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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the September issue of **Beehive**. In this issue, we survey the positions of Egyptian users of SNS regarding the accomplishments of President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi after three years in office, and the general consensus surrounding his poor economic performance. We analyze the public struggle led by Iranian SNS users against the deeply-rooted nepotism in Iran and the Middle East in general, with a wide-ranging campaign, entitled "Good Gene." Finally, we explore the discourse that developed on SNS following the terrorist attack on Las Ramblas Boulevard in Barcelona, Spain, last month. In this discourse, right-wing extremists are both in dialogue with the anti-Islamic discourse in Europe in recent years, and use unique images drawn from historical remnants of the Muslim rule in Spain.

Enjoy!

1095 Days of al-Sisi's Presidency: The Upcoming Egyptian Presidential Elections on SNS

Dr. Michael Barak

Against the backdrop of preparations for the Egyptian presidential elections scheduled for April 2018, social networking sites (SNS) in Egypt have been, for several months, engaged in a frantic discussion. This discussion has examined the achievements of the regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and has debated whether he should be elected for another term. Many Egyptian citizens thank al-Sisi for his efforts to defend the Egyptian homeland against ISIS terrorism and against the Muslim Brotherhood's attempt to take control of the state institutions during the period of Morsi's presidency. At the same time, there is an evident sense of disappointment over al-Sisi's perceived failure to improve the welfare of residents, particularly in the economic realm. While his supporters want to focus on the efforts he has made to advance the Egyptian economy, the Muslim Brotherhood opposition has called on him to resign immediately. In the background, left-wing activists are encouraging people to boycott the elections or, alternatively, to vote for other candidates, even those with no chance of being elected, as a protest against al-Sisi's policies. The discourse on SNS thus reflects the ambivalent feelings of Egyptian users towards al-Sisi.

To enhance his image prior to the elections, young people launched a state-supported SNS campaign last June, called "Egypt 1095." The campaign is intended to highlight the achievements of the regime during its' three-year tenure, and includes the new Suez Canal initiative. Many users described al-Sisi as an admired

leader fighting corruption and terrorism, acting for greater transparency in state institutions and the welfare of individuals. One wrote that al-Sisi managed to give hope to his people, and unite them around the homeland despite the difficult period. Others wrote that he had managed to turn the Egyptian army into one of the strongest, and thus has restored Egypt's status as leader of the region.¹ On his Facebook page, al-Sisi expressed gratitude for the initiative: "We thank the people working on this excellent effort. It proves that the young people of Egypt are the hope of this nation, and they will lead it."²



Egyptian squash champion Nour al-Sherbini praises the momentum and the achievements of Egyptian sports during al-Sisi's presidency as part of the "Egypt 1095" campaign on SNS

Among the supporters of al-Sisi, there were those who nevertheless criticized his performance on the economic level. “We are furious at the unjustified cost of living, the lack of government supervision of markets, and the failure to take punitive measures against unscrupulous [i.e., corrupt] people.” Another user from the capital expressed joy at the fact that “We are rid of the Brothers’ rule, but failed economic planning has plunged us into the abyss.” Yet another, from the city Banha, noted that Egypt bears a heavy economic burden because the inauguration of the new Suez Canal has not proven itself, has only deepened the country’s budget deficit. The user continued by stating that it “would have been better to settle for the old [Suez] canal.” Another user urged al-Sisi to focus on rehabilitating tourism, which was severely damaged by the bombing by ISIS of a Russian plane over the Sinai Peninsula.

Other criticism, mainly by anti-Islamist Egyptian students without a specific party affiliation, dealt with the suppression of individual freedoms. The discourse on the subject was renewed following the mid-September decision of the Egyptian Minister of Education to compel university students to sing the national anthem facing the Egyptian flag. This decision was framed as an effort to strengthen the connection of students to the homeland, but many students ridiculed the measure as a joke, stressing that there are other ways to strengthen national feelings. They said it would have been better for the regime to allow elections for the Students Union to be held on campuses without external intervention, to grant freedom of expression, and to release from prison the students who were convicted for nothing more than daring to criticize the regime.³

The Muslim Brotherhood also held a wide-ranging discussion describing the al-Sisi regime as a failure that is leading Egypt to national disaster. At the end of August, the Brotherhood’s supporters launched an online campaign, which won Qatari support,

called “Remove Your President.” It listed reasons for al-Sisi to resign. These included, *inter alia*, his alleged inability to protect the security of the Coptic population against terrorism, and the deterioration of the economic situation in Egypt.⁵ In early September, their rhetoric was heightened following publication of a report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) accusing Egypt of torturing prisoners, which it described as a “crime against humanity.” The report was exploited for propaganda purposes using varied hashtags, including “Torture” and “Al-Sisi’s Crimes Against Humanity.”⁶ al-Sisi’s supporters, on the other hand, claimed that the report was false, and called HRW a “fifth column” operating in the service of Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood and even ISIS.



