



THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

Testimony by **Dr. Nathan Brown**

Nonresident Senior Associate, Middle East Program

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
Subcommittee on Terrorism, HUMINT, Analysis, and
Counterintelligence

Washington, D.C.

April 13, 2011

Thank you Chairwoman Myrick and Ranking Member Thompson for inviting me to testify today.

I am a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University and a nonresident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. I have been researching and writing on Islamist movements in the Arab world since 2004, with a special focus on the Egyptian, Kuwaiti, Palestinian, and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood chapters as well as associated organizations.

In my research on the Muslim Brotherhood, I have travelled numerous times to each of the countries in question, interviewed leaders, parliamentarians, activists, critics, former members, journalists, and academic specialists; I have also surveyed statements, platforms, newspapers, and websites associated with the movements and collected the sometimes voluminous Arabic-language scholarly writings and research center reports on the movements.

While the Brotherhood has the reputation of being something of a closed organization and sometimes operates in a difficult political environment, I have actually found it to be one of the easiest topics to research in the Arab world: its leaders are accessible and often surprisingly frank; its critics are outspoken and detailed in their observations; its activists can be loquacious; and the written record is uncommonly rich.

My view of the Brotherhood is that its rise would confront the United States with some political challenges but that those challenges would be most successfully met if the Brotherhood is integrated as a normal political actor in the various countries in which it operates. Seen that way, the Brotherhood is far more a political than a security concern for the United States.

In my testimony, I hope to be able to use my research to answer five questions today that are germane to the Committee's work.

- What is the Muslim Brotherhood?
- What is the Brotherhood's position today?
- What is the Brotherhood's position in revolutionary Egypt?
- Is there an international Muslim Brotherhood organization?
- What should U.S. policy be toward the Muslim Brotherhood?

What is the Muslim Brotherhood?

The Muslim Brotherhood is an ambitious and socially engaged movement dedicated to reforming individuals and the entire society along Islamic lines. Its broad agenda and flexible nature have allowed it to survive even in the authoritarian conditions of the Arab world. Transitioning to a democratic system will be a challenge for Brotherhood organizations not because they are opposed to democracy—far from it—but because they have been structured for non-democratic politics and have not even decided how much of their work is really political rather than social, religious, educational, charitable, or personal.

Original model: The Brotherhood as Boy Scouts but more ambitious

In describing the Muslim Brotherhood, it is perhaps best to start with the movement's motto, imprinted on its emblem: "Be Prepared!" The resemblance with the Boy Scouts is far from coincidental. The movement's founder, Hasan al-Banna, was aware of Scouting and wished to found an organization that was similarly devoted to fostering the personal development of the rising generation. But the Brotherhood was distinct from the Scouts not only in its specifically Islamic orientation but also in its more ambitious agenda: to this day Brotherhood leaders speak of their mission as reforming the individual and the society in all dimensions.

For al-Banna, the task of the Brotherhood was not to build an isolated community of saints, separate from the society and living in a state of moral purity; it was to build a movement that would be deeply engaged with the society, serving as a model, teacher, and leader. Al-Banna's genius lay in inspiration and organization rather than in systematic thought. Indeed, from the beginning, it was clear that the Brotherhood model was based less on abstract ideas as on forging tight personal bonds around dedication to a common (but very general) vision of personal and social reform. To this day, the organization is so strong that schisms are rare; yet it is also so flexible that almost nobody is dismissed from the Brotherhood for anything he (or, in the case of associated women's organizations, she) says or thinks.

The Brotherhood becomes political and international

With the Brotherhood so dedicated to social and political engagement, it is not at all surprising that the movement is deeply affected by the conditions in which it operates. In its first few decades, for instance, it began largely as a social movement but took on an increasingly political focus. In the 1940s, as other Egyptian movements created youth wings that took on a paramilitary aspect (modeled in part on European movements of the left and right during the same period), the Brotherhood formed its own.

In the late 1940s, it constructed a "special apparatus" that engaged in some violent activity. While that body was disbanded over half a century ago, the damage to the Brotherhood's reputation has been ongoing. In the 1950s and 1960s, as the Egyptian regime moved to suppress the Brotherhood using extremely harsh methods (widespread arrests, executions, show trials, torture, exile) the Brotherhood moved underground.

But if the Brotherhood was having trouble in Egypt, it was replicating itself internationally. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, it attracted interest in other Arab countries; sometimes Egyptian Brotherhood members travelled to other countries to help spread the model. As Brotherhood organizations were founded in other countries, they sometimes found a more open political environment and were able to shape themselves accordingly. In Jordan, for instance, the Brotherhood was the first movement to take advantage of a liberalized political party law in 1992 to form its own offshoot, the Islamic Action Front.

