Editors: Dr. Harel Chorev and Dr. Joel D. Parker

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Dear all,

The Doron Halpern Middle East Network Analysis Desk is happy to present the September issue of Beehive. In the first article, **Adam Hoffman** examines the discourse in the social networks of several Gulf States regarding Israel's normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain. In the second article, **Elad Ben David** shows the use of social media as a powerful tool for marketing Da'wa in America.

Enjoy

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"Gulf citizens against normalization": Reactions to Israel's normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain

Adam Hoffman

On August 13, US President Donald Trump announced that the United Arab Emirates and Israel agreed to sign a normalization agreement. The agreement was presented by Emirati officials as the start of a warm peace. Social media was flooded with messages by Emirati users celebrating the agreement and waving Israeli flags, which gave the impression that the agreement was universally welcomed by Emiratis. Contrary to this rosy picture, social media users across the Gulf States criticized the agreement and many users strongly rejected any normalization with Israel. This discourse intensified after Bahrain announced on September 11 that it reached its own normalization agreement with Israel. While this criticism initially emerged from nationals of other Gulf States, around mid-September Emiratis also joined this discourse, revealing a wide range of reactions to the agreements by social media users from the Gulf States. While many of the responses to both agreements seem authentic, it should also be considered that some accounts promoting comments and hashtags that are either supportive or critical of these developments are operated by bots. Online political discourse in the Gulf since the Gulf Crisis (2017-present) has seen the manipulation of discourse on Twitter by state actors.[1] Given this past record, it is highly likely that the discourse on Gulf social media regarding both agreements is also influenced by state actors.

Many Emirati social media users praised Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed, the UAE's de-facto ruler, for signing the normalization agreement with Israel. Since the announcement of the deal, the hashtags "Muhammad bin Zayed is a man of peace" and "the man of peace

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[1] Andrew Leber and Alexei Abrahams, "A storm of tweets: Social media manipulation during the gulf crisis", *Review of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 53, No.2 (2019), pp. 241-258.

Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed" started trending in Emirati social media.[2] Other users celebrated the benefits for Emirati Muslims created by the agreement. A prominent Emirati social media user tweeted "Finally we, Emiratis, will be able to pray at al-Aqsa Mosque."[3] Such comments reflect the increasingly nationalist discourse on Emirati social media, which is centered around the glorification of the leadership of Muhammad bin Zayed and Emirati national interests at the expense of traditional Arab causes.

In parallel to the celebratory comments posted by many Emiratis, a campaign under the hashtag "Palestine is not my concern" (*Filastin laisat kaḍiati*) started trending on social media.[4] Under this campaign, many Emirati and Saudi users posted comments critical of the Palestinian leadership and stressing the precedence of their own national interests over the Palestinian cause. One Emirati user claimed that "Israel is not my enemy and Palestine is not my concern,"[5] while a Saudi user claimed that "Riyadh is more important than al-Quds (Jerusalem)" [see figure 1].[6] Such comments, while not uncontroversial, show the dominance of Gulf States' nationalist sentiments in recent years and the lack of an Arab consensus over the Palestinian issue in public opinion in the Gulf States.

"Riyadh is more important than al-Quds", from Twitter

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[2] See for instance: #محمد_بن_زايد and #رجل_السلام_الشيخ_محمد_بن_زايد; رجل_السلام on Twitter.com.

[3] @HSajwanization, Twitter.com, 13 August 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[4] See, #فلسطين_ليست_قضيتي on Twitter.com.

[5] @HSA__A, Twitter.com, 9 September 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[6] @fayez_101, Twitter.com, 6 September 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

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In contrast to such responses to the agreement, other voices were critical of this development and rejected any normalization by the Gulf States with Israel. After the Omani Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a statement in support of the agreement, Omani intellectuals emphasized that the Ministry's statement "does not, and will never represent us," and released a statement which affirmed their categorical rejection of "all forms of normalization practiced by the ruling Arab regimes" with Israel.[7] In Kuwait, the local branch of the BDS movement published a statement signed by twenty-nine political parties and civil society organizations which rejected normalization with "the Zionist enemy" and stated its objection to any concessions.[8] Anti-normalization hashtags also started trending in the Gulf, which included the more general "normalization is treason"[9] in addition to hashtags stressing the objection by specific national citizens in the Gulf, such as "Saudis against normalization,"[10] "Bahrainis reject normalization,"[11] "Kuwaitis against normalization,"[12] "Qatari students against normalization"[13] and "Gulf citizens against normalization."[14]

