

BeeHive

השיח ברשתות החברתיות במזדה"ת

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Volume 4, No. 8, September 2016

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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the September issue of Beehive. This issue covers the public campaign in Iran encouraging a boycott of two local banks, in response to their refusal to serve institutions affiliated with the IRGC. It also reviews the campaign against ISIS on social networking sites (SNS), which is aimed at presenting an alternate narrative to that presented by the organization. The final article examines the way that ISIS' 'Amaq News Agency makes extensive use of SNS to appropriate “lone wolf” terror attacks in the United States and Europe as its own.

Enjoy!

From “The People’s Bank” to “Humiliation Bank:” The Campaign against Iranian Banks' Boycott of the Revolutionary Guards

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In early September, two Iranian banks announced that they were suspending transactions with companies connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a move that was met with fierce public criticism. This censure led to a campaign on social networking sites (SNS) calling for a boycott of banks for allegedly disgracing the national honor and by their display of submissiveness to the West. This event once again demonstrates the willingness of conservative, right-wing opponents of the Iranian government to use SNS for political or public struggles, despite their objection on principle to such services. The campaign also highlights the willingness of Iranian citizens to join protests when they perceive harm to national interests.

On September 3, Iranian media reported that two local banks, Sepah and Mellat, were refusing to provide banking services to any institution having ties to the IRGC. This decision was made following the imposition of economic sanctions by the international community on such institutions, due to their involvement in Iran's non-conventional armament efforts and in terror activities. The daily newspaper, "Kayhan" reported that the banks' decision was announced in letters they sent to a conglomerate subordinate to the Revolutionary Guards, "Khatam al-Anbia." This organization controls hundreds of companies and enables the IRGC to exert wide control over the Iranian economy..¹

The Iranian banks' decision is apparently related to the agreement being formulated between the Iranian government and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international initiative to combat money laundering and the financing of terrorism. This agreement is intended to allow Iran to be removed from the FATF's "blacklist" and will lift significant limitations on Iran's use of the international banking system, which remain in place even subsequent to the nuclear accords. The agreement being negotiated with FATF has sparked fierce opposition from the political opponents of President Rouhani, who accuse his government of surrendering to the task force's demands regarding the support that Iran, and especially the IRGC, provides to terrorist organizations - with Hezbollah being first and foremost among these. Opponents of the government claim that the agreement is contrary to the country's national interests, and have even compared it to the Capitulations Agreement that granted excessive rights to citizens of the United States living in Iran during the reign of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.²

Reports of freezing banking services to organizations owned by the IRGC quickly sparked strident protests in media outlets identified with the conservative right, and on SNS. On Twitter, dozens of tweets accused the banks and government of treason and of surrendering to the dictates of the West. From their perspective, Iran agreed to impose "self-sanctions" on its institutions even as the international sanctions were removed.³

Commenting on the banks' behavior, one user tweeted that Bank Mellat (in Persian: "People's Bank") is a suitable name for a bank that takes the interests of the people and nation into consideration, not for one that collaborates with the enemy.⁴ Several users punned that the bank's name ought to be changed from Bank Mellat to Bank Zellet (in Persian: "Humiliation Bank").

Several users compared submission to the demands of FATF to events from Iranian history that the Iranian public generally considers to be emblematic of national humiliation. For example, it was compared to the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828) in which Iran surrendered large territories under its control to Russia.⁵ Another recalled the 1890 Iranian tobacco protest against increasing Western domination of the country.⁶ He claimed that if the religious leader of that time, Mirza Hassan Shirazi, were alive today he would issue a *fatwa* (Islamic legal ruling) to close all accounts in the Mellat and Sepah Banks.⁷ Israel was also dragged into the campaign in the form of a logo designed in the shape of a Star of David (see picture), in order to transmit the message that the demands of FATF serve the interests of Israel.



"#Humiliation_Bank" (Twitter)



The burning of bank cards issued by Mellat and Sepah Banks (Telegram)

The protest climaxed with a public campaign calling for a boycott of the banks. As part of the campaign against the two banks, a Telegram group was launched demanding the repeal of the "treasonous agreement with FATF," and calling on citizens to take action to express their protest to the banks' managements. The suggested steps included transferring their accounts to other banks, sending complaints to the bank via their Internet sites, not using the banks' ATM machines, refusing to accept checks issued by the two banks, removing the banks' apps from smartphones, distributing contents criticizing the banks on SNS accompanied by the hashtag "boycott bank Mellat/Sepah," and burning credit cards and bank books issued by them.⁸

