Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood After the Revolution

By Samuel Tadros

The extraordinary scenes broadcasted from Tahrir Square in Cairo during the eighteen days that led to the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February, 2011, were met with great enthusiasm and support in Western countries. Politicians and numerous scholars were hopeful that the revolution, with the young liberals who were portrayed as leading it, would lead to a better future for Egyptians. They were also hopeful that Egypt’s politics would finally break free from the struggle between dictatorial regimes and Islamists that has paralyzed the country as well as the modern politics of other countries in the Arab world. Finally, the gridlock was broken and the blossoms of the Arab Spring were flourishing.

Contrary to initial hopes, however, the role of Islamists has not regressed; indeed, seven months after the revolutionary euphoria wore off, the Muslim Brotherhood remains at the forefront of Egyptian politics. In fact, the erosion of the state’s security apparatus gave Islamists an unprecedented opportunity to shape the country’s political debate. With elections now scheduled for a parliament that will form a constitution writing committee, many have begun to fear that the Islamists will not be merely one among many actors on Egypt’s new political scene. Instead, many fear that we may face a future when Islamists write the rules of Egypt’s new politics, putting their long-term mark on the new system to ensure their continued control.

The Muslim Brotherhood is at the center of the current struggle to shape Egypt’s future. Since the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is the mother organization of Arab Islamism, the ramifications of the struggle in Egypt are likely to spill over to other countries in the
region. For years, a fierce debate has taken place among Western scholars regarding the Brotherhood. Has the Brotherhood—which began in 1928 as a reactionary and sometimes violent ideological movement bent on constructing an Islamic State—changed its approach to politics and its principles? Should the United States open a dialogue with them? While some have argued that the Brotherhood has become moderate and have portrayed it as a socially conservative movement committed to democracy, others have warned that the Brotherhood’s declarations on their commitment to democratic rule were a sign not of moderation but of pragmatism. The Brotherhood’s objectives had not, in fact, changed since its founding. What had changed was the movement’s overall ability to achieve its objectives as well as its ability to project and frame this project (especially in English) in a way that would win the sympathy of outsiders. Given the opportunity, the Brotherhood would seek to implement its long-term radical agenda to establish an Islamic State.

That opportunity has arrived. The breakdown of the state’s security apparatus and the opening in the political system has given the Brotherhood an historical chance to operate freely and position itself as the strongest player in a new Egypt. While several constraints on its power remain, the most obvious of which is the Egyptian armed forces, the Brotherhood’s newly acquired freedom of action has meant a new self-confidence in its strength and an increased willingness to elaborate more clearly and publicly on the kind of new society the Brotherhood aims to build. The new freedom has, however, not come without new challenges for the Brotherhood. Since the revolution, the Brotherhood’s leadership has been preoccupied with questions of how to retain the movement’s youth membership, how to structure its relationship with both the newly established Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and the armed forces, and how the Brotherhood as a whole should deal with a changing and volatile political environment. Examining how the Brotherhood has shaped and been in turn affected by Egypt’s changing political environment helps us understand not only how the Brotherhood operates but also, more importantly, how it thinks.

The Revolution Surprise

The success of the demonstrators in Egypt in ending the thirty-year rule of Hosni Mubarak surprised the world. What seemed like a stable authoritarian grip on power was brought to its knees in just a few days. Perhaps no one was more surprised than the Egyptians themselves—especially the Muslim Brotherhood. This explains, in part, the Brotherhood’s statements describing the revolution as a “work of God,” as no human action could fully explain for them what had taken place.

