



THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD PREPARES FOR A COMEBACK IN SYRIA

Raphaël Lefèvre

MIDDLE EAST | MAY 2013

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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Summary

The Muslim Brotherhood is the most powerful group in Syria's exiled political opposition network. It is also emerging as a significant presence in rebel-held territory in northern Syria, where it is rebuilding its grassroots movement after thirty years in exile. But the Brotherhood's success in the next stage of the Syrian revolution depends on its ability to address several significant challenges.

Key Themes

- The Brotherhood is Syria's best organized opposition group. Its political strategy rests on building a network of alliances with various ideological and religious forces, even if they seem inconsistent.
- It can count on a network of committed activists inside and outside the country and on powerful fundraising capacities.
- The Brotherhood is dominated by an old guard. But a younger generation of Brothers is dynamic, innovative, more liberal, and increasingly impatient to exercise more influence. The youth are poised to play a powerful role in the Brotherhood's reconstruction efforts.
- Many Syrians mistrust the Brotherhood because of the years it spent in exile and its deeply entrenched culture of secrecy and hierarchical rigidity.
- As a Sunni organization, the Brotherhood is in the majority, but the country's ethnic and religious minorities are a significant force, making up 30 percent of the population.
- Non-Sunni communities inside Syria are particularly wary of a Muslim Brotherhood comeback despite the group's self-described centrist message.

Challenges Ahead

Winning the hearts and minds of Syrian society. The Brotherhood will have to embrace greater transparency and address the mistakes it has made if it hopes to solidify its position.

Attracting and engaging the younger generation. To avoid losing relevance, the organization needs to provide opportunities for younger conservative politicians. The youth offer the Brotherhood a golden opportunity to renew its membership pool, galvanize its troops, and refresh its image.

Building local ties with the country's *ulama*—especially in Damascus.

The endorsement of the *ulama*, Syria's many sheikhs and religious leaders, could boost the Islamist organization's legitimacy and provide it with an already constituted social base wherever it crucially lacks one.

Acting as a counterweight to Syria's jihadists.

The Brotherhood will be the center of gravity of any broad Islamist coalition, and its rising profile inside the country is shifting the Islamic spectrum back to the center. The organization could be the ideological, political, and military platform that confronts radical jihadist groups.

Welcome Back to Syria?

Active in rebel-held territory in northern Syria ever since the Syrian uprisings started in March 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood is about to rebuild its base in Syria after thirty years of absence. The Islamist organization was outlawed after waging a bitter military struggle against the Baath regime of then Syrian president Hafez al-Assad from 1976 to 1982, but the head of the group recently declared that “the movement will go into action” across the country within months.

The Brotherhood began publishing a newspaper in Syria mid-February. It will soon launch its own television channel broadcasting in the north of the country and open local offices in the liberated cities. And it plans to establish a political wing to compete in future elections and predicts that it could win as much as 25 percent of the vote.¹ Even the current regime seems to believe that the only real alternative to its rule would be a Muslim Brotherhood takeover of Syria.

But, for all the Brotherhood’s history of opposition to the Baath Party, its prominent influence over the political opposition to Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and its optimistic electoral predictions, is the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood really ready to rule a post-Assad Syria?

Two themes, though they vary greatly in nature and extent, seem to be the drivers of the Muslim Brotherhood’s ambitions: first, the reconstruction of the organization’s very structure and social base and, second, the need to build bridges with a Syrian society long accustomed to the Brotherhood’s absence and the regime’s markedly pejorative rhetoric about the group. But a series of unprecedented challenges await the Islamist organization upon its eventual return to the country.

The Brotherhood has spent decades rebuilding networks inside Syria, and recent trends suggest that the organization is now ready to quickly expand. One group in particular is set to play a powerful role in the Syrian Brotherhood’s reconstruction: the Islamist youth. These self-described “sons and daughters of the Brothers” provide the Muslim Brotherhood with a golden opportunity to renew the pool of its membership, galvanize its troops, and refresh the image of the group.

The organization’s eventual success will depend upon whether or not it is able to move on from a political culture based on hierarchical rigidity, underground secrecy, and internal bickering to a more open framework that provides opportunities for young conservative politicians to become leaders that

Even the current regime seems to believe that the only real alternative to its rule would be a Muslim Brotherhood takeover of Syria.

can attract and engage the new generation. Ideology will matter as well, since the Muslim Brotherhood's youth is, generally speaking, more inclusive and less ideologically rigid than its elders.

The ideological tone set by the Brotherhood is also likely to impact two antagonistic constituencies that are both set to have a powerful say in any post-Assad Syria: the Salafists who have emerged as important actors on the ground and the religious and ethnic minorities who make up 30 percent of the population. The organization will have the chance to pose as a platform for compromise, a self-described "centrist" force whose task will be to bridge the gap between the minority communities wary of strict Islamist rule and Syria's more religiously conservative voices. Much of its future success will depend on whether it is able to channel the Salafist energy unleashed since the beginning of the Syria crisis into peace and compromise.

To compete effectively with other "centrist" voices, the Muslim Brotherhood will imperatively have to build a strong relationship with the *ulama*, the country's many sheikhs and religious leaders, whose endorsement could boost the Islamist organization's legitimacy and provide it with an already constituted social base wherever it crucially lacks one, like in Damascus.

How the Brotherhood addresses these key internal challenges will define and determine the nature and extent of its success in the next stage of the Syrian revolution.

The Challenge of Return

Even though the situation in Syria poses a unique set of challenges to the Muslim Brotherhood, its leaders remain optimistic. They are keen to invoke the "Tunisian example" in which an Islamist organization, Ennahda, returned home after years in exile, quickly rebuilt a strong grassroots movement, and eventually reasserted its position within the political system.

But the scales of the repression suffered by Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria differ considerably. Only a handful of Ennahda's leaders went into exile, and the bulk of its membership remained in Tunisian prisons or under house arrest. By contrast, virtually all of the Syrian Brothers, whether leaders or rank-and-file members, had to escape the country to avoid being tortured and killed. In the process, the Syrian regime imprisoned tens of thousands of dissidents of all political and religious stripes. It systematically blamed its brutal tactics on the Muslim Brotherhood's doomed confrontation with the regime in the 1970s and 1980s. This led Syrians to mistrust and resent members of the Brotherhood who had managed to escape abroad.

