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UNPRECEDENTED PRESSURES, UNCHARTED COURSE FOR EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD
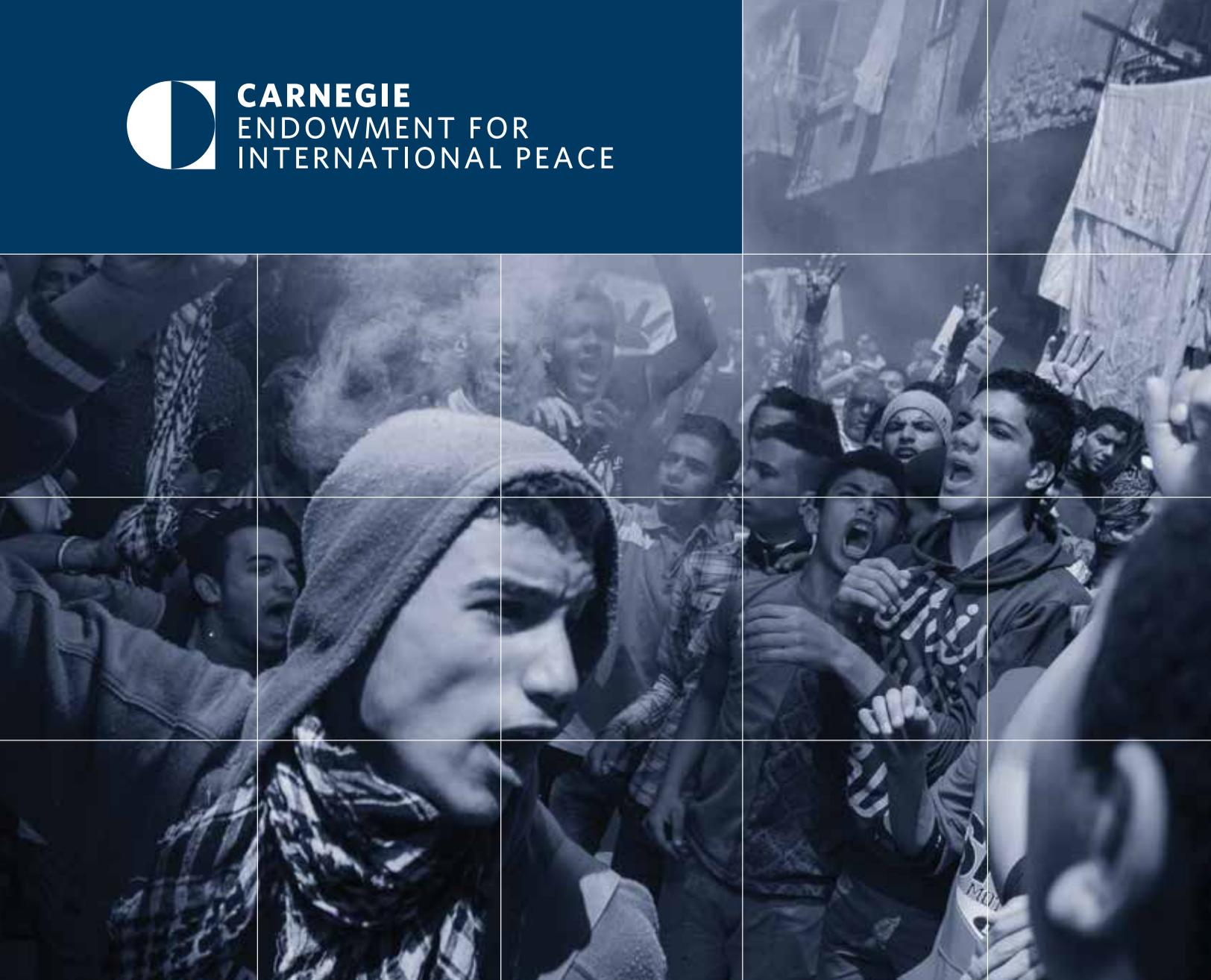
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Summary

The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition movement and one of its oldest, is squeezed between an unprecedented crackdown from the security state and a young generation pushing for more assertive action against the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. As a movement that has long espoused evolutionary change morphs into one that advocates revolutionary change—and struggles with whether that means adopting a strategy of violence against the state—the implications for Egypt and the entire region are massive.

