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The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: Illusion and Reality

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For 40 years, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has found itself largely outside of Syrian politics. Decimated by years of bloody confrontation with the Hafez al-Assad regime, the Brotherhood was driven into exile, where it faced organisational and geographic dispersion, a weakened leadership, and dwindling financial resources. With the onset of the conflict in Syria, however, the Muslim Brotherhood has found itself with potential new political prospects.

The Muslim Brotherhood is the only Syrian political movement in which youth find a concrete identity, unrelated to other identities and their failed political projects. By engaging with their surroundings, these new members will make up a formidable force in elections if the Brotherhood employs them well. In addition, the Brotherhood has strengthened its ability to build coalitions over the past three years, building alliances by exaggerating their own dominance and leading others to believe that this will win allied partners more votes. This has included both alliances with armed Islamist factions as well as the creation of a new political party in mid-2013, the Waad Party, in collaboration with Christian and Muslim secularists.

The Brotherhood's expansion, however, remains a complex issue. Its true size, and its representation in the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces are difficult to ascertain; its engagement with the foundational philosophical and political principles of the international Muslim Brotherhood organisation is unclear; and the future of the Waad Party is far from certain. Will the party be able to build an independent identity, will it become the Brotherhood's political arm, or will it become an unprecedented participatory space in which the Brotherhood and others can work together as partners, without any one party dominating the others?

The collapse of the Assad regime will be followed by a political vacuum, which will either tempt or force the Muslim Brotherhood to enter ruling institutions. Yet despite all of its challenges and limitations, the Brotherhood may prove the most able to rally the public to its

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side. What is certain is that other political entities have failed to build consensus or network along their interests, leaving an open field for the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies.

Historical Antecedents: Geographic and Organisational Dispersion

The evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria begins with the bloody events that took place between the organisation and the regime starting in 1964, but primarily after 1976, and which ended in the broad destruction of its membership base and set the stage for the group's geographic and organizational dispersion.

The confrontation between the Syrian Brotherhood and the regime was spearheaded by the Fighting Vanguard, a breakaway armed faction founded by Marwan Hadid (1934-1976) following internal disputes between the Aleppo and Damascus offices of the organisation over the position of General Leader, among other issues. This faction carried out a series of assassinations aimed at weakening the regime by forcing it, along with Islamists more broadly, into a battle for which they had not planned. By 1982, however, the Brotherhood was defeated, with the destiny of its members falling into three broad groups. First was the undeterminable number of members – mostly youth – killed in direct combat, often in street fighting, from late 1979 to the end of 1982. Second were those imprisoned with long sentences and almost completely eliminated. Tried under Law No. 49 criminalising anyone proven to belong to the Muslim Brotherhood, many were sentenced to death. Only those who had been under suspicion, but not convicted, were released during this period, and only after 13-24 years of inhumane imprisonment. Their liberation was a strategic move to sow fear among potential opponents by leaking news of the horrors that those confronting the regime would face. Initial estimates indicate that around twelve to fifteen thousand prisoners were killed by torture, hanging, disease, or due to lack of food and medicine. Third were the youth and leaders who were able to survive on their own and leave Syria for Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other countries. These members formed the nucleus of what would become the main body of the Muslim Brotherhood in later years.

These members who escaped the grip of authorities were subject to the hardships that many exiled groups face in maintaining their organisational structure, and namely the struggle to ensure stable resources to survive. The Brotherhood may have provided resources to a limited section of its cadres who were close to certain leaders, keeping these individuals close to the organisation despite the difficulties associated with being scattered in diaspora. As time passed, however, crises and disputes multiplied, making bonds more fragile, and chipping away at the requirements and justifications for listening, obeying and pledging allegiance to the organisation's leaders. This took place alongside deep changes brought about by the communications revolution and globalisation, disrupting old mechanisms that kept young people obedient to traditional leaders. These shifts set further changes in motion, particularly with regards to organisational relationships and sources of information and analysis. Access to greater knowledge set people on equal footing with those in authority, making it difficult for leaders to maintain the dominance they once held.

