khatami from taking part in any public, political or cultural events for three months. In addition, he is barred from meeting senior government officials, clerics, political activists, trade



Mohammad Khatami. Caption above:
“Master of reforms is here to stay in the heart of the Iranian nation.” Source: Twitter

union activists, and students.²¹ A spokesman for the judiciary denied new restrictions, but Khatami's attorneys and confidants confirmed he had recently been notified of these new measures.²²

Social media users in Iran launched an online campaign to lift the restrictions. Using the hashtags "Khatami is here to stay" and "We will not allow Khatami to be erased," protestors praised him as an admired leader and a symbol of Iranians' desire for freedom. "Khatami is an idea, one cannot jail an idea," one protestor tweeted.²³ "We will not allow history to be erased," wrote another, adding that the former president played a meaningful part in Iran's modern history.²⁴ Khatami's image was widely shared on social media in defiance of the ban in official state media. Protestors declared the regime's efforts against Khatami futile. "He is locked in our hearts and we will not release him. You want to lock him up, but what shall you do with our hearts?" was one rhetorical question on Twitter.²⁵ Other users described the regime's policy as a double-edged sword, ultimately increasing support for Khatami. "The sword of his words grows sharper and of greater influence," as one tweet put it.²⁶

Protestors also demanded that the two reformist leaders be released from their house-arrest of six years, and some criticized President Rouhani for failing to act on his authority as chairman of the Supreme National Security Council to end the years-long political oppression of reformists. This criticism reflects reformists' increasing disappointment with Rouhani, who won their votes but does little to improve civil liberties for fear of confronting the conservative religious establishment headed by the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei.

Some critics singled out Ebrahim Raisi, head of the special tribunal established in the 1980s to try clerics for various crimes, including political offenses against the regime. The conservative cleric had run for the presidency in the last elections that were ultimately won by Rouhani. Online critics accused Raisi of exploiting his court position to avenge his defeat by targeting his political adversaries.²⁷ Several reformist lawmakers also joined this charge, such as Mahmoud Sadeghi, who tweeted that the sanctions imposed on Khatami by a former presidential candidate underscores the danger averted by Rouhani's reelection.²⁸ Taking their online protest to the next level, 86 members of the Majlis reformist faction submitted a letter to Rouhani, calling the new restrictions a blunt violation of the human rights anchored in the Iranian constitution.²⁹

On the whole, the online reactions to the tightened restrictions on Khatami illustrate the limits of power of the Iranian regime. Certainly, the government may exploit its control of non-elected bodies, including the judiciary, to continue oppressing its political adversaries. However, this appears to have the opposite effect, as Khatami's case demonstrates well. After an eight-year term as president, he was widely regarded a failure, especially where advancing reforms and securing civil

liberties were concerned. Khatami owes much of his rehabilitation and present public support to the social networks, the main arena in which reformists campaign against their political oppression. Khatami himself has become a symbol of Iranians' ongoing pursuit of freedom.

16 Years Later: Taliban Views on the Anniversary of the US Invasion of Afghanistan

Ariel Koch

October 7 marked the 16th anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan that began when then-Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar refused to turn in al-Qaeda leader and 9/11 mastermind Osama bin-Laden.³⁰ A decade after the invasion, former US President Barack Obama declared that al-Qaeda had been defeated, and that the Taliban would never again regain control of Afghanistan.³¹ In both cases, he was proven wrong. Four years later, Obama admitted the US was incapable of vanquishing the Taliban.³² By then, the war had cost hundreds of billions of dollars, mobilized tens of thousands of US and other coalition soldiers, and cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians. The Taliban remains a threat to the Afghan government and NATO forces in the country.³³ This is evident in its online propaganda as well.³⁴

The roots of the Taliban, a fundamentalist Sunni movement, can be traced back to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The 1980s saw a widespread popular uprising against the 'heretic' secular Soviet occupation by local *Mujahideen*, later joined by other Muslim volunteers. The Afghan fighters evolved into the local Taliban movement, and the foreign ones produced the global al-Qaeda, whose leaders bin-Laden and his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri pledged allegiance (*bay'a*) to Taliban leader Mullah Omar and his successors, reflecting the tight bond the Afghan movement and the terror organization. When the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1988-1989, the Mujahideen perceived this as a victory. However, a civil war erupted in the wake of the withdrawal; in 1996, the Taliban seized the capital Kabul and later the entire country, and proceeded to enforce a brutally oppressive regime based on Islamic law.³⁵ Even today, the Taliban remains a key player in Afghanistan.³⁶



Military reports on the Taliban English-language Telegram account, October 15th.

