



מרכז אליאנס ללימודים איראניים

מרכז משה דיין ללימודי המזרח התיכון ואפריקה



# BeeHive

השיח ברשתות החברתיות במזדה"ת

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## From the Editors

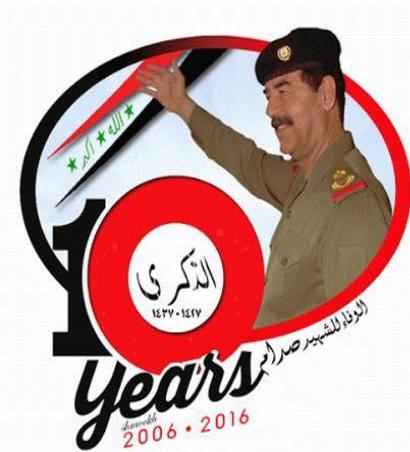
The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the January issue of **Beehive**. In this issue, we explore the proliferation of Saddam Hussein's image as defender of the Arab world, which is magnified by fear of Iranian regional influence. We also discuss Iranians' responses to a letter in which Iranian exiles urge US President Trump to adopt an aggressive policy towards Iran. Finally, we follow the tumultuous discourse surrounding the Turkish referendum on consolidation of Erdoğan's political authority.

**Enjoy!**

## Reviving the myth of Saddam Hussein

Gilad Shiloach

In late December, thousands of people across the Middle East commemorated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saddam Hussein's death. The former Iraqi president was deposed by the American invasion in 2003, convicted of crimes against humanity, and executed by hanging on December 30, 2006. The show of support for Saddam's legacy occurred mostly on social networking sites (SNS) and was led by users from Saudi Arabia and other regional Sunni nations. This support was contextualized by the majority Shi'ite Iraqi Army's victory in the battle to reclaim the city of Mosul from ISIS, during one of the most decisive periods for Iraq since the country's post-Saddam descent into chaos. As relations between Sunnis and Shi'ites, and particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, reach a low point, evocation of the image and legacy of Sunni Saddam exposes a deep rift in the Middle East, and raises questions about Iraq's current standing in the region. The support for Saddam on SNS shows that many still consider him a symbol of Arab nationalism, and that a decade after his death, he is still popular in some Middle Eastern circles, perhaps more so than among Iraqis.



Online poster marking a decade since Saddam was executed: "Loyal to the martyr Saddam Hussein 2006-2016"

In late December, several thousand posts were published on Twitter and Facebook using hashtags like "a decade since the death of Saddam" and "anniversary of Saddam's martyrdom," primarily by users from Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries. They used the image of the deposed dictator to bait Shi'ites and protest the spread of Iranian influence in the Middle East. Many remembered the dictator with longing and lamented the passing of "someone who protected not only his homeland, but also the entire Arab homeland from the spread of Persian Shi'ites." They also shared an illustration of Saddam hugging a map of Iraq and protecting its territorial integrity.<sup>1</sup> Others called him "Leader of the Arabs"<sup>2</sup> and "Hope of Arabism."<sup>3</sup> Some wrote that the day Saddam was executed was also the day that Iraq was put to death"<sup>4</sup> and protested the fact that Americans had turned Iraq over "to the filthiest creatures of Allah – Shi'ites."<sup>5</sup> Saddam's daughter, Raghda Hussein, who lives in Jordan and has more than 500,000 followers on Facebook, published several posts on the anniversary praising her father. She wrote, "On this day, the world lost its father, an awe-inspiring commander, the president of the Iraqi Republic, and defender of the Arab nation."<sup>6</sup> Activity marking a decade since the death of Saddam occurred primarily on the Internet, although there were some reports of small memorial events held in Jordan,<sup>7</sup> Yemen,<sup>8</sup> and Mauritania.<sup>9</sup> The largest memorial was held in Amman, the Jordanian capital.<sup>10</sup> Aside from a few newspaper editorials, these events did not attract significant attention from Arab media.

