

## From Long Island to Lebanon: Arab-American Bloggers Seek Out the Diaspora<sup>1</sup>

The date is August 6, 2006. Just an ordinary Sunday afternoon in Massachusetts. Nothing remarkable about the apartment either; picture the room of a typical engineering student. Stuff everywhere, chaos reigns. But in the mind of this room's inhabitant, a blogger known to his online readers by the pen-name 'Jij,' connections are being made in time and space. For Jij, the violence being meted out on his country Lebanon on this lazy Sunday afternoon is all too real. So real he is gripped by thoughts of family far away:

"My room is a mess. I am sitting in the middle of a war zone. Every inch of the floor is covered with books, papers, clothes, empty bottles of water, electric wires, CDs, trash and cardboard boxes. It feels like my room is slowly moving to Beirut while I sit in it...I found some old photos behind my desk. One of them is a black and white picture of my parents. On the back it says 'Aleppo 1976.' They were so young. They were my age."<sup>2</sup>

Jij, or Jihad Ibrahim as he is more commonly known, was not alone as an Arab in America writing about the Israel-Hizbulla War online. When Israel first began dropping

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Arab-American" is used loosely throughout this study as the analysis focuses on those people of both Arab and Iranian descent as well as expatriates from the Middle East. The bloggers interviewed for this piece all live in either the United States or Canada; some of them are immigrants; others are first generation. Both Muslim and Christian bloggers were interviewed for this study.

<sup>2</sup> Salam Cinema, <http://salamcinema.blogspot.com/2006/08/day-26.html>

bombs on Lebanon following the abduction of two soldiers by Hizbullah, Arabs in America turned not just to the coverage of Al Jazeera, LBC, and Al Arabiya, but also increasingly to the Internet. Isolated from the events taking place overseas—not to mention from their loved ones caught up in the month-long war—Arab ex-pats wanted to feel as though they too had a voice to be reckoned with. So, people in America and elsewhere went online to vent their frustrations, anxieties and criticisms of events. The online response to the war shows once again how the Internet is being used to generate loose Diaspora communities that cross national boundaries.

### **Blogging the War**

Responding to Western reporting of the conflict which many Arabs considered vague and biased, Arab-American bloggers felt a responsibility to encourage balanced dialogue during the Israel-Hizbullah War of July and August 2006. This meant not only seeking out previously rarely-heard voices from the Arab World, but also playing some role in shaping narratives of the war. For many bloggers, this marked a rare shift to political discussion.

“I only wrote politics during the war, because I really did not feel like writing about anything else,” admits Jihad Ibrahim, host of Salam Cinema.<sup>1</sup> “There was nothing else on my mind. That was the case for everyone online, I think. I felt compelled to write a lot because I felt there was an asymmetry in the way things were presented online.”

Ibrahim exhibits the struggle for those living in the Diaspora to combine an affinity for Western pop culture with a deep concern for contemporary political issues in his homeland, Lebanon. On his homepage in late November, “Jij” posted a tribute to the late Hollywood director Robert Altman followed immediately by a long analysis of the assassination of Lebanese Christian leader, Pierre Gemayel. “The country’s divisions are very deep and are not going away. Let’s hope nobody else dies in the meantime,” he wrote on November 23, 2006. The post shows the subtle ways in which Arab-American bloggers negotiate their dualistic identities.

### **Bypassing Censorship in the Arab World**

If blogs can function as a means for Arab-Americans to communicate directly with people in the Arab World, they may be particularly valuable to Arabs suffering from censorship and persecution due to their online activities. Often, those who discuss politics in North America do not feel the same pressures felt by bloggers in the Middle Eastern countries—that is, as long as they are outside the region. Iranian-Canadian blogger Hossein Derakhshan was wrapping up a visit to Tehran last year when authorities detained him at the airport. His blog, <http://hoder.com/weblog/>, which is dedicated to discussions relating to Iranian politics, technology and pop culture, addresses a number of subjects considered taboo in Iran. His website even offers tips for setting up personal blogs and getting around censorship tools.

Citing a violation of Iran's integrity, authorities interrogated Derakhshan, then forced him to sign an apology for his blogging activities before permitting him to leave. He says his experience in Iran has only reinforced his desire to continue blogging. "[The Iranian government] wrongly sees me as a threat," says Derakhshan. "They think I am trying to topple the regime, but I'm not."

