

## Media experiences and communication strategies of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from 1928 to 2011: A brief historical overview

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The media experience of the Muslim Brotherhood (Arabic: Ikhwan al-muslimin) goes back nearly seven decades and has included magazines, newsletters, radio broadcast, face-to-face proselytizing in mosques and cultural centers and finally online communication via websites and social media platforms. Since its foundation, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has been involved almost continuously in conflicts of varying intensity with the country's political authorities (ISS 2011) and the group's communication strategy has evolved in close relation to the different relations it maintained with Egypt's governing elites during different periods. In this article I provide a brief historical overview of central aspects of the MB's communication strategy from its foundation in 1928 to the overthrow of the regime of Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

### 1. Founding years and consolidation, 1928 – 1948

The MB was created during the monarchy, under a semi-liberal regime subject to severe limitations imposed by the British, who retained considerable control over Egypt's affairs, and whose military continued to occupy the country. Founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna in the city of Isma'iliya, the MB remained small during its first three years. In 1932, it moved its center to Cairo from where its membership began to grow dramatically. After a year in Cairo, the organization began publishing its first weekly newsletter and held its first general conference. By 1938 it had three hundred offices throughout the country and an estimated membership between 50.000 and 150.000 (Munson 2001).

A distinctive feature of the MB was its complex federated structure with a multi-level network of branches throughout the country, united by the headquarters in Cairo (ISS 2011; Munson 2001).

During its early years the MB was an explicitly apolitical society, dedicated to charity and religious reform. It focused on poverty, a perceived decline in morality and stricter adherence to Islamic values, as well as collective resistance to corrupting Western influences as solutions to these problems. However, the MB avoided applying these views to specific political issues and remained vague when it came to translating them into concrete policy demands. Rather than that, during the early years, the group's communication strategy was closely related to the basic organizational feature of its federated structure: The establishment of each new branch headquarters would immediately be followed by the launch of a public service project (e.g., construction of a mosque, school, or clinic). These activities brought the MB into contact with millions of Egyptians and added material legitimacy to its ideological message of Islam as the true path to social development. Alongside its public works, the group relied on a strategy of vertical word-of-mouth communication. Documents stating the group's position on current issues would be distributed from the Cairo headquarters to the rural centers. There they would be explained to a small group of literate leaders, each of whom would then pass on the information to one hundred fellow Ikhwanis. This combined strategy ensured that the group's ideology would not remain as a set of abstract ideas debated exclusively by intellectuals and group leaders. Instead, members at the base could perceive the Islamic message as linked to the practical activities of the group. The group's rapid expansion demonstrates the efficiency of this strategy in terms of

membership recruitment: By 1949 the MB constituted the largest organized force of civil society in Egypt with an estimated membership of 300.000 to 600.000 active members (Munson 2001).

It was only towards the late 1930s that the MB adopted a decidedly political tone. In its newsletters the group explicitly supported the Arab general strike in Palestine and expressed itself increasingly critical of the quasi-colonial role of the British. In 1941, the MB presented candidates to the parliamentary elections for the first time and began to organize increasingly large public rallies calling for political reform and the withdrawal of the British troops.

In 1948, the Egyptian government officially dissolved the MB and imprisoned many of its members after the police had discovered several caches of bombs and explosives. Although the group claimed that these had been accumulated for use in the Arab-Israeli war, the government interpreted these discoveries as proof that the Brotherhood was planning a revolution. At that time, the MB had gained enormous popular support through its public works. The government was thus keen to take the opportunity to neutralize what it had come to fear as the threat of a potential parallel state, which Egyptians might come to consider as more legitimate than the official one and dissolved the group, imprisoning many of its members. The MB retaliated by assassinating the Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi, in turn, its founder and leader Al-Banna, was murdered two months later by Egyptian police (Munson 2001).

