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The Turkish “Iwo Jima”: The Law of Süleyman Şah Is No Longer the Law of Istanbul

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The tomb of Süleyman Şah (Suleiman Shah, 1178-1227), the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Osman I, is located in a Turkish enclave within Syrian territory. It is the only territory that Turkey holds beyond its borders. Under the Ankara Agreement signed by the Turks and the French in 1921, Turkey has maintained its sovereignty over this anomalous site. Despite the historical importance of the tomb, its location makes it impossible for many visitors from Turkey to reach it. However, the national consciousness always considered the site an integral part of the Turkish homeland.

When ISIS forces took control of the Kobani region and established themselves in the environs of the Syrian Euphrates River, where the tomb is located, the rumors that fighters from ISIS had encircled the site and would likely launch an attack against the Turkish garrison of 36 soldiers stationed there made headlines in Turkey. The pressure on the government in Ankara grew after ISIS published the grim images of the Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh being burned to death in a cage. Moreover, the policy of ISIS, in both Iraq and Syria, of destroying tombs – on the grounds that pilgrimages to shrines have no place in Islam (a familiar Wahhabi concept) –

began to arouse concern in Ankara. Might the Turkish soldiers posted to guard the grave meet a similar fate?

Following the ISIS raid on the Turkish consulate in Mosul on June 11, 2014 in which 49 Turkish diplomats and their families were captured, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan (now president) and then-Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (now prime minister) were criticized for failing to evacuate the compound before raid. The release of the diplomats in September 2014 significantly reduced this pressure, but it seems that the incident changed the perception of Turkish policy towards ISIS.

Western pressure on Turkey to act against ISIS grew after the assassination of Kasasbeh in February. Turkey, which has an interest in supporting the Syrian rebels operating against the Assad regime, signed an agreement with the United States on February 20, 2015. Under the terms of this agreement, the two countries would train and supply all forces who are fighting Assad and ISIS (who are also fighting each other). This firm stance had immediate results on the ground. Only two days after signing the agreement, possibly due to a concrete fear that ISIS would attack the tomb, Ankara decided to relocate the ancient grave to a site adjacent to the Syrian Village Eshme, which is closer to the Turkish border and controlled by Kurdish fighters from the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

In order to be certain that the Turkish public would not perceive the move as a defeat or retreat – especially before the general elections on June 7, 2015 – Davutoğlu and the government worked hard to depict the move using heroic images of a daring operation intended to protect the lives of the soldiers and the tomb itself. Both the mainstream media and social networks (SNS) disseminated pictures of the site of the new tomb, showing soldiers raising a Turkish flag in a manner reminiscent of the famous picture of the American soldiers raising the flag after the conquest of Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima during World War II. As part of these efforts, they also published a picture of Davutoğlu following the operation closely from a monitor-filled war room (see photo), projecting an image that clearly invokes those of President Obama monitoring the Navy SEALs during the operation to assassinate Osama bin Laden. These images went viral among SNS users who support the government, and were captioned “The glorious army, the glorious commander” (According to the Turkish constitution, President Erdoğan is the commander-in-chief of the Turkish army).¹



This propaganda is consistent with the importance of the tomb in the Turkish national consciousness, as embodied by the famous Turkish saying, “The Law of Süleyman Şah is the Law of Istanbul.” However, the operation was greeted by stormy reactions on SNS. Opponents of the AKP accused Erdoğan and Davutoğlu of being unable to defend the homeland (the original tomb in Syria) from a terrorist organization. Some went even further, and speculated that the move could serve as a precedent for further withdrawals in face of Kurdish fighters. The more nationalists users among the government’s opponents were outraged by the transfer of the grave to an area under the rule of Kurdish PYD forces. They argued that the tomb and the soldiers guarding it were relocated to a locale under the auspices of Kurdish fighters whom the government in Ankara considers terrorists. Kemalists users, who are also oppose the current government, accused the Davutoğlu administration of “selling the homeland to a terrorist organization without a shot.”² Another reflection of these opinions can be found in the critical caricatures mocking the government that have been shared on SNS. The most prominent cartoon depicts the government as a trucking company, “AKP Moving” (using the initials the ruling party’s name, AKP), with the slogan, “Moving all types of shrines” (pictured).³



