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# The Islam-Online Crisis: A Battle of Wasatiyya vs. Salafi Ideologies?

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### Abstract:

*Islam Online has been one of the most prominent and stable Islamic websites since it was founded in 1997. However, in March 2010 Islam Online suffered a major crisis, which has come to be known as 'the IOL-Crisis'. This is a suitable case for exploring whether multiple layers of authority are at play in online religious communities(Campbell 2007). At the time of the crisis, I was conducting fieldwork with the social team of IOL-Arabic. This article provides rich ethnographic detail about the time before, during, and after the crisis – as experienced by the social team. I outline how the social team made sense of the crisis through producing crisis-narratives that draw on Islam Online's institutional narrative. Moreover, I illustrate how narratives about the crisis gradually shift to alternate explanations, in tact with new developments of the crisis. I conclude with reflections on what types of authority were drawn on during the IOL-Crisis.*

### Keywords:

## Introduction

> Last Monday the Cairo employees were restrained from accessing the IOL- server. They all risk losing their jobs. (...) they worry that a *salafi* perspective will replace their *wasatiyya* outlook and that IOL will basically become a *shar'i* type of website.
>
> (Field diary, March 22, 2010).

Islam Online (IOL) has been one of the most prominent and stable Islamic websites since it was founded in 1997. Many were taken by surprise when IOL suffered a major crisis in March 2010. The IOL-Crisis is a vital event in the history of IOL, but also in the history of Islamic and religious websites,

and thus warrants scholarly attention. Previous studies of religious websites tend to argue that the Internet is a space for negotiation and contestation of traditional religious authority[1]. Still, as Campbell (2007:2) points out, such claims are rarely sufficiently substantiated, nor do they distinguish between different layers of religious authority 'in terms of hierarchy, structure, ideology and text'. Campbell (2007:2) calls on researchers to 'identify what specific form or type of religious authority is affected. Is it the power of traditional religious leaders? (...) Is it the corporate ideology of the community?' In exploring these questions, Campbell (2007, 2010) combines online research and offline interviews with *users* of religious websites. In a similar vein, Krüger (2005:11-2) argues that in order to analyse 'invisible aspects' of online religious communities, such as communication behind the scenes, fieldwork is required[2]. In my view, this argument is equally valid for studies of *producers* of religious websites, as in the present case.

At the time of the IOL-Crisis, I was conducting fieldwork with the Social Team (ST) of IOL Arabic, the producers of IOL's output on society, family, and social counselling. My data about the IOL-Crisis sheds light on 'invisible aspects' of IOL and offers the opportunity to examine Campbell's questions about religious authority through a specific case. More precisely, the aims of this article are threefold[3]. First, I provide a reconstruction of IOL's institutional identity narrative (corporate ideology) and an analysis of how it was brought into play during the build up of the crisis. Second, I focus on how the ST made sense of the IOL-Crisis, through producing crisis-narratives[4]. Third, I outline how IOL's ties with a traditional religious authority are called upon during the crisis. Before delving into empirical detail, I provide some background on IOL and my fieldwork.

## The field, methodology and ethics

### The website

IOL was dedicated to 'spreading *da'wa*, (propagation of faith)' and aimed at promoting 'a unified and lively Islam that keeps up with modern times in all areas' (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009:15,11). From the outset IOL was

multifaceted, providing much more than digitalized versions of religious scripture. The site offered a range of services such as news, fatwas and counselling services. Particularly in recent years IOL expanded and came to include numerous new specialized subpages. IOL also launched the satellite counselling channel *Ana*, to which a number of web-employees were outsourced. Employing Campbell's (2005:18) typology of discourses religious groups use about technology, IOL is best described as framing 'technology for affirming religious life' where the internet 'serves to affirm or build communal identity and cohesion (...) Identity comes from reinforcing a particular set of convictions or values that are transported online'.

## Ideology

IOL promoted itself as a wasatiyya website. According to Høigilt (2008:14) wasatiyya advocates correct Islamic praxis and adaptation to contemporary society. Yusef Al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian Islamic scholar based in Qatar, is considered to be the founder of the idea of wasatiyya[5] (Gräf 2009). However, some of his views, such as endorsing suicide bombings in Palestine, are considered 'extremist' and for these he has been banned from entering the US and UK (The Economist 2010). Still, Al-Qaradawi represents a moderate voice on certain topics, and is a prominent figure of offline religious authority – with a global impact. IOL enjoyed close ties to Al-Qaradawi, although, according to Gräf (2008:2), his role was symbolic and simply lent IOL credibility. It is likely that Al-Qaradawi's support, fame and location contributed to the way IOL was financed. IOL was funded by private donations to Al-Balagh society in Doha / the Qatari board of administers. Al-Qaradawi has been the head of the Qatari board since 1997. Funding has been from primarily Saudi and Qatari sources (Abdel-Baky 2010:2).

## The Setting

IOL's main offices were located in Sixth of October City, outside of Cairo. The office building is striking with modern blue glass windows and a glass

roof visible from afar. The most impressive feature of the building is the large hall, resembling an Islamic courtyard. The IOL offices themselves resemble modern offices in many corners of the world. Most employees shared open-space offices, and there was no gender segregation. The only aspect that may point to this being an office in Egypt is the relatively old IT-equipment. This is perhaps surprising, considering that computers are the main tool of an organization running a website. IOL-Cairo's staff consisted of roughly 350 employees – two thirds of whom worked on editorial content[6]. The ST counted nine members, only two of whom were male. The leader of the ST was female. Most of the members were in their thirties, and held a BA degree.