As a result, the Syrian Brotherhood's leadership has become more tolerant and lenient with its tired and dispersed base of supporters. This has led to a fragile organisational structure, united by a shared history of persecution, with a diaspora grouped in various countries, and relying

on the remaining financial assets it holds. The Brotherhood also invested in private companies, which employed members of the organisation and kept them in its orbit. In addition, the Syrian Brotherhood was able to enjoy particular support, including counsel, funding and material support from the international organisation¹ of the Muslim Brotherhood. In belonging to the same organisation, family bonds among those in exile were strengthened by virtue of necessity and conditions of diaspora, creating a vast network between many Brotherhood leaders.

Internal and External Challenges of the Last Decade

Following the death of Hafez el-Assad, the Syrian Brotherhood showed a glimmer of democratic aspirations. Yet over the last decade, a variety of internal and external challenges, including internal tensions within the organisational structure, competition with Sufi currents, and the rise of Salafi extremism, have curtailed the organisation's ability to amass constituents and consolidate.

This state of affairs lasted until the end of 2005, when the Brotherhood signed the Damascus Declaration on Democratic Transition along with other opposition groups and several Syrian nationalist parties and figures. They joined the Damascus Declaration with a statement released by the Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni, the Muslim Brotherhood's General Leader in Syria, followed by a series of policy papers and statements. These papers – the best produced by the Brotherhood during that period – come closest to promoting a shift towards a deliberative democratic approach to power. Yet in late 2006, they allied with Abdul Halim Khaddam, former Vice President of Syria, in forming the National Salvation Front, without consulting with their partners in the Damascus Declaration. This alliance between the Brotherhood and Abdul Halim Khaddam was the subject of much debate in Brotherhood circles, and many thought the organisation had bet on the wrong horse. It also widened the gap between the organisation and parties to the Damascus Declaration. Shortly before Israel's attack on Gaza at the end of 2008, the Brotherhood announced their withdrawal from the National Salvation Front.

Until early 2010, the Brotherhood had no presence in Syria because of Law No. 49 and the sentence of execution for anyone with proven ties to the group. Furthermore, the Sufi sheikhdom current—which was encouraged by Hafez al-Assad, and his son, Bashar al-Assad, after him—was a natural opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, both ideologically and organisationally. Indeed, these Sufi sheikhdoms present the most important obstacle for the Brotherhood. The majority of the Sufi sheikhdoms are aligned with the regime. This includes most Sufi circles, which attract many Muslims seeking simple and guaranteed reconciliation with God, themselves, and Muslim society more generally. The most notable orders include

¹ What came to be known as the “International Organisation” of the Muslim Brotherhood is no more than a coalition of offices in Arab countries that played a role after Hassan al-Hudaybi, successor to al-Banna, was detained in Egypt in 1954. The Brotherhood has not been under the Supreme Guide's control since Omar el-Telmesany (1904-1986) took over the position in 1974 with the blessing of President Anwar Sadat (1918-1981), after Hassan al-Hudaybi's death. Instead, Arab country offices, with representatives from every Arab country, represent an international leadership parallel to the Supreme Guide, resulting in numerous problems that gave rise to the International Organization. This organisation is comprised of two people from each country, and has a coordinating role, though it does not have any direct authority over the Brotherhood in any Arab country.

those of Sheikh Ahmed Kuftaro (1912-2004), Sheikh Mohamed Said Ramadan Al-Bouti (1920-2013), and the Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun (b.1949). These orders have not allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to lure any of their supporters away.

In addition, the Brotherhood has historically been a more urban phenomenon, and has been involved in the public sphere, both politically and socially. This was due to the fact that unlike all other religious and political currents in Syria, they were the only ones able to maintain a cohesive organisational structure, even if it was a bare bones one. This, in turn, enabled them to make decisions institutionally and elect their leaders. Yet for a long time all decisions were made by the first tier of leaders, without any development or training that would enable the second tier to take over leadership tasks. Things changed somewhat during the last elections for the Shura Council and General Leader on November 6, 2014, when several promising young men like Husam Ghadban, Hassan al-Hashemi, and Molham al-Droubi—all eligible to become General Leader—ran in the elections. Yet in the end, Mohamed Hikmat Walid (b.1944), a man in his seventies, was elected.

