ACIS מרכז אליאנס ללימודים איראניים

מרכז משה דיין ללימודי המזרח התיכון ואפריקה

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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 May issue of ***Beehive***. This issue presents the dissonance between young Egyptians' increasing use of SNS as a means of levelling criticism against the regime, and the demand of freedom of expression, and the government's distrust of these mechanisms and its use of traditional enforcement methods to limit it. We also review the differences of opinion on SNS surrounding "Saudi Vision 2030," juxtaposed with the overwhelming support shown by traditional media. Finally, we describe an online campaign launched by young Iranians to increase awareness of traffic safety and the strong public and official support the campaign has received, in both cyberspace and on the road.

Enjoy!

Egypt: Satire Suppressed: The Arrest of Street Children as Seen on SNS

Dr. Michael Barak

On May 10, an Egyptian court sentenced four members of the satirical street theater troupe, "Street Children" (*Atfal Soara*), to 15 days in prison. The young men were accused of using social networking sites (SNS), particularly the video sharing site YouTube,[1] for the purpose of:

> "Spreading ideas that incite acts of terrorism and participation in mass events aimed at harming the security of the regime, and calling for the establishment of a group to work against the basic principles of the state, advocate against the authorities and cooperate with others in deliberately disseminating false information and messages against the governmental system."

The arrest of troupe members sparked a major protest on SNS that demanded their release, and sharply criticized the regime's policy of silencing people. This case demonstrates, once again, the gap between the Egyptian public's need for freedom of expression and the regime that finds it difficult to deal with such a demand, and therefore uses obsolete means of enforcement and policing to silence them.

Street Children, made up of six members ages 19 to 25, began operating on SNS in 2016. Its declared purpose is to communicate the sentiments of ordinary citizens on social and political issues. To date, their activity has been characterized by sarcastically expressing criticism of government policy using satirical selfie videos featuring members of the group. In one video, for example, they chant "al-Sisi, why do people hate you?"[2] They then upload the videos to SNS, especially Facebook and YouTube, where some have been viewed by one million or more users. The group's Facebook page, which had 300,000 followers, states that its members are "young men working in theater. We decided to shoot videos in the street accompanied by crazy ideas... you can meet us anywhere... even if your day is crowded or choked...the street is filled with laughter."[3]

The site was closed when the members were arrested but was reopened a few days later. Following the actors' arrest, young activists and Egyptian journalists launched a protest campaign on SNS, demanding their release, the cancellation of the charges against them, and calling on the regime to allow freedom of expression. Criticism was mostly shared using the hashtags #freedomforstreetchildren[4] and #freedomtolaugh.[5] On Facebook, they created a page entitled "Freedom for Laughter."[6] Omar Hamzawy, a professor at the University of

Cairo, tweeted: “The Street Children became victims of suppression because of songs. Your freedom has been denied as your songs are being played. In the republic of fear, the citizen is a source of worry to be kept quiet.”[7] Many Egyptian users in Egypt and abroad uploaded selfie photos and videos to SNS as a sign of solidarity with the arrested actors, together with the taunting caption, “al-Sisi, does a cellphone camera scare you?”[8] The renowned satirist Bassem Yusuf, uploaded two selfie videos addressing the issue and accusing al-Sisi of oppressing young people for fear of losing power.[9]

Furthermore, young Egyptians posted an online petition signed by several scholars and activists, including the former Minister of Culture, Emad Abu Ghazi, and head of the Human Rights Committee of the Egyptian Parliament, Mohamed Anwar al-Sadat (a relative of the former Egyptian President). The petition states that the undersigned wish to express their protest over the suppression of freedom of expression, seen in the repeated persecution and arrests of artists, writers and liberals on the grounds that they are a security threat. Moreover, it argues that silencing them amounts to prohibiting satire as a means of expression.[10]

Opponents of the al-Sisi government affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood took advantage of the protests to attack the Egyptian regime and its leader, and also uploaded messages to SNS. In a commercial broadcast on the satellite channel al-Sharq, which broadcasts from Istanbul and is associated with al-Sisi’s critics, the newscaster stressed that al-Sisi has no right to silence the voices of young people.[11] This is not the first time that the Muslim Brotherhood has adopted political and social issues on the agenda for their own political gain and to raise awareness of issues it wants to promote, such as the campaign protesting the poor physical conditions of inmates in Egyptian prisons.[12]

This campaign, distributed in five languages, used the hashtags #prisonerchoking and #Iwanttobreathe to put pressure on the Human Rights Commission to intervene on behalf of prisoners. According to the activists, the prison cells are extremely and inhumanely hot, which causes prisoners to become sick and even die. As a sign of solidarity with the prisoners, activists uploaded pictures of their heads covered with plastic bags, to illustrate the inability of prisoners to breathe (see photo).[13]

The arrest of members of a satirical street theater troupe shows the Egyptian government’s concern about the influence of SNS in shaping public opinion, especially of young people. Yet young Egyptians make extensive use of SNS to lash out at the regime and express their frustration about the lack of rights and curtailed freedom of expression. The regime, which has not yet managed to develop suitable tools for dealing with online incitement or protest, uses traditional means for silencing discourse on SNS, including arrests. In any event, it is clear that both the regime and the Egyptian people consider SNS to be very important.

