Politics or piety? Why the Muslim Brotherhood engages in social service provision

ISLAMISTS ON ISLAMISM TODAY

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Editor's note: "Islamists on Islamism Today" is a new series within Brookings's [Rethinking Political Islam](#) project. In this series, we will hear directly from Islamist activists and leaders themselves, as they engage in debate with project authors and offer their own perspectives on the future of their movements. Islamists will have the opportunity to disagree (or agree) and challenge the assumptions and arguments of some of the leading scholars of political Islam, in the spirit of constructive dialogue.

Steven Brooke provides an [informative and well-researched overview](#) of the Egyptian regime crackdown on social service and educational organizations perceived as affiliated with, or in a position to raise the profile of, the Muslim Brotherhood.[1] His examination seems intended to explore three distinct questions. First, whether the social movement (*haraka*) or the political party (*hizb*) is to be privileged by the Brotherhood in the future. Second, whether the appeal of the Brotherhood's approach will diminish in favour of the Salafist-jihadist model; and a third, albeit related, question of whether the crackdown on the movement's social service provision will increase the potential for violence.

I concur with the factual elements of Brooke's account and I agree with the author that this lens provides a unique and much needed framework through which to consider these important questions. Yes, the closure of space for social services—when coupled with the closure of so many other avenues of life in Egypt—could possibly lead to

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[1] Steven Brooke, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Social Outreach after the Egyptian Coup," Brookings Institution, August 2015. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2015/07/rethinking-political-islam/Egypt_Brooke-FINALE.pdf?la=en .

extremism on the part of some. Yes, I too hear many murmurs among younger Egyptians about the appeal of a confrontational, parallel state-like systems approach and again, yes, we need to think more seriously about the relationship between a revivalist religious and societal movement that is the Brotherhood and the question of political participation in a non-repressive, truly representative political environment.

And whereas I do not disagree with the specific representations in the paper, I disagree with the overall framing of the issues. In effect, Brooke conveys the sense that individuals choose an ideological stance and a course of action largely because of extrinsic, rather than intrinsic factors. In other words, the author seems to argue that how individuals behave in the face of regime repression stems more from the avenues the regime leaves open rather than their own assessment of right and wrong. Furthermore, the author appears to posit that the primary motive for the Muslim Brotherhood providing social and educational services is also extrinsic. Brooke does acknowledge that "the group's social service provision was largely provided without discrimination: there is no ideological litmus test nor allegiance necessary to access the group's services- in fact the Brotherhood goes to great effort to emphasize their social services are open to all." But he then makes a fairly large logical leap to suggest that this is because "the Brotherhood overwhelmingly viewed social services as would a *political party,* in the sense that they were a way to reach out to and mobilize voters." Elsewhere: "For the Brotherhood, social service provision has historically functioned as [a mechanism to attract potential political supporters], as a way to win mass support as the organization strove to gain political power." The author also cites the Brotherhood's long history of registering its social service and educational institutions with various governmental bodies as support for the contention that the Brotherhood deliberately operated within regime rules.

Service, Belonging and Polity

This narrative represents one of the most important areas of contention between members of Islamic movements and their observers, and if readers are to understand Islamic movements, they must bear the following in mind. The Brotherhood is fundamentally an Islamic social movement, not just a political one, and it teaches its members to view the value of service, first and foremost, through a religious lens. Service builds character. Service is a form of charity that is obligatory on those who can provide it and is diminished by reward, praise, or other forms of recognition. Finally, and this is an aspect central to founder Hassan al-Banna's message and is a defining feature of the contemporary Muslim Brotherhood: Service to compatriots is an act of building *our* country and serving *our* people. Service reinforces the notion that these

unrepresentative, corrupt, authoritarian, nepotistic regimes are but a transient, unnatural superimposition on the fabric of history rather than having any permanence.

