



## The Problem of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood

By Jeffrey Azarva and Samuel Tadros

*On June 20, 2007, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research convened a meeting of U.S. intelligence officials to weigh the prospect of formal engagement with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,<sup>1</sup> known in Arabic as al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin. The session was the result of several years of discussion about engaging the group considered by many to be the fountainhead of Sunni fundamentalism.*

Although the Bush administration established a diplomatic quarantine of the Brotherhood after September 11, 2001, members of the U.S. House of Representatives held several meetings in Egypt in the spring of 2007—almost three months before the State Department meeting—with Muhammad Saad al-Katatni, an independent member of the Egyptian parliament and the head of its Brotherhood-affiliated bloc. On April 5, 2007, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) broke with convention and met with Katatni at the Egyptian parliament building and at the residence of U.S. ambassador to Egypt Francis J. Ricciardone. Then, on May 27, 2007, a four-member U.S. congressional delegation led by Representative David Price (D-N.C.) met with Katatni in Cairo.

Following Hoyer's visit, the U.S. Embassy in Cairo dismissed Egyptian criticism that his meetings presaged a reversal of U.S. policy.<sup>2</sup> In November 2007, Ricciardone also played down the meetings when he claimed that U.S. contacts with nominally independent Brotherhood members did “not imply American endorsement of the views of the individual parliamentarians or their political affiliates.”<sup>3</sup> Despite this reassurance, the meetings with Katatni are indicative of opinion leaders, both inside and outside the U.S. government, warming

to the idea of dialogue and reconciliation with the Brotherhood.

While acknowledging doubts about its democratic bona fides, recent essays and opinion pieces featured in *Foreign Affairs*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and the *Boston Globe* have all suggested that engagement with the Egyptian Brotherhood—the progenitor of every major Islamist movement today—could serve U.S. interests in spreading democracy to the Arab world.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, a much publicized white paper by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace likewise concluded that, despite several “gray zones” of ambiguity in Islamist thinking, a “policy of engagement with Islamist organizations, particularly with their reformist wings, is the only constructive option open to organizations and governments that believe democratic development in the Middle East is in everybody's interest.”<sup>5</sup>

The logic behind such reasoning rests on the supposition that, in a region where political Islam enjoys widespread appeal, so-called moderate Islamist movements are better suited to effect political change than their secular rivals. Given these organizations' large constituencies, it has become fashionable for engagement advocates to contend that representative governments can emerge in the Arab world only if groups like the Brotherhood are integrated into the political process. In a country with strong Islamic currents like Egypt, such a policy would appear not only sensible but

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Jeffrey Azarva (jazarva@aei.org) is a research assistant at AEI. Samuel Tadros (stadros@datamedia systems.net) is an Egyptian activist living in Cairo.

inevitable. Yet while the movement, established by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, constitutes the most organized and well-funded opposition in the country today—the byproduct of both its charitable services and *da'wa* (literally “call to God,” or preaching) network that operate outside state control—any examination of its rhetoric and political platforms shows U.S. outreach to be premature. Despite its professed commitment to pluralism and the rule of law, the Brotherhood continues to engage in dangerous doublespeak when it comes to the most fundamental issues of democracy.

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## Islamic Law and a Civil State

For all its talk of embracing liberal reform and a civil style of governance—albeit with a *marja'iyya*, or Islamic source of authority, at its core—the Brotherhood remains a dogmatic organization wedded to religious ideology. Nowhere are the perils of cooperation with the Brotherhood or its increased participation in the political arena more discernible than in the group's vision for a future Egyptian state.

The Brotherhood's first political reform initiative, issued in March 2004, provides a window into the group's thinking.<sup>6</sup> Regarding the movement's ultimate goal, supreme guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef is explicit. He writes that the Brotherhood's “only hope, if [we] wish to achieve any progress in our lives, is to return to our faith and apply *sharia* [Islamic law].”<sup>7</sup> Akef explains that the “establishment of God's law is the real solution to all of our suffering, whether it is due to domestic or foreign problems. . . . This [the introduction of *sharia*] is achieved through the creation of the Muslim individual, the Muslim household, the Muslim government, and the state which leads Islamic nations and carries the banner of *da'wa* so that the world is fortunate enough to receive the best of Islam and its teachings.”<sup>8</sup>

