Table of Contents

From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the June issue of Beehive. This issue covers the expansive internet campaign led by supporters of the Islamic State, which provides a glimpse of the geographic distribution of the organization's supporters. We also examine the discourse surrounding Ramadan that developed on social networking sites (SNS) in Turkey, which has exposed the rift between the conservative-traditional public and the secular public in that country. The final article covers the Iranian regime-led activity on SNS in memory of Iranians who have fallen in the Syrian campaign, as a means for mobilizing public support.

Enjoy!

A Demonstration of Virtual Power by Supporters of the Islamic State

Gilad Shiloach

On 21 May, supporters of the Islamic State (IS) led an extensive, world-wide campaign on social networking sites (SNS), following an item shared on Twitter and Telegram reporting that the organization's principal propaganda branch, the *al-Furqān* Institute, would soon be distributing a recorded speech by one of the Islamic State's senior leaders. For supporters of the organization, as for media outlets covering it, publications by the institute are important media events, worthy of anticipation. Indeed, the announcement aroused great excitement among followers of IS, who called for spreading news of the anticipated recording in order to create waves of media anticipation. Some went further and uploaded pictures of themselves at various locations around the world, a gesture that went beyond the usual limits on activity in the virtual realm. This demonstration of virtual support provides a glimpse of the ability of the organization's supporters to organize in cyberspace, and hints at their global distribution.

The virtual show of support began after a poster (see picture) showing the al-Furqān Institute's logo was published on Twitter and Telegram channels identified with supporters of the Islamic State. The poster shows a microphone, hinting at an audio recording, with the caption, "Soon, God willing." The poster does not give any indication as to the possible content of the speech, or the identity of the speaker. To supporters of IS, and to those who monitor its activities, it was clear that the speaker would be one of two people, either the organization's

leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or its spokesman Sheikh Abū Muḥammad al-ʿAdnānī, because al-Furqān does not distribute the speeches of any other leaders.

When news of the recording was received, accounts identified with the organization, especially on Twitter, began sharing messages with the hashtag *#al-Furqān* in Arabic and accompanied by the above poster. In some cases, a request to tweet as many messages as possible using the hashtag was also included. For example, one supporter of the Islamic State tweeted: "Every supporter should tweet 30 or 50 posts with the *#al-Furqān* hashtag, so the tag trends and we can show the world the strength of support for the Islamic State."[1] "Trending topics" are the hashtags being tweeted most frequently at any given moment. These are displayed on the home screen of all Twitter users in the relevant geographical region. A hashtag included on this list is necessarily more successful, and receives even greater exposure as a result of its inclusion. Indeed, screenshots shared by analysts and

journalists during the evening of 21 May, before the speech itself was published on SNS, show that the *#al-Furqān* hashtag was the most popular Arabic-language tag.[2]

The campaign reached its climax when dozens of the organization's supporters around the world uploaded photographs showing themselves holding notes that included the title of the speech, the *#al-Furqān* hashtag, plus the date and location where the picture was taken. This is considered an exceptional move by supporters of the organization, who generally avoid any exposure that moves beyond the virtual world, for fear of being caught by the authorities if they express support for a terrorist organization. Photographs were uploaded from a wide range of places including Canada, Paris, London, Belgium, Norway, Germany, Holland, Argentina, Colombia, Turkey, Morocco, Tikrit, Baghdad, Gaza and elsewhere. A document published on the investigative site Bellingcat, and information uncovered by Twitter users who followed the campaign and deciphered the pictures in real-time, confirmed the location of several photographs in Europe and America. In some of the cases, they were able to reveal the residential address of the people photographed.[3] For example, one user working with Google Street View successfully identified the exact intersection in Münster, Germany where the photograph here was taken.[4] Another user confirmed identification using a map showing the position of street advertisements in the city.[5] In a similar manner, the locations of photographs taken in Paris,[6] London,[7] and Hoofddorp (a small city adjacent to Amsterdam Schipol Airport[8]) were identified. This sample shows the geographic distribution of Twitter accounts identified with the Islamic State, which may well be indicative of the overall geographic distribution of its supporters.

