The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in 2016
Scenarios and Recommendations

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The removal of Mohammed Morsi from the presidency by the Egyptian army on July 3, 2013 led to a number of significant structural transformations within Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The security crackdown that has taken place since, including the imprisonment of thousands of leaders and mid-level MB cadres, makes it nearly impossible for any central leadership to control the movement's lower ranks.

At the same time, the radicalization of the Islamist scene following Morsi's ouster has affected at least parts of the MB's support base. While the argument that MB members are joining violent extremist groups in large numbers frequently serves political purposes, radicalization among the MB's ranks is in fact a real concern. The recruitment potential of MB members to ISIS-affiliated groups, such as the Sinai-based organization Wilayat Sinai, was exemplified in a recent video, where an ISIS commander urged MB members to "use the experience they gained from ousting the previous regime of Hosni Mubarak to topple Sisi's regime."[1] It also indicates that a sizable number of MB rank-and-file members are frustrated with their leaders' reluctance to advocate a more aggressive stance against the regime, despite widespread human rights violations.

Given the complexity of the situation in Egypt, this report has a threefold objective: first, to provide an overview of the current state of Egypt's national scene in general, and the MB in particular; second, to outline three scenarios for how the MB – as a still central, although vastly diminished, player within Egypt's broader national scene – may evolve in the short to medium term; and finally, to recommend measures that may guide the thinking of German policymakers and support them as they stay abreast of the highly dynamic political situation in Egypt.

The Overall Context in Egypt

The military regime in Egypt currently faces a number of significant challenges, chief among them the deeply depressed Egyptian economy. Although the fiscal year 2014–15 ended with 4.2 percent growth, Egypt's economic fundamentals remain weak. Growth in past years was driven primarily by foreign direct investment and large-scale government spending. While Egypt's central bank has spent billions to prop up the Egyptian pound's exchange rate against the dollar, exports have sharply declined, with balance of payments deficits hitting 3.7 billion dollars in the first quarter of fiscal year 2015–16. A sharper drop was prevented by the injection of six billion dollars by Egypt's Arab Gulf allies as well as 1.5 billion dollars in loans from the African Development Bank and the World Bank. The expected profits from Egypt's development projects announced last March at an economic development conference in Sharm el Sheikh have failed to materialize. Similarly, despite massive investments in the Suez Canal expansion project, revenues have been declining as global trading activities diminish due to the slowing Chinese economy.

In an effort to deflect attention from these economic ills, the Egyptian government is currently announcing new measures such as land reclamation projects that are supposed to reduce the risk of food insecurity. Indeed, the country's economic collapse is prevented only by its being continuously propped up by the Gulf states; the result is the sell-off of large assets to foreign investors.

The lack of economic progress is further exacerbated by the government's inability to stabilize the security situation. The downing of the Russian Metrojet Airliner on October 31, 2015 by the ISIS-affiliated group Wilayat Sinai revealed the extent to which the government is unable to control the insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula. Acts of terrorism and armed resistance are eroding the trust of global investors and foreign governments in the government's ability to provide security. So did the government's killing of eight Mexican tourists in a botched operation in September 2015. The desire to invest in the Egyptian economy has declined as a result. Major economic development conferences have been cancelled, including the World Economic Forum on the Middle East, which was scheduled for May 2016 in Sharm el Sheikh.

As a result, discontent within the Egyptian population is becoming more pronounced. Indeed, the general public has grown largely disillusioned and in many instances harbors resentment against a military regime that takes ever more repressive measures against civil society. This strategy of repression has reached its worst levels in decades and is now aimed not only at Egyptians but also at foreign researchers. The murder of Giulio Regeni, an Italian PhD student from Cambridge University who disappeared on January 25, 2016, shows the extent to which power within the Egyptian regime has become decentralized. The abduction of a foreign researcher in broad daylight could only have taken place within a political environment where rogue elements within the regime feel that they can operate with complete impunity. It reveals the extent of the growing fragmentation of the Egyptian polity.[2]

Against this background, the internal organization of the Muslim Brotherhood has been transformed in significant ways. Specifically, a number of developments have further fractured an organization that was already internally divided along generational, organizational, and ideological lines.