But since *sharia* has always resembled more of an ever-evolving set of rulings and interpretations than a codified legal system, the Brotherhood's appeal for Islamic law has aroused fears of just what its implementation would entail. Akef's initiative provides few specifics, but when he does elaborate there is cause for concern. For instance, under

the rubric of building the “Egyptian human being,” Akef stipulates that the media be purged of all material contradicting Islamic rulings; in the field of educational reform and scientific study, he seeks a greater emphasis on military training and memorization of the Quran; and with respect to cultural creativity and the arts, he calls for “conformity between the cinema and theater and the principles and values of Islam.”<sup>9</sup>

Misgivings about the Brotherhood's desire for an Islamic state by no means end there. While Akef has maintained that the application of Islamic law would be consistent with that of Egyptian law—article 2 of the Egyptian constitution enshrines Islam as the official state religion and Islamic jurisprudence as *the* principal source of legislation—his claim has failed to assuage fears. President Anwar Sadat introduced the latter provision into the constitution in 1981 not to facilitate the enactment of Islamic legislation, but to appease his Islamist opposition as a means of undercutting leftist influence. To be sure, its effect on the drafting of legislation since has been minimal. Akef's explanation is insufficient to quell concerns about the conflicts that could arise in lawmaking should a Brotherhood plurality deem legislation “un-Islamic.” Here, uncertainty abounds. What issues, for instance, would the group regard as divine and beyond the pale of elected officials? More importantly, how would the constitutionality of a controversial law be determined; that is, would independent arbiters, such as religious clergy, determine its compatibility, or would government institutions deliver a ruling? Perhaps of greater consequence, how would the Brotherhood respond to a decision that contravenes Islamic law?

Since 2004, Brotherhood members have tried to resolve these quandaries, but their statements have only served to muddy the issue further. The dissonance between the Arabic-language pronouncements of senior officials in the organization's Guidance Bureau and their softer, more elastic, English-language interviews and publications has generated greater skepticism about the movement's adherence to democratic values. In a July 20, 2005, interview with the Egyptian government weekly *Akher Sa'a*, Akef rekindled such doubts about an “Islamist free-elections trap” when he claimed: “We believe in democracy fully because it is the one that brings free and fair elections. But as for democracy without limits, which says that the people's opinion is everything, we say to it ‘no.’ People's opinion is guided by *sharia*.”<sup>10</sup>

Six months later, Akef's words took on added significance when the Brotherhood registered unprecedented

gains in the 2005 legislative elections. Independent candidates belonging to the group captured eighty-eight seats in the 454-member parliament despite contesting just 35 percent of the races.<sup>11</sup> Eager to put domestic and international concerns to rest after the elections, prominent Guidance Bureau member Abdel-Moneim Abul-Fotouh told the English-language *Al-Ahram Weekly* that, concerning Akef's stance, "No law, no matter how divine, can be enforced without the public's consent."<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Habib, Akef's deputy, later seconded Abul-Fotouh's view in an April 2007 interview with *The New York Times Magazine* when he declared that, should the People's Assembly (the lower house of parliament) propose a law in violation of *sharia*, the legislature would have ultimate jurisdiction in reconciling the matter. "The People's Assembly has the absolute right in that situation," Habib explained. "Parliament could go to religious scholars and hear their opinion, but it is not obliged to listen to these opinions."<sup>13</sup>

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Abul-Fotouh's and Habib's comments may appear to reflect enlightened thinking, but when juxtaposed with the Brotherhood's most recent platform, disseminated to Egyptian intellectuals in August 2007 in a preliminary draft and intended as a blueprint for a civil party, they are far less reassuring. The program, according to the independent Egyptian daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, calls for the creation of a "Supreme Ulama Council," a body of elected religious scholars that would review executive decisions prior to implementation for their compliance with Islamic law.<sup>14</sup> The platform states that while the body would serve in a consultative capacity, its opinions would be compulsory on matters governed by "proven [Islamic] texts,"<sup>15</sup> an amorphous term that could easily expand the council's authority. Muslim Brotherhood officials have defended the program as a trial balloon, but their claims miss the point. For a group sorely in need of revamping its public image, the mere reference to such a council, one reminiscent of Iran's *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurists)

system of governance, will recast discussion about its true intentions.

