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# Middle East Brief

## The Brotherhood's Dilemma

Prof. Marc Lynch

The question of the Muslim Brotherhood's (MB) real attitudes toward democracy has rarely been of more intense interest to American foreign policy. Despite recent electoral setbacks for the Islamic Action Front in Jordan and the Moroccan Party of Justice and Democracy, Islamist electoral success (the Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Palestine, the AKP in Turkey) has thrown into sharp relief the dilemma posed for the United States by promoting democracy: Free elections in today's Arab world are likely to produce Islamist victors.

The Egyptian government and many Egyptian skeptics alike accuse the MB of lying about its democratic commitments and working within the system in order to overthrow it. Inevitably, the specter is raised of an organization that would, in effect, subscribe to the position "One man, one vote, one time"—and which, if given the opportunity, would impose a despotic religious law over an unwilling population. If this alarming picture were shown to be accurate, then many Americans would back away from promoting democracy—as the United States has, indeed, done over the last year and a half.

In response, the MB paints itself as a peaceful, moderate organization committed to working within a democratic system—repressed because of its popularity rather than its extremism. It argues that the Egyptian regime, not the opposition, shows contempt for democracy and systematically undermines moderation and human rights. In its defense, it points both to its own public rhetoric and behavior over the last few years, and to the regime's repressive

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performance. If Islamist parties could demonstrate a genuine commitment to the rules of democratic politics and a genuine opposition to violent extremism, then many in the West might be more willing to accept their electoral success.<sup>1</sup>

Which view of the Muslim Brotherhood is more accurate? The Egyptian MB has clearly placed a high premium on demonstrating its democratic commitments, and has gone to considerable lengths to persuade its critics at home and abroad. Debate now centers around whether this represents a misleading public relations campaign to mask its real agenda or a sincere expression of its political views.

This Brief argues that the last two years have provided an unusually direct test of the Brotherhood's commitment to democratic practices in the face of these internal and external challenges. Since the Brotherhood's successful participation in the 2005 parliamentary elections—its candidates won 88 seats and entered Parliament as by far the largest opposition bloc—the Mubarak regime has cracked down hard, with wide-ranging arrests among Brotherhood leaders and cadres, targeting of its financial sectors, and a hostile media campaign, as well as Constitutional revisions directly aimed at barring the MB's political involvement.<sup>2</sup>

It is easy for an organization to proclaim its commitment to democracy when things are going its way and it stands to gain from free elections; how it responds when times are tough, when the pressures to leave the political arena are intense and the costs of remaining high, tells us more about its true convictions. Few would have been surprised if the Brotherhood had turned against the democratic game at a time when the regime was working against it so openly. Its continuing public embrace of a democratic agenda under such conditions speaks more clearly than would similar talk of democracy at a time when electoral victory seemed within reach. It is particularly impressive given that the Brotherhood has sought to demonstrate a commitment to democracy at a time when Egyptian politics are manifestly undemocratic and getting worse—when the regime itself would not likely pass the tests posed to its Islamist rivals.

At the same time, ambiguities in the Brotherhood's attitudes and behavior continue: its relative silence over more extreme Islamist political campaigns; the retrograde cultural politics of some of its activists; and, most recently, the inclusion of several controversial ideas in its draft political party platform agenda. The Brotherhood increasingly appears to be internally divided on key points relevant to the democracy question. The determined exploitation of those ambiguities by its political rivals and by sensation-seeking Egyptian media will likely prevent the Brotherhood from consolidating its image as a democratic force.

To evaluate the MB's response to a constricting political space, this Brief looks closely at over fifty interviews with, and statements and documents made or written by, Brotherhood leaders over the last year (all in Arabic), supplemented by the public debates in the Egyptian and Arab press and by my personal interviews with many of the MB's senior leaders and activists.<sup>3</sup> It examines three controversies in particular: the debate over whether to withdraw from politics in the face of official repression, and the decision to compete in the Shura Council elections in particular; the idea of issuing a political party platform; and the decision thus far to refrain from mass protests or violence. (These issues obviously do not exhaust the realm of possible areas to explore, but they do represent some of the most important and relevant issues bearing on the question at hand.) With respect to each issue, I focus not only on the position taken but on the reasoning offered in its support: Are democratic norms being advanced merely on strategic grounds

(i.e., as the best way to achieve a particular goal, such as persuading skeptics or avoiding repression), or on normative grounds (as the right thing to do, in line with Islamic rules of conduct and the MB's core principles). For example, in response to criticism of the MB's internal authoritarianism, Deputy Supreme Guide Mohammed Habib responded that "democracy and free elections are a fundamental feature for the MB. . . elections take place at every level. . . it is not possible for anyone to hold any position inside the MB except through elections. . . In addition, every internal decision in the MB is voted upon if there isn't consensus."<sup>4</sup> Such a response takes as a given that democracy is a good thing, to be embraced—a normative stance which suggests a deeper commitment than, say, the purely strategic judgment that internal democracy is the best way to avoid schisms or disunity.