The challenge of Sayyid Qutb: The Brotherhood confronts radicalism within its ranks

The Muslim Brotherhood has had some radical ideas develop within its ranks. It has largely rooted those out, though a lingering residue remains.

The harsh suppression of the Egyptian “mother movement” in the 1950s and 1960s had deep effects on the movement’s leadership. It made most of them far more cautious, less politically inclined, and more anxious to avoid confrontations with rulers. But it also gave birth to a far harsher version of the Brotherhood’s ideology—one that sought not to dive into social and political engagement but instead withdraw from a society that it saw as having completely lost its way and abandoned Islam. This alternative approach, most fully developed by Sayyid Qutb, argued that the task was for individuals to reform themselves—but in contrast to al-Banna’s approach, to do so in isolation. Such individuals, after they had educated and prepared themselves fully were to then build up a pious and dedicated vanguard movement and embrace the inevitable clash with the broader society.

How did the Brotherhood as a whole react to the Qutbist variant that had emerged within its ranks? Ambivalently. That ambivalence—the failure to repudiate Qutb’s ideas fully and explicitly—has led to great suspicions about the Brotherhood. Is the movement harboring a desire to pursue its agenda through forceful, even violent means? The answer to this question is clear: no. The repudiation of securing change through violence is clear, strategic, and sustained. (The movement does still support what it considers violent resistance to foreign occupation—as I will explore below—but it has been explicit for over a generation that existing Arab political systems in places like Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait should not be changed by force).

Brotherhood leaders hesitant to jettison Qutb attempt to place the violent aspects of his writings aside by arguing that they were products of the imprisonment and harsh repression; they also seek to play down his radicalism by claiming (with some accuracy) that Qutb was denouncing the society but that he never engaged in *takfir* (declaring a claimed Muslim to be an apostate) for individuals. The real problem connected with the Brotherhood’s continued association with Qutb is that it suggests that the desire to withdraw from the society rather than engage intensively with it is still alive. What activists sometimes describe as a *tanzimi* (organizational) tendency is still predicated on a preference for building up and preserving a strong movement even at the expense of playing a strong social and political role.

Continuing debates over politics

And indeed, that is the real debate within most Brotherhood movements today. It is not over violence or moderation. Within the movements, activists and leaders debate how much and in what ways to engage in politics. Should the Brotherhood run for office? Build coalitions with others? Form a political party? If it is politically active, what should be the relationship between its party activities and the movement as a whole?

Operating in an authoritarian environment, answering these questions has been relatively easy: they are often answered for the Brotherhood by existing regimes. Dedicated to peaceful change, Brotherhood leaders have generally complied with restrictive laws even while complaining bitterly about them. But if a new democratic environment emerges in the wake of revolutionary upheaval in the Arab world, the Brotherhood will have to make some very hard decisions about how much to conceive of its role in political terms. Already divisive debates have broken out within the movements in several countries over precisely this issue.

The Brotherhood Today

Most Brotherhood movements are more public and open than many of their critics fear. The Brotherhood is sincerely dedicated to peaceful change in most of the places it operates—but it makes a clear exception for societies it regards as living under occupation.

Is there a hidden agenda?

I find little basis for claims that the Brotherhood harbors some kind of hidden agenda. The positions of the Muslim Brotherhood are generally far clearer and more detailed than observers realize. It is not difficult to discover where the group stands. Where the Brotherhood's position is less than clear, it is generally not because the movement is hiding its position; the problem is generally that the movement has not made up its mind.

Observers of the Muslim Brotherhood in many countries are often suspicious when they hear conciliatory words from movement leaders. Some suspect that the Brotherhood has a hidden radical agenda that it reserves for private discussions among members while it presents a gentle and conciliatory face to the outside world.

Some of these suspicions are so deep that they probably cannot be countered: there are critics of the Brotherhood who believe that every radical statement from a leader is truthful while every moderate one is dissimulation. There are others who view conciliatory statements only as proof of the wily and cagey nature of the leadership; the more they hear such words, the deeper their suspicions grow. Still others doubt the democratic commitment of Brotherhood leaders by demanding to see actions, not words—forgetting the fact that in most places the Brotherhood operates, there are no democratic rules in place to observe.

To be fair, in the closed political atmosphere of authoritarian systems, such suspicions often flourish. In the case of the Brotherhood, they are often augmented by regimes that propagate wild allegations and strange conspiracy theories—in its final days, for instance, the Mubarak regime sought to spread the belief that demonstrators were being manipulated by Zionist, Iranian, American, and Brotherhood agents; less ambitiously but just as bizarrely, they would encourage talk of a secret U.S.-Brotherhood alliance.

