



Middle East Report

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Background

Young Brothers in Cyberspace

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Marc Lynch

Marc Lynch is associate professor of political science at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University.

In September 2007, the Society of Muslim Brothers, Egypt's largest organized political force, released a draft political



Khayrat al-Shatir, center, as he and other Muslim Brothers are led into a Cairo court to face a military tribunal, February 28, 2007. (Ben Curtis/AP)

platform to a select group of around 50 Egyptian intellectuals. The response was scathing. Planks such as those advocating formation of a "higher council" of religious scholars with what looked like a legislative role and a ban on a female or Christian head of state triggered an avalanche of complaint from friend and foe alike. For the Brothers' enemies, the draft platform was a gift from heaven, revealing at last the Islamist organization's "true face" and justifying the constitutional ban on political parties with a "religious basis," strengthened by the government in March with the clear purpose of preventing the Brothers from becoming a legal party. As the debate unfolded, however, a novel feature of the Brothers' "true face" began to emerge: sustained criticism of the platform posted by young Muslim Brothers on their personal blogs.[1] "Is this the platform of a political party or a religious organization?" queried one youthful blogger, 'Abd al-Mun'im Mahmoud. The posts, in turn, generated another sharp debate, not only about the platform, but also about what it means to be a member of the Brothers and the limits of public dissent.

These online discussions are a manifestation of a new trend among young Muslim Brothers and a dynamic new force inside the organization.[2] As of the spring of 2007, there were an estimated 150 bloggers in the organization—an impressive number given that less than a year before there had been virtually none. At home in cyberspace, blogging Brothers have more in common with other young Egyptian activists, whether leftist or nationalist, than they do with their less wired peers. Their jibes at the draft platform, along with those of secular commentators, were undoubtedly one

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Western Sahara Poser for UN Reuters (Africa Blog)

April 28, 2009
 Jacob Mundy

Morocco serves as the backdrop for such Hollywood blockbusters as *Gladiator*, *Black Hawk Down* and *Body of Lies*. The country's breathtaking landscapes and gritty urban neighbourhoods are the perfect setting for Hollywood's imagination.

Unbeknown to most filmgoers, however, is that Morocco is embroiled in one of Africa's oldest conflicts - the dispute over Western Sahara. This month the UN Security Council is expected to take up the dispute once more, providing US President Barack Obama with an opportunity to assert genuine leadership in resolving this conflict. But there's no sign that the new administration is paying adequate attention. [Full Story>>](#)

Letters, He Gets Letters Bitter Lemons International

March 26, 2009
 Chris Toensing

Shortly before assuming office, President Barack Obama was handed a missive signed by such Washington luminaries as ex-national security advisers Zbigniew Brezezinski and Brent Scowcroft, urging him to "explore the possibility" of direct contact with Hamas. One month after he entered the White House, Obama received an epistle from Ahmad Yousef, a Gaza-based spokesman for the Islamist movement, making the same recommendation. "There can be no peace without Hamas," Yousef told the *New York Times* when asked about the letter's contents. "We congratulated Mr. Obama on his presidency and reminded him that he should live up to his promise to bring real change to the region."

There is no word, as yet, on how the foreign policy doyens' message was received, but Yousef's occasioned a huffy US rebuke of the UN Relief Works Agency, whose top official in Gaza, Karen Abu Zayd, passed the letter to Sen. John Kerry while he was visiting the devastated territory in mid-February. Even a single sealed envelope, it seems, creates the appearance that the Obama administration is breaking with the US vow, enunciated first under President George W. Bush, not to speak with Hamas until it agrees to renounce violence, abide by previous Palestinian agreements with Israel and recognize Israel as a Jewish state. [Full Story>>](#)

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reason why the draft party platform was withdrawn for revision in late October (though leaders have said the offending clauses in the platform will not be altered).

In some ways, the rise of the young bloggers is another round of a recurrent pattern of generational challenges to the Brotherhood's hierarchy. But it also responds to wider trends in the environment in which the Brotherhood operates. The transformative impact of new media technologies, the enthusiasm unleashed by a year of political protests in 2004–2005 and the growing repressiveness of a sclerotic regime on the brink of a leadership transition have affected the youth of the Muslim Brotherhood just as they have the rest of Egyptian political society.

Outside of Cairo and Alexandria, however, the vast majority of Brotherhood youth seem to be traveling in a different direction, toward a more conservative, religious orientation unconcerned with politics. When the Brothers sent the party platform out to the cadres in the provinces, "salafi" youth reportedly had few opinions to offer—and when they did, they chided the leadership for its more progressive positions, calling for a more "Islamic" document. The showdown between these two trends among Muslim Brotherhood youth will have long-lasting repercussions for the future of the organization and for Islamist politics around the world.

