

The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood

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FRIEND OR FOE?

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD is the world's oldest, largest, and most influential Islamist organization. It is also the most controversial, condemned by both conventional opinion in the West and radical opinion in the Middle East. American commentators have called the Muslim Brothers "radical Islamists" and "a vital component of the enemy's assault force ... deeply hostile to the United States." Al Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri sneers at them for "lur[ing] thousands of young Muslim men into lines for elections ... instead of into the lines of jihad."

Jihadists loathe the Muslim Brotherhood (known in Arabic as al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen) for rejecting global jihad and embracing democracy. These positions seem to make them moderates, the very thing the United States, short on allies in the Muslim world, seeks. But the Ikhwan also assails U.S. foreign policy, especially Washington's support for Israel, and questions linger about its actual commitment to the democratic process.

Over the past year, we have met with dozens of Brotherhood leaders and activists from Egypt, France, Jordan, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom. In long and sometimes heated discussions, we explored the Brotherhood's stance on democracy and jihad, Israel and Iraq, the United States, and what sort of society the group seeks to

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create. The Brotherhood is a collection of national groups with differing outlooks, and the various factions disagree about how best to advance its mission. But all reject global jihad while embracing elections and other features of democracy. There is also a current within the Brotherhood willing to engage with the United States. In the past several decades, this current—along with the realities of practical politics—has pushed much of the Brotherhood toward moderation.

U.S. policymaking has been handicapped by Washington's tendency to see the Muslim Brotherhood—and the Islamist movement as a whole—as a monolith. Policymakers should instead analyze each national and local group independently and seek out those that are open to engagement. In the anxious and often fruitless search for Muslim moderates, policymakers should recognize that the Muslim Brotherhood presents a notable opportunity.

BIG BROTHERS

SINCE ITS founding in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood has sought to fuse religious revival with anti-imperialism—resistance to foreign domination through the exaltation of Islam. At its beginning, the Brotherhood differed from earlier reformers by combining a profoundly Islamic ideology with modern grass-roots political activism. The Brotherhood pursued an Islamic society through *tarbiyya* (preaching and educating), concentrating first on changing the outlook of individuals, then families, and finally societies. Although the Brotherhood's origins were lower-middle class, it soon pushed Islamization into the local bourgeoisie and then clear to the palace. At the same time, it formed the armed Special Apparatus, replicating Young Egypt's Greenshirts, the Wafd's Blueshirts, nascent Nazi Brown-shirts, and other paramilitary organizations that were rife in the Middle East at the time.

In 1948, with civil strife looming, the Egyptian government dissolved the Brotherhood. Later that year, a number of Brothers were implicated in the murder of the prime minister. Despite his public denunciation of the assassins, Hasan al-Banna, the Brotherhood's founder, was soon assassinated as well—leaving the factionalized Brothers squabbling over a successor.



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

*Voters from the Muslim Brotherhood praying outside a polling station,
El Mansura, Egypt, December 1, 2005*

In a gesture of conciliation to the palace (and also to prevent a single faction from dominating), the Brotherhood chose an outsider, the respected judge Hasan al-Hudaybi, to succeed Banna as its leader. Hudaybi's selection coincided with the military coup that toppled the Egyptian monarchy. The Free Officers Movement, led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser and his successor, Anwar al-Sadat, had worked closely with the Muslim Brothers, who were attracted by the soldiers' nationalist stance and Islamic rhetoric. But the Free Officers' promise to Islamize the new constitution soon proved illusory. An embittered member of the Brotherhood's paramilitary Special Apparatus emptied a pistol at Nasser during a speech, prompting the new regime to herd into Nasser's squalid jails much of the organization, few members of which had any inkling of the hair-brained assassination adventure. Nasser, uninjured and unfazed, emerged as a stoic hero, the Brotherhood's notorious Special Apparatus as the gang that could not shoot straight.