The evidence supports the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's democratic claims to a considerable degree, but remains far from definitive. There is little question that the MB has gone to great lengths to behave as a democratic actor and to formulate a more democratic discourse. At the same time, mixed messages from within the organization—not least of which the contents of its latest draft political party platform—as well as pervasive doubts about its ultimate goals complicate any easy conclusions. A plausible reading of the evidence is that the discourse and behavior analyzed in this Brief represent the preferences of a currently dominant pragmatic coalition within the Brotherhood's leadership, but do not yet amount to a set of convictions fully internalized by the rest of this vast and still largely secretive organization. The controversies surrounding the MB over the last few years should be viewed as evidence of its own internal confusion as it struggles to grapple with a rapidly changing domestic and international political arena, as well as of the incompatibility between some of its deeply held ideas and more liberal conceptions of democracy. Analysts should thus look for evidence of the evolving balance of power and ideas in an organization in flux—while policy should be oriented toward encouraging a victory for the pragmatists and democrats within the organization.

## The Political Context: Participation and Repression

The Muslim Brotherhood's political behavior over the last few years has responded both to internal changes in the organization and to changes in the Egyptian political context. Paralyzed by an internally sclerotic situation, the Brotherhood initially failed to take advantage of the opening political space. It remained on the sidelines of the protests that rocked Cairo in 2002 (in support of the Palestinians) and 2003 (against the Iraq war), except when encouraged by

the regime to organize semi-official rallies, to the frustration of many of its younger members.<sup>5</sup> This began to change in January 2004, when the septuagenarian Mohammed Mahdi Akef took over as Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and empowered the "middle generation" of Brotherhood activists. This pragmatic, politically oriented cohort, which had over the course of the 1970s and 1980s learned the art of political organization and mobilization in student unions and professional associations, was primed to push the Brotherhood more forcefully in the national political arena despite the reservations of many of the organization's old guard.<sup>6</sup> Two months after Akef took over, the Brotherhood issued an important policy paper laying out its views of reform, which crystallized the pragmatic views of the "middle generation" and energized a new generation of youth activists.

The shift in the Brotherhood's political behavior responded both to internal organizational developments and to changes in the Egyptian political environment. Akef assumed leadership of the Brotherhood just as the political environment opened up in the face of external American pressure to democratize and the dramatic appearance of the Kifaya protest movement. As that movement evolved, and political protests began to roil Egyptian political life, the Brotherhood worked tentatively with other political activists. It refrained from joining a common front (to the frustration of other movements) but did coordinate positions and allow individual members to act as they liked—which spawned important relationships among youth activists across ideological lines.<sup>7</sup>

The Brotherhood's cadres finally came into the streets on March 27, 2005, its first serious demonstration focused on domestic affairs since Hosni Mubarak came to power in 1981. In response, the regime rounded up several thousand Brothers, including several senior leaders. The Brotherhood also joined other opposition forces in calling for a boycott of the May 25, 2005 referendum on amending the Constitution, but disappointed many other activists by sitting out the presidential election.<sup>8</sup> Its cooperation with other factions remained unsatisfactory to all sides, with the MB proving unwilling to share the limelight with smaller factions.

The September 2005 parliamentary elections marked a watershed in the Brotherhood's political activity. The Brotherhood contested the elections openly, running its slate as nominal independents but under a clearly identifiable common platform.<sup>9</sup> When its candidates did better than expected in the first round, however, the regime panicked. The election quickly degenerated, with security forces blockading voting booths, massive arrests of Brotherhood members across the country, and outright incidents of fraud. Despite all these regime interventions, the Brotherhood



emerged with 88 seats in the lower house of Parliament (out of 454), constituting by far the largest opposition bloc. Though it was too small to block legislation, the delegation nonetheless proved to be effective parliamentarians, focusing their efforts on issues of corruption and public freedoms.<sup>10</sup>

As the Brotherhood emerged as such a potent force within Egypt's political institutions, President Hosni Mubarak grabbed attention with a public warning that the Brotherhood posed a threat to Egypt's national security.<sup>11</sup> In December 2006, the regime found the pretext it needed to crack down: a martial arts demonstration by students at al-Azhar University, which the Egyptian media effectively portrayed as the action of a Brotherhood "militia." Seizing the opportunity, the regime targeted the MB's financial assets, seizing businesses and freezing bank accounts, and arrested more than one thousand of its members, including over thirty senior leaders. In February, Deputy Guide Khairat al-Shater and other senior leaders were referred to a military court, the first time the regime had resorted to such measures since 2001. The regime then pushed for constitutional revisions which effectively barred the way to the Brotherhood's future participation in electoral politics (specifically Article 5, which prohibited any political activity based on religion). The referendum on these revisions passed in the face of an opposition boycott, albeit with a turnout believed to be well below 5 percent and widespread allegations of fraud.

Nevertheless, the Brotherhood persevered in its attempts to contest elections. In June 2007, the Brotherhood's efforts to contest elections for half of the upper house of Parliament met with fierce official resistance: Hundreds of its candidates were disqualified, while the few who managed to run faced blatant obstacles. Not a single of its candidates won.

