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Internet Freedom in the Middle East: Challenges for U.S. Policy

By Andrew Exum
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On February 22, Egyptian blogger Abdul Karim Suleiman was sentenced to four years in prison for messages posted on his personal website. Suleiman, who blogs under the name Kareem Amer, was a student at Cairo's al-Azhar University when he posted comments deemed by Egyptian authorities as blaspheming Islam, inciting sedition, and insulting President Hosni Mubarak. For the first two offenses, he drew three years' imprisonment; for the third, an additional year. Among other things, Suleiman posted comments harshly critical of Muslims in his native Alexandria during their violent 2005 clashes with Coptic Christians. He also labeled his conservative religious university "the university of terrorism" and called Mubarak a "dictator."

The Suleiman case highlights two important issues for U.S. policymakers: America's continued bilateral relations with the Mubarak regime, and the greater issue of internet freedom in the Middle East. While the focus of this article is the latter, the way in which U.S. allies in the region treat political speech on the internet will most certainly have an impact on future bilateral relations with countries from Tunisia to Bahrain.

Blogging in the Middle East

Blogging -- along with satellite television, instant messaging, and text messaging -- has irrevocably changed the way Arabs interact both with each other and with the outside world. Egypt alone is estimated to have more than one thousand bloggers -- internet users who run their own websites and post regular messages to their readers -- with numbers increasing by as much as 50 percent every six months. Not all blogs in the Middle East, however, are political. Most blogs, like those in the United States and elsewhere, are personal websites on which users post updates about their daily lives and interests, with links to friends' sites.

In Egypt, blogs have also become a place where political dissent and commentary can be posted with -- until now -- relatively little fear of retribution from government authorities. Unlike the nation's tightly controlled, state-run television stations and newspapers, blogs give Egyptians (often writing anonymously or under pseudonym) the opportunity to air their opinions on current events or Egyptian religious and government authorities. The number of blogs and the inherent challenges of internet policing make blogs far more difficult to shut down or control than Egypt's few independent newspapers or pan-Arab media outlets.

This is not to say that the authorities have not tried. A November 2005 report by Human Rights Watch on internet freedom in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Iran found that these four countries had "detained dozens of online writers for their activities online in recent years."

The Suleiman case is just the latest in a series of crackdowns on Egyptian bloggers and online journalists. In 2002, an Egyptian journalist was sentenced to six months in prison for alleging in an online journal that the state-appointed editor of *al-Ahram* newspaper was corrupt. In March 2003, Egyptian activist Ashraf Ibrahim was arrested by authorities for e-mailing human rights agencies photographs of state security agents violently dispersing a peaceful protest. Ashraf was charged with "harming Egypt's reputation" abroad. The Muslim Brotherhood's internet activities in Egypt have also come under scrutiny. And 2006 witnessed perhaps the most disturbing incident of intimidation, when imprisoned blogger Muhammad al-Sharqawi was beaten and

sodomized with a cardboard tube by Egyptian police officers.

As might be expected, the censorship and suppression of internet political speech in Syria and Iran is even more severe. In Iran, however, more than 75,000 bloggers post on the internet -- making Farsi, according to one estimate, the third-most popular language for blogging worldwide. Staunch U.S. allies such as Tunisia and Bahrain also intimidate online journalists and bloggers. In Tunisia, Zoheir Yahiaoui was jailed for a year for posts made on the web journal *Tunezine*. Another online journalist in Tunisia, Muhammad Abu, is currently serving a three-year prison term for an article he published criticizing a decision made by Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.

In Bahrain, meanwhile, bloggers criticizing the ruling Sunni minority are being increasingly harassed by authorities. The Bahraini government even banned the website Google Earth for three days last year during the run-up to parliamentary elections, when bloggers used it to highlight the vast palaces of the Sunni aristocracy versus the slums in which much of the Shiite majority resides.

Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are still struggling to respond to the challenge posed by Arab satellite networks such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya -- where ordinary Arabs can call in and voice their unedited grievances live before 30 million other viewers. In this context, blogs and online journals are yet another headache for ministries of information that, just ten years ago, could still claim a stranglehold on the flow of information reaching their populace. This challenge is intensified as nations such as Egypt and Jordan attempt to make the internet and its corresponding economic and educational opportunities more available to their citizens.

U.S. Policy and Freedom of Expression

As authoritarian Arab regimes face complex challenges in the way they deal with the explosion of political speech on the internet, U.S. policy should be clear. The Egyptian regime's recent sentencing of Suleiman, and the censorship of internet speech in Egypt and other allied states, runs contrary to American values and undermines long-term U.S. interests in the region.

U.S. officials are worried about how much political speech in the Arab world is hostile to the United States, as well as the way in which radical Islamists use the internet to spread messages of hate and to celebrate attacks against Western civilians and military targets. These are not empty concerns -- the internet is jihadists' propaganda machine of choice. U.S. enemies in Iraq, for example, have used the web as a weapon to publicize and even coordinate attacks against U.S. forces. The Egyptian government, and others, would claim that complete freedom of political speech on the internet plays into the hands of Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

This claim, however, should ring false in the ears of U.S. policymakers. Egyptian authorities played the "Islam card" themselves in the case against Suleiman. Although al-Azhar University expelled and brought charges against Suleiman (who had claimed that the religious institution stifled freedom of expression), it was the government of Egypt that tried, convicted, and imprisoned him. The state used the excuse of Suleiman's "insult against Islam" and his criticism of Mubarak to punish him under Article 179 of the Egyptian Penal Code, which allows for the detention of "whoever affronts the President of the Republic." By using criticism of Islam as a pretext to silence political speech, the government violated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Egypt ratified in 1982.

The United States is in a difficult position when its support of free speech conflicts with concerns about the radical Islamist message conveyed by some of those speaking freely. This, of course, does not apply to Suleiman's case. It may be of special concern to the United States that the Egyptian government decided to come down hard on a liberal blogger. Nevertheless, in condemning Suleiman's treatment, Washington should not make the content of what he wrote its primary concern. U.S. officials -- both in condemning such treatment and articulating a policy for internet freedom in the Middle East -- should instead uphold the

principle attributed to Voltaire: "I detest what you write, but I would give my life to make it possible for you to continue to write."

That principle extends to criticism of Egypt and Jordan's ties with the United States and Israel, as well as to blogs written by young members of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and articles spreading falsehoods about the U.S. occupation in Iraq. The one exception should be speech that incites violence or is grossly and morally offensive -- an exception that exists in U.S. law as well. That exception should not be an excuse that authorities use to stifle any speech they consider offensive to government interests, however.

Conclusion

As President Bush's democracy agenda in the Middle East falters amid difficulties in Iraq, the American public and U.S. policymakers should not lose sight of the fact that a freer, more open Middle East remains in the long-term interests of the United States. Pan-Arab satellite stations, text messaging, and blogs have gone a long way toward increasing freedom of expression in the Arab world, with little or no encouragement needed from Washington. "The new Arab sphere is a genuine public sphere," writes American political scientist Marc Lynch, "characterized by self-conscious, open, and contentious political argument before a vast but discrete audience."

Such argument ultimately benefits the Middle East and the United States alike. When, in fall 2006, Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas posted videos of police officers beating and sodomizing a bus driver, this served U.S. interests by giving diplomats leverage to pressure Cairo on human rights issues. It is equally important to realize that, like the pan-Arab television networks, blogs and bloggers are here to stay. Political speech on the internet will only grow more prominent in the years to come. The United States is better off embracing this trend than joining those regimes engaged in fruitless attempts to reverse the new wave of free speech spreading throughout the region.

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