

# Facebook reflects struggle over Islam's role

By JEFFREY FLEISHMAN  
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CAIRO, Egypt -- His fingers tapping like a tiny army over laptop keys, Waleed Korayem, a university student who quotes Einstein and Voltaire, skims the Internet in a noisy cafe and opens his Facebook group, the one that drives Islamists into fits of rage: Yeah, We Are Seculars and We Are Proud.

It's hot and he is sweating, clicking through cyberspace venom and passionate screeds of Muslims debating Islam and democracy in the Middle East. Some of it is playful, some of it mean, but beyond the aliases and funny log-on names, this electronic parallel world has given young Muslims a voice beyond their mosques and repressive

separation between the spiritual and the political. Conservative pages and groups call for Islamic states and a pulling away from liberal Western influences. One Facebook group literally wants to awaken the faithful; it provides wake-up calls so its members don't sleep through dawn prayers.

With dueling names such as the International Day to Take Off Your Veil and Prophet Muhammad: The Greatest Leader of All Time, they taunt one another; they agree to disagree and occasionally they hack into opposing Facebook pages to mute, at least temporarily, the offending polemic.

It is an invigorating Internet landscape, a place where opinions on fatwas and female genital excision are played out in a culture that typically is sensitive about how far to push

on screens that can hold infinite numbers of words. It's exciting, but he wonders where it's going. Is it chatter and discourse in a vacuum, provocative but not powerful enough to overturn oppressive governments or contemporize religious thought?

"Egypt is caught somewhere between Islam and a civil state," Korayem said. "That's why we have all this angst."

Beneath the hum of an air conditioner in Cairo's upper-middle-class neighborhood of Heliopolis, Amr Ali, a dental student who is a devout believer, sits in his bedroom and types furiously on his Facebook page, We the Muslim Youth Can Change This World. The quest has become so consuming that Ali's father, an orthopedic surgeon who worries that his son might

In the dim cool of his room, Ali is part missionary, part explainer, seeking to abolish Western stereotypes about Islam while spreading the Koran's message from Casablanca to Paris. His Facebook group has crossed geographical, if not ideological, boundaries, flashing with the images of moderate Islamic thinkers as varied as televangelist Amr Khaled, South African preacher Ahmed Deedat and Yusuf Islam, formerly Cat Stevens.

"We can change perceptions about Islam," he said. "I now have a relationship with an American guy on Facebook. He first contacted me by calling me a terrorist. 'Do you belong to Al Qaeda?' But I've explained the nature of Islam, using Koran verses to correct his misperceptions. Now he and I discuss Islam and Buddhism online. I'm also helping a British woman who wants to convert to Islam. She messaged me through my group. I've helped to find the nearest mosque in England. It has all become my mission."

Ali clicked to a page of charts and percentages. Sixty-seven percent of those visiting his site are between 18 and 24. Only 1 percent are 45 and older. Women outnumber men 59 to 41 percent; naturally, as with just about any topic he encounters, Ali adds a religious twist as to the reason why.

"The prophet said that women have softer hearts than men," he said. "That's why I think there are more girls on groups like mine. I believe if you go to the secular groups, you'll find mostly men."

Korayem has his own charts and graphics, and he recently hired a Jordanian woman to translate his Facebook group into French. The group, which the other day carried a link to actor Will Smith's fan page, is also in Arabic and accepts posts in English. Korayem is Ali's counterpoint, an intellectually curious young man who logs hours in cafes sipping juices and firing off missives. He and Ali have debated their philosophies over the Web, and politely regard each other as worthy adversaries.

Young Muslims are "resorting to this virtual world because we have no space in the actual world," said Korayem, a business major who once belonged to the

Facebook group Egypt: A Secular Nation. "Secularism is the best way. It is the basis for democracy. Egypt is not moving toward Islam. It's moving toward delusion. Basing your ideology on religion is a myth, and this myth ended in the Dark Ages.

"It's a sensitive time now. I used to say, 'God forbid secularism.' Now I see religion as too pervasive. An Islamic state would put an end to equality. No matter how merciful it tried to be, an Islamic state would never reach the equality all citizens deserve."

That is the crux of the debate across the Middle East. In Egypt, for example, the regime of President Hosni Mubarak has largely repressed freedom of political expression. Many Egyptians, especially the middle class, have given up on politics and become more devout. Hijabs, religious bumper stickers and text messaging of Koranic passages have become increasingly common.

"Thirty percent of the messages I get every day are insults from Islamists," said Korayem, whose Facebook group has 2,300 members. "Their lives revolve around religious texts. They're closed to everything else. My mother is very religious and she tells me, 'May God guide you to the right path.'"

The other day, sitting in a cafe in the hour before dusk, Korayem had a brief moment of magnanimity: "This Internet debate may lead to common ground between secularists and religionists. There are more similarities than you'd think."

But a click to his discussion board, Islamic or Secular Rule, suggests that kindred spirits and common ground are a long way off:

"Secularism is refused by all means," wrote Mohamed Amer, taunting Korayem in a cyber-spat of one-upmanship. "In fact, it goes against the will of the Egyptian, the Arab and Muslim peoples who crave Islamic rule. National interests rest in the adherence to Islam and faith."

Korayem shot angrily back: "Enough, I swear to God, we get bored with what you say. It is all the same talk, the same ignorant definitions (of secularism) and the same useless arguments. I won't reply to what you are saying because I have already replied tens of times."

But his fingers keep typing.



Photo by ASMAA WAGUIH/ Los Angeles Times

Waleed Korayem works on the Internet in a cafe in Cairo, Egypt.

governments.

"This is not just a technical war, but a moral one. Facebook is reflecting what's happening in Muslim society," Korayem said. "I'm engaged in dialogue between Islamists and secularists. But there's too much tension. No one wants to revise his opinions. It's turned into a screaming war. Islamists speak to me as a disbeliever. They want to convert me. They quote verses of the Koran as if to awaken me."

The struggle is over Islam's role in the new century. Facebook groups like Korayem's seek

and question religion. But with no central structure, Islam, whose tenets have been interpreted different ways by countless imams and mullahs, is now being analyzed by thousands of new, young and disparate Web surfers. Some are as devout as the weekly sermons crackling from minarets; others are confused, searching; and some push for change with paeans to human rights and modernity.

Korayem believes he's living in a transformative time in Islamic history, when a new generation can express whatever it wants

be unfairly tagged as a radical by security forces, disconnects the family's high-speed Internet line during exams.

"Secular and atheist groups are posting on my group, accusing Islam of promoting terrorism," said Ali, a slight man with rimless glasses whose Facebook group has nearly 22,000 members. "I'm very surprised at all the secular Facebook groups out there. I'm concerned. They are young people and they are lost, following misleading slogans. Some of them are totally against religion and all the prophets."