Several weeks later, images of Saddam again appeared on SNS. Users from Sunni countries, again mostly Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, used the hashtag “Save occupied Arab Iraq”<sup>11</sup> to protest the “Iranian conquest”<sup>12</sup> of parts of the country. They referred to the battles in Mosul and the expected defeat of ISIS by the Iraqi Army, Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and other Shi’ite militias supported by Iran. Users expressed fear of Iranian influence and Shi’ite hegemony in Iraq, warning that Iraq is on the verge of losing its “Arab” identity to its Persian neighbors. “Iraq needs someone like Saddam,”<sup>13</sup> wrote users. Others expressed their sorrow at the death of the admired leader with the words, “May Allah have mercy on Saddam.” Others claimed that after Saddam's death, “Iran began to bark and raise its voice”<sup>14</sup> and “All that remains is the Iraq of the Iranians. The noble Arab leader Saddam has gone, and with him Iraq and Arab-ness.”<sup>15</sup> Even if not stated explicitly, the outcry against Iranian expansion shows that at least one sector of the Middle East's population preferred the presence of ISIS in Mosul, a firm Sunni stronghold, to Shi’ite-Iranian conquest.<sup>16</sup>



**Illustration of Saddam hugging a map of Iraq, which was shared dozens of times on SNS**

Commemoration of Saddam's death is not a new phenomenon. In past years, users commemorated the dictator on the Gregorian date of his death, on Eid al-Adha, the Islamic calendar date of his death, and in response to terror attacks on Iraq.<sup>17</sup> Small groups in the region occasionally hold rallies in his memory, supporting his legacy. From the perspective of these users, “ISIS would not have come about under Saddam,” and his mortal enemies from neighboring Iran are the main beneficiaries of his ousting.<sup>18</sup> There are Facebook pages devoted to “the hero martyr

Saddam Hussein,”<sup>19</sup> with more than 100,000 followers, and several dozen other groups where users can find Saddam’s famous quotes, video clips and pictures. Within ISIS, there is also commemoration of Saddam, with posters of him displayed in the organization's explosives factories<sup>20</sup> and command posts in Sunni strongholds like Falluja.<sup>21</sup> This symbolism indicates that many senior officers in ISIS are exiles from Saddam’s regime, army and Iraqi Baath party, who joined ISIS for utilitarian, ethnic, and ideological reasons.

The events that occurred in the Middle East following Saddam Hussein's ousting in 2003 led to his centrality in a number of myths. The most prevalent narrative in posts published by Sunni users represents Saddam as the ultimate defender of Arabism against Iranian-Shi’ite expansionism. These users laud Saddam's capacity to maintain the region's and Iraq's Arab identity and territorial integrity. There is no disputing that Baghdad, currently under Shi’ite leadership, no longer serves as a counterbalance to Tehran's influence. As Iran strives to achieve regional hegemony, Iraq has ceased to play a central role in the Arab world and Persian Gulf. Instead, Iraq has become a failed state, succumbing to Sunni-Shi’ite conflict and jihadist terrorism, from ISIS to al-Qaeda (led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi). As such,

although expressions of support for Saddam are not a new phenomenon on Middle Eastern SNS, they were more extensive this year. This increase seems to be linked to the campaign for Mosul and fear of Iranian control over Iraq following ISIS' defeat.

## Critics or Traitors? Responses to Iranian Exiles' Letter to Trump

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In late December, exiled Iranian activists produced uproar within Iran by calling for US President Donald Trump to adopt an aggressive policy towards Iran. Shortly after their letter was published, social networking sites (SNS) were flooded with thousands of responses from Iranian users, including both the current regime's supporters and critics. These users took issue with the letter, and saw their fellow Iranians as having crossed a red line by cooperating with a foreign power to pressure Iran. To them, this was not legitimate criticism of the regime, but rather contemptible assistance to Iran's adversaries.

In late December 2016, 30 Iranian exiles sent a letter to Trump in which they called for him to cancel the nuclear treaty with Iran, and expand sanctions against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), financial institutions controlled by the Supreme Leader, and top Iranian officials involved in human rights violations. Their declared purpose was to intensify pressure on the regime in Tehran and work towards its removal.<sup>22</sup> The letter was signed by journalists, human rights activists, and former political prisoners. These included Ahmad Batebi, a leader of the student demonstrations in 1999 who became a symbol of the protest after being photographed in a bloodstained shirt, and Arash Sobhani, a soloist for the successful Iranian rock band Kiosk and host of the satirical television program OnTen, broadcast on Voice of America in Farsi.

