



Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood experience International response and regional implications

SUMMARY Accused of taking an authoritarian turn and being unable to sort Egypt's economic problems, Mohammed Morsi, the democratically elected Egyptian president was ousted earlier this year. The ensuing crackdown on his party, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), has pushed the organisation to return to the underground organisation with which it had worked for decades. The implications are region-wide, not only because of Egypt's strategic position in the Middle East but also because of the impact the Egyptian episode could have for other MB-linked groups which are widespread in the region.

Disillusionment with the democratic process could lead MB-like entities in the region to decide against assuming governmental responsibilities or even participating into the electoral process at all. This could induce radicalisation of part of the movement and/or a shift of allegiances to competing Islamist groups.

Therefore, even if in the short term most Western parties may be relieved at getting rid of Islamists from power in Egypt, in the long term weakening and/or radicalisation of MB risks leaving international actors without what had seemed to be a relatively "moderate" alternative to hard-line Islamist movements. These will probably gain strength, and be better placed to propose alternative scenarios, as the result of the failed MB democratic experience.

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Muslim Brotherhood's short rule

On 3 July 2013, the military takeover, following mass demonstrations in Cairo against President Mohammed Morsi, abruptly ended the Muslim Brotherhood's democratic period in government, which had been difficult from the beginning. Indeed although the MB's Freedom and Justice Party had won nearly half of the seats in the Egyptian Parliament's lower chamber in February 2012, the People's Assembly was [dissolved](#) by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) five months later, in June 2012.¹ Morsi, the MB presidential candidate elected a few days after this dissolution tried in vain to [reverse](#) it, but found himself in unending conflict with judicial and military authorities.

After months of political struggle, the MB lost all power as a result of popular discontent and opposition from what is called the "[deep state](#)"² in Egypt (the army with its massive economic assets, the judiciary, and state administration). The main criticisms of Morsi concerned economic mismanagement, poor governance and authoritarian tendencies, with some observers calling his style of governance "majoritarisme", referring to autocratic governance by the largest party.³ Indeed several of Morsi's measures have



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reinforced the weight of this accusation, for example, in November 2012, making his decisions immune from judicial review (a decree later annulled because of protests), or nominating 17 MB-affiliated governors in June 2013.

The interim government, backed by the army, declared a state of emergency (supposed to last one month from 14 August, but only [ended](#) by court order on 13 November). It has also detained over 2 000 MB supporters and leaders, including Mohammed Morsi, whose [trial](#) started in November 2013, and frozen assets of its main figures.⁴ The pro-Morsi demonstrations ended in bloodshed with the number of victims being difficult to [estimate](#). Media seen as favourable to the MB were closed and the licences of 55 000 imams sympathetic to the movement withdrawn.⁵ Finally, on 23 September 2013 all activities of the Brotherhood, its NGO and affiliated groups were [banned](#) by court order and assets seized. Many MB activists have received prison [sentences](#), as high as life in jail for several of its leaders.

The revised draft constitution, to be put to a referendum in January 2014, gives wide powers to the army, including the right to try civilians in some cases. In parallel a new law [restricting rights of demonstration](#) and public protest has been passed, resulting in police forcibly ending all protests, not only those organised by the MB.

Western responses

These events have a deep impact on the region, and place Western partners in a delicate situation with regard to their response to what is seen by many as a *de facto* military coup, against a democratically elected president, but by others as the continuation of a grassroots revolutionary movement.⁶

The European Union

On 29-30 July, during her visit to Cairo, EU High Representative [Catherine Ashton](#) held

various meetings with different forces on the Egyptian political scene, including MB, but did not succeed in getting them around the negotiating table.⁷ In its [conclusions](#) of 21 August 2013, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council condemned "all acts of violence", and called upon all parties to engage in "real and inclusive dialogue" in order to "return to the path of democracy". It also called on the Egyptian authorities to end the state of emergency, and announced the suspension of all export licences to Egypt covering goods that could be used for internal repression.

On 12 September 2013, the **European Parliament** adopted a [resolution on the situation in Egypt](#). The resolution acknowledges the failure of Morsi's government to deal with economic issues and to take into account concerns of all democratic forces in Egypt. In respect of the military takeover of 3 July 2013, the EP condemns the "disproportionate use of force by Egyptian security forces" and all acts of terrorism and violence. It stresses that any ban or exclusion of MB from political life would only lead to increased radicalism. MEPs also call upon the interim government to guarantee freedom of operation for civil society, trade unions and media.