In prison, the guards applied the kind of torture that would make Arab nationalism infamous, in Egypt as well as in Iraq and

Syria. The Brothers' wounds throbbed with fateful questions: How could those who stood shoulder to shoulder with us against the British and the king now set their dogs on us? Can those tormenting devout Muslims really be Muslims themselves? Sayyid Qutb, then the Ikhwan's most profound thinker, produced an answer that would echo into the twenty-first century: these were the acts of apostates, *kafireen*. Accordingly, the torturers and their regime were legitimate targets of jihad.

But from his own cell, Hedaybi disputed Qutb's conclusion. Only God, he believed, could judge faith. He rejected *takfir* (the act of declaring another Muslim an apostate), arguing that "whoever judges that someone is no longer a Muslim ... deviates from Islam and transgresses God's will by judging another person's faith." Within the Brotherhood, Hedaybi's tolerant view—in line with Banna's founding vision—prevailed, cementing the group's moderate vocation. But it appalled the *takfiris*, who streamed out of the Brotherhood. Qutb, who breathed his last on Nasser's gallows in 1966, went on to become the prophet and martyr of jihad. "Qutb has influenced all those interested in jihad throughout the Islamic world," said a founding member of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, an erstwhile jihadist group known for its vicious campaign against foreign tourists in Egypt during the 1980s. "The Brothers," he continued sadly, "have abandoned the ideas of Sayyid Qutb."

The Ikhwan followed the path of toleration and eventually came to find democracy compatible with its notion of slow Islamization. An Islamic society, the idea goes, will naturally desire Islamic leaders and support them at the ballot box. The Ikhwan also repeatedly justified democracy on Islamic grounds by certifying that "the *umma* [the Muslim community] is the source of *sulta* [political authority]." In pursuit of popular authority, the Brotherhood has formed electoral alliances with secularists, nationalists, and liberals.

Having lost the internal struggle for the Brotherhood, the radicals regrouped outside it, in sects that sought to topple regimes throughout the Muslim world. (Groups such as al Jihad would furnish the Egyptian core of al Qaeda.) These jihadists view the Brotherhood's embrace of democracy as blasphemy. Channeling Qutb, they argue that any government not ruling solely by sharia is apostate; democracy

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is not just a mistaken tactic but also an unforgivable sin, because it gives humans sovereignty over Allah. Osama bin Laden's lieutenant, Zawahiri, calls it "the deification of the people." Abu Hamza al-Masri, the one-eyed radical cleric who presided over London's notorious Finsbury Park mosque, considers democracy "the call of self-divinity loud and clear, in which the rights of one group of people, who have put their idea to vote, have put their ideas and their decisions over the decisions of Allah." Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (whom a recent West Point study found to be the most influential living jihadist thinker) inveighs, "Democracy is obvious polytheism and thus just the kind of infidelity that Allah warns against, in His Book."

Many analysts, meanwhile, sensibly question whether the Brotherhood's adherence to democracy is merely tactical and transitory—an opportunistic commitment to, in the historian Bernard Lewis' words, "one man, one vote, one time." Behind that warning is an extensive history of similar cadre organizations that promised democracy and then recanted once in power: the Bolsheviks, the Nazis, the Baath Party in Iraq and Syria, even the Nasserists. There is slim evidence that the Brotherhood has pondered what it would do with power. Although it has been prodded by the electoral process to define its slogan—"Islam Is the Solution"—Islamist governmental blueprints are scarce, even ones as sketchy as Lenin's *State and Revolution* or Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

But in at least one respect, the Brotherhood differs from those admonitory precedents: its road to power is not revolutionary; it depends on winning hearts through gradual and peaceful Islamization. Under this Fabian strategy, the Brotherhood seeks a compact with the powers that be—offering a channel for discontent while slowly expanding its influence. As one senior member told us, "It would be unjust if the Brotherhood were to come to power before a majority of the society is prepared to support them." Another Ikhwan leader told us that if the Brotherhood should rule unwisely and then face electoral defeat, "we will have failed the people and the new party will have the right to come to power. We will not take away anyone's rights." And in extensive conversations with the Muslim Brotherhood's disparate allies throughout the Middle East, we heard many expressions of confidence that it would honor democratic processes.

