



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 Middle East Social Media Analysis Desk is happy to present a special double issue of Beehive to mark two years of publication. This issue analyzes the discourse on Palestinian social networks in response to the terrorist attacks of the last month; reviews the moods on Saudi and Iranian SNS after the Hajj tragedy in Mecca in last September; follows the political strife in Turkey and the role of SNS in inciting turmoil; discusses consumer boycott of Iranian-made cars, which is one of the socio-economic consequences of the nuclear agreement; and examines the Garbage Protest in Lebanon, and its political consequences.

Enjoy!

Responses, Incitement and Organization on Palestinian SNS In Connection to the Recent Escalation

Dr. Harel Chorev and Moran Levanoni

The ongoing attacks in Israel and events on Palestinian social networking sites (SNS) in recent weeks are closely interrelated. The SNS, particularly Facebook (the most popular network among Palestinians) express the genuine fury and activist polemic now prevailing among Palestinians. The intensity characterizing this discourse goes far beyond the fury that was previously saved for grim incidents during the civil wars in Syria and Yemen. Moreover, it has disrupted the passive, fatalistic belief – that the only real hope for the Palestinian situation comes from Allah, not humans – which characterized the discourse on Palestinian SNS until recently. Yet SNS are not limited to seemingly passive reflection of moods. Rather, they are also a platform for active forces – in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel, and abroad – who use them to further inflame tempers. These users encourage translating online fury into real action in the streets, whether by individual attackers or through confrontations with Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). SNS play a key role in the organization and management of events.

In Israel the general understanding is that the current escalation began with the murder of Alexander Levlovitz, who was killed by rocks thrown at his car on September 13. As reflected on SNS, Palestinians place the turning point a bit later, in the wake of the stabbing attacks carried out by Mohannad Rafiq Halabi from al-Bireh, who murdered Rabbi Nehemia Lavi and soldier Aharon Bennett, and by Fadi Alwan of Issawiya, who stabbed a 15-year-old boy. When the attacks became known, Facebook pages were established in memory of the two terrorists,¹ on which users wrote both messages of condolence and calls for revenge on the pages' timelines. Conspicuously, many writers abandoned the caution normally characteristic of Palestinian users who fear a reprisal from Israeli and Palestinian security forces. This time, they gave expression to their worst feelings.



Thus, it took only hours for the relatively calm situation to be transformed, and SNS were flooded with calls for martyrdom (*istishhad*) and a new intifada. This response was evident in the use of hashtags including “the intifada has begun” and “Jerusalem resists” (*Al-quds tatqawam*),² and calls like the one posted by Issam, a student of

civil engineering from Gaza, who wrote: “What, other than revolution, can liberate my land?”³ Images of Halabi and Alwan were symbols that played a clear role in intensifying the discourse. A picture of Halabi kissing the head of Diaa Talahami went viral; Talahami was a friend’s father and Islamic Jihadist from al-Dura who was killed by IDF fire on September 21 after throwing an explosive device on a military jeep at Harsa junction. The image was widely distributed as a portent of things to come, demonstrating the Halabi’s membership in the “family of sacrifice.”



From the timeline of the page in memory of Mohannad Halabi: Teens preparing petrol bombs.

In addition to messages accompanying images of the two terrorists, calls for action, as well as reports – some fabricated – describing confrontations between Palestinian security forces and settlers, were uploaded to SNS and special purpose apps (like the Hamas-affiliated Quds TV), which were revitalized when the situation escalated. These reports have three goals: 1) incitement with the purpose of igniting the fiery atmosphere; 2) guidance for initiating

attacks, such as “this is the most effective way to stab a Jew to death” (instructions on the most vulnerable parts of the body, how to coat the knife with poison, etc.); and 3) an uncensored means of communication for multifaceted discourse which could direct demonstrators to specific points of active confrontation with Israeli security forces, and a means of reacting to those events. These features of SNS make it advantageous for organizations like Hamas whose terror infrastructure has been systematically dismantled, as well as the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, who are attempting to lower the profile of their incitement activities in order to avoid problems with Israeli law enforcement agencies.

