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EGYPTIAN CROSSCURRENTS:
THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND DEMOCRACY ON THE NILE

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The Muslim Brotherhood (*Al Ikhwan al Muslimeen*) is the world's oldest and most influential Islamist movement. Founded in Ismailiya in 1928 by Hassan al Banna, the Brotherhood, like most of the grassroots movements that sprang up in Egypt at the time, was strongly opposed to colonial rule and advocated Egyptian independence. But while most anti-British movements took inspiration from an array of

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Western-imported ideologies, the Brotherhood based its discourse on Islam. Creating what would become the motto of generations of Islamists ("Islam is the solution"), al Banna saw the answer to the Western "military-political-ethical-social invasion" of the Muslim world as "resistance to foreign domination through the exaltation of Islam."[1] Al Banna viewed Islam as complete and all-embracing, governing all aspects of private and public life. For him Islam was not just "empty acts of prostration" but "politics, society, economy, law and culture."[2] Solutions to all problems of Egypt and, more broadly, the entire *ummah* could be found in this complete system: only when Muslims had fully implemented Islam would they regain their natural and God-given position of prominence in the world.

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[1] Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), page 223; Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, "The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2007):108.

[2] Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Movement,* 1928–1942 (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998), page 202; Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 232–33.

Al Banna's reference to Islam's mythical past as the cure for the *ummah*'s ills does not contradict his embrace of modern political mobilization tactics. His organization created a capillary structure that included mosques, professional organizations, charities, social services, and publications. Internally, the Brotherhood subdivided itself into a myriad of sub-organizations and committees, each with a very precise structure and goal. In less than twenty years, it was estimated to have over half a million members and an even larger number of sympathizers spread throughout Egypt.[3] The group attracted many from the city proletariat and the recently urbanized, well-educated, but frustrated lower middle class of government employees, white-collar workers, and university graduates with few employment prospects.[4]

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Al Banna had established an extensive network of *dawa* organizations that could tailor their message to their audiences. But he also devised a long-term social engineering program that, in his mind, would lead to a bottom-up Islamization of society.[5] Al Banna's public message called for the establishment of an Islamic state through Islamization from below, a slow process that saw the creation of a purely Islamic system of government only as the natural consequence of the peaceful Islamization of the majority of the population. Yet parts of the Brotherhood seemed not to have patience to await the fruits of their *dawa* and, almost from the organization's inception, developed a secret apparatus that planned to use violence to further their goals. Initially the secret apparatus carried out attacks against British interests in the country, but it soon extended its violent actions against domestic targets, bombing sites owned by or linked to Egyptian Jews and killing prominent politicians, judges, and government officials.[6]

These escalating tensions led Egyptian authorities to ban the organization in December 1948. A few weeks later, members of the Egyptian security forces killed al Banna; several of the Brotherhood's top leaders were incarcerated and summarily tried. The

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[3] William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004), 302.
[4] Dennis J. Sullivan and Sana Abed-Kotob, *Islam in Contemporary Egypt: Civil Society vs. the State* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 42.
[5] Jamal A. Badawi, "Approaches to Muslim Reawakening: Al-Banna's Approach," in Muhammad Mumtaz Ali, ed., *Modern Islamic Movements: Models, Problems and Perspectives* (Kuala Lumpur: Noordeen, 2000).
[6] Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 30–64.

Brothers had lost the first of many battles they would fight with the Egyptian government over subsequent decades. The Brotherhood received an unexpected boost in 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers overthrew King Farouk and established a republic. Yet the Brothers' hopes to influence Nasser to establish an Islamic state were soon crashed. A new confrontation soon ensued and the Brotherhood was once again banned in 1954. The new ban opened a dramatic phase of the Brotherhood's history, characterized by sweeping arrests, concentration camps, summary military tribunals, and widespread torture. The brutal crackdowns of the 1950s and 1960s caused major changes, spurring three developments that have marked the organization's recent history and more generally, the trajectory of the global Islamist movement.

