



THE MOSHE DAYAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AND AFRICAN STUDIES

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We are happy to present the February issue of Beehive. This issue discusses the social protests that erupted in Saudi Arabia over its national epidemic of deadly traffic accidents involving teachers, Erdoğan's efforts to put Turkey at the forefront of the battle against global Islamophobia, and the ongoing protests on Iranian SNS (Social Networking Sites) against the continued detention of opposition leaders. Enjoy!

Isn't the Blood of Saudi Teachers Red? **The Saudi Education Ministry's Reaction to the Death of Teachers in Traffic Accidents as Seen on SNS**

Dr. Michael Barak

"Most of the world dies in bed but in Saudi Arabia we die on the road."¹ This tweet was written by a Saudi physician in response to the dramatic increase in the number of Saudi teachers who were killed in traffic accidents while traveling to work during November-December 2014.² This is indeed a common event, a "national plague" in Saudi Arabia; tens of thousands of teachers, all women, are forced to travel hundreds of kilometers to work in remote locations, far from home and at their own expense, in chartered vans.³

The sharp increase in the number of accidents in recent months has aroused renewed interest in the topic,



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particularly on social networking sites (SNS). From there, the conversation has made its way into the real world. The discourse is characterized by growing resentment at the incompetent way in which the Saudi Ministry of Education is handling the problem, and its discriminatory attitude towards women teachers.⁴ Many users uploaded pictures, videos, and graphs showing alarming statistics on the extent of the phenomenon, and emphasizing that immediate, careful attention must be invested in solving the problem, because the loss of teachers' lives is doing serious damage to the social resilience of the kingdom.⁵ A user from Jeddah wrote: "The meaning of a teacher's death is orphaned children, broken families, damage to education, and above all the loss of life."⁶ Other users listed the forces they believe are the cause of the increasing number of accidents, including the deficient condition of infrastructure and roads, the poorly maintained vans, driving at excessive speeds, and drug use by drivers.⁷

Some women drew a connection between the accident rate and another controversy in recent years, tweeting that if Saudi women were allowed to drive this tragedy could be prevented.⁸ Many users pointed an accusatory finger at senior government officials, particularly the Ministry of Education and former Minister of Education Khalad al-Faisal. One user wrote: "Dear senior official, How many teachers need to die in order to convince you that we are experiencing a crisis and genuine disaster?"⁹ Another demanded that the Ministry of Education consider the blood of



teachers as valuable as the blood of martyrs. Another user from Jeddah tweeted that despite living in a region plagued by traffic accidents, the Saudi princes do nothing to resolve the problem, even though there are solutions available. These include assigning teachers to schools near their homes, arranging transportation through the Ministry of Education, and increasing enforcement, etc.¹⁰ Another suggested that the Ministry of Education allocate resources to construct residences for teachers near the schools where they teach.¹¹ Yet another wrote to the Minister of Education: "We want you to imagine what would happen if your daughter were riding that bus!"¹²

The phenomenon itself was also reported in the establishment media but on a much lower level, as not to anger the regime. Meanwhile, the discourse on SNS was truly heated and the emotional atmosphere eventually managed to move beyond the online arena and come to the attention of senior officials.¹³ For example, some circles in the religious establishment acknowledged the issue and blamed the ongoing tragedy on the Ministry of Education.¹⁴ Last December, the Mufti of Saudi Arabia called on King Faisal to examine ways to contain the

phenomenon. He supported his demand with the claim that the needs of families are being ignored because teachers must rise very early in the morning and spend most of the day away from home.¹⁵ The political establishment also responded strongly to the accidents. Member of Parliament Dr. Amal al-Shaman cast doubt on the suitability of the measures taken by the Ministry of Education to reduce the number of traffic accidents involving teachers. She claimed that most of the ministry's efforts were focused on illusory steps intended only to reduce the amount of media coverage. Al-Shaman demanded that the ministry transfer teachers to positions closer to their homes and treat them respectfully.¹⁶

Teachers' voices were also heard on SNS. One tweeted a message to the Minister of Education: "I am your sister, who works as a teacher. I have diabetes and am a pedagogical supervisor in distant villages in al-Qasam. My husband is threatening to divorce me and my life is about to collapse. If only I could transfer to a position in the city of Medina."¹⁷

