

Over the Net



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The seventh issue of Over the Net looks at trends across the Arab world. The first part focuses on the discourse, albeit limited, about the three non-Arab countries in the Middle East: Israel, Iran, and Turkey. A thorough examination suggests that for various reasons, and possibly contrary to common assumptions, Arab citizens regard none of the three countries as an existential threat, in comparison with domestic problems or regional issues, such as the struggle against radical Sunni Islam and political Islam. The publication then discusses three main trends in a number of countries, as reflected in the discourses on social media. The first trend is toward the eradication of activism and a free press. The second is an emphasis on the need for a new political elite, rather than replacement of the system. The third is the growth of protest over living conditions, weak governance, and worsening government services. The last part of this issue describes what Syrians on social media call "the Iranian model" in Syria. Close observation of events in Syria in recent years can generate a number of insights about the operational frameworks and various means advancing Iranian goals in the country, particularly military aspects.

Presence-Absence: Non-Arab Countries in Arab Discourse

Discourse on the social media in the Arab world in the current decade features first and foremost a focus on domestic matters. This state of affairs was shaped by the events of the Arab Spring and the instability that to this day prevails in some of these countries. As a result, foreign policy issues have become marginal. At the same time, one aspect that still arouses interest among the public in Arab countries – even if not on a large scale – is the three non-Arab "regional powers": Iran, Turkey, and Israel. The relations between them and the Arab Middle East do not lead the current agenda, but several interesting insights can nevertheless be derived from the existing discourse.

Turkey and Iran: Critical Realism

Of these three countries, Turkey is the talked about most, primarily due to its emergence under President Erdogan as a country that is politically and vocally supports housing and sponsoring political Islam entities such as: Hamas, the Free Syrian Army, Ahram al-Sham, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Arab world is divided on the question of political

Islam, split between supporters and those who regard it as the biggest threat, and the [public debate](#) has therefore become more heated.

Iran comes second in the Arab discourse debate. Other than Saudis, the vast majority of the Arab public is not overly disturbed by Iran on a daily basis, and its effort to attain hegemony in the region in countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. Even in these four countries, there are more pressing domestic issues. The Arab social media does not reflect the sense that Iran's policy and drive to export its revolution poses a danger or an existential threat to the religious and national order in those Sunni countries, in contrast to political Islam and Salafi jihadist movements, which are perceived by large sections of the public as a concrete threat to the stability and identity of the Arab countries.

In Lebanon and Iraq, two countries where Iranian influence is significant, the Islamic Republic does not command the same salient position on social media that outside observers might expect. In Lebanon, discourses on social media are dominated more by discussions on domestic political issues, infrastructure, state services, unemployment, the internet and the like. Whatever discussion there is about Iran is confined almost exclusively to the Sunni community, with Iranian control of Lebanon criticized for suppressing the country's political and military independence and sovereignty. The same is true in Iraq, where despite Iran's strong interference in internal state affairs, the discourse above all features domestic issues referring to the weak state governance, together with endemic security and political corruption, such as the threat of radical Islam and the question of the Kurds and their political representation in the country.

In the Iraqi context, it is interesting that what appears to be the hatred for the United States and its policy in Iraq still exceeds the feelings toward Iran or Turkey. Despite the past war and the current challenges, there is an understanding that at the present time, Iraq needs military, security, and economic cooperation and diplomatic relations with Iran. Nonetheless, there is a vocal desire and aspiration among the public in Iraq for political and military reforms that will eventually lead to the strengthening of Iraqi sovereignty and reduce dependence on outside parties in the long term. At the same time, there is also a realistic understanding that at present, Iran and Turkey are essential to Iraq's reconstruction, security, and water and electricity supply. There is therefore opposition on the social media in Iraq and in Syria and Lebanon to the economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran and Turkey because of their negative impact on the already weak economies in the neighboring countries, which to a large extent depend on Tehran and Ankara. Other than in Saudi Arabia

and the United Arab Emirates, it is difficult to find general support for the American sanctions policy.

