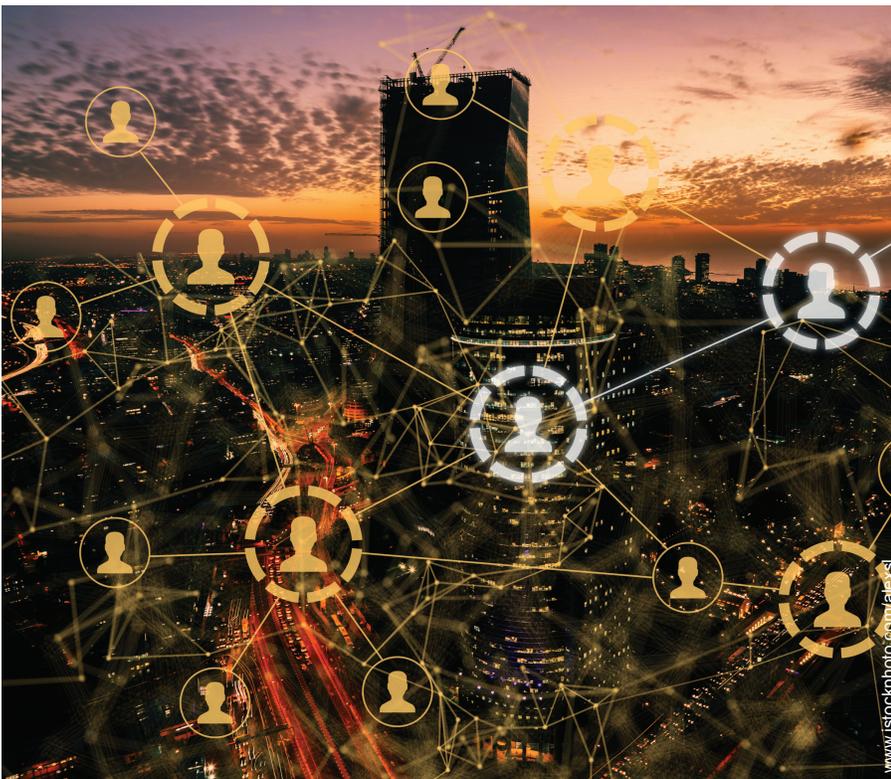


# THE CARAVAN

A Publication of the Hoover Institution on Contemporary Dilemmas in the Greater Middle East

## SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST



### THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

How has the development of social media and new communications technology influenced the political landscape in the Middle East? Has social media been used by a new generation as a force for democratization? As a force for radicalization by Islamists? Have repressive regimes within the region manipulated this internet phenomenon to monitor and hunt down those who seek change and modernization? There is a conflict inherent in social media - it is used for good and for evil depending on whose hands are at the controls. How can we harness this means of communication to help in the spread of democracy while at the same time attempting to lessen its power when used by radicals and tyrants?

ISSUE 1714

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

##### INTRODUCTION

The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly

##### FEATURED ANALYSIS

Social Media, New Technologies and the Middle East  
by **Russell A. Berman**

Social Media and the Gulf States: A Revolution that Is Not Revolutionary  
by **Afshin Molavi**

Social Media: A Shaping Force of Identity and Action – The Palestinian Case  
by **Harel Chorev**

Social Media: A Misplaced Hope  
by **Samuel Tadros**

A Trench War In The Digital Age: The Case of Iran  
by **Abbas Milani**

The Syrian Uprising: What Role Did Social Media Play?  
by **Qutaiba Idlbi, Kassem Eid (Qusai Zakarya)**





# SOCIAL MEDIA, NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND THE MIDDLE EAST

by **Russell A. Berman**

It is a global story, a new industrial revolution. The spread of the internet and the proliferation of social media have led to dramatic changes with salutary results: greater access to more diverse information, gateways to goods and services that have transformed the retail experience, and opportunities to engage and network with expanded communities, while still staying in touch with friends and family, all thanks to the blessings of these new technologies.

Yet these indisputable gains have their shadow sides. The expansion of information sources has undermined the traditional gatekeepers that served (successfully or not) as guarantors of quality, the major newspapers and the television network news. New outlets for online journalism have emerged. Some uncover important new content, but others distribute the mendacities of fake news. Unfiltered falsehoods can circulate now more freely than in the past. Meanwhile, because members of the public can pick and choose their preferred information sources, a tendency toward self-segregation into opinion bubbles sets in, as readers mainly visit those sites that reaffirm their own opinion. Because one can avoid perspectives that might challenge one's own, increased polarization results, and the on-line communities that develop can incubate one-sided extremism.

As valid as the positive impact of new technologies has been for our civic life, we cannot ignore these downsides.

The cyber optimists who applaud the contribution of social media to democracy have to recognize the concerns of the cyber pessimists who point out the threats inherent in this new public sphere. It is as if the democratization of information has gone hand in hand with the elimination of the hierarchy of judgment, the willingness to distinguish between true and false.

This Caravan explores the impact of these communication technologies on the politics of the Middle East, in various countries and with regard to their consequences for the political processes. Their advocates present them as vehicles for expanded democratization, examples of a liberation technology, because they allow for a freer flow of information, but also because they have the potential to mobilize masses protesting against a dictatorial regime. Such is the vision of the cyber optimists. Yet these very same technological tools have also served the designs of repressive regimes, assisting them in thwarting and persecuting their critics. And to make matters worse, social media and online communication have contributed to the spread of jihadist radicalism by appealing to potential recruits for the war against the West.

Iran is arguably the paradigmatic case for the democratic promise of social media. Like the rest of the Middle East, it has a young population, therefore predisposed to using the new technologies. In the 2009 presidential election, opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi reached out

to the young, reform-minded electorate by campaigning extensively via YouTube and Facebook. When the official election results announced his defeat and handed victory to the anti-reformist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, massive demonstrations erupted, which led the regime to close down press offices. Protesters turned extensively to the internet as a vehicle for the dissemination of information within Iran, for their own political organization and for reaching out to the international community. The regime responded by shutting down access. The democratization capacity of the internet was at most an opportunity to promote change, but a brutal regime intent on staying in power at all costs can evidently block it and survive. Nor could the protest movement succeed because the international community, superficially sympathetic, was not inclined to give it genuine support. At that point, the Obama administration had a different kind of deal with the mullahs in mind and therefore had no interest in seeing the democracy movement succeed. Lesson: liberation technology may be able to build a protest movement, but it can also elicit even more powerful resistance.

