

Politics of Information: The Internet and Islamist Politics in Jordan, Morocco and Egypt

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Politics of Information

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first saw a dissemination of the Internet as a center of communication, information, entertainment and commerce. The spread of the Internet reached all four corners of the globe, connecting the researcher in Antarctica with the farmer in Guatemala and the newscaster in Moscow to the Bedouin in Egypt. Through the Internet, the flow of information and real-time news reaches across continents, and the voices of subalternity have the potential to project their previously silenced voices through blogs, websites and social networking sites. Political organizations across the left-right continuum have targeted the Internet as the political mobilizer of the future, and governments now provide access to historical documents, party platforms, and administrative papers through their sites. Similarly, religious groups display their beliefs online through official sites, and forums allow members from across the globe to debate issues of eschatology, orthopraxy and any number of nuanced theological issues. Fusing the two, Islamist political organizations have made their presence known through sophisticated websites detailing their political platforms, relevant news stories, and religiously oriented material discussing their theological views. This paper will specifically examine this nexus – the use of the Internet by Islamist political organizations in the Middle East in the countries of Jordan, Morocco and Egypt.

Although a wide range of Islamist political organizations utilize the Internet as a forum to publicize their views and create a national or international reputation, the methods and intentions of these groups vary greatly and depend on the nature of the organization. This paper will examine the use of the Internet by three ‘moderate’ Islamist parties: the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, the Justice and Development Party in Morocco and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. As these three parties have increased their political sophistication and reputation, both at home and abroad, they have increasingly utilized the Internet for a variety of purposes. First, Islamist organizations have used the Internet as a contemporary extension of the public sphere, a sphere through which parties frame, communicate and institutionalize ideas to a broader public. Secondly, the Internet provides Islamist organizations an unfiltered forum through which officials may promote and advertise their positions and views, as well as circumvent local media restrictions imposed by the state. Finally, the Internet allows Islamist organizations to present a counterhegemonic discourse in opposition to the ruling regime or monarchy or on display to an international audience. This third motivation applies most specifically to the Muslim Brotherhood, which presents a sophisticated English language website designed in a Western style and tailored to reach a selective audience of scholars, politicians and journalists. The MB has excelled in this so-called “bridgeblogging”¹ and has set the standard for Islamist

¹ Lynch, Marc. "Blogging the New Arab Public." February 2007. *Arab Media & Society*. 2008

parties attempting to influence international perceptions of their positions and work. The content varies between the Arabic and English versions of the site, and will be examined further in the section on the Muslim Brotherhood. These three goals overlap significantly in both their intentions and desired outcomes; however, each goal targets a different actor: the public, the media, and the regime. Following an analysis of these three areas, this paper will proceed into a case study analysis of the websites of the IAF, the PJD and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Motivations for Participation

The topic at hand rests on the question of what motivates Islamist political organizations to use the Internet. In recent years, a number of authors have examined elements of this question through an analysis of Islam on the Internet and the use of technology in sustaining and propagating the Islamic faith. Studies specifically analyzing Islamist websites have overwhelmingly approached the subject from a national security angle and focused primarily on “Jihadi” websites and the use of the internet by terrorist organizations to raise money and recruit potential supporters. Recent studies by The Middle East Media Research Institute include such titles as, “Islamist Websites as an Integral Part of Jihad,²”

<<http://www.arabmediasociety.com>>Lynch, Blogging the New Arab Public., 11.

² MEMRI. "Middle East Media Research Institute." 21 February 2007. Islamist Websites as an Integral Part of Jihad: A General Overview. April 2008

“Cyberspace as a Combat Zone: The Phenomenon of Electronic Jihad,³” and “The Enemy Within: Where Are The Islamist/Jihadist Websites Hosted, and What Can Be Done About It?⁴”

Outside of security studies, a few authors have analyzed the changing role of the Internet within the Arab world or within Islamic circles in the Middle East. Gary Bunt’s *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication & Cyber Islamic Environments* examines how the Internet has shifted the loci of power within the Islamic world by decentralizing religious interpretation away from traditional structures of authority and power. Rather than relying upon traditional interpreters of Islam, Muslims are now seeking alternative interpretations through the Internet. Bunt briefly addresses the political aspects of these phenomena suggesting that both government and opposition Muslim political parties are now turning to the Internet as an “effective area for investment and development.”⁵ A second work by Gary Bunt examines the wide range of Islamic websites available through the Internet. In *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments*, Bunt approaches the Internet as a social connector

<<http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=jihad&ID=IA32807>>MEMRI.org, July 19, 2007, #328.

³ MEMRI. "Middle East Media Research Institute." 27 February 2007. Cyberspace as a Combat Zone: The Phenomenon of Electronic Jihad. April 2008

<<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA32907>>MEMRI.org, Feb. 27, 2007, #329.

⁴ MEMRI. "Middle East Media Research Institute." 19 July 2007. The Enemy Within: Where Are the Islamist/Jihadist Websites Hosted, and What Can Be Done About It? April 2008

<<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA37407>>.

