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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the December issue of *Beehive*. The articles deal with the responses on Turkish social networks (SNS) to the country's current crisis with Russia and to the process of normalizing relations with Israel; with the offensive against Azmi Bishara on SNS in the Gulf States and its broader implications; and the campaign led by social activists and representatives of the reformist opposition to increase the representation of women in the Iranian Majlis.

Enjoy!

Downing of the Russian Plane and its Consequences: “A Great Miracle Happened There”

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

The downing of a Russian plane that penetrated Turkish airspace on November 24 was the focal point of discussions on Turkish social networking sites (SNS) in recent weeks. The crisis between Turkey and Russia that arose following the incident forced Turkey to re-assess its international diplomatic situation, due to its dependence on Russia for energy (54.76% of Turkish gas comes from Russia), commerce, and tourism.¹ Given its problematic relations with Israel, Egypt, Assad’s regime in Syria, Iran and Iraq, the crisis deepened Turkey’s international isolation. It is against this background that we should understand the messages of reconciliation that Ankara recently began transmitting to Jerusalem. Indeed, Turkey is trying to make the best of a bad situation and its’ “Precious Loneliness” (*Değerli Yalnızlık*; in the sense of preferring Islamic moral values over short-term national interests) in the international arena. It seems that Ankara is beginning to consider Israel’s Mediterranean natural gas as a possible alternative to Russian sources, and that change is being reflected on the diplomatic level. However, discourse on SNS indicates that the new policy can be expected to encounter resistance from citizens of Turkey, and harm the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

The downing of the Russian fighter jet was met with widespread expressions of support on Turkish SNS; the plane was shot down after completing a bombing mission targeting Syrian Turkmen fighters that were battling the forces of Assad (and his Russian supporters) in the Mount Turkmen region of northwestern Syria. Many in Turkey consider the Turkmen population in Syria an integral part of the greater family of Turkish peoples. Users boasted about the downing, stressing that Turkey is neither the Ukraine nor Georgia, and Ankara will not assent to having its sovereignty threatened by Russia. Because the plane was downed on Teachers’ Day in Turkey, many users tweeted, “Turkey taught Russia an important lesson: do not violate airspace borders.” Turkish nationalist activists, who have been collecting money and food for Turkmen fighters for some time, leveraged the wave of anti-Russian sentiments, distributed posters urging Turks to support “their Turkmen brothers” and used SNS to organize protests outside Russian diplomatic missions in Turkey (pictured). Only a few Turkish users expressed reservations about the downing of the plane, and complained that the government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had damaged the country’s relationship with Russia.



Mount Turkman –
A source of pride for Turkey

It is important to note that Russia made extensive use of SNS to deliver messages to the Turkish people, because leading institutional media outlets in Turkey refused to air the Russian version of events. Thus, the official Twitter accounts of the Russian Embassy in Turkey and the Russian Turkish-language news agency Sputnik became the main channels through which the Kremlin sought to influence public opinion in Turkey. Among other things, these accounts sent messages to Turkish users, inviting them to watch the Russian army’s press conference in Moscow. At that conference, the Turkish government was accused of supporting ISIS. While Turkish users who support the opposition retweeted the Russian messages, government supporters called them “cheap, Pravda-style Cold War propaganda.”²

Against the background of the crisis with Russia, Ankara began to reconsider its foreign policy. In retrospect, it may be that the public candle lighting held on the eighth night of Hanukkah in Istanbul’s Ortaköy Square, with municipal sponsorship, was the first sign of a change in Turkish policy towards Israel. For the first time in history, Turkish Jews lit Hanukkah candles in a public space. In the spirit of the holiday, they reported that the event was “a great miracle happening there” (pictured). On SNS, too, this event was widely interpreted as being a first step towards normalization of relations with Israel, after years of decline.