Social media played a similarly prominent role in the January 2011 protests in Tahrir Square in Cairo, which forced Hosni Mubarak from power. Communication technology facilitated the mobilization of demonstrators as well as information sharing, so much so that journalists came to speak of the “Facebook Revolution.” In contrast to the movement in Iran two years earlier, this one succeeded because of local circumstances, but also since it benefited from support in Washington. The initial success, followed by the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the opposition it elicited and the subsequent military coup, make up a familiar story. Less familiar is the cyber war that has played out in Syria. Soon after the Arab Spring came to Damascus with calls for Bashar al Assad to give up power, the regime began a crack down on critics, with a particular interest in gaining access to their social media networks as a mechanism to root out other opponents. It is dangerous to be Facebook friends with regime critics. The Syrian Electronic Army also took shape, presumably with regime support and perhaps assistance from Iran and Russia, to wage online war against Assad opponents. SEA has attacked domestic sites as well as international targets, even the Associated Press Twitter account, for example. On the other side, the global hacktivist group Anonymous has penetrated the Syrian Defense Ministry, and WikiLeaks has released extensive files potentially damaging to Syrian political figures. In addition to the many other dimensions of the Syrian tragedy—chemical weapons, barrel bombs, ethnic cleansing, and the sufferings of the refugees—the conflict also has taken shape as a proving ground for global cyber

conflict. Particularly worrisome is the international market that has developed for surveillance technology and other tools that enable repressive regimes to carry out internet censorship, site blocking, hacking and virus infections.

A further aspect of the impact of the internet on the Middle East conflicts involves the utilization of social media for jihadist recruitment. The phenomenon is particularly relevant in cases of so-called self-radicalization in Europe and the United States, where individuals succumb to the lure of extremist propaganda, produced in Middle East sites. Pulled into ISIS circles, some cyber recruits carry out violent acts in the West as “lone wolves,” while others travel to the Middle East in order to fight for the caliphate. More broadly, jihadist online agitation contributes to the development of subcultures in the West, defined by alienation and resentment, and posing a constant threat of violence.

Given this complex landscape for the politics of social media, an equally complex and multidimensional set of responses is required to defeat Islamism, in both its Iranian and jihadist variants. In the Middle East, the new communication possibilities have raised questions about democracy, repression and extremism. An answer is needed for each:

- First, the US should not dismiss the democratization potential of the liberation technologies and their extraordinary appeal to the young population. It is important to articulate a credible program for reform and good governance, no matter how tempered by realism.
- Second, just as hostile regimes engage in repression and surveillance in cyber space, the US needs tactics to disrupt those efforts in order to support forces of liberalization.
- Third, recognizing jihadist cyber activism, we need a fully developed counterterrorist cyber agenda, including the expectation that social media firms show greater willingness to shut down extremist sites and to cooperate with law enforcement in breaking up terrorist milieus.

Supporting the expansion of free speech, especially for regime critics in repressive states is not inconsistent with simultaneously calling for limitations on extremist speech that promotes violence in the democratic West because its goal is to do us harm. The state has an obligation to protect us from that harm, including through developing a

program for cyber count-terrorism against online Islamism. According to news reports, the recent slaughter of concertgoers in Manchester, England, was announced on a Twitter account before it took place. We need an intelligence capacity to monitor signs like this and to know how to respond in order to prevent such attacks. Those who assert that we just have to grow accustomed to terrorist violence as a fact of our lives or who complain that protecting our safety might limit their speech share responsibility for the violence.



**Russell A. Berman**

Russell A. Berman, the Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University, is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and a co-chair of the Working Group on Islamism and the International Order.



www.istockphoto.com/portfolio/imaginima

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE GULF STATES: A REVOLUTION THAT IS NOT REVOLUTIONARY

by Afshin Molavi

“One of the startling discoveries of our time,” the author and social philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote nearly half a century ago, “is that revolutions are not revolutionary.” Hoffer’s insight has aged well. All across our world, particularly in the emerging world over the past three decades, we have been witnessing quiet revolutions that are “not revolutionary” driven by urbanization, growing middle classes, and increasing access to information coupled with the rocket fuel of rising aspirations.

Consider China, urban India, parts of urban Africa, large swathes of East Asia. Individuals are connected and expectant and aspiring in ways unimaginable just a few decades ago, in ways that are, well, revolutionary. As the author Evan Osnos astutely points out in his fine book, “The Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China,” the greatest change to come to China has been “aspiration, the sheer ability to make a better life.”

The contagion of aspiration has spread far and wide, including the Middle East and North Africa region. The story of the Arab Uprisings is largely a story of aspirations unmet, and heavy-handed governments slamming the doors on young populations seeking opportunity, dignity, hope, and freedom. Social media helped break down the walls that protected the palace,

but also the walls that disconnected and disaggregated people. Facebook became, in some instances, the connected coffee house where the pamphleteer could challenge the unjust ruler, and slip quietly away.

In Egypt’s case, *al-Shabab al-Facebook* (the youth of Facebook) played a considerable role in the early days of the uprising, particularly the Facebook page known as *Kullena Khaled Said* (*We are all Khaled Said*, the Egyptian blogger beaten to death by police authorities). Before there was Tahrir Square, there was “Khaled Said square” on Facebook, masterfully administered by Wael Ghonim, the Dubai-based Google executive.

Over the next few months, uprisings led to the fall of dictators from Tunis to Tripoli, Cairo to Sana’a, threatened the ruling family in Bahrain, and rattled Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, prompting the son of the “Lion of Damascus” to display his own terrible claws with unrelenting ferocity.

The crowd’s fist-pumping slogan -- “ashsha ‘b yurīd isqāt annizām” (the people want the fall of the regime)--echoed through a history of autocracy, underdevelopment, and corruption. Over a one year period, rulers with more than 100 years on their various “presidential thrones”, with sons in waiting, fell to the crowds. The “burned

generation” - the name given to the young whose lives have been burned by the state’s inability to provide them a decent life -- did some burning of their own. The world was turning.

