



THE MOSHE DAYAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND AFRICAN STUDIES

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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 January 2016 issue of *Beehive*. This issue examines the crisis of trust between educated young people in Egypt and the al-Sisi regime due to the latter's intervention in the Students' Union elections; reviews how the Islamic State uses social networking sites (SNS) to spread intensive campaigns against its enemies; and analyzes the increasing use of the Telegram app for messaging in Iran and its significance.

Enjoy!

## A Crisis of Trust between Young Egyptians and the al-Sisi Regime

Dr. Michael Barak

In late December 2015, students from 24 universities across Egypt launched a widespread protest on social networking sites (SNS) against the involvement of the Egyptian Ministry of Education in the Students' Union elections in Egypt, and against the violation of freedom of expression. The online protest reflects the deepening crisis of trust of the educated youth of Egypt in their government, and young people's severe disappointment in the government's refusal to adopt democratic values.

The Egyptian Students' Union is an umbrella organization of all government and private universities. It was founded in 2011, after the overthrow of President Mubarak. However, when President Mohamed Morsi was removed from office in July 2013, the union's elections were frozen. The freeze was initiated by allies of the new president, Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, who sought to "cleanse" the universities of groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been declared a terrorist organization. Two-and-a-half years later, in November 2015, the union's elections were resumed. However voter turnout was low, with only 30% of the students in Egypt participating. A likely contributing factor, among others, was a campaign waged on SNS by students who support the Muslim Brotherhood; they called for a boycott of the elections under the slogan "Our right" (*haqqna*), protesting the military coup of al-Sisi and the subsequent suppression of individual freedom in Egypt.<sup>1</sup>



Flyer published by students supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, calling for a boycott of the Student Union elections in Egypt

In the current round of elections, two blocs were particularly prominent: the Voice of Egypt's Students (*Sawt Tullab Misr*), which benefited from the regime's indirect support, and an organization of independent students mostly belonging to the January 25 Revolution movement of young, secular activists, who oppose the al-Sisi regime. In the final tally, Abdullah Anwar was elected as the Chairman of the Union and Amar al-Helo as his deputy; both were conspicuous leaders during the January 25 Revolution. These results did not find favor in the eyes of the Egyptian regime. The Minister of Education Ashraf al-Shehy decided to postpone announcing the results, claiming that there were supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood among the elected representatives. Al-Shehy even issued an edict dispersing the Egyptian Students' Union on the grounds of irregularities in the elections at Zagazig University.

The Egyptian government’s intervention in the results of the Students’ Union elections seem to reflect its concern about the consolidation of militant opposition to the regime among educated young people. Ahmed Al-Bakri, Vice Chairman of the Students’ Union of Egypt and Chairman of the Students’ Union at Al-Azhar University, highlighted this when he spoke about the al-Sisi era in October 2015: “All of the universities are covered by surveillance cameras. The Egyptian student has become a danger to national security, and the security [apparatus] has begun to run the universities.”<sup>2</sup>



**Pictures of Egyptian public figures who support the Students’ Union**

The decision to disperse the current Students’ Union aroused great anger and sparked protests on Facebook and Twitter using the hashtag “I support Egypt’s Students’ Union” (*Adam Ittihad al-Tullab Misr*). Students across the country expressed their frustration on SNS and called for applying pressure on decision-makers to make them change their mind.<sup>3</sup> According to many students, the regime’s blatant interference in the elections exacerbated the crisis of confidence between the younger generation and the regime, which keeps young people from political life, and is considered a symbolic return to Mubarak’s dictatorial regime. From their perspective, the Egyptian regime nurtures student groups that obey its commands, while simultaneously cutting off those that could threaten its stability. Others noted that the time has come to accept that the military regime prefers to impose its will “and take the people’s will and choices out with the garbage.” Students also claimed that young secular people erred when they did not continue the revolution in January 2011, stressing that, “the people’s memory is short, (and) the military does not know what democracy is.” Some even expressed concern about the outbreak of popular protests on campuses at the beginning of the second semester, if the government does not retract its decision to dismantle the Students’ Union.<sup>4</sup>



**Former head of the Students’ Union at Ain Shams University and current voluntary president of Roshte Association for Medical Education showing her support for the struggle of the Egyptian Students’ Union**

