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The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: No Time for Obituaries[1]

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The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is the oldest socio-political movement active in Egypt. Its members and structures are now undergoing one of the most severe crackdowns in its history, at the hands of an Egyptian government that constituted itself in the aftermath of a popular revolt followed by a coup against a short period of MB rule in 2013. The MB, however, although dispersed and fragmented, is still not defeated, and faces options related to its future political trajectory. This paper discusses these options and concludes that the MB is most likely to ready itself for a "long struggle" scenario that would amount to waiting out the period of repression and reconstituting itself on a bottom-up basis.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has existed in Egypt for 86 years, and has survived several crackdowns by the Egyptian security sector. In 1954, an MB member attempted to assassinate Gamal Abdel Naser. Then came the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981, followed by rising militancy among Egyptian Islamists in the mid-1990s, and after the 2005 parliamentary elections. Since the removal of President Mohammed Morsi on 3 July 2013, the movement, illegal but widely recognised and acknowledged thanks to its social and charitable activities, has been experiencing the most violent and prolonged period of state repression in its history. Between 3 July and 31 December 2013, at least 2,528 Egyptian civilians, many of whom were members or supporters of the MB, were killed by the security forces, and 18,977 were arrested (of whom 2,590 were classified as "political leaders" of the MB and other Islamist organisations).[2] Six months later the number of arrests could, according to some estimates, have risen to 40,000.[3]

Nonetheless, the Egyptian state, which, through the then presidential candidate Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi, announced that the MB would not exist,[4] has been unable to eradicate the movement completely.[5] The MB

[1] The research for this article was conducted by the author in May–June 2014 in Cairo, Egypt within the framework of the SPrinT (Strategic Partnership in Transition) project, led by the Polish Institute of International Affairs and the Finnish Institute of international Affairs, with the cooperation of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo. SPrinT is sponsored by the European Commission. The author's understanding of the discussed subject was strengthened by the 30 semi-structured interviews he carried out during his stay in Egypt, with political activists, experts, think-tankers, journalists and academics specialising in Islamism. In order to protect the identity of the interviewees, as is stipulated in the rules governing SPrinT, the author guaranteed their anonymity and refrained from quoting their opinions directly. Nonetheless, his analysis was influenced by their insights and the reader will find references to information provided to the author in these interviews throughout the text.

[2] M. Dunne, S. Williamson, "Egypt's Unprecedented Instability by the Numbers," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24 March 2014, www.carnegieendowment.org.

[3] See: footnote 1.

[4] "Egypt's Sisi Vows Muslim Brotherhood 'Will not Exist'," *BBC News*, 6 May 2014, www.bbc.com.

takes inspiration from its previous encounters with violent state repression and perseveres. Once again, it seems poised to defy the odds, and soldier on towards its centenary. The MB's history of clandestine existence, its internal discipline, and the dedication of its cadres undoubtedly, play a role in the movement's survival in an ever more repressive Egypt. Every Friday, its members, sympathisers and followers, albeit in diminished numbers, stage demonstrations all around the country, and the leaders of the movement continue, sometimes from exile or prison cells, to rally the MB's rank and file.

At the same time, however, the scale of repression and the MB's relative unpopularity in Egyptian society, after its unsuccessful spell in governance between 2012 and 2013, have reduced its chance of attracting new members and reaching out to new political allies. This creates a new dynamic in which observers of the MB should not rush to compose the movement's obituaries, but should instead concentrate on how the current bout of repression would, if at all, transform the movement, and how the MB plans to remain politically and socially relevant in Sisi's Egypt. The six scenarios outlined below attempt to answer these questions and offer a glimpse into the possible future of the "movement of controversy and contradiction … near impossible to pin down,"[6] which has a track record of surprising observers.

Scenario 1: A Deal With…?

The Egyptian polity is often presented as an arena in which up to four political players compete for power. These are the omnipresent and all powerful Egyptian military; the "old regime" (former members of President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party); the "liberals," the "secularists" and the "left," (an ill-defined and amorphous milieu of political parties, groups and activists who played a prominent role in the events of 2011 but proved politically unsuccessful in their aftermath or were marginalised by the military after the summer of 2013); and finally, the Islamists, a broad current encompassing not only the MB and its allies from the National Alliance Supporting Legitimacy, but also the Salafis. Alliances between the aforementioned players, with the military as the ultimate "kingmaker," are said to ensure the survival of a given regime in Egypt. At the moment, however, none of the aforementioned players are ready to accept the MB as a legitimate political force in Egypt, and nor is the MB prepared to reach a compromise with other players.