The new leader transitioned from being head of the Brotherhood's political wing, the National Party for Justice and Constitution (also known as the Waad ("promise") Party for its Arabic acronym), to the head of the Brotherhood itself. Nearly nine months have passed since he took office without him effecting any change, which suggests that there is no new vision for the Brotherhood. There is clearly a deep conflict in the group's organisational structure on several levels: a silent conflict between the older generations, which has refused to keep pace with new developments, and the new generation, which has grown up with globalization and the communications revolution. As a result, traditional leaders and departments in the organisation have less power, there is greater access to information, and people are more able to express and influence public opinion. There is also a regional conflict within the organisation between the Hama contingent, represented by Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh and his former deputy Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, and the Aleppo one, represented by former General Leader Ali Sadreddine Al-Bayanouni and Zuhair Salem, director of the Arab Middle East Centre in London. Finally, there is a conflict within the organisation between hawks and doves, between an extremist current and a pragmatic, flexible one. The extremist current is represented by Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, Deputy General Leader Husam Ghadban, and Media Bureau official Amr Mashouh, while the pragmatic current is represented by new General Leader Mohamed Hikmat Walid, Political Bureau official Hassan al-Hashemi, and Molham al-Droubi. This last conflict is currently the most important and influential one.

The Salafi current has also grown dangerously, in both its advocacy and jihad, and the Muslim Brotherhood must confront it in an ideological battle—both internally, within its own ranks, and externally, on the street. The Salafis have more cohesive, targeted intellectual tools and systems for this battle. These can provide firm and satisfactory answers to people suffering from marginalisation, scorned by the world, and whose lives and injustices are belittled. Confronting them will not be easy for the Brotherhood, especially given events since 2012. By transforming from Salafi currents into *tafkiri* ones, they are able to provide a young generation of oppressed Muslims with answers, and dreams of certain solutions. These Salafi currents offer promises of justice backed up by force, according to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, in which young people can have a direct, personal, and tangible role in decision-making and implementing the desired justice. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood's

discourse is evasive, lost between basic principles on which the organisation was founded, and constraints of political pragmatism and rules for engaging with public space. This has meant abandoning the dreams their generation was raised on. The Brotherhood is trapped between pressure from their base of support on one side, and pressures from the new Salafi current on the other. The international community's neglect has provided fertile soil for this current, leading people to get involved in more extremist circles. The best proof of this is the waves of people currently joining the Islamic State and other jihadi Salafi organisations.

Prospects for Expansion and Recruitment Today

While the Syrian Brotherhood remains small, it is nonetheless experiencing a degree of expansion in terms of new recruitment. This phenomenon is the result of both disappointment with existing models of engagement in public life and opposition, as well as a lack of firm understanding of the organisation's ideology. This fluidity in motivation shaping expansion, however, could lead to changes within the Brotherhood itself.

In order to assess the real structure and size of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is necessary to look at the number of participants in elections for the Shura Council. The Shura Council is made up of thirty members, with each member representing sixty captains (a captain is an individual who has spent a certain number of years in the organisation). From these numbers, we can conclude that there are between 1800 and 2000 Syrian members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This takes into account that many are scattered across other countries, and only engage in a minimum of the Brotherhood's political activities. The most active groups are those residing in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The Emirates, and the Gulf more generally, tightly restricts any Brotherhood activity. There are also hundreds of new members who come either from the Brotherhood's spectrum or Brotherhood families, and are given a chance to join an organisation whose clear enemy is the regime they have long wanted to dismantle and defeat. Young people's desire for Islamist social development that is engaged in public life, which has long been weakened by corruption, are not fulfilled by Sheikdom and Sufi movements; instead, they find that the Brotherhood embodies this approach.