A Muslim Brotherhood banner calling on al-Sisi to resign

Among left-wing users, opinions are divided between the desire to boycott the elections as a protest against al-Sisi, who failed to keep his promises to care for the welfare of the people and the absence of a suitable alternative candidate, and between those who view this as a fundamentally mistaken idea, preferring instead to prevent al-Sisi from winning a landslide victory. The reasons for their opposition to al-Sisi include his decision to transfer the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia, which they regard as treasonous and a historical error.⁷

In an opinion poll conducted by an Egyptian Twitter user, in which more than 20,000 respondents were asked about their desired next president, 61% supported al-Sisi, 13% supported another candidate, and 26% expressed their desire to boycott the elections entirely.⁸ The survey reflects the mood of the current discourse, in which al-Sisi's supporters, including those who are disappointed with his economic performance, seek to re-elect him. Meanwhile, his opponents from the Muslim Brotherhood and the left are divided between their desire to boycott the elections and their desire to minimize the margin of al-Sisi's victory. In their view, the economic crisis, the narrowing of freedom of expression, and the exploitation of SNS as propaganda tools for the regime's needs, such as "Egypt 1095," are evidence of the regime's moral impoverishment.

Social Media vs. Tradition: Iranian Users Criticize Nepotism

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In recent weeks, Iran's social networks have been waging a sharp debate over nepotism in the public sector. Although the phenomenon is common, it is considered one of the worst problems in the Iranian public sector, and the recent debate on this issue is unprecedented in scope. The public and media storm surrounding the appointment of relatives of senior officials (known in Persian as "*Aqazadeh*," – "sons of the lord" or "princes") to public office attests to the decisive contribution of social networking sites (SNS) as a means for social criticism, and increased civic awareness of negative phenomena in politics and Iranian society generally, parallel to the continued strength of traditional, informal networks.

The discourse about nepotism began on SNS after Iranian businessman Hamid-Reza Aref gave an interview to Videogram in late July.⁹ Hamid, 36, is the son of Mohammad-Reza Aref, who served as First Vice President under President Mohammad Khatami from 2001 to 2005 and who now chairs the reformist faction in the Iranian parliament (Majlis). In the interviews, Hamid spoke about his success and rapid progress in business. His business began flourishing in the early 2000s, when the South African cellular operator MTN, in which he was a business partner, won a tender issued by the Iranian Ministry of Communications. This tender allowed it to acquire 49% of the second-largest communications company in Iran. When he was asked about his meteoric success in business, Hamid attributed it to the "good genes" he inherited from his parents. His words sparked a storm on SNS, with many users accusing him of being patronizing, and mocking him with the claim that his business success is unrelated to his qualities or talents, but rather to the fact that his father was vice president when MTN won the huge tender.

Reactions to Aref developed into a wide-ranging discourse on nepotism in the Iranian public sector. Thousands of users posted comments on Twitter, Instagram and Telegram accompanied with the hashtag "good gene."¹⁰ They harshly criticized senior Iranian officials, who prefer to promote their children without regard for their skills or experience, while young people who are not close to senior officials find it difficult to find work, and some are even forced to emigrate from Iran because of the unemployment crisis. One user wrote that he is unemployed despite having a master's degree in construction engineering and nearly ten years of experience in the field, while others are placed in senior positions because of their "good genes."¹¹ Another sarcastically suggested changing the name of Government Week (celebrated annually in Iran in late August) to "Good Gene Week."¹²

To illustrate the severity of the phenomenon, users listed several cases, all in recent weeks, in which children of senior officials were appointed to top management positions. The examples included: Ahmad Araghchi, nephew of Iran's deputy foreign minister and nuclear negotiator, Abbas Araghchi, who was appointed to a senior position in the central bank despite his youth (under 40) and meager experience; Farshad Abbasi, the 28-year-old son of the deputy governor of Ardabil Province and head of President Rouhani's presidential campaign in the province, was elected mayor without any experience in municipal administration; Amir Bahmani the son of Mahmoud Bahmani, the governor of the central bank of President Ahmadinejad's administration, who was also elected as mayor; Mehdi Vakili, the 26-year-old son of Majlis member Mohammad-Ali Vakili, who was appointed CEO of a mining company under the auspices of the Ministry of Labor and Social Services; and the appointment of Mostafa Jashnsaz, a son of a senior executive on the National Oil Company, to a management position in a company engaged in oil and gas drilling.