⁵ Bunt. Virtually Islamic : computer-mediated communication and cyber Islamic environments. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000., 66.

among Muslims worldwide, a place for the propagation of ideas, networking, dialogue and research.⁶ Finally, Rasha A. Abdulla's *The Internet in the Arab World* provides a historical context for the spread of the Internet in the region focusing on the interactions between the Internet and Islam, Arab governments and youth in Egypt.⁷ These three books provide a well-rounded religious and cultural foundation upon which an analysis of the Internet in the Middle East may proceed. The authors do not however expand their analysis further into the political realm to examine the use of the Internet by Islamist parties.

A number of more recent articles have attempted to fill this gap in the literature, specifically through an analysis of blogging and its implications within the political and religious realms. Marc Lynch in "Blogging the New Arab Public" and "Young Brothers in Cyberspace" explores the means through which opposition groups including Islamist parties can use blogging to help achieve their political and social goals.⁸ He cites "bridge-blogging" as one part of this process whereby bloggers "primarily address Western audiences, usually writing in English with the intention of explaining their societies."⁹ Bloggers in this category attempt to shape how Western media cover the region by providing relevant and

⁶ Bunt, Gary. *Islam in the Digital Age : e-jihad, online fatwas and cyber Islamic environments*. London: Pluto Press, 2003.

⁷ Abdulla, R. (2007). *The Internet in the Arab World: Egypt and Beyond*. Germany: Peter Lang Publishing.

⁸ Lynch, Blogging; Lynch, Marc. "Young Brothers in Cyberspace." *MERIP* Winter 2007.

⁹ Lynch, Blogging, 11.

timely information often neglected or censored in official Arab media.¹⁰ The concept of bridge-blogging extends to traditional websites as well such as the Muslim Brotherhood's English site. This paper seeks to build on this literature with an emphasis upon the political implications of the Internet in the region so as to present a fuller picture of this phenomenon.

Islamist political organizations that choose to use the Internet as an integral part of their organization do so with very specific purposes in mind. Creating and implementing a high-quality website reflecting the values and views of an organization requires a great deal of manpower and financial capital; capital that the party could spend elsewhere if they did not believe in the power of the Internet to bring about its strategic goals.

Therefore, Islamist parties use the Internet for three specific purposes. First, the Internet serves as a contemporary manifestation of the public sphere. This concept stems from Jurgen Habermas' analysis of coffeehouse culture in 18th century Europe in his landmark piece *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In this sphere, individuals engage in rational debate on problematic social topics related to general society. This public is inclusive by nature and allegedly disregards status as a prerequisite to enter into the ongoing conversation. In the decades following Habermas' analysis of the public sphere, scholars have expanded the scope of this concept to include multiple public spheres

¹⁰ Lynch, Blogging, 27.

encompassing voices of subalternity - those of women, ethnic and religious minorities, the oppressed and those from outside the Western world. The proliferation of the Internet again challenged this concept and some scholars have envisioned the Internet as a new medium expanding the public sphere throughout the globe. Internet users from all backgrounds engage in a variety of activities online reshaping this space and challenging what it means to participate in the public.¹¹

This constructed space between the official sphere and the private sphere, from which “the public sphere is more or less institutionally and culturally differentiated” is where Islamist political organizations utilize the Internet to express their individual political and religious desires.¹² Hoexter, Eisenstadt and Levtzion set forth a three-step process through which individuals and organizations construct their respective public sphere.¹³ Islamist groups follow this same process. First, groups frame the argument and establish the boundaries of acceptable discourse. In Islamist organizations, this process occurs before the creation of a website. Leaders must discuss what issues they wish to include on their site, how they wish to present their arguments and to whom the material is targeted. This process may be as simple as choosing a person or group of persons

¹¹ Eickelman, Dale and Jon Anderson, New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, p5.

¹² Hoexter, Miriam, Shmuel Eisenstadt and Nehemia Levtzion, The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 140.

responsible for the site, or it may be a complex and politically sensitive process through which individuals of differing opinions may vie for control of the website's content and official positions.

Secondly, Islamist groups must communicate their position via the website. Through the communicating process, the organization encourages and invites debate on problems of the common good and the criteria of inclusion and exclusion evolve in response to the demands of internal members as well as in response to external visitors to the site.¹⁴ The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood site, for example, conducts a weekly poll through which site visitors express their opinion on a relevant topic. Although this may not directly affect the website's content or positions, it does provide the creators of the site with a rough measure of viewer opinions.

The third step of the process involves the institutionalization of the created public sphere.¹⁵ In this final step, organizations stabilize and ensure the permanence of the website as a forum of open debate and as a means through which the Islamist organization can continue to express and disseminate its positions. Options to ensure a website's permanence include the creation of mirror sites, which function as backup sites should the government block the original site. In 2004, for example, the Egyptian government began blocking the Muslim

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁵ Hoexter et al. 140.

Brotherhood's official Arabic site to Internet users inside Egypt. The Brotherhood responded by establishing mirrored sites under similar web addresses.¹⁶

As described by Eickelman, the Internet as a public sphere:

create[s] an irreversible trend toward a freer market in religious, political, and social ideas and foster[s] a pluralism often resisted and poorly understood both by states and by religious authorities. These new technologies challenge those who seek authoritatively to demarcate the lines between the licit and the illicit.¹⁷

Through this freedom of ideas and pluralism of authority, Islamist organizations are utilizing this expanded public sphere to make themselves heard and to advertise their positions and goals.

