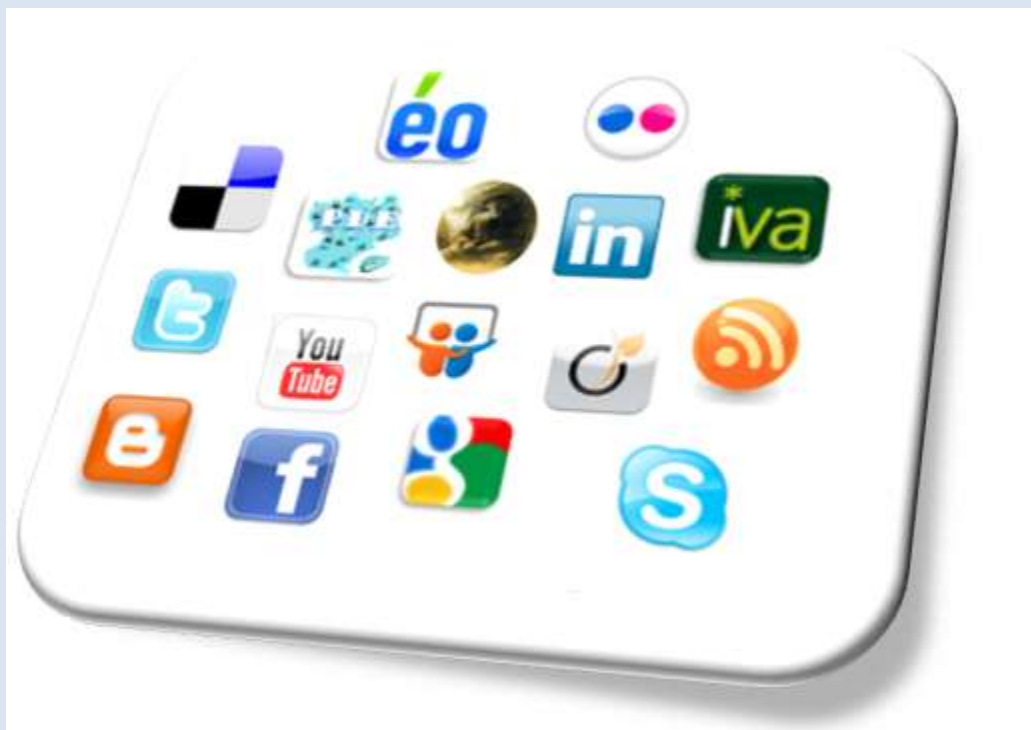




## Social Media and the Middle East



**The Israel Project**  
Jerusalem Office  
Tel: 972 2 623-6427  
Fax: 972 2 623-6439  
[www.theisraelproject.org](http://www.theisraelproject.org)

Twitter: @israelproject  
Facebook: [www.facebook.com/theisraelproject](http://www.facebook.com/theisraelproject)  
Youtube: [www.youtube.com/tipinfo](http://www.youtube.com/tipinfo)

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## About TIP

The Israel Project (TIP) is a non-profit educational organization that gets facts about Israel and the Middle East to press, public officials and the public. The Israel Project is not affiliated with any government. Our team of trusted Middle East multi-lingual experts and former reporters provides journalists and leaders with fact sheets, backgrounders and sources. TIP regularly hosts press briefings featuring leading Israeli spokespeople and analysts that give journalists an opportunity to get information and answers to their questions face-to-face. By providing journalists with the facts, context and visuals they need, TIP causes hundreds of millions of people around the world to see a more positive public face of Israel. This helps protect Israel, reduce anti-Semitism and increase pride in Israel.

## The Jerusalem Office

The Israel Project's (TIP) Jerusalem Office is a non-governmental resource working with foreign journalists and leaders based in Israel. It provides reporters and members of the diplomatic community with needed facts and information before they file their stories/reports. TIP's Jerusalem team features several Middle East experts and former journalists. TIP's Israel team, led by Marcus Sheff, includes experts who are fluent in English, Hebrew, Arabic, French, German, Farsi and Russian.

