



THE MOSHE DAYAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND AFRICAN STUDIES

ALLIANCE CENTER FOR IRANIAN STUDIES



BeeHive

Middle East Social Media

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Volume 5, issue 5, April 2017

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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is proud to present the April issue of **Beehive**. In this issue, we review social networking sites' users' reactions to the chemical attack in the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhun, attributed to the Assad regime, and to the American military response. Many Iranian users are strongly opposed to the use of chemical weapons, and some blamed the attack on the Assad regime - a reaction unaligned with the Iranian-Syrian partnership. Nonetheless, the motives for President Donald Trump's military response were subject to criticism and suspicion. Meanwhile, Palestinian users' reactions to these events reflected a combination of internal politics and geopolitical context. Palestinian users were divided; some sought to distance themselves from the Syrian regime's traditional backing, while others continued to support the regime and its allies. Finally, Syrian users expressed euphoria, hoping that the American attack heralded a change in US regional policy and an increase in the involvement of the international community.

Enjoy!

Opposed to Chemical Weapons, but Doubtful of Trump’s Policy: Iranian Reactions to the American Attack on Syria

Dr. Raz Zimmt

On the night of April 6-7, a US attack on a Syrian Air Force base in the western Syrian city of Homs provoked mixed reactions on Iranian social networking sites (SNS). These reactions reflected the Iranian public’s complex attitude towards the ongoing crisis in Syria. Some users considered the attack justified, given the preceding gas attack in the Idlib district attributed to the Assad regime. Others claimed that the American action exposed Western hypocrisy vis-à-vis the Middle East.

In the days leading up to the American attack in Syria, Iranian social networks were strongly critical of the chemical attack on Idlib, although users disagreed on the identity of the perpetrator. While some blamed President Assad, others claimed he would have no interest in using chemical weapons, considering his significant gains in the war. Regardless, Iranian criticism of the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war is not a new phenomenon. This sensitivity draws on Iranian victimization in chemical attacks by Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.



Demonstration of solidarity with the victims of the chemical attack in Syria, with the participation of the families of the victims of the Iraqi chemical attack against Iran in June 1987.

The chemical attack in Idlib reignited criticism of Iran’s continued support for the Assad regime. “What a sorry country we are, supporting those who drop chemical bombs on the heads of civilians when we ourselves were the victims of such a crime,” wrote one user.¹ However, this was not the first time Iranian intervention in Syria has provoked public criticism, primarily from the reformist camp. Significant criticism was voiced following the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons against its opponents in the summer of 2013, and after the Syrian refugee crisis worsened. Although this criticism has no practical effect on Iran’s policy toward Syria, it reflects segments of the Iranian public’s dissatisfaction with their country’s official policies.

Against the backdrop of the chemical attack in Idlib, one can understand Iranian expressions of support for the American military response. Many stressed that although they do not support President Donald Trump, his response was necessary and justified, especially after

eight years of the Obama administration's disregard for the Damascus regime's crimes. A number of users opposed Iranian and Western human rights activists' distaste for military action, arguing that the Assad regime's murderous campaign against its citizens justifies punitive action. These users stressed that the president of Syria, not the United States, was responsible for the ongoing war in Syria. From their perspective, if Assad had agreed to hold free elections four years ago, he could have prevented the ongoing crisis and bloodshed.² Some users supported even stronger action than that taken by the US, including bombing Assad's palace. They claimed that only eliminating Assad's regime could end the Syrian civil war, and limited military action would not prevent him from continuing the massacre.³

In addition to human rights activists' principled reservations about the military option, others questioned its effectiveness. They argued that military intervention would not resolve the crisis, and might prolong the civil war by leading to its escalation. As proof, they cited the US military intervention in Iraq, which plunged the country into a bloody civil war. These users argued that it is necessary to employ alternative means to resolve the crisis and assist its victims. "For the price of 50 Tomahawk missiles, it would be possible to buy enough food to feed 2,000 families of war victims in Syria for a year," wrote one user.⁴