Many Iranians perceived the willingness of two Iranian banks to cut off companies connected to IRGC as an embarrassing surrender to Western dictates, and this led to the expressions of their anger on SNS. The PR campaign that developed against the behavior of the banks and the developing agreement with FATF provides evidence of Iranian citizens'

willingness to express their protest in instances that they consider a slighting of national pride and feeling of national honor. Similar responses appeared on SNS after the South Korean company Samsung announced its intention to block Iranian users' access to its app store, because of the economic sanctions on Iran. That announcement set off a wave of criticism by Iranian users who opposed the company's decision, and called for a boycott of its products.⁹

This campaign is another example of the willingness of forces on Iran's conservative right-wing to use SNS as a tool for political and public relations purposes. The conservatives' control of most traditional media in Iran has made SNS the central political arena for reformist and liberal groups but conservative opponents of the government do not absent themselves from SNS, despite their ideological opposition to them. Indeed, they use it to manage political and public struggles. This is reflected by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei recent declaration that maximal usage should be made of SNS, just as Iran's enemies use them.¹⁰ Conservatives' increasing recognition of the potential for recruiting public support inherent in these networks may further increase their presence therein.

The Fight against ISIS on SNS: The War for Hearts and Minds

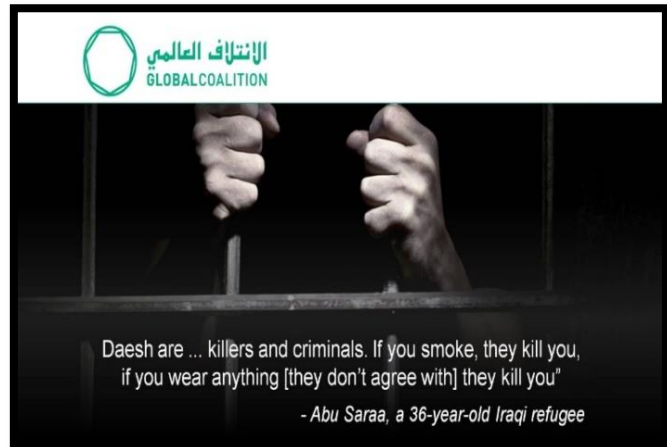
Adam Hoffman

In parallel to the military fight against ISIS – led by the Global Coalition, with the participation of local forces in Iraq and in additional parts of the Middle East – recent months have also seen an online campaign that seeks to debunk the organization's narrative. The online struggle against ISIS is hardly new. As early as November 2015, following a series of ISIS attacks in Paris, various groups of hackers, led by Anonymous, began working to remove ISIS activists and supporters from social networking sites (SNS).¹¹ In addition, Twitter and other technology companies invested efforts to remove accounts and messages associated with ISIS from their networks.¹² The main innovation of the current struggle, which is managed by governments and civil society organizations, is the effort to discredit the messages distributed by the organization on SNS, and to refute the religious and political credibility of its messages, in order to de-legitimize the organization's narrative.

Since the summer of 2014, ISIS has maintained a conspicuous presence on SNS. One metric used to measure online activity is the number of messages sent. In February 2015, ISIS supporters sent more than 90,000 messages on Twitter and on other SNS every day,¹³ in addition to the frequent distribution of propaganda videos to thousands of users by the use of a single hashtag,¹⁴ and the production of high-quality magazines and Islamic songs (*anashid*) that have together spread the organization's extremist ideology to a global audience. In response to Twitter's efforts to eradicate ISIS's presence on its network, the

amount of ISIS activity on that platform dropped dramatically. As a result, supporters migrated to other networks, particularly to the secure messaging app Telegram.¹⁵

Therefore, the challenge of fighting ISIS on SNS remains; it represents a central component of the international effort against ISIS and that organization's online efforts to recruit supporters and funding. Senior officials in the US State Department have claimed that counter-messaging campaigns are an important strategic pillar for defeating the organization.¹⁶ From the perspective of the global coalition, the purpose of these campaigns is to refute ISIS' narrative, and



An anti-ISIS tweet by an Iraqi refugee

thus to undermine the ability of its radical ideology to continue to mobilize supporters.¹⁷ In part, this goal derives from defining the fight the US and its partners in the Global Coalition are waging against ISIS as a “narrative fight,” in the words of White House Press Secretary Josh Ernst. According to him, while the US is mounting a limited attack against a small group of criminals and terrorists who commit atrocities, ISIS presents a narrative in which it is the exclusive representative of Islam and wages war against the 'infidel' West.¹⁸ Ernst's statement is consistent with the strategic approach of US President Barack Obama, who opposes defining ISIS' terrorism as “Islamic,”¹⁹ and instead presents ISIS as an extremist group that has distorted Islam in order to justify acts of terrorism.²⁰