These two factors account for approximately 30% of new members, while the remaining 70% of new members are young people without a clear sense of identity. The Muslim Brotherhood is the only Syrian political movement in which they find a concrete identity, unrelated to other identities and their failed political projects. These young people have only a general idea about the Brotherhood's ideology. This means they are not ordinary members within the Muslim Brotherhood, like others who are active in organisational life and who have gone through Brotherhood training programs and become disciplined members. Yet by engaging with their surroundings, these new members will make up a formidable force in elections if the Brotherhood employs them well. The Brotherhood's expansion remains a complex issue. Although it has a presence and influence in the Syrian political scene, its expansion threatens to change the structure of the organisation and its internal centers of power. There are new members who can be integrated into the Brotherhood's ranks, and it is difficult to predict where their desires and abilities to change the Brotherhood will lead.

The Ideological Relationship with the Sunni Street in Syria

In addition to ideological fluidity amongst new members, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood itself is marked by a lack of ideological clarity either with respect to its vision for an Islamic state and even its adherence to the guiding principles of the other national Muslim Brotherhood organisations. While this pragmatic and consensus-seeking approach to Islamist ideology has allowed the Syrian Brotherhood to remain close to the country's Sunni population, it also presents distinct challenges in the event of an electoral victory.

Though the Muslim Brotherhood's ideological roots are grounded in the thoughts of Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), and some writings by Hassan al-Hudaybi (1891-1973), Mustafa al-Siba'i (1915-1964) can be considered the true founder of Muslim Brotherhood thought in Syria. He was involved in Syrian political life before Gamal Abdel Nasser clamped down on public space by uniting Egypt and Syria in the United Arab Republic. However, when the Muslim Brotherhood went through its deepest crisis in confrontation with Baathist rule in the 1980s, this kind of thinking disappeared. This in turn became a significant problem for the Brotherhood; they deeply reconsidered their ideology, leading them away from the original schools of thought that had shaped the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria. The Brotherhood was left only with political pragmatism, which led it to make more concessions, to get in line with the status quo, and erase the qualities that made the organisation unique, qualities that had given it legitimacy and justified its existence among its followers.

This may be one of the most important obstacles that the new leaders of the Brotherhood must confront. Yet their new political rhetoric is limited to participation in political life, resigning themselves to the outcome of the ballot box and accepting whoever wins, whatever his religion or sect, as long as the Qur'an is a source of legislation (something that is already provided for in the Syrian constitution). Their dream of building an Islamic State, "governed by what God has revealed," has faded. This dream is a pillar of all Brotherhood ideology (which has been the subject of much thought and discussion, and whole schools dedicated to understanding Sayyid Qutb's writings). It also forms the foundation of their concept of governance (that he who does not govern by what God revealed is an infidel), and their constitution and its "milestones" describing a "collective of believers"—an ideal to which members of the Muslim Brotherhood active in politics today do not bear the slightest resemblance.

The Muslim Brotherhood has also failed to engage with contemporary understandings of the modern state, or the possibility of building a modernist Islamic state that Wael Hallaq describes in his book *The Impossible State*². For Hallaq, an "Islamic state" is an illusion, as there is a contradiction between *shari'ah*, with its a moral impetus and concern with pleasing a just God, and the modern state, which replaces God, requiring that man submits to institutions which satisfy the ruling authority and its allies. As a result of this shift towards modernity, the long hoped-for state slowly loses its soul, until it conforms to the exigencies of authority. This is what happens to Islamists who invest themselves in public space, and who back down, again and again, from the basic tenets of their ideology. As a result, their

² Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, Columbia University Press, NY, 2013. Hallaq (b.1955) is a scholar of Islamic law and Islamic intellectual history and professor of Islamic Studies in the Department of Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University.

reputation and achievements will be a far cry from the ideology they were founded upon. The Muslim Brotherhood will thus find itself in a challenging confrontation both with their bases of support, and with their Islamist opponents.

