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# BeeHive

## Middle East Social Media

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### **Rallying around the Flag:**

#### **Ups and Downs in the Peace Process between Ankara and the Kurds**

**Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak**

As the storm surrounding the mine disaster in Soma subsided, surfers on social networking sites (SNS) in Turkey turned their attention to other issues on the political agenda. The peace process with the Kurds, which has been a very sensitive issue in Turkish public discourse since the establishment of the state in 1923, now leads that agenda.

Turkish governments have historically sought to assimilate the Kurds into the majority population. They refused to recognize the existence of a separate Kurdish identity and have called them “Mountain Turks who have forgotten their Turkish identity.” At first, the Kurds rose up against this policy, and from 1922 through 1938 there were twenty-eight recorded attempts at rebellion against the authorities. The final attempt was firmly quashed by the Turkish military, which put an end to Kurdish uprisings in Turkey for a long time afterwards. An important milestone in relationship between the Kurds and the Turkish government occurred in 1980 with the military takeover of the political system. Three years later, the government completely banned the use of the Kurdish language. In response, the Kurds broke their tradition of silence; in 1984 the Kurdish underground (PKK) initiated an armed uprising against the Turkish army. In

the many years since, thousands of civilians and combatants on both sides have been killed in violent clashes.

When Erdoğan rose to power in 2003, he sought to resolve the conflict with the Kurds through diplomatic means. In 2011, the existence of secret negotiations between the Turkish Intelligence Organization (MIT) and representatives of the PKK was leaked to the media and, in 2013, after almost thirty years of armed conflict, the parties declared a truce. Details of the agreement were never published, but experts estimate that it included a promise by the Turkish government to make significant changes in the constitution, which would pave the way for Kurdish autonomy in southeastern Turkey. It has been claimed that the government undertook, among other things, to change the legal definition of Turkish citizenship to moderate the emphasis on Turkish ethnicity. In return, the PKK undertook to withdraw beyond the borders of Turkey, and not to initiate actions against the army. Despite the temporary lull, it seems that the Kurds are not pleased with how the government is implementing its commitments and the fact that it continues to construct new military bases for the border police in southeastern Turkey. Therefore, the PKK is continuing its efforts to recruit rebel fighters into its ranks.

Developments in the peace process have led to a change in the public discourse, which has become more open. This is evident in the current protest by Kurdish mothers from Diyarbakır against the PKK, charging that they smuggled their sons to the mountains last month, in order to force them into their ranks. This has been a familiar practice in the area for the last twenty years, but this was the first time that the mothers rose up in a significant protest and demanded that both the PKK and the Turkish government act to have their sons returned. In this way, the mothers expressed dissatisfaction with both parties, in light of the failed peace process. A review of the mood on SNS around the issue reveals that these mothers' outcry was able to briefly bridge the debate about the Kurdish question in Turkey. Across the political spectrum, users expressed support for their struggle under the slogan, "Lest mothers weep."<sup>1</sup>



*Mothers with photos of their sons*

However, the calm did not last long. Clashes erupted between Kurds and the Turkish security forces, when the former protested the construction of a Border Guard base in Lice, a village in Diyarbakır Province. This led to conflict between supporters of the government and its opponents, including but not limited to Kurds. On SNS, the governments' supporters claimed that the real reason for the Kurdish protests is rooted in the desire of PKK to prevent the Turkish forces from entering the

opium fields in the region, which are an important source of

income for the organization.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that surfers identified with the Gezi Park protests in June 2013 expressed support for and solidarity with the protesters in Lice. They frequently claimed that on the face of it there is no difference between the activists confronting the police in Taksim Square and the Kurds fighting the security forces in Lice.<sup>3</sup> Expressions of support increased further when it became known that two Kurds had been killed during the clashes with security forces.

