

Western Media Is Fixated on the Wrong Arrest in Egypt

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Too many journalists mistakenly view the Brotherhood as a normal political party rather than a highly secretive hierarchy whose most important figures often avoid the media completely.

Last week, Egypt's military-backed government continued its decapitation of the Muslim Brotherhood, arresting four top officials. These included three members of the Brotherhood's 17-member executive Guidance Office, as well as an official in the Brotherhood's Cairo office. All of these leaders play essential roles in the Brotherhood's infamously hierarchical, nationwide chain-of-command, and their arrests will further erode the Brotherhood's ability to mobilize coherently against the military's July 3 ouster of former President Mohamed Morsi.

Yet despite the significance of these arrests -- coming before the Egyptian military banned the party altogether today -- the Western media largely ignored them. Instead, Cairo-based journalists focused on the arrest of Gehad el-Haddad, an English-speaking mouthpiece for the Brotherhood who does not hold any actual authority within the organization's command-chain, and therefore isn't quite a "senior" official, as some reports described him. Indeed, far from reflecting Haddad's actual relevance, the massive, headline-grabbing attention that Haddad's arrest is receiving -- and the State Department's subsequent public denunciation of it -- reflects Western journalists' tendency to exaggerate the importance of the accessible, English-speaking spokesmen on whom they frequently rely, and thereby overlook the far more important players who actually call the shots.

Prior to his arrest, Haddad, 31, was nothing if not accessible. He was in constant contact with reporters through virtually every mode of communication imaginable, eagerly answering phone calls, e-mails, texts, and Twitter direct messages. He was also a reliable source for the Brotherhood's conventional wisdom, which he frequently tweeted from his well-followed account. And after many Muslim Brothers went into hiding following Morsi's removal, Haddad seemed especially accessible, even offering tours of the Brotherhood's northern Cairo protest site. So when journalists needed a quick quote or pithier tweet to capture the Brotherhood's views, they naturally turned to Haddad: He speaks good English, craves the attention, and -- even despite his oft-criticized intellectual dishonesty --

dependably reflects what committed Muslim Brothers are thinking at a given moment in time.

But Haddad's accessibility to journalists -- and his resulting prominence in the Western media -- severely distorted his otherwise minor role within the Brotherhood's hierarchy. To borrow a convention from *The Office*, Haddad was an assistant *to* the now-incarcerated deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater. And given that he was living in Britain at the time of the January 2011 uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak and only returned to Egypt a few months later, Haddad's emergence was largely due to nepotism. His father, Essam el-Haddad, is a Guidance Office leader who served as Morsi's top foreign policy aide, and his father-in-law is Guidance Office leader Mahmoud Abuzeid, who was arrested alongside Haddad in the same northern Cairo apartment on Tuesday.

Most importantly, these high-ranking Brotherhood familial ties meant that the Guidance Office could trust Haddad to give a youthful face to its deeply controlling persona -- at the very moment that many younger Muslim Brothers were openly rebelling against it.

Indeed, Haddad's March 2011 return to Egypt came just as tensions were boiling over between the Guidance Office and a group of prominent Brotherhood youth activists. This rift began in the days leading up to the January 25, 2011 protests that ignited Egypt's anti-Mubarak revolt, when the Guidance Office rejected the younger members' lobbying for the Brotherhood to officially endorse the demonstrations. The rift then intensified after Mubarak's removal, as the Guidance Office sought a strategic alliance with the military junta that replaced Mubarak, and thus refused the youths' demands to participate in a new round of demonstrations against the junta's mounting abuses. These disagreements finally exploded in March 2011, just as the Guidance Office began establishing the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP): The youths held a conference against the Guidance Office's wishes at Dokki's Safir Hotel, in which they protested the Brotherhood leadership's command that all Muslim Brothers support the FJP and called for internal reforms. The conference culminated with an open letter to the Supreme Guide -- a major affront, given the organization's infamous "listen and obey" culture.

At the time, the Guidance Office leader responsible for the Brotherhood's "students file" was none other than Haddad's father-in-law Abuzeid. In an extremely rare interview with the Brotherhood's official website immediately following the "Safir conference," Abuzeid lambasted the insurgent youths for gathering without the Brotherhood leadership's permission, as well as for publicizing the typically secretive organization's internal disagreements. Shortly thereafter, many of the Brotherhood youths who organized the conference were banished from the organization. That same month, Haddad returned to Egypt from Britain, and began his quick rise to prominence with the leadership's firm backing.

In boosting Haddad's image, the Brotherhood appointed him to the "steering committee" of the "Renaissance Project," which the organization depicted as both its political platform and its 25-year policy agenda. But in truth, the "Renaissance Project" was a hodgepodge of barely defined capitalist, statist, and Islamist economic aspirations that never offered any coherent strategy for their achievement. More than anything, the "Renaissance Project" served the propagandizing purpose of making its policy-inexperienced participants look like forward-thinking wonks. Journalists thus began reaching out to the bespectacled Haddad as someone who was not only close to top Brothers, but represented the next generation of a pragmatic, policy-oriented Brotherhood that would develop Egypt much as the Islamist AKP developed Turkey. Of course, this sounds beyond fanciful right now -- Egypt's economy cratered under Brotherhood rule, which was one of the primary reasons that so many Egyptians demanded Morsi's ouster this summer -- but many Western observers swallowed it whole back then. And Western journalists quoted Haddad so frequently that the Brotherhood decided to make him an (again, not the) official spokesman in January 2013 -- though he was primarily authorized to speak to the English-language media, and was far less of a presence in Egypt's Arabic-language press.

Yet while Western journalists were contacting Haddad for constant comment and posting images of his tweets on

their blogs, President Morsi was distributing actual political power to genuinely important Brotherhood officials, such as Guidance Office leader Hossam Abu Bakr, whom Morsi appointed governor of Qalyubia in mid-June. Meanwhile, Brotherhood leaders at the top echelons of its organizational hierarchy, such as Guidance Office leaders Abuzeid and Mohamed Ibrahim, as well as Cairo administrative office leader Hesham Younes, were devising and transmitting orders to the Brotherhood's obedient rank-and-file, calling on them to campaign, protest, and even fight on behalf of the organization. All of these high-ranking individuals were arrested on Tuesday -- yet garnered barely a fraction of the attention that the low-ranked Haddad's arrest received.

That's because too many Cairo-based journalists still don't really get the Brotherhood. They continue to report on the Brotherhood as if it's a normal political party, in which personalities such as Haddad who are prominent to the press corps are particularly relevant. They thereby fail to appreciate what the Brotherhood actually is: a tightly institutionalized, secretive, hierarchical vanguard, in which one's organizational ranking is a vital determinant of importance, and in which some of the most important figures often avoid the media -- and especially the Western media -- completely.

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