Furthermore, Islamic movements like the Brotherhood are interested in preserving structures like the nation-state. Some Salafi and many jihadist groups (not my preferred terminology) do not share this perspective. They do not see the people of their countries as *their* people. They are quick to engage in the ultimate act of de-legitimization (*takfir*). They do not see current nation-states as *their* countries and hence it's easy for them to decide to dismantle what is already there and set up what they envision as parallel countries. They decry and belittle the Brotherhood's recognition of the nation-state, and they claim to seek what they believe to be the only legitimate form of community in Islam, a transnational caliphate. The Muslim Brotherhood and others hold the view that Islam respects and encourages ever widening circles of allegiance, attachment, and belonging. The smallest of those units is the family, towards which one has obligations, and the largest of those is humanity as a whole, passing through smaller units such as neighborhoods, clans and tribes if applicable, then communities, nations, and then the transnational. The fundamental basis for this progressive unity is not religious or ideological, but rather geographic. Support for this position exists throughout the trajectory of Muslim theology, history, and political thought, starting with the personal and societal emphasis on obligations to neighbors (irrespective of their faith) who are considered almost family. These obligations are then expanded through the Constitution of Medina (establishing mutually beneficial relations between Prophet Muhammad— peace be upon him—and the original inhabitants of Medina), and then we see contemporary articulations of citizenship, which are quite compatible with the Constitution of Medina (for example, Ennahda's Rached Ghannouchi,[2] Essam Teleema of al-Azhar, and others).[3]

The caliphate in Banna's conception can exist because cohesion exists across far smaller units not independent of, or irrelevant to it. Banna's articulation of his understanding of the caliphate was very brief. He posits that the caliphate is the articulation of broad-based unity and affirms that the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to re-establish a caliphate but asserts that there are many prerequisite steps before a caliphate can begin to be a realistic notion, such as cultural, econmic, and social integration as well as the evolution of treaties that define and enshrine mutual cooperation leading to an entity resembling a Muslim league of nations (the model of the EU is probably the closest to this concept). Throughout its history, the Muslim Brotherhood has supported the progressive unity

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[2] Abdullah Saeed. "Rethinking Citizenship Rights of Non-Muslims in an Islamic State: Rashid al-Ghannushi's contribution to the evolving debate," Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol. 10. No. 3, 1999. http://www.abdullahsaeed.org/sites/abdullahsaeed.org/files/Rethinking_citizenship_rights.pdf

[3] Essam Talema. "*Huquq Al-Muwatanah fe al-Mogtama'a al-Islami* [Citizenship Rights in a Muslim Society]," Ikhwan Wiki. January 2011. http://goo.gl/1woZCf

mentioned above and avenues for greater cooperation among all nations, according to principles of mutual respect.

There is, of course, much hand-wringing over the idea of the caliphate from some Western politicians and writers who cast it as a byword for everything that is to be feared about Islam and Muslims. Some concerns are credible and require further examination, for example religious freedoms and equality, while some other concerns are merely an extension of viewing Muslims as an exotic "other." We should ask why "states" desiring a "more perfect union" or European countries working towards "an ever greater union" are seen as both natural and laudable, but Muslim nations working towards the same is viewed with suspicion, requiring much justification.

Service, Utility and Violence

The inability of many analysts to understand a spiritual, faith-based motivation for the choices that Islamists make, individually and collectively, represents a barrier to understanding "political Islam" in the first place. The narrative of service provision as a pathway to power cannot explain the resilience of social service provision over decades of repression and restriction. From 1977, when the Islamic Medical Association was founded, to the eve of the January 25, 2011 revolution, there was never a point in Egypt where it was even remotely conceivable that Islamists would gain a sliver of "political power" let alone a fair measure of it. Furthermore, in the context of the authoritarian nature of Egypt's regimes, any such "gains" were always at the mercy of arbitrary repression by the regime. The regime was willing to, and did, impede service delivery by the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s and at no point during this period was a path to political liberalization or emancipation becoming clearer as a result of the Brotherhood's engagement with society.