The discourse on nepotism soon became a political debate, when users affiliated with the conservative right took advantage of the words of Hamid-Reza Aref to criticize the reformist politicians on the grounds that they preferred the well-being of their relatives over the well-being of the country. Some of them showed pictures of Iranian fighters killed in recent months in Syria, with the label "good gene" to draw a comparison between those who, in their view, were blessed with good genes, and the children of the corrupt politicians. A number of users attacked President Rouhani personally, because his younger brother Hossein Fereydoun previously served as his senior advisor, and was recently suspected of economic crimes. Critics accused the president and his reformist supporters, claiming that instead of fighting corruption, they encourage it. Conversely, others contended that nepotism is not limited to any particular political stream. "Despite the many differences between reformists and conservatives, they have a lot in common when it comes to corruption and good genes," tweeted one user.¹³

Traditional media and news sites joined the criticism. A commentary on the conservative website *Tabnak* called for combating the phenomenon, and for allowing competition over



Tweet, with the hashtag #good gene, showing a purported advertisement for "The Prince's Shampoo," which is particularly well-suited for the hair of Reformist princes. The picture on the bottle shows Mohammad-Reza Aref and his son.

managerial positions on equal terms. The article noted that the Islamic revolution was aimed at preventing the hereditary transfer of administrative positions, and thus eliminating any difference between “princes” and the common people.¹⁴ The website *Fararu* published an interview with former Majlis member Ali Tajerniya, who criticized those who believe that they have a right to enter the public arena just because one of their parents served the state in some position. According to Tajerniya, incompetent and unsuitable people are appointed to public office and as a result, many young people prefer to establish close relationships with senior officials instead of acquiring skills, education and experience. He called for the establishment of a mechanism to oversee the process of appointments in the civil service and fight nepotism.¹⁵

This is not the first time that SNS have served as a means of social criticism in Iran, and specifically against nepotism. In 2014, the network roiled after a group of young Iranians launched an Instagram account under the name “Rich Kids of Tehran” that afforded a glimpse into the lives of wealthy young people in the Islamic Republic. Users argued that displaying the wealth of young people for all to see was inappropriate and immoral, especially when most citizens suffer from severe economic distress. Some of them accused the youth of gaining wealth by virtue of their proximity to senior government officials, and claimed that many of their parents serve as senior government officials.¹⁶ The prevalence of nepotism attests to the strength of the traditional, unofficial networks in Iran and in the Middle East generally. The scale of the phenomenon in Iran and its persistence over the decades (even prior to the Islamic revolution) raises serious doubts about the possibility of uprooting it. However, the widespread preoccupation with this issue in the recent past shows the potential of SNS to increase public awareness of the phenomenon, and challenge the traditional networks. This awareness is essential for the struggle against corruption in general and against nepotism in particular, and may serve as the first stage in a process that will require senior government officials to respond to public criticism, and be more stringent about complying with proper norms of behavior than they had done previously.

The Reconquista is Now: Anti-Islamic Discourse After the Attack in Barcelona

Ariel Koch

The terrorist attack on Las Ramblas Boulevard in Barcelona on August 17 is considered to have been the first terrorist attack carried out by Spanish jihadists since the Madrid attacks in March of 2004. As far as currently known, the most recent attack was carried out by Spanish citizens who identified with ISIS, which for its part took credit for the attacks. The discourse on social networking sites (SNS) that developed following the attack was varied, and included black humor and ridicule against the jihadists, alongside violent and inflammatory discourse that was further expressed, *inter alia*, as physical violence directed against Muslims in Spain. This discourse reveals the threat perception of users from the far-right in Spain. This threat perception originated in the Middle Ages, when the Iberian Peninsula was conquered by Muslims, and corresponds, in a surreal manner, with the content world that their jihadist opponents use to justify their violent acts against the non-Muslim population of Europe, particularly in Spain.²⁵

As with previous terror attacks in Europe, the attack in Barcelona sparked many reactions from extreme right-wing users. Spanish users took advantage of the event to claim that Muslims wanted to re-conquer al-Andalus (the Arabic name for the Iberian peninsula during the Muslim conquest in the 8th–15th centuries), with the aim of returning Spain to the fold of Islam. To support their claim, these users used a propaganda video distributed in the al-Khir district of ISIS in which, for the first time, two Spanish speakers threatened additional attacks and made it clear that Spain would be punished for the persecution of Muslims during the Inquisition.²⁶ The reactions ranged from mockery of the jihadists to defiance of the attempt to terrorize the Spanish population, and also included threats and curses against the Muslims in Spain and elsewhere. For example, a meme shared on SNS showed one of the speakers from the ISIS video with the caption, “Wanted to revive the Caliphate, become the meme of the year.”²⁷



From the video the Soy de Derechas distributed on Twitter, showing a man threatening to stab Muslims.