The US

The US "strongly condemned" the ongoing violence in Egypt and argued all parties to seek resolution of the conflict through dialogue. As US legislation prohibits assistance to a country whose elected head of government has been deposed by military coup, the use of that term was [avoided](#) by the Obama administration. The US has cancelled a joint annual military exercise, but did not immediately halt military aid, despite voices raised in Congress in favour of doing so.⁸ It was only on 9 October 2013 that the Obama [administration announced](#) the freezing of part of US aid to Egypt, including a halt in delivery

of some heavy weaponry. It stressed that this step is temporary and subject to revision if democratic progress is made.

Indeed, Egypt is an important US strategic partner in the Middle East. American troops rely on Egypt for preferential use of the Suez Canal, contingency bases and overflight rights. However some observers note that the key US [strategic interest](#), positively affected by Egypt's change in government, lies in the preservation of the Gulf monarchies, which host a large number of US military facilities and are put at risk by the rise of pan-Islamic mass movements such as MB.

As pointed out by some, military aid will resume, not only because of strategic but also commercial interests. US arms firms would lose contracts and joint ventures financed by US\$1.3 billion in annual assistance.⁹

MB movements in the Arab world

Described frequently as the most successful socio-political movement in the Arab world, the MB's branches stretch across the region. Each presents some common ideological and methodological features, despite the decentralised character of the network and its adaptation to local conditions. Although the MB is often said to have seized the opportunity offered by the Arab Spring, it is not seen as its initiator.

Egyptian origins of a global movement

The pan-Muslim movement opposing secular nationalism was founded in Egypt in 1928, and its ideas and methods spread quickly to all majority-Muslim countries as well as to the EU and US.

In Egypt, the MB was banned in the 1950s and 1960s because of its declared objective of violent overthrow of the Egyptian government. It changed its strategy in 1970, renouncing violence and engaging in a number of grassroots activities. Used to acting underground, it re-emerged¹⁰ on the political scene via its Freedom and Justice

Party, after the end of the Mubarak regime in 2011, and won the first democratic elections.

Common features

Although the attempt to form a structured pan-Islamic organisation overseeing the MB network has failed, some [coordination](#) does take place. It is reported that MB leaders from 200 countries met in September 2013 in Istanbul and Lahore, in order to adopt a common strategy to face the Egyptian crackdown on the MB.¹¹

One can also distinguish some common MB characteristics:

Anti-Western ideology

Rooted in Sunni Islam, the MB ideology rejects the idea of a secular state and blames Western countries for political colonisation, resource exploitation and cultural invasion.¹² However, its willingness to participate in the democratic process is regularly asserted. As one [commentator](#) puts it, the "Brothers are torn between radical politics, and a mode of dealing with the West and with the democratic system, that they fear will destroy them".

Gradualism

The MB's historic motto, *Islam is the solution*, illustrates its original mission of islamisation of society, through the implementation of *Sharia law* in all aspects of private and public life. The Islamic state is to be set up at the end of a progressive and pragmatic road. Social, educational and health-related activities are used as the primary tools in this bottom-up process.

Internal discipline

Although MB has various wings and currents, the group maintains strong internal discipline. The majority of the MB movement has developed a pyramid-shaped hierarchy, with centralised decision-making and decentralised implementation.¹³ This, coupled with strong bonds between its members and a culture of secrecy and loyalty, enables it to keep a high degree of organisational cohesion.¹⁴

Differences

Position in the political system

MB-inspired entities have different positions in their respective national political systems. In some they have been in power (Egypt and [Tunisia](#) until recently, and the Gaza Strip). In others, they participate in governing coalitions (Morocco, Algeria). They are in opposition in Jordan, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where MB groups are subject to government repression, accused of seeking to export the Arab Spring revolution to the Gulf monarchies.¹⁵ In the Syrian case, the MB, long operating from exile, has achieved a strong position, albeit [contested](#) internally, in the [Syrian National Council](#) and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. These are intended by the [Friends of Syria](#) parties to lay the groundwork for a government in exile. The MB is also trying to rebuild its network in Syria, but faces rapid growth of independent Salafi militant factions.