Upon its return, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood will have to confront its history and clarify the details of its involvement in the events that led to the confrontation and the organization's eventual exile.

The lack of communication between those inside and outside Syria indeed led to a progressive tarnishing of the Brotherhood's image. Some past episodes are still misunderstood and widely criticized, such as *al-Nafeer* ("the call"). In mid-February 1982, in the middle of Hafez al-Assad's brutal campaign to quell a rebellion in Hama, the Brotherhood leadership managed to gather Islamist fighters in military camps around Baghdad, Iraq. They were prepared to cross into Syria, "liberate" Hama from regime tanks, and take revenge for regime-perpetrated massacres. But the whole enterprise was suddenly and seemingly inexplicably called to a halt by Brotherhood leaders, who asked the volunteers to surrender their arms and return home.²

"People are angry at the Muslim Brotherhood for letting them down after the *nafeer*," admitted a former Syrian Brother currently residing in a rebel-held area in the north of Syria.³ He went on to explain that "we had over a thousand fighters armed with weapons and lined up in 200 cars, but the order never came." Explaining in an open and public manner the way such situations arose will be key if the Muslim Brotherhood hopes to regain the trust of Syrian society.

In this enterprise, the organization will be helped by memories of the heavy price it paid for its unyielding opposition to the Baath regime. These memories were revived by the thirtieth anniversary of the Hama massacre last year and by the brutal way in which Bashar al-Assad's regime responded to the initially peaceful protests in March 2011. "Before the revolution, most Syrians would have held the Muslim Brotherhood responsible for the bloodshed in the 1980s," contended a high-ranking Syrian Brother. "Now this thinking has changed as people understand that it is the regime which was guilty for the massacres—not the Muslim Brotherhood!"

The organization has made repeated efforts to link the narratives of its 1980s attempt at toppling the regime with the current Syria crisis. Making this connection gives historical depth to some modern rebels whose fathers or uncles might have died in prison thirty years ago. There have been concurring reports that among the newest Syrian Brotherhood recruits were people who joined the organization to take revenge for what happened in Hama and elsewhere in the 1980s. Most of them are under twenty-five or thirty years old, and many have lost relatives in either past or current Syrian crises.

The Muslim Brotherhood's membership appears set to exponentially increase in the coming months. The organization launched an official initiative in January 2013 to recruit new members. It even set up an office for recruitment that has been specifically tasked with asking members from prominent Syrian cities to return home and to reconnect with their local communities after decades of absence. The members are also asked to provide money and much-needed goods, such as food and milk, to residents of these cities. Because rebels have secured territory in the north and Syria's border with Turkey is now free, "a number of Syrian Brothers went back to Syria

and reconnected with their relatives and friends,” explained a member of the organization familiar with recruitment matters. He continued, “they all told us there is a real thirst for the Muslim Brotherhood inside Syria.”

The organization has also made contact with many of the estimated 3,000 former Syrian Brothers who went back to Syria in the 1990s when the regime proposed an armistice in exchange for the safe return of those who would relinquish their Brotherhood membership. Some of these individuals have rejoined the organization. A high-ranking Syrian Brother put it this way: “For thirty years, the Muslim Brotherhood struggled for survival—now it is expanding!”

But the Brotherhood has taken a slow, somewhat hesitant approach to this expansion. Some speculate that the organization has adopted a “siege mentality” due to its protracted and bloody battle against the regime. Even the success it found in recruiting new members from some rebel-held areas, for instance in and around Aleppo, was initially perceived as a potential threat. “So many people expressed their willingness to join the Muslim Brotherhood that the old leadership was at first concerned about how to best open up the organization’s gates without being overwhelmed,” explained a young member with access to the leaders.

The Brotherhood’s primary concern is security, which helps explain its reluctance to expand too quickly. In the 1970s and 1980s, Syrian intelligence moles managed to penetrate the Islamist group and the regime successfully thwarted plans for coups d’état and mass defections of soldiers. This is certainly something the Muslim Brotherhood wishes to keep from happening again, and it helps explain why, until recently, applications for membership were restricted to the relatives of Islamist militants who already belong to the organization—and are therefore entirely trusted.

A lack of institutional capacity also slows the rate of recruitment. The Brotherhood cannot yet count on the organizational structures that would enable it to properly process all applications. Becoming a full-fledged Muslim Brother takes time and requires the applicant to go through at least three different phases. This process, called *tarbiya*, includes a series of procedures designed to increase the would-be member’s awareness of Muslim Brotherhood culture—its political history, intellectual underpinnings, and, last but not least, the importance of loyalty to the *tanẓīm*, the organization. The worry is that allowing recruits to become full members without undergoing this process would enhance the group’s short-term prospects of gaining influence in Syria but prove detrimental to its long-term stability.

A last, and much more controversial, reason for the slow pace at which the leadership opened up the gates of membership is that an instant and massive influx of members would shift power within the organization. The Syrian Brotherhood has a long history of ideological, regional, and, at times, clannish divisions among its leaders and members. “The regional issue, in particular, played a role in the leadership’s initial cautiousness on the extent to which

membership to those inside Syria should be opened up,” explained one Syrian Brother close to the leaders.

The leadership is driven by two regional currents—the “Hama faction” and the “Aleppo faction”—with different ideological bents and a long history of tension. After the Hama massacre, the two sides blamed each other for the bloodshed, and that feud ballooned into a leadership crisis that divided the organization for years. The two factions reconciled over a year ago, but a sudden boom in the organization’s membership would benefit the Aleppo faction and unsettle the delicate balance of power. The bulk of new members would come from the country’s two biggest cities, Aleppo and Damascus—to the detriment of smaller cities, such as Hama or Idlib.

To overcome this internal squabbling and effectively rebuild its organization inside Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood will need to count on the support of the dynamic and innovative youth.

