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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the April issue of **Beehive**. This issue examines the public discourse surrounding the transfer of Tiran and Sanafir Islands from Egyptian to Saudi Arabian sovereignty, and how this agreement is being used to taunt and destabilize the Egyptian regime. Also discussed is the importance of national and religious affiliations for the Turkish public's support of the Azeri people, and its significance for Turkish foreign policy. Finally, we analyze how former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his supporters are making extensive use of SNS, which have become an alternative platform for candidates running in Iranian elections.

Enjoy!

The Tiran and Sanafir Islands at the Heart of an Online Protest

Dr. Michael Barak

In April 2016, the Egyptian government announced the signing of an agreement which transferred control of Tiran and Sanafir Islands from Egyptian to Saudi Arabian sovereignty. Since then, there has been heated debate around the issue on Egyptian social networking sites (SNS). On one side, the discourse is characterized by support for Egyptian President 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi and his foreign policy, with an emphasis on the importance of improving the relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. On the other, it is characterized by serious opposition to the prospect of "forfeiting" Egyptian territory and a deep disgust with the al-Sisi regime and its alleged oppression of citizens. This discourse has already resulted in two large demonstrations involving thousands of protesters in Cairo and Alexandra, and opponents of the regime there calling for the continuation of the revolution of January 25.

The Tiran and Sanafir Islands, located in the Gulf of Aqaba, were under Saudi jurisdiction until 1950. At that time, they were transferred to Egyptian sovereignty for fear that Israel would take control of them. Since al-Sisi came to power, the relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia has been strengthened, against the backdrop of the increasing threat that the two countries face from both Iran and Islamic terrorist groups. In the context of these improved relations, and as an acknowledgment of the extensive economic aid that Saudi Arabia has granted Egypt, the Egyptian government recently accepted the Saudis' request that the two islands be returned.

Extensive public discourse around the issue developed on SNS in Egypt. Some described the move as high treason against the Egyptian people and a reflection of Egyptian sycophancy toward Saudi Arabia.[1] For example, one Egyptian user wrote, "The people feel betrayed. Egyptian land was sold cheaply."[2] Others claimed that al-Sisi sold the islands for personal financial benefits from the Saudi regime. Activists in the April 6 Movement, a youth movement opposed to the regime, called on the army to not remain silent in the face of lost territory and coined the slogan, "al-Sisi does not represent me in the sale [of the islands]."[3] Among the angry posts was a song, entitled, "Awad sold his land." "Awad" is a character taken from an old Egyptian song, which expresses the negative, repulsive image of someone who sells his land.[4]

Banner circulated on SNS with the text "Awad sold his land."

There was also extensive discussion regarding the legal ownership of the islands. Many Egyptian users claim that the islands belonged to Egypt even before Saudi Arabia was

established. According to their version, there is historical documentation proving that the Ottoman Empire transferred the two islands to Egypt in 1906, and that historically the countries of the world related to them as Egyptian.[5] The Ghad al-Thawra party, a strident opponent of the regime, posted a note on its Facebook page, which stated that "the two islands, and indeed all the territory of the Arabian Peninsula up to the border of Yemen should actually be under complete Egyptian sovereignty… as well as Sudan and all of Palestine including the Gaza Strip, Jordan and part of the al-Shaman lands that were once under Egyptian sovereignty!!!"[6] MP Haitham Elhariri summarized the mood by noting that only public pressure would be effective in bringing about a change in the decision.[7]

Supporters of al-Sisi, for their part, claimed that transfer of the islands was executed legally, and was important for national security because of the need to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia.[8] Some of them accused Ayman Nour, founder of Ghad Al-Thawra, of forging documents that show El-Sisi receiving monetary bribes in return for transferring the islands.[9] One user noted that even Israel keeps its agreements with Lebanon, Cyprus and Gaza regarding the gas fields that were discovered in the Mediterranean, and therefore agreements between Arab states should be considered even more legitimate.[10] Saudi users also joined the conversation and defended the agreement, presenting historical proof of Saudi Arabia's prior claim to the islands.[11]

