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Volume 6, Issue 6, June 2018

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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the June issue of Beehive. This issue first reviews the campaign against the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, which allegedly transfers aid money to needy people in Gaza instead of relieving the distress of Iranian citizens. We then expose the tension in Egypt between freedom of expression and limits imposed by government censors, as seen in the debate over a controversial movie directed by Khaled Youssef and regulatory laws currently being considered by the Egyptian Parliament. The final article deals with the question of whether the Syrian regime, partially in cooperation with Hezbollah, is involved in narcotics trafficking in rebel-controlled southern Syria, as an element in its overall campaign against the rebels.

Enjoy!
“The Poor of Your City First”: Online Campaign against Iranian Aid to Residents of Gaza

Dr. Raz Zimm

In recent weeks, a campaign against the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation has been running on Iranian social media networks. It protests the money that the foundation gives to impoverished Muslims worldwide, especially in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. Founded shortly after the Islamic Revolution to help the poor and needy in the Islamic Republic, the Relief Foundation has become one of the largest and most significant charitable institutions in Iran, helping hundreds of thousands of families. The tempestuous reactions to the campaign testify to increasing public criticism against channeling Iranian aid out of the country, rather than relieving the distress of Iranian citizens.

At the beginning of Ramadan in mid-May, Iranian media outlets – primarily those affiliated with expatriate opponents of the regime – and social media users posted pictures and videos showing the Foundation distributing iftar meals to 300,000 Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip.¹ These reports provoked widespread public opposition in Iran, claiming that the Foundation, whose budget is largely based on donations from citizens through charity collection boxes located across Iran, is dispersing its funds in Gaza and Lebanon, while Iranian citizens suffer from economic distress and sometimes cannot even afford to buy basic food and clothing.

“While the Iranians are selling their kidneys for bread, the Palestinian media reports that the Relief Foundation distributes daily meals to 300,000 people in Gaza.”² Some users quoted a famous Persian proverb: “A lamp permitted for use at home is prohibited for use in the mosque” (چراغی که به خانه روایت به مسجد حرام است) to support their position.

Shortly after the reports were published, a campaign was launched on Iranian social media with the headline “No to the Relief Foundation,” which succeeded in gaining several thousand users. The campaign included uploading photographs taken at many locations across Iran depicting vandalized collection boxes, and other boxes or models made for symbolic use discarded in trash cans.
The campaign against the Relief Foundation drew angry reactions from senior Iranian officials, who denied the claims that its funds were being used for needy people outside of Iran. The head of the foundation, Parviz Fattah, stated that the use of the Foundation’s money to aid needy people outside Iran, for example in Yemen, Lebanon or Palestine, violates both national and religious law, and that the Foundation is not even permitted to transfer money from one city to another within Iran. He claimed that funds used for Palestinians in Gaza comes from donations that citizens place in collection boxes designated specifically for that purpose. He added that the Foundation does not transfer money donated for domestic purposes overseas, but rather transmits knowledge and experience to countries around the world, including non-Muslim countries, to help them establish similar local charities.3

Several members of the Iranian parliament (Majlis) also expressed support for the Foundation. Majlis speaker Ali Larijani rejected criticism of the Foundation’s activities and praised its efforts to help Iranian citizens. Majlis member Nader Ghazipour supported Fattah’s statement, claiming that, contrary to the media items disseminated by “anti-revolutionaries and Zionists,” the Iranian aid fund does not send any money abroad.4

The reformist press also criticized the campaign, even though it sometimes takes a critical stance towards the regime’s policies. In a commentary published in the newspaper E’temad, the campaign was called “inhumane” and claimed that participants were seeking to widen the gap between the government and the people and divide Iranian society, but are not really interested in social issues or the problems of the citizens. It further claimed that the campaign would have no effect, and might even increase the citizens’ donations to the charity. “If citizens previously considered donations to the Relief Foundation a religious and human obligation, they might now see it as a national and political duty as well,” the article claimed.5 This contention was supported by a counter-campaign mounted by supporters of the regime, who called upon citizens to increase their contributions to the Foundation, in order to express their support for its activities. “I will help until the eyes of people who say: ‘No to the Relief Foundation,’ pop out,” tweeted one user.6 Other users even posted a link to the Foundation’s website in order to encourage the public to contribute to it.7

In order to express support for the Palestinian struggle in particular, users

Photographs shared on Twitter showing citizens contributing to collection boxes designated for aid to Palestinians
uploaded photographs showing citizens donating to the Foundation’s collection boxes designated for the benefit of Palestinians in Gaza during World Jerusalem Day, which was marked in Iran on June 8 (observed annually on the last Friday of Ramadan). “If only the agents connected to the foreign media were present for the Jerusalem Day processions today, to see the fasting citizens who enthusiastically donated to the collection boxes of the Relief Foundation to help the oppressed Palestinian people,” one user tweeted."}