The Generational Divide

Creating a powerful “youth branch” is one of the Syrian Brotherhood’s most important tasks. While Islamist groups from Tunisia to Egypt could always count on a dedicated pool of dynamic young activists, the Syrian organization has been crippled for decades by the virtual absence of a committed Islamist youth. Internal estimates suggest that, before the recent Syrian uprising, barely 20 percent of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members were below forty-five years old—in contrast to 50 percent of Egyptian Muslim Brothers.⁴

There are several reasons for the dearth of young Syrian Muslim Brothers. It seems that most of the Islamist youth were born in exile and never fully identified with the clannish Brotherhood divisions that arose as a result of the 1982 Hama massacre. “The Muslim Brotherhood is all about infighting,” complained a young Syrian Islamist sympathetic to the organization. He said he has not joined the Brotherhood yet because he does not want to be part of the “dirty tricks between Aleppo and Hama.”

Despite their distaste for the warring factions, most young Islamists remained involved in Brotherhood frameworks in their country of residence or participated in support rallies for the Palestinian Islamist resistance. In doing so, they laid the ideological and organizational underpinnings for a potential future membership in the Syrian organization.

A more pragmatic factor also seems to have played a role in discouraging the Islamist youth from adhering to the Syrian Brotherhood: the lack of leadership opportunities at the helm of the highly secretive and quite rigid organization. While former leader Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni encouraged some of the youth, such as Obeida Nahas or Ahmad Ramadan, to take on more visible positions within the group, most successive leaders were reluctant to open up

the leadership to younger figures who had not fought against the Baath Party in the 1980s.

Also fueling the generational divide was ideology. Young Islamist members of the Syrian Brotherhood are, generally speaking, more liberal both politically and religiously than the old leadership. It is in this framework that a breakaway political platform called the National Action Group for Syria (NAG) was born after internal elections in July 2010 saw power pass from the long-dominant Aleppo faction to the more conservative Hama faction. The NAG, founded by Ahmad Ramadan, quickly attracted “the best and the brightest” of the Brotherhood’s Islamist youth, such as Mohamad Sadad Akkad, Ali Mahmoud Othman, and Obeida Nahas. It started to act as a political entity independent from—and sometimes even in competition with—the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership.

Initially, the Syrian revolution made these generational divisions more rather than less visible. Many of the “sons and daughters of the Syrian Brothers” had long been reluctant to join the group but were drawn, after March 2011, to the sense of historical mission provided by the situation in Syria. They started to join newer platforms that had a Muslim Brotherhood “background,” including the NAG, by then a full-fledged member of the most significant exile opposition framework at the time, the Syrian National Council (SNC). They also included civil society organizations, such as Watan, or “homeland,” set up by young Syrians who often had relatives in the Muslim Brotherhood but who were not, in most cases, themselves Brotherhood members.

Skilled in new media and full of initiatives, these young Islamists rapidly emerged as a dynamic force. It was, for instance, Fida al-Sayed, a twenty-seven-year-old close relative of a Syrian Brotherhood member living in Sweden, who started the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page and made it one of the most influential social networking tools for popular mobilization in Syria. The signal could not have been clearer to the old leadership: if a series of initiatives were not soon proposed to lure the Islamist youth back into the Muslim Brotherhood’s fold, the organization would become permanently estranged from its younger sympathizers and, in the medium and long term, lose all political relevance.

It is in this context that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood adopted measures, beginning in March 2012, to encourage young and talented conservative politicians to take on a more active profile within the organization. Two young Syrian Brothers, Hosam Ghadban and Omar Mushaweh, were promoted to leadership positions. The move was particularly significant since Ghadban had been a member of both the Muslim Brotherhood and the NAG. His promotion showed that there would be no retribution against those who had joined Ahmad Ramadan’s breakaway group but were now prepared to return to the “mother organization.” The scheme seems to have been successful insofar as a few other young Islamists followed Ghadban in returning from the NAG to the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Hassan Hashimi. The old leadership, it

seemed, was finally sending signals that it was willing to open itself up and embrace its youth in a more inclusive way than ever before.

The Brotherhood officially set up a youth branch and gave it funds to organize in late December 2012 at a founding conference in Istanbul. To many, the event was nothing short of historic. For three days, over 350 young Syrian Islamists met, networked, and presented papers on subjects ranging from religion to economics to internal reform before discussing these issues in smaller study circles. Their proposals were later studied by the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership at a meeting in early January 2013 of its main consultative body—the Shura Council—which was attended by a delegation of seven representatives of the youth branch. The event may seem trivial to an outside observer but was in fact a watershed moment for an organization struggling to emerge from thirty years of secrecy.

The youth conference also acted as a symbolically powerful event by reconnecting the Muslim Brotherhood to those long-dormant networks of young and dynamic Islamist activists living in exile. “I had not seen that for thirty years,” recounted a Syrian Brother close to the leaders who attended the conference as an observer. “Most of the youth present in Istanbul used to tell me that they would never join the organization as active members; yet, there they were, singing Muslim Brotherhood songs and boasting about their new membership to the movement with a sense of pride—much like their parents thirty years ago. The old leadership understood just in time that it had to open the doors of membership to young conservatives and, as a result, the organization is now recruiting by hundreds.”

The Istanbul youth conference was also historic because, for the first time since the early 1980s, young Islamist militants came directly from Syria to become members of the Brotherhood, attend the event, and network with other new Syrian Brothers. The number of these young Syrians, estimated at 10 percent of the conference participants, is set to grow exponentially in the months and years to come as the new Syrian Brothers make their way back into the country to gather support, provide services, and build a grass-roots political movement. They also represent the Muslim Brotherhood's best chance to counter the argument that the organization is out of touch with Syrian society given its thirty-year exile. In order to make sure that these new militants are properly integrated into the structures of the Muslim Brotherhood network, some have proposed that quotas be set up to ensure that each “office” of the organization—such as media, national affairs, and the political bureau—is staffed with a minimum percentage of Muslim Brothers living inside Syria.