The online protest was also supported by former presidential candidates, media personalities, MPs and public figures, who signed a petition calling for the Ministry of Education to retract its decision and demanding that al-Sisi and the Prime Minister intervene in the crisis immediately.<sup>5</sup> Hamdi Sabah, a Member of Parliament and former candidate for the presidency of Egypt, tweeted that this was an “oppressive, crude decision of a regime that suffers from over-exercising its ‘security muscle’ and a narrow understanding of politics.”<sup>6</sup> ‘Ammar al-Din, editor of the daily Al-Shorouk, complained about the decision to dismantle the union because of “the price it would exact from the Ministry [of Education], the government and related apparatus, given the antagonism [they aroused] among university students.”<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, many students perceive the decision of Egypt's Ministry of Education to void the results of elections in the Students' Union as a gross violation of democratic values, and an attempt to impose the regime's will on its citizens. Moreover, the crisis reflects the lack of mutual trust between the educated youth of Egypt and the regime. In a crisis of this type, SNS are a unique channel that allow young people in Egypt to express their distress over the situation and increase public awareness of their problems, especially when the voice of protest is not adequately heard in the traditional print media. It should be remembered that already during the rule of Mubarak, young people recognized the value of SNS as a tool for organizing anti-government demonstrations and protesting current reality. That eventually led to the fall of the Mubarak regime. The growing frustration of the young people expressed in the wake of the current crisis is evidence of a more strident tone against Egypt's transformation into a military dictatorship, which may move beyond virtual space and generate live demonstrations for real democratization in Egypt.

## The Islamic State's Media Blitz against its Enemies: Issues & Character

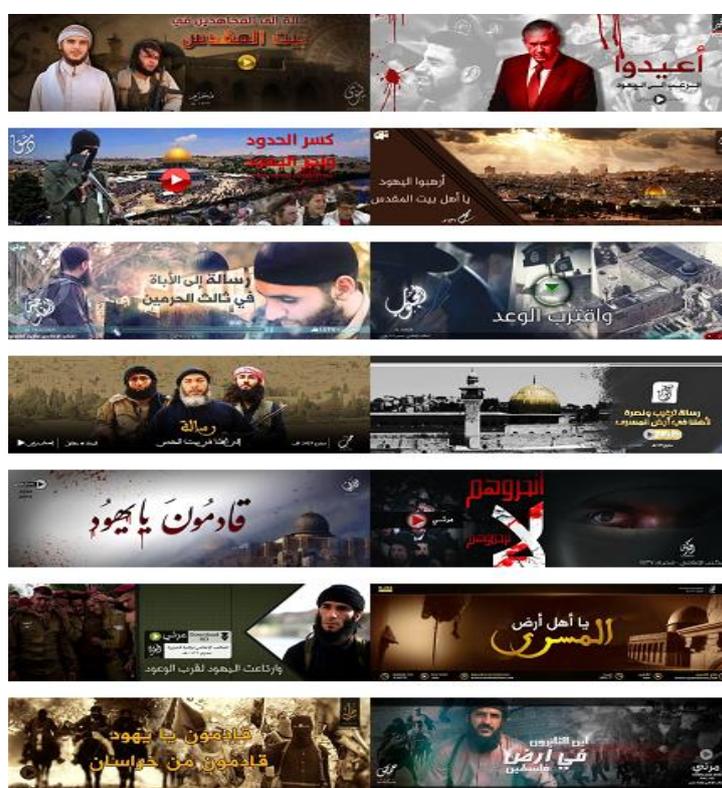
Gilad Shiloach

Last December, the Islamic State launched a media campaign of unprecedented magnitude against the Saudi royal family. It was initiated in response to the declaration by Mohammed Salman, the Saudi Minister of Defense and Deputy Crown Prince, that an Islamic military coalition had been established which would focus on operations against terrorist organizations, particularly the Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> The campaign included fifteen different videos that were distributed by several provinces (*wilayah*) of the Islamic State over a period of a few days. All of the videos transmitted the same message delegitimizing the Saudi royal family, showing its ties with the West, and calling upon Muslims living in Saudi Arabia to join the war effort in Syria, Iraq and other provinces, or to harm the royal family within the kingdom. The campaign was conducted in a focused and aggressive manner on social networking sites (SNS), just as with many other media blitzes that the Islamic State has launched against its perceived enemies.