The critical discourse on SNS following the ISIS raid on the Turkish consulate in Mosul and the relocation the tomb of Süleyman Şah indicate a change in the perception of Turkish nationalism, which shows that a large percentage of the people no longer think that “The law of Süleyman Şah is the law of Istanbul.” In other words, the Turkish people are unwilling to sacrifice the lives of soldiers for a purpose that was once considered sacred, including symbolic territory that is important in the Turkish collective memory – the tomb of Süleyman Şah. While the government refused to recognize this trend before the election, it seems that discourse on SNS reflects a process in which Turkish society is changing from a collective stance to a more individualistic one. The government in Ankara does not want to acknowledge this openly, but has internalized the new reality. Therefore, its policy is to stress nationalism while recognizing

the need to evacuate Turkish territory if the situation requires. Thus, its perspective could be defined as “pragmatic nationalism,” which serves the interests of the government in any time of trouble, regardless of its nature. This is also reflected in the peace process with the Kurds. In those negotiations, AKP does not object to the Kurdish demand to change the definition of Turkish citizenship from an ethnic one to a definition that includes all citizens, including the Kurds, whose ethnic origin is not Turkish. If the Turkish constitution would allow this change, it would represent an official reversal of the traditional policy of Turkish governments that have sought to assimilate and integrate the Kurds into the Turkish secular identity. As in the case of moving tomb of Süleyman Şah, this issue can also be seen as a clear retreat by the Turkish government, even though the AKP presents it as a national accomplishment that will end the conflict with the Kurds while maintaining the territorial integrity of the homeland.

Operation “Spider” and the struggle to free Mohammad Yousefi

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In early January 2015, the Iranian cyber police arrested social networking activist Mohammad Yousefi on charges of acting against national security and violating the sanctity of Islam. Sources affiliated with the reformist opposition reported that Yousefi, a twenty-seven-year-old graduate student of engineering at Amir Kabir University in Tehran, was transferred to an isolation wing used by the Revolutionary Guards in Tehran’s Evin prison, where he is under severe mental and physical pressure designed to force him to publicly confess to his alleged crimes. Yousefi is accused of having established fictitious Facebook pages using the names of artists, soccer players, and celebrities to spread content that casts doubt on and ridicules principles of Islam. An announcement published by the Revolutionary Guards following his arrest said that Yousefi was previously arrested by Iranian security forces in December 2009 for using social networking sites (SNS) to incite the riots that broke out after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections. He served five months of a four year sentence in Evin prison, as the Court of Appeals delayed implementation of his sentence for five years, probably because there was insufficient evidence for conviction.⁴



When news of Yousefi's arrest broke in early March, a virtual campaign for his release was launched. Hundreds of Facebook and Twitter users uploaded his details and pictures with the hashtag #FreeMohammadYousefi. Users expressed their support and protested the Iranian authorities' continuing policy of violating freedom of expression. "I hope that someday no one will be arrested on charges of speaking," wrote one user.⁵ Simultaneously, activists launched a Facebook page to provide updates on the arrest and coordinate activities on Yousefi's behalf, including collecting signatures on a petition demanding that the Iranian authorities release him immediately.⁶ The struggle for Yousefi and other internet activists arrested by the Revolutionary Guards peaked on March 11, when Iranian users flooded the Twitter network with hundreds of tweets expressing support for the detainees and condemning the suppression of SNS activists by the Revolutionary Guards.

Yousefi's arrest is a result of the increased efforts of the Revolutionary Guards' recently unveiled "Spider Project" to supervise and restrict SNS. In two press releases, one issued in late January and another in early March, the Revolutionary Guards reported that the Center for Investigating Online Organized Crime had increased its monitoring of SNS, particularly Facebook. According to this press release, the Revolutionary Guards have succeeded in identifying the origins of approximately eight million "likes" on Facebook pages. The goal of the Spider Project is, according to these statements, to make the public aware of the dangers of Facebook and its online crime and immoral activities, in light of the increasing presence of Farsi speakers on SNS.



The implementation of this project has led to the identification and arrest of several SNS activists, including Mohammad Yousefi, who was identified in the press release by his initials only. The Revolutionary Guards claimed that these activists were planning – with the assistance of Western governments – to harm the sanctity of Islam, distribute immoral content, encourage crime, and slander certain people. In the past two years, these activists allegedly launched approximately 350 Facebook pages that were supposedly used to disseminate forbidden content in order to weaken the institution of the family, disseminate “rotten culture,” mock religious beliefs and values, encourage immoral relationships, publish pictures of young women, take advantage of young people, and distribute immoral, anti-religious content on the Internet.

