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From the Editors

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the December issue of Beehive. The issue begins with a review of the public discourse being held among the Coptic community on Egyptian social networking sites, which concerns the involvement of the church and its leader Patriarch Theodore II in political issues and their support for President al-Sisi. Next, we examine the discourse on Turkish social media concerning the recent arrest of Turkish academics who had participated in the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and the parallels that some users drew between that demonstration and the massive Yellow Vest protests in France. The final article analyzes the *modus operandi* on social media of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, his allies and opponents.

Enjoy!

"First of all, I am an Egyptian citizen, and afterwards a Christian": The Coptic Church in Egypt between religion and politics, as reflected on social media Dr. Michael Barak

The increasingly close relationship between the Egyptian Coptic Church and the Egyptian regime, since 2013 headed by Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, has long been greeted with mixed feelings by members of the Coptic community in Egypt. This trend resurfaced in the beginning of December 2018, with the announcement of Patriarch Theodore II's support for an amendment to the Egyptian constitution that would allow extending the term of the current president. The online discourse sparked by this statement exposes the dissatisfaction of Coptic users with the church's involvement in politics, their suspicion of the regime's willingness to actively promote Copts' rights in the country, and the ongoing erosion of the power of the Coptic Church, partly because young Copts are unwilling to accept the Church as their sole representative in Egyptian politics.

There are about 10 million Coptic Christians living in Egypt today. The spiritual leader of their community is Patriarch Theodore II, who in 2012 was appointed head of the Coptic Church in Alexandria. Under the leadership of Theodore, and since the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, leaders of the Coptic Church have increased their political involvement in affairs of state. This trend became especially salient following al-Sisi's 2014 rise to power and has been motivated primarily out of a desire to protect church institutions and strengthen the Church's hold on its adherents.

Theodore II's declaration led many Coptic users to emphasize that he does not represent them, but that he is only expressing his personal opinion, and also that the patriarch and Coptic Church should refrain from dealing with political issues, and instead focus solely on matters of ritual.¹

For example, one Copt asked why in 2011 the church called on young people to refrain from protests against President Mubarak, but now publicly speaks out on political issues.² Alaa al-Aswani, a well-known Egyptian writer and secular oppositionist (whose Twitter account



Patriarch Theodore II, from Facebook

has 3 million followers), accused Theodore of exploiting his "spiritual status in order to spur the Copts [to take] a political position." He asked "has the church become a political party?", and argued that, if so, it was "an erroneous position that will hurt everyone." In addition, al-Aswani stressed, "if we want democracy, there is no escaping the exclusion of clerics from politics."³ There were those who defended the constitution, and stressed that it should not be altered in favor of al-Sisi or anyone else, because any change could potentially impair its value. One user noted that neither Theodore nor the Copts have the ability to change the constitution, because the regime had predetermined the extension of al-Sisi's term and were using Theodore to legitimize and promote an existing plan. On the margins of this discourse, another debate arose as to whether al-Sisi deserved another term.

There were those who noted that in the absence of another worthy candidate to lead Egypt, al-Sisi was the right person for the job, while others opposed extending his term on the grounds that Egypt's problems were being exacerbated by the increasing cost of living, education, health, etc.⁴ Therefore, it would be better if Theodore had not supported the constitutional change, because of the danger that he would thereby abet the rise of a new Pharaoh in Egypt since the Free Officers' Revolution of 1952.⁵

Another expression of many Copts' dissatisfaction with Theodore's policy was evident on December 14, after an Egyptian policeman, assigned to protect a Coptic church, murdered two members of the community in the Minya Governorate.⁶ The subsequent online discourse accused the patriarch of being unwilling to take a firm stand against the regime with regard to the personal safety of the Copts, and claimed that he preferred to serve the interests of the regime rather than those of the Coptic community. In the context of such criticism, Coptic users demanded that he hold Christmas services in the Minya Governorate to protest the lack of security. One surfer remarked that Theodore had erred when he traveled to the United States in September 2018 to endorse al-Sisi at a time that the homes of Egyptian Copts were being torched. For many Copts, the Egyptian regime needs to prove its intention to protect their lives, before asking them for support for its policies.⁷

