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The Muslim Brotherhood in a Post-Dictator Reality

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The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is one of the main beneficiaries of the socio-political changes in the Arab world. Its pragmatic Islamism is gaining widespread popularity in the region, as expressed at the ballot box as parties either formed by the Brotherhood itself (such as the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party) or inspired by it (such as the Tunisian Ennahda) dominate elections in the Arab world. After a turbulent history spanning almost 90 years, the Brotherhood is finally becoming a force in the world of political power. Such an advance offers a unique chance for the organisation, which in effect functions mostly as a confederated alliance of social movements operating in different Middle Eastern and North African countries, to develop and grow. However, it also carries risks associated with newly gained political responsibility, and the need to strike a balance between some of its members' and followers' cultural, economic, political and social expectations and the extent to which these could be addressed and fulfilled by, for example, the Brotherhood-dominated government of Egypt.

Nonetheless, the Brotherhood is not the only Middle Eastern political actor facing a rather uncertain future. Its growth and successes are studied with varying degrees of support in other Arab capitals, which are yet, if at all, to witness their 'Arab Springs'. Moreover, the previously vilified and ostracised Brotherhood, which already constitutes a successful model of a long-term, strategic, pragmatic and determined political project in a hostile environment, has witnessed a transformation of its political standing in the world. The movement's sudden and unexpected rise to political power in 2011 and 2012 forced all of the regional and global powers to revise their attitudes towards and relations with the previously dreaded Brotherhood. At the same time, it is worth remembering the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood is neither a unitary nor unified socio-political entity. Its territorial or indeed national factions function along different lines and, despite professing adherence to the original Egyptian Brotherhood's Islamism, utilise a variety of tactics in their struggles for political power. Consequently, the Brotherhood's new Western partners should differentiate between their levels of engagement with its respective factions, which each find themselves at different levels of political development and evolution.

From Extreme to Mainstream

The Muslim Brotherhood was formed in 1928 in Egypt as a Muslim socio-political movement opposing capitalism, materialism, colonialism and secular nationalism. The movement's popularity and professed methodology spread quickly, and the 1930s and '40s saw the establishment of its factions or regional detachments in, amongst others, what are now Syria, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Each one of these formally falls under the authority of the Brotherhood's General Guide (currently Muhammad Badi'), who leads the movement's organisational emanations from Egypt. In practice, however, different elements within the Brotherhood have limited contact with each other and their cooperation is often relegated to declaratory support of a given faction's activities. Structure rather than individuality is much more important for the efficient functioning of the group—the MB seems averse to strong personalities. Despite this being a pan-Islamic movement, it hardly functions as one as its internal interaction is of mostly local and not pan-Arabic character. Joint political initiatives, such as the coordinated protests after the publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in the Danish press in early 2006, are rare.

The Brotherhood understood Islam as an antidote to the westernisation of the Arab world. However, despite its often vehemently anti-Western rhetoric and image, cemented by a cursory

understanding of the United States-focused writings and memoirs of Sayyid Qutb—one of the most influential figures in the history of the Brotherhood, the movement, via its organisational emanations, focused its political attention on Egypt (“the near enemy” in the parlance of the current day jihadists, many of whom had been members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s different territorial branches and factions) and not on Egypt’s international backers—neither Soviet Russia nor the United States. The Brotherhood was banned in 1954 but subsequently adopted a prolonged, strategic outlook for the realisation of its political goals and the re-Islamisation of Egypt. Throughout its history, the original Egyptian Brotherhood tried different tactics to further its political goals and successfully combined social activism and charity, paramilitary and terrorist violence, and outright political and electoral involvement. From the 1970s onwards, however, it demilitarised its struggle, disbanded the Special Apparatus, responsible for violent acts in its name, and went as far as creating electoral alliances with the liberal Wafd party while opposing the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. All of these manoeuvres earned the Brotherhood a reputation as patient ultra-pragmatics who survived years of political oppression and established themselves as the most effective opposition to Egypt’s military rulers.