Saudi Vision 2030: One vision, many views

Dr. Nahum Shiloh

On April 25, 2016, the heir to the Saudi Crown, Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz, announced an ambitious project entitled, "Saudi Vision 2030" (*Ra'it Al-Saudi Arabia 2030*), which includes measures to change the socio-economic structure of the kingdom. Its implementation may result in abolishing the extensive subsidy policy that began after Prince Faisal bin Abd al-Aziz ascended the throne in 1964. Under this policy, the Saudi government used the massive oil royalties flowing to the kingdom as a means of providing for all of the population's needs with regards to education, health, welfare and religious services. Publication of this initiative was followed by extensive dialogue on social networking sites (SNS) in Saudi Arabia.[14] Unlike the establishment media, which made an effort to present public opinion in the kingdom as being unanimous in its support, diverse opinions emerged from the discourse on SNS. The regime, which is aware of the power of SNS in shaping national discourse, is trying to moderate criticism of the project by creating transparency and making information on the subject accessible to the public, in order to enlist their support.

The Saudi Vision 2030 initiative is part of a plan that has already been the subject of discussion between the Saudi authorities and society. However, it has now been developed into a comprehensive initiative, in light of falling oil prices and emerging economic and geo-strategic challenges facing Saudi Arabia and the region. The program deals extensively with the relationship between state and society in the kingdom, and includes measures for freeing Saudi Arabia from its oil dependence by developing alternative economic activities. These include tourism and industry, as well as extensive privatization, increasing competitiveness and providing equal opportunities. For example, one of the aims stated plan is to significantly expand the proportion of women in the Saudi labor force.[15] As a result of these measures, the involvement of civil society in decision-making processes in the kingdom is expected to grow, while the monopoly enjoyed by the royal family and the elite surrounding it becomes reduced. If so, it would be a significant revolution for Saudi society.

Saudi SNS convey the public's ambivalent positions with regards to the enterprise. Along with much praise for the project and its patron, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, there are more than a few comments, mostly by young people, expressing concern and doubts about several of its components. These include concern that implementing the plan will transform Saudi Arabia into a country with a market economy that guarantees economic security only for those who are successful investors. For example, one young user tweeted: "The only change will be that Saudi Arabia becomes a country devoid of justice and responsibility, a country where there is no justice in the distribution of resources."[16] Some users argued that the project is not likely to improve status of women in the kingdom. A young Saudi student

tweeted: “A state unable to decide that women may drive [now] publishes an economic vision. If it failed to do something simple, how will it be able to deal with the economy?”[17]

Of particular interest is the reaction of Saudi clerics. Saudi Vision 2030 has inherent potential to substantially erode their position in favor of economic elites, and lead to initiatives that are contrary to the position of religious leaders, such as increasing women’s share in the national GDP. However, the religious establishment, including some members of the Supreme Council of Clerics and even semi-establishment religious scholars like Sheikh Salman al-Auda (who once opposed the regime) and Sheikh Aaidh al-Qarni (who is known for preaching repentance to al-Qaeda operatives in the kingdom), expressed enthusiastic support for the program.[18] There are, however, exceptions. Sheikh Mohammed al-‘Arifi, who is now considered the top religious authority in Saudi Arabia in particular and in the Sunni world more generally, placed his faith in Allah, rather than in Prince Mohammed bin Salman to direct the project in the right way, which might indicate a modicum of criticism: “Allah, make Saudi Vision 2030 into a vision that brings honor and respect to the kingdom and is a source of blessing to our people everywhere. Protect us, unify us and be our support.”[19] Needless to say, considering the delicate relationship between establishment and semi-establishment religious leaders and the authorities, overt criticism is out of the question because the clerics are still dependent, to some extent, on the regime.

Saudi Vision 2030,
from the initiative’s Twitter account

On the other side, the Saudi authorities are currently making substantial use of SNS to mobilize public support for the plan. As part of an establishment-led media campaign, accounts named “Saudi Vision 2030” were opened on all leading SNS, especially Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.[20] They are used to present the message that the project is expected to contribute to the well-being and empowerment of Saudi society. Most posts include visual elements – charts, graphs and tables – designed to make the message more accessible to the public. There are also many posts in English, indicating the authorities’ desire to appeal to Western ears, and present the Saudi vision of economic and military independence for the kingdom.

