# The Muslim Brotherhood Today: Between Ideology and Democracy

by **Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

*On March 22, 2011, Jean-Pierre Filiu and Mehdi Khalaji addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss whether the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamist offshoots -- not only in Egypt but across the Arab region and beyond -- can respond to a more open political environment and an emerging democratic spirit. Jean-Pierre Filiu is an associate professor at Sciences Po in Paris and a visiting scholar at Columbia University. Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and a recognized authority on international Islamic ideological currents. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## JEAN-PIERRE FILIU

The Muslim Brotherhood, for the first time, confronts the challenge of operating in an open political environment. Upon the withering of Nasserism in the 1970s and Baathism in the 1990s, the Brotherhood had become the only ideological or opposition movement of consequence in Arab countries. And paradoxically, the Brotherhood benefited from state-sponsored repression by posing as the true regime alternative, without needing to elaborate on its program beyond the slogan "Islam is the solution."

During the Egyptian revolution, however, a different slogan was commonly heard: "Game over." Although directed at President Hosni Mubarak's regime, such a sentiment could also be applied to the Brotherhood, as it is no longer the sole political alternative.

### Regional and Internal Fissures May Weaken the Brotherhood

Contrary to its pretenses, the Brotherhood lacks regional momentum, remains fractured, and is still generally subservient to the military. In these respects, the contrast with Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), which has learned to play the democratic game, is instructive. The AKP manipulated the Turkish military for political gain, blaming it for the country's ills to benefit at the polls. In Arab states, however, the military still holds the upper hand. Nevertheless, the Egyptian military now tends to agree with the Brotherhood on several key issues: a quick exit by the military from its current overt governing role, resistance to strikes and other forms of labor activism, and reinforcement of a strong regime presence in the country's economy.

But whereas the AKP is unified -- it even absorbed the Turkish Muslim Brotherhood -- the Brotherhood in Egypt

continues to splinter. For example, one leader broke away from the Brotherhood in 1996 to form the more moderate Wasat (Center) Party, which was recognized by an Egyptian court in the wake of the revolution.

An equally significant point of fracture occurred about a year ago when the elderly, hardline Muhammad Badie was nominated the Egyptian Brotherhood's Supreme Guide. Badie faced both organizational fatigue and a crisis spurred by the Brotherhood's relative moderates when Abd al-Muanem Abu al-Fatouh and Gamal Hishmat resigned from the Guidance Bureau.

At the regional level, Badie's candidacy sparked another internal debate: whether to nominate an Egyptian or an outside Muslim (perhaps Khaled Mashal of Hamas). In sending a signal across the region, a non-Egyptian would have strengthened the Brotherhood's transnational goals, but in the end the choice of Badie proved Egypt-centric.

Across the region, local variations are the norm. The Brotherhood in Morocco adopted the name Justice and Development Party, echoing its counterparts in Turkey. In Jordan, the Brotherhood seeks reform, not revolution. In Syria, the group is nowhere to be seen. Moreover, the revolutions now occurring are largely nationalistic, and despite having a pan-Arab dimension fueled partly by Aljazeera, their aspirations are based within postcolonial borders -- an orientation at odds with the Brotherhood's more pan-Islamic worldview.

**Tunisia's Muslim Brotherhood: Opportunity and Obstacles**

The Tunisian Brotherhood in particular, long distanced from the violent and radical teachings of Sayyed Qutb and the group's Egyptian branch of the 1950s, formed the Nahda (Renaissance) Party in 1989. The absence of Brotherhood leaders in the Tunisian revolution can be attributed to their being jailed, exiled, and hunted down. These leaders' main challenge is to rebuild an organization destroyed by decades of oppression.

The Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood prefers to model itself on its Turkish rather than Egyptian peers. Even so, the Islamists are now under heavy scrutiny from secularists, women's rights activists, unionists, and youth. As a result, they remain marginal so far. When their leader, Rachid Ghannouchi, returned from exile on January 30, he disavowed any presidential aspirations. Nahda's legalization did not cause a stir in the local media. And on February 19, demonstrators marched in downtown Tunis to deny any Islamist claims to the revolution.

**Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: A Difficult Adjustment to Democracy**

In Egypt, the Brotherhood was taken aback by the January 25 protests and only joined on the "Friday of Rage" three days later after much persuasion by its cadre of "youth" -- that is, the forty-somethings within the organization such as Muhammad Beltagy. Even then, the group's reception was cool: one slogan heard in Tahrir Square was "not for [former International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed] ElBaradei, not for the Brotherhood." The Brotherhood was also criticized when it joined talks with then vice president Omar Suleiman on February 6, putting the group on the defensive.

The cohesion-obsessed Brotherhood was torn between conservatives who sided with the religious establishment in favoring stability and obedience instead of protest and a "generation gap" filled with angry youth. After Mubarak's fall, the Brotherhood sided with the military in managing the transition. Further highlighting the group's insensitivity to the demonstrators, when the long-exiled Islamist preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi spoke on February 18 in Tahrir Square, his security prevented Wael Ghoneim, a young hero of the revolution, from appearing. Underlining generational differences, the Brotherhood's younger cadre, led by Beltagy, recognized the enormity of this mistake and appeared with Ghoneim a week later to protest Mubarak's holdover prime minister.

The Brotherhood does not yet have a political platform and cannot overcome its opposition to the idea of a woman or a Christian serving as leader of Egypt. And even as its website in English quotes Badie as endorsing democracy "regardless of religion, colour, or creed," the Arabic version carries a completely different message.

Moreover, even within the Islamist camp, the Brotherhood faces competition. The Wasat Party favors postponing elections for a year so that parties may better organize, and rumors are circulating of reform-minded Brotherhood members joining Wasat or forming their own party. One Brotherhood spokesman suggested the possibility of no fewer than four Islamist parties emerging. Both popular "televangelist" Amr Khaled and a coalition of more traditionally Islamic Sufi orders are considering establishing their own parties.

## MEHDI KHALAJI

Although a theological barrier separates the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and Shiite organizations, significant interplay exists between the two camps. Islamic fundamentalism in Iran was inspired in part by the early twentieth-century Egyptian thinker Rashid Rida and by the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei owns several Persian translations of books by the later, more radical Brotherhood figure Sayyed Qutb and has quoted him publicly.

Yet links with Shiites are not universally accepted by the Brotherhood. In Bahrain, some Brotherhood leaders consider Shiites bastards owing to their practice of temporary marriage -- illegitimate in Sunni Islam. The Qatar-based sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, made famous by Aljazeera TV and the closest thing to a transnational Brotherhood leader today, maintains that Shiites believe in a different Quran from his own. The 2006 Lebanon war between Israel and Hizballah heightened divisions within the Brotherhood community on Shiites: Qaradawi saw Hizballah as a menace, but other members of the Brotherhood promised fighters for any future conflict.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood hosts two distinct schools of thought on relations with Shiites. The first is legalistic, and supports the implementation of sharia (Islamic law), while the second emphasizes Islamic unity. Members of the legalistic school share much with Salafists and Wahhabists and look down on Shia Islam, while those emphasizing unity are closer to Shiite groups in the Persian Gulf and Iran.

An influential figure who has written on Sunni-Shiite cooperation is the prominent Swiss-based banker Yusuf Nada, a Brotherhood international political emissary who defended the group's relationship with Shiites after the 2006 Lebanon war. Interpretations like those of Nada emphasize the Sufi or mystical aspects of Islam over the juridical. It is worth noting that many Brotherhood members, including the founder, Sheikh Hassan al-Banna, received a Sufi education.

Furthermore, above and beyond all such theological debates, common interests can bring fundamentalist Sunnis and Shiites together. Politics, not theology, is the major factor behind the sympathy some Brotherhood leaders evince for Iran -- and behind Iran's very active support for the Brotherhood's Palestinian branch, Hamas.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Andrew Engel.* ❖

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