

THE (R)EVOLUTION WILL BE TWEETED

ASSESSING THE SOCIOPOLITICAL IMPACT OF THE INTERNET IN SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN



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- To create and strengthen spaces for dialogue and debate, favouring the creation of a state of opinion.
- To develop and train future decision makers on cyber issues.
- To provide an auditor role to public actors.
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- Objectivity
- Rigor
- Independence
- Methodological approach



THE (R)EVOLUTION WILL BE TWEETED

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INTRODUCTION

“The Revolution Will Be Tweeted” became one of the most recurrent headlines in the West during the Iranian Green Revolution and the Arab Spring. In an outburst of cyber-utopianism, many analysts jumped to the conclusion that social media had played a decisive role in these events. According to this narrative, the revolutions that shook the Middle East in 2009 and 2011 were the first social media revolutions in the world, which proved the tremendous impact of the internet in Middle Eastern societies. Thanks to Facebook and Twitter, the ignorant and oppressed populations of Iran and the Arab countries had been exposed to Western democracy for the first time, and that impelled them to revolt. The Blackberry was the new Kalashnikov and Mark Zuckerberg the hero of the revolution.

This narrative was soon discredited for a variety of reasons, but one of its conclusions is still valid: the internet is having a large impact in the Middle East. This is particularly true in Saudi Arabia and Iran, two of the countries in the region where the popularity of the internet and the number of users are higher. Nonetheless, these internet users do not live in an apolitical and acultural vacuum; they are Saudi and Iranian citizens

who think like average Saudis and Iranians do, who have the same motivations and share the same circumstances. Therefore, it would be illogical to believe that they would act differently from the rest of their compatriots. And an overwhelming majority of their compatriots would not revolt against the current regimes. Stability, prosperity, fear and ideology are some of the reasons behind this relative conformity with the political system, and the internet has not changed these motivations. Hence, its political impact is very limited, and it does not constitute an existential threat to the survival of the regimes.

The impact on society, however, is much more significant. Pressure from social media has achieved substantial improvements in transparency and accountability. Social networks are building virtual communities that reinforce the sense of community for the youth. The internet is even helping Saudi women to better adapt to the bans and prohibitions they suffer. These transformations are gradual but deeper, and therefore will have lasting consequences in the long run. The internet will not topple the regimes in Saudi Arabia or Iran, but will compel them to evolve. Thus, the revolution will not be tweeted; the evolution will.

THE INTERNET IN SAUDI ARABIA

FACTS AND FIGURES

The degree of internet penetration in Saudi Arabia is truly remarkable. As of 2014, the percentage of users in the Kingdom amounted to 65.9% of the Saudi population and 16.1% of the entire population of the Middle East .

Even more extraordinary is the penetration of social media. With one the fastest growth rates in the world, Saudi Arabia has become the country with the most Twitter users per capita in the world, reaching a staggering 33%. This figure is even more surprising in comparison to the UK (12%), the US (11%) or Japan (11%) . If Twitter is booming in these three countries, its expansion in Saudi Arabia is three times more significant, representing over 40% of the Middle East Twitter base . Other social media platforms present much higher penetration rates, like Facebook (93%) and YouTube (96%) . Saudi Arabia is, undoubtedly, one of the countries in the world where social media plays a biggest role.

SOCIAL IMPACT

The popularity of social media has skyrocketed globally for many different reasons: they are efficient communication tools, flexible information sources and, ultimately, a window to the world. Unsurprisingly, Saudi Arabia has followed this trend as well, but in the Kingdom there is

one even stronger justification to use social media: tufush, boredom.

The Saudi youth has a significant employment problem. Around 30% of the population aged between 15 and 24 is unemployed and 18% is classified as NEET (not in education, employment and training). Furthermore, a large part of the young segment of the population classified as having a job is underemployed. For many, free time is not a privilege but a punishment.

Thus, how do the youth spend their free time? In a country where cinemas, bars and clubs are banned, where campus life and extracurricular activities are virtually inexistent and where sport facilities are scarce, entertainment alternatives are very few . Young Saudi women usually seclude themselves in segregated shopping malls, men sometimes turn to illegal activities like car racing or "drifting", but there is one place where both can come together and socialize: the virtual realm.

The popularization of mobile phones in the early 2000s had already started to ease the segregation in rudimentary ways. Many young people could turn on the Bluetooth on their phones and look for random connections to chat . Now, platforms like Facebook or Twitter have become places where men and women can easily fraternize and even date. Married couples who meet for the first time on Facebook are becoming more and more common in big cities like Riyadh and Jeddah.