The second reason Islamist political organizations utilize the Internet is to disseminate their official political and religious positions to a national and international audience. The Internet provides a relatively cheap platform through which these groups can raise awareness of their existence and advertise themselves to potential members within a country. The Internet also provides Islamist groups opportunities to clearly elaborate their official positions as well as counter negative or false information leveled against them by rival groups, hostile regimes or international observers.

As a source of mobilization, the Internet is unmatched in its ability to reach millions of people around the world. Individuals from all political backgrounds, nationalities and socioeconomic classes rely upon the Internet as a

¹⁶ Nafie, Reem. "Al-Ahram Weekly." 9-15 September 2004. Big Brother Blocks Brotherhood Site. April 2008 <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/707/eg7.htm>>.

¹⁷ Eickelman, 34.

source of information. Clearly, Internet users are not passive receivers of information believing whatever they read on the Web, however, the information presented does have the ability to influence the thoughts and opinions of users.¹⁸ Islamic organizations that present information on the Internet do so in a matter that reflects their own political and religious views. As discussed in the previous section on framing, these groups offer a perspective consistent with their political and religious beliefs and goals. Although governments may restrict the abilities of these organizations to publish these same views in newspapers and other hardcopy forms, the Internet reconfigures centralized power structures by preventing governments from stopping the flow of information to potential constituent groups.¹⁹ It also provides Islamist groups with the ability to circumvent local media controls to disseminate their messages to a broader national and international audience.

The third reason that Islamist organizations utilize the Internet is to present a counterhegemonic narrative in opposition to the official narrative of the government. Islamist organizations direct this counterhegemonic discourse towards both national and international audiences in an attempt to increase their own legitimacy while simultaneously eroding the legitimacy of the ruling monarchy or regime. The ability to present this discourse represents a broader

¹⁸ Bunt. *Virtually*, 13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

technologically induced fragmentation of authority where authority can be represented in multiple ways through different actors. The Internet continues this fragmentation, similar to the manner in which Islamic books and cassette sermons broke the monopoly of the *ulama*’ over the interpretation of Islam since the late-1970s forward.²⁰

In this expanding Internet realm, Islamic organizations can present their own interpretations of Islam and call faithful followers to membership, political participation and action. “Islam on the Internet is first a story of new interpreters, newly emboldened by confidence in and command of the channel.”²¹ The devolution of Islamic interpretation to the common man or woman allows Islamic organizations to propagate, mobilize, and challenge the legitimacy of the government and government-sanctioned religious authorities. This ability to communicate laterally through the Internet represents a sharp break from the hierarchical communication of the past, and is a primary motivation for the use of the Internet by Islamic organizations.²²

In her analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, El-Ghobashy suggests that the Brotherhood participates in elections in Egypt primarily as a means to discredit the regime and their alleged total control of the country.²³ The

²⁰ Bunt, *Virtually*, 42.

²¹ Eickelman, 53.

²² Hoexter et al., 32.

²³ El-Ghobashy, Mona. "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (2005): 373-395, 380.

use of the Internet by Islamist groups follows a similar thought process through which these groups seek to demonstrate the fluid nature of hegemony through a continual process of “negotiation between superior and subordinate” relationships.²⁴ This process rests on the need to “challenge and displace the cultural dominance and leadership” of the ruling class with a “coherent and convincing alternative vision of how society might organize itself.”²⁵ The Internet sites of Islamist groups are an integral part of this process and seek to present a legitimate alternative narrative to replace the dominant narrative of the ruling regime.

Thus, Islamist groups utilize the Internet as an extension of the public sphere, to circumvent media restrictions and reach local and international audiences, and to present a counterhegemonic narrative discrediting the regime. The following section will explore these issues further through an analysis of the websites of three Islamist organizations in the Middle East.

Participation in Practice

The proliferation of the Internet in the Middle East demonstrates the remarkable speed through which new technologies disperse throughout the world. Despite its rapid spread, the Arab world remains one of the least penetrated regions of the world with only 7 percent of the region’s 300 million inhabitants

²⁴ Hoexter et al., 16.

²⁵ Hoexter et al., 16.

connected to the Internet.²⁶ While the level of penetration is significantly different between the rich and poor regions, regionally, the Middle East ranks third lowest in the world ahead of Africa and Asia.²⁷ The Arab Economic Union Council lists five factors limiting further penetration: lack of human and economic information technology resources, illiteracy and computer illiteracy, lack of funds for research, lack of telecommunications infrastructure and the high cost of internet connectivity.²⁸

Despite this relatively low penetration, an assortment of actors including governments, organizations and individuals have drawn on the Internet to articulate views to domestic audiences.²⁹ By 2001, every Arab country had launched its own website of varying complexity. The Egyptian and Moroccan sites offers weekly clips of state radio and television networks, and the Jordanian site invited citizens to submit email to the government.³⁰ Despite their presence on the Internet, Arab governments provide only minimal services, although such countries as the United Arab Emirates and Jordan improved in recent years. In contrast, a Human Rights Watch report referenced in Bunt concluded that Islamist

²⁶ Abdulla, 35.

²⁷ World Economic Forum. "World Economic Forum." 2008. The Global Information Technology Report 2007-2008 . April 2008
<<http://www.weforum.org/en/initiatives/gcp/Global%20Information%20Technology%20Report/index.htm>>.