Israel: On the Sidelines – Arousing More Curiosity and Interest than in the Past

Of the three non-Arab countries, the country least spoken of in the Arab world is Israel. There are three reasons for this. First, Israel has minor influence on the Arab countries' domestic affairs. Second, Israel is perceived as supporting the old order and maintaining its connections with the old elites, which is inconsistent with the agenda of many of the activists on the social networks. Third, the Palestinian issue is currently marginal in Arab discourse. At the same time, even though Israel does not attract much interest, a slow process of change in attitude towards it is felt, particularly in three countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq.

A change in policy toward Israel – declared or unofficial – has emerged in these three countries and has shifted the domestic public opinion. Rather than an enemy, Israel is now regarded in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as a strategic ally in the struggle against two greater enemies: radical Islam and Iranian hegemony. Criticism of Israel's policy (mainly toward the Palestinians) is still sounded, but on the other hand, there is support for Israel's actions against its enemies: Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Iran and its proxies in the northern theater. In addition, the two Gulf countries have decided to restrict criticism of Israel by clerics, and unlike in the past, have even allowed free and open discourse on social media with regard to Israel. A similar and surprising process has also taken place in Iraq. In June, Shiite cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr [invited](#) Iraqi Jews for the second time (the first time was in 2013) to return to Iraq. He announced that as far as he was concerned, there was no difference between Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, and Jews, and that Iraqi Jews who had left Iraq are welcome to return to their homeland. Creating a friendly discourse toward Jews was interpreted by many Iraqis as the end of the taboo against talking with Israelis.

As a result, it has been clear since early 2018 that many Saudis, Emiratis, and Iraqis are initiating and even striving to engage in conversation with Israelis on social media. This naturally and perforce involves a critical attitude toward Israeli policy, but there is a desire to talk – a trend that did not exist in previous years among these groups (the Kurds are an exception, since they always has a positive attitude towards Israel and Israelis). What is interesting is that the desire to engage in conversation with Israelis did not result from bottom-up pressure on decision makers, rather the opposite: it is a top-down trend.

Trends in Discourse in the Arab World: A Status Report

The Eradication of Activism and a Free Press

One of the prominent trends in the Arab world at the present time is various forms of state supervision toward deliberate eradication of activism on social media platforms. Claiming that the public discourse on social media generates chaos and potential political instability, some leaders in Arab countries have chosen to restrict the platforms. One way is through media regulations, as Egypt's Sisi ratified a [law](#) to clamp down on social media stating that every account with over 5,000 followers (blogs, Facebook, or Twitter) that distributes false information against the regime or false news will be blocked and its owners [prosecuted](#). The [punishment](#) for those found guilty is six months in prison and a fine of 5,000 Egyptian lira. [Iraq](#) and Syria disrupt and ban internet activity regularly in selective areas and at selected times whenever there are public protests against the regime. In addition, since early 2018, prominent activists on social media have been arrested in [Egypt](#), Jordan, Syria, and especially Saudi Arabia, on charges of opposition to regime policy and public campaigns in support of reforms pertaining to human rights.

In addition to disruption by the state, there is also online activity deliberately designed to influence discourse. Governmental agencies, both in the Arab world and outside the Middle East, deploy "web brigades," also known as the Russian/Saudi troll army, Russian/Saudi bots, Kremlinbots, [troll](#) factory, or troll farms are state-sponsored anonymous Internet political commentators and trolls linked to the Russian/Saudi government. Those accounts are created for the purpose of flooding the internet with fake news and disinformation, in order to create distortion, confusion, and apathy. The two countries with the highest signature of such activity in the region are Saudi Arabia and Russia, each for the purpose of promoting its agenda in the Middle East.

The Saudi effort is to enhance the image and new policy of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, while blackening the image of his enemies and those of the country. In turn, Russia is conducting very aggressive campaigns on the networks, for example concerning the use of chemical weapons, torture, and mass killing. The goal is to place the responsibility on the rebel organizations, such as the White Helmets, and divert attacks from the Assad regime and its partners and to delegitimize its enemies. Before every major military campaign by the pro-Assad coalition in Syria, Russia floods the networks with a disinformation campaign in order to mislead the public and exert massive pressure on the rebel organizations and the countries supporting them to agree to terms of surrender. The result of this policy is the eradication of activism online and loss of public interests. Once the internet is flooded with fallacies and half-truths, the public begins to lose interest and is fed up with the events.