Development of the Muslim Brotherhood since July 2013

The MB today consists of three main groups.[3] First, there is the leadership of the so-called old guard, composed of members of the MB's Guidance Office who had escaped the crackdown in Egypt. These include Mahmoud Ezzat, the organization's Secretary General until December 2009 and a powerful insider; Mahmoud Hussein, who became Secretary General after Ezzat; and Mahmoud Ghozlan, who remains the MB's official spokesperson. This group also includes the London-based Ibrahim Munir, who has served as the MB's "official spokesperson in the West" since 2010 and has lived in exile since 1981.

The second group consists of mid-level MB cadres who have remained in Egypt since Morsi's ouster. Having managed to regroup after a few months, some started organizing "revolutionary" activities against government targets. In early 2014, the weekly meetings resumed within "the families" (*al-usar*, as the MB's smallest educational units are called). In February 2014, internal elections were held to replace the imprisoned leaders with new cadres. They resulted in the formation of a Crisis Management Committee (*lajna idara al-azma*) that was tasked with managing events on the ground. Mohammed Badie – who continues to be recognized by senior members as the General Guide and, as such, the organization's leading figure since 2010 – has been under arrest since August 2013. However, control of the rank and file effectively passed to Mohamed Taha Wahdan, an agriculture professor who was appointed to the Guidance Office in January 2012 after previously heading the Committee of Upbringing (*lajna tarbiyya*).

The third group, consisting of Egyptian exiles attempting to form a new base of operations, emerged in Istanbul in 2014. In April 2015, this group announced the formation of a body called the Crisis Management Office for Egyptians Abroad (*maktab idarat al-azma li'l-Masriyyin fi'l-kharij*) under the leadership of Ahmed 'Abd al-Rahman, a medical doctor from Cairo. The stated purpose of the new office was to unite within a single entity the efforts of various individuals and organizations opposed to the military government, while maintaining relations with external donors and foreign governments.

(See the attached appendix for a listing of the major Muslim Brotherhood figures named in this piece.)

The efforts of these different groups to reassume control over the MB's financial and human resources have led to growing internal friction. For instance, the Istanbul-based Office for Egyptians Abroad was a novelty in the history of the MB and clearly competed with the London-based International Organization (*al-tanzim al-dawli*) that Ibrahim Munir has run since 2010. The Istanbul-based office launched a new discourse on social media platforms that was decisively more aggressive than the assertions of "peacefulness" (*silmiyya*) promoted by the exiled Guidance Office.

In January 2014, the MB's Arabic-language website issued a statement whose vocabulary indicated an abandonment of the path of non-violence: "We are at the beginning of a new phase where we summon our strength and evoke the meaning of jihad…. [We] prepare ourselves, our wives, our sons and daughters, and whoever follows our path for relentless jihad where we ask for martyrdom."[4]

Other statements were issued on the Facebook account of a previously unknown individual called Mohammed Montasser, who claimed to be the MB's new official spokesperson. (Montasser's name is likely an alias.)

On May 16, 2015 a court in Cairo announced that it would uphold the death sentences of Morsi and over one hundred other senior MB leaders, including Mohammed Badie. While the Istanbul-based group of teh MB supported the calls for revolution, Mahmoud Ghozlan published an article on Facebook entitled "Our Strength is Our Peacefulness."[5] Simultaneously, Mahmoud Hussein declared that the Guidance Office "works through its bodies and institutions" and that it was the only body that "manages the work of the society according to its by-laws."[6]

A few days later, to the surprise of observers and insiders alike, Ghozlan and Abdelrahman al-Barr (the prominent MB mufti and member of the Guidance Office) were seen in Cairo, where they attempted to reassert control over the rank and file. Both have since been arrested, while few know the whereabouts of their fellow Guidance Office member, Mahmoud Ezzat.