## Methodology

I conducted fieldwork with the ST, from the beginning of December 2009 until the end of June 2010[7]. I attended editorial meetings as a 'complete observer',[8] (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:82), on a regular basis from December 2009 to mid-March 2010, up until the crisis erupted and the editorial meetings ceased. I also observed each ST-member's regular work-tasks during this period. Editorial meetings had a relatively set structure and were held weekly. I attended all editorial meetings with a mini-laptop and took observation notes throughout the meeting. Following Emerson et al. (1995), my notes consist of logging observations of episodes and dialogues, rather than my own interpretations[9]. Once the crisis hit IOL, my role changed into participant-observer and interviewer. In addition to interviews with the ST-members, I conducted interviews with the counsellors contracted to respond to IOL-users' marital problems (8). Interviews were audio-recorded, and interview-quotes have been transcribed. Moreover, I have thematically coded my data in Nvivo[10]. Dialogues referred to in this article took place in colloquial Egyptian Arabic[11]. Translations into English are my own.

## Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitivity of topics, I anonymise all quotes and observations. I simply use A, B, C etc. in order of utterance, rather than employing

pseudonyms. I start with A for each new episode. This is an ethical decision. Since I happened to be conducting fieldwork during a major crisis, my data provide rare 'thick descriptions' of how the IOL-Crisis was perceived from within IOL's Cairo offices. However, I do not want to draw attention to *who* said what during the conflict. This is particularly true of editorial meetings where my presence was as a 'complete observer', and my informants carried out many conversations as if I was not there. By starting out afresh with A in each episode, it is difficult for even those who know the ST-members to assess who said what.

## IOL's Institutional Narrative

In this section I identify, on the basis of my observations, how IOL's institutional identity is founded on the tropes 'family' and 'the message'. Interview-extracts further clarify how 'the message' is understood by the ST.

The first editorial meeting I attend is on December 6, when the ST are reminiscing a successful IOL Eid celebration. Several references to being 'an IOL family' (*ahl*) are made amidst exchanging funny anecdotes of excited children riding bicycles and eating sweets, followed by shared laughter. The meeting moves to more editorial concerns, and there is a knock on the door. It is the head of IOL Arabic. He asks us to join in the celebration of the Ana channel and the return of the employees from Ana to IOL. We leave the meeting and head to the large hall:

> Employees are welcomed back and chocolates are passed around. (...) The speeches are barely audible. (...) The general gist seems to be to welcome back to those who worked for Ana. I hear 'welcome back to the IOL house, the IOL house is big'. This is followed by laughter that spreads amongst those assembled to listen.
>
> (Field notes, December 6, 2009).

This episode is the first of many fieldwork-episodes that involve descriptions of ST or IOL at large as an 'IOL family'. 'The IOL house' appears to be

a variation of the same metaphor. In my view, the family metaphor is at the core of IOL's institutional narrative. According to Linde (2003:1) institutional narratives constitute social tacit knowledge and serve to:

> reproduce the institution, reproduce or challenge the power structures of the institution, induct new members, create the identity of the institution and its members (...) We may understand this as the way an institution uses narrative to create and reproduce its identity by the creation and maintenance of an institutional memory.

In other words, an institutional narrative is a means of reproducing an organization's identity. According to Linde (2001:3) becoming a member of an institution 'involves learning the stories about that institution which everyone must know, the appropriate times and reasons to tell them'. Moreover, Linde (2003:4) contends that 'narratives that are repeatable through time and across tellers' particularly shape 'the way that institutions remember their past and use that remembering to create current identities for both the institution and its members'. These insights appear to be valid for the IOL ST context. During my fieldwork I was struck by how often narratives of organizational identity featured in various dialogues. In my analysis, 'the message' (*al risala*) is also an important component of IOL's institutional identity narrative. Following up on frequent references to 'the message' during fieldwork, I explicitly asked 'what is the message?' in interviews. A's answer is representative:

> Islam is a holistic religion. Islam is not just about worship, prayer and fasting. It is (also) about all parts of life and interacting with people. When we counsel on how to nurture children, or how to choose a life partner, this is part of Islam. You cannot departmentalize Islam. In our view Islam is life, with all that it encompasses from you wake up until you go to sleep. (...) This is the message.
>
> (Interview, March 21, 2010).

In response to 'what is the message?' the ST-members highlight 'lived Islam',' Islam is life', and 'it is a lived message'. In their elaborations they explicitly forge a link between Islam and living in modern society. Moreover, there is often an emphasis on 'the message' being 'balanced' and *wasat* (middle-ground), drawing on both Islamic and non-Islamic perspectives.  As for what 'the message' is held to achieve, there are slight variations in the responses. For example, according to B the aim is to assist people in 'how to live a happy, good life in acceptance'. In C's words, 'we attempt to equip individuals with the tools to manage their lives and develop'. And D simply says 'the end is producing positive behavioural patterns'. In sum, the emphasis is on developing awareness and empowerment that can alter behaviour in a constructive manner. Part and parcel of creating awareness is discussing topics that some Muslims may deem controversial.  In E's opinion: 'We discuss all sorts of topics. Nothing is off limits. We also discuss topics we may disagree with. But we believe in discussing why a phenomenon came about rather than sticking our head in the dirt'[12].

IOL's identity narrative can thus be reconstructed as follows:

> *We are an 'IOL family', united in one cause, namely to deliver a message. 'The message' is founded on wasatiyya Islam, is balanced and aims at creating awareness and empowering Arab populations. It is focused on 'lived Islam' and relates to modern society and thus may include discussion of controversial topics. 'The message' has the potential to improve the lives of many IOL-users across the globe*[13].

The family metaphor appears to signify close interpersonal ties between employees that resemble kinship[14]. It also seems to function as an image of being united in a common cause. The significance of being an 'IOL family' seems to be in constructing a salient group identity. It also underlines the sentiment that working for IOL is far more than a job: it is also an idealistic call to spread 'the message'. During my fieldwork I came to understand, that belief in 'the message' can at times be equated

to dedication and willingness to sacrifice[15]. This can take the form of working long hours or being paid less than if employed by other media outlets. Moreover, the institutional narrative feeds into the discourse of the internet being framed as affirming religious lifestyle (Campbell, 2005:13-4).