## Contacts

Marcus Sheff  
Executive Director  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-807-9177  
E-mail: [marcuss@theisraelproject.org](mailto:marcuss@theisraelproject.org)

David Harris  
Director of Research and Content  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-807-9498  
E-mail: [davidh@theisraelproject.org](mailto:davidh@theisraelproject.org)

Eli Ovits  
Director of Communications  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-807-9093  
E-mail: [elio@theisraelproject.org](mailto:elio@theisraelproject.org)

Shimrit Meir-Gilboa  
Senior Advisor for Arabic Media  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-801-5982  
Email: [shimritm@theisraelproject.org](mailto:shimritm@theisraelproject.org)

Ronit Shebson  
Senior Communications Associate  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-807-9065  
Email: [ronits@theisraelproject.org](mailto:ronits@theisraelproject.org)

Sharon Segel  
Communications Associate  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-807-9078  
E-mail: [sharons@theisraelproject.org](mailto:sharons@theisraelproject.org)

Shai Oseran  
Media Tours Coordinator  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-803-3471  
E-mail: [shaio@theisraelproject.org](mailto:shaio@theisraelproject.org)

Michal Shmulovich  
Research and Content Associate  
Tel: 02-623-6427  
Cell: 054-807-9522  
E-mail: [michals@theisraelproject.org](mailto:michals@theisraelproject.org)

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## Social Media and the Middle East

With Twitter celebrating its fifth birthday in March 2011<sup>1</sup>, social media is rapidly becoming a key tool of expression. Social media is a set of tools that diffuse content to a wide audience, almost instantaneously. This keeps people up to date on social issues, news and more increasingly, politics.

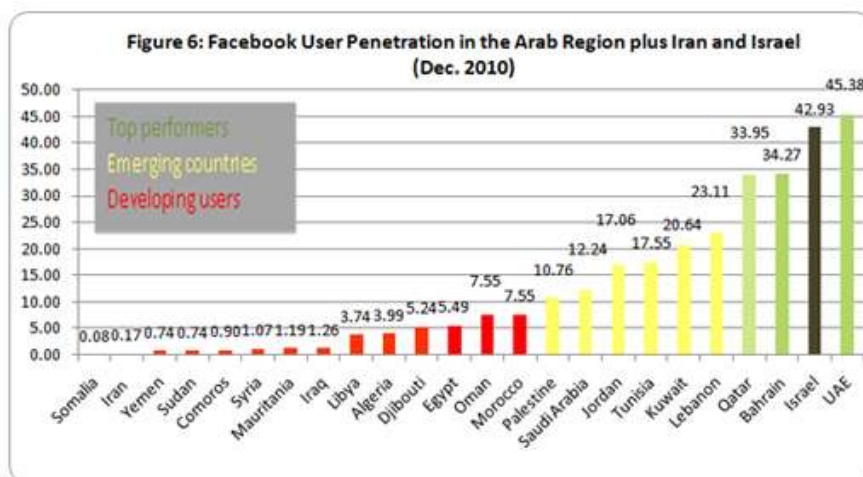
Social media is also a tool that allows interaction across boundaries. Overcoming language barriers, social media users ranging from youth to journalists and political leaders use multimedia to communicate and engage in online discussion. Social media creates a web-based interface between those who may never meet in the non-cyber world.

The nature of social media is slowly moving away from a purely social context towards a political nature. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are just a few of social media platforms being used for this expression. With a young and growing population in the Middle East, citizens and government officials are reaching out with the Internet to communicate their messages to the world.

### Arab Youth Turn to Social Media for a Voice

The Internet provides a censorship-free forum to express opinions and engage in a global dialogue. It is clear that the uprisings in Arab countries such as Egypt and Tunisia were enabled through the wide use of social media to create citizen mobilization to forge change. Images and videos posted via the Internet can rally global opinion and generate international pressure to provide protesters with support.<sup>2</sup>

More than 50% of the populations of Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco and Egypt are estimated to be less than 25 years of age.<sup>3</sup> Egypt constitutes about a quarter of total Facebook users in the Arab region, while the UAE has the highest per-capita usage in the region. The total number of Arab users on Facebook increased by 78% from 11.9 million in January 2010 to 21.3 million by December 2010.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>1</sup> "Twitter celebrates fifth birthday as global influence grows," *International Business Times*, Mar. 22, 2011, <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/125300/20110322/twitter-fifth-birthday-global-influence-social-media-arab-protests-video-piers-morgan-serena-william.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Strenger, Carlo, "The Internet and the revolution of Homo Globalis' ", *Ha'aretz*, Feb. 22, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/strenger-than-fiction/the-internet-and-the-revolution-of-homo-globalis-1.345046>

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, Barbara, "Conference tackles role of digital media in the Arab world," *Arab News*, Mar. 6, 2011, <http://arabnews.com/world/article304360.ece>

<sup>4</sup> "Social media study shows youth drives growth in Arab world, comprising 75% of users," *AME Info*, Feb. 7, 2011, <http://www.ameinfo.com/255919.html>

In the first two weeks of January 2011, Tunisia had an 8% surge in the number of Facebook users. 75% of the Facebook users in the Arab region are between the ages of 15 and 29, according to an Arab Media Social Report conducted by the Dubai School of Government.<sup>5</sup>

Activists and protesters are using Facebook and other social media to create a voice for the citizen and create mass mobilization.

