

# Lessons Learnt

## Post-Mubarak developments within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood



Lorenzo Vidino

AHRC PUBLIC POLICY SERIES NO. 2



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

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the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

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Published by Arts and Humanities Research Council  
Polaris House, North Star Avenue, Swindon, Wiltshire, SN2 1FL  
[www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk)

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Published December 2011

Design by Rumba.

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# Background

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The 'Lessons Learnt' project was originally funded by a grant from King's College London. In May and June 2010 Rob Dover and Michael Goodman, with AHRC funding, ran a series of 5 policy seminars on *Lessons Learnt from the History of British Intelligence and Security*. These were held in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Cabinet Office, King's College London and The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Just under 180 people attended the seminar series in total, from both academia and government. The output from these has subsequently been published in a book called *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Georgetown University Press, 2011).

The rationale for this initiative and the current one have come from the 2004 Butler Report into the Iraq war (and the intelligence situation that contributed to it), which concluded that the historical lessons had been forgotten, and that a regular review process should be instigated.

## The Current Project

This current project aims to build upon the 2010 seminars, improving and developing the relationship between researchers and government via the production of research and briefing papers, and seminars held in Whitehall. The primary impact is on improving national security, achieved via academics contributing to the development of the government's analytical capability.

The project is split into two halves:

- Highlighting historical examples of good analysis.
- Improving understanding of regions of current interest.

Leading academics have been specially commissioned to produce research and briefing papers for a Whitehall audience. This publication series reproduces the reports.

*Commissioned Research on the History of British Intelligence and Security*

Project Reports

1. *'Post-Mubarak Developments Within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood'*  
(October 2011) – Dr Lorenzo Vidino, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich.

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University



## Executive Summary

This paper examines the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a social and political entity, and critically evaluates the Brotherhood's role in the current political upheaval in Egypt. It describes the unique nature of this organisation, in terms of the through-life commitment Brothers make to it, to how successive generations of the Brotherhood have survived and operated politically in Egypt. The key elements of the analysis presented here is a historically informed view of contemporary Egyptian politics. Vidino outlines the absent role the Brotherhood played in the February 2011 revolution, and the uneasy accommodation they formed with the ruling military elite subsequently. He goes on to explain how the resurgent Salafist movements are challenging the Brotherhood's traditional political ground and what the history of the Brotherhood can tell us about how this situation might develop on the ground.

## Series Editors' Notes

The Egyptian revolution in January 2011 would have seemed unthinkable twelve months before. As a rock-solid and yet often controversial ally of the West, Hosni Mubarak had seemed impregnable behind the protective veil of western military aid, and his own military apparatus. And yet the exceptional events in Egypt and across much of North Africa and the Middle East has seen the unseating of an established political order, and its replacement with uneasy coalitions of hitherto untested political entrepreneurs.

The key tasks for all western intelligence and security agencies and policy-makers during 2011 has been to try and identify these potential political elites and the agendas that they will seek to bring to government. This identification task has been important because it will shape the sorts of political engagements western powers will have with these new governments and the assessment of threat, opportunity and challenge that are made about them.

Egypt is a particular case in point. Occupying a key strategic position in the Middle East, and having acted as a bridge between the so-called Arab street and Israel, the rapid end to Mubarak's rule had the strong potential to destabilize the whole strategic balance in the region. The promise of free and fair elections by the transitional government (controlled by the Egyptian military) raised the prospect of a government dominated by those loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood, and it is this secretive group that forms the basis of this research paper.

