



INSS Insight No. 511, February 5, 2014

**The Social Media Discourse in Saudi Arabia:
The Conservative and Radical Camps are the Dominant Voices**
Orit Perlov and Yoel Guzansky

While Saudi Arabia may so far have evaded the significant manifestations of the Arab upheaval, the age of social networks has not bypassed the gates of the kingdom. Since 2012, the number of active internet users has grown by 300 percent. According to recent studies, one-third of Saudi citizens are today regular users of social networks, and the number of Twitter and YouTube users in the kingdom is the highest per capita in the world, which indicates how “connected” the kingdom’s residents are. The average age of Saudi social media users ranges from 26 to 55, with male users (87 percent) far outnumbering female users.

In other parts of the Arab world, the dominant forces using social networks can be seen as “changing forces.” Seeking to challenge the existing social and political structures, they represent a particular segment of civil society: both men and women, they are young, middle class, and mainly educated urbanites with liberal and democratic tendencies. In contrast, in Saudi Arabia, the trend is the opposite. The conservatives, radical forces, religious clerics, and mouthpieces for the regime are more dominant on social networks and use them for indoctrination and mobilization and as a platform for public messaging. Indeed, most social network users in the kingdom are consumers of religious content. Conservative forces have learned to use social networks to complement the traditional tools of mosques and television networks to preach sermons to the faithful in Saudi Arabia and abroad, to recruit Salafist and jihadi fighters, and to warn against “abusing” social networks. According to a poll conducted in the kingdom published in December 2013, 20 percent of Saudis use the internet for reading and watching religious content, while only 8 per cent do so for “political purposes.”

However, Saudi “changing forces” are also active on social networks, using this medium for campaigns to improve the status of women and minorities in the kingdom. While they do not yet call for meaningful changes in the existing governmental structure and do not promote democratic, liberal ideas, they do work to promote the rights and active

participation of young people and women within the existing structures. As such, they are gradually undermining the source of traditional authority.

The Conservative and Radical Camps: "All the King's Men" and Religious Clerics

The "king's men" are politicians, scholars, and journalists who, directly or indirectly, serve as mouthpieces for the royal house. The large majority supports the policy of the palace, explains it, and barely sounds any criticism against it. On the contrary: this group criticizes Arab states, the United States, and Europe. Thus, for example, while only infrequently does the regime express public dissatisfaction with US policy in the region, the "king's men" are "permitted" to expose the rift and the serious crisis of confidence between the countries. For example, on the revolution in Egypt, prior to the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi, while the royal house avoided taking a public position against the Muslim Brotherhood, the "the king's men" warned against the danger and encouraged the Egyptian army to stage a coup.

The-radical clerics are the largest and most popular group in Saudi Arabia. Each of the three leading preachers, Sheikh Salman al-Ouda, Sheikh Muhammad al-Arifi, and Ahmed al-Shugairi, has between 5-7 million social media followers. The focus of this group's discussions can be divided into three. The first is sectarian and directed against the Shiites; the second is anti-Semitic and anti-Western; and the third is conservative and directed against women and progress in general. The sectarian discussion is the most dominant, and there is a call, through both new and traditional media, for a jihad against heresy. The clerics are fully opposed to the secular Sunni leaders in the Middle East, and call for their overthrow. They are enthusiastic supporters of al-Qaeda in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq and sworn supporters of Hamas in Gaza. (This was the case until the organization turned to Iran for aid.) In addition, they are the strongest and most vocal opponents of improvement in the status of women. There are even increasing demands for additional draconian laws to increase the empowerment of the religious police and enhance their authority

The Changing Forces Camp: Shiites, Women, and Young Intellectuals

The Shiite population. The Shiite activists on the net who launched new media campaigns drew their inspiration from the Shiite protests in Bahrain. In early 2011 the Shiite groups, who are found primarily in the eastern province of the kingdom, demonstrated and called for the overthrow of the monarchy. These demonstrations were suppressed by force, and several protest leaders and activists, led by Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, were jailed without trial. Blogs, Twitter, and Facebook accounts of Shiite activists were closed, and in the wake of the brutal suppression, this group went underground. Consequently, most of its activities take place far from the eyes of the government.

Saudi women, intellectuals, young people, and students living in the West: This group does not directly challenge the monarchy, but seeks to expand the rights of women in the

public sphere by integrating women into politics, business, and teaching. The most popular online campaign, Women2Drive, calls for women in Saudi Arabia to be allowed to drive and speaks out against the clerics. However, while the online discourse in the West sometimes sees these “changing forces” as promises of redemption and seeks to enhance their visibility, their online power and influence do not compare to that of the radical and conservative camp in Saudi Arabia, online and elsewhere.

Assessment

Most of the Salafist jihadi discourse in the Middle East originates in the Gulf states. In addition, the training and funding of elements identified with al-Qaeda comes from the Gulf states, primarily from Saudi Arabia, and is sometimes offered openly on the internet. Along with the “changing forces” in the Middle East who have found in social networks the ultimate platform for messages of reform, there are conservative-radical powers that use those tools to spread radical and religious ideology and mobilize the masses.

The relative success of the social networks in Saudi Arabia is explained by the widespread use of smartphones, local culture, and climate conditions, as a result of which people do not often go to public spaces. A further reason is actually connected to the many prohibitions on the Saudis: the tight censorship and surveillance have turned the social networks into an alternative communication tool for many, which compensates for the ban on gathering in public places. The social networks offer an alternative to movie theaters, pubs, and theaters, which are banned in the kingdom.

Young people represent some one half of the Saudi population, and the virtual platforms offer them access to information that in the past was the exclusive province of the official establishment. More than five million Twitter users in the country understand better how conservative and archaic the kingdom is. It can be argued that the extensive use of the networks serves the regime because it allows the subjects to let off steam. Nevertheless, the royal house and the official religious establishment see social media users as a real threat that requires close monitoring, especially regarding content that is damaging to Islam and the royal house. Social networks have also given the regime tools to monitor citizens who previously were more anonymous. Furthermore, the fact that the protests happen mainly on the new media platforms makes it easier for the government to monitor users and deter them from political activity, although the greater the number of users, the more difficult it is to monitor and manipulate them. And while many in the monarchy and the religious establishment make use of social networks for various purposes, this does not prevent them from prohibiting the citizens from doing so. Thus, for example, the mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, strongly criticized Twitter users, describing them as “a bunch of clowns” who are making use of the tool “to corrupt values and to spread lies and rumors.” Nor has the royal house stopped there: a December 2013 report by Human Rights Watch reveals that the regime has blocked and monitored many sites and arrested key activists, with the goal of discouraging others from joining their ranks.

It is impossible to know if and when the Saudi "social media revolution" will spill over into the real world. The main fear of the royal house is that social networks will serve as a catalyst for the outbreak of protests, and indeed, the social media revolution gives a voice to the subjects that undermine the legitimacy of the monarchy. In spite of the conservative nature of the kingdom, many Saudis are not satisfied with the status quo and hope for change, even if they demand it from behind their smartphone or computer screen.

