



THE MOSHE DAYAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND AFRICAN STUDIES

ALLIANCE CENTER FOR IRANIAN STUDIES



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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the February issue of *Beehive*. This issue reviews the public debate in Turkey over the renewed conflict with the Kurds, in which social networks have become an arena of confrontation in addition to the battlefield. The second article concerns the Iranians' discontent after Ruhollah Khomeini, a grandson of the revolution's leader and a moderate candidate for the Council of Experts, was disqualified from running. Finally, we present the public's criticism of the Jordanian regime because of the severe economic crisis that has befallen the kingdom and threatens its stability.

Enjoy!

Turkey and the PKK: War on Several Fronts

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

The Turkish-Kurdish conflict has been a hot topic on social networking sites (SNS) in Turkey since July 2015, when Turkey launched a military operation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The historical conflict between the Turks and the Kurds reignited with a series of attacks by the Kurdish rebels against Turkish security forces. The Kurdish attacks were followed by Turkish military responses, including the Turkish Air Force bombing locations in northern Iraq, and ground operations against Kurdish rebels in southeastern Turkey. Casualties among the Turkish soldiers made the public debate increasingly militant and intolerant, especially on the Turkish side. With the mainstream media fully mobilized in favor of the state, social networks remained the sole arena where opinions opposed to the official government position were expressed without interruption, thanks to the government's inability to effectively censor content on SNS.

A prominent example of ongoing widespread public discourse on social networks in Turkey was triggered by a Turkish military operation in the town of Cizre in Şırnak province. Official reports from the Turkish army said that the rebels had adopted urban warfare techniques, and were attempting to prevent the movement of Turkish ground forces by digging trenches and building obstructive embankments in streets of the town. Moreover, the rebels used underground tunnels that allowed them to move easily and surprise the Turkish army. These tactics made it difficult for the army to maneuver in the field. The difficult battle against the rebels led to many casualties on both sides. While grim pictures and reports were sent from the battlefield via cell phones, the mainstream media ignored the events, including the consequences of the curfew that the Turkish army imposed on the town, for several weeks with few interruptions. Against this background, Kurdish users and their supporters, including members of the peace camp in Turkey, alleged that the Turkish army committed war crimes and massacres against the rebels, under cover of the strict curfew. On the other hand, many Turks supported the Turkish army and government, and called the critics "traitors." There were also those who celebrated the killing of 60 PKK activists by the military, using the slogan "60 corpses in Cizre."¹

The verbal violence and intolerance in public discourse on SNS peaked on January 8, following a live telephone exchange on the popular Turkish program, "Beyaz Show" the night before. Speaking with the host Beyazıt Öztürk, a viewer named Ayşe Çelik ("the teacher Ayse," as she was later called), pleaded, "No to war and killing children." When the call ended, Turkish social networks were flooded with harsh reactions against Öztürk for allegedly



allowing the show to be used as a platform for Kurdish propaganda. Many users called Öztürk a “traitor.” For its part, the Turkish Television Authority imposed a fine of 900,000 Turkish liras (approximately USD 308,000) on the channel that broadcasts Öztürk’s program. The Attorney General also charged the “teacher Ayşe” with broadcasting PKK propaganda live. Conversely, the incident was also followed by expressions of support for Öztürk and the teacher Ayşe, using the slogan “I’m also the teacher Ayşe.” Despite this support, Öztürk chose, due to public pressure, to apologize, and say that as an entertainer he was not interested in discussing political issues.²

Another wave of hostile reactions on SNS began on January 11, when many faculty members at universities across Turkey signed a petition calling for an end to the armed struggle against the Kurds. Turkish nationalists expressed their anger towards the lecturers whose petition, they contended, did not consider how the PKK’s actions undermine Turkish sovereignty in southeastern Turkey, and the violence they use against the Turkish army. In this case, too, users called the lecturers “traitors.” The signatories’ names were shared on SNS, students declared that they would organize protests in their classes, and the Turkish authorities launched investigations against them. In response to this hostility, the lecturers also received considerable support from the public on SNS, and many users protested the investigation opened against the lecturers, on the grounds that it could cause irreparable damage to freedom of expression in the country.³