The MB has a track record of contacts and tactical compromises with the "old regime," especially when it comes to the movement's self-limitation in relation to political participation (for example, in relation to the voluntary decision not to seek a majority in a given parliamentary election in exchange for the ability to lead a less clandestine existence).[7] Moreover, many on the Egyptian left are convinced that the MB have proved willing to co-operate with the "old regime" in the process of jointly undermining its secular rivals in exchange for more lenient treatment of the Islamists (as was the case during the presidency of Anwar Sadat).[8] Nonetheless, Mubarak's former supporters are aghast at the thought of cooperating with the MB, and are banking on their ability to cooperate with the ascendant military. The latter is now the key political player in the country, having played a major role in ousting two of the last Egyptian presidents (Mubarak in 2011, Morsi in 2012), governed Egypt between February 2011 and June 2012, been instrumental in installing the interim president after 3 July 2013 (Adli Mansur), and effectively nominated its head, the defence minister, al-Sisi, as the presidential candidate in 2014.

If the MB is seeking a reliable political partner, the military would theoretically be the best bet. However, the army bases its current political ascendancy on the struggle with "terrorism," allegedly epitomised by the Islamist MB. In this situation, it has no interest, at least for the moment, in striking any deal with the movement. Moreover, the latter rightly perceives the military as the main instigator and beneficiary of the 2013 coup that removed Morsi from office. In such circumstances, one could be forgiven for not taking the possibility of such an alliance seriously, especially as some members and supporters of the MB are said to

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[5] August 2014 saw another attempt at the movement's eradication as its political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party, was banned. See: H. Kortam, "Top Egypt Court Dissolves FJP," *Daily News Egypt*, 9 August 2014, www.dailynewsegypt.com.

[6] A. Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: From Opposition to Power*, Saqi Books, London, 2013, p. 8.

[7] See: N. Brown, *When Victory Is Not an Option: Islamist Movements in Arab Politics*, Cornell University Press, London, 2012.

[8] See: footnote 1.

have responded to alleged proposals for a military-MB deal with the statement "bring back our [MB] dead" first.[9] That does not automatically mean that the MB is bent on destroying the army, as its members attempt to differentiate between the rank and file and the officer corps, alleging that the latter corrupted the armed forces. The movement has adopted the position of the need for the army to "return to barracks" and an end to "military rule," and does not necessarily condone a revolt against the state itself or its institutions.[10]

Theoretically, a more probable political partner would be the aforementioned "secularists" whose members are now, alongside the MB, also for the targets of repression by the Egyptian security sector.[11] The two sides, which cooperated during the January-February 2011 revolution, and both reject "military rule," should be able to find enough common ground for cooperation. Surprisingly, the chances for such realignment are slim, as the "left" is not ready to forget the battles it fought with MB members over the fact that Morsi "betrayed" the revolution and granted himself almost absolute power via his presidential declaration in late 2012.[12] At the same time, the MB feels wronged by the "left," many members of which were instrumental in bringing down Morsi in a popular revolt, followed by a coup d'état in June–July 2013.[13]

The final difficulty for the is the prospects of an MB alliance with another player is that, even if the MB were to cut a deal, no single individual or group would be in a position to conclude such negotiations. The imprisoned leadership is respected within the organisation but has only ostensible control over its dispersed structures, which are now functioning in a survivalist and independent mode. The leadership's basis for internal legitimacy has been very much based on their experience, dedication to the Islamic proselytisation (*dawa'a*), social activities on behalf of the movement, and also the fact that most of them have served prolonged jail terms in Egyptian prisons. It was, however, the activities of those leaders who neglected *dawa'a*, and opted for full scale political involvement of the movement, that ended in the disastrous events of 2013. At the same time, members of a new generation of younger MB members are now imprisoned which in the longer term should allow them to question and perhaps challenge the authority of the pre-2013 leaders. There is also very little contact between the surviving MB structures, and very little coordination between them. For example, the rump leadership is said to communicate via text messages only.[14] If there were to be a "deal" between the ascendant military and the MB, it would at best be an agreement with only one element of the movement, the "domesticated" faction that would be willing to function in Sisi's Egypt and indirectly support the government's legitimacy.