However, the expressions of camaraderie across the spectrum disappeared instantly after Kurdish activists infiltrated an army base and hauled down the Turkish flag from its pole. This act of defiance angered many Turks including those from Gezi Park. The reactions on SNS were stormy. There were even some expressions of satisfaction with the death of Kurdish protesters, under the slogan “Cleaning up in Lice.”<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, surfers from across Turkey organized and took to the streets with the Turkish flags; their slogan was “The flag is the people’s honor.”<sup>5</sup> It is also important to note that some surfers expressed serious criticism of Erdoğan, in particular those who oppose the peace process with the Kurds claimed that his compromising policy led to desecration of the symbol of Turkish sovereignty. They reminded the Prime Minister of his party’s campaign video from the previous elections, which stressed that the Turkish people would never allow the flag to touch the ground either metaphorically or literally. Surfers posted this promise together with a picture of a Kurdish protester removing the flag (see picture).<sup>6</sup>



*Right: the Kurdish protester removes the Turkish flag.  
Left: the Turkish people not allowing the flag to touch the ground, in an AKP campaign video.*

Against the backdrop of renewed tension, the Kurdish mothers’ protests lost the overwhelming support it had initially, proving that past differences have not actually disappeared, despite progress in the peace process. Other political conflicts do sometimes blur these differences, as when protesters from Gezi Park supported those in Lice on SNS. However, the Turkish side has absolutely no tolerance for defiant acts of protest by Kurds, especially when directed at symbols of national sovereignty, and the conflict quickly reignited. The fragility of the “online alliance” with the Kurds clearly shows how deep the chasm between the sides is, and casts doubt on the viability of the peace program promoted by Erdoğan.

## The Stealthy Freedom of Iranian Women: Battle of the Hijab on SNS

Dr. Raz Zimmt

In early May, an Iranian journalist living in London, Masih Alinejad, opened a Facebook page entitled “The Stealthy Freedom of Iranian Women,” where she called on Iranian women to photograph themselves without a head covering and share the pictures with other users.<sup>7</sup> Within less than two months, the page accumulated nearly 500,000 likes. Several hundred Iranian women uploaded pictures of themselves in public places with their heads uncovered. Some also included messages emphasizing their rights to remove, if only for a moment, the veil and expressing hope for the future of freedom in their country.



This is not the first time in which social networks (SNS) have been utilized in the struggle against veiling. In July 2012, a group of students launched a Facebook campaign entitled “Non-mandatory Hijab is the Right of Every Iranian Woman.” Thousands of users joined the campaign and demanded that Iranian women be allowed to make their own decision about whether or not to wear the veil.<sup>8</sup>

However, this student-initiated campaign achieved only limited public support mostly among young liberals, political activists, reformist intellectuals and human rights activists.

Shortly after the current campaign against the law requiring hijab was launched, a group of Iranian men launched another Facebook page, this one entitled “The Stealthy Freedom of Iranian Men.”<sup>9</sup> Several hundred men uploaded pictures of themselves wearing women’s clothing, in partial states of undress, wearing makeup, or with Western hairstyles, as expressions of solidarity with the women’s struggle against laws regulating how they dress (see picture).



The discourse on SNS about veiling has reignited the old debate between moderates and conservatives against the background of the political struggle between the supporters of President Rouhani and his conservative opponents over the government's involvement in citizens’ lives. Conservative media outlets attacked Alinejad’s effort and warned that women were increasingly removing their veil in cities.<sup>10</sup> “Tasnim News” website, associated with the radical right, went to great extremes and published an article that effectively justified the rape of women with uncovered heads. The article claimed, “When a woman displays her beauty

without the permission of her husband and her nakedness arouses another man, there is no reason that a man should ask her permission to satisfy his sexual needs.”<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously, conservative media groups launched a strident personal campaign against Masih Alinejad, accusing her of cooperation with the West in order to harm the Islamic Republic and revolutionary values. Iranian television even published a false item claiming that she had been raped in front of her young son after removing her clothes while under the influence of drugs.<sup>12</sup> The radical television presenter and blogger Vahid Yaminpour called Masih Alinejad a “whore” and compared her to Sakineh Qasemi (also known as “Pari the tall”), a famous prostitute who worked in Tehran during the 1970s and was executed after the revolution.<sup>13</sup> The conservative protest also moved into the streets; on May 7, several thousand supporters of the conservative right-wing demonstrated in Fatemi Square, Tehran. They carried signs supporting the veil and called on the authorities to intensify enforcement of the dress code (in the picture).



