

Over the Net



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The sixth issue of *Over the Net* reviews a number of trends that in recent months have been at the center of the discourse in the Arab world. It first addresses the “Marches of Return,” a series of events that took place adjacent to the border fence between the Gaza Strip and Israel over a period of approximately six weeks, between March 30 (Land Day) and May 15 (the Nakba). These events are examined here on three levels of the public discourse in Gaza: survival, ideology, and narrative. The second topic is the recent elections in Lebanon, Tunisia (municipal elections), and Iraq. A comparative perspective reveals common trends in all three cases with regard to citizens' confidence in the democratic system, voter turnout rates, the number of women candidates, the status of the Sunni parties, and the question of Iranian influence. The third topic addresses the Gulf states through three case studies that have recently drawn public attention regarding various policy issues, all of which share one common denominator: the relocation of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

The Great March of Return

The Marches of Return were originally part of a [civil initiative](#) of social activists in the Gaza Strip that began in January 2018 with the aim of breaking the siege on Gaza through peaceful public protest. This was to be achieved with the arrival of participants at a number of points along the border fence with Israel and the establishment of positions at an approximate distance of 700 meters from the fence, until a change occurred to the status quo. In early March, the Hamas movement seized control of this civil initiative and in practice, led the major marches from March 30 (Land Day) until May 14 (the day the US embassy to Israel was moved to Jerusalem, and one day before Nakba Day); recruited participants; and provided them with transportation from the mosques and points of assembly to the different points along the fence. According to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, as of early June (even before the Naksa events), the March of Return events left 123 Palestinians dead and tens of thousands wounded. It is also apparent that as a result of the ongoing fatigue in Gaza, from the moment the initiative was launched and likewise after Hamas seized control of it, Gazans supported the initiative from their living rooms but did not intend to participate in the marches.

There were three main components of Gazan discourse regarding the March of Return as reflected on social media

The Survival Component: “Prison Break”

The main civil motivation underlying the Marches of Return was the psychological and economic distress of Gaza's youth, most of whom have never once left the “Gaza prison” (as they refer to it). This metaphor of a life in prison is used widely in the public discourse in the Strip. Contrary to the declarative aspect, the ideological component – in this case, the right to return to Palestine – is not the major element preoccupying Gazans. The economic situation, unemployment, and shortages of electricity and clean water have been the major catalyst and engine fueling the protest. Still, Gazans are saying, improvement of the quality of life in “Gaza prison” alone will not end their activity, whose goal is to break the siege.

Two prominent examples of these sentiments were posted on Facebook. The first was [posted](#) by Ahmed Abu Artima (a 34-year old Gazan political activist and journalist, and one of the leaders of the March of Return) on January 7, 2018:

Thank you, Israel, for opening our eyes.

If the occupation would have opened up the border crossings and allowed people to live a normal life and our youth to work in dignity, then solving our political problems with the occupation would have been pushed aside and their solution would have been postponed by a generation or two...However, the harsh living conditions dictated to us by the occupation, which deprives us of a normal life in the most basic way, forces us to choose: confrontation or extinction...All the difficulties we have met are a direct or indirect consequences of the occupation.

The second [post](#), dated March 24, was written by Gazan photographer Yasir Murtaja (killed by IDF sniper along the fence on the “Friday of Tires” on April 6 while covering protests along the Gaza border as a news photographer) in the context of a photograph of Gaza from the air:

I hope the day that I can take this image when I am in the sky instead of on the ground will come!

My name is Yaser Murtaja,

I am 30 years old, live in Gaza City

And I have never travelled before in my life!

The Ideological Component: The “Right of Return”, not the “Deal of the Century”

As in the case of a layer cake, the Gazans placed the ideological component on top of the national struggle and on top of the survival component. Not incidentally, the Marches of Return were planned around a series of key dates during May and June marking important events in the Palestinian national struggle, beginning with Land Day, and including the day of the relocation of the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, Israeli Independence Day, and Naksa Day. The current context is one of opposition to the political deal formulated by US President Donald Trump, known as “the deal of the century.” Discourse on social media indicates that Palestinian society is completely opposed to any political deal that does not include a right of return (according to UN General Assembly Resolution 194). “Yes to return and no to the deal,” they write in their posts and tweets. In addition, the discourse indicates that the ideological yearning complements the basic demand: Gazans want to be liberated from the siege and return to Palestine. For this reason, one symbol of the current struggle is the [key](#) to their homes from 1948. Most of Gaza's young generation see themselves as obligated to return to the original homes of their fathers or grandfathers in Palestine.