Fourth Generation

It has become common to analyze the Egyptian Muslim Brothers in terms of



Muslim Brotherhood students from Cairo University hold a mock funeral for "Egypt—after the constitutional amendments" approved by Parliament, March 21, 2007. (Khaled Dessouki/Getty/AFP)

generations.^[3] The current leadership, for instance, is divided between those whose formative political experiences came during the fierce repression of Gamal Abdel Nasser and those who came of age during the political opening offered by Anwar al-Sadat. For the first generation, Nasser's brutal crackdown inculcated a penchant for secrecy that has endured, even during periods of relative toleration by the regime. Leaders such as General Guide Mahdi 'Akif lived through prison and torture, as well as the rise of the radical doctrines of Sayyid Qutb and the forceful response *Preachers, Not Judges* attributed to past General Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi, which reestablished moderation at the ideological core of the organization. The second generation, by contrast, cut their teeth on the rambunctious university politics of the 1970s. Veteran activists such as 'Isam al-'Iryan, 'Abd al-Mun'im Abu al-Futouh,

Elections Are Key to Darfur Crisis **The Montreal Gazette**

March 7, 2009
Khalid Medani

It has been quite a week. For the first time, the international community indicted a sitting president of a sovereign state. Omar al-Bashir of Sudan stands accused by the International Criminal Court in The Hague of "crimes against humanity and war crimes" committed in the course of the Khartoum regime's brutal suppression of the revolt in the country's far western province of Darfur. Having indicted two other figures associated with the regime in 2007, ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo began building a case against the man at the top, and on Wednesday, the court issued a warrant for Bashir's arrest. [Full Story>>](#)

Out of the Rubble **The National**

January 23, 2009
Mouin Rabbani

Speaking to his people on January 18, hours after Hamas responded to Israel's unilateral suspension of hostilities with a conditional ceasefire of its own, the deposed Palestinian Authority prime minister Ismail Haniyeh devoted several passages of his prepared text to the subject of Palestinian national reconciliation. For perhaps the first time since Hamas's June 2007 seizure of power in the Gaza Strip, an Islamist leader broached the topic of healing the Palestinian divide without mentioning Mahmoud Abbas by name.

At a press conference the following day convened by Abu Ubaida, the spokesperson of the Martyr Izz al Din al Qassam Brigades, the Hamas military wing, the movement went one step further. "The Resistance", Abu Ubaida intoned, "is the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people". [Full Story>>](#)

The Horrors of Israel's Peace

Al Ahrum Weekly
January 22-28, 2009
Samera Esmeir

Three weeks after the war on Gaza, Israel declared a unilateral ceasefire but refused to terminate its so-called defensive operations. In response, Hamas declared a ceasefire for one week, until the withdrawal of Israeli troops has been completed. For many in the West, the ceasefire might seem like an occasion to celebrate, for the cessation of military hostilities on both sides will perhaps renew the peace process. But there are reasons to be critical of this ceasefire, since it continues the situation in which Israel acts unilaterally. What we are actually witnessing is a new phase of the catastrophe in Gaza. While the characteristics of this phase are not yet known, Israel's violence has become ever more evident. And perhaps this is why Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert did not mention the word "peace" once in the speech he gave to announce the ceasefire. The "peace process" might soon be revealed as the other side of the coin to war -- its continuation by other means -- that simultaneously feeds it. [Full Story>>](#)

A Battleground for the Foreseeable Future

Bitter Lemons International
September 11, 2008

Khayrat al-Shatir and Muhammad Habib learned to take advantage of every opportunity, and became masters of organization, mobilization and public engagement.

Convention would then pose today's youth as a "third generation" that grew up under President Husni Mubarak. But Khalil al-'Anani, a prolific analyst of Islamist movements and author of a forthcoming book about the Muslim Brothers, warns against missing the importance of an intervening cohort that entered the Islamist group during the 1980s and is characterized by a bureaucratic rather than a political orientation.[4] To 'Anani, the real "third generation" is made up of men in their forties and early fifties who occupy mid-level leadership positions throughout the organization, which they have used to stifle the creativity and energy of the *shabab* (youth). 'Anani thinks that this urban "fourth generation," continually stymied by the stodginess of their immediate elders, will either lead a reformist movement within the organization or leave, though it is uncertain where they would go. The last group of reformists to split off from the Brotherhood, the Wasat (Center) Party, has failed for more than a decade to secure state recognition as a political party.

As early as 2002, impatient young activists were pushing the leadership to take a more assertive stance in defense of Palestine and domestic reform, including in an unprecedented open letter sent to *al-Hayat* reporter Muhammad Salah.[5] For many of these blogger-activists, it is worth noting, the generations are divided not by age but by attitude toward public argument and new ideas (nearly a dozen older Brothers blog).[6] Muhammad Hamza, a Muslim Brother and a blogger, identifies his as a "generation of the 2004 movement," shaped by the information revolution—satellite TV, cellular phones and the Internet—and the appearance of human rights organizations.[7] Armed with handheld technology, this "2004 generation" obtains and analyzes information, and communicates with fellow Brothers and activists with other leanings, with rapidity and ease. Like 'Anani, Hamza is irked by the narrowmindedness and caution of the third generation, as well as the elderly leadership, throughout the recent years of political ferment in Egypt. Hamza acknowledges that the blogger-activists face significant internal criticism: They are too influenced by liberal ideas, other Brothers say, they want for clear political thought and defined goals, and they pay insufficient attention to the Brothers' imperative to proselytize (*da'wa*). Empowered by the new technology, fed up with the status quo and—for now—encouraged by at least some of Brotherhood leaders, the bloggers and activists have thus far shown little inclination to stand down.