Regarding *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence)—which has relevance for the Muslim public and how it engages with most aspects of their daily life (sales, contracts, inheritances, and determining what is permissible or impermissible)—the Syrian Brotherhood does not have a specific approach or school of *fiqh* thought. In contrast, the Egyptian Brotherhood turns to Sayyid Qutb's book *Fiqh al-Sunnah* as a jurisprudential reference, though Muslims in general are not bound to it. The Syrian Brotherhood would prefer not to be committed to a specific *fiqh* school of thought, which could restrict their relations with other movements. In practice, their *fiqh* choices are characterised more by consensus-seeking, and not committing themselves to a standpoint that would weaken their options. A large segment of the Damascus movement was closer to the Albanian Salafi school (Sheikh Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, 1914-1999), while the Aleppo and Hama movements were closer to the schools of Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda (1917-1997), Mohamed Hamed (1910-1969) and Said Hawa (1935-1989). By being careful to adopt a centrist and consensus-based standpoint on most religious opinions, and not making any sharp breaks with any approaches, the Brotherhood has been able to remain close to a large proportion of Sunnis in Syria.

Taking a close look at their position on politics, and participation in public life in general, we find that most Sunnis in Syria can be divided into two currents. The first is a popular Sheikdom movement, which often lies outside calculations of power and struggles against them. This movement largely focuses on improving one's faith and morals, freeing oneself from temptation and any conflict with authority and its negative influences. It focuses on adherence to a system of *fiqh* provisions that govern one's life, dealings with others, and worship. Scholars such as Mohamed Said Ramadan Al-Bouti, Abdul Karim al-Rifai's school, and the majority of Syrian sheikhs fall within this trend. Yet as a result of recent events, many of them now side with opinion on the street, which is no longer content to remain silent on what is happening in the country. More precisely, there is no longer room for moderates. One either leans towards the authorities and their tools, and becomes their mouthpiece and praises them, or one leans towards the revolution and the oppressed, refusing to be part of the institutions of the political opposition, and focusing primarily on aiding the victims.

The second movement sees Islam as something that encourages and guides one's social and political responsibilities, something that cannot be separated from religion's essence and purpose, in addition to its individual and religious role. The Muslim Brotherhood is a primary proponent of this view. Indeed, most of what this school of thought contains is taken from Brotherhood ideology, or ideology that has been developed from or amended to such thought. Even Jawdat Said's school of thought, despite what sets it apart, added new approaches from Malek Bennabi to original Brotherhood thought.³ Said was interested in historical perspectives, Islam's responsibility towards civilisation, and adopting the doctrine of Adam's

³ Jawdat Said (b.1931) is a Syrian Islamic scholar who belongs to the school of thought of Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi, and was influenced by his thoughts about the three no's: nonviolence, non-secrecy, and nonpartisanship. He presented an ideal model of Islamic action, based on his book *The Doctrine of Adam's First Son: The Problem of Violence in Islamic Action*, 1st ed. Damascus: 1966.

first son as laid out in the Quranic verse, “if you extend your hand against me to kill me, I shall never extend my hand against you to kill you.”

On the level of *fiqh*—which is what Muslims in Syria are generally concerned with—the Muslim Brotherhood’s views are quite close to those of the general public. On the ideological level, it seems that they are no longer guardians of a greater school of thought, but one of its offshoots. Their new approach is infused with a political pragmatism not found in their ideological roots, particularly after the organization was fractured after 1982. This created a problem that Islamic movements both within and outside the Brotherhood continue to face. The Brotherhood’s position today—within opposition institutions, both the National Council and the National Coalition—is a reflection of this confusion. As former Deputy Leader Mohammad Farouk Tayfour and Media Bureau official Amr Mashouh have said, they are moving towards building an Islamic state through the ballot box. This long aspired-for state will be an expression of the aspirations of the Syrian majority, while the electoral minority will have to accept the choice of the majority. Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni and Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh, both former General Leaders, as well as Hassan al-Hashemi, the Political Bureau official, and many others, all say that they are working to establish a deliberative, participatory, civil state, one that is guided by the ballot box and does not aspire for *shari‘ah* rule.

Failing to Catch Up With the Times

The Syrian Brotherhood has revealed a certain inability to respond to new demands for participation and expectations of political leaders. In addition to the generational organisational crisis mentioned earlier, the Brotherhood has also failed to effectively incorporate women representatives, professionalise its elite, or establish a meaningful media presence. These trends represent a certain failure on the part of the organisation to respond to the times.