"Saudi Arabia has become the country with the most Twitter users per capita in the world"

Nevertheless, social media as entertainment goes much beyond online relationships. An entire entertainment industry has developed in the more liberal city of Jeddah in response to the unappealing and oftentimes boring state television channels. Companies like UTURN or Telfaz11 started producing comedy videos for YouTube and recently have branched out into gaming, commercials, booking agent services, etc.. The actors that starred in their videos are now national celebrities who attract audiences in the millions.

These new sites are already an indirect challenge to the official and the religious establishment, both in form and in substance. In form, because comedy has never been well

accepted by Wahhabism and in fact satire and public laughter are always discouraged, deemed not proper of pious Muslims . But also in substance, as they criticize and provoke public discussion, through humor, about serious political and social problems. Two of the most popular shows, La Yekhtar and Aaltayer, regularly make fun of certain Saudi officials, traditional media and state companies like Saudi Airlines . Others, like the singer and producer Alaa Wardi, even recorded a satiric music video titled “No Woman, No Drive”, in which he derided the driving ban for women .

Women are precisely one of the social groups for whom the impact of the internet boom is quite significant, not because it achieved

Alaa Wardi, Saudi star Youtuber



important changes in the status of women in the country, but because it has helped them better adapt to their disadvantaged situation. Women can now get around the city more easily thanks to online car services like Uber or its local version, Careem. Unemployed women have also found self-employment options, like selling food or jewelry through Instagram. Even sexual harassment is now easier to denounce and report to the authorities through social media, which helps women to document these cases with pictures and videos, .

It is undeniable that social media is changing certain patterns of behavior, particularly in the youngest segments of the population. Many of the issues that concern the young are never portrayed in the traditional media, and only social media offers stories relatable to them. This is creating a sense of community unheard of in a country where trade unions and political parties are banned, and civil society is almost nonexistent. Moreover, social media acts to level the playing field among the youth and the elites. Now, even some princes are on Twitter and other social media platforms, and they interact with citizens who would have never met them before . Some, even joke about the royals. As the borders between the private and the public sphere blur in social networks, some people are publicly expressing what was previously restricted to their private life. This change in the perception of the authorities

is almost certainly going to have lasting impacts in society.

Nevertheless, we should not overestimate the political and social implications of this change. It should not be forgotten that the most popular Twitter accounts in Saudi Arabia belong to clerics –many of them considerably conservative– and that 87% of the social media users are men . Saudi social media is a reflection of Saudi society, not a liberal parallel universe. As such, there are

many reasons to believe that there is a large majority of social media users against abrupt social and political change.

Like most Saudis, social media users respect the King, most of the royal family and the religious establishment, and believe that they work

for the best interests of the Saudi people. Beyond this liking or affection, the King's legitimacy is supported by two pillars: money and security. On one side, the vast financial resources of the Kingdom underpin the loyalty of young Saudi subjects in the form of unemployment compensation, subsidized education abroad, public housing and other benefits . On the other side, the chaotic and unstable situation of many of its neighbors is a sufficient threat to dissuade the youth from pursuing alternative forms of government or political regimes. Without welfare and stability, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are of little use.

“The most popular Twitter accounts in Saudi Arabia belong to clerics, and 87% of social media users are men”



#WOMEN2DRIVE campaign, 2011

THE STATE AND THE OPPOSITION

Saudi Arabia installed its first internet connection in 1993 as a communication tool for universities and oil companies, but it was the last country in the Arabian Peninsula to allow public access, which did not happen until 1999 . The main reason behind this delay was the concern of the religious establishment, which feared that it could bring moral and ideological corruption to the Kingdom. The internet –like the radio or the television in the past– was considered bid’ah (innovation) by the Wahhabi ulama, who opposed its introduction as a matter of principle .

The positive experience of Saudi Arabia’s smaller neighbors in the Gulf, and the promise of a unified and centralized censorship system by the civil establishment convinced the clerics that the benefits of the internet largely outweighed its disadvantages. Both the civil authorities and the ulama soon started to explore the possibilities that the

internet offered, setting up web portals to speed up the paperwork for pilgrims visiting Mecca, publishing religious information or dedicating hagiographic web sites to Wahhabi figures like www.binbaz.org.sa .