Off the Sidelines

After a largely quiescent decade, Egyptian politics began to heat up in 2004 with the emergence of the Kifaya (Enough) movement, a loose network of activists from across the political spectrum united by a determination to erase the red lines in Egyptian public life and by an embrace of new information technologies as key instruments of struggle.[8] Focusing on civic freedoms and the possibility that Mubarak would pass the presidency on to his son Gamal (*tawrih al-sulta*), Kifaya staged a series of colorful rallies

Chris Toensing

Bob Woodward's four books chronicling the wars of President George W. Bush are sensitive barometers of conventional wisdom in Washington. Whereas the first volume, published in 2002 at the height of the self-righteous nationalism gripping the capital after the September 11, 2001 attacks, hailed Bush's self-confidence in acting to protect the homeland, the 2008 installment depicts the same man as cocksure and incurious. This much is not news. More educational are Woodward's hints about the worldviews that will outlast this unpopular administration, embedded in the organs of the national security state. [Full Story>>](#)

Egypt Stifles Debate in the United States **Northwest Arkansas Times**

August 27, 2008
Bayann Hamid

The Egyptian regime has once again succeeded in stifling freedom of speech, this time not in Egypt, but in the US. Earlier this month, an Egyptian court convicted a prominent Egyptian-American activist for his outspoken criticism of the regime's poor human rights record in American public fora. The court accused Saad Eddin Ibrahim, of "tarnishing Egypt's image" abroad. The conviction referred primarily to writings he published in the foreign press; most notably among them an August 2007 op-ed in the *Washington Post* in which he criticized Egypt's human rights record and questioned the reasons behind US aid to Egypt. [Full Story>>](#)

Want to Fight Terrorism? Think Globally, Act Locally

Globe and Mail (Toronto),

August 4, 2008

Khalid Mustafa Medani

Militant Islam is under global scrutiny for clues to conditions that foster its rise, and to strategies for reversing that growth. But the key is not in Islamic doctrine, US foreign policy or formal ties to various nations, as many analysts have asserted. It lies at the community level, with clan and local leaders. [Full Story>>](#)

Iraq's Kurds Have to Choose **Globe and Mail (Toronto)**

July 30, 2008

Joost Hiltermann

Kurdish parties have become kingmakers in Baghdad, and they know it. As no federal government can work without them, they are pulling every available political lever to expand the territory and resources they control, trying to build the foundation of an independent Kurdish state. But even more than territory, they need security. If everyone acts quickly and wisely, that understanding could help resolve one of the Iraq war's thorniest issues. [Full Story>>](#)

Exiting Iraq Is Easier Than They Say **The Nation (web-only)**

July 16, 2008

Chris Toensing

The debate over the war in Iraq follows a yellowing script: The minute someone suggests that the US move to withdraw its troops, war supporters cry "Havoc!" True to form, when no

that attracted a great deal of Arab and international media attention. After months of itching on the sidelines on the part of the activist youth, the Muslim Brothers finally joined the protests on March 29, 2005, with a hundreds-strong demonstration—its first in decades oriented around domestic politics—in defiance of a government ban.

For months, as the creative Kifaya protests continued, the Mubarak regime had looked dazed in the international media spotlight. But when the Brothers also went into the streets, the regime began to reassert control, with greater violence than had been used when Kifaya was protesting alone. After the Brothers performed better than expected in the first round of parliamentary elections in November 2005, the regime stepped in blatantly to fix the final two rounds, arresting dozens of Brothers, interfering with voting and, in some cases, resorting to outright fraud (as in the notorious case of Gamal Hishmat, a popular Muslim Brother from Damanshour, whose landslide victory was simply overturned by official decree in favor of a ruling party stalwart). In a widely criticized referendum in March 2007, the regime forced through a set of controversial constitutional revisions that legitimized harsh emergency law and effectively banned the Muslim Brothers from political participation.

University students played a pivotal, if less than constructive, role in the surge of repression. Over the course of 2005 and 2006, Brothers on campus had been frustrated by their inability to contest student union elections, as administrators screened out both leftists and Islamists from lists of possible candidates.^[9] These student activists, with support from faculty, staged a series of demonstrations, including pro-democracy gatherings of thousands of students on multiple campuses in April and September 2005. In November 2006, they organized “shadow elections” to create a parallel, unauthorized Free Student Union. After a period of stepped-up harassment over the summer and fall of 2006, the regime found the excuse it needed to unleash force when a group of student Brothers at al-Azhar University staged an ill-considered martial arts demonstration. The students saw this demonstration as a piece of political theater intended to publicize their frustration with the university administration’s banning of their elected student union and a series of transgressions by security forces against students. Indeed, they invited the media to cover the show.

