From the Ashes of Rabaa
History and the Future of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood

Abdullah Al-Arian
Egypt is in deep crisis. The July 2013 military coup d’état that ended the post-Mubarak democratic transition has ushered in what might be the darkest period in Egypt’s modern political history. The rise of political violence across Egypt, most notably in the Sinai, along with the expansion of radical Islamist groups, was to be expected. It confirms a longstanding truism about politics that John F. Kennedy famously formulated in 1962: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”

How and when Egypt might emerge from this dreadful period remains to be seen. A central part of this drama has been the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, both during the transition period and after the military coup. The Brotherhood is Egypt’s oldest social movement. As such it will undoubtedly play a critical role in the fate of the country. The prominent Egyptian social scientist and liberal Sa’ad Al-Din Ibrahim originally supported the military coup and the subsequent crackdown on the Brotherhood. Recently, however, he warned that if the Egyptian military does not reconcile with the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt will be plunged into civil war.1

Are the Muslim Brothers open to the possibility of reconciliation? What are their leaders and supporters thinking at this moment, and what lessons have they learned from recent events? How have they been processing the turmoil that has shaken Egypt since the 2011 uprising, and what internal debates have taken place within the organization? To help answer these questions, we have an excellent guide in Abdullah Al-Arian.

An historian at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service in Qatar, Al-Arian is the author of a well-received study of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat’s Egypt*. We were honored to host him as a Carnegie Visiting Scholar at our Center for Middle East Studies in the autumn of 2014. It was then that he conducted some of the preliminary research for this occasional paper. Al-Arian enriched the intellectual atmosphere of our university during his sojourn in Denver. We are deeply pleased to publish the fruits of this research he conducted under our rubric.

Publishing this occasional paper is a perfect fit for our center for two reasons. Central to our center’s mission is to enhance the understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in the Islamic world. More broadly, the University of Denver aspires to be a “great private institution dedicated to the public good.” We believe that we have taken a small step in this direction by publishing this important study on the future of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. We are grateful to Abdullah Al-Arian for agreeing to publish this study in our series.

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Moments after the conclusion of dawn prayers on August 14, 2013, Egyptian security forces raided a large sit-in based at Cairo’s Rabaa al-Adawiyya Square and another at al-Nahda Square. Tens of thousands of Egyptians had gathered at the sites to protest the military’s overthrow of Egypt’s first democratically-elected president, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi. With army general and defense minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s assumption of power, the revolutionary moment that began with the 2011 popular overthrow of Hosni Mubarak’s three decades of authoritarian rule was brutally extinguished. As they opened fire indiscriminately on the encampments, security forces killed over one thousand people in the worst case of state violence in modern Egyptian history. The exact figures have been difficult to ascertain in part because officials reportedly burned many of the bodies of those killed during the course of the twelve-hour operation. Within moments of the raid, graphic images of the charred interior of the Rabaa al-Adawiyya Mosque began making the rounds on social media.

An investigative report by Human Rights Watch released one year after the events affirmed that “police and army forces systematically and intentionally used excessive lethal force in their policing, resulting in killings of protesters on a scale unprecedented in Egypt.”2

The number of those killed even surpassed estimates of the Chinese government’s killing of protesters in the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre. To date, no public officials have been held accountable for the events at Rabaa and the state investigation has absolved Egyptian security forces of any responsibility for the mass killings.

Along with its effects on the state of popular protest in Egypt, Rabaa has had a profound impact on the broader narrative of contemporary Islamic activism. It has become a defining moment in time within the storied history of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although not all the victims at Rabaa were members or even supporters of the Islamist group, the military’s excesses have given rise to a perception among many of the regime’s critics that the events of that day represent a continuation of a legacy of violent repression against the Muslim Brotherhood that date back to the early years of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s rule. In the six weeks prior to the events at Rabaa, security forces killed nearly 300 protesters in a series of raids and state officials systematically rounded up nearly all of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leaders and thousands of members and sympathizers. Morsi himself was detained and held in isolation beginning on July 3, 2013.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s broad array of institutions, from its political party and media outlets, to its

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social welfare organizations and local chapters, were shut down. State officials froze its bank accounts and seized its assets. In the months that followed, various organs of the Egyptian state, from the courts to the cabinet, issued official orders banishing the group, in a series of moves meant to provide legal cover for the continued wave of repression. Sisi adopted a “war on terror” discourse to justify his regime’s relentless assault on a social movement that just one year earlier had enjoyed widespread popular support and emerged victorious from every democratic election in which it participated.