## **2. State repression under Nasser and Sadat, 1948 – 1981**

In 1952, the coup of the Free Officers led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the monarchy of King Farouk. Given its supporting role in the revolution the MB enjoyed a brief period of cordial relations with the military junta. However, relations with the new regime quickly deteriorated into what should become its the most traumatic experience of state repression (ISS 2011). Among the reasons were the Officers' refusal to share political power, the MB's insistence on an Islamic constitution, and a deep mutual distrust between Nasser and the MB's new leader Hasan al-Hudaybi (Carré and Michau 1983). In 1954, the government decreed to dissolve the group on the grounds that Hudaybi and his supporters had conspired to overthrow the government. Subsequent trials led to the execution of several MB leaders. Over the next decade hundreds of other Ikhwanis were arrested, held in concentration camps, and tortured while leaders who were not imprisoned were left with the choice between exile and underground (Carré and Michau 1983; Kepel 1984; Munson 2001).

The group enjoyed a slightly less tense relation with the government of Anwar el Sadat who took over the presidency following Nasser's death in 1970 (ISS 2011). Sadat adopted a policy of economic liberalization and, to a lesser degree, political liberalization. The concentration camps were closed in 1971 and the last imprisoned Ikhwanis were amnesticed in 1975. The MB itself though, remained illegal and its position to the regime somewhat vague. While the group neither expressly supported nor opposed Sadat, it came to include many successful businessmen who benefited from his policy of market liberalization.

While state repression under Nasser and Sadat effectively eliminated many other opposition groups, the MB's federated branch structure helped the group to maintain its organizational strength. Although the group was officially banned, and subject to continuous police surveillance the branch system allowed the group to maintain its activities. According to Munson (2001) the Brotherhood kept lines of communication and authority open to different branches in order to protect the larger organization from periodic government crackdowns, police raids,

and infiltration by the state security apparatus and the US State department received numerous reports of mass meetings and pamphleteering throughout Egypt during this time.

Under Nasser, the mosque constituted the group's most important resource for member recruitment and communication. Except for sport events, mosques were the only place where the public assembly of a large number of people was tolerated by the government. A specifically Islamic message was thus crucial for the group's ability to use the mosque in order to disseminate an ideology that was critical of the regime.

Under Sadat, the Brotherhood's main political demand concerned the harmonization of Egyptian laws with the laws of the Sharia. These views were expressed and spread through the late 1970s and early 1980s by the magazine *al-Dawa* which Hamza (2009) describes as the MB's most prolific and active media experience during these years. While Sadat did not accede to the group's request to be recognized as a political party and the Political Party Law of 1977 explicitly banned faith-based parties, in 1976 the group was allowed to publish its monthly magazine whose circulation is estimated to have reached 100.000 (Kepel 1984; Wickham 2002). Because the Brotherhood refrained from openly criticizing the government it was given relative latitude in what it published for almost half a decade. Although *al-Dawa* was not the only outlet for Islamist views in Egypt, it was one of the most consistent and popular. However, writers for the magazine decidedly rejected Israel as a state, both on political and religious grounds. Hence, when Sadat signed the peace accords with Israel at Camp David in 1979, the group's relations with the regime quickly deteriorated and the magazine was prohibited in 1981.

### **3. Selective accommodation and repression under the first two decades of Mubarak, 1981 – 2000**

Following the assassination of Sadat in 1981 by the religious extremist group *al-Jihad*, not officially linked with but only indirectly associated with the MB<sup>1</sup>, Vice-President Husni Mubarak took over the presidency.

Mubarak's relation with the Brotherhood stood halfway between recognition and exclusion: Although the group remained technically illegal, it maintained its national and regional offices and was allowed to present independent candidates or field candidates on the lists of other parties (Carnegie Endowment 2011; Wickham 2002). This ambiguous policy – maybe best described by Bianchi (1989) as an approach of *selective accommodation and repression* – was motivated by the state's need to create a popular base against the growing influence of fundamentalist Islamic groups (Moustafa 2000; Wickham 2002).

During the first decade of Mubarak's rule the MB demonstrated an impressive mobilization and organization capacity. It made a strong showing as junior partner of the liberal New Wafd party and the Labor party in the parliamentary elections of 1984 and won 36 seats as an ally of the Socialist Labor and Socialist Liberal parties in the elections of 1987 (Carnegie Endowment 2011). At the same time, the group's influence in Egypt's civil society further increased as members assumed strategic posts on the governing boards of major occupational or professional interest groups (ISS 2011; Wickham 2002).