The Narrative Component: A Dead Palestinian or a Palestinian who Accepts Subjugation

The main narrative in the Palestinian discourse (and in the Arab world as a whole) is the Israeli “shot to kill” policy that allows no protest/struggle whatsoever. This emotion was best described by a young Gazan as follows: “You Israelis are both raping us and getting angry at us when we scream ‘enough.’” A number of other tweets have reflected this sentiment well. Palestinian human rights activist İyad el-Baghdadi [tweeted](#): “The only good Palestinian in your (Israeli) eyes is a dead Palestinian or a Palestinian who accepts subjugation. Everyone else is an existential threat, a ‘terrorist.’” Lebanese satirist Karlo Sharro [tweeted](#): “Israel has given Palestinians a choice: accept the humiliation of life in an open air prison or we shoot you. Go on, make that choice.” The issue was [summed](#) up by a female resident of Gaza, as follows:

Israeli sick logic:

It did not happen.

If it did, it was not us.

If it was us, he/she was a terrorist.

If he/she is not a terrorist, the bullet strayed.

If the bullet did not stray, then Hamas is to blame.

Another angle of discourse dealt with the asymmetric struggle between Israel and the Palestinians. Some have spoken out against the word “clashes,” as it can be understood as

referring to a direct confrontation between the IDF and another military force, whereas the reality on the ground was one of an army equipped with drones and snipers on one side of the fence and mostly young Palestinian protestors armed with stones, tires, and kites on the other. The use of photographs and videos has been critical in passing on the narrative. It has allowed a juxtaposition of buzzwords and loaded images, on a split screen, between wounded and killed Gazans and photos of the joy in Jerusalem (during the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem), and the homes with light in Israel versus the dark homes of Gaza. The internet was flooded with photos of children, photographers, and paramedics that were wounded and killed in order to show the world Israel's illegitimate use of force. In addition to the desire to return the Gaza issue to the regional and global public agenda, this has also reflected a desire to darken Israel's image.

In conclusion, the Palestinian discourse on social media concerning the Marches of Return sheds light on the main reason why Gazans are interested in running to the fences and risking injury and even death. After Hamas took control of the Marches of Return, the hundreds of thousands of participants who were expected by the movement to come out at the height of the events (at their beginning and their end) did not do so. Rather, the number of Gazans participating never exceeded 50,000. The Palestinian population for the most part stayed in their homes on their sofas and responded to the events with hashtags and tweets. Above all, this discourse is indicative of a desire to break out of "Gaza prison." This discourse explains why the demonstrations were not joined by Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. From a broader perspective, although Arab solidarity has weakened and there has been almost no actual Arab activity supporting the Palestinians in Gaza (with the exception of condemnation on the part of the Arab regimes), most of the Arab support was presented on social media and focused on the narrative war by aiding the Palestinian agenda.

The Elections in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq

In the course of May 2018, elections were held in three Arab countries: on May 6 in Tunisia (the first municipal elections since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011) and Lebanon (the first parliamentary elections in 9 years), and on May 12 in Iraq. The following discussion does not address specific domestic politics in each of these countries but rather general trends shared by all or some of them.

Low Voter Turnout: A Total Loss of Trust in the System

The voter turnout was 33.7 percent in Tunisia, 49.2 percent in Lebanon, and 44 percent in Iraq (the lowest rate since 2003). In the three capital cities, Tunis, Beirut, and Baghdad, voter turnout did not exceed 35 percent. The discourse in the social media is indicative of a total

loss of trust among the population of all three countries in their ability to change the political system and the system of government. As a result, not only are they no longer taking to the streets; they also no longer believe in the power of the ballot box. The older generation of the political leadership does not allow reform and change, not only by violent struggle but also through peaceful democratic methods. As a result, there are those who believe that change in their country is conditional upon the departure of the old guard. In other words, it does not matter how many candidates take part in the elections (and there have been thousands, as opposed to the fictitious elections in countries such as Egypt and Syria) or the voter turnout rate; it is on the whole the same faces, from the same families and tribes, that ultimately reach the ministerial positions in government.

The deepest frustration was voiced in Lebanon. In a [video](#) that was part of a viral campaign on social media, Lebanese Olympic sprinter Greta Teslakian (of Armenian descent) was filmed outside running with the aim of changing the political behavior of the leader (Zaim), portrayed as the head of the mafia, through dialogue between them. In the video, the leader tries to convince her that for years he has provided education, welfare, and security, whereas Teslakian repeatedly explains that it is her right as a citizen to receive these services and the state's obligation to provide them. The video concludes as she and many supporters stand face to face with the leader, holding up envelopes containing the ballots that will remove him from office.