US policy was also criticized for being tainted by political considerations. Users castigated the US administration for disregarding the daily horrors taking place in the Middle East, such as the deaths of hundreds of Yemeni children in Saudi aerial bombardments.⁵ Many recalled the lack of a US response to Iraq's use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq war, and the unabated US support for Saddam Hussein. "Where were the American cruise missiles when Saddam Hussein attacked cities and villages in Iran with chemical weapons?" tweeted one user.⁶ Critics claimed that US policy in the Middle East proves that the attack in Syria was not an expression of genuine concern for Syrian citizens, but rather of Trump's desire to improve his status at home. Many mentioned Trump's opposition to American intervention in Syria after Assad's first chemical attack against the rebels in the summer of 2013. Others pointed out the hypocrisy of taking military action in Syria to supposedly to defend innocent civilians, while issuing a presidential order banning Syrian refugees from entering the US.⁷

Criticism was also directed against Russia, which despite its support for the Syrian regime, neither prevented nor condemned the American attack. Some Iranian users saw Russia's response as evidence of Moscow's unreliability, and of the necessity for Iranian self-sufficiency in the security sector.⁸ This position expresses the deep suspicion that characterizes the Iranian attitude towards Russia. For example, this attitude was evident in the sharp internal criticism voiced in August 2016, after Iranian authorities issued a permit allowing Russian fighter planes to use the military airport in the Iranian city of Madan to attack targets in Syria.

On the margins of the debate, several users discussed the implications of America's military action on Iran's upcoming presidential elections, scheduled for May 19. Some users, especially among President Rouhani's supporters, claimed that Trump's military action demonstrated the need to re-elect moderate President Rouhani to prevent an escalation in the Iran-US confrontation. "When Trump is firing missiles at Syria, we must not elect a radical Iranian president," tweeted a journalist for the reformist newspaper Etemad.⁹ In response, an opponent of Rouhani ridiculed the journalist, claiming that his remarks were like those of a child willing to surrender to his classmates' extortion and pay them off, as long as they did not beat him.¹⁰

The reactions on Iranian SNS to the American attack in Syria indicate the strength of Iranians' opposition to the use of chemical weapons, stemming from historical trauma. This opposition generates harsh public criticism of the Syrian regime, and sometimes even a willingness to justify the American military response. At the same time, the discourse reflects a response to the Trump era shift in American Middle East policy, which Iranians fear may lead to escalation between Iran and the US, or even military confrontation. These events afford a glimpse into the Iranian public's complex response to Iran's military involvement in Syria – an involvement which occasionally provokes public criticism, especially when events expose the cruelty of the Syrian regime supported by their country.

The Chemical Attack on Khan Sheikhun: Palestinians Divorce the Syrian Regime

Dr. Michael Barak

The horrific chemical attack against the village of Khan Sheikhun in Syria, resulting in many children's deaths, deepened the rift between the Palestinians and the Syrian regime, further deteriorating a relationship already decayed by six years of Syrian civil war.¹¹ Fatah and other organizations in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Palestinian diaspora condemned the attack and called for the perpetrators to be held accountable. While Fatah supporters in the West Bank attributed the attack to the Syrian regime and sought to distance themselves from its traditional support for the Palestinians, Hamas leadership refrained from direct accusation. Others rejected the accusations that the Syrian regime was involved in the attacks. These primarily Palestinian leftists, supported by the regime, instead proposed conspiracy theories about the involvement of Western countries, Israel, and several Arab states in the attack.

Many Palestinian users expressed deep shock at the chemical attack against the Syrian village and described those responsible for the operation as "terrorists." For example, a user from Bethlehem wrote that the attack was "a disgrace to humanity's conscience. The blood

of innocents was spilled. Tyranny must be ended and the criminals punished.” Other users criticized the lack of an international response, particularly from the Arab world, in the face of the atrocities. As one user from the West Bank wrote, “What if the nationality of these children was British? In that case, the world would wake up and not be passive. Even the leaders of the Arab countries would condemn and protest. But this child is an Arab child, and everything remains the same except the way [the children of Syria] die.”¹² Muhammad al-Sultan, head of the Student Council of the Islamic University in Gaza, also protested, “Women and the elderly face collective destruction because of international and Arab silence.”¹³ Others were concerned that the attack would exacerbate the civil war.