It backfired badly. Egyptian media, including state-run outlets but also independent newspapers like *al-Masri al-Yawm*, ran a series of sensational stories about a Muslim Brother “militia,” illustrated by ominous-looking pictures of the masked students performing karate moves. Nearly 200 students were arrested, along with a number of older leaders such as Khayrat al-Shatir, who was referred, along with 32 others, to an ongoing military tribunal. The Brothers’ financial infrastructure faced unprecedented pressure through the freezing of assets, confiscation of property and shuttering of businesses. Students also felt the pinch, as Brothers in the universities were denied permission to sit for examinations, kicked out of dormitories and handed suspensions of several weeks to two years. In the fall of 2007, campuses have been

less a figure than Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stated he wants a timeline for a US pullout, John McCain summoned the specter of dire consequences. “I’ve always said we’ll come home with honor and with victory and not through a set timetable,” McCain said. In his major foreign policy speech on July 15, Barack Obama affirmed his support for a withdrawal timetable, adding that the US must “get out as carefully as we were careless getting in.” Obama’s position is the correct one, but he, like many other war critics, has done too little to counter the refrain that withdrawal is simply “cutting and running,” a recipe for disaster. [Full Story>>](#)

rocked by still more protests against administration interference in student elections aimed at barring Brotherhood or leftist candidates.

It was amidst this regime backlash that the new generation of Muslim Brothers found their voices online.

“Brothers Are Humans”

Until quite recently, Arab political blogging was dominated by liberal voices, often writing in English, with little representation for the powerful Islamic trends in society. In Egypt, blogging became virtually synonymous with the Kifaya movement. Innovators like Wa'il 'Abbas (misrdigital.com), 'Ala' 'Abd al-Fattah (manalaa.net) and 'Amr Gharbiyya (gharbeia.net) were at the cutting edge of Internet activism, offering platforms for political debate and posting firsthand accounts of Kifaya demonstrations replete with video and photographs. Kifaya members used blogs to spread information, coordinate protest activities and communicate with each other. Western attention to Egyptian blogs still tends to focus either on English-language bloggers, Kifaya activists who write in Arabic or the imprisoned anti-Islamist blogger 'Abd al-Karim Sulayman.

Despite being early adopters of the Internet (creating one of the first Egyptian student websites in 1999 and participating heavily in the innovative Islamist web publication *Islam Online*), through 2005 young Muslim Brothers largely kept their distance from the blogging trend sweeping politicized Egyptian youth.^[10] As recently as January 2007, the path-breaking Muslim Brother blogger 'Abd al-Rahman Rashwan wrote in some frustration that, even as blogs became more powerful and influential, they remained dominated by the left.^[11] Few comparable Muslim Brother blogs had appeared, he lamented, while “those blogs that have appeared express personal opinions and analysis and don't shape events.” Perhaps, he continued, this was because the style of education given to Brothers runs counter to the idea of blogs, which rely on openness and independence, an argument later picked up by a number of critics of the Muslim Brother bloggers, who posed a fundamental contradiction between being a Brother and a blogger.^[12] Rashwan anticipated the soon-to-be heated question of whether Brothers' blogs should discuss internal affairs on the pages of the Internet: Despite security fears, he argued, Egyptian society has become more open to all kinds of thoughts and Muslim Brothers should not be afraid to express them.

By that time, however, the first signs of a blogging movement among the Brothers could already be discerned. In the fall of 2006, journalist 'Abd al-Mun'im Mahmoud, then 26, launched his blog *Ana Ikhwan* (I Am Muslim Brothers). Mahmoud represented the new face of the organization's youth—politically oriented, pragmatic, comfortable with non-Islamist activists and independent-minded. Mahmoud surprised many by expressing his solidarity with the stridently anti-Islamist Sulayman when he was jailed for posting comments on his blog deemed insulting to Islam. When Mahmoud was arrested in April for membership in an outlawed group and other alleged offenses, a campaign to free him attracted significant cross-ideological support, with leftists 'Abd

al-Fattah and Gharbiyya leading the way.

The first inflection point in the attitude of younger Muslim Brothers toward blogging came with the December 2006 al-Azhar “militia” scandal. As the students’ legal problems mounted, a group of Muslim Brother students launched the website Yalla Talaba (Come On, Students), originally in defense of the al-Azhar students, but later broadening their canvas to university student problems writ large. Concerned individuals also weighed in. Brotherhood member Magdi Saad, author of Yalla Mish Muhimm (Oh, It’s Not Important) (one of the most widely read Brotherhood blogs), first took the students to task for giving the media what they needed to frighten “a society which doesn’t know us well.” But as the consensus against the students built, among the Brothers as well as outside their ranks, Saad reversed course and jabbed at the Brothers’ leaders: “Where were you elders when the students asked for protection after the security forces attacked students at ‘Ayn Shams? Where were you when the security forces beat and kicked the al-Azhar students on campus grounds? Where were you when the student elections were canceled?” The students, he wrote, had been the most active arm of the organization for years, “the quickest to absorb and respond to others’ views of the organization as well as changing circumstances” and the first current within the group to mount demonstrations for political reform.^[13] In a later post celebrating the activism of university students, Saad deemed these young men and women the real “men of the Muslim Brotherhood”—praise that may not have pleased the elders, whose manhood, by implication, pales in comparison.^[14]

The regime’s subsequent arrest of a number of Brotherhood leaders, including such icons for reformist youth as Shatir and ‘Iryan, brought the Brotherhood Internet activism out in full force. Brotherhood members launched an impressively coordinated, web-based campaign seeking the release of Shatir and other imprisoned leaders. Organized by family members, with support from Internet-savvy members, these campaign blogs presented the human side of the Brothers, publishing family pictures, home videos and touching anecdotes aimed at softening the Brothers’ stern image among Egyptians and abroad. They also became a key source of news when journalists not working for the state-run media and human rights workers were banned from covering the military tribunals. The Ensaa website (ensaa.blogspot.com), in particular, became an information clearinghouse.