Women representatives are clearly lacking in the Brotherhood’s leadership; there is often only one woman, if that, in Brotherhood offices, with very limited involvement. Despite the Brotherhood’s recent, and overdue, interest in improving this, they have not transformed theoretical interest into tangible results. This may be due to the influence of traditional thinking among most Brotherhood leadership, where their lack of faith in women’s (and young people’s) abilities to run things prevent them from obtaining leadership positions. This is common practice, even if not done formalised in written decisions, as most Brotherhood directives are done. It is also in line with general Islamic thought, which is still governed by the idea that “those ruled by a woman will not succeed.” They justify the lack of female representation in the Brotherhood with long years of being prosecuted, banned, and forced into exile, saying that they do not want women to suffer the same harassment as men. Women have almost no participation in the Brotherhood organisationally, and as a result, the Brotherhood is not as popular in the community as other religious movements who do integrate women. Religious movements such as al-Qubaysiat in Damascus, for example, which had significant control over primary education, rely on women, who can enter homes more easily than men for outreach.

The Brotherhood also lacks political cadres with a vision, and who are skilled at debate. Although the Brotherhood is familiar with the latest communication technology, it does not have a distinctive rhetoric aimed at others, particularly their political partners or rivals. Their rhetoric has remained the preserve of the political leadership, which is made up exclusively of the elderly. The Brotherhood has not had a political spokesman for years, aside from a small group of people including Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni and Zuhair Salem, who rarely release statements. With the exception of a few policy papers and statements, they have not produced anything that explains their political position on many new issues in Syria. Although the Brotherhood in Syria has changed their political practices in the past, these changes have been only general ones, and some were conditional on al-Assad's regime acknowledging acts it committed against them during that time. Overall, they have not presented any specific new programs or visions of note, nor given a clear impression of their position.

The Brotherhood also lacks a regular media presence that could present their views and define new directions. For example, it does not engage with current affairs, and is unable to express its position on issues such as al-Qaeda, the Brotherhood's poor performance in Egypt, or the current US-led coalition. A glance at the Brotherhood's website is enough to confirm this deficiency, and how unprofessional their media tools are. They do not deny this, but neither have they taken any steps to remedy this weakness. Perhaps their neglect of the media, and how content they are to leave it in its current state, is motivated by the same rationale behind many of their decisions: an aversion to transparency. Engaging with the media would entail being more transparent—something the Brotherhood is not currently forced to do—and might prove disruptive to the organisation.

Similarly, the Brotherhood has become dedicated to acting in secret to escape the control of authorities who have consistently restricted and prosecuted them. As a result, the Brotherhood has acted in a way that most clandestine movements subjected to tyranny and repression do. Such movements are forced to stop working openly and flee the public sphere. Instead of disseminating their ideology and expanding organisationally, they are forced to channel their efforts into covert activities that restrict their choices and use up their energy pursuing defensive measures. When this rationale for covert action fades, it is difficult for such movements to reemerge and engage in public activities again. This is what the Syrian Brotherhood suffers from today. While conditions may have changed, they are unable to communicate clearly and openly, and most of their activities and movements are still conducted in silence and secrecy. This has caused them great harm, as it is no longer possible to conduct secret collective action as the world grows increasingly smaller.

Actions since 2011: A Precarious Game of Coalition-Building and Networking

Over the last three years, the Brotherhood has strengthened its ability to build coalitions, misleading many into believing it is a vast and powerful organisation. This has included participation in national coalitions, networking with armed factions, and even the creation of a new political party, Waad. Such actions, however, are marked by a degree of ambiguity, with no clear idea of how the organisation will evolve politically or in response to the ongoing Syria crisis.