The Brotherhood’s political position in the days leading up to the Egyptian revolution
was weak. Its parliamentary success in the 2005 elections was not matched in the elections of 2010. Due to substantial state intervention and vote rigging, the Brotherhood did not win a single seat in the first round of elections and had only twenty-seven members competing in the second round.\(^3\) Faced with a crushing defeat, the Brotherhood decided to boycott the second round. While state intervention certainly played a role, the Brotherhood had already been declining politically during the previous five years. Its financial arm had been crushed by the money laundering trials of Deputy General Guide Khairat al-Shater and Hassan Malik, a prominent Brotherhood businessman. The state’s targeted prosecution of these Brotherhood businessmen resulted in harsh verdicts and the confiscation of their companies.\(^4\) Furthermore, the Brotherhood MPs that came to power in 2005 had not delivered on much of their promises during their five-year terms. Frustrations were mounting inside the Brotherhood’s youth wing, which saw the movement as incapable of taking a bold stand against the regime. The movement was also plagued by internal conflicts that resulted in the removal of Mohamed Habib, the Deputy General Guide, and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fetouh from the Guidance Council. The Brotherhood’s predicament was evident when one of its MPs, Magdy Ashour, decided to ignore the leadership’s decisions and run in the second round anyway. Accusations that the Brotherhood was attempting to kidnap Ashour to force him to comply were not helpful to the movement’s public image.\(^5\)

When calls for a demonstration against the government started to circulate on the Internet and elsewhere on January 25, 2011, the Brotherhood initially did not think it would garner much public support. Calls from political entities and figures with no significant grassroots following would likely only result in the usual small-size demonstrations by the usual familiar faces. For an organization like the Brotherhood that had grown accustomed to the state’s repression, the idea that the regime could be brought down through protest was absurd. It is true that Tunisia inspired hope, for some more than others, but the passing of time, not to mention old age, had taught the Brotherhood’s leadership to be cautious. Experience also taught them that the Islamist movement would likely end up paying the heaviest price, in the form of arrests and torture, should the state crack down on public demonstrations.

Yet, as the day of protest approached, growing pressure by younger Brotherhood members, combined with the fact that even long-established political parties not known for street activism, such as Al Wafd, decided they would join the demonstrations, the Brotherhood leadership decided to take the middle path that would please everyone. On January 23, 2011, the Brotherhood announced it would take part in the demonstrations.\(^6\) It sought to portray the Brotherhood as part of the rest of the Egyptian opposition and as a movement not distant from popular demands—a position and public image it always sought. Furthermore, the leadership gave a green light to young members to join the demonstrations. What the declaration did not mean, however, was that the Brotherhood
would actually mobilize its members and join the protests with the movement’s full power. Thus, during the first two days of demonstrations, the movement was not rallied or organized and one could not see the Brotherhood descending in mass numbers onto Tahrir square.

After being surprised by the rapid increase in the number of protestors (which, while still small, exceeded the size of usual demonstrations), the Brotherhood began to sense an opportunity. They calculated that the regime was much weaker than it was previously thought to be—a reality that became increasingly evident with the government’s internet and mobile phone ban. The next demonstration, which was scheduled for Friday 28, 2011, was an ideal setting for the Brotherhood to show its power. After Friday prayers, the movement began mobilizing its members, and, by using each mosque as a launching site for a demonstration, the Brotherhood was able to pour an enormous amount of people onto the streets. The results were spectacular. In a few hours the police force was being hammered. Contrary to earlier exaggerated estimations of the strength of the Egyptian police, the police force in Cairo was a mere 17,000 strong. Under siege from every corner, the moment of collapse took place when 99 police stations across the country were attacked. The only solution for the regime was to call in the army.

The Worst Nightmare?

Unlike the youthful demonstrators who chanted “the army and the people are one hand,” the Brotherhood understood better. Shaped by their earlier experience in 1954 when the army brutally suppressed them, the Brotherhood understood clearly that the army they were now facing was the real core of the regime, unencumbered by its outer layers. But the Brotherhood, as well as the public at large, had little knowledge of the army’s political intentions in this new situation. Simply put, there was little information publicly available about the army, and no one knew exactly who was calling the shots. When Mubarak appointed Omar Suleiman as Vice President the next day, the Brotherhood naturally concluded that he was the army’s man. It is with this in mind that they agreed to enter into a dialogue with Suleiman, despite the fact that other movements chose to boycott such meetings and despite all the indications of the personal hatred that Suleiman felt towards the Islamists. These calculations persisted for some time with the Brotherhood’s leadership professing to have no objections to Omar Suleiman becoming president of the country, as he was untainted by the Mubarak regime.