INTERNAL DEBATES

MIDDLE EASTERN jails, petrodollars, geopolitical rivalries, and the “Muslim Awakening” have given rise to a highly variegated Islamist movement. Unfortunately, nuance is lost in much of current Western discourse. Herding these different beasts into a single conceptual corral labeled “Salafi” or “Wahhabi” ignores the differences and fault lines between them—and has thwarted strategic thinking as a result.

When we asked Muslim Brothers in the Middle East and Europe whether they considered themselves Salafists (as they are frequently identified), they usually met our question with a Clintonian response: “That depends on what your definition of Salafist is.” If by Salafism we meant the modernist, renaissance Islam of Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh (turn-of-the-twentieth-century reformers who influenced Banna), then yes, they were Salafists. Yet the ubiquitous Web site www.salafipublications.com, which is run by Salafists who believe that religion should never mix with politics and that existing rulers should be supported almost unconditionally, attacks Afghani and Abduh for being “far away from the Salafi *aqidah* [creed].” (This is the view, for obvious reasons, of the Saudi religious establishment.) Such “pietists,” most of whom were trained in official Saudi institutions, argue that the Brotherhood’s participation in politics has converted them into the “Bankrupt Brotherhood.” According to one, “The Muslim Brothers have political goals and strategies, which induce them to make concessions to the West. For us, the Salafists, the goal is purely religious.”

Other critics speculate that the Brotherhood helps radicalize Muslims in both the Middle East and Europe. But in fact, it appears that the Ikhwan works to dissuade Muslims from violence, instead channeling them into politics and charitable activities. As a senior member of the Egyptian Brotherhood’s Guidance Council told us in Cairo, “If it wasn’t for the Brotherhood, most of the youths of this era would have chosen the path of violence. The Ikhwan has become a safety valve for moderate Islam.” The leader of the Jordanian Islamic Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood’s political party in Jordan, said that his group outdoes the government in discouraging jihad: “We’re better able to conduct an intellectual confrontation, and not a security confrontation, with the forces of extremism and fanaticism.”

In London, Brotherhood leaders contrasted their approach to that of radical groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), that “seek to bring society to a boiling point.”

The Brotherhood claims success at sifting radicalism out of its ranks through organizational discipline and a painstaking educational program. (One Muslim Brother noted that the organization’s motto could be “Listen and Obey.”) If a Muslim Brother wishes to commit violence, he generally leaves the organization to do so. That said, a number of militants have passed through the Brotherhood since its inception, and the path from the Brotherhood to jihad is not buried in sand. Defections have historically occurred when the organization has faced a conjunction of internal and external pressures, as when the *takfiri* element emerged under repression to produce the Egyptian jihadist movement. Today, however, Brothers who leave the organization are more likely to join the moderate center rather than to take up jihad. In the mid-1990s, internal dissent over registering as a political party occurred in the context of a government crackdown against a jihadist assault. These pressures resulted in an exodus of Brothers, many of whom formed the core of the liberal Islamist *wasatiyya* movement, including the moderate Hizb al-Wasat (Center Party).

One issue of enduring concern is Qutb’s ambiguous legacy in the Brotherhood. Critiquing “the martyr,” as Qutb is known, requires a surgeon’s touch: he died in the service of the organization yet had strayed far from the founder’s vision. Even Hudaybi’s *Preachers, Not Judges*, an indirect but clear refutation of Qutb, never mentions him. Today, the Brotherhood lionizes Qutb, admittedly a major figure whose views cannot be reduced to jihad. But it straddles a barbed fence in embracing Qutb while simultaneously arguing that his violent teachings were “taken out of context.” What lessons will younger members tempted to radical action draw?

