



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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Tweeting the Arab Revolution: A Conversation with Sultan al-Qassemi
The Elliott School of International Affairs, Lindner Family Commons
1957 E Street NW, Washington D.C.
Thursday September 15, 12 p.m. - 1 p.m.

On Thursday, the Project on Middle East Political Science held a discussion with **Sultan al-Qassemi**, a columnist based in the U.A.E., well-known for his tracking of the events of the Arab Spring via Twitter, to explore the powers and pitfalls of social media during revolution. **Marc Lynch**, Director of the Middle East Studies Program at the Elliott School of International Affairs and author of the blog "Abu Aardvark," introduced al-Qassemi. **Andy Carvin**, Senior Strategist at National Public Radio (NPR), and an expert on online communities, also offered remarks.

Al-Qassemi began by outlining the background that elevated social media to an indispensable position in the Arab revolutions. First, he described demographic trends that reveal two-thirds of Arabs are below the age of 29, and that 50 million are unemployed. He also emphasized the differences in repercussions between tweeting the events of the revolution from the U.S. and doing the same from the Middle East. Al-Qassemi argued that two events set the stage for the Arab Spring: the deaths of Khaled Said in Egypt and Mohammad Bouazizi in Tunisia. Social media was instrumental in spreading this information and in sparking interest, but it was not responsible for everything that occurred.

While social media has the ability to enable everyday people to express views and publicize events that might otherwise be censored through traditional media, governments have also adapted to the popular new phenomenon. For instance, Bahrain is an almost "completely wired" nation, meaning a large number of citizens have access to the Internet. At the same time, the Bahraini government and its supporters mounted an intimidation campaign called "Think Twice" in response to the increase in free speech on the Internet in Bahrain. **Social media can empower individuals, but it may also become the stage for a counter-revolution. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the number of social media users has risen drastically, but an increasing number of governments have also learned to utilize the platform.** Governments have even cooperated with one another to help leaders track online dissidents.

Arab leaders' awareness of the power of social media in revolution is evident in the Mubarak regime's decision to shut down Internet access on January 27. **Muammar Gadhafi** also referenced Facebook in his January 11 speech. Al-Qassemi noted that the act of tweeting about the Egyptian revolution from a Gulf state was not easy thanks to Gulf leaders' support for Mubarak. Leaders' recognition of social media is also exemplified by the case of Egyptian **Wael Ghonim**, who was an average Egyptian without NDP affiliation who was detained for his revolutionary activities on the Internet. Upon his release, the Prime Minister drove him home, attesting to his prominence gained via social media activism. Furthermore, several governments have enacted legislation banning re-tweeting and Blackberry broadcasts. Thus, the tool associated with a wave of revolutionary youth and greater freedom of speech has become a tool of oppression.

Al-Qassemi noted that after the fall of Mubarak, the peaceful stage of the Arab Spring ended, and crackdowns and counterrevolutions began. **Social media, by nature, is a two-edged sword.** When used without discretion and well-founded sources, social media has the ability to propagate lies and racism. At the same time, it has saved lives by facilitating information exchange, such as the location of security forces. Addressing the trend of pessimism regarding the future of the Arab Spring, al-Qassemi asserted that this revolution would not be limited to a season, but will last well into the coming years. "The trajectory is positive," al-Qassemi added, and "I only see light." The future of this tide of change, however, will rest on the examples of Egypt and Tunisia, on whether or not the brave revolutionaries of these vanguard countries can prove the viability of human rights and democracy. Al-Qassemi continued, saying that regardless of the future, 100 million Arabs have gained freedom this year.

During a question and answer session, **Kelly McNicholas** of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) asked al-Qassemi about his thoughts on how political parties would be utilizing social media in upcoming elections. Al-Qassemi responded by noting that these parties are already campaigning via Twitter and Facebook. In response to a question about whether social media is an elitist platform, al-Qassemi answered that because it is free to use, it is not elitist, although not everyone in the Arab world has access to the Internet, and some still rely on television more than social media.

Another attendee wondered whether Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' (SCAF) recent shut-down of Egyptian Al-Jazeera affiliate Mubashr Misr signaled a change in trajectory. Al-Qassemi was confident that the SCAF's response was simply an attempt to exercise its power amid chaos, and efforts to continue disseminating information and to communicate will ultimately succeed, as it is always possible to broadcast from outside the country. Social media companies have also been active in staying ahead of the curve regarding government crackdowns. For instance, Twitter developed voice tweet after the Egyptian Internet was shut down, enabling users to tweet using only a voice connection by phone.

Andy Carvin responded to a question of how users can determine the credibility of information on social media sites. Considering social media's ability to level the playing field and to give each individual an equal voice, it is often difficult to sift truth from rumor. Carvin noted that he always assumes information is untrue until he receives visual evidence. When visual proof is unavailable, more general determinations on credibility can be made by examining who follows whom on Twitter, for example, as well as the relative formality of writing. He added that in Bahrain, people have been quite successful in resisting online, and that often information can be trusted if many individuals publicize the same stories.