*“Man, where is your honor? Where is your wife’s veil?” A protester in Fatemi Square.*

The conservatives’ response was also evident on SNS, where they launched several Facebook pages to compete with Alinejad’s page. One group of conservative students called their page “The Real Freedoms of Women in Iran,” claiming “to fight against the culture of nudity practiced in the West.”<sup>14</sup> Additional pages, such as “The Hijab is Always Stable”<sup>15</sup> and “Struggle against the Stealthy Freedom of Iranian Women,”<sup>16</sup> stressed the dangers involved in removing the veil for the security of women, and presented the supporters of Alinejad’s campaign as enemies who seek to harm Iranian women and their dignity. Facebook pages named “The Stealthy Freedoms of Western Women” and “The True Stealthy Freedoms,” report cases of violence and physical harm to women living in the West, and the violation of Muslim women’s rights in the West.<sup>17</sup> These pages have not garnered widespread support, with no more than a few thousand likes.

The SNS campaign against mandatory veiling did not escape the notice of top officials. Ali-Akbar Nategh Nouri, a former Majlis speaker and confidant of Supreme Leader Khamenei, made it clear in a meeting with clerics that by changing their appearance and violating the dress code, young people are in fact protesting against the government. He proposed an in-depth examination of the social and economic factors that have led to this situation, and stressed that the problem cannot be resolved by force.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, the campaign against the veil was also criticized by Iranians with a liberal worldview. Despite Alinejad’s many supporters, these critics claimed that freedom is meaningless if it is applied only in secret and in front of a camera. Journalist and women’s rights

activist Zhila Bani-Yaghoub argued, for example, that throughout history people have been forced to pay a heavy price for freedom, which has never been achieved by secret struggles or private acts.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, some users expressed concern that the call to women to reveal their faces on camera would endanger their security and would lead to increased dress code enforcement by the authorities. Others argued that it is incorrect to focus on the veil issue; rather, the main struggle should be against more endemic forms of discrimination practiced against women in Iran.<sup>20</sup>

The unprecedented support the anti-veil campaign achieved on SNS is further evidence of growing public demand for lessening the government's involvement in Iranian civil life. The willingness of thousands of women of different ages and places to protest the laws of the Islamic Republic indicates that this demand is not limited to a small layer of young, educated people from the urban middle class. Many Iranians strive to expand their freedoms and take advantage of the relatively more open atmosphere created by the election of President Rouhani.

Conversely, the conservative right is well aware of the importance of the battle for public opinion, and is unwilling to leave the SNS to its change-seeking rivals. In fact, SNS have become a central arena for the internal struggle over the identity of the Islamic Republic. Judging from the discourse of recent weeks, it seems that the conservatives are losing the battle for the heart of the public and are, therefore, forced to tighten their grip on traditional political centers of power, such as the judiciary, official media outlets, and the state's security apparatus.

## **Kuwaiti Social Networks Discuss Threats from Within and Abroad**

**Michael Barak**

This month Kuwaiti users of social networks (SNS) have been occupied by two issues: a suspected corruption scandal allegedly involving a member of the royal family, and the success of the Islamist terrorist organization, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS),<sup>21</sup> which took over major cities in Iraq, and also implicitly threatened Kuwait.

At the beginning of the month, Musallam al-Barrak, one of the leaders of the Kuwaiti opposition and former Member of Parliament, announced that he found documents proving that Kuwaiti officials stole nearly \$50 billion from public funds, and deposited them in bank accounts abroad, including in Israel. In light of these serious claims, al-Barrak called on the Kuwaiti people to battle corruption. In response, the Kuwaiti regime quickly denied the allegations and claimed that the documents were forged. This new wave of defiance against the regime adds momentum to ongoing protests initiated by both the liberal opposition and Sunni and Shi'i

Islamists since mid-2006, and especially after the Arab Spring, demanding democratic reforms including limits on the power of the al-Sabah royal family.

