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The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Current Crisis and Future Directions

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(Source: kataeb.org)

In July 2018, the Congressional Subcommittee on National Security held a hearing to examine the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood to the United States and its interests. This hearing—expected to pave the way for Congress to follow through on efforts to designate the Brotherhood as a terrorist group—has re-ignited the debate about the Muslim Brotherhood and its relationship to violence and terrorism.

The hearing comes at a time when the Muslim Brotherhood is undergoing a crisis of extreme proportions. This is especially true for the mother branch in Egypt, which serves as the spiritual leader of the transnational Brotherhood movement, and which is suffering what is arguably the deepest calamity in its long history. Since the military toppled President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 and designated the Brotherhood a terrorist organization five months later, the Egyptian Brotherhood has been hunted down and its members imprisoned,

or forced to flee abroad. Its networks have also been dismantled, with its vast web of businesses, charities and social welfare organizations broken up. What once served almost as a state within a state has been brought to its knees.

This state repression has been accompanied by a narrative that links the Brotherhood directly to involvement in violence, with its members accused of committing or being behind terrorist acts inside Egypt ([France24 \(http://www.france24.com/en/20161213-egypt-accuses-muslim-brotherhood-over-coptic-church-attack-suspect-mustafa\)](http://www.france24.com/en/20161213-egypt-accuses-muslim-brotherhood-over-coptic-church-attack-suspect-mustafa), December 13, 2016). [1] This narrative also holds that, at the very minimum, the movement serves as the start of a conveyor belt of radicalism that finishes with the likes of Islamic State (IS). The regime has also routinely linked the movement to several violent groups, including Hasm, which was designated a terrorist group by the United States in January 2018, despite there being no concrete evidence of links between these groups and the Brotherhood ([Egypt Today \(https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/52851/Prominent-MB-affiliated-media-figures-placed-on-terror-list\)](https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/52851/Prominent-MB-affiliated-media-figures-placed-on-terror-list), June 26). To add to the pressure, the regime has also been promoting stories of Brotherhood prisoners “repenting,” having signed up to a set of revisions, referred to as the “repentance acknowledgements,” in which they have denounced the movement ([Egypt Today \(https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/32025/MB-leaders-fear-%E2%80%98intellectual-revisions%E2%80%99-Brotherhood-member\)](https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/32025/MB-leaders-fear-%E2%80%98intellectual-revisions%E2%80%99-Brotherhood-member), November 11, 2017).

The regime’s relentless onslaught against the Brotherhood has not only fueled some of the shrill arguments being put against the group in Washington. This campaign has also fed into ongoing assumptions that the increased repression, coupled with the Brotherhood’s failed performance as a political actor during its brief spell in power, has the potential to radicalize the base and push it toward violence.

Yet however logical such arguments may appear, so far these assumptions are not being borne out in reality. While some hot-headed elements who were either part of the Brotherhood or on its margins may have sought to fight fire with fire, there is still no concrete evidence of there being any real shift either among the base or the leadership toward adopting a violent strategy. By contrast, the Brotherhood has remained remarkably steadfast in its refusal to be drawn down such a path, and Egypt has avoided suffering the same fate as Algeria, which, in the 1990s, descended into a long and bloody civil war after the military stepped in and cancelled the elections that the Islamic party had won.

Gray Areas

This does not mean that there are no gray areas. In the immediate aftermath of the Raba al-Adawiya events, in which security forces killed at least 800 Morsi supporters in a single day, some inside the movement felt that such repression should be met with resistance. This was coupled with a belief that the masses would mobilize in support of the Brotherhood and restore “legitimacy” by bringing Morsi back in a kind of rerun of the events of January 2011. Hence, the Brotherhood encouraged protests and demonstrations in a bid to break the coup.

It soon became clear, however, that the movement had overestimated its own power and that it was no match for the security services. This kind of peaceful resistance had achieved nothing other than deaths and more arrests, and through such actions, the movement was heading down a self-destructive path.

Within this context, a group of Brotherhood activists sought a new way to resist the coup. This group was led first by Mohamed Taha Wahdan, a former Guidance Office member, once in charge of the movement’s education section. After Wahdan’s arrest in 2015, Mohamed Kamal, a doctor and another seasoned Brotherhood member, took charge. He was killed by security services in October 2016 ([MEMO \(https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161004-breaking-muslim-brotherhood-leader-mohamed-kamal-killed-egypts-interior-ministry-claims/\)](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161004-breaking-muslim-brotherhood-leader-mohamed-kamal-killed-egypts-interior-ministry-claims/), October 4, 2016).

