

Talking Back: How Exiled Libyans Use the web to Push for Change

On a dusty September afternoon in 2006, one of the most high-profile exiled opponents of the Libyan regime, Ali Ramadan Abuzaakuk, paid a short visit home. He landed in Benghazi airport where he was welcomed by dozens of tearful family members. In the following days he removed his grey suit to don a white jalabiyya and a traditional stripy vest, toured the seafront under a mid-day sun and then posed for a snapshot in front of the city's landmark double-domed former cathedral.

Given that it was the first time in 27 years this spectacled man had set foot on Libyan soil, it was bound to be an emotionally-charged and ground-breaking event. But whatever the significance of Abuzaakuk's visit in signalling a rapprochement between Qaddafi and his long-lasting enemies abroad, the Libyan national news agency took no notice of this famous visitor. The country's few newspapers bore no trace of the man who helped found the Washington-based American Libyans Freedom Alliance and who now heads the Libya Human and Political Development Forum. Given that Libya's newspapers and national TV are little more than government mouthpieces, it is hardly surprising that they followed the same editorial line: silence. It is only through Libyan opposition websites—open forums where ordinary people post their emails and letters—that we can retrace the footsteps of this vocal enemy of

the Libyan regime: on one opposition website, Abuzaakuk's excited son in the US wrote that he had just talked on the phone to his father, who was exuberant following his warm welcome at the airport; on the website of UK-based *Akhbar Libya*, Abuzaakuk himself posted some of photos of the journey; the popular site Libya News and Views posted the transcript of an interview the exiled man gave after his short trip; and on a more critical note in the letters section of Libya Watanona, an anonymous reader questioned the opposition leader on the political implication of his not-so "private" visit.

In Libya, web access is spreading by the day. Two developments underpin this widening access: first, the growth in Internet cafes which has given even the most remote desert towns access to the web; and second, the introduction of satellite Internet connections which enable users to connect to the web through a satellite, thus bypassing state servers and censors. With this enhanced access, Libyans in Libya are increasingly using the websites of the Libyan opposition abroad to communicate directly to the outside world and, more specifically, to their compatriots in exile. Libyans use these opposition sites in the absence of personal blogs, which are still a novel medium of communication inside this desert country and are, therefore, relatively unknown. There are perhaps a handful of personal blogs written in Arabic which are exclusively dedicated to culture and literature, with no mention to politics whatsoever.¹

The Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi claims to have his own blog, but this multi-lingual website feels more like an official website than an interactive web log.²

It contains no daily entries, only a few articles and a recording posted when the website was launched in the summer 2006. Although the site claims a bulletin board, one finds no posted readers comments, just the leader's official views. There are a few English-language blogs on Libya, but they are marginal both in terms of the number of their members (the largest has received a paltry 76 visitors—a tiny audience compared to some Arabic blogs which receive hits in the thousands) and their content, which consists mainly of photographs of Tripoli, some romantic descriptions of the old medina, and very sporadic attempts to write political commentaries.³ Fear of government repression might be one reason for the overall scarcity of Libyan blogs in Arabic. But after only two years of Internet access in Libya, blogs are clearly yet to catch on.

Young Libyans, even those who are highly IT-literate, are often unfamiliar with blogs. For example, Muhammad, a 26-year-old graduate in computer engineering, looked up the definition of a blog on an Arabic search engine before suggesting that blogs "are something like a chat, but saved on a website." He also attested to the low uptake of blogging in Libya: "I think they have these things in Egypt and Lebanon, but I have never heard of it here."

We must look at the opposition websites, therefore, to find more significant and engaging blog-style interaction. Until a few years ago, when Libya was still a tightly sealed country due to a 20-year-long trade embargo imposed over its suspected terror links, the exiled Libyan community used their websites primarily to create a network of Libyans abroad and to lobby with foreign governments against the ruling

establishment in Tripoli. One such website was, and still is, that of the political opposition group known as the National Front for the Salvation of Libya.⁴

However, since sanctions were lifted in 2004, a handful of UK-based websites set up by Libyans who fled their country in the 1970s are playing a much greater role in fostering awareness of domestic politics in Libya. They no longer cater only for Libyans in Europe and the US. Today these same websites reach their fellow countrymen in Tripoli and Benghazi, Libyans who are beginning to use the freedom of expression granted by the web to talk about themselves and, in some cases, to push for change.

"Do you realize? It is unprecedented... we forced the government to sack the head of Tripoli University," said Ashur Shams, editor-in-chief of the most important online Libyan paper, *Akhbar Libya*. For several months now his London-based website—www.akhbar-libya.com—has been waging an anti-corruption campaign against various high-ranking officials of the Tripoli establishment. After receiving a number of letters from students and faculty denouncing the illicit practices of the chief of Tripoli's Al Fateh University, his site published a report that had an immediate impact: she was sacked from her powerful position at Al Fateh.