IOL's institutional identity narrative is important for understanding how the IOL-Crisis was eventually made sense of by the ST. In the next section I outline fieldwork episodes building up to the crisis.

## Before the Crisis: Tensions Rise

The ST editorial meetings in December and January pass without major events and display no signs of a major crisis being just around the corner. The editorial meeting of February 7 is the first time I take note of 'organizational discontent' featuring as a prominent theme. The extracts in this section are from my field notes (7 February, 2010). At the beginning of the meeting, there is mention of changes to the server:

> A: The server has changed. Why? Is it something technical?
> B: Let's not ask the question why*...
> A: But, we want to understand...
> Some of the other ST members confirm the server change, and make similar comments. There seems to be frustration around the table, but there is the usual atmosphere of smiling, laughter, and comic relief.
>
> [* My interpretation is that there is an undertone: do not ask why because I do not know the answer].

They then turn to editorial matters. Towards the middle of the meeting, I realize that the previous dialogue is an indication of something being wrong, but I do not understand what. There is mention of Mariam Hagri, one of the founders of IOL, having resigned. In this context, explicit references to organizational discontent are made:

A: Did you hear that Sheikh Yusef (Al-Qaradawi) called? (...)
B: He is promising that changes in the organization will.... not harm employees.
C: It (the organizational change) will be good *inshaallah* (*kheir inshaallah*)
D: Yes, *Kheir inshaallah*, all the indicators point in this direction (laughter) the server etc. (laughs again). For sure it's all good. For sure it will be for the better.

*[The latter statement appears to be ironic and all laugh in response].

The mention of Al-Qaradawi, and in such a familiar manner as 'Sheikh Yusef', is interesting, as his role has been downplayed as a strategic alliance (Gräf 2008:2). Yet, my empirical data suggest that Al-Qaradawi's role was one of significance to the ST-members. In retrospect, this dialogue also seems to be a reference to a letter of concern about organizational changes in IOL, sent to Al-Qaradawi and signed by 250 IOL-employees. During the course of the meeting I learn that the discontent I observed is related to a new board of administers of IOL, in Qatar:

A: It seems I take things differently. I feel like there is no hope of change. There is no possibility of reaction. Because, we do not know what is happening. There is no transparency.
B: Certainly not at our level. There is barely anyone in the (Cairo) management who knows anything.
A: Yes, This is what is driving me crazy, that even on the management level...
C: There will not be a revolution ...
A: No, I am not suggesting a revolution. But, the hope is killed from within because the context (of change) is not understood.
C: Sometimes we cannot understand the decision because the context is much greater. Sometimes understanding a part will not help us understand the context.

B: Yes, but sometimes understanding a part, like the server, or understanding many parts, will help us understand the context, help us see the greater picture. (...)

A: Are we expected to be puppets? (...) IOL used to be different from other organizations. Yet, the longer I stay, the more I feel it is the same as everywhere else.

C: These differences have come with the new board of administers (in Qatar). It wasn't like this with the old board.

D: It is the first time they have switched the whole board of administers in one go. The new board is all new, except for two, one of whom has resigned (...)

E: Yes, there is no knowledge. And you are told something, and then a second thing is written, and a third thing is done!A: And what should we do? Just sit and wait while decisions are being made over our heads? Just sit and take it? Wait and accept?

C: Wait and accept – no. We have to wait, so we can gain understanding and then make a decision.

A: I mean this is against the interest of the work. It is against the interest of the job. It is against the interest of the country. (...)

F: (to me) this was not really a good example of a meeting. It was more of a heart to heart (*fadfadah*).

There is also talk of a mysterious committee (*lagna*) of which no one knows the purpose. The ST also talk about having repeatedly asked the new board of its intentions, without receiving a clear answer. This meeting is the first time overt organizational discontent with the new board in Qatar is expressed. It is also the first time I hear of Ana closing. When I probe G after the meeting, she explains that 'Ana closed down one and a half month ago due to lack of funding'. This means that shortly after the celebration of Ana channel, it actually closed down.

When I arrive at IOL on February 14, I discover that the regular editorial meeting had been held earlier than usual without my being informed. It is possible that this was deliberate. Yet, it seems equally likely that it was an

oversight. Extracts in this section are from my field notes (February 14, 2010). I catch up with A who informs me that the meeting dealt with the ST's 'concern' with the new Qatari board. The conversation continues:

> M[16]: Are you worried about the possibility of editorial dictates?
> A: We must assess whether there will be an editorial interference. Many people will have problems with that. But at present it has not happened. (...)
> M: (I repeat) So, you are not worried?
> A: Well, it depends. Personal worry versus worry for the idea. I can choose to leave. I will have a choice. I am not worried about the idea. It is a good idea, and I can take it with me and do it somewhere else.
> M: Like for example start a new website?
> A: Yes, exactly. As for doing it within the organization, one should not get too attached to the organization. The organization should not be your mother and father (laughingly). It is just a workplace.

It is interesting that A talks of how the organization should not be 'your mother and father'. I believe A says this in an attempt to convince herself. She is one of the ST who frequently referred to IOL as 'family' previously. Perhaps this is an expression of the sentiment that if IOL changes, she will no longer consider it her 'family'. The conversation turns to funding and editorial control:

> A: Now there is a worry that the Qatari board may start to interfere with (editorial) details and that the *wasat* ground may ... dissolve.
> M: And what happens if they start to dictate details?
> A: People will leave. We cannot do our job. Our work is based on a message. You cannot dictate how we write or do journalism. We are not like other journalistic media in Egypt, who one day are pro a certain leader, and the next day against.

> Our work is based on values, principles and it is based on conveying a message. This determines our work. We have been developing this idea for 10 years. You cannot just lose the message. (...) We must continue showing everyone that our message is important.