In addition to criticizing Theodore's political involvement, recent online discourse reveals a lack of trust in the Egyptian police. From the perspective of several Coptic users, it would be better for the community to arm itself for self-defense and for revenge, rather than to rely on the Egyptian police to provide security.⁸ In this vein, Nashaat Nasr al-Din, an Egyptian Coptic poet, published a poem on his Facebook timeline which described the personal security of the Copts in Egypt as "broken," and which called for protests against the neglect of their personal security, using the hashtag "Say something before you speak in Heaven" (المتكلموا قبل أن تتكلم السماء).⁹ One Copt writing from outside Egypt harshly criticized the Copts for not mounting mass demonstrations in the streets that would denounce the security chaos and the disregard of the community's safety on the part of Egyptian security forces. In response, Muslim users intervened in the network discourse, and tried to calm the situation by claiming that terrorism was directed not only against Christians but also against Muslims, for example as is happening in the Sinai Peninsula.¹⁰

On December 18, Coptic users criticized Theodore for an interview he gave to Egyptian television, in which he said that "First of all, I am an Egyptian citizen, and afterwards a Christian, who takes into account the interests of the homeland."¹¹ According to many of them, this statement would be proper only if the Egyptian law granted equality to all citizens of Egypt, Muslims and Christians, alike. From their perspective, Theodore's words represented a politicization of religion, and marginalized the Christian identity of many Copts. Others thought that the remarks were made out of fear for the lives of the Christians in Egypt, in the wake of the hostilities and terrorist attacks against them, and in order to win the sympathy of the Muslims.¹²

The discourse concerning the nature of relations between the Coptic Church and the Egyptian regime reveals a growing dissatisfaction among Copts with respect to the church and its leader. Many Copts believe that the role of the Church should be limited to ritual matters alone, and should be distanced from matters of politics and state. From the perspective of some participants in the discourse, it

would be preferable for the Patriarch Theodore II to defend the interests of the Coptic community than for him to defend those of a regime that does not display genuine determination to fight intolerance and acts of violence against the Coptic community. Moreover, it appears that the Coptic Church's involvement in political matters detracts from its status in the eyes of many Copts, and is increasingly eroding its power within this community.

In the shadow of the yellow vests of France: Erdoğan settles accounts with the Gezi Park protesters Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak

During December 2018, the main issue that occupied many users of Turkish social media was the arrest of the Turkish academics who had taken part in the 2013 Gezi Park protest. Unsurprisingly, the timing of the arrests coincided with the huge "yellow vest" protests in France, and some Turkish users drew parallels between the two events. As with many other issues, users of Turkish social media were divided into two camps: those who support the Turkish government's view of the events in Gezi Park and consider it an attempt to topple then-prime minister and current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and citizens who support the opposition and consider the protest in Gezi Park to have been a legitimate demonstration.

Similar to the demonstrations in France, large numbers of protesters were arrested during the Gezi Park demonstrations. However, the whole picture was changed with the wave of arrests that began in 2017 with the arrest of Osman Kavala, who serves on the advisory board of the George Soros Open Society Foundation.¹³ After the arrest of Kavala, it began to be evident that President Erdoğan had decided not to sit idly by, but rather to take action against the Gezi Park protest organizers. To that end, all of Turkey was again surprised on November 9 by the arrest of the thirteen academics who took part in the Gezi Park events. When eight of them were released a week later, the subject became one of the hottest topics of discussion on Turkish social media, at a time coinciding with the launch of the "Yellow Vest" protests in France.¹⁴