In the early phases of the revolution, the Brotherhood’s goals were straightforward. Still unsure of whether the regime would fall, though well aware of the government’s vulnerabilities, the movement aimed at extracting several key concessions. The first goal
was recognition. It was no longer acceptable for the regime to deal with the Brotherhood as if it did not exist; it demanded to be treated as an equal player that had a seat at the table. An official invitation to dialogue with government officials and a change in their status as a “banned group” were essential first steps. Secondly, the Brotherhood demanded permission to form a political party. Thirdly, the Brotherhood aimed to ensure that it would not be excluded from politics in the future. It therefore focused its efforts on changing the constitutional clauses dealing with presidential nominations.

The Brotherhood was, however, careful not to overplay its hand. The movement’s leadership deeply feared a backlash, which they thought likely, especially if the regime was able to convince the West and the U.S. in particular that the Islamist threat loomed and had to be crushed. While plausible, the fear within the movement was also built on a conspiracy-driven mindset and on a distorted view of reality. The Brotherhood, like many other opposition groups, saw the relationship between the U.S. and the Egyptian regime as one of a superpower and a local client. Believing in all sorts of conspiracy theories, the Brotherhood has always exaggerated the U.S.’s influence over Mubarak and the army. This is one reason why the Brotherhood has sought to moderate its message in English. During the revolution, the Brotherhood sought to assuage fears in the West and in the army, too, by indicating their lack of interest in acquiring the Office of the Presidency and by committing to run for only thirty percent of the seats in parliament. More importantly, these assurances were stressed on the ground by attempts to downplay the Brotherhood’s role in the revolution. As long as the Brotherhood could reinforce this belief that the Islamists were not behind the uprising (or at least were not its most powerful force) and could keep a low profile, then it could be assured that the movement would raise no red flags in the Western press.

With Mubarak’s resignation and his decision to hand over power to the armed forces, it seemed that after fifty-eight years Egypt had come full circle. Bolstered by popular support, the army was again in full control of the country. The façade of civilian rule that had been maintained since 1967 was shattered. For the Brotherhood, what mattered now was avoiding a repeat of 1954, when the army cracked down on Islamists. While well aware that its long-term interests and vision for Egypt were different than the military’s, the Brotherhood developed a short-term plan that aimed to appease the military and ensure that a clash does not take place.

**Acting Responsibly**

The Brotherhood’s leadership accurately understood the military’s short-term objectives. The military, while not intending to give up its special and privileged position, had no desire to govern Egypt. After Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war, the military
recognized that its public image as well as its military preparedness had been adversely affected by its involvement in the daily governing of the country. The military’s solution to this was to withdraw from the public spotlight while maintaining overall control over the country. This formula came to an end on February 11, 2011, as the military was forced to govern Egypt. Neither interested nor prepared for the task of daily governance, the military wanted out as soon as possible. Every day it spent dealing with workers’ strikes or sectarian clashes decreased their public support and put their real economic interests at risk. The military’s objectives have thus been to maintain stability, to ensure economic success in Egypt, and to hand over power to civilian politicians as soon as possible to let them deal with the unsolvable problems.

The military’s short-term goals have suited the Brotherhood well. A prolonged transition to civilian rule might lead to Western pressure on the military to stop Islamists. A prolonged transition would also mean further scrutiny by the press and the elite of the Brotherhood’s intentions. Similarly, instability might force the military to remain in power. To avoid all those scenarios and the possibility of a clash, the Brotherhood decided to act responsibly. Demands by other groups were not endorsed unless they could clearly serve the Brotherhood’s overall interests. Street demonstrations were not joined unless the military could be pressured on a key Brotherhood demand.

The result was an image of the responsible and patriotic partner that the military could talk to. Unlike the disorganized and demagogic protestors groups, the Brotherhood gave the military every reason to prefer talking to them. In addition to the sheer differences in popular support that the Brotherhood enjoyed over the other groups, it had a clear organizational and leader-follower structure. If the army needed to negotiate with political groups, the Brotherhood was the ideal partner. The army could know who to speak to and be assured that once a guarantee is given, the members would abide by the leadership’s decisions—something that was not true of the other groups. Furthermore, by refraining from criticizing the military and not participating in demonstrations against the military’s leadership, the Brotherhood sought to send a clear message: “we are much more reasonable and pragmatic than you might think, and certainly more than the others.” The clearest example of this came when several low-ranking army officers joined the demonstrators on April 8, 2011 and renounced the army’s leadership while reading what they called “The First Communiqué.” The Brotherhood was quick to withdraw from the scene on that day and leave those men to their fate.

