Muslim Brotherhood Faces Growing Challenges in Egypt

By Steven Brooke

FOR DECADES, THE Muslim Brotherhood has dominated Egypt's ideological landscape. Today, the group is not just the largest organized political opposition to the Egyptian government, but its influence touches nearly all sectors of Egyptian society, including religion, charity and commerce. Probably not coincidentally, the profile of the Brotherhood's mainstream Islamism has grown as jihadist activity in Egypt plummeted following its bloody apex in 1997.

The Brotherhood's surprisingly good showing in Egypt's 2005 parliamentary elections was a high-profile sign of the organization's growth. Since then, however, the movement's organizational cohesion has been stressed by both endogenous and exogenous developments. Egypt's changing religious landscape, the jostling of different tendencies inside the Brotherhood itself, a government crackdown on the group, and the effects of Israel's recent actions in the Gaza Strip challenge an organization whose unofficial slogan, some affirm, is "listen and obey."[1] While this poses a series of dilemmas to the Brotherhood, the implications also stretch widely across Egyptian society.

A Changing Ideological Landscape

After an absence of seven years, a series of jihadist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula in 2004, 2005 and 2006 killed nearly 150 people, including foreign tourists. The Egyptian press has recently been dotted with periodic reports of the revival of historical jihadist groups, such as Takfir wal-Hijra or Egyptian Islamic Jihad, or the emergence of new groups with names such as The Platoon of Khalid al-Islambuli, Muhammad's Army, or The Abdullah Azzam Brigades. A nascent "al-Qa`ida in Egypt" has even emerged, stirring fears that the country will once again become a jihadist battlefield.

Despite these reports, the (re)emergence of an organized jihadist movement in Egypt remains a remote possibility. Radicalization in the Sinai feeds off the economic deprivation and governmental neglect of the Bedouin population there, conditions that do not transfer well to other parts of Egypt.[2] The vicious jihadist campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s still reverberate among the Egyptian population, and the steadily expanding security and intelligence services have learned from their experiences. There remains no high-profile jihadist figure or group in Egypt to cluster around or from which to receive ideological guidance. Indeed, the recantations and revisions of erstwhile jihadist groups such as Gamaa al-Islamiyya (the Egyptian Islamic Group) and Egyptian Islamic Jihad highlight the weakness of Egypt's domestic Salafi-jihadi milieu.

While welcome, organized Salafi-jihadism's difficulty in gaining a foothold in Egypt addresses only part of a complex situation. As frustration with the government increases and neo-liberal economic reforms exacerbate socio-economic divides, a non-violent but especially stern, politically quietist brand of Salafist Islam has elbowed its way into Egypt's religious landscape.[3] The relationship between this "pietist" Salafism and the Brotherhood is a complex and not necessarily antagonistic one.[4] It is telling, however, that perhaps the main area of disagreement between the pietists and the Brothers is over the legitimacy of political action. Pietist Salafism grants an almost unwavering allegiance to the ruler while strictly avoiding politics and electoral participation, a stance sharply at odds with the mainstream political Islam of

the Muslim Brotherhood.[5] This rivalry has been exploited in Saudi Arabia, for instance, as a way for the government to counter the growing influence of political Islamists. In interviews, some Muslim Brothers have claimed that the same strategy is being used by the Egyptian government today. As they see it, allowing, or even encouraging, the growth of pietist Salafism offers a way to divert the rising religiosity of the Egyptian population into a direction without immediate political ramifications.[6]

The entry of this trend into Egyptian society has been eased by migratory, commercial, and religious links to the Arabian Peninsula. Despite recently being overtaken by Asians, millions of Egyptians have worked as migrant laborers in the Gulf, particularly in Saudi Arabia.[7] As these workers return, some bring a Saudi-style religious conservatism with them.[8] Similarly, Saudi Arabian investment in Egypt has increased dramatically, reaching $1 billion in 2005 and steadily growing since.[9] While the vast majority of this investment is simply routine commerce, there are occasionally religious and cultural repercussions.[10]

1 Personal interview, Muslim Brotherhood activist, summer 2006. For an excellent analysis of the Brotherhood and the war in Gaza, see Joshua Stacher, "The Brothers and the Wars," *Middle East Report* Spring (2009).

