

BeeHive

השיח ברשתות החברתיות במזה"ת

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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the December issue of Beehive. In this issue, we survey the radicalization of discourse on Turkish SNS after the terrorist attacks in Istanbul and Kayseri. We learn about public protests on Iranian SNS responding to restrictions imposed by President Rouhani's opponents on his supporters in the Majlis. Finally, we present the online efforts of Egyptian civil society to advance social issues, with a focus on child trafficking and kidnappings.

Enjoy!

The Land of Martyrs

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Since the attack in Diyarbakır last June, Turkey has faced an unprecedented wave of terrorism that so far, has resulted in the deaths of 421 civilians.¹ This wave erupted as the peace process with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) collapsed and Ankara's military cooperation with the anti-ISIS Western coalition forces began. During this period, Turkish cities have become easy targets for attacks, resulting in civilian and security force fatalities. In December, two murderous attacks, one in Istanbul and the other in Kayseri, captured public attention on social networking sites (SNS), revealing the nationalist discourse of various segments of Turkish society.

On December 10, Turkey was shocked by coordinated terrorist attacks carried out in central Istanbul, near the Beşiktaş soccer stadium, killing 36 policemen and eight civilians.² The timing of the explosions, about an hour after the end of the evening's soccer match, indicated that the fans were not the main targets, but rather the security forces. Because of the volatile relationship between the fans of rival teams, extra forces had been assigned to the game - transforming the stadium into a prime location for an attack on security forces. Turkish authorities blamed the PKK for the attack, but a subsidiary organization, the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), which was responsible for several terrorist attacks in the capital last year, claimed responsibility.³

The high number of victims from the police force elicited national sympathy, and SNS spread this spirit with slogans like "I stand by my policeman."⁴ The scenes of this attack soon became pilgrimage sites, and one of them was renamed "Martyrs' Hill." The Turkish government commemorated victims by incorporating the term "martyrs" into the renaming of attack sites - a common practice since last July's failed coup attempt, in which hundreds of civilians were killed as soldiers fought coup perpetrators. Fans of the rival teams flocked to Martyrs' Hill, answering a call, spread on SNS, for rivals to visit the site together, as a sign of appreciation for the police who secured the game.⁵ Similar gestures were made at other playing fields. The first such gesture occurred when Yasin Öztekin, a player for Galatasaray, after scoring a goal, rushed to embrace policemen standing near the field.⁶ This act won wide support on SNS and was imitated by other players.



Yasin Öztekin hugging Turkish policemen.
From the newspaper *Yeni Şafak*

Conversely, there were also conspicuous expressions of joy at the killing of policemen. These were disseminated by both fake and authentic accounts, especially on Twitter, where a Kurdish user, Berfin Kadem tweeted, "an attack aimed at special forces. How good!"⁷ These statements shocked users, who responded by sharing screenshots and sending them to the police who, in turn, began a campaign to arrest the relevant users. Within in a short time, ten arrests were made, including the arrest of Kadem.⁸

Turkish SNS discourse was polarized by difficult images of the attack and arrests of users who posted incitement. Many nationalist users called for reintroduction of the death penalty, which

was eliminated in 2004 in response to pressure from the EU. Some even recommended carrying out executions in real time, instead of making arrests.⁹ In contrast, there were also prominent moderate voices strongly condemning terrorism, while stressing the need to avoid hatred of the Kurdish people. Their tweets urged people to sidestep the “trap” set by the terrorist organizations that strive to divide the Turkish and Kurdish peoples, and used hashtags like “#Pray for Turkey” and “#We won’t get used to it.”¹⁰



Translation from right to left: The Martyrs’ Bridge, The Martyrs’ Boulevard, Mall of the Martyrs, The Martyrs’ Hill, Tunnel of the Martyrs, The Martyrs’ Stadium. Image taken from Twitter

While public attention was focused on the attack in Istanbul, another attack hit security forces near a Special Forces base in Kayseri, a city in central Anatolia. A car bomb went off, killing 14 Turkish off-duty soldiers, and wounding 55 more, who were riding a bus going downtown.¹¹ A video of the murdered soldiers’ comrades at the scene of the attack, in uniform and swearing to avenge the deaths, was circulated online; it went viral and amplified the nationalist discourse.¹² The scene of this attack also became a pilgrimage site, and the bus stop was renamed “The Martyrs’ Station.”¹³

The passionate discourse on SNS concerning the terrorist attack in Kayseri was also expressed by angry masses on the streets. Violent demonstrators associated with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) targeted offices of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). At the same time, calls for reinstating the death penalty spread on SNS, using the slogans like, “the death penalty begins tonight” and “death penalty for murderers.”¹⁴ The cycle of accusations and incitement on SNS expanded to include not only Kurds, but also Jews and Armenians. Jews were accused of planning and supporting terrorist acts behind the scenes, and some even described the terrorists as Armenian or Jewish.¹⁵

The public discourse on Turkish SNS following the recent terrorist attacks in Istanbul and Kayseri once again revealed a rift in Turkish society. This discourse contributed to strengthening nationalism and increasing hatred towards Kurds and other minority groups in the country. Even the terminology adopted to commemorate the victims at attack sites heightened polarization of the discourse. Such events further distance Turkey from the peace process with the Kurds, while expanding the exposure of ordinary Turkish and Kurdish citizens to acts of violence.

