

BEHIND THE NEWS PROFILE

Netting the Middle East



From a humble beginning to four million devoted subscribers, Maktoob.com is giving Arab nations a strong internet identity. Steven Knipp meets founder Samih Toukan

You've probably never heard of Samih Toukan, or his website Maktoob.com. But don't feel bad. A decade ago you almost certainly would not have heard of Jerry Yang – the Chinese-American engineering student who launched Yahoo.com from his college dorm. Today it's the world's most popular website.

The analogy isn't far fetched. Seven years ago Jordan's Samih Toukan launched Maktoob.com out of his grandfather's family house, in the Jordanian capital of Amman. Within weeks, Mr Toukan and his partners had signed up 4,000 users. By 2000, the site had 100,000 subscribers, and the fledgling firm got a US\$2.5 million cash injection from an Egyptian bank.

Today, Maktoob has gone from being the world's first Arabic-language website to the most popular Arabic-language online community in the world. Boasting four million devoted subscribers, and adding 4,500 more every day, the distinctive site has since been steadily breaking down a barricade of social barriers.

Maktoob – the word means "message" in Arabic – was so far ahead of its time when the website was launched, that Arabic-language keyboards were still rare, so the company had to send out Arabic stickers to fasten on to standard English-language keyboards.

"We started Maktoob as an experiment," Mr Toukan said. "We felt that if the internet was to be used in the Arab world, the Arabic language should be a key. People either don't speak English or simply would like to use their native language."

Having earned an engineering degree in Britain and a masters in business in France, Mr Toukan returned home to Jordan to work as a technology consultant just as the internet was taking off in the west. "After we saw the explosion of e-mail elsewhere, we knew it was coming to this region," he said. "We felt e-mail was the most important application on the net and that this could probably be our entry into the Arab world – if we could help the Arabs use the Arabic language."

To emphasise its identity, last spring Maktoob launched a campaign called *Sajel Ana Arabi* (Proud to be an Arab). The result was not only a roaring commercial success, it led to an emotional outpouring from delighted users across

the Middle East. "It was merely a slogan calling for Arabs to be proud of their nationality by registering with us, but we got a great response," said Mr Toukan. "And even today subscribers send e-mails saying how proud they are that we've been able to compete with international websites."

Building on its coup with e-mail, Maktoob then steadily introduced a range of related products and services, including the first Arabic internet radio station, Arabic chat sites and discussion forums, the world's first Arabic online auction site, a prepaid shopping card for online purchases, the first Arabic-language blogs, and even an online matchmaking service.

"The problem in the Arab world is that few people have credit cards," Mr Toukan said. "And if they do, they don't want to use them on the net, because they're worried about security. And in some countries, like Syria or Libya, there are no credit cards at all." So his pre-paid cash card, called CashU, is particularly useful, particularly for students and young people.

"We've made agreements with banks so our 30,000 CashU card users can simply open a cash account, fill it with the amount they want, buy our card at post offices or supermarkets, scratch out their code number and buy whatever they want online," he said. "The interesting thing about Maktoob is we are physically in Jordan, but our users are from all over the Arab world."

Interesting, but also problematical. Jordan's internet penetration is reasonably high, at 25 per cent – compared

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with China's 1 per cent – and the government welcomes the internet. But the same can't be said for the rest of the Middle East.

The net's popularity in Jordan is due partly to Jordan's youthful King Abdullah, who commissioned a technology survey in 2000 to examine his kingdom's potential to become the Silicon Valley of the Middle East. The survey found that his kingdom of five million had the capability to create 30,000



high-tech jobs annually. A decree was sent out to universities suggesting they produce more IT graduates. Jordan's parliament was pushed to create tax holidays for internet firms. And an international ad campaign was launched, with the slogan: "Jordan: Small country, Big ideas."

"I don't usually like commending governments," said Mr Toukan. "But the Jordanian government's been sup-

portive in adopting the internet and increasing its penetration. And the king's been the major driver behind this."