When I arrive at the IOL-offices on February 28, no one knows whether there will be an editorial meeting. After some confusion, a meeting is assembled. The previously mentioned mysterious committee is now identified as a 'complaints committee' from Qatar. B says 'If Qatar is not interested in IOL, we can find funding elsewhere' after which good news, albeit semi-official, is shared: Saudi partners[17] have agreed to fund a new website project. C says 'this does not mean that we are careless about our work. On the contrary, we have to work well' (Field notes, February 28, 2010). This sequence shows that IOL was taking measures to secure a new website for spreading their 'message', in case disagreements with the Qatari board escalate. The rest of the meeting consists of an active and engaged discussion of editorial topics, which illustrates the ST's determination to work as 'normal'[18]. The next editorial meeting I attend is on 14 March, when the clash between IOL Cairo and the Qatari board is irrefutable.

## The IOL Crisis Begins

The dialogues in this section are extracts from my field notes (14 March, 2010), and suggest that much has happened in the past two weeks. For instance, the 'committee of complaints' is interpreted as having been a pretext to interview the 250 employees who signed the letter to Al-Qaradawi, and review their work-contracts[19]. Also, rumours of the Qatari board wanting to close down IOL-Cairo are flourishing, which brings about insecurities. Distress is projected via comic relief, as in B's humorous comment 'My husband is looking to buy a beans-vender-cart ('*arbiyet ful*), and Mr. C is looking to rent at taxi'. It becomes evident that the Qatari board have employed a lawyer to handle the conflict, and IOL-Cairo has followed suit. The ST talk of resignation, solidarity and workers' rights. They will allegedly receive a settlement if they resign. However,

they do not trust the Qatari board's lawyer. The ST consider collective action to be the most appropriate, and advocate for collectively staying on. But refusing to resign comes with its own ambiguities: if a new website is launched, when? - and will the ST be a part of it? Towards the end of the meeting I ask if they can tell me what is going on:

> D: It seems that the new administration want IOL to transfer into Islam Web, you know, only rules and Koran. They are asking: why should IOL produce news and the social section? What has that got do with Islam? You know?
> M: And, has anyone been let go?
> D: No, not yet, but there are rumours of huge cuts of journalists and editors. There are two people who resigned in protest (...)
> M: And, have you been given new editorial guidelines?
> D: No, not yet, but there are indications ... we expect that this will come. (...)  I guess you could say that the IOL-Crisis, is that we do not feel Qatar's funding gives them the right to own the message of IOL.

In this segment D states that she feels the Qatari board's funding does not give them the right to own 'the message'. Moreover, she expresses a fear that IOL will be transformed into a more narrowly defined website focusing on rules and scripture. This description is in accordance with how E describes salafis. E jokingly tells me: 'In our view a salafi-approach is 'The Prophet said, the Koran said *we-alsalamu'alikum*'' (Interview, March 21, 2010). 'Alsalamu'alikum' in this context connotes 'goodbye' or 'over and out'. The sentiments expressed in dialogue with A and E are important parts of what I consider *the* IOL-Crisis narrative at this point in time.

## The Ideological Narrative of the Crisis Emerges

In mid-March ST-members are strikingly uniform in their understanding of the IOL-Crisis. The crisis is framed as an ideological dispute and the narrative can be reconstructed as follows:

> *The Qatari administration wants IOL to follow a more conservative, salafi line. We do not believe Qatari funding means that they own the idea. We are the owners because we own the idea, the message. We were used to autonomy with regards to what we produce. We are not used to content being controlled by funding. This is new to IOL, it may not be new to Egypt, but it is new to IOL.*

In this narrative, there is a strong sense of 'ownership of the idea' being more valid than funding. Also, the uniqueness of 'the family' in an Egyptian context is highlighted. In addition it speaks to fears of Gulf salafism gaining ground in Egypt (Field and Hamam, 2009). The ideological narrative draws on IOL's institutional memory and identity, and underlines the importance of 'the message'. In my analysis, framing the crisis as a battle between wasatiyya and salafism may actually serve to both strengthen and reproduce the institutional narrative about IOL-Cairo. It affirms the importance of spreading the wasatiyya message and thereby strengthens the 'family' bond. This is part one of the ideological narrative. As will be illustrated, the crisis-narrative is adapted when further developments take place. By mid-March, there are also indications that IOL's institutional identity was served a severe blow.

## Fragility of 'the message' and the fall of 'the family'

The following dialogues are extracts from the editorial meeting on 14 March (Field notes, March 14, 2010):

> A: Part of the crisis (for us) is that we, or let me talk for myself, was married to IOL. It was an opportunity to idealize the organization, to iconize someone. And then when something happens to the organization you find yourself falling apart. Maybe, it is a good thing to get some distance, get a new perspective on oneself, one's life and career.

This quote stems from the same person who previously talked to me about the importance of seeing IOL as 'just an organization' rather than 'mother and

father'. In light of the crisis, it seems likely that A is attempting to convince herself to let go of 'the family'. There are others signs of disillusionment amongst the ST, during this meeting. Some members are relating how they are loosing faith in both 'the message' and in IOL itself. B Refers to a meeting outside of IOL, where she met someone who was enthusiastic about IOL. She explains:

> B: I was talking passionately and I almost forgot about the crisis that we are in. And then I remembered... Ah, I am losing faith in everything, in the dream of the message[20].
> C: We are all united in believing in the dream, the message. You must not lose faith in the idea. Try to separate the idea from the organization. Is Islam something wonderful or not? That some people* are trying to turn it into a narrow version of Islam, is another story...
>
> * [Seems to be a reference to the Qatari administration]

As a follow-up D says: 'All I want is for IOL the organization to go back to the way it was. I keep on closing my eyes and hoping for the better. I keep on hoping it was all a bad dream'. F talks of losing a loved one and thinking that you cannot go on, but realizing that you can. He uses examples from his own life. B has stepped out to answer a phone. G says: 'I am concerned about B losing faith in the message, we all have to help her regain faith in the message'. This concern is followed up by the following response from H:

> I am thinking of a rose, you know. It is beautiful and has a lovely smell, but it has a short life. Let us overlook what type of death it endured, stamped on etc. But, the rose also has seeds, spreads seeds that can be replanted, and can grow new flowers. I want to take my seed, but I am in a freezer... I am thinking that IOL may be just that, our rose, and now we have seeds that we can spread and develop elsewhere. And, now I am thinking is it not better to spread the seeds, rather than

stay in IOL?
E: I love you! (exclaims spontaneously and laughingly).

