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TITOLO/TITLE: CYBERAUTHORITARIANISM, DIGITAL RESISTANCE, AND TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY IN THE MENA REGION.

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S: AHMED ABOZAID; GUENDALINA SIMONCINI

SPEAKERS: AHMED ABOZAID, MAHITAB ALI, SALMA EL HARRAK, GUENDALINA SIMONCINI, MARTA TARANTINO, ALESSIA TORTOLINI

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

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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PAPERS:

1) The EU Offshore Refugee Incarceration, Maritime Digital Surveillance, and the Neocolonial Extraterritoriality in the Mediterranean

Mahitab Ali - Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS), Philipps-Universität Marburg

Since 2015, the EU has embraced a shadow immigration system that stops refugees before they reach Europe. To do so, the EU relies on two mechanisms: (1) financing the establishment of offshore refugee incarceration in the South Mediterranean, and (2) using "combat-proven" maritime digital surveillance to intercept refugees, forcibly dragging them to a network of profit-making South Mediterranean prisons. The paper conceives the Mediterranean as "quotidian confinement" to provoke a colonial business model of refugee refoulement and incarceration, approaching this surveillance in its preventive distributed pattern to illustrate how the EU outsources border security contractors and unmanned maritime technologies to lead the South Mediterranean Coastal Guards to monitor and confine refugee mobility. In contrast, those contractors dominate the arms export market to the MENA. The growing triangular "pincer" convergence among EU politicians, border contractors, and South Mediterranean regimes is analytically prioritized. Therefore, the paper analyzes the "military-security-industrial-authoritarian" complex and how it will lead to enduring disorders and bellicose dismantlement in the EU and MENA. Eventually, the paper aims to unlock a new level of analysis on the

"coloniality of power" in Mediterranean politics, revealing how reciprocal relations between the Southern and Northern Mediterranean liken the criminal complexes and mafiaization dynamism.

2) Digital Authoritarianism and Digital Resistance in Egypt and Morocco: Comparative Multidisciplinary Perspectives

Salma El Harrak, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies and *Ahmed Abozaid*, University of Southampton

This paper examines the dynamics of cyberauthoritarianism and digital resistance in the Moroccan and Egyptian contexts, focusing on control mechanisms, forms of repression, and emerging strategies of resistance since 2011. Through an interdisciplinary approach, we explore the implications of digital technologies on Moroccan and Egyptian society, shedding light on three critical issues: (1) online censorship, (2) state surveillance, and (3) repressive practices. Moreover, we examine the digital resistance tactics adopted by civil society organizations, activists, and human rights advocates, highlighting innovative strategies such as social media utilization, hashtag campaigns, digital security tools, and acts of everyday resistance (or resistance by ruse). Additionally, we analyze the role of the European Union in the Moroccan context, assessing how its financial and technological support to Moroccan and Egyptian authorities may influence the digital landscape and power dynamics. In conclusion, this article provides an in-depth insight into the challenges and opportunities of cyberauthoritarianism and digital resistance in both countries, underscoring the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding these complex phenomena within their local context

3) From Cybersecurity to Cybersafety: Feminist and LGBTQIA+ Tunisian Digital Activism in Times of Cyberauthoritarianism

Guendalina Simoncini - Scuola Normale Superiore of Florence

Over the past decade, Tunisia has shifted from being described as a "laboratory of freedom of expression online" to a "digital police state". Recently, cybersecurity legislation, particularly Decree-Law no. 2022-54 on Combating Crimes Related to Information and Communication Systems, has been employed to restrict dissent and strengthen President Kais Saied's authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, digital repression and online control strategies, far from gender-neutral, specifically target women, feminists, and LGBTQIA+ activists, making them victims of gender-based digital violence through campaigns of insults, threats, image misappropriation and cyberstalking, along with irregular arrests and summary trials. This paper examines how digital security is conceived and implemented by feminist and LGBTQIA+ activists in Tunisia in response to gendered digital repression and explores the protective strategies they use in political activism. It suggests rethinking the concept of digital security, drawing on feminist literature that treats cybersecurity as a feminist practice and advocates reimagining digital spaces through feminist theory. Thus, this article explores the strategies that Tunisian feminist digital activists adopt to protect themselves from repression and gender-based digital violence, such as anonymity, switching to safer social media platforms, adopting Hardware Security Modules (HSM), liaising with BigTech officers, and creating digital safe spaces. The article relies on ethnographic methods including semi-structured interviews and digital observation, as well as social media content analysis of leading Tunisian feminist, queer and LGBTQIA+ public Facebook pages and blogs.