The present censorship system is directed by the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology in Riyadh. Blocked sites are divided into two categories: “immoral” sites – which are mostly pornographic– or websites that advocate for un-Islamic behavior, and sites that threaten the security and stability in the Kingdom according to the Ministry of the Interior, that is, mostly, sites disrespectful or critical of the royal family .

The first steps of social media in Saudi Arabia were not exempt from controversies either. Instead of entirely blocking social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, the government decided to monitor them in search of “immoral” content . Not only the popularity of these social media sites made them more difficult to censor, but also the

security forces found in them important intelligence sources in the fight against jihadism. This new strategy is not welcomed by some leaders of the clerical establishment. The Grand Mufti repeatedly issues fatwas condemning Twitter as a “Council of Clowns” , a place “in which people are invited to ... lie” , “which real Muslim should avoid” and ultimately the “source of all evil” . However, the fact that Saudis are flocking to Twitter in far higher numbers than anywhere else in the world and that most of the clerics are avid tweeters evidences the diminishing influence of certain figures like the Mufti.

This has opened the door to online conversations that were never discussed in the traditional media. Tweeters can now complain about road safety, show their disgust for sexual or child abuse cases, criticize government officials, state contractors or the police, and even force their dismissal uploading videos to YouTube that show their immoral behavior or inefficient performance at the job. The red lines, however, are clear to everybody: none is allowed to criticize the royal family –not to mention the King– or the Wahhabi leadership . Criticism against the peripheral authorities or the “government” as an undefined entity can be tolerated; criticism against the core of Saudi authority is unforgivable.

In the rare occasions when this type of criticism has happened, popular support

Twitter is a “Council of Clowns”, a place “which real Muslim should avoid” and the “source of all evil”

has been practically non-existent and the government’s reaction has been extremely severe. One of the most obvious examples is the “Saudi Arab Spring” of 2011. Following the developments in Egypt and Tunisia, a group of Saudi citizens also turned to Facebook to organize a demonstration against authoritarian rule in the Kingdom, the “Day of Rage”, as it was called. Only one protester showed up among the numerous police forces and helicopters that were patrolling the streets of Riyadh. The demonstrator, Khalid Al Johani, a teacher of religious instruction, told BBC that Saudi Arabia was a police state. Shortly afterwards, he was arrested and jailed for nearly one year without charges . The cases of activists like Raif Badawi

or Hamza Kashgari are similar examples of the willingness of Saudi authorities to uphold their red lines.

The Saudi government does not fear mass protests of a revolutionary nature or the end of Saudi rule as a result of Twitter or Facebook, but it is very aware of the challenges that social media poses to the regime. The current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adel Al Jubeir, recently expressed this concern: “Each young person today has his own TV station: YouTube. His own wire service: Twitter. And his own magazine: Facebook. When every citizen is a walking news conglomerate, you are going to hear and see things differently from the past.” .

THE INTERNET IN IRAN

FACTS AND FIGURES

As of 2014, the percentage of internet users in the Islamic Republic amounted to 57.2% of the Iranian population and 41.2% of the entire online population of the Middle East . The level of internet penetration is close to the regional average but below the Saudi rate. However, the demographics place Iran as the largest country in terms of internet users in the region.

Statistics regarding social media penetration are not available mostly due to the official ban on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, among others. However, this does not mean that the Iranian population does not use these social networks. This essay will explore how people circumvent the prohibition and how they use social media, but its social repercussions are certainly smaller than in Saudi Arabia. The ban on

