

Reforming the Muslim Brotherhood

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The Muslim Brotherhood was not ready for power in post-revolution Egypt, nor was the United States prepared for its ascendance. Mutual suspicion still exists between the two, and unless the Brotherhood reforms, reassures the Egyptian masses, it will never win Western support and is doomed to isolation. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood needs to urgently retreat, regroup, and rethink its vision for religion, society, and politics.

In the short term, confronting the military junta will not help the Muslim Brotherhood, as it forces the best and brightest to become fugitives. Meanwhile, the government should release the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders so that the group can be saved from a path of radicalization.

I have been visiting Egypt regularly and meeting with Brotherhood and Salafi leaders to better understand trends within Islamism. To be a serious force for governing the Arab world's most populous country, the Brotherhood needs to make the following changes.



Remnants of a poster of ousted Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi are pictured on a wall on a street in Cairo, August 2013. (Photo: Muhammad Hamed/Courtesy Reuters)

1. Learn from Tunisia and Turkey

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood must follow the example of the Turks and Tunisians by openly embracing "pluralism" (*ta'addudiyah*) and accepting that a secular state is not necessarily anti-Islam. In fact, it guarantees religious freedom for Coptic Christians, Islamists, and others inside Egypt.

Unfortunately, the Brotherhood shunned this advice from Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Tunisia's Rached Ghannouchi as it rose to power. Ghannouchi advised the Brotherhood in June 2012 that Tahrir Square would not support Morsi if he did not share power with secular politicians and other political parties. In Tunisia, Ghannouchi's Ennahda Movement did not demand that Islamic identity be a clause in the constitution—Egypt's Islamists fought tooth and nail for this and more.

Similarly, Erdoğan was adamant in public and in private that the Brotherhood was on the wrong course. In 2011, he openly called on Egypt's leaders to embrace democracy and acknowledge that "secular" did not mean "irreligious." Instead, then Brotherhood spokesman Essam el-Erian remarked that Egyptians did not need to be taught democracy by Turkey.

Erdoğan and Ghannouchi both knew the power of the "deep state" in their own countries, and that the secular elite would not sit idly by and watch an Islamist project unfold. In contrast, Morsi's people underestimated the mobilizing power of secularist and non-Islamist Muslims at al-Azhar University, Copts, state media, and the judiciary. They also made the mistake of thinking that they had western backing for a four-year term, and worse, that they had the loyalty of Egypt's military.

2. Embrace the Elite

A significant reason for the early success of the Muslim Brotherhood during the lifetime of its founder, Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), was his insight into Egyptian high society, particularly elite Cairo society. He frequented the national opera house, was a regular correspondent with King Farouk I, and understood the power of the media and military. Indeed, he created one of the first Arab magazines, and his followers were among the 1952 military brass, including Mohammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser.

If the modern Brotherhood is to be successful, it will have to move beyond its core constituency "on the street" and win over those same elite again. The fact that many Brotherhood leaders live in Nasr City in eastern Cairo, away from the exclusive neighborhoods favored by the elite—Zamalek Island or the compounds in Sixth of October—is symbolic.

Though this stratum of society holidays in Sharm el-Sheikh and Europe, it is not irreligious. They are personally pious, give large donations to religious charities, are patrons of prominent al-Azhar scholars, and are seen in the first rows of Cairo's wealthier mosques. But their piety is not understood by the Brotherhood, which sees Islam as a political ideology.

By the same token, these elite do not understand the Brotherhood and view it with deep suspicion. They trust state media and military reports of the Brotherhood's extremism and cannot distinguish between Salafis and Islamists.

3. Divorce the Salafis

The Brotherhood's proximity to ultraconservative Salafis, whose influence has been corrosive, is a major reason they are seen as religious, political, and social outcasts in Egyptian society. For example, when Brotherhood members visited Turkey, they refused to take photos with female members of Erdoğan's center-right Justice and Development Party (AKP) for fear that Salafis would use them to undermine the Brotherhood's Islamist credentials.

The Brotherhood refused to jettison the Salafis, erroneously believing it needed their religious endorsement. In doing so, the Brotherhood moved farther to the right, accommodating Salafis in the constitution-writing process, regularly inviting Salafis to the presidential palace, and scheduling frequent meetings with Salafi leaders.