A poster condemning Assad, with the caption “Just wait murderer: Tomorrow you will pay the price,” from Twitter.

Some prominent Palestinian users accused Assad’s regime of genocide. For example, Bilal Muhammad Abdel-Aal, a Gaza teen whose popular songs denounce Israel and praise lone Palestinian attackers, uploaded a Facebook video of acerbic verses condemning Assad. He called the Syrian president a “Zionist murderer,” stressing that shedding Muslim blood crossed a red line and that Assad would pay the consequences.¹⁴ In Ramallah, activists rallied to condemn the Syrian attack, insistently rejecting Syrian aid to the Palestinian cause, claiming that the regime was carrying out genocide. The demonstrators waved signs reading, “Palestine renounces the crimes committed by the butcher of Damascus” and “We don’t want the keys to Jerusalem if they are immersed in the blood of children.” In addition, the demonstrators demanded the release of all Palestinian prisoners held in Syrian prisons and the lifting of the siege on the Palestinian Yarmouk refugee camp south of Damascus.¹⁵ These demands were influenced by a broad internet campaign that Palestinian-Syrians began in January, demanding details about the fate of 12,000 Palestinian prisoners detained in Syria, under the hashtag, “Where are the detainees?”¹⁶



Bilal Muhammad Abdel-Aal, a teen from Gaza in a video criticizing Assad, which he uploaded to his Facebook account.

However, others chose to downplay the event. Notably, leaders of Hamas condemned the chemical attack, but refrained from directly accusing the Syrian regime – likely because of

the traditionally complex relationship between Hamas and the Assad regime. On the eve of the civil war, Hamas was included in “the axis of resistance” (*hamaquma*) to which Syria belonged. However, this positive relationship was disrupted by the civil war and the closure of Hamas offices in Damascus during the summer of 2012. Hamas' rivals, particularly Fatah, have attacked Hamas for its close relationship with the Syrian regime. Regardless, it appears that for now, the Hamas leadership prefers not to oppose the Syrian regime for its crimes against civilians, instead condemning only the attack itself. For example, senior Hamas figure Izzat al-Rasheq tweeted, “Hamas explicitly condemns the ugly massacre that took place today... and the use of chemical weapons against the residents.”¹⁷ However, Hamas supporters free of leadership considerations uploaded sharper condemnations inconsistent with the organization's policy. For example, at a protest organized by the Hamas-affiliated student group *al-Qatla al-Islamiya* in Gaza, the Syrian regime was called a “Criminal who is responsible for the massacre,” and placards read, “Khan Sheikhun is suffocating” and, “The children of Syria are dead.”¹⁸

In contrast, some left-wing Palestinian activists inside and outside Syria, such as members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which is supported by the Syrian regime, denied that the attack had occurred and cleared the Syrian regime of guilt. Taha al-Khatib, a Palestinian commentator who lives in Egypt, exemplifies this position. He claimed that the pictures of the children killed in Khan Sheikhun were forged and the reports of a chemical attack were false. Moreover, according to al-Khatib, the United States was unable to present a single picture proving that the wounded were in hospitals in Turkey. He further charged that Israel and Turkey had buried chemical charges in Khan Sheikhun intended to explode in the wake of a Syrian attack. This would allow for the accusation that the regime had perpetrated a massacre, generating international public support for a strike in Syria.¹⁹ A left-wing Palestinian user from Syria wrote that just as the US had falsified data on the existence of chemical weapons in Iraq to justify its attack on Iraq, it was now falsifying data on Syria. Others sought to exploit the events in Syria to increase resistance against Israel. For example, Tamim al-Barghouti, a Palestinian poet in Egypt supportive of the Syrian regime, claimed that the “barbaric act” ensnares Syria in an ethnic war that deepens its rifts. According to al-Barghouti, the only extrication option is intensified resistance against Israel through concentration of forces in the south.²⁰