This is not the first time in recent years that the Iranian public has expressed its reservations about Iranian investments outside the country. During the wave of protests across Iran in December 2017–January 2018, some demonstrators protested Iran’s continued support of the Syrian regime and terrorist organizations at the expense of Iranian citizens. Similar calls were heard during the merchants’ protest, which erupted at the end of June in the Tehran bazaar. This sentiment was even expressed on World Jerusalem Day this year, when a viral video shared on social media showed a young cleric holding a sign that read: “I wish we had a day to express our support for the oppressed people of Iran (and not for others).”

It is difficult to assess the extent to which the campaign against the Relief Foundation reflects the stance of the Iranian public. However, the turbulent reactions it aroused, and the need for senior regime officials to deny reports of that the Foundation uses its funds to aid the residents of Gaza attest to growing public sensitivity to diverting Iranian resources beyond its borders. This is a result of worsening economic distress, especially among the weaker population sectors, and the failure of the nuclear agreement, which put an end to hopes for a significant improvement in the economic situation of most Iranian citizens, and increasing public frustration. This is clearly reflected in the discourse on social media and the slogans heard during recent protests around the country.
Bad Karma: Censorship vs. Freedom of Expression in Egypt
in the Age of Social Networking

Dr. Limor Lavi

“Karma,” a controversial new film by Khaled Youssef, which premiered in Egypt on the Eid al-Fitr holiday, tells a love story about a young Muslim man and a young Coptic woman who marry despite the opposition of those around them. Issues of religious conversion and government corruption form the backdrop to their particular situation. The director is an Egyptian who is known as someone who does not hesitate to touch the raw nerves of Egyptian society. Indeed, some argue that the defiant nature of previous films he directed contributed to the atmosphere that led to the overthrow of President Mubarak in 2011.

The film, which is now being shown after being banned by the Egyptian authorities, sparked a wide debate on Egyptian online social networks and in the media regarding the place of censorship in the present era, against a backdrop of regulatory measures focused on the activity of media outlets in the country.

A trailer for the film distributed in May was viewed several million times, and aroused great interest on social media. In addition to users who were interested in the film and wanted to see it, there were quite a few others who called for a boycott, because they oppose marriages between Copts and Muslims, and religious conversion. Others feared that depictions of corruption on the part of senior public officials would provoke undesirable public debate and even protests by those angry that the establishment such acts to occur. For example, Jamal al-Sanbati from Cairo wrote: “Boycott Khaled Yusuf’s ‘Karma,’ which was supported by the Minister of Culture.”

The discourse was not ignored by the authorities. Immediately prior to its scheduled premiere on Eid al-Fitr, Karma was banned by government censors, despite the fact that they had previously approved it. Cancellation of its screening sparked protests on Egyptian social media, which spread to the parliament and quickly brought about a reversal of the censors’ decision, with the Ministry of Culture reinstating its approval the next day. This step also triggered online responses. For example, Raman Ahmed, a user from Cairo, reacted angrily, calling the Minister of Culture a “stupid creature” who did not deserve her job, and
the director of the film an “animal” and a “dog” whose film “harmed democracy during the al-Sisi period.” Ahmed further called for a boycott of the film and of the Minister of Culture.13

Simultaneously, a debate developed over the place of censorship in the era of social networking. Egyptian journalist Khaled Montaser stated that anyone who thinks that censorship can work in the age of the Internet is deluding him or herself. He explained that anyone who thinks that a film, a play or any other work of art can lead to a distorted perception of reality, and therefore prevents its publication on the pretext that they want to protect young people, does not understand that this “distorted reality” is an existing fact, and art is a reflection of reality. In the era of Google and YouTube, Montaser advised leaving the concept of censorship behind.14

The discourse on the issue of freedom of expression in the era of online networks did not emerge from a vacuum, but rather from an environment in which the authorities are taking further steps to restrict the media in Egypt. In recent weeks, the Egyptian parliament gave its approval in principle to three new laws which aim to regulate the supervision of the official print and broadcast media. At first glance, these laws prepare the ground for establishing an independent body, separate from the parliament, to oversee these media, but in reality they effectively preserve state control of them, in part because the president will appoint the head of the new national press authority.

