



# BeeHive

## Middle East Social Media

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### Women in Saudi Arabia and Sexual Harassment in Egypt

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Social networking sites (SNS) are an important tool in the struggle to promote women's rights in Arab countries. In Saudi Arabia, women use them in their fight against the law that prohibits them from driving. In Egypt, they facilitate the struggle against the sexual harassment of women in the public domain.

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world where women are prohibited by law from driving. Saudi women have been trying for a long time to change this situation by having parliament pass new legislation, but to no avail.<sup>1</sup> Since late September 2013, SNS have hosted a lively discussion on the subject, sparked by Saudi scholar of Islamic law Saleh al-Luhaidan who declared that driving could injure women's ovaries, reduce their fertility and cause them to bear disabled children.<sup>2</sup> These statements set off a wave of protests that included a call for women to drive their cars on roads throughout the kingdom on 26



قيادة المرأة للسيارة  
إختيار و ليس اجبار

<sup>1</sup> [www.alriyadh.com/2013/10/09/article874086.html](http://www.alriyadh.com/2013/10/09/article874086.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTWIwedDPoQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTWIwedDPoQ)

October 2013, and for a final repeal the prohibition. Simultaneously, activists published an online petition opposing the law that, to date, has been signed by more than 16,000 women. One of the activists wrote, “They’re gonna hear our voices if we shout out LOUD! It’s My Life, it’s now or never!” On YouTube, many women uploaded videos of themselves defying the law by driving.<sup>3</sup> As has become the practice recently in a wide range of social protests, many users changed their profile pictures to the protest’s logo (on the right).

In general, the discourse regarding the prohibition against women driving is characterized by ridicule of Saudi scholars of Islamic law. For example one talkback writer wrote, “Oy to the Wahhabi sheikhs: you even stick your large noses into medical matters... You ought to be ashamed, because you make people laugh at Arabs and Muslims.” Others writers expressed distress at how far the status of women in Saudi Arabia lags behind the Western world and the Gulf States. One noted that, for example, women drive tanks in Russia and several years ago a US woman piloted the space shuttle.

Opponents of this liberal approach use SNS to express conservative opinions, and call upon the state to stand firm against the protesting women and their demands. Some of the conservative participants in the discourse warned that the women’s protests is simply the first step, and they will next make even more far-reaching demands such as removing the veil or allowing public displays of affection. Others contend that the protests began at the initiative of liberal forces who want to accelerate westernization and weaken the Islamic trends, “Liberals dream of subjugating the Islamic trend just as they did in Egypt.” This discourse reveals not only the splits in Saudi society but also the increasing tension between liberals and conservatives, for whom the issue of women driving is a test case of broader social-cultural importance in the struggle between the two movements.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [www.oct26driving.com/; www.youtube.com/channel/UC1HOQJPBfObgyqHoVCxIN1Q?feature=watch](http://www.oct26driving.com/; www.youtube.com/channel/UC1HOQJPBfObgyqHoVCxIN1Q?feature=watch)

<sup>4</sup> مظاهرة\_26\_أكتوبر#  
#ضد\_قيادة\_26\_أكتوبر  
#قيادة\_المرأة\_تؤثر\_على\_المبايض\_والحوض  
#قيادة\_المرأة\_للسيارة  
#السعودية\_ملكة\_لعدم\_قيادتها\_السيارة  
#هل\_تقبل\_الزواج\_من\_بنت\_تسوق\_سيارة

Parallel to the protests in Saudi Arabia, a very different issue relating to women is on the agenda in Egypt. Sexual harassment, both physical and verbal, of women has become a worrisome phenomenon in several Arab countries, especially Egypt. The increasing erosion in women's sense of personal security and their fear of being alone in public places has led to particularly combative dialogue, in which SNS serve as the main stage. Women express their frustration and blame the Egyptian authorities for not doing enough to stop the phenomenon. Egyptian activists use their Twitter accounts to demand stricter legislation regarding the sentencing of sex offenders, replacing the currently accepted fines with imprisonment, and increased presence of security forces in areas known to be problematic. The Minister of the Interior recently responded to these calls and ordered the security forces to act more forcibly against any type of sexual harassment in the public domain.

It seems unlikely that these steps will lead to the protests' end since the activists are demanding more stringent steps to contain the phenomenon. They sharply criticized the society that many claim is infested with low moral standards; instead of defending women who were raped or harassed, the victims are blamed. The conventional media have also been widely criticized for not publicizing suitable publicity on the subject. Therefore, the activists consider SNS to be an important tool in their struggle to change public awareness of the subject. Various groups such as the "Movement against Sexual Harassment," which was founded in August 2012, launched their campaign to make the public more aware of the issue on the SNS. Campaign such *Nefsy*, I Aspire, Catch an Sex Offender, and I Saw Harassment encourage women to upload pictures and videos of harassers to SNS, to share their trauma and actively join the protest.<sup>5</sup>



It is interesting to note that discourse on the subject is also become a tool for political taunting of the Muslim Brotherhood. At the time of the revolution in June 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood were presented as enemies of the people in general; now they are considered

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<sup>5</sup> #شففت\_تحرش

#التحرش

#لا\_للتحرش

#ضد\_التحرش

[https://twitter.com/Anti\\_Harass](https://twitter.com/Anti_Harass); [www.facebook.com/HarassMapEgypt](http://www.facebook.com/HarassMapEgypt); <https://twitter.com/harassmap>; [www.facebook.com/banatmasrkhata7mar](http://www.facebook.com/banatmasrkhata7mar); [www.facebook.com/Ded.Ta7rosh](http://www.facebook.com/Ded.Ta7rosh); [www.facebook.com/Set.Albanat.campaign](http://www.facebook.com/Set.Albanat.campaign)

the enemy of women specifically because of their supposed role in the substantial increase in sexual harassment of women in the recent past. Spokespeople identified with the Muslim brotherhood to have rejected these accusations, and presented them as part of a broader trend to demonize the movement, originating in circles around General El-Sisi.