Everyone joins in the laughter.

Essentially H appears to be saying that perhaps the IOL-crisis is a blessing in disguise. In my reading, this is distinctively a counselling perspective, acknowledging frustration, yet instigating hope (and thus empowerment), in order to continue. During the meeting claims are made to IOL-audience having dropped by 50% since the Qatari take over. This meeting takes place the day before the crisis erupts into a full-blown conflict. I believe the outbreak of an acute conflict was akin to dropping a bombshell on the ST.

## The Crisis Erupts and the Ideological Narrative Evolves

Only a day later, on Monday March 15, things have changed dramatically. The IOL-Crisis has erupted into a severe conflict. The Qatari board of administers have stated that they will close down the IOL offices in Cairo with some 350 employees[21]. The first step in this direction is that IOL-employees in Cairo are prohibited from accessing the IOL-server. During my visit on March 21, A tells me about this development. In her own words:

> The Qataris want to close down IOL Cairo, and only publish out of Qatar. On Monday (March 15) they took down the server and took our passwords and usernames, so we are not able to publish anything on IOL's webpage.

(Field notes, March 21, 2010).

I tell A that I read about Al-Qaradawi stating he would fire the Qatari board members responsible for the crisis, and ask for her comment. A affirms this, adding that Al-Qaradawi will need the support of the rest of the board. 'It could also be that the majority (of the board) votes against this. It is still unclear', A says. Being denied access to the server and told that the Cairo offices will be shut down are important escalations of the crisis.

These incidents also function as narrative turning points that contribute to the evolving of the IOL-Crisis narrative.

## The Ideological Narrative - Part Two

Part two of the ideological narrative adds on to what has already been established in part one. It is an adaptation in order to incorporate recent events, and can be reconstructed as such:

> *The Qataris accused us of publishing things that were 'un-Islamic' and too open-minded. They disapproved of us (ST) writing about Valentine's Day, and sexual relations. They objected to our (ST's) counselling services in general. They disliked IOL publishing photographs of unveiled women and our (IOL's) news-story called 'Palestine's Holocaust'. This was amongst the first items to be removed from the IOL website, after the Qatari administration denied us access to the server. The subpages Al Islamyoon and 20's were removed too. Now we are blocked from the IOL-server, and are not able to do our job. We want to continue working with the message. We want to continue doing what we love and what we believe in. We are not mainly fighting for our rights. The most important thing to us is the message. If they wanted to make a purely salafi website, why couldn't they just start another website? Why did they have to hijack IOL? We are hoping Al-Qaradawi will bring IOL back to us.*

In part two, the crisis is still framed as a battle of ideologies. This claim is substantiated by depicting ST as having been targeted for their discussion of 'un-Islamic' topics. The removal of 20's and Islamayoon[22] is mentioned as further evidence of a salafist turn. Institutional memory about the importance of 'the message' is induced. Indeed, 'the family' and 'the cause' are deemed more important than workers' rights, suggesting a willingness to sacrifice for 'the message'. There is also mention of 'Palestine's Holocaust', a continuously updated news-story that illustrated the number of Palestinians killed by Israelis. The removal of the latter

indicates regional-political discrepancies, rather than a clash of Islamic ideologies. When I asked the ST why the Qatari board disapproved of this particular story, I was told that the Qatari state[23] is reluctant to upset the US and their close ties to Israel. The narrative also reveals that much hope is riding on Al-Qaradawi, still formally the head of the Qatari board, and unavailable for commentary due to a health trip to Saudi Arabia. The hope is that Al-Qaradawi through his standing and influence will be able to turn the events around. Employing a narrative perspective, one could say that this is a story about *a hero* (IOL Cairo) and *the unfit* (Qatari board) who transgresses social order. The story includes a third character who is perceived to be *the saviour* (Al-Qaradawi) and who can potentially reinstate social order[24]. The question: 'if the Qatari administration wanted to make a purely salafi website, why did they hijack IOL?' is intriguing, and will be revisited.

IOL-Cairo employees are active media-players, spreading their narrative about the crisis, through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and the blog 'Voice of IOL'. The IOL-Crisis is swiftly picked up by Arab and international media. News-stories draw on the ideological narrative of the IOL-Crisis[25]. In this sense, B seems to be right on target when stating 'we are media people, and we are trying to use our expertise to our advantage' (Field notes, March 21, 2010).

## Al-Qaradawi's Significance

Since March 15, IOL-Cairo employees have been arranging daily sit-ins and protests, mostly on site. These protests are then transmitted via social media. On March 21:

> A and B lead the way to whiteboards placed by the entrance. The whiteboards display letters of support and newspaper-articles from different organizations and media. Print-outs of subpages of IOL are also on display (such as Islamyoon). (...) A few ST-members assemble around one computer to watch the Qatari board's lawyer talk to the media about the IOL-Crisis. The energy is tense. (...) After several minutes of watching

in silence, B exclaims: 'why doesn't Al-Qaradawi call us and support us? Is there is any direct contact with him, not just his office? Does he know about the latest developments?' C nods in response.