But with the advent of a credible youth branch of the Syrian Brotherhood also comes the question of what will happen to those other youth groups, such as Watan and

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the NAG, that have flourished outside of the organization's fold since March 2011. This was reportedly the subject of a dispute that broke out at the Istanbul conference after 50 young members of Watan, who are also members of the Brotherhood, tried to persuade some of the attendees to join their civil society group. Those arguing against them claimed that Watan's charitable activities should be pursued within the framework of the newly established youth branch, not through a separate organization.

The Brotherhood is attempting to integrate organizations like Watan into its framework by ensuring that they are financially dependent upon the youth branch. The emergence of a youth branch was meant to attract funding from those wealthy businesspeople close to the Islamist organization who had been donating to youth groups such as Watan or the NAG. Diverting funding from these splinter organizations would push them closer to the Muslim Brotherhood's orbit and, eventually, put their initiatives under the tight scrutiny of the Brotherhood's chain of command.

The Unfinished Business

The youth branch might also have an impact on the ideological bent of the Muslim Brotherhood. The youth branch's more progressive and inclusive tendencies were on display at the Istanbul youth conference, where, for instance, its study circles were composed of both men and women. "This was the first time it happened in the organization's history," commented a young Syrian Brother. "It takes time but there is definitely a change toward more inclusion." As a result of pressure from the youth, the organization's leadership has also become more inclusive—if only marginally. Out of 40 members in the Syrian Brotherhood's Shura Council, six are now women.

The youth branch is also pushing for ideological change in another, quite different, direction. It seeks greater separation between the Islamist organization's political activities and its social and charitable actions. "To have credibility," argued a youth branch leader, an initiative "must either be part of the parliament or part of the mosque—it should not do both at the same time." Introducing a clearer distinction between *dawa* (preaching) and politics was already a key motivation behind the creation of the NAG. It was thus natural that the Muslim Brotherhood's youth branch would take up the matter and call for the creation of a political party inspired by the Brotherhood's vision but independent from its leadership.

"Plans for setting up a political party were already there, but we intensified the pressure so that it became more concrete," pointed out a young Syrian Brother. And this pressure seems to be working. A few days after its Istanbul conference, the organization's leader stated in an interview that one "project is to build the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and to form a political

party [that] would have a nationalist identity instead of being named after the Muslim Brotherhood [and] will be open to anyone who wants to join.”⁵

What remains to be seen, however, is the extent to which the party will truly be independent from the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership. An internal proposal aimed at limiting the number of Muslim Brothers that can be members of this political party to one-third or, at the maximum, half of the party’s total membership is gaining ground both within the youth branch and the old leadership. To the young Brothers, the initiative is appealing insofar as it fits within their inclusive view of politics. “Setting such a limit will effectively separate *dawa* from politics and will enable us to work with other Islamists and non-Islamists—possibly even with minorities who would like to join,” explained a member of the youth branch.

The proposal seems to be attractive to the Syrian Brotherhood’s old leaders as well. They have learned from Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood strongly influences the policies of President Mohamed Morsi and the ruling Freedom and Justice Party. As criticism of Morsi and his party has increased, the Brotherhood’s popularity in Egypt has also decreased. “We don’t want the ‘Egyptian model’ in which the party leader is a mirror to the Muslim Brotherhood,” confirmed a Syrian Brother close to the leadership.

Whatever the details of the future political party’s internal structure, it will immediately need to build an ideological framework within which political activities will be carried out. There is evidence this could prove trickier than most analysts expected. The Muslim Brotherhood’s exile and struggle for survival did not leave it in the best shape to achieve an ideological renaissance. In the early 2000s, it published a National Honor Charter and, subsequently, a political project.⁶ But the project was the subject of so much internal controversy that it took three years of debate before its authors were able to publish it in 2004. The document, as a result, did not offer detailed policy proposals on concrete issues, such as the economy or the courts, and focused instead on the rather abstract notion of a “civil state” in which Islamic law would seemingly act more as a cultural referent respectful of diversity than a theocratic system infringing upon minority rights. A recent document, entitled “Building the Syrian State,”⁷ gave more details on the Muslim Brotherhood’s vision of Syrian identity and the country’s future political and economic system, but it still fell short of laying out a concrete set of policy proposals.

The Syrian Brotherhood’s ideological stagnation also seems to reflect the group’s bitter infighting, which pits the hawks against the doves. As a leader in the organization explains, “there are two schools of thought within the Syrian Brotherhood. While one is rooted in a rigid and fundamental interpretation of the sacred texts, the other is characterized by a much more pragmatic, almost intellectual, outlook.”

The more pragmatic trend developed soon after the organization’s founding in 1945 and guided it during its experience in the Syrian parliament throughout

the 1950s and 1960s. Its historical leaders, Mustafa al-Sibai and Muhammad al-Mubarak, are today hailed as true models by most Syrian Brothers. This pragmatic wing coexists with the more doctrinal trend that emerged under the leadership of Said Hawwa and Adnan Saadeddine in the late 1970s in Hama. These figures led the Muslim Brotherhood into armed resistance against the Baath regime.

Ideological differences within the organization have, ever since, largely fallen along regional lines. The Syrian Brothers from Hama, Idlib, and Deir ez-Zor are generally seen as “the hardliners,” and those from Aleppo, Homs, Latakia, and Damascus are characterized as “the pragmatists” or, pejoratively, “the businessmen”—ready to negotiate and compromise when it serves their interests. In most cases, the Syrian Brotherhood is torn between an inflexible ideology espoused

by Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, the organization’s Hama-born strongman and deputy leader, who is often accused of “using his hand first, his head second,” and a pragmatic line defended by its ideologue, Zuhair Salem, who “thinks with his head rather than his hand.”

But regional divisions within the Brotherhood do not dictate ideological leanings as clearly as they did in the past.

The Syrian uprising has brought to the fore new, unique issues. Today, hotly contested topics within the organization include whether the Syrian Brothers doing charity work inside the country should claim their membership.