In some cases, the discourse on SNS developed into a confrontation between Saudi users and Egyptian users, regarding the relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. For example, one Saudi user noted that strengthening the relationship between the countries was primarily important for Egypt, which needs the Saudis' financial assistance to maintain fiscal stability. In response, an Egyptian user wrote that it would be better if Saudi Arabia would stop supporting tyrannical regimes, and added that its support for Egypt is based purely on Saudi Arabia's interests, and its need to reinforce its geopolitical status in the region, since "the fall of Egypt would lead to the fall of Saudi Arabia."[12] Users identified with the Muslim Brotherhood, the April 6 Movement, and leftist movements such as "Socialism and Revolution," used the issue of the islands to initiate a demonstration against the government and called on their supporters to take to the streets in protest. For this purpose they launched a hashtag "Friday: Land is honor,"[13] that was used in more than 100,000 tweets. In response to this organizing effort, the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior published a warning on Facebook that the Muslim Brotherhood intended to take advantage of the demonstration to create chaos and confrontation between citizens and security forces, exposing, *inter alia*, the seriousness with which Egypt takes SNS, since the fall of Mubarak.[14] Supporters of al-Sisi also disparaged the planned demonstration and expressed their support for the president with the hashtag, "We all are with al-Sisi."[15] Another user wrote that the people stand by the president, "against the plot of those calling for a poisonous demonstration; and against the traitors who work against Egypt…"[16] Saudi users also

expressed their disapproval and accused the Muslim Brotherhood of attempting to destabilize Egyptian security.

The demonstrations in streets of Cairo and Alexandria on April 25 were accompanied by the intensification of SNS discourse against the regime of al-Sisi, which included reports and videos uploaded from the scene.[17] The arrest of many demonstrators further fanned the flames; many took advantage of the opportunity to protest against other issues, including the lack of personal freedoms in Egypt. For example, one user tweeted that, "handing over the islands was the final straw that broke the camel's back. It is an expression of a much larger problem prevailing in Egypt."[18] Many demonstrators were filled with a feeling of euphoria and described the protest as continuation of the 'Arab Spring' in Egypt. One said that "This is not another revolution but rather the same revolution of January 25" which, in his words, has the potential to continue until corruption is eliminated and freedom and justice are established for Egyptians. Monael Tahawy, a well-known Egyptian activist, expressed great satisfaction with the demonstration: "I am happy to see that the people of Egypt have broken through the barrier of fear that al-Sisi imposed on the country." [19]

The Internet discourse shows the dissatisfaction of large portions of the Egyptian population with the regime, and what may be the growing disintegration of its power base in light of the territorial price Egypt was forced to pay to Saudi Arabia. Saudi support of Egypt is considered problematic, and opponents of the Egyptian regime do not consider it support for their country but rather support for the al-Sisi regime that perpetuates the suppression of individual liberties.

War in the Caucasus: An Example of Pan-Nationalist/Religious Dialogue on Turkish SNS
Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

For several months, social networking sites (SNS) in Turkey became roiled following the terrorist attacks in Ankara and Istanbul, and the heavy losses that the Turkish army has suffered in battles being waged in the southeastern part of the country against militant groups. More recently, however, the armed conflict between Azerbaijan and the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (hereinafter, "NKR") has dominated public discourse. In general, Turkish users take the side of Azerbaijan, out of a deep national and religious identification with the Azeri people. This position is also commonly supported by Turkish politicians, who see the debate as an opportunity to gain public support. Among the background issues are the long-standing conflict between Turkey and Armenia over the Armenian Genocide, and the Turks' fear of a prospective massive Russian military presence in Armenia on its eastern border.

