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# BeeHive

Middle East Social Media

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## From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the March issue of *Beehive*. This issue examines the contribution of SNS to the election campaigns for the Iranian parliament and the Assembly of Experts; presents the storm surrounding the Syrian comedian Duraid Lahham, who once was critical of the Syrian regime but is now an enthusiastic supporter; and evaluates the role that SNS play in shaping public awareness of humanitarian crises, using coverage of the siege of Syrian city of Madaya as an example.

Enjoy!

## Virtual Election Campaigns: SNS in the Iranian Electoral Process

Dr. Raz Zimmt

On February 26, Iran held elections for their parliament (Majlis) and the Assembly of Experts,<sup>1</sup> after an election campaign in which social networking sites (SNS) played a conspicuous role. SNS were the arena where the main political forces, and candidates on their behalf, conducted their campaigns. The use of SNS was already evident in the presidential elections held in the summer of 2013, mostly on Facebook and blogs, but the extent of the phenomenon in the most recent election campaign was unprecedented. Reformists and the more moderate supporters of the government made the most use of SNS but they were also joined by conservatives, who had previously adopted an antagonistic attitude towards SNS.

A survey published on the conservative Iranian website Tabnak showed that 61% of Iranian citizens considered cellular and Internet SNS their most important source of information regarding the elections, while approximately 20% obtained most of their information from the official, authorized media; some 13% drew it from their participation in campaign events, and only 5% from campaign advertising in the street.<sup>2</sup> The use of the Telegram instant messaging app was particularly conspicuous. Telegram is considered the most secure app for cellular phones and is very common in Iran with more than 20 million users.<sup>3</sup> After the elections, the chief of the Iranian Cyber Police reported that 79% of all election activity on SNS was on Telegram.<sup>4</sup> The activity on Telegram included dozens of channels and special groups that were used to transmit ongoing updates regarding the elections, publish lists of candidates, present the candidates in various districts, and distribute surveys. The widespread use of Telegram for election propaganda led to a wave of speculations about the possibility that the authorities would block the network shortly prior to the elections.<sup>5</sup> The speculation did not eventually come to pass, but it is not clear whether that was because of the regime's policy considerations, or technical constraints that prevented them from blocking it.

The transformation of SNS into a central player in the elections sparked the interest of traditional media. An article published by the IRNA news agency claimed that SNS were more influential in the elections than newspapers and television. Media researcher Zahra Joadya noted that unlike the presidential election, in which there are only a few candidates, there were thousands of candidates running for the Majlis. Thus SNS became the most efficient and influential channel for conducting election campaigns, because the traditional media has difficulty providing a platform for so many candidates. The role of official newspapers and media outlets in shaping public opinion has diminished, in her opinion, relative to the past, primarily among younger people who are more active on SNS.<sup>6</sup>

The activity of reformists and moderates on SNS was particularly conspicuous. The conservatives' control of most traditional media outlets in Iran has, in recent years, turned

SNS into the main arena where the reformists are active. In the previous elections to the Majlis (2012) reformists called for boycotting the election. However this time they took a different approach, and used SNS to call on citizens to turn out en masse and vote. They also used SNS to raise controversial political demands, such as the release of political prisoners including the reformist opposition leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who have been held under house arrest since February 2011. The reformists took advantage of those channels of communications that are not under government supervision in order to recruit former president Mohammad Khatami. Khatami's pictures are not allowed to be published by Iranian media outlets due to his involvement in protests that erupted after the presidential elections in the summer of 2009, which are still widely supported by the public.<sup>7</sup>

The most conspicuous virtual campaign launched by reformist activists on SNS presented politicians, cultural celebrities, well-known athletes and ordinary citizens showing a bandaged finger and declaring their intention to vote. This campaign was designed to transmit the message that despite the severe limitations the authorities placed on reformists' running for office, voting remains an essential key for creating change.<sup>8</sup> The campaign had a tangible impact and influenced many citizens to vote for moderate candidates. There is no doubt that it made a significant contribution to the moderates' impressive achievements in the elections, particularly in Tehran, where moderates won all 30 seats in the Majlis that are allocated to the Tehran district.