Not all Brothers’ blogs are part of a coordinated campaign, however. Over the last year, a growing number of youth have started the sort of individual online journals that would be familiar to youth anywhere. These Muslim Brothers often simply live online—whiling away the hours not just reading blogs, but participating in forums and posting to YouTube and the ubiquitous Facebook. While they engage in their share of political activism, many of their blogs are intensely personal. Like the youth of any country, they spend as much time writing about family and friends as about world affairs—as well as, of course, their religious faith. Like most Egyptians in their age group, they are viscerally concerned with the persistent unemployment, under-employment,

inflation and affordable housing shortage that have made it exceedingly difficult for the last two generations of young Egyptians to marry and settle down according to social expectations. Lastly, these bloggers clearly do not share the salafi aversion to popular culture: Their blogs are full of disquisitions on their favorite songs and books and movies.

Nor are the Muslim Brother bloggers exclusively male. In one fascinating post, the young female Brotherhood blogger Shadha 'Isam told the story of her beginnings with the Muslim Brothers, describing her visits to the mosque and the personalities who attracted her to the organization as well as her conception of its ideas.[15] She explained that she began blogging "to express myself as a girl, as a Muslim, as an Egyptian and as a Muslim Sister," and as a form of peaceful resistance. After her father and husband were both arrested in the regime's crackdown, the 30-year old teacher Zahra' al-Shatir organized the Shatir children to blog in support of their father's release as a way of helping them cope. Other daughters of imprisoned leaders, such as Asma' al-'Iryan (whose father was let go on October 4), also launched campaign websites that developed into personal blogs.

These bloggers are increasingly self-conscious about their activities. For instance, as in other blogging communities, their growth has led to contention over who "belongs" and who does not, and whether their blogs should have some kind of official Brotherhood status. On several occasions, talk on the Muslim Brother blogs has turned to the idea of an official society (*rabita*) or a less formal aggregator. 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ayyash wrote in favor of an aggregator as a central location where the statements and arguments of the 150 Muslim Brother bloggers would all be on display. Such an aggregator would harness the growing collective strength of the bloggers evidenced by the success of the campaign to free 'Abd al-Mun'im Mahmoud, he suggested.[16] But others demurred. How would membership be decided? One blogger wrote that she considered herself a Muslim, even an Islamist, but not a member of the Muslim Brothers: Would she be invited? Another asked what would happen if a homosexual or a secularist wanted to join. Mahmoud, for his part, worried that an aggregator would put an official stamp on an emerging group that thrived on individuality and independence, perhaps impelling the Brothers as an organization to delimit the boundaries of acceptable critical discourse.

An important aspect of the Muslim Brother blogging phenomenon is the connections it has bred between young Brothers and other Egyptian youth. Several bloggers (intriguingly, almost always women) said that their blogs were the first venue in which they had presented themselves to others as part of the Muslim Brothers. As several of the young bloggers explained in interviews for this article, most Egyptians (let alone Westerners) have never met a Muslim Brother in person and so often entertain stereotypes of programmed robots incapable of independent thought and slavishly devoted to religion. As Rashwan wrote in October, Muslim Brother blogging is "in the interest of the organization and the nation in the end, because people are enemies of what they don't know." At the same time, the Brothers often find themselves

in a closed society of their own. Through blogs, they form relationships with non-Brother youth, each discovering the humanity of the other. In one of his letters from prison, translated and published online by the campaigners, Mahmoud described his blog as “my message to myself, to the young Muslim Brothers and to society. I wanted to show that Brothers are humans who have the same dreams [as anyone else]. We have fun. We drink [tea and coffee]. We sit at cafés. We go to movies. We demonstrate...and we blog for freedom.”¹⁷[17]

This discovery did not occur only online, of course. ‘Ala’ ‘Abd al-Fattah, a leading liberal blogger-activist, caused a stir among his fellow secularists when he described his encounters with Muslim Brothers in prison: “They were from this new breed of Islamist that reads blogs, watches al-Jazeera, sings *sha’bi* (popular) songs, talks about intense love stories and chants ‘down with Mubarak’.” The breadth of support for Mahmoud when he was in jail came about not only because he was a blogger, but also because of personal ties forged through activism and journalism.

“Listen and Obey” No Longer

Other Muslim Brother bloggers are less interested in the humanizing dimension: They want to talk politics. In words that could have come from the mouths of fired-up young activists in any time or place, these bloggers complain that too many Egyptian youth—including inside the organization—are “in a coma,” disengaged from politics and unwilling to think critically. They also decry the internal stagnation of the Brothers and the domination of the organization by an older generation accustomed to patriarchal ways of doing business. In one revealing instance, Asma’ al-‘Iryan complained that fathers will not listen to their blogging children.^[18] The fourth generation sees itself as a rising force within the Islamist group, denied by some and exaggerated by others, but certain to be at the center of the organization’s evolving politics. For Muhammad Hamza, author of the blog *Wahid min al-Ikhwan* (One of the Muslim Brothers), the old tradition of “listen and obey” is no longer an option. While this might sound like the refrain of every up-and-comer who is soon to be disillusioned, access to blogs and to the vast storehouse of information available on the Internet improves the odds that, this time, it is true.