In the emerging post-coup political order, the state has determined that there will be no place for the Muslim Brotherhood, even within the semi-legal framework within which it operated during the Mubarak era. During his sham march to the presidency in 2014, Sisi made the audacious pledge that “there will be nothing called the Muslim Brotherhood during my tenure.”

Even in its vastly weakened state, the Muslim Brotherhood has continued to promote peaceful protests and widespread opposition to the coup. Regular student protests have marred Sisi’s quest for stability in what has steadily become an untenable situation. Notwithstanding claims by liberals regarding Sisi’s supposed popularity, a significant percentage of Egyptians do not recognize the current government, and not all of them belong to the Islamist camp. The exact figure is difficult to quantify in the state of widespread repression.

For the entirety of its history, the Muslim Brotherhood shunned a revolutionary path to politics in favor of a reformist approach that sought accommodation with the existing regime. In the absence of that option, the organization’s leadership finds itself in unfamiliar territory in determining its future course. Moreover, the challenges of the post-coup period have brought to the surface deep-seated internal divisions that are the product of the group’s historical development dating back to its reconstitution in the late 1970s. Since that period, the organization’s leadership has been dogged with challenges to its top-down hierarchical

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structure and insular nature, with pressure from the younger ranks to become more engaged in the broader society.

This paper explores the possible avenues that exist for the future reorganization of the Muslim Brotherhood as a prominent movement within Egyptian society. In addition to examining the current debates within and around the organization, it will situate the possible avenues for the future of the organization within a broader historical context.

Before delving into this subject, it is necessary to note that our ability to engage with the pertinent issues in this discussion is quite limited by the fact that most of the key figures within the Muslim Brotherhood’s top leadership have been largely absent from the conversation due to their current imprisonment and isolation at the hands of the Sisi regime. The ongoing conversation, therefore, is limited to those senior figures who have been exiled outside of Egypt, and youth leaders and members both inside and outside of Egypt. Nevertheless, given the current circumstances surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood, these forces are the only ones in a position to help determine the future path of the organization.

Morsi and the Coup: The Muslim Brotherhood Takes Stock

A large part of determining the future involves the Muslim Brotherhood’s conception of the present situation, and in particular its conduct during the crucial post-Mubarak revolutionary moment. In a recent column, the popular poet and commentator Abdel Rahman Yousef posed the pointed question: “Do Islamists make mistakes?” He asked this in light of the current discourse both within and about the Muslim Brotherhood and the year it was supposedly in power. There is much to dispute about the 2012-2013 Morsi presidency, including whether the Muslim Brotherhood actually had the ability to prevent the counterrevolution that occurred. However, there is no doubt that, having found itself at both the highest and lowest points in its eight-decade history during the span of just one year, this period presents a crucial moment for reflection on the decisions made during the post-Mubarak transition.

Yousef suggests that the Muslim Brotherhood’s responses to this question can generally be classified as one of three types. The first is a philosophical or religious response that avoids the substantive portion of the question: all human beings err in the course of their lives. If their intentions are good, God will forgive them their errors and bless their efforts.

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6 On May 16, 2015, an Egyptian court handed down death sentences to most of the Muslim Brotherhood’s leaders in cases stemming from the January 25, 2011 uprising and the year of Morsi’s presidency.

