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Cyberauthoritarianism, digital resistance, and transnational solidarity in the MENA Region.

The digital transformation has significantly reshaped the societies, politics, and daily lives of inhabitants in the MENA region to the extent that the region has been labelled as a textbook case of 'Surveillance Geographies' and a distinct hybridity of 'society of discipline' and 'society of control', where hard/material forms of social control and securitisation coexist with virtual and cyber surveillance and digital authoritarianism (Abozaid 2022, 2023; Amar 2024).

While the uprisings of 2010 and 2011 garnered considerable attention for their use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly new media, this focus has waned amidst prolonged transitions, civil conflicts, and authoritarian resurgence. The academic literature often struggled to fully appreciate the modernity and advanced technological capabilities of Arab activists (Tufekci, 2017). Instead, it tended to over-celebrate the role of ICTs in the uprisings, raising concerns about exceptionalist and orientalist interpretations (Grami, 2013) and without examining the repressive or restrictive aspects of these technologies (Mahlouly, 2021)

However, it is evident that various regimes within the region have effectively utilized technological tools to suppress dissent, a phenomenon commonly referred to as cyberauthoritarianism. Digital strategies can bolster authoritarian survival (Maerz, 2020; Abozaid 2022, 2023) through official/governmental disinformation campaigns, repressive cybersecurity legislations, censorship of dissent, and social media surveillance (Dragu and Lupu, 2021; Al-Rawi 2021).

This is compounded by the troubling prevalence of intersectional and digital gender-based violence, which disproportionately targets women and non-binary individuals, thereby inhibiting their participation in online and offline activism (Yakoubi, 2023). Often, repressive regimes leverage cyber harassment, stalking, and gender-based denigration campaigns to silence feminist activists and LGBTQIA+ rights advocates.

On the other hand, this panel seeks to question and evaluate the European policies of digital securitization and intelligence cooperation with the MENA region. As well as revealing the interlocked negative impacts - direct and indirect - these policies and tendencies play in consolidating and strengthening the cyber iron grip of these authoritarian regimes. Through

this investigation, we seek to reveal, through distinctive case studies, not only the fundamental contradiction between the constitutive liberal and democratic norms on which the European Union was founded, but also the future security repercussions such policies could produce on the EU security and stability, and the anti-Europeanism attitudes of public opinion in the MENA region towards the EU.

Thirdly, the panel discussions will focus on exploring alternative strategies to enhance and strengthen the scope and scale of digital solidarity, empathy, and democratization networks, within and without the EU and the MENA regions. Indeed, despite these challenges, digital networks of solidarity provide crucial support to activists both within Arab countries and across the Diaspora, manifesting forms of cyberresistance. Employing innovative approaches such as cybersorority, hashtag activism and Samaritan-based technology, these networks remain understudied and warrant deeper exploration.

The widespread and transnational censorship of Palestinian-related content on social media platforms highlights the importance of global efforts for transparency and equality in policy enforcement. Furthermore, the integration of virtual and physical mobilizations creates a dynamic third space that facilitates transnational interactions, catalyzing transformative changes and new forms of resistance to authoritarianism.

This panel seeks to explore mechanisms of cyberauthoritarianism and emerging forms of resistance in the MENA region, with a particular focus on contributions that:

- Engage with innovative and interdisciplinary theoretical approaches to examining the relationship between technologies and forms of control, repression and resistance to cyberauthoritarianism.
- Offer methodological reflections for studying the digital space as a contested arena.
- Provide gender-sensitive analyses of the intersection between virtual repressive practices and digital gender-based, racial and cultural-based violence.
- Examining how the European Union's technological and financial support of these authoritarian regimes consolidates the level of inhibitions, control and restriction rather than facilitate cross-regional and transregional mobility and democratization in the region, and how these policies will have a long-term negative impact on the security of the EU countries, especially the Southern Mediterranean European borderland Countries that consider the first front of waves of refugees, asylum seekers, vulnerable migrants, and internally displaced persons fleeing from the MENA region.
- Explore perspectives on resisting cyber control and repression, emphasizing transnational exchange and solidarity channels.

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