The notice published by the Revolutionary Guards also accused Facebook’s international moderators of intentionally encouraging the criminal use of SNS by opponents of the Islamic Republic, who are fighting its Islamic Iranian character, by hiding their identities. Managers of SNS were also accused of impeding the activity of pages that were launched by people identified with the Islamic Awakening and the Islamic Resistance. The organization stated that it intends to expand its monitoring of online crime in the coming months to encompass additional SNS, including Instagram, Viber, and WhatsApp.⁷

This crackdown by the Revolutionary Guards on SNS is additional evidence of Iran’s ambivalence towards it, which can be explained, *inter alia*, by the internal power struggle between the government of President Rouhani and the conservative religious establishment. Since the presidential elections in the summer of 2013, senior government officials have been striving to change the official policy that limits use of the Internet and SNS, out of the desire to reduce government interference in the lives of its citizens, based on the idea that the principles of the Revolution must be adapted to changing realities. The government’s changing attitude

towards SNS is apparent in officials' increasing awareness of discourse on SNS and their public support for removing legal limitations on its activity. The new government has adopted a relatively liberal position on the subject, and supports easing the blockage of SNS. Minister of Communication Mahmoud Vaezi has declared more than once that the government supports making Facebook accessible to Iranians, contrary to the position of the Committee for Determining Criminal Web Content, which is responsible for screening and blocking Internet sites. The conservative religious establishment and law enforcement agencies continue to support restricting access to SNS, which they consider a tool for the infiltration of Western culture into Iran and an instrument of Western intelligence agencies.⁸

Faced with conservative opposition to removing limitations on SNS, the Iranian government, led by Minister of Communications Vaezi, has recently increased its efforts to launch a "smart filtering" system for websites. This system is intended to allow access to all websites and SNS while preventing access to "immoral" content. Minister Vaezi declared that his ministry lacks the infrastructure necessary to completely filter SNS, and that he intends to introduce a system that allows access to all sites but not to forbidden content.⁹

The Conquest of Sana'a by the Houthis on SNS

Dr. Michael Barak

The decline of Yemen in its civil war, the conquest of Sana'a by the Houthis (a Zaidi Shi'ite minority supported by Iran) in January, and the forced resignation of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur following the conquest stirred agitated responses from users of the social networking sites (SNS) concerning the future of Yemen and its position in the region. This discourse was characterized by dismay and great anger about the Houthis' move and widespread concern about an Iranian takeover of Yemen.

Many users, both within Yemen and without, and especially in the Persian Gulf, used SNS to express anger at the occupation of Sana'a by the Houthi minority, whom they perceive as betraying the unity of the Yemeni people and tearing the homeland asunder. In protest, some added a slogan to their Twitter account: "I am a Yemeni expatriate, the Houthis do not represent me" (pictured). Many users chose to direct their criticism at the former president



of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was overthrown in 2011 after many years of control. These users accused Saleh of collaborating with the Houthis in order to return to power. A Yemeni user noted, "Those fighting with the Houthis today are Republican Guard and Central Security Forces loyal to Ali Saleh. Therefore, they should be called, 'the Afash gangs' [after Salah's grandfather, whose name became a derogatory term to indicate that a person who is not well-liked] and Houthis."¹⁰

A significant portion of the discourse was devoted Saudi Arabia's involvement on the side of the ousted Yemeni government. Curbing the increasing strength of Iran is a primary interest of Saudi Arabia in its struggle for regional hegemony and its effort to strengthen the Sunni axis against the Shi'a. Geopolitically, Yemen has always been Saudi Arabia's "backyard." Therefore, they perceive the rise of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite Houthi regime to be a real threat, primarily to the security interests of Saudi Arabia, both in the immediate region and the broader arena of the Middle East. Many users, both Yemenis and others, stressed the importance of this issue and their gratitude for Saudi Arabia's support, especially in light of Iran's involvement.¹¹ Saudi users argued that present events are part of a historical sequence in which Saudi Arabia has proven repeatedly that it is the only guarantor of Yemen's integrity and security.¹²

Many users have focused on attacking Iran's involvement and responsibility for fanning ethnic strife and exacerbating the rift between Sunnis and Shi'ites. A Yemeni user tweeted that every person who was killed in Yemen, whether they be a Salafi, a Houthi, a reformist, or an ISIS supporter is part of the Yemeni nation regardless of their ethnicity, and the preservation of unity is important.¹³ Another user stressed Iran's responsibility for sowing discord among various groups in Yemen as part of its plan to expand its influence and dominate the Arab Middle East. Indeed, the lively participation of users from the Gulf States in this discourse on SNS exemplifies the significance of the Yemeni issue in the region as a whole. A Saudi user termed it an "Iranian invasion and a widespread process of 'Shi'ization.'"¹⁴ Dr. Abdullah Fahad Al-Nafisi, a professor of political science in Kuwait, tweeted that the Houthis are a fifth column of Iran, and their true headquarters are in Tehran: "Iran conquered an Arab capital in Arabia. There is no inter-Arab conflict [here; rather it is inter-Muslim, MB]. Combating the occupation cannot be achieved by dialogue, only by opposition." Al-Nafisi added that Iran intends to annex Yemen as it did in Iraq, and as Russia did in Crimea.¹⁵ Another user claimed that Iran is trying to replicate the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon in Yemen, while others argue that it is American support for Iran that allows it act so brutally. Faisal al-Qassem, an interviewer on the Qatari Al-Jazeera network, tweeted that American support for Iran stems from its desire to fight ISIS.¹⁶