7 Given the structural limits and institutional obstructionism Morsi faced during his year as president, this period has given rise to considerable debates on whether the Muslim Brotherhood ever maintained political power in the post-Mubarak era, its electoral achievements notwithstanding.
A second response tends to minimize the Muslim Brotherhood’s own mistakes and instead shift the focus onto the critics: anyone who acted to undermine Morsi during his presidency and supported the coup that overthrew him has no right to criticize the Muslim Brotherhood’s actions, this line of thinking suggests. In fact, the group is the victim of society’s other forces, who conspired with the state’s authoritarian institutions to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood. As the highest-ranking member of the Muslim Brotherhood not currently imprisoned, General Secretary Mahmoud Hussein has repeatedly rejected calls to revisit the organization’s posture during the post-Mubarak transition or its approach to post-coup realities in Egypt. Moreover, proponents of this viewpoint also tend to reduce the current conflict in Egypt to one between Islamist and secular forces. Much of the rhetoric conveyed by a wide array of Islamist figures from the center stage at Rabaa tended to reflect this outlook. For six weeks, speaker after speaker invoked the imagery of an impending clash over the very nature of Egyptian society’s religious identity, with proponents of the coup characterized as secularist forces who are hostile to Islam itself. In one such instance, preacher Safwat Hegazy predicted a divinely inspired victory over God’s enemies while reporting a young girl’s divine vision of Sisi sitting in a pool of blood.

A third response, emerging primarily from within the youth ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of whom were far more integrated into the broader revolutionary movement, has posited that the Brotherhood needs to acknowledge the critical errors it made dating back to the early days of the revolution. Only once it comes to terms with these mistakes and corrects its strategy going forward can the movement stand to survive the government’s clampdown and undo the damage of the coup.

That outlook was expressed quite forcefully in an internal memorandum circulated among the exiled leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in late 2013. In the unreleased document, the Brotherhood’s exiled youth contingent put forward a platform of reform centered on reconfiguring the organization’s approach to political questions. It identifies two competing narratives on the coup and its aftermath. First, it states that many of the Muslim Brotherhood’s harshest critics have characterized Egypt’s political struggle as one between Islamists and the military, and in so doing, have made the case that the military offers a better path to stability, prosperity, and security. Whether or not its proponents have successfully supported this argument with evidence is immaterial. The document argues that by defending the Muslim Brotherhood’s virtues in governance, the group’s leaders have inadvertently reinforced a narrative of Egyptians having to decide between two unseemly forces competing with one another for power.


Rather than lend credence to such a proposition, the document proposes that the Muslim Brotherhood should support an alternative narrative: namely, one that characterizes the struggle in Egypt as one between the people, millions of whom supported a revolutionary movement to end the exploitation, corruption, and repression of the former regime, and the military, the leading state institution that has usurped much of the country’s resources and is responsible for upholding the prior political arrangement.

In this binary, one narrative promotes the notion that the Muslim Brotherhood is a distinct actor with a narrow agenda that is distinct from the broader aims of the revolution, a view that only serves to further isolate and vilify the Muslim Brotherhood, eventually justifying the violent crackdown against it. Promoting the other view, its proponents argue, would unify the revolutionary ranks against the coup’s relentless attempts to repress all independent political voices.

From here, the document launches into a process of self-criticism. It argues that the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership is partly responsible for creating this negative perception. By virtue of expanding its wider social activist mission into the sphere of partisan politics by establishing the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) so soon after the post-Mubarak transition began in February 2011, the movement ceased to become a group that sought to represent the interests of all Egyptians and instead became a competitive actor in the fraught world of Egyptian electoral politics. Subsequent attempts at cooperation with revolutionary forces proved impossible in light of the obvious conflict of interest brought on by the FJP’s political project. In short, the Muslim Brotherhood’s internal critics believe it was a major strategic error to have abandoned the revolutionary path so early in the post-Mubarak transition. Because the Brotherhood is the largest organized social force, that decision had detrimental effects for the rest of Egyptian society and only succeeded in further alienating the organization from its potential partners within the ranks of the revolutionaries.

Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood’s position vis-à-vis revolutionary change was never clarified throughout the transition. It endorsed the aims of the revolution generally, but was reticent to accept a refashioning of the Egyptian state that required a total rebuilding of its most powerful institutions. At the same time, the group’s leaders never offered clear guidelines by which gradual reforms of the existing institutions would take place. The FJP sought to avoid confrontation with the judiciary and the military at all costs.

In light of these critiques, the document proposes that the Muslim Brotherhood end its ambiguity with regard to revolutionary action. It calls on the central leadership to halt the pursuit of divisive political competition by unilaterally dissolving the FJP. Rather, it suggests the adoption of an explicitly revolutionary track that would unite it with the other revolutionary factions who opposed the coup from its genesis, or who may have supported it initially but have since grown increasingly critical of the Sisi regime. It also calls on the Muslim Brotherhood to pledge that it will not independently contest any elections without being part of
a broad-based and inclusive revolutionary coalition. The Muslim Brotherhood’s central leadership would abandon any pretense to controlling the major decisions made in the revolutionary movement, instead allowing individual members and local committees and groups to proceed independently of the central leadership, thereby giving primacy to the revolutionary consensus over the individual interests of the Muslim Brotherhood’s organization.

In adopting the revolutionary track, the authors make the case that the Muslim Brotherhood cannot attempt centralized control of such a movement, for it would undermine one of the strengths of the Egyptian revolution, which is based in large part on decentralized grassroots mobilization. Rather than attempt to control the movement, the organization must respond to the wishes of the people, based in large part on the achievement of justice even if it requires a confrontation with the exploitative, corrupt, and authoritarian institutions of the Egyptian state.

Moreover, the document asserts that under the right conditions the Muslim Brotherhood’s explicit endorsement of a revolutionary track would cause whole segments of the Egyptian population who had never previously supported the revolution to believe in its merits. Such a development would allow for the establishment of a broad consensus on the need for a fundamental restructuring of the Egyptian state, as opposed to the grafting of democratic institutions onto the pre-existing authoritarian political order.

Under this vision, the Muslim Brotherhood would embark on the same track that Tunisia’s Islamist Ennahda Party has pursued, establishing itself as a consensus builder that bridges the divisions between secular and Islamic trends, as well as addressing concerns about sectarian conflicts and the violation of minority rights. On the more critical decisions to be made during any future transition, the document calls for the building of a popular consensus. On the issue of security, for instance, a structural reform of the Interior Ministry would require the development of popular defense committees to provide security during the interim period.

The internal document concludes by listing these points in a proposed press release, the first such document in the Muslim Brotherhood’s attempted rehabilitation among the revolutionary forces and the broader Egyptian society. In the months since this document was first put forward, the Muslim Brotherhood’s exiled leaders, led by Mahmoud Hussein, Muhammad Ali Bishr, and Muhammad Sudan of the FJP’s foreign relations committee, repeatedly rejected its suggestions. But the positions outlined in the document represent a strong contingent of Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters, particularly among the youth of the movement. There have since been strong signals that the organization could be shifting in support of some of these positions.
In April 2015, the Muslim Brotherhood announced that it had recently conducted new internal elections and replaced 65-70 percent of the organization’s previous leadership with new members.\textsuperscript{11} Ahmed Abdel Rahman, formerly the secretary-general of the FJP, a member of parliament, and a strong proponent of the greater inclusion of youth voices within the Muslim Brotherhood, was announced as the new head of the group’s administrative office in exile\textsuperscript{12} The office would be responsible for the coordination of anti-coup activities, media outreach, establishing partnerships across the spectrum of revolutionary activist groups, and seeking international support. Amr Darrag and Yahya Hamid, two Muslim Brotherhood leaders who served in Morsi’s cabinet, were given expanded roles within the group’s new office, while senior leaders such as Mahmoud Hussein were effectively sidelined under the new arrangement.