The group's actions, especially in parliament, have also engendered little confidence in its agenda. Although the Brotherhood's growing presence in recent years has injected more accountability and debate into an otherwise anemic legislature—representatives from the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) now attend committee voting sessions with greater frequency lest their more disciplined Muslim Brotherhood colleagues obtain a quorum—increased representation has done little to moderate the movement's ranks. Muslim Brotherhood lawmakers have often used their forum in parliament more to rail against what they perceive as Egypt's cultural decadence than to offer real prescriptions for the country's unemployment, inflation, or housing crises.

A 2005 study conducted by the Al-Umma Center for Studies and Development in Cairo revealed that of the total number of Brotherhood interpellations during the 2000–2005 parliament, approximately 80 percent dealt with issues of culture, media, or education. The trend has carried over to the current parliament. In November 2006, Brotherhood member of parliament Ali Laban excoriated Education Minister Yousri al-Gamal for appointing Monica Chavez, a U.S. education expert, to administer a project reforming the country's curricula. "The appointment of an American expert to take responsibility for modernizing education in Egypt is an act of treason for which the minister should be executed," stated Laban, who is a visceral critic of the U.S. Agency for International Development's efforts in Egypt.<sup>16</sup> He recommended a similar punishment for Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif and Minister of Religious Endowments Hamdi Zaqqouq after they approved tearing down a Cairo mosque to make way for a downtown subway line. Laban may be a firebrand, but his outlook for Egypt is not an aberration: other Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarians have routinely submitted proposals to ban alcohol, Western novels, coed schooling, beauty pageants, and individual music artists from performing in Egypt.

Despite these concerns—or perhaps because of them—ambiguity in the group's official programs persists. Though progressive in the area of constitutional reform, the Brotherhood's electoral platform for the June 2007 Shura Council (the consultative upper chamber of parliament) elections continued to gloss over the contradiction in terms between its calls for both *sharia* and parliamentary democracy. Like the 2004 reform initiative before it, the seventy-three-page manifesto confirmed the "Egyptian

people as the source of all authority,” but stressed that the state’s system of governance “conform to Islamic law.”<sup>17</sup> To date, calls for greater clarification on how these principles would play out in practice—and the all important issue of whether the Brotherhood would establish a political party, independent of the religious movement, that is open to all Egyptians—have fallen on deaf ears. Until they are answered unequivocally, the Brotherhood’s inability or reluctance to reconcile Islamic law with democratic norms will continue to fuel speculation that its commitment to pluralism is both fleeting and politically expedient.

## The Coptic Question

Controversy over the Brotherhood’s vision for a “civil state with an Islamic framework” also stems from its ambiguous, if not distressing, view of Egypt’s Coptic Christians. Though considered one of the most homogeneous countries in the Arab world, Egypt boasts the largest Christian population in the region; estimates vary because of sensitivity, but Copts are thought to comprise between 8 and 15 percent of the country’s nearly 80 million people.<sup>18</sup>

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The minority status of Egypt’s Coptic community has long been a delicate issue. The recent outbreak of sectarian violence in the village of Bamha in May 2007 highlighted the growing religious divide between Egypt’s Christians and Muslims. The phenomenon is nothing new. As Nabil Abdel Fattah, assistant director of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, noted recently, the roots of intercommunal tension in Egypt stretch back more than half a century. “The structure of the political regime effectively holds no space for Copts. Coptic political representation began to diminish at the end of the 1940s and with the coming of the 1952 revolution almost disappeared,” he stated.<sup>19</sup>

Today, the plight of Copts and other minorities is perhaps even more precarious. While the constitution’s defense of universal citizenship and religious tolerance is

beyond reproach, institutionalized discrimination against Christians remains commonplace. For instance, presidential decree 291, a modern-day adaptation of the Ottoman Empire’s Hamayouni Edict, places the construction and renovation of churches under government jurisdiction.<sup>20</sup> Approval is often an arbitrary and protracted process. Appointments to government and university posts by Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak are just as revealing: only one of the country’s twenty-six provincial governors is Christian, and there are no Christian deans or presidents at any of Egypt’s public universities.<sup>21</sup> Copts are also unable to matriculate at Al-Azhar University, the taxpayer-funded institution considered the Arab world’s leading center of Sunni religious scholarship. Discrimination also extends to politics: of the 109 candidates fielded by the NDP and vetted by Mubarak in last June’s Shura Council elections, not one was Coptic.<sup>22</sup> In general, Christians are all but barred from the upper ranks of the military and executive branches.