It is not surprising that in such an atmosphere, conspiratorial interpretations of the Brotherhood would flourish. But we can take their formal statements much more seriously than the critics suggest—we need to read them closely to see how definitive and specific they are.

In fact, my own research suggests that the suspicions of Brotherhood movement statements are ultimately based on a poor understanding of how broad ideological movements operate. Of course, Brotherhood leaders, like political leaders everywhere, cast their remarks differently depending on the audience. But my experience is that Brotherhood leaders vary their presentation less than others and show less reticence about expressing views that the listener does not want to hear. In short, the words of Brotherhood leaders are not meaningless—far from it. Because the Brotherhood has many different strands and tendencies within its ranks, the main way that the movement has of ironing out its own position is through hammering out statements, platforms, and verbal formulas. The public

utterances of the Brotherhood leaders are aimed as much at the inside of the movement as they are at the outside, and hard experience has taught leaders that if they work too hard to curry the favor of an external interlocutor, their words may come back to haunt them inside the movement.

In recent years, the movements have opened up somewhat and internal debates are more accessible to outside observers than was previously the case. Some younger activists have even become comfortable in frankly discussing differences within the movements and their disagreements with senior leaders. (On one occasion, I asked a young Egyptian activist if any senior leaders embarrassed him. He nodded and gave me a name—and then helped me arrange an interview with the leader in question!) This makes it easier to study the Brotherhood, but a bit harder to come to a conclusion about its positions since it sometimes speaks with different voices. The reason for conflicting statements is not deception—the contradictions are because of disagreements within the movements.

For that reason, I have learned to watch for two things when reading or hearing the statements of movement leaders. First, is the leader speaking for him/herself or for the movement as a whole (and Brotherhood leaders often carefully distinguish between the two levels)? Second, how specific is the statement? Those utterances that reflect only a personal perspective or that are very vague generally suggest that there is a variety of views within the movement and that there is no clear position. When a statement is made in the name of the movement and when it is very specific, it can be taken as a sincere and genuine indication of the movement's position.

The Brotherhood rejects violence—with a qualification

This can be illustrated by the stance of the Muslim Brotherhood toward political violence. The Brotherhood is telling the truth when it describes itself as a peaceful movement—and truthful as well in the exceptions it makes to that rule.

In most countries, the movement's position is very clear: it seeks only peaceful political change; it rejects violence as a way of securing its goals; and the rejection of violence is not a mere tactical adjustment but a deep strategic commitment. However, the movement also insists that it regards violence as legitimate in cases of foreign occupation and that it therefore has verbally supported violence against Israeli targets as well as against American targets in Iraq. In both cases its positions have been in the mainstream of public opinion in the Arab world. In the former case, the movement has shared in what I have to describe as a deplorable, even reprehensible, failure to distinguish between military operations and targeting civilians. Hamas itself was born out of the ranks of the Palestinian Brotherhood specifically in order to pursue "resistance"—and such resistance takes violent forms, including the use of terrorism. In the Iraqi case, there is an irony in the Brotherhood's position since the Iraqi political party most associated with the Brotherhood—the Iraqi Islamic Party—participated in the U.S.-sponsored effort at political reconstruction after 2003. There is no better evidence of the diverse nature of the movement.

While most Brotherhood organizations emphatically reject use of violence on the domestic scene, this has not always been the case. In Egypt, the "special apparatus" formed in the 1940s was disbanded in the 1950s, but to this day the Brotherhood finds itself forced to

continually affirm that this chapter is firmly in its past. In Jordan, the Brotherhood briefly considered taking up arms in cooperation with Palestinian groups in the late 1960s but ultimately decided against it and has remained peaceful to this day. In Kuwait, members of the Brotherhood took part in resistance to the Iraqi occupation, but since the country's liberation in 1991 have remained completely peaceful.

The Brotherhood embraces political democracy

In most of the countries where it operates, the Brotherhood has embraced democracy. It never rejected democracy in principle, but for a long time it distrusted party politics (an essential element of democracy). It justly acquired a reputation for very hierarchical internal structures and sometimes seemed uninterested in daily political tussles.

But over the last generation, the Brotherhood's dedication to electoral politics, its acceptance of political parties, its rejection of Qutbism, and its full endorsement of rotation of power has become consistent and deeply engrained in the movement's appeals. Some movements have become much more democratic in their internal operations, and those that have not done so are on the defensive (generally explaining that they cannot practice full internal democracy if they are not a fully legal organization).

There are notable limits to the Brotherhood's conception of democracy. Even those within the movement who most champion freedom often focus their attention on political freedom. Brotherhood movements are much more reluctant to place the freedom of the individual over that of the group in the social realm. For instance, the Kuwaiti Islamic Constitutional Movement, a political party with roots in the Brotherhood, boasts how it led the fight for legislation that freed most restrictions on the Kuwaiti press—but still criminalized press attacks on religion.