The policy of "targeted killing" on the internet is now scoring much success. Punishments and reduced discourse on the one hand and floods of fallacies on the other have dealt a critical blow to activism on the social media and have reduced interest in important political and security issues as a result of revulsion and saturation.

The Democratic Revolution: The Operation was Successful, but the Patient Died

When the masses took to the streets in 2011, they hoped to see a process of democratization in the autocratic regimes that ruled their countries. In 2018, a clear improvement in this aspect can be cited in some of the countries, but this has not been accompanied by any improvement in the reality. This fact has aggravated public distrust in politicians, or more precisely, in the [ruling political elites](#). The clearest expression of distrust was in the recent election campaigns in Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq, where voter turnout was no more than 49 percent (and no more than 35 percent in the capital cities).

Despite the relatively democratic practices in each of these three countries, the large number of political parties and candidates, and the "clean" election and tallying process, insofar as this was possible, the results were no different than in the past. The public realizes that regardless of the structure and the political system, the candidates represent the same elites maintaining the same [unsuccessful](#) policy and power. The demand for democracy sounded in 2011 has therefore been replaced in 2018 by a call for generational and political elite change and an injection of new blood into government; only that will make possible a real change in the existing political order in the Arab world.

Revised Version of Protest: From Human Rights to Living Conditions

Eight years after the Arab Spring, there are almost no calls on social media for the advancement of human rights. The "generation of the revolution" faced four options: exile, prison, being silenced, or depression. Those who were able to, left the Middle East. Tens of thousands were arrested and thrown in jail, while some chose to leave social media activity and abandoned political activity, and others were left unemployed and depressed. Since then, the economic situation in all of the countries that experienced the Arab Spring has worsened, giving rise to a common assumption that if the regimes do not institute significant reforms, a new and more violent revolution by the poor will occur sooner or later (in contrast to the protests in 2011, led by intellectual, middle class, and urban people).

These predictions were not borne out. In recent months, protests were organized in Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Those behind these protests were not at the bottom of the

social pyramid; they were the lower middle class. Calls were made at all of these protests for a change in the situation on a series of issues: better public services – health, education, and infrastructure; creation of jobs; and a war against governmental corruption. Since the spirit of these protests was more peaceful than in 2011 and was aimed at achieving better living conditions, not at replacing the government, the regimes responded accordingly and have tried to address the public agenda. For example, in some countries, technocrats with professional qualifications were appointed to head government ministries for socioeconomic affairs, rather than politicians with connections and no knowledge of these issues. The willingness to appoint professional personnel to important positions in education, health, agriculture, infrastructure, culture, and sports is increasing.

It has been claimed on social media that this wave of protest is another [interim](#) phase between the "intellectual" Arab Spring and the "revolution of the poor" that will eventually come, barring a drastic improvement in the economic situation. Partial repairs and temporary solutions will not be able to save the old order from collapse. Others hold that if the new elected governments carry out real reforms in public services as a first step before a determined struggle against institutional corruption, it will be possible to gradually halt the collapse of the old order.

In any case, anyone who thought that public protest was a thing of the past, and that the Arab regimes had succeeded in thwarting the aspirations for change and stabilizing the political order, was wrong. The social ills remain, although the goals have changed. The Arab Spring generation has realized that replacing the system is not enough; the corrupt political elite will replicate the old policy. Democracy without a change in the political elite will not produce the desired results. Yet despite the indifference to current events (because of overloading) and politics (because of distrust of leadership), gradual erosion of the old order is still underway.

The Iranian Model in Syria¹

The Iranian military involvement in Syria, which began in 2012, was designed to save the Assad regime and consolidate Iran's long term [influence](#) in the country. Discourse on the social media is an important tool in understanding Iran's method of operation in Syria, its forces and proxies stationed in the country, and the growth of its influence there. This section is based on social media discourse and assessments of Syrian activists and leaders of public opinion (mainly Sunni), verified by documents, pictures, evidence from the field, and

¹ This section draws extensively from [INSS Insight No. 1079](#).

interpretations by experts. All of this sheds light on the "Iranian model" in Syria, which relies on the buildup of a range of forces that are subject to Iranian authority and serve its interests in the region.

