

## Brotherhood Bloggers A New Generation Voices Dissent

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THE NUMBER OF ISLAMISTS BLOGGING in Egypt has increased noticeably of late, and this mass movement is especially apparent within Egypt's largest opposition party, the Muslim Brotherhood. Often constrained in their own organization, Brotherhood bloggers have begun to savor the freer outlet of the Internet. Though the Muslim Brotherhood may have initially approved of its younger members starting blogs, the bloggers have gone beyond their role as a media tool; now they are writing unprecedented, blunt public criticism of certain aspects of the Brotherhood. These are not ordinary bloggers idly chatting and surfing online, but rather rebels, freed from ideological and organizational constraints. They resent their political and social situation, and disagree with their organization's rhetoric and jurisprudential stances. These bloggers comprise a vanguard searching for new frameworks that will exploit its abilities and fulfill its ambitions, similar to the student movement that emerged throughout Europe in the late 1960s. Young Muslim Brothers did not have purpose or a means to express their aspirations and ideas until they found blogging, a medium that allows them to vent criticisms, and serves as an incubator for writers' ideas. In light of Islamist group tactics, which typically depend on an opaque structure and organizational secrecy, it is ironic that the future of the Muslim Brotherhood seems inexorably tied to a public information forum. Some of these bloggers have sacrificed their future within the movement to lay bare the group's organizational legacy, revealing many secrets about the hierarchy of Islamist organizations. Others have opted to criticize their organiza-

tions in the hopes of encouraging those wavering on controversial matters to speak up, while also wishing to draw attention to themselves and their generation, which eschews values of obedience and loyalty. How the Brotherhood leadership addresses this dissension within its ranks will have a profound impact on its evolution as a political organization.

### **Brotherhood Bloggers Breaking Taboos**

The voices of Mohamed Hamza, Magdy Saad, Abdel-Moniem Mahmoud, Abdel-Rahman Ayyash, Somiya el-Erian, Ibrahim el-Houdaiby, Abdel-Rahman Rashwan and an unknown number of others previously went unheard before the advent of blogging. But almost overnight, these bloggers have risen from oblivion to become virtual stars, and shining examples of a new Brotherhood generation making its mark and using new tools to pursue its goals. These are not average bloggers, simply offering idle thoughts on personal matters or current affairs, nor are they just young men looking to idly pass their time online. Rather they are a phenomenon aiming to break taboos that have been in place for more than 80 years, and they are buttressed by the organizational values and discipline of the Muslim Brotherhood. The phenomenon of Brotherhood blogging has passed through three basic stages: exploration, civil resistance and self-criticism.

#### **Stage 1: Exploration**

The first phase of Brotherhood blogging can best be characterized as an experiment, seeking to challenge the leftist and nationalist domination of the Egyptian blogosphere. This experiment's goal was to import the experience of various secular ideologies into the Islamist camp and employ it to serve the Islamist movement, as one Brotherhood blogger put it.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a key difference between the experiences of leftist and Islamist bloggers in their respective goals. Whereas leftist blogs, which have no true organizational structure, aim to criticize government oppression and human rights violations, the Muslim Brotherhood blogs primarily discuss their own organization – its political and intellectual rhetoric on the one hand and its organizational structure on the other.

This exploratory stage began with two well-known blogs, "I Am Brotherhood"<sup>2</sup> by Abdel-Moniem Mahmoud, a 27-year-old journalist with the *Al-Dustour* newspaper, and "Whatever, It Doesn't Matter"<sup>3</sup> by Magdy Saad, a 29-year-old student leader working in the private sector. Both of these young men began blogging after an embitter-

1 Author telephone interview with Brotherhood blogger Abdel-Rahman Rashwan, October 17, 2007.

2 "I Am Brotherhood," <http://ana-ikhwan.blogspot.com>.

3 "Whatever, It Doesn't Matter," <http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com>.

ing experience: On March 3, 2006, they were arrested along with 19 Brotherhood leaders and members, including Dr. Rashad al-Bayoumi, a 72-year-old member of the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide office, Ayman Abdel-Ghani, Abdel-Mageed Mashali, Mohammed Abdel-Wahhab and Ahmad Abdel-Gawwad, in what was known in Egypt at the time as "the students' case." After Mahmoud and Saad were released, their Brotherhood blogs launched to help focus the media spotlight on the arrests. By the end of 2006, the Egyptian Islamist blogger movement was gaining steam as the number of bloggers quickly multiplied.

