

V. Op-Ed

After the Fall: The Muslim Brotherhood's Post Coup Strategy

by Philipp Holtmann

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt struggles to find a strategy of survival. After the military coup in early July 2013, during which hundreds of its members and supporters were killed by the army, many observers of the post-coup situation assume that the Muslim Brothers (MB) as a whole will go underground. Yet, this is unlikely. Even if— as has happened in recent weeks— many MB are arrested, numerous activists are extrajudicially killed in jails, and the organization is earmarked to be dissolved and its unlicensed clerics forbidden to preach - it will not break its backbone.[1] The Brotherhood will manage to reorganize as a mosaic of social, political and religious networks. This is due to its strategic flexibility and its ability to appeal to the most diverse sectors of society through its combination of social, political and practical actions. The historic record shows how the MB survived earlier waves of repression and indicates that the latest wave of repression will not be its end.

The Egyptian MB's strategic reactions to repression depend on the extent of pressure being brought on the organisation and its members. Levels of repression have varied considerably over the last 65 years. At times, it took a relatively “mild” form of surveillance, combined with prohibitions and demonstrative incarcerations of key leaders, such as the arrest, between 2007 and 2011, of the MB's deputy guide Khayrat al-Shatir. Shatir's arrest was the regime's way of signalling that the MB had to slow down politically, since it had grown too strong in Egyptian party politics.

One of the strategic “behavioural patterns” of the MB is to face repression like a quiet, domesticated cat that sits idle, eats from its owner's hand, respects the house rules and is aware of the limits of its cage. Yet this “peaceful” behaviour can be deceptive. In Victor Hugo's words, “God created the cat, so that man might have the pleasure of caressing the tiger.”

Let's look for a moment at both the most recent and the more distant history. How did the MB behave when it finally gained power after having been excluded from it for more than 80 years? Despite the long waiting period, which should have given it ample time to prepare for taking state power, the MB seemed incapable of ruling the country between 2012 and 2013. This was already illustrated by the changes of the movement's political strategy in the run up to the 2011 elections. Its political behavior at that time stood in stark contrast to the review of political strategies advised by the MB's “*Nahda*” (Renaissance) project, namely, to “begin with a small effort; [gradually] this effort and work will accumulate.”[2] Instead of adhering to its traditional “participation, not domination” strategy in electoral politics since the early 1990s, the Brotherhood suddenly decided to, ‘have the whole cake,’ not sharing it with other parties. Thus, when the revolution started in the spring of 2011 and Mubarak had to leave office, the

Muslim Brothers suddenly saw a tiger in their mirror-picture (to stay with Victor Hugo's metaphor).[3] Their intoxication by the prospects of power was also clearly visible in the short-lived government under Muhammad Mursi. He wanted everything: to control the drafting of the new constitution while at the same time allowing the security apparatus to batter protesters. Moreover, Mursi decreed new laws that allowed for a person's detention for up to 30 days without judicial review. Last but not least he wanted to make his own rules, exempt from any legislative control or judicial oversight. In doing so, Mursi acted not too differently from Hosni Mubarak in the years before 2011. At the same time, one has to admit that it is difficult to govern a Muslim majority country in transition from a military dictatorship to - what many hoped it would be - a democracy. But one year of MB rule has made clear that Mursi had no idea as to how to govern - he lost the support of millions of Egyptians who had in the elections of the post-revolutionary period preferred his persona and his party to secular parties or candidates close to the military apparatus. As a result of Mursi's blatant mismanagement, the military coup of this summer was initially welcomed by hundreds of thousands if not millions of Egyptians. Yet, while the MB are not very good at governing Egypt, they are experts at how to run an opposition.