The Egyptian Brotherhood Before and After the Revolution

Perhaps the best evidence of the strategic rejection of violence was the Brotherhood's activity over the past generation in Egypt. Despite being faced with a restrictive political environment and harsh repressive tools, the Brotherhood maintained its dedication to peaceful change. In Mubarak's final years, the repression became so intense that the Brotherhood began to withdraw partially from the political scene, leaving the movement a bit unprepared for the revolution when it occurred. But the Brotherhood has moved to seize the openings now present, adjusting its positions and organization as rapidly as a cautious and conservative organization can. It still has many more adjustments to make to prepare for democratic politics.

Cat and mouse game under Mubarak: The Brotherhood survives a hostile regime

After a quarter century of harsh suppression, the Brotherhood's leaders were allowed to resume activities under the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat in the 1970s. They slowly rebuilt the organization, aided by the infusion of a new generation of Islamic activists from Egyptian university campuses. But the re-emerged Brotherhood was never legally recognized and it was discouraged from engaging in political activity. It still found a way to participate by running in professional association elections or competing for parliamentary seats under

the banner of other parties. The regime tolerated a moderate level of political activity in the 1980s, but in the 1990s it turned sharply against the Brotherhood, manipulating the electoral system to keep out its candidates, taking over some of the professional associations dominated by Brotherhood members, shutting down businesses and NGOs associated with Brotherhood members, and even dragging some leaders before military kangaroo courts, sending them off to prison for extended terms.

In the 2000s, the regime let up slightly and in 2005 held parliamentary elections where (because of a series of judicial decisions that opened up some of the electoral process) Brotherhood candidates could run. The elections—carried out in three stages—showed the Brotherhood’s electoral prowess. In fact, the Brotherhood was doing so well that the regime moved in increasingly shameless ways (most famously by surrounding polling places with security forces to prohibit people from voting in areas where the Brotherhood was strong) throughout the rounds of voting to limit the Brotherhood’s gains.

And in the wake of the 2005 elections, the regime moved sharply against the Brotherhood. At one point, one-third of its senior leadership was in prison. In a 2010 interview with a Brotherhood parliamentarian, I asked how Brotherhood deputies were able to operate in their districts. He explained that they no longer could operate since many of their local staff members had been arrested. The regime prevented the movement from holding internal elections.

In short, the regime seemed to be playing a cat-and-mouse game with the Brotherhood. The movement was allowed to operate within constantly shifting limits and any time the Brotherhood looked poised to mount a serious political challenge, the regime’s claws came out. The movement reacted in Mubarak’s final years to withdraw into itself. Top leaders who were more experienced in political affairs were often marginalized and the movement’s inward looking, *tanẓimi* leaders asserted their control over the organization.

The revolution: Brotherhood youth suck the movement in

When the January 25 revolution began, the Brotherhood was therefore operating in a very cautious mode and dithered over what role to take. A group of younger activists within the movement wished to participate fully in the demonstrations from the first day and pressed the movement’s leadership to participate. Although they claim they did not expect the leadership to endorse the strike, these youth wanted to obtain their leaders’ blessing for their own participation. And indeed, the Brotherhood’s initial position was that its members were free to demonstrate as individuals but the movement as a whole would have no role. That was all the Brotherhood youth needed. The demonstrations quickly snowballed, and the Brotherhood leaders could no longer hedge their bets so easily.

After a few days, the involvement of the youth leaders pulled in the entire organization. The Brotherhood leaders saw both a strong popular reaction and a brutal but unsteady regime response, and decided to throw the movement’s full weight behind the demonstrations. Elated youth leaders felt they had dragged their reluctant elders along.

But the leadership’s decision to participate did not end the tension between its approach and that of the youth activists. This difference was most dramatically on display when then-Vice

President Omar Suleiman attempted to open a dialogue of sorts with opposition actors—a move clearly intended to convey the false impression that there were viable negotiations heading toward an agreement over a set of regime concessions. By choosing to send some of the movement’s members to the meeting, the Brotherhood’s senior leaders seemed to fall into an old pattern of accepting any bones tossed to them by the rulers. A potential rift within the movement closed only when those who attended the meeting insisted they had conducted no negotiations and merely attended to present opposition demands. Further sessions were avoided. The rift threatened to open again when Brotherhood youth leaders in March held a conference to which they invited some marginalized movement leaders. Top leaders refused to attend. Efforts to manage the tensions continue.

But there is a deep underlying difference between the youth leaders and their elders. There are some policy and ideological differences, but the main gap is more cultural than anything else. Older leaders tend to place a far higher value on hierarchy, internal discipline, patience, and unity of ranks. Most leaders are products of an age in which the Brotherhood underwent great trials, and they therefore tend to be cautious and a bit less open to external forces. It is worth noting that tremendous differences exist among senior leaders with regard to all of these tendencies, however.