Despite the Guidance Office's efforts to project an image of unity, the MB's restless base in Egypt was not placated. Both Mohammed Montasser (who first emerged in 2014 in a Facebook account, advertising himself as the official MB spokesperson) and the Crisis Management Committee declared that the group would continue from within Egypt to pursue its revolutionary path. On July 1, 2015, thirteen MB members were killed in a police raid on an apartment in Egypt's Sixth of October City, inducing the Crisis Management Committee in Egypt to escalate its rhetoric. Montasser's Facebook account stated that this latest aggression constituted a "turning point" that initiated a "new phase of confrontation." MB leaders would "not be able anymore to control the anger of the base," Montasser warned.[7] He highlighted developments in the MB's administrative structure to allow for the more effective execution of ground operations to uphold the "revolutionary work." On social media, many rank-and-file members dismissed the claims of the elders. They argued that a commitment to non-violence in the face of relentless onslaughts by the army amounted to collaborating with the government.

With key members of the Crisis Management Committee in prison, efforts were made to form a new body to represent the MB in Egypt. The government's crackdown of July 2015, as well as Ezzat's presence in Cairo, may have led to a coming together of the exiled Guidance Office, the emerging office in Istanbul, and local activists in Cairo. Sometime between August and October 2015, a High Administrative Committee (*lajna idariyya 'uliya*) was formed to replace the Crisis Management Committee. Its key members included both Ezzat loyalists as well as activists who stood closer to the revolutionary path, such as Mohammed Kamal, the head of the newly formed High Administrative Committee.

Shortly before December 17, the British government published its long-awaited review of the MB, which in turn led to a new eruption of internal conflict.[8] On December 16, Mahmoud Hussein of the "old guard" gave an interview on Al Jazeera in Istanbul in which he sought to portray the organization's unity to the outside world. Hidden between the lines of Hussein's statements was an attempt to prepare the rank and file in Egypt for the decision to suspend the Guidance Office memberships of Mohammed Montasser and Mohammed Kamal and relieve them of their administrative responsibilities.

The response on social media was intense. Many pledged loyalty to the confrontationist stance. Gradually, internal disagreements started to affect operations on the ground. Different geographical sectors issued statements, pledging allegiance to their respective power centers, with some sectors siding with the old guard and the rest with the revolutionary leadership.

At the beginning of 2016, the MB is a highly fragmented group in the throes of significant internal transformation both in terms of organizational structure and ideology. At such a sensitive juncture, a considerable number of its base supporters are vulnerable to radicalization. In the face of continued government crackdown, the MB's internal fragmentation extends all the way down to the "branch" (*shu'aba*) level – the second-lowest level after the "family" (*usra*). This means that even within a single "region" (*muntaqa*, as the third level of organization is called), different branches are aligned with different ideological goals and political strategies. This situation makes any form of central organization difficult to maintain and shows the extent to which things are out of control.

Scenarios

Policymakers in Germany should consider three possible scenarios for how the MB – as well as the broader political situation in Egypt – may unfold in the medium term. In conceptualizing these scenarios, the authors of this paper took into account the MB, the larger structure of the institutional system in Egypt, and the role of the current regime in particular. The scenarios are based on the assumption that the MB's transformation will be shaped in decisive ways by how the broader political framework in Egypt evolves in the future.

Scenario 1: This scenario posits that the regime will remain strong and unified while the MB continues to fragment. The government's harsh crackdown manages to quell internal dissent, while the regime is able to counter any sizable pressure from the international community. Further, the regime manages to keep terrorist activities at the periphery while reasserting control over the security situation at the center. In the absence of viable external or internal challenges to the government, the MB base in Egypt becomes demoralized and passive. Its local leadership loses credibility, while rank-and-file members become demotivated. The situation of competing internal coalitions trying to assert control will continue in some form, but it will mainly play out abroad. Meanwhile, the MB's operations in Egypt will drift further apart. Faced with a continued lack of strategy and diminishing financial viability, rank-and-file members will become alienated from Muslim Brotherhood ideology and turn to better funded organizations advocating radical *takfiri* methods.[9]