Participants in Palestinian discourse frequently call for security forces of the PA to join the resistance against Israel, and for increased action from the irregular field forces of Fatah (Tanzim/Al-Aqsa Brigades), Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and others.⁴ The writers occasionally include active-duty personnel serving in the Palestinian security forces, for example Mohamed al-Karnaz, who shared a photograph of PA security forces deployed in the al-Fawar refugee camp outside of Hebron, seemingly refusing to evacuate the camp as long as IDF forces were threatening it.⁵

The present reality places the PA in a difficult position. On the one hand, the PA is not interested in losing control of the situation, and is well aware of the devastating consequences that would have for both the Palestinian populace and the PA itself. It is alert to the fact that Hamas is behind some of the events (for example, the murder of Eitam and Na’ama Henkin, z”l) and the incitement that preceded them. Aware that

Hamas has been trying for years to undermine the PA's control of the West Bank, the Authority thus takes measured, preventive steps to keep the situation from descending into anarchy similar to the second Intifada, and continues its effective cooperation with Israeli security forces.

On the other hand, the PA, and Abu Mazen more specifically, are attempting to maintain their relevance to the general Palestinian populace, which is quickly eroding. Consequently, the PA's rhetoric and diplomacy has been filled with condemnations towards Israel, in an attempt to display a unified Palestinian front. This approach can be seen both in conventional media and on SNS. For example, the Facebook page of a Palestinian television network has recently uploaded a report showing IDF soldiers accompanied by dogs conducting searches, and pictures of the destruction that occurred, it claims, as a result of Israeli searches in Nablus. The page also frequently posts pictures of the Dome of the Rock, which has been a central motif in the current escalation, accompanied with the caption "Always in our hearts."⁶ Not advertised, however, are the PA's actions on the ground in attempting to find an outlet for the pressure, whilst maintaining a certain level of control over the actions of their regular factions. In the case of the Fatah-identified Tanzim, this is also important for reinforcing the informal relationship between the PA and the "street". However, the loud presence of Tanzim, accompanied by their heavy fire in the streets of Hebron, Ramallah and Nablus has increased significantly in the recent past, and is well-documented in videos that are uploaded to SNS.

It should be emphasized that alongside the inflammatory remarks and calls for attacks and an uprising, other young people continue to post messages that express the same thoughts that have long been dominant on Palestinian SNS; a longing for routine and normality. Expressions of this type are apparent in the happy selfies, ordinary greetings and, optimistic descriptions of the beauty of nature that they upload. For example, the Facebook page of Zuhour Mayyaleh, a social activist from Sur Baher, one of the villages most conspicuous in the current escalation, shows a calm pastoral view through the vineyards on the way from Jerusalem to Hebron, which she writes remind her of similar trips in the United States.⁷

In conclusion, there is a clear correspondence between events in the field and discourse on Palestinian SNS. The advantages of SNS and smartphone-based apps as effective, inexpensive and user-friendly ways to close gaps in operational capabilities have become clearly evident during the current escalation. However, other contemporary examples of online revolutions – the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia and even the cottage cheese protests in Israel – should remind us that the burst of high energy that characterizes protests in which SNS played an important role is also its weak point. Protests in which SNS play a significant role tend to lack

leadership, or have many leaders. Either way, the result is the same. The protest loses its ability to maintain itself in the long-term because it lacks effective organization. Unless institutionalized Palestinian organizations take control of the uprising (including those that are established on an *ad hoc* basis, as in the first Intifada) it is unlikely that the current escalation will survive in its current format. Even so, this is not necessarily a positive; we run the risk that the current model could also be replaced by a more serious escalation.

Hajj Tragedy in Mina – Saudi SNS in the Service of the “Great Game” against Iran

Dr. Nahum Shiloh

On September 24, 2015, a major tragedy took place at the Mina pilgrimage (*Hajj*) site in Mecca. Hordes of pilgrims were trampled or choked to death as they surged towards the site where the annual stoning of Satan ritual takes place. As of writing, approximately 1100 deaths have been reported, with 900 people injured and nearly 1,000 missing. This tragedy occurred two weeks after the previous disaster in Mecca when a crane collapsed on the side of the large mosque, part of the Kaaba compound, causing the death of 111 people and the injury of 394 others.⁸ The large number of Iranian pilgrims who were killed and injured in this disaster (as of this writing, 464 killed and 46 injured) led to a highly publicized confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This dominated the discourse on social networking sites (SNS), managing to over-shadow discussion of the failings that caused the tragedy.