In each of the major political controversies surrounding the Brotherhood in recent years, the bloggers have taken an active role. In the runup to elections for the upper house of Parliament in May 2007, for instance, the Muslim Brothers were embroiled in a public struggle with the regime over the slogan, “Islam is the solution,” long deployed by the Islamists to summarize their worldview and political program. The amendment to the constitution explicitly forbidding party activity with a “religious basis,” passed in a bitterly contested referendum in March, seemed to render the phrase useless. As the Brothers’ leadership defended the slogan on the airwaves and in the press, several prominent Brotherhood bloggers demanded to know why the organization was wasting its time on a sideshow. Why not simply change the slogan, asked Magdi Saad, since everyone knows what the Brothers believe? Why not say “Egypt for all Egyptians” instead,

suggested Ibrahim Hodaybi, grandson and great-grandson of two past General Guides, since that time-honored formula would build a broader coalition? When drafts of the Brothers' political party platform began to leak in the fall, the bloggers discussed the documents aggressively, parsing the details and openly debating the value of the initiative. While they might not yet win these battles, they have clearly established themselves as a both a valuable asset and a force to be reckoned with in the eyes of the leadership.

Rift at the Top

The rise of the young bloggers coincides with a rift at the top of the organization. The fourth generation's patrons are the reformists among the leadership, notably the incarcerated Shatir, the just-released 'Iryan and the esteemed intellectual 'Abd al-Mun'im Abu al-Futouh. When political disagreements between reformists and conservatives surface in public, the bloggers generally take the reformists' side. On October 17, for example, 'Iryan gave an interview to *Islam Online* in which he stated that the Brothers, should they form a political party and eventually come to power in Egypt, would respect the Camp David accord and "deal with Israel based on a political reality that Israel does exist as a state." The next day, General Guide 'Akif was quoted in *al-Hayat* rejoining with the more hardline position that "there isn't something called Israel in our dictionary." Blogger 'Abd al-Rahman 'Ayyash, while vowing that the Brothers would nonetheless regard Israel as an "entity ravaging Arab and Muslim land," applauded 'Iryan's "realistic" stance.[19]

The reformist-conservative divide flared up again in late October with the publication of a veiled attack on the Brotherhood's reformists by a middle-ranking leader, 'Ali 'Abd al-Fattah, which ran on an official Muslim Brotherhood website. 'Abd al-Fattah rejected the possibility of separating *da'wa* from politics within the Brotherhood's doctrine, drawing a sharp response from Mahmoud.[20] How could separating *da'wa* from politics make one a secularist, asked the blogger, when most Muslim Brotherhood organizations around the world do exactly that? The suggestion that forming a political party amounted to blasphemy struck Mahmoud as "an insult to Islam and to the Muslim Brotherhood." His post drew almost 60 comments, on both sides of the issue, many of them quite heated: "You've gone too far," "the security services would celebrate if they read your blog," "not everyone who says 'I am a Muslim Brother' remains a Brother" and worse. Criticism of a man's ideas does not mean disrespect for the man, responded Mahmoud's supporters, and open discussion is healthy and necessary. If such leading lights as Abu al-Futouh, 'Iryan and Hishmat criticized the platform, asked Ibrahim al-Hodaybi, why couldn't Mahmoud? General Guide 'Akif eventually intervened personally to ensure that the same official Brotherhood website published a strong rebuttal of 'Abd al-Fattah penned by Hodaybi. Earlier, Mahmoud had posted a "clarification and apology," denying any intention to insult 'Abd al-Fattah but holding fast to his defense of the principle of dividing politics from *da'wa*—and of the legitimacy of open debate about such vital issues.[21]

The same reformist-conservative divide shows up in disagreements about the value of blogging itself. Ibrahim Za'farani, a member of the Muslim Brothers' Shura Council who maintains his own blog, has written in support of the young bloggers, calling on the higher-ups to encourage the trend. In mid-October, he keynoted an Alexandria conference of human rights activists hailing bloggers—and not just Muslim Brothers—as Egypt's new human rights whistleblowers. More traditionally minded leaders have criticized the fourth generation bloggers repeatedly, but to this point the criticism seems more like chastisement than an attempt at silencing. In a long, impassioned retort to the bloggers' critics, Magdi Saad insisted that intellectual and political arguments could only be a healthy phenomenon, and did not signal splits (*inshiqaq*) in the ranks. "There is no intellectual repression of any type toward me from within the organization because of my presenting my views," wrote Saad, only the kinds of disagreements to be found in any vibrant human society.[22] 'Abd al-Mun'im Mahmoud claims that online discussion has never been discouraged by the leadership, who "don't really get blogging, but are very interested in Internet communication strategies."

