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## From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the November issue of Beehive. In this issue we cover Iranian SNS users' responses to the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. We also explain the various narratives ISIS disseminates regarding the military situation in Mosul, and how Israeli involvement in southern Syria is depicted in Hezbollah's struggle for hearts and minds.

**Enjoy!**

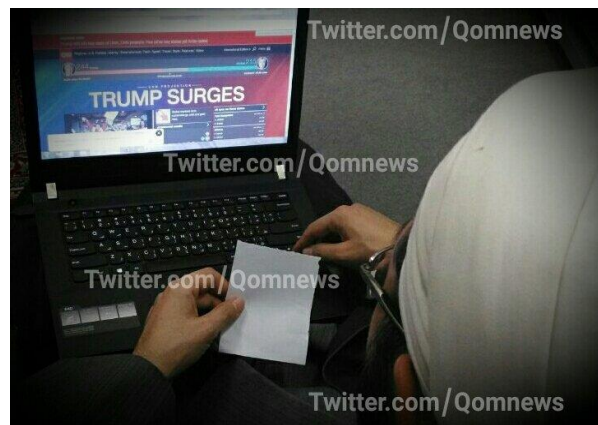
# Responding to the US Elections, Anticipating Elections in Iran

Dr. Raz Zimmt

When the results of the United States presidential election became known, social networking sites (SNS) were flooded with the responses of Iranian users surprised by the election of the Republican candidate, Donald Trump. Until that point, the Iranian public had not shown much interest in the stormy electoral campaign, and the prevailing opinion was that Hillary Clinton would be elected, as shown by an Iranian Students Polling Agency survey.<sup>1</sup> Users' responses included concern about Trump's election, as well as approval of his victory. This discourse gave voice to Iranian citizens' attitudes towards developments in the US, in addition to reigniting domestic political power struggles within the Islamic Republic.

Many users' responses to Trump's victory reflected a critical, adversarial attitude towards him, primarily in light of his behavior and declarations during the election campaign. Some respondents expressed concern that his election would harm the relationship between Iran and the United States, and were particularly worried that the new president would make good on the threat he made during his campaign to cancel the nuclear agreement. There were many mocking comments among the responses. "The only good thing about the election of Trump as president is that we will be able to laugh at the Americans for the next four years," tweeted one user.<sup>2</sup> "This is one small step for Trump, but one giant embarrassment for humankind," responded another.<sup>3</sup> Others cynically recommended that, in light of the election results, US citizens ought to immigrate to Iran.

Several users, especially among Iran's conservative right wing, expressed the opinion that Trump's victory was testimony to American society's moral crisis, its deeply rooted racism, and the weakness of its political system. In response to the allegations of rape and sexual abuse directed at Trump during the election campaign, one Iranian journalist tweeted that Trump's win was evidence that "in the West, a rapist is the most popular."<sup>4</sup> In the eyes of his critics, Trump's victory proved the words of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who described the US election as "a public show displaying the crimes and failures" of the Americans. A few days before the elections, in a speech marking the anniversary of the takeover of the US Embassy in Iran, Khamenei said that the presidential candidates had directed enough substantiated allegations of immorality at each other that they both disgraced the US.<sup>5</sup>



**Iranian religious leader in Qom watching news reports on the US election**

Unlike the predictors of doom who expressed concern about the President-elect, other users claimed that there was no reason to draw hasty conclusions regarding his future policies based only on campaign promises. They contended that Trump would not be quick to implement his combative declarations, and supported their opinion with his ameliorative post-election speech. One of them noted that the usage of politicians' election slogans is similar to that of the phrase "I love you," during sexual intercourse.<sup>6</sup> Another user, apparently identified with the conservatives, wrote that it would be irrelevant if the nuclear agreement were canceled as a result of Trump's election, because in any case, it had no effect on the life of Iranian citizens.<sup>7</sup>

Among those responding on SNS were also some who thought that Trump's victory would serve Iranian interests. They noted his lack of experience in managing foreign policy, his intention to focus on domestic American issues, and his declared antagonism to the Arab Gulf States as factors that might be beneficial to Iran.