Saudi Foreign Minister: Iran is taking advantage of the tragedy in Mina to settle diplomatic accounts and encouraging rioting during the Hajj.

Even though King Salman bin Abdulaziz maintained a thundering silence on his Twitter and Facebook accounts, and made no comment on the tragedy there,⁹ senior Saudi officials did utilize SNS considerably in the wake of the calamity. Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir used his Twitter account to put across three main messages: First, the Saudi authorities do a great deal for the pilgrims and will continue to do so; second, the investigation ordered by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef will be extremely thorough and all parties responsible for the tragedy will be held to account; and third, Iran, which is issuing an outcry and placing responsibility for the tragedy with the Saudi authorities, is merely taking advantage of human suffering to settle diplomatic scores with Saudi Arabia, and is inciting its pilgrims undergoing the pilgrimage. The behavior of Iran, according to al-Jubeir is consistent with its destructive activities throughout the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Yemen.¹⁰

The primary media outlet for the Saudi regime, al-Arabiya television network, used its presence on social networking sites to substantiate the claim that the major cause of the tragedy was the ruinous, unrestrained behavior of Iranian pilgrims. Video segments with diagrams and explanations uploaded to its Facebook page seemingly



showed how Iranian pilgrims rushing towards the stoning site did not follow the designated routes, and disregarded guidelines and instructions of the Saudi security forces [pictured].¹¹

Iranian SNS did not remain indifferent to events in Saudi Arabia.¹² Senior officials, led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, used their Twitter and Facebook accounts to ferociously attack the royal House of Saud. In tweets published on his English and Arabic language accounts, Khamenei demanded that Saudi Arabia take responsibility for the tragedy, and even sent a harsh threat of an Iranian response if the Saudi authorities showed any disrespect towards the tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims, and did not fill their responsibilities in returning the bodies of the deceased to Iran.¹³

Beyond the official response, Iranians used SNS to express their shock at the tragic death of pilgrims, and accused the Saudi authorities of negligence that caused the disaster. Users uploaded pictures and videos from the site of the tragedy to Facebook and Twitter, shared anti-Saudi caricatures that were published in the Iranian press, and created disparaging hash tags targeting the Saudi authorities, including: “Death to the House of Saud,” “Saudi Arabia kills pilgrims” and “Negligent House of Saud.” Users also demanded that the heads of the Saudi government be brought to international justice, and called for a boycott of pilgrimages to the holy sites in Saudi Arabia. User responses even included expressions of hostility and racism towards Arabs, using slurs common among Iranians such as “lizard eaters” and “dirty Arabs.”



Official and semi-official religious establishments in Saudi Arabia also participated in the online discourse following the tragedy. It is particularly worthy to note the response of Sheikh Dr. Mohamad al-Arefe, a cleric known for his extreme positions who sometimes confronts the authorities, and sometimes falls in line with them. Al-Arefe is extraordinarily popular in Saudi Arabia specifically, and in the Islamic world in general, as seen in the fact that he has 13 million Twitter followers and 19 million fans on Facebook. Al-Arefe claimed that meeting death in a place holy to Islam, and especially during the Satan stoning ceremony in Mina, is the most noble type of death that a believer can ask for himself. Therefore, someone who dies during the Hajj has fulfilled the commandment of pilgrimage to its utmost degree. This statement, which redirects the feelings of mourning and anger in a positive direction of religious development and making peace with faith and God’s will, went viral on SNS, helping the Saudi authorities avoid responding to the demands that they take responsibility for the tragedy.¹⁴

Severe criticism of the way in which Saudi authorities behaved before during and after the tragedy in Mina was indeed expressed on SNS, but it seems that it mostly came from users living abroad, rather than in Saudi Arabia. This was particularly conspicuous in the responses of Saudi Shiite religious leaders. Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, considered a leader of the Shiites in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, talked in circles around the tragedy, and his Facebook page ignored it altogether. Conversely, Sheikh Ali al-Ibrahimi, who is from the eastern province but now seems to be living in either Iraq or Iran, attacked the Saudi authorities with a vengeance. In an interview given to an Iranian journalist and quoted on SNS, al-Ibrahimi claimed that the tragedy was nothing other than a massacre the Saudi government had planned in advance, and that the king is not truly “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques” (i.e., Mecca and Medina), but rather a traitor to them. Therefore, international intervention was necessary to protect future pilgrims.¹⁵