Akhbar Libya started in the 1980s as a four-page-long newsletter before going online in 2002. Since its transition to the web, it has had over 26 million pages visited. *Akhbar Libya* has now become an online only newspaper, divided into news articles, editorials and letters to the editor. But given the amount of space dedicated to letters

from the general public, *Akhbar Libya* at times feels like a blog site, where people ventilate their frustrations under the cover of a pseudonym.

According to Shams, the site has begun to wage a fierce anti-corruption campaign inside Libya using letters and reports received from Tripoli or Benghazi. Exile websites have become such a strategic medium for fostering interaction between exiles and their compatriots that the political organization behind *Akhbar Libya*, the Libya Human and Political Development Forum (LHUDF), has launched a site exclusively dedicated to exposing all forms of corruption in Libya (www.transparency-libya.com). This website uses the Forum's contacts inside Libya to uncover phoney business deals and institutionalized bribery. These contacts are diverse and growing, and might be "government officials disgruntled by the system," "people in the ministries," or "people who know what is going on due to their role inside the state apparatus but who are sympathetic" to the Forum's cause.

LHUDF also relies on unsolicited letters from Libyans in Libya to keep abreast of the changing situation on the ground. The people who write rarely sign with their real name, and in most cases use pseudonyms in order to avoid being identified by the government. "Muwatin libi" (a Libyan citizen) is a recurrent signature, but others include "Ahad libi" (A Libyan) or "Ibn Tarablus" (son of Tripoli). In most cases the editors of *Akhbar Libya* screen the letter and, after cleaning up the syntax and spelling mistakes ("these people are not professional writers, and their Arabic is often so-so" Mr. Shams admits), post it on their site. On some occasions, the editors might attempt to use an insiders' leak to compile a full report and then publish it in an article form, often changing the names of those who disclosed the information in order to protect their identity.

In addition to a team of five in the UK, *Akhbar Libya* has four "associates" inside Tripoli who function as the site's part-time reporters. "They are not really professional journalists—there is no such thing in Libya—they are just people with a good knowledge of what is happening in the government, because they are inside the system," says Mr. Shams. Their pseudonyms are Tamer Al Zayat, Mrasili Mutawa', Imraja' Al Qara'un and Matrud Al Khmamasi, and they can be read through a direct link on *Akhbar Libya*'s homepage. What these men write amounts to a social and political critique of Libya. At times their entries are long news reports, while at others just a short note, but they are always credible and deeply unsettling. They are the closest thing to a political blog in Arabic that Libya has so far produced.

Writing on *Akhbar Libya* can be a risky affair. Last year another one of *Akhbar Libya*'s acquaintances dared to write several anti-establishment articles and signed them with his real name—Abd Al Razeq Al Mansuri. He was arrested, accused of propaganda against the government and sentenced to 18 months in jail. Eventually Al Mansuri was released after 14 months, but the experience has left its mark on *Akhbar Libya*'s editor-in-chief. "It served us as a lesson," Mr. Shams said, "albeit a harsh one."

Shams, who has been living in exile since Qaddafi's rise to power in 1969 and has returned to Libya only once back in 1972, claims that government officials read *Akhbar Libya* daily. "I am told that a report on *Akhbar Libya* is handed to *him* every day," he says referring to Qaddafi. "Oh, they sure read us... we know that." Although indirectly flattered by the interest shown by the government he opposes, Mr. Shams is also quick in accusing them of routine attempts to hack his website. "When we talk about some uncomfortable topics they send hackers who try to block our site," he

says, explaining that in June they had a complete collapse of their system and archive, and were blocked for over a month. "It is either the government or the Libyan mafia attempting to stop us from publishing our anti-corruption material."

It is not just *Akhbar Libya* that troubles the Libyan regime; as a site dedicated to the plight of political prisoners in Libya, www.justice4libya.com is also an awkward reminder of the country's painful past. The posted aim of the site is to remember the hundreds of Libyans who were imprisoned or killed under Qaddafi's rule, one of the darkest pages of the country's recent history. Small black-and-white photos of hundreds of political prisoners allegedly killed in prison frame Justice 4 Libya's homepage. This site has become a forum for released prisoners who write about themselves and post memoirs about prison life. They also publish extracts of scripts they wrote while behind bars and share their experiences online.

The postings are deeply personal and often recall painful memories. Samih Hamouda's post comprises eight poignant poems written while jailed in the Kulman prison.⁵ During his incarceration, he wrote in verses about his country and the woman he once loved, but never thought he would be able to share these verses so freely once he was released. Khaled abd Al Wahid, once a political prisoner in Tripoli's Abu Sleem prison, uses his post to tell his bleak story of suffering in jail and remember his cellmates there.⁶ "I cannot forget those faces," he states. "I cannot forget my companions with whom I used to share the little bread we had. I cannot forget Suleiman, who was just lying around one day, and took the blame, protecting his friends, when the guard entered and asked who was praying. He was then beaten up."

