Understanding Today’s Middle East:
Peoples & Places of the Arab Spring
Edited by Denis J. Sullivan and Sarah A. Tobin
UNDERSTANDING TODAY’S MIDDLE EAST
PEOPLES & PLACES OF THE ARAB SPRING

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UNDERSTANDING TODAY’S MIDDLE EAST:
PEOPLE & PLACES OF THE ARAB SPRING
Selected Papers From the 2014 BCARS Graduate Student Conference

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FOREWORD

Scholars of the Arab World carry out their research in an atmosphere of near-constant change, particularly since the uprisings known as the “Arab Awakening” or “Arab Spring.” The political, social, and cultural changes that seized the world’s attention in 2011 have continued to evolve, with important impacts on the Middle East and North Africa—indeed, on the world. All this change, however, remains largely inscrutable for many in the United States and beyond.

This is why BCARS was founded. The mission of the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies is to create an international forum where scholars from Boston and Arab institutions can meet and work collaboratively to advance research and policy, strengthen a scholarly community, and mentor the next generation of scholars and policy analysts.

In April 2014, our first Graduate Student Conference brought together nineteen emerging scholars whose research is exploring “today’s Middle East.” The conference sought to illuminate why the uprisings took place where and when they did, what impact external actors had (and continue to have) on the Arab Spring, and whose voices are being heard—or lost—as events continue to evolve and unfold. We are proud to present the work of seven of these scholars here.

Although it is always challenging to weigh one scholarly work against another—we wish we could include them all—these seven papers emerged with well-crafted arguments backed by strong understanding of the literature, and grounded in the region’s history and current events. In sharing their insights into issues of individual and national identity, political upheaval and change, and international impact related to the events of 2011 and beyond, the authors are seeking to do what our conference keynote speaker, Dr. Shadi Hamid, describes as his own goal in the opening pages of his book, Temptations of Power: trying to understand the “real people who are shaped by their experiences and those of the movements to which they have pledged allegiance.” Their work seeks to contextualize and understand the implications of the Arab Spring—for the Middle East region, of course, but also for the wider audience in the United States and elsewhere.

The conference was structured around five themes: history, identity, outcomes of the Arab Spring, Islamic politics, and a “spotlight on Syria.” For this collection, and considering that each author’s work cuts across at least two of the themes, we present the papers according to geography. We begin in Morocco, where M. Chloe Mulderig and Eliza Berg explore issues of identity, activism, and governmental response to the protests of 2011 and early 2012. Ms. Mulderig’s work earned her a commendation for “best paper” for the conference. Ms. Berg’s paper earned an honorable mention.

Through a comparison of the 1996 and 2011 constitutions and interviews with Moroccan citizens, Ms. Mulderig examines how the government was able to quell popular protests—even encouraging many Moroccans to see the Arab Spring as “a struggle for other nations”—through carefully using language, capitalizing on identity politics, and situating the new constitution as part of a longer process of reform. Ms. Berg’s recent fieldwork in Rabat focused on how Moroccan feminist and youth activists are responding to the 2011 constitutional reforms. In exploring issues of identity in activism, particularly the links and tensions between “feminist” and “youth” activism, she seeks to deconstruct stereotypical notions of Arab women and reveal how they are effecting social and political change in the Arab World.
From Morocco, we shift to Erica Kenney’s comparative analysis of political upheaval and democratic prospects—what she calls the “divergent paths of transition”—in Tunisia and Egypt. She complicates the assumption that free elections are the sole indicator of democratic success for the Arab World. In comparing the two countries’ post-2011 governments, she argues that “equilibrium of religious and secular elements” may be an important ingredient in a Muslim-majority state’s success in shifting to democratic governance.

Remaining in Egypt, we follow Sarah Detzner and Louise Klann in scrutinizing the history and future prospects of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ms. Detzner looks at how the Brotherhood’s survival strategies—in particular, the “trinity” of relationships upon which it draws—has enabled it to retain influence, and what the organization’s previous patterns may mean for its future role. Ms. Klann takes an organizational and sociological perspective, seeking to understand how internal rivalries and ideological rigidity in Brotherhood’s leadership have contributed to its “lack of resilience” in the formal Egyptian political sphere.

The last two papers take us to Syria and Lebanon, countries whose struggles are, perhaps, only just beginning. Through discursive analysis of the regime’s actions to frame itself as a “protector of stability” for the people of Syria, Emily Cury seeks to complicate accepted explanations for why Bashar al-Assad has remained in power. She argues that this strategy of legitimation should not be ignored by those seeking to understand why the regime still stands.

It seems appropriate to close this collection in Lebanon, where the raging Syrian conflict has, as Rima Rassi emphasizes, “no end in sight” and has created a refugee crisis that is placing unimaginable strain on Lebanon and countries throughout the region. That the Arab World has experienced new crises and political changes even in the few months since the conference makes our work all the more important. Ms. Rassi’s paper issues a clear call to the international community, and offers a potential solution, based on qualitative and quantitative analysis, to help Lebanon’s people and its government bear the incredible strain of hosting more than 1.5 million refugees.

As we release this publication, millions of Syrian refugees remain outside their country’s borders, and new challenges are rising in Iraq and other parts of the region. These events make it ever more important for policymakers to understand the Arab region. We are thus challenged to continue working to enhance understanding of the people, places, and politics that have an impact not just on that region, but on us all.

We are grateful to all who made the conference possible, particularly Dr. Hamid and the chairs and discussants for our five panels. We also offer thanks to Carnegie Corporation of New York, which funds BCARS through a generous grant, to Northeastern University and the other BCARS consortium members, to our executive committee, led by Dr. A. Richard Norton, and to the rapporteurs and volunteers who donated their time on April 12, 2014.

Above all, we are proud of all of those who presented at the conference. You are the reason this program exists, and we thank you for your continued work to promote greater understanding of the Arab region.

Dr. Denis Sullivan and Dr. Sarah Tobin
Boston, Massachusetts
September 2014
MOROCCO

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  Moroccan Exceptionalism During the Arab Spring
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  Women’s Rights Activism in Morocco
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New Constitution, Old Tricks: Moroccan Exceptionalism During the Arab Spring

M. Chloe Mulderig

Best Paper, 2014 BCARS Graduate Student Conference

Abstract: The 2011 Arab Spring demonstrations that led to regime change in a number of North African states also resulted in constitutional change in Morocco. After protests involving nearly 200,000 Moroccans, King Mohammed VI charmed his constituents with the promise of a new, more democratic constitution. The resulting document was supported by more than 98 percent of voters in a national referendum and approved in July 2011. Many commentators have noted that the king successfully quelled popular dissent in the country with only a superficial reduction of monarchical power. This article examines the reasons Moroccans had for accepting the new constitution, even though it did not sufficiently address popular concerns regarding corruption or monarchical power. To ensure popular support, the monarchy drafted a constitution that appeased protest movements by elevating Amazigh (Berber) to a national language and enshrining universal human rights, a maneuver that detached Moroccan unrest from the crises of legitimacy then toppling governments across North Africa. By comparing the 1996 and 2011 constitutions, this article explores conceptual changes in the governing document. This article then examines popular understandings of the constitutional referendum to determine why Moroccans embraced gradual change rather than demanding more dramatic reform.

Keywords: Arab Spring, constitutional reform, monarchy, Morocco

As scholars and protestors alike continue to question the impact and legacy of the events known as the “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening,” we must remember the tenuousness and uncertainty that caused many governments in the region to respond publicly to protests during the first few months of 2011. The dictators of the pseudo-democracies of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya stood fast against the waves of protest in their republics, only to be forced to flee, face trial, or succumb to the violent fury of their own people. As demonstrations began to take shape in the only monarchy in the region, Morocco, many living in the country held their breath, awaiting serious confrontation.

Monarchies elsewhere in the Arab World watched the contagious uncertainty wash over North Africa in 2011, but none with as much trepidation as King Mohammed VI of Morocco. Moroccans immediately and excitedly embraced the energy of the Arab Spring, cheering for Egyptians and Tunisians as they toppled their dictators. When President Ben Ali of Tunisia fell in mid-January 2011, Moroccans began preparing demonstrations of their own. Although there was little call for overarching revolution in Morocco, a significant and vocal protest movement—the February 20 movement, named for the planned first day of national protest—brought hundreds of thousands of into the streets in most major Moroccan cities. By March 2011, it was clear to the makhzan (the Moroccan monarchical establishment) that the king would need to publicly address the concerns of demonstrators to prevent further spread of the dissent.

The response surprised many analysts. On March 9, 2011, King Mohammed VI took to the national airwaves to proclaim that he would form a committee to construct and propose a new constitution. The new constitution was presented to the public on June 17, 2011, and Moroccans demonstrated their support in a popular referendum. Though it did little to limit the powers of the king, address issues of corruption in the Parliament, or clearly articulate how change would occur in Morocco, the new constitution was approved with 98.5 percent of the vote in the popular referendum on July 1. Critics argued that the referendum was fixed, but many scholars and Moroccans have refuted this claim, noting that most Moroccan political parties, even the oppositional Islamist Parti de la Justice et du Développement, encouraged voters to support the referendum.

Although party politics played a role in the acceptance of the new constitution, most Fassis (Moroccans living
in the city of Fes) do not feel a sense of permanent party loyalty, and did not look to party representatives to shape their opinions on the constitution. Rather, they looked to the king and his presentation of certain issues in the constitution to inform their decision. Likely aware of this reality, the constitution the makhzan presented in 2011 made concessions on key identity issues that would resonate with Moroccans on a cultural level, rather than a political one.

This article explores the popular reasons that so many Fassis supported the new constitution, to better understand how the monarchy ensured political security during the Arab Spring and beyond. Ultimately, Fassis supported the constitution because it addressed many of the topics of protest—human rights, gender equality, and Amazigh (Berber) rights—in vague but promising ways. The fact that it did little to address monarchical dominance or parliamentary corruption meant little in terms of the popular referendum. Instead, the constitution was viewed as part of a longer-term process of reform, articulated by Fassis as “the king’s progress so far” and “change we will be patient for,” largely disconnecting Morocco from the sudden uncertainty of the Arab Spring. This disconnect then allowed the Moroccan monarchy to co-opt Arab Spring demonstrations into a larger dialogue about gradual political reform.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the city of Fes during the first half of 2011 and all of 2012. As they watched the Arab Spring unfold in early 2011, Moroccans began to question their role in the excitement spreading through the region. During the nearly eighty interviews I conducted in 2012, I asked about the constitution, focusing on my informants’ understanding of the changes and their opinions about the value of the new constitution. Roughly two-thirds of my informants had voted in the popular referendum, with most others stating that they felt they “already knew the outcome”—that the king’s constitution would prevail. Not one of the seventy-six informants expressed a lack of support for the new constitution. Many expressed concern that changes would not be put into effect, but all felt that the constitutional reform represented a significant effort on the part of the king to respond to Arab Spring protests.

To understand the motivations behind such widespread support of the constitution and the referendum, one must first examine the tenuous political situation of 2011 that resulted in the sudden push for constitutional reform.

**Rewriting Rights: 2011 and Constitutional Reform in Morocco**

In early January 2011, young Moroccans inspired by the growing protests in Tunisia began the February 20 movement, which ultimately brought together more than 200,000 people from around the country. The day of protests united youth, labor unions, Islamist groups, Amazigh associations, and influential civil society and human rights organizations with a cacophony of demands. Few called for outright removal of the king, but many protestors demanded significant constitutional reforms to limit the king’s power. In particular, many slogans called into question Article 19 of the 1996 Constitution, which named the king “Amir al-Muminin” (“Commander of the Faithful”), a position of religio-political power many Fassis find increasingly outdated. Yet as Mohamed Madani, Driss Maghraoui, and Saloua Zerhouni note, “the February 20 movement cannot be interpreted as simply part of the Arab Spring, since in the Moroccan context a dynamic civil society has been active over the more recent past.”

The protests of the February 20 movement were thus focused on issues primarily related to an opening of governmental institutions and a limiting of monarchical power, but were staffed by many of the same demonstrators who were already active in protests on identity and rights issues.

On March 9, 2011, King Mohammed VI took to national television to announce an outline for a new constitution, which would be written by a commission of experts, the Commission Consultative de Révision de la Constitution (CCRC), headed by Professor Abdeltif Mennouni. Mennouni is an adviser to the king and a member of the makhzan, leading many in Morocco to accept that the new constitution would be more heavily influenced by the desires of the royal family than by the will of the people. Political parties, labor unions, and Islamist groups were encouraged to contribute to the new constitution via the “Mécanisme de Suivi” (Monitoring Mechanism), a consultative body headed by monarchical adviser Mohammad Moatassim and designed to interface between the CCRC and other bodies. On June 8, organizations affiliated with the Mécanisme de Suivi attended an oral presentation of the draft constitution, resulting in conflicting rumors and general confusion about its contents. Only on June 16, the day before the king presented the constitution to the people, did anyone outside the makhzan get to see the drafts.

Once the draft constitution was made public, the majority of political parties called on their members to vote “yes” in the public referendum. Party newspapers from the nationalist L’Opinion to the socialist Libération encouraged readers to vote for the new constitution. In what may be “the most tangible example of their ‘domestication’ by the monarchy,” most political parties willingly supported the new constitution, even though few changes directly limited the king’s power. These parties had done little to contribute to the drafting process through the Mécanisme de Suivi or the CCRC, yet political parties and labor unions threw...
their support behind the document. By June, little alternative action was possible.

In addition to political parties’ efforts to convince Moroccans to support the referendum, the king himself spoke in defense of the new constitution in a televised speech on June 17. The speech repeatedly informed viewers that the constitution was “drawn up by Moroccans, for all Moroccans.” The king reassured his audience that the new constitution would split controversial Article 19, disconnecting the secular and religious roles of the king. He then presented the importance of Amazigh identity and human rights in the new constitution before launching into a lengthy discussion of the changes to executive, legislative, and judicial powers.

Nowhere in this June 17 speech did the king mention, or even allude to, the events of the Arab Spring, the February 20 movement, or the 2011 demonstrations. Yet it is important not to overestimate the impact of this speech on individual understandings of the proposed constitutional changes. Although the speech was broadcast live on both major Moroccan television stations and repeated later that evening, it was not watched in its entirety by many of the Fassis I interviewed. More important was the language in which the speech was given. Although educated Moroccans can read and write standard Arabic (fus\Ha), nearly all Moroccans converse in colloquial Maghrebi Arabic (derrija). For poorly educated women in particular, standard Arabic can be cumbersome and difficult to understand. The king’s June 17 speech enumerated the many small changes proposed in the new constitution, but legal and political terms were presented in an Arabic that few could easily understand. King Mohammed VI always recites formal speeches in standard Arabic, so this was no exception, but the fact remains that for the majority of Fassis I interviewed, the speech was “difficult to understand” or “boring” (mumil). One excited Amazigh teen living in Fes described the experience of watching the speech:

I sat with my family and we watched the King speak on 2M [a major Moroccan television station]. He spoke quickly, and my mother and father did not really understand. I could not understand all, but the king taught the new constitution to us. And then he said that Tamazight would be the language of the Moroccan people. Then we cheered, and did not listen to him speak more, for we knew the King had listened to our hearts.

We should thus pause before assuming that most Fassis had a clear understanding of the numerous changes to the constitution. Even though the king presented these changes to the public, few among his audience could articulate more than a handful of the issues. My interviews largely confirmed this reality: most Fassis I spoke with regarding the constitution expressed a clear excitement about a particular change that satisfied an issue about which they were already interested. Few Fassis focused on the political or judiciary changes proposed in the new constitution—even as most academics and policymakers have focused their analyses on the change in appointment of the prime minister or other limits on monarchical power. Rather, Fassis were focused on changes that addressed their pre-existing concerns about socio-cultural issues: human rights, gender equality, and the position of Amazigh ethnicity in Moroccan national identity.

Identity Politics: Fassis’ Reflections on the 2011 Constitution

One of the largest changes between the 1996 Constitution and the 2011 Constitution\(^\text{13}\) was the creation of the second sub-section dedicated to articulating the rights of all Moroccan citizens. The 1996 Constitution listed several of these rights in different sections, but it was not until the 2011 Constitution that fundamental human rights were presented together and elevated as a topic of central focus. The enumeration of the human rights of Moroccans appears earlier in the 2011 Constitution than any discussion of the logistics of monarchical or parliamentary rule, demonstrating a change in the structure and even purpose of the constitution.

As a result, the new constitution listed a number of human rights that would now be prioritized by the Moroccan government: the right to life (Article 20); the right to security of person and protection of property (Article 21); the right to physical or moral integrity and freedom from torture (Article 22); the presumption of innocence, right to a fair trial, and protection from inhumane treatment or abuse (Articles 22 and 23); the banning of hate crimes (Article 23); freedom from illegal search or seizure, including of information or private communications (Article 24); freedom of speech and opinion (Articles 25 and 28); freedom of information (Article 27); freedom of assembly and demonstration, including labor strikes (Article 29); freedom to vote for men and women (Article 30); and freedom of access to a number of institutions, including education, healthcare, welfare, clean water, and decent housing (Article 31). Despite the listing of these rights in the constitution, few are clearly defined; some, such as “enjoyment of the right to decent housing,” are suspiciously vague. However, the recognition of human rights as a unique and valuable category of constitutional reform led many outside Morocco to declare the 2011 Constitution a liberalizing victory for protestors and a sign of Morocco’s exceptionalism in the region.
Many of these human rights—particularly in relation to freedom of the press, freedom from torture, and protection from inhumane treatment—were enumerated in the 2011 Constitution as a direct response to crimes committed by Mohammed VI’s father, King Hassan II. Fassis I interviewed were quick to point this out to me. Many made statements like this one: “if we still had Hassan II, we would have killed him like Gaddafi.” This is a strong statement from Fassis who, two decades previous, would never have criticized the monarchy publicly. Instead, many cited the 2011 Constitution as evidence that King Mohammed VI was a “better” king than his father, particularly with respect to physical security and human rights. The new constitution’s emphasis on human rights was, according to one young woman, “proof that Mohammed VI truly loves his people.” Others noted that the numerous rights listed in the 2011 Constitution could be found in the constitutions of other countries, such as France and the United States, further differentiating Morocco’s Arab Spring struggle from that of other Arab states.

The 2011 Constitution also includes a direct statement on the issue of gender in the new Article 19:

Men and women equally enjoy the rights and freedoms of civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental character, enumerated in this Title and in the other provisions of the Constitution, as well as in the international conventions and pacts duly ratified by Morocco and this, with respect for the provisions of the Constitution, of the standards and of the laws of the Kingdom. The State works for the realization of parity between men and women. An Authority for parity and the struggle against all forms of discrimination is created, to this effect.

This article built upon a much shorter statement of gender equality in the 1996 Constitution. The new constitution places the onus on the state to actively fight gender discrimination, though how this equality will be realized or ensured is not in any way articulated. Eliza Berg, interviewing activists in Rabat in early 2013, found that members of several major women’s rights organizations had grown frustrated with the lack of concerted effort from the government to enact Article 19. Some members of Association Démocratique des Femmes de Maroc and L’Union de l’Action Féminine believed the inclusion of Article 19 was a major advance for the cause of women in Morocco. Others had trepidations, but activists from both groups expressed that the 2011 constitutional reform was an opportunity for increased cooperation with the government.

Fassi women cited the expansion of Article 19 as a reason they voted in support of—or simply supported—the new constitution. As one woman explained, “this king made many changes for women before the constitution, with the moudawana [Morocco’s “family code”]. In the new constitution, we saw that he continued to work. So we were patient. And things are changing, we are all talking more about women's problems, so the king, he is listening to women.”

Almost all of the women I interviewed connected the ideas of Article 19 with the moudawana, the family code that King Mohammed VI liberalized in 2004. Thus, even though the 2011 reforms were a direct response to the Arab Spring, Fassis placed the new constitution in the context of a larger progression of reform—one step in a longer-term program—demonstrating that, in Moroccans’ minds, the new constitution may be set apart from the sudden momentum of the Arab Spring.

Perhaps the most clear-cut accommodation to pre-existing identity issues was the constitutional change regarding the introduction of Tamazight as a national language. Article 5 of the 2011 Constitution states:

Arabic is the official language of the State. The State works for the protection and for the development of the Arabic language, as well as for the promotion of its use. Likewise, Tamazight [Berber] constitutes an official language of the State, being common patrimony of all Moroccans without exception. An organic law defines the process of implementation of the official character of this language, as well as the modalities of its integration into teaching and into the priority domains of public life, so that it may be permitted in time to fulfill its function as an official language.

The struggle over Tamazight, the language of Morocco’s indigenous Amazigh population, has been a metaphor for the larger struggle for recognition and respect by Amazigh activists. Even though the issue of language recognition was only a very small part of the February 20 protest—or any other protest in Morocco related to the Arab Spring—the elevation of Tamazight to a national language became the most talked-about change presented in the 2011 Constitution.

That Tamazight is not mentioned in the 1996 Constitution is unsurprising, considering King Hassan II’s well-known condemnation and oppression of the Amazigh identity movement, even in the face of a growing number of Amazigh cultural associations and other civil society organizations. It was not until 2001, two years into King Mohammed VI’s reign, that l’Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe (IRCAM) was established by royal decree. One of the institute’s many objectives was to produce a standardized script for Tamazight’s multiple dialects. In 2003, on IRCAM’s
recommendation, Mohammed VI adopted a form of Neo-Tifinagh as the official script, greatly facilitating the teaching of Tamazight in public schools. Since 2003, Tamazight signs, books, newspapers, classes, and language programs have sprung up around the country, particularly in rural areas with significant populations of Tamazight speakers.15

The new constitution’s elevation of Tamazight to a national language, on par with Arabic, marks a notable and unexpected advance for the Amazigh rights movement. The degree to which this change will actually fulfill the demands of Amazigh activists depends largely on how the reform is enacted. Although there is a community of activists, especially among youth, working toward greater rights for the Amazigh peoples of Morocco, most Fassi I interviewed were not active in these movements. Rather, Amazigh descent was a facet of identity that was a source of pride, but not a reason for protest. For these Fassis, the symbolism of the constitution’s inclusion of Tamazight was more important than a coherent plan for linguistic integration. Nearly all of my informants cited the inclusion of Tamazight as one of the factors for their support of the new constitution.

By elevating Tamazight to a national language, the makhzan transformed the 2011 protests into a stepping-stone toward equal rights for Moroccans of Amazigh descent. The constitutional reform was again removed from the context of the Arab Spring and placed into a longer-term negotiation between the king and Moroccan activists—a negotiation in which monarchical concessions had been made. Many of my Fassi informants viewed the 2011 Constitution as a massive success for the Amazigh rights movement and a moment of great ethnic pride for Amazigh people. This feeling would remain after the popular referendum; as 2012 wore on and the events of 2011 were increasingly described as the “Arab Spring,” Amazigh Fassi gently reminded me that theirs had also been an “Amazigh Spring” in Morocco.

Ensuring Patience: Implications for Monarchical Control

It is within this context of identity politics that many Fassi conceptualized the 2011 constitutional reform, allowing the king to appease Arab Spring protestors without referencing the Arab Spring itself. By emphasizing identity politics heavily in the new constitution, the makhzan ensured an outpouring of popular support for the king, and even oppositional political parties had little hope of questioning the new constitution. The makhzan also ejected Morocco from the repeating pattern of government overthrow that characterized North African states in the first half of 2011. Moroccans have traditionally pledged allegiance to their king—a process known as the bay’a—because of his position as head of the Moroccan people, leader of Moroccan Islam, and king of the nation-state. Although many of the 2011 protests called for the removal of the idea of the king as “Commander of the Faithful” from the constitution, the end result was a clearer definition of the king’s position in Article 41, as well as a clearer delineation of the king’s secular position in Article 42.16 Beyond this literal reaffirmation of the relationship between the Moroccan king and his people, the public referendum can also be viewed as a modern form of popular obedience. Madani, Maghraoui, and Zerhouni argue that “under such political conditions, the referendum appeared more like a renewal of the traditional act of allegiance (bay’a) between the sultan and his subjects than anything else.”17 My interviews largely confirm this position; many informants noted that the king “deserved our patience” (“ysthiq Sabrend”). This notion—that the king deserved obedience or had the right to the support of the Moroccan people—results from a sense that King Mohammed VI has made significant reforms since taking office in 1999. It also fits into a larger cultural understanding of monarchical authority in Morocco. Recognizing the political power of this notion of bay’a, the makhzan reframed the 2011 constitutional reform as a distinctly Moroccan moment.

The overall result of the makhzan’s strategic use of pre-existing identity issues was to frame the 2011 reforms in terms of a long-term monarchical reform. The Arab Spring became a struggle for other nations: a battle against dictators, not benevolent kings; an Arab revolt, not an Arab-Amazigh revolution. The international press declared Morocco an exception to the chaos of the Arab Spring, lauding the king’s support for democracy even if the new constitution did little to ensure democratic process in Morocco. Fassi supported the 2011 Constitution for a variety of reasons, but few focused on monarchical power, choosing instead to support the reforms relating to identity issues as a step toward continuing political and economic progress. The strange exception of Morocco’s 2011 constitutional reform might best be explored both in context of the Arab Spring and in terms of the longer-term, tenuous liberalization of Moroccan politics.

Notes

2 All translations of speeches, interviews, and constitutional documents from Arabic or French into English are the responsibility of the author.
3 Mohamed Madani, Driss Maghraoui, and Saloua Zerhouni.

4 Exact ethnic demographics for Morocco are not available. Most sources divide Morocco’s population evenly between Arabs and Amazigh, with each making up roughly 50 percent of the national population. However, it should be noted that the vast majority of Moroccans are ethnically mixed, particularly in urban areas, and it is not unusual for Fassis to joke that “every Moroccan has some Amazigh blood.”


