

Policy Forum Report The Muslim Brotherhood: Friend or Foe?

On April 24, 2014, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) convened a Policy Forum for key Congressional and Executive Branch staff and selected representatives of the American Muslim community to discuss the Muslim Brotherhood and its various manifestations in different settings. The following is a summary of the views expressed and the insights that emerged from the discussion.¹

Background

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928, in order to spread Islamic morals and oppose British colonial rule. While the Brotherhood's early work primarily consisted of providing medical, educational, and other types of services to the poor, the group's later focus has been to promote a more traditional view of Islam, and to call for a return to the use of the Qur'an and sharia law as the basis for personal and political life.

The Muslim Brotherhood supported the 1952 coup against the British-backed monarchy in Egypt, but quickly ran into trouble with its successor, the military junta of Gamal Abdel Nasser. After attempting to assassinate Nasser in 1954, hundreds of Brotherhood members were jailed and the group was barred from government. It was during this time that Sayyid Qutb rose to prominence in the Brotherhood. Although his writings influenced future militant Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda and Hamas, the Brotherhood itself renounced violence in the early 1970s.

The Brotherhood soon spread from Egypt to surrounding areas, including Algeria, Syria, Sudan, and the Palestinian territories, where it provided the basis for Hamas. In Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, and Kuwait, the Brotherhood has established itself in parliament or in the mainstream political opposition and is growing in popularity (generally through establishing local political parties, since the Brotherhood itself is not a party). Although initially reluctant, the Brotherhood came to support the uprising in Syria in 2011 and has played a role on the Syrian National Council during the conflict and participated in attacks against the government and the Baath Party.

Although the Brotherhood did not initiate the 2011 Egyptian uprising against Hosni Mubarak, it eventually threw its support behind it; and in 2012, Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi was elected Egypt's first post-revolution president. He served until July 2013, when he was ousted by the military following mass anti-government protests. The Brotherhood was subsequently labeled a terrorist organization, and the military transition government has cracked down on pro-Morsi protestors who continue to demonstrate against his overthrow. (Subsequent to this Forum, former army chief Abdel

¹ The International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) is a Washington-based NGO that prevents and resolves identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy by incorporating religion as part of the solution. American Muslims for Constructive Engagement (AMCE) is an informal group of Muslim community leaders and scholars that seeks to foster a constructive partnership between the American Muslim community and the US Government for the purpose of advancing the national interest. The views expressed in this brief may not necessarily represent the views of ICRD or AMCE.

Fattah El-Sisi was elected president by nearly 97% of the electorate, with an estimated 46-47% voter turnout.)

Fearing uprisings in their own countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have also labeled the Brotherhood a terrorist organization, and it has assumed a somewhat controversial posture in Europe and the United States as well. Most of the Forum discussion focused on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Perceptions Gap and Current Situation

Views of the Brotherhood in Egypt range from highly critical to highly sympathetic. Some prefer a strong army leader to a democratically-elected Brotherhood leader, viewing the Brotherhood as lacking the competence and tolerance to govern effectively and inclusively. They believe the Brotherhood tried to impose an Islamist state on Egypt, and refuse to accept the organization until it reforms itself. Others feel Egypt cannot be democratic if it excludes the Islamists, and that there can be no real democracy under a military ruler, even an elected one like Sisi. They view the struggle between the Brotherhood and the current government as not simply a struggle for power but a struggle to reclaim civilian rule over the government. They see no contradiction between an Islamist state and a civil state. One Brotherhood member stressed that this pro-Brotherhood contingent is now in dialogue with groups who formerly supported Morsi's overthrow but who now regret it, and believes that Egyptians will continue to demonstrate in the streets peacefully against Sisi's rule until there is change.

Others hold views somewhere in the middle, supporting neither the Brotherhood nor Sisi, and condemning the military take over and crackdown on protestors. Sisi has been accused of suppressing not only the Brotherhood but all voices of dissent.

In this environment, there have been few opportunities for dialogue among Egyptians with opposing views, especially since the banning of the Brotherhood. Many tend to believe their views represent the majority, and deny or dismiss those who think differently, without understanding the reasons for why they do

Criticisms of the Muslim Brotherhood

Those who oppose the Muslim Brotherhood tend to hold one or more of the following views:

- The Brotherhood fails to realize that democracy entails inclusiveness, tolerance, and pluralism, not just majority rule.
- The Brotherhood is trying to turn Egypt into an Islamic state governed by sharia law rather than a secular state. Once they regain power, the Brotherhood will begin to dismantle the civil state and make it difficult for liberal, secular, and non-Islamist political forces to participate. The sense that democracy was being threatened by the Brotherhood led many to support Morsi's overthrow.
- The Brotherhood is not willing to coexist or enter into dialogue with those who think differently. Both during and after Morsi's rule, the Brotherhood demonized their critics and accused those who didn't support them of not being true Muslims. They alienated the secular or non-Islamist Egyptians, Christians, women, youth, and the main revolutionaries who overthrew Mubarak. They have sought dialogue with the West but not with other Egyptians.
- Under Morsi, some protestors were detained or killed, and the Brotherhood has instigated violence in Egypt after Morsi's overthrow.

