

NEWSBRIEF

Royal United Services Institute

ISSN 1471 - 3330 March 2011 Vol 31 No 2



How Moderate is the Muslim Brotherhood?

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has blindsided the West, and appears as a pluralistic movement. As a result, the US National Security Council has emphasised that the US has not ruled out 'engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood as part of an orderly process'.¹ Yet the Brotherhood is locked in endless debate between those who aspire to instant jihad – citing Mohammed's small armies defeating much larger ones as in the battles of Badr and Uhud – and others who advocate a multi-generational process of 'da'wah' (persuasion via example and preaching), as well as deception. Some analysts look to Islam's past traditions to prove this point. Strategies can involve the use of concepts such as 'taqiyyah', a process that includes lying to enemies to conceal one's true intentions, which Raymond Ibrahim claims is widespread in the Islamic world. Forms of taqiyyah can include collaboration with the enemy or 'hudna', a ceasefire that provides organisations like Hamas time to replenish their weapons stocks. The ultimate objective is the attainment of power.

Da'wah and taqiyyah were strategies employed by the Iranian revolutionary Ayatollah Khomeini in the late 1970s in his dealings with the United States. Khomeini shrewdly echoed what the international community wanted to hear and spoke of gender equality and the violation of human rights by the Shah. History will recall how Khomeini later proceeded to brutally purge all those who had previously constituted his coalition to advance his Islamist agenda. Thus Khomeini laid down the blueprint that has been followed by Islamist groups across the Middle East: the more distant from power, the more moderate and democratic their rhetoric. The greater their proximity, the more openly anti-Western and undemocratic their agenda becomes.



A Muslim Brotherhood political candidate campaigns in his local district before the parliamentary elections, Cairo, 2010.
Photo courtesy of Evan Hill/Al Jazeera.

Egypt

Mustafa Mashhur, a former supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood stated, 'We accept the concept of pluralism for the time being, however, when we will have Islamic rule we might then reject this concept or accept it'. While the Muslim Brotherhood's internal deliberations are secret, Mashhur revealed that the Brotherhood differs from terrorist groups like Al-Qa'ida in tactics, but not in ultimate goals. Numerous Islamist terrorists have emerged from the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood including Bin Laden associates Abdullah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Foreboding the manner in which the Brotherhood remained in the shadows during recent protests in Egypt, Mashhur wrote that 'One should know that it is not necessary that the Muslims repel every attack or damage caused by the enemies of Allah immediately, but [only] when ability and the circumstances are fit to it'. Mashhur advanced that these tactics be adopted by Islamists

internationally, as the ultimate goal is 'to restore the Islamic Caliphate and to re-establish the Islamic state on strong foundations.' The Muslim Brotherhood has advanced politically through alliances with opposition parties and by its members running as independents. During the recent protests, for example, it set up Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammed ElBaradei as the head of the opposition movement, referring to him as the 'donkey of the revolution', implying that he could be cast aside after having been ridden.

The Muslim Brotherhood's participation in a broad-based coalition can be compared the strategy of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua that aimed to counter the threat of a moderate, reformist government via the formation a broad, urban-based coalition co-opting most of the opposition faction. This ensured that the coalition's military and security elements remained in the hands of the Communist leaders. It is of no surprise that two years

after the party achieved greater proximity to power by winning 20 per cent of assembly seats in the 2005 parliamentary elections, it sought to draft a political agenda calling for a ban on women and non-Muslims becoming heads of state, and the creation of a religious council to vet government decisions, similar to the Council of Guardians in Iran.

The Egyptian public appears susceptible to elements of Islamist ideology, which provides an ideal social context for the Muslim Brotherhood to further its goals – at the expense of the West. According to a recent Pew Research Center poll, 59 per cent of those polled who said there was a struggle between modernisers and fundamentalists also said that they were in favour of Islamists; 20 per cent said they held a favourable view of Al-Qa’ida; 30 and 49 per cent held favourable views of Hizbullah and Hamas respectively (the latter having links to the Muslim Brotherhood). 89 per cent want adulterers punished by stoning; 77 per cent want robbers to be whipped and have their hands amputated; and 84 per cent favour the death penalty for any Muslim who changes their religion. It is in this illiberal culture that ElBaradei has declared that he would not monitor the Philadelphi Corridor (between the Gaza Strip and Egypt) for the smuggling of weapons to Hamas; and secular opposition leader Ayman Nour has called for a ‘re-evaluation’ of the Camp David Accords.

Turkey

Moderate rhetoric has been used by Turkish Islamists to conceal their agenda since Turkey’s constitutional court shut down the Islamist Welfare Party in 1998. The AKP was able to win the 2002 elections by putting forth a moderate political platform, yet now in power the AKP is becoming increasingly authoritarian. The security forces use violence against anti-government protestors, opposition figures are wiretapped and independent papers have punitive taxes or fines imposed upon them. The AKP is currently refashioning the judiciary by appointing judges to its high courts.

Tunisia

The leader of the Tunisian Islamist party Al-Nahda, Rachid Ghannouchi, stresses the importance of multi-party democracy and pluralism while seeking to join the unity government, expressing that his party ‘closely resembles’ the Turkish AKP party. Ghannouchi has visited Tehran regularly and receives support from Iran. In the 1991 Gulf War, he called for attacks

on US interests throughout the Middle East to avenge the invasion of a Muslim country. Currently he says, ‘We are still against the political agenda of American interference in Arabic countries’.