We commissioned a research paper on the Muslim Brotherhood because we felt that this group was subject to a large number of characterisations which required testing and

further exploration. We also felt that an expert paper on this subject was timely and important given that it seemed likely that people loyal to the Brotherhood would form a dominant part of the next Egyptian government and therefore the internal dynamics and fluidity within the Brotherhood was important to explore. We were particularly struck by the absence of the Muslim Brotherhood within the January 2011 revolution and the political accommodation they have reached with the military after the fall of Mubarak; both of these things seem to run contrary to what we would have expected to be the case. Whilst this paper was finished in early October 2011, it continues to be of relevance to our thinking about the attempt at a secondary revolution in late November 2011, in which again the Brotherhood appears to have played little role. The scene looks likely to be set for a contest for control of Egypt between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood, on one side and a coalition of Salafists on the other. High quality research work in the humanities, as demonstrated by Lorenzo Vidino here, will be an important part of our contemporary and historical understanding of these political upheavals.

**Robert Dover & Michael S. Goodman**

# Lessons Learnt – Post-Mubarak developments within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

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The January 2011 revolution that led to the end of the 30-year regime of Hosni Mubarak has brought Egypt into uncharted territory. Provisionally governed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a body of twenty senior military officers, for the first time in its history the country seems to be destined to have an authentically democratic political system. The political and technical challenges to the process are plentiful and it is not surprising that the SCAF has already postponed the parliamentary and presidential elections once. Egyptian society is understandably swept by a mix of excitement and apprehension at this new phase of its millenarian history.

Among the many political forces seeking to play a role in the tumultuous post-Mubarak period particular attention has been devoted by observers inside and outside of Egypt to the Muslim Brotherhood. The oldest and most influential among modern Islamist groups, the Brotherhood is believed by many to be poised to be the main beneficiary of the Egyptian revolution, its vast grassroots reach and political experience giving it an edge over the many and deeply fragmented competing political forces on the ground. This paper seeks to address some of the many internal and external dynamics surrounding the group that are likely to shape its actions and Egyptian politics in the near future.

## A long, tormented history

Founded in Ismailiya in 1928 by Hassan al Banna, the Brotherhood, like most of the grassroots movements that sprang up in Egypt at the time, was strongly opposed to colonial rule and advocated Egyptian independence. But while most anti-British movements took inspiration from an array of Western-imported ideologies, the Brotherhood based its discourse on Islam. Creating what would become the motto of generations of Islamists (“Islam is the solution”), al Banna saw the answer to the Western “military-political-ethical-social invasion” of the Muslim world in an interpretation of Islam as all-embracing, governing all aspects of private and public life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2007):108.

Al Banna's reference to Islam's mythical past as the cure for the *ummah's* ills does not contradict his embrace of modern political mobilisation tactics. His organisation created a capillary structure that included mosques, professional organisations, charities, social services, and publications. Internally, the Brotherhood subdivided itself into a myriad of sub-organisations and committees, each with a very precise structure and goal. In less than twenty years, it was estimated to have over half a million members and an even larger number of sympathisers spread throughout Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

Al Banna's public message called for the establishment of an Islamic state through Islamisation from below, a slow process that saw the creation of a purely Islamic system of government only as the natural consequence of the peaceful Islamisation of the majority of the population. Yet parts of the Brotherhood seemed not to have patience to *await the fruits of their dawa* and, almost from the organisation's inception, developed a secret apparatus (Nizam al Khass) that planned to use violence to further their goals. Initially the Nizam al Khass carried out attacks against British interests in the country, but it soon extended its violent actions against domestic targets, killing prominent politicians, judges, and government officials.

These actions provided Egyptian authorities with a legitimate reason to clamp down on the political force they deemed the biggest challenge to their power. The first wave of brutal crackdowns took place in the late 1940s at the hands of the Egyptian monarchy. But the most brutal actions against the Brotherhood were carried out by the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. The ban Nasser put on the Brotherhood in 1954 opened a dramatic phase of the Brotherhood's history, characterised by sweeping arrests, concentration camps, summary military tribunals, and widespread torture.