10 Ottaway, “The New Moroccan Constitution: Real Change or More of the Same?”


Everyday Uprisings: Women’s Rights Activism in Morocco

Eliza Berg
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Abstract: This paper examines the recent trends in women's rights activism in Morocco, focusing on the strategies, challenges, and successes of established feminist organizations and youth activists in light of the country’s 2011 constitutional reforms. Central to this description and analysis is an attention to the political tensions and socio-cultural norms and pressures that shape activists' relationships with the government, with each other, and with Moroccan society. This paper is part of a larger thesis that explores contemporary women's rights activism in Morocco and the Middle East and North Africa region, and summarizes my fieldwork in Rabat in January 2014. Responding to the growing media attention on women's rights issues following the Arab Spring uprisings, this paper measures constitutional promises for gender equality and democratic practices against the simultaneous openings for, and restrictions against, feminist and youth campaigns. In addition, I compare feminist and youth activist strategies, revealing the new and holistically guided ways in which young women’s rights activists are implementing campaigns through social media and popular protest. Although youth strategies and ideologies depart from those historically used by feminist organizations, they continue to refer to and rely upon the work of feminist activism in their social and political pursuits.

Keywords: activism, Arab Spring, feminism, women’s rights, youth activism

Gender and Agency in the Arab Spring

One of the many articles addressing women’s rights to appear in online and print media since the uprisings in the Arab World leads with the (now oft-asked) question: “The Arab Spring: What did it do for women?”¹ In this article—and countless others—there follows a discussion of the ways Arab women are better- or worse-off in countries from Tunisia to Bahrain, which experienced popular protests calling for a variety of political, social and economic reforms beginning in 2011. Although these discussions are important—indeed, necessary—I believe this question distracts us from a more useful inquiry guided by two questions: What did women do for the Arab Spring? And subsequently, How do women continue to engage in social and political activism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region? As recent work in feminist literature and gender studies shows, women living in the MENA region are not simply defined by the narrative of oppression we so often see in Western-oriented media. A leading scholar in this field, Saba Mahmood, explains that “feminist scholarship performed the worthy task of restoring the absent voice of women to analyses of Middle Eastern societies, portraying women as active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested.”² However, some media analyses of the recent political and social developments in the region continue to situate their narratives within the “stereotype of the passive, victimized Third World woman”³ who receives change, rather than actively participating in it.

Against this backdrop, this paper problematizes and deconstructs such depictions through an analysis of contemporary women’s rights activism in Morocco, based on fieldwork I conducted in the capital city of Rabat in January 2014. After briefly discussing the gender dynamics of the country’s 2011 uprisings, I focus on the ways in which Moroccan women, particularly feminist and youth activists, situate their activism in the continued atmosphere of political restructuring, on the one hand, and maintenance of an authoritarian government, on the other.

Women’s Rights Activism in Morocco: Foundations and Historical Context

Women of diverse social, religious, political, and economic backgrounds are actively involved in sociopolitical movements in the MENA region, especially in the context of women’s rights. Two of the main organizing influences for women’s activism in Morocco are feminism, exemplified in self-identified feminist organizations that prioritize gender equality, and
Islamism, typified by women’s sections of Islamist organizations that call for egalitarianism in an Islamic context. Feminist activism has a long history in Morocco, starting in the 1940s with the “educated wives, daughters and sisters of prominent nationalist leaders,” who created spaces for the discussion of “women’s emancipation…within the larger vision of the modernizing developmentalist nation.”

The establishment of what Loubna Skalli calls the “feminist generation” of the 1980s, on whose actors I focus in this paper, developed in response to “power struggles” between the monarchy and political opposition in the 1960s and 1970s, when feminist activists began to develop an agenda separate from the leftist political parties with which they were involved. Anchoring their “demands for women’s rights within international legal frameworks and human rights discourses,” the first feminist activists organized around the issue of legal reform—an issue that continues to define the women’s movement in Morocco today. The 2004 reform of the Moroccan family code, or moudawana, which situated women in a more equal role with their male counterparts in the family, is often cited as a success for the country’s feminist activists.

Islamist women’s groups are increasingly influential in Morocco. Nadia Yassine, head of the women’s section of the Jama’at Al-Adl wa-Ihsane (Justice and Spirituality Association, or JSA) has risen to prominence among Morocco’s Islamist movement, which also gained popularity during the 1980s. Contrary to feminist activists’ positioning within the international rights-based framework, Yassine and her fellow JSA members draw on interpretations of the Qur’an and the Sunna in their “project of Islamization of everyday life…as a path for Islamizing the state.” Despite clear differences in ideology, it is important not to place too much emphasis on the supposed “Islamist-feminist divide.” Indeed, Zakia Salime’s work emphasizes the “interdependencies and intersections” between Islamist and feminist movements, showing how activists are situated in a continuum of overlapping influence between the most “conservative” forms of Islamism and the most “progressive” forms of liberal feminism. As scholars have argued, the feminists’ eventual inclusion of religious rhetoric in their campaign helped to garner support for reform of the moudawana.

Thus, when the Arab Spring made its appearance in Morocco in the form of the February 20 movement in 2011, feminist and Islamist women activists were very much involved in the conversations and debates that surrounded the movement’s political demands and claims. The JSA and a leading feminist organization, the Union for Feminine Action (UAF) both eventually joined the February 20 movement’s National Council of Support, which provided the movement with consultation and support in the form of protesters and financing. However, February 20 was driven by youth activists, with varying relationships to feminism and Islamism, who were intent on distinguishing themselves from both ideologies. Twenty-year-old Amina Boughalbi made the first call for protest in an online video, after which the movement developed a broad agenda that ranged from “dissolving the Parliament, the government and the constitution,” to “social demands including access to housing and free education, economic demands such as better wages and access to jobs, and cultural demands, notably the recognition of Tamazight as a national language.”

These demands were presented in the form of widespread protests, which began when “several thousand rallied in the streets in more than 60 cities and towns in Morocco” on February 20, 2011. Unlike feminist protests of the past, in which women usually constituted a majority of the protesters, and Islamist protests, where male and female protesters occupied distinct, gendered spaces, February 20 displayed a consistent “gender performance of parity” with a “bodily presence of women in the movement…at all levels of mobilization and organization.” As Salime points out, this “performance of parity” was not accompanied by specific calls for gender equality; activists refrained from “the usual feminist rhetoric of ‘equality’ before the law” and claimed that equality between men and women would naturally develop if their demands of “dignity and freedom for all” were met. Likewise, the movement held Islamist and feminist groups at a cautionary distance, allowing for their integration only after the “movement was identified as…an independent youth movement that was ‘secular, modernist, democratic, and aiming to establish civil institutions and a civil state.’”

Morocco’s uprisings therefore created and engaged in new forms of activism, driven by youth between the ages of 18 and 30, that incorporated Islamists and feminists but kept their influence at the periphery of the movement. Following King Mohammed VI’s announcement to reform the constitution just a month after the protests started, many feminist organizations and human rights groups, including the UAF, publicly announced their support for the proposed reforms. Furthermore, the Islamists withdrew their support for February 20 in November 2011, following elections that made the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) the ruling political party in Morocco and one of its members, Abdelilah Benkirane, the country’s first Islamist prime minister. As the February 20 movement disintegrated and protests ceased, feminist and Islamist activists returned to their organizational strategies, while deciding how to operate in the new political landscape. I address these strategies and changes in the discussion that follows, focusing on the feminist
organizations. And what of youth activism, particularly women’s rights activists? As this paper also shows, young women’s rights activists have not returned to the status quo. Rather, they continue to build on the tactics and ideologies of the February 20 movement while maintaining a distinct character in post-2011 Morocco.

Understanding Women’s Rights Activism, Post-2011: Strategies and Campaigns

FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS

The Moroccan Women’s Democratic Association (ADFM) and the UAF are two of the oldest and most prominent feminist organizations in Morocco. Both founded in the mid-1980s, these organizations have historically drawn on the rhetoric of universal human rights, as espoused by the United Nations and its subsidiaries, to advocate for top-down legal reform in Morocco. This strategy continues to define the contemporary functioning of the ADFM and UAF, which frame their activism through coalition-building, increasing awareness and education, and gathering consensus for reform.

Much like the One Million Signatures Campaign that united feminist organizations in their movement to reform the moudawana in the 1990s, the ADFM and UAF helped to establish the Feminist Spring for Democracy and Equality Coalition in March 2011, soon after the first February 20 protests. Aimed at strengthening the feminist community during the uprising, the coalition’s stated aim was “to establish equality between women and men in civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.” Subsequently, when Mohammed VI created the Consultative Commission for Constitutional Reform during the same month, the coalition submitted a memorandum outlining the feminist organizations’ expectations and suggestions for the new constitution. Though members of feminist organizations were not formally invited to serve on the committee, the memorandum nevertheless exerted public pressure on the commission “to incorporate international conventions, namely CEDAW [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women], into the new constitution, to ensure equality for women and men, and to institutionalize affirmative mechanisms and measures for women’s equality.” It is worth noting that the top-down tactics employed by feminist organizations provide legitimacy to the government, particularly the monarchy, as the ultimate arbiter of gender justice. For example, despite its informal participation in the constitutional reform process, the Feminist Spring for Democracy and Equality Coalition strongly approved of the new constitution due to the inclusion of Article 19, which stipulates that men and women have equal rights as stated “in the international conventions and pacts duly ratified by Morocco” (including CEDAW). Fatima Maghnaoui of the UAF was not the least bit hesitant to express her satisfaction with the constitutional reforms in our interview, even stating that she perceived it as a “great success” for the coalition and its feminist members. Indeed, the article fulfills every one of the coalition’s suggestions. Nevertheless, the ADFM and UAF accepted a decision on reform that was made away from the reach of Moroccan civil society—a decision that was not accepted equally by other activists more skeptical of the king’s promises. The positioning of feminist organizations as legitimizers of the regime placed them at odds with younger activists, as discussed later in the paper.

Feminist organizations also participate in forms of activism that operate separately from governmentally focused channels. Multiple members of the Feminist Spring for Democracy and Equality Coalition run centers that provide services for women, such as the ADFM-headed Nejma Center for victims of domestic violence, and UAF’s similar Annajda Center, which has eight locations throughout Morocco. When I visited the Annajda Center in Rabat, three mother-daughter pairs were waiting to meet with the center’s staff. (One of these was seeking help for a case of domestic violence involving the daughter’s stepfather. When the mother went to the authorities with this issue, she was “laughed at” and given no assistance.) Though Morocco has only recently started to release information and statistics on violence against women, a 2011 government report discussed by my informants at both organizations notes that two out of three Moroccan women (about 63 percent) have experienced some form of violence. High as these numbers are, especially when compared with neighboring Tunisia (20 percent reported domestic violence), my informants hypothesized that the numbers may be even higher, given the prevalence of street harassment—ranging from verbal abuse to physical contact—reported by Moroccan women. Though most of my other informants saw feminist organizations as primarily focused on top-down strategies, these centers for victims of domestic violence seek to meet women where they are, and fill in legal and functional gaps at the grassroots level.

Despite the ADFM and UAF’s engagement in grassroots activism, they unquestionably choose to portray themselves as primarily focused on legal reform. Fouzia Yassine of the ADFM spent the entirety of our interview discussing the ADFM’s advocacy campaigns, notably their continued struggle to ensure the full implementation of the new moudawana. Although this rhetoric reflects a continuation of the organization’s founding strategies, the changes brought about by the constitutional reforms and the subsequent shifts in
Morocco’s political landscape (the positioning of the PJD, for example), can be seen as catalysts for innovation in feminist activism, notably the adoption of what Fouzia called a campaign for “radical change.” For instance, Fouzia noted that the inclusion of Article 19 in the new constitution is useless without some semblance of implementation across other areas of law and governance. She explained that part of the ADFM’s current mission is to push for a “harmonization of laws,” meaning that the family code, penal code, labor code, and other areas of governance must be updated to reflect Article 19’s progressive language. Fouzia described this campaign as part of the ADFM’s vision for radical change, defined by the organization’s call for comprehensive legal reform on the basis of gender equality and its fundamental opposition to moderate or gradualist efforts at implementation. Furthermore, Fouzia positions this feminist vision in direct opposition to the “new government” led by the Justice and Development Party, signaling that the PJD’s ascendency is the most concerning development of the 2011 reforms from a feminist standpoint. Increasing feminist claims against the PJD and its perceived intentions further complicate the relationship between civil society and the government. Fouzia was not the only one of my informants who pointed to the PJD’s “Islamist agenda” as the main barrier to the full realization of gender equality in Morocco. Although a full analysis of Fouzia’s claim is beyond the scope of this paper, it must be noted that her comments are best understood in the context of the historical relationship between feminist organizations and Islamist actors, rather than the existence of a uniformly “Islamist” agenda aimed at maintaining gender inequalities. Carrie Rosefsky Wickham’s work concerning the PJD is particularly helpful on this point. As she explains, the PJD is “hardly in a position to dictate government policy on its own”; indeed, the party’s power is continually checked by the king’s superiority and the necessity of compromising with its coalition members in order to “govern effectively.” Therefore, although feminist organizations have many reasons to remain wary of Islamist actors’ intentions, it seems unlikely that the PJD is capable of implementing an “Islamist agenda,” in any form it might take.

Even so, recent interactions between the Islamist-led government and feminist organizations continue to exhibit clear tensions, as described to me by Fouzia and Fatima. To illustrate this dynamic, I consider the initiative to reform the Penal Code to address violence against women, a legislative initiative that the Feminist Spring for Democracy and Equality Coalition moved to the top of its agenda in 2011. The popular calls for democracy, increased government transparency, and reduced corruption—spread mainly through the February 20 movement—resulted in controversial but nonetheless “radical” constitutional revisions. Articles 12 through 15 specifically acknowledge the rights of citizens, male and female, to freely contribute “in the enactment, the implementation and the evaluation of the decisions and the initiatives of the elected institutions and of the public powers,” with specific reference to the “creation of instances of dialogue” between civil society and the government. Encouraged by these statements, the coalition submitted recommendations to the government concerning the draft violence against women bill, hoping for the opportunity to collaborate on this important piece of legislation. However, as Fouzia and Fatima both confirmed, the government did not respond. Instead, the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development—headed by PJD member and sole female minister Bassima Hakkaoui—issued Bill 103.13 in November 2013 without input or guidance from civil society. Members of the coalition, including the ADFM and UAF, were not only outraged by their exclusion despite persistent attempts at communication, they also disapproved of the bill’s content.

Deciding to take action, the coalition organized a public protest of the bill and submitted a list of critiques and suggestions to the ministry. Notable inclusions were that the bill was “generic” and lacked “a comprehensive and clear vision of the fight against gender-based violence in its dimensions of prevention, protection, prosecution and support of victims.” Fouzia expressed frustration that the bill referred to violence in general and failed to see violence against women as the central organizing concern. Fatima noted that it was impractical for the ministry to refuse consultation from women’s organizations, since they have the most experience dealing with the causes and consequences of gender-based violence in Morocco. The coalition demanded “the postponement of the bill’s adoption, pending revisions demonstrating coherence between its vision, approach, and mandates; and an open dialogue and consultation process with Moroccan women’s rights organizations.” Instead of passing the bill, the government changed its course: immediately following the November protest, Prime Minister Abdellah Benkirane declared the formation of a committee to hear inputs from civil society regarding the bill. At the time of writing, the committee is still considering submissions, including those from the ADFM, UAF and other coalition members.

This account reveals that feminist activists exercise a substantial, but contextually limited, amount of influence on top-down campaigns aimed at increasing women’s rights, illustrating a pattern of governmental exclusivism followed by cautionary collaboration. This phenomenon is not new; there are striking similarities
to the context in which the family code was reformed in 2004. As Salime has explained, the Moroccan government (and Mohammed VI in particular) found itself in a position in which promoting what would be perceived as a liberal rights-based legal reform was politically and economically beneficial. Nine years later, the draft violence against women bill was released at a time of heightened political scrutiny, when many Moroccans (and members of the international community) were closely monitoring governmental promises of democratic reform and transparency. Although the ministry clearly wanted to avoid collaboration with women’s groups on Bill 103.13, it could not risk ignoring the coalition’s public grievances—which inherently accentuated issues of governmental accountability to civil society. It follows that feminist groups must continue to navigate their relationship with the government with explicit attention to timing and context. Nevertheless, this example also highlights the potential for future successes stemming from feminist activists’ new strategy of “radical change.” Mostly due to Article 19, feminist organizations now have a legitimizing framework for implementing this strategy, which demands a comprehensive overhaul of Morocco’s legal codes “for the realization of parity between men and women.”

YOUNG WOMEN’S RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

One concern that came up in my conversations with Fouzia and Fatima was the “aging” of Morocco’s women’s movement, and its inability to connect with younger generations of feminists and women’s rights activists. Skalli, who has explored the generational politics of the women’s movement, locates the “urgency with which [feminist] activists talk about the renewal of leadership structures and bridging the distance with the younger generation” within a socio-political context “where youth express the highest degree of cynicism about all political institutions and skepticism about the values of political leadership.” Citing the younger generation’s experience with a “dysfunctional public educational system,” and prolonged unemployment, Skalli claims that the majority of Morocco’s youth (ages 18 to 30) take a position of “willed distastion” from the feminist movement, which many youths perceive as dominated by “political elite” who failed to address their political and economic realities.

Skalli’s analysis is helpful for understanding the generational disconnect between the majority of feminist activists and Moroccan youth—and for locating a major challenge to future mobilization of the women’s movement—but it fails to recognize the ways in which Moroccan youths engage in women’s rights activism, albeit through strategies and campaigns that are distinct from their older counterparts. I had the opportunity to speak with one such activist, Majdouline Lyazidi, who helped form the Woman Choufouch group in 2011, deciding it was an opportune moment for their voices to be heard. (“Woman, chouchou” means “Woman, what’s up”—a common phrase men use to address women on the street.) Majdouline and her university-aged colleagues launched the group with inspiration from the global SlutWalk movement, which stemmed from a series of protest marches beginning in Toronto, Canada, in April 2011. SlutWalk protests, and subsequently Woman Choufouch protests in Morocco, address sexual violence in general, while calling for an end to specific components of rape culture, including street harassment, victim blaming, and legislation that trivializes rape.

Much like the February 20 movement, Woman Choufouch began in cyberspace, namely on Facebook. Operating first as “SlutWalk Morocco,” in the summer of 2011, Majdouline and her peers began posting images, articles, graphics, studies, and statistics on harassment and violence against women in Morocco. The page now has more than 8,500 followers, with posts in French, Arabic and English. About a year later, Majdouline and her fellow activists created a new page, named “Woman Choufouch” (now with more than 2,500 followers), reflecting an effort to localize their message: Majdouline believed Woman Choufouch could reach a wider audience by using a term familiar to all Moroccans. She also wanted Woman Choufouch to continue the spirit of protest that had subsided following the constitutional reforms, and to “fill in the gaps” left by feminist organizations.

According to Majdouline, feminist organizations like the ADFM and UAF cannot provide the kind of holistic social change that she and her younger colleagues seek. She believes meaningful change can occur only through the creation and sustenance of a national dialogue around the normalization of sexual violence in Moroccan society. The feminist campaign for gender parity through legal reform is not enough for Majdouline; she wants to clarify this goal by focusing on what she considers to be the largest obstacle to Moroccan women’s freedom, namely, sexual violence and street harassment. Part of Majdouline’s goal for the organization is to reach out to young men as well as women; she told me that, in her experience, many men don’t know there is a difference between harassment and flirting. Due to lack of education on the subject, she noted that many men feel they have the “right” to address a woman on the street in sexually suggestive ways, or even initiate physical contact without consent. The incorporation of men marks a departure from tactics traditionally used by feminist organizations, which tend to focus on and mobilize networks of mostly women.
Though Majdouline refrained from expressing overt criticism of feminist organizations in Morocco, she made sure to emphasize that Woman Choufouch maintains a separation from those groups. This distinction is comparable to the gender dynamics espoused by the young women and men who participated in the February 20 movement: as Salime notes, many activists involved in the movement were critical of the feminist groups’ tactics, claiming that their emphasis on “the specificity of women’s issues” isolated [the feminist] movement and channeled their efforts to state bureaucrats, foreign funds…consultancy and expertise.” However, Woman Choufouch does not completely reject the legacy of feminist activism. Its members largely resemble the youth trend of “strategic endorsement,” described by Skalli as young activists who are “willing to openly embrace the bigger project of gender equality” while refraining from identification with the larger women’s movement. Therefore, Majdouline and Woman Choufouch can be positioned somewhere between the feminists’ organizational strategy and the “new feminism” of the February 20 movement; they are at once skeptical of and reliant upon the notion of “women’s issues” as a locus for mobilization. Though clearly reaching beyond women-only spaces by focusing on Moroccan society as a whole, Majdouline’s goals for Woman Choufouch’s activism prioritize issues (rape and violence against women) that were not given primary attention by February 20 protesters.

In early March 2012, Amina Filali—a sixteen-year-old girl who had allegedly been forced to marry her rapist under Article 475 of the Moroccan Penal Code—committed suicide by ingesting rat poison. As the news spread across Morocco, and the world, Woman Choufouch decided to rally in the name of Amina to bring an end to Article 475. The language of the article is as follows:

> Whoever, without violence, threats or fraud, abducts or attempts to remove or divert a minor under eighteen years, is punished by imprisonment of one to five years and a fine of 200 to 500 Dirhams. When a nubile minor…marries her captor, the latter may only be prosecuted when a complaint is filed by a person(s) entitled to apply for annulment of marriage and cannot be sentenced until after the annulment of marriage has been pronounced.

Majdouline explained to me that uniting around Amina’s case was incredibly important for her group, because it simultaneously mobilized Moroccans against an unfair legal concept and made room for national discussions about sexual violence, harassment, and rape. For Majdouline, Article 475 represented more than a problematic piece of legislation; it exposed Moroccan women’s lack of autonomy. Regardless of the details of Amina’s case, Majdouline explained that using marriage to “solve” the problem of premarital sex placed sole responsibility for restoring justice to her family and community with Amina—not with the state, and not with her alleged rapist. Majdouline further noted that this is a common theme in stories of sexual violence and harassment: narratives often focus on the woman’s appearance (“was she wearing revealing clothing?”) or intentions (“what was she doing walking alone late at night?”). Calling attention to discussions of socio-cultural norms further distinguishes Woman Choufouch’s activism from the legally oriented campaigns that are exemplified in feminist organizations’ publications and memorandums.

Amina Filali’s case provided an opportunity to bring these issues to the forefront of the Moroccan social and political arena, and Majdouline and her colleagues didn’t hesitate to cultivate a national discussion around them. In 2012, Woman Choufouch organized protests that called for the repeal of Article 475 and used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to discuss victim blaming, consent language, and other aspects of rape culture. Article 475 also quickly became a locus for women’s rights activism in a broader sense, even though the article does not explicitly refer to cases of sexual violence or rape. However, an NGO report submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in December 2013 exposes the extent to which Article 475 was used in cases of rape and “applied in cases of sexual abuse of minors in order to preserve the ‘honor’ of the victim and her family.” Other human rights NGOs and women’s groups began to investigate the use of Article 475 for cases of rape following Amina’s death; the report notes these contributions from Moroccan NGOs. The ADFM and UAF also became involved in documenting the problems with Article 475, as Fouzia and Fatima noted in our conversations. Additionally, an online petition to repeal Article 475, launched in March 2012, gained more than 800,000 signatures and was submitted to the government (the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development). Article 475 was officially abolished on January 22, 2014, nearly two years after the beginning of Woman Choufouch’s campaign.

Though Woman Choufouch was instrumental in spreading the petition for legal reform through its online resources and networks, its interaction with the government through institutionalized channels has been limited. Majdouline explained that it has been difficult for youth-based groups like Woman Choufouch to engage in activism at a level similar to organizations like the ADFM and UAF, because its members don’t know how to navigate the system and it doesn’t have solid material support. Woman Choufouch is not an officially recognized NGO, and its
members use their own money to pay for expenses related to their activism. Ultimately, Majdouline believes their goals are better served through the organization of protests and a powerful presence on social media. Part of the success the Amina Filali campaign had in attracting international attention involved young activists’ ability to garner online support and translate it to participation in the protests. Much like the February 20 movement and other uprisings in the Arab World post-2011, Woman Choufouch’s Internet-based tactics distinguish it from more established NGOs, whose online presence is minimal. The ADFM is one of the only organizations with a website accessible in English as well as French and Arabic; the UAF’s website was not functioning at the time of writing. Some groups have blogs, but they are updated sporadically and usually written in one language.39

In addition to a constant presence on Facebook and Twitter, Woman Choufouch and young activists like Majdouline are increasingly involved in media campaigns that draw international attention to their causes. Majdouline was involved in a project in Morocco led by GlobalGirl Media (GGM), a nonprofit organization “dedicated to empowering high school age girls from under-served communities around the world through media, leadership and journalistic training to have a voice in the global media universe and their own futures.”40 In 2011—in partnership with the United States Embassy and the Institut Spécialisé du Cinéma et de l’Audiovisuel—GGM Morocco began providing a series of workshops through which a group of young women produce short videos and blogs “about issues relevant to their lives.”41 As participants in this program, Majdouline and her colleagues created a 30-minute documentary titled “Breaking the Silence About Sexual Harassment: Moroccans Speak Out!” The video has more than 61,000 views on YouTube and has been nominated in the YouTube-sponsored DoGooder Nonprofit Video Awards.42

Nadir Bouhmouch, another Moroccan activist and member of the February 20 movement, co-wrote and directed the film “475: When Marriage Becomes Punishment,” which, as the title suggests, investigates the use of Article 475 in Amina Filali’s court case. The film has its own website, with main information in English, but elements in Arabic and French as well; an active Facebook page43 with more than 3,400 followers; and recent publications and blog posts on sexual violence legislation in Morocco. Majdouline and Nadir’s involvement in popular media campaigns that provoke discussions about sexual violence and women’s rights issues defines the broader landscape of youth activism in Morocco. These tactics serve the goals of activists like Majdouline, who seek a holistic solution to perceived social ills. She believes that with social and visual media, issues like sexual harassment and rape can no longer be ignored by Moroccans. These tactics seek to change people’s actions, not just the laws that supposedly govern these actions. Though she also advocates for a harmonization of legislation regarding gender issues, as do the ADFM and UAF, Majdouline and her colleagues do not employ the top-down tactics of women’s NGOs, although they are every bit as passionate about and involved in women’s rights activism. Majdouline explained that many young activists harbor distrust for political institutions, and, routes to reform that would necessitate working within the existing political structure.