However, the discourse opposing Trump should not be thought to suggest a preference for the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton. To the contrary, comments on SNS regarding Clinton include a tangible level of distrust, particularly in light of the rigid stance she took towards Iran while serving as Secretary of State under President Obama. From the perspective of many Iranians, there is no significant difference between the candidates' fundamentally hostile attitude towards the Islamic Republic. As one user declared, "America is America. There is no difference between Trump and Clinton. There is that external difference between an elephant [symbol of the Republican Party] and a donkey [symbol of the Democratic Party], but neither has understanding."<sup>8</sup>

Although the discourse focused on Trump's victory in the US election, it also reflected differences of opinions about domestic politics. Among supporters of President Rouhani, there was clearly a higher level of disappointment over Clinton's loss, and concern that the election of Trump would reinforce extremists in Iran. On the other hand, conservative right supporters of the regime mocked the reformist journalists who hurried to declare Clinton president, and hoped that the defeat of the Democratic presidential candidate would weaken President Rouhani's standing prior to the elections expected in May 2017. Ali Naderi, editor in chief of the hardline website Raja News, claimed that Brexit and the US elections demonstrate the failure of globalization, and a growing tendency towards isolationism in the West. This contrasts with Rouhani's approach, which is characterized by an attempt to increase Iran's integration in the international community.<sup>9</sup>

Attitudes towards internal Iranian politics were also evident in the comparisons Iranian users drew between Trump and former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Both were depicted as populist, extroverted politicians who were elected despite a lack of support from the political establishment and traditional leaders. The comparison between the two leaders produced many cynical responses. For example, one user tweeted, "Our only option is to export our jokes about Ahmadinejad to the US, so they can use them to pass the next eight years."<sup>10</sup>



**“Populists Unite”:** From the cover of the Iranian Weekly “Sada”

The results of the US presidential elections sparked a variety of responses in Iran, ranging from restraint, expressions of concern about the future, and even satisfaction with the results. The lively, witty, and sharp discourse that developed on SNS testifies to users’ high level of awareness. They expressed not only familiarity with the potential impact of the results of US policy towards Tehran, but also attempted to apply

conclusions derived from the US results onto the Iranian political system.

# ISIS Social Media and the Battle for Mosul

Gilad Shiloach

The campaign to liberate the city Mosul from the grip of the Islamic state (ISIS) has presented the *jihad* organization's propaganda apparatus with a challenge unlike any other in its short history. The extent of the battles, the quantity of enemy forces, and the city's status as the most important ISIS stronghold in Iraq, second only to Syrian city al-Raqqah, are unprecedented. For more than two years, ISIS has been presenting itself as a success story, grounded in its extensive campaign of conquests and terrorist attacks in both the Middle East and the international sphere. Now it is forced into a defensive posture on home territory. ISIS' media branch has been a factor in its success, and the propaganda it has produced since the beginning of the Mosul battles is indicative of the importance the organization places on the campaign for the city. Its efforts feature two central narratives. The first presents the situation as an emergency, while the second depicts the continuation of normal life, despite the fighting. Notwithstanding the contradiction between these depictions, they have the same goal: reinforcing support for the organization, and bolstering its recruitment efforts.

Officially, the campaign for Mosul began on October 16, 2016, led by a coalition of local and foreign forces. Headed by the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces, the coalition benefits from aerial support provided by the United States led international coalition. Other militias involved in the fighting include the Shi'ite Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) supported by Iran, the Nineveh Guard supported by Turkey, and small militias, some of which are Christian. Therefore, ISIS and its supporters have used the narrative of "few against many" since the beginning of the battles, in order to transmit a certain level of urgency and recruit additional support. In its propaganda, ISIS has depicted the campaign as a "Crusader-Shi'ite campaign" against Islam,<sup>11</sup> and taken pride that its forces are fighting against "more than 20 countries."<sup>12</sup> In order to promote this narrative on social networking sites (SNS), ISIS propagandists in official publications use the hashtag "*Ghazwah al-Ahzab*" (Battle of the Trench).<sup>13</sup> This refers to a battle in 627 CE, in which a large coalition led by the Quraysh tribe besieged Muslims led by the Prophet Mohammed in the city of Medina. According to tradition, the Muslims were victorious because of the foxholes and trenches they dug around the city to block the enemy invasion.