One consequence of the Nasserite crackdowns was the emigration of large numbers of Brotherhood members. Many fled the persecution in Egypt and found a golden refuge in Saudi Arabia and other countries of the Arab Gulf. There the Brothers became teachers, lawyers, administrators, and bankers, taking intellectual jobs that the cash-rich but educationally underdeveloped Gulf countries had to fill in great numbers. Soon the Brothers began to put the Saudis' wealth to good use. Some funds went to finance the activities of the Brotherhood in Egypt, which was struggling to stay afloat. But much larger amounts went to the creation of Islamic centers, publications, and organizations worldwide. Saudi financial patronage and Brotherhood brainpower led to the formation of the Muslim World League (1962), the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (1972), and other multimillion-dollar *dawa* organizations that spread the Saudis' and the Brothers' interpretation of Islam.[7] Though the Arab Gulf was the perfect haven and a seemingly inexhaustible gold mine, not all Brothers who had chosen to leave Egypt decided to settle there. Smaller numbers, also coming from other Muslim countries, relocated in Europe and North America, hoping to receive political asylum or attracted by the option of furthering their studies at local universities. These "Western Brothers" founded some of the first Muslim organizations in the West, at the time little more than student groups with a few dozen members.

The second development was the violent radicalization of a part of the Brotherhood. At a time when thousands of Brothers were languishing in jail and the formal leadership of the organization was proving itself ineffective, many found a new ideological leader in Said Qutb. In works that have become classics of the Islamist movement, such as *In*

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[7] Reinhard Schulze, *Islamischer Internationalismus im 20 Jahrhundert: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Islamischen Weltliga* (Leiden: Brill, 1990); see also John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 2:207– 209.

the Shade of the Quran and Milestones, Qutb's analysis, unquestionably influenced by the horrors he witnessed in detention, is that the situation is so dire that Muslims cannot and should not wait.[8] Islamization from below is too slow a process, impeded by the intervention of local authorities and foreign powers. Therefore the only solution lies in the concepts of *takfir* and *jihad*. *Takfir* is the practice of declaring a Muslim a non-Muslim, and Qutb claims that it applies to the current Muslim rulers who, by refusing to implement *sharia* and establish authentic Islamic states, have in effect abandoned Islam.

In Qutb's view, "true" Muslims are obligated to overthrow and kill such rulers in order to establish an Islamic state. *Dawa* cannot do what *jihad*, in this case defined as violent confrontation, can accomplish. Qutb was never able to implement his vision and, after years in jail, he was hanged in 1966.[9] His martyrdom only increased his popularity. Qutb's doctrine, and particularly his religious justification of violence, has influenced generations of militants throughout the Muslim world. In Egypt, members of the Brotherhood broke with the group and formed bands such as the Gamaa Islamiya and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which aimed at using violence to overthrow the regime. Globally, Qutb's teachings have inspired the actions of most *jihadist* groups, making him the undisputed ideological forefather of modern Islamist terrorism.[10]

Whereas after the persecutions of the 1950s and 1960s one section of the Brotherhood chose a direct confrontation with the regime, most of the group opted for accommodation. By the late 1960s several leaders of the organization began to publicly eschew violence against the regime, beginning a long process of normalization that had been under way until the end of the Mubarak regime. Many point to a book written by the then *murshid* (spiritual guide) of the Brotherhood, Hassan al Hudaiby, as making a clean break with the Qutbist phase. *Missionaries, Not Judges*, never mentions Qutb but rejects his doctrine of *takfir* and argues for reverting to al Banna's focus on education.[11] Hudaiby states that the Brothers should not judge other Muslims, a role that is reserved for God, but should simply focus on educating them on true Islam.[12] Adopting his

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[8] Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 36-59.

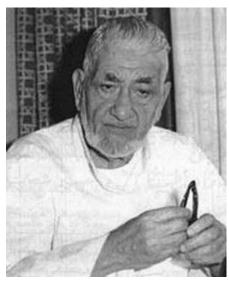[9] Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, *Islam in Contemporary Egypt*, 43.

[10] For an excellent overview of Qutb's life and influence, see Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 7–31.

[11] Interview with Barbara Zollner, London, December 2008; John O. Voll, "Fundamentalism in the Sunni Arab World," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[12] Barbara Zollner, *The Muslim Brotherhood : Hasan Al-Hudaybi and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2008); Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 107–11.

teachings, the Brotherhood opted for a nonviolent opposition that focused on societal reform through grassroots education.[13] The shift crystallized in the late 1970s, when Umar al Tilmisani, the charismatic and astute third leader of the Brotherhood, began cooperating with the Egyptian government, opting for a policy of gradualism and accepting a place within the political process.[14]

The accommodationist wing, which soon gained the leadership of the organization, understood that any sort of violent confrontation would have seen them on the losing side and led to further persecutions. These "New Muslim Brethren" therefore decided to focus on *dawa*, implementing

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the bottom-up Islamization detailed by al Banna. Nasser's death in 1970 and the rise to power of Anwar Sadat gradually allowed more room for the Brothers to conduct their activities. Since then, the organization has endured periodic crackdowns, albeit minor, inevitably followed by periods of relaxation during which the Brotherhood, while never officially allowed to operate as a formal organization, had been tolerated. The Brothers established a *modus vivendi* with the government and while still officially banned they participated in elections. They still aim at Islamizing society but declare their intent to do so without resorting to violence.