Hanukkah candle lighting near the elaborate mosque in Ortakoy Square

Another clear sign came after Erdoğan’s visit to Turkmenistan, where he tried to promote energy projects that could be an alternative to dependence on Russia. Upon returning home, he sent Israel a conciliatory message: “Rapprochement between Turkey and Israel is crucial for the entire region.”³ A spokesman for AKP, Ömer Çelik, even declared, “There is no doubt that the State of Israel and its people are friends of Turkey.”⁴ This newly positive attitude is apparently an outgrowth of the administration’s aspiration to expand the sources of energy available to Turkey, making Israel’s gas reserves something to be wooed. However, in order to avoid political damage, the Turkish government is concealing this new foreign policy for now. Its supporters avoided addressing the issue on SNS, as did government-affiliated newspapers. In contrast, opposition supporters flooded SNS with strong criticism, emphasizing that relations with Israel were being improved even though there was no change in the status quo in Gaza. Supporters of the AKP also voiced criticism, particularly of the statement made by the party spokesperson, claiming that Çelik had expressed his personal view and nothing more. On the other hand, some justified normalization with Israel on the grounds that it served Turkey’s national interests.

In summary, the Turkish discourse on SNS shows that the growing tension in relations with Russia following the downing of the plane did not put a significant dent in support for President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. In contrast, the mood on the networks shows that cautious reaching out to Israel is received with mixed feelings by supporters and opponents of the government alike. Erdoğan and his colleagues are aware that this issue is sensitive, and without the problematic geopolitical situation of Turkey and the worsening crisis with Russia, they probably would not have made such a move. Indeed, they dared to take it only after the general election, when their political position was secure. Either way, contrary to the standard dogma that supposedly dictates the course of Turkish diplomacy, on which Davutoğlu bases his philosophy (and his book *Strategic Depth*), it seems that Turkey is now forced to change its colors like a chameleon, in response to circumstances.

Unwanted Guest? SNS Campaign against Azmi Bishara in the Gulf

Dr. Nachum Shiloh

Since former MK Dr. Azmi Bishara fled Israel in 2007 to avoid arrest for aiding Hezbollah during the Second Lebanon War, he has been moving from one Arab capital to the next. During this time he has lectured on topics related to Israeli politics and the Israeli-Arab conflict, served as a commentator on Israeli affairs for several Arab television stations, and written columns in Arabic newspapers. For several years, Bishara has been living in Doha, the capital of Qatar, where he directs the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and serves as an advisor to the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. There are those who think that Bishara, who is a Christian and now a Qatari citizen, is the most powerful person at Al-Jazeera.

While in Doha, Bishara has often been the subject of attacks from various parties in the Gulf, but the media campaign against him has moved up a level in recent weeks. Among his harshest critics is General Dhahi Khalfan Tamim, a former commander of the Dubai police who was in the limelight following the assassination of Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh. Known for his unbridled tongue, he was once demoted for making improper statements against various parties in both the UAE and the larger Arab world. Khalfan attacked Bishara in response to the latter establishing the satellite news channel Change (Al-Taghir) that broadcasts from London, with assistance and funding from Qatari authorities. “Bishara is a pet of the Israeli Mossad,” tweeted Khalfan, adding that Al-Taghir is nothing but a tool designed to foment civil war (*fitna*) in the Arab world, and damage the Gulf States and Egypt. Khalfan further tweeted that the younger generation of the Gulf States must act, and rise up against all the “servants of evil” in the Arabian Gulf, such as the “mercenary Azmi Bishara.” He urged the latter to leave the Gulf and “return to Palestine.”⁵ At the climax of the campaign during December 2015, Khalfan tweeted dozens of statements against Bishara, and used the Twitter survey platform to inquire about attitudes towards him. More than 3,300 people participated in the survey, of whom nearly 80% expressed agreement with the statement that Bishara is “terrorist,” an “enemy of the Gulf” and an impediment to their security (pictured).



A Twitter survey on Khalfan’s account: 76% agree that Bishara is a “terrorist,” while only 10% believe that he is “the right man in the right place,” and 14% lack a strong opinion on the subject.