## The MB Responds to Repression

The Brotherhood has gone to great lengths to cast itself as a persecuted democratic opposition, while working to assuage the fears aroused by its political success. When explaining the regime's crackdown, Brotherhood leaders consistently emphasize the regime's political fears of their electoral success.<sup>12</sup> In an interview for this article, Mohammed Habib mused that if he could have changed one thing the Brotherhood had done over the last few years, he would have "won fifty seats instead of eighty-eight."<sup>13</sup> Essam al-Erian argues that the crackdown came "because the regime has no popular support," and that "the problem is not between the MB and the regime but between the people and a tiny minority elite which refuses

to engage in dialogue."<sup>14</sup> This section examines in detail the MB's rhetoric and behavior with respect to its electoral participation, its political party platform, and the issue of violence.

### 1. A Retreat from Politics?

In late May 2007, the influential moderate Islamist Muhammed Salim al-Awa called on the Muslim Brotherhood to announce an immediate end to political activity and to return to *dawa* (proselytizing) work, such as education and social work.<sup>15</sup> The time was not right for political work, he argued, when faced with such a repressive and corrupt regime. Instead of fruitless attempts to participate in elections that lacked even independent judicial oversight, the MB should return to a focus on building an Islamic society from below, while taking special pains to create positive relations with Christians. The MB should continue to work against repression and for freedom and religion, he asserted, but should not nominate candidates for elections. Eighty-eight members of Parliament could actually accomplish little, he believed—and as a result of the Brotherhood's forays into electoral politics, its image and that of Islam were dragged through the mud and the people were inflamed against the MB.

Such arguments offered the Brotherhood an easy way out of its political crisis. But instead, the Brotherhood's leadership forcefully rejected these criticisms, arguing that political work was the best road to reform and insisting on continuing to participate in electoral politics wherever possible.<sup>16</sup> While he sympathized with al-Awa's frustration, Essam al-Erian argued that these were the costs that had to be paid to fight oppression and corruption and that seats in Parliament were the best way to wage the necessary battles. Mohammed Habib explained that the Brotherhood participated in elections despite the risks in order to break the political and media walls which the regime tried to impose around the Brotherhood, revealing the lies of the ruling party and its pretensions of democracy while using elections as an excellent means to interact with the people.<sup>17</sup> For Habib, the commitment to political activity is a deep principle which transcends these pragmatic concerns: Since Islam is a comprehensive system, it is impossible to have *dawa* focusing on ethics and faith without political engagement.<sup>18</sup>

The Brotherhoods' commitment to the political process in a more repressive environment underwent its first major test in April 2007, when it announced that it would contest the June Shura Council elections despite the passage of constitutional amendments designed to prevent its political participation.<sup>19</sup> It contested the elections under a platform

which explained that its participation reflected its deeply held belief in the necessity of participating in popular and political work.<sup>20</sup> While the Brotherhood lambasted the constitutional changes, they argued, it remained committed to working through legal means.

Its disastrous showing in the Senate elections prompted renewed challenges to the strategy of electoral participation. In response, al-Erian set forth seven benefits to participation in the political process despite the arrests of MB leaders, “which spread much frustration and led people to ask what was the value of participating.”<sup>21</sup> It forced judges to assume a greater role in interpreting the Constitution, put a sharp spotlight on regime hypocrisies, revived a general sense in the Brotherhood of the importance of participation, forced movement inside the ruling National Democratic Party, brought new MB figures of the third and fourth rank into the public eye and trained them in new forms of *dawa*, and broke the regime’s monopoly on the public sphere. After the elections, the MB moved quickly to seize the moral and political high ground through an aggressive media campaign. For instance, on al-Jazeera on June 11, 2007, Abdul Monem Abu al-Fotouh, MB Executive Bureau Member, announced that “today we can see another great setback for Egyptian democracy. . . . if the NDP were able to compete with the MB today in a fair election, why would it go to all these lengths to prevent one?” Turning the setback to the MB’s advantage, he declared that “we are proud that we move with popular support and in a peaceful way using all democratic means . . . despite arrests and beatings.”

The pro-participation position appears to have the upper hand in the Muslim Brotherhood today, but the existence of the debate shows two important things: First, that there are significant internal doubts with respect to pursuing the political route (especially among the more *dawa*-oriented cadres); and second, that the Brotherhood is willing and able to defend its position in public debate. Were the Brotherhood to abandon the political arena, it is difficult to believe that its young, politically engaged members would simply follow instructions.<sup>22</sup> Either the Brotherhood would splinter, or else it would witness mass defections—either to another political movement or to more violent movements. For now, however, the Brotherhood’s decision to contest the Shura Council elections, and its determination to compete in future elections in whatever way the system allows, suggests a significant commitment to the democratic process. The option of retreating from politics in order to ride out the repressive storm was not only open to them, and indeed validated by leading intellectuals within the movement; it was actively encouraged by their official tormentors.

## 2. A Political Party?

The second major response of the Muslim Brotherhood to the regime’s repression was its move to draft a political party platform—a major institutional and doctrinal advance which offered unclear concrete benefits and triggered a fierce response from the regime.<sup>23</sup> The MB made clear that it would not submit an application to the Parliamentary Political Parties Committee, controlled by the National Democratic Party, which would certainly have rejected its bid as it did the applications of other opposition parties (including that of the moderate Islamist Wasat [Center] Party). Instead, it explained that it planned to offer its platform to public opinion, thereby both responding to critics who had accused it of lacking a clear political vision and explaining to the people its real positions and ideas in place of the distortions peddled in the media. In other words, the political move—establishing a virtual party with a clear platform—once again served as an integral part of the Brotherhood’s outreach to society.