Among the prominent accounts disseminating anti-Islamic propaganda is that of a Spanish user named “Soy de Derechas,” (“I am a believer,” in Spanish) with more than 26,000 followers.²⁸ On August 20, he uploaded a short video showing a Spanish-speaking man holding a sword and threatening Muslims.²⁹ In the video, the sword was claimed to a replica of “*tizona*,” the sword of Rodrigo Díaz de Viver, better known as El Cid, an 11th-century knight, portrayed in Spanish-Christian narratives as a great Christian warrior who participated in “La Reconquista,” the re-conquest of Spain from the Muslims.³⁰ The man, whose identity is still

unknown, cursed “the Moors” (the historical designation for the Muslim invaders from North Africa), and warned them, “there are still many Spaniards facing you.” The video was shared more 1,600 times, and received more than 1,400 likes. Most of the responses to the video were supportive, but some expressed incredulity and shock at the show of hatred. A similar video was distributed after the London Bridge attack, in which an extreme right-wing activist from Liverpool was shown wearing a hand grenade and brandishing a machete as he threatened to blow up mosques and injure Muslims.³¹

The anti-Islamic discourse that developed following the attack included, not infrequently, more general expressions of xenophobia, directed also against Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals. An example is the Twitter user known as “†German Turis,” who has more than 30,000 followers.³² He describes himself as an “anti-communist” and highlights his opposition to any Muslim presence in Europe. Hashtags used by the account include “#whitegenocide,” and “#defendeurope,” which are used by radical right-wingers, including neo-Nazis and supporters of white supremacy in Europe and beyond. By implication, these challenge the presence of other minorities in Europe.

In the context of this discourse, there were more than a few references to Muslim immigrants, who were presented as a tangible danger to Spain. Such references included images that ridiculed liberals who ostensibly are closing their eyes to the supposed danger. Some users called for outlawing Islam and expelling Muslims from Europe. The illustration shown here was distributed using the Twitter account of a user known as “Kfan Patria & Madrid,” who describes himself as a patriot from Madrid. It shows a man kicking a book labelled “Koran” into a black hole, with the caption, “F*ck Islam. This Is Europe.”³³ Another image shows a map of Europe with the words “To protect our territory from the invaders: a white, united and strong Europe against the invader.”³⁴ This corresponds with the message disseminated by extremist right-wing elements in the West who contend that Muslim immigrants are terrorist operatives and dormant agents of ISIS.³⁵



Drawing from the Twitter account Kfan Patria & Madrid with the text F*ck Islam. This is Europe

Following the terrorist attack in Barcelona, Spanish media reported on Islamophobic incidents, including arson and attempted arson of mosques, and attacks on “Muslim-looking” civilians,³⁶ in addition to the attacks on Manchester and the London Bridge in England.³⁷ According to the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE), a mosque in Madrid was also attacked by members of a group affiliated with the extreme right after the March 2016 Brussels attack.³⁸ However, this seems to be a limited and relatively new phenomenon in Spain. For comparison’s sake, after the attacks in Madrid in 2004, public

opinion leaned left, as exemplified by the election three days after the attack of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the left-wing candidate for prime minister.

Jihadi terrorism provokes and spurs the extreme right in Spain, which uses it to justify their hostility and violence, not only against the jihadists and their supporters, but against all Muslims. Together they are perceived as a single entity that intends to conquer Spain, and to expand into all of Europe. In this context, people on both sides of the divide use narratives and symbols from the Wars of the Reconquista to mobilize support, and to cast the current struggle as part of an ongoing, even eternal, struggle between the Christian world and supposedly avaricious Islam. Alternatively, such discourse is used to assert ancient rights to the Iberian Peninsula, according the world view of the beholder. Discourse of this type may have negative implications for the fabric of relations within society in Spain, and in Europe in general.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Egypt1095days/videos/186559851878803/>

² <https://www.facebook.com/AlSisiofficial/posts/2007333515959644> 30.6.17. For more on the process of establishing the group and producing the video on the regime's accomplishments, see *a-Masry al-Youm* on 30.6.2017.