Diverging Views Amid an Unprecedented Crackdown

- While the Brotherhood has faced several crackdowns, notably a lengthy one under late president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, it has never experienced as intense a period of killing, imprisonment, torture, and other forms of repression as the one since the July 2013 coup against former president Mohamed Morsi, a senior Brotherhood figure.

- The Brotherhood's internal review of Morsi's disastrous year in power concluded that the organization failed to be revolutionary enough, and that the political deals it tried to cut with the military and other parts of the state backfired.

- Brotherhood leaders worry about losing the allegiance of youth, who are taking the brunt of repression and are susceptible to radicalization by extremist groups.

- Leaders have become more deferential to younger members, who are driving the organization to an extent not seen before.

A More Revolutionary Direction

- The Brotherhood as an organization inside and outside Egypt is back on its feet and held elections for underground leadership positions, including the general guide and members of the Guidance Bureau, as well as for a new external affairs bureau in Istanbul.

- Brotherhood leaders and activists are still in an early stage of defining what it will mean for the organization to become revolutionary. The only certainty is that it means opposing an Egyptian state they have concluded is irredeemable.

- While the Brotherhood's official position remains largely one of nonviolent resistance, what members and leaders say in public and private is more ambivalent, and several Brotherhood statements have endorsed retribution. Some members express concern about abandoning decades of nonviolence and fear being drawn into an unwinnable and extremely destructive armed struggle with security forces. Others say that in the context of unprecedented state violence against the Brotherhood and all other opposition, continuing to call for peaceful resistance is nonsensical.

- The regime has increased its crackdown on the Brotherhood, including threatening to execute senior leaders, after violence against state targets by Sinai-based extremists escalated in summer 2015, even though the state has not established Brotherhood responsibility for that violence. This has raised the stakes higher than ever.

Introduction

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has come out of the defensive crouch in which it was poised for the first eighteen months after the 2013 coup that removed Mohamed Morsi from the presidency and has chosen new leadership bodies. Based on the authors' interviews with a range of members and observers of the organization carried out between May and June 2015, it is clear that Brotherhood members and leaders have conducted an extensive and apparently contentious internal review of what went wrong between the fall of former president Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and Morsi's removal from power. They came to a conclusion startlingly similar to that articulated by secular opposition groups about the Brotherhood: the organization was insufficiently "revolutionary." How this judgement translates into a specific political strategy is less clear and perhaps not even decided yet.

What is clear, however, is that the Brotherhood leaders are concerned about retaining their youthful members. Members of that younger generation are the main targets of unprecedented human rights abuses and of extremist recruitment, whether by atomized bands or larger organizations such as the Sinai-based Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), which has affiliated itself with the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Brotherhood elders, who in the past insisted on rigorous discipline in the lower ranks, patience, gradualism, and avoidance of full confrontation with the regime, are increasingly deferring to those who desire a more assertive approach to the Egyptian security state.

The escalation of violence in Egypt in summer 2015—with militants on June 29 killing public prosecutor Hisham Barakat, the highest-level official to be assassinated in the country in twenty years, as well as mounting the largest attack on the military in Sinai to date on July 1—has brought a responding escalation in the state campaign against the Brotherhood, including threatening to carry out death sentences against members that were passed before the attacks. This has happened despite the government's failure to make public any evidence of a connection between the organization and the attacks. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi pledged on June 30, 2015, that death sentences would be enforced, raising the possibility that some or all of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders (including Morsi, imprisoned former general guide Mohamed Badie, and former speaker of parliament Saad el-Katatni) and others currently on death row—more than 60 in all—could be executed.[1]

> **Brotherhood elders are increasingly deferring to those who desire a more assertive approach to the Egyptian security state.**

Police killed nine alleged Brotherhood members, including a former member of parliament, in Cairo on July 1 in what authorities described as a shootout with armed terrorists and Brotherhood sources described as a summary execution.[2] Such developments are raising the chances of an uncontrolled spiraling of violence ever higher.

The reorganization and reorientation of the Brotherhood could have far-reaching implications for the movement, political Islam in general, and Egypt's political future. The Brotherhood is by no means the only opposition movement or only Islamist group in Egypt (Salafism has grown significantly in the past decade[3]). And some of the issues at stake have hardly escaped notice; the struggles over the organization's direction and its flirtation with violence have drawn considerable commentary.[4] But the Brotherhood is still a heavyweight in the country and the Arab region. The transformation of the organization—its ideology and structure, as well as the place it occupies in Egypt's opposition—may be even more profound than day-to-day squabbles suggest.

