

Interviews and Presentations

The Muslim Brotherhood's Views on Iran

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Washington Institute fellow Eric Trager sat down with Foreign Policy Association blogger Reza Akhlaghi to discuss how Egypt's leaders view Iran's regional strategy and the upcoming presidential election.

In the face of new developments in the Arab world, what should a new Iranian administration take notice of vis-a-vis Arab-Iranian relations?

Iran should recognize that its policies are increasingly unpopular in the Arab world for two reasons. First, the Salafists, who are deeply opposed to Iran, have emerged as a major political force in a number of post-revolutionary Arab states, and in Egypt the Salafists are highlighting the Muslim Brotherhood's outreach to Iran in their campaign against the Brotherhood. Second, Iran's actions have intensified the Sunni-Shiite split and thus contributed to the violence that is now spreading from Syria into Iraq. Iran would thus be well advised to cease its support for Maliki's divisive policies in Iraq and its support for the Assad regime in Syria, because a continuation of these policies will likely strengthen the backlash against it, as well as fuel further violence across the region.

What key differences do you see between the Islamic ideology espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood and that of Shiite Iran? How does the Muslim Brotherhood view Iran's anti-Western policies and the country's potential for regional influence?

Unlike Iran's concept of *vilayat-e faqih*, the Muslim Brotherhood has no jurisprudential approach for interpreting the sharia to derive *fiqh*, and it ultimately uses "Islam" as a slogan to justify its power consolidation while tarring its enemies as non-Islamic. The Brotherhood's view of the sharia is thus very vague, which is why its leaders still do not know what "implementing the sharia" means for policy and refer back to the sharia very superficially, and only to justify whatever policies they pursue.

As with Iran, anti-Westernism is a foundational principle for the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood views the establishment of an Islamic state in Egypt, and ultimately a "global Islamic state," as necessary means for resisting Western cultural and political influence. Its anti-Westernism is currently less apparent than Iran's, however, because -- according to deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater -- building an Islamic state (i.e., consolidating power) precedes establishing a "global Islamic state," and the Brotherhood understands that it needs relatively stable international relations to consolidate power at home. It is, therefore, willing to have relations with the West in the short run while it is pursuing this goal, but will likely become hostile once it pivots towards pursuing its foreign policy goals.

Would the Muslim Brotherhood be able to carve out a position for itself in a post-conflict Syria? What kind of bilateral relations with Iran does the Muslim Brotherhood envision in a post-Assad, post-conflict Syria?

It seems likely that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood will be an important player in post-Assad Syria, but it is not clear whether its organizational strength will make it a leading force, given Syria's fractiousness. And whereas the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has engaged Iran and sought to coordinate a solution to the Syrian civil war with it, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood reportedly resents Tehran's longtime backing of the Assad regime. So it remains to be seen how this relationship might develop in a post-Assad Syria.

From what perspectives does Iran's presidential election carry significance for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt?

Iran's presidential election does not carry a great deal of significance for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, because the Brotherhood will likely seek to continue its engagement with Tehran with whoever is elected. The Brotherhood does not have any specific vision for what it wants from its relationship with Iran; it simply wants to use this outreach to signal a shift from the relatively pro-Western foreign policy of the Mubarak era. So, for the Brotherhood, the winner of the forthcoming Iranian presidential elections is irrelevant.

Do you see in AKP -- Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party in Turkey -- ideological affinities with the Muslim Brotherhood? Is Turkey in the same line with Qatar and Saudi Arabia when it comes to building an anti-Iranian bloc in the region?

The AKP shares the Brotherhood's Islamist outlook, but like the Brotherhood its defining feature is its autocratic behavior. So just as more journalists have been prosecuted in Egypt for "insulting the president" during Mohamed Morsi's first year in office as during Hosni Mubarak's 30 years, Erdogan's Turkey has the most imprisoned journalists in the world. But unlike Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the AKP's leadership has coincided with strong economic growth, and it has also worked to consolidate its power more gradually and thus faced far less resistance. The Brotherhood initially looked to the AKP as a model given the AKP's political success, but once the Brotherhood faced resistance, it abandoned the AKP's type of gradualism and is now attempting to consolidate power as quickly as possible, which has only intensified the resistance against it and weakened the very state that the Brotherhood is trying to control.

As for regional alignments, much depends on the outcome in Syria and whether or not the U.S. ultimately gets involved. A more engaged American approach would ensure the fall of the Assad regime and thereby contribute to Iran's isolation, presumably with the backing of Saudi Arabia and Turkey. But so long as the U.S. remains on the sidelines, Iran will remain a major player in Syria and possibly force its way into negotiations with Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia regarding that country's future. This would prevent the consolidation of an anti-Iranian bloc.

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