The brutal crackdowns of the Nasser era led to the violent radicalisation of a part of the Brotherhood. At a time when thousands of Brothers were languishing in jail and the formal leadership of the organisation was proving itself ineffective, many found a new ideological leader in Said Qutb. In works that have become classics of the Islamist movement, such as *In the Shade of the Quran* and *Milestones*, Qutb's analysis, unquestionably influenced by the horrors he witnessed in detention, argued that Islamisation from below is too slow a process, impeded by the intervention of local authorities and foreign powers. *Dawa* cannot do what *jihad*, in this case defined as violent confrontation, can accomplish. Qutb's doctrine, and particularly his religious justification of violence, has influenced generations of militants throughout the Muslim world. In

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<sup>2</sup> William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004), 302.

Egypt, members of the Brotherhood broke with the group and formed bands such as the Gamaa Islamiya and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which aimed at using violence to overthrow the regime.

Whereas one section of the Brotherhood chose a direct confrontation with the regime, most of the group opted for accommodation. By the late 1960s several leaders of the organisation began to publicly eschew violence against the regime, beginning a long process of normalisation that had been under way until the end of the Mubarak regime. The accommodationist wing, which soon gained the leadership of the organisation, understood that any sort of violent confrontation would have seen them on the losing side and therefore decided on implementing the bottom-up Islamisation detailed by al Banna. Nasser's death in 1970 and the rise to power of Anwar Sadat gradually allowed more room for the Brothers to conduct their activities. Although never officially allowed to operate as a formal organisation, the Brotherhood established a *modus vivendi* with the government and participated in Egypt's social and political life until the fall of Mubarak.

## New life after Mubarak

The Brotherhood was only belatedly and marginally involved in the protests that toppled the Mubarak regime. Its leadership, fearing the backlash from the regime had the revolt failed, decided not to participate in the first days of the protests.<sup>3</sup> Younger Brotherhood members did, on the other hand, play a significant role in the protest movement. Although they did not wave the group's banner or sing religious slogans, young Brotherhood activists were deeply involved in the protest movement, gaining the respect of liberal activists and participating in the 25 January Youth Coalition, the movement's directing body.

Since the fall of Mubarak the Brotherhood has found itself catapulted in a completely different environment in which it is, almost inevitably, one of the main protagonists. The liberal activists who led the protest movement have been so far unable to unite and translate the enthusiasm of the revolution into a viable political force. Other political forces, whether the few opposition parties of the Mubarak era or other political entities linked to charismatic individuals like former IAEA head Mohammed el Baradei, have faced similar challenges in gaining traction. Although polls in the country are unreliable and uncertainty seems to dominate Egypt's current political debate, it is commonly believed

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "What is the Muslim Brotherhood's Role in New Egypt?" PBS Frontline, February 22, 2011.

that the Brotherhood will be able to capitalise on its superior political experience and grassroots reach and make significant gains in the forthcoming elections.

For the first time in its history, in fact, the Egyptian Brotherhood will be openly participating in elections – in the past its members were forced by the regime to run individually. In June, in fact, the state authorised the formation of the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). The Brotherhood insists the FJP is “ideologically, organisationally and financially” independent from the organisation and points to the presence of a Copt as vice-president as evidence of its broad base.<sup>4</sup> But several elements point to the fact that the FJP is nothing but the movement’s political party. Tellingly, several members of the Brotherhood’s top body, the Guidance Bureau, moved to the FJP. Moreover, the movement wrote the FJP’s party platform and bylaws, has decided how many seats the party will contest and is apparently also picking the candidates for them.<sup>5</sup>

The Brotherhood has announced that the FJP will contest only 50% of the seats in the parliamentary elections and will not field a candidate for the presidency.<sup>6</sup> Estimates on how the Brotherhood will fare in the elections are based on little more than gut feelings but most consider likely that the group will obtain something between 20 and 35% of the seats in the future Egyptian parliament.<sup>7</sup> Considering the deep fragmentation of competing forces, it is not unlikely that the Brotherhood will be the largest block in parliament, making it a necessary partner of any government. But my sense is that you think they could sweep to power if they wanted, but are holding back. Is this because they fear western powers won’t allow them to come to power?