<div align="right">(Field notes March 21, 2010).</div>

It is interesting that in a crisis like this ST-members need and expect the support of Al-Qaradawi. It points to him representing more than a strategic alliance. On March 22, Al-Qaradawi announced, on *Al Jazeera*, that he would reverse resolutions by the new board and suspend those responsible. He added: 'IOL must return to its' family' (Al-Qaradawi, 2010)[26]. Intriguingly, Al-Qaradawi also draws on IOL's institutional memory, employing the family metaphor to signify the IOL-Cairo staff. Moreover, his statement feeds in to the crisis-narrative that 'the family' are the owners of 'the message'. Al-Qaradawi's statement can be interpreted as an attempt to save the 'IOL family'.

## Dooms-day and Shifting Narratives

When I arrive at IOL on March 24, IOL-employees are in a plenary meeting. After the meeting, A greetings me with:

A. Did you here the latest news?
M: I read something online this morning about sheikh Al-Qaradawi, but it was unconfirmed.
A: What did you read?
M: That Al-Qaradawi was sacked from the board of administers.
A: It is true.
M: It is true? I cannot believe it.
A: Yes, it was not expected and is quite a blow as we had a lot of hope riding on him. And who is to protect us now? We feel a little unprotected. (...)
A receives a call, I step aside and talk to B while A is on the phone. B expresses a similar sentiment.

> B: All hope has been hanging on Al -Qaradawi, and now this
> gone. We found out last night. The Qatari government got
> involved, sacked Qaradawi and reinstated the two that were
> the origins of the problems (...).
> I resume my conversation with A.
> A: It is quite a shock. We are starting to wonder if they were
> after Qaradawi himself. It seems that the Qatari state was
> under pressure from America to remove Al-Qaradawi. It may
> be related to IOL's active reporting on Palestine. It could be
> related to accusations about Al-Qaradawi being a supporter of
> terrorism, you know.
>
> (Field notes, March 24, 2010).

In an unexpected twist of events, Al-Qaradawi was eradicated. There is no
doubt that this was a severe blow to my informants. It basically spelled out
'doomsday'. It meant that they had lost the battle of IOL and the Cairo
offices would be shut down. IOL would not be able to 'return to its family'.
A's answers represent a shift of perspective from the previous crisis-
narrative. Now, the emphasis is on US and Qatari macro politics, rather
than ideological differences within Islam. From a narrative perspective,
Al-Qaradawi's eradication transformed the IOL-Crisis narrative into
a *tragedy*. Al-Qaradawi is (re)casted as *the tragic*, who is unable to assist *the
hero* in restoring social order. Al-Qaradawi's removal is thus an important
narrative turning point. The outcome of the crisis and thus the end of the
crisis-narrative is now known. Knowing the end of the narrative facilitates
new and multiple versions of the crisis-narrative[27].

## Narratives Multiply

On March 24, Ibrahim Al-Ansari, an Islamic scholar of the new
generation[28] and recently appointed head of the Qatari board, tells *Al
Jazeera* that the crisis is not related to ideology. He says that the dispute
concerns 'different visions about IOL' and adds: 'We want to develop IOL,
they want status quo' (Al-Ansari 2010). In the nine weeks following March
24, the ST no longer uniformly frame the crisis as an ideological battle,

and Arab media follow suit[29]. New narrative versions, which highlight political motivations or inefficient management as the reasons for the crisis, surface. These are classified as 'narrative versions', because they are in dialogue with the first IOL-Crisis narrative that focused on ideology.

## Political Narratives

A number of ST-members abandon the framing of the crisis as a battle between salafi and wasatiyya. Instead, they provide narrative versions that emphasise external, political factors:

> *'The Holocaust of Palestine' is one of the main reasons of the crisis. The evidence for this is that it was the first item to be removed from the IOL-website. The Qatari state gave into pressures from US Congress and/or Israel[30]. IOL-coverage of Palestine put Israel in a bad light. It was a plot to get rid of Al-Qaradawi while he was prohibited from responding due to illness. Qatar hosts a US military base and has trade agreements with Israel and cannot afford to upset its allies.*

The narrative depicts IOL having become too political and critical in their covering of the Israel-Palestine Conflict. Moreover, Al-Qaradawi himself was a target, due to 'being on a terrorism list' and his eradication was necessary. In this reading IOL is seen as a dangerous tool. Commenting on this B says 'we are essentially a social movement, we create awareness and equip people with tools in their lives'. He likens the Qatari take-over of IOL to 'cutting off the wings of the organization, so it can no longer fly'. Less common political versions relate struggles of regional influence between Qatar and Egypt, or Qatar and Saudi Arabia[31]. The former relates to IOL being an influential enterprise, and the latter to Saudi Arabian donors being dissatisfied with the Qatari take-over. Still, the explanation ST-members find the most plausible is that Qatar was pressured by the US and/or Israel. Next I turn to narratives that focus on internal factors.

## Inefficient Management Narratives

> *It is not a question of salafi vs. wasati. It is a question of poor management of IOL (Cairo). IOL expanded too much, with numerous subpages like Al Islamyoon and the launching of Ana channel. It was a dispute about how IOL should be run. But there was a lack of clarity of intention from Qatar's side. And, there was stubbornness on both sides so the conflict got personal. This is why the crisis escalated to this magnitude.*

This narrative focuses on intra-organizational faults. The first time I came across this narrative is in Nadia Elawady's blog of March 24 (Elawady, 2010)[32]. She is a former employee of IOL and sees the crisis as a dispute about what type of organization IOL should be. Elawady maintains that the Qatari board wants to run IOL as an organization for *da'wa* and believe that IOL 'diverted from what it intended to be'. The board is dissatisfied with the expansions of IOL, initiated by the Cairo-management, because they left IOL's core pages suffering. Expansion also implied financial investments that could have been spent on increasing salaries or updating IT. In her description of IOL-Cairo's reactions, Elawady affirms my analysis of IOL's institutional identity. Elawady (2010) describes how employees consider one another 'family' and emphasizes the significance of 'the message':

> It's also important to mention that to many IslamOnliners, IslamOnline is not a job; it's a message. This has also added to the loyalty many employees show to the organization and the upper management. They aren't all in it necessarily for the stable salary or the comfortable working environment. They are in it because they strongly believe in the role IslamOnline is playing in portraying a moderate Islam.