This brings us to the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. With the exception of Bahrain, none of these states faced a significant uprising. Perhaps, one simplistic narrative suggests, that the gleaming skyscrapers, the five-star hotels, and the Western consultant-driven economic development plans, suggested a facile modernity imposed over traditional, de-mobilized, de-networked societies. This, coupled with a mix of petro-patronage and repression ensured a quiet Arabia.

This neat and imprecise narrative, however, understates the dramatic transformations taking place in Gulf societies, accelerated and in some cases catalyzed by the information revolution. These are not hermit Kingdoms, and political uprisings should not be the only barometer of change.

The GCC states are among the most wired places on earth. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar all have higher internet penetration rates than the United States, according to the International Telecommunications Union. The UAE ranks as one of the most advanced countries globally when it comes to broadband access. Meanwhile, three-fourths of Kuwaitis and two-thirds of Omanis have access to the internet, considerably higher than the Middle East average, and above global levels. Among Arab states, only Lebanon can keep up with the GCC states in internet penetration.

In 2011, Bahrainis took to Pearl Roundabout, echoing the chants of other Arab publics, but also displaying a remarkable sense of incipient nationalism in chants such as “birūh, bideḡ, nafīdak yal Bahrain’ (with our blood, our soul, we sacrifice ourselves for you, Bahrain).” The state responded with force, decimating Pearl Roundabout and then hunting out protestors with the help of “incriminating” Twitter and Facebook posts. The state has jailed several social media activists specifically for their postings, and continues to aggressively monitor social media activity.

Every Gulf country monitors political activists closely. Tough anti-terror laws with loose interpretations make it difficult to speak out against ruling royals. Whereas

intelligence services in the past often physically tracked dissidents, they now track them in cyber-space as well.

This, then, surely explains why there were no uprisings in other GCC states, some might say. But could there also be a less dramatic, if less satisfying, explanation? Perhaps Gulf youth are largely not dissatisfied with their lot. Perhaps they do not feel burned as did Egyptian or Tunisian youth. Perhaps they are not politically mobilized because, well, life is not bad for the majority of young men – the ones that tend to lead uprisings.

The recent Arab Youth Survey, an annual poll conducted by the public relations firm ASDA’A Burson Marsteller, reflects this narrative. In interviews with the 18-24 demographic across the Arab world, a striking picture appears, a picture of two Middle East: satisfied, contented youth in the Gulf Arab states and dissatisfied, frustrated young people more broadly across the region. Asked if they feel their country is going in the right direction, a startling 85% of GCC youth said: “yes.” In nine years of polling, Gulf Arab youth have been more optimistic about their futures than other Arab youth.

If you are a young Emirati of both genders, you have opportunities available to you unavailable in most of the world: well-paying jobs, incubator and accelerator programs if you want to be the next Steve Jobs, scholarships for education, easy access to a global commercial hub like Dubai with creative class talent mingling with world-class firms. You also have the envy of your neighbors. For five years running, when the Arab Youth Survey asked young Arabs if they could live anywhere in the world, the answer has been the same: the United Arab Emirates. The US comes a distant second.

If you are a young Saudi with even modest ambition (women included) over the last five years, you could get a full scholarship with gold-plated health benefits, a monthly stipend for you and a spouse (if you have one), and four years or more studying in the United States or somewhere else in the world, with annual return tickets home. Up to the year 2014, the Kingdom had spent \$6 billion funding more than 200,000 students, more than half of whom studied in the United States. It might be one of the most extensive scholarship programs ever to emerge from the developing world.

But, one might say, the Shah of Iran also granted scholarships to young Iranians in the 1970s and many

of those same students became part of the vanguard of the revolutionary movement that toppled the Iranian monarch in 1979. True, but Iran's society in the 1970s was far more politically mobilized against the ruler than Saudi society today.

But political agitation is not the only kind of agitation that transforms societies.

Today, Saudis are the most active per capita users of Twitter, YouTube and Instagram in the world, with one of the deepest smart phone penetrations globally. Not long ago, in the year 1990, when Iraqi tanks rolled into Kuwait, Saudis were largely kept in the dark in the immediate aftermath: newspapers and television were banned from reporting the news. Today, in Saudi Arabia, such a ban would be meaningless, even laughable. The news would spread in seconds via Twitter and other social media. Saudis produce more than 200 million tweets per month.

Saudi social media has produced some stars, like the comedian collective known as Telfaz11. They are the ones behind the "No Woman, No Drive" viral video mocking the Saudi women driving ban to the tune of Bob Marley's famous "No Woman, No Cry." Saudis were also among the first of many countries to produce a Gangnam Style parody video ("Saudi Gangnam Style"), shortly after the Korean pop song went viral globally. There is even a young, Saudi-based female comedian, and a bevy of aspiring Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube wanna-be stars. If nothing else, social media has showed us that, yes, Saudi Arabia has hipsters and snarky young people too.

Young Saudis took to Snapchat, in particular, because the social media site allowed them momentary acts of self-expression that would be deleted and sent into the netherworlds of cyberspace, but they also began to populate Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube with vigor. Many young Saudi women run Instagram businesses, selling cakes or crafts based on their large followings. Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman -- the prince of the internet generation -- virtually runs the government on the social media messaging site WhatsApp, insiders tell me.

Meanwhile, start-up culture has also landed in the Gulf states, most notably in Dubai, where companies like Souq.com, the e-commerce retailer, was recently sold to Amazon for \$650 million. Young Arabs dream of becoming the next Rolando Mouchawar, the CEO and co-founder of Souq.com, or Samih Toukan, the pioneering Internet entrepreneur, or Fadi Ghandour, the Dubai-based founder of Aramex (think FedEx for the Middle East and Africa) and angel investor. A bevy of incubators and accelerators are proliferating across the UAE, a country that, in its own way, has become, as one Emirati commentator put it, "a start-up nation."

Still, such widespread access to social media means that future political activists will have an infrastructure in place that they could not have dreamed of a decade ago. Facebook remains a potent tool of organizing.