Many supporters of the Gezi Park protest sympathize with the Yellow Vests, and began to tweet in Turkish using the hashtag "*Sarı Yelekliler*" ("yellow vests" in Turkish), to express their support for the struggle against the French government.¹⁵ Naturally, users began to compare and contrast the Gezi Park protest and the French protest movement. However, it is evident that the Yellow Vest protests did not succeed in causing the Turks to take to the streets. In order to understand this, it is important to note the significant difference between the two protests. In France, the masses – mainly identified with the economic periphery – are protesting the cost of living. In the Gezi Park protests, the Istanbul bourgeoisie and many leftists demonstrated to voice their opposition to the increasing concentration of government authority in Turkey. It is also important to note that the results of the 2017 referendum in favor of expanding Erdoğan's authority, and those of the 2018 parliamentary and presidential elections all reflected an overwhelming victory for Erdoğan. This fact seems to have stifled users' hopes of changing Turkish politics, and may have prevented them from taking to the streets at this time.

The opposition was not the only group speaking out; Erdoğan's supporters also expressed their opinions on the recent arrests and the Yellow Vest protests. Not surprisingly, they adopted the position of the Turkish government, and labeled Osman Kavala and the academics "collaborators with George Soros." Soros, they claimed, has tried to overthrow many governments around the world. In this context, Erdoğan's supporters pointed to Georgia, Serbia, Ukraine, and the Arab countries who experienced "colorful revolutions."¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, the criticism of Soros came after

President Erdoğan's dramatic statement, that the "man behind Osman Kavala is the Hungarian Jew George Soros. "¹⁷

The issue gained even more momentum when the Turkish police issued an arrest warrant for actor Memet Ali Alabora, who lives in England because of his activity as a leader of the Gezi Park protest.¹⁸ In addition to Alabora, journalist Can Dündar, who lives in Germany, has been charged with treason for disclosing classified information from the Turkish intelligence Agency.¹⁹ Moreover, the Turkish

police claim that Alabora and Dündar acted in accordance with the instructions of Kavala and Soros, and tried to topple the government.²⁰

Users of Turkish social media did not remain indifferent when Erdoğan's opponents began circulating a tweet of an Armenian member of parliament from the Kurdish Party, Garo Paylan, in which he captioned a 2003 picture of Erdoğan meeting Soros with the perhaps provocative question: "It wasn't a crime then, why is it today?"²¹

 Garo Paylan I @GaroPaylan · Nov 21
 ~

 Erdoğan: "Gezi olaylarının finansörü olan bir kişi (Osman Kavala) içerde. Arkasında kim var? Meşhur Macar yahudisi Soros."
 ~

 Fotoğrafta, Erdoğan ve AKP sözcüsü Ömer Çelik Soros ile görüşüyor.
 Soros ile görüşmek o gün suç değildi.

 Bugün neden suç olsun?
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 Erdoğan



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Picture of a red vest published by supporters of Erdoğan on <u>Twitter</u>

Photo of Erdoğan with Soros in 2003, from Twitter

Erdoğan's online supporters tried to justify the arrest warrants by pointing out the arrests of demonstrators carried out by the French police. These users also ridiculed the situation in France and began to tweet about the incidents in Paris and Brussels, using the hashtag "We are worried."²² In addition, users who sympathize with President Erdoğan's government suggested that Gezi Park activists join the protests in France by using the hashtag #ÇapulcularFransaya ["agitators to France"]²³ and noted, "Traitors wear yellow but our color is known (red, as the flag of Turkey)."²⁴

President Erdoğan also chose to augment the public discourse with his personal mockery of events in France. "You remember that during the Gezi Park events they sprayed a slogan on the wall: 'The oppression began with

the conquest of Constantinople in 1453.' I am very worried, if they write in France that the oppression began with the French Revolution in 1789.²⁵ "In addition, Erdoğan tried to deter potential Yellow Vest protesters in Turkey by saying that they should think twice before going out into the streets because "Turkey is neither Paris nor the Netherlands" and if they dare to take to the streets, the Turkish people will also go out to the streets, and confront them as they did on the eve of the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016.²⁶ As expected, these statements by Erdoğan dominated social

media and his remarks about the French Revolution became a hit. Many users issued warnings to anyone inspired by the Yellow Vests to take to the streets..²⁷

