The Brotherhood Breaks Down

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Jan 17, 2016
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Articles & Testimony

Although the group's vision for establishing an Islamist state in Egypt won't evaporate, the rigid internal discipline that defined its decisionmaking and mobilization is now a thing of the past.

Muslim Brothers call Mahmoud Ezzat the "Iron Man." The stoic 71-year-old deputy supreme guide earned that nickname on account of his lifelong struggle on behalf of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, including over a decade spent in Egyptian jails, during which he burnished his reputation for toughness as one of the foremost enforcers of discipline within the organization's rigid hierarchy. Following the July 2013 ouster of Egypt's first elected president, Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, Ezzat's legend within the organization grew as he evaded the crackdown that landed most top Brotherhood leaders in prison, and then hid within Egypt even as other Muslim Brothers fled into exile. "He has the ability to hide because he was imprisoned prior to this for about ten years," Brotherhood youth activist Amr Farrag said during an October 2014 interview in Istanbul. "He can sit for something like five years without speaking to anyone, sitting in only a closed room. He can do this." Farrag added that Ezzat asked his Brotherhood colleagues not to contact him, presumably to avoid detection within Egypt.

Ezzat's strategy for self-preservation ultimately worked: Egyptian security forces did not capture him. But in his absence, the Brotherhood's internal discipline collapsed, and a severe internal rift exploded into the open in the spring of 2015. After initially attempting to resolve these divisions from within Egypt, Ezzat suddenly reappeared in Turkey in mid-November and declared himself the Brotherhood's acting supreme guide. Yet the Iron Man had lost his touch: Many Muslim Brothers rejected his power play, and the rift has deepened considerably in the past few months.

Ezzat's failure to assert his control reflects a significant change in the organization's internal culture. For much of the past two decades, the Brotherhood was dominated by a hardline faction known as the "Qutbists" -- followers of the radical Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, whose call for global jihad later inspired al Qaeda and other terrorist movements. Like other Brotherhood leaders of his generation, Ezzat was imprisoned with Qutb prior to Qutb's execution for plotting to overthrow Gamal Abdel Nasser's government in 1966. Although Ezzat downplays the more extreme elements of Qutb's writings, he and his fellow Qutbists embrace Qutb's call for creating a "vanguard" that would "keep itself somewhat aloof" from the broader society until it can establish Islamist rule. Until the January 2011 Arab Spring uprising that ended Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year reign, the Qutbists viewed the Brotherhood's pursuit of power as a long-term goal, and worked in the interim to build an ideologically cohesive organization by recruiting only the most dedicated followers and preparing them for power when the time was ripe. The Qutbists typically argued against political cooperation with non-Islamists, fearing that doing so would force the Brotherhood to compromise on its Islamist principles.

This insular approach put the Qutbists at odds with the Brotherhood's so-called reformists. Although the reformists shared the Qutbists' long-term aim of establishing a global Islamic state, they believed that the organization could best promote its agenda through broad-based outreach, including coordination with non-Islamist groups on shared political goals. The reformists thus led the Brotherhood's efforts to organize and win power within Egypt's professional syndicates during the 1990s, and reformist Brotherhood youths participated in opposition coalitions that included non-Islamist forces. Brotherhood reformists also spearheaded the organization's outreach to the international community, feeding the narrative of a supposedly "moderate Muslim Brotherhood" within Western academic and policy circles.

Yet the reformists always represented a small minority within the Brotherhood's leadership, and the Qutbists -- often led by Ezzat -- sidelined them whenever a significant disagreement emerged. For example, when young reformists attempted to establish a Brotherhood-oriented political party in 1996 against the wishes of the executive Guidance Office, they were banished from the organization. Similarly, when two prominent reformist leaders criticized a 2007 Brotherhood "platform" that called for banning non-Muslims from running for president of Egypt, they were voted out of the Guidance Office in subsequent internal elections. The Brotherhood later banished them for their continued disobedience following the 2011 uprising. And when a group of young Brotherhood cadres rejected the Guidance Office's edict commanding all Muslim Brothers to support the organization's nascent Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in March 2011, the young cadres were soon banished as well.

In all of these instances, the Qutbists' swift enforcement of discipline prevented internal disagreements from becoming significant fissures. Indeed, those reformists who remained within the organization fell in line, even as the Qutbists charted an increasingly aggressive political strategy in the years that followed Mubarak's overthrow. The Brotherhood thus remained tightly unified through the various elections and referenda of the 2011-12 period, in which the FJP won both parliamentary houses and Mohamed Morsi, its presidential candidate, won the presidency.

Approximately halfway through Morsi's year-long presidency, however, new tensions emerged within the Brotherhood. In November 2012, Morsi issued a constitutional declaration that gave him unchecked executive authority. He then used the ensuing crisis to rush an Islamist constitution draft to a referendum. As mass protests gathered outside the presidential palace demanding Morsi's overthrow, prominent Brotherhood youth cadres threatened an aggressive response. "When the Future of Egypt [sic] is in balance...we are more than willing to pay for it with our lives not votes," Gehad al-Haddad, the son of Morsi's foreign policy adviser, tweeted at the time. Others called for "cleansing" the nation of Morsi's critics.