Frustrated by what they perceived as the lack of action by what was left of the traditional leadership, most of whom were now based abroad and paralyzed by the shock of what had happened, this activist group established its own rival leadership bodies and media outlets through which it sought to wrestle control of the movement. More importantly, this group advocated for a more robust response to Morsi’s overthrow. Although notably vague in its language, it sought to raise the stakes by rekindling the revolutionary spirit of January 2011 and advocating a more vigorous form of popular resistance to the regime. This included adopting what some

members described as “creative pacifism,” namely attacking police cars and electricity pylons, stopping trains, and setting fire to public buildings (al-Araby Jadeed (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/amp/investigations/2015/12/28/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AB%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%87%D9%85>) December 28, 2015). In other words, engaging in a form of civil disobedience in which violent actions other than killing were considered legitimate.

When this form of resistance also failed to bear fruit, some elements—they may or may not have been linked to the Brotherhood—went further and advocated for the targeting of the security forces, or the killing of judges who passed death sentences (al-Araby Jadeed (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/amp/investigations/2015/12/28/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AB%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%87%D9%85>) December 28, 2015). Around this time, a handful of hot-headed youths advocated for the carrying of weapons to confront the repression and to protect the protests that were still ongoing at this time.

This was a chaotic and reductive response by certain elements that were either part of the Brotherhood or on its margins, who felt the need for action in the face of both severe repression and the inertia of the traditional leadership. Kamal himself was explicit in his statements that he did not want to militarize the revolution, but rather wanted to have the necessary tools to “break the coup” and protect those who were protesting. In other words, his mission was to “exhaust the regime, throw it into confusion and then defeat it” (Mekameleen TV (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffxvHduo064>) [YouTube], October 6, 2016).

However, the group’s efforts fizzled out fairly early on. This was partly because it could not sustain itself in such extreme and repressive circumstances. It was also because the veteran leadership, whose priority was to preserve the movement at all costs, refused to bend and insisted on upholding its stance of peaceful resistance. The traditional leadership was well aware that such an approach would be suicidal, and would strip the movement of the moral authority it could still lay claim to through upholding its pacific stance and appealing to democratic legitimacy. It was also conscious of the fact that the Egyptian Brotherhood carries a particular weight as the mother branch of a transnational movement and any wrong move that could leave the movement open to accusations of violence would have major repercussions, including in the West.

The old guard worked hard, therefore, to convince and contain these rival elements. When that failed, it kicked them out of the movement. Moreover, there was no real appetite for such a self-destructive approach within what was left of the Brotherhood, including the leadership in prison. In addition, those who are bearing the brunt of the regime’s crackdown, including Morsi and other iconic Brotherhood leaders, are clearly backing the old leadership abroad.

Thus the wider movement was able to absorb this challenge to its leadership and with Kamal’s death the project lost its momentum.

A Revolutionary Approach?

However, splits within the Brotherhood remain. Perhaps the most pronounced division is between the traditional leadership and those Brothers, some of whom are based in Turkey operating under a body named the General Office of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are still employing a discourse that demands a more revolutionary approach.

Advocates of this approach, who include Amr Darrag, Ashraf Abdel Gaffar and Gemal Heshmet, have openly criticized the traditional leadership. They accuse it of having failed during its time in power, and of being unwilling to undertake any proper review or to amend its methods in line with present-day realities. This group argues that the events of the Arab Spring ushered in a new era of revolutionary activism, making the Brotherhood’s old gradualist approach of reforming society from the bottom-up redundant, requiring the

movement to adopt new methods that are more in line with the spirit of the times ([al-Thawra Channel \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3UbXFVI9UY\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3UbXFVI9UY) [YouTube], November 3, 2015). As Heshmet explains, the group wants to continue along al-Banna's path, but to "bring up a new generation fed on the concept of 'we are revolutionaries'." [2] He makes clear that this does not mean being aggressors, but explains, "Revolutions are the best way forward and the best way to gain freedom." [3] Indeed, this group seems to believe that Egypt, and the Arab world more widely, is still in a revolutionary mode, and that there is a need to capitalize on such revolutionary fervor.

While it is not clear exactly what this group means by being more revolutionary, it is evidently advocating a break from the movement's old way of doing things. In 2017, the new group issued an evaluation of the movement since its inception and concluded that Brotherhood had failed because it had not been revolutionary enough and because it had not focused sufficiently on politics. [4] It argued that organizational elements had taken priority over revolutionary or political action and that there had been a failure to separate the Brotherhood as an organization that did *dawa* (preaching Islam) from its political work. As such, this group looks to be trying to push the movement toward a more political route, in a watered down version of what an-Nahda has done in Tunisia, and effectively secularizing the Brotherhood in the process.