This episode sparked lively discourse on SNS, which blamed the royal family for exploiting Kuwaiti citizens and leading the country towards collapse. One argument is that government officials take advantage of the constitution for their own needs, stealing money and harming the future of the younger generation, especially through pervasive nepotism. Surfers, including opposition members of parliament, stressed that corruption is a dangerous plague that must be eradicated immediately. It was noted that civil society requires



demonstrating national responsibility in the face of corruption, especially when state institutions fail to do their job. Following these political messages, opposition members also used SNS to call Kuwaitis to a huge demonstration against the regime in Irada Square on June 10, to protest corruption and violations of civil rights by the regime. Waleed al-Tabatabaie, former Islamist MP, called on Sunni and Shi'i citizens to evaluate the situation and re-examine their relationship with the Kuwaiti royal family, which he accused of "opening accounts in Tel Aviv, totaling \$7 billion...."<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, supporters of the royal family argued that there is no unequivocal evidence of corruption, and the documents held by al-Barrak are counterfeit. A surfer claimed that "it is illogical for the money to have been deposited in Tel Aviv, because Israeli banks and currency are weak..."<sup>23</sup>

The attention that ought have been directed to the demonstration that Kuwaiti opposition organized on June 10, shifted to a much more dramatic event that occurred the same day when the northern Iraq city of Mosul fell into the hands of militants from ISIS. This was immediately reflected on SNS and the discourse on corruption gave way to heated debate about the threat to Kuwait's security in the event that Iraq were to collapse. Initially the comments of Sunni surfers expressed joy on the "liberation" of Mosul from the Iraqi regime. Sunni Islamist former MP Mohammed Hayef al-Mutairi tweeted that the liberation was the result of the continuing oppression of the Iraqi people, especially Sunnis, by the al-Maliki government. Iraqi Sunnis, he pointed out, have lost patience with the discriminatory policy of al-Maliki, and want to be rid of it. Others noted that the time had come for ISIS to repay the Shiite oppressors.

However, the joyous reactions were soon replaced by anxiety about Kuwait's security, especially following the threats that ISIS militants posted on Twitter: "When we're done with Iraq, we'll conquer Kuwait in less than an hour, and free it from the Saudis." Many surfers, Sunnis and Shi'is alike, expressed concern that the occupation of Mosul paves the way for the conquest of Kuwait. Former MP Nasser al-Duwailah predicted, "Kuwait must prepare for the worst

eventuality within a few months.” He called on Kuwaitis to forcefully confront approaching ISIS militants because the Iraqi army is no longer on the border between Iraq and Kuwait. Another tweeted that if ISIS enters Kuwait, “We – all the people – will confront them; We do not deserve to live in our homeland if we do not defend it.” Another interesting response came from Saad al-Ajami, former minister of communications, who gave his opinion of the complex history with neighboring Iraq, “Iraq has been and will continue to be a source of concern and danger for Kuwait, whether is ruled by a moderate or extreme Shi’is, Sunni Ba’athists or ISIS.”

Pro-regime surfers connected the discourse on corruption led by the Kuwaiti opposition and worries of an ISIS conquest, taking the opportunity to accuse the opposition of distracting the security forces, which might allow ISIS to topple the regime. Moreover, some surfers held Saudi Arabia and Iran responsible for the spread of ISIS in Iraq. Despite Iran’s support of Iraqi President Nouri al-Maliki and the opposition of ISIS to Bashar al-Asad’s regime in Syria, they contend that that ISIS is actually an extension of Iran, giving it an excuse to take over parts of Iraq. According to one surfer, the war in Iraq is part of a comprehensive Iranian program to fight Sunnis, just as in Syria and Yemen, “and the Gulf states are the next target.” Some also expressed concern about Iranian and Hezbollah militia forces that have entered Iraq for the purported purpose of protecting Samara where many Shi’i saints are buried. Other surfers claimed that Iran is using SNS to sow panic about the spread ISIS, in order to create favorable public opinion among Kuwaiti Sunnis towards the Maliki regime, which alone is capable of maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity and security of all its citizens.