It is within this context that the Brotherhood’s duplicitous remarks about religious tolerance have caused consternation among Christians. Since the Brotherhood’s success in the 2005 parliamentary elections, the question of whether the group would safeguard minority rights and universal citizenship has risen to greater prominence.

One source of friction between Copts and the Muslim Brotherhood stems from discrimination in the public sector. Though the Brotherhood’s 2004 reform initiative and 2007 Shura program describe Copts as “partners of the homeland” and “part of the fabric of Egyptian society,” such statements are mere platitudes. Semantics is a Brotherhood art form: the programs are more illuminating for what they imply than for what they actually state. Take the 2007 Shura platform: it declares that Copts “are equal with their Muslim brethren in all rights and duties, and in obtaining public positions on the basis of ability and specialization.”<sup>23</sup> On the surface, this clause may appear benign, but for those well versed in Brotherhood parlance, it is yet another telltale sign of deception. The document offers little clarity as to what this means except to state that “all citizens have the right to obtain membership in parliament.”<sup>24</sup> Responses to questions of a more sensitive nature, such as whether a Christian can serve as president or hold high-ranking positions in the security forces or executive cabinet, are conspicuously absent from the document.

Such questions, of course, are not unfounded. In April 1997, then-supreme guide Mustafa Mashhur set off a firestorm of criticism when he portrayed Copts as fifth

columnists and demanded the reinstatement of the *jizyah*, the traditional poll tax levied on non-Muslims living under Muslim rule. Mashhur, no doubt one of the more polemical figures in the Brotherhood's history, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the taxation of Copts "is a part of *sharia* which also entails their exclusion from the army. . . . If we have non-Muslims in the army and a Christian country attacks us, then Christian members of the armed forces could change their allegiance and become agents for the enemy."<sup>25</sup>

Brotherhood officials have since repudiated the *jizyah* and the related concept of *dhimmitude*—the second-class status to which *jizyah*-paying, non-Muslim subjects were relegated—but their track record on universal citizenship remains worrisome. In a May 17, 2005, interview with the Arabic daily *Azzaman*, Habib, the current deputy guide, invoked the doctrine of *wilaya kobra* (major governance; i.e., the presidency) to justify the Brotherhood's position on religious rule. In defending the principle, which holds that non-Muslims cannot preside over Muslims in high-level civil positions, he stated: "When the movement will come to power, it will replace the current constitution with an Islamic one, according to which a non-Muslim will not be allowed to hold a senior post, whether in the state or in the army, because this right should be granted exclusively to Muslims."<sup>26</sup> In a February 2, 2006, editorial posted on the Brotherhood's official Arabic-language website, Habib soft-pedaled his earlier stance when he wrote that the Brotherhood would bestow "complete citizenship" upon Christians, which would include the "full right to hold public office, except for the head of state."<sup>27</sup> But as Israel Elad-Altman points out, Habib's translated comments on the Brotherhood's English-language website were even more diluted to read that Copts would enjoy the right to hold public posts "including that of head of state."<sup>28</sup>

Yet, in another familiar instance of Brotherhood schizophrenia, the movement's most recent party platform prohibits both women and Christians from occupying the presidency because the position entails certain Islamic duties neither can perform. On October 10, 2007, Brotherhood member of parliament Mustafa Awadallah echoed the document's view when he stated, "We cannot accept a Coptic nominee for president" because "we do not want to oblige anyone at the expense of religion."<sup>29</sup>

Mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood is also rooted in its equivocal condemnations of sectarian violence. When Coptic-Muslim violence convulsed Alexandria, Egypt's second largest city, in April 2006 after a knife-wielding

Muslim assaulted parishioners in three churches, killing one, Essam El-Erian, head of the Brotherhood's political bureau, denounced the attacks as "wanton acts of violence," confirming that the "grievances of the Coptic community of Egypt are an integral part of the wider grievances of the people of this country."<sup>30</sup> However, an April 17, 2006, report in the London daily *Al-Quds al-Arabi* revealed that, while the Brotherhood condemned the attack itself, it endorsed the whitewashed account put out by the Egyptian Interior Ministry: that the violence was not the result of religious intolerance or incitement, but rather the work of a mentally deranged individual.<sup>31</sup> The Brotherhood's acknowledgement of the root causes behind Christian-Muslim strife has since improved but leaves much to be desired. Following the latest episode of violence in Bamha, in which Muslims, protesting the construction of a church, set fire to Coptic shops and homes, the movement issued an English-language condemnation attributing the incident to "religious intolerance" and an "incorrect understanding of Islam," but posted no such statement in Arabic.