In early 2011, after peaceful demonstrations had begun to spread throughout Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood established what can be considered a “crisis cell.” Meanwhile, Ahmed Ramadan and a group of young Muslim Brotherhood members began to expand their meetings and formed what was later called the National Working Group for Syria. This included young Brotherhood members who had not been given the opportunity to rise to leadership positions within the Brotherhood, and for whom the current political climate was an opportunity. They were a small body that stayed within the orbit of the Brotherhood. With the support of the Brotherhood, they were able to form a part of the Syrian National Council for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and later the National Coalition, as an independent bloc from the Brotherhood; however, the Brotherhood’s true size, and its representation in the Syrian National Council and the National Coalition, are controversial subjects. The Brotherhood contributed four representatives to the coalition, as well as four others who have not acknowledged that they represent the Brotherhood. It is impossible to know how much dominance these eight members will have over the coalition. Perhaps this was a tacit agreement between the Brotherhood and others, who exaggerate the Brotherhood’s dominance to justify their inability to build effective national, secular strategies, alliances, and projects for running the National Council that do not fall under the control of one specific agenda or group. The Brotherhood benefits from this exaggeration, and perhaps even contributes to it. They take advantage of it to build alliances, by leading others to believe that an alliance with them would help them win more votes. And indeed, most members of the National Council were either fooled or averted their eyes.

However, as difficult times continued, and it became apparent that the regime would not fall in weeks or even months, as people had hoped, many of the Working Group’s members withdrew. The Working Group—which was made up of no more than thirty people, scattered across different countries—was reduced to a third of its original size. Differences arose between the Working Group and the Muslim Brotherhood around representation and their views on matters, which strained the relationship, and as a result they officially broke with the Brotherhood. Some people were suspicious of this break: the Brotherhood was no stranger to politically devious moves; on the contrary, this is a strategy at which they excel. Despite persistent attempts to expand this small body and provide it with supporters, it failed to transform into a real political body and remained attached to the Brotherhood. What is certain, though, is that other entities have failed to build consensus or network along their interests, leaving an open field for the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies.

The Brotherhood has also attempted to network with armed factions by approaching them intellectually, acting on their behalf in the National Coalition or National Council, or offering them a portion of the support that some states have sent through Brotherhood channels. Yet all of these attempts have failed. This has prompted the Brotherhood to form what they call the ‘Shields,’ a Brotherhood version of armed action, which has not been successful thus far. Entering the game of arms, and directing it in the field, requires significant capabilities that the Brotherhood does not possess, though nor do other Syrian political opposition groups. There is also a deep internal divide within the Brotherhood regarding their stance on participating in armed action. Perhaps this is rooted in the organization’s bitter experience in the early 1980s, as well as the fact that their ability to manage such action is weak. Yet this has not discouraged the Brotherhood from repeatedly attempting to politically represent

armed factions of an Islamic orientation in nationalist circles and the international arena, for the Brotherhood to benefit from their influence in Syria domestically, and give their political position more weight.

The Brotherhood's most recent attempt was networking with Ahrar al-Sham, although both sides went back and forth on the matter. The Brotherhood has continued in its attempts to network and envelop armed factions of an Islamic orientation, so as to combine the political side with the military side to strengthen both parties. The Brotherhood aims to respond to the marginalisation it has begun to experience—not least as its financial resources are dwindling, threatening its ability to play the role it wants in Syria. Moreover, this proposed union is clearly important at this stage. Turkey may soon expand its control into sections of northern Syria, and if this happens, its closest ally would have to manage the area on behalf of Turkey. The Brotherhood, if united with Ahrar al-Sham, would be the best party to do so. Of course, this will be a difficult challenge for the Brotherhood to face, as this course of action would not please the United States, even if it may fall in line with the Qatari-Turkish approach.

Meanwhile, in mid-2013, the Brotherhood and Christian and Muslim secularists founded the National Party for Justice and Constitution (the Waad Party), a nationalist party with an Islamic orientation. This party is still struggling, however, with its early stages of development. The first challenge lies in its Islamist orientation: to what extent will this attract people who truly dream of establishing an Islamic state and will the Waad Party be their preferred means for doing so? How can this orientation be interpreted, and what transformations will Syria need to undergo? The second challenge lies in the party's ability to build an independent identity, untainted by the Brotherhood it was born out of. Will it become the Brotherhood's political arm, or will it become an unprecedented participatory space in which the Brotherhood and others can work together as partners, without any one party dominating the others? The Waad Party will have a greater chance of success if the Brotherhood leaders refrain from playing a leadership role in the party, and instead allow the group's youth to try to work with others to build something new and different from the legacy that still presents a huge obstacle to any tangible, re-envisioning of the Brotherhood's thought or political practice.