Scenario 2: A "Domesticated" MB

An MB functioning in Sisi's Egypt would have to exist under a different name. In addition, it would probably be forced to restructure its activities away from any social or charity work, as the Egyptian state now sees these areas of activity as sources of MB strength and is keen to undermine them with its own charity work and stricter control of Egyptian mosques. Such an arrangement would be almost impossible to sell to any MB members who are convinced of the extra-political character of their movement, in particular the religious aspect. In these conditions, any grouping of MB leaders who would endorse such a political offer, if one were to be made by the Egyptian state at all, would almost automatically lose credibility with the rank and file members, aghast at the prospect of a compromise with a regime intent on eradicating the MB. Moreover, the history of the movement is not noted for encouraging examples of successful MB splits which produced seemingly more lenient and conciliatory Islamist groups or parties in Egypt. In reality, the internal wrangling in the MB amounted to nothing more than walkouts or desertions of groupings of usually Cairo-based, more reformist leaders who rejected the movement's rigidity and communist party style of

[9] *Ibidem*.
[10] K. Dawoud, "Brussels and Back," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 22–28 May 2014.
[11] D. Kholaif, "Egypt Outlaws Anti-Mubarak April 6 Movement," *Al-Jazeera*, 28 April 2014, www.aljazeera.com.
[12] See: D. Kirkpatrick, "Citing Deadlock, Egypt's Leader Seizes New Power and Plans Mubarak Retrial," *The New York Times*, 22 November 2012.
[13] See: footnote 1.
[14] *Ibidem*.

discipline.[15] After leaving the MB, however, their political projects, such as the al-Wasat Party, failed to seriously alter the map of Islamism in Egypt.

Theoretically, the movement's youth wing, angry with the leadership's running of the movement between 2011 and 2013 (such as the alleged alliance with the SCAF, and alienation of other revolutionary forces), and coming to the fore as the previous generation of leaders is arrested, could be a partner in future discussions. However, this is also the part of the MB that is the most exposed to the government's repression of the movement, for its student members have been sustaining the MB through their protests in recent months. Consequently, they have been shot at, killed or jailed, and are less than likely to separate from the original MB to form a rival Islamist outfit with the blessing of the current regime. Their increased anti-state radicalisation could prevent a quick return to politics for the MB, which will first and foremost attempt to reconstitute itself from the bottom up, while returning to what it used to do best, i.e. *dawa'a*. This could be followed by individual, leadership sanctioned though seemingly independent, forays into the political arena by some of the senior members of the MB.[16]

Scenario 3: Rehab

Just as chances for a "domesticated" MB to appear look slim, another scenario—the movement undergoing a "rehabilitation" process—also seems relatively unlikely. It is, however, important to discuss this prospect as the MB has been declared a terrorist organisation in Egypt, and in theory that entails the possibility of engaging the movement's members in a state-sponsored process of not only disengaging from violence but also deradicalisation and separation from extremist ideals. Interestingly enough, the MB underwent a voluntary, and non-state sponsored, process of moderation and disengagement from violence from the late 1960s onwards.[17] Thirty years later, the Islamic Group (IG), an Islamist movement rivalling the MB (initially in a voluntary manner but later with the support of the Egyptian state), successfully de-radicalised on an organisational basis, which resulted in the release from prison of thousands of its members.[18]

The key difference between those processes and the situation in 2014 is that the current day MB, despite being branded a terrorist organisation by Egypt, does not engage in violence on an organisational basis. It possesses, unlike the MB in the 1950s or the IG in the 1990s, no military wing, and thus it is impossible to demand its disengagement from violence. The movement's members do engage in violent protests, and some of them are said to be radicalising and providing recruits for disparate terrorist cells, but the leadership of the MB and the vast majority of its members and sympathisers remain non-violent. The MB is also accused of links with the Islamist terrorists in the Sinai, or even a "post-ideological" alliance which sees both sides join forces to combat the hated military regime, but there is little evidence to substantiate that claim.[19] Moreover, attempts to present terrorist groups such as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis as the post-2013 coup MB under a different name ring hollow, as these jihadists have a track record of operations dating back to 2011.[20]