Immediately following publication of the letter, conservative right Iranian media outlets supportive of the regime attacked the letter's signatories and accused them of treason. The conservative newspaper Sobhe-No printed pictures of the signatories on its front page next to a picture of Trump under the headline, "30 who sold out their homeland" (see picture).<sup>23</sup>

An opinion piece published by Fars News Agency wrote that those who complained that the regime had spilled their blood were now openly encouraging President Trump to suck the blood of their countrymen.<sup>24</sup>

Criticism of the signatories quickly expanded beyond the conservative right to include political activists and media outlets identified with the reformist camp. Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari, Minister of the Interior under reformist former President Mohammad Khatami, told an interviewer for the Shargh newspaper that the letter served the interests of Iran's



"30 who sold out their homeland:" Front page of Sobhe-No

hardliners. He emphasized the reformists' support for the nuclear agreement, and asserted that there is no difference between the signatories and the radical opponents of the government who call for the agreement's revocation. Activist Hamid-Reza Jalaei-Pour declared that despite being a reformist, he believes that democracy is the way to save Iran. If Iran or the lives and security of its citizens were endangered, he would willingly go to war under the leadership of the Supreme Leader.<sup>25</sup>

Widespread public discourse simultaneously emerged on SNS, which were flooded with thousands of messages using the hashtag #Letter to Trump (#نامه\_به\_ترامپ).<sup>26</sup> A few users, mostly Iranian exiles, expressed support for the letter claiming that external pressure on Iran is the only way to achieve the desired political change. "When the boots of oppression and tyranny stomp on the necks of citizens, questioning the assistance of foreign powers is not only logical and ethical but sometimes even necessary," tweeted one user.<sup>27</sup>

Compared to the limited support for the letter writers, opposition on SNS was rampant. Among those responding, some used strong language to attack the signatories. These users claimed that the signatories do not represent the citizens of Iran, and are nothing more than "Traitors disguised as intellectuals and supporters of freedom, who are willing to sell their country's people for a pot of gold."<sup>28</sup> Others claimed that it is only possible to change the Iranian regime from within, and not through American or foreign intervention. "There is a great difference between a critic of the regime who demands reforms and an opponent of the regime who is willing to contact even an enemy in order to bring it down," tweeted one user.<sup>29</sup> Several noted that the letter was sent on the anniversary of Operation Karbala-4, initiated by Iran in late December 1986 during the war against Iraq. In this operation, which quickly ended in a resounding defeat for Iran, Iranian soldiers discovered that the Iraqi soldiers they were fighting had been aided by Iranian opposition Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK). The treachery of the letter's signatories was compared to that of MEK.<sup>30</sup>

Many users highlighted the fact that opposition to the letter had emerged beyond the boundary of the regime's supporters. "Most Farsi-language users of Twitter demonstrated this evening that although they oppose the Islamic regime, they are not traitors who would betray their homeland," read one tweet.<sup>31</sup> Iranian exiles' call to intensify sanctions against Iran aroused particular opposition amongst Iran's residents, who suffer the impact of the sanctions that weaken their economic situation. They claimed that sanctions against Iran were doing serious harm to its citizens, and calling for their intensification is a betrayal. Quantitative evidence of this trend was identified by an Iranian Internet researcher, who found that a day after the letter was published, more than 74% of the tweets bearing the hashtag #Letter to Trump were sent from within Iran.<sup>32</sup> Signatories emphasized that their intention was to encourage sanctions focused solely on IRGC and the regime, not widespread sanctions that would harm ordinary citizens.

The harsh criticism from many Iranian SNS users reveals the intensity of Iranian citizens' fear for the fate of the nuclear agreement in the Trump era. From the perspective of the Iranian

public, were the new American administration to increase pressure on Iran and revoke the nuclear agreement, Iran's economic crisis would worsen, shattering the hope for economic improvement that followed the signing of the accord. This perspective is amplified by broader Iranian opposition to the policy of sanctions, which is seen as an illegitimate form of pressure used by the West to diminish Iranian sovereignty. In response to the letter, outcry expressed by the Iranian public, including strong critics of the regime, reflects distaste for foreign attempts to apply external pressure on the country. To Iranians, the letter represents a type of action that is largely considered illegitimate, undermining national unity and honor. Those who support such actions are likely to find themselves rejected as collaborators and traitors.

## **Erdoğan's Referendum**

**Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak**

In the aftermath of unprecedented terrorism in Turkey last month, social networking sites (SNS) are engaged in fierce political debate over the ruling party's attempt to replace the current parliamentary system with a presidential system. The change is expected to grant President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan authority over the executive branch and lead to increased centralization of the government. The discourse on SNS affords a glimpse into the political opinions of rival camps.

The failed military coup of July 15, 2016, and the resulting mass demonstrations against military intervention in Turkish politics, significantly strengthened the standing of Erdoğan and his former political party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Erdoğan took advantage of these waves of support to strengthen measures against the Kurdish political movement, arresting the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) leaders in November. This marked the beginning of a pact between Erdoğan and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), led by Devlet Bahçeli. With the reinforcement of Turkish identity and the position of Islam in the public sphere, the ideological gap between the parties is narrowing, allowing MHP to support AKP's political agenda.