This was not an easy decision on the part of the Brotherhood. Its decision to form a political party triggered intense regime opposition and internal dissent, and it has paid a heavy cost to advance the idea. The first public floating of the idea of a MB political party was soon followed by the “al-Azhar militia” affair and the subsequent campaign of arrests of Brotherhood leaders like Khairat al-Shater and Essam al-Erian. Similarly, the arrest of al-Erian and fifteen other MB leaders in August 2007 immediately followed an appearance by Mohammed Habib on al-Jazeera TV to discuss the Brotherhood’s plans to release a party platform. That the MB has been willing to pay these significant costs suggests that it places a high value on the idea of a political party, and that the idea cannot be easily dismissed as cheap talk aimed at pleasing external critics.

The result in the short term has not been the anticipated one, however. The contents of the draft platform eventually exploded into a major controversy which undermined years of the MB’s patient efforts to persuade Egyptians of its democratic credentials.

Prior to the platform’s official release, a series of leaked drafts suggested that it would follow in the path of previous such documents, like the 2007 Shura Council electoral platform and the 2004 Reform document.<sup>24</sup> In those leaked drafts, the MB responded creatively to the seemingly insurmountable obstacle posed by constitutional amendments banning the creation of a political party with a religious referent by proposing to create “a civil political party with an Islamic referent, which doesn’t violate the Constitution.”<sup>25</sup> It argued that this “Islamic referent” was consistent with the affirmation in Article 2 of the amended Constitution

that the Sharia would be the primary source of legislation. Habib emphasized that the “MB rejected the idea of a country ruled by religious authorities, preferring a state of institutions, with laws passed by an elected Parliament but conforming to Sharia.”<sup>26</sup> The leaked versions focused on the authority of elections, the freedom to form political parties, and the importance of civil society, a rotation of power, the sovereignty of law, judicial independence, and so forth. They were still Islamist, of course: They rejected all forms of foreign intervention and interference, sought to promote faith and Sharia, and offered a vision of a more Islamic society. But these drafts devoted more space to politics and economics than to religious discourse, and seemed to represent the views of the Brotherhood’s pragmatists.

When the final draft of the program was released to fifty Egyptian intellectuals, it came as a shock. Whereas the earlier drafts had focused on democracy and political freedoms, this version emphasized Islamic religious concerns. Most controversially, it rejected the idea of a woman or a Christian serving as head of state, and advanced the concept of a Higher Ulama Council with a legislative role. This Council, which seemed to directly contradict Habib’s earlier assurances, became the focal point of intense public arguments about the Brotherhood’s real intentions.<sup>27</sup> Abdel Monem Said Aly described it as a blueprint for Iranian-style religious rule, while the Op-ed pages were filled with columns lambasting the MB for its seeming retreat from democratic convictions.<sup>28</sup> Stung, MB leaders launched a campaign to defend the concept of such a Council, emphasizing that the HUC would be advisory rather than authoritative and that it would only improve the quality of religious advice rather than add new religious injunctions. The real point of the HUC, they argued, was to reduce the role of al-Azhar, which had become utterly subservient to the regime’s political demands, and replace it with an elected Council—which at least some MB leaders thought would be seen as demonstrating the Brotherhood’s democratic convictions rather than throwing them into doubt.

While the MB’s opponents seized upon the platform as revealing the “true face” of the Brotherhood, in fact it more likely represented the very real internal divisions in the organization. The draft platform was drafted and released at a time when many prominent moderate leaders including al-Shater, al-Erian, and Mohammed Bishr, were in prison, which tipped the internal balance of power temporarily toward the conservatives. By some accounts, the rank and file of the MB were unenthusiastic about the earlier drafts, which struck them as too liberal, too political, and insufficiently religious. On the other hand, when the draft platform was released, a number of prominent reformist MB leaders (including al-Erian, Abu al-Fotouh, and Gamal Hishmet) went public with their dissatisfaction over its controversial contents.<sup>29</sup>

In mid-October, Habib admitted that the MB had made mistakes, and announced that he would head a committee to redraft the platform.<sup>30</sup> Whether the three most controversial passages in the platform are dropped will be taken as a key signal of the MB’s responsiveness to public opinion. (At the time of this writing, the final outcome remained unclear.)

However it plays out in the end, it is clear that the debate over the party platform has hurt the MB with elite Egyptian opinion more than had anything since the “al-Azhar militia” scandal. The controversy over the contents of the platform has obscured one of the most important aspects of this whole affair: the MB’s willingness to incur significant political costs in order to form a political party. The idea of forming a party had always been deeply controversial within the MB itself, with many members fearing that it would fundamentally turn the organization away from its *dawa* roots and expose it to new pressures and temptations. (The MB had split over precisely this issue in 1996, with a number of moderate figures leaving the organization, over the objections of the Brotherhood’s senior leadership, to form the ill-fated Wasat Party.) Furthermore, the regime has made it clear that it considers such a move to constitute a “red line,” perhaps out of fear that a Brotherhood political party might present a viable alternative to the National Democratic Party.

