

Where Did Nick Kristof Get the Idea That the Muslim Brotherhood Is Moderate?

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Articles & Testimony

The Brotherhood's efforts to project itself as a responsible actor in Egypt do not align with the inflammatory views freely expressed by its members.

Parliamentarians' offices typically feature self-flattering photos and patriotic paraphernalia, so I was taken aback by the decor of recently elected Muslim Brotherhood MP Saber Abouel Fotouh's Alexandria headquarters. The walls were mostly blank, except for a tremendous banner commemorating a protest that the Muslim Brotherhood had sponsored outside the local "Zionist consulate," complete with an image of a burning Israeli flag. (The demonstration took place following an August 18 incident along the Egyptian-Israeli border, in which Israel responded to a cross-border attack in Eilat that resulted in the deaths of eight Israelis by inadvertently killing six Egyptian soldiers when it chased the attackers back into the Sinai.) When I asked Abouel Fotouh whether it was appropriate for a future parliamentary leader to display a neighbor's flag in flames, he got rather defensive. "We burned [the Israeli flag] for our soldiers and for Gaza, and we will burn it again and again if they infiltrate anything in the region," he said.

As the ascendant Muslim Brotherhood tries to project itself as a responsible actor, including by hosting credulous *New York Times* columnist Nick Kristof for a home-cooked meal, it is important to recall these kinds of statements. Over the past two weeks, I have interviewed seven Brotherhood parliamentarians-to-be. Far from being moderate, these future leaders share a commitment to theocratic rule, complete with a limited view of civil liberties and an unmistakable antipathy for the West.

The Brotherhood's theocratic vision presents itself in a number of forms. At the most basic level, the organization's future parliamentarians insist that all law should be drawn exclusively from the sharia -- and they are convinced that this is a goal shared by nearly all Egyptians. "Most political streams in Egypt -- liberals, socialists, nationalists, and Islamists -- demand that sharia be the main source of legislation," Saad al-Husseini, the Brotherhood's top candidate on a Gharbiya electoral list and a member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Office, told me. A number of

Brotherhood MPs-to-be even claimed that Egypt's Christian community was pro-sharia. "The Christians are Egyptians, and true Egyptians will take the sharia's side, and not the side of the French," said recently elected Alexandria MP al-Mohammadi al-Sayyid.

To be sure, the Brotherhood, unlike Egypt's Salafists, does not intend to legislate based on a literal interpretation of the sharia. It claims instead to be guided by pragmatic interpretations of the sharia's true aims -- or "*maqasid*," as this principle known in the field of Islamic jurisprudence. But no matter how generously one interprets the sharia, certain prohibitions are unavoidable -- and the Brotherhood's parliamentarians vow to push those prohibitions into law.

Policy-wise, the most important Qur'anic prohibition that the Brotherhood wants to implement is the ban on interest-based banking. The platform of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party explicitly speaks of "fighting" usury, though the Brotherhood MPs-to-be that I interviewed tried to soft-pedal this language a bit. "We won't ban [interest-based banking]," said Alexandria MP Sobhi Saleh. "But we will aim to decrease the interest rate to zero through economic growth." Initially, the MPs said that the Brotherhood would simply broaden Islamic banking options and "let the people choose what they want." But this gradualism will likely be challenged by the Salafists, who support implementing interest-free banking more rapidly. It hard to imagine the Brotherhood bucking them on this very basic Islamic issue.

Two other Qur'anic principles that the Brotherhood intends to implement are those banning alcohol and calling for modesty in women's dress. Thus, Brotherhood political leader Saad el-Katatny, who previously chaired the organization's parliamentary bloc, declared in August that Egypt "should not allow beach tourism," railing against the bikinis and alcohol consumption that drive Egypt's Red Sea tourism. Some of the Brotherhood's future parliamentarians expressed support for these ideas. "Sharia controls our morals and we have a religious community here," said Ali Fath al-Bab, a former MP who is now running for the Shura Council, Egypt's upper parliamentary body. "Our rules and constitution should come from our tradition to express our religion."

Others, however, offered a compromise of sorts. "Are tourists coming just for beaches and alcohol?" Essam Mukhtar, who was recently elected in northern Cairo, asked me. Some are, I responded. "Then we can make private beaches here," he said. Most of the Brotherhood MPs-to-be that I interviewed expressed their hope, however, that Egyptian tourism might be refocused towards hosting conferences and "medical tourism," meaning visits to Egypt's therapeutic natural spas.

Yet perhaps the most telling indicator of the Brotherhood's theocratic outlook were the future parliamentarians' comments on whether they would permit those who do not believe in the sharia to criticize or challenge it. The answer was, without exception, no. "It's not allowed for Christians to come and say that the sharia is wrong," said Abouel Fotouh. "They are not specialists." Mukhtar agreed. "There is no ultimate freedom, because your freedom ends at the freedom of other people," he told me. "And if I humiliate things that you respect, I violate your freedom." When I told Mukhtar about a video that a friend had sent me depicting Salafists calling for holy war against the Jews, he laughed and suddenly transformed into a civil libertarian. "People are free to say what they want," he said. He proceeded to rant against Israel.

But the Brotherhood's antipathy isn't reserved only for Israel. When I asked Saleh, who has been spoken of as a potential candidate for parliamentary chair, for his views on 9/11, the fast-talking lawyer suddenly got very serious. "I'm still not convinced [of the official story]," he said. "Crashing into the 100th floor does not turn a building into ash." When he proceeded to cite unnamed "American scholars" to substantiate his views, I told him that Americans would find this offensive. "Does it make Americans angry that I read reports that came from them?" he asked. "I will have [these studies] with me when I go to America...I will tell them that these are your [explanations], not mine."

Indeed, Saleh intends to preach 9/11 revisionism on his first trip to America. Perhaps he'll do it at a home-cooked meal hosted by Nick Kristof.

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