Younger leaders, on the other hand, are far more comfortable with broad coalitional politics. They tend to be far more open about internal matters, less risk-averse, and less deferential both to the organization as a whole and to its senior leaders. They see the Brotherhood as much more freewheeling and decentralized, a broad set of networks united by a common vision and general approach. As one younger activist told me, “The Guidance Bureau is only one part of the Brotherhood,” making it clear he did not consider it the most important part. If he wanted to contact like-minded fellow activists, he did not need to go through formal movement structures, but could simply use other forms of networking enabled by current communications technology.

Seen this way, the tensions within the movement are not likely to lead to anything like a schism—though individual members might leave in frustration or find themselves marginalized. Most youth activists are not pressing for a complete revolution within the movement—though many would vote for a different kind of senior leadership when elections are eventually held. Older leaders have tried to maintain good relations with their younger members, and younger activists tend to talk of their elders less with burning resentment than with the indulgence that youth can sometimes find for seniors they believe to be out of touch.

Since the revolution: Getting ready for the challenges of democracy

The breakdown of Egypt’s authoritarian regime has opened real possibilities for the Brotherhood to enter the political realm more fully than it ever has in the past. But it is important to remember that the Brotherhood has a comprehensive agenda that is not restricted to politics; it does not want to abandon all of its social, educational, religious, and charitable activities in order to run for office. Nor does it seek to pursue politics for its own sake; its purpose is not to rule as an end in itself, but to be politically involved for the sake of its broader reform and Islamification mission.

The Brotherhood expects to finally regain legal recognition in Egypt and even found a political party. Thus, the post-revolutionary climate in Egypt is more favorable for the Brotherhood than that which prevailed in the Mubarak years. But it is important to avoid exaggerating the Brotherhood's position in Egypt today. One often hears that the Brotherhood is poised to do well in any elections because it is the best organized political force in the country. There is some truth to that statement, but we must also remember that the elections where the Brotherhood performed well were ones in which the vast majority of Egyptians stayed home. When the Brotherhood mobilized all its supporters—for instance in 2005—it did not even try to win a majority of seats nor could it have done so. In a more politicized and engaged society, there is every reason to expect many Brotherhood candidates to win seats, but most seasoned observers of Egypt consider a Brotherhood majority unlikely, even if the movement sought one (which it says it does not).

And despite the predictable conspiracy theories about a secret Brotherhood-military alliance, in fact the Brotherhood's direct contacts with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) are weak; both the Brotherhood and the SCAF seem to want a rapid transition (though for different reasons), but there is not much evidence of a similar set of priorities beyond a general sense of haste. The Brotherhood has profited from the SCAF's lifting of political restrictions from the authoritarian period, but it is hardly alone or singled out in that regard.

If the Brotherhood is to take full advantage of any emerging democratic environment it will have to form a political party (as it has begun doing) but also free that party to make decisions and take positions according to a political dynamic. Initial indications are that the cautious senior leadership of the movement is reluctant to do this, anxious to ensure that its party not become so political that it lose touch with its ideological principles. While those outside the country look closely to see what positions the party will take, the critical questions for now are how much freedom the party will be given. The real debates right now within the Brotherhood—and they are intense—are less about what the party's platform should be and more on how it should be organized and how long a leash it will be given.

A party that operates under a fully political logic—rather than being closely controlled by a less politically-minded movement—is likely to continue the ideological evolution that we have begun to see on issues like women's rights and even Camp David.

The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty: Evolution of the Brotherhood's position

The Brotherhood's position on the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty has evolved considerably in tone and is beginning to change in content as well. The emotional attachment of the Egyptian Brotherhood to the Palestinian cause is almost as old as the organization. And Hamas refers to the Egyptian Brotherhood as the “mother movement” acknowledging that its roots lie in attempts by Palestinians to emulate the Egyptian Brotherhood. But the Brotherhood also sees itself as a responsible political actor and has trouble denying the validity of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

As long as it was far removed from political power, there was no reason for the Brotherhood to budge much on the issue. Its leaders could retreat into ambiguity, refusing to say whether they wanted to abrogate the treaty and instead calling for it to be submitted to a referendum.

As it has tried to present itself as a serious actor ready to play a constructive role, its emphasis has changed: it talked for a bit about submitting the treaty to parliament rather than to a popular referendum. Certainly it knows that the idea of renewed warfare is an anathema to most Egyptians. And increasingly the Brotherhood has called instead for simply ensuring that the treaty is observed (without making clear if it thinks it is being violated and, if so, how). And it has called for renegotiating aspects of the treaty (presumably desiring to end the full demilitarization of Sinai and some of the economic aspects of the treaty). All these positions are common to most political forces in Egypt.