Despite civil society’s proven ability to provoke change, Morocco lacks a culture of volunteerism or activism. Majdouline noted that Moroccan young people “are taught to follow, not to lead,” a lesson that is undoubtedly rooted in the country’s long history of authoritarian rule under the monarchy. Therefore, I argue that it is less relevant to discuss the “disinterest” of Moroccan youth in the women’s movement, than it is to examine the ways in which they do engage in activism and why. Salime provides an examination of this phenomenon in her article on the “new feminism” of the February 20 movement. Confirming Majdouline’s observation about young activists’ disillusionment with state institutions, Salime states, “February 20th members define their movement as a ‘dynamic of protest’ [that] opposes ‘an economic regime in which the country’s resources have been concentrated in the hands of the few.’”44 In this dynamic, youth activists in the February 20th movement distinguish themselves from feminist groups who “built their activism around a legalistic framework that necessitated the involvement of state agents and the King, as ‘arbitrator.’”45 However, Salime notes, “feminism was the first movement to open up multiple spaces for debating issues of democracy and citizenship as they pertain to women,” and the first movement to rally around the issue of gender equality in the form of massive popular protests.46 So, despite activists’ ambivalence toward and criticism of feminists’ current positioning, Salime argues that youth activists actually employ ideologies and tactics that have been used throughout the history of the feminist movement in Morocco. Granted, my fieldwork does not focus on the February 20 movement as a locus for women’s rights activism. On the contrary, Majdouline and her colleagues must be distinguished from both the February 20 protesters and established feminist organizations, for the reasons I have outlined. It is valuable to consider Salime’s argument here, however, because of the similarities between Majdouline and Salime’s descriptions of contemporary youth activist
tactics and ideologies. Both examples clarify that there is not a clean break between feminist and youth activism; rather, young women’s rights activists continue to draw on feminist rhetoric and strategies, while making unique contributions to Morocco’s activist landscape.

Opportunities for Collaboration and Change: Conclusions

A brief inquiry into the gender dynamics of Morocco’s uprisings, and a more detailed account of feminist and youth activism following the Arab Spring, reveals some of the ways in which women effect social and political change in the Arab World. Further analysis on this topic will benefit from a detailed inquiry into Islamist actors. Although it is apparent that feminist organizations such as the ADFM and UAF continue to exert their primary energies on top-down strategies such as legal reform, they have developed a new dynamic of “radical change” that is simultaneously enabled by the new constitution and resisted by groups with newfound political legitimacy, such as the PJD. Furthermore, feminist organizations continue to enjoy support from international and regional sources of solidarity—namely, the United Nations and local and regional coalitions—but have encountered difficulties in garnering widespread support from younger generations of activists.

As the case of Woman Choufouch exemplifies, a young generation of women’s rights activists prefer to situate their activism within discussions and debates that challenge the mindsets and socio-cultural norms of Moroccan society, drawing on legal reform as a secondary solution. This sentiment is summed up well in one of Nadir Boughmouch’s blog posts, in which he calls the abolishment of 475 “a scribble on paper.” And yet, youth activists like Majdouline and Nadir continually look to the older generation of feminist activists for leadership, despite their hesitation to enter into collaborative relationships. Indeed, Nadir ends his blog post with a call for comprehensive law reform, citing the National Plan of Action originally proposed in 1998 by feminist organizations, which suggests the creation of a national sexual education program. Such overlapping ideologies indicate the growing incentives for—and possibility of—improved intergenerational cooperation in Morocco’s activist milieu. Finally, although activists of all ages are cautious of prematurely celebrating the repeal of Article 475 and revisiting Bill 103.13, these examples indicate that women’s rights activists may continue to realize their demands, albeit through far less radical means than they propose.

Notes

5 Ibid., 335.
6 Ibid.
7 See “The Moroccan Family Code (Moudawana) of February 5, 2004” (Global Rights, 2005).
8 Zakia Salime, Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvi.
9 Ibid., xx.
10 See Brad Archer, “Family Law Reform and the Feminist Debate,” Journal of International Women’s Studies 8, no. 4 (2007); Salime, Between Feminism and Islam.
12 Interview with Fatima Maghnaoui of the UAF, January 2014.
13 Salime, “A New Feminism?” 102.
14 Ibid., 101.
15 Ibid., 102.
16 Ibid., 105.
17 Ibid., 109.
18 Ibid.
19 See Zakia Salime, Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
21 Ibid.
27 See The Advocates for Human Rights, “Violence Against Women in Morocco” (http://www.stopvaw.org/morocco). Under the supervision of Nouza Skalli, former minister of solidarity, women, family and social development, the Moroccan
government released the first statistics on violence against women in November 2007. This year also marks the beginning of the initiative to outlaw violence against women and reform the penal code, an initiative for which feminist organizations continue to campaign today.

33 Paul Silverstein, “Weighing Morocco’s New Constitution,” Middle East Research and Information Project, July 5, 2011. http://www.merip.org/macro/macro070511?ip_login_no_cache=447d3830d607d11ae46c9b03762dcbf (accessed February 6, 2014). In a review of the 2011 reforms, Silverstein notes, “it would be a mistake to dismiss the referendum as yet another rubber stamp on the monarchy’s will. If not revolutionary, the constitutional revisions are certainly radical,” especially when compared to previous revisions which only slightly expanded "the role of the prime minister, including some minimal language on human rights and citizenship.” Silverstein also cites the expansion of the new constitution from 108 articles to 180, in which “very few of the older articles have remained unchanged.”
37 Salime, Between Feminism and Islam, 114.
40 Ibid., 339.
41 See https://www.facebook.com/pages/SlutWalk-Morocco/132681343491773
42 See https://www.facebook.com/pages/Woman-Choufouch/105467879580033
47 Ibid. The report states, “one association reported that, of 11 cases involving rape of a minor that they handled in 2013, Article 475 was raised in six cases; the age of victims ranged from 14–17, while the age of the rapists ranged from 23–28.”
49 For example, see the blog of Le Feminin Pluriel (http://fpmaroc.blogspot.com/), a Rabat-based women’s NGO. The blog has not been updated since 2008 and is only accessible in French.
51 Ibid.
52 See: http://www.youtube.com/user/nonprofitvideoawards
53 See https://www.facebook.com/475LeFilm
54 Salime, “A New Feminism?” 108.
55 Ibid., 107.
56 Ibid., 107.
58 Ibid.
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More Than Free Elections: Divergent Paths of Transition in Tunisia and Egypt

Erica Kenney

Abstract: This paper seeks to explain why transitions in Tunisia and Egypt have fared so differently since 2011. First, two significant contributors to democratic transition are an effective, democratic civil society and autonomous civil-military relations, and their relative presence or absence play important roles in these two states. Second, democracy in Muslim-majority states must temper the political influence of potentially anti-democratic elements of its population. As some scholars have shown, Muslim societies are more likely to consolidate democracy when (1) party politics are competitive and multi-polar, (2) cooperation or compromise occurs between religious and secular actors, and (3) the majority of Muslims can be characterized as ideologically moderate, defined here as non-advocacy of an Islamic state or Shari’a law, privilege of individual rights and liberties, and tolerance toward minorities. I try to demonstrate that Tunisia has achieved a much closer measure of these indicators than has Egypt. I argue that the post-2011 Egyptian government failed, in part, because the first elections resulted in political conditions that were not conducive to an effective equilibrium of religious and secular elements.

Keywords: Arab Spring, civil society, democratic transition, Muslim democracy

Elections are certainly a prerequisite: democracy cannot exist if elections are not fair, open, and free. Still, one must be cautious to not read too much optimism for democracy into the free election; what happens after that first election can be as harmful as before, and history provides many unsettling examples of elected authoritarianism. Fair and free elections are only a noble beginning on an uncertain path, one that does not necessarily lead to democratic consolidation. Often, the result is what some scholars have called semi-authoritarianism, a combination of democratic institutions (such as elections and parliaments) with unchecked authority, giving the appearance of democracy while leaving authoritarianism intact. Whether this will remain the case in the post-2011 Arab World is open to debate. What is certain is that three years after the uprisings, outcomes have varied widely.

The political developments in Tunisia and Egypt provide a significant contrast. Both states saw the rise of freely elected Islamist parties following the revolution, and both have recently passed new constitutions, yet only Tunisia shows signs of a sustainable transition to democracy. This paper seeks to explain why the transition in these two states has fared so differently since 2011, and whether there is cause for optimism on successful democratic consolidation in the future.

My analysis looks at three categories of criteria relating to democratic transition. The first two are important elements of democratization in general. First is the role of civil society in both structural and cultural dimensions: (a) associational life independent of the state as a counterbalance to state power, and (b) the cultivation of norms of civility. Second is the role of civil-military relations, such that democracy is more likely where these relations are autonomous and professional. The third basis of evaluation is specific to Muslim-majority states in transition. As noted by Robert Hefner, democracy in Muslim-majority states must contain and temper the political influence of illiberal, and potentially anti-democratic, elements of the population. Muslim-majority states have the fewest
stable democracies in a strictly institutional sense—even fewer in terms of liberal democracy. Of the world’s forty-nine Muslim-majority states, only two (Senegal and Indonesia) are considered liberal democracies.\(^5\) As some scholars have shown,\(^6\) Muslim societies are more likely to consolidate democracy when (1) party politics are reasonably competitive and multi-polar, (2) cooperation or compromise occurs between religious and secular actors, and (3) the majority of Muslims are ideologically moderate, which I characterize by non-advocacy of an Islamic state or Shari’a law, privilege of individual rights and liberties, and some level of tolerance toward minorities.

This paper attempts to demonstrate that Tunisia has achieved a much closer measure of these indicators than has Egypt. First, I contend that Tunisian civil society actors have been more successful in pressuring the government to be sympathetic to liberal-democratic values. The Tunisian military has also remained distanced from politics, whereas Egypt’s democratic ambitions have been hindered by the politically dominant role of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Along the latter set of indicators, I argue that the post-2011 Egyptian government failed in part because the first parliamentary elections resulted in political conditions that were not conducive to an effective equilibrium of religious and secular elements.

1. Civil Society and Democracy

The history of civil society as a political concept can be traced to European medieval civic structures, and finds a rich development in the western philosophic tradition. This has led some to suggest that the concept of civil society cannot accurately be applied to the Arab World,\(^8\) but the term has proven versatile and has become an important part of the region’s politics. The notion of civil society as a vital element of democracy became increasingly popular in political science literature on post-Soviet Europe, as scholars noted the destructive effects of Communism on civil society. Additionally, some scholars have argued for an Arab-specific concept of civil society to counter criticisms that the concept is an imposition of Western culture, and thus invalid for analysis of Arab politics. Seif Mardin and Saad Eddin Ibrahim, among others, argue that civil society has an equivalent history in the Arab World. Whereas the origins of Western civil society lie in the medieval town, Mardin emphasizes the roles of ulama—the communal “sections” of the Islamic town—and merchants in the origin of an “Eastern” model.\(^1\) Ibrahim draws a similar conclusion, and notes that, after state-building began in the Middle East, the characteristics and vitality of civil society have fluctuated under the controls and pressures of authoritarian regimes.\(^10\)

A.R. Norton summarizes the relationship of civil society and democracy, stating, “[t]he symbol of democracy is the contested election and the secret ballot...But democracy does not reside in elections. If democracy has a home, it is in civil society.”\(^11\) Civil society is often seen as a prerequisite for democracy, although it may also form after a democracy is instituted. A strong civil society does not inevitably lead to democracy, since many other barriers to democracy may persist, but the development of a strong civil society nonetheless reinforces processes of democratization.\(^12\)

Civil society is an elastic concept that carries a wide variety of meanings,\(^13\) but for the purpose of this paper it is best understood as encompassing two dimensions. First is the structural or institutional: civic associations, political parties, professional and nonprofit organizations, social clubs, religious congregations (and the like) that are autonomous and independent of the state and which can serve as mediators between state and society, counter excesses in state power, and promote norms of political participation and self-governance. Although this dimension can certainly provide an arena in which citizens become familiar with democratic modes of governance, the prevalence of civil society organizations in itself offers no guarantee that values favorable to liberal democracy will be cultivated. Civil society, conceptualized in a variety of ways, has been heralded as a bulwark against despotism, yet even in a vibrant civil society one must be wary that it does not betray this very goal in forming a “tyranny of the majority,”\(^14\) especially considering that some associations are predatory or anti-democratic in character.\(^15\) Therefore, the second dimension of civil society is normative and cultural: ideally, civil society promotes and functions in an environment of tolerance of difference, in which there is a tacit agreement of mutual respect for participants’ competing individual interests.\(^16\) This is often referred to as civility, democratic civility, or a democratic political culture. It is worth noting that civil society in a structural sense can reinforce norms of democratic civility when crosscutting interests weaken the polarity of sharp divisions, but this dynamic cannot substitute for a broader commitment to civility.\(^17\) Civil society at its best should foster a tolerant, accommodating, political culture; if it is limited to a strictly structural definition, then mafias, organized crime, terrorist organizations, or non-criminal organizations that are hostile to pluralism and democracy also fall within the definition.\(^18\)

Once the restrictions of the authoritarian regimes were gone in post-2011 Tunisia and Egypt, both states saw an increase in the number and variety of civil society organizations, including labor organizations, human rights organizations, and political parties. In the structural sense, civil society became more robust. In
terms of promoting civility, both states had active civil society associations advocating for liberal-democratic norms. I will argue, however, that these elements were more effective in mobilizing and pressuring the government for democratic change in Tunisia than in Egypt, where associations lacked sufficient resources to compete against well-established Islamists.

2. Civil-Military Relations

In the context of the 2011 uprisings, Eva Bellin notes that the degree to which a regime’s military was professional greatly affected whether the authoritarian leader was ousted. Militaries that lacked the attribute of professionalism either sided with the regime or contributed to a descent into civil war, as in Libya and Syria. Civil-military relations play a significant role in sustaining the transition after such an overthrow occurs. Professionalism and regime-independence ensure that the military, as an establishment, remains subordinate to civilian rule; in the best conditions, ruling elites do not have a monopoly on the use of force, and military leadership are not cronies of the regime. In a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, Huntington refers to this dynamic as the “praetorian problem,” which includes circumstances in which a military opposes democratization efforts and those in which a military plays a powerful role in the transition but is reluctant to return power to civilian authorities—or grants itself special immunities and privileges. Huntingdon defines a professionalized military as one that “recognizes the limited functions of the military and is compatible with civilian control.” He contrasts this with politicized militaries (such as the Spanish military under Franco or the Turkish military’s defense of Kemalism) committed to ideologies inconsistent with a sustained democratic transition under civilian rule.

3. Muslim Democracy

Since Muslim-majority democracies are rare and Arab-Muslim democracies have yet to exist, I have looked to the examples of Indonesia, Senegal, and, to an extent, Turkey; the first two are the only liberal democracies with Muslim-majority populations, and all three have ranked reasonably well on scales of democracy such as Polity IV and Freedom House. Observing these states reveals that one of the greatest challenges is to cultivate a system that will temper the influence of anti-democratic Islamist groups and foster electoral politics that diffuse sharp polarization. I find that three major elements contribute to stability: (1) a competitive political arena where Islamists are but one voice among many; (2) a setting in which religious elements compromise, cooperate with, or build coalitions with secular forces, and (3) a Muslim majority characterized as religiously moderate. The term “moderate Islam” is vague and open to interpretation: I define this moderate condition as a position that (a) does not advocate for an Islamic state or Shari’a law, (b) conceptualizes Islam such that it privileges individual rights and liberty, and (c) shows a reasonable level of tolerance toward minorities. This third criterion goes hand-in-hand with the normative dimension of civil society.

MULTI-POLAR COMPETITION

An electorally competitive system is widely considered a precondition for the emergence of democracy in any context, and this is especially the case in Muslim societies. In Vali Nasr’s view, a strong degree of electoral competition is one driver of Muslim democracy. Nasr notes that, where it is difficult for any party to take a dominant role, all parties are under pressure to practice political pragmatism; this especially pressures Islamist elements to abandon anti-democratic goals. Similarly, Daniel Brumberg argues that democratic transition succeeded in Turkey and Indonesia because secularists were organized effectively enough to counter Islamist influence, giving incentive for Islamist parties to be accommodating of pluralism. Brumberg describes the ideal level of competitiveness as a “politics of dissonance” in which political ideologies are expressed in a multi-polar way, avoiding deadlock or single-party domination. A dissonant political environment allows for change and transformation in power-sharing relationships and provides security against the imposition of Islamist ideology on the state. Islamist factions should be allowed to exist in and be tempered by the political process instead of being repressed; Brumberg cites the civil war in Algeria as an example of the negative consequences of repression. Indonesia is a relevant example: competition exists between Muslim and secular factions—and within Muslim groups—but is not so divisive as to result in chaos or fragmentation. These longstanding divisions helped usher in the country’s democratic transition. Likewise, elections in Senegal are remarkably fair, free, and diverse; as Etienne Smith notes, diversity in this political landscape “helps prevent the emergence of binary and exclusive reinforcing cleavages that would lead to open conflict.” Other factors certainly contribute to democratic stability in Indonesia and Senegal, including conditions that may not be able to be replicated elsewhere (such as a Sufi majority, as some argue is key to Senegal’s success), but the balance of electoral competition each one displays is nonetheless a successful example for Muslim societies to strive toward.
RELIGIOUS-SECULAR COOPERATION

Although the competitive and open political arena promotes democratic stability by tempering the influence of radical factions, it is also important that the predominant religious actors engage in compromise and cooperation with secular forces. This has proven beneficial in Indonesia: since the end of the Suharto regime in 1998, Islamist factions have had to find accommodation with secular forces. Mohammed Ayoob emphasizes that, since Indonesia’s democratic transition, competing Muslim political parties have emerged and sought coalitions with secular parties. In Senegal, this takes the form not of political parties but of a cooperative relationship between Sufi Brotherhoods and state officials. In both states, public policy is, at times, the result of consensus between religious and secular authorities. Compromise such as this is vital: in predominantly religious societies with politically salient sectarian minorities, political officials cannot afford to alienate either constituency without risking political legitimacy and stability, so concessions must be made on each side.

“MODERATE MAJORITY”

This is the most difficult indicator to measure and the most ambiguous, but it is relevant as an ideal to strive toward, if nothing else. Given that fundamentalist variations of Islam are characterized by illiberal attitudes toward minorities, and that some oppose democratic systems entirely as contrary to Islam, it is important for proponents of these ideologies to remain a very small proportion of society in order for democracy to be sustained. Indonesia’s religious political parties (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah) provide a relevant example: they represent the vast majority of Indonesian Muslims and reject the pursuit of an Islamic state. Similarly, Jenny White cites Turkish Islam as an example of a moderate view, in that it “limits Islam in politics to ethical and moral inspiration of individual behavior and individual choice.” A 2007 Turkish opinion poll showed that a majority opposed to Islam playing any public role and 89 percent expressed a view of tolerance toward non-Muslims. Senegal’s Muslim population differs, in that its Muslim majority is overwhelmingly Sufi. Although Sufism is not itself a monolithic variant of Islam, it is generally syncretic and, as such, is particularly conducive to toleration and compromise. On the whole, it may be helpful to think of this kind of Islamic disposition in the terms noted by Asef Bayat, who refers to Islam of a moderate character as “Post-Islamism,” in contrast to Islamism associated with the Islamic Revolution in Iran or the Islamic Salvation Front (known as FIS) movement leading up to the Algerian civil war. Bayat finds that this liberal-leaning ideological trend is becoming a stronger element of Muslim populations in recent years and that its emergence is promising for the cause of democracy.

Comparing the Transition in Tunisia and Egypt

Tunisia and Egypt share similar starting points. In both states, civilians revolted against corrupt, repressive regimes and succeeded in removing autocrats from power, with the assistance of the military. In both states, fair and free parliamentary elections followed, with competition by a wide array of political parties, and transitional governments took shape. In both states, Islamic political parties led these transitional governments. Three years later, each state has passed a new constitution. Yet Egypt finds itself right back where it started, perhaps even worse off than before the uprisings: the 2014 constitutional referendum was characterized by a distressing silencing of dissent, and the resulting document gives unchecked authority to the military. In contrast, Tunisia’s new constitution has been celebrated as one of the most progressive in the Arab World, even a model for political reform in the region. What accounts for these widely divergent outcomes?

CIVIL SOCIETY

In the structural sense, both Tunisia and Egypt have seen significant associational activity, even under the limits of authoritarianism. A host of social, political, religious, and professional formations have found their way in society, through formal organizations and in forms cemented by community, family, and tradition. In the early 1990s, Tunisia had at least 5,100 officially registered organizations, and Egypt had more than 13,000. These civic associations ranged widely, from charities and human rights groups to professional syndicates and political activist groups. Once the repressive regimes were overthrown, these numbers increased, especially among associations aimed toward human rights and women’s issues.

The majority of associational life is favorable to civility and many elements directly promote norms of civility; however, there are still uncivil actors that upset the balance. Denis Sullivan notes that Egyptian civil society has its share of corrupt and self-serving associations guilty of practices such as embezzlement, elaborate pyramid schemes, and theft under the façade of charity. Fundamentalist Islamists do not promote inclusive democratic values, and Egypt is the birthplace of several militant Islamic groups. Tunisia faces continuing problems with violent Salafi groups and terrorist organizations such as the Maghreb branch of al-Qaeda. Additionally, fundamentalists (including non-violent Salafists) who advocate for illiberal values still have significant voices in society. No civil society is without some corruption or ineffectiveness, but,
ideally, these elements are not the dominant voices and those of a more liberal disposition ultimately carry greater influence.

Tunisian civil society contains a diversity of voices, and for much of 2012 it was unclear whether those promoting values of tolerance and inclusion would succeed at seeing these values actualized against the countervailing influence of illiberal-leaning Islamists. Fortunately, an active civil society is holding the government accountable to liberal-democratic values. When values were threatened during debates on the draft constitution in 2012, civil society responded, and their efforts carried more weight with the transitional government than did those of similar groups in Egypt. In Tunisia, liberal groups mobilized by the thousands against the proposed unequal status of women and articles restricting freedom of expression. Ultimately, the articles were revised to reflect the demands of secular liberals. Public outcry also erupted over the inclusion of Shari’a in the constitution, and many secular organizations mobilized for change. When the new regime engaged in questionable practices toward the judiciary, the Association of Tunisian Judges mobilized in protest. Most recently, Tunisian activists have succeeded in lobbying for constitutional amendments that secure freedom of the press. Mohamed Bechri suggests that this success is largely attributable to the facts that Tunisian civil society is “profoundly secular” and the majority of associations formed after the uprisings are focused on women, youth, and human rights. The progressive character of Tunisia’s constitution is in part a testament to the effectiveness of civil society actors’ commitment to pluralism in an environment of competing social and political worldviews.

Without question, the Muslim Brotherhood is Egypt’s largest and most potent force in civil society; the organization has a strong social base from years of providing religious and social services that the authoritarian state failed to provide. This is problematic to the extent that it leaves liberal and secular actors without comparable resources for mobilization, and in that the Brotherhood does not necessarily share an outlook of tolerance and inclusiveness. Members of the Brotherhood are not monolithic in their values and goals, but the organization does not have a record of promoting a culture of democratic civility. When its party ran after the uprisings, the Brotherhood’s website still displayed its 2007 platform, which rejected political roles for women and non-Muslims and recommended that all legislation be reviewed by imams for compliance with Shari'a. Though some officials claim a desire for democratic governance, it is not clear that liberal-democratic norms are included. The post-2007 platform for the Brotherhood’s party is not much of an improvement: it proclaims the equality of all citizens and rejects discrimination on the basis of religion or gender, but includes a qualification that women are still confined to act within “society’s basic values”; for religious minorities, all behavior outside of personal status and worship must conform to Islamic principles. There are certainly organizations, both secular and religious, that have advocated for liberal-democratic change, but they have a record of organizational ineffectiveness, either due to internal divisions and rivalries or insufficient economic resources and social capital. Unlike in Tunisia, the demands of seculars and liberals did not alter political outcomes, and many were left alienated under the Brotherhood-led government.

CIVIL–MILITARY RELATIONS

During the uprising in Tunisia, the military sided with the people and assisted in ousting Ben Ali from power; it protected the people from Ali’s police force and escorted him out of the country into exile. In other words, the Tunisian military supported democratic transition, and unlike in Egypt, it did so without privileging its own interest over that of the people. This is largely because the Tunisian military has historically played a limited and apolitical role, and it lacks the degree of power and privilege of the Egyptian military. Tunisia’s military has remained subordinate to civilian authority and maintained its distance from politics, and the Ministry of Defense has stated that it has no interest in imposing military rule. Moreover, the military has not become an agent of civilian repression, nor has it ever been before 2011. In contrast to the situation in Egypt, the Tunisian military has not been an obstacle to transition and is unlikely to hinder progress in the future.

Like its Tunisian counterpart, the Egyptian military supported the people during the uprising, facilitated the removal of Hosni Mubarak, and claims to be committed to the people, but here similarities end. The SCAF seems ultimately bent on supporting its own interests—including political power without accountability to civil society—above any other end. A continuing pattern of abuse, such as trying civilians in military courts, violence against opposition, and intentionally stirring up sectarian conflict, is increasingly problematic. The military placed limits on the post-uprising democracy in order to protect its interests, and continues to grant itself special powers and privileges without accountability. This refusal to defer to civilian authority continues to be a major obstacle to transition in Egypt. The authoritarian behavior of the post-uprising SCAF is an extensive discussion in itself; I mention it briefly to highlight that it is a major factor in Egypt’s stalled progress, as compared with Tunisia’s.
MULTI-POLAR COMPETITION

The first Tunisian elections had a good start with broad and inclusive participation in 2011, with 113 political parties representing a wide range of religious and secular ideologies competing for votes. The self-proclaimed moderate-Islamist party Ennadha carried 41 percent of the vote and won 89 of 217 seats in Parliament. The result was a coalition government formed by Ennadha and two secular parties: the Congress for the Republic and the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (Ettakatol). The offices of prime minister, president, and speaker of the Parliament were each given to one of the three parties. Although the 2011 elections did not include Salafists, and although the coalition government was initially hesitant to legalize a Salafist political party, it has since permitted Salafists to participate in the political process as of May 2012. In Ben Ali’s regime, Islamist parties were banned and political parties in general were restricted; following Ali’s removal, the number of secular political parties increased dramatically—representing considerable competition for Ennadha. The proportion of representation that resulted prevented one party or faction from dominating politics and gave incentive for consensus-building, to which Ennadha ultimately proved committed despite internal divisions. Moreover, Ennadha has stepped down from power, and transition is now in the hands of a technocratic caretaker government. Rather than sharpening polarization, Ennadha has sought to alleviate tensions. Its willingness to step down to promote successful transition is good evidence of this fact.