Of the campaigns waged by the Islamic State last year, the one launched after the deadly terrorist attacks in France on 13 November 2015 was the most significant and successful for the organization's struggle against the West. The campaign distributed twelve videos against France in only nine days.<sup>9</sup> Some celebrated the results of the attack, others threatened France and other Western countries with additional attacks, and still others mocked France's failed response to attacks. Another campaign was launched in October 2015 to recruit Somalis into the Islamic State's forces, with an emphasis on members of Al-Shabaab in Somalia, as part of the organization's effort to expand in east Africa. This campaign distributed six videos in just three days.<sup>10</sup> An aggressive campaign was also waged in the Israeli arena. In response to the wave of Palestinian terrorism that began in September 2015, the Islamic State distributed at least fourteen videos in only five days last October. These included messages stressing the importance of the al-Aqsa mosque, promises to liberate the holy places from the Jews and encouraging individual Palestinians to continue their attacks.<sup>11</sup> The campaign's peak was recorded on October 23 when the Islamic State's province in Damascus distributed a video in which one of the its fighters seemingly speaks fluent Hebrew and threatens Israel that "the real war has not yet begun" and "soon there will not be a single Jew anywhere in the country."<sup>12</sup>

The campaigns launched by the Islamic State are similar in their presentation of the selected content, and their form of production and distribution. In many videos, the Islamic State presents archival segments or historical illustrations that support its case. For example, most of the videos in the campaign against Saudi Arabia open with scenes showing members of the Saudi royal family with the presidents of the United States, or historical passages explaining the importance of the Arabian Peninsula. The campaign against France stressed the amount of attention the attack received on international news channels, while videos in the anti-Israel campaign video presented the religious significance of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Jewish

domination over Palestine. All of them show at least one activist of the Islamic State delivering the message fluently, while facing the camera, armed and dressed in uniform. The speakers in the videos typically introduce the general idea of the campaign or clip at the beginning of their speech. Towards the end, the videos make direct threats against their enemies. The campaigns are intensively distributed on SNS with specific hashtags, for a limited period of time. In the campaign against Saudi Arabia, supporters of the Islamic State posted requests to share the videos with the hashtag **اصبرا\_الوحي\_بلاد\_يا** (“Oh land of revelation, be patient”), which became the campaign’s slogan.<sup>13</sup> The leading hashtag used when distributing anti-Israel videos was **نحر\_اليهود** (“slaughter the Jews”), and the chosen hashtag for campaign addressing al-Shabaab was **أيها\_المجاهد\_في\_الصومال** (“Oh warrior of jihad in Somalia”).



Islamic State’s anti-Israel video campaign

The Islamic State runs the campaigns in a centralized and directed manner. They begin with the organization’s top leadership, who direct the central Propaganda Bureau, which then transmits guidelines to the Propaganda Offices of each province. The headquarters’ ability to engage the provinces in the effort to raise consciousness – even the more remote and peripheral ones, like Hadhramaut in Yemen and Barqa in Libya – has proven very effective in transmitting focused messages. It furthermore contributes to the aura surrounding the Islamic State, helping to create the illusion that it crosses territorial boundaries, and is present and active in large areas of the Middle East and Africa. Given the production quality evident in

the videos, which requires time for preparation, production and editing, it appears that provinces play only a minor role in their production. It seems the central propaganda headquarters is actually responsible for production, and the provinces for the active distribution.

The scope of the Islamic State's media activity over the past year illustrates the magnitude of the organization's investment in its propaganda machine, both print and broadcast. A summary of the organization's media activities, which appeared in its official weekly magazine, Al-Naba (distributed virtually on SNS and physically in provinces of the Islamic State), claimed that within one year provinces of the Islamic State had published no fewer than 710 videos, and 14,523 pictures, including 1,787 stills. It was also noted that the provincial Media Offices are responsible for covering local events in their area, and despite being separate entities, they operate "under the direct supervision of the (Central) Bureau of Communications,"<sup>14</sup> which is none other than the Propaganda Bureau.

The similarity in the way content is presented, the production style and the means of distribution again proves that the propaganda machine of the Islamic State operates in a centralized, uniform and organized manner. This conclusion reinforces the assessment that the other parts of the organization are also characterized by centralized control,<sup>15</sup> in contrast to assessments that claimed, until recently, that the organization is fairly decentralized, in both its communications and operational activities. From the video campaigns, we can learn what the Islamic State's top priorities are and which messages it wants to implement. It has been quick to make significant use of SNS to distribute many videos to thousands of users with a single hashtag.

## Telegram: The Most Popular Social Network in Iran

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In the past year, use of the Telegram network has expanded dramatically in Iran. Telegram is considered one of the most secure text messaging applications for cell phones. It is very common among Iranians for whom security capabilities are especially important, given the regime's efforts to monitor traffic on social networking sites (SNS); this includes traffic on this secure app.

