

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD
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Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I am an assistant professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a Carnegie Scholar. I have been studying the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab politics since 2004, when I began working on my dissertation on the movement as a doctoral student at Yale University. I have interviewed dozens of members of the Brotherhood, studied the history of the movement, and read widely in the writings of its leaders and thinkers.

I should note that I personally disagree with the agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood. But as a scholar my main focus has been to try to understand the organization and its appeal to Egyptians.

I will focus today on five questions: Who are the Muslim Brothers? Are they committed to democracy? Are they violent? Would they win elections in a democratic Egypt? What kinds of things would they try to do if elected? And should we worry about them?

Q. Who are Egypt's Muslim Brothers?

A. They are a religious organization and political party in a poor, dependent country.

The Muslim Brotherhood is both a political and religious organization, and has been since its establishment in 1929. Its founder, a schoolteacher named Hassan al-Banna, declared to his followers: "Oh Brethren: You are not a charitable organization nor a political party nor a local body of purposes limited in intention, rather you are a new spirit entering the heart of the nation, bringing it to life with the Qur'an, and a new light dawning to dispel the darkness of material with the knowledge of God, and a voice that raises again the call of the prophet."¹

The Brotherhood, which agitated against British control of Egypt, was outlawed in the late 1940s, enjoyed a brief return in the early 1950s after the overthrow of the monarchy, before being driven underground by the Arab socialist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Anwar Sadat allowed the Brothers to return to political life in the 1970s, and the movement has participated in Egyptian politics ever since. It is as yet formally outlawed and banned from forming a political party, but most

¹ Hassan al-Banna, *Majmu'at Rasa'il al-Imam al-Shahid Hassan al-Banna* (The Collected Letters of the Martyred Imam, Hassan al-Banna), al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya (n.d.), p. 170

observers expect the ban to be lifted and the Brothers to field a political party in advance of Egypt's September parliamentary elections.

Ideologically, the movement is religious and conservative. The Brothers want to win seats in parliament (and eventually the presidency) in order to legislate according to what they think God wants. One of the movement's major goals is achieving Muslim unity—less under a single polity than through a European Union-style federation or free trade area that Muslim states would join voluntarily.² They are critics of the West, both for its hegemony over Muslim lands, and for its cultural values, which they find at odds with their traditional ones. The Muslim Brotherhood is as likely to criticize America for our acceptance of homosexuality or of sex outside of marriage as it is for our invasion of Iraq or friendship to Israel.

Q. Are they committed to democracy?

A. As far as we can tell, yes. But they are not liberals.

It is difficult to know whether any group is truly committed to democracy. However, what we know is that the Muslim Brothers have run in every Egyptian election since 1984. Furthermore, as one scholar put it, the movement's politicians have been, "some of the region's most vigorous and outspoken proponents of democratic reform."³ For example, Mahdi Akef, the Brotherhood's former general guide, affirmed his group's belief in "the peaceful alternation of power via ballot boxes within the framework of a constitutional parliamentary republic."⁴ Such a view represents a departure from the teachings of Sayyid Qutb, a prominent Brotherhood ideologue in the 1950s and 60s, who believed that democracy was a blasphemous, manmade invention that was incompatible with the rule of God's law.

It has been argued, however, that the Brotherhood's current embrace of democracy might be an instance of *taqiyya* (dissembling) and *kitman* (concealment).⁵ The scholar Steven A. Cook suggests that Islamists are simply, "seeking to use democratic procedures in order to advance an

² See, for example, Sayyid Disuqi, "Al-Khilafah al-Islamiyya Darurah Hadariyyah, (The Islamic Caliphate is a Civilizational Imperative)" *Ikhwan Online*, May 14, 2006 (<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=20342&SecID=360>, last accessed April 10, 2008); Abd Al-Aziz al-Rantisi, "Nahw al-Khilafah al-Islamiyyah, (Towards the Islamic Caliphate)" *Ikhwan Online*, September 24, 2003, (<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=2344&SecID=360>, last accessed April 10, 2008). "For us to have a presence, we must erect the United States of Islam."; Ahmed al-Tilawi, "Al-Dawlah al-Islamiyya fi Fikr al-Imam al-Shahid Hassan al-Banna, (The Islamic State in the Thought of the Martyred Imam Hassan al-Banna)" *Ikhwan Online*, July 19, 2007 (<http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=22061&SecID=343>, last accessed April 10, 2008)

³ Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "Democratization and Islamists—Auto-Reform," Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy Annual Conference, May 4-5, 2006. (<http://www.ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=4112&SectionID=0>, last accessed April 4, 2008).