IS supporters who participated by sharing the hashtag on SNS also used the term "*ghazwa*," which means "invasion" or "infiltration," with additional Islamic significance referring to the Islamic conquests in the days of Mohammed. The use of this word concretizes the feeling of accomplishment that supporters of the organization had following their "battle" to conquer SNS and their use of the networks to publicize the speech.[9] That night (21 May) a recording was distributed containing a speech by IS spokesman Sheikh Abū Muḥammad al-'Adnānī. In the speech, al-'Adnānī called on the organization's supporters in Europe and the US to perpetrate terrorist attacks during Ramadan, and acknowledged the challenges the organization faces at home, as well as the offensive against it intensifying in Syria and Iraq.[10] IS supporters greeted the speech with enthusiasm, which increased the spread of both the recording and the transcript on SNS.

The SNS campaign surrounding the al-Furqān speech actualizes the mantra commonly repeated by people connected to the Islamic State, "half of the jihad is media," which expresses their perception

that cyberspace is a battlefield, and a tool with which war is waged. With their online demonstration of power, the organization's supporters were successful in their effort to reunify – if only for a few hours – the community of online supporters, and motivate them to take part in the collective effort to promote distribution of the recording. In this context, dozens of supporters took some degree of personal risk by disclosing something of their presence in the non-virtual world, in order to further spread the campaign on SNS. For the management of Twitter, this demonstration of power also reflects the limitations of the control mechanism they have imposed on supporters of IS for the last few months,[11] but were unable to prevent them from making massive use of the platform when called upon to do so.

Secularization vs. Religionization:
Ramadan and the Fate of Hagia Sophia on Turkish SNS

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, regularly sparks religious-political discourse on social networking sites (SNS) in Turkey. Last year, they focused on calls for China to grant greater freedom of religion and conscience to the Uyghurs living in the Xinjiang province. This year, however, the discourse floated internal Turkish issues, including levels of commitment to the fast of Ramadan, and disagreement over efforts of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) to convert the famous Hagia Sophia building into a mosque. This discourse reflects the division in Turkish society, between the conservative-traditional public that wants to accelerate the process of religionization that Turkish society has been undergoing in the last decade, and the secular public that wishes to maintain its identity.

Ramadan has a profound effect on the daily life of Muslims due to the limitations on daytime eating, drinking and smoking that are in force for the entire month. In Turkish society, the decision to observe the fast of Ramadan has become a sign of commitment to Islam. Therefore, friction between traditional people and secular ones who declared publically on SNS that they did not intend to fast during Ramadan led to a dispute between the two camps. Using the hashtag #Wewouldforbidfasting, which became popular on SNS, secular people mocked those who fast by claiming, "while Muslims are hungry, non-Muslims continue their technological advancement." Secular users stressed the damage the fast does to physical and mental health, using the hashtag #Idontfastbecause. There were those who refused to believe that the anti-religious slogans were indeed shared by secular people, and claimed that they had actually been posted by supporters of the government who wanted to disparage the secular camp and widen the gap between it and the traditional public, which is evident in both worldview and lifestyle. Against this backdrop, many secular users stressed the importance of secular values, including freedom of religion and conscience, and sharply criticized anti-religious tweets.[12]

A "Fast Patrol" in Erzurum, from Twitter

Within this internet discourse, there were also users who highlighted the damage done to secular Turks' freedom of religion and conscience by the "Fast Patrols" (or "Beating Patrols") that use violence to enforce the fast.[13] A few users testified that the Istanbul Police had randomly arrested some people who were smoking in public, which is considered a violation of the fast.[14] Conversely, traditional users expressed fury at the anti-religious tweets and banded together under the hashtag #Don'tdisparagemyfast, while others praised the commandment to fast and the tradition that brings

families together.[15] Several traditional users even compared people who choose not to fast to animals. Additional fuel was added to the fire when Prof. Mustafa Aşkar used the same language to describe Turks who chose not to pray, while speaking on one of the government-sponsored television programs broadcast daily at the end of the fast. The comments made by Prof. Aşkar shocked the Turkish SNS, and led to strident responses and denunciations,[16] including the use of the hashtag "There'sapimpatTRT" (Turkish Radio and Television).[17] Following the response of SNS to Aşkar's comments, even the Presidency for Religious Affairs joined the censure and used its Twitter account to stress that these remarks were inconsistent with the values of Islam.[18]