The narrative of "few against many" was also developed in a speech given by the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on November 2, approximately two weeks after the battle for Mosul began.<sup>14</sup> Al-Baghdadi spoke about the battles, emphasizing this narrative through the usage of Quranic verses referring to the Battle of the Trenches.<sup>15</sup> This seemed to be an attempt to create a connection between his current organization and Islam's first community; between himself, a self-declared "Caliph," and the Prophet Mohammed; and between Mosul and Medina. The title of the speech, "This was promised to us by Allah and his Messenger," also originates in the Quranic *al-Ahzab Surah*, which relates to the battle. It

should be noted that al-Baghdadi's speech did not explicitly refer to Mosul - Rather, he limited himself to calling on believers to defend the Nineveh district, where the city is located. Apparently, this was to avoid publicly overstating the importance of the city to the organization, and giving the impression that the battle for Mosul was of utmost importance.

The ISIS propaganda machine has not neglected the fighting; it has published hundreds of items and reports from the battlefields around the city since the campaign began. The Nineveh district, where Mosul is located, disseminated two well-produced videos, of 20 minutes or more each, documenting the battles around the city and the suicide attacks ISIS has mounted against Iraqi forces. The footage was photographed using cameras mounted on gliders and soldiers' helmets.<sup>16</sup> The Islamic State's 'Amaq News Agency published maps showing battles around the city and deployment of the various forces.<sup>17</sup> The agency gloried in the fact that the organization was able to mount 120 suicide attacks during October 2016 alone, a large majority of them during the battles surrounding Mosul.<sup>18</sup> The electronic weekly al-Naba, published by ISIS and distributed on SNS, announced, "The Shi'ites are unable to enter the city,"<sup>19</sup> and "Convoy of heretics burning down the walls of Mosul."<sup>20</sup> At the same time, ISIS is attempting to transmit the message that the Islamic State is not the aggressor in this campaign, but rather its victim. 'Amaq News Agency published pictures and videos claiming to show the results of attacks by the international coalition, including civilian casualties, and the targeting of civilian buildings and kindergartens,<sup>21</sup> including shocking depictions of dead and bleeding children caught under the ruins.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the narrative exposing the emergency situation, ISIS propaganda also focuses on an opposite narrative that shows Mosul as a calm, safe and functioning city. This is not necessarily a new phenomenon. Since its founding, ISIS has invested significant resources in presenting a positive, civilian side to its story, and showcasing the services that it provides to "subjects" of the Caliphate. Similar to the "emergency narrative," the "normal life narrative" is a tool for recruitment, intended to persuade supporters to immigrate to the territory of the Caliphate, and enjoy a supposedly normal life there. After the beginning of the campaign for Mosul, ISIS' first publication included video footage of carefree residents in the streets and markets, accompanied by interviews with the "man on the street." In these interviews, residents said, "The situation is normal," and accused the international Arab media of disseminating lies, making it seem as if something significant were happening in the city.<sup>23</sup> Other official publications since the beginning of the campaign have shown local farmers working in hothouses and fields,<sup>24</sup> thriving commerce in the market and near the stock exchange,<sup>25</sup> a tour of dental clinics providing services to residents of the city,<sup>26</sup> construction of a mosque in Tal Afar, another city where fierce battles are raging,<sup>27</sup> and other similar scenes.

In conclusion, the first month of the battle for Mosul was characterized by significant media attention from ISIS, demonstrating the campaign's importance for the organization. The conflicting narratives in its propaganda are intended to broadcast strength, present itself as a victim, and simultaneously contend that life continues as normal. These conflicting

narratives are directed towards different audiences, but have the same goal - recruiting members for the organization at a significant juncture in its history. Mosul was and remains a symbol of the successful campaign of conquest in the summer of 2014, when the organization's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared in public, and called on Muslims around the world to obey him as Caliph. Therefore, the media management of the current campaign might hint that the organization has no intention of surrendering to the large coalition facing off against it, even though most observers believe that it will, sooner or later, be defeated and driven out of the city. This attitude of fighting a war to the end broadcasts an aggressive message directed at those who are setting their sights on other strongholds of the organization, for example al-Raqqah.