## Internal fissures

As any large political movement, since its early days the Brotherhood has been characterised by the presence of internal divisions. A major fissure that has existed since the days of al Banna is between the Nizam al Khass and the non-militarised, more moderate wings of the group.<sup>8</sup> The Nizam al Khass has always perceived itself as the group’s elite, a secretive and cohesive block that has traditionally resisted any control

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<sup>4</sup> “Future of the Muslim Brotherhood Debated,” *IkhwanWeb*, July 10, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Nathan J. Brown, “The Muslim Brotherhood as Helicopter Parent,” *Foreign Policy*, May 27, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> There are various theories as to why that is, ranging from the Brotherhood’s desire not to play an excessively visible role in the near future (see the last section of this paper) to its lack of charismatic figure that would be able to obtain a victory. The author leans towards the first hypothesis.

<sup>7</sup> A poll conducted in late September by the Egyptian Cabinet’s Centre of Information revealed that 35% of Egyptians supported the Brotherhood. See: [www.ikhwanweb.com/iweb/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=32369:poll-reveals-35-of-egyptians-support-muslim-brotherhood&catid=10388:paragraphs&Itemid=794](http://www.ikhwanweb.com/iweb/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32369:poll-reveals-35-of-egyptians-support-muslim-brotherhood&catid=10388:paragraphs&Itemid=794)

<sup>8</sup> For an extensive description of those dynamics see Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition* (London, Saqi Books, 2010), pp. 27-60.

from the group's established leadership. Members of the Nizam al Khass bore the brunt of Nasser's persecution but also played a crucial role in recreating the organisation during the Sadat era. Since the late 1970s members of the small, cliquish and secretive sub-group have dominated the Brotherhood's internal life. Although formal positions might have been occupied also by other individuals, Nizam al Khass members *de facto* exercise full control over the organisation.

These dynamics have led to significant tensions between the Brotherhood's three generations. An aging leadership dominated by the Nizam al Khass dominates the group's life, exercising its power in largely non-transparent ways. Its power is challenged by the mid-management, individuals in their late 40s and 50s who joined the Brotherhood as student leaders and who are struggling to advance in the organisation. And then there is the youth, which encompasses young professionals in their 30s and 20-somethings who are extremely active online and participated in the revolution.

The revolution has unquestionably accentuated resentments that the second and third generations have had against the first for several years. The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back seems to have been the Brotherhood's leadership order to all members not to join any party other than the FJP. Several prominent Brotherhood activists have defied the order and formed their own political forces. Ibrahim al Zafarani, a Brotherhood leader in the Alexandria region, formed the al Nahda party and was soon joined by former Deputy General Guide Mohammed Habib. Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, another prominent leader of the second generation, announced his candidacy for presidency and took several young Brotherhood activists to run his campaign. Youths who had been active in the revolution formed al Tayyar al Masri (Egyptian Current), a Cairo-based party that has also attracted activists from a non-Islamist background. Other minor political entities have also sprung up over the last few months.

The Brotherhood's leadership has shown itself to be inflexible and has expelled all members who defied its order not to join any political force other than the FJP. These unprecedented tensions – the similar episode of the Brotherhood expelling some of its members who had formed the al Wasat Party in 1996 was on a much smaller scale – have led many observers to argue that the Brotherhood is in turmoil, plagued by internal dissensions that could lead to its collapse. Moreover, it has led many to wonder whether the activists who formed these entities have done so because of ideological differences with the Brotherhood or simply because dissatisfied with its murky internal bureaucracy. And, moreover, how much traction are these new forces likely to gain? These issues have obvious policy implications.

There is no question that there are some ideological differences between the Nizam al Khass-dominated leadership and the younger generations of activists. The former have political views that reflect the personal hardships they underwent and adopt extremely conservative positions on a variety of issues. Younger militants tend to adopt views that are more in line with the intellectual evolution that Islamism has had over the last twenty years. Several individuals affiliated with the Brotherhood shape this contraposition in terms of “the youth of Hassan al Banna versus leadership of Said Qutb.”<sup>9</sup> The current leadership, they argue, has gone astray from the Brotherhood’s original message as laid out by al Banna and, because of their personal experiences, has embraced Qutb’s significantly more radical ideas.