**Campaign poster circulated on Telegram to encourage people to vote**

Another campaign showed artists and cultural figures commenting on the cultural persecution and economic distress they experienced under the regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Majlis dominated by right-wing conservatives, and calling on citizens to vote for candidates who support President Hassan Rouhani.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the dominance of moderates on SNS, the conservative opponents of the government were not absent, even though the attitude of right-wing conservatives in Iran is traditionally characterized by a more skeptical attitude towards SNS. The conservative establishment considers the Internet and SNS to be tools in the service of a “cultural offensive” that enemies of the revolution have mounted against it, and as channels that serve Western intelligence agencies. However, the high penetration of SNS in the population, particularly among young people, has led to increased use of networks by conservative forces that want to disseminate the values of Islam and the revolution. The last

election campaign provided additional evidence for the increasing use of SNS for the political and propaganda needs of conservative parties.

The most conspicuous conservative campaign was designed to present the moderate candidates as collaborators with the West, particularly Great Britain, which is still perceived as the traditional archenemy of Iran, one that strives to intervene and influence Iranian politics and society, particularly through the BBC broadcasts in Persian. This perspective was also presented by the Supreme

Leader Ali Khamenei in a speech on 17 February in which he claimed that the BBC had issued instructions to Iranian citizens telling them how to vote.<sup>10</sup> Shortly thereafter, radical right-wing supporters of the regime launched a campaign on SNS calling on citizens to fight against British attempts to influence the election campaign and avoid voting for “candidates supported by the BBC.”<sup>11</sup>

The use of SNS continued on the election days themselves, when an attempt was made to use them for manipulative purposes and spread rumors. The reformists, for example, claimed that forces from the conservative right-wing were spreading false reports about the authorities’ intention to close schools on the day after elections. These reports were intended, they claim, to encourage citizens to travel outside of their election district, which would keep them from voting. Presumably that would serve conservative interests, because the moderates have generally been supported by a broader public.<sup>12</sup> Conservatives, for their part, accused the reformists of attempting to diminish their public status, for example by spreading pictures manipulated in Photoshop that supposedly showed conservative candidates, who the conservatives claimed were not on their lists - in provocative poses.<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, the election campaigns for the Majlis and the Assembly of Experts brought the use of SNS, especially Telegram, to new heights, in both the reformist-moderate and the conservative camps. There is no doubt that this development also affected the election results, especially in the Tehran district where moderates won a landslide victory. Making SNS the main campaign arena gave the Iranian public access to information, which was previously limited by the government’s control of most of the media. However, it also provided the regime with additional means for the mass distribution of its messages on its behalf, and ways to oversee the flow of information.



Anti-British campaign poster on Telegram

## Ghawwar Tosha: How the Spokesperson for Syrian Arab Nationalism Became a Servant in a Persian Temple

Moran Levanoni

Social networking sites (SNS), television networks and news agencies have been discussing comedian Duraid Lahham obsessively in recent weeks. Lahham, a Syrian author, comedian and television star was known for the biting jabs he directed at Arab leaders and the Ba'athist government of Syria. Yet, after the outbreak of civil war in Syria, he declared his love for Bashar Al-Assad and his fealty to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. If this weren't true, it might have been the comic plot of his next movie.

Lahham was born in 1934 in the Shi'ite al-Amin neighborhood in Damascus, to a lower-class family from the Ismā'īlyyah sect which split from Shi'ism in the eighth century and is closer, therefore, to the Alawite sect to which Assad belongs. He achieved most of his fame from the role he played in the 13-episode television series "*Sah al-Naum*" ("Pleasant Sleep") which was a resounding success in Syria during the 1970s and was widely-viewed throughout the Arab world. The series, which dealt with everyday life in an imaginary neighborhood in Damascus called "*Kal min ido alu*" ("Anyone who can afford it"), was written by a friend of Lahham, Nihad Quali, and both played leading roles in the show. The show's characters, especially Ghawwar Tosha and Hosni Burazan, played by Lahham and Quali, became cultural icons in the Arab world, thanks to the witty barbs they aimed at Arab leaders and the Syrian Ba'athist regime. Lahham achieve artistic maturity in 1987 in "*The Border*", a bittersweet movie dealing with Arab nationalism, bureaucratic stupidity and love without borders, which established Lahham as a comic actor and creator of the first order. The film was awarded a Golden Bear prize at the Berlin Film Festival.