On the other hand, Palestinian users in Syria and abroad heavily criticized supporters of the Syrian regime for expressing audacious solidarity with “the chief murderer Bashar al-Assad.” In Ramallah, demonstrators chanted, “No to the left if it stands beside Bashar.”²¹ One user wondered how Palestinians could stand by Assad while Jews were expressing solidarity with the children of Khan Sheikhun.²²

The reactions on SNS to the Syrian regime and the massacre in Khan al-Sheikhun articulate fissures between significant segments of the Palestinian people. Geopolitical and internal

political contexts influence attitudes towards an issue that is not directly related to the Palestinian cause. Hamas leadership's failure to explicitly blame the Syrian regime underscores a difficult dilemma. Hamas fears the erasure of any remnants of its positive relationship with Syria and, no less importantly, with Assad's main ally, Iran. This stance, combined with West Bank Palestinian leadership's unwillingness to advance the problem of the Palestinian prisoners in Syria, is liable to drive a wedge between the Palestinian diaspora and Hamas and Fatah leadership. The discourse also displays the influence of Palestinian left-wing activists' strong pro-Syria stance, resulting in refusal to recognize the regime's crimes – a refusal that many users find immoral.

We Love You Trump: Syrian Users on the American Attack

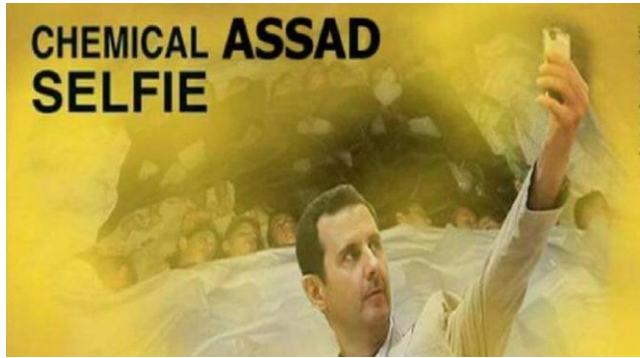
Adam Hoffman

On April 7, US destroyers fired 59 cruise missiles at the Syrian army's al-Shaerat base, responding to the chemical attack against Khan Sheikhun three days earlier, which Syrian rebels and most of the world attributed to the Assad regime. The American attack evoked strong reactions from Syrian activists and refugees on social networking sites (SNS). They expressed anger and fury at the regime, along with euphoria and optimism in response to the American intervention. Surrealistically, US President Donald Trump, known for his controversial statements about Islam and his attempts to impose an executive order to prevent Muslim immigrants from entering the United States, became the darling of many Syrians. These surprising expressions of support for Trump are contextualized by many Syrians' perception of the Obama administration and the international community as apathetic to Syria's civil war.

The chemical attack in Khan Sheikhun on April 4²³ killed at least 86 people, most of them women and children, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.²⁴ Laboratory tests conducted by British and Turkish scientists found that the chemical substance used in the attack was Sarin gas.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, Syrian President Bashar Assad denied the Syrian regime's responsibility for the attack and claimed that "the chemical attack was completely fabricated."²⁶

The chemical attack was strongly condemned throughout the world, and also provoked angry responses from Syrian activists on SNS. These responses were shared as part of a virtual campaign launched on Twitter under the hashtag "Chemical Assad" in Arabic and English.²⁷ The tweets included pictures showing the bodies of children killed in the attack and expressions of outrage against Assad. According to one Syrian user, "The world will not forget Assad's crime in Syria and the killing of the children by [Assad] the chemist."²⁸ An account associated with the Syrian revolution published a call to online activists to use this

hashtag for two purposes; to decry the massacre in Khan Sheikhun, and to remember “*al-Ghutta al-Sharqiya* in 2013,” a deadly chemical attack in August 2013 also attributed to the Syrian regime, which caused the deaths of hundreds of people.²⁹ Another tweet showed Assad’s photograph, with the bodies of child victims of the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhun in the background, and the caption “Chemical Assad Selfie” (see photo).³⁰



A poster distributed as part of the “Chemical Assad” online campaign, from Twitter.