While Jordan enjoys full internet freedom, in Saudi Arabia, Syria and other Middle East nations censorship is still common. "Some sites are blocked, some political, some pornographic, some gambling," said Mr Toukan.

"You can't push for change too fast. But at the same time, the internet is a medium that's almost impossible to control. It's much more free than newspapers. You can put a newspaper writer in jail for a few days, as happens. But with the internet, the day after someone closes you down, you could set up another site, literally overnight, in the British Virgin Islands – and put whatever information you want on it. Always these governments resist technology, but then they realise they can't beat it, so they give up."

As a businessman, Maktoob's founder must walk a thin line, striving to fill lucrative commercial niches, while being careful not to upset traditional political powers in certain markets. "We want to be democratic," he said. "If our chat rooms aren't democratic, people won't use them."

"However, if in the discussions people insult the king of Saudi Arabia – where Maktoob has three quarters of a million users – you could be blocked there. But at the same time if, for example, the government in Syria comes to us, saying: 'We will not block you if you allow us to monitor your e-mail,' we will not accept this, because we will lose credibility with our users."

One example of Maktoob's profit versus penalty balancing act is its popular fee-based online matchmaking service, a revolutionary concept in the Arab world. "In Jordan, you can go on dates," said Mr Toukan. "But not in Saudi Arabia. So we package this not as a dating site but as a marriage site. We don't use the word dating, because if we did we'd be blocked. The home



Like Yahoo founder Jerry Yang (far left), Samih Toukan is carving out a name for himself, as founder of the biggest Arabic-language website, with the help of a growing team of employees (below). Photos: Oliver Tsang/Steven Knipp

page states: "This is a site for getting to know one another, for the purpose of getting married."

Mr Toukan pulls out a faxed letter just in from Algeria, one of scores he regularly receives from around the region. Written in Arabic, it said: "Sir, I want to thank you for this very good site. I also want to tell you that I met the girl of my life on your chat line, and we're now getting married."

A less controversial but potentially equally profitable addition to the Maktoob stable is a recently purchased Lebanese firm, AdabWaFan.com – meaning "literature and art". It is like Amazon.com, but for Arabic books. In an ingenious move, Maktoob jointly acquired the company together with Aramex.com, a Jordanian-based global delivery company, thus closing the e-commerce circle of promoting, selling and delivering products online.

"This is an interesting project because it will add many Arab users in the US and Europe to our customer base, as these are people who want to buy Arabic books, but don't have access to them," Mr Toukan said.

He and his partners today employ 50 people, and have regional offices in Dubai and Saudi Arabia. Their latest acquisition is a small firm called Sport of Jordan. "Arabs are absolutely sports-crazy," he said. "So we want to take this regional so we can offer broad Middle Eastern coverage and provide localised content for each different market."

Despite Maktoob's success, Mr Toukan has no intention of vacating his homely headquarters for a glitzy glass-box high-rise. Instead, he's having his grandfather's roomy old three-storey house renovated.

And, while corporate power lunches are becoming popular in Jordan, Mr Toukan prefers to pop back to his family's home to enjoy lunch with his parents and two sisters. Some Arabic traditions are simply too treasured to be changed.

Tale of two Iranian soldiers reveals a nation torn in two

Religious fissures and the horrific toll from conflict with Iraq continue to haunt the country, writes Robert Tait

Surrounded by a vast, ghostly army of Iran's war dead, Mohammed Majid Nekooyi and Ali Reza'i should have been linked by a common bond. They had gone on the same day to pay their respects at the vast Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, where about 300,000 Iranians killed in the country's bloody war with Iraq lie buried.

But the two war veterans reflected a cultural chasm that seemed emblematic of the social and religious fissures at the heart of contemporary Iran. While one of the men longed for an age of Islamic purity, the other wished for the type of secular society that is anathema to the current rulers.

Situated on Tehran's southwestern tip, Behesht-e Zahra is the physical embodiment of Shia Iran's fixation with human martyrdom. Row after row of graves sit tightly packed next to each other. Every

week, on Thursday evenings and Fridays, bereaved relatives visit to remember loved ones officially revered as martyrs.