In another sign that the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership has conceded to the pressure from its base, the group gave its full backing to an anti-coup coalition group that it did not directly command, the Egyptian Revolutionary Council (ERC). An academic and political analyst, Maha Azzam, presides over the ERC, while former judge Walid Al-Sharabi serves as the group’s vice-president. Although the ERC also includes familiar Muslim Brotherhood figures like Amr Darrag and Gamal Heshmat, the new group styles itself as an umbrella organization that seeks to coordinate anti-coup activities with activists of all political and ideological stripes. Given the continued deep-seated hostilities between the Muslim Brotherhood and large swaths of the revolutionary movement, leaders of the ERC acknowledge that forming meaningful partnerships in the course of their anti-coup activism presents an uphill struggle. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood’s continued demand that Morsi be reinstated as president as part of a political settlement to the current impasse is one that other groups challenging the Sisi regime do not support.

**Competing Trends within the Muslim Brotherhood**

It is important to place these recent developments within the Muslim Brotherhood’s broader historical evolution dating back to its reconstitution in the late 1970s. When Anwar Al-Sadat made the determination to release them from prison, there were barely a hundred surviving members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Many simply wanted to reintegrate back into normal life, leaving only a small handful to decide the future of the organization—if there was to be one at all. Even though he had released them, Sadat had been careful not to bestow any legal status on the group, so the survivors of Nasser’s prisons knew they were to be operating outside the bounds of the law.

\textsuperscript{11} Interview with Ahmed Abdel Rahman, *Bila Hudud*, Al-Jazeera, April 22, 2015 (Arabic).

Two opposing trends emerged: one advocated for the Muslim Brotherhood to develop a broad movement without a centralized organizational structure; the other advocated for a strong hierarchical structure without an engagement mechanism with the broader society. Under the leadership of the newly-selected General Guide Umar Al-Tilmisani, a compromise was reached that attempted to find a middle position. This divide, however, continued to play out in several ways over the course of the ensuing years.

There was at once an emphasis within the inner circle of the leadership on exercising greater control over the rank and file, while maintaining its deep distrust of the state and large segments of Egyptian society. On the other end, there was a strong push for greater engagement with society and less emphasis on doctrinal and organizational uniformity. Ultimately, both of these trends tended to adopt a reformist approach to activism and avoided any direct challenge to the regime. Some believed in continued social work and active recruitment of members to broaden the Muslim Brotherhood’s base and shape a new generation of Egyptians to believe in the movement’s mission. Others wanted greater accommodation with the state by reaching implicit agreements on the extent of its political engagement, such as the number of parliamentary seats it would contest. In exchange, the leadership effectively offered its endorsement of the political process and therefore its tacit support for the regime. Whatever change the Muslim Brotherhood hoped to bring about in the course of this arrangement would be gradual and incremental.

For all of its rhetoric on issues of social justice, the Muslim Brotherhood benefited from the economic liberalization pursued by Mubarak in a variety of ways. First, its base was made up of a large contingent of middle class Egyptians who profited greatly from these policies and enjoyed rapid upward social mobility throughout the 1990s and beyond. It also led to the rise of a particular wealthy elite represented most prominently by figures like Khairat Al-Shater and Hasan Malek, although it should be noted that the wealth of the Muslim Brotherhood’s elite pales in comparison with that of the oligarchs closely tied to the Mubarak regime who enjoyed tremendous prosperity due to widespread corruption and nepotism. Secondly, rising income inequality and the state’s withdrawal of a number of critical social services allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to step into the breach by expanding its social welfare services and thereby giving it another avenue to reach Egyptians.

These developments had major implications for the Muslim Brotherhood’s role in the 2011 uprising. By this point, the organization already maintained an established mode of operation and a particular relationship with the state. It was a decidedly reformist organization that believed in accommodation with the regime and creating a place for itself within society that could not be rolled back at the whims of an authoritarian ruler. In that sense, the ensuing revolutionary moment offered great risks in addition to the possibility of great rewards. Understandably, the leadership took a cautious approach. Not only did it
decline to endorse the initial protests on January 25, 2011; once it did offer its support, it also maintained a direct line of communication with regime officials in an effort to negotiate a possible end to the protests in exchange for a greater share in the ruling bargain, much to the dismay of its core youth contingent and the broader revolutionary movement. Once Mubarak stepped down, the Muslim Brotherhood was the first revolutionary force to endorse the transition timeline put forward by the ruling military council, mobilizing its supporters to vote in favor of the March 2011 referendum that established the process.