### Stage 2: Civil Resistance

The civil resistance stage was launched after more than 40 Brotherhood leaders, including the Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Khirat el-Shater, were transferred to a military tribunal in February 2007. Brotherhood blogging during this stage became an online sensation, as more members and sympathizers logged on. The goal during this stage was to focus attention on the military tribunals and quickly report on their news, while also revealing their deficiencies before local and international audiences. This phase began with the blogs posted by family members and relatives of the detainees, the most famous being "Ensa" ("Forget"), which is structured as a news channel following the tribunal's sessions (25 posts as of Nov. 1, 2007), and which also hosts personal information on each of the detainees in Arabic and English.<sup>4</sup> "Ensa" is actually an agglomeration of a number of family blogs devoted to the individual detainees. Some argue that these blogs were created by the detainees' children as a manifestation of their sentiment that the Muslim Brotherhood had no strategy to deal with the military tribunals, whether through media coverage, amassing support, or mobilizing public opinion at home and abroad. Among these frequented blogs are those by the children of Khirat el-Shater<sup>5</sup> and the well-known Brotherhood businessman Hassan Malek,<sup>6</sup> "El-Fagreya" founded by Asmaa Yasser Abdu for her father's cause, and "The el-Erian Daughters" blog, maintained by Asmaa and Somiya, the daughters of the frequently-arrested Brotherhood leader Assem el-Erian.<sup>7</sup>

### Stage 3: Self-Criticism

Currently, Brotherhood blogging has outgrown its earlier two purposes and is delving into a self-criticism phase, in which aspects of the Muslim Brotherhood's organization

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4 "Ensa," <http://ensaa.blogspot.com>.

5 "Khirat el-Shater," <http://www.khirat-elshater.com>.

6 "Free Hassan Malek," <http://freehassanmalek.blogspot.com>.

7 "The el-Erian Daughters," <http://banatelerian.blogspot.com>.

and ideology are questioned. This stage has clearly spread among the Brotherhood youth, and this may be the first time in the Brotherhood's history that it has faced such open criticism from its own members. The Brotherhood blogger Magdy Saad's "Whatever, It Doesn't Matter" blog, which has published a number of posts addressing the organizational and philosophical situation inside the group, is perhaps the best-known example of this trend. Saad's blog was followed by a series of others, such as "Waves in a Sea of Change"<sup>8</sup> started by 27-year-old Mostafa el-Naggar. El-Naggar's website is dedicated to monitoring all the critiques of the Brotherhood posted elsewhere, often reposting them to help amplify their effects.

Some blogs have concentrated on the Brotherhood's political and intellectual rhetoric, including gentle criticism of the rhetoric's very basis. "One of the Brotherhood" went online in late 2006, and its 27-year-old writer Mohamed Hamza is one of the more influential bloggers seriously discussing ideological and intellectual issues. The same goes for "Brotherhood Youth," run by Abdel-Rahman Rashwan, a favorite of the other bloggers, due to its highly rationalized approach to deconstructing Brotherhood rhetoric.<sup>9</sup>

### **Models of Brotherhood Blogging**

There is no single model for Brotherhood blogging, revealing that there is some degree of intellectual disagreement and generational diversity within the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, bloggers have a broad range of goals; for example, there are those who see blogging as a potent means to improve their position within the Brotherhood, or to draw the attention of Brotherhood leaders to their talents and the role they could play. Others see blogging as a vehicle for criticism of the leaders, especially some of the mid-level leaders who enjoy little popularity among the Brotherhood's youth. Still others view blogging as a way to stir up new ideas within the organization and refine its political and intellectual rhetoric. As a result of this range of goals, there are numerous types of Brotherhood blogs.

### **News Blogs**

News blogs are concerned with monitoring all the news and commentary on the Brotherhood from other media sources. Most prominently, Abdel-Moniem Mahmoud's "I Am Brotherhood," which some refer to as "Abdel-Moniem Reuters," tirelessly gathers news items on the Brotherhood and adds its own commentary. Mahmoud's work for

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8 "Waves in a Sea of Change," <http://2mwag.blogspot.com>.