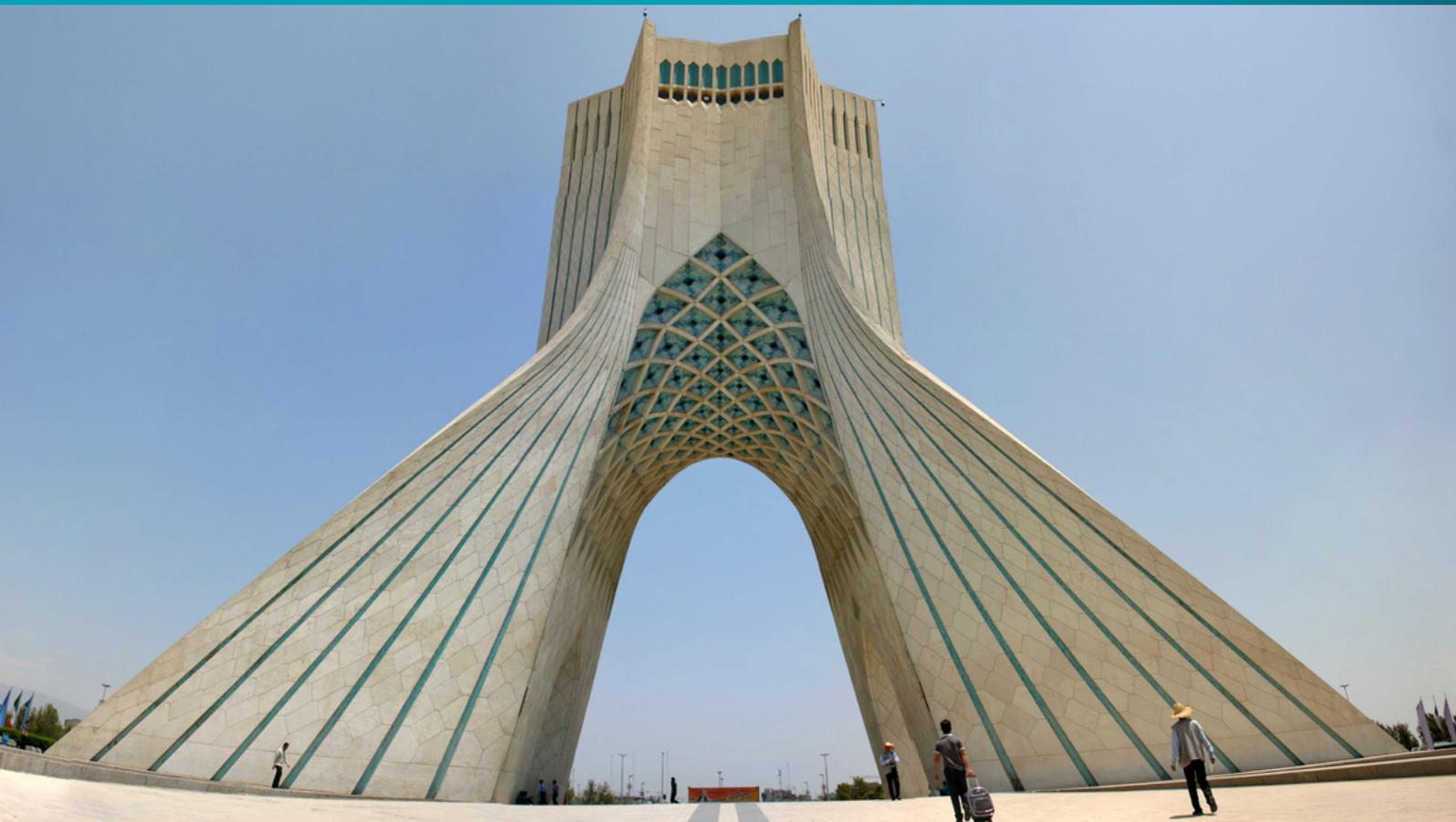
online social networks, among other reasons, explains why the Iranian blogosphere is one of the most active –between 60,000 and 110,000 blogs – not only in the Middle East, but also in the world.

THE STATE AND THE OPPOSITION

The relationship between the internet and the state in Iran is diametrically opposed to that of Saudi Arabia. While the religious establishment of the Kingdom feared the impact of this new technology in the traditional Saudi society and tried to contain its expansion, the Islamic Republic became an early enthusiast of the internet and actively encouraged its development, more than any other Islamic country in the Middle East. Thus, in order to understand the internet in Iran, the state must be our starting point.

This approach toward technological innovation is something characteristic of modern Iran. The Iranian Revolution was

Azadi Tower, Tehran



in many ways a modernizing movement and the revolutionaries realized very soon that technology could work to their own advantage. The very much discussed use of cassette tapes to spread revolutionary ideas while the Shah was in power is a good example. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was very clear about the natural partnership between Islam and technology:

“The claim that Islam is against modern (technical) innovations is (...) nothing but an idiotic accusation. For, if by manifestations of civilization it is meant technical innovations, new products, new inventions, and advanced industrial techniques which aid in the progress of mankind, then never has Islam, or any other monotheistic religion, opposed their adoption. On the contrary, Islam and the Holy Quran emphasize science and industry.” (Ayatollah Khomeini, quoted in Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004, p. 22)

Like the cassettes in the 1970s, the internet could help Iran to promote its interests and spread the revolution and the Quranic message in the 21st century. Hence, it is not surprising that Qom, the city of the Shia clergy, lived an internet boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The ayatollahs soon transferred their teachings to the virtual realm and gained an influence online that has remained until the present day . The internet craze spread rapidly in the rest of the country and Tehran did not fall short: by 2001

it already had more than 1,500 internet cafés . Both the Iranian society and the state were completely fascinated by the web.

