Is it Time to Pursue Intra-Sunni Reconciliation?

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Brief Analysis

Although there is little official confirmation, reports have emerged that the Sisi government and Muslim Brotherhood representatives have begun attempting a type of reconciliation. Bloomberg first **reported (https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-02-06/egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-finds-favor-again)** in February that the Egyptian government sought reconciliation in order to offset internal differences between the government and former members of the military disgruntled by President Sisi's policies. In July, Turkish Radio (TRT) also began reporting that the Muslim Brotherhood entered negotiations with the Egyptian government to normalize relations. Just days later, Sisi referred to "rumors" and "false news" as the main threat to stability in the Middle East—an implicit rebuke of these reports of reconciliation.

Further dashing hopes of an immediate breakthrough between the Egyptian authorities and the Brotherhood was the recent announcement that the Giza Criminal Court sentenced Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Badie and deputies Essam al-Erian and Mohamed El-Baltagy to life in prison for their respective roles in the infamous "Raba'a" clashes of 2014. After the verdicts were rendered, the Brotherhood issued a statement, calling for national dialogue and reconciliation between disparate segments of Egyptian society.

Nevertheless, a potential reconciliation or rapprochement between the Egyptian government and the Brotherhood would have major implications for the current pan-Sunni alliance, in which differing perspectives on the Brotherhood continue to serve as a major sticking point.

There remain several major points of contention between the government and the Brotherhood. The Egyptian government is infuriated by Turkey-based pro-Brotherhood television stations that attack the policies of the Egyptian government around-the-clock, such as Mekamleen TV. Meanwhile, staunch opponents of the Brotherhood argue that the Iranian government and the Brotherhood leadership—separate brands of political Islam—hold similar ideological and political similarities, making them natural allies against moderate Sunni states.

On the other hand, jailed Brotherhood members and sympathetic countries around the Middle East believe regional efforts to counterbalance Iranian influence must be done in concert with the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, working towards incremental rapprochement between the government and the Brotherhood would instantly grant President Sisi's government greater legitimacy and help Egypt persuade Qatar and Turkey to scale back its support for exiled Egyptian Brotherhood mouthpieces.

Rapproachment between the Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood would also help mitigate a far larger regional dispute that has been increasingly harmful in the past year. Egypt is at the epicenter of a larger Arab-Islamic conflict brewing in the GCC, Middle East, and Red Sea between pro-Brotherhood states (Turkey-Qatar) and the anti-Brotherhood Quartet (UAE, Egypt Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain). In the absence of reconciliation between the two camps, larger problems could be on the horizon for America's moderate Sunni allies in the Arab world.

Without rapprochement, a more aggressive alliance between Turkey, Qatar, and a "rehabilitated" Iranian state may emerge. While Tehran currently exercises influence mainly by supporting rogue militias in Arab states, the country could expand its backing of Islamist-leaning governments already within Tehran's reach, a strategy already visible through the Assad regime and Hezbollah's increasing presence in Lebanese parliament. Qatar has already been pushed in this direction through the ongoing Gulf Crisis, through which they resumed full diplomatic ties with Iran and inviting Iranian Revolutionary Guards delegations to Doha on several occasions.

Meanwhile, Turkish and Iranian military representatives are cooperating to stamp out Kurdish military threats in the region. Even as Iran suffers from the re-imposition of sanctions reducing support to terrorist organizations and paramilitary forces in exchange for sanctions relief, the three countries may attempt to completely turn Lebanon and Iraq away from Saudi Arabia following Riyadh's landmark rapprochement with Baghdad and hard-fought reconciliation with Lebanese political factions after a brief spat with prime minister Hariri.

Intensifying efforts to find a permanent solution to the intra-Arab rift over the role of Islamism in government could also open the door to dialogue addressing the larger challenges of extremism, terror, and violence in the Middle East. Since the 1930s, groups like the Brotherhood have drawn support and inspiration from clerics such Muslim Brotherhood spiritual founder al-Banna and current leader of the International Union of Muslim Scholars Yusuf al-Qaradawi, both of whom justify the use of armed struggle to push back against authoritarianism in the Middle East.