In the political realm, ideological leanings are still relevant. “The main obstacle standing in the organization’s way when it comes to setting up a political party has to do with the kind of message it will eventually put forward,” summed up a Syrian Brother close to the leaders. “Its political program will either be influenced by the hard line promoted by Farouk Tayfour or by the compromising vision offered by Zuhair Salem.” It is quite likely that the Brotherhood will ultimately settle on a political program that is a mix of both trends. “Even though most people within the organization share Zuhair Salem’s views, the political party will need Farouk Tayfour’s unique capacities to pour resources into Syria and his credentials as an uncompromising opponent to the regime,” reckoned one source. This will be particularly true when it comes to courting the Salafists.

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Resolving the Salafist Question

The Salafists have emerged as one of the most vocal and efficient forces of the Syrian uprising. On the ground, Salafist militias such as Ahrar al-Sham have proved militarily able to compete with the regime’s most loyal troops and, as a result, are gaining popularity within rebel ranks. Ideologically, their call for a return to the practices of the *salaf*, or the great ancestors and companions

of the Prophet Muhammad, resonates with Syria's increasingly conservative Sunni constituency.

They are a diverse bunch, however. Some, the so-called scientific Salafists, use *dawa* and, in some cases, politics to convince society to become more religious. Others, the Salafist jihadists, want to enforce Islamic law. Dealing with the latter group would be a significant challenge for a post-Assad transitional government composed of the Muslim Brotherhood. "The media concentrate on tensions within the opposition between the secularists and the Islamists, but, in fact, the next fight will pit moderate Islamists against the Salafist-Jihadists," argued a Syrian Brother.

For all the blurriness of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological program, it is within such a framework that one should view its calls to "see Islam as a centrist force."⁸ By posing as a compromising figure between less religious or even secular Sunnis, on the one hand, and the Salafists, on the other, the Brotherhood hopes to gain wider acceptance from both Syrian society and the outside world. And there is evidence that the Brotherhood would be well equipped to channel at least some of the Salafist energy that has been unleashed during the uprising away from jihadist violence and into a constructive political platform.

Some of the most respected leaders of the Salafist movement in Syria indeed used to belong to the Muslim Brotherhood and, in many cases, maintained good relations with the organization even after breaking away from it. This is the case, for instance, with Sheikh Muhammad Suroor Zain al-Abideen, who is a member of the Hariri tribe, which is located around Deraa, and was a prominent figure in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood when it was participating in politics during the 1950s and 1960s. He left after the Brotherhood's leadership crisis in the late 1960s but remained close to the Aleppo faction. Muhammad Suroor left Syria for Saudi Arabia, where he became acquainted with the Wahhabi movement and attempted to politicize it. He later sought refuge in the United Kingdom before moving to Qatar, where he resides to this day. He is, despite his long exile, a figure still much respected by the Syrian Salafists, whom he funds generously.

Some sources suggest that, were there free elections in a post-Assad Syria, Suroor or his son, Bashir Zain al-Abideen, would gain many of the votes in the country's southeast. There, he could ally with the Muslim Brotherhood. "I am sure there will be moderate Salafists of Suroor's creed who will join the Muslim Brotherhood within a coalition," contended a source close to the organization's leadership. Complex loyalties inspired by regionalism and personal friendships may end up playing a more important role than ideology per se in tying groups together in coalitions. Sheikh Adnan al-Aroor, a prominent Syrian Salafist figure who strikes populist chords on his television show broadcast in Saudi Arabia, could, for instance, also join a Muslim Brotherhood-led coalition out of allegiance to Tayfour. "Sheikh al-Aroor is not a friend of the

Muslim Brotherhood—but he is a friend of Hama and, therefore, of Farouk Tayfour,” explained a Syrian Brother.

For now, however, coalition building is not in the spotlight. The attention is centered on the myriad armed Salafist rebel groups that have emerged on the ground since the uprising started. While ruling out the option of teaming up with the Salafist jihadist group of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Muslim Brotherhood nonetheless seems to be actively courting the more mainstream scientific Salafists. This sometimes takes the form of funding or training. “A top commander from the Free Syrian Army [FSA] got an offer from three members of the Muslim Brotherhood to train 1,200 affiliates in a military camp in the region of Idlib,” a source close to the FSA recounted. While it is difficult to independently verify the accuracy of such statements, it is likely that such a process is, in one way or another, under way. “Some of us were trainers in military camps in neighbouring Iraq when we were fighting the Syrian regime in the 1980s—we know how to do that,” confirmed a former Syrian Brother.

But the Muslim Brotherhood’s support for certain Salafist armed groups has sometimes backfired, especially when the Salafists felt they were being used as

pawns on a wider political chessboard.⁹ This seems to have been the case with Suqur al-Sham, a Salafist brigade active in the Jabal az-Zawiya area in northern Syria. Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh (Abu Issa), its leader, initially joined the Committee to Protect Civilians (CPC), a platform mainly composed of current and former Muslim Brothers who provide funding and material support for rebel groups. But he left the committee after he was reportedly asked to pledge his political loyalty to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

That process can engender bitterness with the Muslim Brotherhood and could end up endangering the organization’s position as a self-described “centrist force” attempting to bridge the gap between moderate Islamists and mainstream Salafists. And that, of course, can lead people to look for other options.

After Abu Issa left the CPC, he teamed up with Emad ad-Din al-Rashid—the Brotherhood’s main “centrist” competitor and an increasingly popular opposition figure.¹⁰ When he left Damascus for Istanbul early in the uprising, al-Rashid, a former assistant dean of the University of Damascus’s Faculty of Islamic Law, could already count on a network of former students and political activists that he had been nurturing since the early 1990s. Even though his group is mainly active in the Syrian capital, al-Rashid has begun to extend his reach to the rest of the country. His powerful fundraising capacities have given him enough financial resources to provide support to many rebel groups, and he has also been able to play a leading role in attempting to resolve nascent conflicts in Syria. In January 2013, he went into the Syrian Kurdish areas and reportedly managed to broker a ceasefire between seven Arab and Kurd rebel

The Muslim Brotherhood’s support for certain Salafist armed groups has sometimes backfired, especially when the Salafists felt they were being used as pawns on a wider political chessboard.

groups and the Democratic Union Party, a leading Kurdish faction close to the secessionist Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party.