The Brotherhood's leaders initially tried to calm the group's youth elements by directing them to demonstrate in support of Morsi at a separate location from the anti-Morsi protesters. Yet as pressure for a more direct response

from below mounted, the Qutbists struggled to contain it. After all, the youths' call for confronting the anti-Morsi opposition was a direct outgrowth of the Qutbists' ideological rejection of compromise with non-Islamists, so the Guidance Office ultimately relented and mobilized its members to "protect [Morsi's] legitimacy" outside the presidential palace on December 5, 2012. It was one of the Brotherhood's most damaging decisions, catalyzing severe clashes between Muslim Brothers and anti-Morsi protesters in which ten people were killed. The Brotherhood's attack on protesters became a rallying cry for the anti-Morsi opposition, and Egypt's military finally responded to the escalating and often violent protests by removing Morsi from power on July 3, 2013. The new military-backed government then launched a severe crackdown on the Brotherhood, which effectively decapitated it.

With the Brotherhood's leaders in prison, exile, or hiding, the youth cadres suddenly gained significant influence. When the Brotherhood held new leadership elections in February 2014, it replaced 65 percent of its previous leaders, and 90 percent of the new ones came from the younger generation. In contrast to the Qutbists, who reverted to seeing the Brotherhood's struggle as a long-term one, these younger Muslim Brothers advocated a revolutionary posture to destabilize the new regime of President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi as soon as possible. Under their leadership, the Brotherhood embraced "jihad" and "martyrdom" in a January 2015 statement, and touted attacks on security forces and infrastructure on its social media pages. Meanwhile, the youths sidelined the old Qutbist leaders, such as longtime Brotherhood Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein, who managed the organization from abroad during the year following Morsi's ouster.

The Qutbists repeatedly warned the new youth leaders that this type of revolutionary violence would legitimize the regime's crackdown on the organization. When their advice was ignored, however, the Qutbists took matters into their own hands: In a May 2015 statement, Hussein attempted to reappoint himself secretary-general. The youth leadership rejected his maneuver, and news of the split spilled into the open, as Brotherhood youths launched a popular "we will not go backwards" hashtag on social media against the Qutbists' so-called soft coup. To resolve the crisis, the Brotherhood's Supreme Administrative Committee, which was established to run the organization's affairs within Egypt, announced that it would investigate the rift and punish those responsible. But in late May and early June, the Egyptian government captured three of the Brotherhood's remaining senior leaders in a Cairo suburb, which halted the investigation.

Meanwhile, a new rift emerged between the Brotherhood's offices in London and Istanbul. The Istanbul office had been given control over the Brotherhood's activities in exile after Morsi's ouster. But its youth members' calls for violent revolution in Egypt had put pressure on the Brotherhood's office in London, which the British government was investigating. The London office therefore attempted to distance itself from Istanbul by ordering its members to cease contact with the Istanbul office. The Supreme Administrative Committee in Cairo tried to calm this new crisis by encouraging the two offices to collaborate, but the London office refused and referred the Istanbul office to Ezzat, the Iron Man, for a second investigation.

Tensions once again exploded into the open in mid-December, when the young Brotherhood spokesman Mohammed Montasser (likely an alias) called for protests in Egypt to "bring down the military" on January 25, which marks the fifth anniversary of the 2011 uprising. The Qutbists responded furiously: They accused Montasser and his fellow Brotherhood youths of violating the organization's decision-making processes, and Ezzat announced that Montasser would be replaced by another spokesman. Yet these moves only deepened the split within the organization. Although the Brotherhood's most senior leader within Egypt, Mohamed Abdel Rahman al-Morsi (no relation to the deposed president), supported the Qutbists' move and accused the youths of attempting to monopolize power within the organization, at least 16 Brotherhood provincial offices rejected the Qutbists' stance, and the Alexandria office referred Ezzat's choice for spokesman to investigation. The two factions then declared separate media portals, with the youths maintaining their control over the Brotherhood's traditional website ikhwanonline.com, while the

Qutbists established a new website, ikhwan.site.

In recent weeks, the Qatar-based preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi has attempted to mediate the crisis, and his deputy recently proposed that the Brotherhood establish new bylaws for managing the organization. But it will be difficult to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Although the split within the Brotherhood is partly generational, it also reflects severe differences regarding the organization's goals and strategy -- whether it should seek power now, as the youths demand, or in the distant future, as the Qutbists believe, as well as what tools it should use to assert Islamist rule. Yet these questions are increasingly theoretical. The Egyptian government's obliteration of the organization within Egypt means that the Brotherhood has no realistic shot at power anytime soon, and its various factions thus have little incentive to reunify in pursuit of shared ambitions. To be sure, the Brotherhood's vision for establishing an Islamist state in Egypt won't evaporate, but the rigid internal discipline that defined its decision-making and mobilization is now a thing of the past. As a result, the Iron Man is now a relic.

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