Jordan

In Jordan as in Egypt, the government legitimised its democratic deficit by portraying the Palestinians as having Islamist tendencies and thus banned them from all political activities other than joining the Muslim Brotherhood, otherwise known as the Islamic Action Front (IAF). As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood has been set up as the only viable alternative to the government. The party echoes the government’s position that the Palestinians should consider their stay in Jordan as temporary and wait until ‘Palestine is liberated’. Parroting the government’s position has enabled the Brotherhood to set up an extensive civil network in Jordan.

Rather than embrace protests, the IAF seeks to empower itself through the political process. To this end, it seeks to amend Jordan’s election laws banning Palestinians from voting in their preferred constituencies, which reduces support for the IAF. Jonathan Schanzer has noted that amending the election laws has the potential to grant the IAF a parliamentary majority. The IAF could then proceed to challenge Jordan’s secular laws, economic ties with the US and the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel.²

Gaza and West Bank

Hamas was established as the Muslim Brotherhood’s Gaza branch. Having won the 2006 election, Hamas vowed that it would not impose Sharia law. Yet after assuming power, it cracked down on freedom and liberties. For example, the party has sought to prevent the sexes from mingling in public, and interior ministry officials still halt couples in the streets, demanding to see marriage licences. This has led to a flight of secular academics and professionals. Israel’s foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman declared that in the West Bank, Hamas is waiting for Salam Fayyad to fulfill his political goals of declaring a Palestinian state and delegitimising Israel in the process before attempting to take over authority.

A Long War

The combination of da’wah and taqiyyah creates openings for an Islamist civil-societal space as a platform for future resistance. More broadly this is termed by US Colonel Thomas Hammes as ‘fourth-general warfare’ (4GW) – a mode

of asymmetric warfare that places less emphasis on battlefield victory than on creating political, social and economic networks that are geared (over years and decades) towards undermining the political will of the enemy to engage in combat.³ One example is Israel, which was able to successfully counter terrorists functioning without political mobilisation under the rubric of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). Yet Israel was unable to effectively defeat a group with a broader remit that included the setting up of local service institutions, actually culminating in de facto local governments in various refugee camps. Rather than inflicting military losses, it established a rival regime and began to erode the legitimacy of Israel. This proved a buoyant context in which terrorism was able to further advance the PLO’s political aims.

Indeed, Hassan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, sought to take over society through a grassroots association that would provide social services. This has been lost on US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who referred to the Muslim Brotherhood’s running of twenty-nine hospitals as filling the vacuum in governance; ‘It is not necessarily with a view to promoting violence or overthrow of the state’. Yet historically in the Upper Egypt region, Islamists such as Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiyya and Al-Jihad created civic services that fostered sympathy, legitimacy and an environment for recruitment. These groups launched numerous terrorist acts against Coptic Christians, tourists and former government figures. The Muslim Brotherhood has tactically renounced violence and placed itself at odds with Al-Qa’ida. Yet it has endorsed acts of terrorism against US troops in Iraq and Israel. Its rejection of violence may, therefore, just be a ploy.

Failure to appreciate the nuances of such strategies often leads to a spurious distinction made between the political and terrorist wings of organisations. David Aufhauser, the former general counsel to the US Treasury Department and chair of the US National Security Council’s policy co-ordinating committee on terrorist financing, described making distinctions between terrorist groups’ charitable and military wings as ‘sophistry’, adding that ‘the idea that there’s a firewall between the two defies common sense.’ The State Department echoed this saying, ‘As long as Hamas continues to rely on terrorism to achieve its political ends, we should not draw a

distinction between its military and humanitarian arms, since funds provided to one can be used to support the other.⁴

Fostering a liberal civic culture in the Middle East can undermine the support of Islamists and defang their subversive strategies. The Muslim Brotherhood's participation in government would not have a moderating effect as it would shed its false front when it attained real power. To prevent this from occurring in Egypt, it is essential for a constitution and electoral laws to be written during an extensive transition period to prevent any party from achieving a monopoly on power. Basic freedoms should be enshrined in this constitution, such as the freedom of speech, assembly,

political organisation and practice of religion. In Jordan and Tunisia, creating an independent judiciary and promoting broader civil society serve to undermine Islamists.

Ultimately, painting radicals as moderates may serve to present policy in manageable frameworks, however arbitrary and spurious, for Western governments. But this is disingenuous. The alternative is to admit to both a lack of influence on events that have taken place, and wasted time on the part of Western governments in cultivating indigenous liberal democratic forces in the Middle East.

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NOTES

¹ A White House spokesman said that a reformed government in Egypt 'has to include a whole host of important non-secular actors that give Egypt a strong chance to continue to be [a] stable and reliable partner.'

² Jonathan Schanzer, 'The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 February 2011.

³ Colonel Thomas Hammes, *The Sling and The Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2006).

⁴ E Anthony Wayne, 'The Hamas Asset Freeze and Other Government Efforts to Stop Terrorist Financing', testimony to the House of Representatives Committee on Financial Services, 24 September 2003.