Many Brothers have indeed framed their expulsion from the Brotherhood in these terms. Some have argued that if al Banna were to come back to life he would not join the Brotherhood in its current form.<sup>10</sup> Several young members have written on their Facebook pages that their expulsion is insignificant, as the current leadership has abused the group’s heritage and that whoever believes in al Banna’s true message will always be a member of the Brotherhood.<sup>11</sup> To show the leadership’s deviance from al Banna’s message About Fotouh points to the fact that, during al Banna’s times, Brotherhood members were free to run for and support several parties.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, as the debate over the possibility of joining other parties shows, the core of the disagreement between the leadership and the breakaway members is not over ideology but, rather, over the group’s internal decision-making processes.<sup>13</sup> Ideological differences within the group do exist but they have always had and they had never led to schisms. Even some of the most vocal activists who have been expelled from the group openly state that they believe in the Brotherhood’s message as they have always had and will continue to support the group’s agenda.<sup>14</sup> It is apparent that the core of the contention is purely over management, as ambitious and competent younger activists are increasingly

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<sup>9</sup> Concept repeated in interviews during the author’s visit to Cairo in August 2011 by Kamal el Helbawy, Abdel Moneim About Fotouh, Abdelrahman Ayyash and Mohammed Shahawy.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Abdelrahman Ayyash, former Brotherhood member, Cairo, August 2011. Ayyash was reporting this not necessarily as his opinion but as a sentiment shared by several young Brotherhood activists.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Abdelrahman Ayyash, former Brotherhood member, Cairo, August 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Abdel Moneim About Fotouh, Cairo, August 2011.

<sup>13</sup> See also Eric Trager, “The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood: Grim Prospects for a Liberal Egypt,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Abdelrahman Ayyash, former Brotherhood member, Cairo, August 2011; interview with Mohammed Shahawy, former Brotherhood member currently running Abdel Moneim About Fotouh’s presidential campaign, Cairo, August 2011.

frustrated at seeing their careers inside the group decided by the obscure maneuvering of an octogenarian leadership elected through murky processes.

## Assessing the fissures' impact

Although events are very much in flux, it seems at least premature if not outright incorrect to see these fissures as a massive rebellion of the youth leading to a fragmentation and even the collapse of the Brotherhood. These developments are unquestionably interesting and should be monitored but, at the end of day, they are unlikely to make a major dent in the socio-political machine of the Brotherhood. Three concurring reasons can be identified to explain this limited relevance.

The first is that most of the new political forces created by former Brotherhood activists stand little chances to gain much traction among the Egyptian electorate. Most of them are virtually unknown to the greater public and, like many fellow activists of the revolution, unlikely to be able to capitalise on the already waning wave of enthusiasm once emanating from Tahrir Square. Aboul Fotouh, who is much better known to the public and respected by many non-Islamists, might stand a better chance, also considering that he is running for president, where the Brotherhood is not fielding any candidate.<sup>15</sup> But he, like fellow breakaways, lacks the massive resources and pool of grassroots activists the Brotherhood possesses. The party platforms of most of these new forces are full of platitudes and have little differences from the Brotherhood's and the FJP's equally vague platforms.<sup>16</sup> It seems unlikely that the average Islamist or religiously conservative voter would prefer these new, untested entities over the Brotherhood's long-established brand name.

Moreover, personal considerations also influence the decision of many young, frustrated Brotherhood activists. The Brotherhood is not simply a political movement, but for its members is their entire life. It is not uncommon for members to come from Brotherhood families, undergo five to eight years of training before being formally admitted to it, marry within the group, obtain a job through its network and spend their free time in small locally-based Brotherhood learning groups. It is likely that many members, having seen the decisiveness with which the leadership confronted the first breakaways, prefer to timidly express their criticisms internally rather than being expelled and face a major disruption in their personal lives.