The tension and violent discourse generated in the entertainment and academia sectors spilled over to soccer stadiums. The match between a Kurdish team, Amedspor (the Kurdish name of Diyarbakır, a city in southeastern Turkey) and a Turkish team, Başakşehir, that was critical for determining which team would advance to the next stage of the competition for the National Cup occupied the public’s attention. Turkish nationalists saw it as another battleground



between Turkey and the Kurds. During the game, their posts on SNS used military terminology to describe moves made by the Turkish team against its Kurdish rival. At the same time, fans of the Kurdish team demanded victory from their team, and defined it as an achievement in the war against “fascism”, as they described it. Başakşehir forward Semih Şentürk added to the inflammatory discourse by celebrating the goal he scored with a military salute. Immediately after the match, Şentürk said that he had scored on behalf of the Turkish soldiers who are fighting Kurdish rebels, and many SNS users praised him for the comment. The game ended in a tie, and it was the Kurdish team that advanced into the final last 16 of the National Cup. When Amedspor was later victorious over another Turkish team Bursaspor, a player on its squad, Deniz Naki, tweeted that the team’s win was a victory for “those who lost their lives under oppression.” The Turkish Football Association meted out an unprecedented

punishment for this statement: Naki was banned from twelve games, but no disciplinary action was taken against Şentürk for his salute. Overnight, Naki, who was previously unknown in Turkey, became a symbol for Kurdish users, who shared a picture showing his arm with the Kurdish word for “freedom,” “*Azadi*,” tattooed on it.⁴

SNS in Turkey give expression to diverse and contradictory positions, but simultaneously function as a central arena for lynchings that can destroy the life of key or famous personalities, who choose to oppose the government and/or the Turkish army’s operation against Kurdish rebels. Beyazıt Öztürk and the university lecturers who were defined “traitors” by nationalist users are typical victims of the phenomenon. Lynching on SNS does not facilitate cultural dialogue, but unlike the silencing of opponents in other arenas, it does permit freer speech and periodically creates new heroes, such as the Kurdish player Naki. The spread of violent political discourse between the Turks and the Kurds in the worlds of entertainment, academia and sport proves that the rift between the Turks and the Kurds is deepening day by day.⁵

The Revolution Devours its Grandchildren: Responses to the Disqualification of Hassan Khomeini as a Candidate for the Assembly of Experts

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In late January, the Iranian Guardian Council published the names of candidates it had approved to stand for election to the Assembly of Experts on February 26. According to the Iranian Constitution, the Assembly of Experts is responsible for monitoring the activity of the Supreme Leader, appointing a successor or even removing him if it finds that he is no longer fit to carry out his duties. The elections, which are held once every eight years, were the subject of special interest this year, because it is likely that the council elected now will indeed choose the next supreme leader, as the health of incumbent Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is failing.

The list of potential candidates who were not approved included Hassan Khomeini, a young grandson of the founder of the Islamic Revolution, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This decision led to extensive discussions on social networking sites (SNS). The 44-year-old Khomeini is considered the most prominent of the 15 grandchildren of the Islamic revolution's leader. In the 1990s, he began religious training with senior clerics in Qom, and after his father's death managed the mausoleum in the elder Khomeini's memory, and took responsibility for preserving his heritage. For years, Hassan Khomeini avoided political involvement but in recent years he has commented on sensitive political matters more frequently. He is currently affiliated with the moderate reformist movement in Iranian politics.

On December 18, 2015, Khomeini filed his candidacy for election to the Assembly of Experts. He was marked one of the most conspicuous candidates from the camp supporting President Hassan Rouhani, thanks to his family connections, religious talents, his relative youth (which is attractive for many young voters) and comparatively moderate positions. Therefore, rejection of his candidacy aroused strong reactions within the Iranian political system and among the public. The Council justified its rejection by noting that Khomeini did not appear to take the competency exam on religious law that was given as part of the process for vetting candidates. This argument was rejected by his supporters, who attributed the disqualification to his moderate political positions and close relationship with President Rouhani, and Expediency Council Chairman and former President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is also affiliated with the moderate wing of Iranian politics. On January 29, Khomeini issued a response expressing his amazement at the decision of the Guardian Council which, he contended, was made despite testimony by senior clerics about his legal competency. He announced his intention to appeal the decision, at the request of the public, but expressed doubt about any chance that the Council would change its mind. In the end, the decision remained in place.⁶

Responses to the disqualification of Khomeini on SNS expressed public support for the young cleric, dissatisfaction with the decision of the Guardian Council, and criticism for the regime

that prevents candidates with political concepts and ideas differing from its own from standing for election.⁷ The initial publication of reports that Khomeini was barred from running filled SNS and reformist-affiliated news sites with expressions of support for him. Many internet users claimed that the Council's decision was evidence that the revolution "devours its children." One user said that after the revolution had finished consuming all its sons, it continued by devouring its grandchildren. Another wrote that if the leader of the revolution himself were alive, he would have been disqualified by the Guardian Council. "Thirty years ago, if some had said that thirty years in the future, the candidacy of the founder of the revolution's own grandson would be blocked, people would have called him a derogatory nickname,"⁸ tweeted one Iranian user. Others claimed that there was no reason to be surprised by the decision of the Council, because it is well-known that the Iranian regime seeks to strengthen the exclusive position of its conservative supporters, and allows competition only between different sectors of the regime. Moreover, some members of the Guardian Council also serve in the Assembly of Experts and therefore have an interest in preserving their political power there.