4) The re-organization of LGBTQIA+ resistance under digital surveillance in Jordan

Marta Tarantino - Ph.D.

More than a decade after the wave of democratization that sparked optimism across the Arab World regional borders, censorship, securitization of public spaces, and reversed forms of counter-activism resurfaced, both in the physical and online spheres. In this scenario, Jordan represents a very interesting and under-investigated case of securitization and digital surveillance: indeed, as the country carefully built a democratic and modern image of itself abroad, it is harshly criticized for its autocratic and increasingly coercive methods at home. Reinforcement of digital surveillance, transnational repression, and prosecution of regime's critics or activists are today all main constituents of Jordanian reality, whose turning point was marked in 2023 by the approval of the Cybercrime Law by the parliament. In this context, queer activists and LGBTQIA+ communities, – already one of the main targets of state-sponsored violence both online and offline – started to reorganize and partially adapt their online activism to resist this increased and "updated" version of repression. Looking deeper into Jordan's accurately built façade aims at unveiling processes of silencing and censoring of the LGBTQIA+

community online, as well as to map a preliminary understanding of how digital surveillance and cybersecurity are effectively changing the queer/LGBTQIA+ activism in the region nowadays.

5) "I want to tweet without being arrested": the Lebanon National Cyber Security Strategy and the suppression of dissent during October 2019 protests

Alessia Tortolini, University of Bologna

This paper examines the role of the Lebanese National Cyber Security Strategy (LNCSS) in preserving elite power in Lebanon. Using a two-stage analysis, it explores how intelligence and security services leverage cybersecurity to maintain control. The first stage utilizes a SWOT analysis to evaluate LNCSS objectives and strategies in relation to Lebanon's institutional framework, particularly highlighting the influence of clientelism. It reveals how cybersecurity serves as a tool for authoritarian control rather than fostering technological development. The second stage compares initial findings with reports from international human rights organizations on political violence in physical and cyber realms. The analysis suggests that the enforcement of LNCSS has strengthened the regime's ability to protect its interests while neglecting social justice and human rights, as evidenced by civil society complaints and international organizations' observations. Overall, this analysis sheds light on the evolution of cybersecurity exploitation in Lebanon, revealing how the government promotes LNCSS as a developmental step while using it as a tool for repression.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Ahmed Abozaid is a Lecturer of International Security at the Department of Politics and International Relations, at the University of Southampton. He has published many books in Arabic and English, including *Undesired Revolution: The Arab Uprising in Egypt* (Brill 2023), and *Counterterrorism Strategies in Egypt* (Routledge, 2022). In Arabic, he published 7 books including *Theories of War and Peace*, 2vols (Qatar University Press, 2024). According to Arab Citation & Impact Factor, since 2012 Abozaid has been continuously listed among the top three most cited and most influential Arab scholars among 3000 researchers from over 22 countries. Abozaid holds PhD from the University of St Andrews (UK) in International Relations and Political Theory.

Guendalina Simoncini is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Political and Social Science at Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence since September 2022. She holds a PhD in Political Sciences from the University of Pisa (2022), the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's degree "MIM" (2017), and a Bachelor's degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Granada (2014). Her research interests encompass political communication, critical security studies, and gender studies, with a focus on North Africa and Southern Europe. Guendalina has contributed to various research consultancies for NGOs and IOs and authored several academic papers, book chapters, and the book "Counterterrorism in Transition: Post-2011 Tunisian Democracy and the War on Terror" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

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