²⁸ Abdulla, 35.

²⁹ Bunt, Launching, 71.

³⁰ Ibid., 71-72.

organizations were leading the charge in Internet sophistication in the Middle East.³¹ To this topic we now turn.

The following case studies of the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, the Justice and Development Party in Morocco and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt will examine a number of issues related to their use of the Internet through their official websites. Each section will begin with a brief look at the country's Internet statistics and efforts by the government to control its usage. Following a brief history of the respective Islamic organizations, the studies will examine the websites of the Islamic groups. The website analyses will examine the sites for quality of production, content, frequency of updates, external links and thematic goals.

Jordan

According to the 2007-2008 World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology Report, the country of Jordan ranks 47th out of 127 countries examined in its overall network readiness index, a measure of a country's overall receptivity to information technology. Of the country's 5.8 million inhabitants, less than 14 percent have access to the Internet, a mere 791,000 people. Of the 14 Middle Eastern and North African countries surveyed

³¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

using the “network readiness index,” Jordan places fifth in the region, although it falls behind many other developing countries in Latin America and Asia.³²

Overall, the Jordanian regime provides its citizens with unfettered access to content on the Internet. The OpenNet Initiative, a non-governmental organization which investigates and exposes governmental filtering and surveillance procedures worldwide, suggests that the Jordanian government does not filter any sites related to social, security or internet tools, although it maintains selective filtering of some political websites.³³

Islamic Action Front

The Jordanian Islamic Action Front (*Jabhat al-'Amal al-Islami*) traces its roots to the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Jordan in 1945. Gathering in support of a religious struggle against the Jewish forces in Palestine, a group of merchants joined together to begin the Brotherhood.³⁴ King Abdullah I personally inaugurated the opening of the Brotherhood's office the same year praising the group for its structure as a religious, charitable and nonpolitical society.³⁵ From this period until 1992, the Muslim Brotherhood expanded its influence throughout Jordan providing charitable and religious services to its constituents. However, in 1992 following a relative economic and political

³² World Economic Forum.

³³ OpenNet Initiative. "OpenNet Initiative." 2007. Jordan. April 2008
<<http://opennet.net/research/profiles/jordan>>.

³⁴ Schwedler, Jillian. *Faith in Moderation : Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

liberalization, the Muslim Brotherhood formed the Islamic Action Front (IAF) as an official political party.³⁶ Although the Brotherhood chose to remain a nonpolitical organization, the IAF unofficially served as the party's political wing, with 353 individuals from the MB on the founding committee of the IAF.³⁷ Since 1992, the IAF made impressive gains in the country, creating a set of internal structures to elect party leaders and to ensure a turnover in top positions.³⁸ Through its inclusion in Parliament, the IAF has focused on economic issues and corruption, calls for structural political reform, social, cultural and religious issues and for a reconsideration of Jordan's peace treaty with Israel.³⁹ As the group has matured, it has increasingly become independent of the Muslim Brotherhood and generally acts as an independent political party.

The website of the Islamic Action Front, www.jabha.net,⁴⁰ at first glance is an unimposing website geared towards an Arab and Arabic speaking audience. A link to an English edition of the site is provided, however, at the writing of this paper the English edition remains little more than a form providing users with IAF contact information and a standard information request form through which users can request further information. Requests by the author for further information via the email form went unanswered.

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁷ Schwedler, 87.

³⁸ Brown, Nathan. "Jordan and its Islamic Movement." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2006, 6.

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ Islamic Action Front. Jabhat Al-'mal Al-Islami. 2008. April 2008 <www.jabha.net>.

The Islamic Action Front webpage gives an impression of an average quality website lacking technical sophistication and complexity. Visitors to the homepage can access a number of links to recent news, external religious information, statements and speeches, party documents and external links. Aesthetically, the site is unassuming, lacking eye-catching graphics and high-quality images. Strategically, however, the site presents a number of issues vital to the message of the IAF. First, a section entitled “From Our Goals” filters through a list of the IAF’s political and religious objectives. Examples of these goals include “The support of religious institutions and the spread of the Islamic message through effective advocacy and religious guidance,” “The pursuit of the nation’s unity, freedom, and resistance to colonial and foreign influence,” and “The overall development of society from an Islamic perspective.” Other vital sections of the homepage encourage limited communication between site users and the IAF through a mailing list and a specific section separate from the main body of links provides access to religious information on the Quran and Hadith. Although lacking in general sophistication, the IAF website functions consistently with few broken links and errors.

The content of the IAF site provides information on a wide range of areas relevant to the party. Users may access a news section displaying articles on a number of topics including Palestine, schedules of IAF MPs, protests, reports, economic issues and other topics related to the IAF’s political and religious

positions. Articles originate with internal authors and not from mainstream news sources in the region. Generally, the selection of articles reflects the interests of the party and does not provide a wide diversity of viewpoints.

Other content on the site presents limited descriptions of the IAF's platform through official speeches and policy decisions. The IAF publishes its official responses to issues of science, legislation, education, and foreign events and discusses internal and external political dealings. The "Documents and Papers" section lists a number of documents relevant to the party's platform. Documents include the Constitution of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Jordan Political Parties Act, a draft of the U.S. Greater Middle East Initiative and the text of U.N. Resolution 242.