⁴ Muhammad Mahdi Akef speech, October 12, 2005 (<http://ikhwanweb.com/Article.asp?ID=13336&SectionID=89>, last accessed March 5, 2008)

⁵ Robert Spencer, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, Regnery Publishing, 2005, p. 80.

antidemocratic agenda,”⁶ an echo of Edward Djerejian’s worry that Islamists seek only “one person, one vote, one time.”⁷ It is not clear how we can resolve this. All we know is that the Brotherhood runs in elections, does not engage in violence when it loses, and promises to continue doing so.

However, the Brotherhood’s commitment to democracy does not mean it is committed to a liberal vision of democracy. Muslim Brotherhood thinkers are apt to believe that democracy should “not render permissible that which is forbidden, nor forbid that which is permissible.”⁸ This suggests that they envision building safeguards into the democratic process so that it does not produce results that contravene Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood’s 2007 draft party platform proposed a council of scholars that would vet all legislation to make sure it conformed to the shari`ah (a proposal some senior Brothers have since backed away from). Obviously this is not something that conforms to our liberal understandings of democracy.

Many Muslim Brothers I speak to point to the use of democratic procedures in the Brotherhood’s internal affairs as evidence of the movement’s commitment to democracy. Historians tell us that, even in the movement’s early years, leadership positions (except for the position of General Guide, which the founder, Hassan al-Banna, enjoyed by virtue of a loyalty oath) were determined by a vote of the group’s general assembly.⁹ Democratic procedures are encoded in the organization’s bylaws, which include provisions for a 100-seat legislature that approves the group’s budget and elects both the movement’s chief executive (every five years) as well as the members of its 15-seat executive committee (every four years).¹⁰ Indeed, during the Mubarak years, the Brotherhood often brandished its democratic practices as a rebuke to the regime, whose infidelity to democracy is now well known.

But, of course, there is a world of difference between the Brotherhood’s internal voting procedures and democracy—not the least of which who has the right to vote. The universe of voters in the Brotherhood’s elections is a narrowly defined group of the chosen, who are not themselves elected and among whose number we find no women. Moreover, critics of the Muslim Brotherhood point to the fact that the movement’s most recent elections for general guide and for its guidance bureau were marked by accusations over irregularities and violations of the movement’s procedures.

⁶ Steven A. Cook, “Mistaking Data for ‘Theory,’” *Journal of Democracy*, 17.4 (2006), p. 168

⁷ Edward Djerejian, “The US and the Middle East in a Changing World,” *Dispatch* (U.S. Department of State), Vol. 3, No. 23, June 8, 1992 (<http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/briefing/dispatch/1992/html/Dispatchv3no23.html>, last accessed April 12, 2008)

⁸ Quoted in Tahhan. p. 294

⁹ Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement 1928-1942*, London: Ithaca Press, 2001, pp. 61-62

¹⁰ Mona El-Ghobashy, “The Political Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2005

Q. Are the Brothers violent?

A. In Egypt, not anymore. But they see violence against Israel as resistance to occupation.

It has been said that the Brotherhood's history demonstrates the movement's willingness to use violence to achieve its ends. For example, in the 1940s, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood established a (now defunct) "special apparatus," which was blamed for the assassination of Prime Minister Fathi Nuqrashi in 1948. Today, Muslim Brotherhood-related parties in Palestine and Lebanon both boast militias. Add to this the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood's catechism includes a line declaring that "death for the sake of God is our fondest wish," and it is easy to understand the doubts that attend the Muslim Brotherhood's fervent affirmations of democracy.

However, the Egyptian scholar Hassanayn Tawfiq Ibrahim reminds us that the Muslim Brotherhood was not the only Egyptian party with a militia. During the 1940s, he tells us, "many political trends [...] had their own armed militias."¹¹ According to the historian Yunan Labib Rizk, both the Wafd and Young Egypt parties, inspired by fascists in Germany and Italy, established paramilitary organizations—called, respectively, the Blue Shirts and the Green Shirts.¹² And while the Brotherhood's role in the Nuqrashi assassination is a stain on that organization's reputation, it's worth noting that Anwar Sadat—whom we today revere as a man of peace—in 1945 and 1946 participated in assassination attempts against then-Prime Minister Mustafa al-Nahhas (who escaped) and pro-British Finance Minister Amin Uthman (who did not).¹³ The Brothers argue that their violent history is just that—history.