The Nagorno-Karabakh region, located in the Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is home to two main ethnic-religious groups: an Azeri-Muslim population and an Armenian-Christian population. In 1805, the region was conquered by the Russian Empire. After the Communist Revolution in 1917, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan was established in 1920. Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, which has an Armenian majority, then became an autonomous region under Azeri sovereignty.[20] With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh declared independence and the region became known as

Poster circulated on Twitter with the hashtag #TürkiyeSeninleAzerbaycan (#Turkey is with you Azerbaijan)

the "Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh Republic." This national entity never received international recognition, and is legally considered part of the Republic of Azerbaijan. On the surface, NKR functions as a separate entity independent of Armenia. Despite their close relationship, this is due to the fact that Armenia's desires to avoid the appearance of having annexed the region. Since the early days of NKR, it has been the focal point for ethnic disputes between the Azeri and Armenian populations. In 1994, the sides reached agreement through Russian mediation on a cease-fire which would maintain the *status quo* established when the Soviet Union was dissolved, and which would leave the territory in Armenian hands.[21] Occasional exchanges of fire continued in the region until November 2014 when there was a significant deterioration in the relationship between the Azeris and the Armenians following the shoot-down of an

Armenian helicopter by the Azeris.[22] The tension peaked with a military confrontation between the two sides in early April 2015.

As has been demonstrated repeatedly, Turkish SNS are generally interested in events in the Muslim world, particularly those concerning peoples that are considered part of the Turkic family of nations. The Turkish public opinion is influenced, in most cases, by the national and religious identity of the parties. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Turkish public supports Azerbaijan in the present conflict. The ethos that considers Turkey and Azerbaijan two countries belonging to one ethnic nationality is firmly anchored in the Turkish consciousness and plays an important role in the Turks' identification with the Azeris. This stance is based, *inter alia*, on the linguistic and cultural traits shared by the two peoples, which makes the relationship between the two countries organic. The position taken by the Turks is also influenced by the intractable tension between Turkey and Armenia surrounding their different interpretations of the events of 1915. While the Armenians consider those events a genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire against the Armenian people, the Turks deny this claim, contending instead that the Turkish and Armenian peoples were both victims of the First World War.

As part of the discourse on Turkish SNS, users created hashtags including "#Turkey is with you Azerbaijan" and "#End the occupation."[23] Similarly, users shared a petition attempting to place the conflict on the agenda of the White House in Washington, in order to create diplomatic pressure on NKR and the Armenians who support it indirectly.[24] Barbs of criticism were also aimed at Turks who previously referred to themselves as "Armenians" as an act of identification after the 2007 assassination of Hrant Dink, who had been a senior Turkish journalist of Armenian descent.[25] A cartoon distributed on the internet called on them to help the Armenians fight the Azeris (see picture).[26]

Cartoon circulated on Twitter, showing a soldier informing the President of Armenia on the progress of the Azeris and the need for immediate reinforcements. In response, the President calls for drafting to the front "those Turks who called themselves Armenians."

The military conflict in the Caucasus is depicted on Turkish SNS as having the potential to expand into a comprehensive military campaign that might even be felt in Turkey. According to the prevailing opinion on SNS, the conflict is the result of direct pressure that Russia – considered the traditional patron of the Armenians – has brought to bear on NKR Armenians, encouraging them to attack the Azeris. Proponents of this interpretation claim that the Russians are motivated by a desire to force the Armenians, who support NKR economically and militarily, to demand additional aid from Russia, including personnel. They believe that

Turkey could therefore eventually find itself facing an expanded Russian presence on Armenian territory just over its eastern border. If that comes to pass, Turkey would be completely surrounded by Russian forces, which are currently located on its southern border in Syria, in the Black Sea to the north, and on the west in the Aegean Sea, where the Russian Navy opened fire on Turkish fishermen last December.[27] This claim expresses the exacerbated suspicion and tension towards Russia felt by Turks since the Russian aircraft was downed following a violation of Turkish airspace on November 24, 2015.