The frequency with which the IAF updates the website depends on the section of the page. Content on the "News" section of the site receives multiple updates daily on events occurring the previous day or week. Other sections including "Statements and Speeches" and "Views and Comments" receive updates on an intermittent basis, sometimes only once every few months.

Finally, the opinions section of the site offers viewers a list of opinions and fatwas regarding specifically political issues such as the support of Hizbollah in Lebanon, Guantanamo Bay, the role of the government in Iraq, and the occupation of Muslim lands by American military forces. Noticeably missing from the site however, is an explicitly religious section in which the IAF describes

its religious beliefs and the relationship between the party's Islamic beliefs and how this translates into political activism. Although other sections of the site utilize a religious discourse in how they approach political issues, a section describing the party's key religious tenets is lacking.

External links from the IAF website highlight a wide range of issues related to the official positions of the IAF. On the homepage, a prominent image of an axe puncturing a Star of David wrapped in Israeli and American flags links to a site run by the Committee for Supporting the Palestinian People.⁴¹ This site calls for the boycott of such goods as McDonalds, Lays and Coca-Cola, and Ariel detergent, for their support of the state of Israel. Further messages on the site criticize the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel. A second prominent link on the homepage brings users to the official website of Televangelist Amr Khaled.⁴²

Links from the "Related Sites" page focus primarily on other sites related to Islam. Users may access sites for the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, the Social Reform Society of Kuwait, the Moroccan Islamic Youth and Islam Online.

As seen through an examination of the Islamic Action Front's website, the party's goals for the site are rather limited. As an extension of the public sphere, the IAF has chosen to frame its positions rather simplistically. Rather than using

⁴¹ Committee for Supporting the Palestinian People. Committee for Supporting the Palestinian People. 2008. April 2008 <<http://www.kate3.com/about/>>.

⁴² Amr Khaled. Amr Khaled. 2008. April 2008 <<http://www.amrkhaled.net/>>.

the forum to interact with its constituents in a continual process of framing and reframing ideas with the intent of communicating and institutionalizing the process, the creators of the webpage utilize the site solely to advertise the IAF's positions and to express their views on a select number of issues. The choice of material on the site as well as the lack of foreign language versions suggests that the IAF has chosen to direct its website primarily to internal Jordanian viewers already familiar with the IAF and its official positions. This approach differs greatly from that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as this paper will explore further later. As discussed previously, the third motivation for the utilization of the Internet by Islamist groups is to present a counterhegemonic narrative through which organizations increase their legitimacy while reducing the legitimacy of the ruling regime. The lack of a unified and coherent position and argument on the IAF's site suggests that the organization seeks more modest goals of advertising and limited interaction with constituents.

Morocco

The World Economic Forum's 2007-2008 Global Information Technology Report ranks the country of Morocco 74th out of 127 countries studied in the report. Such factors as restricted freedom of the press, low usage of the Internet for business practices and a lack of personal computers prevented Morocco from scoring higher on the index. Out of a population of roughly 32 million people, an estimated 20 percent have access to the Internet. Of the 15 countries examined in

the Middle East and North African region, Morocco is ranked eleventh in overall network readiness.⁴³

According to the OpenNet Initiative, the Moroccan government selectively interferes in the country's Internet access. Although OpenNet found no evidence of political and social website filtering, the government engages in selective filtering of conflict and security sites as well as in the use of Internet tools. The conflict and security sites filtered deal primarily with the topic of Western Sahara.⁴⁴

Justice and Development Party

The Justice and Development Party in Morocco has a complicated history stemming from the creation of the Islamic Youth Association in 1970 under the guidance of Abdel Karim Mouti'. The Moroccan regime encouraged the organization's growth as a counterweight to powerful leftist movements in the country, and it received official recognition in 1972. Following dissolution in 1976, the association officially reformed in 1983 changing its name to Reform and Renewal (*al-Islah wa al-Tajdid*) in 1992.⁴⁵ Members from this group merged with the *Mouvement Populaire Democratique et Constitutionnel* (MPDC) in 1992

⁴³ World Economic Forum.

⁴⁴ OpenNet Initiative "OpenNet Initiative." 2007. Morocco. April 2008
<<http://opennet.net/research/profiles/morocco>>.

⁴⁵ Wegner, Eva. "The Contribution of Inclusivist Approaches towards the Islamist Opposition to Regime Stability in Arab States: The case of the Moroccan Parti de la Justice et du Developpement." 2004, 7.

and with the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR) soon after.⁴⁶ In 1999, members of the MUR formed the Justice and Development Party as a “pragmatic opposition party that supports the political system; accepts the monarchy in its current form; [is a] proponent of democratic processes; strives for deeper entrenchment of religious norms in politics and society; [and] holds nationalist positions on the issue of Western Sahara.”⁴⁷

The Justice and Development Party’s website, <http://www.pjd.ma>,⁴⁸ is an impressively simple website geared towards an Arabic speaking audience and filled with information on a variety of subjects related to the country of Morocco, its politics, and the actions and policy stances of the PJD. At the writing of this paper, the website did not feature an English or French version of the website. The site does not appear to have a means through which visitors may contact the site administrator or submit feedback or questions.