Let us look back at their strategic responses to the relatively "mild" repression under former president Hosni Mubarak since the mid-1980s. The MB relied on a three tiered strategic approach, first tried after dictator Mubarak's rise to power in 1981.[4] Following the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat, Mubarak and his military apparatus clamped down heavily on all Islamist organizations, not only the Jihadis. Over time and as the shock waves of 1981 ebbed away, the MB began to turn towards electoral politics. It was an active, integral and progressive approach that later would turn into a winning streak.[5] The second tier of the MB strategy under Mubarak was to take effective control of student and professional unions (*niqabat*), such as the lawyers' association in 1992 and the journalists' association in 2003. Already in the 1950s when its membership was larger than ever before or since, the bulk of Brotherhood-members came from the most modern and westernized segments of society. They were lawyers, bureaucrats, academics, engineers, students and doctors. This second tier of the MB strategy under Mubarak should not be lost sight of. We have to keep in mind that Islamism in Egypt should not be equated with backwardness. Relative deprivation models cannot explain the massive influence of Muslim Brothers among educated and modern Muslims! The third tier of its low profile strategy under Mubarak comprised the expansion of its network of social services which provided food for the poor, housing, jobs and also served as a recruitment tool for bringing new members into the Brotherhood. This services network goes back to the 1950s.[6] Burning this social capital now by igniting a civil war would be counter-productive for any rational survival strategy of the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, there is another side to the Brotherhood: like a wounded beast it could also tear the house that it built apart, no matter how high the casualties, and disregarding any

consequences. We should not forget that – to stay with Victor Hugo’s metaphor - some of the movement’s kittens have become stray cats in the past, i.e. extremist ideological groups broke away from the mother-faction and interpreted the “totalizing” MB core-concepts violently, including the justification and perpetration of indiscriminate terrorism against civilians.

This “beast” is the accumulation of collective emotions of isolation and frustration paired with a totalitarian and Manichaeic worldview. There were several major clamp-downs on the movement, namely in 1948, 1954, 1965, 1981.[7] The most notable was the one following its break with Col. Nasser, who had come to power in 1952. After some Muslim Brothers tried but failed to assassinate Nasser as he gave a speech in Alexandria in 1954, the movement was dissolved and many of its members were thrown into jail, where they were frequently tortured and some of them were even killed. This period of “concentration camps” (*mu‘taqalat*) became the major narrative of victimization of the Brothers (the “bloody Monday and Tuesday” of early July 2013 will probably strengthen this narrative).[8] In the isolation of their prison cells, some of the incarcerated MBs started to reject political or non-violent strategies altogether. In the wake of their renewed suppression of 1965, the disastrous defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 war with Israel and the rise of political Islam as an ideological alternative to Pan-Arab socialism, militant splinter groups of the MB, such as *Jama‘at Shabab Muhammad* (*Jama‘at al-Faniya al-‘Askariyya*), *al-Jama‘a al-Muslima* (*Jama‘at al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra*), *Tanzim al-Jihad*, *al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya* emerged, forming the new role models for other Arab Jihadi organizations.[9] More and more youngsters in the 1970s became receptive for embracing revolutionary Islamist models, such as the one formulated by the MB ideologue Sayyid Qutb. Qutb who was hanged by Nasser in 1965 (after he had refused to ask for pardon) can be seen as the ideological “Godfather of Jihadism.” Yet, in the same period other figureheads of the movement, such as al-Hajj Abbas al-Sisi, attracted large crowds of followers with non-violent and more egalitarian Islamist ideas. We have to keep in mind that this happened in the second half of the 1970s, when the spread of Jihadi splinter-factions of the MB was at its peak. Thus, there have always been balancing trends within the Egyptian MB, especially in times of crisis. [10]

Roel Meijer claims that the movement never seems to have committed itself ultimately in one way or the other; its political terminology since its creation in 1928 has been characterised by ambiguity.[11] Can this maneuverability tell us more about the future strategic behaviour of the MB? In the history of the Muslim Brothers, concepts such as party politics (*hizbiyya*) and jihad have moved from the ideological center to the periphery and vice versa, and the interpretation of these concepts has drastically changed in periods of conflict and cooperation with the regimes of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. Already in the 1930s, MB founder Hassan al-Banna said that the movement was “a Salafi propaganda, a Sunni way, a Sufi reality, a political body, a sports group, a cultural association, an economic company, a social thought.”[12] By conceptually framing the movement in such a vague way, al-Banna created platforms for the

