



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“The Role of Citizen Journalism and Social Media in the Middle East and North Africa”

**National Democratic Institute
2030 M Street NW, Washington, D. C.
Monday, February 7, 12:00pm – 2:00pm**

On Monday, the National Democratic Institute hosted a discussion about the role new and social media has played in the dissemination of information and in supporting offline mobilization across the region. **Joelle Jackson**, senior program officer at NDI made opening remarks. **Chris Spence**, chief technology officer at NDI moderated the event and introduced the panelists: **Houeida Anouar**, a Tunisian digital activist; **Golnaz Esfandiari**, senior correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and editor of the Persian Letters blog; and **Raed Jarrar**, Iraqi-American blogger and political advocate based in Washington.

Chris Spence opened the discussion by stating that social media has become embedded in the everyday lives of citizens and that it is not possible to separate political activism from the media. The media, Spence says, allows for more opportunities, but also carries greater risks. And autocratic seem to have the upper hand as evidenced by the Egyptian government shutting down the internet last week. Spence also stated that **while there is no direct correlation between new technology/social media and positive political reforms, they do seem to be changing the behavior of activists and journalists and how they go about achieving reform.**

Houeida Anouar began by stating that when Ben Ali came to power in Tunisia he blocked all access to open media in the country and didn't allow the people to speak. The media became state-owned while independent outlets and bloggers were harassed and suppressed to the point that they engaged in self-censorship or were shut down. As a consequence, Tunisians were unable to access information and obtain a full understanding of what was going on in the country.

The only way they could attain information was through the internet. Anouar stated that the government would routinely block the activists, civil society members and opposition groups' websites. However, Tunisians, like herself, who were abroad would gather information from the internet and from phone calls with activists on the ground and then send them in e-mail newsletters to disperse information. **The internet, Anouar says, was a place where people could actually find information and react to it.** 3 million Tunisians, out of a population of 10 million have internet access, with 2 million of them on Facebook.

The revolution Anouar says was made easier by widespread information made available on the internet; when protests began after Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, they were quickly covered online on Al Jazeera and Facebook. **She argues, however, that the success of the protests was not due to social media, but rather to the simplicity and clarity of protesters' demands: employment, freedom and dignity.** She also stated that the spread of the revolutions was due to trade unions which mobilized members in different cities. In the case of Tunisia, social media and the internet was a great supplemental tool as visuals and information from the streets were spread quickly and were verified by Al Jazeera; this prevented the government from trying to spin the story in their favor by stating that it was an Islamist revolution.

Golnaz Esfandari stated that the current revolutions are not Twitter Revolutions and that social media sites serve as a tool, not a catalyst for change. In Iran, she states, the government traditionally has control over the internet. However, during the 2009 Green Revolution, citizens and activists became better at using social media tools effectively, citing citizen journalism on Facebook and Twitter and the capturing and uploading videos of violent scenes through cell phones as examples. Esfandari states that the Iranian people used internet because they don't have a space to discuss issues on other platforms, but argues that in many cases they also become “stuck in the

virtual realm” out of fear of going into the streets. During the Green Revolution over 100 people were killed and thousands were arrested; over 500 people are still being detained, she says. Thus, she is pessimistic of the participation of the people in solidarity protests scheduled for February 14th.

Raed Jarrar began by stating that the last two weeks in Egypt demonstrated that the new media is not a necessity as protests continued despite the internet shut down. He cautions against the risks of relying on social media by pointing to the fact that the Egyptian government has recently obtained censorship software from U. S. firms which can obtain IP addresses of people posting on line. He also described how the government has allegedly “hijacked pages” by hacking into administrators’ accounts and changing messages. Jarrar recounted the hacking of Al Jazeera’s site last week in which the hackers changed advertisements to demonstrate Al Jazeera and foreign groups’ desire to bring down the Mubarak regime. Much like China, they also have launched an online propaganda machine with former police officers posting pro-regime rhetoric.

In Iraq, Jarrar stated, the internet penetrations is very low, with only about 1% of the population having internet access compared to Egypt and Iran where internet penetrations reaches 25-30%. The new media tools are thus rendered ineffective especially as the 1% with access are also unlikely to be involved in protests. Instead, many people use cell phones to send text messages and multimedia messages to spread information. Thus, in Iraq, censorship is not the issue, but rather penetration. **In the Middle East and North Africa, each nation has its own specificities and thus, a broad generalization over the role of social media cannot be made, Jarrar says.**

Anouar responding to Jarrar’s statements, discussed the Tunisian government’s online anti-revolution campaigns which aimed at scaring people by putting out reports of the water system being poisoned and synagogues being burned in attempts to blame Islamists. She also stated that while the protests continued and since the ouster of Ben Ali, citizens have gone out of their way to make sure information is verified by multiple sources and personal confidants prior to publishing or passing along reports. She also noted that **social media made the revolution unfold so quickly; it hastened the pace and the steps.** She claims that this is a new era with the medium of internet as one of the most important things as it provides the people a voice and a place to disseminate information.

In response to a question on how government presence online hinders activists, Anouar stated that it definitely scared many Tunisians, given the “legends of Ben Ali’s repression structure.” Jarrar stated that Facebook forums are less useful now as they have become inundated with pro-government rhetoric. He states that it makes it difficult for many to know what is real and what is not; the government has successfully attacked the public spaces. Esfandiari states that in Iraq, the government closely monitors blogs and sites and that there is a notable presence of cyber police, leading many to post anonymously.

A Freedom House Officer stated that prior to the uprisings they had listed Tunisia to be as oppressive as China in the category of internet freedom due to the high number of cyber attacks and sophisticated hacking which led to large degree of self-censorship. He went on to say that many activists are using new media tools, but are unsure of the vulnerabilities of this approach. He also applauded Facebook, Google, and Twitter for their attempts to help protesters get information out in both Egypt and Tunisia.

Anouar responding to questions and statements on Al Jazeera stated that it was vitally important as millions in the region watch its coverage and that it serves as the intersection between new and old media. Jarrar also lauded Al Jazeera’s use of new media in its coverage.

An audience member commented that the government in Egypt seemed to employ a clever strategy in Egypt by shutting down the internet for 5 days, implementing a curfew, and blocking Al Jazeera’s coverage as it gave non-protesters nothing to do but to watch *Nile Sat*’s coverage. Thus, many people were unaware of what was going on and when the internet service was restored their confusion grew as pro and anti-regime groups posted conflicted statements on Facebook, Twitter and other forums. Anouar agreed and stated that the Tunisian government attempted to employ a similar tactic by releasing false information and reports of attacks. Jarrar also stated that while *Nile Sat* displayed “vulgar” propaganda, online there seems to be a much more sophisticated approach which points to their institutional capacity.

Finally, in response to a question about how the governments will use social media in the future, Anouar remarked that the Tunisian interim government has selected a former imprisoned blogger to be the youth minister to show the people that they recognize the value of the youth and the voices of online protesters. She stated that the new minister tweeted the events in the first cabinet meeting which may speak to a greater openness in the government which will be willing to talk and interact with the youth and the larger populous.