The quality of the PJD website is relatively high. Information is organized in an efficient, yet presentable manner and easily maneuvered by site visitors looking to investigate specific areas. The graphics presented are high quality and non-distracting, and the layout of the site draws users to the links on the side, as well as to recent news articles present in the middle of the page. Areas of interest

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁷ Werenfels, Isabelle. Between Integration and Repression. Berlin: SWP Research Paper, 2005, 13.

⁴⁸ Justice and Development Party. Parti de la Justice et du Développement. 2008. April 2008 <www.pjd.ma>.

on the homepage include a campaign related to the blockade of Gaza and links to the party's official publication bearing the same name as the party. Viewers also have ready access to the party's official election platform documents as well as an online poll measuring the responses of visitors in relation to specific issues.

Functionally, the site runs smoothly with few detected broken links or errors.

The information the PJD presents on the site is extensive and covers a wide range of topics. The top sidebar on the page separates news and information into a number of smaller topics. Users can search news articles related to the Secretary-General and the Secretariat, and the "Data and Communications" section displays official statements issued by the PJD on a number of topics. The "Release and Publications" section displays the covers of reports issued by the PJD. Although these documents are inaccessible through the site, their presentation is impressive and demonstrates the professionalism of the party. In addition to these documents, the site provides full access to the PJD's 86-page electoral program which clearly describes the party's goals and official positions.

A good portion of the website falls under the second sidebar labeled "Working Parliament." In this section, viewers can research the PJD's members in Parliament, access hundreds of documents detailing the party's history of legislation, view transcripts of speeches and presentations, and read transcripts of official communications between party members and outside bodies.

Links on the top of the page provide users with information on the history of the Justice and Development Party including a clear and explicit version of the party's platform, as well as a short history of the founding members and principles of the group. Other interesting features of the site include a projection on the home page of how many other visitors are currently visiting the PJD site, as well as a hit count on major documents detailing how many other visitors have accessed a specific document, speech or news article.

The frequency with which the PJD updates information on its website is difficult to discern, as the majority of postings do not have a corresponding date attached to them. However, over a three-month period of observation, the information presented on the site changed frequently, specifically in the main news section and in the polling section.

The external links section of the PJD site is rather limited. Each one of the six external links brings the user to an official page of a PJD candidate from a previous election, although only three of the six links continue to function. No links to external political, religious or news sites are provided.

Overall, the PJD has created an impressive site providing a great deal of information to visitors on the history of the party, its record and goals in Parliament, and its foundational tenets and beliefs motivating its participation in the Moroccan political system. Similar to the IAF's site however, the broader goals of the site are limited and geared exclusively towards a national audience

somewhat familiar with the PJD and its history and platform. The presentation of information and policies, while somewhat critical of the ruling regime, focuses more on what the PJD is doing, rather than on what the regime is neglecting.

Thus, in the case of the PJD, suggesting that the party is presenting a counterhegemonic narrative to reduce the legitimacy of the regime is inadequate.

Similar to the IAF, the relationship between the Islamist parties and their respective regimes is one of dependency and mutual recognition. Neither party seeks an overthrow of the current political system, but rather a gradual transformation and Islamicization of society from within. While not counterhegemonic, the PJD does fulfill the other two motivations as to why Islamist parties utilize the Internet. As a public forum, the PJD website allows the PJD to interact with its constituents and gather feedback through its official poll. The website also allows the party to present an accurate description of its official beliefs and tenets undistorted by censorship or media critical of the organization.

Egypt

According to the 2007-2008 World Economic Forum's Global Information Technology report, the country of Egypt ranks in between the countries of Morocco and Jordan at 63rd out of the 127 countries studied. One of the greatest factors inhibiting Egypt's technology ranking stems from the quality of its educational system, specifically its math and science programs. With an estimated 2006 population of 75.4 million, just short of 8 percent of the country's

inhabitants have access to the Internet. Of the 15 Middle East and North African countries examined, Egypt ranks ninth, just ahead of Mauritania and Morocco.

Of the three countries examined, according to the OpenNet Initiative, Egypt ranks highest in its policy of openness to the Internet. The report found no evidence of governmental filtering of political, social, security or Internet tool sites. Despite this high rating, the Egyptian government has recently increased its monitoring of the Internet cracking down on specific bloggers in the region,⁴⁹ and at times attempting to block the Muslim Brotherhood's site to Internet users within Egypt.⁵⁰

Muslim Brotherhood

Hasan al-Banna founded the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 after a group of men approached him in Ismailiyya and expressed their desire to form a movement under al-Banna's leadership.⁵¹ The movement grew rapidly throughout the following decades, expanding its influence throughout Cairo and the surrounding regions and calling Egyptians to spiritual renewal and reformation. In the 1980s, following a complicated relationship of repression and tolerance with the Egyptian ruling regime, the Muslim Brotherhood increasingly became active in politics by fielding candidates for parliamentary seats and taking part in trade

⁴⁹ Abdulla, 86-87.

⁵⁰ The Arabist. "The Arabist." 23 May 2005. [Request on Web Censorship](http://arabist.net/archives/2005/05/23/request-on-web-censorship/). April 2008 <<http://arabist.net/archives/2005/05/23/request-on-web-censorship/>>.

