



INSS Insight No. 351, July 4, 2012

Trends in Lebanon: Lebanese Discourse on the Social Networks, July 2012

Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov

Most of the 10 percent of the Lebanese population using social media (Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and YouTube) are identified with the March 14 camp. They comprise primarily Sunni Muslims, but also figure a good number of Christians, Lebanese media figures, foreign journalists, and Lebanese expatriates. At the outset of the regional upheavals, Shiites and Druze participated little in the intra-Lebanese discourse in the social media, but their participation has increased over time. Furthermore, some Lebanese politicians, among them Prime Minister Najib Mikati and opposition leader Saad Hariri, are very active on the internet and use the new media to disseminate messages, express opinions, and reach younger segments of the population.

What follows is a look at some of the leading issues currently debated on the Lebanese social networks.

The Absence of the Leadership

The two leaders of the principal political camps in Lebanon, the March 14 camp headed by Saad Hariri and the March 8 camp led by Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, operate away from Lebanese public space public (Nasrallah is in hiding in Lebanon, and Hariri, following assassination attempts, has been forced into de facto exile) and conduct their daily communications with the Lebanese people via social networks, video clips, and TV. Hariri, currently situated in Saudi Arabia, has 153,000 followers on Twitter and 48,000 followers on Facebook. In both camps there is criticism of the leaders' conduct and their supporters' lack of access to them. A prevailing sentiment is that the direct, "unmediated media" are critical to processes of change, but that they cannot entirely replace the leaders' presence and action on the ground. Although he conducts a cautious, neutral policy and is active on Twitter and Facebook, Prime Minister Mikati is not widely viewed among social media opinions as a strong, charismatic figure who can lead Lebanon to meet the complex challenges it faces.



Deterioration to Inter-Community Struggle

The social media discourse reflects growing concern about an intense flare-up of inter-Lebanese strife and inter-community conflict, based on two different perspectives:

- a. Blaming Syria and the Assad regime as interested in undermining stability in neighboring countries, especially Lebanon, while cautioning them against support for external intervention in Syria's internal affairs. Likewise, this sentiment is also a signal to the international community about the cost the region can be expected to pay in case of foreign military intervention in Syria.
- b. Blaming Lebanese internal politics: A different trend, becoming stronger of late, places responsibility for the recent violence in the Tripoli area on Lebanese politicians who exploited the events to promote internal power struggles. These tendencies are complemented by efforts to arm and advance a various militias.

Disbanding Armed Militias

There are more reports than in the past about huge influxes of arms from Iran, Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, destined for the various militias. There is a sense that at this rate, Lebanon is a powder keg that could explode at any time, leading to the loss of the state's ability to govern. Consequently, social media users are debating the need to disarm Hizbollah, the Sunni militias, and the Palestinians. Contributors to the discussion are doubtful of the Lebanese army's ability and even desire to disband the militias, both because of its limited power and because most of those serving in the Lebanese army are Shiites: their first loyalty is to the Shiite community, whereas the good of the Lebanese state as a whole takes second place.

Initial Signs of Intra-Shiite Criticism of Hizbollah

Thanks to the full backing Nasrallah has given Assad's regime since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, an increasing number of Shiite journalists are criticizing the Hizbollah leader's support for the Syrian president. For them, Nasrallah – the man who for so long was the standard bearer of the resistance – betrayed this ideology the moment he chose to back the oppressors rather than the oppressed. Among Lebanese Shiites, there is talk of their suffering increased harassment because of Hizbollah's support for Bashar Assad: being denied municipal services, job discrimination, street fights, and more. In addition, Shiites in the Dahiya neighborhood in Beirut are not satisfied with the level of security and city services Hizbollah is providing them. They therefore send letters to Prime Minister Mikati demanding more involvement by the government in Shiite neighborhoods so that they need not rely on the inadequate Hizbollah apparatus. Similarly, there are demands for jobs, municipal services, and basic security (police, firefighting, and ambulance services), which they claim are deficient.



Conclusion

Despite a widespread impression that the Arab Spring or Arab uprising has so far bypassed Lebanon, the social media users are concerned that Lebanon could be next, if/when Bashar Assad's regime falls, and that the clashes in Tripoli between Sunnis and Alawites are a harbinger of what Lebanon can expect should events spill over from Syria to Lebanon.

In Lebanon, people shudder at the possibility of civil war. According to them, "No one understands the meaning of civil war better than those who've experienced it." Thus, there is much concern about Hizbollah's conduct and the organization's attempt to cancel or alter the Taif Agreement, which brought political stability to the country, and that it is liable to draw Lebanon into an unnecessary confrontation with Israel.

In this context, the social media reflect the claim that Lebanon already underwent its social, civil upheaval in 2005, and that despite the counterrevolution in 2008, Lebanon is, relatively speaking, making more progress than the rest of the Arab world. Young people in Lebanon strive more for social justice, the resolution to problems of water, electricity, and energy, employment and a steady income, affordable housing, self-realization and women's rights, than they want to "fight someone else's war."

Most of those active in the social media hope that events in Syria end as they did in Libya and that Assad's regime falls. In their opinion, given the current situation, the only way to make this happen is through Western intervention, in tandem with Assad's elimination by the Syrian opposition.

