

## **Working Paper**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
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International and Security Affairs

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# **Inside The Arab Bloggers' Minds: Europe, Democracy and Religion**

Monitoring Facebook and Arab Blogs from  
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# Table of Contents

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Young Arabs and the Internet .....	1
Main groups in the Arabic language blogosphere .....	1
Blogosphere overview .....	1
Does Europe enjoy the trust of the Arab Youth? .....	1
Democracy – illusion or reality? .....	3
Turkey – a mediator or a gambler? .....	4
What does the media say? .....	4
What do young Arabs really want? .....	5
Blogs .....	5
References .....	6

## Young Arabs and the Internet

The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) has the second highest percentage of young people in the world. According to the 2010 World Population Data Sheet, the population in the MENA region is around 384 million people. Over 30 percent are between 15 and 30 years old.

According to the Arab Media Outlook Report 2011, there are 65 million internet users in the MENA region. In the first quarter of 2011, there were more than 30 million Facebook users. Egypt alone had 7,339,660 Facebook users in mid May 2011, a third more than in December 2010. In 2010, 35 percent of Arabic discussions in social media networks included political terms. This number has increased to 88 percent in 2011.

There are more than 40,000 blogs in Arabic, according to a study from the Berkman Center for Internet and Society in 2010. The ability of the bloggers to move quickly in the internet and to participate simultaneously in different platforms such as Twitter and Facebook poses a challenge for the study of the blogosphere.

### Main groups in the Arabic language blogosphere

Arabic bloggers and Facebook users are mainly young and male. According to Facebook statistics, during the first half of 2011, the highest proportion of female bloggers was found amongst the Egyptian and Tunisian population. Almost half of the bloggers in both countries are women, one of the highest percentages of female bloggers in the entire Arabic blogosphere. The majority of users in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Libya are male. The majority of bloggers and Facebook users in the MENA region are between 20 and 35 years old.

The Arabic and English language blogosphere is active in Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen and Libya.

Moroccan, Tunisian and Algerian bloggers write in a mix of Arabic and French. Almost all bloggers and Facebook users make use of the dialect of their countries of origin.

## Blogosphere overview

This paper analyses the Arabic blogosphere by looking at 30 individual and group blogs out of 40,000 from different Arab countries. Even though these 30 blogs do not automatically reflect the views of all young Arab users of social media, they still give a profound insight into a new phenomenon. This paper explores major concerns and questions of the young generation in the Arab World with a special focus on the recent political changes.

### Does Europe enjoy the trust of the Arab Youth?

The majority of Facebook users and bloggers in the blogs examined do not differentiate between European and American foreign policy in the Middle East. Very few bloggers see any difference at all. They often use the word "West" for both, Europe and the US, but also express their ideas and feelings vis-à-vis European politics.

Despite this, Europe is absent in almost all these discussions. Very few bloggers and Facebook users mentioned Europe at all. When they do, they mainly criticized countries such as France and Britain because of their long support of the autocratic regimes in the Arab World. Germany is totally absent in their discussions.

Bloggers and Facebook users have different opinions regarding their expectations of European countries.

The famous Facebook page: "We are all Khalid Said/ Politician", points out that European countries can make a valuable contribution to the "democratic transition" in Egypt and other Arab countries. In a video uploaded on April 8<sup>th</sup> on this page, people in the streets of Cairo were asked about their understanding of democracy and how this could be applied to their country. Most of them did not know which democratic model would be best for Egypt. They did not display an understanding of the notion of the division of power. Some participants in the discussion consider "Europe" as the best model to apply but failed to distinguish between different European models of democracy. Others mentioned the possibility of learning from European experience in building political institutions.

The Tunisian blogger Lina Bin Mhenni publishes an influential blog called, "Tunisian girl", and is also active on Facebook. On May 10<sup>th</sup> she mentioned the

importance of European investments in Tunisia. Bin Mhenni explains that Europe would always be an important economic partner for Tunisia. She believes that through bilateral cooperation, young Tunisians will have access to jobs in Tunisia. This will have an immediate impact on immigration to Europe. But at the same time, she is uneasy about Europe's previous support for ex-President Ben Ali. She also criticized the careless way in which Europe is handling the continuous political turmoil in Tunisia. Bin Mhenni argues that the revolution did not succeed yet and that the Tunisian police are still brutally attacking civilians and journalists.