Stand on Jihad

The view on the use of violence as a means to achieve MB goals differs from group to group. Some MB groups (like in Egypt) have declared themselves against the use of violence, although divergences exist internally and some are still accused of backing terrorist attacks. Others tolerate more flexible stances to enable them to manage all factions. Less frequently, Jihad is openly acknowledged as a means for political campaigning. This is the case of Hamas. In Syria, although MB refuses to admit to having armed branches, the organisation sponsors dozens of small paramilitary units in the country.¹⁶

Finances

The lack of transparency in regard to MB funding is often denounced. The main sources of [finances](#) seem to be concentrated in a limited number of backers, as described in the case of the Egyptian MB:

- wealthy diasporas in Gulf states and Western countries,

- funds generated by organisations controlled by MB and members' fees,
- Islamic banks,
- Recently, Qatar and, in the case of the Syrian MB, Turkey.

Regional implications of the Egyptian case

Commentators stress that tremendous uncertainty surrounds the Arab Middle East following the Arab Spring uprisings, since the internal political changes affect the balance of power in the region.¹⁷ Egypt's turmoil has added to this uncertainty.

Gulf countries

The fall of the first elected MB leader has been a relief to the majority of Gulf rulers, who fear revolutionary contagion spreading via MB networks, and proposing socially sensitive bottom-up political Islam as an alternative to still conservative, but elitist, Wahhabi-dominated regimes. Just a week after Morsi's overthrow **Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait** pledged a total of US\$ [12 billion](#) in support to Egypt.

Among Gulf Monarchies, **Qatar** has taken almost the complete opposite approach to the MB. Indeed the Emirate gave financial support, [estimated](#) at US\$7.5 billion to Morsi's Egypt. Since his fall, bilateral relations have deteriorated: in September 2013, Egypt returned US\$2 billion deposited by Qatar in its Central Bank. The Qatar exception is explained by its rulers' immunity to popular challenge (with its 250 000 citizens having the highest per capita income in the world) and huge geopolitical ambitions.¹⁸ The implication of Qatar stepping back from Egypt could lead to a change in its strategy, and a retreat from giving strong support to the MB throughout the region. This could weaken Hamas and Syrian MB groups financed by Qatar.¹⁹

Gaza strip/Hamas

For [Hamas](#), the ousting of Morsi, its strongest ally, was a hard blow, jeopardising

its long-term perspectives. In the days following the events, the Egyptian army closed the Rafah border crossing, (now reopened infrequently) and destroyed 80% of the tunnels that link Gaza with Sinai, accusing Hamas of being responsible for security problems in Sinai.²⁰ Adding to shortages in supplies for the population, the closure of tunnels will hurt Hamas itself financially: taxes on goods delivered via Israel are transferred to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, with only the "taxes" on smuggled goods ending up in the Hamas treasury.

Israel

Since the bilateral peace treaty in 1979 Egypt has become an important factor in Israeli security. Although Morsi did not break the pact, he had envisaged renegotiating it. This, coupled with MB's anti-Semitic rhetoric, was a source of concern for Israel for its long-term prospects. Therefore the [Israeli](#) silence on the regime change, reducing slightly Israel's growing isolation after the Arab Spring²¹, was a diplomatic posture hiding overall satisfaction. Israel has enhanced [cooperation](#) with Egypt in order to [secure Sinai](#), authorisation Egyptian deployment in the demilitarised zone, in principle forbidden by the 1979 treaty.

Turkey

Turkey has condemned Morsi's overthrow, accusing Israel of being behind it and [deploring](#) ambiguous Western [reactions](#) towards what it [called](#) "a military coup" that "destroyed Egypt's fledgling democracy". [Commentators](#) stress that Turkey, together with Qatar, are the "big losers" of recent changes in Egypt. Governed by an Islamist "moderate party", with the army retaining a strong influence, Turkey had worked hard to establish the Cairo-Doha-Ankara "pro-change" axis in line with its growing regional power ambitions.

Perspectives

Observers agree that in the short term, there is little chance of the MB participating in any potential reconciliation process that would legitimate what they call "usurpers".²² This will enhance the already deep socio-political polarisation of Egyptian society.