While jihadists have been sorting out the finer points of international slaughter, the Ikhwan has hunkered down to pursue national goals. In the November 2005 legislative elections in Egypt, independent candidates

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affiliated with the Ikhwan, which is officially banned but still tolerated, won a surprising 20 percent of the assembly—especially impressive considering widespread government fraud and voter intimidation. In the new parliament, the Brotherhood has coordinated its legislative efforts by forming an internal experts committee, nicknamed “the parliamentary kitchen,” that groups Brotherhood candidates according to their specialties. Instead of pursuing a divisive religious or cultural agenda, the Brotherhood has pushed for more affordable housing, criticized the government’s handling of the avian flu threat, and demanded accountability for the recent series of bus, train, and ferry disasters.

These electoral advances and moderate, practical criticisms have made for an increasingly tense relationship with the Egyptian government. The Ikhwan’s electoral gains were followed, in May 2006, by their support for judicial reform and independence. President Hosni Mubarak’s suspected preparations for handing over power to his son Gamal have led to further crackdowns on the opposition.

Such pressure exacerbates differences between various tendencies in the Egyptian Brotherhood. Since the 1980s, middle-class professionals have pushed it in a more transparent and flexible direction. Working within labor unions and professional organizations, these reformers have learned to forge coalitions with and provide services to their constituents. A leader of the reformist faction told us, “Reform will only happen if Islamists work with other forces, including secularists and liberals.” This current finds a comfortable home within the Egyptian umbrella movement Kifaya (Enough!), which embraces the Brotherhood along with all manner of secularists, liberals, nationalists, and leftists. Kifaya was born in fervent opposition to the war in Iraq and now forms the battered core of Egyptian democratic opposition. (It is ironic that a war waged in the name of promoting democracy has midwived a democratic front in Egypt that is at odds with the United States and its war.)

The Brotherhood’s reformist wing contends with conservatives in high positions in the organization who bear the scars of repression and secrecy. The sharpest divisions have occurred over the issue of forming a political party, a key plank of the reformist agenda. Doing so, reformists argue, would serve the broader goals of the organization by giving the Brotherhood a platform to spread its message

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to an otherwise unavailable audience. The conservatives argue that a party should be an annex to the movement, devoted solely to politics. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood's social movement would perform tasks outside of politics, such as charity, education, and health.

BROTHERLY LOVE OR SIBLING RIVALRY?

ALTHOUGH THE Egyptian branch remains the most influential Brotherhood group, offshoots have prospered throughout the Middle East and Europe. But there is no Islamist "Comintern." The Brotherhood's dreaded International Organization is in fact a loose and feeble coalition scarcely able to convene its own members. Indeed, the Brotherhood's international debility is a product of its local successes: national autonomy and adjustability to domestic conditions. The ideological affiliations that link Brotherhood organizations internationally are subject to the national priorities that shape each individually.

Suppressed throughout much of the Middle East, the Brotherhood spread across the Arab world and, via students and exiles, to Europe. In the early 1980s, the Egyptian Ikhwan sought to establish coordination among dozens of national offspring. But opposition was universal. Right next door, the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood powerhouse Hasan al-Turabi protested, "You cannot run the world from Cairo." When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brothers objected to the acquiescence of the International Organization and withdrew, taking with them their plump wallets. The U.S.-installed government in Iraq is another apple of discord. While Muslim Brothers throughout the Middle East and Europe inveighed against the "puppet" Iraqi government, the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood sat prominently in the Iraqi Parliament. More recently, the alliance between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and Abdel Halim Khaddam, the dissident former Syrian vice president, has been widely offensive to other Brotherhood branches. The war in Lebanon last summer sharpened that divide, as the Syrian Brothers leaped to denounce President Bashar al-Assad's meddling in Lebanon, while the rest of the Brotherhood rallied behind Hezbollah.