In Bahrain, in addition to collective hashtags opposing normalization, comments by individual users against normalization also stood out. This negative discourse, which was promoted by many Shiʿa civil society organizations and individuals, intensified after the announcement of the agreement between Bahrain and Israel. The Shiʿa-majority country has seen anti-regime protests since 2011, and the popularity of the Palestinian issue in the Arab world made opposition to the agreement a convenient mobilization cause for the country's Shiʿi opposition. Many Bahrainis stated that the agreement signed by their government did

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[7] "عمانيون يرفضون التطبيع مع إسرائيل ويدعون الأنظمة العربية إلى العودة إلى رشدها واحترام إرادة شعوبها" [Omanis reject normalization with Israel and call on Arab regimes to return to their senses and respect the will of their people], *Jadaliyya*, 15 August 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[8] @BDS_Kuwait, Twitter.com, 16 August 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[9] التطبيع_خيانة#, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[10] سعوديون_ضد_التطبيع#, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[11] البحرين_ترفض_التطبيع#, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[12] كويتيون_ضد_التطبيع#, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[13] طلاب_قطر_ضد_التطبيع#, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[14] خليجيون_ضد_التطبيع#, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

not represent them. One Bahraini human rights activist tweeted, "as a Bahraini citizen, I announce my disavowal of the normalization agreement with the Zionist entity and consider it a stab in the heart of the Bahraini people and a betrayal of the sacrifices of the *umma* [the global Muslim community]."[15] Other accounts posted messages with the statement "I am a Bahraini rejecting the normalization with the Zionists,"[16] or used the hashtag "no to normalization with the Zionist entity."[17]

"The normalization does not represent the Bahraini people",
#normalization_is_treason, from [Twitter](#)

After the signing of both agreements in the White House, the hashtag "the people against normalization" emerged as well,[18] which sought to emphasize that the agreements signed by the UAE and Bahrain did not represent the peoples of the Gulf States. One tweet addressed to "the Zionists" warned that though the 'Arab Zionists' - a derogatory term for the Arab

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[15] @ealsaegh, Twitter.com, 11 September 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[16] @almesh8ab, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020 (The tweet has since been removed).

[17]لا_للتطبيع_مع_الكيان_الصهيوني#, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

[18] #الشعوب_ضد_التطبيع, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

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regimes which emerged in early September as part of the criticism of the agreements – "tried to normalize [relations], curry favor with you and get close, you will never escape your fate, and you will never take over Muslim holy places, because the Islamic Umma will rise and attack resolutely."[19]

Such comments show that opposition to normalization with Israel in the Gulf is based on both Islamist and pan-Arab political narratives, which see such a development as a betrayal of sacred Arab and Islamic causes. While Emirati social media users were initially reluctant to voice criticism of the UAE-Israel agreement, Emirati criticism of the agreement eventually became more vocal following their counterparts in the Gulf. The hashtag "Emiratis against normalization" joined the same hashtags by nationals from the five other Gulf States. Twitter and Instagram accounts[20] associated with this hashtag called for "the launching of a popular Emirati campaign to combat normalization."[21]

Despite decades of tacit cooperation between Israel and the Gulf States, normalization remains a controversial issue, and some Gulf citizens still profess their solidarity with the Palestinian cause and reject normalization with Israel. At the same time, the rise of nationalist sentiments in the Gulf in recent years has also led to a sidelining of the Palestine issue, with many viewing it as local Palestinian concern rather than a symbol of pan-Arab unity. While normalization remains a controversial topic, as the anti-normalization social media campaigns clearly illustrate, key policymakers, as well as ordinary social media users, from the Gulf States have begun to display a range of different attitudes towards relations with Israel.

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[19] @s20321k, Twitter.com, 12 September 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.
[20] @UAE_vs_IL, Twitter.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020; @uae_vs_il, Instagram.com. Last accessed 22 September 2020.
[21] @UAE_vs_IL, Twitter.com, 15 September 2020. Last accessed 22 September 2020.

Marketing Daʿwa in America Through Social Media

Elad Ben David

The importance of media culture in spreading Islamic messages is a known phenomenon that started many decades ago, before the digital era. Audiotapes assisted Ayatollah Khomeini in his 'cassette revolution' for spreading his messages and had a significant role in the Islamic revolution in 1978-79.[22] The evolution of cassettes with television and satellites during the 80s and the 90s reached a more diverse Muslim audiences and increased the spreading of Islam.[23] However, during the last two decades, media culture was significantly upgraded with the rise of new online media, which became a powerful tool among American Muslim preachers. They used it to market a positive image of Islam, which in the post 9/11 era was often accused of being a "religion of of terror."[24]

Daʿwa is an essential activity[25] for spreading Islam and has a variety of meanings, such as: praying, calling (others),[26] propaganda, missionary activity, etc.[27] The Islamic obligation to perform daʿwa is a command incumbent upon every Muslim to spread the message of Allah to all humanity according to one's ability.[28] Its primary goals are guiding Muslims and attracting non-Muslims to Islam.