The Presidency for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), headed by Mehmet Görmez, is a government agency with the grandiose budget of close to $21.4 million for 2016,[19] which makes it a key player in the move towards increased religiosity in Turkey. In addition to providing religious services and implementing many projects with this goal, Diyanet strives to increase awareness of Islam using a wide range of media including, but not limited to, SNS, as well as its own television channel. *Inter alia* Diyanet is leading the effort – supported by many Islamists in Turkey – to convert the Hagia Sophia building into a mosque. Until the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453, the building served as an Orthodox Church. After the conquest, Sultan Mehmet II ("Mehmet the Conqueror") gave orders to convert the church into a mosque. In 1934, during the rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of the Turkish Republic, the building was again transformed, this time into a museum. During the renovations, the ancient depictions of Jesus and his mother Mary etched into the building's walls were revealed.

Using the hashtag #OpenHagiaSophiaErdoğan" to address President Recep Erdoğan directly, supporters of Diyanet called for reconverting Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Many users paraphrased Sultan Mehmet II's slogan, "Either I will conquer Constantinople or Constantinople will conquer me" and wrote, "Either Hagia Sophia will conquer us or we will [conquer] Hagia Sophia," accompanied by a poster (pictured).[20] The Presidency for Religious Affairs took the additional step of broadcasting its daily Ramadan television program of prayers and readings from the Koran from Hagia Sophia. This move was received positively by traditional users on SNS who expressed a desire to pray in the historic building on a regular basis. Conversely, secular users were angered by the decision and stressed the importance of Hagia Sophia to humanity as a whole, and the need to main the *status quo* there. A few of them even suggested converting the museum not into a mosque but rather into a church. The disagreement prevailing in the SNS discourse surrounding Hagia Sophia had a negative influence on the relationship between Turkey and Greece. Greece, as an Orthodox Christian country, is worried about the possibility that the building might be converted back

"Either Hagia Sophia will conquer us or we will [conquer] Hagia Sophia!" Taken from Twitter

into a mosque. As a result, the Greek ambassador in Istanbul visited the site, while one of Diyanet's television programs was being filmed, and reported on the situation to Athens. Many Turkish users on SNS perceived the Greek ambassador's visit to Hagia Sophia as a blatant violation of Turkish sovereignty, and demanded that the museum be transformed into a mosque without further delay. As a result, the Greek ambassador in Istanbul visited the site, while one of Diyanet's television programs was being filmed, and reported on the situation to Athens. Many Turkish users on SNS perceived the Greek ambassador's visit to Hagia Sophia to be a blatant violation of Turkish sovereignty, and demanded that the museum be transformed into a mosque without further delay.[21]

The public discourse on Turkish SNS during the last month demonstrates the rift between the traditional and secular publics in Turkey, and the lack of tolerance and mutual respect between the camps. While the secular side considers the fast of Ramadan an excuse used to impose restrictions on their lifestyle and an expression of religious coercion, many traditionalists complain that the secular public is inconsiderate. The tension between the camps emerges from the process of religionization occurring in Turkish society in response to the desire of conservative-traditional forces to redefine the country's national identity. Not for nothing do they consider keeping the dictates of Islam and initiating processes with a religious nature the "completion of the conquest of Constantinople." The significance of these moves is the imposition of a traditional lifestyle on the secular public, similar to the manner in which secular forces previously led Turkish society. Moreover, domestic issues with potential ramifications for Turkey's international relations, as in the case of Hagia Sophia, are also influenced by this dispute.

Online Monuments: Commemorating Iranian Deaths during the Campaign in Syria

Dr. Raz Zimmt

During the last year, social networking sites (SNS) have served as a platform for commemorating the hundreds of Iranian combatants killed in the military campaign in Syria since 2012. Iran became involved in Syria in an effort to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime, its most important strategic ally in the Arab world. In the summer of 2015, the rebels' cumulative gains forced Iran to dispatch significant reinforcements and become actively involved in the fighting. At that stage, Iran's involvement began to exact a heavy price on human lives. Since the launch of the Syrian army's ground offensive in northern Syria in October 2015, nearly 300 Iranians have been killed, according to multiple estimates. The total number of Iranians killed in Syria since the beginning of the civil war there is estimated at more than 400.[22] Faced with these heavy losses the Iranian regime is making extensive efforts to mobilize public support for its involvement in Syria. Their efforts include honoring the fallen with funerals, memorial services and conferences in their memory, as well as extensive activity on SNS, all intended to enhance the public's commitment to making a sacrifice on behalf of the Islamic Republic, and present military involvement in Syria as a vital national interest.