> This helps explain the position of many workers currently on strike. They are not only defending their jobs; they are defending the message.

In sum, Elawady believes the IOL-Crisis is a power-struggle between Doha and Cairo about how IOL should be run, one that 'got ugly and personalized'. Similar narratives were put forward by some of the IOL-counsellors in interviews[33]. For instance, Dr. A talks of IOL becoming so large and unfocused that it became 'a dinosaur, with body parts moving on its own'. He believes that IOL's constant expansion was the cause of its demise. 'It is our fault for not focusing on our expertise', he says[34]. In a similar vein, Dr. B questions the (Cairo) management's decision to expand when IOL's income was based on donations. In her opinion, the viability of new projects was unsure, as the funding could suddenly be discontinued. Dr. B. provides the analogy of a father in Qatar, and a mother in Egypt to describe the conflict. She is more critical of Qatar's role than Dr. A. In Dr. B's own words:

> The mother knows all the details of the every day lives of the children, while the distant father may have opinions without first hand knowledge. One day the father can decide he wants a divorce, he may leave her in kindness[35], or he may be brutal and, with no dialogue, simply state he will take the children and their house, and she is out on the streets. The Qatari administration chose the latter strategy.

A slightly different angle is provided by Dr. C who says 'it is a lack of professionalism from the Cairo side to think they owned IOL, because they had the thoughts. Qatar had the money. They have to respect that'. She uses the analogy of a developer building a large fancy house for many millions, and then deciding to tear it down. 'Is it a shame to tear the house down? Yes, but the owner can do that', she adds. These narratives are 'outsider narratives' in that they are proposed by individuals outside the core of IOL[36].

## Fusing Narrative Versions

In the early days of the crisis the ideological narrative was the *only* crisis-narrative to be heard amongst ST and in news-coverage. The lack of

alternative interpretations represents a 'narrative silence'. Yet as events developed, and in the weeks following the crisis, political narratives surfaced as the dominant narrative version amongst the ST and in Arab media[37]. The latter indicates IOL Cairo's media-proficiency. Counsellors also talked of inefficient management. At times, political and inefficient management narratives were fused into one. What happened to the ideological narrative? Did it simply disappear? The answer is yes and no. With time, it becomes evident that a number of ST- members no longer could consider the ideological narrative plausible. This may be a response to Al-Ansari's adamant denial of ideological motivation. Yet, not all have abandoned an ideological framing of the crisis. For instance, A elegantly fuses the political and ideological narrative versions into one. A maintains that the Qatari administration disapproved of 'the message' and ST's discussion of unsuitable topics, but also believes US-Congress and Zionist pressures led to the 'Qatari-hijack of IOL' (Interview, May 2, 2010). A says that the goal is to transform IOL into a website that 'is not too social and not too political'. Also, some of the counsellors see the crisis as result of both ideological differences and inefficient management. It is interesting to note that none of the ST talked of inefficient management. Those who provided versions of this narrative were ex-employee Elawady and counsellors, neither of whom breathed the conflict day and night in the IOL-offices.

Before concluding, I take a brief look at actual changes made to the IOL website during and after the crisis.

## IOL's Webpage

On March 24, there is no explicit information about the crisis on IOL's homepage or the social pages. Popular subpages of IOL, such as Al Islamiyoon, were removed, which is an indirect sign of the crisis visible to IOL-users. Yet, is there any evidence of a salafist turn on IOL after the Qatari take-over? The social pages are surprisingly unaltered, with the exception of the eradication of interactive counselling. Interestingly, the list of essays dealing with marital problems from a counselling

perspective (including sexual relations) seems to be intact. This means that unsuitable topicality was not the only reason for removing items. No new posts are added. By May, IOL has retrieved older layout and dated posts. Still, the content of the posts do not point in one clear direction. During the crisis and well in to August, IOL appeared to be a website in transition. By mid-August a total refashioning of layout and content has taken place. The social pages now present new content, with headings similar to those displayed prior to the crisis. Most notably IOL now provides 'social counselling' again. Still, by mid-October there are only three 'social counselling' posts, two of which deal with marital relations. All posts produced by the old IOL-ST (my informants) have been removed from the website[38]. These observations suggest that remodelling the IOL website in a salafi direction either was not the goal, or was incomplete.

## Conclusion

The IOL-Crisis indicates that even well-established religious websites can abruptly be dismantled or refashioned to fit different needs or ideologies. By focusing on IOL's institutional narrative and various crisis-narratives, I have brought 'invisible' knowledge (Krüger 2005) about IOL to the forefront. Moreover, the IOL-Crisis case supports Campbell's argument about authority being multi-layered. The struggle between IOL Cairo and the Qatari board is hierarchical, in that the latter have more formal and financial power. Still, my data indicate that there may not be a single conflict of authority at the core of the IOL-Crisis. Rather, a set of intersecting and perhaps contradictory range of tensions (ideological, political, inefficient management) seem to be in play. Yet, intriguingly, all crisis-narratives seem to reproduce IOL Cairo's 'corporate ideology', regardless of how they frame the crisis. And, finally, IOL Cairo's close ties to the offline religious authority Al-Qaradawi did not ensure them immunity to the 'hijack of IOL'. Indeed, Al-Qaradawi's elimination from the Qatari board and his replacement by Al-Ansari, indicates that we may be witnessing a generational shift of religious authority.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

[1] See for example, Anderson 2003, Bunt 2003, Hofheinz 2005, Mandaville 2002.

[2] Combining online research with ethnography, interviews, or online surveys, is recommended by other scholars of online religion. See for instance Larsson (2005:2) and Lövheim (2004:61).