Egypt’s first post-uprising elections were initially broad and inclusive, with sixty parties representing a wide political spectrum. Unfortunately, competition in elections did not lead to healthy competition in the outcome. The vast majority of votes went to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists, with 32 percent divided among fifteen other parties and candidates. The result was 68 percent with Islamists of illiberal credentials, including 25 percent Salafists—Islamists were not just one element in a multi-polar political arena. Mohamed Morsi’s administration claimed a commitment to democratic values, but governed in a majoritarian manner. Many in the opposition felt that Morsi’s government was yet another authoritarian regime, given its departure from pluralism. Instead of a setting in which Islamists’ religious agendas would be tempered, the Islamist-dominated regime worsened political polarization and left the opposition alienated.

COOPERATION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR ACTORS

Tunisia has satisfied this condition remarkably well, and did so even years before the uprisings. For nearly a decade before Ben Ali’s fall, Islamist and secular elites were meeting on a regular basis outside the country to negotiate rules for governing the country in the future. When Ali was ousted and a new government was on the drawing board, leaders began with a longstanding background of dialogue and negotiation. After the 2011 elections, there was considerable debate about whether the constitution would include illiberal principles, such as articles denoting Shari’a as a source of the law, anti-blasphemy laws, and women’s status framed as “complementary” instead of equal to men. Ennadha’s original platform expressed commitment to liberal principles; however, ideological divisions within the party led to disagreement on wording in the proposed constitution. By the spring of 2012, Ennadha had reached a consensus: it made concession to liberal discontent by removing any mention of Shari’a, and, for the Islamists, kept the language denoting the country’s religion as Islam. This kind of compromise can be attributed, in part, to the fact that Ennadha governed alongside non-Islamist parties, a position in which compromise across ideological lines was necessary to accomplish political goals. Beyond institutional incentives, Rachid Gannouchi was concerned about alienating either side; his party demonstrated a commitment to finding consensus between secularists and Islamists. Anouar Boukhars notes, “After heated internal debates within the party about the conditions of compromise, the moderate and consensual line won out over the more confrontational strategy preferred by an appreciable portion of Ennadha’s activist base,” resulting in a “potentially landmark accord between bitter enemies.”

The lack of cooperation between religious and secular is a major failing point in Egypt’s transition process. Several months after Mubarak was deposed, the secular and liberal groups who opposed him had not met even once to discuss guidelines or plans for democratic transition, and the 68 percent Islamist majority left little institutional incentive for cooperation. Even before the fall of Mubarak, there was little to no cooperation between religious and secular actors. Cross-ideological alliances have occurred occasionally in Egypt’s past, notably in 1984 (the Wafd party and the Muslim Brotherhood) and 1987 (socialist labor and liberal parties with the Muslim Brotherhood), but these alliances were short-lived due to fragmentation and divisions within and between groups. Dina Shehata (2010) has argued that when alliances between secular and religious civil society actors were formed, they were temporary, and done for political expediency instead of a commitment to pluralism. After Mubarak’s fall,
ideological fault lines persisted, and neither seculars nor liberals displayed a willingness to work with the other side. Before the July 2013 coup, for example, a senior Muslim Brotherhood official did not even recognize secular opposition as a viable political force, stating that he saw the political game as entirely bipolar: the only players were the old regime and the Brotherhood.76 Morsi’s administration continued to alienate his opposition, refusing to make concessions or pursue true consensus-forming measures; the sharp polarization of politics was only deepened, and culminated in popular support for his removal in July 2013.

A MODERATE MAJORITY

In Tunisia, Ennadha declares itself a moderate party and its leader, Rachid Gannouchi, seems genuinely committed to a moderate stance. Although Ennadha’s internal divisions make it difficult to characterize the entire party within one segment of an ideological spectrum, its moderate voices appear to be dominant. Because Ennadha’s official Islamic “label” is moderate and Gannouchi clearly advocates for a moderate outlook,77 public reception of the party can be one way to measure the public’s own moderation—and it is a hopeful measure. In 2012, Ennadha received a positive opinion from 65 percent of Tunisians, and most (66 percent) viewed Gannouchi’s leadership favorably.78 The majority does not advocate for an Islamic state; only the Salafists hold this position, and they remain a minority. Ennadha’s decision to revise the proposed constitutional articles on anti-blasphemy laws and women’s status was a strong step in the direction of privileging individual rights and liberties. Still, it is hard to say whether this is truly representative of the majority of Muslims, since most of the public outcry was from secular groups.79 At the least, there is promise with regard to women’s status: a recent poll shows that 74 percent of Tunisians favor women’s equality.80 Although Tunisian society is not without some ideological polarization, it nonetheless seems fair to conclude that a sizable majority are amenable to liberal values.

It is difficult to say where the majority of Egyptians fall in their political attitudes and preferences. In general, a significant level of public support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist groups is problematic.81 Yet the Brotherhood’s reputation varies depending on who is asked, and approval declined after Morsi’s election: when polled prior to the July coup, 72 percent of Egyptian respondents did not believe the Brotherhood was committed to democracy, and 71 percent felt that the party intended to Islamize the state and control its executive powers.82 These responses (and all other responses in the survey) were highly polarized between supporters of Islamist parties and those with the opposition, so the statistical majority hardly reflects a clear consensus. In terms of liberal values, one can also look at views on women: 58 percent of Egyptians say women should have equal rights as men; a promising majority, although not an overwhelming one.83 Less promising is the finding that 60 percent of Egyptians believe that laws should strictly follow the Quran, contrasted with only 23 percent in Tunisia.84 Based on the levels of support for the Brotherhood before and under Morsi and the polarization indicated by survey responses, it appears that Egyptians remain ideologically divided, and it will be difficult to assess the character of the majority until greater unity is achieved. In general, opinion polls indicate that the Egyptian public is more divided on and less accommodating of liberal values than is Tunisia, although not by a startling degree. For example, most Egyptians reject an Islamic state, but similar numbers are not united against Shari’a law.85

The Road Ahead for Tunisia and Egypt: Is Democracy on the Horizon?

Tunisia and Egypt experienced essentially the same starting point—popular mobilization leading to the overthrow of an authoritarian regime—and both faced similar challenges of societal tension between Islamists and secularists in the aftermath. Initially, Egypt’s path looked promising, with competitive elections and a military that seemed committed to democratic transition, but the lack of cooperation across ideological divides ultimately led to a parliament dominated by Islamists of illiberal leaning, and the military did not function as an element of the civilian government and failed to usher in an accountable, democratic system. The SCAF still controls the state and continues to drag the country back toward authoritarianism. Even if the SCAF fulfills its word on being only a transitional government86 and facilitates a new set of free and fair elections, it is possible that the next civilian government will also fall apart. If Egypt is to return to a path toward democracy, the military will have to withdraw from politics and accept a more limited role, with civilian accountability. To compete effectively with the Muslim Brotherhood, non-Islamists in Egypt will need to become better organized and attract greater numbers and support before competing in new elections, assuming the SCAF does carry out elections.87

Tunisia’s population seems more disposed toward moderate Islam than Egypt, a fact that can only help in the pursuit of democracy, but the differences are not enormous. The more significant keys to Tunisia’s relative success are the absence of military interference, the willingness of the leading Islamist party to share power and respond to pressures from liberal voices in civil society, and the presence of consensus-building
between Islamic and secular forces. In Egypt, moderate religious actors and secularists will have to work together to rival the strong ties in civil society that led to the Muslim Brotherhood’s rise to political power. Another reason for Tunisia’s relative strength in civil society, compared with that of Egypt, is the absence of repression by the military, so the withdrawal of military interference will also be a pre-requisite for improving the capacity of Egyptian civil society to effect political change favorable to pluralism and democracy.

Tunisia’s progress is not irreversible, and significant obstacles stand in the way of democratic consolidation and stability. As Russell Raymond notes, “The key issues that inspired the 2011 uprisings—economic disenfranchisement and impunity for police abuses—have yet to be addressed.” 88 Additionally, Salafist violence in Tunisia, although not as pervasive as the violence in Egypt, hinders prospects for stability and consensus in the future. Yet, Tunisia is still moving forward, has made more progress than any other “Arab Spring” state, and is better positioned and organized to facilitate a successful transition than any other country in the region. There is no guarantee that Tunisia will become the first stable Arab democracy in history, but there is good cause to be hopeful for Tunisia’s future, provided that political elites continue to show commitment to solving the problems that led to the 2011 uprising and to maintaining an environment of dialogue and consensus.

Notes

14 Ibid., 120–122.
20 Huntington, The Third Wave, 231ff.
34. For example, in Indonesia and Senegal, education policy and curricula are a result of consensus between religious authorities and state education ministry officials. See Stepan and Linz, “Democratization Theory,” 19.
38. Stepan contends that Sufism emphasizes “those parts of the Qur’an which urge tolerance as a response to diversity”; see Diouf, “Introduction,” 2, quoting Stepan, “Statement.”
45. Sullivan, Islam in Contemporary Egypt, 35.
56. Muasher, The Second Arab Awakening, 95.
60. Ibid.
63. Chomiak, “Tunisia.”
64. Feuer, “Islam and Democracy in Practice,” 2.
65. Chomiak, “Tunisia.”


73 Boukhars, “In the Crossfire,” 3.

74 Stepan and Linz, “Democratization Theory” 23.

75 Shehata, Islamists and Secularists in Egypt, 83–115.

76 Blair, Taylor, and Perry, “How the Muslim Brotherhood lost Egypt.”


84 Ibid, 2.

85 Muashar, The Second Arab Awakening, 98; Zogby Research Services 2013, “After Tahrir.”

86 Blair, Taylor, and Perry, “How the Muslim Brotherhood lost Egypt.”

The Muslim Brotherhood’s Remarkable Trinity: Organizational Survival and Adaptation

Sarah Detzner

Abstract: Egypt watchers have been urgently asking what to expect from the Muslim Brotherhood since the fall of Mubarak, the Brotherhood’s ascension, and the military’s subsequent designation of the Brotherhood as terrorists. To predict the organization’s future, one must examine the strategies it has used over its near-century as a durable actor in Egypt. Its core approach remains constant—the Brotherhood has always won support by fulfilling needs—practical and expressive—the state has proved unwilling/unable to meet. It also leveraged two other key relationships. The first is with the state, which must, at any given time, be either unable or unwilling to destroy it. The second is internal: the Brotherhood must keep a large enough membership pursuing a unified strategy to challenge the state/court the population. The organization has been most influential when it draws from this trinity of relationships, weakest when it cannot, and most able to recover though its ability to reestablish them. This work traces these dynamics during four phases: founding to near-destruction after the 1952 coup, imprisonment to rebuilding/resurgence (Nasser-Sadat), the shift to a new membership strategy/organizational evolution (Mubarak), and recent whiplash victory and defeat. Finally, it examines what previous patterns mean for the Brotherhood’s future.

Keywords: Al-Sisi, Arab Spring, Egypt, Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood

What does the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt really want, and what will it do to get it? Egypt watchers have been asking these questions for a long time, but with increasing urgency since the fall of the Mubarak regime, the electoral ascension of the Brotherhood’s political wing, and the Egyptian military’s subsequent retaking of power and outlawing of the organization. This piece contends that one of the more useful ways to predict the Brotherhood’s future behavior and prospects for survival and resurgence is to examine its remarkable record of adaptation and survival in its near-century of existence.

The core of the Brotherhood’s approach has remained the same—always behaving as if “the people are the prize,” the organization has “won” the support of a significant number of Egyptians by transforming itself to fulfill practical and expressive needs that the state has proved unwilling or unable to meet. Although its relationship with the population is paramount, the Brotherhood has also had to leverage two other key dynamics to maintain power, and is invariably at its weakest when it fails to do so. The first of these dynamics is with the state, which for Brotherhood survival at any given time must be either unable (because of state weakness and relative Brotherhood strength) or unwilling (because of the useful roles the Brotherhood can play) to destroy the organization. The second dynamic is internal, wherein the Brotherhood must keep a large enough membership agreed upon a successful strategy in order to challenge the state and court the population effectively. The Brotherhood has been most successful and influential when it is able to draw power from all three of these relationships, weakest when unable, and able to reconstitute itself after set back time and again by its ability to reestablish them.

This work examines the Brotherhood’s evolution during four phases in its history—its founding to the near-destruction after the Free Officers coup, imprisonment under President Gamal Abdel Nasser to rebuilding and resurgence under President Anwar Sadat, the shift to a new strategy along with organizational evolution under Hosni Mubarak, a brief discussion of the Brotherhood’s electoral rise and subsequent swift removal and persecution—and concludes with an examination of what these patterns might mean for the Brotherhood’s future.

I. Foundation to Imprisonment

MEETING THE PEOPLE’S NEEDS

In the first decades after Hassan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, the organization was competing for space in a crowded political ecosystem. The British-dominated monarchy was extremely unpopular, and numerous groups—including
communists, secular democrats, radical Islamists, and fascists—all formed parties to vie for the loyalty of the discontented population.

The Brotherhood had (and has retained) a clearly political final goal, the establishment of an Islamic state. However, al-Banna’s conception of how that state would be achieved set the Brotherhood apart. He believed:

[the] process would be carried out in four stages: first, to make every individual a true Muslim; second, to develop Muslim families; third, to establish a Muslim ummah (or community); and finally, to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. This…dictates different strategies for different stages of history. For example, da’wa (proselytizing) and education are more appropriate methods of spreading the Islamist message in the earlier stages, whereas a more political approach is suitable to the later stages.3

Thus, the Brotherhood “was an explicitly apolitical religious reform and mutual aid society during these early years.”4

As Ziad Munson reveals in his analysis of this period, “Probably the most important single feature of the society’s expansion was its method of establishing new branches.”5 Whenever the Brotherhood opened a new offshoot, the immediate priority was public service projects—usually the establishment of a mosque, schools, and a social club, but also clinics, support to local industries, and whatever else might be needed in a particular locality. Thus, when the Brotherhood argued that “Islam is the solution” to the problems plaguing Egypt at the time, it had, in terms of impact on citizen’s daily lives, stronger evidence to back up its argument than any other major actor, including the weak and exploitative state. As Alexis G. Grynkewich has noted, the Brotherhood’s activity highlighted the state’s failure to fulfill the social contract, without directly challenging the state’s authority.6

This network of social services with a religious base also gave the Brotherhood a lasting, institutional presence in communities even during times of official repression; most regimes were cautious about interfering with mosques. Even during the most successful crackdown directed at the Brotherhood in its history, early in Nasser’s administration, the government was “forced to fund and continue staffing the Society’s extensive network of services...for fear that their collapse would lead to widespread unrest.”7

The Brotherhood, initially cautious about endangering this foothold, made its first foray into politics on the regional rather than the national level, a strategy that did not immediately antagonize the state and proved extremely popular. The British-backed regime could not move forcefully against its patron on key issues such as Palestine, and “the comparative inaction of the Egyptian government in support of the Palestinians undermined its legitimacy and increased the relative popularity of the Ikhwan.” 8 The Brotherhood extensively supported the Arab general strike, railed against British imperialism generally, and eventually sent fighters to the 1948 struggle, fighters who returned to a hero’s welcome and have remained part of the organization’s “historical mythology.” 9 As the later history of the Brotherhood further illustrates, these two key strategies—making up for the state’s deficiencies as a provider of social services, as well as its inability to take action reflecting the foreign policy preferences of the general population—would continue to be extremely effective tools for the Brotherhood in retaining and regaining the support of the population.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND COHESION

An examination of the Brotherhood’s organizational structure in the first several decades after its founding reveals not only some of the strengths that allowed it to grow quickly and survive repeated government crackdowns, but also the beginning of a pattern of schisms that would both weaken the organization at key moments in its history and earn it enduring accusations of incubating violent radicalism.

During his lifetime, Hassan al-Banna exerted a great deal of control over the Brotherhood’s overall direction. However, he also recognized a need to retain the commitment and loyalty of core members through consultation, to localize the Brotherhood’s message so as to gain traction in different parts of Egyptian society, and to create local leaders strong and trusted enough to act without close supervision. Almost from the beginning, the Brotherhood operated along somewhat democratic lines, with locally elected leaders representing their members at periodic consultative conferences. al-Banna, the first “general guide,” could and occasionally did overrule the decisions of this Shura Council, but not without a paying a political price.10

The organization was structured in a way that was much more networked and less hierarchical than competing organizations, which Munson identifies as a key contributor to its long-term survival. Individual branches enjoyed a relatively high level of autonomy, and its “federated structure allowed it to appeal to the parochial orientations of different groups and different regions of Egypt.”11 Additionally, during bouts of state repression during the late 1940s, “the leader of one designated province is vested with the nationwide leadership of the entire Brotherhood organization…In
the event that the entire provincial organization in the leading province is uprooted [by the police], the national leadership is passed on to another province according to a planned random pattern.”

Through this system, the Brotherhood was able to insulate parts of itself from “periodic government crackdowns, police raids, mass arrests, and infiltration by the state security apparatus—events that effectively eliminated many other opposition groups in the country.”

The Brotherhood also established three tiers of membership: first-tier members simply paid dues and joined the member list, second-tier members were expected to participate regularly and take loyalty oaths, and third-tier members devoted their lives to the Brotherhood. This structure worked well, in that it complemented al-Banna’s teaching that Brothers must work their way up, achieving piety in their own lives before pursuing community/political goals. The relatively minimal requirements for new recruits made Brotherhood membership a much less monumental commitment than membership in other parties of the time; the Egyptian Communist Party, for example, expected recruits to make a much more extreme break from their previous lives. For all its successes, however, it was structural problems and miscalculations within the Brotherhood during this period that led to the organization’s near-extinction in the mid-1950s.

Throughout his lifetime, al-Banna was generally opposed to violence as a tool for regime change, maintaining that the Islamization of the state would follow naturally from the Islamization of the people and the subsequent Islamization of social institutions. However, he was also deeply invested in the cohesion of the Brotherhood. Several times early in the organization’s history, splinter groups seceded from the Brotherhood over impatience with al-Banna’s gradualist and non-violent approach (most notably the “Youth of Mohammed” in 1938). Thus, in the early 1940s, under pressure from organization members—particularly from veterans returning from the struggle in Palestine—al-Banna allowed the creation of the Jihaz al-Sirr, or “Secret Apparatus,” although he continued to argue against the use of force. According to Sarah Salwen’s analysis, “the Secret Apparatus was formed to provide an outlet for those remaining members who wanted to prepare for armed struggle against the British and the enemies of Islam, thereby reducing some of the pressure on al-Banna and the rest of the Muslim Brothers for immediate militant action.” It also brought the Brotherhood more in line with other political parties and movements of the time, most of which maintained armed wings.

The extremely hierarchical structure of the Secret Apparatus was problematic, given al-Banna’s ambivalence. Secret cell leaders took orders only from the head of the Secret Apparatus, who theoretically reported only to al-Banna. However, al-Banna’s reluctance to engage directly with some of the heads gradually eroded his authority over them, and, “rather than providing a safe outlet for the more activist Muslim Brothers so as to relieve pressure on the leadership to adopt a more confrontational and militant strategy…the creation of the Secret Apparatus actually strengthened the revolutionary convictions of its members and weakened the central leadership’s control over them.”

In the mid-1940s, amid general government repression of all groups, the Brotherhood’s federated structure helped keep it from complete dissolution, but communications and consultations throughout the organization were predictably impaired. Some Brotherhood cadres, mostly those associated with the Secret Apparatus, started to take more militant action, targeting judges, rival groups, etc. The government responded with further suppression, which in turn triggered further retaliatory violence. Despite publicly disavowing the violent portions of the Brotherhood, al-Banna was killed by police in 1949.

According to the Brotherhood’s charter, the next general guide should have been elected by a vote of the Shura Council, but the Brotherhood’s underground and disorganized status made this procedure unlikely. Eventually, the leaders of several top factions came together and made a decision that was extremely telling of how the Brotherhood leadership saw its priorities and future role. Choosing Salih Ashmawi, the leading internal contender, “would have indicated clearly that the organization had finally settled on a militant strategy for achieving its objectives, which would have threatened the unity of the organization and led to further clashes with the government.” Instead, factional leaders approached an outsider, the respected jurist Hassan al-Hudaybi, in hopes that his selection could rebrand the Brotherhood in the eyes of both the state and the people.

Al-Hudaybi, a proponent of returning the Brotherhood to the apolitical preaching and education role of the its beginning, insisted on the dissolution of the Secret Apparatus as a condition of accepting leadership. He also was instrumental in the Brotherhood’s decisions, after the Free Officers coup of 1952, to turn down the Officers’ offer of control over several ministries and to not immediately form a political party. All of these decisions were unpopular with portions of the Brotherhood, and, as an outsider, al-Hudaybi’s authority and prestige was limited. Several historians have suggested that Nasser further encouraged infighting and division within the Brotherhood, as it was a large part of the reason he was able to imprison, suppress, and nearly destroy the Brotherhood in 1954.
RELATIONSHIP WITH THE STATE

As previously mentioned, the Muslim Brothers’ early interactions with the regime consisted mostly of activities that undercut the state’s power and legitimacy without directly threatening its authority. At the same time, in a pattern that would repeat frequently in Egyptian political history, the Brotherhood and the state frequently found uses for and ways to accommodate one another despite their rivalry.

As early as 1942, the government of the day agreed to crack down on alcohol and prostitution, in addition to letting the Brotherhood freely publish its newsletters, in exchange for the organization’s staying out of parliamentary elections. In the mid-1940s, the government actually deliberately loosened restrictions on the Brotherhood and encouraged its branches to intimidate other parties as part of a strategy to counter the then-powerful Wafd party. The pre-revolution government did not move definitely to suppress the Brotherhood until 1948, when the existence of the Secret Apparatus became widely known, at which point al-Banna immediately attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to negotiate a settlement with the government rather than escalate violently. Al-Hudaybi’s subsequent selection as general guide was, as Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke note, partially “a gesture of conciliation to the palace.”

The Free Officers coup in 1952 initially seemed to mark a new era of state-Brotherhood cooperation. Even while trying to placate the previous regime, Brotherhood leaders had been consulting and building ties with the Officers for several years. The new regime released imprisoned Brotherhood members and allowed the organization to resume activities. However, as Nasser consolidated his leadership over the Officers, the Brotherhood represented a considerable threat to his control. Even had the Brotherhood agreed to assume positions within the regime, their central ideology was incompatible with Nasser’s secular Arab Socialism, and they were angry at the Officers’ failure to incorporate their input on major legislation, as had been (purportedly) promised in pre-coup period. Worse, for most of this transitional period the Brotherhood very likely had more popular support than the Officers. In 1954, after surviving a failed assassination attempt supposedly carried out by the Brotherhood (several scholars contend that Nasser staged the attempt to create a pretext for repression), Nasser ordered the organization’s dissolution and the arrest of thousands of its members. Several key leaders were executed.

This marked the low point in the Brotherhood’s history, probably the closest the organization ever came to disappearing. The next few decades would represent a period of internal consultation and experimentation as the Brotherhood tried to make sense of the disaster and draw appropriate lessons for its future strategy.

II. Nadir to Resurgence

ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIMENTATION

In the words of Salwen, after Nasser’s crackdown “the repression was so severe and the dismantling of the leadership so successful that, for three years, the Muslim Brothers seemed to fade away almost completely.” The Brothers, having never definitely resolved the schisms of the post-al-Banna period, now found themselves scattered to different prisons (a deliberate regime strategy). The organization would have to find a way of reuniting, reconstituting itself, and agreeing on an approach before it could try to regain the ground it had lost with either the general population or the state.

Several years after the initial arrests, when some lower-level members began to be released, a committee formed to make an effort at reorganization and form a communications network linking those in and out of prison. This group came to be known as Organization 1965, and was heavily influenced by jailed Brotherhood member Sayyid Qutb, whose writing “laid the groundwork for the regrouping of Brothers outside the prison environment and was thus essential to the revival of the Muslim Brotherhood” and “imbued the group with a new sense of optimism and activism.” Qutb’s writings were compelling in large part because they answered the questions many jailed and tortured Brotherhood members were wrestling with regarding how the regime they had seen as a partner in the anti-colonial revolution could have turned on them so dramatically. Qutb’s answer, briefly put, was that a regime that acted in such a manner was not Muslim, nor were its members. Furthermore, Qutb maintained, it was the duty of all Muslims to violently resist a non-Islamic regime attempting to rule over a Muslim population. Qutb drew a great deal of support from former members of the Secret Apparatus.