Turkish politicians, led by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and the spokesperson for the Justice and Development (AKP) Party Ömer Çelik, did not remain indifferent to the public discourse. They made official statements of Turkey's support for "the Beloved Azerbaijan (*Can Azerbaycan*).[28] In disputes of this type, it is evident that these politicians wish to position Turkey as a patron of Muslims, particularly Turkic peoples, and as an emerging power in the Islamic world, in order to improve the government's image in the eyes of the Turkish public. This political tactic has proven effective, and the Turkish public historically has expressed greater satisfaction with the government's performance following events of this type.[29]

The dispute between Azerbaijan and NRK demonstrates that the Turkish public chooses to stand by peoples that it feels an affinity for, and that the pan-Turkish national identity and the pan-Islamic religious identity respectively both play significant roles. For its part, the Turkish government is well aware of this and uses it for its political benefit. Previous experience shows that public support of the government often increases following any sharp criticism of Israel, China, Russia or Armenia. This is largely due to the fact that such positions are considered to be a demonstration of Turkey's power in face of influential countries, and is a conspicuous component of a Turkish foreign policy which has been largely designed to serve domestic policy.

Ahmadinejad's Online Campaign: Paving the Way for a Political Comeback?

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In early April 2016, a journalist asked former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about the possibility that he would run in the next presidential elections scheduled for the summer of 2017. Ahmadinejad avoided an explicit answer, replying only that, "God willing we all see each other in 96 [the Iranian calendar year 1396 corresponds to 2017]."[30] On another occasion, the former president said that the Guardian Council would have no reason to reject his candidacy were he to run. At a meeting with some of his supporters, Ahmadinejad recently said that not only reformists and supporters of the government, but also some conservatives fear the possibility that would run in the next election. Despite the vague statements, Ahmadinejad appears to have started an extensive campaign towards a possible return to political life, using social networking sites (SNS) as his main distribution platform.
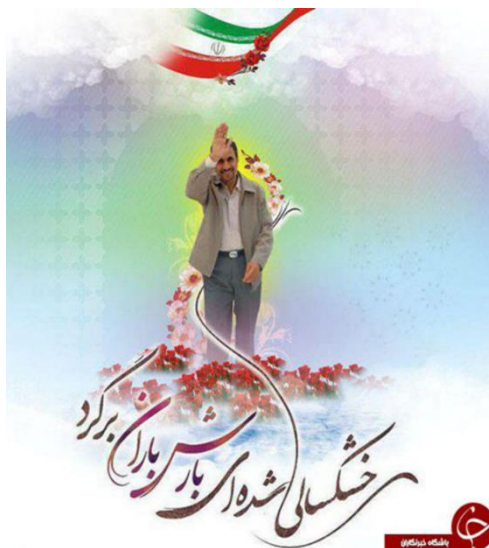
Poster supporting Ahmadinejad published on Telegram, early April 2016

In 2013, Ahmadinejad completed two four-year terms of office. In accordance with the Constitution of Iran he is allowed to run again for the presidency elections in 2017. If he does, it can be expected that he would be running against President Rouhani who will, most likely, seek a second term. Ahmadinejad surprised many in 2005 when he won a landslide victory over former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. However, he ended his second term politically isolated and bruised after two years of an unprecedented power struggle with the top leadership. The confrontation between Khamenei loyalists and supporters of Ahmadinejad revolves not only around political power, but also a sharp ideological struggle over the identity of the Islamic Republic. The messianic ideas of the president and his associates, who challenged the status of the clergy and highlighted the national-cultural component of Iranian identity over Islam, were considered to be a major threat by the conservative establishment, led by Ayatollah Khamenei.[31] As a result, the establishment directed most of the resources it had previously aimed at the reformist camp, against the president and his supporters.