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<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Egyptian liberal activists, Cairo, August 2011; see also David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egypt Elections Expose Divisions in Muslim Brotherhood," *New York Times*, June 19, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Trager, "Youth Activists Chip Away at Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 1828, July 6, 2011.

Moreover, while the leadership has indeed shown an iron fist when dealing with its first breakaways, there are signs that it is also reconsidering some of its internal practices and making efforts to make them more transparent.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that this process is likely to be slow and gradual. Brotherhood leaders argue that it was the very same vertical and secretive structure that is now under criticism that allowed the group to survive 60 years of repression.<sup>18</sup> The regime has been removed by only a few months, the Brotherhood is still technically illegal, and nobody really knows how the political situation will evolve even in the near future. It would be unfair, argue senior Brothers, to ask the group to dismantle that structure and function like a Western political party operating in a long-established liberal democracy. An internal debate over internal decision-making processes will proceed at a slow pace and according to developments in Egyptian politics, but it is likely to contribute to a decrease in internal fissures.<sup>19</sup>

While these three factors are likely to reduce the impact of the fissures, it is arguable that a fourth, more philosophical consideration helps putting the phenomenon in perspective. From its early days the Brotherhood, like any other large political movement, has not been monolithic and has had a variety of strands. There are personal rivalries that can be quite bitter. And indeed the younger generation tends to have less conservative views than the old guard. But when it boils down to core issues, to a general view of what society should ideally look like, the disagreement is minimal. The idea of making Egypt more Islamic – arguably, to be clear, not in the sense of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan or revolutionary Iran – is common to all. There might be disagreements on some aspects and even vicious infightings, but there is a common vision.

Before anything else, in fact, the Muslim Brotherhood is a school of thought, a common frame of reference through which its members see the world. In the long term, when possibly confronted with major decisions regarding Egyptian society and politics, all fractions and subgroups are likely to cast their personal and ideological divisions aside and stand together. Even Aboul Fotouh, who has been the target of vicious attacks by several Brotherhood leaders for his decision to run as president and has often been criticised by the most conservative elements of the group for his moderate views, is convinced that all Islamists will vote for him. “They might dislike me,” he argues “but they know that my ideas are much closer to theirs than those of secular candidates like Amr Moussa

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Anas Ibrahim Alqassas, public relations official for the Brotherhood, Cairo, August 2011. For example in August 2011 the Brotherhood for the first time held its internal elections publicly, inviting members of the national and foreign media.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Omar Khairy, senior political advisor to the Brotherhood’s Guidance Bureau, Cairo, August 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mohammed Shahawy, Cairo, August 2011.

or el Baradei.”<sup>20</sup> Once in parliament, whether sitting all together under the FJP banner or begrudgingly side by side under the insignia of several competing political forces, individuals that come from the Muslim Brotherhood milieu are likely to vote as one block on core issues.

## Electoral strategies

This role of main actor in which the Brotherhood has found itself after the fall of Mubarak has forced it to make choices and considerations that were completely unforeseen until a few months earlier. The group is involved in a delicate balancing act with a variety of entities, from the SCAF to Salafist groups, from its potential electoral base to the international community.

Until recently the Brotherhood seemed to have found a surprisingly successful *modus vivendi* with the Army. The Egyptian military is undoubtedly the strongest of players in post-Mubarak Egypt, largely popular among the public and immensely well-funded not only by a never-disclosed state budget but also by its direct involvement in a myriad of financial activities. While liberal activists have accused the military of hijacking the revolution and, by early summer, staged protests against it, the deeply pragmatic Brotherhood has decided to side with it. This behavior has led many to accuse the Brotherhood of having entered into a secret deal with the military, an agreement in which what are arguably the two strongest forces on the scene would have outlined a power sharing mechanism.<sup>21</sup> While there seem to be no evidence to back the accusation of a secret agreement, there is no question that the military and the Brotherhood are aware of each other’s power and, for different reasons, are seeking to find an uneasy yet so far successful accommodation. These dynamics seem to have changed over the last few weeks, as the Brotherhood has joined those criticising the SCAF for its handling of the transition process and has threatened to boycott the forthcoming elections.<sup>22</sup>