## A Renunciation of Violence?

Reservations about the Brotherhood extend to the group's position on violence. To date, it has eschewed only terrorism within Egypt, which arouses suspicions about its efforts to obtain legitimacy as a peaceful political actor.

That the Brotherhood has sanctioned violence in the past is not in question. A 1946 intelligence report commissioned by the U.S. War Department painted a picture of a "militant society" that "encourages youth movements and maintains commando units and secret caches of arms," estimating that the movement possessed somewhere between 60,000 to 70,000 rifles.<sup>32</sup> Established in the 1940s under British occupation, the group's paramilitary branch known as the *al-nizam al-khas* (special apparatus) carried out a wave of bombings and targeted assassinations. The violence culminated in the 1948 murder of Egyptian prime minister Mahmoud Naqrashi following his order to disband the movement. A failed attempt by the group on the life of then-prime minister Gamal Abdul Nasser in October 1954—its actual role in plotting the attack is still the subject of controversy—forced the movement underground until it reemerged under Sadat as a counterweight to Nasserist forces. By the time it resurfaced in the 1970s, however, the Brotherhood was not in a position to engage in terrorist activity against the state.

Instead, the movement sought a *modus vivendi* with the Sadat regime. As Gamal Sultan, an ex-member of the violent Islamist group *al-Jama'a al-Islamiya*, explained, "The Muslim Brotherhood had just come out of Nasser's prisons, they were worn out and just wanted to make peace with the government—*al-Jihad* and *al-Jama'at* were young groups that had different ideas—they were more appealing to the youth."<sup>33</sup> Upon their release, most Muslim Brotherhood members recanted their views on violence and distanced themselves from the beliefs of Sayyid Qutb, the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue whose seminal 1964 work, *Signposts*, served to radicalize a new generation of Egyptians for whom the group was not confrontational enough. (Today, the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement still refuses to renounce Qutb's tract, even though it serves as the ideological inspiration for al Qaeda and other like-minded terrorist groups).

But as the Brotherhood's radical fringe splintered off to embrace jihad and take up arms, the Guidance Bureau, led by then-supreme guide Omar Tilmisani, embarked on a new, gradualist approach to implementing Islamic law by penetrating society not only through the mosque, but also through the political system. Although prohibited from operating as a licensed political party, Muslim Brotherhood members were allowed by Mubarak to stand as independent candidates for parliament in the 1980s. In the 1984 legislative elections, the group threw its hat in the ring by forming an alliance with its traditional foe, the liberal *al-Wafd* party. The Muslim Brotherhood shift in methodology paid off as the alliance won 13 percent of the seats in parliament, and the Brotherhood emerged as a potent opposition force to Mubarak.<sup>34</sup> The movement's intermittent participation in elections since 1984—and its apparent willingness, at least procedurally, to play by government rules despite heavy manipulation—has helped silence many of its critics, but questions about its repudiation of violence still linger.

On December 10, 2006, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated students clad in fatigues and black masks staged a paramilitary parade at Al-Azhar University. The Hamas-style spectacle drew a swift rebuke from government officials leery of the movement's clandestine nature and violent history. Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs Moufid Shehab accused the movement of reactivating latent militia cells by "issuing directives to Al-Azhar University students . . . to undertake acts of sabotage, violence, and destruction."<sup>35</sup> Although the parade allegedly arose as a remonstrance against restrictions placed on Brotherhood students running in student

union elections, the group gave the government and state-run press ample ammunition to portray it as a threat by failing to adequately respond to their recriminations. Brotherhood leaders apologized and denounced the event, but they squandered a golden opportunity to make their movement's internal operations more transparent. Parliamentary bloc leader Muhammad Saad al-Katatni, for example, spun the episode as an "athletic" display, yet failed to discredit charges, no matter how specious, of Muslim Brotherhood incitement and indoctrination on university campuses.