In recent weeks, Iranian media has dealt extensively Ahmadinejad's return to political life. The website *Nameh News* reported that he had already started preparations for the elections and quoted a former senior advisor, Abdul-Reza Davari, who said Ahmadinejad is the only one who can defeat incumbent President Hassan Rouhani in

the upcoming elections.[32] Prof. Sadeq Zibakalam, a senior political analyst at Tehran University, also estimated that Ahmadinejad is waiting for an opportunity to return to politics. In an interview with the website *Fararu*, Zibakalam said that if President Rouhani cannot show improvement in the economic situation in the coming year, Ahmadinejad may use this to run for re-election.[33] Referring to the possibility that the Guardian Council might prevent Ahmadinejad from standing for election, Zibakalam said that if the Council can be convinced that Ahmadinejad can beat the incumbent, it will likely approve his candidacy in order to save the conservatives from defeat. [34]

For his part, Ahmadinejad has increased his public appearances and trips around the country in recent months. During the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) in March, he took a high-profile tour of battle sites in the Iran-Iraq War in the southwest of the country, where he met with citizens and criticized President Rouhani's policies.[35] At the same time, extensive propaganda activity by the former president and his supporters has been evident online in recent months. Ahmadinejad launched an impressive and very active official website that provides regular updates on his activities and statements, publishes photographs of him, and provides statistics designed to highlight his achievements as president, especially in the economic field. It is also used as a means to recruit and contact supporters.[36] In addition to the site, the former president and his supporters manage accounts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.[37]

However, most of the propaganda campaign of Ahmadinejad and his supporters is conducted through Telegram, an instant text messaging application with more than 20 million users in Iran. Apart from Ahmadinejad's official Telegram channel, which had more than 8,200 users[38] as of mid-April, the main Telegram channel used by his supporters "Government of Spring" (*dolat-e bahar*) has 12,000 members[39] and there are several dozen additional Telegram channels and groups of Ahmadinejad's supporters. Most channels and groups have several hundred members and operate through a geographical and national cross-section in different regions of Iran. The activity on Telegram includes expressions of support for Ahmadinejad, and the distribution of revolutionary, ideological and religious-Islamic content. Included in the latter are messages memorializing Revolutionary Guards killed in Syria, condemnations of President Rouhani, particularly regarding the nuclear agreement and economic issues, incitement against the opposition leaders, and Shi'ite messianic ideas, among other topics.

The choice of SNS as a tool for managing major propaganda campaign on behalf of the former president is not accidental. Fierce confrontation erupted between Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader and the religious establishment, which leaves him with almost no significant backing from official parties or organizations working in the political arena, including in the conservative camp. Most official media is also antagonistic towards him. Under these circumstances, SNS have become a main arena

where the former president can directly mobilize public support. Ahmadinejad's online activity reflects a growing trend on SNS in recent years. The online arena has become a central component of election campaigns in Iran, particularly for candidates who need to compensate for limited or hostile coverage in the traditional media.[40]

It is too early to assess whether Ahmadinejad will ultimately decide to enter Iran's next presidential elections, and if his candidacy will be approved by the Guardian Council. His success in the elections, if approved, depends on his ability to mobilize public support, including through SNS. We can therefore assume that his supporters' use of SNS will expand over the next year in an effort to lay the groundwork for a proper public relations campaign if Ahmadinejad does decides to run again. The increasing use of SNS by candidates and their supporters in Iranian elections indicates the networks' role as a platform for disseminating alternative media campaigns by those who cannot afford to do so through traditional media.

[1] ‏#عواد_باع_ارضك; ‏#صنافير_مصرية ; ‏#الحجاز_مصرية ;‏#تيران_مصرية

[2] https://twitter.com/tarek00707/status/718875960284745728, viewed on April 9, 2016.

[3] https://www.facebook.com/6aprilshabab/?fref=photo

[4] https://facebook.com/Twsela/videos/1112672622113917, viewed on April 12, 2016.

[5] https://www.facebook.com/masralarabiaofficial/videos/470126569847103/?comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22O%22%7D, viewed on April 10, 2016.