The main claim has been that despite the freedom of choice and the multiple candidates, Nabi Berri was once again elected as head of the parliament and Saad al-Hariri elected as prime minister for a third consecutive term. Most of the cartoons in Lebanon have highlighted a “[bad smell](#)” coming out from the ballot boxes. One cartoonist even drew the Lebanese as [sheep](#) who typically blame the shepherd or the wolf for their bitter fate instead of assuming responsibility and understanding that the problem lies with them. In a Tweet, Lebanese activist Anis Tabet [noted](#): “In a perfect world, every single person that was elected in 2009 would vanish. I can't believe that some people are still convinced that this batch is competent. The country is rotten and they still talk about change. You had 9 years to show some change.”

In Tunisia, in contrast, the independent candidates did succeed, and in Iraq Muqtada al-Sadr surprised the system with an unexpected victory, causing some of the Iraqi population to see the glass as half full. According to them, because these are countries that have experienced wars and revolutions, fundamental change will take time; nonetheless, the results are positive and preferable to a dictatorship and chaos. Some remain defiant, and maintain that it will never be possible to satisfy everyone: when there is no democratic process and the country's

president receives 97 percent of the vote (as in Egypt), the "experts" complain; and when there is a democratic process and voter turnout is low, everyone also complains. On the other hand, there too (although the makeup of the coalition in Iraq is still unknown, as are the identities of the future mayors of Tunisia), most voices believe that the same faces will return as ministers and mayors. As long as it is a failing system, this approach emphasizes, it will continue to produce the same rotten apples.

The Rising Power of Women

In all three elections, many candidates were women. Although the public would like to see more women in parliament than will be the case, more women were elected than in previous years. The most prominent process of change and the most interesting discourse on the subject occurred in Tunisia and Lebanon. The new Tunisian municipal election law [requires](#) every party or electoral list to include at least 47 percent women, 37 percent young adults (ages 25-35), and 2 percent candidates with disabilities. Moreover, the Ennahda party (the Islamist party) promised to appoint Souad Abed-el-Rahim as mayor of the capital city of Tunisia (which would be a precedent for the capital cities of the Middle East).

In Lebanon, 86 women ran on 77 different lists (14.4 percent of all candidates), as opposed to 14 women candidates in 2009. Ultimately, only six women (as opposed to four in 2009) were elected to parliament, with at least four belonging to the strong families in Lebanese politics: Hariri, Aoun, and Gemayel. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the promotion of women (although not yet a sufficiently widespread phenomenon) has actually received broader public support and been more successful than other democratic efforts in the Arab Middle East.

The Weakening of the Sunnis

Extremely evident, alongside the rising power of women and perhaps linked to it in some way, has been the weakening of the Sunni parties in general and the political Islam parties in particular. In Lebanon, Saad al-Hariri's al-Mustaqbal (The Future) party declined from 33 to 21 seats in the parliament. Although it is still the largest Sunni party in the parliament, and Hariri was elected for a third term as prime minister (by virtue of coalition agreements), its power has declined considerably. It is no coincidence that al-Hariri appeared on the cover of *al-Akhbar* (the newspaper affiliated with Hezbollah) under the headline: "[The Slap](#)." A similar trend was also visible in Iraq, where the Sunni bloc, headed by Ayad Alawi, won 47 seats, as opposed to 64 in 2014. In Tunisia, too, despite the fact that the Islamist Ennahda party overcame the secular Nida Tunis party (second and third place, respectively), it has, since the elections of 2011, [lost](#) more than half of its strength in terms of the number of voters.

According to the discourse in the social media, the results have aroused different responses. On the one hand, there has been a sincere sense of satisfaction that the corrupt Sunni politicians are growing weaker, which will bring each of the countries closer to the longed for processes of change. However, alongside this optimism, there is also a very real fear of a blow to Sunni Muslim representation within the internal politics of these countries, which could result in anxiety and fear, ongoing frustration, and another wave of radicalization within the Sunni camp.