Hassan Khomeini and President Rouhani. Source: Telegram, 31 January

Users were divided about Khomeini's decision not to take the proficiency test in religious law. While some believed he should have taken it because he is not exempt from obeying the law, others expressed the view that the exam was designed only to serve as an excuse for the Council to disqualify his candidacy, and that Khomeini would have been rejected regardless, because of his moderate positions and the public sympathy that he enjoys. Controversy also arose regarding how Khomeini ought to respond. While there were those who felt he should appeal the decision, others recommended that he not appeal, so as not to give legitimacy to the Council and its decisions.

Against the backdrop of massive public interest provoked by Khomeini's disqualification, there were some voices which called for minimizing the event's importance. In a post on his Facebook page, exiled Iranian human rights activist Ali Afshar came out against what he called "exaggerated reactions" to the disqualification. For example, it was defined as "the worst political event since the revolution." Afshar claimed that, even if the Council had approved

Khomeini's candidacy, he would not have been able to bring about significant change in the political system. Moreover, he argued that the disqualified candidates included some who surpass Khomeini in their political or religious standing.⁹

Responses to the disqualification of Khomeini's candidacy reflect continuing public dissatisfaction with the conservative government's efforts to exclude anyone who challenges their exclusivity in the political system. However, the opposition to the idea of boycotting the elections following the disqualification, and the lively discussion about the disqualification on SNS, could indicate that Iranians still consider the political game important. It seems that despite the severe restrictions that the Iranian regime imposed on candidates, the public continues to show interest, and is ready to take an active role in the elections process. The trend to avoid boycotting the elections was also evident in the recent elections for the Majles (2012) and presidency (2013), when the opposition calls from the Iranian diaspora to boycott the elections were not well received by either the public or parties affiliated with the reformist opposition.

The Economic Crisis in Jordan as Seen on SNS

Dr. Michael Barak

The severe economic crisis in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is now the top subject in its public discourse, generally and on social networking sites (SNS). The Kingdom of Jordan places blame for the crisis, which threatens its stability and social fabric, on the flow of Syrian refugees into its territory. In an interview with the BBC on 2 February, King Abdullah II warned that Jordan is close to breaking point as a result of the refugee problem and, sooner or later, “the dam will be breached,” meaning that social services, infrastructure and economy will collapse completely.¹⁰ However, the claim that the crisis is an inevitable product of the regime’s conduct, including its allegedly rampant corruption at the top, is widely held among the Jordanian public.

According to United Nations records, Jordan currently hosts about 635,000 refugees, but Jordanian authorities estimate that the number is closer to one million. King Abdullah II has said that one-quarter of the kingdom’s budget is allocated to addressing the problem of refugees, although 86% of them still live below the poverty line.¹¹ Many Jordanian politicians have warned about the severity of the economic crisis



caused by a wave of Syrian refugees migrating to the kingdom, and offered different solutions for dealing with the crisis. Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour beseeched Western countries to grant his country generous financial aid.¹² Former Prime Minister Ali Abu al-Ghareb focused on solutions at the national level, and proposed that the regime encourage investment by granting Jordanian citizenship to investors who are not citizens, set aside land near Amman, fight bureaucracy and corruption, offer incentives to encourage the industrial sector,¹³ and open casinos in Aqaba, the Dead Sea area and Petra.¹⁴

Efforts to increase global awareness of the issue of Syrian refugees in Jordan and its economic implications have won public support in the kingdom. For example, one user wrote that the King’s remarks are “incomparable words of gold. The cards must be on the table so that the world will understand how large a sacrifice we, his people, are facing. How important it is to give them ever more knowledge...”¹⁵ Another user noted that the economic crisis in Jordan is currently very deep and severe. It is good that the issue is high on the public agenda, so the world will help Jordan.¹⁶

This support has not diminished criticism in the public discourse, and contempt for the conduct of the Jordanian regime, which many consider to be the main culprit in the economic crisis. This debate also reflects long-standing antagonisms between different classes in Jordanian society, due to economic and social disparities, which will remain regardless of the

situation. Some writers explicitly mentioned rampant corruption in high places. One user noted that the Jordanian regime boasts that its new ministers received their higher education at leading international universities, including Harvard and the Sorbonne, but that education has proven worthless because they are unable to handle the economic crisis, and ignore the problems of the ordinary citizens. Another noted that all these economic experts do not understand anything about improving the situation, but only increasing the tax burden.