*“Social media has given the most marginalized groups in the region a voice.”*<sup>6</sup>

- Mona Eltahawy, columnist and public speaker on Arab and Muslim issues

With the outbreak of the Tunisian uprising leading to a domino effect in the region, social media played a large role in distributing information, images and events to citizens. Activists used three main modes of social media to connect to the global world. Facebook provided the tools to create events and groups to rally support on an online and non-online scale whereas YouTube spread eyewitness reports of events virally. Twitter remained a key tool to give up to date quick and instantaneous information through the Internet and smartphones.<sup>7</sup>

Inspired by the Arab uprisings, Palestinians have begun to embrace social media to urge for Hamas-Fatah unity.<sup>8</sup> The Facebook group *The People Want to End the Division* campaigned for a rally on March 15, 2011, to exert pressure on the government to end the dispute. The group has over 21,000 supporters. Social media is giving the Palestinian youth an alternative to violence by turning to an online discussion over aggressive confrontation on the streets.<sup>9</sup>

Israeli president Shimon Peres believes the role of social media in the Arab protests present an “opportunity for peace.” “Internet, Twitter, Facebook have opened eyes in a big way and I guess that they will not allow those eyes of the people to close again or cover the ears of the world,” he said.<sup>10</sup>



Israeli President Shimon Peres  
David Katz/The Israel Project

<sup>5</sup> “Arab Social Media Report,” *Dubai School of Government*, <http://www.dsg.ae/NEWSANDEVENTS/UpcomingEvents/ASMRGeneralFindings.aspx>, (accessed Mar. 22, 2011)

<sup>6</sup> “Can Social Media Bring Democracy to Middle East?” *Voice of America*, Aug. 17, 2010 <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/middle-east/Will-New-Media-Bring-Democracy-to-Middle-East-100898544.html>

<sup>7</sup> Center for International Finance and Development. “The role of social media in Middle East uprisings,” *Center for International Finance and Development*, Mar. 8, 2011, <http://uicifd.blogspot.com/2011/03/role-of-social-media-in-middle-east.html>

<sup>8</sup> Abu Toameh, Khaled. “Palestinians use social media to urge Hamas-Fatah unity,” *Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 9, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=211441&R=3>

<sup>9</sup> “Palestinian Demonstrators launch peaceful call for unity,” *Voice of America*, Mar. 23, 2011, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/middle-east/-Palestinian-Demonstrators-Launch-Peaceful-Call-for-Unity--118540064.html>

<sup>10</sup> “Israel: Arab protests ‘opportunity for peace,’” *AFP*, Feb. 22, 2011, <http://www.france24.com/en/20110222-israel-arab-protests-opportunity-peace>

## Government Officials and Royalty Turn to the Web to Interact with Citizens

Social media is beginning to offer government services and interaction via the Internet or smartphones. “Facebook can be a great public diplomacy tool. It becomes a way to communicate with the masses and gain popular support,” said Andre Oboler, Australian expert on social media.<sup>11</sup>

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad turned to his Facebook page to ask suggestions for future cabinet appointments and to sell the idea of a Hamas-Fatah unity government.<sup>12</sup> Fayyad posed the following questions to his Facebook friends: “In light of the ongoing consultations aiming to form a government, which people do you consider credible, have excellent leadership and scientific skills, and can be relied on to hold a ministerial portfolio?”

*“We appreciate the role of the youth and their participation in making this decision, they play a major role in our march toward freedom,”*<sup>13</sup>

- Salam Fayyad



In the Arab region, Egypt announced the resignation of Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq via Facebook rather than traditional media outlets.<sup>14</sup> Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom launched an online campaign to promote a three-day weekend, and encouraged a user debate forum on the issue.<sup>15</sup>

Even royalty is making a social media presence. Along with an official website<sup>16</sup>, Queen Rania al Abdullah of Jordan is using a YouTube channel<sup>17</sup> to connect with subjects and beyond. This allows her to communicate with a worldwide audience to challenge perceptions of the Arab world and increase cross-cultural discussion. In addition, she uses her Youtube channel and web page to promote tolerance, education and other social issues.