2 International Crisis Group, "Egypt's Sinai Question," January 30, 2007; Scott Anderson, "Under Egypt's Volcano," *Vanity Fair*, October 28, 2006.

3 For a more pessimistic view of the spread of Salafism in Egypt, see Chris Heffelfinger, *Trends in Egyptian Salafi Activism* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

4 In describing Salafists, this article relies on the broad categories (jihadist, pietist, and political) used by Samir Amghar, "Le Salafisme in Europe: Le Mouvance Polymorphe d'une Radicalisation," *Politique Etrangere* 1 (2006). Additionally, the author's personal correspondence in 2008-2009 with a Muslim Brotherhood member was particularly helpful to understanding this relationship.

5 For more on this strain of Salafism, and particularly on its relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, see Stephane Lacroix, "L'apport de Muhammed Nasir al-Din al-Albani au Salafisme Contemporain," in Bernard Rougier ed., *Qu'est-Ce Que Le Salafisme?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France/Proche Orient, 2008), pp. 54-57, 62-64.

6 Personal interview, Muslim Brotherhood activists, summer/fall 2008. Some recent news reports have also mentioned this tactic. See Paul Schemm, "Ultraconservative Islam on Rise in Mideast," Associated Press, October 18, 2008; Nabil Sharaf al-Din, "After Years of Supporting Salafism To Counter the Muslim Brothers and the Jehadists, Egyptian Authorities Launch a Campaign To Counter a Salafi Tide Among Youths," Ilaf.com, December 12, 2008.

7 Jackline Wahba, "Does International Migration Matter? A Study of Egyptian Return Migrants," draft paper prepared for the conference "Arab Migration in a Globalized World," February 2003.

8 See, for instance, Caryle Murphy, *Passion for Islam*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), pp. 31-34.

9 "Saudi Investment in Egypt Reaches 1 Billion Mark," Saudi Arabian Market Information Resource and Directory, June 5, 2005.

10 See some examples cited in Jack Schenker, "Hyatt and Dry - Saudi Hotel Owner Takes the Fizz Out of Cairo's Tourist Allure," *Guardian*, July 21, 2008; Rod Nordland, "The Last Egyptian Bellydancer," *Newsweek*, June 9, 2008.

Pietist Salafism in Egypt has also expanded due to a number of Saudi-trained and influenced clerics. Largely eschewing formal organizations, popular shaykhs such as Abu Ishaq al-Heweny, Mohamed Hassan, and Mohamed Hussain Yaqob are creating a religious center of gravity that competes with the Muslim Brotherhood's political Islamism. As apparent from their biographies, many are influenced by Abdul Aziz Ibn Baz, Muhammed Nasir al-Din al-Albani, Muhammed Ibn al-Uthaymin, and others from the Saudi Salafist establishment. They, and others linked to this movement, run professional websites, host austere television programs, carve out niches in Egyptian bookstores, and operate increasingly influential charities and religious associations. While this trend is non-violent, their rigid conception of belief, occasionally antagonistic posture toward religious minorities, and tendency to withdrawal from society led the Egyptian scholar of Islamist movements, Khalil al-Anani, to warn of a revival of "social violence" as Egyptian society undergoes a "Salafisation."[11]

The Brotherhood Under Pressure

Beyond Egyptian society, these changing religious dynamics influence the Muslim Brotherhood as well. The Brotherhood is a large organization, consisting of a number of competing sources of ideological inspiration. One of these is a Salafist-tinged conservatism, historically stronger among more rural constituencies of the Brotherhood but increasingly making urban inroads. In part, this influence entered the Brotherhood through those members who studied or spent time in Saudi Arabia during the repression of the 1960s and 1970. Its lineage also traces back to the general support Saudi Arabia offered conservative opposition movements throughout the Middle East during the "Arab Cold War" from 1958-1970.[12] The recent growth of Salafism in Egyptian society has been mirrored by a strengthening of this trend inside the Brotherhood. It is increasingly popular among younger activists.[13]