Still another contended that Jordan focuses only on national security, to the exclusion of economic security and employment, abandoning the poor of the country, deserting the elderly, and making no effort to build new housing. Some said despairingly, “everything becomes more expensive; land, apartments, cars... A salary is insufficient for those who wish to buy a car...” and “the escalating cost of financing a marriage is an obstacle to establishing a family.”¹⁷ One user declared, “this situation was caused by the irresponsible policies of Jordanian politicians.” Another commented that the refugee crisis has managed to arouse politicians from their apathy because “[they’re] afraid that the presence of Syrian refugees in Jordan will hurt [them] in [their] pocket.” Still another wrote accusingly that politicians “live at our expense.”¹⁸

Criticism of the regime also included outrage at the proposal to open casinos as a solution to the crisis. One told the proposal’s initiator Ali Abu al-Ghareb, “Stay home, leave Jordan alone, don’t destroy it... You are the main cause behind the destruction of the Jordanian economy.” A user from Irbid said that opening casinos would only provide a new opportunity for al-Ghareb and his friends to steal public funds.¹⁹

From the public discourse on Jordanian SNS, we can learn about the great frustration Jordanian citizens feel in the face of the severe economic crisis that has befallen the kingdom, and that threatens their livelihoods. While the Jordanian government places blame for the crisis on the growing stream of Syrian refugees entering Jordan, there are many citizens who think that the economic crisis is a result of poor government behavior. Some point to rampant corruption at the highest levels of government, where officials, they claim, are concerned only with maintaining their own interests, without any real intention to help the weaker strata of the population. It seems that the current economic crisis is intensifying old frustrations, and the disgust many Jordanian citizens have for the regime’s behavior. Whether or not the main reason for the economic crisis in Jordan is the wave of Syrian refugees, popular unrest is already developing in Jordan among the lower classes. Not for nothing, King Abdullah II warned that Jordan is facing a real catastrophe.

¹ #cizre #cizrede60leş #CizredeSavaşSuçuişleniyor #CİZREdeKatliamVar

² #BeyazShow #AyşeÖğretmenBenim

³ #akademisyenler ; akademisyenler bildirisi

⁴ Semih Şentürk, Deniz Naki, Azadi, #GururumuzsunDenizNaki #DenizNakiYanlızDeğildir

⁵ See: Yanarocak, "Rallying around the Flag: Ups and Downs in the Peace Process between Ankara and the Kurds." *Beehive*, vol. 2, no. 6, June 2014 at <http://dayan.org/content/bee-hive-middle-east-social-media-vol-2-issue-6-june-2014>.

⁶ "I'm appealing because of public demand," *Entekhab*, 29 January 2016.

⁷ For responses to Khomeini's disqualification, see the following examples:

<https://www.facebook.com/divanesara/photos/a.516370928409076.1073741825.196619943717511/1006254092754088/?type=3>; <http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/250019> ;
<https://www.facebook.com/dw.persian/posts/1250544858293791> ;
<http://alef.ir/vdcccmmq112bqi18.ala2.html?327373> ; <https://www.facebook.com/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%85%DB%8C%D9%86%DB%8C-Seyed-Hasan-Khomeini-379213050692/?fref=photo> ; <https://www.facebook.com/hatefmotahhary/posts/1022523997820669> ;
<https://www.facebook.com/balatarin/posts/957229880980021> ;
<https://www.facebook.com/Iranwire/posts/818538308292572> ;
<https://www.facebook.com/shahrvandiyar/photos/a.266672463388781.64672.157375150985180/1013456165377070/?type=3> ;
<https://www.facebook.com/kaleme/photos/a.10150229987566032.320949.147906276031/10153546748566032/?type=3>

⁸ 29 January 2016, <https://twitter.com/sazekhamoush/status/693110841772736512>

⁹ 31 January 2016,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=964748623599915&set=a.106795436061909.11872.100001943601226&type=3&theater>

¹⁰ 2 February 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=im5BT98RkTk>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL2_nvAUIbg

¹¹ 2 February 2016: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35462698>;

14 February 2016: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=-X2QsmzPPO0>

¹² 30 January 2016: <http://alghad.com/articles/917508>

¹³ 13 February 2016: <http://alghad.com/articles/920208-99>

¹⁴ 13 February 2016: <http://www.ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleno=259050>

¹⁵ 5 February 2016:

<https://www.facebook.com/RHCJO/photos/a.393170040732782.82254.383533738363079/924568187592962/?type=3>

¹⁶ [#الثاني_عبدالله_بقلم](https://twitter.com/Majod1890/status/694795204549812225) ; <https://twitter.com/Majod1890/status/694795204549812225>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.; <https://www.facebook.com/sarayanews/posts/1102209356498181>

¹⁹ Ibid.