That is not to say that the Muslim Brotherhood has completely eschewed violence as a mean to achieve political goals. The group openly supports in words and, in some cases, deeds various Islamist groups that use violence in areas where the Brothers perceive that Muslims are being attacked. Brotherhood leaders have consistently endorsed suicide attacks and other forms of violence in Palestine, Kashmir, Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time it has frequently criticized and condemned the actions of al Qaeda and affiliated groups, with which it has engaged in a vicious diatribe over tactics, strategy and theology.[15]

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[13] Barbara Zollner, "Prison Talk: The Muslim Brotherhood's Internal Struggle During Gamal Abdel Nasser's Persecution," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 39 (2007): 411–33.

[14] John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*? (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 140–41; Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt,* 62–63.

[15] For a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and al Qaeda, see Marc Lynch, Islam Divided Between *Salafi-jihad* and the *Ikhwan*, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Volume 33, Issue 6, June 2010, pages 467 – 487.

The Brotherhood in post-Mubarak Egypt

Over the last few weeks commentators in Egypt and throughout the world have debated the likely role of the Brotherhood in post-Mubarak Egypt. The situation is so fluid that it is difficult to make any reliable prediction at this point. It is nevertheless possible to highlight some dynamics that have characterized the Brotherhood over the last few years and that could have important implications for the near future. One of them is the presence of deep fissures within the organization. As most large organizations, in fact, the Brotherhood is plagued by personal and ideological divides that have surfaced in the past but that are likely to become more evident as the glue that kept the group together—opposition to the regime—has disappeared.

The deepest fissure is generational. Most of the institutional roles within the organization are covered by members of the first generation, individuals who in most cases spent several years in jail during the Nasserite crackdowns of the 1960s. Chief among them is Muhammad Badi', who took the helm of the organization in January 2010. The first generation is anchored to many of the traditional positions of the Brotherhood, including a more than ambiguous stance over democracy, religious freedom and the use of violence for political means. Since assuming the position of *murshid*, for example, Badi' has raised controversies by stating that the United States is "heading towards its collapse" and openly calling for jihad against Israel and Jews.[16]

Over the last few years the leadership of the first generation has been challenged by the second generation, activists who joined the Brotherhood as students during the relative freedom of the 1970s. Leaders of the second generation like Issam Al Arian and Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh strike a completely different tone, speaking the language of democracy and human rights. Several commentators argue that they are just better versed at presenting a moderate façade to the outside, while in reality retaining the same views of the old guard. But whether it is a genuine ideological divide or simply a power struggle, there is no question that strong tensions exist between the two generations.

Complicating the picture is the emergence of a cadre of twenty and thirty-something. For years this third generation complained about the rigid hierarchy of the organization and their exclusion from its upper echelons. But the events of the last few weeks have created additional resentment towards the leadership, as many within the

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[16] http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/4970.htm and
http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3300

third generation were dismayed by its delayed participation in the mass protests against the regime. There is no question that the Brotherhood's initial hesitation to join the protest movement cost it significant support, both within its rank and file and with the Egyptian population at large. Many within the third generation have formed a coalition with the April 6 Movement and other youth groups that were on the forefront in Tahrir Square during the protest. Although the dynamics are difficult to assess at this point, it is not unfair to say that some of them no longer recognize themselves in the Brotherhood's traditional leadership, whether the first or the second generation.

This chaotic situation is complicated by the lack of transparency within the Brotherhood, a complaint commonly raised by members of the organization itself. There are good reasons to believe that those occupying the highest official positions in the group are not necessarily the most important decision makers. This strategy of putting forward fronts while leaving the real masterminds behind is partially justified by the continuous repression the group had to endure since its foundation. It nevertheless leaves outsiders and even most within the rank and file without a clear understanding of the real power dynamics within the Brotherhood.

