“Nostalgia as resistance? The Arab social media campaign to remember Al-Andalus”

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This paper examines an Arab online campaign to commemorate the anniversary of the fall of Al-Andalus – the Muslim rule over modern-day Spain that lasted from the sixth to the fifteenth centuries. The campaign was initially launched as a Facebook page, “Al-Andalus,” by a young Palestinian woman in 2010. Today the page has more than 144,000 followers from across the Arab world and the diaspora. The campaign to remember Al-Andalus becomes most active on 2 January, the anniversary of the Muslim defeat in Spain. The 2013 campaign has been particularly successful as Arab news media reported and commented on how thousands of online Arabs tweeted and used Facebook to commemorate the Muslim loss of Al-Andalus and celebrate their Arab and Muslim identities. Through a textual analysis of the Facebook page and tweets about Al-Andalus, in addition to news media coverage of it, this paper explores the meanings ascribed to this nostalgic discourse in the Arab public sphere. The paper addresses what this campaign tells us about a young generation of Arabs and its renewed expressions of collective memories about past Arab grandeur and glory. It explores how the Al-Andalus campaign relates to other objects of Arab nostalgia, such as in relation to Palestine. The paper engages with the concepts of memory and nostalgia, not only as passive reflections of anxieties over a current Arab world in turmoil, but also as discourses of resistance in reaction against a sense of powerlessness over immense political and cultural uncertainty. The larger themes of this case-study contribute to our understanding of the place of history in Arab political culture. The paper also highlights the ways that social media are used to narrate histories, construct memories, create publics, and inform political identities.