The Trendsetting MB in Egypt

In 2005 the Brotherhood candidates (running as independents) won close to 20% of the seats in the Egyptian parliament. In the first free parliamentary elections of 2011/2012, after the fall of Mubarak, the political party formed by the MB—the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP, *Hizb al-hurriyya wal-‘adala*) won 47% of the seats in the lower house of parliament. Thus, the MB’s cautious and conservative approach, followed by accusations of siding with the Egyptian army against the wishes and expectations of the protesters, and preceded by years of political preparation, eventually allowed the movement’s political emanation to reap tangible rewards. It propelled the Brothers into government despite the fact that the Brotherhood at first hesitated and then, only reluctantly, sided with the Egyptian revolutionaries.

The FJP parliamentarians are predominantly little-known and inexperienced. The party is not the only emanation of the MB’s legacy in Egypt. MB members most divergent from the mainstream had already left the group and formed smaller political parties, on radical Islamist (An-Nour) or liberal lines (Al-Wasat). However, FJP’s strength still lies in the variety of political views amongst its members, who range from moderate liberals to pragmatists and ideologues.

It remains to be seen whether other branches or territorial factions of the Muslim Brotherhood could emulate the success seen in Egypt. In order to assess such a possibility, one needs to ascertain their conditions and positions in relation to the Egyptian Brotherhood’s blueprint for success—prolonged, patient and non-violent political involvement.

The Palestinian MB

In 1987, Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood activists based in the Gaza Strip formed Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, which, contrary to the position of its parent organisation at the time, was to mix religious agitation, charity and social work with paramilitary and terrorist violence aimed at Israel. Such a policy effectively put Hamas at odds with the original Brotherhood and constituted a split leading to the emergence of an autonomous organisational structure. That is not to say that Hamas would not mirror the Egyptian Brotherhood’s methods or learning processes—in the early 21st century it cautiously moved into electoral politics and by 2006 had established itself as the largest political organisation in the Palestinian Authority. It would not, however, relinquish armed struggle for the establishment of Palestine, nor recognise Israel’s right to exist. Nonetheless, it could not fail to respond to the 2011 successes of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutionaries who achieved their aims without recourse to violence. Suddenly, Hamas’ preferred modus operandi was exposed as ineffective and out of touch with the demands and expectations of the Arab man on the street, still concerned about Palestine but focused on economic and social issues.

As a result, we could be witnessing the return of Hamas to the Brotherhood’s mainstream. It is now involved in reactivated negotiations with rival Fatah to form a government of national unity of the Palestinian Authority, and some of its leaders, especially those previously based in Syria, profess admiration for mass and non-violent political involvement. Moreover, they also hint at the need to formally re-establish the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine as a theoretically separate entity led by the current Hamas leader, Khalid Mishal. Nonetheless, the extent to which the organisation is ready and

willing to transform itself wholesale into a social movement modelled on the Egyptian Brotherhood remains unclear, especially as it continues to view armed struggle as an essential component of its strategy. As long as this policy brings favourable political returns and the control of the Gaza Strip, then Hamas will probably not find itself under increased pressure to mend its ways. Thus, there could still be limitations on how much its evolution is shaped by the travails of its Egyptian mother organisation or even the smaller Islamic Group (*Al-Gama'a al-islamiyya*) and Islamic Jihad (*Al-Gihad*), which underwent prolonged processes of de-radicalisation and whose members may today be counted amongst Egyptian parliamentarians.

The Syrian MB

Formed in the 1930s, the Syrian MB participated in political life until the 1960s when the Ba'ath Party took control of the country and began repressing the Brotherhood. The group rose against the regime in the late 1970s, only to be pacified bloodily in the Hama massacre of 1982. Its leaders are in exile, as membership of the organisation has been a capital offence since the early 1980s. In 2001, it issued a manifesto calling on the regime to end one-party rule and hold democratic elections. Unlike the MBs in Egypt and Jordan, the Syrian MB was deprived of the possibility to capitalise on the growing Islamist sentiment in the Middle East in the 2000s. The Syrian government cunningly supported the rise of those Islamists not affiliated with the MB, through the construction of new mosques and limited tolerance of their radical sermons. In 2010, Muhammad Riad Shaqfa became the Syrian MB's secretary general—a change that signalled a less liberal line in the local Brotherhood's policies.