Sleem Amamou is a young and active Tunisian blogger who on January 18<sup>th</sup> became the Minister of Youth and Sport after the revolution in Tunisia. He resigned from the Ministry on May 23<sup>rd</sup> to be responsible of the first digital political party, called "Pirate party" in Tunisia. In a one-to-one interview on May 4<sup>th</sup> Amamou agreed with Bin Mhenni that after the Tunisian Revolution Europe will be an important economic partner especially in the tourism and industry sector. But, in his opinion, before any new cooperation is agreed upon, Europe must understand that not all young Tunisians and Arabs are terrorists or sympathize with Bin Laden's ideology. He explains that young Arabs feel that Europe does not trust them and that Europeans view all Arabs as terrorists. Young Tunisians are not sure how Europe will treat them after the revolution. Amamou explains that young Tunisians admire the European way of life. They usually decide to go to Europe instead of going to Saudi Arabia and Yemen. He argues that the EU must do more to understand Tunisian culture and mentality. Mr. Amamou concludes that Europe must understand that young Muslims are against extremists and terrorism. Tunisians are well educated people and open-minded towards other cultures.

Few of the bloggers or Facebook users give Europe an important role in the recent developments in the Arab World. Mr. Suhail Gossaibi, who is a native from Saudi Arabia but lives permanently in Bahrain, publishes the well known blog: "Suhail Gossaibi Radical Dojo" and rejected during a one-to-one interview on May 10<sup>th</sup> any help from European leaders. In Gossaibi's opinion, nobody in the Arab World will ask for Europe's help after the end of the political turmoil. He explains: "It's not sure what is wanted from Europe. Many young Arabs, especially in Bahrain, are frustrated with the one-sided reporting from

the Western Media. The democratic transition is not really about Europe, it is more about young Arabs".

There was a heated debate on April 25<sup>th</sup> on one of the Syrian Facebook pages: "The Syrian Revolution" concerning the role of the West and especially of Europe. Users criticize the silence of European leaders towards the massacres in Syria. Even though the majority of users support on May 15<sup>th</sup> European sanctions against Assad's regime, they refuse any political interference or military intervention in Syria. They believe that any intervention will take the revolution out of their hands. It is crucial for most participants in these blogs that these movements are, and must remain, driven by young Arabs.

Many North African blogs clearly express their anger about the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, and his support for the dictators in North Africa. They were also disturbed by his announcement that France will implement a plan to protect European borders from illegal immigrants. Participants in these discussions said that Sarkozy was responsible for Europe's lack of success and acceptance in North Africa and especially in the Maghreb.

Libyan bloggers can be clearly distinguished from the respective blogger communities in Egypt and Tunisia. Almost all Libyan users agree on the importance of Western intervention in their country, to protect civilians and support the revolution. They go as far as asking NATO to kill Gaddafi, arguing that it is their legitimate right to see him dead after the massacre he committed in Libya. Libyan bloggers introduced religious aspects to their fight ("Jihad"), which is not the case with Tunisian, Egyptian and even Syrian users. Tribes were often mentioned in the discussions as were the respective relationships among these tribes.

On some Libyan Facebook pages, such as "Libya Now" and "R.N.N", there was an intense debate on April 22<sup>nd</sup> on the reasons for Western help and Western intervention. One of the issues they discussed was Libya's oil. Some participants in the debate stressed the idea that "the West" has a secret agenda in Libya and that Europeans are going after their oil. From their point of view, Europe is taking care only of its own interests. It is argued that European leaders always side with the strongest party, no matter who is behind it. What Europe wants is to secure access to the strategic energy resources in North Africa. Other participants did not mind that "the West" might take advantage of the situation as long as they protect civilians and get rid of Gaddafi.