In this sprawling necropolis, and to the hypnotic taped sound of Islamic mourning chants, Mr Nekooyi and Mr Reza'i had intensely personal – and strikingly parallel – experiences to relate.

They had each left their families as teenage *basijis* (volunteers) to fight in a conflict billed by Iran's mullahs as a holy war between Islam and foreign infidels, even though the majority of Iraqis share the Shi'ite faith of most Iranians.

After a brief training regimen, they were pitched into combat. Both saw scores of comrades cut down brutally as Iran sought to counteract superior Iraqi weaponry with a reckless human wave strategy, ultimately costing an estimated one million Iranian lives.



Mourners at graves in the vast Behesht-e Zahra cemetery. Photo: AP

In the 17 years since the conflict ended, Mr Nekooyi and Mr Reza'i have attempted to adapt to Iranian society after the upheavals.

But there the similarities end. Mr Nekooyi, 33, volunteered for the army at 15, lying about his age to qualify for service. Religious by upbringing, he had been inspired by the calls to martyrdom issued by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's late supreme leader.

Fate had spared Mr Nekooyi, who served as a sniper in Kurdistan

and on the southern front, but he did not feel lucky. "On one occasion, a cluster bomb exploded at my feet," he said. "Nothing happened to me but all my friends were killed. I couldn't count it as lucky. The way I saw it, those who died had the honour to be martyred. What you regard as being horrible or terrible, I don't see as such."

Asked what he would most like to see in modern Iran, he replied: "I would like the 12th Imam to come." He was referring to the religious

figure who Shia Muslims believe went missing in the ninth century and who, they hope, will one day reappear to herald an age of unprecedented justice.

For Mr Reza'i, 38, the call to arms had come from profound grief felt over the death of his brother, Morteza, in the battle of Khorramshahr in 1982. "I was never the sort of person to go into a mosque," he said, as he tended his brother's grave. "Neither me nor my brother had a martyr complex. I wasn't interested in dying."

But determined to emulate his brother, Mr Reza'i – who requested that his true family name be withheld – enlisted as a 16-year-old, rejecting the exemption to which he was entitled through Morteza's death. He was pitched into battle in an offensive known as Valfajr 1st. Of 1,600 Iranian soldiers who stormed the Iraqi positions, he says he was one of 39 to survive; He fled the front and never returned.

What Mr Nekooyi saw as glorious martyrdom, Mr Reza'i regarded as futile. "All these young men went to be martyred and who took responsibility?" he asked. "The

only optimistic thing you can say is that people went to defend their country because it was invaded by Arabs. That makes us feel justified.

"Iranian people don't have the same feeling now as during the war. All these martyrs are forgotten. The authorities will remind people of them from time to time, but only for their own ends. I would like to see society move towards real development and for religion to play a less prominent role. I would like to see fewer of these Islamic advertisements. Religion and politics don't go together."

The views of Mr Reza'i could hardly deviate more sharply from the official line. Government-commissioned murals depicting the blood of martyrs and sacrifices of the war are emblazoned on walls and buildings throughout Tehran. But many believe the imagery belies the reality. Many families say they are not adequately provided for by the various foundations set up to help relatives of the fallen.

There also are complaints that the younger generation – too young to remember the privations of the period – and the authorities fail to

appreciate the sacrifices of the war generation.

The phenomenon has been highlighted by the recent case of Mohammed Rejabi Sani, a mentally disabled war veteran who died in prison, allegedly after being beaten by guards and fellow prisoners. He had been taken into custody after an argument with two other men who had apparently mocked him for his disability. An Islamic cleric is heading an investigation initiated after his family claimed the prison authorities had denied him medication for his condition, prompting him to behave violently.

At Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, another war veteran, Hamid Reza Dehghan, 41, believed he understood the cause of the malaise.

"Some of those in authority today are so young that they were not touched by the war," said Mr Dehghan, who said he retained faith in the ideals of the revolution. "They have not felt the suffering of the people, who were under 100 per cent economic sanctions, and all the other related misfortunes of the period. Our society has moved far from the goals of the revolution."