[3] Providing a comprehensive review of news-articles that analyse the IOL-Crisis is

beyond the scope of this article. Here, I will only draw on news-articles where this is relevant to fieldwork-episodes.

[4] The communication between Doha and Cairo, during the crisis, was at the top-management level. I cannot draw an accurate picture of communication at this level. Nevertheless, this article sheds some light on what type of information was trickled down from the management level to the ST.

[5] Al-Qaradawi is also a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

[6] The number of regular employees is reported to be between 250-350. Numbers vary in news-reports collected on http://www.diigo.com/list/ahmedikhwan/islamonline-strike-news-, and, http://yalally.blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_1740.html

According to one of my informants, IOL Cairo had 350 employees, 150 of whom work with editorial content. Campbell (2001:31) estimates that the entire network of international scholars and writers that IOL draws on is over 1500 individuals.

[7] Prior agreement to conduct fieldwork amongst the Arabic ST was arranged during my visit to Cairo and IOL in May 2009.

[8] 'Complete observer' entails being a silent observer rather than a participant-observer. This applied to my role in the editorial meetings, where I sat quietly, observed and typed field notes. Only as the crisis built up, did I start to ask questions during these meetings.

[9] Still, certain segments elicited immediate interpretations. These are clearly marked as 'interpretations' in my ethnographic notes and are marked with * in the extracts. I spent many hours systematizing the notes for further use, in direct sequence to the observation.

[10] Software for qualitative data analysis.

[11] With the influx of Modern Standard Arabic.

[12] The citations in this section (in order of reference) are from interviews conducted with ST-members on May 23, 2010, May 30, 2010, May 2, 2010, April 11, 2010.

[13] All reconstructed narratives in this article are constructed on the basis of the totality of field notes and interviews. Reconstructed narratives are marked with italics in order to distinguish them from other data, such as interviews and field notes.

[14] It is also possible to interpret the family metaphor as signifying IOL-staff considering one another as 'brothers and sisters' in the same manner as for example members of the Muslim Brotherhood do. However, I do not believe this to be the case, as I never heard ST-members refer to each other as 'brothers' or 'sisters' during fieldwork. The times I have heard kinship relations explicitly mentioned, informants spoke of 'being married to IOL' or considering IOL 'their mother and father'. Moreover, family is a common metaphor in many organizational narratives (Hart, 2003:2).

[15] Lia (1998:69) writes of a similar 'willingness to sacrifice' component when dealing with the formative years of the Muslim Botherhood in Egypt.

[16] M is for my voice.

[17] The question of funding is never specified beyond 'Saudi funders' or 'Saudi partners'. However, it is clear that reference to 'Saudi partners' entails the same sources that previously contributed to funding IOL through donations to the Qatari board.

[18] I was also able to observe work tasks with ST-members up until about a week before the crisis erupted.

[19] See for instance Hassan (2010:1) who mentions that an investigative committee from Qatar questioned the 250 employees who signed the statement to Al-Qaradawi.

[20] For lack of a better translation, this is a direct translation of what was said in Arabic, namely: *Hilm al risala*.

[21] See footnote 6.

[22] 20's was a subpage targeting youth in their twenties, and Islamayoon was a subpage about Islamist movements and ideology.

[23] Often this is not specified further, but sometimes there is mention of the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervening in accordance with news-coverage. See for example Hassan (2010) and Abdel Halim (2010).

[24] This reading is inspired by Hydén (1998).

[25] This argument is based on reading through most of the newspaper articles dealing with the crisis collected on two websites:

http://www.diigo.com/list/ahmedikhwan/islamonline-strike-news-, and, http://yalally. blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_1740.html

The articles are in both Arabic and English, and the list contains both Arab (Egyptian and Gulf) and international articles. The two sites contain some cross-references. In addition, I ran online searches of 'IOL-Crisis' in both Arabic and English to supplement the list, yielding a couple of additional articles (not on these two website's lists). If content of a specific article is referred to in the text, I reference it directly.

[26] This is a clip of the IOL-Cairo staff watching Al-Qardawi's statement, followed by their applause and was posted on YouTube and IOL's Facebook page.

[27] This analysis is inspired by Hydén (1998).

[28] He is some 40 years younger than Al-Qaradawi.

[29] This argument is based on reviewing newspaper articles dated after March 24 and that deal with the crisis. The articles are collected on two websites:

http://www.diigo.com/list/ahmedikhwan/islamonline-strike-news-, and, http://yalally. blogspot.com/2010/03/blog-post_1740.html

[30] Sometimes there is mention of CIA, the US Jewish Lobby, Zionists but this is less common than saying US or Israel.

[31] On a few occasions I also heard mention of political motivation related to IOL's alleged

ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, but this was rare. This angle is beyond the scope of this article.

[32] This blog differs from newspaper articles about the IOL-Crisis (see footnote 25) both with regards to content (internal inefficient management), and in that the author is a former IOL-employee.

[33] The prefix 'Dr.' is added to the counsellors for two reasons. 1. To distinguish between them and the ST-members.  2. All of the quoted counsellors were addressed as 'Dr. so and so' by the ST.

[34] In his view IOL's 'expertise' is the social section, and the counselling services in particular.

[35] This is likely to be a reference to a verse 2:229 of the Qu'ran about divorcing 'in kindness'.

[36] The quotes in this section are selected from interviews with counselors conducted on the following dates in 2010 (in order of appearance): May 15, May 9  and May 12.

[37] This argument refers to the articles written after March 24, 2010. See footnote 25 for sources.

[38] By August 2010, OnIslam.net, the offshoot website that the previous IOL-Cairo staff created with the assistance of Saudi funding, is up and running. The previous IOL-Cairo staff have succeeded in the continuation of spreading their 'message' via a new website. The layout and categorization of topics is similar to IOL prior to the crisis. Also, a number of the pre-crisis IOL posts, such as essays and interactive counselling, are now to be found on On Islam.