While the Al-Azhar episode rekindled doubts about the movement's disavowal of violence at home, it has been its position on violence and terrorism beyond Egypt's borders that has given U.S. policymakers pause. Here, Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers have found it more difficult to rally to its defense. On August 3, 2006, with Arab governments standing on the sidelines during the height of the Israel-Hezbollah war, Akef declared his readiness to "send immediately 10,000 mujahedeen to fight the Zionists alongside Hezbollah."<sup>36</sup> That Akef, who had praised Hezbollah's initial seizure and killing of Israeli soldiers on July 12, 2006, as a "heroic act"—the *casus belli* for Israel's month-long military campaign—was unable to deliver on his promise mattered little. His declaration was consistent with the movement's anathematic view of Israel. In their public oratory, Akef and other Brotherhood officials have made little secret of their enmity for both Israel and the United States, which, like the Jewish state, they perceive as a colonial and expansionist power. To this end, the Brotherhood has regularly endorsed Palestinian and Lebanese "resistance"—a euphemism for terrorism—against Israel and legitimized suicide operations against U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan as "a religious obligation."<sup>37</sup>

## Camp David and the U.S.-Egyptian Relationship

Should the Brotherhood ever assume power or constitute a majority in parliament, such positions, of course, would have profound implications for the Camp David Peace Accords and, *ipso facto*, the U.S.-Egyptian relationship. While the Brotherhood's numerous policy programs have skirted the issue of adherence to the accord, Akef has been more forthright in his public pronouncements. In a November 10, 2007, interview, Akef stated that the "Brotherhood has not recognized Camp David from the very first day it was signed," explaining not only that the group rejects all agreements with Israel but that Arabs

and Muslims should “resist the enemy [Israel] with armed jihad.”<sup>38</sup>

So ingrained is this rejectionist stance within the Brotherhood that when political bureau chief and unofficial spokesman Essam El-Erian, a so-called voice of moderation, told the pan-Arabic daily *al-Hayat* in October 2007 that the “Brotherhood would recognize Israel if it ever came to power,” the internal backlash proved so overwhelming that El-Erian retracted his statements and informed the Brotherhood’s website that the movement “sees Israel’s existence as null and void. . . . [I]t is not possible to recognize it.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps concerned that El-Erian’s initial statement signaled a softening of the Muslim Brotherhood position, Akef put the issue to rest when he emphasized that the movement “did not have anything called ‘Israel’ in its dictionary,” and that while Muslim Brotherhood members were free to express their opinions, “the final decision rests with the supreme guide.”<sup>40</sup>

But despite their tough talk, Muslim Brotherhood leaders have yet to articulate how they would deal with the likely fallout of such a decision. To be sure, abrogating the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement would be reckless. It would have far-reaching consequences not only for the Brotherhood but also for Egypt. Voiding the treaty would accelerate the Brotherhood’s isolation in the Western world, but more importantly, it would all but guarantee the termination of Egypt’s annual \$1.8 billion U.S. aid package—\$1.3 billion of which is earmarked for military assistance. For the Egyptian military, a powerhouse institution that depends on Washington for much of its training and the procurement and maintenance of its armaments, an abrupt cutoff would jeopardize security and invite internal instability. Just how the Brotherhood would compensate for U.S. assistance and maintain a deterrence capability toward Israel is unclear.

Economic considerations are also paramount to the equation. In their rhetoric, Muslim Brotherhood leaders have often touted plans to develop traditionally neglected regions, such as Upper Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. But would, for example, a Brotherhood-led government subordinate pragmatism to principle and annul the Qualified Industrial Zone (QIZ) agreement, a 2004 trilateral arrangement with Israel and the United States whereby Egyptian goods manufactured in designated industrial areas can enter the United States duty-free because of a proviso that such products contain a minimum percentage of Israeli inputs? While it is true that the QIZs are geared toward textiles, their abolition would not be insignificant. From January to November 2006 alone, Egypt exported

LE 3.5 billion (\$630 million) worth of goods under the QIZ, an amount equaling 22 percent of all Egyptian exports sent to the United States during that period.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, if a Brotherhood-led government decided to scrap the QIZ deal, which Egypt and Israel expanded in October 2007 to include eight new zones in Upper Egypt, such a decision would no doubt have a deleterious effect on Egypt’s ability to attract foreign investment, and could scuttle its participation in the European Union’s Euro-Mediterranean free-trade zone, slated to come on line in 2010.