Through their political inclusion the Brotherhood's functionaries acquired new communications skills that clearly reflected in their political discourse. In public statements the MB explicitly re-

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<sup>1</sup>The group was subsequently found to have hatched the assassination plot with *Al Gamaa al-Islamiyya*, a Brotherhood offshoot that would, in the mid-1990s, develop ties with *al-Qaeda*

nounced violence, committed itself to democratic values, and pledged to strive for moderate Islamic reform within the frame of the country's political system (ISS 2011; Moustafa 2000).

During this period, books of prominent Ikhwan scholars were available in many bookstores and the Brotherhood published three monthly magazines - *al-Mukhtar*, *al- I'tisam*, and *Liwa' al-islam*. The latter, which has often been described as the successor to the popular Brotherhood magazine *al-Da'wa*, reached its height of circulation in 1987 with 95.000 copies out of which a roughly 55.000 were sold inside Egypt. In fact, the MBs actual communications outreach may have been substantially bigger: As buying magazines or books was often unaffordable to even the middle class, these publications were often xeroxed and distributed to a much larger number of readers (Wickham 2002).

However, relations with the regime deteriorated once more starting from the early 1990s. As the MB began to use its increased political and societal leverage to criticize and pressure the government, Mubarak reacted with repressive measures to curb its influence. In 1993, professional associations were placed under state control and over thousand Ikhwanis were arrested between 1995 and 1996 on charges of conspiring to overthrow the government.

#### 4. The Brotherhood's digital era, 2000 – 2010

It is certainly no accident that the dawn of the MB's digital era coincides – or at least overlaps – with renewed state repression of the group. The year 2000 witnessed the Brotherhood's first serious web presence with the launch of several Arabic websites (Hamza 2009). Initially, the MB relied on bloggers who maintained servers located outside of the country and thereby couldn't be taken offline by the government (Howard 2011).

The MB successfully used the Internet to share information, organize supporters, and conduct other activities that helped it challenge the government. One reason why the group could effectively use digital technology is Egypt's relatively young and technically versed population. The median age in Egypt is 24 and 33 % of the population is under 14. Cell phone use is wide spread with 67 mobile phone subscribers for every 100 inhabitants. About 10 % of the population has used the Internet at least once (Howard et al. 2011). Internet use is highest among the country's young urbanites. Like other opposition forces, the Brotherhood benefited from the fact that Cairo and Alexandria are not only centers of cultural activities but also had reasonably well developed Internet infrastructures from 2000 onwards, thus enabling the cities' politically disaffected youth to create a dynamic public sphere online.

The first phase of Brotherhood blogging can best be characterized as an attempt to challenge the secular domination of the Egyptian blogosphere (Al-Anani 2008). Activist blogging in Egypt had thus far been closely tied to the leftist Kifaya National Movement for Change, a grassroots movement agitating for civil rights and political reform since 2004 (All-Malky 2007). Now, MB bloggers sought to import the experience of secular bloggers into the Islamist camp and employ it to serve the Islamist movement (Al-Anani 2008).

In an effort to reach out to Western opinion makers in 2005, the Brotherhood launched its first official website in English, *Ikhwanweb*<sup>2</sup>. Khaled Hamza, the website's chief editor, describes its mission as follows:

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.ikhwanweb.com/>

*Ikhwanweb's basic mission is to bridge the knowledge gap between the MB and Western intellectuals so that they get to know its ideology without distortion, and understand our political, cultural, and moderate religious message [...] Ikhwanweb was not concerned with spreading Islam [...] We are rather adopting a political, cultural and intellectual discourse [...] Ikhwanweb's news coverage avoided any direct religious discourse [...] We worked hard to make the editing mainly based on press professionalism, objectivity and neutrality. We focused on issues of democracy, reform, political repression, torture and tyranny. (Hamza 2009)*