The offensive Khalfan initiated against Bishara on social networking sites (SNS) is not surprising. Like other senior officials in the United Arab Emirates, Khalfan despises the rulers of Qatar and frequently denounces their positions, particularly their support for the Muslim Brotherhood,

which is considered a destabilizing opposition force in most Arab countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The statements made by Khalfan apparently reflect the views of the UAE's leaders, who prefer to use him as a transmitter for their messages in order to avoid direct confrontation with the leaders of Qatar. Even the media coverage of the Arab world on Al Jazeera comes under their criticism, as a result of the rulers of Qatar using the channel to goad Arab governments, especially those who have taken determined action against political Islamic movements in their countries, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

Further analysis of the discourse on SNS in the Gulf shows that strong criticism of Bishara is widespread, and even expressed by many in Qatar. In September 2015, Abdullah al-Mulla, an independent Qatari media personality, wrote on Twitter that the number of Qatari citizens tweeting attacks at Bishara was multiplying. Al-Mulla added that he “respects the rich experience and struggle of Bishara, but his re-invention plan [meaning Bishara’s plan to make the Arab states independent, democratic and free from dependence on the great powers] should be adapted to the Qatari character.” Al-Mulla’s words were retweeted by many users in Qatar, including Sheikh Suhaim bin Mohammed al-Thani, from the Qatari ruling family, who is a researcher at the Bishara’s research center in Doha.⁶

Digging into Qatari SNS reveals many opposition elements in the small emirate who want to harm Bishara. On September 4, 2015, an opposition supporter who calls himself “Hammad Al-Kuwari – a free Qatari” published an image of a burning car with the caption: “Shots fired at Azmi Bishara’s car in Doha, near Jawazat Bridge. The criminals fled in a Land-Cruiser” (pictured). Although Al-Kuwari referred to the perpetrators as “criminals,” and did not make any explicit statements attesting to his opposition stance, the fact that he shared the picture suggests that he is not among Bishara’s supporters.⁷ This is, therefore, another example of “low key” opposition activity, for which SNS are the main – if not the only – platform where these ideas can be expressed.



A month before that event, on August 2, a Twitter account in the name of “The Qatari Free Army” (*Al-Jaysh Al-Qatari Al-Hurr*) appeared. Its “Message Number One” on the establishment of the organization, stated its goal as liberating Qatar from the clutches of the United States, and that its first act was the kidnapping of Azmi Bishara.⁸ Bishara, of course, was not kidnapped and certainly not “freed through American mediation,” as the Qatari Free Army tweeted the next day. The Twitter account functioned for only a short time, and it is not clear whether such an organization was actually established, or whether someone opened the account for a brief time for propaganda purposes only. However, the selection of Bishara as the first target

suggests that there are groups in Qatari society, even if they are marginal, who consider him a full partner in an illegitimate regime. It must be said that the focus of the Qatari opposition on Bishara is not only the result of their opposition to him *per se*, but also – and perhaps primarily – because these groups prefer, for their own reasons, not to confront the authorities directly. Bishara, as a Christian, pan-Arabist and effectively a visitor in Qatar, is a much easier target.

Discourse about Azmi Bishara crosses spatial boundaries in the cyberspace of the Persian Gulf. Months before Dhahi Khalfan launched his campaign against him, Bishara was already a topic of discussion in the Egyptian media. Newspapers sympathetic to the regime of President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, such as *Al-Yawm Al-Sabi* spared him no criticism or scorn. They claim that Bishara effectively controls Al-Jazeera, and played a key role in driving a wedge between the leaders of Qatar and the Egyptian army and security forces after the revolution of January 2011. Readers' comments on these articles left no doubt; even some Egyptians consider Bishara someone who betrayed the Palestinian people and sold the struggle for money. For them, Bishara abandoned the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in favor of a life of ease; now he is nothing more than a puppet in the hands of the rulers of Qatar, meddling in the internal affairs of other Arab countries.⁹

In summary, the campaign against Azmi Bishara on SNS is not simply propaganda targeting a single individual; rather, it is multi-faceted. It firstly reflects the tensions between Qatar and the other Gulf states, and how none of the Gulf rulers want a direct media confrontation with the Qatari leaders at this time. Secondly, it demonstrates how frightened the Gulf states and Egypt are of the Muslim Brotherhood and the influence of Al-Jazeera. Finally, it opens a window on how the Qatari opposition functions, and shows that it lacks, at least for the time being, the ability and (probably) the willingness, to confront the rulers of Qatar directly.