The passage of time perhaps obscures the fact that the regime was intent on crippling the Brotherhood through various repressive measures. Brotherhood members were subjected to military trials, youth members routinely apprehended, torture regularly employed, and all means of public participation were progressively closed through the so-called "siyasat tagfeef al-manabe" (roughly translated as the policy of drying out the resources and avenues of activity). The only difference between the Mubarak and Sissi regimes is that the former feared international opprobrium while the latter believes, and for very good reason, that the international community, specifically the United States, will support massive repression. Yet under President Anwar el-Sadat and then Mubarak, service provision continued, expanded, and became entrenched. I fully realize that many analysts and readers have difficulty abandoning utility-based interpretations in favor of intrinsic, faith-based motivations, and this is a barrier that should be explicitly acknowledged. And it is because of this—because many of our actions are not

traditionally the most expedient or the most utilitarian, but rather are principled and faith-based—that the movement continues to have adherents. And it is also precisely for this reason that violent, radical approaches will continue to have limited appeal among Brotherhood members and supporters. (In other words, it is very unlikely that those faithfully committed to serving their societies, irrespective of differences in faith or political trends, could turn to destroying those same societies through engaging in violence or terrorism).

To be a bit more thorough, let me further contextualize utility-based interpretations of the Muslim Brotherhood's behavior. There is no doubt that Muslims are obligated to think, to reflect, and to employ the best means to bringing about their desired ends. Accordingly, individual and group actions are not irrational or detached from considerations like the likelihood of success. However, it is the framework for understanding "rational" choices that seems to be misunderstood. For the Muslim Brotherhood, the primary drivers are moral and religious. The ends are multi-layered. Service delivery in the form of food aid, accessible education, or healthcare serve multiple objectives: It helps people in need; it brings with it a spiritual return for the individuals involved in providing assistance; and it improves society. If the result of Brotherhood-led service provision is that the regime is pushed to engage in further service delivery and improves its responsiveness to people's needs, then this is a success. If such improvements are sustained and institutionalized, this is further success, and so on. If service provision fails to improve our popularity, this does not lead to a "reassessment" of the utility of service provision as a primary, core mission of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood's reach in the mid-1940s in terms of social service provision and popularity was impressive. The repression that followed in the 1950s and 1960s occurred with a fair measure of popular support for the Nasser regime. A completely utilitarian approach would have led to the conclusion that service provision is an unreliable means of securing popular support. The Brotherhood did *not* reach that conclusion, and this was deliberate. Indeed, other groups came to precisely that conclusion starting in the 1950s and continuing to the present day. The chasm between the Muslim Brotherhood and those other groups is the Brotherhood's privileging of faith over utility while not discounting the latter, where other groups, such as ISIS, privilege utility over morality and faith while occasionally discounting the latter in the name of the former.

Hence, while Steven Brooke's analysis is excellent and insightful and does add an important dimension to the conversation, it does not truly reflect the mind of Islamists such as myself and others I know. Yes, service is a form of outreach and a way for people

to know the movement. But no, being shut out of the space of service provision does not, in and of itself, lead people to strike a path to violence or to question fundamental tenets of their mission and identity. There will be exceptions, of course, but the norm will not be that. The fact that some individuals will feel that there is no avenue before them other than violence is a reflection on the failure of repressive regimes and the international reaction to them, rather than a reflection on the success or lack thereof of our own philosophy. So, while the use of violence is an important phenomenon to study and reflect on and while it may result in a very high cost to society, what needs to be examined – and what is more relevant to understanding violence – is why the international community supports and normalizes repressive, authoritarian regimes when the evident result is radicalization of their citizens.

But beyond this question of violence from within the ranks of Islamists, a more concerning outcome of the appropriation of social and educational services by the regime is the one outlined by the author in his conclusions: As this nepotistic, corrupt regime that has little concern for individuals' welfare destroys the last remaining means of helping Egyptians preserve a measure of life and dignity, the prospect for widespread societal action becomes more real. For example, labor disruptions have intensified over the course of the past two years.[4] The full effect on the poor of the abrupt cessation of subsidies in the context of financial corruption and the lack of a social safety net has not yet been felt. In short, the factors that can often lead to widespread disruption and protest are increasing rather than decreasing.