Supporters of the law, particularly from the establishment, present it as a promise to ensure freedom of expression. When doing so, they stress that the new law prohibits censorship and establishing media outlets based on religious, gender or ethnic discrimination. In addition, the law prohibits detention without trial for publication offenses, except in cases of incitement to violence, and does not require journalists to reveal their sources.15

Conversely, the prevailing opinion in the online discourse is that the new laws are “an attack on the press” despite being passed on “Egyptian Journalists Day,” which is marked on June 10. A site supporting journalists’ rights posted: “On Egyptian Journalists Day, al-Sisi assassinates the press and hates the fourth estate,” with a poster reading “tightening the noose” (pictured).
The main sections of the law that are subject to public criticism relate to social networks. One of these, known as the “Big Brother section,” states that a social networking account with more than 5000 followers can be blocked or suspended if the account holder publishes false information, slander, incites to illegal activity, or calls for extremism. Journalists and online activists contend that the formulation of the law is intentionally vague to facilitate its use as a basis for persecution and silencing. Another argument against the new laws is that no one from the Journalists Union and/or electronic media contributed to their wording. Some 800 journalists signed a virtual petition against the principled approval of the new laws, and another petition called on the Journalists Union to convene an emergency meeting to protest them. Similar criticism was forthcoming from international organizations in the field of human rights and freedom of the press, including UN organizations.

The timing chosen for passing these laws in parliament is not coincidental. It is clear that the Egyptian establishment is following well-worn patterns of government. Just as Mubarak would impose limits on the public space, to the extent possible, in times of distress, before elections or when public unrest was likely, and then reopen it to let-off steam after the moment passed, the al-Sisi regime is doing likewise. This behavior has been evident on several occasions when there was potential for public outrage, such as the controversial increase in electricity prices and ahead of the June 30 anniversary of the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood regime. Another possible explanation for the timing is the presumption that Egyptians would be distracted by the Ramadan fast, preparations for Eid al-Fitr, and the World Cup – with the expectation of seeing the achievements of the legendary Egyptian footballer Muhammad Salah – which would allow the regime to pass the new laws without the Egyptians noticing.

Egypt is currently feeling the tension between the authoritarian methods used by the regime before the Arab Spring, and the open, unrestrained discourse of social networks, which serve as a platform for voices that support freedom of speech and those who seek to limit it. Sometimes, it seems that the state has the upper hand, as in the case of media and press laws. At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that in the case of Karma, public pressure succeeded in reversing the state’s decision, to the benefit of those who advocate for freedom of expression.
Drugs, Shi’a, and the Struggle for Southern Syria

Moran Levanoni

The boundary between the forces of the Syrian regime and the rebels in the Hauran region in southern Syria, which includes the cities of Daraa, Quneitra and Suwayda, has remained largely unchanged for the last three years, and is anchored in an agreement to prevent escalation that parties signed last November in the presence of the Jordanians, the Americans and the Russians. The absence of a central government in the rebel-controlled areas, also known as the “liberated lands,” led to anarchy in the region. This allowed multiple armed militias to infiltrate the area and operate alongside Hezbollah cells. One of the most conspicuous results is widespread drug trafficking, which is largely attributed to Hezbollah, although it is possible that the Syrian regime is also involved. The question is whether or not this is a deliberate campaign aimed at controlling the young Syrians in the region by supplying drugs.

The direct smuggling lines between the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon and Syria have enabled Hezbollah, which is involved in the fighting in Syria, to leverage its drug trafficking capabilities to create extensive commercial ties with leading local merchants such as Nouh Zeitar, a member of the large Zeitar clan from the Beqaa Valley, who specializes in growing and exporting drugs. He is a well-known drug dealer and the Lebanese police have issued several warrants for his arrest. Zeitar is also considered a social media personality, and maintains at least five Facebook pages, including the Admirers of Nouh Zeitar page, with 4500 members, and the Nouh Abou Ali page with 57,000 followers. The content published using his personal account includes statements supporting Hezbollah, pictures of the organization’s secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, and pictures showing Zeitar with armed fighters near the front in Zabadani, a town in southwestern Syria near the Lebanese border (see photo). In the region’s new reality, a drug dealer has become a legitimate personality and a Shi’i patriot.

The rebels, for their part, are working to stamp out the distribution of drugs in the areas under their control. Last September, forces from the Free Syrian Army, a rebel faction belonging to the moderate opposition, carried out a large-scale operation in the environs of...
Daraa, as part of an attempt to lay their hands on drug dealers. During the operation, 15 suspects were arrested for trading and dealing in drugs. According to law enforcement agencies, a considerable portion of the drugs sold in Daraa come from Suwayda, an area controlled of the Syrian regime and with a Hezbollah presence, where local Druze and Bedouin tribes have traditionally engaged in trafficking and in drug and weapons smuggling. 