In 1965, Nasser’s regime detected the group attempting to build an arsenal, allegedly to overthrow the state. Qutb and several others were executed, and suppression of the Brotherhood renewed. As Salwen observes,

The emergence of the Organization 1965 had implications for the Muslim Brothers’ organizational decision-making, factional balances, and choice of strategies and tactics. By allowing the formation of the Organization 1965 and the rise of Sayyid Qutb as its spiritual leader, Hudaybi indirectly aided the revitalization and
reorganization of the Ikhwan, but he also inadvertently created an organizational subsection of the movement that would come to challenge his leadership and strategic vision, as the Secret Apparatus had done earlier in his career. Qutb’s ideology, combined with the repression it brought upon the organization once again, also precipitated a critical debate within the ranks of the Muslim Brothers over the future direction of the movement and the legitimacy of the strategic use of violence.32

This debate ultimately cost the Brotherhood some of its most committed members, but it may well have saved the organization by shifting the balance of power to moderates, thus positioning it for later reemergence. In the wake of Qutb’s execution, most of his supporters broke off to form other, more violent groups, such as Gamma Islamiya, in a move somewhat analogous to al-Banna’s earlier break with the “Youth of Mohammed.”33

This schism was largely due to al-Hudaybi’s public rejection of Qutb’s religious interpretations (though not of Qutb himself, who became a martyr) and Organization 1965. The divide was further exacerbated by al-Hudaybi’s pronouncements during the 1967 war with Israel that Nasser, whatever his flaws, must be supported against a non-Muslim enemy—a position Qutb’s followers vehemently opposed. Finally, in 1969, al-Hudaybi circulated among Brotherhood membership a text titled “Duo la Qudat” (roughly, “Preachers Not Judges”), which laid out a vision for the future marked by a rejection of violence and a return to the educational, missionary, and social service tasks of the Brotherhood’s early days.34

Thus reconstituted and repositioned, after Nasser’s death the Brotherhood was able to reach out to the pious Anwar Sadat (who had been the Free Officers’ liaison with the Brotherhood pre-revolution) and offer him support in building his own power base, independent of Nasserite true believers. As Steven Cook puts it, “Even though it was a shadow of itself, the Brothers could claim the legacy of a truly mass movement and thus remained a potential political and social force.”35

Additionally, the Brotherhood provided a useful, non-violent outlet for Islamist sentiments at a time when Qutb-inspired extremist groups were beginning to proliferate. To this end, Sadat responded favorably to the Brotherhood’s overtures, began releasing jailed members in 1971, and promulgated a new constitution asserting that Islamic law was now “a principle source of legislation.”

However, throughout this period, Sadat remained cautious of giving too much power to the Brotherhood. The organization remained officially illegal, and the government made numerous efforts to promote competing religious societies.36 The Brotherhood, in turn, was cautious of lending its legitimacy too freely to Sadat, given his relatively minor concessions. Ultimately, this cautious alliance would break down completely over economic and foreign policy issues, but its brief life allowed the Brotherhood a crucial window to reestablish itself outside of prison and try to reactivate positive memories and old loyalties amongst the population.

RENEWED OPPORTUNITY WITH THE PEOPLE

Since this period was dominated by the imprisoned Brotherhood’s struggle for organizational survival, little attempt was made to reach out the population as a whole. However, as noted in the first section of this work, the organization had established fairly broad and deep roots before its dissolution, and only a small fraction of those who had ever been members in any capacity were actually jailed during Nasser’s crackdowns. The resiliency of the Brotherhood’s reputation is demonstrated by Sadat’s belief, even after a decade and a half of suppression, that the organization’s support was still a political prize worth having. Sadat’s decision to promote religion as one of the pillars of his rule, along with the population’s shaken faith in Nasser’s secular approach following the 1967 defeat (identified by Raymond Hinnebusch as “the decisive political event which revived the fortunes
of the Islamist movement”), paved the way for the Brotherhood to win back support it had lost.30

III. Resurgence, Change of Strategy

NEW WAYS TO CHALLENGE THE STATE

The early part of Sadat’s tenure was a time of cautious rebuilding for the Brotherhood, with relatively minimal interference from the state as long as the organization kept to apolitical activity. This “cold peace” came to a dramatic end with Sadat’s signing of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel. Sadat attempted to regain Islamist legitimacy by amending the Egyptian Constitution to make Islam the source, rather a source, of legislation. Although this proved ineffective, the change would prove a useful future tool for the Brotherhood in its rhetorical attacks on state behavior.

For the first several years of his rule, Hosni Mubarak, Sadat’s successor, took much the same approach of cautious and limited tolerance toward the organization. However, the Brotherhood, rebuilt and reestablished over the years since imprisonment, but not yet well-positioned to exploit popular discontent, was ready to take action to dramatically change its relationship with the institutions of the state, as part of a larger strategy to expand its appeal to and legitimacy with the population as a whole.

In 1984, despite the very limited power of the Egyptian Parliament in general and the small minority of members permitted from outside the regime’s NDP bloc in particular, the Brotherhood decided to become involved in parliamentary elections. In the words of third General Guide Omar al-Tilmisany:

> When we were released from the 1981 detention, we were in a state of near-recession. We set to looking for a lawful means to carry out our activities without troubling security or challenging the laws. Allah saw fit to find us a lawful way in the views of officials. The parliamentary session had ended and thinking began on the new parliamentary elections. It was the opportunity of a lifetime.39

In order to contest the elections, the Brotherhood took another significant step in forming an alliance with the legally recognized Wafd party, promising to harness the Brotherhood’s much greater popular support to elect their candidates in return for slots on the Wafd ticket. This successful strategy was the first time the Brotherhood had made common cause with a secular party against the regime rather than the reverse. Despite significant electoral engineering to prevent it, the Wafd/Brotherhood alliance garnered 15 percent of the national vote, well above the threshold necessary to be awarded seats. In subsequent elections over the next twenty-five years, the Brotherhood would continue to form alliances with a variety of other parties, run candidates as independents, and in general attempt to stay far enough ahead of regime election fraud and electoral-law tampering to maintain a noticeable presence in Parliament.40

As Brotherhood leaders had hoped when deciding to contest elections, Parliament proved an effective forum for the organization to draw attention to the gap between what the population generally desired and what the regime was willing or able to provide. In particular, Brotherhood members spoke out about official corruption, repression and abuse by security forces, economic concerns, and culture issues such as pornography and obscenity. Both parliamentarians and Brotherhood members generally also continued to draw public attention to the government’s unpopular foreign policy decisions, most significantly ongoing engagement with Israel.41

Sana Abed-Kotob has characterized the Mubarak regime’s approach during this period as largely tolerant of the Brotherhood, with occasion crackdowns when members “overstep[ped] the bounds of acceptable criticism of government.” 42 During the mid-1990s, however, state repression intensified and many of the Brotherhood’s younger leaders were imprisoned. Cook, among others, interprets this crackdown as having served two purposes: first, to be seen (particularly abroad) to be “doing something” about the violent Islamist groups escalating their activities in Egypt at the time (despite the Brotherhood’s non-involvement); and second, to use the cover of “combating extremism” to suppress an increasingly successful rival to state power, as the Brotherhood’s efforts to expand its influence in Parliament and civil society bore fruit.43 The regime “strained to make the case that the Brotherhood was the intellectual fount of the violence the country was now confronting,” but relatively few inside Egypt seemed convinced that the organization was responsible.44

ORGANIZATIONAL REFORM AND INCREASING TRANSPARENCY

Mona El-Ghobashy characterizes this period in the Brotherhood’s organizational evolution as a phase when the organization “morphed from a highly secretive, hierarchical, anti-democratic organization led by anointed elders into a modern, multi-vocal political association steered by educated, savvy professionals not unlike activists of the same age in rival Egyptian political parties.”45

This evolution, however, was not uncontested and not without setbacks. Many have identified a generational divide, first opening up in the 1980s between original Brotherhood leaders imprisoned by Nasser, who
preferred to keep to the Brotherhood’s missionary, educational, and social service roles (believing society to be in al-Banna’s first stage of bottom-up Islamization), and a younger generation who believed the state had to be contested more directly, though non-violently, in Parliament and civil society (believing the nation to be in the second stage of institutional Islamization).46

It was the younger generation of Brothers who engineered the electoral alliances that kept the organization in Parliament, as well as the take-over of the professional organizations, discussed later at greater length. This generation also consistently pushed the Brotherhood to issue clarifying statements about its commitment to the civil rights of Copts and women, among others, as well as its commitment to democracy, to push back against the Mubarak regime’s attempt to label the Brotherhood as dangerous, illiberal extremists.47

In the early 1990s, it was this generation of leaders who were largely targeted and imprisoned, underlining where the regime felt the real threat to its power lay. During this period, a series of old-guard conservative general guides held power (this critical role had been passed among a small group without elections or general consultation since 1954, ostensibly due to the Brotherhood’s suppression) and managed to raise serious doubts about the organization’s real embrace of democracy and civil rights. In 1995, for example, the general guide blocked the signing of a key document, which would have seen most Egyptian political parties outline their joint demands of the regime, because of the text’s insufficient mention of Shari’a.48

In 1996, exasperated members of the younger generation petitioned the government to form a new party, Wasat, that would have a more democratic internal structure and more accurately express their views. Brotherhood leadership, in an unprecedented move, not only turned against the Wasat founders but also collaborated with the regime in their arrest and trial. The resulting scandal was tremendous and did a great deal of harm to the organization’s reputation. However, a combination of internal consultations and the deaths of some of the old guard enabled the Brotherhood to undertake a course-correction in 2000, when jailed members of the younger generation got out of prison and assumed leadership positions.49

From that point, “ideological articulation picked up where it had left off”—in 2004, for the first time since al-Banna’s death, the Brotherhood announced publicly the internal democratic procedure that would be used to elect the next general guide.50 From this period until the fall of Mubarak, the organization would make a sustained effort to make its internal procedures and consultations increasingly democratic and transparent, partly as a potent propaganda tool against the regime, whose governance could now be painted as less democratic than the supposedly illiberal Brothers, and partly as a way of retaining its new members, particularly the educated professionals who had joined the organization in the previous decade.51

EXPANDING ROOTS AMONGST THE PEOPLE

As in previous eras, the Brotherhood’s most critical task during this period—the goal that motivated both the organization’s engagement with the state and its struggle for internal reform—was rebuilding and expanding popular support for the Brotherhood. The organization revived strategies that had worked in the past, most notably recreating and expanding its social services network. This approach was particularly effective, as it coincided with the government’s increasing inability to provide these services, widespread corruption and ineffective economic policies having taken their toll. Several commentators have highlighted the 1992 earthquake in Heliopolis as a key turning point—the government’s response was slow, ineffective, and insensitive to victims, while the Brotherhood quickly mobilized doctors, engineers, and others to help, as well as providing longer-term support to victims. The regime’s response to this threat to its authority was a new law banning the private collection of donations for similar relief efforts, a move that was predictably unpopular with the citizenry and did little to slow the Brotherhood.52

The Brotherhood was able to marshal the human resources to respond to the crisis in Heliopolis, and to provide services more generally, because of a bold strategic move it had taken in the mid-1980s to raise its profile and recruit among educated, professional Egyptians—its gradual takeover of the professional associations. Civil society organizations have always been important in Egyptian civic life—the unions were the first locus of resistance against the British—and they represented an alternative path to influence as the Brotherhood struggled to retain a foothold in Parliament. Their leadership positions were also contestable by democratic means in elections that favored the well-organized. By the early 1990s, the Brotherhood controlled the engineers’, pharmacists’, doctors’, and lawyers’ associations, and was making significant inroads among student and faculty groups, building support amongst those disinclined to militancy but thoroughly disgusted with the regime’s mismanagement and incompetence. In 1993, the state passed a Syndicate Law, aiming to make it harder for the Brotherhood to retain and expand these gains, but the organization was already fairly entrenched.53
As previously noted, throughout this period, and particularly after 2000, the Brotherhood was making a conscious effort to moderate its rhetoric and convince onlookers at home and abroad that it had truly renounced violence and embraced democracy. When attacked on these grounds, the Brotherhood often used the opportunity to draw attention to the state’s own deficiencies in using violence and suppressing democracy. However, it can’t be denied that the Brotherhood also adopted the strategy of targeting different messages to different audiences, in order to attract the widest possible base of support. For instance, many have noted that most of the Brotherhood’s statements regarding cultural issues unpalatable to the liberal international community, such as women’s responsibilities in the home and duty to submit to male relatives, tend to be released only in Arabic, while its more conciliatory statements appear in English.54

Additionally, while renouncing violence as tool of change within Egypt, the Brotherhood in this period revived its role as the agitator for the sentiments of the Egyptian “street” on foreign policy issues, condemning the government’s close cooperation with the United States, endorsing “resistance” in Iraq, and similar positions. This reflects the Brotherhood’s desire to keep credibility even with the more extreme Islamist elements of Egyptian society, with whom it perpetually competes for votes and recruits, as well as its need to keep its own broad coalition together. This is an ideologically fine line to walk; several observers believe the Brotherhood renewed doubts about its intentions in Egyptian society with its 2007 political platform, which, among other things, labeled women and non-Muslims unfit for the presidency, though not for other positions.55

IV. Upheaval, Future Prospects

STATE POWER: A MONKEY’S PAW?

The Muslim Brotherhood did not, as an institution, play a central role in the popular protests that overthrew Hosni Mubarak in 2011, although many of its members were among those in the streets. In the subsequent parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood fulfilled predictions that the “Freedom and Justice” party it had founded would win the vast majority of seats it contested, slightly less than half of the total. Years of efforts to maintain a broad constituency and prepare for electoral participation left the Brotherhood in a much better position than newly organized activist groups or smaller existing parties like the Wafd, whose existing support base was limited, if well-defined.

Renewed concern about the organization’s commitment to democracy began to mount when the Brotherhood broke its pledge not to run a presidential candidate and managed to successfully run Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Brotherhood’s Shura Council. Less widely recognized is the fact that, when Morsi assumed the presidency, the Brotherhood gave up a position that had been its key source of strength throughout its history—its role as foil to the state, the organization that would point out and, to some extent, compensate for state failures. Now that the Brotherhood held both legislative and executive authority, it would be hard to escape blame for failures to meet citizens’ needs and possibly overly optimistic post-revolutionary hopes. Morsi was under tremendous pressure to deliver and not lose the “prize” of popular support the Brotherhood had worked so hard to develop.

This was particularly problematic because Morsi did not have the freedom to act that his position would normally suggest. In the early months of his presidency, the remnants of the Mubarak regime—the military-led Supreme Council of the Armed Forces—blocked many of his initiatives and collaborated with Egyptian Supreme Constitutional Court to dissolve the newly elected Parliament. Even beyond these constraints, victories of any size proved elusive.

In the words of one commentator, “Morsi could not even deliver on his promise to clean the capital’s streets during his first 100 days in office.”56 The breadlines, water shortages, and electricity cuts of the Mubarak era continued.57 Before, the Brotherhood could gain popularity by filling some of the more obvious social service gaps left by the state. However, providing improved social services reliably for the whole population through crumbling infrastructure and a civil service that remained profoundly corrupt was a much more difficult task. Morsi managed to briefly bolster his popularity at home and in the region by exploiting another oft-used and effective tactic of the Brotherhood under pressure, seeking political victories abroad, by garnering recognition for brokering a ceasefire in Gaza.

However, overall, Morsi responded to pressure by trying to grab and consolidate as much power as possible, including pushing for a quick vote on a hastily drafted new constitution that lacked the support of most non-Islamist groups.58 In any case, the response from Egypt’s still-activated revolutionary base was large and swift, with protests escalating by the day and the opposition become ever more united, especially after Morsi broke his pledge to tolerate peaceful protest and used security forces and Brotherhood volunteers to intimidate protestors.

In July 2013, the Egyptian military took advantage of the internal frustration and external fears Morsi’s first year had sown to forcibly remove him from office. Since that time, as the military attempts to
reconsolidate its position, it has moved to suppress the Brotherhood with escalating intensity, moving from violently breaking up protest camps, to declaring the organization a terrorist group, to putting Morsi and other leaders on trial, and finally, in recent weeks, to holding mass trials against members, resulting in hundreds of death sentences.59


In order to accurately forecast what is to come, it is necessary to once again consider the fundamental dynamics that in the past have hobbled the Egyptian state and given the Brotherhood room to survive and grow.

If Morsi was brought down by his inability to deliver material improvements to the people, then the question naturally becomes whether or not the military oligarchy, now helmed by likely future President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, is positioned to do any better. The short-term answer appears to be yes—there has been a massive influx of economic aid coming in from Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, eager to counter and contain Islamist populist influences that could potentially threaten their own regimes. This aid has been explicitly funneled through the military.60 Further, secularists, religious minorities, and all others frightened by Morsi’s heavy-handed power grabs while in office, are now much more inclined to back al-Sisi than they were Mubarak, at a time when the threat of Brotherhood power had yet to be made concrete. Finally, Egypt is living in a more dangerous neighborhood than it was at the beginning of the Arab Spring. Syria serves as a close and potent object lesson in the dangers of internal upheaval. In this context, al-Sisi’s high approval ratings come as no real surprise.61

However, the long-term picture for the new (or perhaps more accurately, revived) regime is nowhere near as rosy. Fundamentally, Egypt’s economy has become more and more distorted and less and less efficient over decades of military rule, as the armed forces have engaged in monopoly-building and rent-seeking across an expanding range of industries. This is extremely unlikely to change—the military leaders who most benefit from these distortions are al-Sisi’s strongest supporters, whom he cannot afford to alienate. Gulf money may fill the gap for a time, but it is by no means a guaranteed revenue stream, especially given Saudi Arabia’s many other international commitments and its need to spend internally to maintain legitimacy. It also means the Egyptian government will be at least somewhat constrained by the need to accommodate its sponsors’ foreign policy preferences, possibly at the expense of its own best interests or the population’s desires. Aid from the United States, so long an effective prop, remains a bit of a question mark; following the military takeover, it was reduced to some degree, and there have been threats to further reduce or eliminate funding if mass executions take place.62 Even if the credibility of these threats is uncertain, such aid is unlikely to exceed previous levels and thus contribute to the tangible economic improvements the populace demands. In a regional climate where conflict is now widespread, and given most of the Gulf states’ passion for stability, the old threats to reignite conflict with Israel that used to yield more promises of aid are unlikely to convince.

These long-term dynamics may well be why the government is taking such strong action against the Brotherhood now, despite international outcry and the internal danger of creating martyrs. If the Brotherhood in Egypt can be wiped out in this moment of opportunity, it will not be available to fill the void in the state’s ability to meet practical and expressive needs as the state’s weaknesses grow, and no other organization presents such a well-organized and established threat.

However, this author contends that the government is extremely unlikely to be successful in this project. By some estimates, as many as 1 in 85 Egyptians are, or have been, Brotherhood members.63 The government may be able to decapitate the leadership, but as the post-al-Banna and Nasser era experiences illustrate, the Brotherhood is more than capable of regenerating and reorganizing after such a loss. Furthermore, the government must walk a fine line with a populace newly reminded of its power to remove rulers: too harsh government action against the Brotherhood could eventually be perceived (or actively spun) as a broader attack against Sunni piety, or end up engendering popular feelings of sympathy and solidarity for those attacked, especially if they are lower-level members. Anti-Morsi feeling may still run high, but even at the height of Morsi’s power, the Brotherhood was not entirely identified with his actions, and several prominent members spoke out against him, leaving the organization yet another avenue for rebuilding its relationship with the people.64 Finally, some have alleged that the Brotherhood is receiving material and financial support from Qatar—if true, this clearly strengthens the organization’s resources.65 Ultimately, the future resurgence of the Brotherhood will likely come down to whether or not it can rebuild organizational unity and develop new lines of argument or forms of practical support that will appeal to the population at an opportune moment that seems likely to recur—a moment when the current government again finds its unity faltering and the willingness of its constituents to wait for reliable services and economic opportunity waning.
Notes

1 The title reflects the author’s belief that the “trinity” of relationships upon which the Muslim Brotherhood draws places the organization in a position analogous to that of the army of a state in Carl von Clausewitz’s famous “remarkable trinity,” which is commonly simplified and expressed as “the military, the government, the people” (quote drawn from David Jablonsky, “US Military Doctrine and the Revolution in Military Affairs,” Parameters 24, no. 3 (1994): 18–36).


5 Ibid., 501.


8 Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 9.

9 Ibid., 17.


12 Ibid., 498.

13 Ibid., 498.

14 Ibid., 497.


17 Al-Banna argued at the organization’s Fifth Conference in 1939 that the Muslim Brothers were not yet ready for the third stage, and warned against impatient activists who might act independently and undermine the Society’s long-term objectives (Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 14).

18 Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 15.


20 Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 16.


22 The Brotherhood participated in parliamentary elections intermittently from 1938 onward; however, widespread electoral tampering of the time, among other factors, prevented them from making major gains or wielding real legislative authority. (Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 36).

23 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 33.

24 Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 18.


27 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 53.

28 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 64; Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 24.


30 Ibid., 420; Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 27.

31 Zollner, “Prison Talk,” 419.

32 Salwen, “From Pulpit to Party,” 27.

33 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 90.

34 Most scholars believe the text was not actually written by al-Hudaybi, but rather by prominent members of his faction, possibly in consultation with Islamic authorities at Al-Azhar (Zollner, “Prison Talk,” 428).


36 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 125.

37 Ibid., 125.


40 Ibid.


43 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 165.

44 Ibid.

45 El-Ghobashy, “The Metamorphosis,” 373.


48 Ibid., 386.

49 Ibid., 387.

50 Ibid., 389.

51 Ibid.

52 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 165.


54 Leiken and Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” 117.

55 Cook, The Struggle for Egypt, 189.


“US says Egypt’s executions of 529 Muslim Brotherhood men would impact future American aid,” Jerusalem Post.


Who Is Moderating? Pre-uprising Dissent and Difference in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: A Model for National Leadership?

Louise Klann

Abstract: The patterns that developed during the Muslim Brotherhood’s pre-revolutionary leadership began to reach the limit of their effectiveness as this respected and enduring Islamic organization stepped onto the national stage to try its hand at national leadership at a uniquely hopeful moment. This paper contributes an organizational and sociological perspective to explain the Brotherhood’s lack of resilience in rough-and-tumble Egyptian politics. Adding to participation-moderation theorists, I focus on the Brotherhood’s organizational capacity to overcome the Egyptian deep state and democratic zeitgeist in post-revolutionary Egypt. I argue that the Brotherhood’s internal rivalries curtailed the political flexibility and creativity needed to address Egypt’s dysfunctional state. Through three case studies, I show how internal culture and structures of obedience incentivized the old guard to balance against, rather than ally with, moderating politically savvy members: conservatives’ ideological rigidity and strategy of isolation limited their effectiveness when both confronting the deep state and building democratic legitimacy. Finally, Morsi’s rule has little to say about Islamist governance in general, as it originates in a particular political and organizational milieu. If reformists had gained organizational control, there may have been a very different outcome.

Keywords: 2013 coup d’état, deep state, Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, Muslim Brotherhood

Winning and Losing: The Brotherhood Takes the Helm

The Muslim Brotherhood’s glaring failure during its year in Egypt’s executive office has been attributed to political naïveté and Mubarak-era elites’ concerted effort to thwart the Brotherhood’s policies. These explanations are undoubtedly true, but they don’t capture the complete picture.
has the power to block or oust civilian governments that counter its vision. In Egypt, the deep state consists of a persistently powerful security system constructed by Nasser which included the Interior Ministry, military, and National Democratic Party (NDP).4

This paper begins with an examination of the literature on civil society groups and Islamic democracy movements followed by a brief history of the Muslim Brotherhood—focusing on the ideological shift from Hassan al-Banna’s founding through the Nasser period and inter-generational ideological divides. Next, I explore the ideological competition between the Salafis and the Brotherhood. Finally, I look at the conservative center’s treatment of ideological difference in its relations with reformists, outside groups, and youth.

Civil Society in the Arab World

Voluntary associations have been seen as a means for civil society to affect political development since the 1990s.5 The dominant liberal definition of civil society offered by Amy Hawthorne has been understood as, “the zone of voluntary associative life beyond family and clan associations but separate from the state and the market.”6 In this view, the individual participates in associations in order to hold the state in check and ensure the promotion of societal goals. Civil society is considered primarily democratic and liberal; therefore, an expanding civil society ought to increase democracy. In Egypt, on the contrary, associations have had very little political capacity to hold the state in check. The predominant political party, the NDP, acted as a patronage system, essentially rubber-stamping executive branch initiatives.6

This paper begins by considering Antonio Gramsci’s hegemonic theory of civil society, which sees civil society as an extension of political power. Civil society includes all groups outside the direct coercive control of the political state; however, the ruling class uses civil society to maintain its dominance, extending its control beyond what would otherwise be possible. Civil society is also the space where associations position themselves within a hegemonic field, engaging in a “war of positions” against other groups.9 In this view, civil society groups never leave the realm of political power.

Gramsci’s view can be expanded to apply to large and complex groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in which hegemonic positioning occurs among internal centers of power. When dealing with external groups, these internal groups relate either in sync (where their interests are in line) or in competition (where they are not). This now necessitates a discussion of how civil society functions within the Islamic Arab context.

ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

The question of whether Islam is fundamentally compatible with democracy has been the subject for much scholarly debate. Reconciling Shura with the framework of popular sovereignty complicates democracy’s application, particularly regarding the degree of freedom allocated to individuals in legislation and expression.10 Nonetheless, scholars such as John Esposito argue that Islam has all of the elements necessary for democracy to develop within a Muslim context—shura [consultation], ijma [consensus], and ijtihad [independent judgment].11

Much of the democratization literature is based on the inclusion-moderation thesis. Institutionals such as Adam Przeworski argue that participation by Islamic actors in the political process necessarily would moderate their political behavior as they endeavor to resolve conflict within a democratic system.12 Identity literature takes a more nuanced perspective: political learning occurs as actors participate in a pluralistic political system, decreasing ideological rigidity as learning reconfigures political and ideological worldviews, value systems, and mindsets. As actors adapt to the institution’s expectations, they justify their adaptations in order to ameliorate internal cognitive dissonance. As Michael Zürn and Jeffery T. Checkel argue, “Acting in accordance with role expectations may lead to the internalization of these expectations.”13 Jilian Schwedler suggests, however, that moderation, rather than being a linear process from radical goals toward democratic governance, can be a tool for government co-option and entrenchment of regime power.14 I define “moderation” as ongoing political accommodation where organizational goals and methods remain open to internal revision and external influence, and where the goals and ideologies of outside groups can be tolerated. Inclusion-moderation literature does not fit well with the Muslim Brotherhood, a sizable and complex organization with many different centers of power that pursue many objectives at once.15 But Carrie Rosefsky Wickham offers a needed correction. Given the diffuse institutional environment in which the Brotherhood operates, change takes more time and occurs at the individual level. Interaction with different Egyptian and foreign actors exposed some Brothers to the global discourse on democracy and progressive readings of Islam, and individual transformation led some of these actors to promote change within the movement. Participation generated new strategic interests and prompted internal debates about the group’s ultimate goals.16 Wickham assumes, however, that moderating elements within a large organization will necessarily produce internal reform. So far, that has not been the case for the Muslim Brotherhood.
THE POWER DYNAMICS OF INDIVIDUAL REFORM

In such analyses, one would expect gradual individual transformation to result in organizational reform and moderated political goals: changes at the individual level spread to organizational members who are not participating, so that, eventually, conservative members make liberal compromises on major ideological hurdles. Group consensus is unlikely—especially because the strategic benefits of democracy in a diffuse system are sporadic and long-term—and without consensus, power dynamics become important. Can the moderating group impose organizational and political ideological reform on more conservative members, or vice-versa? Since individual transformation is a long and uneven process, non-transformed, status-quo members may be incentivized to align against unwanted change. In this case, it is just as likely that internal pressures for reform will lead to ideological and organizational retrenchment, rather than reform.17

In response to regime oppression, some generations of Brothers have engaged politically, whereas others have given up political participation as futile.18 From a Gramscian perspective, the question must then shift from whether participation moderates to who is participating and moderating within the organization—and whether the organization “learns” from the moderating faction or balances against it. To understand how this played out in Egypt, the discussion will now turn to a brief survey of status-quo retrenchment within the Brotherhood’s institutional and ideological framework leading up to the January 2011 uprising in Egypt.

