

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Gets a Facelift

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Articles & Testimony

The movement's young leaders are turning to explicitly violent 'revolutionary' tactics in order to stay relevant, but they are escalating a fight they are unlikely to win.

Amr Farrag is a prominent Muslim Brotherhood youth cadre. The 28-year-old Cairene is a widely followed exponent of the organization's ideology on social media and manages the popular pro-Brotherhood news portal Rassd. But these days, he no longer operates in Cairo. On July 5, 2013 -- two days after the Egyptian military responded to mass protests by removing Brotherhood-backed President Mohamed Morsi -- the organization's leaders urged Farrag to relocate to Istanbul, so that he could evade the Egyptian government's anti-Brotherhood crackdown and reestablish the organization's media operations in exile. Meanwhile, as many more Muslim Brothers fled to Turkey during the chaotic weeks that followed Morsi's ouster, the Brotherhood formed a committee in Istanbul to resettle them, hoping to preserve the organization until it could return to power in Egypt, which it promised its members would happen very soon.

But as the months wore on, and Egypt's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood grew more severe (at least 2,500 people were killed and 16,000 imprisoned, and Morsi has just been sentenced to death), impatience with the rate of progress divided the organization's younger members from its older ones. Farrag and other exiled Brotherhood youths rebelled against the group's older leaders, blaming them for "misanalyzing" the political situation leading up to Morsi's overthrow and then mismanaging the post-Morsi period. They further rejected their leaders' calls for a patient, long-term struggle against Egypt's military-backed government. They advocated instead for revolutionary -- and violent -- tactics to destabilize the government sooner rather than later.

The Brotherhood's leaders also lost control over its younger members within Egypt, who launched a low-profile insurgency to undermine Egypt's economy and topple the current regime. "There are things we're not allowed to speak of," Farrag said during an October 2014 interview in Istanbul, when asked about Muslim Brothers' activities in Egypt. "Like the [so-called] anonymous acts that the Egyptian media speaks about, such as blocking roads and bringing down electricity towers." It was the first time any member had acknowledged on the record the Muslim Brotherhood's responsibility for the attacks on Egypt's power grid.

Yet these fissures within the Muslim Brotherhood have fizzled in recent months. The younger, revolutionary wing of the Brotherhood that Farrag represents won the organization's latest internal elections, which were held in February. According to Brotherhood leader Ahmed Abdel-Rahman, the organization replaced 65 percent of its previous leaders, and 90 percent of the new ones are from the younger generation. The Brotherhood has also formed an "Office for Egyptians Abroad," which will centralize the organization's work in exile and prepare for a more aggressive struggle against the regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, which continues to heavily repress the Muslim Brotherhood. "There will not be a political solution before the demands of the revolutionaries on the ground are met," Abdel-Rahman said during an interview with Al Jazeera, referring to the Brotherhood and its allies within Egypt. "We will continue our revolution until victory," he added. The Muslim Brotherhood's central aims are uncompromising: the Sisi government must be destroyed. The organization's latest statement following Morsi's recent sentencing calls for a "revolution that cuts the heads from the rotten bodies" and advocates "exterminating all of the oppressors."

The Brotherhood's new revolutionary posture has two implications. First, to achieve its revolution against the Sisi government, the organization is embracing violence explicitly, particularly on its social media accounts. The Brotherhood's political party in North Sinai recently posted photos on Facebook showing off its work: burned tires blocking train tracks and an arson attack on an electricity transformer. The group pledged to "continue to wear down the coup by all means." Around the same time, the Brotherhood party's southern Cairo branch posted a photo of a young man throwing a Molotov cocktail and admonished its supporters to either "die among slaves or become a man with the revolutionaries." Other Muslim Brotherhood branches across the country have posted photos of Molotov-toting Islamist youths, roads set ablaze, and police stations engulfed in flames. While Rafik Habib, formerly the vice chair of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, wrote in a recent paper that this violence targets "tools of oppression" -- meaning infrastructure -- rather than "lives," he indicated that the organization has entered a new stage and intends to escalate towards more extreme forms of violence.

To be sure, the Brotherhood's use of violence isn't new. During Morsi's presidency, Muslim Brothers repeatedly targeted and tortured anti-Morsi protesters, and the Brotherhood assembled groups of club-wielding vigilantes at its major protest site in northern Cairo in the days leading up to Morsi's overthrow. In the months that followed, moreover, Muslim Brothers frequently attacked police vehicles, security headquarters, and police officers' private homes. But in all these instances, the Muslim Brotherhood maintained a level of plausible deniability: it claimed that it had no control over the "anticoup" offshoots that organized the attacks, disavowed pro-Brotherhood television statements that had explicitly threatened foreigners in Egypt, and even removed a January 2015 statement from its own website that called for "jihad" and "martyrdom." And perhaps most incredible, the Brotherhood's two-faced strategy worked: even as evidence of its violent activities mounted, the Obama administration praised the Brotherhood's verbal commitment to nonviolence and, thus, continued its diplomatic engagement with Muslim Brotherhood officials.

The second implication of the Brotherhood's violent turn is that it may partner with other revolutionary movements against the Sisi government. As Brotherhood leader Mohamed Gaber told the Istanbul-based pro-Brotherhood network Mekamilen, the organization "seeks to use all expertise inside and outside the Brotherhood to achieve its

goals at this stage" and is pursuing "complete revolutionary alignment" with all political forces that seek to end military rule in Egypt.

Although the Brotherhood is a notoriously insular vanguard that mistrusts outsiders, its sudden call for broad-based cooperation against the Sisi regime reflects its declining relevance within Egypt. This is partly due to the sweeping nature of the Sisi government's crackdown on the organization, but it is also a result of the Brotherhood's diminished popularity given its failures in government. According to the Brotherhood's own estimates, 70 percent of the antiregime activity within Egypt is occurring without Muslim Brothers, and the organization seemingly fears that its influence is falling even among Egyptians who oppose the current government. The Brotherhood is also trying to regain control over its cadres on the ground, many of whom lost contact with their imprisoned leaders and turned to non-Brotherhood opposition movements instead. In turn, the Brotherhood's social media pages are now actively promoting groups such as Popular Resistance and Students Against the Coup, whose members range from far left anarchists to non-Brotherhood Islamists, and which frequently clash with security forces.

At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood's "Office for Egyptians Abroad" is working to strengthen the organization's relationships with other exiled oppositionists. Top Brotherhood leaders have thus assumed official positions within the Egyptian Revolutionary Council (ERC), a coalition of groups that reject Morsi's ouster. It recently elected two non-Muslim Brothers -- former Chatham House fellow Maha Azzam and former Judge Walid al-Sharabi -- as its chair and vice chair, respectively. In recent weeks, the ERC sent a delegation to Asia, where it reportedly urged the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to boycott Egypt and petitioned Malaysia to use its United Nations Security Council seat to pressure Cairo. The ERC thus provides a wider umbrella through which the Muslim Brotherhood can continue its previous international lobbying efforts against the Sisi government.

The Brotherhood's youthful leadership and its adoption of revolutionary methods may succeed in reintegrating its youth cadres, who largely view "anticoup" violence as legitimate and believe that the Brotherhood should work with other opposition movements in these efforts. But it won't help the Brotherhood achieve its ultimate goal of returning to power in Egypt. After all, many Egyptians view the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization because of its violent assaults on protesters and threats against media figures during Morsi's reign. The Brotherhood's explicit endorsement of violence and partnership with other radical movements will alienate the broader Egyptian public even further and reinforce Sisi's popular support. That means Farrag and his young colleagues are escalating a fight they are unlikely to win.

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