⁵¹ Mitchell, Richard P. *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 8.

and syndicate elections. When Mubarak came to power, he continued a selective policy of accommodation and repression recognizing his inability to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵² In this context, the Muslim Brotherhood made incredible political gains in the parliamentary elections of 2000 and 2005 and projected itself onto the world stage as a serious and effective political actor.

The Muslim Brotherhood's website, www.ikhwanonline.com⁵³ and the English version, www.ikhwanweb.com,⁵⁴ are extremely sophisticated websites providing clear examples of high-quality and influential Islamist websites. While both the English and Arabic sites are impressive in their own rights, this paper will primarily examine the Arabic website for structure and content. A brief analysis of the differences between the English and Arabic sites will occur later within the context of bridgeblogging. References to the Brotherhood's site will refer to the Arabic version, unless otherwise stated.

The website of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is highly impressive and of high technical quality. The site is laid out with large and clear graphics, with a banner at the top displaying the emblem of the Muslim Brotherhood, and an image of birds flying over a world emblazoned with the words "The Muslim Brotherhood." Sections of the site are clearly delineated, with a multitude of links

⁵² Wickham, Carrie Rosefsky. Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 103.

⁵³ The Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimīn. 2008. April 2008 <<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/>>.

⁵⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) Official English Website. 2008. April 2008 <<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/>>.

on the right side addressing such topics as culture and art, Palestine, youth, the history of the Muslim Brotherhood and others. A rolling status bar displays up-to-date newsfeeds across the top of the site, and sections display news stories updated frequently on a wide range of relevant topics. Viewers have ready access to a great deal of information, and the site functions flawlessly without instances of broken links or graphical errors.

The content of the Muslim Brotherhood site covers a wide range of topics and provides viewers information on a range of political, social and religious issues. Visitors interested in learning about the history of the Muslim Brotherhood can read an extensive history of the group covering its eighty years of existence within the “Founding of the Brotherhood” section. Within this category, viewers can browse historical writings of the group’s founder, documents from other important figures within the group, as well as general narratives of the organization and the fight against corruption within Egyptian society. News sections within the site provide extensive information on news related to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The “Arabs and Non-Arabs” news section highlights events throughout the region and the world and offers insightful reports on such events as President Carter’s visit to Syria, the status of politics in Pakistan, as well as the status of Muslims within France. Reports within the “Culture and Arts” section discuss recent Arab and international films, the literary legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood and the status of antiquities in the Middle East.

Beyond the areas mentioned, the Muslim Brotherhood's website offers a wide array of stories on a variety of topics.

In addition to its news stories and reports, the Brotherhood's website, in contrast to those of the PJD and the IAF, offers a wide selection of multimedia for the website viewer. In the "Multimedia" section, viewers can watch recorded clips of television shows from Hizbollah's Al-Manar, watch recent debates on the role of Islam within society, as well as listen to live Qur'anic recitations from Saudi Arabia, Cairo and Palestine. Stark video images from protests in Mahalla el-Kubra, Egypt are freely displayed on the site, and viewers can download patriotic Egyptian songs expressing their love of freedom. Links to download ringtones and backgrounds for mobile phones appear to be under construction.

Also in contrast to the sites of the PJD and IAF, the Muslim Brotherhood's website presents a broad picture of the organization's religious beliefs. Sections throughout the site discuss the role of Islam within modern society and the interaction of politics and religion. The intermixing of the two frames a compelling call for viewers to embrace their Islamic faith and engage in politics as an extension of their beliefs.⁵⁵

The sheer quantity of information on the site prevents a full analysis of the site's many other features. Similar to the site of the PJD in Morocco, the Brotherhood's site conducts online polls where viewers can express their opinion

⁵⁵ For more on this subject, see Wickham's *Mobilizing Islam*.

on such issues as religious duties, political decisions and current events. In addition, viewers may easily contact the Muslim Brotherhood through various links and forms throughout the site, although an attempt by the author to find out more about the site went unanswered.

The authors of the Muslim Brotherhood site update the website daily and post numerous news articles on a variety of topics. The updates include short articles on recent news events, as well as longer reports on a variety of issues relevant to an Egyptian or Arab viewer.

The “Links” section of the Brotherhood’s site provides links to three categories of webpages: Islamic sites, scientific sites and news sites. Included within the Islamic links section are links to Islam Online, the Islamic Association of Britain, the Aqsa Foundation, as well as a number of other Islamic networks. Within the scientific sites section are links to Amr Khalid and a number of other Islamic scholars examining scientific issues. The news section within the site’s external links includes links to BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, Islam Today, and a number of online radio shows in Arabic.

The English version of the Muslim Brotherhood site differs greatly from the organization’s site in Arabic in both content and design. Bearing a strong resemblance to news sites in the United States, its message is clearly tailored to reach an international audience likely more skeptical of the Muslim Brotherhood and its democratic credentials. Similar to the Arabic site, the English version

maintains a high quality of presentation that guides the viewer to a number of sections articulated on the left hand side of the page.