The Syrian MB remained largely silent at the beginning of the protests in Syria, but it soon joined the largest opposition organisation—the Syrian National Council (SNC) in Istanbul—and is thought to be its most influential faction. The Syrian MB, unlike the Egyptian organisation, has not operated in its country of origin for more than 30 years and is therefore much weaker, with no structural base apart from a religious society. It has yet to match its popularity in the SNC with that in the rest of Syria, where the local anti-regime coordinating committees are leading the uprising. Thus, unlike the MB in Egypt, the Syrian MB was widely considered to be struggling and obsolete before the 2011 revolt.

The MB in Jordan

The MB in Jordan is a legal entity, and its political wing—the Islamic Action Front (*Gabhat al-'amal al-islamiyy*)—participates peacefully in political life and elections. The Jordanian MB often cooperated with the monarchy, and its limited participation in political institutions moderated its members' political views. However, with the outbreak of the Arab revolts, the Islamic Action Front has taken a more radical stance towards the government of Prime Minister 'Awn al-Khasawneh. It rejected an invitation to participate in the government but did not exclude such a possibility if democratic elections were held. Elements of the Jordanian democratic opposition fear that the Islamic Action Front could monopolise the whole opposition movement and negotiate a potentially greater share of power in the government.

Cautiously Pet the Elephant in the Room

All the MB factions are different and the EU should approach them accordingly. Having ignored and isolated these groups for years, European countries should now see them as initiators of the biggest Arab political parties of the future. A valid attitude seems to include attempting to establish a dialogue and political contacts (including those at the party-to-party level), especially with the MBs in Egypt and Jordan. Likewise, the EU should not, in its aid and cooperation programmes, differentiate among religiously inspired parties, entities or officials, and those that are not religiously inspired, as long as they abide by fundamental rules indicated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Simultaneously, however, the socio-political emanations of the Brotherhood ought to be encouraged to implement transparent and accountable practices, especially in relation to internal democracy and the acquisition of funding. There have been four major, obscure sources of funding for the MB: wealthy Egyptian émigrés in Gulf countries (such as Saudi Arabia or Kuwait), funds generated by organisations controlled by the MB in Egypt and Jordan, Islamic banks and entrepreneurs, and direct state or charity funding from the Gulf. Additionally, Qatar has recently emerged as an outside source of funds for various Islamic political groups as the country hosts different MB delegations, and

could potentially offer a moderating influence on different factions of the organisation. Moreover, Qatar's backing is beneficial to the various political emanations of the MB, as it constitutes an effective buffer zone in their nascent and problematic contacts with the West.

The Palestinian MB should not be rewarded prematurely for declarations about the changes in their operational methods, but the EU should encourage its leadership and members to initiate de-radicalisation processes similar to those of the MB in Egypt in the 1970s and the Egyptian Islamic Group in the 1990s. The EU should also make it clear that it does not exclude the possibility of changing Hamas' terrorist status. This is the most tangible leverage that the EU possesses over different factions of the MB in the Middle East. European influence over the course of development of other factions is very limited. The Syrian MB is a special case in point, as it might indeed wield power in the Syrian National Council, but support for it elsewhere in Syria does not correspond to its status in the SNC. The current crisis in Syria puts the MB there in the spotlight but in fact it seems to be the weakest of the four MB groups analysed in this paper.

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's anti-Western, anti-European and anti-American ideology, the group had previously concentrated on its local adversaries, despotic Arab governments. Following the events of 2011–2012, the MB finds itself in an unprecedented and triumphant phase of its development and it now needs to rethink and review its goals strategically, and catalyze its social and political energy towards new challenges and tasks ahead. The Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt faces the following dilemma: it could choose to compete for the religious electorate with the hardline, Salafi parties and thereby lose the support of religious liberals, or it could lean towards the centre, in an attempt to broaden its appeal. So far, the direction in which the party will evolve has been unclear; but certainly this decision will eventually establish a blueprint for other mainstream Islamist parties elsewhere in the region. One thing, however, is certain—the MB phenomenon is not transient and the Western world urgently needs to re-assess its policies in relation to the branches and factions of this most successful socio-political movement of the Arab world.