The **radicalisation** of, at least, parts of MB movement is often [seen](#) as the main result of Egypt's aborted democratic experiment, which is also making hard-line Islamic groups more appealing. In Egypt this radicalisation could turn into armed violence against the state and its commercial interest. This would further increase the terrorist risk around tourism assets.²³

In September 2013, the [Tunisian MB's](#) ruling Ennhada party has announced it would step back from government in a [negotiated arrangement](#) in order to avoid escalation of political conflict. This suggests that some MB groups may choose to take a more conciliatory approach to governance in light of the Egyptian experience.

Further reading

[Egypt: Back to Square one?/](#) Colombo, S; Meringolo A, IAI Working Papers 13, 23 July 2013.

[Above the state: The Officers' Republic in Egypt/](#) Sayigh, Y, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2012.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This followed the ruling of the Supreme Constitutional Court that found unconstitutional the electoral law under which the election had been held. The court ruled that party members should not have been allowed to contest the one-third of seats designated for independents.
- ² [Egypt's 'deep state' claws back freedoms](#)/ Financial Times, 20 June 2012.
- ³ [Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood](#)/ Laub Z, Council of Foreign Relations, 28 August 2013.
- ⁴ [Le porte-parole des Frères Musulmans arrêté au Caire](#)/ Le Monde, 17 September 2013.
- ⁵ [Egypt should preserve unity among disparate parties](#)/ Al Monitor, 15 September 2013.
- ⁶ [The Army's coup in Egypt: for the people or against the people?](#)/ Teti A, Gervasio G, Open Democracy 23 July 2013; [Egypt: Back to square one?](#)/ Colomba S, Meringolo A, IAI Working Papers 13, 23 July 2013.
- ⁷ [Egypt in turmoil: from 2011 revolution to the current crisis](#)/ Kettis A, Briefing Note, Policy Department, European Parliament, August 2013.,
- ⁸ [Egypt in crisis: issues for Congress](#)/ Sharp J, CRS Report, Congressional Research Service, 12 September 2013.
- ⁹ [Why the US won't cut military aid to Egypt](#)/ Marshall S, Foreign Policy, 29 February 2012; [The Egypt Aid Dilemma](#)/ Tankel S, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 August 2013.
- ¹⁰ MB-affiliated candidates participated as independents in 1984 parliamentary and local elections.
- ¹¹ Global Muslim Brotherhood organisation holds meetings in Istanbul, Lahore/ Factiva, BBC Monitoring Middle East, 26 September 2013.
- ¹² [From prison to palace: the Muslim Brotherhood challenges and responses in post-revolutionary Egypt](#)/ El Houdaiby I, FRIDE, Working Paper 117, February 2013, pp. 13-14.
- ¹³ [The structure and funding sources of the Muslim Brotherhood](#)/ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre, 2011.
- ¹⁴ Idem; [Struggling to adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria](#)/ Lund A, Carnegie Endowment, May 2013.
- ¹⁵ [The Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring: tactics, challenges and future scenarios](#)/ Vidino L, Centre for European Studies, Policy brief, May 2013.
- ¹⁶ [Struggling to adapt: The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria](#)/ Lund A, Carnegie Endowment, May 2013, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ [The 2011 uprising in the Arab Middle East: political changes and geopolitical implications](#)/ Dalacoura K, International Affairs 88:1, 2012.
- ¹⁸ [New emerging balances in the post-Arab Spring world: the Muslim Brotherhood and Gulf monarchies](#)/ Dacrema E, ISPI, January 2013.
- ¹⁹ [Qatar geopolitical gamble: how the Gulf state may have overreached](#)/ Walt V; Time.com.
- ²⁰ [Hamas seeks to ease tension with Egypt army](#)/ Amer AA, Al Monitor, 16 September 2013.
- ²¹ [Geo-strategic consequences of the Arab Spring](#)/ Rózsa E, IE MED Papers 19, June 2013, pp. 25&19.
- ²² [Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood](#)/ Laub Z, Council of Foreign Relations, 28 August 2013.
- ²³ [Egypt: factions in Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood likely to turn to armed violence](#), IHS Global Insight, 19 August 2013.