As the primary item on of its political agenda, AKP is utilizing MHP's support to attempt to introduce a presidential system, centralizing the Turkish political system. Such an amendment would require a majority of 367 votes to be cast in favor. Because the combined AKP and MHP bloc are 11 votes short of that number, they have instead proposed a national referendum, which requires only 330 votes in favor. The referendum is expected to encompass a comprehensive package of reforms. The primary reform would transform the parliamentary system into a presidential one, weakening the system of checks and balances. Other reforms included in the package would strengthen the judiciary's executive branch and change the judicial appointment process.

Although MHP was successful in recruiting the votes necessary to conduct the referendum, which is scheduled for April 2017, resistance to party chairman Bahçeli is being voiced within the party. Led by Meral Akşener, thirteen of the party's parliamentarians have decided not to support the reform package. Opposition was also expressed on SNS, where ordinary users and Turkish celebrities called upon members of MHP to oppose the referendum. They attacked the chairman as “a traitor that sold himself to Erdoğan.” In response, supporters of Bahçeli accused the leaders of internal party opposition of divisiveness and called on the party's supporters to back Bahçeli.

Unsurprisingly, Erdoğan's supporters contributed to Bahçeli's online support. They posted graphics portraying the two as leaders cooperating to advance Turkey. Supporters of Erdoğan added that the amendments would make it possible to eradicate elite influence from Turkish government (see picture).<sup>33</sup> In order to justify support for the package of reforms up for referendum, users claim that the opposition of secular Turks and international powers – such as the United States, Great Britain, and Israel – to the proffered presidential system emerges from “a lack of desire to see a stronger Turkey.” They also claimed that “all citizens of Turkey must support the package of reforms.”<sup>34</sup>



“With the new constitution, the people will rule” –from Twitter



“We are rising up – If not now...when?” –from Twitter

The secular camp, depicted as plotting Turkey's demise, responded with the counterclaim that drastic shifts would result in a regime change, and not improved governance. From their perspective, the proposed reforms would lead to the death of the Republic, replaced with a Sultanate headed by of Erdoğan. Like some nationalist users, some secular voices also criticized Bahçeli's behavior. There were even

those who claimed that Erdoğan possesses compromising recordings of Bahçeli that leave him open to extortion, motivating the agreement.<sup>35</sup> In addition to these conspiracy theories, many secular Turks expressed frustration with the parliamentary proceedings. They called on the Turkish people to preserve the values of Atatürk, the republic's founder, by strongly opposing the reforms presented in the referendum. Many users in this camp changed their profile pictures to a graphic of the word “No” (“Hayır” in Turkish) and called for voters to “Oppose the dictatorship” using the hashtag “We are rising up – If not now...when?” (see picture). Although their goal is to evoke a popular uprising, they have not yet had much success.<sup>36</sup> Secular users also expressed opposition to the parliament's legislative moves, claiming that the post-coup state of emergency was an attempt to stifle democracy.

Analogous to the online tumult, parliament was thrust into chaos. At one point, members of the secular Republican People's Party (CHP) stormed the podium in an attempt to halt the vote on sections of the referendum's reforms. The uproar that followed ended with one broken nose, complaints of being bitten, and the podium's destruction. SNS users responded by expressing their anger at the members of Parliament, who they accused of childlike behavior.<sup>37</sup>

At this stage, the Kurds are avoiding taking an official stance on these political issues, despite their reflexive opposition to Bahçeli and his party. This response is apparently a product of the apathy of many in HDP to the reforms. Ironically, a few Kurdish users do support the presidential system, in the hope that subjecting Erdoğan to fewer political pressures would bring him back to the negotiating table.

Public discourse on Turkish SNS reveals how the political attempt to institute a presidential system is perceived as a means to reinforce Erdoğan's status. Among Turkish users, there are many who are critical of these moves, unswayed by nationalist justifications. It is important to note the strong, even violent, opposition in parliament by those who consider the referendum an affront to the Republican nature of Turkey. However, this opposition plays into the hands of Erdoğan, who is essentially leaving the dirty work to his supporters in parliament. By doing so, he successfully maintains a presidential image despite the tumultuous atmosphere.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://Twitter.com/ALblagi/status/816040394790240256>