A number of regimes in the Middle East are infamous for cracking down on bloggers to cap the spread of online dissidence. However, given that there is greater room for free expression in America, Arab-Americans usually feel at liberty to criticize Arab governments without fearing the same retribution. Moroccan-American journalist and blogger, Issandr El-Amrani concedes to this: "I blog under my own name partly because the blog is linked to my journalistic writing and partly because I have more freedom to do so as a US citizen," he says.

According to Nancy Beth Jackson, a journalist and professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs in New York, Arab regimes are still trying to come to grips with the way technology is changing the dynamics of opposition. "It is easier [for governments] to control the message in a newspaper than online," she explains. "Governments controlling the press can also control the message. Try that with Google!"

With that in mind, to what extent is blogging by Arab-Americans linked to opposition movements within Arab countries? In fact, blogs more commonly touch on

personal stories or pop culture than politics. Most act primarily as a means of communication between friends. As the majority of bloggers are young (a study conducted last year by Perseus, an online research group, found that 58 percent of bloggers worldwide are between the ages of 13 and 19; 36 percent are in their 20's<sup>3</sup>), blogs are fertile ground for social exploration and interaction. Many Arab-Americans who were previously isolated from young people in the Middle East find themselves more aware than ever before about the issues and interests of their peers overseas. So Arab-American blogs are more likely to be socially rather than politically threatening to Arab regimes.

Nevertheless, the best-read blogs are likely to adopt political causes. "The best blogs, in my opinion, are quite focused and issue-driven and can act as a platform for activism or to bring attention to a particular issue," notes El-Amrani. "They also often help tear down false representations that people have of certain countries or cultures." In some sense then, even blogs which are not strictly political can have some political impact by changing readers' opinions.

### **Blogging to the Homelands**

For the most part, Arab-American bloggers believe their online writing is more than just a hobby; it is a way of life. Many say they seek to provide a service both to people in Diaspora communities seeking discussion about their 'homelands' or looking to engage in debate beyond the confines of the mainstream media.

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<sup>3</sup> Perseus: The Blogging Geyser, <http://www.perseus.com/blogsurvey/geyser.html>

“I think an Arab-American is expected to have certain views on certain issues, so it's not so much that there are pros or cons about raising these issues, but it's really all about how those issues are brought up and discussed,” says American-born Egyptian blogger Paul Kist, host of the site *Singing in the Shower*.<sup>4</sup> He relishes the opportunity to interact with people of other cultural backgrounds online, and in the process break down barriers. Kist, 28, a resident of Long Island, New York, targets those with “preconceived notions, biases, or hatred” with the aim of broadening their horizons, and ultimately persuading them to think differently—to “remember, ‘he's no different than me.’”

But if blogs help readers from different cultural stand points understand each other, they also allow for widely divergent views of the world. This is as true within the Arab expatriate community as it is between Arabs and non-Arabs. In their blog “Kompashun,<sup>5</sup>” dubbed a “Podium for the Powerless,” Arab-American bloggers Jad Najjar and Omar Farha face off with essays and posts that reflect their polar views on the Middle East conflict, particularly when discussing the role of Hizbullah in Lebanon.

“Thoughtfulness is an important aspect of our writing and our mission because the mainstream media has no choice but to leave out too much from its reporting, which ultimately facilitates the average American’s ignorance,” says Najjar.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.paulkist.com/blog/index.php>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kompashun.com/>

Many Arab American bloggers express frustration with the mainstream media; others with politics itself. Such frustration can be sensed by the following entry written by Dr. As'ad AbuKhalil, a professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus and host of the blog "Angry Arab News Service:"

Saturday, December 02, 2006:

"Nothing annoys me about the March 14th Movement in Lebanon and the opposition movement is their frequent invocation of the word "civilized" to describe their activities and movements. I just heard a Hizbullah leader talk about the "civilized" nature of the protests. Civilized? What is with that obsession? Count me out of any movement that aims at "civilized" behavior. They all want to be like the White Man. It is a disease in Lebanon, afflicting all political movements and groups."<sup>6</sup>

This is just one more example of the potential for bloggers to participate in framing their own narratives. This is particularly important for Arabs in America, a country where some mainstream media outlets have only ratcheted up their patriotism in the wake of the so-called "War on Terror," a trend which often results in associating terrorism uncritically with the Middle East. Blogs can allow Arab-Americans to find their own voice which fuses a sense of belonging in the United States with a sense of attachment and pride in ethnic identity.