**Duraid Lahham as Ghawwar Tosha in the satire *Sah al-Naum***

Throughout his career, Lahham comically presented the struggle of common men facing the apparatus of government, and openly criticized dictators who ignore the will of the people. Lahham also supported the Syrian-Arab nationalism of the 1970s and 80s, under whose umbrella Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites and Ismailites came together. Because of his work, President Hafez al-Assad awarded him the Medal of the Syrian Republic in 1976. Apparently the barbs



**Duraid Lahham receiving an award for his artistic work from President Hafez al-Assad in 1976.**

Lahham directed at Assad's regime were a form of criticism that the authorities could abide and even adopt as an indication of its tolerant attitude. Some even suggested that Lahham won because he is member of the Ismā'īlyyah sect.<sup>14</sup> Similar

prizes were bestowed on Lahham by Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba, Lybya's Gaddafi, and Lebanese President Emile Lahoud. In 1992, he was appointed UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador to the children of Syria, and in 1999 was promoted to UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador to the Middle East and North Africa. The title was withdrawn in 2004 following a visit to South Lebanon where spoke out against US President George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, whom he compared to Hitler.<sup>15</sup>

At the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Lahham abandoned any hint of criticism against the government and stood unequivocally alongside Bashar Al-Assad, both in media interviews and posts on SNS where he expressed his sympathy for the regime. Lahham outdid himself in September 2015, when he published a love song to the youthful president, "Mr. President, until now I underestimated you and looked at you with admiration... but today my heart has changed and now I'm really in love with you ...."<sup>16</sup> When the song was published, Lahham was subjected to harsh criticism on social networks, from both art critics and political analysts, who criticized him for ignoring the blood-soaked war in Syria and the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians. In response to his critics, Lahham said that, like the president, he strongly opposes, the murderous religious extremism ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front brought to Syria, without referring to the criticism of Bashar Assad.

In January 2016, a clip in which Lahham is heard warmly praising the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appeared on news sites and SNS.<sup>17</sup> The comments were made during a ceremony in support of the Arab Syrian army; Lahham addressed Khamenei: "In your spirit is holiness; in your eyes, hope; and in your hands, action... You have the appreciation and respect of the struggle and the grand army. Long live Iran, Long live Syria." These words were met with angry reactions throughout the Arab world. An article entitled: "How did Duraid Lahham deceive us all this time?" was published on the Facebook page of Faisal Al-Qassem, presenter of the program "*Al Ittijah Al-Maacs*" ("On the other hand") on Al-Jazeera, and on the website of the Al-Arabiya television network.<sup>18</sup> Among the many responses posted by users, one Palestinian wrote: "All Duraid Lahham's friend are long dead... He has forgotten his Arab nature; now even Ghawwar Tosha is dead, and Lahham buried him with his own hands." A Saudi user wrote: "Lahham praises sectarian division and can no longer be considered a nationalist." Another added, "Lahham is nothing more than a servant in a Persian temple."

Like many icons in Syria, the image of Duraid Lahham, who was once considered a symbol of support for Syrian-Arab nationalism, has become a figure identified with the camp supporting Assad and a fig leaf for the regime. The civil war forced many citizens of Syria, Lahham among them, to return to their ethnic and religious identity as a basic identity group, and support the rule of Assad and his allies; the same government that only twenty years earlier was lampooned by Lahham himself. This indeed reflects how, even in the cultural arena, the severe rift between the Sunnis and the Iran-Hezbollah-Assad axis is feeding the bloody war in Syria. At a time when the civil war in Syria takes a heavy toll of life and destruction, even a comedian who once comforted all Syrians has become a party to the war.

## Syrian City of Madaya: Uses and Limits of SNS in Humanitarian Crises

Natasha Spreadborough

At the beginning of January 2016, Western media networks began covering the siege imposed on the Syrian city of Madaya, which was causing severe hunger and suffering among the local population. This coverage was the result of an extensive campaign on social networking sites (SNS) that aimed to bring the humanitarian crisis in Madaya to the attention of the world, after it seemed that the traditional media had tired of the Syrian crisis. The success of the campaign can be seen in the media echoes that followed, which in turn spurred the UN and international community into greater action to end the siege.