The non-religious Saudi opposition in Western countries also responded to the tragedy on SNS. A well-known anthropologist living and teaching in England, Madawi Al-Rasheed, used her Twitter account to attack the Saudi authorities for not taking responsibility for the tragedy, and added that the development of the Hajj complex undertaken supposedly for the benefit of the pilgrims were actually intended to enrich members of the royal family.¹⁶ Immediately thereafter the journalist and member of the Saudi opposition, Ali al-Ahmed of the Institute for Gulf Affairs in Washington tweeted: “If the Saudi Arabian authorities were innocent in the Mina tragedy they would invite the United Nations and the countries from which the deceased pilgrims came to join in the investigation of the events.”¹⁷

Overall, the discourse about the tragedy in Mina on Saudi SNS was largely dictated by the “great game,” namely the geopolitical and religious rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Government officials therefore found themselves in the same camp as the official and semi-official religious authorities, and even liberal and opposition groups within the kingdom preferred to keep a notable silence. It remained for the overseas opposition to be the sole online voice in articulating genuine criticism of the government on SNS.

The Bloody Path to the Ballot Box

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

The previous general elections in Turkey, held on June 7, 2015, did not leave the country with a stable government. The results prevented the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (and the home party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) from maintaining its single-party rule, and it was forced into coalition negotiations. However, a combination of several factors made a coalition impossible: the bitter rivalry between the four largest parties in the Turkish parliament (the conservative AKP, the Kamalist-secularist CHP, the nationalist MHP and the Kurdish HDP); the military's ongoing battle against the Kurdish PKK; and the intensive pressure that Erdoğan exerted on Davutoğlu to hold new elections on November 1, in order to restore single-party rule by AKP. These issues were the focus of a great deal of attention on Turkish social networking sites (SNS).



On July 20, 2015, at the height of the coalition negotiations, ISIS mounted a terrorist attack in the town of Suruç near the Syrian border. The attack caused the death of 32 Turkish civilians, most of them people of Kurdish descent who were on their way to deliver humanitarian aid to the city of Kobani, which was recently liberated from the control of ISIS. The devastating results of the attack place it in the center of Turkish discourse on SNS.

Most users identified with the victims, and in that spirit uploaded pictures of carnations with the hash tag “There is a massacre in Suruç” (pictured).¹⁸ However there was also a minority of Turkish nationalists expressing happiness and satisfaction at the death of the Kurds, using the hash tag “cleansing in Suruç.”¹⁹ The tense atmosphere on SNS worsened after the PKK and the HDP pointed an accusing finger at the Turkish government, whom they insisted were responsible for the attack, due to the fact they willingly ignored the activities of ISIS in Turkish territory. Some SNS users also claimed that Ankara bore responsibility for the attack, on the basis of various several conspiracy theories postulating a covert relationship between the Turkish government and ISIS.

Moreover, against the backdrop of anger on SNS and among Kurds in the street, members of PKK began a campaign of revenge against Turkish soldiers in the southeastern part of the country. The Turkish government responded with a broad military attack on both ISIS and PKK, with most of the fire aimed at the Kurdish group. Reactions on SNS were divided. On one hand, both supporters of the

government and Turkish nationalists expressed satisfaction with the government's response, and many called for an end to the peace process with the Kurds, which began in 2009. Supporters of the campaign also described it as a battle that Turkey is waging not only against PKK and ISIS but also against the countries that are purportedly supplying those two organizations (pictured). On the other hand, Kemalists and Kurds accused president Erdoğan of taking cynical advantage of the policemen's murders, and using them as a pretext for a military campaign designed to earn his party the support of nationalists in the upcoming election, moving him closer to the goal of reestablishing single-party rule in Turkey.