## **Environmental Struggles, Soccer and Politics Meet on SNS**

### **Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak**

The last several months, the discourse on SNS reflects the discontent that some segments of the Turkish public feel towards the domestic policies of Prime Minister Erdoğan, which are eroding the widespread agreement that prevailed in the secular Kemalist country before he took office. The continuing protests are, to a certain extent, “aftershocks” following the major “earthquake” that occurred following the events in Gezi Park last June. They focus on subjects that are generally not high on the agenda of the establishment Turkish media, which in no way means that they are trivial. Despite the large number of news agencies, newspapers and other media outlets, the Turkish media has long chosen to ignore or at least reduce public exposure of protests, in order to avoid confrontation with the Erdoğan government. Many media outlets are owned by business people who are fearful lest their businesses be harmed by a confrontation with the government. Therefore, they avoid expressing criticism. Indeed, as a result of the pressure the government is currently applying to its opponents, we are witnessing mass firings of journalists considered to be opponents of Erdoğan, and many journalists have been arrested on various and sundry charges. Turkey is currently the country with the highest number of journalists imprisoned for reasons related to their work. Against the backdrop of the widespread attack on freedom of the press, the free expression still possible on SNS provides a platform and exposure for opponents of the Erdoğan government.

One conspicuous current protest opposes an ambitious venture of the Municipality of Ankara and the ruling party (AKP) who wish to pave a highway along a route that passes, in part, through a forest belonging to the Middle East Technical University (ODTÜ or



METU). As in the case of Gezi Park, ecological damage led a wave of student protests with a social and political background. These protests, and others, are largely being managed via SNS. Students upload photos, articles, and reports of violent clashes with police forces during demonstrations, and take advantage of the networks to transport demonstrators to various fronts where there are confrontations with security forces.<sup>6</sup>

Soccer fields are another important arena where echoes from Gezi Park are felt. In Turkey, soccer is more than a popular game. A large part of Turkish society defines its identity by its soccer team, and social and political struggles immediately find expression on the field. During the Gezi Park riots this summer, a faction of Beşiktaş fans known as “Çarşı,” were among the leading opposition figures against Erdoğan and his government. Çarşı members are very active on SNS and use them to mobilize support for the protest, while not avoiding direct confrontation with the police in the field. Even when there was a lull in the streets, they continued to openly express their opposition on the field. In light of the reasons mentioned above, the Turkish sports channel, Lig-TV, not only avoided any reference to the protests but deliberately silenced the loud voices of protesters at the fields when broadcasting. Either way, the storm in the fields itself led, according to senior analyst, the party in power to initiate the establishment of a pro-Erdoğan faction of Beşiktaş fans, known as “Eagles 1453” (1453 is the year when İstanbul was conquered from the Byzantines). This faction is supposed to serve as a counterweight for Çarşı.<sup>7</sup> Tension between the warring factions makes a significant impact both on the field and on SNS, where there are strident clashes between supporters and opponents of Erdoğan, especially prior to important games for Beşiktaş.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [#HeryerODTÜHeryerDireniş](#)

[#DirenOdtü](#)

[#GitOrmandaYaşa](#)

<sup>7</sup> [www.radikal.com.tr/spor/marjinal\\_gruplar\\_bize\\_dogru\\_yonlendiriliyor-1152143](http://www.radikal.com.tr/spor/marjinal_gruplar_bize_dogru_yonlendiriliyor-1152143)

<sup>8</sup> “Marjinal gruplar bize doğru yönlendiriliyor”, Radikal

[http://www.radikal.com.tr/spor/marjinal\\_gruplar\\_bize\\_dogru\\_yonlendiriliyor-1152143](http://www.radikal.com.tr/spor/marjinal_gruplar_bize_dogru_yonlendiriliyor-1152143) September 23, 2013  
(Accessed in: October 10, 2013)

<sup>8</sup> [#çarşiyıYedirmeyiz](#)

[#dirençarşı](#)

[#ÇArşı](#)

[#TeroristtenTaraftarOlmaz](#)

[#çarşıHuzuraKarşı](#)

[1453 Kartalları](#)

The SNS provide a glimpse of the political confrontations and civil protests that have disappeared from the discourse in the official Turkish media. At the same time, they are very active players, encouraging and organizing protests. This forces the authorities to take vigorous action even though they have succeeded in enforcing quiet in the establishment media. The necessary conclusion is that it is insufficient for anyone interested in current events in Turkey to limit themselves to the official media. Rather, it is very beneficial to be aware of events in the virtual arena.