

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3138
February 8, 2011

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Lurks as a Long-Term Threat to Freedom

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Although Egypt's widely supported protest movement was reportedly instigated by secular opposition activists, the largest and most well-organized group within Egypt's diverse coalition of opposition groups remains the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement determined to transform Egypt into an Islamic state that is hostile to freedom. The Muslim Brotherhood has joined other opposition groups in negotiating with Vice President Omar Suleiman over the ground rules for establishing a transitional government.

In facilitating a transition to a more representative government, the Obama Administration should be careful that it does not also inadvertently help the Muslim Brotherhood advance its anti-freedom agenda.

A History of Hatred. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928, is the Middle East's oldest and most influential Islamist movement. Outlawed in Egypt since 1954, when it attempted to assassinate former President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Brotherhood has seen its leaders repeatedly jailed and has been forced to moderate its violent proclivities. Although it has changed its tactics, it retains the long-term goal of creating an Islamist state that would be an enemy of freedom.

An offshoot of the Brotherhood, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981, perpetrated a series of terrorist attacks in Egypt in the 1990s, and became part of al-Qaeda. Another offshoot, the Palestinian Islamist extremist group Hamas, won elections in Gaza in 2006, staged a

coup in 2007 to transform Gaza into a terrorist base, and remains committed to destroying Israel.

The Muslim Brotherhood's strategy is to lie low in the current crisis and work behind the secular gadfly Mohamed ElBaradei, a spokesman for the broad opposition coalition who is far better known outside of Egypt than inside the country. The former U.N. bureaucrat is a lackluster political novice who commands little grassroots support and would be a useful figurehead to defuse Western anxiety while the Brotherhood organizes behind the scenes to transform the disjointed popular revolt into a draconian Islamist revolution.

The populist revolt now has broad-based popular support from a wide spectrum of political movements, but so did the French, Russian, and Iranian revolutions in their early stages before well-organized revolutionary minorities ruthlessly established dominance and erected dictatorships to enforce their anti-democratic ideologies.

The Muslim Brotherhood has a clear advantage over Egypt's weak and fractured secular opposition parties because it has enjoyed a head start in organizing politically. The Mubarak regime crushed the secular opposition while allowing the Muslim

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3138>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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Brotherhood to operate just enough to scare the U.S. and other Western nations into buying its line that only Mubarak stood between the Islamists and power. Brotherhood candidates were allowed to run as independents in the 2005 elections and won about 20 percent of the seats in Egypt's parliament. In contrast, the secular parties are poorly financed and badly organized and, because of systematic government repression, have had little opportunity to build a popular base.

If it comes to power, the Muslim Brotherhood will inevitably be hostile to the values and interests of the United States. It is committed to imposing Islamic law (Sharia), which would severely restrict the freedoms of Egyptians, particularly women and the Christian minority, which comprises about 10 percent of Egypt's population. It insists that only a Muslim male can lead the nation. The Brotherhood's Islamist ideology will lead it to renege on Egypt's current commitment to fight Islamist terrorism and possibly its nonproliferation obligations. It is sure to undermine and eventually abrogate Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel and work with its junior partner Hamas to plunge the region into a series of crises and wars that will threaten Egypt, Israel, the Palestinians, and Jordan, which also has a peace treaty with Israel.

Ultimately, an Egypt dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood would further destabilize an already volatile region and deal a disastrous blow to American power and influence in the Middle East.

Keep the Muslim Brotherhood at Arm's Length. To limit the Muslim Brotherhood's ability to undermine both Egypt's freedoms and America's interests in the region, the Obama Administration should keep it at arm's length. Embracing the Brotherhood would only demoralize pro-Western opposition movements and lead them to accommodate themselves to its rising power. Rather than inserting itself into the delicate negotiations over the transition to a new government, Washington should allow the Egyptian military establishment—the only institution in Egypt capable of serving as a counterweight to the Islamists—to negotiate an

acceptable transition arrangement with the opposition coalition. The army has historically played a vital role as a bulwark against Islamism.

Washington should also give ElBaradei as wide a berth as possible. As Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, he revealed himself to be a prickly apologist for Iran's suspect nuclear activities who went out of his way to criticize the United States while obsequiously seeking to mollify Iran. Washington should instead seek to work with and bolster other secular opposition parties and emerging leaders of civil society. The immediate goal should be to assist the army in brokering a political deal that will enable a smooth transition to a sustainable democratic government that will not be subverted by the Muslim Brotherhood.

To this end, Washington should leverage its \$1.5 billion in annual aid to Cairo to ensure the emergence of a government that respects the freedom and human rights of its own citizens and complies with Egypt's international obligations to fight terrorism, reject nuclear proliferation, and respect the peace treaty with Israel.

Hijack Prevention. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood pursues a radical long-term Islamist agenda while masking its hostility to freedom and genuine democracy with self-serving tactical rhetorical moderation. The Obama Administration should patiently seek to advance freedom and stability in Egypt through a transition to a more representative government that gives the Muslim Brotherhood the smallest possible opportunity to hijack the reform process.

The worst possible outcome of the present crisis would be to open the door to a takeover by a totalitarian Islamist group hostile to the United States while working to replace President Mubarak's authoritarian regime.

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