The chemical attack against the Syrian town not only led to international condemnation, but also to an unusual American military response against the Syrian regime. Trump stated that the attack “changed his mind” about Assad and “crossed a lot of lines.”³¹ This statement was a reminder of former US President Barack Obama’s famous August 2012 statement that drew a “red line,” warning the Assad regime not to use chemical weapons. However, that warning was not enforced when the 2013 use of chemical weapons was attributed to the Syrian regime. In response to the attack in Khan Sheikhun, Trump declared that military action was in the interests of “the supreme national security of the United States to prevent and deter the proliferation and use of lethal chemical weapons.”³²

The American attack was the first military action by the international community against the Syrian regime since the outbreak of the civil war in March 2011. This marked the new, aggressive line taken by the Trump administration towards the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons. As a result, it elicited enthusiastic reactions from many Syrians. Bana al-’Abed, a seven-year-old girl who became famous for her tweets from besieged Aleppo,³³ tweeted, “I am a Syrian girl who suffered under Bashar Assad and Putin. I welcome Donald Trump’s action against the murderers of my people.”³⁴ A Syrian user living in Sweden wrote, “As a Syrian refugee, I never imagined I would say this: Thank you Donald Trump for bombing the regime that uprooted me, please do more.”³⁵ Qassem Eid, a former Syrian rebel who fled to the United States, wrote, “As a Syrian and survivor of Assad’s chemical massacre [in 2013], I want to thank the President of the United States for attacking the dictator, you gave me hope [...] may God bless you, sir.”³⁶ In an interview on CNN, Eid continued, “For more than six years, we asked [the world] for protection, and



A picture of Donald Trump with the words “We love you,” from Twitter.

today for the first time it happened. Today, unlike in the past, Assad is being held responsible for his crimes against humanity.” Beyond this attack, he urged Trump to work to create no-fly zones in Syria and eliminate the planes remaining in Assad’s air force, preventing the regime from continuing to bombard Syrian citizens. To date, this interview has been viewed more than 3.6 million times on YouTube.³⁷

In another expression of Syrian users’ support for the American attack, many users changed their profile pictures to a picture of Trump accompanied by the Arabic inscription, “We love you” (*menakhabak*), which quickly became a meme circulating among Syrian Twitter users.

³⁸Changing profile pictures expressed not only appreciation for Trump, but also defiance of Assad, whose image accompanied by “We Love You” is displayed on billboards throughout Damascus. This image and inscription are also common among supporters of the Syrian regime on SNS.³⁹

The chemical attack on Khan Sheikhun was the most recent episode in the Syrian civil war’s long list of atrocities. Although the world has been consistently aware of this series, only the most recent episode led to an exceptional American attack on the Syrian regime. It is highly doubtful that this attack will change the face of the battle in Syria, or save the lives of Syrian civilians subjected to daily attacks by the Assad regime. However, lacking any practical pathways for the civilian population to oppose the regime and impact the dynamics of the ongoing conflict, SNS provide civilians with the space to express protest, anger, and frustration at the regime’s actions, as well as satire and triumph in response to American actions. The enthusiastic discourse on SNS illustrates many Syrians’ desire for significant international intervention in Syria, ending the country’s civil war and its accompanying humanitarian disaster.

¹ <https://twittercom/Ravankav/status/849315838767321088>

² https://twittercom/saeed_HK_/status/850297910013173761

³ <https://twittercom/mohammmmmmadk/status/850313262013054978>

⁴ <https://twittercom/AhmadDastaran/status/850232762518839299>

⁵ <https://twittercom/tousheh/status/850201155623714816>

⁶ <https://twittercom/halVlid/status/850213777530167298>

⁷ <https://twittercom/febrahimzade/status/850241597568503808>

⁸ <https://twittercom/faridsob/status/850484166885912576>

⁹ <https://twittercom/mhmehrzad/status/850181718921400320> ;

<https://twittercom/faridsob/status/850484166885912576>

¹⁰ <https://twittercom/ahaddarvishi70/status/850310073654145024>

¹¹ In June 2016, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah, headed by Dr. Khalil Shikaki, published results of a public opinion poll showing a decline in Palestinian’s support for the Syrian regime, because of the brutally oppressive tactics that the regime uses against the Sunni population of the country. The poll found that only 18% of Palestinians support the Syrian regime. For the complete survey in Arabic, see <http://www.pcpsr.org/ar/node/659> ; in English, <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/658>.