Bloggers of Middle Eastern origin writing from abroad for Arab and Iranian audiences can help forge a new sense of Diaspora community and identity. "Blogs

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<sup>6</sup> Angry Arab News Service: <http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2006/12/nothing-annoys-me-about-march-14th.html>

reinforce communities for sure, since they give voice to their scattered members,” admits Derakhshan. “Technology has also made it very easy to get in touch with things at home. The information gap has never been narrower between exiled Iranians [for example] and those who live in Iran.”

This is particularly true for Lebanese living abroad trying to keep track of fast-changing events in their homeland. “I wanted to feel like I was taking part in the protests that culminated in the historic March 14 demonstration, which in turn epitomized the Cedar Revolution,” says Lebanese-American blogger Raja Abu Hassan, one of six contributors of the Lebanese Bloggers website.<sup>7</sup> “I wanted to communicate with other Lebanese and find common ground based on liberal ideals and a love of our country.”

But this is not just true of politics; events of profound cultural significance can also galvanize the blogging Diaspora. For example, when Egypt’s legendary author and Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz died earlier this year, blogs around the world paid tribute to his writing. For those living in the Diaspora, it gave them the opportunity to commemorate his legacy by sharing memories of the stories they or their parents grew up reading.

But despite the potential for footloose interaction, blogging is not without its own barriers. For example, it likely that the perceptions of Arab-American bloggers, like those

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<sup>7</sup> Lebanese Bloggers: <http://arabblogandpoliticalcommunication.blogspot.com/>



of the Arabs overseas, are shaped by their environment. Bloggers in the United States may hone in on scrutinizing (or hailing) the Bush Administration's policies in the Middle East, whereas Arab bloggers in Egypt or Palestine, for example, tend to place heavier emphasis on the troubles within their own regimes.

More significantly, perhaps, is the role language plays constraining interaction. For the online community in the Arab world, illiteracy is a major impediment since some 65 million Arab adults cannot read, according to the United Nations. In the United States, English is the mother tongue for many of the young Arab-Americans taking to the World Wide web. While a few sites do cater to entries written in both English and Arabic, the majority of those hosted by Arab-Americans are exclusively in English. Certainly this creates a language barrier between the Arabic-only online community in the Middle East and the English-only community of Arab-American bloggers.

One might also question the accuracy of political and social assessments made about the Arab world by those living in the Diaspora. Some web-hosts based in the Arab world caution that their peers overseas represent, in the words of one blogger, a "romanticized" view of the events taking place in the Arab world, and that their blogs must be taken merely at face value.

"Arab-Americans are usually delusional about the country and culture they left behind," suggests Cairo-based Egyptian blogger "Sam Adam" (his penname), host of the

popular blog Rantings of a Sandmonkey<sup>8</sup>. “They usually think in terms of ‘I am Egyptian American’ or ‘I am Muslim American,’ so they come loaded with the prejudices, beliefs and preconceived notions that their families, community, other Arab friends and the media tell them. This definitely reflects in their blogs.”

Nevertheless, committed Arab-American bloggers adamantly defend the medium’s social and political potential. “Bloggers naturally form communities that shape public opinion—I think they can have a role in shaping the perceptions of conflicts and on-going issues in the region,” notes El-Amrani.

This is particularly significant for Arab-Americans who found themselves—their culture and religion—thrust into the spotlight following the attacks of September 11, 2001. As media images show incessant images of violence and destruction in the Middle East, Arab-American bloggers find themselves in a sensitive—but vital—position to challenge stereotypes of Arabs living in the Diaspora while equally strengthening solidarity among them. “The words we use can be powerful tools,” notes Kist. “They can build, or they can destroy—I try to remind myself of this, so I can keep contributing back, and hopefully affect someone in a positive way.”

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<sup>8</sup> Rantings of a Sandmonkey, <http://www.sandmonkey.org/>

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