Unless governments work to accommodate Islamist leaders' concerns, this justification of armed struggle will remain a call against the political leadership of the country. The necessity of involving clerics and faith-based groups in conflicts with a religious dimension is also demonstrated by history. For example, political and religious leaders avoided conceding that the intra-Irish conflict contained religious overtones during the first thirty years of "the Troubles" in Ireland. It was only when clergy members acknowledged the role of religious polarization in the conflict that conflict began to subside, as the conflicting sides were able to adequately address the full range of issues fueling it. Compelling Muslim clerics to agree that conflict and terrorism will not lead to political fruition in the Arab and Islamic world is incentive enough for the United States to push for dialogue between mainly Sunni states in the Arab and Islamic world.

The United States, Britain, and other Western countries have resisted labeling the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, fearing that such a designation could trigger more strife and violence in the Middle East. The United States should use this bargaining chip to pressure Islamist groups that continue to maintain ties with the West to pursue genuine reconciliation with the moderate Sunni states. If the United States were to blacklist the Muslim Brotherhood, it is possible that the UK—currently a stronghold of Brotherhood affiliated charities and organizations, would also feel compelled to crackdown on the group. While one may argue that completely eradicating the Brotherhood is the best strategy to pacify the Middle East, the move could backfire and lead to more violence and chaos. The US might work with moderate Sunni allies to interject Western-trained and educated, technocratic Islamists into positions in finance, civil engineering, construction, and information technology in a region suffering from major deficiencies in scientific innovation and development. Any reconciliation would require Islamist groups to cease using incitement to pressure secular Arab states into accepting "democratic" transition.

While the Muslim Brotherhood represents one of the major stumbling blocs against regional cohesion, any regional alliance would benefit from inclusion of religious leaders more broadly as well. Currently, the Trump administration

is promoting the concept of a regional security alliance to counter Iranian influence, stylized as a “Middle East NATO,” which would include the GCC, Jordan and Egypt. While the expansion of inter-state cooperation is an important and positive step forward to begin countering Iranian influence, the initiative does not present a solution to the policies of states that directly or indirectly enable Iranian influence.

In the absence of a larger dialogue that includes influential non-state organizations and institutions such as the International Union of Islamic Scholars (supported by Turkey and Qatar) and Al-Azhar (supported by Saudi Arabia and Egypt) to openly discuss the dangers of violent political Islam, the region will continue to reel from local conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and beyond.

Perhaps even one jointly penned fatwa calling on terrorists to put down their arms could help diminish the influence of extremist religious figures, encourage reconciliation, and prevent the potential of a new regional war. Moreover, seeking to develop a more encompassing dialogue could be a first step in the direction of actually mobilizing the Islamic Military Council Counterterrorism Coalition formed in Riyadh in December 2015. Were this alliance to operate in practice as well as in theory, the combined forces of armies such as Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan could eventually deploy forces to stabilize zones largely afflicted by violence and terrorism—but only if these groups can resolve their differences. ❖

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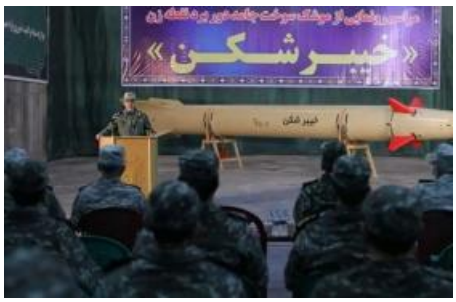

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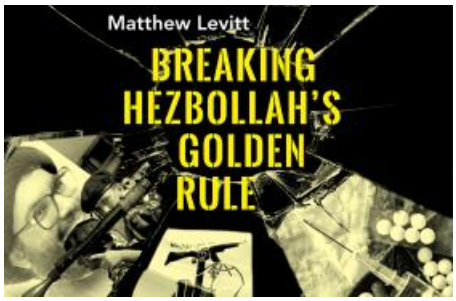

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