



Mismatched Expectations: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Uprisings

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INTRODUCTION

Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, despite falling on opposite sides of the Middle East's Sunni-Shia divide, both see benefits in cultivating ties. For Iran, outreach to the Brotherhood, particularly the movement's Egyptian branch, is a low-cost investment in a group that could help Tehran widen its influence in the region. For the Brotherhood, it is useful to have connections with Iran—a regional power that shares a similar, though not identical, ideology on the role of Islam in politics and society—to serve as political leverage with other important actors in the Middle East. However, while Iran is eager to develop a deeper relationship to support its regional agenda, the Muslim Brotherhood remains hesitant to move beyond friendly contacts. This is due to the organization's overriding priorities, notably its unwillingness to alienate the Sunni Arab world.

While the parties have had informal contacts since the founding of Iran's Islamic Republic in 1979, the relationship entered a new phase as the [Muslim](#)

[Brotherhood rose to power](#) in Egypt after the 2011 uprising. When the Brotherhood's candidate, Mohamed Morsi, was elected Egypt's president in 2012, official contacts between Cairo and Tehran increased. But Morsi, forced to heed the views of Egypt's military establishment and traditional allies, proved unwilling to reestablish formal diplomatic ties, which had been severed in 1979, during his first and only year in office. Instead, the new Egyptian administration undertook a more gradual approach toward warming relations with Iran.

Despite the coup that removed the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013, Iran continues to reach out to its members and views the group as a potential ally in advancing its regional goals. The Brotherhood, meanwhile, retains its pragmatism, engaging in informal contacts with Iran that will not sabotage outreach efforts to other influential regional actors. However, the Brotherhood's current weakness and the negative image of Iran among many Sunni Arabs represent obstacles to heightened cooperation.



THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND TEHRAN: MORE THAN INTERLOCUTORS

In 1979, Brotherhood branches from several Arab and non-Arab countries sent delegations to offer support to and congratulate Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolution's principal leader. The writings of influential Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb, particularly his framing of Islam as a revolutionary system of political and social governance, also appealed to current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who translated Qutb's works from Arabic into Farsi.

In subsequent decades, informal contacts continued to take place through emissaries from the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood (IOMB), the body formally responsible for coordinating among the organization's branches worldwide and shaping its foreign relations. Iran worked with the IOMB's London office to organize interfaith dialogues between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This included the Iran-backed Islamic Unity Forum, established in 2007 with cooperation from Ibrahim Munir, the secretary general of the IOMB. Such events also allowed Iran to develop and sustain contacts with members of the Egyptian Brotherhood, which as the movement's original branch holds considerable sway within the IOMB and has traditionally served as a bellwether for other Brotherhood organizations in the Middle East.

The shared basis in political Islam between the Brotherhood, one of the world's largest and most influential Sunni Islamist movements, and Iran's Shia Islamic Republic facilitated cooperation between the two sides. Ideologically, both parties advocate for the establishment of an Islamic state, religious proselytism (*daawa*), and Muslim unity. They also share some common geopolitical aims, including the need to confront Israel and liberate Palestine.

However, key ideological differences also exist. In particular, the Brotherhood rejects revolutionary

tactics to gain power. Instead, the group has sought to build political influence through elections, while also emphasizing to Western powers skeptical of the group's intentions that it opposes establishing an Iranian model of Islamic governance. Nonetheless, ideological commonalities outweigh differences for Tehran, which views the Brotherhood as an ideal Sunni partner in its endeavor to "unify the Islamic world politically."¹

Iran sees the Brotherhood as a bridge for improving relations with the Sunni Muslim world. Given the movement's broad reach and contacts, it could be a persuasive advocate for the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" against U.S. influence in the region, and importantly, a mediator with fellow Sunni Islamist groups hostile toward Tehran.² Many Arab regimes and Salafi-oriented Sunni religious movements have historically depicted Shia Iran as a sinister force in the Middle East. This negative perception has only grown in recent years as a result of Tehran's direct support for President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria against a largely Sunni opposition during the Syrian conflict.