Scenario 2: According to this scenario, the internal political situation remains fluid, and the MB's organization becomes more unified. Discontent within the broader Egyptian public – fueled by a worsening economic situation and widespread indignation over human rights abuses – leads to an uptick in contentious revolutionary activity. Local protests, particular labor and strike actions, intensify and are met with growing repression by the regime, which in turn further fuels discontent among an increasingly restless general population. The MB's local leadership will take on a greater role in organizing street protests, challenging the security establishment on different levels. This in turn will strengthen the MB's credentials, empowering both local activists and the relative position of the Istanbul office. In response, senior Guidance Office members (the "old guard") recognize the growing authority of the MB in Egypt and increase support for local operations against the Egyptian government. The movement as a whole will unify around a more radical ideology, undertaking violent actions that are viewed as legitimate, according to the logic of the revolution as understood by the MB. Faced with growing internal threats, state institutions and the media rally around President Sisi and strengthen his position with respect to his internal rivals. Despite the regime's increased unification, the political situation will be more unstable and unpredictable than it is today.

Scenario 3: The final scenario presumes a continuation of the regime's internal fragmentation and posits a strengthening of the MB's relative position. Pressure mounts on the regime as the situation in the Sinai Peninsula and in neighboring Libya deteriorates. Local franchises of ISIS and radicalized elements within the MB step up terrorist operations against state and civilian targets. Unable to control the threats both at the center and the periphery, the military regime is increasingly challenged from multiple power centers within the Egyptian state, including from within the military but also from the police, the judiciary, and the people (*al-sha'ab*). The MB will remain fragmented, with different factions seeking to collaborate on a tactical level with elements of state security against Sisi's rule and hoping to prepare the ground for re-entering the formal political process. Despite internal fragmentation, however, the organization's relative power will be strengthened, with parts of the organization teaming

up with state elements against the current regime. The political situation remains unstable and the potential for a coup from within the regime remains high, while national and international support for the MB grows.

Recommendations

Contemplating these three scenarios, German policy-makers can take a number of measures to stay on top of the fluid, unpredictable, and highly dynamic situation in Egypt today.

Four concrete recommendations are:

Reaffirm a strong commitment to core values of tolerance, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and social justice. Especially after the recent murder of the Italian student Giulio Regeni, it is crucial for the German government and other EU member states – and for academic institutions and civil society at large – to speak out against human rights violations. Germany should make clear that the country's economic cooperation with Egypt and German foreign direct investment into the Egyptian economy depend on clear improvements within Egypt, including security sector reforms.

Continue to strengthen intercultural activities between Germany and Egypt, especially support for human rights organizations, NGOs, and cultural institutions. Such support is of enormous symbolic value. It is further recommended that the German government continue to logistically and financially support exchanges among civil-society activists, journalists, researchers, young professionals, academics, intellectuals, artists, and cultural figures in the framework of workshops, conferences, seminars, and events.

Increase logistical and financial support for Egypt's emerging entrepreneurship scene, specifically encouraging companies in the technology and education sectors. Investing in the tech start-up sector will support grassroots activists on the ground while diminishing the potential for radicalization among Egyptian youths as a result of unemployment. The opportunities created by the global communication revolution, especially the combined trends of high Internet penetration rates in Egypt and falling costs of communication globally, offer a creative, non-political, and smart way to increase social investment and create a more inclusive economy.

Support further research into the internal evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood. Special attention should be given to conducting field-based research, with a focus on Istanbul, Doha, and Khartoum. It is further recommended to commission an extensive research project that maps key local, regional, global actors, networks, and organizations, in addition to identifying the central stakeholders and mechanisms that constitute the "MB ecosystem." Specific attention should be given to understanding the MB as part of the geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa, in particular the relationships with key regional governments, including Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Sudan.