Recent figures, published at the end of 2015, show that the number of Telegram users in Iran exceeds 20 million. On December 26, Abol Hassan Firouzabadi, Secretary-General of the National Cyber Council, reported that almost 22 million Iranians have joined the network and 15 million are active users.<sup>16</sup> A survey conducted by the Iranian Student Polling Center (ISPA) in November and December 2015 also showed that Telegram has become the most common SNS in Iran, used by more than 37% of internet users aged 18 and over. The survey showed that its usage in Tehran alone nearly doubled, from 25% in March 2015 to 48% in the most recent survey. Concurrently, use of Viber, which had previously been considered the most common app used by Iranians – although it is less secure – dropped significantly: from 42% of Tehran residents using SNS in March 2015, to only 13% in the most recent survey.<sup>17</sup>

Telegram has also attracted government officials and media leaders, who have begun to open channels on the app in recent months. Among those running channels are the Office of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the Office of the President Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian Broadcast Authority, and news agencies and leading news sites, some of which are affiliated with the radical right and the Revolutionary Guards, such as Fars and Tasnim.

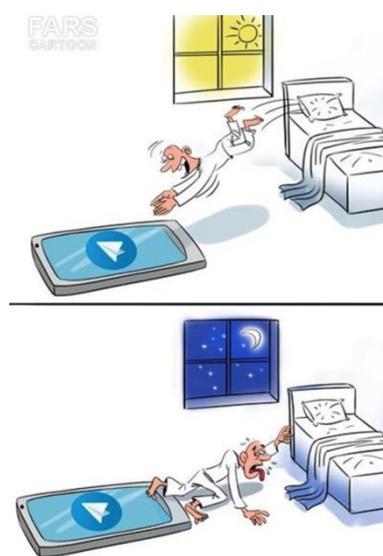
The growing popularity of Telegram was very evident last July when its browsing speed in Iran slowed down for several weeks, sparking angry reactions from users. According to the Telegram company, the slow browsing speed was not caused by an overload but by local suppliers in Iran who tried to intentionally limit their network traffic.<sup>18</sup> The Iranian authorities have denied this, as well as the accusation that they intended to block the network.<sup>19</sup>

A similar allegation was made in October 2015, as part of a public confrontation that erupted between the CEO of Telegram, Pavel Durov, and the Iranian authorities. On 20 October, Durov tweeted that access to Telegram was blocked in Iran, after the company refused to comply with the requirements of the Ministry of Communications to supply the Iranian authorities with surveillance tools for spying on citizens.<sup>20</sup> A Communications Ministry spokesman quickly denied this claim, saying that there was no intention to block Telegram.<sup>21</sup> A spokesperson of the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI) also said that the government opposed total bans on SNS, and that this policy would remain in effect throughout the current government's term.<sup>22</sup> Following these clarifications, Durov retracted his previous claim that the network had been blocked by the authorities.<sup>23</sup>

Alongside the statements made by representatives of the Iranian regime that they would not block access to Telegram, IRGC did issue warnings about using the app. A message from the cyber warfare branch of the Revolutionary Guards said that although senior officials in Telegram had agreed to remove the option to send immoral stickers via app, it was still possible to use it for distributing content that could harm national security or the sanctity of Islam.<sup>24</sup> The authorities did not stay content with just the warnings, and launched a wave of arrests targeting administrators of channels on Telegram. By mid-November more than twenty administrators had been arrested and accused of disseminating “immoral” content via the network.<sup>25</sup>

Subsequently, Iranian media reported in December 2015 that a “smart filter” was being used to disqualify specific messages that include predefined, prohibited content. Iranian web users have testified that attempts to send messages including certain words or phrases have failed, and that they immediately received a message saying that the message could not be sent due to local restrictions in their country.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, in January 2016, the Committee to Determine Instances of Criminal Content, which is responsible for the policy on filtering and blocking websites, decided not to completely block access to the app. The Secretary of the Committee, Abdol Samad Khoramabadi, made it clear however that the judiciary retains the right to block the network in the future.<sup>27</sup>

The government’s ambivalent policy toward Telegram reflects an internal political power struggle in Iran. President Rouhani’s government has a relatively liberal attitude towards SNS and advocates removing blockages. This position is contrary to the approach of conservatives, who consider SNS to be tools that Iran’s enemies in the West use for cultural infiltration and espionage. This view was expressed, for example, in an article published in June 2015 by the radical site Mashregh News: “Telegram: Weapon or Software?” The site accused the app of being an “anti-social Zionist network” and claimed that one of the main investors in the company is Israeli-Georgian businessman Mikhael Mirilashvili, who it called a “senior Israeli security official.” The site further accused Telegram of systematically collecting information about network users and then transmitting it to Western intelligence services who use it for “social engineering” of Iranian society. Mashregh called on the authorities to take urgent action to block the “Zionist Internet war” and prevent the exploitation of private information about Iranian web surfers by “the enemies of Islam and Muslims.”<sup>28</sup>



