What Role for the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria's Future?

by **Michael Jacobson (/experts/michael-jacobson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

In calling for a demonstration in Damascus on March 10, Haitham Maleh, an opposition figure with close connections to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, proclaimed, "We are 85 percent of the country"—an apparent gesture of solidarity against Syria's ruling Alawite minority. The group of about 100 demonstrators who answered his call was reportedly dispersed by several hundred progovernment demonstrators. Along with President George W. Bush's rejection of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad's ambiguous proposal for a phased or partial withdrawal from Lebanon, the incident fed speculation on whether Asad's regime will survive the current tumult. Although few would mourn the regime's collapse, many are concerned that such a development would allow an Islamist group such as the Muslim Brotherhood to take control, which might be even less appealing to the United States than the current regime.

Background

While a number of Arab governments have cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood presence in their countries, Damascus has been particularly harsh in suppressing the organization. The group became an important player in Syrian domestic politics in the 1950s, eventually establishing itself as a strong opposition faction against the regime. In response to the Brotherhood's growing power, the government banned it as a political party in 1958.

Relations between the Brotherhood and the regime became far worse in the late 1970s, characterized by frequent violent clashes. The last straw for the government was the Brotherhood's attempt to assassinate then-president Hafiz al-Asad in June 1980. The following month, the government passed a law making membership in the Brotherhood a capital offense; the law is still in force today. Armed conflict between the regime and the Brotherhood finally came to a head in 1982: the Syrian army, in an effort to eliminate the group entirely, entered the city of Hama and killed between 5,000 and 10,000 of its members. In the wake of the massacre, many of the surviving members left Syria and moved to Western European countries such as Spain and Germany.

Relations with the Current Regime

When Bashar al-Asad took power in 2000, the Brotherhood took steps to reach out to the new regime. In May 2001, the group created a "National Honor Pact," accepting the democratic process and, for the first time, recognizing the legitimacy of the regime. In subsequent years, the move appeared to pay off. In 2004, Syrian government officials, including Asad, met with Muslim leaders who had ties to the Brotherhood. As Muhammad Habash, a Syrian member a parliament, stated, "The commonalities between the Islamic movements and [the] national movement are stronger

than at any time before." The signs were so promising, in fact, that the Beirut Daily Star ran an article in May 2004 titled "Damascus, Brotherhood Set to Reconcile?" In the end, however, the negotiations appeared to fizzle, bringing the two sides no closer together.

Will the Brotherhood Take Over?

Several factors have sparked concern about the prospect of Islamist groups such as the Brotherhood taking power in Syria following a regime collapse. Many jihadists are traveling from and through Syria on their way to Iraq, raising the question of how active Islamist extremists are inside Syria and how much Damascus tolerates or encourages their activities.

Syria's basic demographics are a key factor as well. As mentioned previously, much of the Syrian leadership, including Asad, hails from the Shiite Alawite sect. Alawites represent only 15 percent of the Syrian population, however, while Sunnis comprise more than 70 percent. Many Sunnis do not regard the Alawites as true Muslims and would prefer not to live under Alawite control.

In addition, some have speculated about the growing influence of Islam within Syria—as a religion and, perhaps, as a political force. A recent Washington Post article titled "Religious Surge Alarms Secular Syrians" described several new religious trends in Syria: young women are now more likely to wear headscarves, privately funded mosques are being built in downtown Aleppo, and Muslim clerics are demanding an increased role in the political process. In fact, Syrian vice president Abdul Halim Khaddam, a Sunni, recently issued a statement urging citizens to act more in accordance with Muslim laws and traditions. Given these factors, some have speculated that a religious Sunni organization such as the Muslim Brotherhood may be well positioned to take power if the regime falls.

Moreover, the Brotherhood recently released a statement that may indicate a reversal of the group's engagement strategy, though it is far too early to tell whether the move demonstrates an increased willingness to confront the regime. Following the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, the Brotherhood faxed a statement to the London-based al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper calling for an investigation into the murder and lamenting the sharp deterioration of relations between Syria and the "Lebanese people," who could be heard "shouting in unison 'Syria, get out.'" The statement noted that "Hariri's death might be the straw that will break the camel's back as far as Syrian-Lebanese relations are concerned," and that "no one can absolve the Syrian leadership from guilt."

The idea of the group taking power in Syria has generated considerable unease among Western observers, with some citing recent reports that Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members in Europe have been linked to al-Qaeda and the global jihad. Although it is certainly plausible that individual group members have joined the global jihad, this is not necessarily reflective of the views of the organization as a whole. By and large, members in Europe do not maintain close ties to the main organization in Syria. Moreover, the Brotherhood may realize that Western pressure on Asad will be helpful to their cause, making the organization unlikely to embrace the anti-Western jihad.

Not Well Positioned to Take Over

Despite all of the above factors, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood or any other Sunni Islamist group would have great difficulty filling the vacuum if Asad's regime collapsed. The Brotherhood was greatly weakened by the government's actions in the 1970s and 1980s and has never fully recovered its strength. Indeed, after the regime crushed the group in 1982, the Brotherhood abandoned its strategy of direct confrontation. Although members continued to operate and meet in mosques—often under the auspices of moderate Sunni clerics—they did not act in the same aggressive fashion. In comparison to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Syrian Brotherhood has a far less educated membership, boasts a far less wealthy constituency (which is drawn primarily from the lower middle class), and poses a much less potent political threat. Other Sunni Islamist groups in Syria are even less well equipped

to assume control.

Some Syrian liberals remain wary of a potential Brotherhood takeover. Yet, Kamal Labwani, an opposition leader released from prison five months ago, emphasized that the opposition is fighting on two fronts, and that "the fight against the government has . . . priority" over the fight "against the fundamentalists."

How Little We Know

Any speculation on succession in Syria must include the caveat that it is largely guesswork. In reality, little reliable information about such developments is available to researchers and analysts. Gauging the strength of Islamists in Syria is a particularly difficult challenge. The regime forbids any research on the topic, and Muslim Brotherhood members are reluctant to speak with outsiders. Increased understanding of such groups in Syria is vital for U.S. policy in the region.

Michael Jacobson, a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, served as counsel on both the congressional and independent commissions investigating the September 11 attacks. ❖

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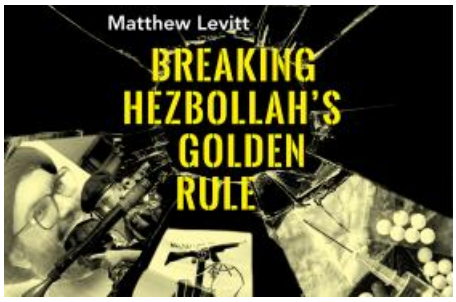

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