Similarly, many observers have noted that over the last few weeks Brotherhood leaders and spokesmen have issued conflicting statements on several issues, from whether the group was going to apply to become a political party to its position on the peace treaty with Israel. "It's never entirely clear with the Brothers," wisely observes Josh Stacher, a professor at Kent State University, "it's a big group, with lots of different points of view. You can find the guy always screaming about Israel and then you got the other guys who don't care about Israel because they're too busy worrying about raising literacy rates."[17] How much these conflicting statements are signs of the group's internal fissures or, rather, of its tendency to speak in different ways to different audiences is, of course, debatable. But it is unquestionable that the Egyptian Brotherhood is hardly the monolithic movement that some like to portray.

Despite this internal fragmentation, it is undeniable that the Brotherhood remains, at least at this point, the best organized among the political forces operating in post-Mubarak Egypt. It is the only one with a nationwide grassroots apparatus and trained cadres of political activists. At the same time, it is unlikely to completely dominate the political scene. In interviews with the author of this report in 2009 various members of the Brotherhood's Shura Council stated they assessed the Egyptian population's support

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[17] http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704629004576135882819143872.html

for the group in a then hypothetical free election at 20 to 25%.[18] And a poll conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in the wake of Mubarak's fall found that the Brotherhood is "approved" by only 15% of respondents and its leaders received barely 1% in a presidential straw vote.[19] It is very difficult to predict the developments of the Egyptian political scene over the next weeks, let alone months, but it seems fair to state that the Brotherhood will have a significant role in it but it does not seem destined to dominate it.

The Brothers and Democracy

Given the latest developments in Egypt, it becomes imperative to examine the Brotherhood's stance on democracy. As for most issues pertaining the group, opinions among experts are almost irremediably split on the subject. An array of highly respected scholars and commentators subscribe to what could be termed the optimistic view. Optimists see the Brotherhood as a religiously conservative yet democratic-leaning movement that has undergone significant changes throughout its history and has now reached maturity—in which it fully rejects violence and engages in the democratic process with remarkable enthusiasm. Optimists believe that, as some Brotherhood leaders have said, the movement's traditional motto, "The Quran is our constitution," is just an emotional slogan used to rally supporters—in reality, its members today embrace the legitimacy of man-made laws and constitutions.

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An equally significant group of academics and analysts adopt a diametrically opposed reading of the nature, evolution, and aims of the Brotherhood. Viewing most, if not all, of their latest shifts toward moderation and nonviolence as an elaborate tactical dissimulation of their real goals, pessimists perceive the Brothers simply as wolves in sheep's clothing. On this account, the Brotherhood merely portrays itself as a moderate organization seeking to operate within the democratic framework; in reality, it has never abandoned its goal of establishing an Islamic state whose real nature has little to

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[18] Interview with Issam Al Arian, Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh and Hisham el Hamami, Cairo, December 2008.

[19] http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/pollock-Egyptpoll.pdf

do with democracy. Pessimists argue that the Brotherhood "believes in democracy as a political means more than a value or political concept."[20]

The debate is complicated, as usual, by the multiplicity of conflicting statements coming from the Brotherhood. There is no question that traditionally the old guard, driven partly by an anti-colonial fervor that made them shun any Western influence, rejected democracy as a foreign system incompatible with Islam. "Democracy," stated former Muslim Brotherhood *murshid* Mustapha Mashour in 1981, "contradicts and wages war on Islam. Whoever calls for democracy means they are raising banners contradicting God's plan and fighting Islam."[21] And it cannot be ignored that, as of September 2010, Badi', technically the highest figure in the Brotherhood's hierarchy, has stated that "[t]he noble Koran is the constitution that sets out the laws of Islam," clearly pointing to a strict religious nature of the form of government he envisions.[22]

Nevertheless, observers cannot overlook the fact that over the last twenty years many among the Brothers' second and third generation have taken a more open approach to the issue of democracy and the replacement of man-made law with *sharia.* Many among the new generations claim to have abandoned the idea of an Islamic state based strictly on *sharia,* speaking instead of a democratic system with equal citizenship for all and simply an Islamic cultural background.[23] Others compare themselves to the Christian Democrats of various European countries, embracing democracy while maintaining their religious identity.[24]

Yet the optimists have been significantly disappointed by the publication of the Brotherhood's first comprehensive political program in 2007.[25] An especially controversial section proposed the creation of a council of religious scholars who would

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[20] Amr Al-Chobaki, "Future of Muslim Brotherhood," June 13, 2007, http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=814&ref=search.php.