9 "Brotherhood Youth," <http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.com>.

the opposition newspaper *Al-Dustour* has helped him in this regard, and he has attracted attention within the Brotherhood for his extensive network of connections in the media and civil society. His blog also tracks the news of arrests of Muslim Brotherhood members, and publishes photographic evidence of human rights violations in Egypt.

### Rebel Blogs

With perhaps the loudest voice among Brotherhood bloggers, the rebel bloggers aim to draw attention to weak points within their organization, including intellectual and organizational stagnation, and their implications for Islamist youth and the Brotherhood's support base. These blogs raise issues that had previously been taboo in Muslim Brotherhood discourse, such as the Brotherhood's internal organizational system. These blogs also critique the Brotherhood's political and intellectual discourse. This type of blogging has stirred trouble within the ranks of the Brotherhood, both provoking more conservative factions by openly discussing the organization's flaws, and generating reservations on the part of some Brotherhood leaders toward this new type of self-criticism, in the belief that it could adversely affect the group's external image and internal cohesion.

The best example of a rebel blog may be "Waves in a Sea of Change," which raised the ceiling for Brotherhood self-criticism to unprecedented heights. In its early posts, the blog addressed the procedures for promotion within the Brotherhood, bluntly criticizing the prioritizing of loyalty and obedience over competency. The blog offered an example: how the organization selected its candidates for the 2005 parliamentary elections. The blog argued that "sheikhs from the mosques were chosen and pushed to enter the elections and do political work without them having any prior experience in politics or work in general."<sup>10</sup> The same blog also objected to the Brotherhood's continuous mix of preaching and politics, which denies it the ability to further develop its ideas and rhetoric. Later, "Waves in a Sea of Change" blasted the Brotherhood's mid-level leadership, or what it called the "administrator class," for monopolizing the group's organizational structure without a hint of transparency or openness to criticism and alternative viewpoints.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, "The Free," run by someone calling

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<sup>10</sup> "Waves in a Sea of Change," <http://2mwag.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post.html>.

<sup>11</sup> "Waves in a Sea of Change," [http://2mwag.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post\\_29.html](http://2mwag.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post_29.html).

himself Abu Yasser, demanded that the mid-level leaders distance themselves from, or apologize for their administrative mistakes.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most serious issues “Waves in a Sea of Change” has addressed is the Brotherhood’s internal selection process. The blog criticized the nomination and voting processes of the Brotherhood, the former giving priority based on the educational level attained by Brotherhood members, not their politics or electoral platform. In vot-

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ing, the blog argues, matters are even worse, with the right to vote restricted to members of a certain rank and above, preventing both associated and regular members – who make up the majority of the Brotherhood – from voting.

The other well-known blog practicing self-criticism is Magdy Saad’s “Whatever, It Doesn’t Matter,” which made a splash with-

in the Muslim Brotherhood and paved the way for young Brotherhood members to be more openly critical of the organization. For instance, the blog tried to establish the principle of self-criticism; one post, bearing the title “Teach Yourselves Rebellion, Alarm and Throwing Stones,” attempts to break the taboo against criticizing the Brotherhood. This use of the term “rebellion” was a defiant challenge from a young Brotherhood member directed at the leaders who maintained an old-school mentality.<sup>13</sup> While this posting displeased many people across the ranks of the Brotherhood, it succeeded in breaking the silence and thus forcefully inaugurated the period of Brotherhood self-criticism. Saad himself says, “Self-criticism is a healthy phenomenon for the group, since it expresses a kind of natural intellectual back-and-forth within the Brotherhood ranks.”<sup>14</sup> Saad emphasizes that criticism needs to be constructive and address serious issues, and he later posted a message aimed at guiding bloggers’ critiques of the Brotherhood, and practicing what he preaches in terms of self-criticism.<sup>15</sup> Speaking about his blogging experience, Saad says that it “represents a good opportunity for the normal audience to get to know a Brotherhood member, and to see the difference between the individual and the organization. It also provides space for freedom of expression in a more open way without having to follow certain rules.”<sup>16</sup>

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12 “The Free,” <http://al7our.maktoobblog.com>.

13 “Whatever, It Doesn’t Matter,” [http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/04/blog-post\\_25.html](http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/04/blog-post_25.html).

14 Author telephone conversation with Magdi Saad, October 25, 2007.

15 “Whatever, It Doesn’t Matter,” [http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post\\_18.html](http://yallameshmohem.blogspot.com/2007/10/blog-post_18.html).