The common assumption is that since Iran and Hezbollah joined Syria's civil war until the present time, i.e., the liberation of southern Syria from the rebels in July 2018, Iran, and not Russia has been the dominant actor in Syria. The operational outline of the pro-Assad coalition, which comprises Russia, Iran, and its proxies, is as follows: first Iranian advisors observe the site, and assess the operational feasibility and prospects for successful conquest. Then they meet with the Russian liaison officers in order to coordinate the land and air operation; military combat forces are then sent into the campaign – Syrian army forces and the Shiite militias under Iranian command. The area designated for liberation from the rebels is surrounded and besieged. The operation begins with a crushing aerial bombardment by Russian air units and the Syrian air force, combined with heavy artillery fire. Once the rebels' strongholds have been weakened, the land forces penetrate and liberate the area. At the same time, negotiations with the rebels for a surrender settlement are conducted by Russian officers.

The Axes Approach

According to the Iranian approach, a number of axes are needed to preserve the Assad regime, which together with geographic control and command control in Syria is a key instrument of Iranian influence, and an important phase toward control of the Shiite crescent and creation of a land corridor connecting Iran with the Mediterranean Sea.

- a. "The heart and arteries" (the Syrian "spine"): axis of major cities in the center and north of the country, home to most of the population and the governmental and economic centers. An essential condition for victory in the war is maintaining control of the along the "spine" from Daraa in the south through the capital city of Damascus and continuing on the central axis leading north to Homs, Hama, and Aleppo, and west to Latakia.
- b. Territorial contiguity: Iran is gradually taking over a number of key areas in order to create a contiguous [territorial presence](#) between Iran and the Mediterranean Sea, first aiming at the easier portion and then proceeding to the more difficult parts: the Syrian-Lebanese border, followed by Damascus surroundings, the Iraqi-Syrian border, east-to-west strategic hinges, and now southern Syria. In the next stage, forces will be freed up to take over two more challenging regions in northeast Syria – the Kurdish zone, supported by the US-led Western coalition, is essential for Iran, because it controls the Syrian-Iraqi border, and the Idlib province, the last stronghold

of the Sunni rebels, which is protected by Turkey. Gaining control of these areas is too difficult at this stage, and has therefore been postponed to subsequent stages of the civil war.

- c. Logistics: the main supply corridor from Iran to Syria via Iraq, and from there to Lebanon (by land and by air). This axis (which in a speech in August 2017 Hassan Nasrallah called "the Liberation Road") is essential to the buildup of Iran's military strategic capabilities in Syria and its ability to send forces, weapons, and logistics support to its proxies.
- d. The economic and trade axis will be reopened after being completely closed the past few years. It will pass along the "spine" from northern to southern Syria along the M5 international highway from Turkey to Jordan and the Gulf states via Syria. This axis will help in Syria's economic reconstruction and relieve Iran of some of the economic [burden](#).

Structure of the Iranian Force

The online discourse also reveals a multi-layered structure of forces in Syria marked by growing Iranian influence.

- a. The Quds force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps is an organic Iranian force responsible for Syria; the other forces operate under it. Its order of battle and deployment have changed during the war according to the operational needs, varying from 2,000 to 5,000 soldiers. The force includes commanders and consultants operating alongside other forces in the pro-Assad coalition – the Syrian army, the Syrian militias, and the Shiite militias. The Quds force was reinforced in the second year of the civil war when there was serious concern about the survival of Assad's regime. In the first stage, most of its mission was defensive – guarding President Assad, his loyalists, and his strongholds. With the progress of the fighting, most of its missions switched from defense to offense and assistance in the liberation of areas taken by the rebels. The force later helped open up the strategic routes and arteries.
- b. Syrian National Defense Forces: In the early years of the civil war, when the Syrian army (the Syrian Arab Army – SAA) under Assad's control almost collapsed (due to desertions, lack of recruitment, and heavy losses), Iran decided to help Assad establish the National Defense Forces (NDF) – Syrian militias with Iranian command, training, financing, and armaments. The NDF forces are the Syrian equivalent of the popular Shiite Iraqi militias (Hashad al-Shaabi) and Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to reports, the NDF has recruited some 90,000 Syrian volunteers, with the goal being to base most of the force on Alawites and Shi'ites. At the same time, they have also recruited people from other sectors.