Al-Rashid's political group, the Syrian National Movement, counts on other advantages as well. Its centrist message competes well with the Muslim Brotherhood's. "We even have a few members who are liberals such as Christians and Alawites," boasted one of Emad ad-Din al-Rashid's closest advisers. "Whatever our religious or political background, we all agree to see Islam as a reference in the future political system—but more as a cultural and civilizational referent than as a legal or even religious one." The Syrian National Movement also joined the Syrian Liberation Front, an Islamist coalition of rebel forces in which mainstream scientific Salafist groups such as Suqur al-Sham hold prominent importance.

Al-Rashid's increasing success and the growing shadow the Syrian National Movement casts over the exiled Muslim Brotherhood pose a threat to the Brotherhood's future in Syria. And the fact that al-Rashid is a popular Islamic scholar in Syria highlights the Brotherhood's need to court the powerful *ulama* and other major constituencies inside Syria.

Courting the *Ulama*

The large number of Syrian religious sheikhs and local clerics who have not been tainted by supporting the Baath regime will hold the key to the Muslim Brotherhood's eventual return. These *ulama* who remained in Syria after the repression of the early 1980s benefit from local followings. They could provide the exiled Brotherhood with an already-constituted social base were they to support it.

Ideologically, there is much common ground between the Muslim Brotherhood and most of Syria's *ulama*. Indeed, some of them are already Syrian Brothers. The most prominent is Sheikh Muhammad Ali Sabouni, who heads the League of Syrian Scholars and is a member of the Aleppo faction of the Muslim Brotherhood.

And support would not be out of the ordinary. Historically, the majority of the country's *ulama* supported the Brotherhood in elections during the 1940s and 1950s. During the constitutional crises of 1949 and 1973, they provided their network of contacts and religious credentials to the Islamist organization, which helped the Brotherhood mobilize support for its constitutional changes.¹¹

But the repression of the 1980s and the subsequent exile of the Muslim Brotherhood changed the dynamics of that relationship. With the organization gone, the *ulama* started enjoying a monopoly on the religious and, at times, political scene. As a result, their influence and autonomy dramatically increased—to the extent that some of them, such as Emad ad-Din al-Rashid,

Moaz al-Khatib, or Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, are now preparing to compete with the Muslim Brotherhood in a post-Assad Syria.¹²

Brotherhood leaders “see in the *ulama* who do not support them a threat to their very existence,” explained a leading opposition cleric from Damascus. “When a sheikh stands up to the regime and tries to play a political role, they feel threatened as it pulls the mat from underneath them and it gives the *ulama* all legitimacy to have the support of the public.”

Two brothers, in particular—Osama and Sariya al-Rifai from Damascus—seem set to play a powerful role in post-Assad Syria that could well determine the Muslim Brotherhood’s future success, or failure, in elections. The Brotherhood’s reach has been limited in the Syrian capital since the 1960s leadership crisis saw most of its activities shift to Aleppo. Most Damascene Brothers resigned from the movement at that point, including Abdul-Karim al-Rifai, a prominent sheikh, father of Osama and Sariya al-Rifai, and founder of the Zayd Group (Jamaat Zayd).¹³ Concentrating on education, al-Rifai strove to build a network of mosques within Damascus that would act as educational centers for market traders and craftsmen from Damascus’s middle class. He meant for this network to eventually lead to the establishment of a pious and prosperous Islamic society.¹⁴

When Abdul-Karim al-Rifai died in 1973, his eldest son, Osama, succeeded him at the helm of the Zayd Group. Even though the group’s leaders refrained from taking strong political stances in the tense context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, enough rank-and-file members joined the armed opposition, which was also supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, that the regime decided to exile Osama and Sariya al-Rifai as well as their close associates. By then, the al-Rifai brothers had already gained a great deal of influence in Damascene society.

The regime allowed Osama and Sariya al-Rifai to return to Syria in 1993, a decade after the political situation stabilized. The Zayd Group completely refrained from politics and focused again on mosque-based education and, increasingly, on social works. By the end of the 2000s, it could count on a “charitable empire.”¹⁵ But this commitment to eschewing politics changed with the beginning of the 2011 uprising. The al-Rifai brothers’ early support for the protesters bolstered their popularity even further among the Sunni middle class and merchant community of the capital. It is estimated that, as of today, the Zayd Group can count on a pool of 20,000 committed followers who have spread to Latakia and Homs in addition to Damascus, where the movement is said to control a network of over 450 mosques.

It is easy to understand, in such context, why courting the Zayd Group has become a priority for the Syrian Brotherhood. In addition to the vast social base, religious credentials, and popular credibility an alliance with Osama and Sariya al-Rifai could provide, this would reinsert the Islamist organization into Damascene society. This is a major requirement for a Brotherhood that

has been walled off from its “Damascus wing” since the late 1960s. Some even suggest that, without such a potential alliance, the organization could not effectively run a transitional government. Within such an alliance, “the Zayd Group would not integrate the Muslim Brotherhood as, understandably, it now has its own ‘brand’ and will most certainly have its own political party,” recognized a Syrian Brother close to the Zayd Group sheikhs. “But it would naturally team up in the framework of an Islamist coalition,” he contended.

The two groups may be distinct, but organic links still remain between the two. Many young Syrian Brothers who were born in exile studied under the auspices of Zayd sheikhs who sought refuge in Saudi Arabia until the early 1990s. “We studied the Quran, the *hadeeth*, *tasfeer*, the history of the prophet and the writings of some modern political thinkers such as Muhammed Qutb,” remembered one Brother. “Zayd and the Muslim Brotherhood thus belong, in many ways, to the same school of thought.”