The national branches also have divergent views of the United States. In Egypt and Jordan, even as it has considered a partnership with Washington against “autocracy and terrorism,” the Brotherhood, driven partly by electoral concerns, has harshly criticized the United States. The Syrian Brotherhood, meanwhile, keenly supports the Bush administration’s efforts to isolate the Assad regime; the kind of inflammatory anti-U.S. statements typical in Jordan and Egypt are rare in Syria.

Even on the central issue of Israel, each national organization calls its own tune. Every Muslim Brotherhood leader with whom we spoke claimed a willingness to follow suit should Hamas—the Palestinian offshoot of the Brotherhood—recognize the Jewish state. Such earnest professions may be grounded in the confident assumption of Hamas recalcitrance, but that position nonetheless stands in sharp relief to that of most jihadists. As Zawahiri expresses the jihadist view, “No one has the right, whether Palestinian or not, to abandon a grain of soil from Palestine, which was a Muslim land, which was occupied by infidels.”

The Brotherhood does authorize jihad in countries and territories occupied by a foreign power. Like in Afghanistan under the Soviets, the Ikhwan views the struggles in Iraq and against Israel as “defensive jihad” against invaders, the Muslim functional equivalent of the Christian doctrine of “just war.” However, the Brotherhood’s failure to stress the religious dimension incenses the jihadists, who mock the Brotherhood (including Hamas) for conducting jihad “for the sake of territory” rather than for the sake of Allah. Compare the statement from the Brotherhood’s Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who argues that “the enmity between us and the Jews is for the sake of land only,” with this one from Zawahiri: “God, glory to him, made the religion the cause of enmity and the cause of our fight.”

Muslim Brothers expressly deny their organization is anti-Semitic. The current Egyptian general guide, Muhammad Mahdi Akef, argues that there is no conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jews, only between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Zionists (who, Akef told us, “are not Jews”). Despite these denials, Brotherhood literature has expressed hatred for all Jews, not just “Zionists.” The October 1980 children’s supplement to the Brotherhood newspaper *Al-Dawa*, for example, was designed to instruct young children on “the enemies of your religion”: “Such are the Jews, my brother, Muslim lion cub, your

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enemies and the enemies of God. ... Muslim lion cub, annihilate their existence.” But in a recent sermon at a Somali mosque in North London, Kamal El Helbawi—reportedly the most influential Muslim Brother in the United Kingdom—declared that to be a good Muslim, faith was not enough. After faith there was neighborliness, and Helbawi related a story: “The well-known scholar Abdullah Ibn al-Mubarak had a Jewish neighbor. The Jew wanted to sell his house. The buyers asked him the price, and he said, ‘Two thousand.’ They said to him, ‘But your house is only worth one thousand.’ He said, ‘Yes, but I want one thousand for my house and another one thousand because of the good neighbour whom I am going to leave behind.’” After the service, we asked Helbawi whether recent news accounts of Muslim anti-Semitism in the English Midlands inspired his sermon, which publicly lauded a Jew for displaying a sacred Islamic virtue. “Precisely,” he replied.

Islamists have been accused of using deceptive “double discourse”: good moderate cop in English, bad fundamentalist cop in Arabic. A recent article in the journal *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* found worrying discrepancies between the English and Arabic versions of certain articles on the official Muslim Brotherhood Web site. But Helbawi’s sermon was delivered exclusively in English, with no restatement in Arabic. This public, on-the-record display was far more persuasive than the usual Brotherhood spin separating anti-Zionism from anti-Semitism.

BROTHERS ABROAD

IN EUROPE, Brotherhood-led groups represent minorities in secular, democratic countries, and they understand that they will remain minorities for the foreseeable future. None actively pursues the objective of converting its compatriots to Islam. Instead, the emphasis falls on the rights of religious minorities. (Ironically, the European Brotherhood-inspired organizations take full advantage of Europe’s extreme official religious tolerance, inspired by the experience of Nazi anti-Semitism.)