The army for its part did not publicly reveal its worries about the Brotherhood. The key difference between 1954 and today is the army’s lack of a political program. Simply put, there is neither a Nasser nor a Nasserism that has emerged inside the army. The army was quick to form a constitutional committee that included one Brotherhood member and that was also chaired by a known Islamist. The committee’s resulting document, which endorsed first holding parliamentary elections and then writing a
new constitution followed by a presidential election, was exactly what the Brother-
hood wanted. The battle for the referendum over the committee’s document pitted the
Islamists, the military, and the Egyptians who were fed up with the continued uncer-
tainty, against the “liberal” elite. The result was an overwhelming defeat of the latter.
While this success gave the Brotherhood further confidence in its strengths compared
to other parties, it has also come with complications.

Never Be Alone

For the Brotherhood, politics in Egypt is a game of three players—itself, the
military, and the “liberal” elite. The three players are not equal in power, but the game
remains one in which each has significant chips. In the Brotherhood’s eyes, it represents
the majority of the people; the army obviously has the guns. The elite deserve more el-
aboration. Hardly liberal in ideology or discourse, they are an amalgam of diverse groups
whose only common denominator is the fact that they are not Islamists. They thus in-
clude Christians, Nasserites, Socialists, Trotskyites, businessmen, and a portion of the
upper middle class. The only thing uniting this combination of contradictory groups is
their fear of the Islamists. As a result, they have traditionally run to the state for protec-
tion from the Islamist threat, as was the case during the Islamic terrorist campaign in
Egypt during the 1980s and 1990s. Their strength according to the Brotherhood is in
their control of the cultural institutions and media of the country.

The political game is thus simple. If two of the three players join forces, the third
player loses. This situation has always been the Brotherhood’s greatest fear: that non-Is-
lamists would reach a deal with the military on the grounds that both, according to the
Brotherhood, have an American patron and that the Islamists would ultimately pay the
price and be repressed. So, while the first goal of the Brotherhood since the revolution
has been to appease the army, the second most important concern has been to prevent
an army alliance with the non-Islamists.

In the years before the revolution, the Brotherhood invested wisely in building bridges
with non-Islamists. By showing a face of moderation on some issues and by cooperating
with non-Islamists on various ventures against Mubarak, the Brotherhood has been able
to allay some elite fears over its agenda. As a result, in most cases it has been non-Islamists
who have been spinning the Brotherhood’s record and agenda and presenting it as a mod-
erate organization to the Western media. For example, Mohamed El Baradei in an interview
with Fareed Zakaria on CNN described the movement as “having nothing to do with
extremism,” “a minority amongst Egyptians,” “in favor of a secular state,” and just “a socially
conservative group” that is “in favor of every Egyptian having the same rights.”

The Brotherhood is thus determined to strike a careful balance and maintain its own

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links with the non-Islamists. And yet, with the danger of an alliance between the army and non-Islamists in mind, and even though the Brotherhood enjoyed what it interpreted as its resounding victory in the referendum, the Brotherhood has remained fearful of an open struggle breaking out between Islamists and non-Islamists. Should battle lines be drawn, no matter the pragmatism that the Brotherhood shows, there is no guarantee that the army would not betray them. The ideal solution for the Brotherhood, then, is to be part of a grand coalition that would include it and some of the non-Islamist parties.

The Salafist Challenge

While the Muslim Brotherhood is the strongest and most popular Islamist group in Egypt, it is hardly the only one. The fall of Mubarak ushered in a new era of freedom for Islamists, and thus we see a proliferation of new Islamist actors and parties. Two major groups—the Salafis and the jihadists, including Jamaa Islamia and Egyptian Islamic Jihad—have resurfaced since the revolution. While both groups have been around for a long time, their acceptance in politics today is entirely a result of the revolution.