However, this intimate relationship between the state and the internet had negative consequences. In the following years, the evolution of the internet, its expansion, and the way it could be used depended considerably on the political establishment, and it changed in parallel to the political situation. As a result, we can distinguish three periods which correspond to three different presidents: Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and Hassan Rouhani (2013- present).

The Khatami presidency corresponded with the internet boom. During this period, the internet was relatively free from state intervention. This was partly due to the reformist character of the president, to the lack of awareness of the potential that the internet had for the opposition to the regime, and to the lack of technical knowledge to filter and control the web.

Nonetheless, it was not long until the opposition decided to use the web as well. Pamphlets and manifestos calling against the theocratic regime and the repression of dissidents, like the writings of the political prisoner Akbar Ganji, were smuggled out of prison and published in the internet . But there was one manifesto in particular whose publication truly shocked the authorities.

“Qom, the city of the Shia clergy, lived an internet boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s”

In 2000 Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri published his memoirs online, in which he harshly criticized the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and opposed the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih .

The alarmed Khamenei and the conservative faction reached to the conclusion that the internet had to be controlled. Despite the efforts of the Presidential Office , in 2001 the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution ordered the ISPs to remove “anti-Islamic” and anti-government content from their servers, and shut down hundreds of cafés in Tehran . This decision was never strictly implemented, but it marked the beginning of the competition between conservatives and reformists to control the internet or relatively liberalize it. Another blow for the reformists –and especially for the already flourishing blogosphere– came in 2003, when filtering and blocking were officially imposed for the first time . This measure has had profound consequences for the future of the internet in the country, and was only the beginning of a new authoritarian and nationalistic period: the Ahmadinejad presidency.

Since his first day in office, the new president intensified the blocking and limited access to information. In 2006, he required all the internet sites to register at the Culture and Islamic Guidance Ministry and instructed the IRGC to engage with bloggers in order to shift conversations in favor of the government . Along the same lines, the government banned high speed broadband, and in special occasions –like the 2009 or 2013 elections– throttled web traffic as an alternative to blocking.

Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad wanted to reform the internet even further, he wanted a purely Iranian and Islamic internet, separated from the rest. This “halal internet”, as it was referred to, was an attempt to reaffirm national sovereignty and gain absolute control over the online content. Likewise, he tried to develop a national email, a national browser, a national search engine, national social networks, etc. . The results, however, were quite limited. The popularity of the national versions of the search engines or the social networks could never match that of the originals, and the project of a national internet suffered constant delays, budgetary constraints and, in recent years, lack of political support.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a lecture at Columbia University



The 2009 elections constituted another turning point in the history of the internet in Iran. The subsequent mass demonstrations in the streets of the major cities of the country made the government feel under siege, and the online social networks –to a greater or lesser extent– seemed to have contributed to the demonstrations. The backlash was almost immediate. The Iranian Parliament passed a law to criminalize certain online publications and increased the pace of blocking.

Four years later, during the elections, the internet became once again a controversial issue. Hassan Rouhani campaigned in favor of greater freedom online and since he became president he has advocated for a reduction of filtering: “some people think we can fix these problems by building walls, but when you create filters, they create proxies... this [current policy] does not work. Force does not produce results.” . Despite conservative opposition, he achieved the unblocking of the WhatsApp mobile application and the development of 4G services in the country, both discouraged until then .

The conflict over internet policy between Rouhani and the conservatives –led by Ayatollah Khamenei– has become visible precisely on the social media. Every new judicial sentence against internet users is an opportunity for Rouhani to express his disagreement. This was the case in

2014 when six friends were incarcerated for posting a video on YouTube that shows them dancing to the pop song “Happy”. Shortly after, the Iranian president tweeted that: “#Happiness is our people’s right. We shouldn’t be too hard on behaviors caused by joy.” Khamenei’s reactions against the use of social media are usually criticized as

hypocritical, as he opened accounts in nearly all of the social networks banned in Iran, like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, both in Persian, Iranian and Arabic. His motivation to communicate his message beyond the borders of the Islamic Republic is quite clear, but it is hardly justifiable that he uses the channels that he repeatedly condemns.