[21] *Ad- Dawa* magazine, January 1981, quoted in Sayed Mahmoud Al-Qumni, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Initiative as a Reform Program: A Critical Review," paper presented at the conference on Islamic reform, Brookings Institution, October 5–6, 2004. Available at: http://www.brookings.edu/fp/research/projects/islam/cairopaper1.pdf (accessed October 7, 2008).

[22] *Al-Ahram*, January 14, 2007.

[23] Interview with Dr. Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh and Dr. Hesham El Hamamy, Cairo, December 2008; Israel Elad Altman, "Current Trends in the Ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, December 29, 2005.

[24] Amel Boubekeur, *Political Islam in Algeria,* Center for European Policy Studies working document 268, May 2007.

[25] Amr Hamzawy, "Regression in the Muslim Brotherhood's Platform?" *Daily Star,* November 1, 2007.

express their opinion on the compatibility of legislation with *sharia*.[26] Reminiscent of the powerful Council of Guardians established in Iran after the Islamic revolution, such a body would be empowered to veto any legislation that it deemed against *sharia*, although some members of the group claimed its purported role would be merely advisory.[27] The platform also contained provisions that limited the role of women and non-Muslims in the state it envisioned, barring them from the highest positions of power.[28]

The process of drafting a party platform brought to light the enormous tensions between the first and the second generation and it seems clear that the former prevailed. Faced with widespread criticism, several Brotherhood leaders have stated that these were simply ideas that were discussed internally, proposals that have never been approved as official Brotherhood policies.[29] As usual, honest commentators cannot avoid to at least be taken aback by this and many other ambiguities. Pessimists believe that, knowing that certain buzzwords reassure Westerners, the Brothers have made the language of democracy, human rights, and social equality their own, but employ it with meanings that seem quite different from those intended by their interlocutors. Semantic tricks, rhetorical artifices, and clever repackaging of their message do not affect the Brothers' goals, which seem unchanged.

Optimists take a different approach. Considering that only twenty years ago most Brothers viewed democracy as a form of apostasy, a system that, while in some aspects treating non-Muslims and women differently, recognizes basic rights and favors popular participation is a major development and, possibly, a step in the direction of more fully embracing democracy. Moreover, according to them, it would be unfair to demand that Muslims should adopt a form of government mirroring the West's. Some

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[26] Nathan J. Brown and Amr Hamzawy, *The Draft Party Platform of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Foray Into Political Integration or Retreat Into Old Positions*? Carnegie Papers, Middle East Series, Number 89, January 2008.

[27] Various members of the Egyptian Brotherhood claim that the role of this body is still debated internally and should be seen not as binding but as simply advisory. Interview with Dr. Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh and Dr. Hesham El Hamamy, Cairo, December 2008. Some scholars believe that Islamists simply seek to create bodies of judicial review to confirm legislation's compatibility with *sharia*, like bodies in most Western constitutional systems (see, for example, Noah Feldman, *The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State* [Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2008], 11–15, 120–23).

[28] Various members of the Egyptian Brotherhood claim that the group's position on the issue was also misinterpreted. Rather than banning women and non- Muslims from being heads of state, they would not introduce them as candidates, but since they accept the democratic process, they would accept the election of anybody by the majority. Interview with Dr. Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh and Dr. Hesham El Hamamy, Cairo, December 2008.

[29] Interview with Kamal Helbawy (London, December 2008) and Dr. Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh and Dr. Hesham El Hamamy (Cairo, December 2008).

Brothers indeed point to the unfairness of imposing Western principles and standards on Muslim societies. "Will the West accept a different model of democracy in Islamic countries," asks Issam Al Arian, "a model which uses Islam as a source of authority, where religion is a fundamental core of politics, where the people have the power to appoint, observe and dismiss [the ruler], yet sovereignty belongs to the *sharia*?"[30]

What is the Brotherhood's actual line on democracy? Is the position of Badi' and the old guard the dominant one? Or is the Brotherhood heading towards the concept of "Islamic democracy" outlined by the second generation? Or perhaps to a full embrace of democracy in all its aspects, as several leaders of the third generation advocate? Are these divisions real or simply a veneer to make the group appear more moderate? And if they are real, how are they going to be solved? It is likely that the answers to these difficult and crucially important questions will be found over the next few months.

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For an assessment of the global reach of the Muslim Brotherhood, see:
"The Global Muslim Brotherhood: Myth or Reality?"

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[30] Israel Elad Altman, "Current Trends in the Ideology of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, December 29, 2005.