Abu al-Futouh, in an interview for this article, waxed eloquent about the *shabab*, welcoming their blogs as salutary for the leadership and for society as a whole. Of course they differ from us, he said: Every generation differs from its predecessor, and has a distinctive mode of thinking. But this generation is more dynamic, more progressive and more open to new ideas than past cohorts of youth. This, he concluded, is a sign of the life and capacity for self-renewal within the Muslim Brothers' organization. In an October 9 interview with *Islam Online*, Abu al-Futouh went even further: "I don't deny that the organization needs internal reform...nor that we need change and elections within the Guidance Bureau and Shura Council. The organization would be better off if we [leaders] were exchanged for representatives of the youth." But not all elders are so seemingly eager to relinquish their authority.

The open and frank discussion of contentious issues sponsored on blogs is also not appreciated by every member of the Muslim Brothers. After he attacked the draft party platform, Mahmoud posted an anonymous letter that accused him, Magdi Saad and other bloggers of exposing to the public debates that should be private. As one blogger wrote, "If you have suggestions, take them straight to the people in question... You don't accomplish anything by writing about our problems on the pages of the Internet." [23] The contrast between two visions of the Muslim Brothers' interests is stark: Should the Brothers be a secretive organization determined to present a united front to a hostile outside world, or an open organization determined to offer a window into its deliberations in order to reassure potential allies?

The fears of the more conservative Brothers are not ungrounded. In May, the newspaper *al-Masri al-Yawm* ran several sensationalist stories claiming that the Brothers' blogs revealed a major schism in the organization and that the youth were the vanguard of an internal revolt ready to cleave the organization in two. The stories

wove strands of complaint from the blogs into a tapestry of crisis. Horrified young bloggers hit back with a series of posts deconstructing the newspaper's account and defending their institutional loyalty. 'Isam al-'Iryan, for his part, pronounced the bloggers' reproof of their leaders constructive.[24] Nevertheless, the bloggers received strident criticism from within the Brothers' ranks for their imprudent airing of internal disputes. For many of the fourth generation, the episode was a lesson learned: We do, in fact, need to watch what they say, for fear of our independent line being used against the movement by its opponents. 'Abd al-Rahman Rashwan, still a proponent of openness, acknowledged the critical Brothers' point that the group, already "absorbing blows from all around, should not also have to take them from within," but also mused that the regime's toleration (to date) of Muslim Brother blogging may stem from its reading the internal debates as evidence of debilitating organizational indiscipline. Developing the capacity for self-critique, Rashwan continued, may instead make the Brothers stronger.[25]

Counter-Trend

The reformist young bloggers make up only one component of the Brothers' rank and file—and a relatively small one. With their high visibility and (often) their family ties to the senior leadership, they clearly represent an elite among the youth, one with unusual access to decision-makers. It is difficult to gauge the distribution of views in such a vast and half-underground organization, but there is considerable anecdotal evidence that much of the new generation is inclined toward salafi ways of thinking. One troubled, reform-minded Brother claimed in an interview that reformists make up only about 15 percent of the youth. Reformists punch above their weight because they are intellectually engaged, take-charge personalities who have gained the confidence of the leadership, but the balance of the youth, mostly from the provinces, are salafis with little interest in politics.[26]

Such salafi youth care more deeply about the expression of faith and austere personal behavior, and seem to hold much more conservative social and political views. Their relations with Coptic Christians have often been tense, especially in Alexandria and in the south, in stark distinction to the more forthcoming attitudes of the bloggers. Where the politically engaged *shabab* of Cairo peruse the columns of liberals, nationalists and the Islamist-leaning intellectual Tariq al-Bishri, the salafi youth restrict their attention to Islamic pamphlets and proselytizing. Where the bloggers think nothing of discussing movies or music, the salafis cultivate a spartan aesthetic that radiates disdain for popular culture. Indeed, the gap between the stylishly dressed, clean-shaven blogging Brothers and their bearded salafi counterparts can seem as wide as that between the salafis and Western-oriented youth. And despite the urban-rural presentation of the divide by many of the blogger-activists, the retrograde cultural politics of the salafi trend can also be seen these days at the universities.

The rising salafi tide is a matter of concern to the bloggers, as well as to the more progressive leaders. In late January, Rashwan wrote a series of posts criticizing the salafi trend. He cited lack of proper education and reaction to the security crackdown as reasons for the

ascendance of salafism. He defended the mainstream Brothers' approach as more difficult, but more valuable than the simple slogans of the salafis. Other blogger-activists speak more scornfully of their salafi peers as incurious and lacking in political consciousness. Under the weight of regime repression, however, it would be only natural for youth to become disenchanted with peaceful channels of political participation. When Ayman al-Zawahiri blasted the Brothers for running in the 2005 parliamentary elections, and called upon the rank and file to remove their leaders, top reformists delivered stinging retorts, demonstrating both their opposition to al-Qaeda's extremism and their unease over the possibility that Zawahiri's appeal might find receptive ears. In the words of 'Isam al-'Iryan, "Those opposing the participation in power of moderate Islamist movements are the Americans, authoritarian Arab regimes, radical secularists...and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Isn't that a strange alliance?"[27]