While the Brotherhood does not say formally as a movement that it accepts the treaty, individual members note in private discussions that they think that the movement has dropped its opposition to the treaty itself, although they acknowledge that support for the Palestinian cause remains strong. Most of all, they make clear that the movement is in an uncomfortable position on the issue, seeking to avoid a strong stand and preferring instead to emphasize domestic issues. Were the Brotherhood offered positions in the government, most observers agree that the Brotherhood would flee from the Foreign Ministry to avoid having to deal with the issue.

The International Muslim Brotherhood

There is an international Muslim Brotherhood organization that works to coordinate among the movements in various countries. But it does not matter very much. The various movements do follow a similar general model, but they are free to apply it very differently according to what they see as appropriate for their own societies. So while country-based organizations swap ideas—and sometimes contribute funds—across countries, the formal international organization is almost irrelevant.

At a global level, the Brotherhood is no Mafia. Nor is it a rigid and disciplined Stalinist-style Comintern. It most closely resembles today's alliances among various like-minded organizations like socialist or Christian Democratic parties. These are tame frameworks for a group of loosely linked, ideologically similar movements that recognize each other, swap stories and experiences in occasional meetings, and happily subscribe to a formally international ideology without giving it much priority. There is every reason to be interested in the Brotherhood's myriad (and surprisingly diverse) country-based movements, but there is no reason to fear it as a menacing global web.

Is there an international organization?

A while after the election of Muhammad Badi' as "general guide" of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the international Brotherhood organization—a contentious and unusually public process—I shared a lunch with some leaders of a Brotherhood-inspired movement in another Arab state. The conversation was mostly in English, but sometimes turned to Arabic (particularly when the Brotherhood leaders were speaking to each other). One of them asked me in English, "Nathan, what do you think of what is going on in the Brotherhood in Egypt?" Before I could reply, another leader asked my questioner in Arabic, "Who is the new general guide?" Neither of them could remember, so I piped in with Badi's name. Neither one noticed me at first, so I repeated it. At that point, one of them replied vaguely to the other, "Yes, I think it is Muhammad something."

How disciplined and well-organized can an international organization be when followers struggle to recall their supposed leader's name? In press interviews, personal meetings, and material designed for their own members, Muslim Brotherhood leaders in various Arab countries refer very respectfully to the Brotherhood way of doing things, but almost never to the authority or even existence of the international organization. Yet increasingly, awareness of Islamist movements in the West has led to some dark talk of an international Brotherhood that serves as a cover for all sorts of missionary, political, and even violent activity. From a solid core in the Arab world, the Brotherhood's tentacles are said to be reaching out from Oslo to Oklahoma City.

There is an international Muslim Brotherhood. Muslim Brotherhood movements exist in a number of societies; each one of them is headed by a "general supervisor." Most chapters are members of an international body; they also accept the overall leadership of the "general guide," a figure who has almost always doubled as the leader of the Egyptian organization (the original organization, often referred to in other countries as "the mother movement"). The international organization is not only timid; it is also shy: we know little about its internal operations; we learn about its meetings and actions only when it takes a public decision.

There are a few movements that are clearly inspired by the Brotherhood (in Israel, Kuwait, Iraq, and Indonesia, for instance) that do not acknowledge an open association with the international movement; some have formal ties that are not openly acknowledged and all have informal ties. And there are other organizations besides the international Brotherhood—such as the International Forum for Islamist Parliamentarians—that are informally associated with the Brotherhood and work to gather members from Brotherhood chapters and Brotherhood-type movements in various countries.

The weakness of the international organization

Why does this international organization not matter? Because it has not (and probably cannot) do very much. First, it is sluggish and unresponsive. It could not coordinate an effective response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, for instance. It cannot even resolve movement issues effectively. On the few occasions it has been called in to settle difficult organizational questions, it has not responded with efficiency or alacrity. For instance, in 1989 a dispute among Jordanian Brotherhood members about whether to accept an invitation to join the cabinet proved so contentious the disputants tried to kick the question upstairs to the international organization. The answer came far too late and contained too much ambiguity to resolve the issue. In 2007, Khalid Mish'al sought to have Hamas recognized as a distinct member of the international organization, because, for historical reasons, the Palestinian wing of the Brotherhood was regarded formally by the international organization as combined with the Jordanian. The international organization took years to untangle the two organizations, largely because it let the two movements work out their own separation.

Second, the international organization is not only sluggish, it is also Egyptian dominated. Its leader is always an Egyptian and Egyptian Brotherhood members have scoffed at the idea that a non-Egyptian might be selected. Badi's election was approved by the international organization, but there was some grumbling about the rubber-stamp nature of the process.

