

# The Muslim Brotherhood Sees Cairo's Flirtation with Biden as an Opportunity

by [Haisam Hassanein \(/experts/haisam-hassanein\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Haisam Hassanein \(/experts/haisam-hassanein\)](#)

Haisam Hassanein is an Associate Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**Many Brotherhood members seem eager to exploit recent U.S.-Egyptian gestures on human rights, but there is little likelihood that the Sisi government will reconcile with the fractured, unpopular Islamist group.**

**O**n October 25, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi terminated the state of emergency he declared in Egypt four years ago. The move is one of several recent measures aimed in part at addressing the Biden administration's concerns about human rights and democracy. Over the past few months, Sisi has announced a human rights strategy, released political prisoners, and even talked about potential openings with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).

Ultimately, however, he is unlikely to pursue the deeper changes that Washington wants to see before it releases \$130 million in withheld U.S. aid. In Sisi's view, Egypt's progress on economic and security issues could not have happened without unity around one voice—namely, his. He is also unlikely to reconcile with the MB, in part because the group is splintered by internal rifts.

## A Brotherhood Divided

**B**itter infighting between exiled MB leaders in Britain and Turkey has peaked of late as the group struggles to unify its messaging toward Cairo. On October 10, acting general guide Ibrahim Munir suspended six Turkey-based members of the group's shura (consultative) council from his headquarters in London, citing "administrative offenses." The most prominent of these members—former MB secretary-general Mahmoud Hussein—quickly responded to the move via the organization's main Facebook account, declaring that the shura council had convened and voted to dismiss Munir by an 84 percent margin. Munir then struck back by appearing on Al Jazeera, where he accused the Turkish camp of violating the group's constitution, denied any major internal fissures, and argued that

the few members who disagreed with his leadership could leave if they want.

The roots of this squabbling stretch back to August 2020, when acting leader Mahmoud Ezzat was arrested by Egyptian authorities. After Munir was selected to replace Ezzat based on seniority rules, one of his first decisions was to cancel Hussein's long-held secretariat position and decrease his power by placing him on a newly established assistance committee.

Tensions were exacerbated this summer when Munir insisted that shura council elections be held on time in the Istanbul districts of Sirinevler and Beylikduzu, where the majority of Turkey's MB exiles reside. Hussein and his allies are widely unpopular among this constituency because of their perceived financial corruption and nepotism, so they sought to postpone the vote for fear of losing local control. When the election proceeded and proved unfavorable to them, they disputed the results on the grounds that MB elements in London had spent millions of dollars to sway voters in Istanbul.

## Munir's Goals

**A**mid this infighting, Munir's camp has steadily pursued three main objectives that date to the beginning of his tenure:

**Revitalizing the sluggish shura council.** The council has lost much of its power due to heavy losses among its ranks, whether due to imprisonment (53 members), death (37), exile (27), resignation (3), or suspension (1). Only 23 council members remain active, 10 of whom were chosen by Hussein's group in Turkey, the Association for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Abroad. This growing leadership vacuum has led many mainstream MB members to leave the organization or become inactive.

**Engaging and empowering younger members.** This is a huge concern for the eighty-four-year-old Munir. Right after the summer council election, he appointed two new spokespeople to appeal to younger MB members: former parliamentarian and governor Osama Soliman (age 57) and journalist and former Al-Azhar student union chief Sohib Abdel Maqsood (30). In his latest interview with the London-based television network Al-Hiwar, Munir stated that the legacy of his generation should be helping future leaders reintegrate with the MB and pave the way for their return from exile.

**Securing the release of political prisoners.** In his latest public appearances, Munir has refrained from using the word "coup" in describing Sisi's ascent to power after the 2013 fall of Mohamed Morsi's MB-led government. Rather, he has directly messaged Cairo about wanting to reconcile, arguing that it would help the Brotherhood prevent radical youths from resorting to violence. At the same time, he has demanded that Egyptian officials take steps toward "transitional justice." After Sisi announced his new human rights strategy in September, young MB prisoners across Egypt signed a petition asking the group's leaders to capitalize on the initiative and help them get released. In doing so, they declared that Morsi's legitimacy had ended with his death in 2019, and that they now accept Sisi as president. Yet top MB figures in al-Aqrab prison have not signed the petition. Younger members issued a similar statement two years ago, denouncing MB leaders and asking the grand imam of Al-Azhar to mediate on their behalf.

## Celebratory Atmosphere Tinged with Caution

**I**n response to these developments, pro-government elites in Egypt have issued countless articles and talk-show remarks declaring the MB's "collapse." Yet some liberal and ex-Islamist voices argue that the government is still a long way from eliminating the group's ideas among mainstream Egyptians. One former MB leader—Safwat al-Kharbawi—even called on Sisi to open space for political parties in order to prevent the more radical strains of Brotherhood ideology from spreading.

Speculation about Sisi's intentions toward the MB has also been shaped by two developments earlier this year. In

June, Egypt's Court of Cassation sentenced twelve of the group's leading figures to death, including infamous preacher Safwat Hegazy, former parliamentarian Muhammad Beltagy, and influential mufti Abdul Rahman al-Bar. Their executions have since been on hold pending Sisi's signature, suggesting that he may be saving them for potential future bargaining.

In September, Sisi used the unveiling of his human rights strategy to make indirect reference to the MB, stating his willingness to accept "them" so long as they abandon any efforts to influence government policies. Two weeks later, Cairo released four radical Salafist clerics imprisoned for taking the side of Brotherhood protestors in 2013.

The fragmented MB sees such releases and the wider U.S.-Egyptian human rights dialogue as an opportunity to revive itself from the ashes and restore the limited operational space it was granted during the Mubarak era. Yet the group's current pleas for reconciliation are unlikely to work for several reasons:

**The MB has nothing to offer Sisi.** This year has been a total loss for the Brotherhood, whose internal rifts widened even as Cairo managed to convince the group's biggest regional backers, Qatar and Turkey, to dilute their local media rhetoric (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypt-turkey-rapprochement-constraining-muslim-brotherhood>) against the Egyptian government. Sisi's confidence has been further bolstered by his significant security and economic accomplishments in recent years. In short, his strong government has little reason to reconcile with a weak, fractured group, especially at a time when other political Islamists are facing severe setbacks in countries such as Tunisia and Morocco.

**Reconciling might hurt his domestic popularity.** For many Egyptians, the essence of Sisi's legacy is that he saved the country from the Brotherhood and successfully countered surges in terrorism. Hence, any official policy change toward the unpopular organization would likely be met with distaste from his core constituents.

**He prefers zero-sum policies.** When anything goes wrong in Egypt today, it is still quite normal for the government to blame the MB, and for much of the public to accept this argument. Sisi's circle is reluctant to lose this important card. For instance, Transportation Minister Kamel al-Wazir blamed the recent crisis over problems in the train system on the fact that the ministry hired many MB-affiliated employees during Morsi's reign. In response, parliament authorized the government to fire state employees found to have any links with designated terrorist organizations such as the MB.

**He wants to preserve his regional alliances.** The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have lent Sisi heavy financial and political support ever since he helped topple Morsi in 2013. And one thing the three capitals still agree on—especially after America's withdrawal from Afghanistan—is the need to keep chipping away at the influence of political Islamists and other radical elements. Embracing the MB could threaten that pillar of unanimity.

*Haisam Hassanein is a Middle East analyst and a former Glazer Fellow with The Washington Institute.* ❖

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