After the king's death last month, Minister of Education al-Faisal was replaced by Azzam al-Dakhil, who has connections to the education system. It is likely that one reason for this appointment was the regime's understanding that it would be worthwhile to calm the atmosphere and mollify the critics who took aim at al-Faisal. Many people welcomed the appointment of a new minister, and expressed cautious optimism about his willingness to solve the difficult problem. One user noted that al-Dakhil will be remembered in history if he makes an effort to improve the status of teachers and solves the problem of accidents. Several teachers suggested that al-Dakhil establish a government transport company that would be responsible for providing safe transportation. The new minister's declaration that he would seek a solution for the problem and act to improve the status of teachers reinforced the feeling of optimism.¹⁸

The discourse on SNS shows that the government's response to traffic accidents generally, and to those involving teachers in particular, stirs massive criticism. This is expressed through purely social discourse that, although neither political nor disseminated through official channels, is significant enough to force the Saudi government to respond to an issue it would have preferred to conceal, as evident in the limited coverage of the issue in the establishment media. This again exposes the importance of SNS as a new arena where the government has limited ability to exert control, and one that is capable of forcing the authorities to respond and take action. Now it remains to be seen if the new Minister of Education can indeed meet people's expectations.



**Al-Dakhil and his book
With the Teacher on
importance of teachers
in Saudi Arabia**

Islamophobia: A New Moral Shield

Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

Since the attack on the satirical newspaper, Charlie Hebdo – whose perpetrators allegedly acted in the name of Islam – the proliferation of Islamophobia in the western world has become a central theme on Turkish social networking sites (SNS). Most Turks face no Islamophobia in their daily lives, but do encounter it when they contact European embassies, as when applying for visas. It is important to note that Turkey has been applying for membership in the European Union since 1963, a fact that intensifies the feelings of humiliation and insult when visa applications are rejected. Moreover, according to reports in both the mainstream media and SNS, the massacre Charlie Hebdo exacerbated the situation, causing many Turks' requests to visit Europe to be denied for no reason.

The discourse on SNS shows that many Turks are convinced that they, through no fault of their own, have become victims of increasing prejudice and Islamophobia in Europe. Statements of this kind peaked after it was learned that the French Embassy refused to grant a visa to a well-known Turkish businessman, Sami Kızıldağ, who wanted to take his daughter to Disneyland Paris. Kızıldağ's terse response – "I was ashamed to be a Turk" – seems to epitomize the Turkish sentiment, and has become a widespread protest slogan on SNS.¹⁹ Expressions of frustration in light of the deteriorating image of Islam became more strident after ISIS executed a Jordanian pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh, by burning. Like their reactions to videos of prisoners being beheaded, a vast majority of users strongly condemned the execution of al-Kasasbeh, and many shared pictures of the pilot during a visit to the Old City of Istanbul on their profiles (pictured).²⁰



The Turkish public's opinion of ISIS has never been more negative. A survey conducted in October shows that 92.5% of respondents opposed the organization, with only 4% expressing their support.²¹ This trend is also prominent on SNS: only a few saw fit to praise the execution of the pilot, claiming that he had killed many members of ISIS. The sweeping condemnation of the execution on SNS was accompanied by discussions posing the questions, What is true Islam? Are the actions of ISIS religiously acceptable? Users supported their arguments with quotations from the Koran.²²

The murder of three members of a Muslim-American family in North Carolina on February 10, shocked both SNS and the establishment media in Turkey, further contributing to volatile tempers and discussions of the growing Islamophobia in the West. This feeling was reflected in

the sharply critical remarks of President Erdoğan, who condemned President Obama because the latter was slow to denounce the crime or call it “Islamophobic murder.” The front page of the government-affiliated newspaper Yeni Şafak headlined its report of the murder “Islamophobic massacre.” Erdoğan’s words and an image of the paper’s first page went viral on SNS. In addition to this protest, users complained about the minimal coverage of the murder on international news outlets, compared to their coverage of the killings at Charlie Hebdo. They expressed their frustration by sharing the famous photograph of three monkeys, “Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil” (pictured).²³

In conclusion, the growing influence of Islam in Turkey, the strengthening of anti-Islamic positions in the West, and provocative images distributed by ISIS caused many Turks to call for efforts to improve the image of Islam in world opinion. They were joined by the Turkish government, who wants to present itself as the patron of the entire Muslim world while striving to brand Ankara as a capital representing a tolerant Islam that rejects violence of any kind. As part of these efforts, Erdoğan is attempting to create an equation that defines Islamophobia as a crime equivalent to anti-Semitism. This position has been reflected in many of his statements for a long time; now the government is leveraging the murder of the American students to raise awareness of Islamophobia, bolster its legitimacy, and make it into a weapon that Turkey can wield against anyone it considers an “enemy of Islam.”