## Hezbollah's Struggle for Hearts and Minds on the Syrian Golan

Moran Levanoni

On October 15, the Hezbollah-affiliated television channel *al Mayadeen* broadcast an investigative program entitled, "Southern Syria: A Region in Flames," which ostensibly dealt with Israeli policy and the various groups active in the southern Syria sector. The 50+ minute program provided insight into the narrative that Hezbollah is attempting to transmit as part of its military and propaganda campaign in the Syrian Golan Heights. The campaign aims to present Israel as a force interfering in southern Syria to ensure the success of regional Jihadist forces. Hezbollah's campaign plays on Israel's declared policy of the last three years, which includes transferring humanitarian aid to residents of the Syrian Golan and rescuing people injured in the fighting there,<sup>28</sup> in addition to maintaining military deterrence. Recently, Israeli media even reported on the establishment of a Coordination and Liaison unit between Israeli and Syrian agencies, facilitating the expansion of civilian aid.<sup>29</sup> In addition to being broadcast on television, the investigative report was also disseminated, as is customary, on the *al Mayadeen* YouTube channel<sup>30</sup> and Facebook page.<sup>31</sup>



Interview with Israeli General (res.) Amirdror on *al Mayadeen*



The title of *al Mayadeen's* investigative report

*al Mayadeen's* report included an assessment of the military actions taken by the various forces active in the Syrian Golan Heights. These included the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and all of its various factions, *Fateh al-Sham* Front (formerly *al-Nusra* Front), forces allied with the Syrian regime and its militias (*Shabiha*), various Druze militias, and forces backed by Hezbollah and Iran, from 2013 until today. In addition to interviews with activists in Syria and Europe, such as Mohammed Khairallah Harbhat and former officers in the Free Syrian Army, the report included an interview with Israeli General (res.) and National Security Advisor Yaakov Amidror,<sup>32</sup> and Israeli broadcasted interviews and briefings with Israeli generals of the Northern Command, Chief of the General Staff, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In order to prove Israeli intervention in Syria, the investigative report included biased descriptions of battles and military campaigns, particularly the tactical successes of Islamist

factions, along with various statements by Israeli military officials.<sup>33</sup> In addition, it claimed that a series of attacks against 50 officers and fighters of the Free Syrian Army, in which Khairallah Harbhat (who was interviewed for the report) was injured, had been carried out by jihadist groups, with the involvement of Western intelligence officials and Israel. The report even alleged Israeli military involvement in April 2015, in the battles at *Jubata al-Khashab* and the *Quneitra* check point, which helped Islamist factions take control of key points in the region. At the time, the IDF Spokesperson's office issued a statement that the action was a response to leakage of fire from Syria into Israel. The investigative report concluded that the Israeli-Western-Saudi front is working actively to implant a compliant Islamist regime in the southern Syrian front, at the expense of the moderate FSA faction. As a result, in a complete role reversal, Hezbollah is portrayed as the sector's legitimate representative of the free world.

The battle for hearts and minds, known in Arabic as "*al harb 'ala al waai*," is an important, foundational item on the Hezbollah's agenda.<sup>34</sup> The organization's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah reads Israeli newspapers and has, several times in the past, responded to subjects raised in the Israeli press.<sup>35</sup> He has cleverly used the Israeli public's fears as a vehicle to transmit his messages. Likewise, he gained advantage from the "Four Mothers" movement in the 1990s that led the public campaign for Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. During Israel's second war in Lebanon, Nasrallah's emerged victorious from the battlefield of public perception, with much of Israeli society incorrectly believing that his speeches were more reliable than announcements by IDF officials.<sup>36</sup>

The timing of the investigative report was not coincidental. The war in Syria is currently exacting a heavy price on Hezbollah, not only in casualties and resources, but also in loss of legitimacy in the Arab, Lebanese and Shi'ite sectors. Therefore, Hezbollah is using propaganda in an attempt to restore its legitimacy. The standard narrative in most of Nasrallah's speeches during the last five years has been the fight against Sunni jihadists, and particularly ISIS - which he claims was established by Israel and the Americans. In addition, he attempts to evoke dissent among his opponents and erode their legitimacy. In this context, Hezbollah is promulgating a narrative that presents the soldiers of the Free Syrian Army in the southern front as pathetic men who have fallen into the trap set for them by the Israeli-Western-Saudi front. The anti-Israel narrative disseminated by Hezbollah has even reached Israeli Knesset, where there are those who believe and quote it.<sup>37</sup>

The struggle over narrative is an extremely important component of the campaign that Hezbollah is waging against Israel, especially under the leadership of its current Secretary-General. The investigative report on *al Mayadeen* television is another expression of this struggle, representing the organization's efforts to inculcate the narrative that Israeli intervention is intended to cause ongoing chaos in the southern front of the Syrian Golan Heights. This demonstrates Hezbollah's sophistication and its propaganda capabilities - against which Israel must act, responding as it would to any other threat. Although the

propaganda war could be less expensive and more effective than confrontation on the battlefield, it is no less significant.