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- ¹² 4 April 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/QudsN/videos/1495713600505536/>
- ¹³ 5 April 2017: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_11fhAdgnA
- ¹⁴ 6 April 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/1036742203042741/videos/1472675109449446/>; Another video of a different teen was also shared on the Facebook page of Gazan Bilal Muhammad Abdel-Aal. It called for leaders of the Arab world to wake up and help Muslim, not only in Syria but also in Afghanistan, Palestine, and elsewhere.
- ¹⁵ 4 April 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/QudsN/videos/1495713600505536/>
- ¹⁶ #وين_المعتقلين; See also the website of the Documentation Center of Missing and Detained Palestinians in Syria <http://mdpal.info>
- ¹⁷ 4 April 2017: https://twitter.com/izzat_risheq/status/849316986660298753
- ¹⁸ 5 April 2017: حلب_تحترق # https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_11fhAdgnA
- ¹⁹ 8 April 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urfiXEr8gMk> ; <https://www.facebook.com/taha.elkhatib.9/posts/1909678462608905>
- ²⁰ 4 April 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/tamim.albarghouti.7/posts/10158389809450364>
- ²¹ 5 April 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/yarmok.news/videos/1283714618371061/>
- ²² 4 April 2017: <https://www.facebook.com/QudsN/videos/1495713600505536/>
- ²³ Anne Barnard and Michael R. Gordon, "Worst Chemical Attack in Years in Syria; U.S. Blames Assad." *The New York Times*, April 4, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/04/world/middleeast/syria-gas-attack.html>
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- ²⁵ Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Sir Geoffrey Adams, "54th Special Session of the Executive Council", Gov.UK, 13 April 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/54th-special-session-of-the-executive-council>; "Turkish health minister says tests confirm sarin use in Idlib attack", *Reuters*, April 11, 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-chemical-idUSKBN17D10L>
- ²⁶ "Syria's Assad says Idlib chemical attack 'fabrication': AFP interview", *Reuters*, April 13, 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-assad-idUSKBN17F1NE>
- ²⁷ #بشار_الكيموي; #Chemical_Bashar
- ²⁸ <https://twitter.com/wa991522/status/851820861820678146>
- ²⁹ <https://twitter.com/2011Hsr/status/851814761876553728>
- ³⁰ <https://twitter.com/RevolutionSyria/status/851918833506029569>
- ³¹ "Trump says chemical attack in Syria crossed many lines", *Reuters*, April 6, 2017 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib-idUSKBN1770YU>
- ³² Barbara Starr and Jeremy Diamond, "Trump launches military strike against Syria", *CNN*, April 7, 2017. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/06/politics/donald-trump-syria-military/>
- ³³ "Childhood under fire in Aleppo: 7-year-old documents her life in the besieged city," *Walla! News*, October 3, 2016 (in Hebrew). <http://news.walla.co.il/item/3002605>
- ³⁴ <https://twitter.com/AlabedBana/status/850252389114200065>
- ³⁵ <https://twitter.com/miladkawas/status/850235991709237248>
- ³⁶ <https://twitter.com/QZakarya/status/850200124680581121>
- ³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3uaf1NFxXc>
- ³⁸ <https://twitter.com/AbuSulaymanMM3/status/850251053333225472>; <https://twitter.com/QatarPI/status/850346978407890944>; <https://twitter.com/omarghabra/status/850207129424113664>
- ³⁹ https://twitter.com/bayloun_hussein/status/852836785730318336; <https://twitter.com/mayushka313/status/852233710183297025>; https://twitter.com/Sohayb_Masri1/status/852232123784331264; <https://twitter.com/syrianresist/status/852265204398391296>