In conclusion, the public discourse on Turkish social networks surrounding the recent wave of arrests, the arrest warrants, the Yellow Vest protests in France, and their influence on Turkey, show that Erdoğan's supporters control the online discourse. In light of warnings by Erdoğan and users who support his rule, it seems that the Turkish users identified with the opposition have been deterred and are afraid to actively protest as they did in 2013. Alongside the public discourse, the Ankara government appears to be using social media in its efforts to prevent the French protests from spreading to Turkey. Their public and online discourse indicates that the Turkish government and its supporters have a surplus of self-confidence. Despite this, social media channels in Turkey continue to function as the only spaces within the Turkish public sphere that allow open dialogue, expressions of opposition to Erdoğan administration, and the presentation of a variety of opinions.

"Bots," arrests and the connection between them: the *Modus Operandi* of Mohammed bin Salman's regime in Saudi power struggles Dr. Nachum Shiloh

The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, which did significant damage to the international standing of the kingdom, revealed interesting aspects of the current power struggles now taking place in Saudi Arabia. The struggles pit the heir apparent, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and his allies, against competing forces within the kingdom, primarily rivals within the royal family and religious leaders from the "Purity" ("Sahwah") movement, and those beyond the country's borders, particularly Iran, Qatar and Turkey. These struggles are also playing out online, where both sides use a range of tools and manipulations, and work incessantly to undermine the other's standing in social media discourse.

At the present time, it seems that the supporters of Mohammad bin Salman are prevailing in the struggle playing out on social networks. In addition to the fact that the young heir apparent is a member of "Generation Y," which has grown up in an advanced technological environment and for whom social networks are the preferred arena of action, he has the resources of the state at this disposal, largely due to wide-ranging orders and appointments signed by his elderly, ailing father, King Salman. These instruments gave Mohammad bin Salman control over all economic and military systems in the country, and by doing so broke with the prior practice of the House of Saud, which had maintained checks and balances between its various branches.

Among other methods, bin Salman has adopted the use of "bots" on social networks. Bots are software designed to collect information or take action online by imitating ordinary users.²⁸ Reportedly, the Saudi government is investing huge sums in the development and acquisition of bots that generate fictitious accounts on social networks, for the purpose increasing support for the Saudi government, attacking its foreign rivals (including Iran, Turkey and Qatar), and to win adherents for the Vision 2030 program of reform, which is considered a prized project of the Crown Prince.²⁹

Some Twitter bots can tweet more than 100,000 times a day. Because of this capacity, their impact on Saudi cyberspace is so great that experts believe that half of Twitter users in Saudi Arabia today are artificial.³⁰ The New York Times has even claimed that the Crown Prince has an "electronic army" operating on the social networks, to locate members of the opposition, like Jamal Khashoggi, and to recruit supporters for Vision 2030. According to the newspaper, one of the Crown Prince's loyalists, a computer engineer named Ali A'al Zabara, who was associated with the Saudi intelligence apparatus, infiltrated the Twitter company as an employee, which enabled him to track down Saudi opposition



From the "Prisoners of Conscience" Twitter channel

activists, and obtain their phone numbers and IP addresses.³¹

The importance of the online sphere and social networks in the struggle between Mohammad bin Salman and his rivals is also evident on another level: the arrest of several dozen clerics, princes and businessmen, as well as the restrictions on movement that have been imposed mainly on clerics. Reviewing the lists of clerics who in the past year have been arrested or whose movement has been restricted on the instructions of the Crown Prince shows that they do not include the members of the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars (*Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulama*) who are in their eighties and nineties and relatively not active on social networks. In any case, they do not endanger the standing of the heir apparent. On the other hand, the lists do include religious leaders in their forties, fifties and sixties, who are very active in social networks and have many followers. For example, the Twitter accounts of Sheikh Muhammad al-'Arifi (born 1970) and of Sheikh Salman al-'Ouda (born 1956, one of the leaders of the Islamist faction) have about 15 million followers.