The Salafis represent the more important of these two groups politically, and they have built broad-based grassroots networks throughout the country, especially in the countryside and the city of Alexandria. While the Salafis were divided among numerous shaykhs during Mubarak’s era and barred from forming umbrella organizations or networks, they managed to quickly unite after the revolution. Long suppressed, and with no knowledge of how politics are conducted, they burst onto the scene like an angry bull. So far, two Salafi parties have emerged as a result: Al Noor (The Light) and Al Asala (Authenticity).

The second Islamist group to re-emerge since the revolution shares most of the Salafi ideology, but it is differentiated by its unique historical experience with formal terrorism. Members of Jamaa Islamia and Egyptian Islamic Jihad, long imprisoned for their roles in the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and the subsequent years of Islamist terror, have been freed since the revolution and have suddenly, just like the Salafis, seen the virtues and benefits of the electoral process. After quickly removing the leadership that had brokered a deal with the regime and renounced violence, the names and faces of Abboud al-Zomor, Tarek al-Zomor, and even Mohamed al-Zawahiri returned to haunt the Egyptians. Their political party, Al Bena’a wel Tanmeya (Construction and Development), was rejected by the Parties Committee. The removed “moderate” leadership is setting up its own party named Al Dia’a (Luminance).

The rise of the Salafis and jihadists as a political force has posed a serious challenge to the Muslim Brotherhood. Because the Brotherhood has long been accustomed to being the sole Islamist group competing in elections, the new competitors are sure to
complicate things. More importantly, the more extreme views of the Salafis could pull some Brotherhood members toward their flashier rhetoric. In a competition over who is more Islamic, the more extreme groups will win. That is one battle the Brotherhood has no interest in fighting. Furthermore, the media attention given to the Salafis and jihadist groups has proven embarrassing for the Islamist cause. With the Salafis obsessing over Christian women, whom they claim converted to Islam and were kidnapped by the Church, and the weekly jihadist rallies in front of the American Embassy demanding the release of the infamous Blind Shaykh Omar Abdel Rahman, the Brotherhood has become increasingly worried that this Islamist activism will alienate the non-Islamists, the army, and their Western supporters.

To make matters more complex, despite the Brotherhood’s pledge to not run for the presidency, there are three announced Islamist candidates. The first, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fetouh, is a former Brotherhood leader, often described in the Western press as a moderate. His decision to run for the presidency against the leadership’s wishes has created internal tensions in the movement, since many members do not understand why, considering the fall of the tyrant Mubarak, the movement should be cautious and concede political ground to non-Islamists by not running for president. The second declared Islamist is Selim El Awwa, a member of the Brotherhood splinter party Al Wasat (The Center). A respected Islamic figure by many, he poses similar challenges to the internal cohesion of the movement to Aboul Fetouh. Those two, however, pale in comparison to the threat posed by Hazem Salah Abu Ismail. Abu Ismail, whose father was a leading Islamist and who has already run twice before as a Brotherhood candidate in Egypt’s parliamentary elections, represents the largest problem for the Brotherhood. His Islamist bona fides are beyond debate, his dress and manner are modern, and his ideas are appealing to both Brotherhood and Salafi Islamists.

The Salafis’ annoying behavior reached its maximum with the demonstrations on July 29, 2011. The Brotherhood’s decision to participate in the protests that day was driven by its desire to show the mass support it has and enjoys. The military needed to be reminded of who really controlled the streets. While the Brotherhood and the Salafis had both reached an agreement with the non-Islamist parties beforehand on making the day one of national unity and also on their political demands, the Salafis’ political naivety and anger was soon out of control. Frustrated by what they perceived as an attack on Islam by the non-Islamists’ insistence on writing a constitution before elections, the hundreds of thousands of Salafis who pooled into Tahrir Square were unapologetic in their Islamist sloganeering. Even Brotherhood members were hard to find in the seas of angry Salafis. The day resulted in the Brotherhood’s worst nightmare: the non-Islamists became frightened.
The Grand Coalition

The magic solution to the Brotherhood’s problems lies in the next elections. While limiting its candidates to only fifty percent of the seats might seem to be a huge sacrifice from a movement whose long-term agenda is to bring about the total transformation of society along Islamic lines, in reality, the self-imposed limitation serves numerous Brotherhood goals. Winning a comfortable forty percent, for instance, would mean that the Brotherhood would be the most important parliamentary player that no one could ignore. At the same time, such a win would not tie the Brotherhood’s hands by forcing it to form a government. Some assume that the Brotherhood is not hungry for power, but this is an incorrect assumption—it is. However, the Brotherhood’s ideal situation would be to become part of a governing coalition that insulates the group from being blamed for all the failures that the new government will inevitably face as it grapples with the country’s profound economic and other problems. The question for the Brotherhood is therefore “Whom should we partner with?”