The categories listed on the sidebar differ from those of the Arabic version of the site. Samples of the top issues include Torture, Political Islam Studies, Iran, Copts and Democracy. Many of these topics reflect issues popular within Western media and within contemporary political and religious movements in the United States and Europe. The issues highlighted within the English site are chosen to appeal to a Western audience and to serve as a bridge of understanding and commonality between Western viewers and the Muslim Brotherhood. The inclusion of articles and topics critical of Islam and Islamists demonstrates that the Brotherhood is capable of self-critique and openness. Viewers are left with the opinion that the Brotherhood seeks opposing opinions and is willing to work with those who may hold differing viewpoints. Using Lynch's model discussed previously, the English site essentially serves as a clearinghouse of information for Western journalists wishing to report on the Brotherhood or political Islam. By actively providing information, the MB has a greater chance of positively influencing the coverage they receive in the Western press.

As part of this bridge-building, the site contains a wide scope of news stories and reports as well as stories written by external authors from *The New York Times*, the Carnegie Endowment Center and Al-Jazeera. While most articles on the site favorably portray the Brotherhood, administrators have in the past

posted reports critical of the organization including reports from USAID and Frontpage Magazine. Users may also access reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Harvard University and other centers.

Despite topical variances between the English and Arabic versions of the sites, the overall content and message does not vary significantly. However, the level of religious discourse intertwined throughout the two sites varies greatly. As discussed previously, the Arabic version of the site prominently displays information on Islamic issues throughout the site, with the Brotherhood's key principles highly integrated into the different topics. Conversely, the English site, while not denying the Islamic foundations of the Brotherhood, significantly reduces the imagery and Islamic discourse throughout the site. No swords nor copies of the Quran adorn the English page, and the words 'Islam' or 'Muslim' are scarce. In addition, the topics and links from the homepage generally focus on political issues and relations between the Middle East and the West. While one may be tempted to read too deeply into these variances between the Arabic and English sites, the level of religious discourse accurately reflects the anticipated viewership of the sites and should not necessarily be seen as an attempt to dilute the Islamic principles of the Brotherhood to a Western audience. Rather, the content of the English site reflects stories and principles which a Western viewership, specifically in the media, can resonate with in writing a story.

Of the three Islamist websites examined in this paper, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt utilizes the Internet in the most effective manner through a high-quality website reaching both national and international audiences. The Brotherhood's use of the Internet fits well within the three described motivations for Islamist organizations to utilize the Internet. First, the Muslim Brotherhood uses their website as an extension of the public sphere by clearly articulating their positions in a public medium through which constituents and non-constituents can engage in debate, respond to news articles, and express their opinions through online polls. The Brotherhood thoroughly frames their positions and articulates their stance on political and religious issues throughout the site. This communication of ideas and beliefs sustains the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood online and institutionalizes their position as a powerful and present Islamist organization within Egypt. The second reason the Muslim Brotherhood utilizes the Internet is to disseminate and make known its positions, both as a source of information and as a potential source of mobilization. By using the Internet, Muslim Brotherhood officials can circumvent local censorship and press laws and reach millions of people at a relatively low cost and with ease. Through the site, the Brotherhood can counter negative accusations and stereotypes leveled against it and provide updated and correct information to viewers interested in the details. Even more importantly, the presence of the Brotherhood online serves as a source of mobilization through which leaders can reach potential members

throughout the country. Viewers of the site can access religious and political information about the group, and in the process he or she may become convinced of the validity of the Brotherhood's beliefs. This is not a mindless process in which the viewer becomes convinced of the Brotherhood's claims, but rather a process of agency where an individual's political or religious beliefs may predispose him or her to agree with the Brotherhood on the topics presented.

The third reason Islamist groups utilize the Internet is to present a counterhegemonic narrative aimed at discrediting the regime and at increasing the legitimacy of the organization framing the argument. More so than the PJD or the IAF, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt excels in this area. This willingness to present a complete and alternative narrative through the Internet likely stems from the political interactions between the Islamist groups studied and their respective regimes. Differing from the PJD and the IAF, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is not a recognized and legal political party existing in a complementary and dependent relationship with the ruling regime. In seeking to present a holistic counternarrative to the regime, the Brotherhood must explicate its positions on a number of policy issues and make its presence known internationally. This fact likely explains the robust size of the Brotherhood's sites as well as the presence of a reputable English language version. By presenting itself as an alternative to the ruling regime, the Brotherhood seeks to highlight the sharp difference between the corruption of the regime and the prosperous future envisioned by the Muslim

Brotherhood. By effectively fusing religion and politics within the Arabic site, viewers are called to participate in the political process and to transform society through their education, their families, their religion and their politics.

Conclusion

As seen in this paper, Islamist political organizations have increasingly utilized the Internet as an effective political and religious forum. The expertise and skill with which the different parties utilize the Internet depends on the experience and goals of the parties, however, the trend of Islamist political participation through the Internet is clear. Islamist parties use the Internet for a variety of reasons, most specifically to advertise and disseminate their political and religious messages to a broader national and international audience. The Islamic Action Front in Jordan and the Justice and Development Party in Morocco are still in the early stages of framing their Internet messages. At this point, their sites are geared towards a national audience interested in discovering more about the respective political parties. In contrast, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has developed a professional and powerful website, in both English and Arabic, to inform national and international audiences of the Brotherhood's positions, and to advertise and propagate the group's political and religious call to potential constituents in Egypt and abroad. While the overall effectiveness of Islamist Internet participation remains unclear, Islamist political organizations will continue to spread their messages through the Internet in order to reach

constituents and interested parties. Only time will determine the effectiveness of the Internet in bringing about the goals of Islamist political parties in the Middle East.

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