These accusations gathered momentum on SNS, following comments by Pres. Erdoğan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu at a mass rally they organized in Istanbul to mark the dramatic increase in the number of Turkish soldiers killed during the campaign. The rally, an ostensibly non-partisan event organized under the slogan, national event organized under the slogan “One voice against terrorism,”²⁰ quickly became partisan when Erdoğan called on voters “to send local and national representatives to the Turkish parliament.”²¹ Davutoğlu explicitly stated that the public must give the government a single-party mandate and leave the Kurdish party beneath the electoral threshold.²² Supporters of Erdoğan flooded SNS with this call while his opponents accused him of discrimination, and repeatedly claimed that Erdoğan had dragged Turkey into a military confrontation to serve partisan interests. However, it should be noted that in light of the heavy exchanges of fire and many losses, criticism of the government remained limited and relatively moderate. Despite their opposition to the military campaign, many users felt that need to express their identification with the nation, and SNS pages were filled with pictures of Turkish flags and photographs of the victims' funerals.²³

Expansion of the Turkish military campaign to Cizre in the southern Turkish province of Şırnak reignited the debate. Operating under a shadow of strict censorship, the institutionalized media in Turkey gave only superficial coverage to the campaign, again causing SNS to be Turkish citizens' primary channel of information about events. Highly disturbing pictures of death and destruction were circulated on SNS, using the hash tag “Cizre.” Many users, apparently those of Kurdish origin, called the campaign a “massacre.”²⁴ Conversely, Turkish users frequently cast doubt on the reliability of the photographs, claiming that they actually showed the civil war in Syria. (Horrible pictures from that conflict are indeed used on the internet to deceive public opinion about other conflicts in the region, including the one between Israel and Gaza.) Turkish nationalists also



responded defensively to the mass sharing of pictures by dressing the Twitter bird in a PKK uniform and armed with a rifle (pictured).

Against the backdrop of ongoing fighting, the Kurdish party and other non-governmental organizations planned a peace rally for October 10 in Ankara. Tens of thousands of their supporters gathered at the railroad station in the capital, intending to travel to Sıhhiye Square which was secured for the rally.



The state is the killer

However, their plans were disrupted when two suicide bombers exploded near the train station. In one of the largest terrorist attacks in the history of Turkey, 105 people were killed and 441 injured as of the time of this writing.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, SNS were quickly flooded with real-time reports and photographs from the scene. Again many users directed barbs of criticism at national leaders, using hash tags such as “The identity of the killers is known,” and “AKP is a murderer.”²⁶ Their anger also spread to the streets when a mass demonstration filled İstiklal Street in Istanbul, with protestors carrying posters baring slogans that had previously been spread on the Internet (pictured). This was, amongst other things, a clear, contemporary example of the connection between SNS and live action in the streets.

On the other hand, some supporters of the government endorsed the conspiracy theory that the PKK was responsible for the terrorist attack because it wanted to destroy national unity.²⁷ Aside from the mutual exchange of nasty accusations,



Turkish users from across the political spectrum uploaded pictures in remembrance of the attack, and to mourn its consequences. A particularly significant picture was captioned “10.10.15,” and also featured a word play based on the name of the capital city Ankara, which can be divided into “An,” meaning “a moment” and “kara” a synonym for “black,” and was thus displayed to read “a black moment.”²⁸

In conclusion, Turkey is currently experiencing a period of unrest unlike anything in its past. It seems that the instability, both in the government and in the peace process with the Kurds, will continue - at least until the results of the election in early November become known. Until that time, it can be assumed that the relationship between the government and the Kurdish leadership and that of other groups in Turkish society will continue to disintegrate. The expressions of hostility in the institutionalized media and baseless hatred being spread on SNS are likely to further deepen the divide in Turkish society.

Consumer boycott of Iranian Automakers on SNS

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In early August, Iranian internet users of social networking sites (SNS) launched an initiative calling for a boycott of Iran's two largest automakers, Iran Khodro and Saipa, demanding that they lower the prices of their new vehicles, and calling on citizens to favor Western-made cars instead. This is not the first time that a consumer boycott of Iranian automakers has been organized on SNS. In recent years, several users have launched Facebook pages calling for a boycott of Iranian-made cars due to their high cost and low quality,²⁹ but these initiatives never achieved the momentum and significant media coverage that the current protest has managed. It can be assumed that this protest gained such strength in the wake of reports that Western automobile manufacturers intend to resume their activities in Iran, following the nuclear deal and the expected lifting of sanctions.