The efforts of the Iranian regime to mobilize public support for military involvement in Syria are not new. A few months after the Syrian civil war began, groups identified with the regime launched Facebook pages devoted to the fighting in Syria from the perspective of Iranian fighters.[23] These pages included reports regarding the accomplishments of the Syrian regime and its allies in their battles against the rebels, propaganda content opposing the rebels, details about the combatants from Iran, Hezbollah and Arab countries who were fighting the rebels, extensive coverage of fallen Iranian fighters and other content of a religious-Shi'ite nature. The regime's recent intensification of its propaganda efforts, because of the heavy losses Iranian forces have sustained, is intended to strengthen positive Iranian public opinion and forestall any possible criticism.

The messaging app Telegram, which is very popular in Iran, is a conspicuous component of these efforts. Several dozen channels have been opened on Telegram to memorialize the fallen, with membership ranging from a few hundred users to several thousand. Extensive activity is also evident on other SNS including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Although it is difficult to definitively identify the people behind these pages, it is clear that official agencies or institutions are involved because of, *inter alia*, the regime-oriented content that was published.

The memorial activity on SNS is characterized by extensive use of religious-Shi'ite rhetoric, extensive quotations from the Koran and *hadith*, and enthusiastic support for the value of sacrifice in defense of the Shi'ite holy places in Syria. The Iranian casualties are called "fallen defenders of the holy shrine" (شهدای مدافع حرم) referring to the Sayyidah Zaynab mosque in the southern suburbs of Damascus, where the Shi'ites believe that Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali and the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed, is buried. The memorials include references to dates on the religious calendar

and imbue them with current content. For example, 21 April was observed as Father's Day in Iran, based on the birthdate (according to the Islamic calendar) of Ali ibn Abu-Talib, the eldest son of the first Shi'ite Iman. Many Iranian users of SNS marked the day by commemorating the numerous fathers who were killed during the battles in Syria, leaving orphaned children behind.

The use of religious-Shi'ite rhetoric is similar in character to its use in Iranian propaganda during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). . As part of the regime-led propaganda efforts, the Iranians utilize the foundational myth of Karbala, which recounts the sacrifice of the first Shi'ite Imamn Husayn ibn Ali in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, against the Umayyad caliph Yazid I. Invoking this myth is intended to goad the public into joining the battle, and be an inspiring model for combatants. The slogan identified with the campaign at the time was "Every day is Ashurah and every place is Karbala."[24]

"Defenders of the holy place… Happy Father's Day…" A poster shared on Telegram

Alongside the religious content, the commemorative channels are used for uploading personal and familial content,[25] including photographs of the fallen, biographical details, selections from the memories and testaments they uploaded before their deaths, songs or poems written in their memory, and eulogies written by relatives and friends who praise the deceased at length.

Despite the tendency to avoid explicitly political content in commemorative contexts, the memorial channels on Telegram are also used to report on developments on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, which include many expressions of support for the regime and its leader, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Thus the commemorative activity is harnessed to reinforce public support for the Iranian regime and its policy in Syria. It should be noted that there are additional channels for routine reports on the military campaign,[26] which the regime uses for the same purpose.

The extensive use of SNS to commemorate the Iranian fighters killed in Syria is additional evidence that despite the Iranian regime's reservations about SNS, elements associated with the regime are willing to use them to transmit messages consistent with the values of the Islamic Republic. The broad reach of the SNS supplies them and their supporters with a convenient, accessible means for rallying the public around shared national symbols, and encouraging collective consciousness. Online memorials for the fallen create an opportunity, not only to increase public support for the campaign in Syria, but also to nurture an ethos of self-sacrifice for the good of the nation and to reinforce Iranian national solidarity.