“Supreme Leader Khamenei has opened accounts in nearly all of the social networks banned in Iran”

SOCIAL IMPACT

The constant changes in internet policy throughout the last decades have had a direct impact in the population. The thirty-somethings who enjoyed a more liberal lifestyle during the Khatami presidency, saw since 2005 how the state was pushing them into their private spheres, away from cafés, concerts or political gatherings . Then, even in their privacy of their homes, the state also interfered in their computers, telling what was appropriate for them, and blocking the rest. Blogs and mobile texting –much more difficult to control and filter– became very popular, and their popularity transformed radically the configuration of communication in Iran. Unlike social media, these channels

of communication do not build virtual communities; instead, they promote a more individuated way of communication, which, in the end, inhibits group behavior.

Nonetheless, social media is still used in Iran and the variety of tools available to circumvent the blocking has never been greater. VPNs, proxies and similar technologies are more and more common, although there is no consensus with respect to the percentage of the population which enjoys access to them.

The reason to turn to social media, however, is generally not politically motivated. Iranians use social media primarily to stay in touch with friends and family, for professional networking purposes or simply for entertainment. Only 5% of the population uses social media to “contribute to social and political activism” , while the majority remains largely apolitical.

Nonetheless, the existence of an apolitical youth in a regime that prides itself in being revolutionary is not a satisfactory situation for the authorities. They government certainly prefers a politically active youth who defends revolutionary values. With this aim in mind, they are further intruding in people’s

private spheres to politicize entertainment, information and even dating. The IRGC, for example, has teamed with Amir Tataloo, an Iranian rapper with millions of followers on social media, to film a music video to defend the right to develop nuclear energy and to “arm the Persian Gulf” . Along the same lines, the state also launched an “Islamic” online dating app in which users cannot see profiles or pictures of their potential dates; only the officials running the app can access them and match the “compatible” couples .

Like in Saudi Arabia, also in Iran the internet has had a positive impact. New economic opportunities are available for the unemployed and educated youth. Contact between the diaspora and the rest of the country has become significantly easier. Transparency is now reinforced, and the authorities feel a stronger pressure to act against negligent policemen, or corrupt officials . But the state has always been aware of the internet’s potential and used it for its own advantage. “The impact of this virtual world on the society, country and even on people’s lifestyles is absolutely real,” Rouhani recently said , and this is precisely why the conservative establishment will never relinquish its control and put an end to its intrusions.

Propaganda graffiti in Tehran



CONCLUSION

The internet has had profound effects in both Saudi Arabia and Iran, but, unlike some have argued in recent years, it has never posed an existential threat to the stability of their political systems. Historically, modern technologies have had important implications for the opposition to political regimes, but they are certainly only one factor among many others. The French Revolution did not take place because of the guillotine, nor did the Russian Revolution because of the railway system or the Iranian Revolution because of the cassettes. Historical trends, economic calamities, ideological conflict or simply the lack of legitimacy have usually been stronger motives behind the opposition to a regime. In the words of Evgeny Morozov, “tweets don’t topple dictators, people do!”.

The internet, per se, does not take political sides. The internet is not a weapon that the state or the opposition can use, but a battleground for the battle of the narrative. And both the authorities in Saudi Arabia and Iran are winning it, although with very different strategies. Riyadh decided to restrict public access to the internet at first, and only when the

religious establishment realized that it could serve to their own interests and that it had not wreaked havoc in neighboring countries, they allowed it in. The political impact of the web in the opposition movement is very limited, as the benefits from oil revenues have bought the loyalty of those citizens that would prefer a different regime. Tehran, on the contrary, became an enthusiast since the very beginning, and instead of restricting its introduction, decided to expand the state to every corner of the internet. If it was used intelligently, they thought, the internet could become the vehicle of the revolution. This intrusion, combined with the blocking of the opposition, is helping the regime to win the battle of the narrative.

Nonetheless, the internet is silently transforming the Saudi and Iranian societies in deeper ways. The authorities’ misdeeds are now more exposed than ever, the psychological perception of the regimes is changing accordingly, and the virtual communities are instilling a sense of community to the younger generations. These are the real sources of worry for the Saudi royals and the Iranian ayatollahs. Tweets, for the moment, are not.



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