The value the MB places on the idea of a political party can be seen in the high costs it has been willing to sustain to put it before the public. The prospective gains of having a party do not seem to be primarily strategic: It is almost inconceivable that the party would be granted an official license, and thus it would not be able to present its own candidates to contest elections. Instead, the MB seems to understand the value of a political party in terms of how it might clarify the persistent ambiguities about its real political agenda and demonstrate its commitment to democracy.

### 3. *The Issue of Violence*

Distinguishing itself from radical groups has been of keen concern to the MB for decades, particularly during the vicious insurgency waged by the Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad organizations in the 1990s. The Brotherhood cites the book *Proselytizers Not Judges (Du’a La Quda)*, authored by then Supreme Guide Hassan Hudaybi in the late 1960s in response to Sayid Qutb’s radical doctrines, as its primary reference point and as providing the doctrinal core of its moderation.<sup>31</sup> It distances itself from the use of *takfir* (the practice of declaring someone a non-Muslim)—though, as we will see below, it has muddied this point by often staying on the sidelines rather than actively denouncing high-profile cases of its use by non-Brotherhood Islamists. While its public support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Iraqi resistance has opened its peaceful convictions to challenge, the MB itself



has by all available evidence abstained from violence and has consistently condemned terrorism by groups such as al-Qaeda.

In the context of the current political showdown, the prominent Egyptian columnist Hassan Nafaa recently observed that the battle has been one-sided. Despite the regime's provocations, he wrote, "there is no decision, as far as we know, by the Brotherhood to respond to violence with violence."<sup>32</sup> Rafik Habib, noting that the Brotherhood had responded so passively to the regime's campaign and had refused suggestions that it launch a sustained, massive campaign of street demonstrations aimed at fundamentally challenging Mubarak's regime, argued that it understood that the regime probably wanted such a campaign in order to justify its own repression.<sup>33</sup> While the Brotherhood has waged a fierce media campaign in support of its imprisoned leaders, it has been notably reluctant to engage in more provocative forms of political protest and has not been linked to any acts of violence. Mohammed Mahdi Akef's explanation for this combines principle with deeply pragmatic concerns: "It is not in anyone's interest now for there to be any violence or clashes [because the government is] preparing for confronting any opposition or protests and is waiting to repress protestors and beat them and imprison them."<sup>34</sup> Habib told me that there must be a purpose to public demonstrations; given the high costs imposed by the regime, it was foolish to protest for the sake of protest.<sup>35</sup>

The "al-Azhar militia" scandal tapped into deep, latent fears among Egyptians that the Brotherhood harbored a secret armed group – fears upon which the regime expertly played. But in general, the more sensational charges leveled against the Brotherhood seem to have failed to generate significant traction. In late August, regime media claimed to have found documents proving that the Brotherhood had planned to assassinate regime officials, that Khairat al-Shater oversaw a secret military wing, and that MB members in Alexandria had sought contacts with al-Qaeda—all charges angrily denied by Brotherhood leaders.<sup>36</sup> Many observers suggested that the regime needed to invent such charges because to this point the MB has given them little to work with since the ill-considered al-Azhar demonstration.

The Brotherhood described the last allegation—of having sought contact with al-Qaeda—as "the strangest charge." Al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri is well known for his antipathy to the Muslim Brotherhood, and has tried repeatedly in recent years to appeal to Brotherhood members over the heads of its leaders, challenging members of the Brotherhood to explain how their behavior can be reconciled with the imperative to jihad and urging its cadres to seek new leadership. In response to a June 2007 al-Zawahiri tape demanding that MB clarify its position on

the Arab peace initiative, al-Erian responded by challenging al-Zawahiri to confront MB directly in a dialogue and to defend his failed strategy in an open debate: "We accept advice from any Muslim; we advance and retreat ourselves at any moment, and we ask al-Zawahiri to consider the same course and accept some advice: His approach and his *dawa* are very dangerous and inflame negative opinion about Islam and Islamic movements in the world, and hurt the Islamic presence in Western countries."<sup>37</sup> As Abu al-Fotouh put it: "We reject all statements of al-Qaeda absolutely; there is a huge gap between legitimate resistance, such as what is done by the Palestinian people against the Zionist enemy, and using violence and force outside the framework of resistance to an external enemy."<sup>38</sup>

It is not clear how long this position can last, however. In a period of regional radicalization and domestic repression, the Brotherhood is struggling to maintain its appeal to a younger generation which sees that its strategy of political accommodation has borne little fruit, and which is bombarded with more radical agendas. The Brotherhood today in fact struggles against radicalization on two fronts: first against more radical Islamist competitors, and second against the frustration and anger inspired by the regime's repression. The influential Egyptian columnist Fahmy Howeydi recently pointed out that there is no evidence that the Egyptian MB has been involved in any acts of violence in the past thirty years. But its leaders now openly worry about the frustration of its younger members and their ability to control their passions.<sup>39</sup>

