

Brotherly Love

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

Nov 5, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



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So far, the Obama administration has chosen the wrong way to influence Egypt's new Islamist leaders.

There is one curious beneficiary of the September 11 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi that cost four American lives: Egypt's new Muslim Brotherhood government. The attack in Libya and subsequent controversy has almost entirely obscured the siege that same day of the American embassy in Cairo, and President Mohamed Morsi's irresponsible handling of a very dangerous situation. It was only when President Obama phoned Morsi two days after the protests started and read him the riot act that Morsi denounced the attack and vowed to secure the embassy.

The Brotherhood's first response to the attack -- to praise it and schedule its own protests -- was not surprising. The Obama administration's pursuit of friendly engagement with the party has led it to believe that it can get away with just about anything. The Brotherhood's emergence as Egypt's new ruling party has substantially altered the U.S. policy debate over dealing with Islamists. Given Egypt's cultural and strategic centrality within the Arab world, the question is no longer whether we should deal with Islamists, but how. The White House's answers leave much to be desired.

Rather than put conditions on America's generous package of economic and military aid, the administration has often appeared to believe that through deeper engagement, the United States can build richer, friendlier relations with the organization and convince it to soften its hostile, intolerant views.

For instance, in early September, the White House arranged for a U.S. business delegation to visit Egypt and meet with top Brotherhood businessmen. Unfortunately, just as the delegation made a point at a Cairo press conference to praise Egypt's stable business climate, across town an angry mob was laying siege to the U.S. embassy, while the Brotherhood hardly played the role of stabilizer.

Nonetheless, the effort to engage the Brotherhood on its own terms instead of ours continues. A new RAND report,

"The Muslim Brotherhood, Its Youth, and Implications for U.S. Engagement," calls on Washington to engage Muslim Brotherhood youth figures, who may be the organization's -- and Egypt's -- future leaders.

"Engagement offers both sides an opportunity to dispel misunderstandings," the report states. Engaging "up-and-coming youth within the organization who are not used to engaging the West" will make long-term U.S.-Brotherhood relations more sustainable.

The report recommends a variety of ways in which U.S. policymakers can use engagement to encourage the Brotherhood to act more cooperatively, such as coordinating American speakers for Brotherhood student events; inviting Brotherhood youth leaders to speak at American universities; and offering Brotherhood youth opportunities to study in the United States.

"Over time," the RAND report asserts, "such people-to-people exchanges could have more impact on U.S.-Egyptian relations than official meetings between high-level politicians." In other words, the more the Brotherhood gets to know us, the more they'll learn to like us.

However, the argument for engaging Muslim Brotherhood youth ignores some important facts. For one, the Brotherhood is a deeply ideological outfit, with a historically anti-Western outlook. It seeks to establish an Islamic state in Egypt, has long opposed Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, and holds deeply intolerant views towards religious minorities. Moreover, the very process through which one becomes a Muslim Brother is designed to exclude those who might be inclined towards ideological moderation.

After being recruited -- typically at their mosques or universities -- young candidates for the Brotherhood are subjected to a rigorous five-to-eight-year process of internal promotion. Throughout this period, rising Muslim Brothers are repeatedly tested on their completion of the Brotherhood's educational curriculum, vetted for their commitment to the Brotherhood's theocratic principles, and monitored for their willingness to take orders from the Brotherhood's senior leadership. Those who don't win their elders' approval are banished from the organization. Indeed, as RAND's report notes on multiple occasions, Brotherhood youth participation in the organization is "modeled on the principle of 'listen and obey.'"

That is, Brotherhood youth are not, for the most part, open-minded people whose worldview can be reshaped through chummy exchanges with American policymakers. They are purpose-driven, deeply ideological individuals, willing to commit five to eight years of their young lives to serve as mere foot soldiers in service of the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda.

Its rigid hierarchy presents a second obstacle hindering American policymakers from successfully engaging with its youth members -- namely, the Brotherhood's senior leadership. RAND's report acknowledges that Brotherhood leaders prevented a young member from attending a conference at a U.S. think tank, and that Brotherhood youth typically decline to meet with U.S. officials without explicit permission. RAND tries to work around this inconvenient fact by advising that "direct contacts with [Brotherhood] leaders can help build the necessary trust and address leadership concerns about American attempts to include [Brotherhood] youth in civil society programming."

Yet despite RAND's optimism, it is unrealistic to believe that a deeply hierarchical organization will demand anything less than full control over which members can interact with U.S. officials. Indeed, when the Brotherhood sent its first youth delegation to Washington in April, it dispatched its most organizationally committed pitchmen to present a genial face to Western audiences without conceding anything ideologically.

Proponents of engagement rarely note that the Brotherhood's closed organizational features constitute real, perhaps insurmountable, problems. Rather, from their perspective, one of the most daunting hurdles is U.S. public opinion -- or Americans' well-founded distrust of Islamists. Accordingly, RAND advises that "engagement" needs to be "insulated from domestic political attacks by having more members of Congress" meet with Brotherhood leaders.

However, the point should not be to alter how Americans and their elected officials perceive the Brotherhood, but rather to change how the Brotherhood acts. The lesson for advocates of engagement in the Obama administration and elsewhere is that closed, theocratic organizations do not become moderate when they are embraced unconditionally. They moderate when they are being squeezed and find themselves without other options.

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

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