An Era Unlike Any Other

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is perhaps the most successful nongovernmental organization in the country's history, thriving when tolerated, surviving when repressed, and occasionally reinventing itself over nearly nine decades. The current wave of repression is more severe than anything the movement has experienced at least since the era of then president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. After an attempt on Nasser's life in 1954 attributed to the Brotherhood, the group was outlawed and more than 1,000 of its members tried in court, with many others jailed in desert prison camps without charge.[5] Among the four eventually put to death in 1964 was Sayyid Qutb, whose writings on ideas such as *takfir* (the claim that existing societies are not truly Islamic and are therefore legitimate targets of warfare) were foundational texts for several generations of Islamic extremists, such as those who assassinated then president Anwar Sadat in 1981. The radicals evolved in various directions, some launching an insurgency that shook Egypt in the 1990s, the remnants of which gravitated toward leaders of al-Qaeda, such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.

While the Nasserist crackdown spawned extremism, the Brotherhood movement did not adopt the idea that the Egyptian state was part of the *jahiliyya*, the world of ignorance outside of Islam. Instead, it sought to participate in the system, remolding the society through reform and gradualism. In the 1970s, Sadat allowed the Brotherhood to reemerge, perhaps as a counterweight to leftist forces, and in the 1980s, Hosni Mubarak allowed members of the Brotherhood, which remained an illegal organization, to run for elections

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on the party lists of legal political parties anxious to pick up extra votes. The Brotherhood gradually built a political presence, getting as far as winning 20 percent of seats in the lower house of parliament in the 2005 election, which was relatively freer than others during the Mubarak era.

But the movement's political progress was not steady; rather, the organization was caught in a cat-and-mouse game with the regime in which it was allowed to operate within ever-shifting limits. A rollback in political and civil liberties from 2006 to 2011 saw several senior Brotherhood leaders imprisoned and the group largely barred from running in elections.

The one-year tenure of Mohamed Morsi was rocky for the Brotherhood, which was unprepared for governance.

After four decades of fitful political openings and closings, the Brotherhood appeared to be as surprised as most Egyptians at the 2011 popular uprising against Mubarak, which resulted in a sudden political opportunity that allowed the group to form the Freedom and Justice Party. A series of electoral victories for the Brotherhood ensued (culminating in winning the presidency in June 2012), opening the group up to a far greater degree of international and domestic scrutiny—even an unusual series of leaks and recriminations concerning internal struggles—than ever before.

The one-year tenure of Mohamed Morsi was rocky for the Brotherhood, which was unprepared for governance. It was even more difficult for the movement's political opponents and allies alike, who were infuriated by the Brotherhood's majoritarian style, insensitivity to non-Islamist input into the constitution, confrontation with the judiciary, and tendency to isolate itself or bandwagon with Salafists.

Following large anti-Brotherhood demonstrations calling for early elections, the military coup against Morsi in July 2013 spurred a cycle of action and reaction: The Brotherhood and its Salafist and other Islamist allies resisted the coup via large and persistent demonstrations. The authorities put down those demonstrations with great brutality (including the mass killing of more than 1,150 pro-Morsi demonstrators at Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda Squares in August 2013[6]). The violence was not all from the side of the state. Supporters of the Brotherhood attacked police stations, churches (holding all Christians responsible for the pro-coup stance of Coptic Pope Tawadros II), and other targets.

The regime's crackdown was harsh. As of late 2014, an estimated 42,000 people were reportedly in custody,[7] including almost all of the top leadership of the Brotherhood as well as several thousand of its members or supporters, many of them arrested during demonstrations. Hundreds of cases of torture, deaths in detention due to abuse or lack of medical care, sexual assault as a tool of intimidation, and forced disappearances among dissidents affiliated with the Brotherhood as well as many other Islamist or secular groups have been documented by Egyptian and international groups.[8] Hundreds of Morsi supporters in and out of the Brotherhood went into exile; most went to Turkey, some to Europe or North America. The Brotherhood not only lost its legal status,

political party, and media outlets, but it was also declared a terrorist organization, a step that allowed the government to close down or take control of hundreds of nongovernmental organizations as well as commercial enterprises reportedly affiliated to the group or its senior members.