If disengagement from violence is not a serious prospect vis-à-vis the MB, then one could consider attempting de-radicalisation of the movement. This, however, would prove tricky as the MB is often far less radical in its ideology and policies than elements of the Islamist milieu which are allowed to function in Sisi's Egypt. These include the Salafi groups, to an extent politically represented by the Al-Nour Party, which came second in the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections, and supported the removal of Morsi and MB from power in 2013. Moreover, asking MB members to recant their Islamism, a raison d'être for the movement's existence, equates to demanding a retreat from proselytising, charity work, political and social activities,

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[15] See: C. Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, Princeton University Press, Oxford, 2013, pp. 183–186.
[16] See: A. Eleiba, "Cut Off the Roots," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 19–25 June 2014.
[17] O. Ashour, *The De-radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, Routledge, New York, 2009, p. 44.
[18] *Ibidem*, pp. 90–102.
[19] See: footnote 1.
[20] D. Barnett, "Ansar Jerusalem Calls on 'Spies' to Repent in Latest Video," *The Long War Journal*, 12 March 2014, www.longwarjournal.org.

and the de facto end of the organisation. At most, some individual members might be tempted to rhetorically "de-radicalise" from expressing anti-Sisi sentiment in public, but that would have to be preceded by the establishment of some form of "domesticated" MB (see: Scenario 2).

Scenario 4: Escalation

In theory, a large social movement such as the MB could still attempt to escalate the political situation and seek a showdown with the Egyptian state. However, it is now obvious that the MB, which is far from eradicated, spent all its potential for political escalation via popular mobilisation in the summer of 2013. Moreover, at that time, even with fewer leaders, activists and supporters either dead or imprisoned, it proved unable to withstand popular anger against its rule, and in the long term failed to stop the creeping coronation of Sisi as Egypt's president. Even though the new president's popularity has recently been dented by painful subsidy reforms, this does not automatically mean a spike in the MB's popularity.[21] So far, it has failed to motivate its members and supporters to take part in nationwide protests against a series of events legitimising the post-coup d'état Egypt, such as the January 2014 constitutional referendum, the May 2014 presidential election, and next month's inauguration of Sisi. It even proved unable to destabilise the country on the anniversary of Morsi's removal. In short, the movement is able to maintain the mobilisation of its most dedicated members, who continue to protest after midday prayers every Friday in different parts of Egypt, but is too weakened, fragmented and leaderless to coordinate nationwide protests.[22]

All the above does not mean, however, that the MB will abandon the idea of escalation in the medium or long term. Currently, its protests are of symbolic value and the majority of Egyptians regard them as inconveniences or signs of desperation on behalf of an unpopular social movement. These protests, although draining police resources, are also to an extent welcomed by the Egyptian government, which bases its legitimacy partly on the grand struggle against "terrorism," i.e., the MB. At the same time, the MB is said to be aware of the fact that it must persevere if its seemingly low-level protests are to contribute to the deterioration of the economic, political and social situation in Egypt. Its strategic reasoning dictates that, by contributing to "making things worse," the tide will eventually turn in the MB's favour.[23]

Scenario 5: Terrorism

If the short-term escalation of protests is less than likely, and the movement is adamant about its dedication to non-violence, then one should not expect the MB to opt for armed struggle. A structural embrace of this method of achieving political aims by the movement's leadership would destroy the last 45 years of MB's evolution towards an entity attempting to accomplish deep-rooted social change in Egypt, and striving for restoration of Egypt's "legitimate" government (that of the deposed Morsi). The movement has no armed wing, and is not, as some have claimed, in the process of establishing one in neighbouring Libya.[24] However, radicalisation of individual members or elements of MB local or regional structures should not be ruled, out as they might be eager to hit back at the "military regime." Moreover, one should not discount the influence that the successes of the jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) in nearby Syria and Iraq could have on the Egyptian militants and/or Islamists who could be tempted to establish a link with the aforementioned IS via Sinai, Jordan, and possibly the Gaza Strip.[25] However, such a development is far from certain as the Egyptian security sector makes it harder for the local jihadists to operate transnationally because it is now actively involved in isolating the troubled Sinai from the rest of Egypt, and cooperates closely with Israel in its handling Hamas, based in the Gaza Strip. In addition to this, any attempt by MB members to establish, for example, an Egyptian arm of the IS, would only strengthen the anti-terrorist narrative of the Egyptian

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[21] B. El-Dabh, "Unsustainable Solutions to Unsustainability," *Daily News Egypt*, 8 July 2014, www.dailynewsegypt.com.
[22] See: @EgyAntiCoup (twitter feed of the Anti-Coup Alliance) on twitter for weekly updates on these protests in English.
[23] See: footnote 1.
[24] See: D. Cristiani, K. Rękawek, "Algeria and Egypt Struggle with the Implications of Libya's Political Chaos," *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 12, no. 13, 26 June 2014, www.jamestown.org.
[25] See: M. Salem, "Why Islamic State's Caliphate Is Trouble for Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, 18 July 2014, www.al-monitor.com.

government.[26] This, to an extent, will act as a brake on any militant intentions of the majority of the MB members, who are far more likely to draw inspiration from their movement's history and its ability to withstand numerous periods of repression.