Many non-Yemeni users from the Gulf states expressed serious concern about the ongoing strengthening of Iran's influence in the region, as Walid Al-Ahmad, an Kuwaiti columnist, tweeted: "The Iranian octopus is coming for you."¹⁷ Other users stressed that "The Houthi are

threatening Saudi Arabia.”¹⁸ In light of this, many users emphasized that the Gulf states must pull together and establish a united front to block this trend. Some tried to promote this by using the hashtag “Global Arab-Gulf front for fighting Shi’ite terrorism.”¹⁹ One Saudi user tweeted that Iranian ships are considered enemy ships and the Yemeni army should therefore attack them.²⁰ Under the hashtag “fighter against Houthis” some users stressed the importance of resistance to the Iranians.²¹ Another Saudi user stressed that Yemen’s Sunni residents will lose out if they do not immediately act against the Houthis and their supporters.²² Other users expressed their wishes with the hashtag “May Yemen be a graveyard for Iranian plans,” and that Iran and its allies would sink in the mud of Yemen, as history proved in the past when Egypt became embroiled in a Yemeni civil war in the early 1960s.²³

The discourse on SNS about the conquest of Sana’a is indicative of the real anxiety and distress felt by residents of the Sunni Arab Gulf states. They see Iran as constantly striving, successfully, to expand its influence. The “swallowing” of Yemen by Iran is, therefore, another link in the chain of Iranian conquests of Arab territory, as were Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, that have become its pawns on the way to regional hegemony. Users of SNS emphasize the urgent need to meet this danger not only with diplomatic action but also through physical force, a belief that almost goes unmentioned in the official channels of traditional media.



Cartoon uploaded to SNS: On the right Nasrallah of Hezbollah, holding the hand of baby “State of Lebanon.” On the left Hussein al-Houthi, leader of the Houthis in Yemen, holding the hand of baby “State of Yemen.” Above the babies, it says “Love of God.”

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- ¹ #ŞanlıOrduŞanlıKomutan
² #VatanYahutSüleymanŞah
³ #AkNakliyatTürbeTaşınır
⁴ <http://www.daneshjoonews.com/archives/17423>.
⁵ <https://twitter.com/maziarajax/status/573768999860744193>.
⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/FreeMohammadYousefi>.
⁷ <http://alef.ir/vdcgy79xxak9nw4.rpra.html?258392>.
⁸ Raz Zimmt, [Revolution at a Crossroads: The Struggle for the Nature of the Islamic Republic](#), *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 17, no. 1, April 2014.
⁹ <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13931121000879>.
¹⁰ #عصابات_عفاش_والحوثي
¹¹ #انا_مغترب_يمني_الحوثي_لايمثلني, #اليمن_سقطت_بيد_الحوثي, #صنعاء_في_قبضة_الحوثيين
¹² https://twitter.com/nagib_alarb999/status/576738364931489793 March 14, 2015.
¹³ #انا_مغترب_يمني_الحوثي_لايمثلني
¹⁴ #اليمن_سقطت_بيد_الحوثي, #انقلاب_الحوثيين_في_اليمن,
¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/DrAlnefisi/status/576635394327859200> March 14, 2015
¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/kasimf/status/573397433440329728> March 5, 2015
¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/Bumbark/status/572868994870345728> April 3, 2015
¹⁸ #الحوثي_يهدد_السعودية
¹⁹ #جبهة_خليجية_عربية_عالمية_لمواجهة_الإرهاب_الشيعي
²⁰ <https://twitter.com/maldhabyani/status/578601741681184769> March 19, 2015
²¹ https://twitter.com/photo_shop_3d , <https://www.facebook.com/groups/696701380447704/>
²² <https://twitter.com/abubader2133/status/> March 21, 2015
²³ #اليمن_مقبرة_المشروع_الإيراني