The influence is somewhat visible in the Brotherhood's internal debates over political participation. While the Brotherhood has been officially committed to the political process since 1984 and shown little outward signs of revisiting that decision, the issue is still a fault line in the group. Among some conservative members, especially those influenced by a traditional Salafist wariness of politics, the group's electoral forays are a distraction from the Brotherhood's core mission of *da`wa* (preaching) and *tarbiyya* (education, upbringing).[14] The other side of the divide is inhabited by "middle generation" Muslim Brotherhood leaders as well as a small but highly vocal younger generation of politically engaged activists.[15]

These divisions have been amplified by the Egyptian government's ongoing crackdown on the Brotherhood. In December 2005, candidates affiliated with the officially banned but tolerated Muslim Brotherhood managed to win 88 out of 454 seats in the Egyptian parliament. This was followed shortly after by Hamas' majority victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections. These unexpected successes spurred the Egyptian government to increase the pressure on the Brotherhood, partly to remind the newly-empowered organization that the traditional "red lines" still applied. In addition to a wave of arrests, a number of legal measures designed to constrict the Brotherhood's participation in Egyptian political life were also introduced.[16]

According to the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide Muhammed Mahdi Akef, in the last 10 years 25,000 Muslim Brothers have spent time in prison.[17] In 2008 alone, according to other Brotherhood sources, more than 7,500 activists were arrested.[18] Whether intended or not, the Egyptian government's arrests of politically engaged, pragmatic individuals such as Khairat al-Shater and Isam El-Arian have subtly shifted the internal dynamics of the group in a more conservative direction. As conservative influences figure more prominently in the group's issuances, such as the draft party platform, some inside the movement have expressed their frustrations.[19] The Egyptian government's actions also reportedly caused some prominent voices within the Brotherhood to privately question whether or not the benefits of political participation are outweighed by the heavy costs of state repression.[20]

As government pressures exacerbate different tendencies in the Brotherhood and internal tensions stretch the movement's boundaries, external actors are attempting to exploit the turmoil. The internet has become a significant field in this contest.[21] As one Egyptian Muslim Brother stated, "everytime there is a forum or a comment section [of an

---

11 International Crisis Group, "Egypt's Muslim Brothers: Confrontation or Integration?" June 18, 2008, p. 22. There is also a risk that crude "preventative countermeasures" against some of these conservative, though non-violent, actors may actually provoke the sort of violence the government is seeking to avoid.

12 Saeed Shehabi, "The Role of Religious Ideology in the Expansionist Policies of Saudi Arabia," in Mardawi al-Rasheed ed., *Kingdom without Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 190-191.

13 Khalil al-Anani, "Supressing the Muslim Brotherhood is not a Solution," *Daily Star* [Cairo], March 5, 2008.

14 The debate is partially illustrated in Israel Elad-Altman, "Democracy, Elections, and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 3 (2006). For a contemporary account, see Rania Badawi, "Al-Doktor Yusuf al-Qaradawi: Rais al Ittihad al Alami Ulema al Muslimeen (1/2), Qawaneen al-Irhab wal al-Thuwara' Makhalafa Lilsharia," *al-Masry al-Youm*, September 8, 2008. In an interview, one Muslim Brother attributed al-Qaradawi's hard-line stance on Shi`a to influence from Gulf-based Salafists (al-Qaradawi is based in Qatar).

15 For a vivid portrait of this young, politically active cohort, see Marc Lynch, "Young Brothers in Cyberspace," *Middle East Report* Winter (2007).

16 "Egypt's Muslim Brothers: Confrontation or Integration?" pp. 12-15.

17 "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Leader Expects 'Nothing Good' From Obama," *al-Arab* [Doha], January 24, 2009.

18 "Egypt Arrests 7588 From the Brotherhood in 2008," al-Jazira, January 30, 2008.

19 In the fall of 2007, a number of young activists created www.ikhwanoffline.com, which paralleled the Brotherhood's official www.ikhwanonline.com website to register their disappointment with the conservative editorial direction of the official website.

20 Personal interview, Muslim Brotherhood activist, fall 2008. A senior official, however, recently stated that the Brotherhood was planning to contest the 2010 parliamentary elections. For more, see Abdel Moneim Mahmoud, "Habib: Gaza is our Opportunity for Reconciliation and we Will Participate in the 2010 (Parliamentary) Elections," www.IslamOnline.net, February 8, 2009.