The Question of Iranian Growing Influence in Lebanon and Iraq

One of the main issues surrounding the elections in Lebanon and Iraq was the political power of the parties and the coalitions that are supported by Tehran. In Lebanon, the coalition of Hezbollah and the Shiite Amal, in addition to the Free Patriotic Movement led by Lebanese President Michel Aoun (the largest Christian party) and the Progressive Socialist Party led by Walid Jumblatt (Druze), make up the largest parliamentary bloc. Also in Iraq, the pro-Iranian Shiite al-Fatah Alliance, led by the deputy leader of Hashed al-Sha`abi (PMU) and the Badr organization (the equivalent to the Iranian Quds units in Iraq) headed by Hadi al-Amiri, came in second place in the elections (after the coalition led by Muqtada al-Sadr), with 47 parliamentary seats. Even before a government was formed, Sadr was obliged to form his bloc with Hadi al-Amiri's coalition, meaning that no stable government can be formed today without the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in these countries.

The discourse in Lebanon and Iraq concerning Iranian involvement in the elections began as a result of commentaries by experts and scholars from the West and from the Gulf states, which naturally focused more on the Iranian influence than on domestic dynamics. A clear expression of this can be seen in the newspapers in the Gulf states, which proclaimed the failure of Saudi policy in Lebanon and the absolute victory of Iran. According to a [Tweet](#) by Saudi journalist Jamal al-Khashoggi (more than 1.5 million followers on Twitter): "In conclusion: the election results in Lebanon are a failure of the Saudi efforts to reduce the influence of Iran in the region...The time has come to reexamine the previous policies and alliances, not only in Lebanon but in the region as a whole." Qatari *al-Jazeera* journalist Faisal al-Qasem (more than 5 million followers on Twitter) added fuel to the fire with his [Twitter poll](#), which asked followers whether Iran had defeated Saudi Arabia in the Lebanese elections. More than 8,000 people voted; 61 percent voted yes. An angry Lebanese reaction came immediately regarding the claim that Lebanon and Iraq were the equivalent of Iran, or alternatively, that Hezbollah and Lebanon were one. Most of the reactions on this issue in Lebanon were [cynical](#) and sought to serve as a reminder that Hezbollah (without its coalition or blocs) won only 14 seats in the Lebanese parliament (as opposed to 12 during the elections

of 2009) and three government ministers (as opposed to two in the previous elections). It had gained strength, but not in a dramatic manner.

In Iraq, on the other hand, foreign elements have actually highlighted Iran's loss to Muqtada al-Sadr's Shiite coalition. Here too most of the Iraqi population sought to present a more complex picture. The struggle was not between a pro-Iraqi national Shiite coalition and a pro-Iranian national coalition, but rather over the question at the heart of the election campaign: a preference for a war against corruption (al-Sadr) or a war against terrorism, first and foremost the Islamic State (al-Amiri). Most of the Iraqi population felt that the war against corruption was more important. Although al-Sadr is interested in the removal of US and Iranian forces from Iraq, he is simultaneously, portrayed on social media, a good friend of Quds Force leader Qasem Soleimani and was his guest in Iran for a few years after fleeing Iraq during the war.

In conclusion, both the Lebanese and Iraqi publics try to paint a complicated picture regarding the Shiite parties and Iranian influence, and reject the dichotomous representations embraced by many in the West and in the Gulf states.

The Gulf States and the Struggle over Jerusalem: Three Case Studies

In recent months, the internet discourse in the Gulf states has resulted in a number of interesting trends on social media, each of which relates to a different topic and has a domestic and regional context of its own, but linked by one common thread: the status of Jerusalem in light of the relocation of the United States embassy in Israel.

The Americans Cook, the Saudis Pay, and the Israelis Eat the Cake

The discourse pertaining to the US embassy's relocation to Jerusalem can be divided into voices of intellectuals, journalists, policy experts, religious leaders, leaders of public opinion, and politicians, primarily in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, which for some time now have been voicing pro-Israeli views and criticizing the Palestinians' policy in general and Hamas terrorism in particular; and voices by their bitter opponents and supporters of the Palestinian struggle. The former, while maintaining Jerusalem's sanctity to Islam and insisting it is "Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine," are severe critics of the Palestinian leadership in general and of Hamas in particular. "If the resistance were real, there would not be even one person not in support of it, as we always stand beside those on the side of truth everywhere. But this is a case of Iranian manipulation carried out by Hamas at the expense of the children of Gaza, which is something that we cannot accept," [tweeted](#) liberal Saudi journalist Turki al-Hamad with regard to the March of Return on May 14.

As a result, many refer to them on social media as the “Arab Zionists” (#صهاينة_العرب). Almost all cartoons illustrate Saudi funding for Trump’s policy, implying the relocation of the embassy – whether by means of [money](#) or oil. Saudi Arabia’s silence, money, and oil are responsible for the weak policy regarding the Palestinian issue, for the loss of Jerusalem, and for the American embassy’s relocation to Jerusalem. This is the view of many in the Gulf (and the Arab world in general). If in the past Egypt was seen as responsible for the glorious failures of the Arab world, [responsibility](#) and failure is now transferred to Saudi Arabia. A new player has been found to blame for Palestinian suffering.