## The Limits of Persuasion

In spite of its concerted efforts to demonstrate its commitment to democracy, the MB has had only partial success in persuading other Egyptians or the West. Take the continuing skepticism of many Egyptian Coptic Christians. Since its electoral success in 2005, the MB has issued a steady stream of reassuring statements about Coptic citizens, even as one controversy after another has erupted. In April 2006, Habib said that "Copts are partners in the nation . . . with all rights of citizenship. . . this understanding is deeply rooted inside the MB."<sup>40</sup> Mohammed Mahdi Akef told Dream TV on June 12, 2006, that "I don't distinguish between Muslim or Christian or Jew, because citizenship is the right of all." Abu al-Fotouh insisted on al-Alim TV on January 15, 2007, that "our position is clear that Copts are a part of the national fabric and citizenship is at the core of all rights and responsibilities."

At the same time, a steady series of controversies has undermined this message. In early 2007, for example, one line in a book by the Islamist (thought not to be MB) intellectual

Mohammed Amara was taken by Coptic activists as a call for Christian blood and became a major national controversy.<sup>41</sup> Some Copts bristled when al-Erian was reported to have asked: “How can we face American conspiracies . . . when some Copts among us serve an American agenda first?”<sup>42</sup> Other Copts complained about an inflammatory statement by a MB mufti against the construction of new churches, and his suggestion that Copts should pay a special tax.<sup>43</sup> The prominent Coptic intellectual Milad Hana argued that no matter how reasonable recent MB words were, they ultimately could not assuage Coptic fears.<sup>44</sup> The man in the street knows well, argued Hana, that if the MB came to power it would move to impose Sharia, and Copts would be turned into second-class citizens. One sees in this history a powerful summary of the limits of public rhetoric to persuade skeptics in a heated political arena: At times of strife and mutual fears, there is a tendency to believe the worst and to downplay conciliatory rhetoric as a smokescreen.

MB leaders generally blame these difficulties on propaganda campaigns in the semi-official media and pro-government tabloid. In April 2006, for instance, Mohammed Mahdi Akef bitterly complained about Egyptian press campaigns distorting the Brotherhood, which he described as “spreading *fitna*.”<sup>45</sup> Al-Erian similarly grumbled that “public opinion is misguided on this question because it has been subjected to a massive media campaign to pave the way for repressive measures against the MB.”<sup>46</sup> In August 2007, Habib attributed the “propaganda campaign against the MB” to the regime’s fury over the Brotherhood’s plan to release a political party platform.<sup>47</sup>

It would be misleading to attribute all fears of the MB to such propaganda campaigns, however. As the widely respected liberal talk show host Magdi Mohanna pointed out during an interview with Mohammed Mahdi Akef on Dream TV (June 12, 2006), “there are fears not only by the ruling party but in civil society, who see that there are ambiguities in many of the issues of the MB and its political program.” For all its commitment to democratic procedures, the Brotherhood’s substantive positions on most social and cultural issues remain proudly conservative. MB members routinely engage in “culture wars” on issues such as censorship, veiling, and the like, which alienate mainstream Egyptian elite opinion.

While the Brotherhood presents “Preachers, Not Judges” as the core of its ideology and officially rejects the practice of *takfir*, it rarely takes a strong public stand against it. Brotherhood leaders deny having anything to do with Yusif al-Badri, the leading practitioner of the *takfir* weapon in Egypt today, but they rarely issue strong or consistent public denunciations of his efforts.

Members of other political factions have complained of the MB’s unwillingness to enter into coalitions as equals. Even sympathetic Western analysts remain concerned about the “gray areas” in the Brotherhood’s political thought, ambiguities that remain problematic for anyone grappling with its real attitudes toward democracy.<sup>48</sup> Finally, the Brotherhood’s support for Hamas and the Iraqi resistance tends to strongly color perceptions of the Brotherhood in the West (though not really among Egyptians, most of whom agree with those foreign policy views).

Finally, the MB’s core commitment to *dawa*, religious outreach, represents a profound problem for Egyptian liberals. Essam al-Erian offers as a defense of the MB’s democratic commitments that “the MB does not seek power as a goal; its goals are greater than that, to really change society.”<sup>49</sup> But for many skeptics, this wider, transformational agenda is precisely the problem. Many Egyptian liberals and secularists view this agenda, which aims to create new Islamic individuals and a genuinely Islamic culture, as inherently incompatible with democracy.<sup>50</sup> While exploring this question is beyond the scope of this Brief, it is worth pointing to as one reason behind the Brotherhood’s difficulties in persuading others.

Another source of the MB’s limited power to persuade and reassure lies in its own conflicting signals and mixed messages, which the Brotherhood’s enemies and the Egyptian press are always ready to highlight—but the problem is not rooted in hostile media campaigns. Ultimately, it is driven by the Brotherhood’s own internal divisions, and the conflicting demands of both pleasing its “base” and reaching out to the wider public. When MB leaders put out inflammatory rhetoric to please their own supporters, the same language frightens and angers others and can make their more forthcoming statements in other forums appear disingenuous.