Daʿwa in America became noticeable since the late 1950s, with the increase of immigration and the foundation of Muslim organizations, such as the Islamic Circle of North America

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[22] Emmanuel Sivan, *The Crash Within Islam* (Tel-Aviv: Ofakim Library, Am Oved Publlishing, 2005), p. 110 (In Hebrew). For more information about the effect of cassettes in the 1979 revolution, see: Shaul Bakhash, "'Sermons, Revolutionary Pamphleteering and Mobilization,' Iran 1978", in S. A. Arjomand (ed.), *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam*, (New York: Palgrave 1984).

[23] Nabil Echchaibi, "From audio tapes to video blogs: the delocalization of authority in Islam", *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2011), p. 28.

[24] Ibid, p. 29. See also: Dina Lisnyansky, "Islamic Da'wa in Europe: France and Italy as Case Studies," (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Hebrew University, Jerusalem (2014) pp. 10, 182 (In Hebrew).

[25] See for example Qur'an 3:104.

[26] The word comes from Arabic word (*Dau*), which means to invite or calling others about Islam.

[27] Lisnyansky, "Islamic Da'wa in Europe", p. 6.

[28] Ibid.

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(ICNA)[29] and the Muslim Student Association (MSA),[30] which saw daʿwa as a primary goal.[31] As a minority in a Western-secular environment, daʿwa enabled them to justify their residence in a non-Muslim country (*Dar Al-Kufr*)[32] that was considered outside the rule of Islamic law (*Shariʿa*).[33] This attitude was perfected by Muslim thinkers such as Khurram Murad (1932-1996),[34] who strove to bolster Islamic presence in America by adopting strategies to apply Islamic ideas to a Western context, such as universal values and social issues.[35]

However, the 9/11 attacks pushed daʿwa activity to a much more vital level for the Islamic community. Following the catastrophe, Islamophobia acted as an incentive for numerous American Muslim Imams and activists to boost their daʿwa activity. They realized that to protect their religion, they must enhance their integration with their fellow American non-Muslims by performing stronger social involvement and civic responsibility.[36] Those activities included cooperation and consolidating the ties between Muslim communities, creating a broad interfaith encounter with Christians and Jews, and enhancing Muslim involvement in the political arena.[37] These actions were accompanied by the rise of new

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[29] @ICNA, Facebook.com [Page]. Last accessed 10 September, 2020.

[30] @msanational, Facebook.com [Page]. Last accessed 10 September, 2020.

[31] Larry Poston, "Da'wa in the West", in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad ed., *The Muslims of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 131-132.

[32] *Dar Al-Kufr* means a geographical location where the shariʿa is not in force, as opposed to *Dar Al-Islam*, which is considered the natural place for Muslim to reside. Nowadays these notions have lost much of their validity with new Muslim generations born in Western countries, and the increasing Islamic presence.

[33] Larry Poston, "Da'wa in North America: The Past, the Present, and the Future", in Itzchak Weismann and Jamal Malik (eds.), *Culture of Da'wa: Islamic Preaching in the Modern World*. (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2020), pp. 162-163.

[34] Khurram Murad was an influential Pakistani Islamic philosopher who was active during the eighties in The United States. He was the student of the one of the most important Pakistani Muslim scholars of modern Islam, Abul A'la Maududi (1903-1979) who was the founder of the famous Islamic missionary group, Jamaat-e-Islami.

[35] Poston, "Da'wa in North America", p. 130.

[36] Raquel Ukeles, "The Evolving Muslim Community in America: The Impact of 9/11", Mosaica- Research Center for Religion, State and Society, 2003, 8-9.

[37] Jonathan Curiel, *Islam In America* (I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, NY, 2015) pp. 51-53. The first Muslim Congress was elected following this activity, Keith Ellison in 2006. Ibid, 52.

media that emerged a few years after the attacks and was used by those preachers to present Islam and Muslims in a peaceful and positive light.[38]

Daʿwa activity in social media is prevalent in three leading platforms - Youtube, Facebook, and Twitter. [39] Most preachers have an active account in each of them. The large number of followers on these social platforms demonstrate the popularity some of the prominent American preachers have. For example, Nouman Ali-Khan[40] from the Bayyinah Institue[41] for accessible teaching of Arabic and the Quran has gained more than two million followers on Facebook. The Youtube channel of Yasir Qadhi,[42] a well-known cleric from Epic Masjid[43] in Texas, has more than fifty million views, and Yasmin Mogahed,[44] an Egyptian American speaker and a leading female voice, has close to 450 thousand followers on Twitter.[45]

"Get Married", A clip of Khalid Yasin, that grant him a rapper look when he urges young Muslims to get married, from YouTube

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[38] Lisnyansky, "Islamic Da'wa in Europe", pp. 182, 184.