Shortly after the 2011 uprising in Egypt, a joke made the rounds, one that imagined deposed President Hosni Mubarak in the afterlife meeting his former compatriot and fellow President Anwar Sadat, who was assassinated by an Islamist extremist in 1981.

Sadat turns to his former Vice-President Mubarak and asks with intense curiosity: "Who did it? Was it the Islamist extremists?"

"No, it was an even more powerful enemy," Mubarak responds.

"More powerful than the extremists?" Sadat asks incredulously. "Who can this group possibly be?"

"Facebook," Mubarak says.



**Afshin Molavi**

Afshin Molavi is a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.



# SOCIAL MEDIA: A SHAPING FORCE OF IDENTITY AND ACTION – THE PALESTINIAN CASE

by Harel Chorev

The global expansion of social media over the past decade has sparked a vibrant debate about its role in mobilizing political protest movements worldwide, from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street. Clay Shirky was among the first to claim that social media can serve as a tool for bolstering civil society and the public sphere. Others, like Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner, took this further and defined social media as a “liberation technology” with the power to expedite democratization processes. A counter-argument to these so-called “cyber optimists” came from thinkers like Malcolm Gladwell and Evgeny Morozov. These and other “cyber pessimists” argued that the impact of social media on the political arena is limited, and cautioned that repressive authorities might exploit it to suppress opponents.

Six years after this debate began, both assessments seem somewhat categorical, as social media and its impact have grown more complex and nuanced. Undoubtedly, social media has profoundly influenced many spheres of life, including politics, but the prediction that it would hasten democratization proved optimistic. It is a tool that serves any master skilled enough to utilize it to his benefit - and not necessarily for democracy. Turkish President Erdogan, who used social media to save his authoritarian rule during the attempted coup

of July 2016, offers one example. Another is the horrific efficiency of this medium in the hands of ISIS.

Social media also has the power to reshape identities and political relations by flattening old hierarchies. By creating new, highly interactive social arenas and providing information independently of governing authorities, social media has collapsed the traditionally vertical feed of information into a horizontal spread, and made information free for all. This broad process serves personal and collective quests for various liberties, although democracy does not necessarily follow.

Palestinian social media is often mentioned in the context of the debate regarding the extent of its role in the recent wave of lone wolf attacks against Israelis. Some attribute considerable power to mobilizing content, while others argue that the motivation for attacks lies in the occupation of the West Bank, socioeconomic conditions or personal reasons. This ongoing controversy reflects a limited understanding of the effect of social media, which is both wider and deeper than the narrow focus on the impact of mobilizing content. One of the most important implications of the effect of social media is its contribution to the changing relations between the individual and the traditionally surrounding collectives, an issue with

substantial social and political consequences, including on lone wolf attacks.

In Palestinian society, young Palestinians, mostly those born since the early 1990s, are often described as an individualistic and self-absorbed generation (al-gil al-maslahgi), different from the previous generations that were perceived as more committed to the national collective. Like many of their global peers, they too are perceived - correctly, in this case - as anti-establishment. Palestinian sociologist Jamil Hilal observes that individualization processes have in fact been underway since 2005, when the Palestinian Authority (PA) adopted neoliberal economic policies that encourage a pursuit of personal economic interests rather than collective national goals. These policies, Hilal claims, extends beyond individuals to include government agencies and NGOs, rendering them dependent on donors and constantly struggling to ensure their economic survival. He also argues that the shift from the PLO's egalitarian underground culture of comrade-brother to the state-like hierarchy of the PA has weakened Palestinian solidarity, as well as the urge to mobilize for collective action.

The wave of lone wolf attacks that began in October 2015 suggests that labeling the young generation as individualistic and self-absorbed is insufficient, and that a more nuanced characterization of Palestinian youth is required. By definition, lone wolf assailants appear to express sheer individualism, as most act without seeking permission or guidance from their family, or from political organizations - the traditional collective sources of authority. At the same time, these attacks may be seen as the ultimate individual sacrifice for the collective, whether national or religious (many assailants have declared, for example, that they did it to protect the al-Aqsa Mosque).

A striking example of the combination of these seemingly contradictory sides is found in a text titled "Ten Commandments for any Martyr", which was posted on Facebook by 23 year old Bahaa Allyan in December 2014, a year before he and another assailant killed four passengers on a bus in Jerusalem. Serving as a will of sorts, four of Allyan's "commandments" demand that his death not be appropriated by political organizations. Allyan addresses the different parties and stresses that the attack would be carried out on behalf of the national collective: "My martyrdom is dedicated to the homeland, not to you." Allyan's case shows that the seemingly contradictory individualistic and collectivistic sides of Palestinian youth are in fact reconcilable, and that social

media plays a key role in framing the two together. They reject the social and political templates imposed by the traditional collectives, and expect the freedom to choose and even create the collective that suits their personal views and interests.

Social media provides such alternatives by creating social arenas in the form of online communities of various sizes and interests, ranging from small local groups to national-level ones. These online communities augment and sometimes even replace the old collectives as sources of authority and as an arena for collective action in the pursuit of a diverse range of goals.

Many of the online communities focus on a common interest, such as Ask Jerusalem, which fosters Palestinian knowledge about Jerusalem, or Mobilizing for Palestine, which describes itself as a nonpartisan group for young Palestinians interested in their national and human rights. Other communities address specific localities, such as the Facebook page called, Qalandia Refugee Camp, or the supra-regional community titled, The Discussions of the Boys and Girls of Hebron and Ramallah. The largest Palestinian online communities are Shihab and Shabakat Quds al-Ikhbariyya, with about six million followers each on Facebook. Both present themselves as news agencies but in fact are platforms for sharing information and exchanging ideas like other online communities. Their popularity derives largely from the fact that these two "news agencies" are perceived by young Palestinians as non-establishment. Paradoxically, most young supporters are unaware that both communities are quietly administered by Hamas, which uses them to shape the media agenda according to its own interests.