Conclusion

Despite the Syrian Brotherhood's weaknesses, regional and international centers of decision-making still rely on them in the face of Syria's fragmentation and the collapse of state institutions. Indeed, some American politicians seem to be betting on this, hoping the Brotherhood will rally the street in order to diminish the humanitarian and institutional cost of the war. Yet this would sap the Syrian Brotherhood's energy: they would lose much of their internal mobilisation, become less effective, and would be unable to withstand any future force, no matter how prepared they were. Furthermore, reconstruction of infrastructure and recovery on a humanitarian level will take decades. Placating the armies of injured parties in refugee camps or dilapidated shelters will not be an easy task for any party. Whoever shoulders this difficult burden will be faced with a flood of people who will hold them responsible for everything the war has left in its wake—a huge burden for a group with very low capacity.

The collapse of the Assad regime will be followed by a political vacuum, which will either tempt or force the Muslim Brotherhood to enter ruling institutions. This could be a fast track to the top for them, or a test of how fragile they are, given their utter lack of experience with political power. They would not be able to confront the deep state that lies in wait for them, or whoever takes power. Consequently, the secular opposition, or individuals from within it, could mobilise the opposition or criminal groups to deal the final blow to what was left of the Brotherhood's dreams. This would be similar to what happened in Egypt, even though the Egyptian Brotherhood had far more experience than their counterparts in Syria in this regard; the Egyptian Brotherhood had been involved in Egyptian political life, and had more than eighty representatives in the Egyptian parliament, in addition to the political alliances they depended on. How then would things play out for the Syrian Brotherhood, who has not been involved in Syrian politics for forty years, except among the ranks of the exiled opposition? Added to this is their deep, and very real sense of great injustice, which has fostered the illusion that they are entitled or able to lead. The Brotherhood will likely not be satisfied with remaining in the parliament and service sectors, such as in municipalities and unions, while Syria stabilizes.

This problem does not apply to the Syrian Brotherhood alone, but to all political opposition frameworks. Perhaps the Brotherhood sees establishing the Waad Party as the best step towards entering the world of politics in Syria's future—a world that will not resemble the one Syrians knew prior to the revolution. Yet they have acted too quickly, and without the necessary tools. This is not a unique mistake, yet even so, the Waad Party lacks an environment in which it can thrive. This new party will not be able to deny that it is colored by the Brotherhood, which will keep it from expanding, and prevent it from playing an important role in Syria's future.

The fundamental questions here are whether, in practice, the Brotherhood is truly the guardian of Brotherhood thought, as embodied by Issam al-Attar and Mustafa al-Siba'i, and whether they truly present an approach for those who seek an Islamic state. These questions could be answered through two possible scenarios. On one hand, if the Brotherhood rode into power on the back of popular revolution, they might be seduced by revolutionary legitimacy and in euphoria announce that a state based on Islam had succeeded. The masses do not have a clear sense of what an Islamic state entails, however, and simply envision a space of religiosity, justice, and security, and they would soon be shocked by the Brotherhood's direct interference in their daily affairs. Conversely, if the Brotherhood came into power or positions of authority through elections, they would be restricted by voters' wishes, and would have to be careful not to anger or alienate them. This would force them to present a loftier vision, which might not be able to withstand everyday realities or the power of opposition forces (if these forces were able to build their ranks, which they have not yet been able to do). Secularists, however, do not have organised agencies with programs that affect the Syrian public and that could be a viable alternative for thousands of people who seek a mobilisation framework different from political Islam. Despite all of its challenges and limitations, the Brotherhood may prove the most able to rally the public to its side.

About the author

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