It goes without saying that Mohammad bin Salman's rivals do not sit idle, rather they work tirelessly on social networks. For example, they run a colorful Twitter account called "Prisoners of Conscience" or "Detainees of Opinion" ("*Mu'aqtali al-Rai*"), which tweets every few minutes, to inform the public about the situation of clerics, writers and journalists who have been detained in Saudi Arabia, especially those held since November 2017. Their tweets include information about the worsening of detention conditions, torture and the reasons for arrest.³² Sometimes these accounts are used to organize virtual campaigns designed to raise awareness of specific issues, such as protests against the conditions in isolation cells.

The struggle between Mohammad bin Salman and his rivals on social media is reflected not only in criticism of the arrests and reforms, but also in censure of the personal conduct of the Crown Prince. In July 2017, for example, a Twitter account called "Advisor to Prince Muhammad bin Nayef" was



Campaign on <u>Twitter</u> using the hashtag "#solitary confinement: A crime against humanity"

launched, directing sharp criticism at the Crown Prince, on matters ranging from the huge sums of money for which he is allegedly responsible, to discussions of "who might replace Mohammad bin Salman" if and when he is rejected by the royal family. It is quite clear that Prince Mohammad bin Nayef, who was deposed as heir apparent in June 2017 and replaced by Mohammad bin Salman, is not the owner of this Twitter account. However, the account owner's use of his name and image

indicates that the opposition is taking a step up in an attempt to expand the rift that has developed within the Saudi royal family in recent years.³³



Twitter account "Advisor to Prince Muhammad bin Nayef"

In short, social networks reflect the power struggle in Saudi Arabia, between the supporters and opponents of the heir apparent, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, especially following the wave of arrests that began in November 2017. While the latter wields the power of state, even in cyberspace, the former are not burying their heads in the sand. Rather they demonstrate ingenuity and sophistication in the struggle for public opinion in Saudi Arabia and abroad. As we have shown, the virtual world and the real world are intertwined and inextricably interconnected. As the rifts between the sides deepen, we can expect to see further upsurges in the struggle, both in the social networking arena and on the ground in Saudi Arabia.

¹ <u>@694641294043122</u>. Facebook.com, 12 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.facebook.com/groups/694641294043122/permalink/1169129609927619/</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018.

 ² @ra2y3aam. Facebook.com, 7 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.facebook.com/ra2y3aam/videos/vb.1652954831678038/325906898246074/</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018.

³ <u>@AlaaAswany</u>. Twitter.com, 6 December 2018. Available at <u>https://twitter.com/AlaaAswany/status/1070916692711235584</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018.

⁴ <u>@ ra2y3aam</u>. Facebook.com, 7 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.facebook.com/ra2y3aam/videos/vb.1652954831678038/325906898246074/</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018; <u>@nagah.boulis</u> Facebook.com, 14 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10217863377196343</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018.

⁵ <u>@AlaaAswany</u>. Twitter.com 7 December 2018. Available at <u>https://twitter.com/AlaaAswany/status/1071062586987343872</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018. ⁶ Nader Shukry, "Killer of two Minya Copts charged with premeditated murder", *Watani*, December 17 2018. Available at <u>http://en.wataninet.com/coptic-affairs-coptic-affairs/coptic-affairs/killer-of-two-minya-copts-charged-with-premeditated-murder/27098/</u>. Last accessed 19 December 2018

#عايزين البابا يصلي قداس العيد في المنيا 7

⁸ <u>@taranemcom</u>. Facebook.com, 13 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.facebook.com/taranemcom/posts/591922437905726</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018.

#تكلموا_قبل_أن_تتكلم_السماء 9

¹⁰ <u>@Nashaat.Nasr</u> . Facebook.com,14-19 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.facebook.com/Nashaat.Nasr/posts/2152457451444179</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018; #عايزين البابا يصلي قداس العيد في المنيا

¹¹ @dmc. Youtube.com,17 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQQU1b16omw</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018.