The automotive industry of Iran, which is the largest car manufacturer in the Middle East, accounts for approximately 10% of GDP. Although the sanctions and the economic crisis hit the industry hard in recent years, it did manage to recover after the interim nuclear agreement was signed in late 2013, and production increased by more than 50%.³⁰ Following the signing of the nuclear agreement in July, European and east Asian automakers have begun exploring opportunities for returning to the Iranian market and establishing manufacturing plants there. If they indeed do this, they can expect to compete not only with the Iranian companies, but also with the inexpensive Chinese automakers who have introduced their cars to the Iranian market in recent years.

The consumer boycott was launched a few weeks ago on Telegram, which is considered the most secure text messaging app for cell phones. It is very widely used by Iranians for whom the network's security capabilities are especially important given the regime's efforts to monitor traffic on SNS. The protest included calls for citizens to avoid buying new locally-manufactured cars until foreign cars are imported into Iran. Many text messages circulated claiming: "Automakers must realize that no one will buy their cars after the sanctions are lifted, and European and Korean cars enter the market." For example, one writer texted that he had planned to replace his car with a new one, but changed his mind because of the boycott initiative.

The protests later spread to users' comments on news sites. Many users complained not only about the price of locally produced vehicles, which are generally in the range of 20-40 million tomans (about \$6,000 to \$12,000), but also about their lower quality. One user wrote that the main problem is that 2015 model cars are sold with

technologies from the 1990s, while another claimed that new cars require repairs within six months because of poor quality parts. Other users expressed doubts about the success of the protest, and one complained that Iranians actually tend to buy when prices rise, and that they would even buy foreign cars at double the price.³¹ Conversely, some responses included calls to extend the boycott to other areas such as housing and food.

In mid-August, the campaign expanded with the launch of a Facebook page “Buying a 0 [km] car is forbidden,” which includes newspaper reports on consumer protests, price comparisons for new cars manufactured by foreign and local companies, and calls for citizens to join the boycott.³²



Buying a 0 [km] car is forbidden

Automakers were left with no choice but to respond to the consumers’ protest, even though they rejected the demand for lower prices. Chairman of the Iran Vehicle Manufacturing Association, Ahmed Nematbakhsh, explained that automobile prices depend on fluctuations in foreign exchange rates so lower prices cannot be expected in the near future, and that prices might rise even further. He predicted that the protests would not affect the consumer car market, given that there is no change in the demand for locally-produced cars. Economic commentators also found the expectation of lower prices in the near future to be unrealistic. According to a leading economist, Sayed Laylaz, current economic conditions make it impossible for foreign companies to produce cars in Iran, meaning that there would be no substitute for those manufactured by local companies. Despite this, he did express understanding for the consumers’ protest and blamed their rage on the conduct of the Iranian automakers in recent years. He said that the manufacturers need to apologize to customers for providing low-quality service and not keeping the promises made before cars were sold.³³

The fact that the protest against the automakers has mostly been conducted using Telegram draws attention to the increasing use of this network in Iran. Roughly five million Iranians use the app, and there was a significant leap in usage last year, mainly due to the technical problems that Iranians encountered using similar cellular-based apps, particularly Viber (which is Israeli in origin).³⁴ The growing popularity of Telegram in Iran was clearly evident in July, following a slowdown in its browsing speed that lasted several weeks and sparked angry reactions from users. In response, Telegram blamed the slow browsing speeds on local suppliers in Iran who, they claimed, were trying to limit traffic on the network.³⁵ For their part, Iranian authorities rejected the claims and denied that they attempted to block use of the network.³⁶

It is too early to assess whether the consumer boycott against the automakers will eventually lead to lower car prices in Iran. However, representatives of local manufacturers report that since the campaign was launched, sales volume has dropped by roughly 50%,³⁷ although it is unclear whether there is a direct link between the two. In any case, after years of being denied easy access to Western-made consumer products, Iranians expect that the lifting of sanctions and return of Western companies to Iran will encourage competition in the domestic market and increase pressure on local manufacturers to ensure lower prices and better quality. This is one of the indirect socio-economic implications of the nuclear deal, of a type that usually does not get heard in the traditional media, which tends to focus on security aspects. Therefore, SNS offer a unique glimpse of the direct impact of the nuclear agreement on the lifestyle of Iranian citizens, while allowing the leaders of the protests to maximize the benefit of the change.