- The Brotherhood is disingenuous—they say one thing to their constituents in Arabic and another to the international community in English. They reneged on their vows not to run a candidate for President or to seek majority participation in the Parliament.
- The Brotherhood is incompetent to deal with Egypt's economic and other problems. Morsi was
 perceived to be receiving his instructions from the Shura Council instead of making his own
 decisions.

Support for the Muslim Brotherhood

Those who support or sympathize with the Muslim Brotherhood tend to hold one or more of the following views:

- Brotherhood candidates came to power through free and fair elections. The Brotherhood is the
 most organized opposition institution in Egypt, and has greater grassroots support than the
 security forces, judiciary, and media, which support the army. Egypt cannot be democratic if it
 overthrows elected leaders and excludes Islamists.
- The Brotherhood did invite people of differing views and identities to participate in Morsi's government. For example, he appointed a Coptic Christian—Nancy Zakhari, Minister of Scientific Research—to his cabinet. Most of the groups which cooperated in his overthrow were invited to participate in his government, and some of them now regret supporting his overthrow.
- The Brotherhood did not purge its opponents to the extent that the military government has. Far more Egyptians have been killed and jailed after Morsi's overthrow than during his administration. (Exact numbers are disputed, but the Egyptian government claims 600 killed, the Brotherhood claims 1200, and Al-Jazeera claims 1400.)
- The Brotherhood has denounced violence, and recently stated that the peacefulness (of the protestors) is stronger than the bullets of the army and that anyone who wants to use violence for political change is not part of the Brotherhood. However, with the Brotherhood now banned as a terrorist organization and a majority of its leaders exiled or imprisoned, it is losing its ability to control the actions of its supporters and sympathizers. Some believe that the current bombings in Egypt are actually carried out by the government so that its opponents can be blamed and discredited, and that the street protests that led to Morsi's ouster were instigated by the military rather than the general populace.
- Many of the problems under Morsi's rule were inherited from previous regimes. A significant portion of the Egyptian economy is controlled by the military, so it could not be reformed by Morsi in a mere year. Rather than dismissing officials outright due to past corruption, Morsi wanted to give them a chance to redeem themselves in a new, non-corrupt government.
- The Brotherhood made some mistakes, but there were also concerted efforts to make them fail, both from leftist and other parties who became spoilers (e.g. by boycotting political proceedings, refusing attempts at reconciliation, and destabilizing the transition process) and from the media, who portrayed them as transnational agents rather than patriotic Egyptians.

Role of the United States

The United States has been alternately accused by various factions of supporting the Brotherhood on the one hand and supporting Morsi's overthrow on the other. Although the United States has suspended much of its aid to Egypt following the overthrow, its refusal to call the overthrow a "coup" (which would require a complete suspension of aid) has hurt its credibility in the eyes of those who see this as supporting or acquiescing to a military takeover of a democratically-elected government. By the same token, labeling the overthrow a coup would cause America to lose what little leverage it has yet remaining.

Others feel the United States did support democracy in Egypt during Morsi's administration, and that the US Ambassador engaged in "shuttle diplomacy" between Morsi and Sisi in an attempt to resolve the crisis before Morsi was ousted. The United States now faces the dilemma of how best to support the Egyptian people when it is not clear what the will of the people is, in the aftermath of the popular overthrow of a democratically-elected government.

Recommendations for the United States

Various participants offered recommendations for US policymakers:

- Support the democratic process in Egypt rather than any particular party. Adhere to America's own principles of freedom, human rights and rule of law in its relations with Egypt.
- Pressure the Egyptian government to allow vulnerable groups to have a political voice and to protect free expression for voices of dissent. Support training programs to help vulnerable groups better express their concerns and participate in civil society.
- Encourage or support dialogue and collaborative problem-solving among diverse Egyptian groups (e.g. Islamists, liberals), centered on understanding opposing views and serving common interests, such as economic improvement, security, and freedom of expression. This should include supporting such dialogue among Egyptian expats who could influence those back in Egypt.
- Ensure that conditions are attached to US aid that support democratic principles and human rights. Target future aid so that it benefits the people directly, not simply the military.
- Make US aid more visible and recognizable by ordinary people. When Egyptians cannot see the effects of US aid or identify it as coming from America, the United States gets no credit for its assistance, further fueling misperceptions about the adequacy of US support.
- Work with Egyptians, including the Muslim Brotherhood, to further mutual interests, and engage in a dialogue of equals.
- Raise concerns about US citizens currently imprisoned and being mistreated, and work to protect their rights.