It is interesting to note that the extensive use of SNS by the royal family allows us, *inter alia*, to detect subtleties in the relationships between family members, including the tension prevailing within the upper echelons of the Saudi leadership. The royal family generally expresses broad support for Saudi Vision 2030 and other initiatives by Prince Mohammed bin Salman. But careful observation of tweets posted by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef – the heir apparent who may someday be asked to step aside in favor of the next in

line, namely Prince Mohammed bin Salman – reveals tension between him and the latter. For example, immediately after the launch of the project, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef tweeted statements that presented Prince Mohammed bin Salman as his assistant and subordinate: “I bless the homeland and the source of my help, my brother and my right hand, Muhammad bin Salman on this ambitious vision. May Allah protect our king and our country.”

The public discourse on SNS regarding Saudi Vision 2030 opens a window for understanding the mood within Saudi society. Unlike traditional media, SNS show that while Saudi Vision 2030 was well-received by some of the public and leadership, other parts of the public actually perceive it as a source for concern. Regardless of the decision made regarding the project, SNS will provide an opportunity to gain insight into the mood within the kingdom and the sources of power active there, in contrast to previous eras, in which the regime controlled the media completely. This is, therefore, also an expression of progress made by the Saudi regime that recognizes the power of discourse on SNS and is working to recruit public support in that arena.

"I Drive between the Lines:"
SNS Contribute to Improving Driving Culture in Iran

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In recent months, a campaign to change the country's driving culture has been conducted on Iranian social networking sites (SNS). It has aroused considerable interest and is well-received by the public. The campaign is designed to raise awareness among motorists of the dangers of crossing the dividing lines on roads, an offense which is responsible for roughly ten percent of traffic accidents in Iran. The deputy commander of Iran's traffic police recently said that on some officially three-lane highways, traffic actually travels as if there were five lanes, disrupting other drivers and increasing the risk of traffic accidents. Drivers who ignore safety laws are some of the major causes of road accidents in Iran, which has one of the highest accident rates in the world.[21] This campaign is further evidence of the Iranian public's growing use of SNS to promote various issues of civil concern. When the civil concerns are consistent with the objectives of the Iranian establishment, as in the current case, the establishment lends its support, despite its principled reservations about SNS.

Advertisement on Telegram for the "I Drive between the Lines" campaign

The "I drive between the lines" campaign began as an initiative led by several young students from Tehran in February 2016. As part of the campaign, they established accounts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram,[22] where they circulated photos and videos documenting cars crossing the white dividing lines on the main roads and uploading public service announcements, illustrations and cartoons intended to increase awareness of driving in accordance with the law. The campaign emphasizes the benefits of being careful to comply with the dividing lines, including reducing traffic accidents, relieving road congestion, improving efficiency and reducing traffic jams on the highways.

Siavash Kashmiri, a leader of the campaign, recently told the Iranian news agency ISNA that the original idea for the campaign was to print stickers and distribute them to drivers. In the end, under the influence of other students who joined the initiative, it was decided that SNS would be the best platform for disseminating the message. Yet shortly after its launch, the campaign moved from the virtual arena to the street, and stickers reading "I drive between the lines" were seen on the roads. Kashmiri said that the campaign began without government aid or external funding, and drivers who were moved by the online campaign and heeded the initiators' call, printed stickers bearing the campaign's slogan

independently. He further said that they had also received inquiries from Iranian celebrities who expressed readiness to promote the campaign without any compensation.[23]

The public response was so impressive that Tehran's Traffic Police announced in late April that it would join the project. The district traffic police chief announced that stickers bearing the campaign slogan would also be affixed to police cars, and praised the campaign, saying that using the public's ability to influence and instruct other citizens is the best means for improving driving habits. He pointed to the importance of SNS in promoting such initiatives, and said that the regime is also using SNS to raise awareness of the issue of road safety.[24]

The campaign received wide coverage in traditional media as well. An article published on the site "Tabnak" related to the success of the campaign in increasing drivers' awareness of traffic laws and improving their driving habits. The story highlights the fact that the campaign has been more effective than enforcement measures taken by the police. The article claims that while police imposed heavy fines on speeders, they have not been able to persuade them to change their poor driving habits; in contrast, this campaign has indeed achieved good results.[25]

As SNS have expanded in Iran in recent years, social media, with its accessibility and ability to spread a message rapidly, has become a major arena for acting on civil issues, as well as engaging in social and political struggles. The campaign to change driving culture in Iran is a good example, and joins a list of other online civil struggles, including the opposition to Iranian automakers, raising awareness of environmental issues and the struggle for animal rights.[26] This campaign reflects a growing civic consciousness and willingness on the part of Iranian citizens to join civil society campaign struggles in cyberspace, which often overflow into the streets, where they sometimes become active public protests.

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[25] "Hashtag succeeds where the police could not," *Tabnak*, April 21, 2016.

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