Scenario 6: Readying for the "Long Struggle"

If a battered and dispersed, yet persevering, MB is unlikely to conclude a deal with the Egyptian state, re-organise on more lenient and seemingly benign, "domesticated" lines for public consumption, engage in the process of de-radicalisation, escalate its protests or "go terrorist," then the most plausible option is for the movement to dig in and await better times. This would entail going back to the MB's roots, and existing in parallel with the Egyptian state. The MB could be counting on the fact that, the further Egypt moves away from the events of 2012 and 2013, the more likely it is to regain its socio-political standing amongst the Egyptians who are likely to grow disenchanted with a government imposing painful austerity measures, and targeting not only Islamists but also "secularists" in its drive to combat enemies of the state.[27] Consequently, the authorities will not be able to totally prevent the movement from bottom-up re-organisation and reconstitution, as they will not possesses the resources to completely shut down an entity numbering hundreds of thousands of members who are used to operating in a semi-clandestine fashion on an everyday basis.

The questions, however, remain, as to how this reconstitution would proceed, and, with the majority of leaders in prison or exile, who would be directing or coordinating. Another variable that must be taken into account is the stance of the movement's radicalised members, who might contest the primacy of the old leadership, and could thus constitute a new "middle generation" (the first arrived in the 1970s and consisted of student leaders who refashioned the MB for political and parliamentary participation in the next decade).[28] The difference might be that the new "middle generation" could, unlike their 1970s predecessors, end up pushing the movement back towards its *dawa'a* oriented roots, and away from engagement with non-Islamist political forces, so that joint opposition to the "military regime" becomes even less tenable. Thus it is likely that the MB could become more radical, and more insular in its approach to socio-political issues in Egypt. This is most likely to assure the movement's survival, and annul its premature obituaries, but will simultaneously alienate it from its potential allies, and convince its members of the righteousness of their ways and means. In the end, the MB might revert to the well-known path of attempting to mould Egypt so that it fits inside the movement, and not vice versa.

Conclusions

Trying to ascertain the future of the MB, a poorly studied and widely misunderstood movement, is unlikely to produce a "smoking gun or 'aha' moment," as anyone studying it will be far from certain if they have established its true nature.[29] The MB is now even more diffuse than it used to be, with communication and command and control channels under severe pressure, and rank and file members under less supervision.[30] Moreover, this only reflects the pre-2013 reality of what in effect were several MBs in different parts of Egypt, with Cairo structures witnessing the highest level of internal political debate and dissent, and rural sections more *dawa'a* oriented and in line with the preferences of the movement's conservative leaders.

To compound matters further, the MB, which has a far from successful track record of cooperation and outreach beyond its own organisation, is becoming increasingly insular in its proceedings, and, as it feels wronged by the "old regime," the military and the "secularists," it is not likely to review its position significantly, or repent for its 2012–2013 mistakes in governance. Thus, it will not conclude any deals or go

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[26] See: M. Bradley, "Egyptian TV Swayed Public against Morsi, in Favor of Sisi," *The Wall Street Journal,* 28 May 2014.
[27] See: footnote 1.
[28] See: C. Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, p. 115.
[29] C. Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood*…, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
[30] See: footnote 1.

through government sanctioned rehabilitation, and its internal discipline prevents it from splintering along factional or regional lines. At the same time, it is in no position to escalate the political crisis in Egypt, nor is it ready to go "terrorist."

In such conditions, the most likely scenario for its future is the aforementioned "long struggle," during which the scattered remnants of the movement will attempt a "back to basics" retreat, and the MB operatives will endure another spell in the seeming doldrums of Egypt's socio-political arena. They will persevere, but the "new" MB, just as the one of the 1970s and the 1980s, is likely to be different from that of 2014.