Building an electoral coalition to contest the next elections serves a number of purposes for the Brotherhood. First, the non-Brotherhood candidates winning on the joint list will be indebted to the Brotherhood for their victory, and this, in turn, will give the Brotherhood a certain degree of leverage over them. Secondly, if the group has already limited itself to less than fifty percent of the seats (as the Brotherhood has), why not insure that the other fifty percent are friends and not foes? Thirdly, by entering into a coalition with non-Islamists, the Brotherhood seeks to ensure that they are not politically isolated and are able to stop the emergence of an army alliance with non-Islamists. The more the coalition is an amalgam that makes no sense, the better, as this will effectively prohibit the coalition partners from combining against the Brotherhood. This helps to explain why the Brotherhood on June 13, 2011 created the Democratic Alliance for Egypt, along with Al Wafd, Al Ghad, the Nasserite Party, and another thirty smaller parties.18

This alliance is popularly portrayed as being against the remnants of the old regime.19 There is truth to that claim, as the local politicians who sued to win, as National Democratic Party candidates, are the only real competitors to the Brotherhood. But it also serves a more important purpose: balancing. If the alliance included only non-Islamists it would be relentlessly attacked by the Salafis, and the Brotherhood would risk being outflanked by them. By attempting to include them with the non-Islamists, the Brotherhood achieves all its goals in one strike. The Brotherhood will play the role of moderator and middleman between both camps, toning down each side’s demands and threatening them from the other side. This strategy was complicated when the Salafi Al Noor Party left the alliance seeking a purer Islamist coalition, though the alliance still includes smaller Islamist groups.
ISLAMISM’S NEWLY ACQUIRED FREEDOM OF ACTION AS A RESULT OF THE REVOLUTION comes with its own internal problems for the Brotherhood. Many analysts initially had high hopes that the Arab Spring would exacerbate splits inside the movement. Their arguments were based upon the presumed existence of a moderate versus extremist battle over the soul of the Brotherhood, as well as a presumed split within the movement between its youth wing and an older generation that has been reluctant to adapt to changing times. Both arguments have exaggerated the extent of the differences inside the Brotherhood and, more importantly, the ability of any potential breakaway group to pose a threat to the mother organization.

In the mid-1990s, a similar process had taken place with the creation of the Al Wasat Party. The inability of Al Wasat to pose a real threat to the Brotherhood and to pull its members away should have been an educational moment for analysts. Membership in the Brotherhood is a very long process designed to ensure with absolute certainty that there is conformity to the movement’s ideology and a clear adherence to its leadership’s authority. The ties that exist between Brotherhood members are simply too hard to break. They not only revolve around an ideological agreement, but they also often involve financial, social, as well as family ties. Leaving the movement on bad terms often means losing financially and being shunned by family and friends. The predicament of Aboul Fetouh today serves as an especially telling example. Shunned by his former colleagues (who describe him as having “violated his covenant with God”) and with his campaign banners constantly vandalized by Brotherhood activists, Fetouh is left to criticize the movement but with no effective political ability to offer an alternative. This, however, does not mean that some young members will not leave the movement; some have already left, and some no doubt will continue to do so. But the hope that these defections of individuals could produce a more moderate movement over time is most likely misplaced.

Over the long term, an even more challenging question for the Brotherhood concerns its relationship with its own creation, the Freedom and Justice Party. While the establishment of a political party has been one of the key demands of the movement for years, no elaboration has ever been given on how the movement and the party will ultimately coincide. Now that the movement has a party, such questions have only increased. Could a non-Brotherhood member join the FJP? If he could, could he rise in its leadership? Would some members of the movement remain outside the party? Those kinds of questions remain unanswered. More importantly, the room for action and the party’s freedom of decision-making remain unclear. The question of the Brotherhood and the FJP’s relationship is in a certain sense not entirely new, as the debate over the political versus social and religious roles of the movement has been raging for years.
The Vision for Egypt

After officially forming the FJP in February 2011, the Brotherhood was forced to elaborate further on its program than in the past. The party’s ninety-three-page-long party program sheds significant light on what the Brotherhood’s plans for a future Egypt look like, both in what the program explains and in which areas it chooses to remain ambiguous.24

The first clear aspect of the FJP program is the totality of its vision. There is no aspect of human life that the program does not aim to discuss and to put under state regulation. In what should seem bewildering to outside observers, the program leaves no detail unmentioned, from participation in cultural festivals abroad (pg. 85), to fast and free internet services (91), and even to publishing scholarly journals (33). While the Brotherhood has been criticized for years for its lack of a clear program, the view it takes of all human actions as regulated and supervised by the state leaves no room for doubt on the kind of state they aim to build. Looking more closely at the program’s various sections helps explain this point.

The program starts by explaining what the FJP views as the intrinsic weaknesses of modern political parties, including their emphasis on and sole attention to practical matters such as legislation (4). Instead, the FJP program emphasizes other matters that are no less important than legislation and include the intellectual, spiritual, moral, and belief [iman] aspects of man. To prove the point, they quote the words of Christ: “Man shall not live by bread alone” (4). The program then explains that the goal of the party is “cleansing the soul and hearts, upgrading the feelings, refining the character, by calling for a commitment to worship, good manners, sociability and behavior, and to remind people of God, the Day of Judgment so as to wake up conscience” (4). The Mubarak regime had furthermore turned Egypt away from God and “into a colony of Western and Zionist policies.” According to the program, “forgetting the Day of Judgment and God is one of the most important reasons that led to the Egyptian people’s revolt” (5).

The program insists that the parliamentary system is the most suitable for Egypt (11).25 And in an attempt to respond once and for all to the traditional Islamist criticism that true Muslims and activists should not involve themselves in parliamentary political life, the program answers by refusing to accept that politics is a dirty game and promises to tie politics to Islamic principles and values (6). The principles of Islamic Sharia are the main source of legislation (7), while the non-Muslim minority is given the right to resort to their own religious rulings in family and religious affairs (7).

As the FJP’s program begins to describe in greater detail how every aspect of human activity should be regulated by the state, its major problems become clearer. In reforming the justice system, for instance, the program emphasizes reinstating the right of every
citizen to raise a Hisbah case in court (14). Women “are entitled to all their rights,” but only “if this is not inconsistent with the fundamental values of society and while achieving a balance between a women’s duties and rights” (16). Civil society is encouraged and described as “a partner of the state in achieving the interests of society,” but of course should not be permitted to operate against “the basic values of society” (17). Foreign policy naturally also gets its fair share in the document. Interference in the affairs of another state in the name of universal human rights is decried and so, too, is neo-liberalism and democracy promotion (21). “Arab and Islamic unity is one of the conditions of Egyptian national security” (22), and the Egyptian Israeli Peace Treaty is implicitly mentioned with the statement that treaties between states have to be accepted by the population (22). The “Zionist greed” in Sinai is explicitly addressed, and it is solved by state-led Muslim immigration to Sinai (22). Moreover, the Palestinian cause is described as “the most dangerous Egyptian national security case” because “the Zionist entity is an aggressive, expansionist, racist, and settler entity” (23).

On domestic issues, the FJP’s program calls for many of the Islamist policies historically associated with the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood’s historical obsession with the dangers posed to Egypt by foreign education is highlighted (29), and the program calls for Arabizing the teaching in universities (32), asserting that the goal of education is to “strengthen Arab and Islamic identity” (28). Scientific research is to be developed in order to “create a researcher that is committed to ethics and values” (32). Protecting the youth from “the cultural invasion that aims at weakening the nation” is very important (70), as “the cunning tricks of Western culture spoils and does not fix” (81). The role of houses of worship should be expanded to include a department combating illiteracy, committees for solving disputes, a department for educational services, and others (76). Zakat (charity) is to be collected by the government (76), and the national economy is to be based on the Islamic economic system (50).