The confrontation with the United States has guided Iran's foreign policy since the founding of the Islamic Republic. To recruit allies, Tehran has historically employed a bottom-up approach in the Arab world that focuses on cultivating ties with nonstate actors and local communities, including Sunni Islamist groups. Alliances with Sunni Islamists are necessary to bolster the nonsectarian nature of Iran's "resistance front" in the region. Egypt, given its large population, border with Israel, and status as a member of the U.S.-backed regional camp since roughly 1979, remains a highly strategic location in which to make such inroads.

In the Muslim Brotherhood's view, a relationship with Iran serves to underpin the movement's self-appointed leadership role in promoting Islamic unity worldwide. It also considers it practical to maintain good relations with Iran, given its status as a regional power. Even the prospect of improved Brotherhood-Iranian ties could serve as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from

regional powers opposed to Tehran, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. However, compared to the Iranians, the Brotherhood has displayed less eagerness to increase cooperation due to its wariness over Iran's international isolation and generally unfavorable image among Sunni Muslims. Instead, the Brotherhood has engaged in contacts with Iran when expedient to serve the group's overall interests, as witnessed after the movement's political ascent in Egypt.

MISMATCHED EXPECTATIONS AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power following the Egyptian uprising ushered in a new period of direct engagement with Iran. Iranian officials hoped that rapprochement with Egypt under the Brotherhood was a first step toward reestablishing diplomatic ties with Egypt and ending its own [regional isolation](#). (In place of a fully normalized diplomatic relationship, Iran and Egypt only have Interests Offices in each other's countries.) However, this ambition remained unfulfilled and did not account for the Brotherhood's need to balance numerous political considerations, particularly the views of influential domestic Egyptian actors, such as the military, and regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia. As a result, Brotherhood-led Egypt chose to pursue only limited cooperation with Iran.³

Brotherhood Rule Leads to a Warming of Ties

Iran's characterization of the Arab uprisings as an "[Islamic awakening](#)" framed the transformative events in Egypt in religious terms. This established common ground with Islamist organizations that were formally entering politics during this period. In April 2011, Egypt's then foreign minister [Nabil Alaraby stated that Egypt](#) was open to reestablishing diplomatic relations with Iran. The prospect of friendlier Iranian-Egyptian relations appeared only to improve following the successes of the Brotherhood-linked Freedom and

Justice Party in Egyptian parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012.

Upon Morsi's election as president in June 2012, the new administration improved Egypt's ties with Iran to emphasize the Brotherhood's vision of a new and independent foreign policy. Morsi's decision to include Tehran in his first major diplomatic initiative—brokering a solution to the Syrian conflict—signaled that [Egypt under the Brotherhood](#) was willing to pursue a course at odds with the traditional isolation of Iran. The Morsi government proposed setting up a working group composed of Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to discuss ways to halt the violence in Syria. While the diplomatic initiative never materialized, it demonstrated that the [Brotherhood viewed Iran](#) as an influential regional player that merited a seat at the table alongside Egypt's traditional pro-U.S. allies.

In August 2012, Morsi handed over the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement to Iranian officials in Tehran, becoming the first [Egyptian president to visit Iran](#) in over thirty years. Then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad later reciprocated by attending an [Islamic summit in Cairo](#) in February 2013. Iran also attempted to strengthen ties through proposed deals to boost Egypt's lagging economy. These offers included a package to promote Egyptian tourism to Iranians, provide oil shipments, and implement various trade agreements.⁴⁴

Rather than immediately seizing the opportunity for increased economic cooperation with Tehran, Morsi allegedly sought to leverage Iranian offers to improve his administration's relations with Saudi Arabia. After Morsi's election, [Riyadh worried that the Brotherhood](#) would undermine the existing Egyptian-Saudi alliance in favor of Iran, its main rival in the region. While negotiating with Tehran, the Morsi administration informed Saudi Arabia about the details of Iranian overtures, hoping the Saudis would offer commensurate economic packages in return.⁵⁵ In that way Morsi sought to placate Riyadh and underline that Egypt still



prioritized a relationship with Saudi Arabia over Iran. However, in what appeared to be an effort to undermine the budding Iranian-Egyptian rapprochement, the Saudis informed Iran that Egypt had passed along to them the Iranian trade proposals.⁶⁶ Although this put the Morsi administration in an embarrassing position, the revelation did not halt contacts. Business normalization continued, and in March 2013 the **first commercial flight** between Iran and Egypt in thirty-four years landed in Tehran.