Campaign to Increase the Representation of Women in the Iranian Majlis

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In late October, a few dozen Iranian social and women’s rights activists launched a public campaign designed to significantly improve the representation of women in parliament (Majlis), ahead of parliamentary elections expected on February 26, 2016. Only nine women (out of 290 members) serve in the current Majlis. The largest representation of women after the Islamic Revolution was in the fifth Majlis (2000-1996), which had fourteen female members.

The announcement launching the campaign stated that increasing the representation of women in the Majlis is necessary in order to fight discrimination against women in Iranian law. It further noted that it is despicable that only three percent of the representatives in the Majlis are women, particularly as the number of women in parliaments around the world is rising steadily. The campaign, entitled “Struggle to change the masculine face of the Majlis,” aims to help elect at least fifty women who support gender equality. To this end, it initiated a variety of political and PR activities, including encouraging women to submit their candidacy in the elections, promoting the inclusion of women on the candidate lists of various political factions, and supporting and endorsing the election campaigns of female candidates who support gender equality.¹⁰ On December 8, the campaign's activists held a conference at Tehran University on the changing status of women in Iranian parliamentary history.¹¹ During the conference, the Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, Shahindokht Molaverdi, expressed support for having reserved seats for women in the Majlis, and said that worldwide experience proves that this step has a positive impact on the promotion of women’s rights.¹²

Social networking sites (SNS) occupy a central place in the management of the campaign. At the outset, the founders launched a website, a Facebook page and a Twitter account for the campaign,¹³ which publish regular updates about public activities and the regular interviews activists give to the media. Moreover, with the aid of shared posts and photos illustrating discrimination against women in Iran, the campaigners hope to raise public awareness of the issue. Another campaign with a similar goal, named “Women Vote for Women” was launched by activists affiliated with the reformist opposition in Iran. It also makes extensive use of social networks for information purposes.¹⁴



“Struggle to change the masculinity of the Majlis”

From the Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/women4parliament/>

Through this new campaign, activists appeal to citizens, especially women, and call for them to support the candidacy of women committed to equality.

The campaign is led by women's rights activists, who oppose "the male monopoly" in Iranian politics and who present increasing the representation of women in the Majlis as a prerequisite for ending discrimination against women. Some emphasize that it is insufficient to call for electing women to Majlis. Rather, it is necessary to ensure that the women elected advocate gender equality.¹⁵ In an interview, one activist contended that low representation of women in politics is a sign of a backward country. She noted that although there has been progress in the participation of women in society, the economy, education and health services after the Islamic Revolution, their participation in the political arena is still very low, despite the growing number of women graduating from academic institutions.¹⁶

The campaign launch sparked lively public discourse about women's rights in Iran generally and their political involvement in particular. Debate on the subject quickly took on a political tinge when activists affiliated with the moderate reformist camp in Iranian politics sided with the initiators of the campaign, while elements associated with the conservative right criticized it. Its supporters include two former presidents, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, who expressed support for increasing political involvement of women and improving their representation in the Majlis.¹⁷ Conversely, conservative right-wing elements criticized the campaign, stressing that its founders were inspired by feminist, Western concepts and driven by a political plan for a reformist take-over of Majlis. Women identified with the conservative establishment in Iran, like the Vice Chair of The Women's Social-Culture Council, joined the critics, claiming that the campaign reflects the "enemy infiltration into the field of women and the family."

The debate over the entry of women into politics provoked mixed reactions among users of social networks (SNS) and news sites. Some users support increasing women's political involvement, while others expressed a conservative approach with respect to their role in society. On the Alef news site, one user argued, for instance, that it's wrong to believe that it's possible to compete in the international arena in the 21st century, when the role of women is limited to sleeping late and preparing soup for their husbands. Another user said that as long as there is discrimination against women, there is no alternative but to allocate reserved places in Majlis for women, so they can advance their own status. Yet others insisted that women should be involved only in matters related to the management of home and family. A few even claimed that women working outside of the home leads to negative social consequences, such as increased divorce rates.¹⁸

The campaign to increase women's representation in the Majlis is part of a larger, multi-year campaign in Iran to amend legislation that discriminates against women in various fields,

including their legal status, rights in the areas of marriage and divorce, integration in the labor market, and the enforcement of hijab. A large part of the struggle is being conducted on SNS, because human rights and civil society activists understand that cultural and social changes are a necessary condition for political and legislative changes. Therefore, they consider it crucial to increase public awareness of these issues through comprehensive, online public relations activities.