<sup>2</sup> <https://Twitter.com/mustafatofe1/status/814626015381192704>

<sup>3</sup> <https://Twitter.com/rehoumabenncer/status/815075867403649024>

<sup>4</sup> <https://Twitter.com/sqahtan1/status/814932487310868480>

<sup>5</sup> [https://Twitter.com/brq\\_y1/status/815192966906216448](https://Twitter.com/brq_y1/status/815192966906216448)

<sup>6</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/RaghadSaddamHussein/photos/a.173154259407179.51610.173144322741506/1217065618349366/?type=3>

<sup>7</sup> January 1, 2017:

<http://www.watanserb.com/2017/01/07/%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2atCwXOc-OY>

<sup>9</sup> January 10, 2017: <http://www.alakhbar.info/news/19812-2017-01-10-21-48-18.html>

<sup>10</sup> January 6, 2017: <http://assabeel.net/local/item/209601-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D8%A5%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B0%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%9F>

<sup>11</sup> #أنقذوا\_العراق\_العربي\_المحتل

<sup>12</sup> <https://Twitter.com/mohamdbnakeel/status/819090092149145600>

<sup>13</sup> <https://Twitter.com/rakanalrbe3an1/status/81890857701215027>

<sup>14</sup> [https://Twitter.com/abo\\_shded\\_s/status/819102720443502593](https://Twitter.com/abo_shded_s/status/819102720443502593)

<sup>15</sup> [https://Twitter.com/CR\\_1412/status/819117941027381248](https://Twitter.com/CR_1412/status/819117941027381248)

<sup>16</sup> Gilad Shiloach, "Iraqis Blame Al Jazeera For 'Promoting ISIS Interests' In Fight For Fallujah", Vocativ, 31 May 2016. Available at <http://www.vocativ.com/324041/iraqis-blame-al-jazeera-for-pro-isis-coverage/>.

<sup>17</sup> Gilad Shiloach, "Iraqis Irate Over Dire Security Situation Long For Days Of Saddam", Vocativ, 4 July 2016.

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<http://www.vocativ.com/336634/iraqis-irate-over-dire-security-situation/>

<sup>18</sup> Gilad Shiloach, "ISIS Would Never Have Happened Under Saddam, Say Arabs", Vocativ, 24 September 2015.

<http://www.vocativ.com/234269/isis-would-never-have-happened-under-saddam-pine-arabs/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/The.hero.martyr.Saddam.Hussein/>

<sup>20</sup> Gilad Shiloach, "Saddam Hussein Posters Purportedly Found In ISIS Bomb Factory", Vocativ, 13 July 2016.

<http://www.vocativ.com/210766/shiite-militia-reportedly-find-posters-of-saddam-in-fallujah-campaign/>

<sup>21</sup> Gilad Shiloach, "Saddam Hussein Allegedly Found In ISIS Headquarters", Vocativ, 29 May 2016.

<http://www.vocativ.com/323724/poster-of-saddam-hussein-allegedly-found-in-isis-headquarters/>

<sup>22</sup> "An open letter by Iranian dissidents to President-Elect Donald Trump," <http://taghato.net/article/30837>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://sobhe-no.ir/newspaper/151>.

<sup>24</sup> "Perfect sellers of the homeland: when anti-revolutionaries ingratiate Trump," *Fars* December 24, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> "Reformist responses to dissidents letter to Trump," *Feraro*, December 27, 2006.

<sup>26</sup>

<https://Twitter.com/hashtag/%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%BE?src=hash>

<sup>27</sup> [https://Twitter.com/D0wn\\_Under/status/813586418190589952](https://Twitter.com/D0wn_Under/status/813586418190589952)

<sup>28</sup> <https://Twitter.com/Masooti/status/812730676898385920>.

<sup>29</sup> <https://Twitter.com/MansourKiaei/status/812684680935960576>.

<sup>30</sup> [Twitter.com/rhosseini0/status/812715593199747074](https://Twitter.com/rhosseini0/status/812715593199747074).

<sup>31</sup> [https://Twitter.com/aqaye\\_mohandes/status/812728200405073920](https://Twitter.com/aqaye_mohandes/status/812728200405073920)

<sup>32</sup> <https://Twitter.com/Ammir/status/812776169267400705>.

<sup>33</sup> #Evet #Senibaşkanyapacağız #TürkiyeİçinEVET

<sup>34</sup> <https://Twitter.com/dscomar/status/820715925284552705>

<sup>35</sup> <https://Twitter.com/fikretfirat/status/814212461817630720>

<sup>36</sup> #AyağaKalkıyoruz #Hayır

<sup>37</sup> #11ocak2017tbmmkavgası #tbmm #kavga