Lebanese bloggers, such as Asaad Abu Khalil, criticize the relation between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. On April 13<sup>th</sup> he started a debate in his blog “The Angry Arab News Service” concerning arms sales to the Saudis and the extent to which this is a legitimate way to promote democracy in the region. Using articles uploaded from news agencies, such as Reuters, Abu Khalil discussed the price of selling arms to Saudi Arabia. He hints at the idea that these arms were used in Bahrain to suppress Shia protests. He implies that Israel is behind Riyadh’s new hunger for arms and that Israel will benefit from any conflict in the region.

Almost all users differentiate between Europeans (as people) and European leaders. They explained that Europeans are supporting Arabs but their leaders are only serving their own interests. In Al Jazeera talk, a blog by Al Jazeera Television, participants pointed out on May 12<sup>th</sup> that European leaders’ main concern is about losing control of the Arab countries and their strategic energy resources in the wake of the turmoil. “The West” supported the “Arab Spring” only after the movements succeeded in Tunisia and Egypt. In the opinion of some users, the West had a hand in the revolutions. European and American security officials, it is said, met with protesters and some bloggers and offered logistical support.

## Democracy – illusion or reality?

Despite different opinions concerning the revolutionary movements in the Arab World, almost all users agree that the revolution in their countries is not over yet and that the road to democracy is a long one.

Mohamed Mansour, a blogger and participant in “Al Jazeera Talk”, explains on May 16<sup>th</sup> that the revolution in Egypt has still not succeeded because the main demand of installing a civilian government has not been achieved yet. In “Maktoub blogs” Ahlam, a Yemeni activist and blogger, concentrates on the difficulties of obtaining democracy in Yemen. Ahlam explains that even if President Ali Abdullah Saleh would give up power, he would still have his followers in the new government. The fact that there are different centers of power in Yemen will create an obstacle to any democratic process.

There were many questions concerning the situation in the Arab countries after the recent political changes. Bloggers asked many questions concerning the meaning of democracy, how to achieve it, and

what is the price for it. Egyptian bloggers ask what kind of democracy would be suitable for the Egyptian culture.

On March 16<sup>th</sup> Saudi blogger Ahmed Al Omran asks in his blog “Saudi Jeans” if the ‘fear barrier’ in Saudi Arabia has been broken yet, referring to the unsuccessful protests in Saudi Arabia that were suppressed by the police.

There are three different opinions on how a possible participation of the Muslim Brotherhood in a new government is seen within the Egyptian blogger community. The first group is against any participation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the upcoming elections. The second group demands a party program of the Muslim Brotherhood before they decide if they want to elect them or not. The third group criticizes the Muslim Brotherhood for their policies, but would be willing to accept their democratic right to run for office.

In Egyptian, Bahraini, Lebanese and Syrian blogs sectarianism in Arab societies was widely discussed. On April 26<sup>th</sup>, Khaled Elekhetyar in his “Freelancitizen Blog” refuses sectarianism and religious parties in Syria. He accuses the Syrian regime of pushing for a sectarian conflict by attacking Sunni, Kurdish and Christian civilians in Syria in a bid to weaken the revolution and the protestors.

Mahmoud Salem, who was arrested by the police in February 2011, and who is the author of the “Sand-Monkey”, a famous English language blog, urges the Egyptian society to admit that: “sectarianism has its roots deep in the foundation of the Egyptian society”. On May 10<sup>th</sup> Salem explains in his post that the reasons behind the sectarian problems are the ignorance of the “Other” (in this case Muslims or Christians) and the lack of interest in learning from the past and its mistakes. He blames both Christians and Muslims in Egypt for not learning from the past.

There is a big campaign on Facebook to stop sectarian discord in Egypt, Syria and Bahrain. Young Egyptians – both Muslim and Christian - created a page on facebook “Together in front of God” and “We are all Egyptians” to find a common ground to communicate and to protect Egypt from any conflict. On this page, Christian and Muslim bloggers stress the importance of a dialogue between different religious beliefs to solve problems with sectarianism. Users agree that there is a need to further develop the religious discourse in Egypt. They also agree that the sectarian conflict can be traced back to the old regime, which

had an interest in inciting tensions in the population on this issue.