I ideological Change: Conservative and Reformist Development

At the 1928 founding of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna sought a wide and ideologically diverse base. He envisioned an all-encompassing organization that sought unity in diversity. Rather than ideologically rigid, it was open to trans-organizational influences and self-critique.19 Despite these founding aims, however, in response to Nasser’s bloody and sustained repression of the Brotherhood, diversity and openness was partially subsumed by self-protecting revolutionary logic, initiated by factions influenced by Sayyid Qutb.

The large-scale suffering Qutb saw in Nasser’s prisons led him to eschew the Brotherhood’s peaceful da’wa [missionary] mission and ideological flexibility. Instead, he argued, revolutionary Islamic activism offered the only effective means to create an Islamic society. Similar to pre-Islamic times, Egyptian society was in jubil—state of willful blindness to God’s sovereign power that shunned Allah’s bakimiyas (sovereignty) and replaced it with philosophy and epistemology. Giving human beings legislative authority had led to moral bankruptcy.20 To reinstate Allah’s legislative sovereignty, according to Qutb, Muslims must impose Islamic law as the sole source of legislation. He called for a Muslim vanguard to overcome the false gods of materialism, science, and rationalism to reestablish the authority of Allah by force.21

Qutubists prioritized secrecy and military confrontation with the state, and questioned the handling of state relations by the supreme guide (murshid).22 As Barbara Zollner notes, “Not only did they consider the murshid’s political maneuverings, as practiced in the years before the milna [ordeal], to be indecisive, weak and therefore the main cause of the persecution, but they also accused him of cooperating with a jubili state system.”23 In 1969, Hasan al-Hudaybi responded with the tract “Du’at la Qudat” (“Preachers Not Judges”), refuting Qutb’s claims by emphasizing the flexible nature of Shari’a and the longstanding role of human interpretation, and that living under Shari’a rule was possible, even in a non-Islamic state.24

Ashraf Nabih El-Sharif argues that organizational “dualities” emerged from the Brotherhood’s milna that are instructive to the reform/conservative development. After multiple attempts at liquidation, the sanctity of the organization became vital to safeguard its members and the Islamic movement, but ideological flexibility for socio-political engagement remained necessary to continue outreach in the face of the regime’s brutality.25 A balance between these two ideological necessities had to be maintained—if only a superficial balance. To participate, the Brotherhood needed the regime’s blessing, and therefore they needed to demonstrate political self-restraint; meanwhile, the Brothers needed to confront the regime’s authoritarian laws in Parliament. However, challenging the regime opened the group up to more repression—something the 1960s generation was keen to prevent.26 The dualities were necessary to maintain the organization, but the dominating power center shifted in response to external pressures.

The halting political liberalization of the Sadat years consolidated two strategies. First, during periods of liberalization in the early 1970s, the Brotherhood engaged politically, attempting to transform the existing political framework from within.27 Sa’id Hawwa, a Brother who was also the most influential Islamist intellectual at the time, advocated for political activism to promote the Islamic message. This necessitated political creativity and flexibility, although organizational conservatism continued to exist within the Brotherhood.28 Sadat’s early political opening led then-murshid Umar al-Tilmisani to reject violent activism and state confrontation. Although Sadat prevented the Brotherhood from forming a political party, Brothers ran as independents in 1976, winning
limited parliamentary seats.\textsuperscript{29} Once in office, those Brothers focused on the codification of \textit{Shari'a} law.\textsuperscript{30}

In the late 1970s, organizational unity and loyalty began to take priority over flexibility and diversity.\textsuperscript{31} As his policies became more and more unpopular, Sadat became increasingly intolerant of dissent. Neoliberal reforms destabilized the economy, and Egyptians bitterly opposed the 1979 peace treaty with Israel.\textsuperscript{32} Crackdowns culminated in the 1981 seizure and imprisonment of top-level Brotherhood officials including al-Tilmisani. Banned from forming an official party and denied legal status, Brotherhood officials moved away from full political participation, choosing instead to operate outside the reach of direct state control.\textsuperscript{33}

Against this backdrop, generational splits within the Brotherhood offer context for how the conservative elements consolidated power before the 2011 uprising.

\textit{Generational Cleavages}

\textbf{THE 1960s GENERATION}

Both ideologically and politically conservative, the 1960s generation controlled key positions in the Guidance Bureau and the \textit{murshid}, drawing authority from having survived Nasserist persecution and from their personal sacrifices to the Brotherhood’s cause. Rather than focusing on politics, their objective was organizational unity: cadre formation, education, and proselytization.\textsuperscript{34} They consolidated power further by controlling the distribution of internal and external resources, training new recruits and controlling appointments to \textit{jama'a} branch offices.\textsuperscript{35}

Their sense of ideological supremacy and Nasser-era victimhood led to an isolationist stance vis-à-vis other opposition groups.\textsuperscript{36} With less experience interacting with leaders outside the movement, their rhetoric was less in line with the commitments to democratic norms that were espoused by the more reformist and engaged 1970s generation. As Bayoumi Ghanim has noted,

\begin{quote}
The brutal repression the veteran leaders of the Brotherhood endured subjected them to a crisis. They spent a good part of their life in prison, sometimes as long as twenty or twenty-five years, and many of them were subjected to torture. They developed a mind-set that the whole world is against us. You can’t expect them to forget all this and say \textit{yallah nidardish} [come on, let’s talk].\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

The hard isolationist ideology put the 1960s generation at odds with more engaged younger members. This zero-sum mentality toward both internal and external groups impeded meaningful organizational compromises on power-sharing and political goals.

\textbf{THE 1970s GENERATION}

Unlike other generations, this middle-generation’s leaders were recruited to join the Brotherhood after leading successful Islamist student movements. As outsiders, they demonstrated ideological independence in their political work, critiqued Brotherhood practices, and envisioned a different overall mission, pushing for internal restructuring of the organization and for more democratic electoral procedures. As their political power increased, however, the Guidance Bureau blocked their ascension to senior positions, appointing supporters of the “old guard” to strategic posts.\textsuperscript{38}

The Brotherhood had actively recruited student leaders, hoping to revitalize their declining base after Nasser’s repression of the organization,\textsuperscript{39} and many of the most talented and dynamic of these young leaders had joined, despite their reservations about the Brotherhood. The recruits expressed concerns about existing leaders’ religious commitment and conciliatory approach toward the regime, and moral laxity in society.\textsuperscript{40} In short, their ideological independence and flexibility put them at odds with the 1960s generation. From the beginning, Brothers from the 1970s generation developed unique religious and cultural norms.\textsuperscript{41} Their theological outlook centered on Sayyid Qutb and Salafist thinkers, rather than al-Banna or al-Hudaybi. At the same time, their experience managing campus affairs had put them in close contact and, at times, cooperation with secular youth leaders. These 1970s leaders gained political savvy and learned the art of political compromise, prioritizing issues that were important to the diverse student population.\textsuperscript{42}

After they took the oath, Brothers of the 1970s generation continued to develop their political skills and ideological flexibility. They ran successful professional syndicates and won seats in Parliament. As they engaged in society, they continued to moderate, affiliating themselves with more progressive interpretations of Islam that better fit with their work.\textsuperscript{43} As Muhammad Siman, former secretary-general of the Egyptian Syndicate of Engineers, noted,

When those of us affiliated with the Brotherhood first became involved in the syndicate, we kept to ourselves. But by the early 1990s, there was a widening in our viewpoint involving a greater openness to others in society, and a greater willingness to cooperate with them…You see, initially we clung to a mistaken understanding of Islam; we thought that those of us in the movement should only interact with each other. But then we looked at the early period of Islam and discovered that the Prophet was open to everyone. We realized that isolation doesn’t give you strength, but that being open to others does.
Because, you see, the syndicate is a civil institution, not a religious one, and to run its affairs properly, you need the most qualified people to assist you, whether or not they are from the Ikhwan.44

This individual transformation seen in the 1970s generation did not cross over to the next generation, who aligned themselves more closely with the old guard’s ideology.

THE “THIRD GENERATION” AND THE IKHWAN YOUTH

Regime intransigence prevented the sense of political success that had been achieved in the 1970s. Their ideological leanings meshed with the 1960s generation, so they were placed in key administrative posts.45 Although the majority of young members are similar to the 1960s generation in outlook, a small but influential youth group, Ikhwan, is closely affiliated with the 1970s generation. These youths were a product of a burgeoning Internet culture that facilitated network activism over isolationism.46 For example, reform-minded bloggers (discussed below) used media attention to push some reform, but this put them at odds with Brotherhood leadership. Pressure for ideological change came not only from the 1970s and Internet generation, however, but from Salafists who exacerbated inter-generational conflict on reform.

Religious Rivals

Salafist religious rivalry pulled the Ikhwan closer to conservative ideologies and incentivized an ideologically rigid stance toward reformists. Under Mubarak, Neo-Salafist ideology gained ground, and popular Neo-Salafist TV programs and preachers began influencing public opinion.47 To compete for religious power, it behooved the Brotherhood to take a tone more in line with the national religious mood. As Egyptian researcher Hossam Tamamm recalls, Egyptian religiosity had shifted indelibly to the Salafists: “If you want to identify a religious right, center and left nowadays this means in practical terms you would be referring to rightist Neo-Salafists, centrist Neo-Salafists and leftist Neo-Salafists.”48

Conservative and apolitical during this period, Salafists interpreted religious texts literally. The Saudi Wahhabi influence bestowed a doctrine that prioritized obedience to the regime and individual piety, and Neo-Salafists engaged the Brotherhood in intense debates, rebukiing them for lax religiosity. These debates tended to center on individual piety rather than societal rights under the regime. As the Egyptian Islamic field became subsumed by cultural contestation of public virtue and morality, which the individual could control without fearing state persecution,49 the Brotherhood’s vision for political engagement was at a disadvantage. Salafi individual piety did not put their followers at risk of police brutality and jail, and the Brothers’ da’wa mission had not resulted in clear political success.

Meanwhile, Neo-Salafist critiques kept reformers in the spotlight, vilifying the 1970s generation, questioning their religious credentials, and claiming that they intended to secularize the Brotherhood. To Salafists, electoral participation and ideological accommodation were religiously illegitimate—and dangerous. They argued that the Brotherhood had to contain this movement to reclaim its lost authenticity, and, sensitive to their religious credentials and legitimacy, the Guidance Bureau minimized the reformists’ role. This move kept the organization in a defensive posture on questions of reform and political participation.50

Political Participation under Mubarak

The Salafist challenge deepened intergenerational cleavages in the Brotherhood, and was useful to Mubarak as a means of diffusing the organization’s effectiveness. The Mubarak regime effectively co-opted the Brotherhood to stabilize the political sphere in the chaotic period after Sadat’s assassination in October 1981. Moderate murshids helped keep Mubarak in power by providing social services and diffusing the radical-leaning youth. Internationally, Mubarak could point to the threat of the Brotherhood to rally international actors to his regime: any democratic political opening carried the threat of a looming Brotherhood takeover.51

As the Brothers saw increasing electoral success in the 1980s, Mubarak responded with concentrated crackdowns on Brotherhood leaders, culminating with the arrest of fifty-four mid-level leaders in 1995, to thwart their efforts in the coming election.52

After the repression of the Sadat regime, the vulnerable Brotherhood was focused on organizational restoration, using proselytizing and political expansion to protect itself from eradication. This necessitated the quick acquisition of political knowledge, coalition-building, and electioneering.53 Under Mubarak, initial political opening created space for reform. Murshid al-Tilmisani again engaged politically, inspiring younger members.54 By 1987, the Brotherhood had won enough parliamentary seats to be the largest opposition bloc.55 Despite previous rebuttals by the state, al-Tilmisani reopened the discussion around creating a political party, but after his death the old guard stopped pursuing it. Conservatives argued that a political party would divert resources away from the group’s da’wa activities and lead to tighter government surveillance. They wanted to avoid the internal debate that would naturally follow such a decision, because it may have undermined group cohesion.56

This view of debate and difference of opinion as threat can be understood as an attempt to prevent dangerous
fissures: organizational unity protected the group against the prying state. However, the 1960s generation began to rely exclusively on these organizational containment strategies as they pushed reformers to the edge of the organization.

1995’s Hizb al-Wasat Party: Internal Critique

The different worldviews of socially connected reformists and the isolationist old guard came to a head after unsuccessful attempts by the 1970s generation at administrative reform. In 1995, after dialogue with outside groups, reformists dramatically split with the Brotherhood to form the Hizb al-Wasat party. The Wasat movement powerfully made public the growing internal divisions and lack of internal reform in the Muslim Brotherhood: Wasat leaders opposed the Brotherhood’s increasingly authoritarian leadership, while reformers lacked a formal platform to connect to the group’s base, effectively isolating the reformist trend and limiting their impact on the group.

The Guidance Bureau, led by murshid Mustafa Mashur, responded handily to this self-critique and ideological difference. Once the split became public, the Guidance Bureau answered with a public denouncement of Wasat leaders, saying the party did not project a “pure image of Islam,” and publicly opposing Wasat’s application to form a political party. They warned others of following their example, even coercing many Wasat members to return to the Brotherhood. Aboul-Ela Madi, a founding member of Wasat, told a newspaper, “This small group of people waged a war on us that we did not expect. We expected them to say, ‘we disagree with you’ or ‘we have nothing to do with this project.’ But waging a comprehensive war against us on all levels was a big shock that took some time to absorb... Their attack was even worse than what the government did to us.” Further highlighting the division between the worldviews of the two groups, a Wasat leader criticized the Brotherhood for “buried feelings of defeatism and retreat, and a lack of self-confidence and an inability to confront the Other and embarrassment and hiding behind religion, to the opposite psychological state of excessive arrogance and feelings of superiority and accusations against the Other.”

To solidify their base, the Guidance Bureau published “The Virtues of Hardship,” which warned members about the Wasat party, calling it “arrogance and tyranny” to insist on the rightness of their opinion when that opinion went against the majority’s preferences. The statement ended with a Salafist exhortation linking obedience to the Guidance Bureau to Islamic duty and asserting that “respect for one’s elders is the duty of the faith.” Questioning the Guidance Bureau would not be tolerated.

Reformists saw the Wasat party as a cautionary tale—escalating conflict would lead to marginalization. The episode fragmented the Brotherhood’s remaining reformist-minded members, who were increasingly sidelined as the old guard strengthened its position and the group experienced renewed pressure from Mubarak. This was not the end of the reformist movement, however; they saw another surge in organizational importance during the Bush administration’s 2004 democracy initiative.

Bush and Political Opening: Stalled Cross-Partisanship

In 2004, the Bush administration pressured Mubarak to hold freely contested national elections the following year. Socio-political movements multiplied in response. The Brotherhood’s new reform-minded murshid, Mohammad Mahdi ‘Akef responded to the increase in political space by publishing a reform initiative in 2004 and allying with fellow opposition groups during the 2005 “Cairo Spring.” The initiative highlights the increased strategic importance of the reformists in periods of political opening when the Brotherhood needed to rely on members who had connections outside the group.

As calls for reform from groups such as Kefaya (the Egyptian Movement for Change) gained momentum, ‘Akef tried to shed the Brotherhood’s historic isolation and build networks with opposition groups. However, the Brotherhood struggled to act in concert with others. Reformist members successfully navigated this space, but the old guard’s isolationist predilection and ideology impeded the formation of meaningful alliances. One human rights activist, Gasir Abd al-Raziq, noted the struggle: “This new juncture is confusing to the Muslim Brotherhood. It wants to be seen as part of the wider moment for democratic reform but still wants to maintain its own separate identity.” This desire for separateness also complicated internal deliberations based in ideology (democratic reform). The Brotherhood struggled to be a part of a group without being in charge, so it created its own.

To buoy its cross-partisan credentials, the Brotherhood formed the National Coalition for Reform and Change, but reaching mutual understanding proved difficult. Although the coalition was inclusive, there was no sharing of ideas that typified cross-partisan movements such as Kefaya. As Esam Sultan noted, “[The National Coalition has] no real dialogue. If they talked for just 10 minutes they would reach an impasse! The Brotherhood established a coalition with groups that it still sees as kuffar [infidels].” This distrust ran both ways: secular groups were deeply distrustful of the old guard’s democratic commitment. Hisham Qasim, a liberal activist, explained this distrust: “The Brotherhood says they are for democratic reform, but I
don’t buy it. The development in their thought and discourse doesn’t show where they saw the light. The Brotherhood used to say, ‘it’s Islam versus everything else,’ but they bit off more than they could chew so they had to backtrack. So now they speak in a democratic language, but their goals are the same.”

Opposition groups were also concerned about the old guard’s organizational dominance. Although some Brothers were more open-minded, as George Ishaq noted, “The course the Brotherhood takes hinges on the instructions of the old guard.” He also explained that: “Some members of the Brotherhood seek a genuine dialogue with us, but others want only a monologue.” Ishaq (and others) also questioned the marshid’s response to external groups’ input and inability to accept criticism. Ishaq recalled, “I met the marshid and told him, ‘You must reassure the people; the Copts, for example, are extremely afraid of you.’ And one of the conservatives in his entourage looked at me and said, ‘You are going to tell us what to do? Who do you think you are?’”

This final reformist moment was cut short, however, when Mubarak pushed back after Brotherhood victories in 2005. Many reformists were jailed. In this environment, political acumen became less necessary and ‘Akef—the most centrist of the old-guard Brothers and founder of the Wasat party—was pressured to step down. He had been elected as marshid in 2004—an appropriate choice during a period of political opening—but his commitment to pragmatism and flexibility over rigid ideology, principles, and generalizations put him at odds with the conservative faction who now moved against him. His announcement that he would not run for a second term set the stage for the conservatives to take control of the Brotherhood.

Conservative Organizational Control

INTERNAL DISSENT AND FEEDBACK

MECHANISMS IN THE 2007 PARTY PLATFORM

In the wake of the Brotherhood’s success in the 2005 election, the Mubarak regime’s jailing of several reformist leaders allowed the conservative elements to once again take control of administrative functions and to draft a new political platform for the Brotherhood. Reformist Essam al-Aryan drafted a short and progressive platform, but this draft was amended in his absence (by Mohamed Morsi) to include conservative, medieval jurisprudence from Islamic scholar Abu al-Hasan Ali Ibn Muhammad Ibn Habib al-Mawardi. These additions demonstrated the old guard’s conservative vision for the legislative application of Shari’a. Reformists and bloggers decried the proposed establishment of a religious council that would review legislation, and restrictions on women and non-Muslims’ right to hold the office of presidency.

IKHWAN YOUTH BLOGGERS

For some Ikhwan youth, blogging became a source of self-expression that freed them from traditional, top-down dictums of the Brotherhood leadership. Unlike the majority of Ikhwan youth, bloggers are primarily reformist, with political imagination and intellectualism that raised their expectations of membership in the Brotherhood. However, these youth bloggers expressed concern about the lack of a bottom-up channel for protest and influence. They also objected to the archaic method of organizational education for Brothers, and leader behavior.

In the year of the National Platform, the number of bloggers shot up from a handful to 150, many advocating change to the 2007 directive. Overreacted to this dissent, the Guidance Bureau haphazardly tried to contain the bloggers, stopping some. When Guidance Bureau member Ali Abd al-Fattah published a damning article accusing critics of “ideological defeatism,” blogger Abd al-Mun‘im Mahmoud responded: “He called us secularists; it almost reached the point of takfir [declaring us infidels].”

Despite intimidation from the Guidance Bureau, media attention gave bloggers some leverage. The cumulative effect encouraged reformist leaders from the 1970s generation to develop proposals for electoral reform, but conservative leaders still sidelined their critique. Mohamed Mors, then head of the Brotherhood’s political division, met with bloggers to allow the youth to vent but, as in meetings with external opposition groups, there was no real debate and their concerns weren’t given serious consideration. The bloggers were assured that their input was welcome and given a promise to “study the issues,” but their proposals were put on the back burner. Increasingly frustrated, bloggers such as Abd al-Mun‘im Mahmoud told the Associated Press, “those in charge aren’t connected with today’s world.”

CONTESTED 2008 – 2010 ELECTIONS

The old-guard Brothers successfully consolidated their dominance in the 2008 and 2009 Guidance Bureau elections, and in the 2010 marshid elections. The conservative wing demonstrated its willingness use extrajudicial means to alienate dissenting members in pursuit of organizational control. Taking extraordinary measures in response to fresh crackdowns by the Mubarak regime, the Guidance Bureau conducted elections by going door to door. Amid widespread accusations of irregularities, all five new Guidance Bureau members were conservative. They also successfully rushed the 2010 election to select the...
Shatir. A long conservative than the preferred candidate Khayr candidate in 2012, was arguably even more processes. Moreover, the reformists who could have brought party leaders to step down from the Brotherhood.

The Guidelines Bureau remained a major player in Egyptian politics. Given the old guard's pattern of pushing for organizational control, it is not too surprising that when real political power became possible in 2011, the old guard formed the Freedom and Justice party, and won a majority of parliamentary seats. The party's majority in Parliament should have been allowed the Brotherhood to have a major role in creating the new constitution. Pushback from the deep state, in the form of the military and judiciary, prevented the formation of a meaningful opposition to the well-entrenched deep state. Although the Brotherhood's short tenure since 2011 has little to say about Islamist governance in general—originating as it did in a particular political and organizational milieu—if reformist members had gained organizational control, or if the democratic experiment been allowed to continue, there may have been a very different outcome in Egypt.

RURAL ALLIANCES

The elections brought in more rural members into the Guidance Bureau, a trend the old guard encouraged. According to Tammam, the fact that “rural people are less prone to challenging their leaders,” resulted in an increase in rural norms such as absolute loyalty and obedience to group elders, aversion to difference, and disrespect for political engagement. Tammam also notes the resulting shift in the organization norms and practices:

Over the past few years, the Muslim Brotherhood has been infused with rural elements. Its tone is becoming more and more patriarchal, and its members are showing their superiors the kind of deference associated with countryside traditions. You hear them referring to their top officials as the “uncle hajj,” the “big hajj,” “our blessed one,” etc. Occasionally, they even kiss the hands, the heads of top leaders.

These trends led to indifference toward reformist initiatives for change, a decreasing appeal for urban youth, and a turn toward less-risky political groups such as Salafism.

THE FREEDOM AND JUSTICE PARTY

The 2011 Arab uprisings made it possible for the Brotherhood to operate freely for the first time in Egyptian politics. Given the old guard’s pattern of pushing for organizational control, it is not too surprising that when real political power became possible in 2011, the old guard formed the Freedom and Justice party, and won a majority of parliamentary seats. The party’s majority in Parliament should have allowed the Brotherhood to have a major role in creating the new constitution. Pushback from the deep state, in the form of the military and judiciary, prevented the Freedom and Justice party’s parliamentary majority from forming the constitution they had originally preferred. In response, the old guard used the party to run for the presidency.

The Guidance Bureau remained a major player in Freedom and Justice Party decisions even after asking party leaders to step down from the Brotherhood. Moreover, the reformists who could have brought their ideological flexibility and political savvy and skills to bear were kept out of the party’s decision-making processes. Mohamed Morsi, the party’s presidential candidate in 2012, was arguably even more conservative than the preferred candidate Khayrat al-Shatir. A long-time member of the conservative Guidance Bureau and head of the Brotherhood bloc in Parliament from 2000 to 2005, Morsi was loyal to the old guard and dutiful in fulfilling their directives. Ibrahim Hudeibi, a former Brother and blogger, commented, “[Morsi] does not challenge any organizational decision…he is not an independent leader.”

The Brotherhood’s continued distrust of outsiders and expectation of obedience ultimately proved unhelpful to the project of nation-building, because it curtailed not only political creativity and acceptance of ideological and political difference, but also sensitivity to constituents, alliance-building, and feedback mechanisms.

Conclusion

The Brotherhood’s internal culture and structures of obedience prevented participation from moderating the Guidance Bureau, and the marginalization of reformist members handicapped the organization’s political capacity as they stepped onto the national stage. Moreover, the patterns developed during the old guard’s tenure in Brotherhood leadership began to reach the limit of their effectiveness: The habit of handling dissent and ideological difference by ignoring it, creating empty institutional mechanisms for venting rather than attempting creative adaptation, and intimidating dissenters did not serve them well during a period when Egyptians were less tolerant of Mubarak-era political tactics. Like the Brotherhood’s attempts to build cross-partisanship in 2005, the Freedom and Justice Party struggled to build meaningful alliances. A strategy of isolation rather than alliance-building prevented the formation of a meaningful opposition to the well-entrenched deep state. Although the Brotherhood’s short tenure since 2011 has little to say about Islamist governance in general—originating as it did in a particular political and organizational milieu—if reformist members had gained organizational control, or if the democratic experiment been allowed to continue, there may have been a very different outcome in Egypt.