The siege of Madaya started in July 2015, as part of an attempt by forces aligned with the Syrian regime to exert pressure on the rebels, in nearby Zabadani, a city close to the Lebanese border that has been controlled by the rebels since 2012.<sup>19</sup> The crisis worsened when government and Hezbollah forces mounted an offensive against Zabadani last fall, resulting in some ten thousand refugees escaping to Madaya, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the city. The situation was further compounded by Russian airstrikes that continued despite the September 2015 cease-fire, and in violation of promises to evacuate residents of the besieged city.<sup>20</sup>

In September 2015, the first scattered reports emerged which exposed the harsh conditions faced by inhabitants of Madaya – whose existence was largely dependent on bulgur wheat and weeds.<sup>21</sup> During this time, the UN struggled to get aid into the besieged town mainly because of opposition by government forces<sup>22</sup> and the reluctance to deliver airborne assistance for fear that rebel and government forces alike would try to down the planes.<sup>23</sup> Whilst it succeeded in October to send a shipment of biscuits to Madaya and Zabadani, the food turned out to be expired.



Only in January 2016, did more significant media interest in the humanitarian crisis in Madaya begin. This was the result of a massive online campaign launched on SNS in early December, primarily through efforts of aid workers and human rights activists in Madaya. The campaign focused on disseminating images and videos of emaciated, starving children and elderly people, alongside corpses, with the hashtags #Madaya and #Save Madaya, in English and Arabic.<sup>24</sup> The campaign also included pleas from the city's residents for urgent international aid.

The success of the campaign was facilitated firstly by using simple and unique hashtags, making it easy to locate and link pictures from the scene across multiple SNS. Furthermore, the campaign transmitted a clear, direct message. This was augmented by the shocking pictures chosen, particularly those of emaciated children. Activists and health officials' reliable testimonies about the situation on the ground, augmented the shock created by photographic evidence. All these factors combined with the Christmas holiday period, and the swelling of the news



wave from Madaya in early January shows that the campaign worked – it seems – on public sentiment in West that was influenced by the holiday spirit of giving. Also contributing was the perception that the crisis in Madaya, unlike others in Syria which were hampered by operational constraints (the deployment of combat forces in the field, high integration of the rebels among the poor population, etc.), actually had the chance of being solved.

Yet the campaign was not error-free. Between January 4 and January 12, several images purporting to show the situation in Madaya, but actually documenting Iraqi citizens several years ago, were shared by various news outlets. These pictures were eventually removed, but not before causing confusion.<sup>25</sup>

The effect of the campaign is evident in the response it drew from the international community. On January 14, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon declared that preventing food from reaching civilians is considered a war crime, regardless of who was behind the action. Around the same time, reports surfaced indicating that the UN had been aware for months that residents of Madaya were starving. As a result, on January 19 the UN gave permission for western countries to deliver food to Madaya by air, even without the approval from the Assad regime. The UN further declared, "All options should remain on the table" for stopping the siege of the city. In the opinion of Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Stephen O'Brien, this uncharacteristic decisiveness reflected the failure of the UN to respond to the siege, as part of its continuing failure to resolve the five years of civil war in Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the success of the campaign, this remains a limited means of influence for raising awareness and creating long-term media attention on specific issues. The main test, therefore, will be the extent to which awareness remains in the public consciousness over time, and whether it leads to a positive change in the situation of the local population. In this context, the benefits of using social networking as a tool for floating issues, including humanitarian ones should be recognized. This is especially true considering the fact that these means were previously unavailable, and citizens and non-establishment forces had little, if any, ability to have a significant impact on the content disseminated by traditional

media. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that SNS have limitations, and there is a need to find effective ways to leverage the media hype they form around different issues.

The SNS campaign to encourage assistance to the Syrian city of Madaya demonstrates the significant contribution that SNS can make to increasing public awareness and recruiting the international community. The campaign also contributed to increased interest on the part of traditional media, despite the fatigue that characterizes it after covering the war in Syria for more than five years. Launching an organized campaign at the right time proved that it is possible to awaken emotions; moreover, it led to action that provided relief, at least temporarily, to the people of Madaya. Conversely, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of medium and its short-term influence, and effectively leverage the media echoes it creates, in order to maintain the effect over time and create meaningful change in the field.