¹ “Doğalgaz Piyasası Sektör Raporu”, T.C Enerji Piyasası Düzenleme Kurulu [Natural Gas Market Sector Report, Republic of Turkey Energy Market Regulation Council], Ankara, 2015.

http://www3.epdk.org.tr/documents/dogalgaz/rapor_yayin/DPD_RaporYayin2014.pdf [Accessed: December 21, 2015]; “Türkiye-Rusya ekonomik ilişkileri,” [Turkish-Russian Economic Relations] *Official Website of Republic of Turkey’s Embassy in Moscow* <http://moskova.be.mfa.gov.tr/ShowInfoNotes.aspx?ID=219659> [Accessed: December 21, 2015]; İlk darbe turizmde: En büyük Rus turizm şirketlerinden biri turlarını durdurdu” [Tourism suffers the first strike: One of biggest Russian tourism operators stopped launching tours], *Diken*, November 24, 2015. <http://www.diken.com.tr/ilk-vurgun-turizmde-en-buyuk-rus-turizm-sirketlerinden-biri-turlarini-durduruyor/> [Accessed: December 22, 2015]

² Pravda was the official newspaper of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union from 1918 to 1981; “Davutoğlu: “Pravda Palavralarına Kimse İtibar Etmez””, *Haberler*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.haberler.com/davutoglu-pravda-palavralarina-kimse-itibar-etmez-7934001-haberi/> [Accessed: December 22, 2015]

³ Erdoğan: Türkiye-İsrail yakınlaşması hayati önemde”, *Aktif Haber*, December 14, 2015 <http://www.aktifhaber.com/erdogan-turkiye-israil-yakinlasmasi-hayati-onemde-1274369h.htm> [Accessed: December 21, 2015]

⁴ “Çelik: İsrail devleti ve halkı Türkiye’nin dostudur”, *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2015 <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/celik-israil-devleti-ve-halki-turkiyenin-dostudur> [Accessed: December 21, 2015]

⁵ The Twitter account of Dhahi Khalfan Tamim https://twitter.com/dhahi_khalfan

⁶ <https://twitter.com/SuhaimAlThani>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/alkuwarifredm/status/639832934518624256>

⁸ www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2015/08/02/752475.html

⁹ <http://www.youm7.com/story/2015/6/5/%D9%86%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B7-%D8%B9%D8%B2%D9%85%D9%89-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%B6%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%82-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD/2211715>

¹⁰ Campaign for changing the masculine face of Majlis <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1LR-DAtWysthBmOeZBcRn6ioNFnU0kDtFteQUReNOF08/viewform>.

¹¹ “Report from the conference on the history of women in the Iranian Majlis,” *Kalemeh*, November 11, 2015.

¹² <http://www.women4parliament.org/>; <https://www.facebook.com/women4parliament/>; <https://twitter.com/equalparliament>.

¹³ <https://twitter.com/VoteWomenCamp>, <https://www.facebook.com/VoteWomenCampagin?rdr=p>.

¹⁴ “What do women want in the 10th Majlis,” *Kayhan*, November 30, 2015.

¹⁵ “Women’s participation in politics is a need, not a worry,” *Aftab Yazd*, December 8, 2015.

¹⁶ “Reserving places for women: From the daughters of Hashemi to the Vice President,” *Fars*, October 29, 2015.

¹⁷ “Founders of the campaign to change the masculinity of the Majlis are an enemy influence on women’s issues,” *Dana*, November 30, 2015.

¹⁸ “Reserving places for women on electoral lists: feminist or reformist?” *Alef*, December 3, 2015.