21 For a pietist Salafist critique of the Muslim Brotherhood, see "The Historical Influences and Effects of the Methodologies of al-Ikhwaan al-Muslimoon Upon the Salaf," Salafi Publications, March 2003, available at www.thenoblequran.com/sps/sp.cfm?secID=MNJ&subsecID=MNJ18&loadpage=displaysubsection.cfm.

article], the Salafis are there."[22] Ayman al-Zawahiri in particular has repeatedly appeared on video and audio releases alternatively heckling and enjoining the Brotherhood. For instance, in a March 11, 2007 audiotape, released at the height of the Egyptian government's repression of the Brotherhood, al-Zawahiri offered a carefully crafted message to Brotherhood members and sympathizers, urging them to reject the Brotherhood's peaceful, accomodationist approach that has led to nothing but repression:

> I appeal to all my Muslim brothers to set themselves free from the shackles of the organizations leading them into the mazes of politics…The Egyptian government is pouncing on those who recognized the legitimacy of its president, constitution, and laws. It is pouncing on those who accepted the rule of the majority of voters, and renounced the rule of Shari`a. It is pouncing on those who accepted citizenship and abandoned and renounced the brotherhood of Islam.[23]

The Effects of the Gaza Crisis

Israel's recent offensive in the Gaza Strip has also affected the Brotherhood. Although Israel may have weakened Hamas, their military action in Gaza also strengthened Islamist movements across the Middle East.[24] Islamists positioned themselves at the center of popular anger and frustration, leading Hossam Tammam, a savvy observer of Islamist politics, to write that "Islamism is now the master of the

moment."[25] In Egypt, Supreme Guide Muhammed Mahdi Akef personally led the Brotherhood's participation in a series of massive protests against Israel's actions. According to Deputy General Guide Muhammed Habib, more than 1,200 Muslim Brotherhood activists were arrested protesting the attacks on Gaza, and hundreds remain in prison.[26] Yet in crafting a response, the Brotherhood's leadership was forced to balance between pressures from the cadres (and society writ large) while preserving the organization's long-term viability. As a conservative organization concerned with ensuring its survival and expanding its reach inside Egyptian society, the Brotherhood must avoid provoking a regime increasingly worried about ongoing socio-economic disturbances and a looming, potentially chaotic transfer of power. As driven home especially hard in the last few years, confrontation with the government carries tremendous consequences.

Fortunately for the Brotherhood, however, direct and drastic confrontation is unnecessary. As dissatisfaction grows (and the very sober International Crisis Group wrote even before the Gaza crisis that "anti-regime sentiment appears to be reaching new heights"), the Brotherhood will benefit from its position as the most prominent opposition to an increasingly unpopular government.[27] Going forward, the Brotherhood will likely continue to avoid hot button issues, such as presidential succession, while staking out positions supported by Egyptian popular opinion, such as stopping natural gas shipments to Israel or reopening the Rafah border crossing with Gaza.[28]

A strategy that slowly and peacefully grows and consolidates the Brotherhood's position is in line with the organization's goals as well as its methodology. A potential problem, however, is that the disconnect between the Brotherhood's calculated, Fabian approach and the urgency and emotion unleashed by Israel's war on Gaza will be so jarring that the Brotherhood's non-violent orientation will seem insufficient. While a large-scale cleavage of Muslim Brothers from the broader organization is highly unlikely, the effect on individuals, particularly those already disenchanted and frustrated with developments of the last few years, is less clear. A similar dynamic may echo in broader society, whereby the Brotherhood's studied approach detracts from the organization's ability to draw new members and compete among an increasingly diverse religious landscape.