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SYRIA AND LEBANON

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Strategies for Survival: The Syrian Regime’s Construction of Social Legitimacy

Emily Cury

Abstract: At the outset of the Syrian uprising, Bashar al-Assad’s overthrow was seen as inevitable. Three years later, he remains in power, and Syria’s peaceful revolution has transformed into a violent civil conflict. The regime’s survival despite intense domestic and international opposition is a puzzle that many scholars have attempted to tackle. Explanations include the regime’s willingness to crush dissent, the support of its regional and international allies, and the international community’s reluctance to intervene. All of these explanations deepen our understanding of the regime’s robustness, but they implicitly assume that the regime—because of its blatant use of force and disregard of international law—is not concerned with legitimizing its power. This article seeks to problematize this assumption by examining if and how the regime has concerned itself with questions of legitimacy. I argue that the regime is acutely aware of the need to legitimize its power and is actively engaged in constructing the source of its legitimacy. Through a discursive analysis of regime communication, I demonstrate that the regime has framed and constituted itself as the protector of stability, both inside and outside Syria. This strategy of legitimation is an important aspect of why Bashar al-Assad remains in power.

Keywords: constructivism, framing, legitimacy, sectarian, Syria

In the past three years, the Syrian uprising has transformed from a peaceful civil movement into an increasingly violent armed conflict. Many predicted that, faced with mass discontent in the form of a peaceful revolution, Bashar al-Assad’s regime would follow the example of other dictators in the region and soon be overthrown. The “Arab Spring” uprisings that brought an end to decades of authoritarian rule in neighboring countries—including Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—were seen as a tidal wave that would soon wash over Syria. As of the writing of this paper, however, Bashar al-Assad remains in power and Syria’s conflict rages on, wreaking a degree of destruction and devastation that even the most pessimistic observers did not foresee.  

Although explanations for the apparent robustness of the Syrian regime are as complex and multifaceted as the conflict itself, in general they fall under one of three sets of arguments. First, the regime’s survival is seen as a result of its blatant use of violence and repression to quell the opposition. This set of arguments credits the existence of a sophisticated coercive apparatus—comprising praetorian military units, the secret police, and the army—for the survival of the regime. Part of the strength of this coercive apparatus is believed to lie in its fragmentation, which guarantees a vertical power structure. The infamous mukhabarat (secret police) consists of multiple branches, often competing with, sabotaging, and spying on one another. This fragmentation was intended to guarantee that no single security unit would become so powerful as to pose a threat. It should come as no surprise that the regime would view the security forces as potentially mutinous. After all, Bashar al-Assad’s father, Hafez al-Assad, took power through a military coup in 1970 and set out to build a regime that would ensure no such scenario would be repeated against him. In addition to fragmenting the security system, he ensured loyalty by placing family members, and members of his own Alawite sect, in key positions of power. For reasons that will be discussed throughout this paper, the regime’s tactics of conflating its own survival with that of the Alawite minority continues to ensure the loyalty of the security forces, whose leadership is disproportionally Alawite. It is worth noting that the sectarian manifestations of the conflict we are now witnessing are a direct consequence of regime tactics, and not, as is often portrayed, the inevitable expression of intrinsic sectarian hatred. The second set of arguments explains the robustness of the regime as the result of...
support of international allies, mainly Iran and Russia. Seen through this lens, al-Assad’s survival is the result of the geostrategic calculations of its allies. Iran’s main goal is to maintain the regional balance of power with its neighbors in the Gulf, the most important of which is Saudi Arabia. The al-Assad regime, along with Hezbollah in Lebanon, is seen as the last card to maintain that balance. Similarly, Russia’s support of the Syrian regime is arguably a way through which the former can secure its economic and geopolitical interests in the region, while demonstrating its relevance as an international political player. As long as these two allies continue to supply the Syrian regime with money, arms, and political support—Russia’s veto in the UN Security Council being of paramount importance—Bashar al-Assad could remain in power for a prolonged period, if not indefinitely.

The third set of arguments blames the political stalemate on the international community’s unwillingness to provide significant support for the opposition. The reluctance of the United States to intervene by, for example, arming the opposition in a more sustained manner, or exerting more political pressure on Russia, is seen as having emboldened al-Assad, thus guaranteeing his continued survival. The United States is viewed as particularly culpable for its incoherent policy toward Syria. While signaling a disavowal of al-Assad, the United States fell short of intervening in favor of the opposition, thus leaving it no choice but to look elsewhere for support. This is believed to be an important cause for the increasing influence of radical elements among the opposition.

These three sets of explanations, especially when combined, provide important insight regarding the Syrian regime’s survival. Nevertheless, they share a theoretical blind spot in implicitly assuming that al-Assad’s regime lacks all legitimacy, both domestically and in the eyes of the international community. The regime’s tactics to quell dissent included repression, co-optation, and nominal and vague promises for political change, seeming to signal that legitimacy is not a core of the regime’s concerns. I argue that, rather than being unconcerned with questions of legitimacy, Bashar al-Assad and his regime are anxiously aware of the need to legitimize their power and have been actively engaged in constructing the source of their legitimacy. I further argue that to fully understand the robustness of the regime, the ways in which the regime has sought to construct its legitimacy must be taken into account.

The remainder of this paper is dedicated to examining how the regime has constructed the sources of its legitimacy through three main discourses: the jihadi “other,” the foreign conspiracy threat, and the existing “progress and reform” discourse. What these three discursive constructions have in common is that they present Bashar al-Assad—regardless of how unsavory a figure—as the best alternative and safest choice for Syria and the international community.

The Regime’s Initial Response: Constructing the Jihadi “Other”

A key regime strategy in responding to the initial uprising was a speedy, cohesive, and intense campaign accusing the opposition of terrorism and religious extremism. It is worth highlighting that this was done from the very outset, when, by all accounts, the opposition was best characterized as domestic, peaceful, and secular. The regime’s strategy aimed first and foremost to produce fear, deliberately using sectarianism to rally Syria’s minorities. As early as March 2011, the regime declared that it was fighting against “armed gangs” and terrorists, despite the fact that this period was characterized by civilian rallies demanding political and social reform.

Al-Assad made continued reference to “national unity,” which, although seemingly guileless, was a tactic meant to produce fear by awakening prescribed identities. In a country that includes more than 20 ethnic and religious minorities, al-Assad was signaling that the uprising posed a threat to the “harmony” and “cohesion” that guaranteed their existence—and that he was fighting to protect. The emphasis on “national unity” was a way through which al-Assad reminded minorities specifically—but also Sunnis from the middle and upper class who benefited from the regime’s policies—just how fragile their position was. By discursively associating “violence” and “blood” with the need to strengthen, unite, and bring harmony to the county, the regime was drawing a coded, but readily understood, analogy between opposition to its reign and the potential of sectarian violence. As al-Assad argued,

[B]lood that was spilled on the streets is Syrian blood, and we are all concerned because the victims are our brothers and their families are our families. It is important to look for the causes and those behind these events. We need to investigate and bring the people responsible to account. This has happened anyway, but let it be for bringing about national unity rather than disuniting the
Syrians. Let it be for strengthening the country rather than weakening it, for putting an end to sedition rather than enflaming it. Let us act as quickly as possible to heal our wounds and restore harmony to our larger family and maintain love as our unifying bond.10

The image of blood being spilled in the streets is meant to cause fear by evoking familiar scenes of other civil wars, such as those of Iraq and Lebanon. Further, al-Assad argues that “we” are all concerned because those who have died are “our” brothers and families, identifying all Syrians—including himself—as belonging to the same national family. The passage also cautions that any attempt to bring the guilty to justice should be done in a way that unites, rather than divides, this larger “family.” It is, thus, those who have dared to raise and oppose the integrity of the national family who threaten the “harmony” and “unity” that guarantee the existence of all members of the family. The “family” under threat in this discursive representation is not the Alawite ruling family, but the Syrian national family.

Addressing students at the University of Damascus on June 20, 2011, roughly a month after his first national speech, al-Assad defines the enemy as belonging to one of three groups: Syrians who have decided that destroying the country is an appropriate way to voice their demands; criminals and “outlaws” for whom chaos is a preferred condition; and “the third and more dangerous” of these, those with extremist and takfiiri ideologies.11 He describes this latter group as belonging to a “bygone age” and their ideology as “lurking in dark corners, ready to emerge when an opportunity presents itself, or when it finds a handy mask to put on.” This, of course, implies that extremists and the threat they pose are always present in society, waiting for the right opening to strike. It is thus left to the regime to keep this threat from surfacing. By warning his audience not to be deceived by the “handy mask” of democracy and freedom the enemy may be trying to put on, al-Assad presents the peaceful protestors as nothing more than extremists in disguise.

Further, al-Assad describes the opposition as one that “kills in the name of religion, destroys in the name of reform, and spreads chaos in the name of freedom.” As constructivist theorists remind us, meaning is only made possible through opposition, and all opposition of meaning is hierarchical, one term being always superior and preferred over the other.12 By juxtaposing terms such as violence/religion, destruction/reform, and chaos/freedom, this discursive representation aims to construct the opposition movement as the source of danger, while presenting the regime as the protector. The aim is to strip the opposition of its greatest source of power: the justness and morality of the cause.

When al-Assad’s regime decided to employ force to respond to the initial peaceful protests, it practically guaranteed the militarization and radicalization of the opposition.13 Indiscriminate state violence, coupled with frustration resulting from years of socioeconomic oppression and the regime’s unwillingness to legitimize people’s demands, was the fastest way to ensure that people who felt they had nothing to lose would take up arms against the regime.14 From the regime’s perspective, this also served as an important strategy. Having claimed, from the first days of the uprising, to be fighting “armed groups” and terrorists, it had now created the conditions to secure the fulfillment of the prophecy.

In his first interview with the American media after the uprising, given to ABC’s Barbara Walters on December 7, 2011, al-Assad asserted that his regime was not suppressing opposition, but fighting terrorists. The dialogue itself is interesting, in that it reflects al-Assad’s active discursive struggle to construct the opposition:

**al-Assad:** Now we are having terrorists in many places killing people.

**Walters:** Now?

**al-Assad:** No, not only now but from the very beginning, no, not now. Now, it is recognized in the media; that is the difference, but from the very first few weeks we had those terrorists who are getting more and more aggressive; they have been killing people. We have over one thousand one hundred soldier and policeman killed. Who killed them? Peaceful demonstrations! This is not logical, this is unpalatable.15

This construction of the opposition as the “Islamist other” is a way through which the regime also actively constructs its own identity. Whereas terrorists threaten national security, the regime defends it; whereas terrorists seek chaos, the regime seeks stability; whereas terrorists inflict violence, the regime imposes security. This latent discourse is not lost on Syrians, especially those belonging to minority communities. The co-optation of religious and ethnic minorities has been a central strategy pursued by the regime since it came to power in 1970.16 This co-optation has taken a number of forms, including, most

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obviously, building a minority regime, patronage and clientelism (partly organized along sectarian lines), and establishing the façade of a secular regime. The active construction of the opposition as the jihadi “other,” along with the regime’s reliance on paramilitary “defense” units, popularly referred to as “shabiha,” served to generate and fuel the sectarian dimensions of the conflict.17

I do not claim that the rise of sectarianism is purely a result of regime tactics. Factions within the opposition, as well as foreign political and religious leaders such as Yusuf Qaradawi, also played a critical role in constituting the conflict along sectarian lines.18 What I do claim is that the regime has a history of using minorities to legitimize its hold on power; therefore, its current construction of the opposition as an existential threat to Syria’s minorities must be seen as an extension of that history. Many minorities, including members of al-Assad’s Alawite sect, share the socioeconomic and political grievances that all Syrians share, so their loyalty toward the regime should in no way be perceived as automatic. The regime, acutely aware of this fact, is therefore continually working to secure their loyalty by constructing the threat against which it then claims to provide protection.

In his interview with Walters, al-Assad attests to the potential volatility that Syria could pose to the region, and consequently the international system, if sectarian divisions are not kept in check:

The Middle East is generally very diverse in ethnicities, in sects, and in religions, but Syria is the most diverse and this is the fault line where all these diversity (sic) meet. So, it is like the fault line of the earth and when you play with it, you will have earthquake that is going to affect the whole region…20

Al-Assad is not only constructing a threat that could destabilize Syria and the entire Middle East. By predicting an “earthquake,” he seems to be using the potential threat as a warning to the West—after all, the interview was conducted in English and directed toward a Western audience.

By exploiting the importance of Syria’s geographic location and proximity to Israel, the regime’s discourse also intended to awaken the latent anxieties that an “awakened” Arab World posed to the West. Rami Makhlouf, the president’s billionaire cousin, portrayed al-Assad’s regime as the only one that could guarantee Israel’s security, stating ominously to The New York Times that “if there is no stability here, there is no way there will be stability in Israel…Nobody can guarantee what will happen after.”21 Al-Assad’s positioning of the regime as the only guarantor of stability for the international community was, and continues to be, a way to secure tacit agreement of his regime’s survival.

The Opposition as a Foreign Conspiracy

The performative representation of the opposition as nothing more than a foreign conspiracy to destabilize Syria is the second major discourse through which the opposition has been interpreted.22 Through this construction, the regime positions itself and its supporters as “true Syrians” and patriotic defenders of the nation, while representing the opposition as foreign, or as domestic traitors with foreign ties. Like all discursive constructions, history and narrative become important tools through which meaning is produced.23 The construction of the opposition as foreign enemy relies on a long history with foreign threat in the form of colonialism, political and economic intervention, and military conflict. The history of foreign intervention in Syria is crucial to understanding why these lines of argument resonate so well with a large segment of the population.

When al-Assad states that “Syria is facing a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country,”24 his audience readily understands the message. The symbol of an octopus whose tentacles reach menacingly toward Syria evokes fear and aversion. Further, the tentacles of this opposition extend from nearby and distant countries, understood to include neighboring and international powers that have opposed the regime. This depiction is only one example of a familiar image that is recycled in different forms. Similar imagery is found in a political cartoon25 published in Syria Times, a mouthpiece for the regime.

The cartoon shows a man—depicted in blatantly racist and stereotypical terms, and with the flag of Israel on his hat, to avoid any confusion—out of whose mouth another man, whose hat features the U.S. flag, emerges. Out of that man’s mouth emerges a jihadi, wearing no hat, but with a long beard. The image is clear enough: Israel gives orders to the United States, which proceeds to give orders to jihadis plotting against the regime. The comic is particularly interesting because it combines both discursive representations—the jihadi “other” and the foreign conspiracy—in one image. Not only is the opposition made up of

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extremists, but they also respond to foreign powers.

By constructing all those who have dared speak against him as traitors, al-Asaad leaves no room for legitimate dissent: Anyone who is against the regime is against Syria. This discursive representation of the opposition aims to depict the conflict in zero-sum terms: there can be no middle ground in a fight against foreign conspirators. As al-Asaad argues, “those involved intentionally or unintentionally…contribute to destroying their country.” All dissent is intentionally or unintentionally sedituous; therefore, all who participate in it have betrayed their homeland. Through this construction of the opposition, al-Asaad further demarcates who fits inside the imagined Syrian community, and who does not.

Syrians are warned continuously to protect themselves against the conniving machinations of the opposition: their demands may seem benign, but make no mistake, the opposition is a wolf in sheep’s clothes. The regime’s rhetoric reminds people that the opposition is complex and highly organized, having infiltrated many institutions of the state. Al-Asaad reminds his audience that there are “groups in more than one governorate linked to some countries abroad…media groups, forgery groups and groups of ‘eye-witnesses’” all involved in plotting Syria’s destruction. Alluding to the outbreak of protests, al-Asaad argues that although the people of Dar’a—where the protests began—have no responsibility for what happened, they do have a responsibility to fight against sedition. The people of Dar’a are defined as patriotic and dignified, as opposed (implicitly) to the treasonous and unpatriotic few who sought to sow chaos and destroy the homeland.

By constructing the opposition as a foreign agent, the regime seeks to legitimize its behavior as necessary to defend the integrity of the nation. The brutal use of force is legitimized, because it is not being used against Syrians, but against foreign conspirators. Even if some of these conspirators are Syrian nationals, their plotting against the nation places them outside the moral boundaries of the community. In a 2013 interview, al-Asaad does seem to leave room for the existence of a domestic opposition with which the regime would be willing to enter into dialogue, stating, “we are open for these parties to participate in governing the Syrian state.” There can be no opposition that seeks to overthrow the regime—only one that, driven by its patriotic love for Syria, participates with the regime. Thus, the kind and degree of opposition that will be accepted is something that the regime will determine. As members of al-Asaad’s government often claim, “negotiation only under the umbrella of the homeland.” It is worth noting that the Arabic term for homeland, watan, is interchangeably used to mean the state, thus conflating the state structure al-Asaad has built with the national homeland.

Constructing the Geneva Conference as a Neo-imperial Intervention

One of the most problematic aspects of the “foreign threat” construction is the fact that it includes practically every country on which the potential for a diplomatic resolution ultimately depends. When asked about the government’s stance toward Geneva II, al-Asaad responded by questioning the legitimacy of the parties invited to the negotiating table. “It is clear,” he argued, “that some of the groups, which may attend the conference, didn’t exist until very recently,” but “were created during the crisis by foreign intelligence agencies.” The political opposition movements are discursively represented as tools of foreign powers. This representation is a way not only to tarnish the opposition, but also to obviate the regime’s duty to enter into negotiations and find a political resolution.

By constructing the opposition as foreign-backed and the Geneva Peace Talks as a Western scheme to meddle in Syria’s internal affairs, the regime aims to present the political opposition as disconnected from on-the-ground reality. One of the ways the regime sought to remind people just how unfit opposition leaders were was by dropping “educational” pamphlets during the bombardment of Damascus suburbs in July 2012. One pamphlet shows opposition leader Burhan Ghalioun sitting in a bar beside an attractive blonde woman. The caption reads, “enjoying life’s pleasures.”

Representing the political opposition as foreign and disconnected, and emphasizing the opposition inside Syria as violent jihadi and disloyal, the regime seeks to signal that it has no real negotiating partner. As al-Asaad has argued,

The majority of those fighting and carrying out terrorist operations on the ground have no political agenda. Some of them have become professional armed robbers, and others, as you know, are takfiri organizations fighting for an extremist Islamic emirate and things of that kind. Geneva means nothing for these groups.
Al-Assad is thus discursively constructed as the defender of all “loyal” Syrians and protector of the nation. Further, “real” Syrians must recognize that nothing good can come from negotiating with the very forces that are plotting against the nation. To the degree that there is any hope in political negotiation, it is one that takes place in Syria and among Syrians—implicitly, under the regime’s rules.

Opposition to What? Progress, Reform, and the Portrayal of Normalcy

The last discourse I would like to examine is not directly concerned with constructing the opposition, but with denying the very reality upon which the opposition bases its claims. This discourse seeks to obliterate the opposition by questioning the veracity of its demands. I refer to this as the “progress and reform” discourse.

In his 2011 speech to the National Assembly, al-Assad reminded his audience of the advances his government had made in the past decade. He described the three pillars of his regime as development, “opening up”, and communicating directly with the Syrian people. The terms “development” and “opening up” are meant to signal the economic liberalization policies be instituted (and which led to many of the social and economic inequalities that led to the uprising).32

Although the liberalization policies—including deregulation of the banking sector, privatization of state-owned farms, and opening of the market to foreign competition—resulted in some degree of economic progress, the majority of Syrians did not experience any of the benefits these policies were supposed to bring. In fact, those in rural areas, along with the urban poor, experienced a steep decline in economic security and overall standards of living.33 By proudly counting his liberalization policy as a pillar of his regime’s success, al-Assad was speaking to a particular audience, mainly composed of the secular middle and upper classes, reminding that audience of all it had to lose were the regime to fall.

Perhaps the most ironic of the regime’s “pillars” is that of “direct communication with the people.” Had not so many lives been lost in this conflict, it would seem almost comical that a dictator facing a mass uprising would claim popular consultation as one of his pillars. As evidence of the policy of direct consultation, al-Assad cites a “long series of meetings which have included all sections of society,” which he considered “the most important thing I have done throughout my years in my official position.” Although many would be quick to dismiss these justifications as the propaganda of an irrational regime, such a dismissal does little to help us understand why, as absurd as these arguments may sound, they are accepted by a certain segment of the population.

The discursive construction of normalcy was another strategy that became commonly used by the regime as the conflict intensified.34 Images of al-Assad driving his car around Damascus, alongside his wife, were meant to send a clear message: al-Assad, the man and husband, does not fear for his safety, and neither does his regime. Further, while citizens anxiously awaited some indication that the regime recognized the severity of the crisis, al-Assad was busy meeting with the Polish prime minister to discuss “the strategic relationship between the Arab World and the neighbors of the Baltic sea.”35 Rather than publicly recognize the situation, the regime concerned itself with the mundane aspects of governing. The more the crisis intensified and the humanitarian situation deteriorated, the more the regime sought to promote its “business-as-usual” narrative to assure the public, and perhaps itself, that al-Assad’s Syria remained as orderly and obedient as it had always been.

The Power of Representation

In this paper, I have attempted to examine some of the less overt manifestations of power. By examining the discursive constructions through which the Syrian regime has attempted to represent the opposition, this paper has aimed to demonstrate that the struggle to represent reality is one of the central ways through which power is exerted, negotiated, and, thus, potentially subverted. This is not in any way intended to deny the coercive nature of power and the fact that violence is one of the main ways through which power continues to be exercised, especially in the case of Syria. What I do claim is that even the most coercive forms of control, such as those on which al-Assad relies, seek and require some degree of legitimation.

The regime has relied on a particular construction of the opposition as alien, subversive, disloyal and jihadi, in addition to a representation of normalcy and progress, to gain a degree of legitimacy, acceptance, and support for its behavior. Through its depiction of the opposition as “other,” the regime is actively engaged in the construction of its own identity, an act that serves to further legitimize its power. One of the main sources of legitimacy for the modern state is derived from its role as the provider of security. However, in order
to perform this task—which is the very source of its legitimation—an enemy must first exist. The Syria regime’s construction of the opposition has enabled it to portray itself as the savior of the nation, the grantor of national unity, and the beacon of progress, all of which have become important arguments through which its power is legitimized, and its survival extended.

Notes

1 The United Nations estimates that almost half of Syria’s population now needs some form of humanitarian assistance. (The number of Syrians who have died since the beginning of the conflict exceeds 140,000.) In addition, according to UNHCR, 2.3 million Syrian refugees are residing in neighboring countries, and 6.5 million Syrians are internally displaced. Civilians have endured severe social and psychological trauma that, although less easily quantifiable, have had devastating effects, particularly on children.


10 Bashar al-Assad, speech at the People’s Assembly, March 30, 2011.

http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=117&Itemid=496


17 Ibid.


19 Qaradawi is blamed for increasing religious tensions by calling on Sunnis from all over the world to wage jihad against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. See http://www.bbc.com/news/world/middle-east-22741588

20 Bardah al-Assad, interview by Barbara Walters, ABC, December 7, 2011.


23 Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

24 Al-Assad speech, March 30, 2011.

25 The image is available at: http://syriatimes.sy/index.php/editorials/commentary/122-08-the-us-deeply-troubled-1

26 Al-Assad speech, March 30, 2011.


34 International Crisis Group, “Syria’s Phase of Radicalisation.”

Struggling to Cope: The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Its Impact on Lebanon

Rima Rassi

Abstract: The exodus of refugees from Syria is by no means the first time the Arab region has faced an urgent refugee situation, and is, regrettably, not the first time the humanitarian response has been underfunded, chaotic, and highly uncoordinated. The severity of the humanitarian crisis in Lebanon, which has taken in Syrian refugees in massive numbers, is unmistakably grave. Moreover, the exceptional influx of refugees poses long-lasting ramifications for this small nation. This paper highlights the consequences of not providing Lebanon with sufficient aid to deal with this crisis. I argue that Lebanon is rapidly reaching the brink of collapse, resulting from (1) the political, economic, demographic, social, and infrastructural pressures of the refugee influx and (2) the lack of aid from the international community. Emphasizing indicators that can be used to measure Lebanon’s inability to absorb refugees, this research goes beyond the attempts of recent studies, using a mixed-methods assessment to examine the impact of the crisis.

This paper seeks to illustrate the effects of the meager supply of aid to Lebanon. I argue that the country is rapidly reaching the brink of collapse, resulting from two factors: (1) the political, economic, demographic, social and infrastructural pressures of the refugee influx; and (2) the lack of aid from the international community. Emphasizing indicators that can be used to measure Lebanon’s inability to absorb any more refugees, this research goes beyond the work of myriad recent studies on the refugee crisis, using a mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) assessment to examine the impact of the crisis.

To counter Lebanon’s otherwise imminent collapse, I suggest the creation of decentralized management cells on a governorate (muhafaza) level. These cells would act as decision-makers in the zones of refugee settlement—to be empowered and sustained by crisis management teams and locally trained individuals. This strategy is significant, as it would help address tensions between host communities and refugees—an issue that must be kept in mind when formulating any response to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon.
The Arab region recurrently witnesses waves of refugees and internally displaced persons. Indeed, the history of the modern Middle East has been characterized by long-term human displacement, and the current exodus of refugees from Syria is by no means the first time the region has faced an urgent refugee situation. Regrettably, this is also not the first time the response to such a crisis has been chaotic and highly uncoordinated. The present humanitarian crisis in Lebanon is unmistakably grave, as the influx of Syrian refugees stretches the country’s already-fragile institutions and tensions continue to rise daily.

Unfortunately, there is no end to Syria’s conflict in sight. It is projected that Syria’s civil war will most likely last until for another ten to fifteen years—and possibly well beyond that date. Several factors and conditions that contribute to the prolonging of civil conflicts apply to Syria, such as the role of “veto players” (foreign powers) and the presence of numerous participating factions. After nearly four years of civil strife, and with no sign that the conflict will be resolved in the near future, the Syrian refugee issue is quickly spiraling toward categorization as a “protracted refugee situation.”