A clear example of the impact of online communities and the collective support they provide the individual can be found in the fact that some of these communities serve as sources of authority that support lone wolf assailants. Like other online communities, they operate on various social networking sites, and often use internal language of symbols and codes to conceal the intentions of their members. Although diverse in style, this coded online discourse reflects the same desire of potential assailants to gain legitimacy for their actions from their online communities.

On March 20 2017, the Israel Police announced it had uncovered a WhatsApp group named "The Road to Heaven" that was used for sharing religious content and encouraging lone wolf assailants. A week before, one of

its members was killed after stabbing two police officers in Jerusalem. The police recovered the assailant's smartphone, exposed the group and arrested another 18 members. Additional information from the Israeli security establishment attests to the scope of the online communities that support assailants. In April 2017, Israeli authorities reported that over the past year, monitoring online activity had uncovered 2200 Palestinians in various stages of preparing attacks. 400 of them were arrested, and the rest received warnings.

Social media has had a profound impact on Palestinians and many aspects of their life. It offers alternatives to traditional focal points of identity and authority, and allows individuals the independence to reshape their relations with their social and political environment. Part of the strength of this effect derives from the particular conditions of Palestinian reality, such as the occupation of the West Bank, the geographical and political division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the disappointment of many Palestinians in their political institutions for failing to resolve the Palestinian problem. However, one must not ignore the influence of global

trends. First and foremost among these is the expansion of social media and its designated technologies, which unlike traditional media outlets, create new social and political arenas. An additional global process is the emergence of the new generation widely called Generation Z, which is generally characterized by individualism and a pessimistic mindset towards their future. Throughout the world, a strong anti-establishment attitude towards political organizations and professional establishments, including academia and the so-called "mainstream media," is expanding. These tendencies drive a constant search for alternatives, for which social media offers a wealth of options.



**Harel Chorev**

Dr. Harel Chorev is head of the Middle Eastern Network Analysis Desk at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.



# SOCIAL MEDIA: A MISPLACED HOPE

by Samuel Tadros

Under the subtitle of “How an Egyptian revolution began on Facebook,” the *New York Times* in February 2012, ran a laudatory review of Wael Ghonim’s newly released book *Revolution 2.0*. The review noted how a young Google executive frustrated by his country’s injustices, especially police brutality, had started a Facebook page that quickly attracted hundreds of thousands of similarly frustrated young Egyptians, becoming both a platform for expressing anger as well as a mobilizing venue. The effectiveness of the latter was on full display as the page Ghonim created called for the protests that eventually brought down Egypt’s long term dictator, Hosni Mubarak, and helped activists coordinate their protests. As many had hoped, social media was helping to transform the Arabic speaking world for the better.

But even then, the enthusiasm for the role of social media in closing the Arabic speaking world’s democracy deficit had its detractors. Social media and the new communication technologies were after all merely tools, and the crisis was first and foremost one of ideas. Just as the new tools could be utilized for mobilizing activists, they could similarly be utilized by others with more problematic ideologies: for example, the jihadis. Few had taken note that the computer retail industry in Egypt was from its inception dominated by Islamists, or that Islamic themed pages dominated Arabic language material online. Al Qaeda had already shown its effectiveness in using social media and communication technologies to spread its propaganda, and the Islamic State would soon excel in this domain. As the Arab Spring turned into winter, the ability of jihadis to use social media platforms

to disseminate their message, recruit new jihadis and radicalize thousands of Muslims was hard to miss. “Jihadists have been on the internet a long time, and they probably know how to use it better than you do,” was the opening sentence of a Vice article on the subject.

Both narratives—social media as a means of democratic transformation and alternatively as a means of radicalization—have dominated the discussion of the role of social media in the Arabic speaking world. Lost in between these two poles has been the role social media and new communication technologies have played in the dissemination of conspiracy theories and as a means of regime propaganda.

\*\*\*\*\*

Imagine yourself an Egyptian forty years or older as the Egyptian revolution was unfolding. You probably did not have a social media account on Facebook or Twitter and treated both as something your children wasted their time with. Contrary to popular misconceptions, the majority of the country’s population was not to be found in Tahrir Square during the revolution, but instead had watched it unfold on their television sets. The dramatic scenes were quickly followed by unprecedented changes at an accelerated pace: Mubarak’s resignation, trials of former government figures, and an explosion of new political movements and political operatives. For thirty years, Egyptians had been accustomed to a stable political scene and a lack of politics. Now their world was turned upside down.

For millions of Egyptians frightened by the pace of change and eager to find out what was happening in their own country, social media was the only one venue possible. If the revolution had started from a Facebook page, then Facebook was the place to be, if one was to keep track of the political changes impacting one's life. After all, Mubarak had been so frightened by social media that he had ordered the internet cut as the protests escalated. In the immediate aftermath of the Egyptian revolution, the number of Egyptian Facebook accounts exploded, skyrocketing from 4.7 million accounts in 2011, a *Wired* article noted, to 26 million accounts by 2016.

But if the country's population lacked political education, its media outlets were similarly professionally weak. The explosion of interest in politics was equaled by an explosion in news sources, many of them composed of little beyond a few guys with computers. The more sensational the story, the more likely it is to attract viewers. If The Guardian could fabricate a story during the Egyptian revolution claiming Mubarak's wealth totaled seventy billion dollars, no one should have been surprised that an Egyptian news outlet would up the figure later to four trillion dollars. Fake news may be a term popularized in recent months in U.S. politics, but it originated in a region whose culture was dominated by a conspiracy theory mindset.

Yet behind the spread of conspiracy theories during the Arab Spring lay a more sinister entity, the Iranian and Russian propaganda outlets. Even before the Arab Spring, Iranian propaganda targeting the Arabic speaking world had specialized in fabricated stories. The way they operated was fascinating. A story would appear in an obscure Palestinian newspaper which no one had ever heard of. From there it would be taken up by Hezbollah's *Al Manar*, before making its way into the pages of every respected Arabic newspaper, at which point the original source would have been forgotten. Following the Arab Spring, Iranian affiliated outlets exploited the hunger for information by developing an elaborate social media presence. The Russians soon followed suit. While the Iranian English language *Press TV* has 3.5 million followers on Facebook, its *Arabic* one, *Al Alam*, has six million. *Russia Today's* English outlet with 4.5 million followers is eclipsed by RT Arabic which enjoys 11.7 million followers, making it the third largest Arabic language news channel on Facebook.

Arab regimes soon took note. While the most elaborate social media presence belongs to the Syrian Electronic Army which has specialized in hacking websites and news agencies reporting on Assad's brutality, and

together with an army of Twitter accounts has managed to spread conspiracy theories regarding regime opponents, other regimes have also learned the lesson. Aware of the impact of social media in shaping public opinion in Egypt, the Sisi regime has not only toyed with the idea of controlling Facebook access, but has its own cadre of supporters spreading its propaganda online. These supporters successfully tarnish the reputation of activists and regime opponents, but they also spread conspiracy theories serving the regime's narrative. No farfetched conspiracy is beyond the pale, from claiming that the Egyptian navy had defeated its American counterpart and taken the commander of the Sixth Fleet hostage to insisting that the revolutions across the region are part of an elaborate U.S. secret plan called Fourth Generation Warfare, a theory President Sisi himself holds.

Today, the Arabic speaking world is engulfed in turmoil. With the exception of Tunisia, the fall of several Arab regimes has not led to a transition to democracy. The hopes pinned on social media to bridge the democracy deficit have proven false. More profoundly, the Arabic speaking world's crisis of modernity remains unchanged. The region lags behind the rest of the world in every aspect, outside of the production of savagery. Even a realist-driven foreign policy must recognize that the region's ills pose a threat to the global order.

The Arabic speaking peoples are not from Mars. They seek the same things as other peoples all around the world. If the region's freedom deficit is to be seriously confronted and remedied, more is needed than merely hoping that the internet will change the region. Conspiracy theories are not only harmful to these societies. They have a negative impact on how the United States is perceived and how effective its policies will be in the region. The U.S. government should take an active interest in spreading accurate information while discrediting conspiracy theory outlets. More importantly, a lesson must be learned. Social media and the new communication technologies are the means, but it is up to us to make sure that they carry the right ideas.



### **Samuel Tadros**

Samuel Tadros is the Distinguished Visiting Fellow in Middle Eastern Studies at the Hoover Institution, a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom and a Professorial Lecturer at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.



# A TRENCH WAR IN THE DIGITAL AGE: THE CASE OF IRAN

by Abbas Milani

A trench war, fought in our labyrinthine digital world, has been raging in the Islamic Republic of Iran for more than two decades. On one side is a youthful internet-savvy society—adept at the gender-neutral, hierarchy-averse pluralism of platforms and networks—a society craving to join the 21st century. On the other side is a clerical despotic regime with a claim to divine legitimacy, a parallel male-dominated septuagenarian elite, enamored of gender-apartheid and of ideas more than a millennium old—a power structure that is retrograde, passé and stale, compared to the vibrancy of Iranian society at large.

Of Iran's more than eighty million people, 56.4 million have a cellphone, and 57.4 percent have access to the internet. At least 14 million people (with some estimates going as high as 40) use *Telegram*, and another twelve to fourteen million subscribe to *Instagram*. While Facebook is banned, and Twitter filtered, millions of Iranians use them both, for everything from e-commerce and romance to politics and public relations. More ironically still, virtually all government officials, including Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, and the most fervent advocate of the need to fight the evils of the digital age, feverishly use their Twitter and Facebook accounts to take their message to the public.

The regime, now acknowledged around the world as one of the most adept at hacking, has tried to use social

media and the possibilities of the digital age to contain, co-opt, control, even suppress the opposition. In their eclectic and elected affinities with the digital age, while averse to its liberation possibilities, their goal is very close to what 19th century Utilitarianism called the “pan-optic vision”—the ability to monitor every node of a social organism from a unitary position. Orwell in his inimitable style called this same kind of vision Big Brother watching. What makes the achievement of this goal unlikely is that along with the efforts of the regime and its ideological and security apparatus, Iranians from all walks of life, especially Iran's embryonic civil society, and the vast non-violent opposition to the regime, inside and outside the country, have also tried to use the same media to organize, and mobilize their activities and fight regime policies and propaganda. In a sense then, Iran is the smithy wherein the paradigmatic problem of our age is hammered out each day: Is social media a tool of utopian liberation or a means of Orwellian control? The verdict, at least in Iran, is yet to be determined.

In this trench war, as expected, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), as the main muscle of clerical despotism, plays the critical role. Through some of their myriad front companies, they control the majority share of corporations that own and operate virtually the entire digital infrastructure, as well as smart phone services in the country. They use that power to slow down access

to the internet, deny services in times of crisis, and filter sites or platforms seen as most dangerous. They have purchased more than five hundred million dollars worth of sophisticated software that allows them to track and monitor every account and message in the country. Only a few platforms, like *Telegram*, are still deemed to be beyond their reach. More than once the regime has toyed with the idea of emulating China and establishing a “safe” national internet.

Where software interdiction and overtly threatening gestures of censorship do not suffice, the regime and the IRGC use a vast army of paid minions and ideological myrmidons—or in their own parlance, cyberjihadists—to both control and shape the social media, and also to track and if needed arrest civil society activists. In this effort, they enter chat rooms, study what they call the “semiotics” of the digital age and try to reframe discussions in these rooms; they “follow” activists to not only offer arguments amenable to official dogma, but to help undermine narratives incongruent with prevailing regime ideology. The militia-cum-gang Basji, with its throng of a million men and women—some believers, others social opportunists who join (the way opportunists joined the Young Communist League) to enjoy the perks of membership—have been the foot soldiers of this cyberjihad.

So important is this Jihad in the regime’s often militaristic narrative of the world that more than once, their ideologues have referred to the internet as a tool or incarnation of the devil. Social media, they say, is the favorite weapon of America in its culture war with Islamic Iran—the most potent tool in what Khamenei calls America’s “Cultural NATO” against Iran. Fighting its “negative impact” is thus central to their strategy. Every city and region has its own commander of oversight for social media. In a lengthy article in one of their websites, they outline these “negative” aspects. The list includes such sins as the ability of social groups to learn from experiences of places like Yugoslavia about how to disrupt “national unity” and change consumption patterns, to intensify cultural cleavage, and to spread “fake news.” Foremost

amongst the dangers of the digital age, according to the regime, is the effort to undermine people’s piety and religious identity and replace it with secular or hybrid identities. They even refer to a verse from the Quran as proof positive that social media is sinfully subversive. The verse says, “Those who love that indecency should be spread abroad concerning them that believe—there awaits them a painful chastisement in the present world and the world to come; and God knows and you know not.” (Quran, 24:19; Arbery translation.)

And yet, in spite of these regime efforts to filter and control, limit and structure the digital landscape, the people continue to use it cleverly to learn about the world, counter regime claims, and organize everything from raves to underground theater performances. A movement to have women publish an image of themselves without a veil online was surprisingly successful, while stealth satire, through recording and sharing small comically dubbed clips has been a favorite pastime. During the May 19 presidential elections, a remarkably vast social network was active, using every platform, working on “fact checking” candidate’s claims, getting out the vote, and even guiding voters to polling stations with shorter lines. The reformist candidate, Hassan Rouhani won; the conservative candidate, Ebrahim Raisi, generally assumed to be the conservative’s main candidate to succeed Khamenei as a Supreme Leader, lost badly; regime shenanigans in trying to “engineer” the final tallies to make the loss less embarrassing were duly exposed in the social media, and conservative threats at revenge were a constant digital reminder that a battle might have been won by the people, but the trench war rages on.



**Abbas Milani**

Abbas Milani is a research fellow and codirector of the Iran Democracy Project at the Hoover Institution. In addition, Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford University.



# THE SYRIAN UPRISING: WHAT ROLE DID SOCIAL MEDIA PLAY?

by Qutaiba Idlbi and Kassem Eid (Qusai Zakarya)

This essay combines the first-hand experiences and analyses of two young Syrian activists. One, Kassem Eid, survived the sarin gas attack and starvation siege of his Mouadamiya suburb of Damascus. He has written extensively in opinion pieces on the subject of the revolution in Syria. Qutaiba Idlbi's work has focused on the accountability of aid organizations. He speaks widely on the nature of the Assad regime and the cause of the opposition. He was twice imprisoned by Assad's intelligence services at the age of 21.

## **Kassem Eid:**

Growing up in the dictatorship established by Hafez al-Assad in Syria was hard for almost everyone outside Assad's family and his inner circle. A military dominated by loyal members of the Alawi sect and nearly a dozen brutal intelligence branches kept the population in a state of poverty and constant terror. Anyone who dared to speak against Assad was crushed.

To keep the Syrian people under control, Hafez al-Assad created a bubble through the tight management of state media. Cable TV, the internet, newspapers, magazines, and even books that offered a perspective at odds with government propaganda were all forbidden. My own life-line to the outside world was the magazine my late father would smuggle to our home – Readers Digest. It was from this incendiary literature that I learned English and came in contact with life beyond the big prison that

was Syria. I learned that people in other countries live a lot better than we do and that they elect their president and governments. And that their presidents do not keep electing themselves.

In 2000, Hafez al-Assad died and his son Bashar became president of Syria. It took the Syrian government all of five minutes to amend the constitution to accommodate the son's 34 years of age. The youthful eye doctor, educated in London, promised to bring change and to open up the country to the world through free trade and technology. The free trade was anything but. Both commerce and technology were tightly controlled by Bashar's cousin, Rami Makhoul, who owned the only two cell phone companies operating in Syria, private TV channels, private newspapers, private radios and internet – and almost every private company and bank in Syria.

It took less than two years for computers and the internet to become wildly popular in Syria. In 2002, when I was almost 16, I started working in an internet café near our home in Moudamiya. At that time, most of the customers were teenagers who came to play online video games or use online chat websites.

Many websites were immediately blocked by the government, but we found our way around that by using false IP's. Many young men learned how to become hackers, and computer shops opened in Damascus where programs, games and software that normally sold

for a hundred dollars or more could be had for sometimes less than a dollar.

For the Syrian government itself, the internet proved a much more nefarious device. Undercover intelligence officers working for Bashar used the internet to recruit jihadists from Syria and other parts of the Arab world, encouraging them to go to Iraq to fight against the United States. After Saddam Hussein was toppled, the Assad government was convinced that the Syrian regime would be the next target in the American sights.

Online chat rooms calling for jihad, videos on YouTube showing civilians killed by the United States forces, songs calling for jihad and praising Al Qaeda, imams like the famous Abu al Qaqa (who turned out to be an undercover Syrian intelligence officer) preaching publically about the importance of jihad in Iraq – all that was once forbidden to talk about suddenly became legal – and desirable. The regime used online media to whip up an exodus of young Syrians and other Arabs to go and kill American soldiers. The Sinjar documents recovered by US troops, attest to the extent of this flow of fighters and underscore the effectiveness of the Syrian regime's use of social media.

\*\*\*\*\*

From a different angle, Qutaiba Idlbi describes the paranoia and brutal response on the part of Assad's government to the unregulated, unauthorized use of the new medium taking hold in Syria.

#### **Qutaiba Idlbi:**

On one of the nights in May 2011, I heard the heavy booted steps coming towards my cell. Moments later the door was opened, and I was taken to the interrogation room once again. Since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, I had been reporting for international media on the events inside the country. Now, I was detained in the headquarters of the Syrian political intelligence after they discovered part of the network I was working with to do my reporting. When I arrived at the interrogation room, I was met by a man who introduced himself to me as a computer engineer major specializing in social media. He wanted my help in logging on to my Facebook account. After attempting to log on, it became evident to me that my family had deactivated my account and changed my password. My interrogator, however, was only aggravated by the fact that my Facebook was in English, which was incomprehensible to him. After 14 failed attempts, he finally accepted the explanation I concocted on the spot –

that Facebook had developed a mechanism to shut down accounts of those they know are being detained by the government. He even called in his superior to explain how I had helped him uncover this mechanism!