³ <https://www.facebook.com/RassdNewsN/videos/1801715843238850/>;

<https://www.facebook.com/Youm7/videos/2139529379451046/>;

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mSgCG2D7co> ; <https://www.facebook.com/no.sisi.2018/> on 27.9.2017.

⁶ جرائم السيسى ضد الانسانية; ضد الاعدام السياسي; لن تسقط جرائمكم; السيسى راعي التعذيب; #كفاية تعذيب

⁷ <https://twitter.com/Baher/status/910243875155009539> on 17.9.2017. For more details on this issue see, Michael Barak, "The Tiran and Sanafir Islands at the Heart of an Online Protest," *Beehive*, Vol. 4, issue 4 (April 2016) <http://dayan.org/content/tiran-and-sanafir-islands-heart-online-protest>.

⁸ <https://twitter.com/zeinatsedky/status/9083585283137208321> on 14.9.17 :

https://twitter.com/Hazem_Azim/status/910483541317832704 on 20.9.17.

⁹ http://www.aparat.com/v/xs58l/Hamidreza_Aref_-_Videogram_-_%D8%AD%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A7_%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%81_-_%D9%BE%D8%B3%D8%B1_%D8%AF%DA%A9%D8%AA%D8%B1

¹⁰ For details on the responses see

https://twitter.com/search?q=%23%DA%98%D9%86_%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A8&src=typd

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/Aban0098/status/904446640936931329>.

¹² <https://twitter.com/Aram8160/status/904643964673896450> .

¹³ <https://twitter.com/behmash/status/899240360227909632> .

¹⁴ "We did not have a good gene in revolutionary thought", , Tabnak, September 3, 2017.

¹⁵ "Political gene," Fararu, August 31, 2017.

¹⁶ Raz Zimmt, "Rich Kids of Tehran: Extravagant Lifestyles and Social Criticism on Iranian SNS," *Beehive*, vol. 2, Issue 9 (October 2014). <http://www.dayan.org/sites/default/files/behive%20october%20final%202014.pdf>

²⁵ I presented an example of this in my article "Jihad Works Both Ways: Representations of the New Crusaders," *Beehive*, vol. 5, issue 6, June 2017 <http://dayan.org/content/jihad-works-both-ways%E2%80%9D-representations-new-crusaders>

²⁶ Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, "Jihadism in the Spanish Language After the Barcelona Attacks", *The George Washington*

University's Program on Extremism, August 2017.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extremism.gwu.edu/files/TorresSorianoJihadismInSpanish.pdf>

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- ²⁷ https://blogs.elconfidencial.com/alma-corazon-vida/tribuna/2017-08-25/espana-chiste-meme-yihadista_1433809/
- ²⁸ <https://twitter.com/SoydeDERECHAS>
- ²⁹ <https://twitter.com/SoydeDERECHAS/status/899369776551776261>
- ³⁰ Rodrigo Díaz de Viver, known as El Cid Campeador (1044-1099), was for a time a mercenary who served Muslim rulers of Spain, even in their wars against Christians.
- ³¹ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/racist-clips-grenade-chest-brandishes-10562352> ; <https://twitter.com/ahudhayfah/status/872220865274011648>
- ³² <https://twitter.com/german21168>
- ³³ <https://twitter.com/kfan90/status/907518171963424768>
- ³⁴ <https://twitter.com/kfan90/status/907114354981720065>
- ³⁵ https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/zngwz9/kleinfeld-refugee-memes-debunking-846, and also <http://mashable.com/2017/02/02/refugee-memes/#MAIKSvL5SiQu>
- ³⁶ <http://www.elmundo.es/andalucia/2017/08/20/59994ab0ca4741dd488b4635.html> ; <http://www.newsweek.com/muslims-spain-madrid-barcelona-attack-654964>; On Islamophobia in Europe, see: Enes Bayraklı and Farid Hafez (eds.), "European Islamophobia Report - 2016", Turkey, Istanbul: SETA - Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, 2016. <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/SPAIN.pdf>
- ³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jun/20/anti-muslim-hate-surges-after-manchester-and-london-bridge-attacks>
- ³⁸ Institución para la observación y seguimiento de la situación del ciudadano musulmán y la islamofobia en España, "Informe Especial 2016: Incidencias e Islamofobia," *Unión de Comunidades Islámicas de España*, Madrid: 2017, p. 3. <http://ucide.org/sites/default/files/revistas/isj16.pdf>, and also <https://www.thelocal.es/20160323/far-right-group-targets-madrid-mosque-after-brussels-attacks>