16 Saad telephone conversation, op cit.

Although he admits that there are downsides to the blogging phenomenon, he thinks they will disappear as the experiment matures and stabilizes.

“I Am With Them” by Mostafa el-Naggar is another important blog offering a critical vision of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly regarding how differences within the Brotherhood are managed. The blog’s unflinching nature has worried many within the organization. In one of his postings, el-Naggar discussed the differences of opinion within the Brotherhood; he attacked the stagnation that dominates and asserted that openly discussing controversial topics is not shameful or a violation of privacy, but rather shows a genuine desire for reform.<sup>17</sup>

Abdel-Rahman Rashwan’s blog “Brotherhood Youth” largely focuses on critiquing the group’s political rhetoric. For example, the blog addressed the highly controversial recent draft platform released by the Muslim Brotherhood, critiquing aspects of it and calling it a miscalculated attempt to form a political party. He noted that this comes a full 11 years after the attempt by Abu el-Ela Madi, who split off from the Brotherhood in 1996 to form the Al-Wasat Party, which has not yet been granted party status by the government.<sup>18</sup>

In his blog “Al-Kawakibi,” which clearly has critical leanings, Islam Lutfi posted a message laying out objective critiques of the Brotherhood’s draft party platform, and raising serious questions about the organization’s intentions; Lufti took particular concern with the article calling for the formation of a Council of Islamic Scholars, which has been the part of the platform provoking most of the attacks by scholars and observers.<sup>19</sup>

### **Social-Humanitarian Blogs**

Social-humanitarian blogging emerged after military tribunals were formed for several Brotherhood leaders, and the detainees’ relatives had no other way to reach out to the public. This type of blog allowed relatives to emphasize the human interest side of the Brotherhood’s political plight, highlighting the detainees’ social roles and status. The blog “Ensa” is a living example, publishing sketches of the detainees’ personal lives, while also detailing the tragic circumstances the detainees’ families now face. The blog broadcasts videos with news briefs on the detainees, as well as details of human rights violations committed against them, whether during the arrest, or in the prisons where they are being held.<sup>20</sup> The blogs by detainees’ adult children also fit into the social-

17 “I Am With Them,” [http://anam3ahom.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post\\_24.html](http://anam3ahom.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post_24.html).

18 “Brotherhood Youth,” <http://ikhwanyouth.blogspot.com>.

19 “Al-Kawakibi,” [http://kawakby.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post\\_23.html](http://kawakby.blogspot.com/2007/09/blog-post_23.html).

20 “Ensa,” <http://ensaa.blogspot.com>.

humanitarian model, such as “El-Fagreya,” posted by Asmaa Yasser, the daughter of Brotherhood leader Yasser Abdu, who was arrested by the government in December 2006, and then sent to the military tribunal. Posts on “El-Fagreya” tend to be emotional, moving pleas generating reader sympathy for her and her father’s plight.<sup>21</sup>

### **Blogging Sisters**

In addition to the cadre of young male bloggers, young women associated with the Muslim Brotherhood have become part of the blogging movement. This is an unparalleled development for the organization, and Egyptian society at large, given the conservative characters of both. The Muslim sisters’ blogs, at first, were connected to personal issues stemming from the arrest of family members in the Brotherhood. For instance, there are about 10 blogs run by young women in or affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Perhaps the most visible example is “That’s How I Am” by 17-year-old Arwa el-Tawil, who had 50,000 visitors on her site in just six months. Another female blogger is the aforementioned Asmaa Yasser Abdu, whose “El-Fagreya” is popular with other young bloggers for its focus on humanitarian subjects, which evoke empathy from her readers. There are also the blogs by the children of the Brotherhood detainees, such as “Daughter of Islam”<sup>22</sup> by Somyia el-Erian and “The el-Erian Daughters,” a blog by her sister Asmaa el-Erian<sup>23</sup> which focuses on those being held by the government. Zahra el-Shater, the daughter of Deputy Supreme Guide Khirat el-Shater, also runs a blog focusing on the military tribunal cases.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Brotherhood’s Reaction to the Bloggers**

In general, the Muslim Brotherhood has not yet articulated a specific strategy for how to deal with the bloggers, and so far the group’s relationship with bloggers has passed through two stages. The first stage was one of indifference, in which the bloggers’ comments and unprecedented criticisms were ignored or dismissed as unimportant, as leaders believed that only a handful of youth in Cairo and Alexandria were involved. In this stage, some of the leaders were quite ignorant of both the nature of the blogs, and of their potential impact on the group’s image. This stage lasted roughly throughout the first half of 2007. The second stage began in the second half of 2007 as the blogging phenomenon transformed from a number of isolated cases into a mass movement and began to be perceived as a threat to the organization, especially after draw-

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21 “El-Fagreya,” <http://elfagreya.blogspot.com>.