Instructions for fighting ISIS online, from the Sawab Center's Twitter account

During the last year, several official accounts have been opened on Twitter and elsewhere, as part of the effort to fight the narrative disseminated by ISIS. Included among these are a Twitter account maintained by the Global Coalition²¹ and another operated by the British Government, under the name UK Against Daesh (the Arabic acronym for ISIS). These accounts provide ongoing updates about the military campaign against ISIS and the damage inflicted to its forces. Their purpose is to contradict the reports that ISIS distributes about its own successes in the field and its governmental activities within the territory of the “Islamic State.” For example, one tweet in UK Against Daesh contended that more than 25,000 ISIS fighters had been killed since the beginning of the Global Coalition's attacks on the group in September 2014.²² The Coalition also uses these accounts to circulate the stories of people who have deserted the organization and of Muslim civilians who have suffered under the iron fist of ISIS's reign of terror, using the

hashtag “WhyTheyLeftDaesh.”²³ The purpose of these stories is to expose the fraud presented in ISIS' propaganda, which claims that the organization is acting in accordance with pure Islam and provides for the needs of the populations under its control.

Another type of message promoted on these accounts aims to undermine the religious and political legitimacy of the organization's activities. One of the most prominent campaigns of this type is the “Sawab Center,” which publishes messages under the headline “United Against Extremism.” This account, established in July 2015, targets a Middle Eastern, Muslim population with tweets in Arabic and English.²⁴ Sawab is the result of a joint initiative by the governments of the United States and the United Arab Emirates, and has 159,000 followers as of this writing - an impressive number on social networking sites, especially considering its official, governmental nature.²⁵ Its content includes verses from the Qu'ran and messages calling for peace and interreligious tolerance. Thus, Islam is presented as a noble religion in opposition to the atrocities committed by ISIS. Other messages relate to the steps that all users can take against ISIS on SNS, including tweeting positive messages in response to ISIS propaganda, encouraging users to report ISIS messages as inappropriate, so that they will be removed from the specific platform, and not re-sharing messages posted by the organization.²⁶ The goal is to encourage ordinary Muslim users to present a rational, authentic voice against ISIS, one that is not funded by Western corporations or government agencies.

Another prominent effort is the “Truth about ISIS” campaign, which is not identified with any government or official organization. Instead, it is operated by a British ex-jihadist who wants to prevent Westerners from joining the organization. The true identity of its initiator is kept secret for fear that he will be attacked by ISIS supporters in Great Britain.²⁷ The campaign has accounts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, in addition to a website with many new videos and articles emphasizing the failures of ISIS on the battlefield and the atrocities it commits.²⁸ It works to expose the true reality hidden behind the organization's propaganda, and to refute the messages that present ISIS as victorious using the same tools ISIS itself uses. For example, after the death of ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the “Truth about ISIS” Twitter account published a video presenting the organization not only as defeated on the battlefield, but also as losing control and disintegrating from within.²⁹

The range of initiatives being undertaken in the fight against ISIS on SNS is further evidence of the power of SNS as a central arena for shaping public opinion in the 21st century. This fact is recognized at once by violent non-state actors, such as ISIS, as well as governments and civil society organizations. These initiatives, which are directed at different target audiences, aim to achieve three goals: to reduce the number of Westerners recruited by ISIS and thereby hurt its ability to replenish its ranks, to reduce support for ISIS in the Sunni Muslim world, and to encourage ISIS fighters to desert the organization. The fact that the forces fighting ISIS on social media use the same tools and the organization's own messages

provide an impression of trustworthiness and authenticity to these messages, and provides a look inside what is happening among ISIS forces and within the territories under its control. These are critical aspects of the online war for "hearts and minds" that ISIS had previously waged unchallenged.

Post Facto Jihad: ISIS' 'Amaq News Agency Takes Responsibility for Lone Wolf Attacks in Europe and North America

Gilad Shiloach

The series of attacks perpetrated by supporters of ISIS in the United States and Europe beginning in June brought the 'Amaq News Agency, part of the ISIS public relations apparatus, to center stage. The agency's work, which makes extensive use of social networking sites (SNS) to disseminate its reports, shines light on how ISIS appropriates individual attacks, and transforms them into attacks committed on its behest even when there is no evidence of a direct connection to it, or of guidance from the organization. This is additional evidence of the power of SNS to shape, and even create, reality.

The 'Amaq News Agency issues press releases using the Telegram network, primarily in Arabic, English and French. At times, it also uses smartphone apps.⁴⁹ 'Amaq purports to fill a role similar to that of a government press agency, publishing dozens of press releases that appear, on the surface, to be dry and informative. Reports issued by the agency lack the pathos characterized by other PR issued by ISIS, and lacks the jihad rhetoric intended to inflame the masses or to deter enemies. The reports do not include depictions of mass executions and beheadings. Its semantic usage demonstrates that the agency wants to present an image of providing ostensibly objective reporting. For example, unlike the official ISIS propaganda, in which the offensives that the global coalition mounts are referred to as "Crusader offensives," 'Amaq, calls them "American offensives." Similarly, 'Amaq replaces the terms "Allawi Army" and "Shiite Army" used in ISIS propaganda with the simpler "Syrian army" and the "Iraqi Army," respectively.