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Appendix: Current Figures within the Muslim Brotherhood

Mohammed Badie: "old guard" MB leader and longtime spiritual guide of the organization; General Guide of the MB since January 2010; arrested in August 2013 and sentenced to death in May 2015

Abdelrahman al-Barr: member of the MB's "old guard" leadership; prominent MB mufti and member of the Guidance Office; arrested in May 2015

Mahmoud Ezzat: "old guard" MB leader; acting General Guide of the MB since 2013 and member of the Guidance Office since 1981; current whereabouts unknown

Mahmoud Ghozlan: member of "old guard" MB leadership and official spokesperson of the MB since ca. 2004; arrested in May 2015

Mahmoud Hussein: "old guard" MB leader; member of the Guidance Office since 2004 and Secretary General since 2010

Mohammed Kamal: Egypt-based head of the MB's High Administrative Committee since October 2015; adherent of the newer revolutionary current

Mohammed Montasser (alias): spokesperson since ca. January 2014 of the more revolutionary Egypt-based MB; true identity unknown; role as "official spokesperson" has been contested

Mohammed Morsi: longtime MB member and president of Egypt from to June 2012 to July 2013; currently under arrest and sentenced to death in May 2015.

Ibrahim Munir: "old guard" MB leader and "official spokesperson in the West"; head since 2010 of the London-based International Organization of the MB (*al-tanzim al-dawli*)

Ahmed 'Abd al-Rahman: leader of Crisis Management Office for Egyptians Abroad, founded in Istanbul in April 2015; his role as "official spokesperson in the West" is contested

Mohamed Taha Wahdan: Egypt-based member of the Guidance Office since January 2012 and Head of the Crisis Management Committee since February 2014; adherent of the newer revolutionary current

Notes

1 The video was released on January 23, 2016. May-aan Groisman, "ISIS Calls on Muslim Brothers in Egypt to 'Take up Arms' against Sisi," *Jerusalem Post*, January 24, 2016 <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/ISIS-Threat/ISIS-calls-on-Muslim-Brothers-in-Egypt-to-take-up-arms-against-Sisi-442581> (accessed March 7, 2016).

2 See Ibrahim El Houdaiby, "The Egyptian Inter-regnum: the High Cost of Suppressing Change," DGAPkompakt 6 (February 2016) <https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/27594 > (accessed March 7, 2016).

3 See Victor J. Willi "Phoenix Rising from the Ashes: the Internal State of Affairs of the Muslim Brotherhood at the start of 2016," *Jadaliyya*, January 25, 2016 <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23677/phoenix-rising-fr > (accessed March 7, 2016).

4 The website was recently removed, but the quote can be found in Abdelrahman Ayyash, "The Brotherhood's Post-Pacifist Approach," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 9, 2015 <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=60665> (accessed March 7, 2016).

5 Mahmoud Ghozlan, "Our Strength is Our Peacefulness," originally published on Ghozlan's Facebook account. The text can be found on <http://old.egyptwindow.net/ar_print.aspx?print_ID=32741> (accessed March 7, 2016).

6 Mahmoud Hussein, Facebook post, May 28, 2015 <https://www.facebook.com/mahmoud.hussien.3576/posts/862155067208413> (accessed March 7, 2016).

7 *Ikhwanonline*, Statement 86 [in Arabic], July 3, 2015 <https://www.ikhwanonline.com/BrotherhoodStatements/68/Default.aspx> (accessed January 2, 2016; the text has been taken offline).

8 British government, "Muslim Brotherhood Review: Main Findings," ordered by the House of Commons, December 17, 2015 <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/486932/Muslim_Brotherhood_Review_Main_Findings.pdf> (accessed March 7, 2016).

9 The term *takfiri* – from the Arabic noun *kafir* (unbeliever) – refers to extremist groups who consider those Muslims who do not follow their interpretation of Islam to be apostates. The practice of *Takfir* involves declaring other Muslims to be infidels and condoning their deaths. It is not accepted by the majority of Islamic scholars.