[6] https://www.facebook.com/GhadAlthawra/photos/a.366789780081411.86440.366762866750769/1019140098179706, viewed on April 11, 2016

[7] https://www.facebook.com/haitham.elhariri

[8] Ibid.

[9]http://www.elfagr.org/2101867 ; https://www.facebook.com/haitham.elhariri/posts/10153294582571157?comment_id=101532946573 61157&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R0%22%7D, viewed on April 14, 2016.

[10] https://www.facebook.com/haitham.elhariri/posts/10153294582571157?comment_id=101532946573 61157&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R0%22%7D, viewed on April 13, 2016.

[11] ‏#مصر_ترحب_بالملك_سلمان

[12] https://twitter.com/AmiraTamerH/status/721051523564838912, viewed on April 16, 2016.

[13] ‏#جمعة_الأرض

[14] https://www.facebook.com/MoiEgy/photos/a.181676241876047.36036.181662475210757/1072537809456548/?type=1&theater, viewed on April 14, 2016.

[15] ‏#كلنا_يد_واحده_مع_السيسي

[16] https://twitter.com/MasterLocalZone/status/720870334333722624

[17] See for example the videos at https://twitter.com/i/moments/720992120744603650

[18] ‏#عواد_باع_ارضك

[19] https://twitter.com/monaeltahawy/status/721023729392820225, viewed on April 15, 2016.

[20] Tim Potier, *Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia* (The Hague, Kluwer Law International, 2001), 2

[21] Ibid. pp. 7-83

[22] Gallia Lindenstraus, "Nagorno-Karabakh:The Frozen Conflict Awakens," *Strategic Assessment* 18, no. 1(April 2015):97. Available at http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan18_1ENG%20(5)_Lindenstrauss.pdf

[23] #TürkiyeSeninleAzerbaycan #işgaledurde #AzerbaycanaDestekOl #Azerbaijani #azerbaycan # AklımdanGeçen #KarabakhNow #KarabakhPeace #qarabağ #azerbaijan #baku

[24] "Establish justice and prevent a great catastrophe,"We the People, available at https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/establish-justice-and-prevent-great-catastrophe. Last viewed on April 20, 2016.

[25]"Hepimiz Ermeniyiz pankartı," InternetHaber, January 23, 2007. Available at http://www.internethaber.com/**hepimiz**-ermeniyiz-pankarti-64109h.htm

[26] https://twitter.com/Dokunan/status/717038066138001408. Last viewed on April 20, 2016.

[27] "Rus savaş gemisi Ege'de Türk balıkçı teknesine ateş açtı", *BBC Türkçe*, December 14, 2015. Available at http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/12/151213_rus_gemisi_ege

[28] https://twitter.com/Akparti/status/717279736544755712, viewed on April 20, 2016.

[29] Emre Erdoğan, Dış Politikada Siyasallaşma: Türk Kamuoyunun "Davos Krizi" ve Etkileri Hakkındaki.

[30] "Ahmadinejad: 'We all see each other in 96,' *Fararu*, April 3, 2016.

[31]

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[32]" Ahmadinejad's Mobilization in Spring 95 [2016] for Runnign against Rohani in Spring 96 [2017]," *Nameh News*, April 4, 2016.

[33] "Possibility that Ahmadinejad will Return and Chances the Candidacy will be Approved," *Fararu*, April 5, 2016.

[34] "Ahmadinejad: The Guardian Council has no reason to reject my candidacy," *Asr-e Iran*, April 6, 2016.

[35] "God willing we all see each other in 96," *Shargh*, April 4, 2016.

[36] http://www.ahmadinejad.ir/.

[37] https://twitter.com/ahmadinejad__ir.

[38] https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@dr_ahmadinejad

[39] https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@dolatebaharchannel.

[40] Raz Zimmt, "Virtual Election Campaigns: SNS in the Iranian Electoral Process," *Beehive*, vol. 4, no. 3, March 31, 2016. Available at http://dayan.org/content/beehive-virtual-election-campaigns-sns-iranian-electoral-process.