Portents

What do all the inter- and intra-generational fissures portend for the future of the Muslim Brothers? An older Muslim Brother blogger, Ahmad 'Abd al-'Ati, came out in favor of the fourth generation's openness: "The blogs represent a sign of success despite the fears of others that they have crossed the line.... Exchanging ideas is not a divide between generations and differences of opinion are not divisions."[28] This is an opinion from which young bloggers like Rashwan take heart. Yet Deputy Guide Muhammad Habib seems bent on squelching talk of "generations" or "trends" out of concern that it could be used to weaken the Brothers.[29]

Some skeptics dismiss the blogs as a public relations stratagem. That may have been partly true at the outset, particularly as regards the blogging campaigns in support of the al-Azhar students and to secure the release of the Brotherhood's imprisoned leaders. But their emergence as an independent force among the Brothers is something altogether different. The bloggers of the Muslim Brothers represent a growing intellectual and political force within the movement that could, over time, help tip it in a reformist direction. But they face considerable challenges: a leadership wary of change, a regime increasingly prone to arresting troublesome Internet activists and a salafi counter-trend that could well take the Muslim Brothers in another direction entirely. How much impact the blogging Brothers can really have remains to be seen, but at the least they represent a new dynamic in the world of Islamism and Arab politics, and offer a striking new window upon the internal life of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Endnotes

[1] Summaries of the critics' positions appeared at Nafidhat Misr, a semi-official news and opinion website run by young Muslim Brothers outside of Cairo) <http://www.egyptwindow.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=6795>.

[2] See Marc Lynch, "Blogging the New Arab Public," *Arab Media and Society* 1 (2007) and "Brotherhood of the Blog," *Guardian*, March 5, 2007, as well as the section, "Arabic Blogs," in Arabic

Network for Human Rights Information, *Implacable Adversaries: Arab Governments and the Internet* (2006), available online at <http://openarab.net/en/reports/net2006/blogger.shtml>. Also see the review of Brotherhood blogging by 'Abd al-Rahman Rashwan, who runs the blog Ikhwan Youth (Shabab al-Ikhwan), at http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_23.html.

[3] See Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37/3 (August 2005).

[4] Interview with Khalil al-'Anani, Cairo, October 6, 2007.

[5] *Al-Hayat*, April 15, 2002.

[6] Magdi Saad, for instance, includes in his "generation" everyone open to new ideas, whether they are "20 or 60 years old": <http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post.html>. See also the list of Brotherhood elders who blog at <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=31397&SecID=303>.

[7] Interview with Muhammad Hamza, Cairo, October 6, 2007.

[8] On the role of blogs in this activism, see Wa'il 'Abbas, "Help Our Fight for Democracy," *Washington Post*, May 25, 2007.

[9] Human Rights Watch, *Reading Between the Red Lines: The Repression of Academic Freedom in Egypt* (New York, June 2005).

[10] See interview with 'Abd al-Mun'im Mahmoud by Global Voices Online, available at <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2007/05/04/abdel-monem-mahmoud-the-egyptian-totalitarian-regime-is-the-problem/-more-26>.

[11] Rashwan's post is at http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.com/2007/01/blog-post_05.html.

[12] See, for instance, the post of Sharif 'Abd al-'Aziz at http://justice4every1.blogspot.com/2007/04/blog-post_15.html.

[13] Saad's post is at http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2006/12/blog-post_16.html.

[14] This post is at http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_30.html.

[15] See http://molotoofy.blogspot.com/2007_02_11_archive.html. Such personal narratives seem to be more common among female bloggers. See, for instance, Asma' al-'Iryan's similar account at http://banatelerian.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_03.html.

[16] 'Ayyash's post is at http://al-ghareeb.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_24.html.

[17] An English version appears at <http://freemonem.cybversion.org/2007/05/16/monem-blogs-from-prison-hi-from-behind-bars/>.

[18] She was embarrassed and furious when this line was picked up in an inflammatory treatment of the Muslim Brother blogging phenomenon published in *al-Masri al-Yawm* on May 29, 2007. Her scorching self-criticism generated over 50 comments:

http://banatelerian.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_03.html.

[19] See 'Ayyash's post, "Israel: An Entity to the Brothers, a State to the Party": http://al-ghareeb.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_20.html.

[20] 'Ali 'Abd al-Fattah, "Islam Is Our Referent," available at <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/print.asp?ArtID=31704&SecID=390>. Mahmoud's response is at http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_29.html.

[21] The "clarification" is at http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_31.html.

[22] Saad's post is at <http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post.html>.

[23] This post is at <http://entaq.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post.html>.

[24] His comments were reported at http://freedomofegypt.blogspot.com/2007/06/blog-post_9619.html.

[25] See Rashwan's October 23, 2007 post, "Muslim Brother Blogging: An Evaluation": http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_23.html.

[26] On the growing gap between these cultures within the Brotherhood, see Husam Tammam, *Transformations of the Muslim Brotherhood* (Cairo: Madbouli, 2006). [Arabic]

[27] Agence France Presse, January 7, 2006.

[28] His post is at http://abdelatti.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_11.html.

[29] Interview with Muhammad Habib, Cairo, October 5, 2007.

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