Despite this, 'Amaq is indeed considered an inseparable part of the ISIS media apparatus, even though it is not recognized as an official propaganda agency. 'Amaq reports primarily on positive developments for ISIS on the battlefield, on territorial conquests and on terrorist attacks around the world. It provides extensive coverage of the global coalitions' assaults on ISIS targets in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, with emphasis on the destruction caused. Thus, 'Amaq continues the general line of ISIS propaganda that presents itself as a victim that protect civilians from these attacks, in an attempt to create legitimacy for taking revenge on the West. Moreover, the name chosen for the agency is not coincidental. The apocalyptic Islamic tradition transmitted by the prophet Mohammed states that the Day of Judgment will come when Christians come to fight Muslims in two cities, 'Amaq and Dabiq

located in what is now northern Syria. The press agency was given the former name, while the latter is the name of an English language magazine published by ISIS.

'Amaq gained prominence as a result of its exclusive photographic report about ISIS' September 2014 battles against the Kurds in Kobani in northern Syria.⁵⁰ The agency was the first to officially report the death of ISIS Minister of War Abu Omar al-Shishani in July 2016,⁵¹ and the death of spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani in late August 2016.⁵² It was the one to publish an exclusive report that ISIS was taking official responsibility for the attacks in Paris last November, as well as the attacks in Jakarta, Indonesia in January 2016,⁵³ and Brussels in March of that year.⁵⁴ However, it would seem that the most significant task 'Amaq has recently undertaken was claiming for ISIS several attacks by individual terrorists, which are sometimes known as "lone wolf" attacks, in the United States and Europe during the summer of 2016.

The wave of terrorist attacks began on June 12, when Omer Mateen opened fire in a gay nightclub in Orlando Florida, killing 49 people. Approximately 12 hours after the attack, 'Amaq took responsibility for the attack, claiming that it was committed by a soldier of the caliphate.⁵⁵ They did this even though, to date, no evidence has been found that Mateen had any direct contact with ISIS or that the organization participated in planning or directing his actions. The agency's claims were somewhat supported by reports in the American press that Mateen placed a call to the 911 emergency line during the attack, and during that conversation swore allegiance to ISIS.⁵⁶ In subsequent weeks, ISIS again took responsibility for several attacks committed by individual terrorists, with or without their consent. These attacks included the killing of a policeman and his partner in the Paris suburb of Magnanville by terrorist Larossi Abballa, only two days after the attack in Orlando,⁵⁷ and in July, when Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlef drove a truck into a crowd in Nice, France, killing 84 people. In the last instance, 'Amaq even provided a motive for the attack, stating that it was "in response to the call [by ISIS] to attack civilians in coalition countries" fighting the organization.⁵⁸ In some cases the agency published videos that the attackers filmed of themselves prior to and during the attack, swearing allegiance to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in front of the camera.

The presentation of these terrorists as caliphate soldiers is intended to not only to appropriate the attacks and attackers, as noted, but more importantly to transmit the message that anyone can fight on behalf of the organization, even without traveling to the territory of the "Islamic State" or participating in the ISIS training camp. The only threshold is attacking a target designated by the organization. Therefore, it insists on presenting such actions as a response to its call and the product of its propaganda efforts.

'Amaq News Agency plays a key role in appropriating lone wolf attacks for ISIS. Taking responsibility for attacks no less severe than those previously conducted by the organization positions ISIS as a global threat to the soft underbelly of its enemies around the world, even when it is suffering losses in Syria and Iraq. The murderous efficiency of these

attacks, and the ability of ISIS to appropriate them, time and time again, with the assistance of the attackers themselves, leads to the conclusion that SNS have led to a deep change not only in the marketing and indoctrination methods used by Islamic terrorism,⁵⁹ but also in how it organizes itself internationally.

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² “The FATF agreement is a greater disaster than the capitalist agreements, making the government responsible for implementing US policy within the country,” Fars News Agency, September 3, 2016.

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⁴ <https://twitter.com/razavialiakbar/status/772126165624561664>.

⁵ <https://twitter.com/personal1364/status/771072351672958976>.

⁶ The tobacco protest was encouraged by senior Iranian religious leaders after the British Imperial Tobacco Company was granted an exclusive concession for selling and controlling tobacco and tobacco products in Iran. At the height of the protest, a religious authority (Mirza Hasan Shirazi,) issued a *fatwa* declaring smoking and using tobacco forbidden to all Iranian citizens.

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