In a parallel set of developments, Sinai-based militants used the coup and the chaos that followed as an opportunity to step up their war on the Egyptian armed forces. Included in that group was ABM, which originally focused on Israeli targets but had already started attacking Egyptian soldiers during Morsi's presidency—notably killing sixteen soldiers in a Sinai ambush in August 2012.[9] Between autumn 2013 and summer 2015, the insurgency spiraled, leading to nearly daily small attacks and occasional large attacks on army outposts that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of soldiers and militants; due to a media blackout, exact figures have been difficult to obtain. Although the Egyptian government as of summer 2015 had not presented evidence of a connection between the Brotherhood and groups such as ABM (other than a much-quoted statement by Brotherhood leader Mohamed el-Beltagy saying that Sinai violence would result from the coup[10]), government media continued to reinforce the alleged link frequently. An armed forces video released after a massive July 1, 2015, militant attack in Sinai, for example, implicitly connected Morsi and other Brotherhood leaders to the attack by showing file photos of them.[11]

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The challenging experiences of a brief and chaotic political opening from early 2011 to June 2013 as well as the extreme travails from July 2013 through 2015 have led the Brotherhood to question the lasting value of many of the achievements of the previous decades during which it had slowly climbed back after the Nasserist crackdown.

A Rejuvenated but Different Organization

There is no mistaking that the Brotherhood is now at a turning point every bit as challenging and far-reaching in its implications as that following its clash with the regime in the 1950s and 1960s. And it is clear what kind of shifts are under way: the organization is becoming less hierarchical, less focused on its own organizational viability, and less insistent on distinguishing itself from other Islamist and revolutionary groups. The result of these changes is already making the movement different from what it was in the recent past. As some observers note, a Muslim Brotherhood that is no longer so hierarchical, disciplined, cautious, and rigid is simply not the movement that existed previously.

The question is not so much whether these trends are real; they are unmistakable and the movement's leaders make no attempt to deny them. The question is how far they will go.

The first move, away from rigid hierarchy, is striking. As the Brotherhood grew, it contained multiple tendencies and visions, but the top leadership—the Guidance Bureau and the general guide—held a tight rein on organizational matters. While Brotherhood members were often free to discuss and opine on many matters, when it came to deeds (or even expressing individual opinions about those few ideological or doctrinal issues on which the movement had spoken definitively), all were expected to toe the line or face disciplinary procedures. The existence of tight cells, linked hierarchically, allowed the movement to act coherently when its leaders felt that it needed to; indeed, one of the reasons the organization could perform so well at the polls was its ability to convert itself into a vote-canvassing machine. But it was not merely at election time that its mastery of command and control seemed impressive; the hierarchy allowed the organization to implement difficult decisions, sustain itself under unfavorable conditions, and deploy its resources in tactically adept ways.

By contrast, in the new environment, the movement appears to be driven more by its base than by those at its apex. Many more senior members seem to be willing to defer to younger members. A senior member in Istanbul stressed the movement's commitment to nonviolence but with some resignation about the youth's sense of "personal energy." He and others pointed to what they saw as an understandable desire for vengeance that it would be senseless to oppose. A senior member spoke of the younger membership as "more daring" and described the leadership's role as one of guiding those impulses in productive ways. A member who has engaged extensively with youth noted how different the rising generation was, partly due to the formative experiences from 2011 to 2013: "They were not raised in the values of the Brotherhood; instead they were formed in demonstrations, online forums, and ideas of personal freedom learned from abroad—even from Hollywood movies." Another Islamist who is not a member but a close observer of the Brotherhood said that "no leader has moral authority now; no one can say 'trust me.' The base questions everything." And the Brotherhood has turned into a bit of a laconic organization, restricting itself to official statements that seem to paper over differences, allowing individual members to speak in a fiery way and describing their stances as personal rather than organizational.