22 “Daughter of Islam,” <http://bentellislam.blogspot.com>.

23 “The El-Erian Daughters,” <http://banatelerian.blogspot.com>.

24 “Khirat el-Shater,” <http://www.khirat-elshater.com>.

ing attention from newspapers and television media. At this point, many in the leadership felt that the blogging had to be stopped, while others wanted to look into the phenomenon and find ways of dealing with it. Toward this end, some leaders sought to meet with the bloggers, whether on the sidelines of open events where questions of the freedom of expression are discussed, or in private meetings. Exemplifying the latter scenario, Dr. Mohammed Mursi, head of the Brotherhood's political department, held a meeting with a group of Brotherhood bloggers to hear their opinions and try to discuss their criticism of the organization.<sup>25</sup> The meeting between Brotherhood leaders and bloggers signals just how worried the organization leadership has become, particularly given the Brotherhood's current dilemma – a crisis in its relationships both with the regime and the Egyptian political elite, resulting from the fallout after the draft party platform was announced.

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It is apparent that there are two schools of thought within the Brotherhood on dealing with dissident bloggers in their ranks. The first still thinks the phenomenon should not be taken too seriously and that blogs are merely idle online chatter incapable of sapping the organization's grassroots support base, which is more in line with the Brotherhood's positions. The second school argues that blogging is an expression of a new spirit flowing in the veins of the Brotherhood's base that needs to be absorbed and strengthened. This spirit also demonstrates the organization's intellectual vitality, and represents an excellent opportunity to improve the external image of the Brotherhood as an organization open to diverse viewpoints. However, proponents of this view still believe that flexible controls must be implemented to soften criticism of the Brotherhood, while absorbing the bloggers and using them for political mobilization.

The Brotherhood's interaction with the bloggers is not much different from their relationship with critics in general, particularly dissidents within the Brotherhood ranks. For the most part, this strategy is based on ignoring and containing such threats. Previously, the Brotherhood had rarely paid much attention to such criticism. Some observers argue that the Brotherhood was too busy with more pressing issues, such as managing its relations with the government and political forces, and so had no desire to spread its efforts thin by tackling peripheral issues. Others suggest that the

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25 Abdelmoniem Mahmoud, "A Meeting for Containing MB Youth?" *Al-Dustour*, October 27, 2007.

organization was concerned that responding to such critiques could set a precedent, opening the door of self-criticism that had been closed for decades, and bringing negative repercussions for organizational unity and cohesion. However, it is hard to believe that these strategies will succeed in stopping the Brotherhood bloggers from openly recording their positions on the organization's political and intellectual performance. This is a practical view, since such a move would fuel the stereotype of the Brotherhood suppressing dissent, in line with what its detractors claim.

### **Implications for Brotherhood Blogging**

The phenomenon of blogging by young dissident Brotherhood activists has far-reaching implications, and is tantamount to letting the views of the Brotherhood's internal relations out of the closet. Until recently, no one could have imagined that some of the Brotherhood's youngest members would criticize their leaders so openly. These blogs crossed many of the Brotherhood's accepted boundaries on members' behavior. These critiques, even if they are not taken seriously, represent a deviation from the Brotherhood's carefully cultivated air of secrecy. The blogs have also altered the image of the Muslim Brotherhood, since they gave many Internet-savvy Egyptians first-hand exposure to the ideas floating around in the organization. This gives the Brotherhood's leaders – should they manage to capitalize on the suggestions of their young activists – a chance to improve the stereotype of their organization held by many ordinary Egyptians. All told, the Brotherhood blogs are a defiant gesture in the face of the stifling ideological control exerted by some mid-level group leaders. Blogging represents a real challenge to the Muslim Brotherhood's status quo, and the Brotherhood must quickly adapt in order to ensure its future survival. ■