However, fears of Brotherhood violence persist, and the Brothers have not done enough to dispel them. In December, 2006, a group of approximately 35 Brotherhood students at al-Azhar University—who were protesting a decision by the university to expel some of their members—decided to put on a martial arts show, complete with black commando-style uniforms.¹⁴ Though my Brotherhood interlocutors dismissed that episode as a regrettable instance of poor judgment by some high-spirited youths, harder to dismiss was the former guide Mahdi Akef's declaration in August 2006 that he was ready to send 10,000 Brothers to fight alongside Hezbollah in its war

¹¹ Hassanayn Tawfiq Ibrahim, *Al-Nidham al-Siyasi wal-Ikhwan al-Muslimun fi Misr: Min al-Tassamuh ila al-Muwajaha 1981-1996 (The Political System and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: From Tolerance to Confrontation, 1981-1996)*, Beirut: Dar al-Tali'ah lil-Tiba'ah wal-Nashr, 1998, p. 63

¹² See Marius Deeb, *Party Politics in Egypt: The Wafd and Its Rivals 1919-1939*, London: Ithaca Press, 1979, pp. 350-354; and Yunan Labib Rizk, "The Colour of Shirts," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 748, 23-29 June, 2005 (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/748/chrncls.htm>, last accessed April 3, 2008). According to Rizk, the newspaper of the Wafdist Blue Shirts was even called *al-Jihad*.

¹³ See Donald M. Reid, "Political Assassination in Egypt, 1910-1954," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1982, pp. 625-651

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Police Intensify Crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood," *Human Rights News*, December 18, 2006 (<http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2006/12/18/egypt14890.htm>, last accessed April 7, 2008)

against Israel.¹⁵ All Muslim Brothers I speak to believe that Hamas' actions against Israel are justified forms of resistance against occupation.

Two facts are worth noting, however. First, on September 14th, 2001, the leaders of several Muslim movements, including Mustafa Mashhur, the Brotherhood's general guide at the time, released a statement condemning the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.¹⁶ (Although some were unsatisfied by the fact that the statement was also signed by the founder of Hamas, and did not mention Usama Bin Ladin.) Second, every credible observer of the recent Egyptian revolution has noted that the Brotherhood played a constructive and peaceful role in the protests that brought down the Mubarak regime.

Q. Would the Brotherhood win democratic elections?

A. They would certainly win a significant share of seats. How many is unknown.

We have no way of knowing how the Brothers would perform in a free and fair election. The movement captured 88 out of 444 seats in Egypt's 2005 parliamentary elections, but this was with less than 25 percent turnout. In total, between 2.5 and 3 million Egyptians voted for the Brothers in 2005, out of approximately 32 million eligible voters. On the other hand, the Brotherhood only competed for 160 seats in that legislature—had they run for more seats, they almost certainly would have earned more votes.

My research on the 2005 parliamentary elections shows that even the most electorally successful Muslim Brotherhood candidates won only small pluralities of the vote on the first round of balloting.¹⁷ Since the movement has never been put to a free and fair electoral test, any attempt to infer future performance from past results is risky, but it is safe to say that in past elections, even in districts where the Muslim Brotherhood eventually won, more people generally voted against the Brotherhood (for candidates of the ruling party or for local notables) than for it.

Looking ahead to Egypt's upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections: The movement has promised to seek neither the presidency nor a parliamentary majority, but it is as yet unclear how many parliamentary candidates they will nominate in September. As the most organized political party in Egypt, there is every reason to expect the Brothers to win a significant number of seats in the new legislature. However, recent splits in the organization—between liberals and conservatives, young members and the old guard—may compromise the movement's electoral effectiveness.

¹⁵ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 148

¹⁶ "Ulama wa mufaikkurn Muslimun yunadidun bil-hujum ala Washington wa New York (Islamic scholars and thinkers condemn the attacks on Washington and New York)," *al-Quds*, September 14, 2001, p. 2

¹⁷ The 2005 elections were two-round elections carried out in three geographically-determined phases held about ten days apart.

Q. What kinds of things would the Brotherhood do in parliament?

A. They want to legislate morals, but they also see themselves as anti-corruption watchdogs.

It is clear that if the Brotherhood had its way, it would like to erect Islamic law, which it sees as the surest foundation for a just, equitable, and prosperous society. As noted above, the Muslim Brothers have disavowed plans to seek a parliamentary majority, so it's unlikely they will have their run of the legislature in the near term. Nonetheless, they will certainly constitute an important bloc in parliament, and the best predictor for what they would do in future parliaments is what they've done in past ones.

How did the Brothers behave in parliament under Mubarak? I have counted all interpellations (questions to ministers) issued by Brotherhood deputies between 1984 and 2005 (1990-2000 are excluded because there were no Brothers in parliament from 1990-1995 and only one from 1995-2000.) A review of the data suggests that religious issues did not make up the majority of the Brotherhood's parliamentary agenda. Thus, while 2 of the Brotherhood's 5 interpellations in 1984, and 3 of its 6 in 1987, dealt with religious matters, in the 2000-2005 parliament, religious issues were dwarfed by issues of political corruption and bureaucratic mismanagement. Of the more than 50 Brotherhood interpellations issued between 2000 and 2005, fewer than ten dealt with religion.