- c. Local Defense Forces (LDF) – police, security, and civil administration units of local militias believed to number up to 50,000 men. This body, manned by people loyal to the regime, was established by Iran in response to the demand of local communities loyal to the rule of the central regime in Damascus, in part in order to detect and eliminate those cooperating with the rebels and opposition groups in Syria. Iranian or Hezbollah commanders are integrated in these militias.
- d. Shiite militias – the Shiite militias from Afghanistan (Liwa Fatemiyoun) and Pakistan (Zeinabiyoun Brigade) recruited and operated by Iran. These militias are believed to number 10,000-15,000 soldiers. They were designated for use as a key strike force in liberating territory held by the rebels and later for strengthening Shiite and Alawite communities in Syria and protecting them from revenge and hostile activity by the various radical Sunni militant groups. Iran, in coordination with Assad, is encouraging the soldiers of these militias and their families to immigrate to Syria, where they undergo a process of naturalization and absorption in preparation for remaining there, even if it is decided to remove foreign forces from the country as part of a political settlement. The soldiers and their families are settled in officers' neighborhoods abandoned by Sunni refugees and displaced persons. The purpose is to strengthen Shiite identity in Syria and together with the Shiite and Alawite recruits to the LDF/NDF militias, to consolidate long term Iranian influence and fortify internal support for the Assad regime.
- e. Shiite rapid intervention forces: Iran sometimes uses Shiite militias from Iraq and Lebanon (Hezbollah's Radwan units, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Hezbollah Clavade, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Liwa'a Zulficar, Liwa Dhu al-Fiqar, Liwa Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas, Kawe al-Jafiryah, and others) as forces for rapid intervention in combat areas in order to decide the battle when forces are inadequate for overcoming rebel resistance. At the peak of the fighting, the rapid intervention forces contained up to 30,000 soldiers. In contrast to the attempt to make the Afghan and Pakistani militias into Syrian citizens, the militias from Iraq return to their home countries when their missions are accomplished.
- f. Hezbollah – The Damascus Shield and Protector of Lebanon Perimeter: Hezbollah has operated in Syria since 2012 with an order of battle varying from 4,000 to 9,000 soldiers (the number varies according to the unfolding events of the civil war) alongside Assad and under Iranian direction. Hezbollah's first mission in Syria was to save the Assad regime and closely protect Damascus. In late 2016, Hezbollah forces took part in the battle to liberate Aleppo, Syria's second largest city. At the same time, Hezbollah focused on fighting in order to preserve its achievement in the area bordering Lebanon, called the Q zone – Quneitra, Qalamoun, and al Qusayr. The

main goal was to expel the rebels and the Sunni population in essential areas, in order to safeguard the access roads from Syria to Lebanon, settle a friendly population along and adjacent to the Syrian-Lebanese border, and prevent terrorist and revenge attacks by Salafi jihadist groups in Lebanon. The discourse on the social media suggests that Shiite combatants (excluding those from Iraq) land in Beirut Airport, and proceed to recruitment, absorption, and training camps in Lebanon operated by Hezbollah. After their training period is over, the recruits wearing Syrian army uniforms, are integrated into forces fighting on the side of the Assad regime.

- g. Lebanese and Iraqi mercenaries. These fighters are not members of the various Shi'ite militias, but help in fighting in areas where logistical and operational support is needed. They are funded by Iran and, like the Shiite militias from Iraq and Hezbollah, also return to their home countries when their missions are accomplished.

Iran conceals its control in Syria; it wants to act and influence behind the scenes, while integrating the forces under its command into the country's militias and military governmental framework. It is therefore difficult to establish precisely the number of Iranian proxy forces in Syria. According to many Syrian media reports, especially on opposition websites and social media, the Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and the Shiite militias are participating in the fighting taking place in southern Syria while wearing Syrian army uniforms. Russia is certainly aware that not only are the pro-Iranian Shiite militias not withdrawing from southern Syria, but they are even reinforced there. Presumably the Iranian project in Syria will continue, and forces identified with Iran will be deployed near the border in the Golan Heights under some kind of cover in the near future.