In the wake of these historic differences, the organization featured an exodus of both youth and veteran leaders in the months after the post-Mubarak transition began. Abd al-Moneim Abul Futuh was the most prominent leader to leave the organization and establish his own political party, the Strong Egypt Party, as the vehicle for his presidential campaign. The Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership refused to acknowledge that it was facing an internal crisis of dissent and disillusionment within its ranks. Recent reports suggest that this, too, may be changing. A recent statement by an FJP spokesman, reiterated by other figures in the organization, calls on the group to shift its energies away from political work in favor of a return to an emphasis on the most basic unit within the Muslim Brotherhood, the ‘usar (clubs or families), weekly reading groups made up of five-seven members to discuss the core Muslim Brotherhood curriculum. 13 These reports emerged in the wake of the suicide by activist and former Muslim Brotherhood supporter Zainab Mahdi, who was reportedly alienated by the organization and experienced a crisis of faith. Critics have urged for a renewed emphasis on the basic curriculum of the Muslim Brotherhood as established by its charismatic founder, Hasan Al-Banna. Others have added that the curriculum itself needs to be revised to reflect contemporary challenges facing Egyptian youth 14

Indeed, the internal structure of the Muslim Brotherhood is one that faces major challenges going forward. From the moment that the organization shifted the bulk of its energies to political work through the FJP, it neglected to maintain its active recruitment into its historic social movement organization, with the number of new members reaching a complete standstill after 2011. By withdrawing from spaces of traditional strength for the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization has allowed alternative social forces, from Salafists to liberals and leftists, to exercise greater influence on the next generation of Egyptian activists. In addition to offering an ideological and institutional home for Egyptian youth suffering from the policies of the coup regime, the renewed focus on the Muslim Brotherhood families is also meant to provide organizational continuity and resilience in the face of efforts by the Sisi regime to eradicate the


14 Ibid.
The coming year will be quite revelatory for the future of the Muslim Brotherhood and the trajectory of political Islam more generally. In the past we have seen the fortunes of these parties turn rather quickly, yielding the rise of so-called “post-Islamism” as an explanatory concept.\(^{15}\) With the resurgence and victory of the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring, followed by its dramatic fall, there was once again a belief that Islamism had run its course, that it existed as a salient force as long as it was in the opposition to secular authoritarian regimes, but that it offered nothing in the way of solutions to political and socioeconomic crises in a post-revolutionary democratic transition. That assessment must be tempered by recent developments within the movement and across Egyptian society. So long as it thrived while challenging authoritarian rulers, political Islam offered itself as an alternative but it did not propose a true reconceptualization of the state. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which are reformist in nature, sought to undo the authoritarian tendencies of a government without transforming it in any fundamental fashion.

Given the recent setbacks in Egypt, many young activists see the future of Islamism as lying beneath a broad-based and inclusive revolutionary banner. Their call for a more universal outlook built upon unifying principles views the Sharia as a frame of reference that informs the legislative process by following the spirit, not the letter, of traditional Islamic legal principles. Partly in response to criticisms of the Morsi presidency, some Muslim Brotherhood activists have de-emphasized the centrality of issues of personal piety and religious practice in favor of greater interest in social justice and good governance. However, this shift has yet to result in a demonstrable closing of the revolutionary ranks in opposition to the Sisi regime.