The wave of state-driven repression may make micromanagement more difficult in any case, and the mood of the base is percolating up through the organization in important ways. There seems to be a feeling that the older generation tried a set of approaches (patiently building on small openings to increase social and political activities gradually) that either failed or are no longer relevant; there is also a smoldering anger that makes patience—a long-treasured virtue for the movement—much less valued. "Everything changed the day that the Rabaa massacre happened,"[12] said one Islamist youth about the events in August 2013, adding that "the rise of the Islamic State paralleled the destruction of the democratic experiment in Egypt, and time is on the side

of the radicals." Several youth interviewed recalled specific statements or steps by Morsi, or by Guidance Bureau member Khairat al-Shater (seen as a major guiding force of the group until his arrest after the coup), that suggested they were duped by Sisi and others in the state.

Second, the Brotherhood is no longer as focused on self-protection as it once was. The members that slowly rebuilt the Brotherhood from the 1970s onward seemed at times to operate with a sense of a long-term historical role. They had been entrusted with a mission that required the movement's continued health and viability; they thought in terms of decades or generations rather than month to month. Organizational needs were not an end in themselves; they were a means to the reformist and religious aims of the movement. But by preserving and protecting the Brotherhood, the organization's leaders could bequeath to subsequent generations the tools necessary to improve society even if the circumstances were not propitious at that given point in time. Such, at least, was the attitude of the leaders, and it helps explain their caution and hesitation at many key moments.

Now, however, the movement seems less risk-averse. Perhaps it is the scale of the repression that makes members feel that they have less to lose. But the shift also seems to be a product of the growing power of youth within the movement, including the elevation of younger members to leadership positions, partly due to the incarceration of most top leaders.

Finally, the Brotherhood no longer sets itself off so sharply from the rest of the opposition camp. The movement's strong sense of organization and discipline formerly led it to draw very sharp lines between who was in the movement and who was not and among gradations of membership. Joining the Brotherhood was a major commitment in terms of time, energy, and even finances. And it tended to be a family affair, with Brotherhood members encouraged to associate with each other and to marry within the movement. The result was a set of tight personal bonds that sustained the movement but could also make it insular and sometimes tone-deaf at best when dealing with nonmembers.

The new environment, in which the base is more empowered, gives the initiative to those who have spent less of their lives in the movement and seem more willing to reach out to those with similar ideas who have not made the commitment to the organization. A young Islamist close to the movement but not a member described the attitude as "now we can no longer listen to the Brothers over our head." Instead, younger activists describe lively discussions carried out among members and nonmembers, in exile and in Egypt, about the direction of opposition movements and political Islam more generally. The demonstrations following Morsi's ouster, in which sympathizers from outside the movement joined, may have cemented some personal bonds and created a deep sense of injustice over the violence inflicted. Now, influence comes from deeds and grievances, substituting for the time when organizational dedication and history were the main currency in the movement.

While it is clear that the Brotherhood is thus becoming a different kind of organization, the old structures still exist; indeed, leaders claim that they have found a way not simply to revive the old structures but to remold them to the new environment. The Guidance Bureau and the larger Consultative Council have had their many vacancies filled, leaders claim, though the names of the members will no longer be made public due to the risk of arrest. Contingency plans have been made to replace all leaders if they are arrested, and in some cases the line of succession is several layers deep. The leadership claims that the basic cell of the Brotherhood—the family unit— is operative throughout the country. And a new external body has been created to manage the Brotherhood members in exile. Headquartered in Istanbul, that body is headed by Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, a member of the Consultative Council and a figure who gives the impression of being an old-style organizational stalwart, but the group also includes some far more cosmopolitan figures such as Amr Darrag and Yahya Hamid, both ministers during the Morsi presidency. Most of the members' names, however, have not been publicly revealed. The Istanbul group does not present itself as the leadership—it professes fealty to the Guidance Bureau in Egypt—but exists instead to interact with international interlocutors.

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It is difficult to tell how much these descriptions of organizational recovery are bravado, but even if they are accurate, Brotherhood leaders acknowledge the necessity to be on guard for new challenges. The movement has never had to balance an external and an internal wing (and, indeed, older international representatives of the Brotherhood have complained about the new Istanbul group). In an uncharacteristic step, Brotherhood leaders even acknowledge consulting with Islamist movements elsewhere about how to manage the emerging challenges—Tunisia's Ennahdha movement, for example, which also had to knit together external leaders and an internal movement driven underground.

The organization has been caught between the fiery statements of many of its members and supporters and the somewhat more circumspect official spokespeople. It is increasingly having its agenda set by its base, and those chosen to lead seem to spend some of their energy following instead.