Editor’s note: This article was written before the New Year’s terrorist attack on the Istanbul nightclub, Reina Club. This attack adds an additional 39 deaths to the number of fatalities from terror in Turkey.

Social Media as a Window into Political Tensions in Iran

Dr. Raz Zimmt

With the approach of the Iranian presidential elections, scheduled for May 2017, the power struggles between President Rouhani and his hardliner political rivals are intensifying. In the last few weeks, a strident debate has emerged over limitations that the conservative-controlled judiciary placed on two members of the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) associated with the presidents. The conflict quickly moved from the political arena to the virtual world, and social networking sites (SNS) became a central tool for both sides' political and public efforts.

On November 20, Majlis member Ali Motahari was supposed to give a speech in Mashhad. Motahari, the brother-in-law of Majlis speaker Ali Larijani, is considered one of the most prominent supporters of President Rouhani in Majlis. In recent years, he has adopted a critical approach towards the regime's conduct on a variety of controversial issues, such as individual freedoms and political arrests. Shortly before Motahari's arrival in Mashhad, the city prosecutor cancelled the speech and locked the venue.¹⁶ President Rouhani criticized the cancellation, calling it "a source of shame." In a letter sent to the Minister of the Interior, the president claimed that those who cancelled the speech were encouraging extremism and sectarianism in society, and instructed the ministry to investigate the incident.¹⁷

The cancellation of Motahari's speech and President Rouhani's strong response sparked widespread discussion on social networking sites (SNS). The president's supporters came to Motahari's defense. They used the hashtag "#Free Mashhad" to attack the judiciary and accuse senior clerics in Mashhad, led by radical cleric and Friday preacher Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, of stifling discourse.¹⁸

At the same time, Rouhani's supporters launched a campaign on SNS using the hashtag "#source of shame," referencing the president's words. With this hashtag users extended their criticism to other negative developments in Iran. The campaign quickly became a virtual confrontation between supporters and opponents of the president. Supporters of the president and the reformist opposition presented breaches of individual liberties, political repression, and arrests of political dissidents as "sources of shame." By contrast, according to Rouhani's opponents "the true source of shame" was the failure of the president and his government to improve the economic situation, reduce the hardships faced by citizens, combat traffic accidents and air pollution, and fight corruption. To illustrate their argument, they uploaded graphic images of poverty and distress in Iran.¹⁹

A few days after the cancellation of Motahari's speech, an attempt was made to arrest Majlis member Mahmoud Sadeghi, also identified as a Rouhani supporter. On November 27, security forces arrived at Sadeghi's home with a warrant issued by the judiciary, and tried to arrest him. The warrant was issued after Sadeghi raised allegations against the Head of the Judiciary, Sadeq Larijani, claiming Larijani held public funds in private bank accounts. Ultimately, a group of supporters gathered outside of Sadeghi's home prevented the arrest.²⁰

In a series of tweets, Majlis member Sadeghi protested the attempted arrest and claimed that it was illegal, a violation of his parliamentary immunity. He stressed that the pressures applied by the judiciary would not detract from his determination to continue the fight against corruption in all government institutions.²¹ Other allies of the president also harshly criticized the attempted arrest. Among those supporting Sadeghi was Majlis member Ali Motahari. Motahari argued, in a letter to Tehran's general prosecutor, that the attempted arrest might deter members of Majlis from carrying out their duties, for fear of being arrested or summoned for questioning.²²



Gathering of supporters at Sadeghi's home. From Twitter.

The arrest of Sadiq also sparked frenzied comments on SNS. During the attempt, SNS were flooded with expressions of solidarity with Sadeghi. His supporters were called to come prevent the execution of the warrant and real-time photos and videos of citizens and security guards gathering around his home were transmitted on Twitter. The campaign of support included sharing hundreds of tweets with the tag "Mahmoud Sadeghi is not alone."²³ A group of citizens supporting Sadeghi was also launched on the Telegram network. The group, with nearly 4,000 members, not only expressed support for Sadeghi but also uploaded content identified with general positions of the reformist camp. These included slogans in favor of freedom of speech, expressions of support for President Rouhani and his government's policies, and criticism of Rouhani's conservative opponents.²⁴

The cancellation of Majlis member Motahari's speech and the attempted arrest of his colleague Sadeghi evoked a discourse on SNS that exhibited the growing tensions between the two main political camps in Iran - the reformist president's supporters and opponents. This tension is expected to intensify in the coming months, as the presidential elections approach. Based on past experience, we can assume that the upcoming presidential election will lead to increased use of SNS, which is expected to reach new highs in both political camps. Using SNS as a central arena for managing the campaigns may help expose the Iranian public to opposing political opinions, but may also increase political polarization.