However, we should not interpret this to mean that the Brotherhood would just behave like any other liberal political party. In the past, the Brotherhood has used its position in parliament to oppose any attempts to liberalize laws governing the personal or sexual realm. For example, the Brothers opposed passage of the June 2008 children's rights bill, which aimed to bring Egyptian laws in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Brothers labeled the bill a contravention of the *shari'a* and an "importation" that "brings punishment under the guise of mercy." At issue were provisions criminalizing female genital cutting, raising the age of marriage to 18, and granting increased legal recognition to children born out of wedlock. □ □

Though female genital mutilation has been declining in legitimacy and popularity in recent years, the Muslim Brotherhood's parliamentarians have stood against attempts to criminalize it. One Muslim Brotherhood MP argued that the matter of circumcision should be left to the parents, in consultation with "pious, honest doctors."¹⁸ Another even argued that the practice is Islamically-sanctioned and brings real benefits for girls, and that "behind the attempts to criminalize [female circumcision] are Western organizations that aim to change our society's Islamic values and disfiguring its identity."¹⁹ In July, 2008, one Brotherhood MP, even spoke up on the floor of

¹⁸ Farīd Ismā'īl, "Makhātir Qanūn al-Tifl (The Dangers of the Child Law)," Website of Muslim Brotherhood Parliamentary Bloc, June 30, 2008. Available at <http://www.nowabikhwan.com/Index.aspx?ctrl=press&ID=e70fe6e1-98e7-4108-8dbf-4bb46a6820a1>.

¹⁹ `Abd Allāh Shahāta, "Al-Khitān fī kitāb jadīd li `Askar (Circumcision in a new book by `Askar)," Website of Muslim Brotherhood Parliamentary Bloc, May 24, 2008. Available at <http://www.nowabikhwan.com/Index.aspx?ctrl=press&ID=48875f85-1f16-4efa-ac03-6955a15b8a7b>.

parliament in defense of two women doctors who were under prosecution for performing female circumcisions. Another dismissed medical objections to clitoridectomy by comparing it to having one's tonsils removed.²⁰□

The Brotherhood was also strongly opposed to the provisions raising the age of marriage and making it easier to register children born outside of marriage (current Egyptian law stipulates birth certificates must indicate the father's name). Several Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarians argued that raising the age of marriage would lead to increases in sex out of wedlock. Removing the requirement of listing a father on birth certificates was thought to have a similarly indecent effect. During floor debates over the bill, one Brotherhood MP asked, “When the adulterous woman comes with a child and says this is my child and he has no father, she is admitting adultery, and yet there is no punishment, and this encourages adultery.” Another Brotherhood MP concurred, and asked, “Shall I simply leave my daughter to come and go with her boyfriend without punishment?”²¹

Q. Should we worry about the Muslim Brothers?

A. We should worry less about the strength of the Brothers, and more about the strength of Egyptian democracy.

The Muslim Brotherhood is a religious organization and political party in a poor, dependent country. Nothing more, nothing less. It is not particularly friendly to American power or culture, but neither is it in a position to threaten either of these things. It has a vision for Egypt that we might consider retrograde, but it claims to want to achieve this vision through the electoral process, and so far its behavior has borne this out. Whether Egyptians will be receptive to the Brotherhood’s agenda is an open question, but evidence from previous elections reveals that Egyptians have a wide range of political preferences and affiliations and the Brotherhood cannot claim to represent a majority of them. My belief is that we should be concerned less with gauging the Muslim Brotherhood “threat” than with helping to ensure that Egypt’s democratic institutions are healthy, durable, and invulnerable to any group (Islamist or not) that may try to subvert them.

²⁰ `Abd Allāh Shahāta, “Nūr al-Dīn yarfud mu`āqabat tabībatayn ajratan `amaliyyāt khitān (Nūr al-Dīn rejects the punishment of two women doctors for performing female circumcisions),” Website of Muslim Brotherhood Parliamentary Bloc, July 19, 2008. Available at <http://www.nowabikhwan.com/Index.aspx?ctrl=press&ID=af08b400-fcd6-494a-8e0d-d13cbd75b806>.

²¹ Muhammad Diā' al-Dīn, “Al-kutla tarfud qānūn al-tifl wa tasifuhu bi al-mustawrad (The Bloc rejects the ‘children's law’ and describes it as imported),” The Official Website of the Muslim Brotherhood's Parliamentary Bloc, June 1, 2008. Available at <http://www.nowabikhwan.com/index.aspx?ctrl=press&ID=3b0d976f-bd45-466c-9a34-d214ff27702c>.