On the ground, these young Syrian Brothers are trying to reconnect the two groups by carrying out common projects with the Zayd youth. Outside of Syria, there are reports of a number of meetings held between Osama and Sariya al-Rifai and the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. It remains to be seen, however, whether the Zayd Group—especially after spending so many years to build up its own popularity in Damascus—would have more to gain or more to lose from an alliance with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

Reaching Out to Syria’s Non-Sunni Communities

Another priority for the Syrian Brotherhood has to do with how it can best appease the country’s religious minority communities. The country’s population is 13 percent Shia (including Alawites, Twelver Shia, Ismailis, and Zaidis), 10 percent Christian, and 3 percent Druze. The Brotherhood certainly knows it will gain very few votes from these corners of Syrian society, but it still sees its project of building a “new Syria” as resting upon the minority communities’ willingness to give up on the Assad regime. Convincing the non-Sunni communities that, should the Muslim Brotherhood gain power through elections, the group would not infringe upon their rights is therefore a cornerstone of its political strategy. Syrian Brothers are also keen to insist that such tolerance is genuinely part of their view of how society should work. “We will defend all the rights of the minorities—Islam urges us to do so,”¹⁶ declared the Brotherhood’s leader in a recent interview.

Inside Syria, however, such statements seem to go largely unnoticed. Sizeable portions of the country’s non-Sunni communities still cling to the regime’s rhetoric that the uprising reflects “a struggle between Islamism and secular pan-Arabism.”¹⁷ Syria is experiencing “the resurgence of the minorities’

subconscious fear for survival which emerged during the violence of the late 1970s and early 1980s,” according to a prominent Alawite dissident. That fear, said the dissident, helps explain why there is an immense gap between the Muslim Brotherhood’s reassuring discourse and its seeming lack of impact on the non-Sunni communities on the ground.

This disconnect may also be a result of the non-Sunnis’ reluctance to forgive the Brotherhood for its actions during the 1976–1982 insurgency. Thirty years ago, the organization’s initially peaceful political struggle against the Baath regime turned, under the weight of brutal repression, into a sectarian and violent confrontation between Syria’s Sunnis and the religious minorities. In the midst of chaos, the Muslim Brotherhood teamed up with an extremist group called the Fighting Vanguard, which specifically targeted members of the minority Alawite community. The wounds of those past atrocities may have been partially healed, but the scars still remain deep.

The Brotherhood has attempted to address its legacy. In documents published in 2001 and 2004, the Muslim Brotherhood partially acknowledged its mistakes and carried out “a thorough review of its policies”¹⁸—including the rejection of violence and the promise of equal rights for all citizens regardless of their religious or ethnic background. “The Syrian Brothers have changed,” confirmed the Alawite dissident who works with them in the opposition. “The consequences of the sectarian confrontation left deep scars on them too and they have learned lessons from it.” Another prominent Syrian opposition activist, of Christian background this time, went further. “The negative image some Christian circles still hold of the Syrian Brotherhood principally stems from the regime’s thirty-year-long effort at planting the seeds of misinformation and mistrust.” Some even suggest that assassinations of prominent non-Sunni personalities at the time, such as Muhammad al-Fadl, the dean of Damascus University and an Alawite dissident, were carried out by some within the regime and subsequently blamed on the Fighting Vanguard and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is in such a light that one should view the Islamist organization’s vigorous calls for the “formation of a legal inquiry into these events with access to all relevant information.”¹⁹

A growing number of activists, both from non-Sunni communities and from the Muslim Brotherhood, suggest that there might be an eventual change in the dynamics of the two groups’ relationship. One Syrian dissident likened the critical period that would follow any ouster of President Assad to Syria’s quest for independence, during which “the Muslim Brotherhood supported [Syria’s first Christian prime minister] Faris al-Khoury in the mid-1940s and even allied with conservative Christians in some places.” In his view, a post-Assad Syria would offer a similar ground for cooperation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the religious minorities.

Some activists argue that a cooperative dynamic developed quite some time ago in exile. In 2005, from abroad, leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood staged

a spectacular return to Syria's political chessboard by signing the Damascus Declaration together with prominent Christian dissident Michel Kilo and by declaring that the Islamist organization would accept Kilo's election as president of Syria if he were voted in through a free and fair ballot.

To make its statements more concrete, the Muslim Brotherhood encouraged the candidacy of George Sabra, a Christian Marxist, for president of the SNC in November 2012. It also supported the nomination of Monzer Makhou, an Alawite dissident, as ambassador of the rebel National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces to France. And most religious minorities working with the Muslim Brotherhood either in the SNC or the National Coalition recounted relatively positive experiences of their interactions with the Brotherhood. "They are conservatives, of course, but politically they are very open and this is particularly the case with minority groups as they are desperate to showcase their good intentions," detailed one member of a religious minority. Another stated that the Syrian Brotherhood's "constant reassurances that it will support anybody who is elected as president regardless of his or her religious background is a turning point in the history of Muslim Brotherhood movements in the region."

It will be, however, much more difficult for the Brotherhood to appease, let alone work together with, another powerful constituency: the 10–15 percent of Syria's population made up of Kurds. The Kurds are mostly Sunnis, like the Muslim Brotherhood, but are not Arab. Their main criticism of the Brotherhood has more to do with its historical references to Syria's Arab heritage than with its Islamist leanings. "The Brotherhood's thought is as much embedded within pan-Arabism as it is in Islamism," remarked a prominent Kurdish dissident and member of the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change, an opposition platform encompassing several ethnic and religious minority groups.

Indeed, there is a long history of bitterness plaguing the relationship between Syria's Kurds and the Muslim Brotherhood. When a 1962 census led the government to withdraw the Syrian citizenship of many Kurds, the Islamist organization supported the decision. Two decades later, after the Hama massacre, some Brotherhood leaders found refuge in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, who provided them with money and weapons. Many then remained silent when the dictator ordered a cleansing of northern Iraq's Kurds in 1988. The feeling that the Syrian Brotherhood is, by essence, "anti-Kurd" emerged again after it chose Turkey, a country long accused of infringing upon its own Kurdish minority's cultural and political rights, for its new headquarters in exile following Ankara's early support for the Syrian opposition in 2011.