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### Engage or Isolate?

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, U.S. policymakers have grappled with various challenges in their efforts to spread democracy to the Arab world, of which few have been thornier than the question of how to cope with the region’s mainstream, nonviolent Islamist movements. The dilemma is clear: Should the U.S. government reach out to organizations that obtain power through legal channels but that may be inimical to Western interests? Or should it isolate such movements and subject itself to the charge of advancing a foreign policy fraught with double standards? In the aftermath of 9/11, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has presented U.S. officials with precisely this conundrum.

The question has become particularly acute, especially in academic circles, since 2005, when the movement made historic gains in parliamentary elections and became the leading opposition force to the Mubarak government. Those advocating U.S. engagement with the Brotherhood have pointed to both its success at the ballot box and the weakness of secular liberal parties, both financially and organizationally, to suggest that democracy in Egypt cannot come at the group’s expense. Washington’s so-called search for secular, cookie-cutter-style democrats is, they believe, a quixotic effort that ignores the elephant in the room in both Egypt and the Arab world. By courting the Muslim Brotherhood, the thinking goes, Washington

could not only restore some of its lost credibility in the Middle East; it could truly serve the cause of democracy by blunting the influence of less moderate Islamist movements on the ascent across the region.

But the ambiguous and loophole-ridden rhetoric of the Egyptian Brotherhood casts serious doubts on the belief that it could serve as a coalescing force for moderation and liberal reform. Some have defended the troubling discrepancies within their discourse by claiming that the group's policy positions are a product of the environment it inhabits; that is, given its "outlawed" but tolerated status, its leaders are loath to lay their cards on the table for fear of government reprisal. But while the Mubarak regime's heavy-handed treatment of the movement may help to explain its efforts to maintain an aura of secrecy, especially among the old guard, it does little to account for why—if the Brotherhood is as truly committed to political pluralism as its claims to be—its leaders continue to speak out of both sides of their mouths on the most fundamental issues of democracy. Certainly, adopting airtight positions that are in line with democratic principles would not make the group any more prone to the arbitrary crackdowns it currently endures at the hands of a regime keen to preserve its monopoly on power. There is scant evidence to suggest, then, that the Brotherhood's official programs and rhetoric reflect anything but its core beliefs.

As the Hosni Mubarak era in Egypt draws to a close, and more than a quarter-century of semi-authoritarianism gives way to potential uncertainty, it is understandable that the vast majority of Egyptians desire a democratic alternative to the status quo. But such an alternative should not come in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood. Time and again, the group has demonstrated its desire to fuse together mosque and state, a combustible mix that, given the movement's rigid interpretation of Islam, bodes ill for Egypt's and the region's democratic evolution. Until the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood can prove otherwise in both word and deed, any attempt by the United States to engage it is premature.

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*AEI resident scholar Michael Rubin and editorial assistant Christy Hall Robinson worked with Messrs. Azarva and Tadros to edit and produce this Middle Eastern Outlook.*

## Notes

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3. Nicholas Krlev, "U.S. Engages Muslim Brotherhood Despite Rice," *Washington Times*, November 15, 2007.

4. See Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 2 (March/April 2007); James Traub, "Islamic Democrats?" *New York Times Magazine*, April 29, 2007; and Sameer Shehata and Joshua Stacher, "Hear Out Muslim Brotherhood," *Boston Globe*, March 25, 2007.

5. Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, and Marina Ottaway, "Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones," *Carnegie Papers* 67 (March 2006).

6. See Muhammad Mahdi Akef, "The Supreme Guide's Initiative Concerning the General Principles of Reform in Egypt," March 3, 2004, available at [www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=5172&SecID=0](http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=5172&SecID=0) (in Arabic). All translations of Arabic sources were performed by the authors.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Akher Sa'a* (Egypt), July 20, 2005.

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13. James Traub, "Islamic Democrats?"

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