The new Brotherhood leaders might be less cautious than their predecessors in part because they are preoccupied with how to retain the allegiance of young members. Brotherhood leaders and older members are deeply aware and constantly reminded that extremist groups such as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis are recruiting actively. Young members follow the social media campaigns of such groups carefully, partly in order to look for militants who might have come from the Brotherhood or from secular groups active in the 2011 uprising. Brotherhood leaders worry about the impact of extremists' media campaigns; one recalled a widely circulated image showing two photos side by side: one of imprisoned former Brotherhood general guide Mohamed Badie wearing the red garb of a death row prisoner, the other of an Islamic State commander

showing off the tank he had captured. "Moderate and radical Islamists are fighting over the same youth," said one leader in exile.

Young Islamists interviewed in spring 2015, some affiliated with the Brotherhood and some not, seemed to be still furious with Brotherhood leaders two years after the coup and in no mood to blunt their critiques. Older leaders appeared to have accepted these internal critiques meekly, and agreed to give younger members not only plenty of air time in internal debates but also a larger share of leadership roles. One-quarter of the new Guidance Bureau in Egypt reportedly is under the age of forty-five, with at least one member under thirty.

A Review of Past Errors Reaches a Conclusion Similar to That of Critics

The substance of the self-critique within the Brotherhood, put forward assertively by younger members, is simply this: the leadership failed to recognize that 2011 was a real revolution in Egyptian society and to act accordingly. Brotherhood leaders did not make common cause with those who wanted real change, and instead they opted to gain entry to the Egyptian state through rapid elections (agreed upon with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces that held control after Mubarak) and then tried to bring about modest reforms—a plan that failed abysmally. "We failed to build on the profound values that emerged during the revolution," said one young Islamist, "Instead of taking needed time with the transition, we went for superficial political solutions." Another added, "It was a problem to move toward elections so quickly, as many parts of the revolution were not represented in the political process." Youth leaders spoke with regret of compatriots from other parts of the ideological spectrum who were left in the dust as the Brotherhood rushed to reap the reward of elections, only to come up against the immoveable object of the Egyptian state.

The revolution was "not Islamic" and "nonideological," older and younger interlocutors agreed. One senior Brotherhood member noted with regret that "the Brotherhood had a certain project for a century and tried to implement it after 2011, failing to realize that it was no longer suitable for a nation in revolution." The Brotherhood was unable to adapt quickly enough to this need for "broad platforms based on values," said the senior member, which would have required abandoning a long-standing dogma that the movement was responsible for "carrying the load on behalf of the nation." Brotherhood leaders look back at their decision, when Morsi faced increasing, vociferous secular challenges, to tack right and ally with Salafists against secular forces in the parliament elected in early 2012 as a disaster; "This was not what the revolution wanted," said one. The more revolutionary

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path would have taken on serious restructuring of powerful institutions—for example, reforming the security sector and civilian bureaucracy—but the Brotherhood opted to placate them.

While older Brotherhood leaders are sensitive to the implication that they betrayed the 2011 revolution, the youth and elders agree that the decisions made by the leadership to work with the state were naive. "At the time of the revolution, we saw only the police as an enemy, not the state. Now the military, police, judiciary, and bureaucracy all have become vicious," said one youth. A former minister in the Morsi government attributes the Brotherhood leaders' mistakes to inexperience in governing, saying "we were not idiots, we were freshmen."

Members inside and outside Egypt are now debating, according to one leader, "why we offered thousands of martyrs and prisoners just to be part of a state that was based on oppression, coercion, entitlement, and seeking personal gain." One

@GhostyMaher | Down with all those who became traitors…military…Mubarakists…and Brotherhood.

Tweet from August 2, 2013, by April 6 Youth Movement cofounder Ahmed Maher, who was later imprisoned; translated from Arabic

young Islamist said that the essential problem is that "the state sees itself, not the people, as the owners of the country."

The conclusion that the Brotherhood was not revolutionary is quite different from the criticisms leveled at the group by many Western and pro-regime Egyptian critics: that the Brotherhood moved too aggressively within the state, made too many enemies, or failed to reach out to its mainstream opposition, or that its members were simply inept in office.[13] But it has a great deal in common with the critique coming from Egyptian secular youth activists, who accuse the Brotherhood of having betrayed the revolution by allying with the military.