Such arguments are likely to fall on deaf ears as far as the traditional leadership is concerned. This leadership is not going to embark upon any serious review of its ideology or its political approach. It knows full well that any genuine review of this type is likely to prompt more recrimination, something the movement can ill afford at this time. More importantly, it knows that any serious review of its ideology could mark the start of the movement's unravelling, and would only work in the regime's favor. In addition, the Brotherhood by its very nature has never been a movement open to genuine self-review or reflection.

As such, this clash over what is essentially more tactics than ideology is likely to persist. However, the group that advocates this revolutionary stance is unlikely to have any major impact in the long term. It increasingly looks like a talking shop and intellectual exercise that is far removed from the reality on the ground in Egypt.

As such, the bigger movement is likely to absorb this challenge, just as it has absorbed the many challenges that have come before, both prior to and since the revolution. Rather, the core of the Brotherhood will persist and continue to sit it out. This leadership knows that the best means of self-preservation is to sit tight and wait for circumstances to change.

What Future?

All this leaves many unanswered questions about the Brotherhood's future in Egypt. While the traditional leadership has indicated a willingness to reach some sort of compromise with the regime, the regime has shown less inclination to do so. According to the Brotherhood, the regime has made overtures to the movement, but these have been somewhat half-hearted and appear to have been more about neutralizing the movement rather than engaging with it politically. [5]

Swiss-based Yousef Nada, who has long served as a kind of foreign commissioner for the movement, claims that he was asked to go to Egypt by the regime for talks. When he refused, he was told to meet with the Egyptian Ambassador to Switzerland. This was clearly not the kind of engagement the Brotherhood had in mind and was reminiscent of the overtures made to al-Nahda elements in Paris and London during the last years of the Ben Ali regime. Ibrahim Mounir, the Deputy Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, complained, "We don't want this level of talks. The purpose of their talks is to prolong the life of the regime." Mounir also explained in April 2018 that while contacts had continued from 2014 to 2016, the Brotherhood had come to the conclusion that the regime "wanted us to legitimize the coup."

Despite this, the Brotherhood has continued to talk about reconciliation, this seemingly being a way for it to maintain relevance. In April 2018, Mounir listed three conditions that would need to be met for reconciliation to take place. The first was that talks should be at a more senior level than ambassadorial; the second that the dialogue must include all groups that reject the current regime rather than just the Brotherhood; and the third that all political prisoners, including Morsi, should be released before the commencement of any dialogue. [6]

Such conditions are clearly wishful thinking on the Brotherhood's part. In the 1970s, former President Anwar Sadat enabled the movement to rebuild itself following another long period of repression as a means of countering his nationalist and leftist challengers. Today, President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi is not engaged in any such ideological conflict and can clearly do without the Brotherhood. While Egypt's prisons may be groaning under the weight of political prisoners, including from the movement, there is no ideological or political reason for him to compromise and permit the movement to re-establish itself at this time. Any move by the United States to designate the Brotherhood as a terrorist group will only strengthen his hand in this respect.

As such, the Brotherhood and the regime are locked in the same old stalemate, with neither ready at this current point to give any real ground in order to achieve national reconciliation. The Brotherhood is still too bruised and battered from its disastrous experience following the revolution to be able to make any real compromises. Added to this, it has a long way to go to rebuild trust with the population. While the movement still has a core constituency—many of whom support it because they equate it with Islam itself—the shambolic way in which it approached power has left the impression in the minds of many, including the rest of the opposition, that it is not fit for purpose. As such, the Brotherhood is facing a stark choice. It either bows down to the regime's conditions in order to get a foothold back in the country—something it is in no mood to do at this stage—or it faces a very long wait indeed.

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NOTES

[1] For example, Egypt's interior ministry accused fugitive Muslim Brotherhood leaders who have fled to Qatar of training and financing the perpetrators of the bomb attack on a Cairo church that killed 25 people in December 2016.

[2] Readings from Inside. Gamal Heshmet. Dirasat Mostaqbaliya. Issue 2. October 2017

Available at: <http://gamalheshmat.com/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/aan-mstkb1-gmaa-lkhon-lmslmyn.pdf> (<http://gamalheshmat.com/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/aan-mstkb1-gmaa-lkhon-lmslmyn.pdf>)

[3] Ibid.

[4] Evaluation Before the Vision. General Office of the Muslim Brotherhood. March 2017. Available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0QvhG2VgvyNelpIN0t6SmQ5TkE/view> (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0QvhG2VgvyNelpIN0t6SmQ5TkE/view>)

[5] Ibrahim Mounir to Al-Jazeera Direct, April 2018.

[6] Ibid.



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