As individuals spin out of the Brotherhood's orbit, or as the group's ideology and behavior becomes less attractive to a society beset by a series of radicalizing influences, there is a risk of violence. Specifically, the fracturing of Egyptian socio-religious authority opens new opportunity structures, especially for the type of "individualized jihad" as envisioned by al-Qa`ida theorist Abu Mus`ab al-Suri in *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*. For instance, in his January 2009 audiotape, Ayman al-Zawahiri encouraged individualized action, telling Egyptian Muslims specifically "it is your duty to lift the siege, you must take this responsibility."[29] Moreover, while the investigation is ongoing, it appears that February's bombing in Cairo—which killed one and injured dozens—was carried out by individuals operating along these lines. A similar "individualized" stabbing of an American in Cairo's Khan al-Khalili market by an Egyptian motivated by his "hatred for foreigners because of the Israeli offensive in Gaza" took place days later.[30] A few days after that, an

22 Personal interview, Muslim Brotherhood activist, fall 2008.

23 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Palestine is Our Concern and the Concern of Every Muslim," al-Sahab, March 11, 2007. In a contemporaneous interview with a Brotherhood activist, he conceded that on the group's outer edges and among sympathizers al-Zawahiri's attempt to poach "could be effective."

24 In some instances, however, old fault lines proved hard to overcome. Reflecting longstanding disagreements between the Brotherhood and the Salafists, popular Salafist shaykh Mohamed Yaqob initially criticized Hamas for provoking the conflict. He, in turn, was censured by his compatriot Mohamed Hassan. For more, see Abd al-Muna`im Muneeb, "Mohammed Hasan Yamtadah Hamas wa Suwareekh al-Muqawama radan a'alee Sakhraya Muhammed Hussein Yacoub min al-Haraka," al-Dustor, January 14, 2009.

25 Hossam Tammam, "Shifting Sands," *al-Ahram Weekly*, February 19-25, 2009.

26 "Al-Raya Interview with Muslim Brotherhood Deputy Chairman over Gaza Crisis," Ikhwanweb, February 2, 2009. Importantly, other actors were also subjected to a harsh regime response, including the Islamist-oriented Labor Party leader Magdy Hussein and prominent blogger and activist Philip Rizk.

27 "Egypt's Muslim Brothers: Confrontation or Integration?" p. 3.

28 This should not be taken as an argument that the Brotherhood's popular and respected position in Egyptian society is due to some sort of clever triangulation or exploitation of Egyptian popular opinion. Beyond ideology, many support the group because of its effective delivery of social services at local levels, as well as the re-

sponsiveness of elected Brotherhood officials on issues of everyday concern. See, for instance, Samer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "The Brotherhood Goes to Parliament," *Middle East Report* Fall (2006).

29 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Gaza Massacre and the Traitor's Seige," al-Sahab, January 6, 2009.

30 "American Teacher Knifed in Cairo Bazaar," *Arab Times* [Kuwait City], February 28, 2009.

improvised explosive was tossed into a Cairo metro station, although it failed to explode.[31]

Conclusion

The Brotherhood's powerful religious message, defined organizational boundaries and demanding criteria for membership ensure that activists remain committed to the group, even during times of stress and confrontation. As such, a Salafist current wary of politics or a cadre of youths frustrated with an out-of-touch leadership are each manageable within the confines of the organization. Likewise, the Brotherhood has an unfortunate familiarity with state repression and competing for ideological hegemony with various other religious elements. Individually, these factors pose little challenge to a movement as storied, adaptable, and inclusive as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Taken in the aggregate, however, increasing disincentives for political action, rising conservatism, and potential frustration with the Brotherhood's calculated approach to domestic and regional crises all exacerbate the normal centrifugal tendencies in an organization as diverse as the Muslim Brotherhood. Just like the Egyptian society it inhabits, the internal dynamics of the Muslim Brotherhood have become increasingly tumultuous and contentious in recent years. Coupled with the way Salafi-jihadis stalk the organization's periphery, creating and expanding ways to express both local and international grievances, the Brotherhood—and Egyptian society—is facing a potent challenge.

Steven Brooke is an independent academic based in Washington, D.C. He specializes in the study of both violent and non-violent Islamic social movements. His most recent article is "Jihadist Strategic Debates before 9/11," which appeared in the Spring 2008 (31:3) issue of Studies in Conflict and Terrorism.

---

31 "Cairo Metro Incendiary Bottle Fails to Explode," Agence France-Presse, March 1, 2009. These attacks resembled other small-scale, "individualized" attacks in Egypt in 2005. See Jailan Halawi, "Racing Against Time," *al-Ahram Weekly*, May 3, 2005.