Erdoğan “the Monkey” and the Tourism Boycott of Turkey

Another widely discussed trend was born out of two intertwined campaigns originating in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and has been responsible for the campaign to boycott tourism to Turkey (#مقاطعة_السياحة_التركية). The target was Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whom social media activists refer to as “Kardoğan” (“kard” is Arabic for monkey).

The Gulf states’ blitz against Turkey on social media came immediately after President Erdoğan’s [severe criticism](#) against Gulf leaders regarding their policy toward Israel and the US embassy’s relocation to Jerusalem, which he regards as having enabled the change without exacting a political price of Israel. Their policy, he maintains, represents a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Leaders of the Gulf states were furious with Erdoğan’s statements on the subject and launched a massive campaign on social media. From that moment, disagreements began to emerge between different voices in the Gulf, which grew into tension surrounding the conflict with Qatar and the war in Yemen. Alongside the many who supported the anti-Turkish line were Saudis who argued not only that the policy was futile and ineffective (due to the lack of Gulf tourism in Turkey, which means that the boycott campaign will not have a real impact on tourism or on the Turkish economy), but that it was also unnecessary because it could endanger citizens of the Gulf who are present in Turkey and could have an impact that is the opposite of the one desired. Against the Saudi and UAE journalists and leaders of public opinion on social media were the preachers of the Muslim Brotherhood in both Kuwait and Qatar, who launched their own campaign: “Strengthen the Turkish Lira” (#ادعموا_الليرة_التركية).

Waleed Al-Tabtabaie, the political Islam leader in the country who headed the Strengthen the Turkish Lira campaign, [tweeted](#) as follows: “We must support the Turkish economy and invest in it. And with Allah’s help, the Turkish economy will place it in the list of the world’s

ten strongest countries in 2023.” Political science professor Dr. Abdullah al-Ghanim of Kuwait University [responded](#) as follows: “It is amusing that the representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood are asking the public to support the Turkish lira...In the past, they asked the people to embark on a jihad in Syria while they sat at home, and today they are asking the people to embark on an economic jihad in support of Turkish policy, while their money is sitting in banks in the Gulf.”

All of this laid bare the divide existing between the two Sunni Muslim countries of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, due to the latter’s current wide support for political Islam and some Sunni terrorist groups. The internal disagreements and rifts within the Gulf states themselves were also exposed. If, until recently, there were two clear camps (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain on the one hand, and Qatar on the other), with Oman and Kuwait distancing themselves from the conflict and refraining from taking a side due to internal geopolitical sensitivities, on the issue of Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait (the largest party in the country’s parliament) chose to express its position openly, provide Erdoğan and Turkey with full backing, and launch a viral campaign of its own.

“The Child Heroes”

The Kuwaiti telecommunications corporation Zain recently launched a [new advertisement](#) for Ramadan. The video depicts a young Arab child who approaches the desk of the president of the United States and appeals to his heart with a sad song that has a happy ending, with a plot unfolding in the background. During the first part of the video, the child uses his golden voice to explain to the president the situation of the Arab refugees arriving to the shores of Europe and the United States and those who rescue them: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The second part shows Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un, to whom the boy shows the results of their destruction and their bombs. The video ends with the child going to free Ahed Tamimi from jail and the two of them arriving to liberate Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine, against a background of the leaders of the Gulf States holding hands and providing a tailwind for the effort.

The advertisement received 12 million views in the Arab world during its first 24 hours online release and resulted in a massive wave of criticism, to the point that Saudi Arabia decided to suspend its broadcast in the kingdom. The complaints revolved mainly around two aspects. The first was the cynical use of children to create empathy, which only highlights the powerlessness of the Arab leadership whose failings have placed them at the mercy of the leaders of the West. In addition, the appeal to the leaders of the West as saviors strips the Arab countries of responsibility for their citizens and for solving their problems. Second, the

picture of the leaders of the Gulf states alongside the children liberating Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine, also sparked significant anger. This anger focused on the illusion and the impression, which the video attempts to create, that only the leaders of the Gulf states are helping liberate Palestine and providing support to the young people who will liberate it, whereas in reality they have abandoned their responsibility to liberate the capital of Palestine and passed it on popular leaders like Ahed Tamimi and the children, who are heroically struggling against the occupation with their bare hands.