Most members do accept that the “mother movement” will inevitably have a leading role, but many also find the Egyptian leaders far more interested in Egyptian than international affairs. Egypt’s harsh security climate long hampered its leaders from becoming more active internationally—many Egyptian leaders could not travel outside their country.

Finally, the various Muslim Brotherhood movements have developed an ethos of mutual deference: they increasingly hold fast to the idea that each chapter should be free to react as it sees fit to local conditions. The various chapters do consult each other, but they are free to reject the advice they receive. The Iraqi Islamic Party participated in a political process sponsored by the United States at a time when Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood refused contact with American officials because of the country’s occupation of Iraq. Aware of the conflicting stances, leaders of both organizations simply agreed to disagree. Hamas was advised by both Jordanian and Egyptian leaders not to try too hard in the 2006 parliamentary elections. “Participation, not domination” (that is, run but do not win) was the formula suggested to them. They listened to the first half of the message (they ran), but not the second (they won). Unlike their Jordanian and Egyptian comrades who only contest a minority of seats, they submitted a complete slate of candidates for parliamentary seats, enabling their surprising and (in the eyes of several Brotherhood leaders I have spoken to in other countries elsewhere) ill-advised victory.

Mutual deference extends quite far: all Brotherhood movements agree on the general principle that they will work only for peaceful change. The exception is that violent resistance to occupation is legitimate. When is a country occupied and when should resistance be used in such a case? That is for each country-based movement to evaluate. Hamas has universal support for its violent “resistance,” but Brotherhood members also make clear that it is up to Hamas to decide when and how to employ violence.

A global caliphate or a local focus?

But doesn’t the international organization seek to recreate a global Islamic caliphate? There are certainly some older ideological documents suggesting such a distant goal, but there is precious little evidence that the matter weighs much on the minds of current leaders, focused as they are on their domestic scenes. All movements I have studied are dedicated to working within the existing system of nation-states, not creating a global Islamic state.

If the international organization were the germ of a recreated unified Islamic world, membership might be a bit more portable than it currently is. For instance, a member of a Palestinian Brotherhood temporarily residing in the Gulf might be treated in the Gulf state as a member of the local organization. That sort of inter-movement linkage often did happen earlier in the Brotherhood’s history but has declined significantly in recent years. Brotherhood movements in various countries offer each other moral (and in a few cases material) support, but membership in a national organization is hardly treated as membership in a single, international movement.

Loose coordination among movements

In a sense, Brotherhood-type movements—whether formally affiliated or not, whether nominally accepting of the leadership of the Egyptian general guide or completely

independent—do not need a formal organization if their purpose is to reform the societies where they live and operate. The weakness and irrelevance of a formal international organization does not prevent the movement from showing some characteristics that make formal coordination seem unnecessary, even counterproductive.

First, the various country-based movements have no problem trying to follow a common general model, but that is because the model is so general it can be applied very differently in different settings. Members almost never refer to the authority of the international organization or the current general guide, but they regularly refer to the Brotherhood's model (*manhaj*) and to the thought of Hasan al-Banna. Al-Banna's thought, in turn, is hardly an abstract philosophy but instead a set of organizational techniques, inspirational speeches, and a general approach that places a tremendous emphasis on social engagement. Brotherhood members and their movements are supposed to work on behalf of reform on all levels—personal, social, political, and religious. They are to build better selves, families, and communities based on Islamic teachings. This model is flexible but pushes the Brotherhood outwards. It inspires Brotherhood movements and members to enter politics and run for office, form charitable associations, speak softly to non-members, act as role models in their neighborhoods, embark on self-improvement, participate in study groups, and support Islamic causes. Given the broad range of activities Brotherhood movements are involved in—and given the fact that some of this activity does not take place under the Brotherhood rubric—it is often difficult to discern where a Brotherhood's formal organizational reach begins and ends. Brotherhood members are often involved in a host of projects, hospitals, schools, clubs, and associations, but it is not always clear how closely those other organizations are associated with the Brotherhood movement. It is this organizational feature that is both a secret of the Brotherhood's influence and a source of the suspicions and confusion that surround the movement.

The second reason for the limited relevance of the formal international organization is that Brotherhood members recognize each other without it. It may be difficult to tell where each country's Brotherhood organization begins and ends, but it is generally clear to people in the movement who is following the general model and who is not. Ask an Egyptian Brotherhood leader who represents the Brotherhood movement in Kuwait and you will get a clear answer (even though the Kuwaiti movement cut its formal ties with the international organization two decades ago).

