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The Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian State

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The 3 July military coup (2013) and the bloody events that that coincided with and followed it, most notably the dispersal of the Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda sit-ins, marked the climax of the seven-decade long clash between the State and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, albeit at a varying pace.

This paper handles the ideological reasons for this turbulent relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian State, in the post-republic era in particular, and explores why the State has considered the group an opponent that requires fighting a zero-sum battle against. Meanwhile, the group's vision and attitude towards the Egyptian State were contradictory and unclear. However, the MB has mostly adopted a reformist vision that recognizes the legitimacy of the State, and accordingly works through constitutional and legal tracks as much as possible.

Throughout the history of the Egyptian republic over seven decades, the ambiguous relationship between the State and the Muslim Brotherhood has been one of the significant factors that affected the nature and development of Egyptian political system, where tension prevailed over their relationship almost throughout this period, with minor exceptions, reaching its height in several successive "ordeals"[1], most recently the military coup on 3 July 2013 that overthrew President Mohamed Morsi, and the bloody events that followed, most notably the dispersal of the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins.

After that, the group was designated as a terrorist organization, and its affiliate party, the Freedom and Justice Party, was dissolved. In coincidence with these events, the MB leaders, members and even supporters have been targeted and exposed to chase, arrest, trials, and even extra-legal killings in many cases based on trumped-up charges. The MB-related companies, charities, service and educational institutions, in addition to personal properties of many leaders were also targeted with liquidation and confiscation[2].

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[1] Victor J Willi, The Fourth Ordeal: A History of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, 1968–2018 (Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press: 2021), 7-9.

[2] Abbas Qabbari, Muslim Brotherhood Funds Between Reservation and Seizure, Egyptian Institute for Studies, February 2021, p: 1

This strained relationship between the State and the Muslim Brotherhood is the result of interaction of several intellectual and political factors, where some factors are domestic, related to the history of their conflict and lack of trust between the two parties, and some are related to their relations with conflicting regional and international parties. However, this paper will only address part of the ideological basis of this tension, focused on each side's vision of the other, the factors on which this vision was based, to conclude with the impact of this strained relationship on the future of the democratic transition in Egypt, and the possibility of an imminent transformation in these visions.

Egyptian State's vision of Muslim Brotherhood

It goes without saying that the Egyptian State's view of the Muslim Brotherhood has mostly been negative throughout its history. Since the early days of the republic era following the Free Officers Movement in 1952, the State's policy towards the Brotherhood has ranged between complete exclusion from the political sphere, as happened in the Nasser era, with imposition of a legal ban of the MB, confiscation of its properties, arrest and trial of its leaders and activists; or partial containment/partial exclusion during the reigns of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, that were characterized by unofficial acceptance of the group's activity, and partly allowing it a noticeable space in politics and Da'wa (advocacy).

Meanwhile, the MB was frequently exposed to repression, restriction, and political pressure, with the aim of limiting its capabilities. Then, following a short period of official containment during the transitional period in the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution, however since 2013, the State has returned to the policy of exposing the MB to complete exclusion.

There are many definitions of the problematic term of "State", but, as a matter of simplification, the State can be considered "a set of institutions and practices that combine administrative, judicial, rule-making and coercive powers"[3]. However, given the nature of the republic that was established in Egypt in the wake of the Free Officers Movement in 1952, the Egyptian State can be defined as a "Praetorian State", that is the state "in which the army is part of the bureaucratic state and an essential force in creating the middle class"[4], or that it is a state ruled and sometimes "dominated but

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[3] Roger Owen, State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.
[4] Amos Perlmutter, Egypt: The Praetorian State (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Transactions Book, 1974), 4.

not ruled" by the military[5]. Thus, in the Egyptian case, the institutions and practices that constitute the State are subject to the direct or indirect domination of the military.

