



Iran on Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood

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Interview for Iran Primer project, United States Institute of Peace

February 25, 2011

- **For decades, the Muslim Brotherhood was the largest organized opposition party in Egypt. It is Islamist. What are its similarities and differences with Iran's Islamic revolution?**

The current revolt in Iran is against Islamism, but the recent uprising in Egypt is neither Islamist nor anti-Islamist. In Egypt, the Muslim brotherhood was able to find common interests with other political factions to force President Hosni Mubarak to resign.

Before rising to power, Iranian Islamists worked with leftists, nationalists and liberals to oust Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. After Ayatollah Khomeini consolidated power, however, the regime suppressed former allies, including other Islamist factions that did not accept his authority.

The difference between Iranian Islamists and Egyptian Islamists is that Islamism in Iran has been tested by the Islamic Republic and has failed. Islamist writings before the 1979 revolution promise to open up in politics, the economy, and culture. But few of these promises have been delivered three decades later. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed, so has not had operated legally or freely let alone run the country.

Islamists around the world have many differences, but they also often share the common view that democracy is an instrument to gain power—but not always to share it with other parties. Strict Islamists reduce Islam to Islamic law. Some accept democracy but reduce it to elections rather than freedoms, such as equal rights for all citizens--men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, heterosexuals and homosexuals--and freedom of expression, religion and political parties. So some elements of the Muslim Brotherhood are similar to some Iranian leaders in their talk of religious democracy.

- **What contact has there been between the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran since the 1979 revolution, formally or informally?**

There has been regular contact between the Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian officials throughout since the 1979 revolution, both formally and informally. These contacts have taken place in several countries, including the Persian Gulf as well as in Tehran.

The most recent contact was the meeting of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei with Kamal al Halbavi, a senior member of the Brotherhood, in February in Tehran. Iran's supreme leader has a special affection and sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood. He has translated into Farsi several books by the late Sayyid Qutb, who was the leading militant ideologue of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s.

• Both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Republic promote Islam as an ideology governing all aspects of life. How do the two differ on their views toward Islam's role in politics and society?

The main goal of Islamist ideology is to implement Sharia, or Islamic law. When Ayatollah Khomeini ascended to power, however, he soon realized that a complex modern state like Iran could not be run only by Islamic law. He subsequently ruled that the interests of the regime trumped Islamic law when they are in conflict. Iran's supreme leader therefore has the religious legitimacy to overrule religion in the interest of the revolutionary Islamic state. As a result, rule based on "the interests of the regime" is not an Islamic theocracy, but Shiite autocracy and absolutism.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood still advocates—according to its longstanding agenda-- Sharia law in Egypt. Iran passed from Islamic utopianism to Islamic tyranny. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, which has diverse factions, is still in the utopian phase.

• How did the Muslim Brotherhood respond to Iran's 2009 post-election protests and the ensuing opposition Green Movement?

Silence. Islamist groups internationally supported the Iranian regime by their silence. Islamists cannot support secular democracies in the face of an Islamic government.

• How do Iran's ties with the Brotherhood compare to Tehran's relationship to Hamas, a Palestinian group with which Iran has supported since the early 1990s?

Iran, a largely Shiite country, has publicly backed and aided Hamas, a Sunni movement. In contrast, it would have been risky for the Brotherhood to have had public ties to Iran, especially as it ran candidates for Egypt's parliament. But the Muslim Brotherhood is Iran's main potential political ally in a new Egypt. Iran is pushing for the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Iran has invested in various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in other countries, such as groups in the Persian Gulf countries. The Muslim Brotherhood is the largest Islamist organization in the Arab world that ignores Arab nationalism and Sunni identity to facilitate alliances with Islamist movements outside the Arab world.

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