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<sup>1</sup>“52% of Iranians believe that the victory of either Clinton or Trump will not affect the country,” ISNA, November 6, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/ashourinia/status/796178066896785409>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/EhsanRanjbaran/status/796220811887702016>.

<sup>4</sup> [https://twitter.com/m\\_roozbahani/status/796588810918363136](https://twitter.com/m_roozbahani/status/796588810918363136).

<sup>5</sup> “Ayatollah Khamenei: Clinton and Trump prove Iran right,” *CNN*, November 2, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/02/politics/iranian-ayatollah-khamenei-clinton-trump/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/msourena/status/796534417913245696>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/mehdi73067148/status/796443096485658624>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/pK6EiKAJoppT29k/status/796414163794984960>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@naderi\\_note](https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@naderi_note)

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/Hedooxx/status/796446935884427264>.

<sup>11</sup> “Al-Naba,” Issue 55, November 17, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/fghbvccvv4/status/789128048255770624>

<sup>14</sup> For the full speech, see: <https://dawaalhaq.com/post/56071>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/t3ther1/status/787973879918538753>

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/MasrElma7bosah1/status/798224122245320704>

<sup>17</sup> <http://store2.up-00.com/2016-10/1477000849611.jpg>

<sup>18</sup> Gilad Shiloach, “ISIS Uses Mosul Residents As Human Shields,” *Vocativ*, October 19, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> “Al-Naba,” Issue 54, November 10, 2016

<sup>20</sup> “Al-Naba,” Issue 53, November 3, 2016

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=19&v=08HcrrRE-nl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=19&v=08HcrrRE-nl)

<sup>22</sup> [https://twitter.com/abdulkader\\_bj34/status/800100178174873600](https://twitter.com/abdulkader_bj34/status/800100178174873600)

<sup>23</sup> Gilad Shiloach, “Despite Attacks, ISIS Says Business As Usual In Mosul,” *Vocativ*, October 18, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> [https://justpaste.it/mot\\_mos](https://justpaste.it/mot_mos); <http://www.addpost.it/3148>; [https://justpaste.it/nb\\_mos1](https://justpaste.it/nb_mos1)

<sup>26</sup> <http://addpost.it/3041>

<sup>27</sup> <https://justpaste.it/10atj>

<sup>28</sup> For a report on these efforts, see <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4838412,00.html>

<sup>29</sup> Nir Boms, “[“Good Neighborliness” on Israel's northern border?](#)” *Middle East Crossroads*, volume 6, issue 11 (November 2016), Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies.

<sup>30</sup> See <https://youtu.be/e5eNYGE1pTM?t=2135>.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/almayadeen/?fref=ts>

<sup>32</sup> The interview was broadcast without giving credit to the interviewer and photographer, and was likely conducted by representatives of network in Israel.

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Ely Zuzovsky, “UN soldiers who fled from Syria report a new situation,” *Mako*, Sept. 17, 2014, <http://www.mako.co.il/pzm-magazine/Article-8a8708d57448841006.htm>

<sup>34</sup> See the speech given by Nasrallah marking the 10th anniversary of the Second War in Lebanon: “Victory in the Tammuz (second Lebanon) War is the Victory of Consciousness.” <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=498838>

<sup>35</sup> See the December 2011 article “Hezbollah Financed by International Drug Network” <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/316/511.html> and Nasrallah’s February 2012 speech in response: <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=662597&issueno=12125#.UY4Q6UqU3IU>.

<sup>36</sup> The fact that the IDF initially denied Nasrallah’s live report that the INS Hanit had been targeted during the early hours of the war, which later proved true, contributed significantly to this opinion.

<sup>37</sup> Jack Houry, Amos Harel and Gili Cohen, “MK Akram Hasoon: Israel is Helping al-Nusra Front Attack Druze in Syria, February 11, 2016 <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.3065151>.