Other users talked about Arab unity after the political changes. They claim that unity can be achieved once an authoritarian ruler steps down or is removed from office. In the eyes of the internet users these rulers were the main obstacle to unity among Arabs. A number of social networks users, mainly on Facebook, are supporting the idea of revolutions everywhere in the Arab World. Users open pages on Facebook, such as “We are All for Libya” and “To Support Revolution in Syria”. They post special articles on their blogs to support any new democratic movement in the Middle East. But what is more interesting is the users’ criticism on May 15<sup>th</sup> of the League of Arab States. The majority considers the Arab League illegitimate because it represents authoritarian regimes and still consists of many dictators from the Arab World.

### **Turkey – a mediator or a gambler?**

In March 2011, many bloggers were talking about Turkey’s soft power and its role as a third party in the management and resolution of regional conflicts. Dalia Ziada, an Egyptian activist, argues in her blog “that Turkey is not only a top mediator between the East and the West but also between the Arabs themselves.”

Yet in April 2011, after the political turmoil in Syria started, bloggers began questioning Turkey’s diplomatic interests and its policy in the region.

One example is the Palestinian blogger Salah Alden Hameeda’s criticism of Turkey’s reactions towards the political movements in Libya and Syria. On April 29<sup>th</sup> he argues that Turkey does not show leadership qualities but comes across as indecisive and contradictory. Hameeda states “[f]irst, Turkey opposed NATO’s intervention in Libya, and then declared that Qaddafi must step down immediately and leave. The same act was repeated with regard to Syria”. Turkey was very diplomatic with al-Assad’s regime and then told the President to either change the regime’s behaviour towards demonstrators or to step down. The blogger criticizes Turkey for not being clear and firm on foreign policy issues in the region.

Other Facebook pages such as “Syrian Revolution until Freedom” and “Syrian Revolution”, question Turkey’s real intentions vis-à-vis Syria. They have doubts as to whether Turkey really wants to support Syrian civilians or if Turkey is mostly interested in the

outcome of its own elections. They also wonder whether Turkey is not perhaps primarily looking after its economic interests in the region and its relations with the EU and the US.

None of the users in the 30 blogs analyzed mention Turkey’s regime as a good model for any of the Arab countries after the political changes took place in the region. There is a lack of awareness and knowledge about Turkey’s political system and there are also historical and social sensitivities with respect to Turkey as a leading power.

### **What does the media say?**

The established press in some Arab countries such as Asharq Alawsat, al-Hayat and al-Ahram and some well-known columnists seem to have positions on Turkey, the EU and Germany that are more considered than those of the bloggers.

The Lebanese Journalist Randa Takieddine argues in her article in al-Hayat Newspaper on May 27<sup>th</sup> that Europe does not have a clear plan in the Arab world and Europeans misjudged the situation in many Arab countries, especially with respect to the revolutionary movements. She criticizes Europe and its democratic projects in the region, as well as the means by which Europe dealt with Libya in the past and its past rapprochement with Qaddafi regime. She states that for decades Qaddafi bought Europe’s silence with money and oil. She continues: “French president Sarkozy is an example of European policy towards the Arab World. After his honeymoon with the Syrian regime in 2009, he doesn’t know how to deal with President al Assad now”.

There is criticism of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Foreign Minister Westerwelle because of Germany’s policy towards the MENA region and its unconditional support for Israel. Al-Ahram Newspaper on May 12<sup>th</sup> published a long article about Westerwelle’s promise to offer economic support to the MENA region. The article argues that the lengthy list of support that Westerwelle announced in his latest visit to Egypt came without any mention of the implementation mechanism.

The Egyptian Journalist Maamoun Fandy challenges the bloggers directly and asks the young Arabs to leave Facebook and to start facing each other. He writes in one of his articles on March 12<sup>th</sup> that it is not enough to continue the revolution only by communication through Facebook and blogs. “Young Egyptians should

leave the space of social media and start acting in real life. Hiding behind social media is not enough and will not fulfill your demands.” Fandy explains that what is needed after the revolution is much more difficult and dangerous than the revolution itself. He concludes that Egypt needs the new generation now more than the social media needs them.

### What do young Arabs really want?

Based on the analysis of 30 blogs, young Arabs with different nationalities seem to share the same dream of a better life, a new start with a good education, access to jobs and encouragement from the state. What is noticeable is the low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence of young Arabs. This has to do with their frustration at not being able to prove themselves in the absence of a real chance. They complain of a lack of opportunities under the oppressive regimes. What they really need are not only jobs but respect and trust in their abilities to change their societies from within.