Such a state, as described by Nazih Al-Ayyubi, is considered a "predatory state", i.e. it is "so inconsistent with society that it can only deal with it through coercion and use of blatant force, hence came the terms: "police state", "security state", and "intelligence state"[6]. Therefore, the clash between the Egyptian State and the Muslim Brotherhood can be portrayed as a clash between the state bureaucracy, headed by the armed forces, which are the most organized institutions of this bureaucracy in the face of society, headed by the most organized societal force - the Muslim Brotherhood - with the aim of subjugation or dismantling it[7].

Derek Hopwood has stated that in post-independence Egypt, there have been three main types of societal manifestations of Islam can be distinguished in the public sphere: official Islam represented by Al-Azhar and scholarly institutions, popular Islam rooted in society with dominant Sufi features, and political Islam espoused and advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood, which is more deeply rooted and inclusive. Therefore, the strategy of the Egyptian State since Abdel Nasser has been to systematically work to control the first two patterns while striving to get rid of the third (MB)[8].

From this perspective, it can be understood why the military institution during the transitional period was so concerned about the political rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as the rising independence of the Al-Azhar sheikhdom. In a meeting hosted by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in June 2011, Dr. Khaled Abul Fadl recounts how he addressed some of the military leaders to the academics and intellectuals who were present, saying: "You do not know how

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[5] Steven A. Cook, Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007)

[6] Nazih Al-Ayoubi, translated by Amgad Hussein, Amplifying the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 2010, p. 881

[7] Omar Ashour, "Collusion to Crackdown: Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt", Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper 14 (2015): 1

[8] Derek Hopwood, Egypt: Politics and Society 1945-1990 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 95.

dangerous our region is... You do not understand the dangers posed by Islamic extremist groups... You do not understand the dangers constituted by an independent Al-Azhar"[9].

This authoritarian and monopolistic nature of the Egyptian State i explains why the MB remained throughout the seven decades of the republic within the framework of a security file, not a political one, even during the short containment period (March 2011 - July 2013) that followed the January Revolution, during which the group and its affiliate political party were granted legal status, and for the first time since its inception was allowed to assume senior executive positions. This was interpreted - according to one of the security leaders - as a forced tactic resorted to by the SCAF in order to control the "chaos caused by the revolution", as it was the case with similar security disturbances![10]

Does the MB have a clear vision of the Egyptian State?

Against the clear exclusionary vision of the Egyptian state towards the Muslim Brotherhood, it can be claimed that the Brotherhood's vision of the Egyptian State over these seven decades has been incoherent, ranging between a conservative approach according to which it adheres to legal frameworks, recognizes the legitimacy of the existing system, and its program is limited to only introducing some reforms to the policies of the State, whether with regard to the system of governance, economic policies, or international relations - and a radical approach, according to which it presents itself as an alternative to the existing regime, and seeks to achieve radical changes at the level of the nature of the State, its functions, and the philosophy of governance itself, not to mention its economic and social policies as well as international relations. It is true that the MB's first approach has prevailed most of the time, however, as a result of the indecisiveness of its strategic options, its ideological arguments have remained in conflict between patriotism and transnationalism; between a commitment to reform through legal frameworks or seeking "supra-constitutional" changes; between

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[9] Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Failure of a Revolution: The Military, Secular Intelligentsia and Religion in Egypt's Pseudo-Secular State" in Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization, ed. Larbi Sadiki, 260-261 (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2015).

[10] Alison Pargeter, Return to the Shadows: The Muslim Brotherhood and An-Nahda Since the Arab Spring (London: Saqi Books, 2016): 25.

respect for the international system and rebellion against it; and most importantly, between gradual, partial reform and radical comprehensive change.

The first problematic in the Muslim Brotherhood's view of the Egyptian State is the traditional problem related to how far the MB recognizes the legitimacy of this State in light of adoption of restoration of the "Caliphate", as a final goal. Since Hassan al-Banna's early literature in which he stressed his acceptance of the patriotic and nationalist ideas, al-Banna redefined these values and concepts to correspond to the priority of loyalty to the Islamic identity, where he makes these values an integral part of this identity and not a substitute for it. According to Al-Banna, the creed is the one that draws the borders of the homeland and patriotism, not the land borders or geographical borders, and that the Islamic creed considers the whole world as one homeland[11]. Of course, this view does not correspond to the vision adopted by the Egyptian State, which seeks, based on a secular perspective, to maximize nationalist identity, at the expense of religious and doctrinal identities, and seeks to boost political matters at the expense of religious ones, and not the other way around.