Social media existed in Syria before the Arab Spring started in 2010. But up until that point, it was largely used to stay in touch with family members abroad, particularly given the very social nature of Syrian culture. But when the video of Mohammed Bouazizi setting himself ablaze on the streets of Tunis surfaced in December of 2011, things changed rapidly. From this point on, two different arguments about the new technology developed. Its defenders claimed that social media was a tool for crowding and marketing in the service of democratizing society, while, on the other side, its critics pointed out that repressive regimes and dictators across the Middle East used it to collect data on activists and their roles by invading those cyber communities. Both assessments are valid.

In the very early days of the Arab Spring uprisings, social media penetration of Arab communities was relatively low in Syria –about 1% in 2010, available only to the upper middle class and wealthy urban families who had the resources and were interested in a real line of communication beyond their communities. When the Arab Spring ignited, social media was the tool by which the activists in those classes reached out to the world – not only to report on events on the ground, but to speak to the West, in particular, in the hopes that governments and people there would stand by them in their demands for freedom and democracy. Social media became a platform to share information internally as well. Those on the front lines of demonstrations in one part of the country looked to present their distinct local message and identity and to learn about what was happening in other regions of Syria.

Social media was not the spark that lit the Arab Spring, as some contend. This assertion disregards entirely the thousands of people who sacrificed their lives to encourage others to overturn the system that had oppressed them for so long. It discounts the profound social, political, and economic distortions that led to the explosions of 2010 and 2011. What's fair to say, however, is that social media fanned the flame of protest and helped to spread it across the Middle East from Tunisia to Egypt to Libya to Yemen and to Syria. It provided people with a platform to unite their voices and their messages. "The germs of #Syria salute the rats of #Libya and pray for their quick victory" was one such message from July of 2011, mocking the

derision towards their own people that their respective rulers regularly expressed. Social media has indeed been an effective tool in the hands of those seeking the betterment of their society, opportunities commensurate with their education and aspirations and deeply resentful of the deteriorating social conditions, unemployment crisis, tyranny and political corruption. Social media has become the primary tool used by youth who have been thwarted at every turn to express their anger and frustration in unprecedented and creative ways. It has undoubtedly contributed to the rebuilding of a collective identity during the current uprisings, embodied in the slogans, music, art, and clothing on the streets of Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli, Sanaa, and Damascus, that paved the way for the Arab Spring revolutions.

From the government's point of view, social media was the mechanism for breaking through the siege it had laid around society – both actual and cyber (in terms of media blackouts) – through which regimes sought to contain the uprisings. Social media, in general, brought the fear of the unknown into the heart of the Syrian government. In my first detention, my admission that I maintained a Facebook account with 700 friends prompted my torturers to administer additional electric shocks. Social media had become the government's primary concern. As more newly motivated youth joined the opposition movement, the coordination of social media became more fluid. This broadened the movement but it also galvanized the government to put more resources into training and equipping its intelligence services to be able to control the movement through social media. Although it took some time, this new approach by the government proved very effective in monitoring and stalking activists in order to counter the opposition's messages. It came to be known as "The Electronic Army."

It's important here to keep in mind the complex process of political mobilization and its various stages, especially in the uprisings in the Middle East. Initially, a social and political movement gains the consent and support of its constituents through their strategy and by confronting their opponents. The practical mobilization begins when the movement calls on individuals to participate and interact. Social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and others have played an important role in this first stage of political mobilization. These platforms allowed the different segments of society to access a free, flexible and uncensored means of communication, which undoubtedly contributed to the rebuilding of the collective identity and opened a dialogue concerning cooperation among different ethnic, religious and generational groups.

Of all of these segments of society, the ideologically religious Islamist groups have been the most difficult to address and stop at their roots. But it's important to note that these groups grew out of the frustration with the reluctance of the West to support the initial uprising. As a result of the shift toward Islamist ideology, the platforms used also changed in order to recruit for the new emerging extremism. These religious groups have adapted tactics, developed long range strategies, and become more proficient in making the most of the communications technologies available to them. Today, terrorist elements are not only recruited remotely, but global strategies are also channeled through online operations. A system of propaganda across social media platforms is capable of calling for widespread action in a way that does not require any direct connection between these groups and individuals around the world. It has therefore become easier to attack targets at any time or at any place. Because significant technical capabilities are in the hands of these groups, predicting future threats becomes increasingly difficult. Terrorist elements can now be trained and educated without traveling to Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iraq. The exchange of terrorist tactics and incitement to violence is easier than ever before.

It is clear that social media has been an important step in the political development in the Middle East. It has broken the monopoly on thought – and therefore power – that was once held exclusively by the small group of political and economic elites. Citizens have become critics and participants and are now able to analyze, balance, and share opinions. However, social media has also been hijacked by dictators and extremist ideologues alike. It remains to be seen what role these platforms will play going forward.



**Kassem Eid (Qusai Zakarya)**

Kassem Eid (Qusai Zakarya) is a 30 year old Palestinian Syrian rebel and human rights activist who joined the Syrian Revolution in 2011. He's currently a refugee living in Europe.



**Qutaiba Idlbi**

Qutaiba Idlbi is a Researcher at the Global Policy Institute and a Senior Consultant with Pechter Polls specializing in aid and security in the Middle East with a focus on Syria.

# THE CARAVAN

The Caravan is envisaged as a periodic symposium on the contemporary dilemmas of the Greater Middle East. It will be a free and candid exchange of opinions. We shall not lack for topics of debate, for that arc of geography has contentions aplenty. It is our intention to come back with urgent topics that engage us. Caravans are full of life and animated companionship. Hence the name we chose for this endeavor.

We will draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman and Charlie Hill co-chair the project from which this effort originates.

For additional information and previous issues of The Caravan visit [www.hoover.org/caravan](http://www.hoover.org/caravan)

## Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world.

Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.



The publisher has made an online version of this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license 3.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0>.

Efforts have been made to locate the original sources, determine the current rights holders, and, if needed, obtain reproduction permissions. On verification of any such claims to rights in the articles reproduced in this book, any required corrections or clarifications will be made in subsequent printings/editions. Hoover Institution assumes no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Copyright © 2017 by the Board of Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University

**Hoover Institution, Stanford University**  
434 Galvez Mall  
Stanford, CA 94305-6003  
650-723-1754

**Hoover Institution in Washington**  
The Johnson Center  
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-760-3200