In an article entitled, “Drugs: Another Front in Free Daraa, Looking for the Government and Hezbollah Militia,” published on the Zaman al-Wazel website last January, Free Syrian Army spokesman Abu Bakr al-Hassan said: “Supplying drugs is part of the Syrian regime’s plan to harm the younger generation in the south.” He further claimed that investigation of the traffickers who were caught bringing truckloads of drugs from Lebanon to the area under the responsibility of the Free Syrian Army revealed that they were able to pass through the security checkpoints maintained by the Syrian army because Assad’s soldiers facilitated their passage. Another media personality, Jawad Abu Hamza, reported on the capture of a large cell of drug dealers from the Suwayda region, and claimed that the region is a center for distributing drugs throughout southern Syria, with a significant portion of the goods destined for smuggling into neighboring Jordan.

Apparently, Abu Bakr’s remarks were not baseless, as evident in the killing of Ahmad Jaafar Abu Yassin, a resident of the Shi’i village of Suwayda. Jaafar, who was known as a significant drug dealer, fled together with other families belonging to the Shi’i minority from the village Busra al-Sham, following its conquest by Free Syrian Army fighters in 2013. He settled on a sheep farm near Suwayda together with – his neighbors claim – a group of individuals and families he had convinced to convert to Shi’ism. On the morning of March 26, 2018, Jaafar’s body was found lying in Mashnaka Square in the heart of Suwayda. Jaafar was suspected of involvement in explosions on September 4, 2015 that caused the death of Sheikh Wahid Bilous, the leader of the Druze militia ‘Men of Dignity’, which opposes the Assad regime. Indeed, shortly after the murder, a video clip appeared on the Facebook page of the Sheikh Honor Forces taking responsibility for the attack. The next day, a local news network broadcast a video in which Jaafar admitted that he had been involved in the assassination of Bilous, together with Hezbollah operatives and Wafik Nasser, the head of military intelligence in Suwayda. From his comments, it emerges that he forged contacts with the Iranian embassy, Hezbollah, and Wafik Nasser, and became involved in the drug business through them. He used the drugs to attract Druze young people to Shi’ism. Other publications claimed that Jaafar had purchased, at the behest of the Iranian embassy, real estate in order to settle the Shi’a, and had previously been arrested for possession of a large quantity of Captagon tablets. After his arrest, he was transferred to the Syrian security forces but released under strange circumstances. Another source told Orient Net that Jaafar was also in contact with elements close to the Syrian regime and President Bashar Assad.
In the meantime, Syrian young people are watching a new television series released during Ramadan, al-Haybeh, which is expected to capture their hearts. It tells the tale of a charming, generous and noble drug dealer named Jabal Sheikh Jabal (played by Taim Hasan) who lives in a village on the Lebanese-Syrian border and his beloved Alia (Nadine Naseeb Najim). Upon the series’ release, a Facebook page called “Sheikh Al-Jabel is Nouh Zeitar” was launched.

Whether or not the Syrian regime, through Hezbollah, is conducting a deliberate campaign in southern Syria, the very fact that the region is flooded with addictive substances has ramifications. In addition to the accumulated profits that are used to finance the fighting, drug users become dependent on suppliers, they develop apathy and a lack of motivation among the opposing fighters, and finally, the conversion of addicts to Shi’ite Islam has political significance. As a whole, social and media networks, intentionally or unintentionally, seem to be legitimizing drug trafficking by glorifying the images of drug dealers, thus creating an additional influence on young Syrians.

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1. “Distributing meals to break the fast, donated by the Relief Foundation, to Palestinians,” INRA, 18 May 2018.
2. @ali6908 , Twitter, 3 June 2018. Available at: https://twitter.com/ali6908/status/1003365917030526976. Last accessed 4 July 2018.
7. @faghih_h , Twitter, 18 June 2018. Available at: https://twitter.com/faghih_h/status/1007195260122955776. Last accessed 4 July 2018.
8. @R_motlagh , Twitter, 18 June 2018. Available at: https://twitter.com/R_motlagh/status/1005045684716888064. Last accessed 4 July 2018.
In his comments, Montaser also related to the decision of the top administrative court, in late May 2018, that ordered blocking YouTube for one month because it had in 2012 allowed publication of a video that insulted the prophet Mohammed. This was the final ruling on appeal filed by the national authority responsible for communications in a similar case, claiming that is would be difficult to implement. See: “YouTube to get blocked in Egypt for a month”, NewsGram, 27 May 2018.


@khaledelbalshy, Twitter, 23 June 2018. Available at: https://twitter.com/khaledelbalshy/status/1010640165717635072. Last accessed 4 July 2018.