The exceptionally large number of refugees in an already tense and often turbulent country has placed the Lebanese government and the communities hosting refugees under unprecedented levels of strain. A number of Lebanese ministries have tried to address the resulting needs, but the high lack of resources, the sudden jump in population, and internal security concerns are overwhelming the government. Ministers and other officials seem to have acknowledged the circumstances, issuing daily (and frequently, quite controversial) calls for any sort of help in dealing with the refugee crisis. All appear unable to cope with the scale of the crisis. In reality, this crisis presents a double-sided ordeal, as the majority of refugees have settled informally in areas that already have Lebanon’s highest documented levels of poverty and vulnerability. It is estimated that 96 percent of the registered Syrian refugee population and 66 percent of vulnerable Lebanese live side-by-side in 225 localities. Considering the double-edged gravity of the situation, it is surprising that the efforts of the international community are not centered on providing viable and efficient avenues for refugee aid. In December 2013, the U.N. issued its largest appeal for aid to meet the $6.5 billion it deems necessary to address the needs of those affected by the crisis, whether inside or outside Syria. This call was met with only 62 percent of the total requested amount—not enough to provide care to refugees in Lebanon, let alone those across the region.

Recent figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the entity leading the Lebanese emergency response, show that the number of Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon has surpassed the 1 million mark, which the U.N. has called a “devastating milestone.” Unofficial figures put the number much higher than is commonly reported, with Lebanese politicians claiming that the country now hosts around 1.7 million Syrian refugees. These refugees are spread unevenly across the country, with North Lebanon and Bekaa governorates hosting 235,000 and 272,000 refugees, respectively, and Beirut and the South hosting 199,000 and 95,000, respectively. Some 44.7 percent of registered refugees are between the ages of 18 and 59, and more than half (52.8 percent) are children under 18, who have not had access to education for months, if not years. Indeed, displaced Syrians in Lebanon are living in circumstances of dire distress, where pressing concerns such as health care, food security, and decent shelter are not met. Nevertheless, UNHCR is taking great strides when compared with the efforts of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which is struggling to meet the needs of the Palestinians coming from Syria into Lebanon. (Given UNRWA’s funding, which is significantly lower than UNHCR’s, the situation of Palestinian refugees from Syria is arguably much more difficult than those who hold Syrian citizenship.)

UNRWA estimates that more than 50,000 Palestinians have arrived in Lebanon from Syria. Yarmouk Camp, a settlement in Damascus with Syria’s largest community of Palestinians, has seen more than 85 percent of its inhabitants flee due to the fighting. These Palestinians find themselves with little legal protection and employment possibilities, similar to conditions faced by the Palestinian refugees already residing in Lebanon. Research conducted by American Near East Refugee Aid and the National Institute of Social Care and Vocational Training found that 90 percent of Palestinian refugees from Syria are unemployed. Tensions are rising between newly arriving Palestinian refugees and the indigenous inhabitants of Lebanon’s twelve Palestinian refugee camps; as established refugees and new arrivals compete for scarce resources and shelter, the overpopulated camps are coming under even more pressure.

The magnitude of all these figures is best appreciated in the context of Lebanon’s population, which has stood at around 4.425 million. Today, however, one in four people residing in Lebanon is a Syrian refugee—a shift that has effectively increased Lebanon’s population by 25 percent. Every day, UNHCR registers around 2,500 refugees in Lebanon, amounting to
“more than one person per minute.”

Ninette Kelley, resident representative for UNHCR in Lebanon, emphasized the calamity by asserting that Lebanon now holds the “distinction” of hosting the world’s “highest number of refugees per capita.” In other words, Lebanon now holds the highest concentration of refugees as a percentage of population in the world.

The influx of 1 million (or more) refugees comes with widespread repercussions. For Lebanon—a country smaller than the state of Connecticut that is already dealing with a number of internal political and security difficulties—the impact is astounding. The previous political deadlock, resulting in the absence of vital government institutions—specifically, a functioning Cabinet—has forced U.N. agencies, local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs and INGOs) to take over the role of response coordination. This task, one these organizations are not prepared for, has been overwhelming. U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres summarized the challenge during a visit to the country: “The Lebanese people have shown striking generosity, but are struggling to cope.”

Lebanon, Refugees, and National Instability: Political Tensions on the Rise

After raging for almost four years, the Syrian conflict has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and wounded many more, with no immediate end in sight. Rebel factions and the regime of President Bashar al-Assad are engaged in a brutal struggle that has taken on sectarian and ethnic dimensions. Lebanon certainly has tasted the bitter effects of the civil war raging in neighboring Syria. From the beginning of the conflict, a de facto open border policy has permitted those fleeing the fighting to seek refuge in Lebanon—due to highly porous borders, a confessional political system, and the previous months-long Cabinet deadlock. However, Lebanon has no established procedures, strategies, or policies to deal with refugees, and it lacks a decentralized security policy or foreign policy capable of dealing with issues surrounding the refugee influx. These challenges, combined with the informal, sectarian undertones of all partisan politics in Lebanon, mean that politicians are unable to come to consensus concerning the refugees. The result is a de facto policy that leaves the Lebanese government unable to regulate the number of refugees—and numerous threats to national security—entering the country.

More than twenty years after the end of its own civil war, Lebanon remains vulnerable to any sort of demographic shift, particularly those involving protracted refugee situations that can be classified as either “permanent” or “semi-permanent” (as the Syrian refugee situation is proving to be). The effects of a semi-permanent or permanent demographic shift on Lebanon’s fragile sectarian system could be catastrophic, especially on the delicate religious balances operating under its confessional political system. The country is already susceptible to sectarian tension, and the influx of mainly Sunni Muslim Syrians is already causing civil strife along religious lines among Lebanese citizens. For more than a year, Lebanon’s second largest city, Tripoli, has been witnessing constant armed skirmishes, gunfire, and sniper fire, with deaths reported almost daily, as supporters (Alawites) and opponents (Sunnis) of the Assad regime fight with one another at an alarming rate. In response—and rather than highlight the urgent humanitarian need to address the protracted refugee crisis—Lebanese officials such as Minister of Foreign Affairs Gebran Bassil focus on calls to force Syrian refugees out of Lebanon as a means of resolving internal instability. During a meeting of Arab League Foreign Ministers in March 2014, Bassil warned of a conspiracy—“a plan for a long-term stay of displaced Syrians in Lebanon,” urging Arab states to create settlements for refugees outside Lebanon, “because there is a plot to keep them here [in Lebanon] for a long time.”

Bassil’s words reflect the Lebanese fear of a “permanent” demographic change.

Indicators of Demographic, Economic, Infrastructure, and Social Change, and the Effects of the Lack of Aid

Spillovers from the conflict are taking a heavy toll on Lebanon from a number of angles. The general consensus is that Lebanon is quickly approaching a breaking point, prompting a number of high-level calls for aid, namely from Lebanese President Michel Suleiman, who has asserted that “Lebanon isn’t getting the help it needs to cope with the number of Syrians streaming across the border to seek shelter from war.”

Suleiman also stressed that the $74 million in previous donor support was far from sufficient: “The financial contribution [of donor countries] is not enough and the participation in sharing the number of refugees is not enough.”

Increased spending to provide the refugees with public services has strained the country’s budget, as Caretaker Finance Minister Mohammad Safadi expressed in Washington, D.C., in October 2013, stating, “We need $2.6 billion over a three-year period,” beginning with an injection of $450 million to support the strained educational and health care sectors, in addition to social safety nets.

Safadi continued his call for aid, explaining, “We as a government need budget support. The direct aid to the Syrians is being done by the Americans and others, but we need budget support for the part that we are carrying and that no one else would carry.”

To measure the deterioration of the situation and highlight the need for international aid, a number of...
core indicators have been carefully selected from a list of World Bank World Development Indicators, in addition to several significant measures omitted from the World Bank report and other recent studies. These indicators provide a more thorough clarification of the demographic, social, and infrastructural pressures arising from the Syrian conflict and the influx of refugees to Lebanon. The rationale for choosing these measures is based on the country’s modern history and current circumstances; a drastic change in a combination of the following may lead to Lebanon’s collapse:

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1. POPULATION TRENDS

World Bank figures from 2012 estimated Lebanon’s population to be around 4,425 million. It is estimated that Lebanon is housing 1.7 million refugees from Syria (1 million registered and 700,000 unregistered refugees)—a figure that is still on the rise.

a. Population (total)

In October 2013, Caretaker Finance Minister Safadi claimed that 1.5 million Syrian refugees were residing in Lebanon, bringing the country’s total population to a little less than 6 million. The UNHCR registration center in Tripoli projects that the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon will rise to 2 million by early next year. This is a rapid and considerable increase—one in four current residents of Lebanon are Syrian—especially because the population was expected to reach no more 4.75 million in 2040.

b. Population Growth (annual percent)

Statistics from the U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) dating back to 2012 projected that Lebanon’s population growth rate would increase during the period between 2010 and 2015 by around only 3.04 percent, then decrease again during the following period between 2015 and 2020, becoming negative, at -0.71. However, population estimates since the Syrian refugee crisis began indicate that Lebanon’s population growth has reached almost 38.41 percent, a staggering increase in a short period.

c. Population Density (people per km² of land)

Although the World Bank has no population density data for Lebanon for 2012, figures for previous years show a slight increase in population density, from 424.3491691 in 2010 to 428.4252199 in 2011. A calculation of current population density based on new population estimates highlights a staggering increase, to 566.877153 in 2013.

d. Population Aged 0–14 (percent of total)

Children between the ages of 0 and 14 represented 21.5 percent of Lebanon’s total population in 2012, making the number of children a little less than 1 million. The U.N. estimates that at least 500,000 Syrian children have come into Lebanon since the crisis began, thus increasing the figure to around 1.5 million. This surge has made it difficult to accommodate children in schools, and is placing vast strain on the educational system in Lebanon.

2. ECONOMY

The estimated cost of the Syrian crisis to Lebanon is around $2.6 billion, according to the World Bank’s Lebanon Economic Monitor report, which states, “The conflict is having a large, negative and rapidly growing impact on Lebanon’s economy, its social fabric and its public services.” Losses to the country’s economic activity may reach $7.5 billion by the end of 2014; the World Bank claims that Lebanese economic growth has been cut by 2.9 percent, representing billions of dollars in lost economic activity. This decrease is not insignificant. Lebanese citizens have felt the brunt of the decline through noticeable changes in wages, corporate profits, investment, and inflation. According to the Consumer Price Index, inflation was 9.17 percent in March 2013, whereas the Beirut Stock Exchange dropped 14.8 percent in the first two quarters of 2013. Revenue collection has seen a decrease of $1.5 billion, but government expenditure has concurrently increased by $1.1 billion due to the surge in demand for public services—a total fiscal impact of $2.6 billion. The rising demand for public services has culminated in a decline in both access to and provision of such services.

a. Tourism Revenue

Economic activity in Lebanon has been greatly stunted by the Syrian crisis. The large trade sector is a pillar of the Lebanese economy, but all four quarters of 2013 saw significant reductions in trade flows, as well as a
vast contraction in tourism. It is not surprising that the country is struggling with a collapse in tourism revenue resulting from the Syrian crisis. Tourism and hotel occupancy rates have witnessed sharp declines, particularly due to increasing security concerns and travel warnings released by countries around the world. Tourist arrivals fell by 17 percent in 2012, and slumped an additional 10 percent in 2013.42

b. Unemployment, Total (percent of total labor force)

Unemployment has increased nearly twofold, reaching 20 percent and lending credence to fears of the emergence of a “lost generation” of Lebanese. The World Bank asserts that the influx of Syrian refugees into the Lebanese labor market will put an additional 220,000 to 324,000 Lebanese—mostly women and unskilled youth—out of work.43

c. Poverty Headcount at Poverty Line

The number of Lebanese living below the poverty line has increased as a result of the spillover from the Syrian conflict. The 1 million already living below the poverty line at the outset of the conflict have been joined by an additional 170,000 people.44

d. Municipalities and Social Expenditure

In October 2013, the Ministry of Finance released its Public Finance Quarterly Report for the first quarter of 2013 (Q1 2013). The cuts in municipal expenditures and increase in social expenditures are astonishing, given the nature of the crisis. Municipal expenditures were cut substantially relative to Q1 2012, when municipal expenditures totaled LL 204 billion ($136 million); this figure fell to LL 8 billion ($5.3 million) in Q1 2013—a decrease of 96.3 percent.45 The reduction reflects the lack of a concrete policy that would permit Lebanese municipalities to take part of the Syrian refugee burden from the government and international organizations.

In contrast, Lebanese social expenditures—in health, education, National Social Security Fund payments, retirement and end-of-service indemnities—increased significantly. The social bill increased by 19 percent from Q1 2012 to Q1 2013, when the total reached LL 1,249 billion ($832 million). Several reasons are provided for this increase, the most noteworthy being a rise in education spending to LL 67 billion ($44.6 million), and transfers to nonprofit organizations by the Ministry of Social Affairs growing by LL 37 billion ($24.6 million) to reach LL 45 billion ($30 million). These spending increases clearly reflect the impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon.

3. HEALTH

Government health care expenditure has increased as a result of the Syrian conflict. Although many of the services provided to Syrian refugees (and Palestinian refugees from Syria) are paid directly by international donors, international organizations, and NGOs, the Lebanese government has struggled to provide help to nonprofit organizations and extend many public services to the refugees, causing severe strain on the health system, as is reflected in the increase in governmental health care spending in Q1 2013.46 Médecins Sans Frontières claims that the disease burden has shifted to chronic diseases and that access to secondary and tertiary health care is being limited by factors such as the cost of services, short opening hours, and long distances to health care facilities.47 The outbreak of polio in Syria, which emerged in October 2013, highlights the gravity of the health risks posed as refugees flood into Lebanon: there is a real risk that contagious diseases could be exported to Lebanon.

Affordable access to quality healthcare is likely to continue worsening. The Lebanese Ministry of Public Health is struggling to support hospitals and primary health care centers, which are experiencing a surge in demand for services. Immunization coverage among Syrian children under 3 is worryingly low. The government recently pushed ahead with the provision of free vaccinations for measles and polio, but more needs to be done to address communicable and non-communicable diseases.

a. Health Care Spending

The Ministry of Finance’s Public Finance Quarterly Report states that the purchase of medicines has risen considerably, to LL 50 billion ($33 million) in Q1 2013 from LL 9 billion ($6 million) in Q1 2012.48 Furthermore, payments for the hospitalization of uninsured citizens rose by LL 17 billion (around $11.2 million).49 These increases in spending can be directly linked to the burden the Syrian refugee crisis is placing on Lebanon’s health system.

b. Hospital Beds (per 1,000 people)

The Lebanese health system is dominated by the private sector, which is responsible for almost 90 percent of all services provided. Furthermore, the lack of government regulation of private health care has led to an excess of private hospitals clustered mostly in one area. According to a report by Banque BEMO, “the hospital sector suffers from distortions at different levels, including uneven geographical distribution of hospitals, dominance of inefficient small-size hospitals, limited supply of public beds, and low occupancy rates.50 The current number of hospital beds available in Lebanon is estimated to be around 14,864—in other words, 3.5 beds per 1,000 individuals, a ratio that places...
Lebanon first in the Arab World (excluding Israel) with regard to hospital beds.51 Nevertheless, Lebanese health care infrastructure is rapidly approaching its tipping point, with the number of available hospital beds decreasing rapidly. In the Bekaa Valley alone, some hospitals are completely out of beds.52 There is a fear of disease in the informal refugee settlements that have started to appear everywhere (especially in Bekaa) due to lack of water and hygiene, and, with hospital beds becoming quite limited, health workers are highly concerned that a public health catastrophe could break out at any time.53

**c. Infant Mortality**

It is unclear how today’s refugee crisis may affect infant mortality rates in Lebanon—the latest available figures are from 2010—but there is a notable trend in the significant number of infant mortality cases occurring during the first 27 days of life. In 2010, there were 770 cases in this age group, with 757 in the 1 month to 4 years age group. With many Syrian women crossing the border pregnant and giving birth in Lebanon (some without proper access to hospitals or other health care), in addition to the U.N. estimate of around 500,000 Syrian refugee children currently in Lebanon, it is projected that this number will increase significantly.54

**4. EDUCATION**

The Public Finance Quarterly Report for Q1 2013 reflects a rise in education spending, to LL 67 billion ($44.6 million), due to increases in subsidies for private schools and salaries at the General Directorate of Education.55 As the number of refugees increases and the length of time they remain in Lebanon extends, associated pressures on the education system are estimated to grow rapidly and non-linearly (for example, once spare capacity at school facilities is exhausted, new buildings will need to be purchased or rented to serve the additional students). UNICEF and partner charities report that they only have enough makeshift schools in Lebanon for a fraction of the Syrian children living there. Indeed, the education sector is hard-pressed and overextended, limiting its ability to serve the refugees and the communities who host them. Public schools have had to absorb large numbers of Syrian children, and many Lebanese public schools are running evening and night shifts to accommodate these exiled Syrian schoolchildren.

This primary refugee need—child education—is not being met in Lebanon, to the utter distress of the refugee parents. Nigel Fisher, the U.N.’s regional humanitarian coordinator for the Syrian refugee crisis, has stated, “[the parents are] suffering, they don’t have enough, they’re really struggling to survive, and they may have large health issues—but the thing they always say is, ‘I just want my child to get an education.’”56

Unfortunately, only around 33,000 Syrian refugee children could enroll in Lebanese schools in 2013. For those who were fortunate enough to enroll, the vast differences in the Syrian and Lebanese curricula led to high failure and dropout rates among Syrian children, at almost twice the national average for Lebanese children. According to Fisher, if aid permits, an effort to incorporate Syrian children into the educational system in Lebanon can be efficiently coordinated among relevant ministries and local actors.57

**5. SOCIAL COHESION**

Lebanon’s demographic fabric is undergoing substantial and long-lasting changes. In some areas, Syrian refugees outnumber the local Lebanese population. Social relations between refugees and host communities are tense, and mutual suspicion is rife. The war in Syria has triggered sporadic clashes between supporters and opponents of Assad in Tripoli and other areas in Lebanon. Poor Lebanese envy the international food, shelter, and medical aid that some refugees have been fortunate enough to receive. Wages are plummeting due to competition from cheaper Syrian laborers; meanwhile, food prices are increasing, rent and property prices are soaring, and the exacerbation of already dire market conditions are making it increasingly arduous for low-income Lebanese to make a living. As destitution spreads, marginalized poverty pockets are developing. Furthermore, the crime rate has risen, adding to the thorny relationship between the refugees and the local population and inflaming Lebanese public and political opinion concerning the presence of Syrian refugees.

**Case Study**

The case of Bar Elias, a town in the Zahle district of the Bekaa, exemplifies the experiences of communities across Lebanon and is a useful indicator of what can be expected in the coming months. The town’s population before the crisis numbered 50,000, a figure that has now doubled due to the flood of refugees. The local municipality is so strapped for funds that it is struggling to pay all of its employees. Consumption of drinking water has tripled, shelter is scarce, and the municipality is having great difficulty with its refuse collection and sewage systems. With only three policemen in the town, the burden of resolving conflicts between the refugees and the locals has fallen on the town’s mayor. Citizens of Bar Elias assert that their hometown is approaching its threshold.

This town is representative of other localities that are hosting prodigious numbers of refugees, and it illustrates the consequences that can be expected across the country, should sufficient aid not be delivered to the Lebanese agencies dealing with the crisis.
A Decentralized Response to Lebanon’s Syrian Refugee Crisis

Lebanon has become accustomed to dealing with waves of internally displaced persons, the most recent case (before the current crisis) being the July 2006 war. At that time, UNDP and UNHCR were in charge of dealing with internally displaced Lebanese, as the country did not have (and still does not) any crisis management cells. These U.N. agencies were completely disconnected from the local authorities—those who actually need to be overseeing such situations. Generally speaking, UNHCR is taking excellent strides on the ground, but its efforts are minimal compared with what could be done if coordination with local players were happening. The Lebanese government should prioritize the enabling of smoother facilitation between international organizations and local structures, through the creation of decentralized crisis management cells. Various models of coordination and engagement have been tried and tested, and it has been found that the only government bodies that can work and survive in a refugee crisis are the mohafazat, municipalities as actors do not work.58

Ideally, the mohafazat would act as real decision-makers within the zone of refugees, empowered and sustained by crisis management teams and locally trained Lebanese and Syrian individuals. UNHCR on its own cannot comprehend the background of the refugees, particularly the legal loopholes that international staff tends to overlook. Thus, there is an urgent need to deploy crisis management teams institutionalized in the bylaws of Lebanon’s government. These strategic concepts should be able to alleviate the tension between host communities and refugees.59 Because Lebanese political parties—all vocal about their stances for or against the Syrian regime—play a catalytic role in exacerbating host community-refugee tensions, it is now critical to find ways of empowering Syrian and Lebanese civil society, so as to alleviate conflict and friction between the two. A crucial element is the need for community analysis, to look at the dynamics of relationships between Lebanese and Syrians, especially in areas of “positive deviance,”60 in order to bring solutions as well as establish dialogue. Lebanese communities that have developed positive relationships with the refugees must be identified in the near future, so that other municipalities and regions may come to understand how these relationships have been forged and learn how other areas can be educated about proper community response and refugee enablement.

Concluding Thoughts: Lebanon Struggling to Cope

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in a state of tribulation. Lacking formal policies to deal with the refugees, the Lebanese government has not permitted them to settle in makeshift camps, so communities across the country are acting as primary hosts. The impact on Lebanese host communities and the country at large has been extensive, and the severity of the situation can be neither doubted nor ignored. The refugees are living in desperate conditions, and the Lebanese government and the communities who host them are themselves subject to immense strain. Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens all bear the cost of the conflict, no matter their location in the country. The combination of the vast scale of destruction in Syria, the multiple groups engaged in the fighting, and the sectarian aspect of the conflict make this humanitarian crisis even more lengthy and worrisome. With the escalating fighting in Syria showing no end in sight, the influx of refugees continues unabated and Lebanon is rapidly approaching a state of widespread instability and, thus, the brink of collapse.

The political, economic, demographic, social, and infrastructural pressures posed by the presence of so many refugees, compounded by the lack of aid from the international community, have led to the deterioration of Lebanon, to the extent that a social, political, and economic implosion on a national scale is becoming a real possibility. The precise details are impossible to foretell, but developments over the past twelve months allow us to extrapolate the wider consequences of not providing the Lebanese government with sufficient aid. Several trends strongly suggest that the country will soon approach a threshold beyond which the situation will become unstable, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. Creating decentralized management cells led by the mohafazat would help in three ways. First, establishing these cells would address Lebanon’s lack of emergency crisis units. Second, having active decision-makers in these cells would help alleviate the pressures of coordination currently faced by U.N. agencies, NGOs and INGOs, permitting them to step back from the roles the Lebanese government should be filling. Third, these cells would lead to the mitigation of tensions between host communities and refugees. Moreover, training Lebanese alongside Syrians would help shift Lebanese perceptions of the refugee population as a “permanent burden” to individuals with agency and dignity, who can provide temporary “added value” to Lebanon as a whole.

Notes


4 UNHCR (2004) uses the “crude measure of refugee populations of 25,000 persons or more who have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries.”

5 See recent statements by Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Gebran Bassil, who claimed that all Syrian refugees in Lebanon should be deported, and Maronite Patriarch Beshara Rai, who suggested that the refugees should be housed in camps inside Syria.


7 Based on figures from the United Nations and Mercy Corps.


10 Based on figures from the United Nations and Mercy Corps.


22 Ibid.


25 Ibid.

26 At the request of the Lebanese government, the World Bank Group undertook an “economic and social impact assessment” of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon.

27 There are many more indicators that could be explored in-depth in future studies but are not included here due to space limitations.


29 Based on UNHCR and UNRWA figures.

30 “Lebanon needs $2.6 billion to counter Syria war impact,” *Reuters*, October 30, 2013.


33 Ibid.


35 Ibid.


38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.


43 World Bank, “Lebanon – Economic and Social Impact of the Syrian Conflict.”

44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 34–35.
48 Ibid., 34–35.
49 Ibid., 34–35.
50 Banque BEMO, “Hospitals in Lebanon” (June 2013).
51 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
56 Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, closed-door discussion with Nigel Fisher, October 2013.
57 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 “Positive deviance” is based on the assumption that in every community, there are particular individuals or groups whose unusual behavior actually aids them in finding better solutions to problems than their peers who behave as is expected of them in society.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eliza Berg graduated summa cum laude from Boston University in May 2014. She studied international relations and women’s, gender and sexuality studies, with a focus on Africa and the Middle East and international systems and world order. While studying at Boston University, Ms. Berg traveled to Switzerland, Belgium, and the United Kingdom for an international conflict resolution program. She also traveled to Rabat, Morocco, to complete fieldwork for her honors thesis project, “Everyday Uprisings: Women’s Rights Activism in Morocco,” with generous funding from the Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future. Ms. Berg was selected to present an excerpt from her thesis at the 2014 BCARS Graduate Student Conference on the Arab Spring, where she received recognition for the second-best paper overall. She also received the Christopher M. Sassano Award for Writing Excellence in the Social Sciences for this paper, awarded in May 2014 at Boston University. In addition to her studies, Ms. Berg has interned with the Consortium on Gender, Security and Human Rights and the United Nations Association of Greater Boston. She is incredibly thankful for the opportunity to share her work with the BCARS community, and gives special thanks to Dr. Sarah Tobin and Dr. Denis Sullivan for making it all possible.

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Rima Rassi is the senior program coordinator of international affairs and refugee research at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs and part-time instructor of sociology at the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Media Studies at the American University of Beirut. Ms. Rassi holds a bachelor of science in biology with a minor in sociology and anthropology (2006) and an MA in sociology (2008) from the American University of Beirut. She returned to Beirut in August 2013 after completing the coursework for a PhD in political science—emphasis international relations, in order to define her dissertation topic and do hands-on work with Palestinian and Syrian refugees. Her research interests fall within the areas of international development, transitional justice in post-conflict societies, and the politics of humanitarianism and refugee communities in the Arab World.
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