The Brotherhood has implicitly accepted the critique of its former secular allies, and Brotherhood members now speak the language of cross-ideological cooperation. But that does not mean bridges will soon be mended. There is still much bad blood between secular youth activists and the Brotherhood. The secular youth blame the latter for having spoiled Egypt's chance at a real democratic transition, while the Brotherhood is bitter at former secular allies who at least initially supported the July 2013 coup, although many of them turned sharply anti-Sisi after the bloody crackdown and the institution of a harsh antiprotest law.

And while the Brotherhood most likely still commands the support of a significant base inside Egypt as well as the sympathy of many other Islamists, the organization might be unrealistic about the current willingness of the broader public to give it another chance after Morsi's failed tenure and the vigorous campaign of anti-Brotherhood demonization in the official media since then.[14]

Does the Brotherhood Do Revolution?

While there is still more than one view within the Brotherhood, it seems clear that under the extreme pressure of the post–July 2013 period, the movement is undergoing a metamorphosis. It is moving away from its longtime approach of patient, evolutionary change beginning with society and toward one of revolutionary change focused on the state itself.

If the Brotherhood is now a self-consciously revolutionary movement, what sort of revolution is it seeking? The word "revolution" is vague, and it likely means different things to different people. For some, it may simply be a kind of regime change more radical than that which occurred in 2011—perhaps extending to a far wider group of officials who are in charge of Egypt's key institutions. For others, the task seems not simply to replace officials but to alter the culture of the state, based as they see it on command, self-interest, corruption, and domination. And among the Brotherhood's youthful supporters, it is possible to hear even more radical sentiments about changing not merely political structures but the entire society and culture, making them more accountable and less hierarchical and authoritarian.

@Weskandar | The Muslim Brotherhood sided with the military from the start in exchange for power sharing and turned on revolutionaries. #history

Tweet from May 24, 2015, by liberal blogger Wael Eskandar

While it is not clear when the rank and file's revolutionary ambitions might be realized, a sense of resolve still pervades the group. The current regime is seen as unsustainable; word of power struggles and backbiting among Egypt's top officials leads to the impression that another upheaval is coming.

The Brotherhood seems to see itself not so much as sparking that upheaval as in participating in guiding it when it occurs. Movement members do not deny that they are reviled by parts of Egyptian society, but they seem to be sanguine about the prospects of regaining a leading role when the pressure for change becomes irresistible. The prevailing view is that the moment will not come in days, but it will not take decades either.

But if the term "revolution" is vague, admits many meanings, and is not yet married to an identifiable strategy, it is not vacuous. The idea that the Brotherhood should play by the rules set by the regime is derided. Above all, a revolutionary Brotherhood is not interested in running in elections, securing scattered seats in parliament, or accepting an assigned role of being a nonpolitical social movement. The struggle for rapid change is now centrally on the agenda for a movement that previously talked about gradualism and reform; the older insistence that if political change is impossible, members could focus on personal improvement is no longer heard. The Brotherhood of the past generation was quite comfortable with the idea of state power but critical of how it was used. It wished that those in authority showed greater deference to the

moral guidance offered by Islam. The mood in 2015 is inching toward one that questions the state and existing authority in their current forms.

The Question of Violence

Does revolution imply violence? Here the Brotherhood is consistent—but not clear. The movement's official stance is that it abhors violence. For some time, the common refrain has been that the real perpetrator of violence is the current regime and that those exposed to torture or who witnessed their friends killed or female relatives violated will inevitably respond.

But even that evasive approach—which critics allege is a yellow light for would-be violent members—has given way since early 2015 to a steady stream of far more fiery (if still general) talk of jihad, apostasy, and vengeance. A Brotherhood statement issued shortly after the killing of nine Brotherhood members on July 1 warned that a new phase was beginning in which "it will not be possible to control the anger of the oppressed," and called on Egyptians to "rise in revolt to defend your homeland."[15] After several non-Brotherhood Islamists were executed in May, the organization issued a statement saying that words against the regime no longer sufficed, and that "no voice is louder than the voice of retribution."[16] A statement posted on a Brotherhood website on January 30—and deleted a few days later after much controversy—called on "revolutionaries" to recognize that a new phase of "relentless jihad" was beginning, in which "we ask for martyrdom."[17] Media outlets based in Turkey that are affiliated or sympathetic to the Brotherhood, such as the cable television channels Misr al-An and Mekameleen, have featured even more inflammatory statements, often by Islamist imams who are not Brotherhood members, that are part of a pattern of mutual rhetorical escalation between the Brotherhood and the Sisi regime.[18]

@Ikhwanweb | Muslim Brotherhood Important Statement: We reiterate that the peaceful approach is our strategic option in the Revolution against the coup.