Bloggers and Facebook users are independent pluralists, well educated, well informed and well connected with one another. But the majority of bloggers do not know much about Europe and the role of the EU. They tend to talk about “Europe” instead of differentiating between the European countries. There is no or little differentiation between different European political systems, forms of government and institutions. Participants call the EU and the US uniformly “The West”. From their point of view “the West” sees them basically as terrorists. Strong and misleading stereotypes seem to dominate their image which leads to frustration among the young people in the region.

From studying these blogs it seems that the cultural strength of the Arab World is based mainly on religion and the role of the family. This also seems true for the younger generation. Job opportunities are unquestionably one of the principal demands of young Arabs, but not the only wish for the future. Young Arabs repeatedly asked in these blogs and on Facebook for a better environment where family, religion and work can exist in harmony. Young Muslims refuse extremist Islam and sectarian conflicts but they defend their religion and express their pride and identity as Muslims.

### Blogs

- 1 Saudi Jeans (Blog): Ahmed Al Omran – Saudi Arabia
- 2 The Angry Arab News Service (Blog): Asaad Abu Khalil – Lebanon
- 3 Syria-Revolution until Freedom (Facebook): Syrian bloggers, Anonymous – Syria
- 4 Syrian Revolution Digest (Blog): Ammar Abdulhamid – Syria
- 5 Freelancitizen (Blog): Khaled Elekhetyar – Syria
- 6 The Arabist (Blog): A Website on Arab politics and culture. This blog has been run by freelance Arab journalists for over seven years
- 7 Maghreb Blog: A forum devoted to current political, economic trends and news of the Maghreb region – North Africa.
- 8 The Moor Next Door (Blog): Maghreb Affairs, Geopolitics and International Relations.
- 9 Together in front of God (Facebook): Egyptian bloggers to stop sectarian strife in Egypt.
- 10 We are all Egyptians (Facebook): Egyptian bloggers.
- 11 Social Arab Web (2nd Arab Bloggers meeting): mixed Arab nationalities
- 12 A Tunisian girl (Blog): Lina Bin Mhenni – Tunisia
- 13 Al Jazeera Talk: belongs to Al Jazeera TV. Users are from different Arab nationalities.
- 14 Suhail Gossaibi Radical Dojo: Suhail Gossaibi – Bahrain.
- 15 Woman from Yemen (Blog): Anonymous – Yemen.
- 13 Fifth of April youth Movement (Facebook): different bloggers, Anonymous – Egypt
- 16 SandMonkey (Blog): Mahmoud Salem, Egypt, the owner of the Egyptian blog, was arrested by the Egyptian Army in February 2011 because of his article “Egypt, right now!”
- 17 We are all Khaled Said (Politician): Wael Ghoneim & other bloggers – Egypt
- 18 We are all Khaled Said (Public Figure): Wael Ghoneim & other bloggers – Egypt
- 19 We are all Khaled Said (Culture and society): Wael Ghoneim & other bloggers – Egypt
- 20 Werkestan Blog: Ahmad Yussri, Hesham Mansour and Nada Montasser – Egypt.
- 21 Salah Alden Hameeda (Blog): Syria.
- 22 WE are all for Libya (Facebook): Users from different Arab nationalities – To support Libya.
- 23 To support Revolution in Syria (Facebook): Users from different Arab nationalities
- 24 Elaph Talk (Blog): Saudi Arabia and other Arab nationalities.

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- 25 Maktoub (Blog): is a blog that contains different blogs at the same time – Different Arab Nationalities.
- 26 Aziz Ammami (Blog): His blog was very famous among young Tunisians during “Jasmine Revolution” – Tunis.
- 27 Culture ET Politique Arabes (French Blog): Anonymous.
- 28 Healing Iraq (Blog): Created by a blogger named Ziad from Baghdad.
- 29 Arab Youth- Europe (Facebook): to connect with young Arabs in Europe – Different Arab nationalities.
- 30 Aramram (Blog): is a blog grouping from Jordan.

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