Something Stinks – The Garbage Protest in Lebanon

Dr. Michael Barak

The growing discontent among young Lebanese with the government's incompetence in handling urgent issues facing the country, especially the corruption prevailing among the leadership and the political paralysis that has plagued the country for more than two years,³⁸ reached a new peak in July this year. This time, the crisis focused on the mountains of garbage piled up in southern Beirut. The garbage remained on the streets for a quite a time, as a result of both the major waste disposal site in the area being closed, and of the inability of the Lebanese parliament to resolve the issue. Against the background of the serious health hazard, young Lebanese users initiated protests on `social networking sites (SNS). These soon overflowed onto the street and brought about violent clashes with Lebanese security forces, during which one demonstrator was killed and dozens were injured.

The online protest, which was accompanied by the hashtag “You stink” (“*tal’at rehtkhom*”),³⁹ expressed the mass disgust of Lebanese youth at the heads of state, and drew an analogy to issues in many other areas of Lebanese society (pictured). Thus, in addition to complaints about criminal neglect of residents,⁴⁰ and demands to solve the



sanitation crisis,⁴¹ one user noted, “Garbage doesn’t differentiate between Muslim and Christian, between Sunni and Shiite, between Maronite and Druze.” The protest reflects the distaste for the administration shared by all communities.⁴² Other users expressed their wish for the downfall of “the government of garbage... that doesn’t provide water or electricity.”⁴³ It should be noted that the online discourse was also critical of Lebanese citizens and their political responsibility for the fiasco, as reflected in this tweet: “The Lebanese people today reap the garbage they sowed in the polls.”⁴⁴

Within a short time, the online protest expanded from cyberspace into comprehensive, social-environmental activity. A group of activists organized under the name “You Stink” declared that its members were working on an online fundraiser that aims to raise the equivalent of \$22,000 for a campaign to promote awareness of the importance of protecting the environment, the need for a proper solution to the problem of accumulated garbage, and the obligation to prosecute Lebanese politicians for the illegal waste of public funds.⁴⁵

The garbage crisis has affected the political relations within the country. Some users argued that the driving force behind the campaign is none other than Hezbollah and Iran. For them, even though Hezbollah participates in the current government, it seeks overthrow it, and eventually take control of the country. One user tweeted “After Baghdad, San’aa, Damascus and Tripoli, comes another Arab capital (i.e., Beirut) that will fall into the hands of Shiites.”⁴⁶ Another cynically wrote, “In response to the garbage crisis and in solidarity with the You Stink campaign, Hezbollah will change its name to ‘*Hazab-zabal*’ (The Garbage Party).”⁴⁷ It should be noted, that activists in the campaign were quick to deny these claims, and make it clear that they are working for the benefit of the entire Lebanese people.



After an extensive information campaign, You Stink activists on SNS organized a mass protest rally in Beirut on August 22. The demonstration degenerated into violent confrontations between demonstrators and police, ending with the death of one demonstrator and dozens wounded. Many activists documented the violence on mobile devices, and distributed the evidence on SNS, along with harsh criticism of the intensity of the force that the security forces used against them.⁴⁸ Even in government circles the violence evoked disgust. Jubran Basil, the Lebanese Minister of Foreign and Immigration Affairs and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, tweeted: “What country throws garbage on its people and shoots them when they protest? Haven’t we had enough political garbage in this country? Who will be held responsible for the excessive violence?”⁴⁹

The garbage crisis continues to gain momentum. Since the end of August, activists in You Stink have been leading rallies, demonstrations and hunger strikes, demanding the dismissal of the Minister of Environment, Mohammed Machnouk. The chord that the struggle has struck shows that despite the security threat to Lebanon from ISIS and the effects of the civil war in Syria, Lebanese citizens are also involved in civil protests. SNS have accompanied the campaigns, and played an important role in bringing them to the public’s attention.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.facebook.com/%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A-432122420326675/timeline>
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- ¹¹ [facebook.com/AlArabiya?ref=ts](https://www.facebook.com/AlArabiya?ref=ts)
- ¹² We are grateful to our colleague Dr. Raz Zimmt, for providing the responses to the tragedy found on Iranian SNS.
- ¹³ https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/647357295714811905.
- ¹⁴ See for example <http://vb.n4hr.com/337855.html>;
<https://www.youtube.com/embed/s82V23jgJRc>; <http://www.yanbufuture.com/vb/t695265.html>
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- ¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/alialahmed>
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- ¹⁹ #suructatemizlikvar #suructasenlikvar
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