Tweet from June 15, 2015, by the Muslim Brotherhood

Still, many Brotherhood leaders and youth privately voice ambivalence about the likely results of using violence against the state. "We know it is a trap, that the regime is trying to lure us into a fight we can't win," said one youth. An intellectual close to the movement said that senior Brotherhood leaders are worried that the new, youthful leadership might adopt an aggressive strategy that would wreck decades of work during which the movement carefully built the ideology and reputation of moderation.

But according to one young Islamist, talk of nonviolence simply "makes no sense" in an environment of extreme state violence. Young Islamists frankly

mock the Brotherhood slogan "our peacefulness is stronger than their [police] bullets," which they say is manifestly false. Nor are spontaneous outpourings of wrath—directed at buildings, automobiles, or even police officers—by what one leader described as "youth who have an energy for revenge" something that Brotherhood leaders are likely to try to prevent or punish, if in fact they would be capable of doing so.

Is the leadership's apparent resignation to the idea that violence is occurring and to the new revolutionary posture a return to the ideology of Sayyid Qutb? In some ways, emerging approaches are the precise opposite of those identified as "Qutbists" within the Brotherhood. Among the movement's members, Qutbists are seen as those who seek to build a vanguard slowly and methodically, one that operates a bit in isolation from society. While Qutb is remembered outside the movement for his denunciation of all existing regimes—a denunciation that spawned radical and violent movements throughout the region—within the Egyptian Brotherhood, those who followed Qutb tended to favor a sense of rigid hierarchy and discipline remarkable even by Brotherhood standards; it was the quality of the members, not their quantity that was at issue. Thus the Qutbists remained somewhat guarded as the Brotherhood plunged into politics, seeking to win votes and influence many people. Some leading members identified as Qutbists within the movement have resisted the Brotherhood's current evolution, seeing it as overly risky, prematurely confrontational, and likely to provoke worse repression rather than fruitful change.

Instead of forming an elite Qutbist vanguard—or a model like Hamas, in which the movement sprouts a distinct armed wing—the current trend is toward building a decentralized movement that will likely engage in opportunistic local confrontations and street battles, sometimes embracing low-level violence while holding the regime and its perceived provocations as the true sources of bloodshed. Morsi's disastrous experience in government and the ensuing crackdown on the movement do, however, seem to have succeeded in changing views within the Brotherhood movement in a way that Qutb never did, to a belief that the Egyptian state cannot be reformed from within and that the only course is full revolution.

Broader Implications

The unfolding rejuvenation and decentralization of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood is part of a much broader regional picture in which young, discontented populations push against state structures that have failed to deliver adequate opportunities for education, employment, and expression in many Arab countries. Egypt is a particularly extreme case, both in terms of population size and in terms of the level of repression exerted against many of the country's youth. More waves of change following the shocks of 2011 and 2013 are likely,

although when they will occur and what their precise nature will be—peaceful, armed, Islamist, nonideological—are still unknown.

The Brotherhood has been damaged by the post-2013 crackdown, but it has survived. Now it appears determined to play a role when the opportunity for change next arises in Egypt, but a different role than it did last time. As of 2015, that role is vaguely conceived of as more "revolutionary," with the movement pushing for deeper change than it did in 2011–2013. The Brotherhood might in time define its revolutionary goals more clearly, a process that is likely to be shaped partly by whether the organization continues to be isolated with only a few other Islamist groups as allies, or whether it becomes part of a broader opposition conversation that includes secular as well as Islamist groups.

As one of the oldest and most influential Islamist groups in the world, the Muslim Brotherhood bears close watching as it, and Egypt, hurtle toward an uncertain future whose shock waves will be felt throughout the Middle East, Africa, and the Islamic world.

Notes

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