THIRD WAY

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Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and U.S. Interests

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As the United States reorients to the extraordinary new reality in Egypt, American policymakers are focusing on Egypt's largest and best organized opposition movement: the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood presents a real challenge to American interests. It is a deeply conservative Islamist organization with a violent beginning and an avowed goal of imposing Sharia, or Islamic law. Some American leaders, as well as commentators on both the left and the right, are reacting. Soon after Mubarak's fall, the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, called for "the unequivocal rejection of any involvement by the Muslim Brotherhood" in the future of Egyptian government. [1]

That is not an option—the Brotherhood has legitimate and significant support in Egypt. While the U.S. should not embrace the Muslim Brotherhood, we should focus on protecting our interests. ***That means recognizing that the Brotherhood might offer an opportunity to undermine al Qaeda; helping the Egyptian people build strong and independent democratic institutions; and conveying realistic foreign policy red lines to the new Egyptian government.***

Background on the Muslim Brotherhood

The Brotherhood represents both a potential opportunity and a real challenge to U.S. interests. Domestically, the group has rejected violence for decades and appears pragmatic, but its long-term goal is to spread a conservative vision of Islam and form an Islamic state governed by Sharia—its motto is "Islam is the Solution." [2] Internationally, the Brotherhood challenges al Qaeda's ideology, but it is also hostile to Israel and some U.S. foreign policy.

The Brotherhood's early history was violent. It had a paramilitary wing that murdered prominent Jewish and political leaders in Egypt. [3] After an assassination attempt on President Nasser, the group was outlawed and faced decades of government suppression. [4]

Though officially banned, the organization reached a truce with Anwar Sadat in the early 1970s and renounced violence, a pledge it has maintained. [5] Under Mubarak, the Brotherhood remained banned though it created a well-funded and well-organized underground opposition movement that focused on social services—organizing banks, hospitals and mosques for the poor. When allowed, it ran candidates for political office. [6]

Over the years, internal divisions have emerged, and the group's membership now can roughly be divided into three ideological groups: the Da'wa are ideological conservatives who focus primarily on social work rather than politics. The legislative faction tends to consist of conservatives who emphasize political participation and engagement. The final faction is a group of reformers that have remained within the Brotherhood but advocate for a more progressive interpretation of Islam. [7] While the three factions differ, none have called for a return to the organization's violent past.

The Muslim Brotherhood and al Qaeda

The Muslim Brotherhood and al Qaeda have a common ancestry, the far reaching influence of Sayid Qutb, an Islamic scholar whose writings impacted both organizations. A Brotherhood member in its early years, Qutb developed the concept of "takfir," arguing that Muslims of insufficient piety or conservatism should be attacked. [8] In 1969, the Brotherhood's leadership explicitly rejected Qutb's principal teachings in their seminal publication, *Preachers Not Judges*. Now, they actively seek to disassociate themselves from the revolutionary nature of Qutb's writings. But they have not fully eliminated his influence; his writings remain in the

organization's curriculum and are popular amongst the membership. [9]

Today, al Qaeda and the Brotherhood share a call for the eventual creation of an Islamic state governed by Sharia law, but they have different concepts of what that means and how to achieve it. Fundamentally, the Brotherhood sees itself as a part of society and seeks to reform it, while al Qaeda sees itself as outside of a corrupt society and demands change through force and terror. [10]

Because the Brotherhood pursues reform through participation, while al Qaeda argues that only violence can produce change, these organizations have long been adversaries. In 1991, Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's Number 2, published *Bitter Harvest*, which denounced the Muslim Brotherhood for participating in elections rather than in violent efforts to overthrow the Egyptian government. In 2008, he argued that the Brotherhood's party platform was not based on Sharia and therefore inconsistent with the belief of God's law over man because it worked within the Egyptian constitution. [11]

For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood has routinely condemned al Qaeda attacks against civilian Americans and Muslims. Supreme Guide Mohammad Mehdi Akef called the 9/11 attacks "a criminal act which could only have been carried out by criminals." [12] Further, Brotherhood leaders argue that al Qaeda has "nothing to offer than their futile ideology of violence and destruction." [13]

The Brotherhood made a clear distinction between terrorism targeting civilians and attacks against American troops in Iraq. The Brotherhood considered our troops' presence there a foreign occupation and thus a legitimate target for jihad. Nevertheless, there is "virtually no evidence of any MB foreign fighters in Iraq." [14]

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Revolution

The Brotherhood's Role in the Revolution

The January 25th Revolution was secular, not Islamic. Organizers included a Google executive, not a religious leader, and the event was initially organized on Facebook, not in mosques. There were limited displays of religion, and protestors demanded the end of an autocratic regime, not the creation of an Islamic one. A common chant was "Bread, Freedom, Dignity." [15]