While the program attempts to answer the worries of religious minorities and to reassure them, it also includes some proposals that are worrying for religious freedom. The document, for instance, includes an ambiguous statement that seems to indicate an attempt to bring the Christian endowments and the Church under state control (64). It also defines the future role of the Church as an institution that should work in “co-operation with different state institutions and Egyptian civil society to correct current deviant paths” (79).

The program is no less problematic concerning other social freedom. A new family law will be introduced based on Islamic Sharia (65), thus indicating the possible reversal of all gains made by Egyptian women in the realms of khula (divorce) and custody laws. Wives are granted the right to work “but without prejudice to the rights of the family and without prejudice to the provisions of Islamic Sharia” (65). On cultural matters, “the party adopts the view of the lack of separation between the moral and value system and
the creative act” (81), and the document further states that, “the party emphasizes the importance of self-censorship of the Egyptian citizen” (82). The Egyptian cinema should of course “refrain from bad productions,” (84) and it should operate with the FJP and civil society according to “a larger strategy of making the icon [or positive role models] in various areas of film, sports, the theater, literature, the press, and the media” (84). “Egyptian songs should be guided to a more ethical and creative horizon that is consistent with society’s values and identity” (86). Moreover, the freedom of the press should also be limited to institutions “whose message corresponds to the values of society and public morals” (89).

**Conclusion**

*The unprecedented freedom that the Brotherhood enjoys after the revolution* has allowed it to maximize its benefits due to its highly effective organizational skills. While the new era brings enormous opportunities for the Brotherhood and could possibly lead to a complete Islamist take-over of the state, such an outcome is not a done deal. It will largely depend on how well the Brotherhood navigates through the different landmines that exist during this volatile transition period. Keeping a balance between appeasing the military to ensure their fast withdrawal from politics and strengthening an alliance with the non-Islamists could prove quite challenging. More challenging yet will be striking a similar balance between the Salafis and the non-Islamists. Furthermore, even if it manages all of these problems, the Brotherhood will still need to address the much larger and more difficult tasks of actually governing Egypt and living up to the high expectations and somewhat impossible hopes that Egyptians currently harbor.

The Brotherhood’s long-term objective remains unchanged since its founding: the complete transformation of society along Islamic lines. In this regard, one of the movement’s most potent weapons will likely be its infiltration of not only the civil service, which it has done for years, but also the military and police forces. The Brotherhood is insisting that its members can no longer be barred from joining these institutions. Since the revolution, it is virtually impossible to oppose such demands, as it would be ridiculous to allow a Brotherhood member to become prime minister yet reject him as a police or army officer. While today one may still speak of the military as an obstacle to the Brotherhood’s quest for power, in a matter of years, this picture may be significantly changed. Analysts often argue that it is impossible for the Brotherhood to completely re-make Egypt and that society would resist such attempts. True enough, but such optimism often downplays the transformative nature of totalitarianism.
NOTES


21. “Badei: Aboul Fetouh violated his covenant with God.” September 21, 2011. El Wafd. Available at: http://www.alwafd.org/%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/13%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%98069%D8%A8%D8.AF%D9%8A%D8%B9%20%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%87%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87.


23. Asked about who committed 9/11 Aboul Fetouh replied that: “I don’t believe it was jihadists—it was too big an operation,” he told me. “This was done by a country, not individuals. It’s not a conspiracy theory—it’s just logical. They didn’t bring crimes before the U.S. justice system until now. Why? Because it’s part of the conspiracy.” Islam Lotfy, one of the “moderate” youth that analysts had placed hope in and who broke with the Brotherhood to form his own party answered, “I can’t imagine someone flying for twenty minutes and nobody realizes it, and then another plane goes and crashes and then another in Pennsylvania,” Trager, Eric. “Why is the Middle East still in thrall of 9/11 conspiracy theories?” September 3, 2011. The New Republic. Available at: http://www.tnr.com/article/world/94546/middle-east-radical-conspiracy-theories.

24. The detailed party program is available for download in Arabic on the FJP’s official website: http://www.hurryh.com/. References will be to page numbers from this document.

25. The Parliamentary system with a weak President suits of course the Brotherhood quite well in the short term as they are not running for President.