

# The Administration Should Not Meet With the Muslim Brotherhood in Washington

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Brief Analysis

## Washington should avoid engaging an organization that calls for "jihad" and "martyrdom" in fighting a strategic ally.

**N**ext week, a delegation including two prominent Muslim Brotherhood members will visit Washington to advocate against the current Egyptian government, headed by President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. While the delegation will likely draw interest from the media and think tank communities, the Obama administration should not engage with it at any level. Given the Brotherhood's explicit embrace of violence and calls for Sisi's death, U.S. engagement with the Brotherhood at this time will undermine the administration's efforts to strengthen relations with Cairo. It will also undercut the administration's attempts at encouraging the Sisi government toward greater political openness.

The delegation is being hosted by the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), which hosted a similar delegation in January, and the Egypt Institute for Democracy Development, an organization that has no web page or social media presence. The delegation includes Wael Haddara, a Canada-based Brotherhood figure who served as an advisor from abroad to the deposed president Mohamed Morsi, and Maha Azzam, who is not a Muslim Brother and chairs the Brotherhood-backed Egyptian Revolutionary Council, which calls from exile for Sisi's toppling.

The delegation's most controversial member, however, is Brotherhood leader Amr Darrag, who played a central role in one of the Brotherhood's most power-hungry -- and ultimately costly -- decisions during its year in power. Darrag served as secretary-general of the Islamist-dominated Constituent Assembly, which rammed a constitution through to ratification in December 2012. The hasty constitution-writing process came only a week after then president Morsi issued a declaration giving himself unchecked executive authority, and the Brotherhood exacerbated the

political crisis by rushing the draft toward a referendum in the absence of non-Islamist parties, which boycotted the assembly to protest Morsi's blatant power grab. The exclusivist manner in which the constitution was drafted, and its narrow language pertaining to the interpretation of sharia, reinforced widespread fears that the Brotherhood was trying to impose its theocratic vision on Egypt, and contributed to the mass mobilization for Morsi's overthrow in June 2013.

Engaging Brotherhood officials will undermine the administration's efforts at strengthening the U.S.-Egypt strategic relationship, which in recent months have included resuming military aid to Cairo and endorsing a major investment conference in Sharm al-Sheikh. After all, Muslim Brothers frequently call for President Sisi's execution during their demonstrations, and the Brotherhood has embraced violence openly in recent months. In this vein, the Brotherhood called for "jihad" and "martyrdom" in fighting the Sisi regime in a January 2015 statement, and its social media pages routinely publicize attacks on infrastructure such as roads, trains, and electricity towers. While the administration should work to engage broad sectors of Egyptian society, it should draw the line at dealing with an organization that seeks the outright destruction of an allied government.

Moreover, dealing with the Brotherhood will undercut the Obama administration's efforts at encouraging the Sisi government toward greater political openness. Indeed, the administration is correct in its analysis that the Sisi government's crackdown on opposition activists and media, as well as the restrictive environment for NGOs, may once again catalyze a destabilizing political explosion, as in January 2011 and June 2013. By meeting with the Brotherhood, however, the Obama administration will damage its credibility for influencing Egypt in this direction, since the Sisi government and its many supporters will interpret these calls for openness as enabling the Brotherhood's return to politics -- a prospect that the regime and its supporters view as suicidal.

Finally, the administration should learn from its most recent engagement with the Brotherhood, which occurred during the January visit to Washington that CSID organized. While the administration hoped to keep its meetings with Brotherhood officials under wraps, the Brotherhood publicized the meetings, using them as a propaganda tool for encouraging its supporters and challenging the Sisi government's international legitimacy. Indeed, shortly after the Brothers met U.S. officials at Foggy Bottom, a member of their delegation posted on Facebook a photo of himself in front of the State Department's logo, and another delegation member later told a pro-Brotherhood satellite network that a White House official had attended that meeting. This embarrassed the Obama administration domestically, and reinforced conspiracy theories within Egypt about the administration's supposed support for the Brotherhood.

The Obama administration should not allow itself to be used as a propaganda tool in the Brotherhood's ongoing war against the Egyptian government. In short, it shouldn't let the Brotherhood fool it twice.

*Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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