

Why the Brotherhood Won't Back Down

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Articles & Testimony

The Brotherhood seems bent on exploiting perceived divisions within the Egyptian military and fervent commitment among its own followers to perpetuate a fight that it may not be able to win.

After only one year in power, during which its blatantly autocratic behavior alienated millions of Egyptians, the Muslim Brotherhood is back where it started. For six decades before the 2011 uprising, the group sat in the opposition, under fire from a military regime. This time, even after security forces unseated President Mohamed Morsi, detained top Muslim Brotherhood leaders and reportedly issued arrest warrants for about 300 more, shut down the group's television station, closed some of its offices, and then killed 53 and wounded hundreds at a demonstration outside of the Republican Guard headquarters in Cairo, the Muslim Brotherhood does not seem ready to go quietly. It has called for an intifada and has repeatedly vowed to escalate its protests until Morsi is reinstated.

To some extent, the Muslim Brotherhood's determination to keep fighting is a product of how it views the events of the past week. Morsi, the organization argues, was an elected president with three more years left in his term. Therefore, it says, he should be allowed to complete that term and then face the voters in the next elections, whether he was a good president or not.

Historically, however, the Muslim Brotherhood has been willing to compromise, albeit temporarily, on such principles when faced with an insurmountable adversary. "The Muslim Brotherhood always has a 'roof' -- we don't touch it, and play under it," Abdel Galil al-Sharnouby, a former Brother who worked in the organization's central headquarters from 2005 to 2011, told me in June. For example, Sharnouby explained, the roof prior to the 2011 uprising was President Hosni Mubarak. The group set internal limits on the extent to which its members could attack the Mubarak regime. So criticizing particular ministers was fine. But, with occasional exceptions, attacking Mubarak personally was not. Following Mubarak's ouster, Sharnouby said, the roof became Washington, since the Muslim Brotherhood feared that directly confronting the United States on its key interests would invite a devastating response. This is why the Brotherhood never overturned the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, despite its avowed

opposition to both the accord and to Israel's very existence.

Given this background, one might have expected the Muslim Brotherhood to now view the military as its roof. After all, the military is Egypt's strongest institution and can outgun the Brothers. Moreover, during Morsi's presidency, the Muslim Brotherhood did sometimes treat the military as off limits. The group respected the military's autonomy over its own economic interests and defense matters, and even enshrined that autonomy in the constitution that Morsi rushed to ratification in December. Yet remarkably, and despite having little chance of success against the military, the Muslim Brotherhood seems ready to continue taking on the brass for two reasons.

First, the Brothers doubt that the military is unified in favor of the ongoing crackdown. They see the possibility of fragmentation within the military's ranks if the generals escalate violence further. Although the thinking of the Egyptian military below the top generals is rather opaque, recent history validates the Brothers' gamble. After all, one of the more plausible theories about the military's failure to order a crackdown on Tahrir Square during the 2011 uprising is that soldiers stationed in the Square would have refused, creating chaos. Whether there are many Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers within the military -- and it's impossible to know if there are -- Egypt's military leaders always face the risk that soldiers, who are drafted through universal conscription, will refuse to fire on their fellow countrymen. The Muslim Brotherhood also believes that it does have allies within the military who would try to prevent a total assault against the group. "They're [the military] already talking to us -- not just low level, but high level," Gehad al-Haddad, a spokesman for the organization, told me this week. "They're telling us that Morsi is all right. They were in touch with me about the fact that my father [detained Morsi adviser Essam al-Haddad] needs medication. They are briefing us on what's going on."

The Muslim Brotherhood is trying to exploit whatever tensions do exist within the military by publically distinguishing the generals who executed Morsi's removal -- the "putschists," as Essam El-Erian, a leader of the group, referred to them -- from the broader institution. For example, in a statement on Sunday, the Muslim Brotherhood attributed the coup to "some members of the military council," but emphasized, "We fully trust in our great army that redeems us and we redeem it, and which loves us and which we love, and which could not have participated in this conspiracy." And following Monday's deadly violence outside of the Republican Guard headquarters, the organization's website issued glowing reports about soldiers who "refused...to obey the orders of their leaders to participate in the massacre," claiming that the soldiers "threw their weapons on the ground" in protest.

Second, the Muslim Brotherhood knows that it can count on its legions of members, around 250,000 by conservative estimates, to continue risking death to protest Morsi's removal. After all, Muslim Brotherhood ideology extols martyrdom in pursuit of its Islamist agenda, and its motto, which is ingrained into every Muslim Brother through the organization's cultish five-to-eight-year initiation process, includes clauses proclaiming that "jihad is our way" and "death for the sake of Allah is the highest of our aspirations." In fact, this is a point of pride for the organization. "These are not like the people in Tahrir," said Haddad. "When the people in Rabaa [where the Muslim Brotherhood has been protesting] heard the shotguns, they ran to it, not away from it." Muslim Brotherhood leaders thus believe that they can continue calling on their foot soldiers for as long as they see fit.

But the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood intends to keep fighting for Morsi's reinstatement hardly means that it will win. After all, the longer the group tries to resist the military's intervention, the more likely its total decapitation. Its top strategist, Khairat al-Shater, and top political official, Saad al-Katatny, are among the high-ranking Brotherhood figures who have already been arrested, and the warrants for others suggest that a mass incarceration is in the offing. Given the organization's emphasis and reliance on a tightly regimented hierarchy, decapitation could make it act more erratically -- and perhaps more violently -- which would only validate a military crackdown against it. After all, decapitation would mean removing those leaders who could reverse the group's current strategy and determine

that the military is, once again, the organization's roof.

But more to the point, divisions in its ranks or none, the military's leadership is no more likely than the Muslim Brotherhood to adjust its own bottom line, because it would be suicide for the generals to reinstate a president whom they just removed from power. And so persistent civil strife is practically inevitable: the military and Muslim Brotherhood have mutually exclusive interests for which they are willing to fight indefinitely. The conflict will only end when one or the other cracks -- unless Egypt cracks first.

Eric Trager is a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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