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The Reconfiguration of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

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The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is one of the most influential political movements in the modern history of the Middle East. Until the summer of 2013, when the Egyptian military toppled the Muslim Brotherhood-led government, the movement was considered to be the biggest winner of the “Arab Spring” and was expected to continue to lead Egypt, the most populous state in the Arab world, for many years. More generally, political Islam was regarded as an ideology expected to take the Arab world by storm following the collapse of the old dictatorships.

To be sure, under the Nasser and Sadat regimes, the Muslim Brotherhood experienced periods of repression and crisis. The loss of the leadership in 2013, however, and the unprecedented level of suppression experienced subsequently by the movement have made the current crisis the most severe in the movement’s history. Consequently, political Islam as a model for reform that advocates gradual change, opposes violence, and accepts the Arab state as a legitimate framework is rapidly losing its influence. As a philosophy, Islamism has deep roots in Egypt and is not expected to vanish from the map, but there is an increasing risk that groups advocating a much more radical ideology, including global jihad movements, will fill the vacuum left by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The violent conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and Egyptian state institutions escalated after Mohamed Morsi and his government were overthrown. The crackdown on the movement since then has included the killing of thousands of its supporters during demonstrations, the arrest of tens of thousands of Islamist opponents of the regime, the banning of the movement, its classification as a terrorist organization, and the elimination of its economic and social infrastructure, ranging from charity organizations and hospitals to mosques and schools, which the regime either closed or nationalized. The Muslim Brotherhood’s desperate state has led to far reaching changes in its structure, ideology, and nature of the activity by the movement and its supporters in Egypt.

Structural Changes: Weakened Leadership and a Severed Hierarchical Structure

The centralized nature and inflexible hierarchy that characterized the Muslim Brotherhood throughout its history are no more. Decision making in the organization has become decentralized, so that the cells operating in the field enjoy greater freedom of action. The movement's leadership, which is almost entirely in prison or exile, is incapable of enforcing its decisions among the operatives responsible for carrying out policy. The movement's youth are experiencing a sense of helplessness and a lack of vision, and the shock of being confronted with the regime's repressive measures have led to changes within the leadership, a deepening internal rift, and severe criticism by the youth of the older, isolated generation of leaders – leaders who sit comfortably in Turkey or Qatar and call on young operatives to sacrifice themselves in hopeless street clashes against the security forces. The objections among parts of the leadership to violent actions and its adherence to the nonviolent struggle, despite the continual failure of this path to challenge the regime, also arouse severe criticism. In part, the movement's centralized character is being deliberately dismantled in order to adapt its activity to the current limitations and constraints, and to reduce tensions between field operatives and the leadership. The pressure exerted by the regime and the rift between the leadership abroad and activists and leaders in Egypt itself do not suit the traditional hierarchical structure that characterized the movement for many years.

Ideological Changes: Salafi Influence and Despair about the Nonviolent Struggle

The switch to less centralized activity has exposed the Muslim Brotherhood, formerly a closed and relatively homogeneous movement, to external influences of Salafi operatives and religious figures holding more extreme attitudes toward the Egyptian state in general and the current regime in particular. Cooperation between the movement's operatives and Salafi activists began during the protests in Rabaa al-Adawiya against Morsi's overthrow, and became more extensive as the tension between the regime and the opposition mounted. Many religious figures preaching in favor of violent resistance to the regime on television broadcasts sponsored by the Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey are Salafi sheikhs not traditionally identified with the movement. The common denominator of repression by the security forces is blurring the lines of separation between the various Islamic groups.

With the increase in pressure by the regime, the rhetoric of the movement's leaders themselves has undergone a process of escalation. In January 2015, the movement's website published a statement, although it was removed shortly afterwards, calling on its activists and supporters to prepare for "a prolonged and continuous stage of jihad." In June, the leadership adopted a provocative declaration signed by 159 Muslim clerics, some identified with the movement, calling to overthrow the regime and encouraging attacks against the regime and its supporters. In addition, many of the movement's leaders assert that despite their opposition to violence, they understand "those who look

for vengeance” against the security forces for injury to their relatives, and are unable to prevent it. On more than one occasion, the movement’s leaders have argued that “anything below bullets is peaceful resistance” – which lends approval for destruction of property and the throwing of stones and Molotov cocktails.

The Muslim Brotherhood leaders are presumably aware of the consequences of an official declaration concerning an armed struggle against the el-Sisi regime. A turn toward this strategy will limit the movement’s ability to act in the international arena, provide further justification for the regime’s opposition to it, and is liable to alienate a considerable portion of its traditional members. The movement is therefore officially reiterating that it does not advocate violence, but in view of the growing frustration among the young people, adherence to nonviolent struggle jeopardizes the little remaining control exercised by the movement’s leadership over its members. The movement is therefore adopting an intermediate path, depicted as “revolutionary” – a deliberately vague term whose meaning changes and is subject to different interpretations. These interpretations range from protest and popular uprising to sabotage operations such as burning utility poles and blowing up transportation infrastructure to targeted terrorist operations against the security forces.

Involvement in Terrorism: Implications for Israel and the Region

It is difficult to estimate the extent of the Muslim Brotherhood’s involvement in the wave of terrorism in Egypt and the attacks that have become almost a matter of almost daily routine, and have cost a significant number of lives among the security forces, judges, politicians who support the regime, and others. Most of the Islamist operatives in Egypt are not actually members of any organization, and Islamist terrorism therefore does not necessarily denote a direct connection to the Muslim Brotherhood. Nevertheless, the process of Muslim Brotherhood members slipping into various types of violent action is clear. It is believed that at least some of the small terrorist cells operating in the Nile Valley region were founded by former Muslim Brotherhood activists. It is also known that a number of former activists have joined Ansar Bait al-Maqdis – the Islamic State branch in the Sinai Peninsula – over the past two years.

This dangerous process is likely to have momentous consequences not only for the stability of Egypt, but also for regional security. Global jihadi groups affiliated with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda are making strenuous efforts to penetrate the vacuum left by the decline in Muslim Brotherhood power and influence. Although a significant ideological gap separates the Islamic State and al-Qaeda on the one hand from political Islam movements on the other, the weakening of the Muslim Brotherhood, combined with severe repression by the Egyptian regime, added to the loss of faith that change can be achieved using nonviolent methods and the growing Salafi influence, have narrowed this gap. The loss of the power attained by the Muslim Brotherhood through democratic

means stands in stark contrast to the Islamic State's success in consolidating Islamic rule through belligerency in various areas in Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

The reported consolidation of Islamic State cells in recent months in the Cairo area and close to the Egyptian-Libyan border indicates an effort to expand the Islamic State's activity beyond Sinai to Egypt itself. The extreme political polarization in Egypt, combined with the loss of direction by the Muslim Brotherhood, has left a huge reserve of angry and frustrated young people eager to take revenge against the regime. Global jihadi organizations aim to fill this space, and they have a great deal to offer the regime's Islamist opponents, including financing, a supply of weapons, training, and a high level of media and online propaganda. The downing of the Russian passenger jet in Sinai is an example of the destructive potential of the Islamic State's rising power in Egypt. For Israel, the potential threat lies in the consolidation of groups identified with the Islamic State near its southwestern border, further penetration by the Islamic State and other jihad groups in the Gaza Strip, and the destabilization of Egypt. From a broader perspective, the spread of the Islamic State in North Africa will also be affected to a large extent by its ability to exploit the crisis of political Islam caused by the Muslim Brotherhood's decline in Egypt.