U.S. Policy

What should U.S. policy be toward the Muslim Brotherhood? At present we have no policy. In Morocco we deal with an Islamist movement similar to the Brotherhood (though not formally affiliated) as a normal political actor. In Hamas, our diplomats are barred by law and policy from meeting Hamas. In Egypt, contacts are almost non-existent but the formal policy allowed diplomats to meet with those from the movement serving in the parliament. In Jordan, quiet contacts take place but both diplomats and Islamists are bashful and careful about open meetings. In Kuwait, diplomats have contact not only with the Brotherhood-associated party but with Islamists of many different stripes.

No need for a policy on the Brotherhood

We have no policy toward the Brotherhood. And let me stake out what might seem to be an odd position here: I do not think we need a policy.

The U.S. does need a policy toward countries in which the Brotherhood operates, but we do not need a policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood any more than we need a policy toward Green Parties, socialist parties, or parties of the nationalist right. Like these parties, the Brotherhood takes policy positions that are at variance with those of the United States (in the Brotherhood's case, the policy clashes are real and sometimes stark but just as often exaggerated—and Brotherhood stances on most foreign policy issues are generally not out of the mainstream within the countries in which they operate).

In places where the Brotherhood operates—like Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait—we often seek to build strong bilateral relationships that have diverse economic, diplomatic, and security dimensions. The lesson that the past few months should have taught us is that basing those relationships on specific individuals is mortgaging long-term interests for short-term convenience. A solid relationship—and one that is consistent with American values—is more soundly based if it can be forged with a stable and inclusive political system.

Seen this way, our country policies should generally be based on a recognition that the Brotherhood can be deeply rooted in the society. That means that a healthy political system is one that generally should include the Brotherhood. And indeed, as I have tried to show in this testimony, the Brotherhood's social and political engagement means that it is deeply affected by the society in which it operates. In general, Brotherhood leaders are eager to be participants in the political process.

The engagement that matters is domestic, not international

The policy question that is often posed in Washington is whether the U.S. should “engage” the Muslim Brotherhood. I have always been puzzled by formulating the question that way. Discussions between diplomats and leaders of various types are a means of gathering information and pursuing policy, not ends in themselves. The question is therefore not whether or not we “engage” the Brotherhood (our diplomats should, of course, be able to do their jobs by developing informative contacts with all political actors, but these contacts are to make sure our policy is better informed; they should not be the purpose or center of any policy). The real question is whether various domestic political forces can engage each other. We can sometimes contribute to that domestic engagement by making clear we are willing to work with any legitimate leadership.

In Egypt (and in several other Arab states, including Jordan and Morocco, for instance), it is simply not up to the United States to decide whether the Brotherhood is included or excluded. Elections in those countries are arranged in accordance with the law in place there and the United States is unable to determine the rules of entry into electoral politics. No political force in those countries is pressing for the disqualification of the Brotherhood as a political actor.

A more prominent Brotherhood may cause some headaches, but it is not cancer

The political challenges posed by the Muslim Brotherhood in each of these countries is real. But that is precisely the point: the Brotherhood is a political challenge, not a security threat.

When quizzed by some Islamists in Jordan and Egypt about American attitudes toward the Brotherhood in trips over the past two months, I gave my personal opinion: for the United States, the rise of the Brotherhood would be a headache, but it would not be cancer. I was startled when I read a blog post by a recent visitor to Egypt who reported that a movement activist (presumably one I met with) used that precise phrase back to him. If a secular American academic very much ineligible for membership in the Brotherhood and an activist in the Islamist movement agree on a position, it just may be correct.

Biography

Nathan J. Brown is a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University. He also serves as nonresident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. A graduate of the University of Chicago, Professor Brown received his MA and PhD degrees from Princeton University. He has served as a Fulbright scholar conducting research in Egypt, Qatar, and Kuwait; he also taught at Ben-Gurion University in Israel. His work has focused on politics in the Arab world; he has written books on Egyptian politics, the rule of law in the Arab world, constitutional systems in the Arab world, and Palestinian politics. He has also edited books on democracy and democratization.

Since 2004, Professor Brown has focused his research on Islamist movements, particularly those modeled on the Muslim Brotherhood. He is the author of two books on the Muslim Brotherhood. The first, co-authored with Amr Hamzawy, an Egyptian political scientist and senior associate at Carnegie, is entitled *Between Religion and Politics*; it was published jointly by Carnegie and the United States Institute of Peace last year. The second book will be published later this year by Cornell University Press under the title *Participation Not Domination: Islamist Parties and Semiauthoritarian Politics in the Arab World*. Parts of this research have been supported by the United States Institute of Peace, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (where Professor Brown served as a fellow in 2009 and 2010), and the Carnegie Corporation of New York (which named him a Carnegie Scholar for 2008-2011).