In Tunisia, the lifting of web censorship opened the gates to a wave of dialogue between leaders and citizens. Key ministries, including the Interior Ministry, communicate with citizens through a Facebook page<sup>18</sup> with more than 150,000 followers. There, citizens can receive updates on approval process for parties seeking to run, apply to civil service jobs and other government updates.

An increase in government leaders moving “online,” allows further communication between citizens and leaders. This interactive forum provides citizens with another medium to voice their opinions in an

<sup>11</sup> Miller, David E., “Arab leaders are Facebook fans, too,” *Jerusalem Post*, Feb. 3, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=210461>

<sup>12</sup> Silverman, Erica, “Guest post: Salam Fayyad’s Facebook outreach,” *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 28, 2011, [http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/02/28/guest\\_post\\_salam\\_fayyads\\_facebook\\_outreach](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/02/28/guest_post_salam_fayyads_facebook_outreach)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Hendrix, Steve and Wan, William. “Egyptian prime minister Ahmed Shafiq resigns ahead of protests,” *The Washington Post*, Mar. 4, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/03/AR2011030305118.html>

<sup>15</sup> Weissman, Lilach, “Only 150 join long weekend campaign on Facebook,” *Globes*, Feb. 28, 2011, <http://www.globes.co.il/serveen/globes/docview.asp?did=1000626664>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.queenrania.jo/> (accessed Mar. 25, 2011)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/QueenRania> (accessed Mar. 25, 2011)

<sup>18</sup> Laub, Karin, “Tunisian bloggers expect role to grow,” *The Washington Times*, Mar. 23, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/mar/23/tunisian-bloggers-expect-role-to-grow/>

instantaneous, interactive and non-violent manner. The power of the people can engage online as a means to instigating discussion, rather than to the streets. Social media fosters discussion among leaders and citizens enhancing the democratic principles of free speech and political representation.

### Israel and New Media – A Tool to Secure and Protect

The Israeli Defense Forces New Media Desk and the Ministry for Public Diplomacy see new media as an alternative channel to “tell the story of Israel as we know it,” said Israeli Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs Minister Yuli Edelstein.<sup>19</sup> The Internet bypasses traditional reporting to inform globally about Israel and to break stereotypes and perceptions. An IDF Facebook page in French and Arabic are soon to follow and IDF Twitter has 11,000 followers, while its YouTube page has more than 20 million views.<sup>20</sup>

Following the murder of the Fogel Family in Itamar<sup>21</sup>, the Ministry for Public Diplomacy turned to social networks to release graphic images of those massacred with their families’ consent. “We have never done anything like this before, but only these horrific pictures can make the world realize who Israel is dealing with,” said Israeli Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs Minister Yuli Edelstein.<sup>22</sup>

While the Internet provides a positive forum for dialogue, it also fosters hate. Monitoring YouTube and Facebook pages in order to measure civil discontent is a further use of social media to help protect and secure a country. “We’re trying to get the Internet community to become more focused on their responsibilities,” said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Wiesenthal Center. “Right now,

Facebook is both the biggest problem and the best ally in the fight.”<sup>23</sup>



A Palestinian Facebook group calling for a third intifada on May 15<sup>24</sup> is causing an online frenzy in the Jewish world. The group *Third Palestinian Intifada* has over 320,000 “friends” and asks for “help of our brothers in Lebanon” who will assist in raining missiles down on Israel.<sup>25</sup> The founders of the group are anonymous and hope that a domino effect from the Arab uprisings will also bring the downfall of the State of Israel. Facebook has not removed the group despite its hate speech following a request by Israel.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Horowitz, Noa, “The Best will Tweet,” *Bamahane Magazine*, Mar. 13, 2011  
<http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/News/today/2011/03/1301.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Altman, Yair, “Itamar massacre: Fogel family butchered while sleeping,” *Ynet News*, Mar. 13, 2011.  
<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4041237,00.html>

<sup>22</sup> Stoil, Rebecca Anna, “Israel moves to release graphic images of slaying victims,” *Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 14, 2011,  
<http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=212022>

<sup>23</sup> Hamerman, Joshua. “Social Media key platform for incitement,” *Jerusalem Post*, Mar. 20, 2011,  
<http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=213068>

<sup>24</sup> “Third Palestinian Intifada,” *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/Palestinian.Intifada?ref=ts> (accessed Mar. 27,2011)

<sup>25</sup> Levy, Elior, “Israel tells Facebook: Remove intifada page,” *Ynet News*, March 23, 2011,  
<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4046853,00.html>

<sup>26</sup> Odenheimer, Alisa, “Israel asks facebook to remove page calling for third intifada,” *Bloomberg*, March 24, 2011  
<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-03-23/israel-asks-facebook-to-remove-page-calling-for-third-intifada.html>

To counter this Palestinian group, Israelis created a Facebook cause *Delete the Terrorist Hate Group 'Third Palestinian Intifada'*.<sup>27</sup> The cause promotes tolerance and an end to violence and hate speech on public sites. Social Media networks should be fostered for peace building and communication rather than hatred.