“I'm Also a Jerk:” Iranian SNS and the Struggle for the Release of Reformist Opposition Leaders

Dr. Raz Zimmt

The scathing criticism of reformist opposition leaders Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi (who have been under house arrest since February 2011) recently voiced by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, chairman of Iran’s Guardianship Council and a leading conservative cleric, has stirred up a storm on Iranian social networking sites (SNS).

In a speech on February 24, ahead of the 36th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, Jannati called the two opposition leaders and their wives “the four jerks,” and claimed that they want to resume “their incitement,” contrary to the position of the majority of Iranians who reject them. He further added that those calling for their release deserve to be slapped in the face, because the house arrest is a matter of concern for the entire regime – not a partisan political issue about which anyone may express an opinion.²⁴

Only a few hours after Jannati’s controversial declarations were published, SNS users launched a virtual protest. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were flooded with hundreds of responses using the hashtag: “I am also a jerk.” This tag was not a coincidence; rather, it is reminiscent of the “I am also Charlie” slogan that was widespread on SNS following the January attack on the editorial offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris. The campaign also included the launch of a Facebook page, “I am also a jerk,” which accumulated several hundred likes.²⁵

While many users were content to upload content with the hashtag “I am also a jerk,” others expressed their negative opinions of Jannati and their support for the opposition leaders. Some users wrote that if supporting the release of Mousavi and Karroubi had become a criteria for being defined as a “jerk,” they were proud to be jerks. Jannati’s claim that most citizens oppose the release of the opposition leaders was also met with protests on SNS, and many users noted that if everyone who supports the leaders and their release is a jerk, then most Iranians are jerks.²⁶



#I am also a jerk

It seems that Jannati’s remarks reaped bushels of criticism because of their vulgar nature. Many users felt that the use of disparaging language was inappropriate, particularly by a leading religious figure. “It’s better to be a jerk than disrespectful,” wrote one user, and added that if “impure, unhealthy people like Jannati have become the criteria for good, honest citizenry,” he was proud to be a jerk.²⁷ Moreover, the criticism of Jannati – who has been the target of

ridicule in recent years because of his advanced age (88) – quickly became personal and included wishes for his demise.

The criticism of Jannati's comments did not remain limited to SNS, but rather spread to the public domain. Reformist activist Mohammad Kianushrad expressed his dismay that the head of the Guardianship Council had joined the strident criticism against those who support resolving the issue of opposition leaders being kept under house arrest. In his opinion, Jannati's use of vulgar language was a severe blow to the rule of law, and an insult to the citizens, people's representatives, and political leaders who use legal means to call for an end to the house arrest.²⁸ Similarly, the reformist website Bahar News published an article claiming that all Iranian citizens have the right to express their opinion on the house arrest of the opposition leaders, and there was no justification for the vulgar language that Jannati used against the supporters of their release. The article further stated that, contrary to Jannati's claims, their release is supported not only by reformist politicians but also by people close to chairman of the Expediency Council: Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, moderate conservative members of Majlis, and even President Rouhani.²⁹ An editorial published in another reformist website, Saham News, titled "Who is a Jerk?" claimed that the jerks were not those calling for the release of opposition leaders and returning Iran to reason and sanity, but rather those political and religious leaders like Jannati, who forged election results to force President Ahmadinejad and his corrupt allies on the nation, thereby perpetuating their control of Iran's material and spiritual resources.³⁰

This is not the first time that declarations by Iranian leaders concerning the reformist opposition leaders have created a stir on SNS. In December 2013, an online battle was waged between supporters of the regime and its opponents after top government officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, initiated a vociferous PR campaign against the reformist leaders in response to calls for their release, which intensified during Rouhani's presidential campaign. The storm aroused by Jannati's comments is additional evidence of the Iranian public's continued strong sensitivity to the protests of 2009 that were led by Mousavi and Karroubi. The fact that they and their wives have been held under house arrest for four years is an ongoing reminder that the forceful crushing of the protest movement and resulting trauma remain an unhealed wound in the national psyche. The refusal of national leaders to release the opposition leaders, and the hostility that large swathes of the population consequently feel towards the regime, occasionally turn SNS into an arena for warring over the memory of the 2009 protests and their legacy. This is particularly evident due to the fact that SNS in Iran have become an effective tool for the public to disseminate their opinions, unlike the mostly regime-controlled traditional media.