In pursuing relations with Iran, the Brotherhood also had to take the preferences of Egypt's entrenched military and intelligence services into consideration. These powerful institutions were stalwarts of Egypt's traditional foreign policy alignment with the United States and Gulf allies. According to a member of the Brotherhood who worked in the presidential palace, Egypt's military leadership and intelligence services were against full normalization with Tehran, with the caveat that they did not view Iran as an "enemy."⁷⁷ However, the head of the Iran desk at the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate did advise the Morsi administration to pursue more economic cooperation.⁸⁸ It is unclear whether this reflected a genuine interest within the security establishment to deepen Egypt's economic ties with Tehran, or was a trap to make it appear that the Muslim Brotherhood held a **political bias** toward Iran.

The attitudes of Brotherhood supporters and domestic allies further constrained outreach efforts. Among some of the movement's constituents, there was little appetite for developing deeper relations with Iran while it was simultaneously involved in repressing the Syrian uprising. Meanwhile, Egypt's **Salafi movement** and its political arm, the Nour Party, an electoral ally of the Brotherhood, were also against improving **Cairo's ties with Tehran**. The Nour Party's ideological and suspected financial ties with Saudi Arabia hinted at a degree of policy coordination on this front with the group's Saudi backers.

Looking back, Iranian analysts and government officials blame the failed rapprochement with Egypt on Morsi's unwillingness to diverge from the views of Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian military and intelligence services.⁹⁹ Using an anecdote to illustrate the point, one Iranian official described a visit to the presidential palace in Cairo: "I saw the same security guards when I came during Mubarak's period in power. What changed?"¹⁰¹⁰ Morsi was unable to fundamentally alter Egyptian foreign policy and chart a new course. Indeed, the July 2013 coup against Morsi and the Brotherhood marked a return of military rule to Egypt. **Saudi Arabia praised** the Egyptian Armed Forces for the takeover, indicating that the Morsi administration had failed to win the trust and backing of Riyadh. Meanwhile, **Iran's official response** was to condemn the coup, ending its hopes of establishing full diplomatic ties with Brotherhood-led Egypt.

Iranian Outreach to the Brotherhood in Exile

Despite the failure to establish diplomatic ties and the Brotherhood's removal from power, Iran continues to cultivate contacts with the organization in exile. Following the playbook from before 2011, Tehran is using Islam-centric gatherings such as the Islamic Unity Forum to sustain communications between Iranian government representatives and Brotherhood figures. Still, the Muslim Brotherhood remains hesitant to move beyond casual contacts as a result of its present weakness and the lingering resentment in the Sunni Arab world over Iranian actions in Syria. However, the organization does recognize that political developments could push the two sides into closer cooperation, particularly in light of the growing trend against Islamists in the region.

The imprisonment of thousands of Brotherhood members in the wake of the Egyptian coup temporarily paralyzed the organization. Following Morsi's removal, officials from the Iranian Interests Office reportedly reached out to Mohammed Ali Bishr, a member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Office. Bishr had **managed**

to evade arrest after the military takeover, but whether a meeting ever took place is unclear.¹¹¹ At the time, the movement likely recognized that Iran lacked the influence required to solve its immediate crisis in Egypt, which instead necessitated outreach to Washington, Brussels, and Gulf countries.

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership who avoided arrest managed to reorganize themselves in February 2014 through the formation of the Supreme Administrative Committee (SAC). The committee includes Internal and External Administrative Bureaus to manage the group's members and activities in Egypt and in exile, respectively. However, a power struggle emerged within the SAC. It pitted the movement's traditional leadership, as well as IOMB chief Ibrahim Munir, against a faction of younger members, including some who advocated violent resistance against the new Egyptian regime and saw Tehran as a potential backer.¹²¹² The traditional leadership faction eventually reestablished its authority after co-opting or expelling rival members from the organization.