1 https://twitter.com/manaboodyx33/status/733981585599533056

2 https://twitter.com/johannes_saal/status/734081212680179712

3 Ibid.

4 https://twitter.com/hotzn1/status/734076621855068160?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

5 https://twitter.com/ArtWendeley/status/734076968233242625?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

6 https://twitter.com/bm21_grad/status/734097222296567808

7 https://twitter.com/mamzbondok/status/734087842301894656?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

8 https://twitter.com/EliotHiggins/status/734129053670723584?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

9 https://twitter.com/tyaaar4/status/734091432550649861

10 "Islamic State calls for attacks on the West during Ramadan in audio message," *Reuters*, 22 May 2016.
http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-idUSKCN0YC0OG

11 Last February, Twitter published a notice on its blog stating that they network had successfully "suspended over 125,000 accounts for threatening or promoting terrorist acts, primarily related to ISIS" following criticism that the world's largest SNS were allowing accounts connected to terrorism to operated unhindered. It should be noted that research published by Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies in February 2016 found that measures such as those taken by Twitter against terror-related accounts are effective and were able reduce the presence of supporters of the Islamic State and their exposure on SNS, thereby having a negative influence on their propaganda efforts. For more, see https://blog.twitter.com/2016/combating-violent-extremism; http://www.wired.com/2015/11/facebook-and-twitter-face-tough-choices-as-isis-exploits-social-media/ ;
https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf

12 #OruçTutmakYasaklansın #OruçTutmuyorumÇünkü

13 "Erzurum'da oruç tutmayanlara 'dayak timi' iddiası: Bir fotoğraf, iki itiraf", Gazete Manifesto,
http://gazetemanifesto.com/2016/06/11/post-rockin-devi-sigur-ros-turkiyede/

14 Polisten Ramazan gözaltısı: Oruç oruç sigara mı içiyorsunuz lan!", Cumhuriyet, June 8, 2016,
http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/547956/Polisten_Ramazan_gozaltisi__Oruc_oruc_sigara_mi_iciyorsunuz_lan_.html [Accessed: June 15, 2016]

15 #OrucumuzaDilUzatma #OrucunEnGüzelYanı

16 Mustafa Aşkar kimdir kaç yaşında nereli sözleri neden olay oldu?", A24, June 14, 2016 http://www.a24.com.tr/mustafa-askar-kimdir-kac-yasinda-nereli-sozleri-neden-olay-oldu-haberi-40067251h.html?h=11

17 #TRTdeGavatVar

18 "Diyanet'ten "Namaz kılmayan hayvandır" diyen Prof. Aşkar'a tepki", T24, June 13, 2016
http://t24.com.tr/haber/diyanetten-namaz-kilmayan-hayvandir-diyen-prof-askara-tepki,345041

19 "2016 yılı bütçeleri açıklandı: MİT'e 1.6, Diyanet'e 6.5 milyar lira ayrıldı!", Sol, January 27, 2016
http://haber.sol.org.tr/turkiye/2016-yili-butceleri-aciklandi-mite-16-diyanete-65-milyar-lira-ayrildi-143952

20 #AyasofyayıAçREİS #Ramazan #RamazandaMeram #HayırlıRamazanlar

21 #BereketVaktiAyasofya #AyasofyadaSahur

22 Ali Alfoneh, "The IRGC Morphs Into an Expeditionary Force", *POLICYWATCH* 2615, The Washington Institute, May 12, 2016, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-irgc-morphs-into-an-expeditionary-force.

23 Raz Zimmt, "Support for Syria comes to Facebook: supporters of Iran's military involvement in Syria increase their social network presence." Spotlight on Iran, August 25, 2013, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20561. See also, Efrat Harel, "Religion and nationalism: The question of the Iranian identity during the Iran-Iraq War," in *Iran: The Anatomy of Revolution* (Tel Aviv, 2009), pp. 148-173 [in Hebrew].

24 Efrat Harel, "Religion and nationalism: The question of the Iranian identity during the Iran-Iraq War," in *Iran: The Anatomy of Revolution* (Tel Aviv, 2009), pp. 148-173 [in Hebrew].

25 For example, https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@shahid_mh_moradi, accessed 25 May 2016;

26 https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@IranIran; https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@ModafeaneHaram;
https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@modafeon