Compared to other Jihadist terror groups, the Taliban were ahead of the curve in propaganda; as early as 1998 it began spreading its message online in Urdu,³⁷ Pashtu,³⁸ Arabic,³⁹ Dari (Afghan-Farsi),⁴⁰ as well as in English.⁴¹ In addition to presenting its efforts against the US and its allies as successful, the organization used these websites to frame itself as a legitimate sovereign, capable of

providing its subjects with all education, health, security and other needs (recalling the efforts of ISIS in this respect). From time to time, the movement also issued updates on military issues, as well as on civilian matters, such as education.⁴²

Recent years have seen a shift in the Taliban's online efforts, which like other extremists have begun supplementing their website propaganda with social media activity. This is particularly noticeable on Twitter,⁴³ which has become a stage for the organization's jousting with NATO over allegedly fabricated military information reported by the Taliban.⁴⁴ One such instance occurred when Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed that the organization had downed a US military cargo plane,⁴⁵ a report which NATO forces in Afghanistan denied on Twitter as false propaganda.⁴⁶

The Taliban took this year's anniversary of the US invasion as an opportunity to recap the extensive damage caused by the protracted war, and to declare its intention to regain control of Afghanistan. "We are determined to force [out] all occupying forces. This is our legal right. We must defend with our souls our liberty, our self-definition, the Islamic [governmental] system, and our people," a statement



Images from Taliban activists' Twitter and Telegram accounts on the anniversary of the US invasion of Afghanistan

on the Taliban website declared. The statement added that "thousands of our youth await their turn to martyr themselves and look forward to the establishment of an Islamic government."⁴⁷ This propaganda push included a campaign on Twitter and Telegram, where the organization posted images illustrating the devastation that the US had visited upon Afghanistan during the war.⁴⁸ One such image depicted the body of a little boy with an American flag driven through his heart, with the caption "The US War in Afghanistan Since 7 Oct 2001." Another picture bears the date October 7 in Arabic and English, calling it a "Black Day for Afghan Nation" (see images).⁴⁹ On Twitter, Mujahid warned the Americans that their weapons would turn into double-edged swords and ultimately end up serving the organization's interests.⁵⁰ Nearly four thousand people now follow the spokesman's prolific account.

The Taliban's online activity, particularly in social media networks, attests to its adaptation to the digital reality of the 21st century despite being a conservative movement. Today, the organization utilizes digital media for more than just propaganda, and skillfully employs it to brand the Taliban as

a proper agent of government. This does not, however, alter its fundamental character. Mujahid stated this clearly: “[The Americans] must bear in mind that our struggle is based on ideology, not technology.”⁵¹

The Afghanistan dilemma is once more at the doorstep of the American administration, and President Trump will have to confront a Taliban revival and prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming the terror state it was prior to October 7, 2001. In part, this war will have to be fought online. The Taliban have been there for two decades.

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⁴ Rod Norland, "ISIS Fighters, Having Pledged to Fight or Die, Surrender en Masse", *The New York Times*, October 8, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/08/world/middleeast/isis-iraq-surrender.html>

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⁶ https://twitter.com/Raqqa_SL/status/919682352984592385;
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⁷ 15.10.17 : https://twitter.com/brett_mcgurk/status/920418521640833025

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¹⁰ 15.10.17 : <https://twitter.com/DefenseUnits/status/919171226697953280>

¹¹ 15.10.17 : <https://twitter.com/BasharMandalawi/status/920280183659286528>

¹² "President Obama: 'ISIL is not Islamic'", *CNN*, September 10, 2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwp8qKvE-Og>

¹³ For more on the Sawab Center, see Adam Hoffman, "[The Fight against ISIS on SNS: The War for Hearts and Minds](#)," *Beehive: Middle East Social Media*, September 2016.

¹⁴ 15.10.17: <https://twitter.com/sawabcenter/status/919593729333248000>

¹⁵ 15.10.17 : <https://twitter.com/sawabcenter/status/919759807753494529>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/hashtag/SDFfreedRaqqa?src=hash> ; :15.10.17

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<https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/sdffreedraqqa>

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