

No 'Happy Easter': The Muslim Brotherhood's Bizarre Religious Intolerance

by [Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

May 3, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Eric Trager \(/experts/eric-trager\)](/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

President Morsi and the Brotherhood are deploying Islam primarily as a rhetorical device for maintaining internal unity and distinguishing themselves from their rivals.

Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's decision not to attend this coming Sunday's Coptic Easter mass was entirely predictable. Morsi, after all, declined to attend Pope Tawadros II's November investiture and, during his previous stint as chairman of the Muslim Brotherhood's political party, Morsi visited a church on Christmas but made a point of emphasizing that he exited before services started. Yet because Morsi's decision comes on the heels of a Brotherhood fatwa prohibiting Muslims from wishing Christians a "Happy Easter," Morsi's coldness towards Christians reflects a central paradox of the Brotherhood's Islamism: despite its longtime promise to "implement the sharia" upon achieving power, the Brotherhood only offers specific interpretations of Islamic legal principles when it needs to justify its most intolerant impulses.

The fatwa, authored by Brotherhood leader Abdel Rahman al-Barr, is noteworthy for its degree of analytical detail. In it, Barr quotes extensively from the Qur'an to argue that Muslims should only greet Christians on their holidays "so long as this greeting does not come at the expense of our [Islamic] religion." In other words, Barr writes, Muslims cannot wish Christians a "Happy Easter," because "our belief as Muslims, which makes ambiguity impossible, is that [Jesus] wasn't killed or crucified," though Muslims can greet Christians on Easter with the non-sectarian Arabic salutation "*kulu sana wa-entum tayyibun*," which roughly means "hope you are well this year" and is used for all sorts of occasions, including birthdays. By contrast, he adds, wishing Christians a "Merry Christmas" is permissible, because Muslims view Jesus as a human prophet and thus acknowledge his birth.

While this fatwa did little to assuage concerns regarding the Brotherhood's view of minorities, the Easter ruling's specificity strikes a sharp contrast with the Brotherhood's otherwise vacuous approach towards interpreting the sharia for crafting policy. While the Brotherhood technically embraces the jurisprudential doctrine known as

istislah, in which Islamic legal principles are interpreted to achieve "societal benefits," the vagueness of this outlook has long enabled Brotherhood leaders to avoid explaining how they would "implement the sharia" once empowered. This obfuscation has persisted even since Morsi's June 2012 electoral victory.

Indeed, compare the specificity of Barr's fatwa on greeting Christians on Easter with the list of bromides that Brotherhood leader Farid Ismail threw at me during a July 2012 interview, when I asked him what policies would change once Morsi implemented sharia. "It means peace, security, equality, citizenship, freedom, and giving rights for people despite their religion or ethics or color or sex," said Ismail, declining to identify a single specific policy that would change when I pressed further. It is the type of answer that even Muslim Brothers in positions of executive authority continue to give nearly a year later. "Everything I'm doing is sharia!" Kafr el-Sheikh Governor Saad al-Husseini, a top Brotherhood figure, proclaimed to me this past February. "Justice is sharia. War against corruption is sharia. Security is sharia...Improving the economy is the sharia. This is the sharia. To preserve the dignity of Egyptians is the sharia...Day and night we are with poor before rich. This is sharia!"

With such an ill-formed view of what the sharia implies for policy, it is no wonder that the Brotherhood's tenure as Egypt's ruling party has yielded so few distinctively Islamic laws. And the Brotherhood will likely continue to embrace this content-free sharia, for two reasons:

First, by keeping its sharia approach vague, the Brotherhood is able to prevent internal fissures from emerging that could potentially undermine its organizational integrity, which it views as vital to consolidating its power. The Brotherhood thus envisions itself as a disciplined vanguard, which -- according to former Brotherhood spokesman Ibrahim al-Houdaiby -- "focuses on recruitment and empowering the organization while postponing all intellectual questions." To prevent potential fissures, the Brotherhood thus frames its views in specific sharia terms only when it seeks to justify certain theocratic ideas on which its cadres broadly agree, such as in its calls for banning the sale of alcohol, outlawing bikinis, and the "Happy Easter" prohibition.

Second, the Brotherhood's vague sharia approach allows it to justify everything it does as Islamic, while casting its opponents as enemies of Islam who are thereby deserving of punishment. Barr, the Brotherhood leader who issued the fatwa prohibiting Muslims from wishing Christians a Happy Easter, was actually quite explicit on this point when I interviewed him in July 2012. "When we implement the sharia, we will first try to ease the concerns of the people, implementing [it] through cooperation that safeguards freedom and dignity and accomplishes justice," Barr said, echoing familiar clichés. "Then, if someone comes and breaches this, punishments will be brought against him for not accepting this, for the dignity of life and [based on] a correct [Islamic] education," continued Barr, adding that sharia had penalties for all offenses, including "attacking the finances or attacking the mind." Sadly, Barr's call for punishing those who "breach" this broadly-defined sharia has been implemented under Morsi: more journalists have been prosecuted for insulting the president during Morsi's ten months in office than during Mubarak's thirty years in power, and many of these individuals are also being tried for insulting Islam.

So while the Brotherhood is certainly an Islamist organization, the vagueness of its Islamism reveals its most salient characteristic: namely, its totalitarianism, which deploys Islam primarily as a rhetorical device for maintaining internal unity and distinguishing itself from its potential enemies. It interprets sharia coherently (even if offensively) only when it can emphasize its differences with these enemies, such as through its current argument that Muslims' theological differences with Christians should trump the harmless pleasantry of wishing someone a Happy Easter. This is why Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood's president, won't be a president for all Egyptians. Totalitarianism has no room for tolerance.

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

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](/policy-analysis/egypt)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)