MB to sail through almost any ideological and intellectual storm. The social network “Muslim Brotherhood” can turn its strategy 360 degrees around, turn its compass into any promising direction and appeal to any social or political strata should the need arise. Thus, it is not only likely, but a proven fact that the MB demonstrates an absolute flexibility with regard to its interpretation of its Islamist core concepts. The “state owned” clergy of al-Azhar, the official center for religious learning and since the Nasser period effectively controlled by the state, once had the very difficult task under the Sadat regime to re-interpret “true” jihad as *sulh* (peace agreement) in order to provide a theological justification for the 1979 peace agreement between Egypt and Israel. The Azhar clerics needed exactly six years for this (1973-1979).[13] The Brotherhood could have engaged in a similar manoeuvre more recently, if the fallout with the generals had not occurred. There is a play between the “poetry of ideology” and the “prose of political reality” – and like in Hamas’ case,[14] the latter is likely to take the upper hand with the Egyptian Muslim Brothers as well.

This adaptability is part of the MB’s larger strategy of civilizational jihad (*al-'amaliya al-jihadiyya al-hidariyya*), a soft power struggle through propaganda, information operations and the setting up of support networks in politics, business and society. For the Brothers, Islam is a totality (*shumuliya*), a complete system (*nizam kamil*) that encompasses all sectors of human life. In its service, MB cadres, branches and “families” (*'usar*) engage in financial, social, psychological and propagandist efforts in the 70 countries it has taken root. Opting for an armed resistance strategy in Egypt would only disturb this silent expansion process and put an uncomfortably bad label on the Brotherhood’s mother organization.

While this looks devoid of ideals, in commercial marketing as well as in politics, actors not only have to address the desires and needs of different target groups, but reputation management is crucial too. The same goes for Islamist politics. It is of great concern for the wider, international branches of the MB that its foundational movement, the Egyptian MB, be not associated with the Al-Qaeda label, should some Brothers take up arms in Egypt. Therefore, the official Egyptian MB website posted in September 2013 a statement, calling for “non-violent resistance” to the military’s ongoing brutal repression. The MB directive says: “Our old and new experiences confirm that non-violent resistance (*al-muqawama al-silmiyya*) is the most successful, quickest and less life-costly way to counter coups d’état and tyranny.”[15]

Against this background of former strategies against suppression and in the light of its most recent announcements, it is safe to assume that the main wing of the MB movement will try to adapt to the new circumstances, that is, appease the rulers in order to preserve at least some of its political capital. However, at the same time splinter groups are likely to engage the regime with bloody attacks. If the main wing of the movement, however, is pushed too much against the wall and if it is denied any space for manoeuvre, such as being allowed to continue to play a role in the social and economic sectors, then it is not unlikely that the Muslim Brotherhood

core may favour armed struggle. The danger of this possibility is illustrated by the turn of events in Syria and its spill-over effects. The Brotherhood might also split in an underground Egyptian MB and an outside leadership in exile as well as foreign branches. Major leaders, such as secretary-general Mahmud Hussein, deputy supreme-guides Guma'a Amin and Mahmud Ghozlan, have left the country and sound belligerent in their speeches held abroad. They call for the continuation of protests, while local leaders appear to be more pragmatic in their search for survival strategies.[16] The MB has traditionally been strong in mending broken leadership structures through its federated system of semi-autonomous branches, where leadership is decentralized and switches from branch to branch if a leading node is cut off. The modernized and more centralized MB over the last 30 years has given up many of these elements from its underground existence, but may re-activate the federated network-structure to sit out the present wave of repression. In deputy guide Khayrat al-Shatir's own words: "We are Groups, Families, Branches, Regions and officials: the form of this structure may change from one era to another!"[17]