However, starting from the mid 2005, the MB's uniform online image began to crack as young brothers started to openly question certain aspects of the Brotherhood's organization and ideology on their personal blogs. In 2007, the MB released a draft political party platform. Among other things, the platform advocated the formation of a "higher council" of religious scholars to oversee the government and a ban on women or non-Muslims as head of state (Hamid 2009). Sticking out of the avalanche of criticism triggered by the platform, were the harsh comments of young Brotherhood bloggers such as Mohamed Hamza, Magdy Saad, Abdel-Moniem Mahmoud, Abdel-Rahman, Ayyash, Somiya el-Erian, Ibrahim el-Houdaiby. The online debate about the 2007 platform revealed, for the first time, the deep intellectual and generational divides inside the organization (Al-Anani 2008; All-Malky 2007; Lynch 2007a, Lynch 2007b). With the growing importance of social media, the practice of using the Web as a vehicle to voice dissent against MB leaders has spread among younger Brotherhood members.

The MB leadership, in turn, appears determined to have its share in shaping the organization's online discourse. However, it appears unlikely that it will be able to fully control this discourse. In 2009, Ikhwanweb started the Twitter account @Ikhwanweb<sup>3</sup>. In the beginning, @Ikhwanweb was little more than a robotic-curated Twitter feed linking to the website's posts. More recently, however, young Twitterati have been transforming the MB's Twitter channel into an online showcase of the country's most heated debates. Young Ikhwani tweeters emphasize that increased activity on the Twitter did not follow orders from above but was rather an internal decision by Ikhwanweb's editorial team who claims to manage the website independently and without leadership interference. According to the young MB tweeters, their tweets are not vetted, but do represent the official position of the Brotherhood (Bohn 2011). This combination may in time prove to be a potential threat to the cohesion of the MB's media image. The same holds for other branches of Ikhwan's growing network of Web portals. In 2010 the MB launched Ikhwanwiki<sup>4</sup> – a mini library of about 1.700 articles that offers the Brotherhood's perspective of their own history and ideology (Amer 2010). As Evgeny Morozov (2010) has pointed out, Wikis - with their open-editing philosophy - pose a high risk of revealing intra-organizational tensions. In case of the MB the Ikhwanwiki experiment may well backfire by making ideological splits between the movement's old guard and its younger Internet-savvy elements visible to the public.

## 5. The Brotherhood's Role in Egypt's Online Political Sphere post the Arab Spring

As stated above, Egypt has long had an active online public sphere. Many of Egypt's political parties maintain Websites and publish online newspapers. Although the MB was banned under the Mubarak regime its Web presence was rival if not superior to that of many legally permitted opposition parties (Howard et al. 2011).

<sup>3</sup><https://twitter.com/Ikhwanweb>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.ikhwanwiki.com/>

It is largely acknowledged that the MB and its online communication played only a minor role in mobilizing the mass protests that toppled the regime of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.<sup>5</sup> The event that sparked the January 25 revolution was a campaign on Facebook<sup>6</sup> that called for demonstrations to commemorate the death of a young blogger, Khaled Said, killed by policemen in June 2010. What started in Alexandria with demonstrations against police brutality soon expanded into a nationwide protest against social injustice, economic deprivation, and political repression under the presidency of Mubarak.

The enormous clout and consequence of the Khaled Said campaign motivated the MB to further step up its own online activities. As other Egyptian political parties the MB has increased its efforts to create new online content and connect with potential supporters.

Using a crawling based approach to map the Egyptian digital space Howard et. al. (2011) found that significant structural shifts took place between November 2010 and May 2011. In 2010, the Websites of major political actors were centered around social media and Western news media such as CNN and BBC. By May 2011, Western social media and news outlet still held a central position in Egypt's online political sphere but were now clearly arranged along the periphery of the MB's Websites. Digital content produced by the MB has also come to dominate Facebook which is one of the most central nodes in the Egyptian online network of political information.

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<sup>5</sup>This is not to say that individual and collective religious actors in the MENA region at that time were unconcerned or ignorant about the Web's potential for political communication or that they did not dispose of a strategy for online communication. The centrality of digital ICTs for the institutional evolution of political cultures in the Islamic world and the emergence of a new pan-Arab public sphere, united by a common cultural-religious identity and a shared political narrative has been thoroughly discussed in academic and journalistic writing (Bunt 2003, Howard 2011, Lim 2009, Lynch 2006, Nasr 2005, Wright 2011).

<sup>6</sup><https://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed>

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