¹² @coptstoday. Facebook.com, 18 December 2018. Available at <u>https://www.facebook.com/coptstoday/posts/2311667662241882</u> Last accessed 19 December 2018.

¹³"Osman Kavala tutuklandı", *Hürriyet*, November 11, 2017, Available at<u>http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/son-dakika-osman-kavala-tutuklandi-40629587</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018.

¹⁴"Anadolu Kültür operasyonu: Prof. Dr. Turgut Tarhanlı ve Prof. Betül Tanbay dahil 8 kişi serbest bırakıldı", BBC Türkçe, November 17, 2018, Available at<u>https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-46246418</u> Last accessed 16 December 2018.

¹⁵@hersey_fl, Twitter.com, December 3, 2018. Available at:<u>https://twitter.com/hersey_flu/status/1069862374033760256</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018.

¹⁶@sebelibelkis, Twitter.com, April 19, 2017. Available at:<u>https://twitter.com/sebelibelkis/status/854688322496712705</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018.

¹⁷Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: "Kavala'nın arkasında Macar Yahudi'si Soros var", Şalom, November 21ö 2018, <u>http://www.salom.com.tr/haber-108792-</u>

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¹⁸Memet Ali Alabora'ya tutuklama kararı, CNN Türk, December 11,

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¹⁹"Turkey issues arrest warrant for Can Dündar as Gezi protests investigation expands", *Ahval News*, December 5, 2018. Available at: <u>https://ahvalnews.com/gezi-protests/turkey-issues-arrest-warrant-can-dundar-gezi-protests-investigation-expands</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018.

²⁰"Son dakika... Can Dündar hakkında yakalama kararı", *Hürriyet*, December 5, 2018. Available at:<u>http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/son-dakika-can-dundar-hakkinda-yakalama-karari-41042177</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018. ²¹@GaroPaylan, Twitter.com, November 21, 2018. Available at:<u>https://twitter.com/GaroPaylan/status/1065277921269555200</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018.

²²#Endişeliyiz

²³#ÇapulcularFransaya

²⁴@yusufkorkmaz58, Twitter.com, December 11, 2018.<u>https://twitter.com/yusufkorkmaz58/status/1072516911269842949</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018.

²⁵"Erdoğan: Umarım Paris'te 'Zulüm 1789'da başladı' yazıları görmeyiz", *Milliyet*, December 8, 2018. Available at: <u>http://www.milliyet.com.tr/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-dan-onemli-siyaset-2791803/</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018; "Erdoğan'dan 'Sarı Yelekliler' eleştirisi: Avrupa demokrasi dersinden sınıfta kaldı", *BBC Türkçe*, December 8, 2018. Available at:<u>https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-46493634</u>Last accessed 16 December 2018.

²⁶"Son dakika: Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan 'sokağa davet' tepkisi", *Habertürk*, December 16, 2018. Available at: https://www.haberturk.com/son-dakika-cumhurbaskani-erdogan-dan-aciklamalar-2262982 Last accessed 16 December 2018.

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²⁸ "Internet Bot", *Technopedia*. Available at:

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²⁹ See for example: Elias Groll, "The Kingdom' s Hackers and Bots", *Foreign Policy*, 19 October 2018. Available at: <u>https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/10/19/the-kingdoms-hackers-and-bots-saudi-dissident-khashoggi/</u> Last accessed 18 December 2018.

³⁰ "Saudi bots use 'hashtag poisoning' to spread propaganda", *The Peninsula*, 5 February 2018. Available at:

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³¹ Katie Benner, Mark Mazzetti, Ben Hubbard and Mike Isaac, "Saudis' Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider", *The New York Times*, 20 October 2018. Available at:

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³² @m3takl, Twitter.com. Available at: <u>https://twitter.com/m3takl?lang=en</u> Last accessed 18 December 2018.

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