**“Life in Cyberspace”**  
Fars News Agency

The dramatic increase in the use of Telegram, parallel to the ongoing use of other SNS, points to the Iranian government’s failure to curb the infiltration of foreign SNS in Iran. One member of the committee responsible for filtering websites recently admitted that if the authorities

were to prohibit using Telegram, the traffic would simply move to other apps.<sup>29</sup> The limitations imposed by the authorities on SNS and web apps are not only failing to prevent their use, but also improving the ability of Iranians to adapt smoothly to changing constraints, and switch between different networks quickly. The advanced encryption capabilities of Telegram may increase Iranian citizens' sense of security when using it. This might, in the future, result in its increased use for dialogue on issues that are considered politically sensitive, including contacting international users, transmitting messages, and even organizing.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/events/1692702804298037/> #مقاطع انتخابات\_الاتحاد;

<sup>2</sup> 28 October 2015:

<http://www.shafaff.com/article/10436?title3%مصر+طلاب+اتحاد+رئيس+=A>  
[+الانتخابات+محسومة+والطلاب+اختارهم+الامن](#)

<sup>3</sup> For the wording of the announcement by Egyptian universities decrying the decision made by the Ministry of Education, see:

<https://www.facebook.com/TheEgyptianStudents/photos/a.991012257623841.1073741827.990980964293637/991011547623912>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/shabab6april/posts/10154411657968294> #ادعم\_اتحاد\_طلاب\_مصر;

<sup>5</sup> For the petition and signatories, see: <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/supportESu>

<sup>6</sup> 26 December 2015

<https://www.facebook.com/Hamdeen.Egypt/photos/a.251269401623123.59663.125163844233680/927225847360805/>

<sup>7</sup> 28 December 2015 <http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=28122015&id=bbc86d7e-acd0-4501-997a-f71fcb2a9e2>

<sup>8</sup> Noah Browning and John Irish, "Saudi Arabia announces 34-state Islamic military alliance against terrorism", Reuters, December 15, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-idUSKBN0TX2PG20151215>

<sup>9</sup> [https://ia801506.us.archive.org/6/items/frfgerg\\_list\\_10/10.pdf](https://ia801506.us.archive.org/6/items/frfgerg_list_10/10.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://justpaste.it/o562>

<sup>11</sup> <http://justpaste.it/ogmu>

<sup>12</sup> <http://justpaste.it/ohqi>

<sup>13</sup> <http://twitter.com/lsgl9/status/677149504072757248>

<sup>14</sup> وكالة الأنباء الإسلامية حق; <https://dawaalhaq.com/post/32881>

<sup>15</sup> Harel Chorev, Hadas Sofer-Shabtai and Linda Dayan, "Islamic State social networks as an imagined community," Islamic State Media Watch, MDC's Network Analysis Desk, No. 1 (November 2015)

<sup>16</sup> "Firouzabadi's data on Iranian users of Telegram," *Tabnak*, 26 December 2015.

<sup>17</sup> "Interesting data about the use of Telegram in Iran," *Parsine*, 1 January 2016.

<sup>18</sup> 29 June 2015, <https://twitter.com/telegram/status/615503724195278848>

<sup>19</sup> "Communications company cannot use Telegram," *Tasnim*, 5 July 2015; "Iran Denies Censoring the Secure Messaging App Telegram," *Motherboard*, 30 June, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> <https://twitter.com/durov/status/656551981226528768>

<sup>21</sup> "The Ministry of Communications did not block Telegram," *Mehr*, 21 October 2015.

<sup>22</sup> "Communications company: Telegram will not be blocked under this government," *Asr-e Iran*, 21 October 2015

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/durov/status/661975372116922368>

<sup>24</sup> "Revolutionary guards warn some Telegram users," *Alef*, 20 October 2015.

<sup>25</sup> "Managers of 20 Telegram channels arrested," *Iran Daily*, 15 November, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> "Smart screening of the Telegram in Iran," *DW in Persian*, 22 December 2015.

<sup>27</sup> "Blocking Telegram not approved," *Tansim*, 5 January 2016.

<sup>28</sup> "Telegram: Weapon or software?" *Marshegh News*, 19 June 2015.

<sup>29</sup> "75% of Telegram users are Iranian," *Mehr*, 18 November 2015.