If past is prologue, it is safe to assume that the Egyptian MB will continue to exist. If it cannot act as a centrally led movement or as a political party, then it will try to continue to exist in the form of an effective social network whose branches stretch from the local, communal, national levels all the way to regional and international levels. Ziad Munson claims in his impressive social movement analysis of the MB that the movement has prospered even during times of severe state repression, such as in the early Nasserist era in the 1950.[18] Even after the movement's dissolution and the mass arrests in 1954 by the Free Officers regime, it was able to secretly re-group within a few weeks and was in fact, still growing during that period, as released U.S. State Department documents of this time suggest.[19]

At the moment, there is a public nostalgia for the Nasser era in Egypt, which is also reflected on the level of foreign policy. Strategic relationships with the United States, France and Great Britain appear to be worsening. Especially the U.S. suffers from a loss of reputation even among old allies: in Israel Obama is considered by many a wimp and a coward for not intervening in Syria, which does him actually rather well in some Arab and European opinions.[20] But Egyptian military and secular leaders have also claimed that the U.S. is a supporter of the "source of terrorism," because of its links with the Mursi government.[21] There is talk in Egypt about intensified cooperation with Russia and China. Recent developments do not bode well for the future of democracy in Egypt.

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Notes

- [1] Yasmine Saleh, „Egypt bans mosque preachers in crackdown on Islamists,” *Reuters*, September 10, 2013, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/10/us-egypt-protests-idUSBRE9890NF20130910>.
- [2] The project includes a comprehensive review of the Brotherhoods political strategies in the post-Mubarak era. It was planned and presented by deputy guide Khayrat al-Shatir. “Khairat al-Shater on “The Nahda Project” (Complete Translation),” April 10, 2012, Hudson Institute, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Volume 13, accessed October 18, 2013, <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/khairat-al-shater-on-the-nahda-project-complete-translation>.
- [3] Nathan J. Brown remarks that Muslim Brotherhood candidates entered all races for parliamentary seats in all provinces in the first free parliamentary elections in post-revolutionary Egypt. They did not concentrate on their strongholds, nor did they send a signal to other parties and blocs that they were interested in power-sharing. Nathan J. Brown, *When Victory Becomes an Option: Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood Confronts Success* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 2012.
- [4] Laurence Caromba and Hussein Solomon, “Understanding Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *African Security Review*, 17:3 (2008), pp. 118-124.
- [5] The entry into party politics began in 1984 under the third Supreme Guide Umar al-Tilimsani, who continued the non-violent reform trend of his predecessor Hassan al-Hudaybi. Although officially prohibited, MBs were able to run for parliament in 1984 on the list of the Wafd Party in exchange for votes from MB supporters. In 1987 the MB created an “Islamic Alliance” with the Liberal Party and the Labour Party that won 17 percent of the National Vote in the parliamentary elections (65 seats). The Brothers became so powerful in the 2005 parliamentary elections, winning 88 seats as independents. The Brotherhood ran only 150 candidates, less than a third of the house’s seats. The message to the regime was that the MB was not seeking a two-thirds majority necessary to implement constitutional changes. See Israel Elad Altman, *Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement 1928-2007, Research Monographs on the Muslim World Series*, Paper No 2, January, 2009
- Hudson Institute. Yet, Mubarak changed the constitution again, securing his position by separate elections for the presidency (Amendment of article 76 of the Egyptian constitution). In the same year, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood signed from the exile the “Declaration of Damascus,” stating that it would accept the nomination of the Christian Michel Kilo, if fair and free elections were to take place. See Raphael Lefevre, *The Muslim Brotherhood Prepares for a Comeback in Syria, The Carnegie Papers*, May 2013.