Moving Forward

The aforementioned emphasis on the centrality of service to the worldview of Islamists is not an attempt to absolve the Muslim Brotherhood from errors over the past five years. It is important in this context to highlight the fact that the Brotherhood is currently conducting an extensive review of its practices, particularly over the last five years since the January 25 revolution. This review extends to our strategies and overall conceptualizing of the nature of the struggle between civilians and military rule. One of the key elements under review is the relationship between the Brotherhood, as a religious and social movement, and the Freedom and Justice Party (or any other future political parties for that matter).[5] Since the establishment of the FJP, the intention was to establish a clear line of separation between the two entities. In reality, that separation may not have been completed as intended.

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[4] Samir Shalabi. "Why Do Egypt's Rulers Fear the Working Class?" Egyptian Streets. 1 November 2015. http://egyptianstreets.com/2015/11/01/why-do-egypts-rulers-fear-the-working-class/

[5] Amr Darrag. "Muslim Brotherhood Currently Undertaking Comprehensive Political Reviews," Middle East Observer. 13 March 2016. http://www.middleeastobserver.org/muslim-brotherhood-currently-undertaking-comprehensive-political-reviews

As some have pointed out, the FJP leveraged the goodwill that the Brotherhood had established and drew on the movement's social credit in order to acquire legitimacy with voters. In retrospect, I believe that this was a mistake, caused more by the unusual circumstances that Egypt faced, rather than as a result of a deliberate strategy. Prior to 2011, few Egyptians anticipated that the day would come in which their fellow citizens would finally take to the street to bring Mubarak down, let alone that he would be forced to resign. The leveraging of the Muslim Brotherhood's goodwill occurred because it was the Brotherhood, not the FJP that was party to the events of January and February 2011, simply because the latter did not exist then. To Egyptians, it was the Muslim Brotherhood, and not the FJP, that made sacrifices for Egypt. And so, perhaps as a reflexive reaction to the question, "Why should voters trust your stewardship of the economy, the government, etc.?", the FJP leveraged the Brotherhood's goodwill. I say this not to justify the overlap, but rather in the course of trying to critically examine the practices of the past. Conversely, the Brotherhood was unable to completely let go of the FJP, although that evolved considerably over time. I can say that the consensus within the Brotherhood today is to totally disengage the movement from any partisan competitive work when the space for political and social activity is restored. We believe there is a need for a political party (or parties) with strong grounding in an Islamic worldview that seeks to translate that worldview into a living reality. That party will have to elaborate its own platforms and positions; it will develop its own talents and cadres, and it will be free to assume a principled but pragmatic approach to politics. We also believe that there is an ongoing need for an effort aimed religious, societal reform. If the movement as a whole is successful in understanding and implementing both efforts separately, there would be no point in connecting social work to any political agenda.

One final point: We now understand the actions of the regime in a somewhat different light from a simple regime versus opposition binary, with the Brotherhood represented in the latter. We believe that the battle currently taking place in Egypt is one of a militarized, centralized authoritarian vision of Egypt, borne of the legacy of Muhammad Ali (d. 1805), which conceptualized Egypt essentially as a garrison to serve the army. The military establishment, as it is configured today, continues to prioritize the interests of the military over the interests of the nation and its citizens. There is a sardonic reflection, common among many Egyptians, on this relationship between the army and the nation, to the effect that while other countries have armies that serve them, our army has a country that serves it. As long as this relationship persists, the Egyptian citizen will always be alienated from the so-called Egyptian State, at least as it's articulated by army-aligned nationalist politicians and "thinkers." And so today we are thinking about how to rebuild Egypt in a way that incorporates effective local governance and the empowerment of civil society with better national decision-making.

This transition will undoubtedly be challenging since Egyptians have a longstanding tradition of central authority. Nevertheless, this tradition has been under considerable stress for the past fifty years due to the ineffectiveness of the state, largely because of corruption and poor administration. For example, a closer examination of mechanisms for conflict resolution as well as the structure and practices of the informal and micro-economy – and, importantly, an emphasis on decentralization and local authority – may yield valuable lessons for reconfiguring Egyptian governance.

About this Series:

The *Rethinking Political Islam* series is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

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