### Social Media: Israel and Beyond

Israelis are reaching out to communities throughout the Middle East via social media sites using person-to-person programs and targeted campaigns. While the demand for real-time information has grown, analysis and context are something Israeli individuals and organizations provide to the virtual community.

Sites like <http://blogs.ipost.com/> and <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/> feature blogs that provide unique perspectives on world events. Journals and magazines that use blogs can tap into an audience that is interested in a broader picture.

Anecdotally, many Israelis speak of their personal connections around the Middle East, with Arabs and other Muslims keen to learn about day-to-day life in Israel.

The emergence of blogs from hosts like Tumblr, Blogspot and others allows individuals to post content instantaneously. Blogs often link to other blogs and drive traffic to their sites by re-posting relevant content.

Israeli media and agencies tap into the 'blogosphere' by befriending active bloggers and providing content for those types of sites.

Hosts can use free domain names through sites like [www.godaddy.com](http://www.godaddy.com), enabling creators of content to connect directly with viewers who are interested in topics about Israel and the Middle East.

The Green Revolution in Iran was in part fueled by pro-activist forces that were located outside of Iran. Israel's connection to activists in Iran, for example, circumvents the official channels of government information such as PressTV and Fars News Agency, Iran's semi-official news site.

### The Future of Social Media

The future of communication is moving towards the Internet. Social networks such as Facebook and YouTube provide a "goldmine of new content."<sup>28</sup> While online newspapers are still a large source of news, social networks provide a place for information swapping and instantaneous interaction on a global scale. This fosters dialogue and discussion and can lead to an open, democratic Internet-sphere of communication.

*"Traditional media is not irrelevant, but the future of public relations lies in the blogosphere and social networks,"*<sup>29</sup>

- Brig. Gen Avi Benayahu, Israel Defense Forces spokesman.

<sup>27</sup> "Delete the Terrorist Hate Group "Third Palestinian Intifada," *Facebook*, <http://www.causes.com/causes/590993-delete-the-terrorist-hate-group-third-palestinian-intifada/about> (accessed March 27, 2011)

<sup>28</sup> Lefkow, Chris, "Tweeting the Turmoil in the Middle East," *AFP*, Mar. 27, 2011. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jueNS4XIU9BquHiMY7Vmq49h4RqQ?docId=CNG.6f7d1adfb97a7cc8154c2507c0688933.1a1>

<sup>29</sup> Horowitz, Noa, "The Best will Tweet," *Bamahane Magazine*, Mar. 13, 2011 <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/News/today/2011/03/1301.htm>

Merging online and offline existences, social media platforms are becoming a main method of connection and interaction around the world. People are connected 24/7 to global networks where images, information and videos are the tools to openly express opinions on a wide scale.

## Useful Contacts

### David Abitbol

**Affiliations:** Founder and publisher of Jewlicious.com

**Fields:** Social media and internet consultant

Cell: 054-673-5873

E-mail: [Dave@Jewlicious.com](mailto:Dave@Jewlicious.com)

### Dr. Mike Dahan

**Affiliations:** Sapir College in the Negev

**Fields:** conflict, internet, culture, society, politics, Arab-Jewish dialogue. Started the Middle East Virtual Community that was stopped because of the intifada.

Cell: 054-462-2545

E-mail: [dahanm@gmail.com](mailto:dahanm@gmail.com)

### Ehud Ya'ari

**Affiliations:** Chief Middle East Commentator, Israel Channel 2 Television, Associate editor, *Jerusalem Report*

**Fields:** Regional security affairs, conflict & conflict resolution

Tel: 02-566-7585

E-mail: [Yaari2@netvision.net.il](mailto:Yaari2@netvision.net.il)

### Shimrit Meir

**Affiliations:** The Israel Project

**Fields:** Arab Politics, Israeli-Arab affairs, Social Media in the Arab world

Cell: 054-801-5982

E-mail: [ShimritM@Theisraelproject.org](mailto:ShimritM@Theisraelproject.org)