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<sup>1</sup> Elections for the 290 members of Majlis are held once every four years. Although most political authority is held by the Supreme Leader, Majlis does have some authority under the Constitution including ratification of international treaties and agreements, approving the state budget and the ability to remove government ministers or prevent their appointment. In certain circumstances, the Majlis can even recommend unseating the president. Elections for the Assembly of Experts, which consists of 88 religious leaders, are held once every eight years. Under the Constitution of the Islamic Republic, the Assembly is responsible supervising the activity of the Supreme Leader, appointing a successor and even removing him from office if he is no longer capable of fulfilling his duties.

<sup>2</sup> "Will representatives to the 10th Majlis come from Telegram?", *Tabnak*, 20 February 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this subject see Raz Zimmt "Telegram: The Most Popular Social Network in Iran," *Beehive*, January 2016. <http://dayan.org/content/bee-hive-telegram-most-popular-social-network-iran>.

<sup>4</sup> "Telegram's share in the elections: 79%," *Gooya News*, 8 March 2016.

<sup>5</sup> "Possibility of blocking telegram on election day," *Farda News*, 21 February 2016

<sup>6</sup> "Social networks: a central actor in election propaganda," *IRNA*, 22 February 2016

<sup>7</sup> A photograph of former president Khatami and posters calling for the release of political prisoners were published, for example on this telegram channel: <https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@koche94>

<sup>8</sup> <https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@beyadaar>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@koche94>.

<sup>10</sup> Khamenei's speech to citizens in East Azerbaijan Province from the official site of the Supreme Leader, 17 February 2016.

<sup>11</sup> <https://web.telegram.org/#/im?p=@No2UK>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://telegram.me/eslahateiran>, 21 February 2016.

<sup>13</sup> "Destroying conservatives by using models for propaganda purposes," *Mashriq News*, 20 February 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria," *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 2013, 873-841. <http://www.scn-sy.com/ar/news/view/7694.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Haider Farouq al-Jamal, "It is interesting that his father wanted to call him "Hitler" but family members objected", *Duraid Lahham Meshuar Amar*. (Beirut, 2002), p. 27 (Arabic).

<sup>16</sup> "Duraid Lahham to Bashar al-Assad: I liked you but now my love has been transformed", *Al-Hadath News*, 3 September 2015; دريد لحام لـ "بشار الأسد": كنت أحبك.. أما الآن إنقلب حبي ; <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/163673>

<sup>17</sup> On video: What did Duraid Lahham say about Ayatollah Khamenei?", *Al-Alam News*, 28 January 2016; بالفديو؛ <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1783805> ماذا قال دريد لحام عن آية الله خامنئي؟

<sup>18</sup> "كيف استطاع دريد لحام أن يخدعنا ; "How did Duraid Lahham deceive all this time?", *Al-Arabiya*, 2 February 2016; "طيلة الوقت؟"

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<sup>19</sup> Mustafa al-Haj, "Besieged Madaya residents face starvation," *Al Monitor*, January 3, 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/syria-madaya-siege-famine.html>

<sup>20</sup> Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "In Syrian Town Cut Off From the World, Glimpses of Deprivation," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Mustafa al-Haj, "Syrian regime dis young people who are more active on SNS.places Zabadani residents," *Al Monitor*, September 15, 2016. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/syria-zabadani-madaya-regime-hezbollah-displacement-refugees.html>; Avi Asher-Schapiro, "Children Are Eating Leaves Off the Trees: The Nightmare of the Siege of Madaya, Syria," *Vice News*, January 4 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Nick Paton Walsh, "Starving Syrian town: How did Madaya get so desperate?," *CNN*, January 12 2016. <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/12/middleeast/syria-madaya-qa/>

<sup>24</sup> #Madaya #SaveMadaya,

<sup>25</sup> Avi Asher-Schapiro, "Children Are Eating Leaves Off the Trees: The Nightmare of the Siege of Madaya, Syria," *Vice News*, January 4 2016.

<https://news.vice.com/article/children-are-eating-leaves-off-the-trees-the-nightmare-of-the-siege-of-madaya-syria>

<sup>26</sup> Laura Hughes, "Air drop food to starving Syrians, UN tells Britain," *The Telegraph*, January 19 2016.

[http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12108990/Air-drop-food-to-starving-Syrians-UN-tells-Britain.html.](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12108990/Air-drop-food-to-starving-Syrians-UN-tells-Britain.html)