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- ¹ 18.1.15. <https://twitter.com/Naheda2012/status/556764024684023808>
- ² In 2014, 18 women teachers and 90 other women were killed in traffic accidents. In early January 2015, another four teachers were killed. <https://twitter.com/star0o0o/status/553592213590900737>. See also a graph on this subject <https://twitter.com/alsarab28alharb/status/552314739326734337/photo/1/>.
- ³ In 2005, a Saudi study on the subject was published in Arabic. It analysed the issue, and outlined ways for dealing with it http://www.kau.edu.sa/Files/320/Researches/52668_22974.pdf.
- ⁴ #حوادث_المعلمات_إلى_متى
- ⁵ See, for example, a video posted by users, showing farewell messages to a teacher who was killed in a traffic accident: 12.1.15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkNKNV5Xbik>. See also a video documenting traffic violations by a van driver transporting teachers and expressing citizens' protest of the situation 4.1.15 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K76j2EBZ3FI>. Another attempt to increase awareness of the scale of the problem can be found in the Saudi television series "The Teacher's Road" 27.1.15 <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=210361>.
- ⁶ 4.1.15. <https://twitter.com/aybakr/status/551768079433089024>
- ⁷ See, for example, the report of a committee investigating the accidents that found that drivers' use of drugs as the leading cause: 29.1.15 <http://www.makkahnewspaper.com/makkahNews/local/107929.html>.
- ⁸ #حوادث_المعلمات_إلى_متى. #حادث_معلمات_تبوك.
- ⁹ 5.1.15. <https://twitter.com/wlwl2222/status/551940082081341440>
- ¹⁰ 4.1.15. <https://twitter.com/aybakr/status/551764289409650688>
- ¹¹ 23.12.14 <https://twitter.com/57123/status/536618260192452608>
- ¹² 10.1.15 <https://twitter.com/aboabokhaald/status/554013689385193472> . #المطالبه_بإعفاء_خالد_الفيصل_من_التعليم. #وزارة_التربية_والتعليم_تستهتر_بأرواح_المعلمات. #كفاية_غربة_نريدها_كبيرة.
- ¹³ See, for example, <http://www.al-madina.com/node/571394>
- ¹⁴ 26.11.14 <https://twitter.com/Falmotairi/status/537498045617680384>. See the hashtag relating to the Ministry of Education's responsibility for the teachers' death #وزارة_التربية_والتعليم_تستهتر_بأرواح_المعلمات.
- ¹⁵ Al-Hassan, Gharwan. "المفتي" لـ"الفيصل": عيّن المعلمات قرب منازلهن". *SaBQ*, December 7, 2014, <http://sabq.org/wqsgde>.
- ¹⁶ Al-'Ajeeban, Sa'ad. "«حشو».. جلسة رأى أعضاؤها التعليم". *Al-Jazira*, February 11, 2015, <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2015/20150211/ln66.htm>.
- ¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/ahlamab5500/status/562236164497608705> Another teacher wrote a letter to the King of Saudi Arabia saying that she has diabetes and travels 350 km. each day to teach in remote villages, and therefore she requests a position closer to her home. 5.2.15 https://twitter.com/brk_KSA/status/563221613638737920
- ¹⁸ Al-Sakran, Rashid. "د. عزام : سنعطي ملفات النقل وحوادث المعلمات عناية بالغة". *Alriyadh*, February 5, 2015, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1018915>.
- ¹⁹ Türklügümden utandım, "Bir daha gitmem Paris'e", *Hürriyet*, January 25, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1vs4VY1> [Accessed: February 13, 2015]
- ²⁰ Ürdünlü Pilot

21 Türkiye'nin Nabzı Ekim 2014 Savaş ve Barış Arasında Türkiye'nin İç ve Dış Politikası <http://bit.ly/1yyqLJQ>

[Accessed: February 13, 2015]

22 #Gerçekİslam, Gerçek İslam

23 İslamofobik katliam #islamofobi ChapelHillShooting#

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<https://www.facebook.com/mehdi.parpanchi/photos/a.302592706529711.68489.299496943505954/676061559182822/?type=1&theater>,

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