- [6] This network has been so strong that it frequently replaced non-existing state services altogether. For example, the government had to continue financing these services for fear of collapse and widespread revolts after the Brotherhood’s prohibition in 1954. After the earthquake in Cairo in 1992, the Brotherhood’s relief operation was so effective that the inefficient government looked like a bystander. “Brotherhood members rapidly set up shelters and medical tents, provided food, clothing and blankets to residents of the city, and donated US\$1 000 to every family whose home had been destroyed (Walsh 2003:34). The Egyptian government, concerned that the Brotherhood was attempting to compete with the infrastructure of the state, subsequently barred the Brotherhood from carrying out such humanitarian operations in future, which only served to damage the government’s reputation and increase the popularity of the Brotherhood.” Laurence Caromba and Hussein Solomon, “Understanding Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *African Security Review*, Vol.17, No. 3 (2008), p. 120.
- [7] Already in the 1940s some MB members were trained in guerrilla warfare and assassination tactics in the secret paramilitary apparatus of the MB (al-Jihaz al-Sirri). But this „secret apparatus” was part of the larger organization, which was not the case with the armed splinter groups that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.
- [8] Ahmad Ra’if: *Safhat min tarikh al-Ikhwan: Al-Tarikh al-sirri li-l-mu’taqal*. Cairo: Al-Mukhtar al-Islami, n.d.
- [9] Rifa’at al-Sa’id, *Al-Ta’asslum al-siyasi wa rawafiduhu*. Cairo: Kitab al-Ahali, 2002. Rifa’at al-Sa’id, *Al-Irhab: Islam am ta’asslum*. Cairo: Sina li-Nashr, 1995.
- [10] Husam Tamam, *Tahawwalat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun: Tafakkuk al-Idiyulujija wa nihayat al-tanzim* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbouly, 2006), 176-177. These peaceful trends have appeared frequently in Islamist circles, although, nowadays the focus is on civil war under the banner of jihad which seems to find resonance among distressed Muslims in the wider region, where daily terrorist attacks tear ever deeper holes into the fragile social structures of religious and ethnic communities in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and also, increasingly, in central and sub-Saharan Africa.
- [11] Roel Meijer, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the Political: An Exercise in Ambiguity*. In: Roel Meijer and Edwin Bakker (Eds.), *The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 295-320.
- [12] Ahmad Muhammad Shahuq, *Kaifa yufakkir al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*. Khartoum: Dar al-Fikr, 1981, p.71.
- [13] See Philipp Holtmann, *The Transformation of the Jihad-Doctrine in Sadat’s Egypt*. Munich: Grin, 2009.
- [14] See Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *Hamas, The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p.12.
- [15] “*Silmiya, silmiya, silmiya...risala min al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*,” accessed October 12, 2013, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=162319&SecID=211>.
- [16] Other leaders have been arrested in Egypt, such as the Supreme Guide Muhammad Badie, the first deputy guide Khayrat al-Shatir and the second Deputy Guide Rashad al-Bayoumi, as well as the high ranking MB member and chairman of the Freedom and Justice Party, Saad al-Katatni. Mahmud Izzat, formerly third Deputy, has been appointed new Supreme Guide in August 2013 and seems to be hiding in the Gaza Strip. Interpol answered affirmatively to a demand by the Egyptian prosecutor general to assist detaining Izzat for “inciting violence,” if the opportunity presents itself; at the same time, the Egyptian army asked Israeli intelligence to help finding Izzat in Gaza.
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[17] Khayrat al-Shatir, "Mashru' al-nahda al-islami...Khayrat al-Shatir," accessed October 18, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnSshs2qzrM>.

[18] Ziad Munson, Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. *Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2001), pp. 487 - 510.

[19]Ibid..

[20] Uri Avnery, „A Good War,“ September 14, 2013,

<http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1379072913>.

[21] L. Lavni and M. Shamni, "In Egypt, Public Campaign Against Obama, U.S.; Calls For

Intensified Cooperation With Russia, China,“ *MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis Series*, Report No. 1016, September 13, 2013.