While this political maneuvering helped prevent Salafis and Jihadis from opting for anti-government violence, it did not instill confidence in Egyptian voters. Indeed, ordinary people regularly blamed the Brotherhood for the outrageous acts of some Salafis, such as random sharia courts in villages and demands for Christian women to veil. It's now time for the Brotherhood to move to the center.

4. Focus on Institutions, Not Just Individuals

The Morsi presidency often conflated individuals with institutions, an unfortunate tendency that frequently damaged the Brotherhood politically. For instance, then president Morsi mistook General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's religiosity—Morsi and al-Sisi prayed together in the palace, and al-Sisi's wife wore the hijab—as a signal of the military's endorsement of the Brotherhood. Morsi clearly failed to appreciate the military's nationalism and secularism as well as their general opposition to the Brotherhood.

Time and again, the Brotherhood seemed to overprize relations with individuals while underestimating the core interests and values of their respective institutions. In dealings with the United States, Morsi seemed to believe that Ambassador Anne Patterson's closeness to Brotherhood leaders and palace advisers reflected a general U.S. favor. Similarly, Morsi seemed to overlook Hamas's culture of terrorism while cultivating relations with the Palestinian group's leaders.

Going forward, the Brotherhood must also reform itself as an institution from the top down. Its ties with individuals from the pillars of Egyptian society—the military, the judiciary branch of government, and the media—are helpful, but certainly not enough. The Brotherhood cannot plan its return to Egyptian political life solely based on a handful of pluralists at the helm who cultivate relations with the power elite.

5. Bring Women and Youth to the Fore

The Muslim Brotherhood cannot strictly remain a middle-aged "brotherhood" in a country where over half of the population is female, and one in three are under the age of twenty-eight. Currently, women are not allowed to be members of the organization, but instead have a separate sisterhood.

Here again, Tunisia and Turkey prove instructive. When I visited the Ennahda offices, women dealt with me every step of the way. Ghannouchi's assistant and office colleagues were all confident women. They are visibly part of Ennahda. Similarly, in Turkey female Islamists appear in parliament wearing fully western clothes. While some now wear headscarves, others don't. But nobody questions their piety.

The Brotherhood cannot claim to be a serious political force while ignoring its misogynistic inner workings. Morsi promised a female vice president then failed to deliver. His advisers sought to work with women Islamists only via email rather than in person. Male Egyptian

Islamists should learn from Turkey and Tunisia and thereby reassure Egyptian women that the Brotherhood has modernized.

At the same time, with most Brotherhood leaders in prison, this may be an opportune moment for women and younger members to move to the fore. For example, the Brotherhood's appointment of Gehad el-Haddad, an English-speaking youth ([now imprisoned](#)), as a spokesman was laudable, but the senior committees of the organization remain filled with men above the age of fifty.

6. Teach the Spirit of Sharia

The reforms outlined above aim to help answer a fundamental question: What is an Islamic state? The old Brotherhood slogans of "Islam Is the Solution" or "The Quran Is Our Constitution" are no longer viable. To the Brotherhood's credit, they stopped using them while in power, but the grassroots membership failed to appreciate that Egypt's constitution cannot be a divine text. Ghannouchi has led the way in making this point in Tunisia.

This acknowledgment is not an attempt to appease the West or secularism, but is rooted firmly within Islamic jurisprudence. The grandson of the Brotherhood's founder, Oxford-based academic [Tariq Ramadan](#) has done a praiseworthy job in advancing the notion of *maqasid al-sharia* ("goals of sharia") in the modern world, based on classical Muslim scholarship. *Maqasid* theory allows Islamic sharia to be understood through the aims and spirit of the law, rather than the literal interpretation of, for instance, a penal code. This heritage remains largely ignored by the Brotherhood.

Without recourse to *maqasid*, the organization cannot justify women's rights or religious freedom through a citizenship model. *Maqasid al-sharia* is the Brotherhood's saving grace—they should embrace it openly, and educate their foot soldiers in its values. That way, a future Brotherhood-dominated parliament will not be debating female genital mutilation and underage marriage in Islamic courts, but rather regional trade, employment, economic development, and prosperity for all Egyptians.