

OUR DIPLOMATS NEED TO SPEND MORE TIME SURFING THE TOOBZ!

As I noted in my last post, DiFi is accusing the intelligence community of having missed the potential volatility of Middle Eastern unrest because they've been paying too little attention to social media.

So I decided to check the WikiLeaks State cables to see whether DiFi's complaint bears out.

Obviously, this is a totally insufficient test. Not only is State not the primary member of the intelligence community that should be tracking these things, we have no idea how representative the cables are of all State communication. (Though there are obviously intelligence community members working under official cover at the Embassy, and one would hope a good deal of our specialists on any particular country's dialects are stationed in that country.) Nevertheless, it gives an idea of how attentively our Embassies track opposition viewpoints expressed in social media, and how they view social media as a source of information.

And DiFi may well be right.

There are just 14 WikiLeaks cables in this database mentioning both Egypt and bloggers (out of 325 that mention Egypt) but just one—dated March 30, 2009—that talks in detail about the actual content of blogs rather than Mubarak's persecution of them as a human rights issue. (This cable notes that bloggers and other journalists cover torture complaints and a few others refer to specific types of bloggers being persecuted.) The March 30 cable assesses,

KEY POINTS –

(C) Egypt's bloggers are playing an increasingly important role in

broadening the scope of acceptable political and social discourse, and self-expression. –

(C) Bloggers' discussions of sensitive issues, such as sexual harassment, sectarian tension and the military, represent a significant change from five years ago, and have influenced society and the media. –

(C) The role of bloggers as a cohesive activist movement has largely disappeared, due to a more restrictive political climate, GOE counter-measures, and tensions among bloggers. –

(C) However, individual bloggers have continued to work to expose problems such as police brutality and corporate malfeasance.

[snip]

(C) Egypt has an estimated 160,000 bloggers who write in Arabic, and sometimes in English, about a wide variety of topics, from social life to politics to literature. One can view posts ranging from videos of alleged police brutality (ref B), to comments about the GOE's foreign policy, to complaints about separate lines for men and women in government offices distributing drivers' licenses. One NGO contact estimated for us that a solid majority of bloggers are between 20 and 35 years old, and that about 30 percent of blogs focus on politics. Blogs have spread throughout the population to become vehicles for a wide range of activists, students, journalists and ordinary citizens to express their views on almost any issue they choose. As such, the blogs have significantly broadened the range of topics that Egyptians are able to discuss publicly.

It's not clear whether anyone at the Embassy made an independent assessment of the blogs themselves; the cable is heavily reliant on the viewpoints of at least three different sources, as well as the comments of "two young upper middle-class bloggers" and one female political blogger not identified demographically.

Meanwhile, just 5 cables mention both Facebook and Egypt (two cables appear in both searches). Two of these cables simply count the growing number of Mohamed el Baradei Facebook fans. One of them—an April 16, 2008 cable titled, "Mahalla Riots: Isolated Incident or Tip of an Iceberg?" and reviewing the April 6, 2008 events—probably should have alerted US authorities to track Facebook more closely.

(C) April 6 brought together disparate opposition forces together with numerous non-activist Egyptians, with the Facebook calls for a strike attracting 70,000 people on-line, and garnering widespread national attention. The nexus of the upper and middle-class Facebook users, and their poorer counterparts in the factories of Mahalla, created a new dynamic. One senior insider mused, "Who could have imagined that a few kids on the internet could foment a buzz that the entire country noticed? I wish we could do that in the National Democratic Party."

Though the reference to the "senior insider" complaining that Egypt's NDP couldn't foment as much buzz as "a few kids on the internet" suggests the assessment of the importance of Facebook to the movement may have come from Egyptians, not from any analysis conducted in the Embassy itself.

Just as tellingly, most of the 7 cables on Egypt and April 6 are among those that discuss social media (that is, State knew or should have known that social media was an important tool for the April 6 movement).

Meanwhile, it's even worse for Tunisia. Just one cable (out of 81) mentions Tunisia and either blogger or Facebook—and that's a report on the Embassy's own use of Facebook!

At least in the case of Egypt, the Embassy had both warning that Mubarak's government considers bloggers enough of a threat to persecute, as well as some sense that social media has served an organizing function.

Yet even with that warning, Embassy staffers don't appear to have spent much time learning from social media.