[39] See for example, Omar Suleiman from 'Yaqeen Institue' for Islamic research in Texas, where he speaks about police brutality against African Americans. @imamomarsuleiman, Facebook.com, 1 June 2020. Last accessed 9 September, 2020.

[40] @noumanbayyinah, Facebook.com. Last accessed 10 September, 2020.

[41] Bayinnah Institue [Web Page].

[42] @yasir.qadhi, Facebook.com. Last accessed 10 September, 2020.

[43] @epic.masjid, Facebook.com. Last accessed 10 September, 2020.

[44] @YMogahed, Facebook.com. Last accessed 10 September, 2020.

[45] @YasminMogahed, Twitter.com [Page]. Last accessed 9 September, 2020.

Among the above three platforms, YouTube is probably the most active platform due to the diversity of methods and tactics it offers to promote visual daʿwa as part of Islamic discourse in four ways. First, the titles of sermons convey common human feelings, like how to overcome sadness or depression,[46] or why everyone needs empathy. Those can be found for example in the videos of Yasmin Mogahed. Second, using profile photos of celebrities in YouTube clips, such as the case of Nouman Ali-Khan with the singer Justin Bieber. Ali-Khan appeared with Bieber in a cut and paste profile photo on his YouTube sermon both to attract young viewers and to stress Bieber's false pop-music culture in comparison to the "truth of Islam.[47] Third, sermons may include dubbed over cartoons or animated videos to brighten the Islamic message in a fun and attractive way. For instance, in the clips of Yasir Qadhi "respect and love"[48] or "love your parents."[49] Those animated topics can affect and be relevant to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Also, the critical success of the use of animation is its ability to attract young and old ages because the message is profound on the one hand, and presented colorfully and simplistically on the other. Forth, online daʿwa may include very short videos entitled "funny" or "very funny", where a few juicy minutes from a full sermon is cut, to highlight the preacher's punch line. Khalid Yasin,[50] a popular Afro-American from Brooklyn often employs this technique in his clips. His videos combine the firth method of creating a catchy title with a specific appeal audiences looking for comic relief such as, "McDonald's will soon become McClinic…Funny"[51] or "monkey boys- FUNNY."[52]

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[46] Yasmin Mogahed, 4 June 2012, Overcoming Sadness & Depression [Video file].
[47] Pearls of Scholars Channel, 27 April 2014, I Feel Sorry for Justin Bieber [Video file].
[48] Yasir Qadhi, 17 December 2019, Apples & Oranges: Respect & Love (Animated Series) [Video file].
[49] Dynamic Islam, 30 December 2018, LOVE YOUR PARENTS - Yasir Qadhi Animated [Video file].
[50]@KhalidYasinOfficial, Facebook.com. Last accessed 7 September, 2020.
[51] One Islam Productions, 2 May 2012, Fat, Overweight Muslim Leaders | Khalid Yasin [Video file].
[52] Halal Sheikh, 1 September 2011, "Monkey Boys" - FUNNY - by Sheikh Khalid Yasin [Video file].

A clip of Nouman Ali-Khan about Justin Bieber pop culture, from YouTube

These examples manifest a fundamental and continuous challenge to Islam, which is the balance between conservatism and modernity. Part of the young generation of Muslims born in America faces daily problems that have no obvious solution in classical texts.[53] They struggle with secularism and individualism, doubts (about Islam), and contradictions between American and Islamic cultures.[54] This reality presents old conservative religious leaders with the difficulty of how to reconcile Islam with modern challenges, such as atheism, LGBT movements, and feminism.[55] However, American-born Youtuber preachers who speak fluent English[56] and are familiar with modern challenges can more easily engage with such conflicts within the context of American culture.[57] Their daʿwa, marketed in a native medium with direct language, serves as a channel of communication with the youth. Islam is presented as a modern and relevant faith to American Muslims who try to combine it with a Western environment while keeping the religion in tune with modernity.

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[53] Bano Masooda (ed.), *Modern Islamic authority and social change*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 23.

[54] Jeffrey Lang, *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help*, (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publication, 2017), pp. 4-6

[55] As Yasir Qadhi pointed out in one of his sermons: Yasir Qadhi, 7 April 2015, Challenges & Solutions of Muslims living in the West [Video file].

[56] Jeffrey Lang, *Even Angels Ask: A journey to Islam in America*, (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 1997), pp. 213-225.

[57] Such as, for example with the phenomenon of Muslim who wish to leave Islam, where American Islamic institute, like Al-Maghrib (@almaghribworld) from Texas, launched a series of episodes that deals with facing those issues in light of modernity: almaghrib [Web Page].

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