Essam al-Erian has defended these internal disagreements as evidence of the Brotherhood’s internal democracy.<sup>51</sup> In the short run, the publicizing of internal debates complicates the Brotherhood’s ability to control its message or to send clear, consistent signals. In the longer run, however, the increasing transparency of the MB will likely prove to be a strength. As bloggers open up the Brotherhood’s internal debates to public scrutiny, and as non-Islamists gain more access to the MB’s deliberations (as happened in connection with the draft party platform), they may help demystify the MB and to allow outsiders to better judge its real intentions.<sup>52</sup>



## Conclusion

Columbia University political scientist Lisa Anderson once warned that regimes tend to get the oppositions they deserve.<sup>53</sup> For now at least, the Brotherhood seems determined to prove her wrong. The Brotherhood's leadership has remained remarkably consistent in its adherence to the democratic process and its rejection of violence in spite of every regime provocation. It has also matched its words with deeds: contesting the 2007 Shura Council elections, drafting a political party platform, refraining from violent responses. The Egyptian regime's crackdown has had the perhaps unintended virtue of testing the MB's commitment to democracy by imposing harsh costs on that commitment while limiting the likely gains. The MB's determination to proceed with its political party platform in the face of strong deterrent efforts by the regime, or to contest the Shura Council elections despite all the obstacles put in its path, speaks more loudly than would mere talk.

The inferences to draw from this consistency, however, are less obvious. It might reflect a real normative commitment to democracy and to rejection of violence. It might also be merely tactical: a way to reassure Western and Egyptian audiences of the Brotherhood's benign intentions and to undermine support for the Mubarak regime, as well as to prevent a harsher regime crackdown.

The Brotherhood today is perhaps best understood as an internally divided organization, with the balance of power between politically oriented pragmatists and religiously oriented conservatives very much in flux. The MB's still dominant moderate stance is engendering impatience among the ranks, with analysts as well as Brotherhood leaders and activists warning of the growing difficulty of persuading young activists of the virtues of self-restraint.<sup>54</sup> A sensible policy approach would be to try to create the conditions in which the pragmatists could win these internal battles—by reducing regime repression, recognizing and rewarding positive developments, and pushing to open up the public sphere for discussion and debate that might increase the organization's transparency. Unfortunately, current trends seem to be very much in the opposite direction, with the result that the MB's moderates have been put on the defensive, embattled both by the MB's internal conservatives and by the regime's security forces.

## Endnotes

- 1 Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 2 (March /April 2007): pp. 107–21; Shadi Hamid, "Parting the Veil," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 5 (Summer 2007); Marc Lynch, "Memo to the Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Policy* (September 2007).\*
- 2 [Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "Boxing in the Brothers," \*Middle East Report Online\*, August 8, 2007.](#)\*
- 3 One of the most common criticisms of the Brotherhood is that it engages in double-talk, using one language when addressing the West in English and quite another when addressing its domestic audience in Arabic. This Brief draws almost exclusively on Arabic-language statements, but in fact I found no noticeable differences in the Brotherhood's Arabic and English rhetoric. Except where otherwise noted, text of the interviews and commentaries can be found at [www.ikhwanonline.com](http://www.ikhwanonline.com). Personal interviews were mostly conducted in Cairo on October 4–9, 2007.
- 4 Author's interview with Mohammed Habib, January 30, 2007.
- 5 Hossam El-Hamalawy, "Comrades and Brothers," *Middle East Report* 242 (2007).
- 6 Mona al-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): pp. 373–95; Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2001).
- 7 "Reforming Egypt: In Search of a Strategy" (International Crisis Group Report No. 46, October 4, 2005), p. 19; Marc Lynch, "Young Brothers in Cyberspace," *Middle East Report* 244 (2007).
- 8 Many secular activists remain furious over a joint demonstration in July 2005 in which MB activists shouted down slogans against Mubarak with "Islam is the Solution." [Issandr el-Amrani, "Why the Brotherhood Disappoints," \*The Arabist\*, July 22, 2005.](#)\*
- 9 That none of its members were in jail for the first time in years fueled liberal suspicion that the MB had made a deal with the regime in exchange for not contesting the presidential election. See [Issandr el-Amrani, "Controlled Reform in Egypt: Neither Reformist nor Controlled," \*Middle East Report Online\*, December 15, 2005.](#)\*; Yoram Meitel, "The Struggle over Political Order in Egypt: The 2005 Elections," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 2 (2006): pp. 257–79.
- 10 Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "The Brotherhood Goes to Parliament," *Middle East Report* 240 (2006): pp. 32–39; see also the MB's official review of 2006–7 activity, issued June 20, 2007, available at [www.nowabikhwan.com](http://www.nowabikhwan.com).
- 11 *Al-Ushboua*, January 15, 2007.
- 12 Abu al-Fotouh, speaking on satellite TV station *al-Alim*, January 15, 2007.
- 13 Author's interview with Habib, October 5, 2007.
- 14 Quoted in *al-Masry al-Youm*, April 17, 2007.
- 15 Muhammed Salim al-Awa, *Islam Online*, May 27, 2007. See also Rafik Habib, "Islamists and Politics: Marriage or Divorce" *al-Mesryoon*, August 7, 2007, and the response by Essam Abd al-Aziz, *al-Mesryoon*, August 11, 2007; and Mohamed Abu Roman, "Islamists and the Value of the Political Game," *Islam Today*, August 20, 2007.
- 16 Essam al-Erian, *Islam Online*, June 10, 2007.
- 17 Mohammed Habib, June 18, 2007; Author's interview with Habib, October 5, 2007.
- 18 Author's interview with Habib, October 5, 2007.
- 19 Essam al-Erian, *al-Masry al-Youm*, April 18, 2007.
- 20 Released May 15, 2007; available at [www.nowabikhwan.com](http://www.nowabikhwan.com).
- 21 *al-Mesryoon*, June 10, 2007.
- 22 For details on some sharp disputes between the Brotherhood's youth activists and more conservative leaders on these questions, see Lynch, "Young Brothers in Cyberspace."
- 23 Deputy Guide Mohammed Habib denied that establishing a political party was a response to the regime's pressure, arguing that the organization had been considering such a move since the 1980s. But most analysts see the timing of the move differently.
- 24 *al-Masry al-Youm*, August 10–12, 2007; *al-Mesryoon*, August 6, 2007; *Islam Online*, August 25, 2007.
- 25 Abu al-Fotouh, January 15, 2007.
- 26 Mohammed Habib, interview as published on *Ikhwan Online*, January 18, 2007.
- 27 Ironically, the prominent Coptic intellectual Rafik Habib later told the television station al-Arabiya (on October 22, 2007) that the HUC had been *his* idea, and had not emerged from within the MB at all.
- 28 "The Muslim Brotherhood's Religious State," *Asharq Alawsat*, September 26, 2007, and "The Brotherhood's Religious State Again," *Ibid.*, October 10, 2007.
- 29 See Abu al-Fotouh, interviewed by *Islam Online*, October 9, 2007, and Hishmet, *Islam Online*, October 6, 2007. In my personal interviews, many leaders and activists were even more critical. On the question of a Coptic President, Abu al-Fotouh told me that he personally would vote for the Christian Rafik Habib over Gamal Mubarak.
- 30 Interview in *Asharq Alawsat*, October 16, 2007.
- 31 Barbara Zollner, "Prison Talk: The Muslim Brotherhood's Internal Struggle during Gamal Abdel Nasser's Persecution," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (2007), pp. 411–33.
- 32 *al-Masry al-Youm*, August 26, 2007.
- 33 *al-Mesryoon*, August 30, 2007.
- 34 Interview in *al-Araby*, September 2, 2007.
- 35 Author's interview, October 5, 2007.