Using SNS to Combat Egyptian Child Trafficking

Dr. Michael Barak

In recent years, Egyptians have increasingly used social networking sites (SNS) to fight the prevalence of child trafficking and kidnappings. Alongside state authorities and traditional means, such as publishing “missing person” notices, SNS now make a significant contribution to eradicating this phenomenon. Thanks to SNS, hundreds of abducted children have been located and successfully returned to their families. SNS have raised awareness of the issue and of the need to involve citizens in a solution. The choice to turn to SNS in these cases indicates a growing respect for civil society's capacity to create change in Egypt, and impact this and similar issues.

Egypt is one of the countries most troubled by child abduction.²⁵ In 2014, 1,860 children were kidnapped, and the number doubled during the past two years.²⁶ In May 2016, the Egyptian research institute Daftar Ahwal found that between June 2015 and May 2016 more than 17,000 criminals were arrested for their involvement in kidnapping children. Kidnapped children were used as street beggars, in gangs, for sexual purposes, and even as targets for organ harvesters.²⁷ According to Egyptian security authorities, economics are the main reason for the increase in abductions since the toppling of President Mubarak in 2011.²⁸

Many families whose children have been abducted identified SNS as an important tool for locating



Online campaign against using children as beggars

their loved ones. Some families used cyberspace to distribute portraits and offer rewards to those who could help locate their children. However, the impact of these activities was limited and soon died down. In contrast, the Missing Children (“*Awlad Mafqudin*”) Facebook page raised far more awareness of the issue. The page was founded in 2014 by an Egyptian engineer, Rami al-Jabali, and his wife. This page is considered the largest and most active forum for combating child abduction, with nearly one million members in Egypt. Four female volunteers are responsible for maintaining the page,

creating channels of communications with parents of kidnapped children, and uploading identifying information and photographs of missing children. To date, the page has posted more than 8,000 images of children, and is credited with many positive results. According to al-Jabali, more than 150 missing children were identified because of posts on the page, and returned to their families.²⁹ For example, a video uploaded to SNS shows a reunion made possible by Facebook, between a father and his son, who had disappeared in the Suez area in 2006.³⁰

As part of the struggle, al-Jabali periodically initiates online campaigns on the subject. One campaign called on citizens to refrain from donating to beggars aided by children, because of suspicions that the children had been abducted. Another campaign, launched in October 2016, encouraged stricter punishment of abductors, including a call for the death penalty. To support this demand, members of the Facebook page were asked to change their profile pictures to the campaign poster (see picture below).³¹ It should be noted that a similar civil-society campaign, calling for the execution of kidnappers, was conducted in Algeria recently, without connection to

the Egyptian campaign. The Algerian campaign included, among other elements, citizens uploading YouTube video selfies on the subject.³²

Increasing recognition of the success of the Facebook page in locating missing and abducted children has led the Egyptian police to collaborate with the owner. For example, due to this cooperation, a missing child was returned to his father, after he was kidnapped by his mother, who intended to emigrate from Egypt with him, and join the Islamic State.³³ Civic organizations also agreed to cooperate with al-Jabali in launching a campaign, "Together with us," which is focused on assisting homeless people by uploading their pictures to SNS so they can be identified. Moreover, it appears that the page has inspired other citizens to launch related Facebook campaigns. For example, an online campaign was launched in early 2015, calling on Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to issue children serial numbers with pictures of their parents, to facilitate identifying them in the event of kidnapping.³⁴ Other Facebook pages, like "Campaign against the abduction of children" and "Together in the fight against kidnapers" are dedicated to uploading videos of child-beggars in the streets, recommending precautions to keep children from being kidnapped, and more.³⁵



Online campaign calling for the execution of children's abductors

SNS' power is also evident in the criticism leveled by opponents of these initiatives. According to academic circles supportive of the government, SNS blur the truth and have created a false sense among citizens that child abduction occurs regularly in Egypt. For example, an Egyptian academic claimed that there are only a few cases of abducted children - it is not a widespread phenomenon, but rather "lies and rumors without a shred of truth," and "there is no alternative but to restrict these publications on SNS and television shows."³⁶ Some criminal elements also dislike the activities of al-Jabali and his team on SNS, and have threatened their lives, in order to persuade them to stop dealing with the issue.³⁷

Many Egyptian citizens consider SNS an alternative to traditional channels of communications for promoting a variety of topics; the kidnapping of children is only one of many examples. This trend may indicate a loss of confidence in the ability of the system to respond to the plight of citizens, and a growing public recognition that SNS have power to change the current situation. Furthermore, by accusing SNS of presenting the wrong image and exaggerating the extent of an issue, government supporters betray concern about a swell in critical discourse, focusing on the government's inability to ensure the personal safety of citizens, which might lead to increased antagonism toward the regime.

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