The Brotherhood did not officially join the effort until three days into the protests. [16] Later, the Brotherhood angered protestors by backing-off the demand that Mubarak step down immediately during negotiations with Vice President Suleiman. [17]

Some commentators in the United States, ranging from the *The Washington Post* and *The New Republic* to the *The Wall Street Journal* and Glenn Beck, have warned that the situation in Egypt could mirror the 1979 Iranian Revolution. But while such an outcome in Egypt is possible, it is unlikely. First, the revolutions simply do not look the same. In Iran, the movement started as a democratic protest, but from the beginning it had a strong Islamist undertone. # Ayatollah Khomeini was the clear spiritual leader of the revolution, and he returned from exile to a giant crowd and quickly manipulated the process toward an Islamic theocracy. [18]

Second, as Fareed Zakaria has argued, the Khomeini model doesn't work in Egypt. The Iranian regime is unpopular model across the Middle East, particularly in Sunni-dominated Egypt. Moreover, the mullahs do not play a hierarchical or political role in Egypt like Ayatollahs did in Iran. [19]

Possible Role of the Brotherhood in a Democratic Egypt

After the fall of the Mubarak government, the Brotherhood announced that it would not run a candidate for president in the upcoming elections, recognizing that it would be too controversial. [20] However, it did announce its intention to form a political party, and one of its former members of Parliament, Sobhi Saleh, was appointed by the military to an eight person constitutional review panel. Even without a

presidential candidate, the Brotherhood will be a significant player in a new government.

The magnitude of its likely impact is unclear—since no legitimate voting history exists, opinions on its electoral appeal vary widely. A poll commissioned by the Washington Institute on Near East Policy put the group's support at 15%; [21] Dan Byman of Brookings says support for the group "probably represents a healthy plurality of the country;" [22] Marc Lynch estimates that the group has "perhaps 100,000 members." [23] Whatever their actual constituency, the group's sophisticated organization and popular social service work will provide an advantage in parliamentary elections. Yet as they gain a measure of real political power, it is also possible that the three factions of the Brotherhood could divide into separate political parties.

The Muslim Brotherhood and U.S. Interests

Any government involving the Brotherhood is likely to be less supportive of U.S. foreign policy objectives than the Mubarak regime. The Brotherhood's views toward Israel are generally hostile—former General Guide Mahdi Akef told Brookings' Shadi Hamid that the Brotherhood would never accept Israel's existence. However, other leaders walked that statement back, saying they would not accept Israel 'in their hearts' but could resign themselves to reality. [24] International pressure on this issue is also likely to limit the risk that Egypt will abandon the Camp David accords.

When it comes to core American security issues, including the fight against al Qaeda and its allies, the Brotherhood is also a mixed bag. On the one hand, its language can be radical: *The Wall Street Journal* noted that Muhammad Badie, the Brotherhood's supreme guide, gave a sermon in October arguing: "The improvement and change that the [Muslim] nation seeks can only be attained . . . by raising a jihadi generation that pursues death just as the enemies pursue life." [25]

Yet their rhetoric belies their practical tendencies. Despite 30 years of oppression by Mubarak, they did not resort to violence against the state and even suggested he stay in power to maintain stability until elections could be held. Further, the Brotherhood has talked less about applying Sharia in Egypt and more about using Islam as a reference point for lawmaking. [26] If they can work as a moderate force that accepts democracy, they will provide the Muslim world with a powerful counter-example to al Qaeda, which claims that only violence can achieve Islamic objectives.

If, on the other hand, the United States tries to prevent the Brotherhood's participation in a democratic Egypt, as Chairman Ros-Lehtinen suggests, the elections could be seen as a farce, and the Brotherhood could once again be pushed underground and toward radicalization. Given these realities, the United States should work in the coming months to help the Egyptian people build strong democratic institutions, including political parties and the rule of law. Our goal should be for the Brotherhood to be one voice among many in Egypt.

As we seek to achieve that goal, the United States should engage with any political party that renounces violence. This will allow the U.S. to build greater trust with political actors, provide greater insight into Egyptian politics, and create a forum to share concerns directly with decision makers in Egypt.

That is not to suggest that the United States sit idly by if the Brotherhood returns to violence or threatens our core interests in the region or elsewhere. We must make clear what is unacceptable—including abandoning the Camp David accords, or violence against Coptic Christians or others. If any of these things happen and impact Egyptian government policy, the U.S. should act swiftly and boldly—the consequences for crossing any of these red lines should be, at a minimum, the loss of American aid.

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