One example of the Brotherhood’s European approach came after a Danish newspaper printed cartoons satirizing the Prophet Muhammad last year. Although its transnational networks helped spread the word about the cartoons, all branches officially called for peaceful protest. The Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, a grouping of the

most important European Brotherhood-led bodies, condemned the European papers that printed the cartoons but hardly in stinging terms. Although it criticized the cartoons for “hurt[ing] the feelings of Muslims,” it devoted more space to calling for increased cooperation between Muslims and non-Muslims. The jihadists, in contrast, were offering blood money for the heads of the cartoonists and coordinating “embassy burning days.”

In France, the sheer number of Muslims, alarming press and government reports about the Islamization of schools, radical “garage mosques,” clamorous Muslim protests against Israel, desecrations of Jewish graveyards, attacks on uncovered women, and several foiled terrorist plots have created the general impression, inside and outside the country, of a powerful rising Islamism. That is why a number of French and overseas observers rushed to label the stone-throwing, car-burning riots of 2005 in the largely Muslim slums “the French intifada.” But in three and a half weeks of riots, Islamism failed to make its presence felt, still less to establish sharia in some obscure precinct, as reported by overwrought observers. “Islamic radicals played no role in the triggering or spread of the violence,” according to France’s domestic intelligence service, Renseignements Généraux. “On the contrary, they had every interest in a rapid return to calm in order to avoid being accused of anything.” The chief of the Paris branch of the Renseignements Généraux told us that of the 3,000 rioters arrested in Paris last fall, there was “not one known as belonging to an Islamist crowd, and we monitor them quite closely.”

In fact, when the Islamists emerged, it was to try to calm the autumn rioters, who often greeted these missionaries with hails of stones. The Brotherhood-linked organization Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (UOIF) repudiated the riots in a fatwa. That fatwa was the culmination of a UOIF strategy, forged 15 years earlier, to be perceived as a reliable partner of the French government. The highest-ranking permanent official of the domestic surveillance agency told us that the UOIF “needs” them, presumably to certify that the organization poses no danger.

Similarly, when French authorities banned the wearing of the hijab (or *foulard*), the position of the UOIF was accommodation. The UOIF’s cautious stance on the law disappointed other European branches of the

Brotherhood. They wished their French counterpart would be more aggressive and feared the French were setting a precedent of quiescence for other European Islamist groups of a more separatist persuasion.

As part of their collaborationist, low-profile strategy, the UOIF has also maintained a prudent distance from such lightning rods as the Ikhwan figure Qaradawi, notorious in the West for justifying jihad in Israel and Iraq. Qaradawi has gone notably uninvited to recent UOIF annual congresses. (For many Islamists, Qaradawi is no radical; as far as the jihadist ideologue Abu Basir al-Tartusi is concerned, Qaradawi deserves excommunication for his “moderation.”)

The UOIF newspaper *Al Ittihad* even treats the Palestinian question cautiously, supporting only charitable donations to refugees and presenting the Palestinians as victims rather than warriors. The UOIF does not participate in pro-Palestinian demonstrations and steers clear of the charged Arab-Israeli dispute. It did not take part in the 2003 national demonstration against the war in Iraq, nor in the massive marches in the spring of 2006. The organization’s absence from both the riots and the marches, in the European country with the most Muslims, ought to soothe fears of an Islamist takeover of Europe.

The UOIF’s discretion differs sharply from its British counterpart, the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), which warmly welcomes the likes of Qaradawi. Although a quarter the size of the French Muslim population, the United Kingdom’s Muslim population is more angry and assertive, and far more prone to terrorism. The UOIF is more influential than the MAB, but the smaller MAB splashes in a much stormier sea. When the Muslim Brothers formed the MAB in 1997, it was but one of many Muslim organizations in the United Kingdom. Many were radical, rejecting the mild, if more fundamentalist, Deobandi and Barelwi traditions of their parents. Already in the field for a generation was the U.K. Islamic Mission, an offshoot of the Pakistani Islamist movement founded by Abul A’la Maududi. While the UOIF’s voice boomed in the small room of French Muslim activists, the MAB’s was a small voice trying to be heard in a vast auditorium in which the young were already pitching rotten eggs at their elders.