In his numerous entries, Al Wahid claims to write these letters on his prison experiences so that nobody might forget those cellmates of his, some of whom are no longer alive.

Justice 4 Libya is not afraid of courting controversy online. The site provides a link to the first written account of what is alleged to be the most recent prison massacre in Libya. "A Detailed Report of The Abu Sleem Prison Massacre in 1996" claims to be an eye witness account of a prison protest during which guards reportedly killed hundreds of Libyan prisoners.⁷ The author, aware that the report's online integrity relies more on its claims to authenticity than on its coherence, offers a caveat for the sake of credibility: "My apology if these notes are incoherent in places, I wrote them in haste and in fear, then tore them up fearing that the friend with whom I planned to smuggle them had already left." Online readers, we can assume, are unlikely to reproach him. However, the accuracy of such postings cannot be proved because fears of government retaliation prevent people from speaking out. For many though, the site's ability to link an officially forbidden story is enough.

Opposition websites such as Justice 4 Libya and *Akhbar Libya* are officially censored in Libya, but people have nevertheless found ways to access them. Users trying to access *Akhbar Libya* in the capital and elsewhere are usually confronted by a blank screen, but Ashur Shams insists that young web surfers avoid government barriers through proxy servers and satellite internet connections.

Hatem, a 28-year-old manager of an Internet café in downtown Tripoli, shared the opinion that government obstacles to sites are frequently eluded. "It is easy to find

proxy servers, everybody here does it - with some caution," he stated, explaining that these servers located outside Libya enable access to websites that are normally censored. "But in Benghazi things are different: everybody there uses satellite connections to access the web," which similarly enable users to bypass state censors. "In the East they do as they please," he continued with a touch of envy for the technological privileges that the inhabitants of Libya's eastern capital, which for decades has been a hub of political opposition to the regime, have been able to secure by routinely defying government rules.

If *Akhbar Libya* is a constant source of irritation for the Libyan regime, Libya Watanona goes one step further.⁸ Unlike *Akhbar Libya*, Libya Watanona does not edit the letters it receives nor does it cut them. One can find all sorts of entries here, from frustrated, angry (and at times vulgar) hate mail to political commentary.

"Ibrahim Ighnewa, the website's founder and editor, publishes everything he receives without discrimination," Mr. Shams explained, pointing to one of the unique aspects of the web. "As it come in, it goes out," he continued referring to the very spontaneous nature of the postings on Libya Watanona, with their often puzzling spelling and content. It is not uncommon for un-edited online postings to become impulsive political outbursts that leave little room for engaged argument. However, a peculiar feature of this open online forum is that such political hate messages ("hey, you Bastard" is a re-occurring address) are written by members of all Libyan political factions against all possible political antagonists, be it Qaddafi, the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, the US, or the exiled opposition, both monarchist and socialist.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the postings on Libya Watanona is the abundance of obituaries of Libyans living abroad. As tribe is the first and foremost identity marker for many Libyans, Libya Watanona posts numerous faxes and emails sent by relatives of deceased exiled Libyans to the attention of their fellow tribesmen inside the country. On September 26, for example, Zahir Al Hashami Al Rashid used the letterhead of the Islamic Center of Claremont in Pomona, California, to announce to his tribe, the Al Rashid, the death of his father Al Hashami Ali Al Rashid. A similar letter informs the Saghir tribe that their fellow tribesman Shabat Masbah has joined Allah.

There is a tone of nostalgia in such online announcements of recent deaths. This emotional bond also transpires on the web through the online forums exiled Libyans are using to stay in touch with their compatriots—friends, family, tribesmen—inside Libya. In so many ways, they are using the websites of the Libyan opposition abroad not just to foster greater freedom or to engage in heated discussions on the country's current problems, but to maintain their complex and layered identity. For Mr. Shams, an overall attachment to the Libya he left behind in the 1970s pervades his online struggle to inspire political change and his determination to stay firmly in touch with fellow countrymen. A similar feeling also radiates from the joyful web-pics of Mr. Abuzaakuk's long-awaited return to Benghazi. After Libya's long political and economic isolation, the web is now helping the exiled Libyan community and the Libyans inside Libya is to stay in touch and, through this virtual dialogue, push for change.

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¹ The blog of Libyan writer Mohammad Al-Asfar (alasar-mohammad.maktooblog.com) is one such example.

² www.algathafi.org.

³ The main English-language blog hub is libyans.blogspot.com, which has two dozen English-speaking members, some of whom live in Tripoli. Among these the only blogger who at times ventures into a very moderate political commentary is a witty girl who goes by the name highlander (lonehighlander.blogspot.com), who claims to be "so far the only Libyan blogger."

⁴ www.nfsl-libya.com.

⁵ http://www.justice4libya.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=721&Itemid=163&limit=1&limitstart=1

⁶ http://www.justice4libya.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=274&Itemid=163

⁷ The report is available in English at www.stopgaddafi.org/articles/abusleem.html.

⁸ www.libya-watanona.com.