On the other hand, a number of documents that the MB issued over successive decades, most recently, for example, the MB General Guide's 'Initiative on the General Principles of Reform in Egypt', issued in 2004[12], and the Freedom and Justice Party platform announced in 2011[13], stress the group's commitment to operating within the framework of the Egyptian State and according to its rules. Paradoxically, however, the internal MB regulations, such as the MB international regulation issued in 1994, showed that the international dimension is still present in the group's operation strategies. For example, the MB General Guide in Egypt is the leader of the Global Guidance Office and the Global General Shura Council, formed from different countries. This regulation also addresses the Brotherhood in all countries as one unit, and that the General Guide has the right to invite an MB leader in another country to meet him with whenever required[14].

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[11] Ibrahim Al-Bayoumi Ghanem, Political Thought of Imam Hassan Al-Banna, Madarat for Research, Cairo, 2013, pp. 273-274

[12] Initiative on the General Principles of Reform in Egypt, accessed 26 January 2022, https://bit.ly/33XGNtJ

[13] The Freedom and Justice Party Platform, accessed 26 January 2022, https://bit.ly/34jp2VS

[14] Samir Abdel Aziz El-Weseimi, the Egypt Muslim Brotherhood's Administrative Governance, Political Stimulation Groups, accessed 26 January 26, 2022, https://bit.ly/3u3F015

This transnational international dimension is also clearly evident in an article included in the platform of the Freedom and Justice Party, which states that:

"Egypt's national security always starts from its regional, Arab and Islamic surroundings, not only from its borders. We also believe that Arab and Islamic unity is one of the main components of national security, and one of Egypt's most significant historical pioneering roles, that it must be pursued deliberately and gradually, based on the free will of peoples".[15]

This article indicates that the group's acceptance of the national frameworks of the Egyptian State is temporary, and that its strategic objective has been the establishment of an "Islamic international" entity, albeit linked to the requirements of Egyptian national security and the free will of peoples, which is clearly contradictory with the logic of the Egyptian State, and with the interests of its allies, whether in the region or the Western governments.

The second problematic is related to the strategy of change adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood, which lies in the fact that the group adopts radical and comprehensive change views, while pledging to seek achieving them through gradual and constitutional means, under an oppressive and undemocratic regime, and in an unfavorable regional and international context! These three conditions seem illogical to combine, as radical change projects that collide with a repressive political reality, in which there are no spaces for peaceful political and social action, are destined for either abortion or radical transformation to violent means. Counselor Tariq al-Bishri highlighted this contradiction in his comment on the thought of Imam al-Banna, saying: "He never decided in his call whether he intended reform or revolution, and if the revolution is to be considered a kind of 'sedition', how can radical changes in governance be made?"[16]

This hesitation is evident in Al-Banna's writings, as stated for example in the Fifth Conference Message:
"As for the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood does not think about it, nor do they rely on it or believe in its benefits and outcomes, however, they make it clear to every Egyptian government that if the situation continues in this way, without the authorities' thinking of an urgent reform and a quick

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[15] The Freedom and Justice Party Platform, accessed 26 January 2022, https://bit.ly/34jp2VS
[16] Sameh Naguib, The Muslim Brotherhood: A Socialist Vision, Center for Socialist Studies, Cairo, 2006, p. 21

remedy for such problems, this will inevitably lead to a revolution that is not based on the operation of the Muslim Brotherhood, not upon their call, but resulting from the pressure and exigencies of circumstances and conditions, and the neglect of reform procedures.[17]"

However, in the same context, he points to the possibility that the Muslim Brotherhood themselves will undertake the revolutionary work, saying:

"The Muslim Brotherhood will use practical force where others are not feasible, and where they are confident that they have completed the process of faith and unity. But when they use this force, they will be honest and frank, and they will warn first, wait, and then proceed with dignity and honor, bearing all the results of their position with full satisfaction.[18]"

This undefined view led to confusion of the Muslim Brotherhood's attitude towards the Egyptian State, as the group did not adopt a clear position on this bureaucratic-military complex of the Egyptian State; whether it targets dismantling it, which requires revolutionary action and violent confrontation, or that it seeks to coexist with it within a framework of a formula of mutual understanding, and accordingly gradual reform action, perhaps pending an opportunity to control it. Hence, the group's structure and strategies were characterized by a mixture of the two views. On the one hand, the group mostly retained the characteristics of a secret organization that does not care about legal legitimacy, and even does not like to work under it to avoid restrictions. Accordingly, it adopts recruitment of new members, upbringing them on a disciplined ideological indoctrination, and discipline and commitment in accordance with a special allegiance, while maintaining confidentiality of internal regulations, and giving the qualities of belonging and trust a priority over competence in selection for positions[19].

On the other hand, however, the MB, which, based on those characteristics, is supposed to seek to achieve its project through sudden violent change (revolution or a coup), has paradoxically been following reform strategies, whether by social action or quasi-partisan activity, expecting to be able to accumulate these efforts to bring about radical changes in the structure of the Egyptian State,

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[17] Al-Banna's Fifth Conference Message, accessed 27 January 2022, https://bit.ly/3GcwDm1
[18] Ibid.
[19] Abdullah Al-Nefeisi, The Islamic Movement: Loopholes in the Road, Afaq Library, Kuwait, 2013, pp. 162-168

thinking that the dominant military elite and its regional and international allies will allow it to implement such reform program without resistance!

Conclusion

This paper handled the problematic relationship between the Egyptian State and the Muslim Brotherhood, highlighting that the problem is partly due to the negative and contradictory views that each party adopts towards the other. As a result of the authoritarian nature of the Egyptian State, the dominance of the military elite over its administration, its submissive logic in dealing with society and its active forces, and its guardianship of the religious sphere and its societal expressions, the Egyptian State's position on the Muslim Brotherhood throughout its history has been negative and exclusionary to varying degrees.

On the other hand, the group's view of the Egyptian State has been characterized by ambiguity and contradiction to some extent, especially in its view of the nationalist belonging as opposed to transnationalism, as well as in its strategy in dealing with the State, between the reformist and radical orientations.

This strained relationship between the two parties has negatively been affected by regional and international factors, which was evident, for example, during the preparation for the 2013 coup and its aftermath, where the military institution acted as an independent actor away from the elected institutions, i.e. the President and Parliament, the two institutions over which the Muslim Brotherhood dominated at the time. The Egyptian army conducted direct contacts with regional and international powers to ensure their support, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in addition to tacit support from Jordan, Kuwait, Israel and the Obama administration, as these forces saw the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a threat to their legitimacy, political stability and strategic interests in the region[20].

To sum up, it seems that the likeliness of a positive development in the Egyptian State and the Muslim Brotherhood's views of each other is linked to occurrence of radical transformations: at the level of the nature of the Egyptian State, most notably the decline of military hegemony over the State and

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[20] Azzam Tamimi, "From Democracy to Military Dictatorship: Egypt 2013 = Chile 1973", Insight Turkey 16 (1), 2014: 45

its potentials, and the establishment of stable political legitimacy based on constitutionality and electoral legitimacy, which would enhance independence of the national decision and limit external interference in the Egyptian internal affairs. On the other hand, such positive development requires transformations at the MB level as well, whether by restructuring the group; commitment to institutionalization, transparency, and openness; and deciding on its strategic choices regarding functions and the nature and mechanisms of the change it seeks, transformations that do not seem likely to occur in the foreseeable future.[21]

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[21] The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies