

SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ERA OF ISIS

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Even before the Arab Spring, activists took to social media to disseminate information in an atmosphere where the narrative was tightly controlled by the state.

In November 2007, [YouTube shut down](#) the account of Egyptian activist Wael Abbas after he posted a video showing police brutality for containing “inappropriate material.” The video was later reinstated following an outcry from human rights advocates and was then used to [convict](#) the two police officers of brutality.

During the 2006 Israeli air campaign on Lebanon, activist artist Zena El Khalil turned her blog “[Beirut Update](#)” into a source for news about the war and was featured in international [media](#) including CNN, BBC and The Guardian. In the summer of 2010, an anonymously administered Facebook page titled “[We are all Khaled Saeed](#)” after a young Egyptian who was beaten to death by police officers became a [focal point](#) for anti-regime protests leading up to the January 2011 uprising.

For the next few months, social media was prominently used almost exclusively by activists across the Middle East and North Africa from the Maghreb to the Arabian Peninsula. By 2012, Arab governments had woken up to the “threat” of social media and started imposing harsh penalties on activists further pushing them underground. There was also a significant splintering amongst activists who in some cases following the ouster of the head of the regime turned against each other. The online honeymoon was over.

No longer was social media an open space for the region’s activists to express themselves freely and without inhibitions. Online police whose job it was to [monitor](#) “obscene content” turned their attention to political activists on Twitter and Facebook. Online hackers affiliated to or supportive of governments across the region, such as the [Syrian Electronic Army](#), launched denial of service attacks on certain accounts while pro-government thugs intimidated activists using the very “liberation technology” social media platforms that activists had previously employed.

The once liberal and secular activist-dominated social media landscape has made way for conservative clerics or extremist groups. For instance, the Twitter account of Egyptian pro-democracy activist [Wael Ghonim](#) (1.4 million followers) has fallen silent and has chosen to stay away “as Egypt no longer welcomes those who are like me” while the account of conservative Saudi Arabian cleric [Mohamed Al Arefe](#) flourishes with over 10 million followers. [Popular](#) Saudi clerics such as [Salman Al Odah](#) and [Ayedh Al Qarnee](#) have reached astronomical figures and outreach that liberal activists and even governments can only dream of. On the other hand, secular activists with a strong social media presence such as Alaa Abdel Fattah, Ahmed Maher and Ahmed Douma who have chosen to stay in Egypt have been [locked up](#) in jail.

Meanwhile, the drivers that produced the Arab Spring have arguably gotten worse. According to the ILO, unemployment in the region stood at almost [25 percent](#) before the Arab Spring. Today, these figures would be higher due to the drying up of the tourism industry in countries such as Egypt, the disruption of oil sales in Libya, and the millions of refugees created by the Syrian Civil War and other conflicts.

Five Arab states rank amongst the [top ten](#) most corrupt states in the world, and a Transparency International [poll](#) found that the “[endemic](#)” corruption actually worsened in the Arab world since

the uprisings of 2011. Such a dire landscape no doubt facilitated the recruitment that was to take place online by extremists of some of the region's young unemployed youth.

The proliferation of pro-government social media accounts bent on silencing dissent as well as the introduction of harsh penalties including jail terms for breaking loosely defined social media regulations across the region resulted in many liberal activists to either restrict their once public Facebook profiles to "Friends only" or resort to closed Facebook groups with limited members that are heavily and continuously filtered. While liberal and secular activists retreated, extremist accounts multiplied with both public and private profiles and accounts.

Although Al Qaeda has used social media to a limited degree over the past few years beyond posting their videos on YouTube, their breakaway group ISIS has taken its use another level. For starters, ISIS videos have been of a much higher production quality than Al Qaeda, using Hollywood-like special effects. In one of the videos posted online, the ISIS killer [draws his knife](#) to behead a hostage as the film cuts to slow motion to increase the dramatic effect. In a subsequent ISIS video of the beheading of 18 Syrian regime soldiers, the sound of [beating heartbeats](#) is added to the soundtrack. ISIS' most gruesome upload to date featured the burning alive of a Jordanian pilot in a 21-minute video "that imitates the production values of documentaries aired on outlets like the [History Channel](#)". The film ends by showing alleged homes of other Jordanian pilots identified through aerial mapping technology.