In the wake of the Muslim Brotherhood’s tentative adoption of a revolutionary platform, there are three possible outcomes for the ensuing period, though none of them appears likely to materialize without considerable changes to the broader political and socioeconomic environment. First, the Muslim Brotherhood could continue its opposition to the Sisi government until it successfully removes him from power and restores the revolutionary transition toward a democratic system free from domination by the Egyptian military. Second, the Sisi regime could emerge victorious by continuing to shut down any and all avenues for opposition, escalate its clampdown on youth activists, continue the isolation of the Muslim Brotherhood’s imprisoned leadership, and possibly even carry out the death sentences against senior

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figures that were handed down in spring 2015. The third possibility would be for an agreement between the two sides that would legitimize the Sisi government and grant the Muslim Brotherhood partial re-entry into society. In essence, the resulting arrangement would be a reformulated version of the semi-legal status the group experienced under Mubarak, albeit in a vastly reduced form. As it stands, this scenario is also highly unlikely given the regime’s eliminationist policies and the Muslim Brotherhood’s emergent revolutionary footing.16

In the current impasse, neither side is likely to emerge victorious. Despite the changes to its leadership and the creation of the ERC, the Muslim Brotherhood has been unsuccessful in establishing a united front with other revolutionary factions. Ahmed Abdel Rahman recently claimed that more than two-thirds of all anti-coup activities in Egypt were conducted by factions unaffiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.17 While it is difficult to substantiate this claim, what is clear is that there is little to no coordination among the opposition. The development of a broad-based consensus that utilizes its limited resources effectively is critical to the success of a revolutionary movement. Moreover, the Sisi regime has taken full advantage of the international community’s continued disinterest in the state of human rights in Egypt to continue the clampdown. Without serious consequences, in the form of withholding foreign military aid and diplomatic support or imposing sanctions, the revolutionary movement finds itself virtually alone in its standoff against the military. The Muslim Brotherhood’s office in exile has pledged to build international pressure on the Sisi regime, but it is unlikely that the United States or Egypt’s regional allies will shift their stance, barring major internal upheaval and wider mobilization within the country.

For its part, the Sisi regime continues to struggle to solidify its hold on Egypt. Although Sisi has established himself as president, he has failed to develop a substantive political base. There are even suggestions that Egypt’s political elite faces internal divisions as some factions have yet to fully endorse Sisi’s leadership.18 Additionally, the regime’s economic plan has thus far relied almost entirely on the largesse of Sisi’s Gulf sponsors, who provided tens of billions of US dollars in aid to prop up the regime in its shaky first year. That Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates pledged an additional $12 billion in March 2015 indicates that two years on from the coup, the Egyptian economy is still incapable of standing on its own.19

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17 Interview with Ahmed Abdel Rahman, Bila Hudud, Al-Jazeera, April 22, 2015 (Arabic).


Moreover, as Sisi continues to face a militant insurgency in Sinai and occasional outbreaks of violence in Cairo and other cities, the security pledges he made in assuming control of the country have yet to be fulfilled. In fact the regime’s “war on terror” rhetoric appears to be fueling further radicalization rather than quashing the opposition.20

Under the current repressive climate in Egypt, questions have understandably been raised about the use of violence in the course of the Islamic movement’s decidedly revolutionary turn. In a recent column, a member of the group’s old guard, Mahmoud Ghozlan, referred to Tilmisani’s unequivocal condemnation of the use of violence in the 1970s.21 By recalling the past, Ghozlan aimed to rely on the organization’s legacy to dissuade frustrated and impassioned youth from embarking on a path of violent contention against the state. In an indication of the current divisions within the organization, Ghozlan faced fierce responses from young members who argued that after eight decades of activism, the organization’s tactics had resulted only in further isolation and repression. Instead, they have advocated campaigns of civil disobedience and obstruction of the authoritarian levers of state power.22

But whether the revolutionary impulse expressed by the organization’s base, and increasingly within its changing leadership, represents a transitory moment of crisis or a long-term transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood remains to be seen. What is clear is that a renewed approach to politics in Egypt must overcome the obstacles of a new authoritarianism as part of a broad revolutionary effort long before it can ever manifest in a competitive political field.

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22 “‘Peace and violence’ erupt a crisis of authority within the young and old leaderships of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood,” Anadolu Agency, May 28, 2015 (Arabic).
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