Regarding Saudi Arabia, there were claims that just as it could not protect Sunnis against Iran’s territorial ambitions in Syria and Yemen, it is failing to protect the Sunni population in Iraq. Kuwait's position was deftly summarized by Nasser al-Duwailah who tweeted, “Everything that happens in Iraq is nothing but an Iranian plan and a total Saudi failure. With its stupid policy, Saudi Arabia has harmed the future of all the Sunnis and the region.”<sup>24</sup>



In conclusion, beyond the worry about Kuwait’s security in the face of ISIS’s spread, discourse on SNS also reflects the growing frustration among Kuwaitis who perceive an increase in Iranian influence in region, as evidenced by the deteriorating situation in Iraq. Kuwaitis lament the lack of a significant Sunni power working to effectively curb Iranian influence, a role previously played by Saudi Arabia and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Iran is considered a sly power that is throwing sand in the eyes of the world, especially Saudi political leaders, able to take control of Iraq regardless of the cost. Many claim that this can be seen the



fact that ISIS is most likely an Iranian creation designed to prepare the ground for and justify the entry of Iranian troops into Iraq. In this context, the discourse reveals how the status of the Saudi regime as a regional power has eroded; it is now seen as unable or, at least deliberately unwilling, to protect the Sunnis in a regional war, preferring instead to maintain a good relationship with Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> Analar Ağlamasın

<sup>2</sup> #Kenevir Lice

<sup>3</sup> #direnlice , #licedireniyor HerYerLiceHerYerDireniş , Kalekolunuz , #Lice

<sup>4</sup> #LicedeTemizlikVar

<sup>5</sup> #BayrakMilletinNamusudur , #BayrağınNamusunuKoruyamayan, #DirenBayrak **#BayrakSereftir**

<sup>6</sup> "Millet Eğilmez" <http://bit.ly/1kWBhJq> [Accessed in: June 10, 2014

<sup>7</sup> <http://on.fb.me/TEZOHz>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://on.fb.me/1pAVkNj>

<sup>9</sup> <http://on.fb.me/1n3AXpj>

<sup>10</sup> <http://bit.ly/1ji2dxZ> ;<http://bit.ly/1oBiRt>.

<sup>11</sup> <http://bit.ly/1pAWOa4>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://bit.ly/Svbn2l>.

<sup>13</sup> <http://bit.ly/1xDwVvc>.

<sup>14</sup> <http://on.fb.me/1pfKZIS>.

<sup>15</sup> <http://on.fb.me/1qnOvhQ>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://on.fb.me/1oIE8WC>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://on.fb.me/UqVs7G> ;<http://on.fb.me/TF7h9K>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://bit.ly/1ji3chx>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://bit.ly/1kAPUa>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://on.fb.me/1kB6X6>.

<sup>21</sup> Also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, *dawlat al-Islam fi 'Iraq wal-Sham*.

<sup>22</sup> <https://twitter.com/Altabtabie>

<sup>23</sup> [https://twitter.com/miss\\_nouraq8](https://twitter.com/miss_nouraq8)

<sup>24</sup> [https://twitter.com/nasser\\_duwaitah](https://twitter.com/nasser_duwaitah), <https://twitter.com/mhamdhaif>,

<https://twitter.com/Altabtabie>, <https://twitter.com/saad3jmi>, <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/>

الكويت\_في\_خطر, #داعش\_على\_حدود\_الكويت, #لهذا\_السبب\_ثار\_شعب\_العراق\_#داعش\_على\_حدود\_الكويت