- 36 See Habib's interview as published on [Egypt Window](#), August 26, 2007, and *al-Ahram*, August 25, 2007. Rebuttal by Hamdi Hassan (spokesman for the MB parliamentary bloc), *al-Masry al-Youm*, August 30, 2007, available at [www.nowabikhwan.com](http://www.nowabikhwan.com).
- 37 *al-Masry al-Youm*, July 6, 2007.
- 38 *al-Masry al-Youm*, June 26, 2007.
- 39 *Asharq Alawsat*, August 29, 2007, and author's interview with Howeydi, January 2007. My interviews with dozens of younger MB activists included numerous specific examples of these struggles. See Lynch, "Young Brothers in Cyberspace."
- 40 Habib, *Ikhwan Online* April 19, 2006; see also Habib, *Sawt al-umma*, January 22, 2007.
- 41 For details, see "[Amara's Fitna al-Takfir](#)" at the author's [Abu Aardvark blog](#).\*
- 42 Reported in *al-Masry al-Youm*, July 14, 07.
- 43 Ibid. Al-Erian responded by pointing to an earlier MB statement that Christians who serve in the military and pay taxes don't have to pay an extra tax; and that Khatib had apologized for his statement about new churches—which at any rate, he asserted, was a personal opinion and not a MB position.
- 44 *al-Masry al-Youm*, April 8, 2007.
- 45 *Ikhwan Online*, April 16, 2006.
- 46 "Why the regime crackdown," *al-Jazeera*, January 24, 2007. Ibrahim Munir made the identical argument (on *al-Jazeera TV*, on January 22, 2007), as did Gamal Hishmet in an interview with author on January 14, 2007.
- 47 *Ikhwan Online*, August 26, 2007.
- 48 Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway, "Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Grey Zones," *Carnegie Papers*, no. 67 (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2006).
- 49 *al-Jazeera*, January 24, 2007.
- 50 Author's interview with Abdel Monem Said Aly, October 20, 2007.
- 51 *al-Masry al-Youm*, August 8, 2007.
- 52 Lynch, "Young Brothers in Cyberspace."
- 53 Lisa Anderson, "Lawless Government and Illegal Opposition: Reflections on the Middle East," *Journal of International Affairs* 40, no. 2 (1987): p. 228.
- 54 Author interviews with Fahmy Howeydi (January 2007), Ibrahim al-Houdaybi (October 2007), and Diya Rashwan (October 2007).

\* Weblinks are available in the PDF version found at [www.brandeis.edu/crown](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown)





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# Middle East Brief

## The Brotherhood's Dilemma

Prof. Marc Lynch

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