Almost paradoxically, the Brotherhood seems to have been facing a significantly greater challenge in dealing with a movement that traces its roots to its very same ideological foundations: Salafists. Salafism is a literalist and ultra-conservative movement that, over the last twenty years, has grown significantly in Egypt thanks in part to large funding for its activities coming from Arab Gulf donors and the indirect support of the Mubarak regime, which fostered its growth to counterbalance the Brotherhood’s influence.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, Cairo, August 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Urban, “Egypt’s Islamists Mobilising Mass Support,” *BBC News*, August 3, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Matt Bradley, “Egyptians Threaten Ballot Boycott,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Ed Husain, “Feuding Brothers,” *Foreign Policy*, April 5, 2011.

The Salafi movement, in Egypt as elsewhere, is not unified and hierarchical as the Brotherhood. Rather, it is better understood as a hodgepodge of doctrinally and politically splintered local clusters, each led by preachers and leaders with disparate opinions and agenda. Over the last few months the most violent fringes of the Egyptian Salafi movement have been involved in several violent incidents, from attacks against Coptic churches to violent protests against the Christian governor of the Upper Egypt province of Qena, from the armed assault on the Sinai town of El Arish to a cross-border incursion into Israel.

But the most remarkable recent development in the Egyptian Salafi movement is its sudden and enthusiastic infatuation for the political process.<sup>24</sup> Salafists have traditionally accused the Brothers, with whom they otherwise agree on several theological interpretations, of compromising their principles for participating in politics. Yet, since the revolution, to which for the most part they did not participate, most Salafists have engaged in a variety of political activities. While openly declaring that they support democracy only in so long as it does not conflict with Islamic law, Salafists have formed parties, issued political communiqués and staged peaceful demonstrations. The newly formed al Nour Party, founded by Yasser Metwalli in the Salafi stronghold of Alexandria, is arguably the largest of the Salafi political formations and seems to be benefiting from a previously unforeseeable amount of popular support. There are no reliable indications as to how large the Salafi movement in the country is, nor as to how al Nour or any other Salafi party would fare in election. And there is no question that Salafists are not as organised or politically savvy as the Brotherhood. But the enthusiasm around their efforts has surprised many, Brothers included.

On one hand the Brothers have considered the positives in the growth the Salafi movement. First, the presence of this outwardly radical and occasionally violent movement allows the Brotherhood to present itself to Egyptian voters and international observers as a more moderate, rational version of Islamism. Moreover, it could provide a formidable source of votes, as the Brothers have traditionally seen Salafists as part of their natural electoral basin. Although several doctrinarian differences between the two movements do exist, there is no question that on many core issues the two forces see eye to eye. Brotherhood strategists have initially calculated that either Salafists would vote directly for the FJP or, even assuming they could form relatively viable political entities that would enter parliament, such entities would consistently vote with the FJP.

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<sup>24</sup> Marc Lynch, "Tahrir Turning Points," *Foreign Policy*, August 1, 2001.

Yet, the sudden growth of Salafists is slowly being perceived as threatening by the Brotherhood. While the Brothers are forced to weigh every word they utter in order not to upset the military, centrist Egyptian voters, and international observers, Salafists have no such concerns and openly express their uncompromising views on religion and politics. While the Brotherhood seeks to reassure critics that it only seeks “a civic state with an Islamic frame of reference” and aims to be seen as a viable ruling party by engaging in conversations on complex economic policies, Salafists speak to the poor and illiterate about vague but catchy concepts such as social justice and Islamic state.<sup>25</sup> Brotherhood strategists fear the group is being “out-Islammed” by the Salafists, whose outward piety and simple messages might chip away important cross-sections of what the Brotherhood considered its natural electorate.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mohamed Fayez Farahat, “Liberalizing the Muslim Brotherhood: Can It Be Done?” *Arab Insight*, Volume 2, Number 6, Winter 2009; Amani Maged, “Islamic Friday,” *Al Ahrām Weekly*, August 4-10, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Kamal el Helbawy, former official representative of the Brotherhood in the West, Cairo, August 2011.