Policymakers must learn to differentiate the Muslim Brotherhood from radical Islam.

As the MAB grew in prominence, it began to work with the British government. This cooperation has been notable at London's Finsbury Park mosque. That mosque gained notoriety thanks to its infamous erstwhile preacher. Despite Masri's arrest and expulsion from the mosque, his followers returned and quickly regained control. The police, hesitant to intervene directly in a house of worship, offered the MAB control of the mosque in exchange for ridding it of radicals. The MAB gained a majority on the mosque board and gathered to retake the building. Although Masri's men tried to storm the mosque, the assembled MAB supporters routed them. Since then, Scotland Yard tells us that their "reliable and effective partners" have even "deradicalized" some of Masri's former followers.

Open cooperation with the authorities has put the MAB at odds with radical groups such as HT. The contest between the MAB and HT roughly follows ethnic and generational lines: young Muslims of Pakistani descent are heavily represented in HT, whereas the older and fewer Muslims of Arab descent join the MAB. A former HT member told us that his group "dominates the British scene." He estimated that HT had some 8,500 members in the United Kingdom; the MAB could boast only 1,000. The formally nonviolent HT itself is a full step away from the subjects of the British internal security chief's recent assessment of jihadist activity: "Some 200 groupings or networks, totaling over 1,600 identified individuals (and there will be many we don't know) who are actively engaged in plotting, or facilitating, terrorist acts here and overseas." In light of these numbers, no wonder MAB officials told us that their group was "a decade behind," and not gaining ground against, radical groups in the United Kingdom.

DIVIDE AND ENGAGE

BORN AS an anti-imperialist as much as an Islamic revivalist movement, the Brotherhood, like the United States, will follow its own star. If individual branches resist the intercession of fellow organizations, how much less likely is it that they will embrace U.S. tutelage? But cooperation in specific areas of mutual interest—such as opposition to al Qaeda, the encouragement of democracy, and resistance to expanding Iranian influence—could well be feasible.

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One place to start would be with representatives of the Brotherhood's reformist wing, especially those already living in the West. The United States lost an opportunity to hear from one of these reformers last October when Helbawi—the imam whom we heard deliver a sermon extolling a Jew—was forced off a flight en route to a conference at New York University. This treatment of a figure known for his brave stand against radical Islam and for his public advocacy of dialogue with the United States constitutes yet another bewildering act by the Department of Homeland Security, which provided no explanation. This London-based admirer of Shakespeare and the Brontës appears to be exactly the sort of interlocutor who could help bridge civilizations. Instead, his public humiliation was a gift for the radicals, a bracing serving of “we told you so” on the subject of engaging Americans.

U.S. policy toward the Brotherhood is contested between those who view the Brotherhood and its affiliates as a vital component of the global jihadist network and those who argue that the Brotherhood's popular support in key Muslim countries and moderating potential require some degree of engagement. The former view seems ascendant and explains an increase in U.S. efforts to isolate the Brotherhood—such as preventing Helbawi and other reformist members of the Brotherhood from entering the United States or prohibiting U.S. government personnel from engaging with the Brotherhood.

But if the United States is to cope with the Muslim revival while advancing key national interests, policymakers must recognize its almost infinite variety of political (and apolitical) orientations. When it comes to the Muslim Brotherhood, the beginning of wisdom lies in differentiating it from radical Islam and recognizing the significant differences between national Brotherhood organizations. That diversity suggests Washington should adopt a case-by-case approach, letting the situation in each individual country determine when talking with—or even working with—the Brotherhood is feasible and appropriate. In the United States' often futile search for “moderate Muslims” with active community support—and at a moment when, isolated and suspect, Washington should be taking stock of its interests and capabilities in the Muslim world—a conversation with the Muslim Brotherhood makes strong strategic sense. 🌐