

The Muslim Brotherhood: Organizational Crisis and Declining Capabilities

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Brief Analysis

Once a dominant political movement, the Muslim Brotherhood's continual internal crises have caused the group to splinter and recede from the spotlight.

In recent years, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has dealt with numerous crises as a political group, especially in the face of significant pressure from the Egyptian government. Yet the organization has faced increasing internal challenges as well, amplifying the group's struggles as it continues to position itself as an opposition political group. It is worth examining the internal decisions that have pushed this once powerful political force to the margins of Egyptian political life. In this respect, identifying shifts in the group's ideology and organizational structure can provide an indication of its ability to integrate politically or socially.

The Muslim Brotherhood's long-standing organizational challenges have been a decisive factor in its state relations for several decades. Throughout the Brotherhood's history, internal organizational failures have figured in all its political crises. This has only become worse as the group pursues international status, and the movement has faced difficulties in dealing with national governments.

Certainly, the Egyptian state has exercised significant external pressure on the Brotherhood. After the end of the Hosni Mubarak era, and especially in the wake of Mohamed Morsi's removal from office in 2013, the state sought alternatives in dealing with the Brotherhood, and is now pursuing a policy of combatting the group by classifying it as a terrorist organization. The state argues that the group poses a threat to the state and has been a source of extremism and distorted social consciousness for over 90 years.

Yet the group has also floundered due to internal divisions. After 2013, the Brotherhood was plunged into an organizational crisis due to the fallout of being removed from power. Subsequent rifts in the organizational leadership came to a head in 2021, when the group split into two main currents and various smaller groups. As its leadership moved abroad, problems with internal structure became clearer. The group faced two main obstacles in

this regard. First, there was conflict between different factions over the respective jurisdictions of two governing bodies, the Egyptian Shura Council and the General Shura Council. Second, the group has been confronted with regional security coordination that aims to undermine its organizational cohesion. In light of these circumstances, disputes over filling the leadership vacuum remain an ongoing problem.

The movement has also witnessed a decline in its values, and despite the group's ideological emphasis on the principles of obedience within the organization and efforts to cast challenges to the hierarchical structure as seditious and morally corrupt, internal stability within the Muslim Brotherhood has not improved.

In regards to ideology, the group has long used the arguments of its central thinkers, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, to cast blame anywhere but within. During the Brotherhood's initial development, the group primarily followed al-Banna's writings with regard to power, governance, and the state, yet this framework proved inadequate for dealing with ongoing changes in the global order and within the nation-state. Rather than addressing these ideological shortcomings, and without having a clear plan, some members of the group believed that it was important for the group to distance itself from political work and turned instead to preaching and social guidance.

Using Qutb's narrative, the Brotherhood became even more strongly convinced that the outside world is at fault. Qutb argued that Islam suffered from societal ignorance as well as hostility at the global level, and as a result the reigns of power should be given only to virtuous leaders. With this inherited ideology from al-Banna and Qutb, the organization has explained its political failures over the years as stemming from an unsuitable environment and various societal ills. This effectively puts a lid on any efforts to evaluate the organization from inside, including the initiative to establish an "objectives and means" committee.

What's left is a discourse that has stagnated as time has passed, a discourse now dominated by themes of hardship, sacrifice, and divine providence. There is less self-imposed commitment to staying in the organization and reduced loyalty to a single center of leadership. Organizational mythologies have been unable to cement the group's cohesion, which indicates a broader shift in organizational values, as smaller groups within the Shura Council have depleted its collective capabilities.

Without a coherent organizational memory, any attempt to reassess the Brotherhood's mission and structure has no choice but to start from scratch. Various statements indicate a lack of a conceptual framework to find solutions, and a disinterest in discussing responsibility or causality with regard to political and organizational trajectories. This has hindered the potential for change and independent reasoning (ijtihad), and has made it more difficult for the Brotherhood to adapt to current circumstances or explain why the group has failed to implement an Islamic state or move beyond the question of the individual in society.

The Muslim Brotherhood's internal crises reflect its diminishing social capital as its elite leadership circles erode and members continue to leave. Although the freedom of operating abroad with leaders in exile was supposed to unify the group's capabilities, the opposite has happened instead. The group is struggling to control its multiple branches while its limited ideological capacities have made finding pathways out of the crisis near impossible.

Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood has not been able to adapt its discourse to political circumstances. It has moved from reformism to rage without being able to produce new interpretations consistent with the group's need to remain relevant and develop relationships. Its efforts towards rapprochement with the state have been framed in terms of clashes. When discussing its withdrawal from politics, it spoke of conflict as necessarily synonymous with any political engagement. Later comments regarding participation in a transitional stage—made during discussions abroad about the Egyptian National Dialogue in 2022—focused on uncertainty about the future and unpreparedness for change, as well as anchoring political culture around top-down power and change. This represented a departure from traditional Brotherhood writings grounded in reform.

The Brotherhood also lacks demonstrable economic influence. In recent years, it has not had any influence on financial or monetary policy, nor has it been able to organize networks that impact foreign investment. Except in the case of releasing prisoners, states and international organizations have largely ignored the actions and demands of the group. As the Brotherhood's ideological, social, organizational, and economic crises overlap, the movement is shifting into isolated enclaves with limited audiences. This will make it difficult for the group to attract a wider following and to remain politically relevant. ❖

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