The Syrian Brotherhood is aware of its long and complicated relationship with Syria's Kurds. It acknowledged past mistakes and made an attempt at reconciliation in a May 2005 document. A few months later, the group put together an alliance in exile with former Syrian vice president Abdul Halim

Khaddam called the National Salvation Front. The front also gathered a few Kurdish parties and had a Kurdish dissident as a deputy leader. The initiative was short-lived, but similar Brotherhood-Kurdish cooperation reappeared with the election of Abdul Basit Sida, a Kurd, as leader of the Brotherhood-dominated SNC in 2012. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood's most recent official publications are seemingly more inclusive, referring to Arabic more as the language used in "an open space for convergence and interaction" with Syria's diverse ethnicities than as a superior cultural referent.²⁰

The Brotherhood also has an opportunity to get closer to Kurdish Islamists. In February 2005, Sheikh Mohammed Mashouq al-Khaznawi, a prominent Kurdish Islamist scholar with a substantial following in the Kurdish areas, traveled to Brussels for discussions with the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. His assassination a few months later rendered him an icon for Kurdish Islamists, some of whom formed the first Kurdish Islamist party, the Unity of National Struggle for Syria's Kurds, in 2006. This party's advocacy of Kurdish political and cultural rights within a Syrian framework came close to the Muslim Brotherhood's own wording on such matters.²¹ "We're not expecting too many Kurds to join us, but we do envisage an alliance with Kurdish Islamist parties," concluded a Syrian Brother close to the leaders.

Conclusion

The Muslim Brotherhood still has a long way to go before regaining the full trust of society and positioning itself to assume a leading role in the political and security framework that emerges from the rubble of the Syrian revolution. The group's ambitions have been tempered by the difficulties of opposition politics, the challenges of building grassroots support within Syria, and the rise of more extreme Islamist actors on the Syrian stage. A number of recent events reinforce the image of a movement still trying to adjust to the new demands of its more public role and the need to make and build alliances at home and abroad.

The Syrian opposition's lingering suspicion of the Brotherhood was reinforced in early April 2013. Then, a number of influential dissidents froze their membership in the opposition National Coalition in the wake of the election of Ghassan Hitto, an Islamist close to the Muslim Brotherhood, as head of the transitional government running the rebel zone. In an election steeped in secrecy and backroom politics, they leveled thinly veiled criticism at the Brotherhood, denouncing "the dictatorial control exercised by one of [the opposition's] currents" for the unexpected election of the relative unknown Hitto.²²

Instead of taking the opportunity to address its role in the Syrian opposition in a more transparent way both at home and abroad, the Brotherhood dismissed all criticism as lies stemming from a "smear campaign."²³ "We do not seek power," its leader even stated.

Similarly, early Brotherhood efforts to promote a self-described centrist message to reassure critics inside and outside Syria regarding its intentions have failed to achieve their purpose. Concerns about the group's ideology remain strong among non-Sunni communities, more secular Syrians, and key actors in the international community, particularly the United States and Western Europe.

The Brotherhood's handling of the December 2012 U.S. decision to list Jabhat al-Nusra as a foreign terrorist organization reinforced these concerns. Calling the December move "very wrong" and "too hasty,"²⁴ the group was embarrassed by Jabhat al-Nusra's subsequent declaration of loyalty to al-Qaeda in Iraq. It took almost a week for the Brotherhood to issue an official reaction to the statement criticizing al-Nusra's announcement as a "big mistake that will only serve the regime" while nonetheless insisting that there is no extremism in Syria.²⁵ While the Brotherhood has the military and political potential to act as a counterweight to extremist groups inside Syria, it will need to do much more to convince its detractors that it takes this role seriously.

Despite its rich history of involvement in Syrian politics, for some the Brotherhood continues to be viewed as a foreign entity merely representing a local branch of the Egyptian movement. To win hearts and minds, the Syrian group needs to move more decisively to define itself in the context of its own considerable history. It will also need to fully address the circumstances that led to its thirty-year exile and demonstrate a willingness to reflect on the mistakes that were made in its early years. These steps would make it easier for religious minority communities, in particular Alawites, to understand the extent to which the Brotherhood has changed since the 1980s and to be open to assertions that the organization is now truly ready to embrace centrism as a defining ideological and political characteristic.

Finally, the Syrian Brotherhood's centrist strategy has also been complicated by its position on the possibility of a negotiated settlement to the conflict—an issue that was revived in late 2012 and early 2013 by the National Coalition's former head, Moaz al-Khatib. The Brotherhood's uncompromising opposition to any sort of dialogue with representatives of the Assad regime and its push of Ghassan Hitto (who shares the Brotherhood's position on this issue) in the National Coalition election may have been helpful with hardliners. But it likely reinforced critics who believe the group is more determined to dictate outcomes than find ways to solve Syria's problems.

As the Syria crisis drags on into its third year, the Brotherhood cannot afford to be complacent about the future. If it hopes to shed its long-held reputation as a secretive society and position itself for a future leadership role, it needs to explain more publicly the rationale behind its decisions and be more

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open to criticism and debate. The success of its efforts to reach out to and share decisionmaking with a younger generation of Brotherhood members will be critical to this process. The danger is that if the Brotherhood does not make a more aggressive effort to define itself, it will be defined by others. And in the process, it will lose the momentum it has worked so hard to cultivate over the past three years.

Notes

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- 3 Unless stated otherwise, this paper draws from interviews conducted by the author in December 2012 and February 2013.
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- 5 “Syria’s Brotherhood Promises Peace, Stability for Syria,” *Today’s Zaman*, January 20, 2013.
- 6 For a copy of “The Muslim Brotherhood’s Political Project,” see Lefèvre, *Ashes of Hama*, 223–28.
- 7 For a copy of the Muslim Brotherhood’s “Building the Syrian State” charter, see <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=50663>.
- 8 Quoted in the Muslim Brotherhood’s charter “Building the Syrian State.”
- 9 For a more detailed analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood’s involvement in armed struggle inside Syria and the potential it has to backfire against the movement, see Raphaël Lefèvre, “The Syrian Brotherhood’s Armed Struggle,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 14, 2012, <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=50380>.
- 10 For more on Emad ad-Din al-Rashid, see “Trying to Mold a Post-Assad Syria From Abroad,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2012.
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- 20 See the Muslim Brotherhood's "Building the Syrian State" charter: <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=50663>.
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