Since July 2014, ISIS has also been publishing an online magazine called Dabiq, now in its fifth issue, available to [download in PDF](#) and published in English. The propagandist publication, which without the gruesome content would look like a lifestyle magazine, features interviews with fighters and stories about recent conquests by the terrorist organization. The group has also [used popular hashtags](#) such as #WorldCup2014 to disseminate their videos and flood Twitter with their messages.

Pro-ISIS preachers haven't only used the popular social media tools to propagate their messages. Lesser-known platforms such as [PalTalk hosted](#) lectures and debates by radical Islamists preachers who praised ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi as "the leader of all Muslims". Invitations to listen to the PalTalk chat were [posted on Twitter](#) and advertised, according to London and New York City times, leaving no doubt as to who was the intended audience.

In 2014, ISIS developed an Android app called Fajer Al Bashayer ([Dawn of the Good Omens](#)) that when downloaded not only sends users automatic updates about the group but also hijacks their Twitter accounts and posts pro-ISIS tweets and updates on its behalf. Last June as ISIS forces entered the Iraqi city of Mosul, the app sent 40,000 tweets in a [24-hour period](#). This and the increasingly gruesome videos prompted social media firms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to [crack down](#) on terror posts. This policing was most evident following the posting of the beheading video of freelance American journalist James Foley in August 2014.

The social media giants asked users not to share the video and shut down accounts of those who did as soon as they were flagged by users. The White House also intervened asking these platforms not to allow the video to be shared. Additionally, a successful campaign [launched](#) by Twitter user [@LibyaLiberty](#) with the hashtag #ISISMediaBlackout called on social media users not to share the ISIS terror videos. In its first 24 hours, the hashtag was [shared](#) over 11,000 times.

Social media can be a two-edged sword for ISIS. When the first video of the so-called caliph Al Baghdadi delivering a sermon in a mosque was released by ISIS, Muslim netizens took to social

media to [ridicule](#) what appeared to be a swanky Swiss-made watch he was wearing with tweets such as “Omega: [Baghdadi’s Choice](#)”.

Policy changes by social media firms, which are generally reluctant to police online content, were evident over the past two years. In 2012, the US government attempted to shut down the Twitter account of Somali terror group Al Shabab and said that it was [exploring legal channels](#) to do so. Twitter finally [shut down](#) Al Shabab’s account after the group used it to boast of attacks, and the social media platform announced a series of [new policies](#) aimed at combating graphic images and violence.

ISIS understands the potential reach of social media and uses it for recruitment, spreading fear and propagating their extremist ideology. These platforms are also used to raise money and search for sympathizers who can propagate on their behalf and others who can potentially turn into lone wolf attackers. One of these Twitter accounts was called ShamiWitness, and, prior to being shut down by its administrator in December 2014, had over 17,000 followers. The user who was a marketing executive based in Bangalore, India told Britain’s Channel Four, whose investigation ended his career as a propagator of terror, “he would have gone to join Islamic State himself, but his family were financially [dependent on him](#)”. Shamiwitness joined Twitter in 2009 under a different handle and started propagating for ISIS soon after they appeared. Incidents such as this may compel firms and governments to introduce further restrictions on social media thereby once again transforming the previously free and open cyber-sphere beyond recognition.

What initially was a space for liberal minded technology geeks and activists is now a darker, gloomier world in which threats are made and videos of brutal beheadings and government [flogging](#) of liberal activists are shared and cheered. Today, the social media landscape in the Middle East resembles the squares and streets of the Arab Spring cities of yore: it is a new battleground for hearts and minds between regimes, Islamists and activists; between young and old; between freedom and constraint.

There are signs of hope, though. In the midst of the all the doom and gloom, comedy from the likes of Bassem Youssef, Karl Sharro and Fahad Albutairi has become a tool to counter the growing online restrictions. Satire, “the weapon of the powerless against the powerful” has angered brainwashed ISIS followers and countered racist and Islamophobic coverage in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacres. One thing is clear: the liberal minded activists of the Arab Spring may be down, but they are certainly not out.