## Conclusion

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The rise of the Salafi movement triggers a dilemma for the Brotherhood – compete with its stances in order to obtain the votes of the most conservative cross-sections of the electorate or appear as a modern, democratic-leaning force. The Brotherhood is likely to try to do both, although the success of this approach remains to be seen. And this challenge is arguably just one of the many balancing acts in which it is involved.

“We cannot turn a blind eye to the Gazan and Algerian scenarios,” has stated Khairat al Shater, one of the Brotherhood’s top leaders.<sup>27</sup> Indeed those two historical experiences shape the way the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups decide their agenda. In Algeria, the Islamist victory in the 1991 elections triggered the reaction of the military, which cancelled the consultation, and the country entered into an almost decade-long bloody civil war. In Gaza, Hamas’ victory in the 2006 elections led to most Western powers isolating the group. Brotherhood leaders are keen to avoid both scenarios and are going at great pains to avoid tensions with both the military and the international community.

In that regard, the model to which the Egyptian Brothers are looking at is the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP comes from an Islamist background and, since coming to power in 2002, has pursued several policies of Islamist inspiration. While relations with both the Turkish military and the West have been tense, they have not degenerated and the AKP is firmly holding on to power. Although the social and political differences between Egypt and Turkey are plentiful, the Brothers are seeking to learn from the AKP experience. The AKP’s success in economic policies is also of particular interest to the Brothers, who are fully aware that reconstructing the Egyptian economy will be a priority in the near future.

The desire to avoid “Gazan and Algerian scenarios” and the understanding that whoever will lead Egypt in the near future will have to face major economic hurdles and consequent popular discontent might lead the Brotherhood to opt for a relatively less visible role. Calculations will make sense only after the elections, but the Brothers might be leaning to avoiding the role of prime minister or the ministries of economy or foreign

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<sup>27</sup> *al-Masryal-Youm*, June 20

affairs. Rather, they might concentrate on ministries that focus on education and social affairs. Bottom-up Islamisation of society has always been the Brotherhood's main focus and politics has traditionally been ancillary to *dawa*. For the time being it might make sense for a calculating and politically savvy force like the Brotherhood to bide its time, concentrate on low profile societal efforts that are propaedeutic to the fulfillment of its vision, and avoid drawing negative attentions.

Indeed the concept of gradualism has always been at the center of the Brotherhood's *modus operandi* and has been recently expressed in various statements from the group's old guard. The former *murshid* of the Brotherhood Mohammed Akef, for example, has stated in June that "our preliminary platform will be shown through the Freedom and Justice Party, but our full platform will not be disclosed until we are in complete control and take the presidency as well."<sup>28</sup> These statements have been dismissed by the more media-savvy elements of the Brotherhood as unrepresentative of the group's thinking, but they have understandably given reason to pause to many.

It remains to be said that the situation in Egypt is much too fluid and chaotic to make any prediction of what its developments would be even in a few months. Egypt is having its first experience with real democracy and all players, including the Brothers, have no idea where this experiment will take them and the country. It is nevertheless noteworthy that, at least at the time of writing, the Brothers seem to privately and publicly project a confidence about the future that competing groups possessed after the fall of Mubarak but seem to have lost in the following months. One can only speculate how the Brotherhood will fare in the upcoming elections and how it will act after them. But there is no doubt these developments will have repercussions well beyond Egypt.

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<sup>28</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egypt Elections Expose Divisions in Muslim Brotherhood" *New York Times*, June 19, 2011.



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