This period of internal division offered Iran an opportunity to reestablish contacts with members from various Brotherhood factions without the presence of a centralized authority to veto communications. In Istanbul, a hub for Islamist exiles, Iran has courted Brotherhood members and other Islamists by sponsoring visits to Tehran and offering university scholarships. Since at least 2016, two organizations close to the Iranian government—a Qom-based conservative research institute that studies Islamist movements and a Tehran-based civil society group—have invited current and former Brotherhood members to attend conferences.¹³ The research institute has also been seeking to establish a branch in Istanbul that would tap the knowledge of Islamist-leaning exiles, but this plan is encountering funding problems as a result of renewed U.S. sanctions.¹⁴ Recently warming ties between Iran and the Turkish government, one of the Brotherhood's main international backers, have also helped facilitate contacts with Turkey-based Islamists. While this is

a positive development from an Iranian perspective, Tehran is proceeding cautiously to avoid angering the Turkish government, which does not want to see its influence over the Brotherhood undermined.

In July 2017, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in the most high-profile public meeting between the parties since Morsi's removal in Egypt. Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, an adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, met with Ibrahim Munir on the sidelines of a meeting of the Islamic Unity Forum. This encounter provoked a heavy backlash from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which criticized Munir for his participation in the event and characterized the move as “a betrayal of the blood of the martyrs caused by Iranian militias.” So while the talks between senior officials could be a positive signal for the future direction of the relationship, Iran's intervention in Syria remains an obstacle to better mutual ties.

Despite opposition to Iran in Sunni Islamist circles, the Muslim Brotherhood's contacts with Iran serve as an important safety net for the group in a time of growing regional and global uncertainty. If the 2016 military coup in Turkey and the 2017 Saudi-led embargo against Qatar had both succeeded in inducing regime change, the Muslim Brotherhood would have been stripped of its primary backers in the Middle East. As a result, relations with Tehran increasingly represent a useful insurance policy for the Brotherhood, particularly in a situation that would require the movement to seek refuge in Iran. As during the Morsi administration, the Brotherhood remains buffeted by competing influences and contingencies when considering its engagement with its fellow Islamists in Tehran.

CONCLUSION

Though the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran share ideological commonalities and points of political convergence, several impediments stand in the way of deeper ties between them. The Brotherhood's lack of a clear road map for reemerging as a political force hinders

any efforts to plan long-term alliances, including with Tehran. In its current state, the Brotherhood is also wary of being manipulated by more powerful actors such as Iran. On the Iranian side, financial constraints due to U.S. sanctions, along with persisting animosity over Tehran's role in the Syrian conflict, may also negate its efforts to court Brotherhood members in exile.

The prospect of prolonged regional isolation could potentially change the Muslim Brotherhood's calculations and spur a more profound rapprochement with Tehran. As in the past, this will depend on how both parties view their strategic priorities amid evolving geopolitical circumstances. For now, their relationship is defined by mismatched expectations.

Despite the letdown that was Morsi's Iran policy, Tehran will cautiously pursue more extensive ties with the Brotherhood, in the hope that the organization will one day be in a position to serve Iranian interests. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood is keeping its options open and engaging with all parties, including Iran, while awaiting the right political context to reemerge as a force in Egypt.

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NOTES

- 1 Authors' interview with an Iranian analyst, Tehran, August 2017.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Authors' interview with a former member of the Freedom and Justice Party's foreign relations committee, Istanbul, November 2017.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Authors' interview with an Egyptian Brotherhood member who worked in the presidential palace, Istanbul, November 2017.
- 8 Authors' interview with a former member of the Morsi administration, Istanbul, January 2018.
- 9 Authors' interviews with Iranian policymakers and analysts, Tehran, August 2017.
- 10 Authors' interview with an Iranian policymaker, Tehran, August 2017.
- 11 Authors' interview with an Egyptian Brotherhood member that worked in the presidential palace, Istanbul, November 2017.
- 12 Authors' interview with an Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood member, Istanbul, December 2017.
- 13 The organizations requested not to be identified publicly.
- 14 Authors' interview with a former Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood member, Istanbul, December 2018.

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