

A response to Jacob Olidort's, "[Rethinking how we rethink political Islam](#)"

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Editor's note: As part of Brookings's [Rethinking Political Islam](#) project, we've asked a select group of outside scholars to react and respond to the overall project, in order to draw attention to potential blind spots, trends of note, and more.

The Brookings Institution's Rethinking Political Islam project has offered welcome room for debate on the shifting dynamics shaping Muslim Brotherhood groups in a new Middle East. [Jacob Olidort](#)'s¹ recent piece was particularly useful in two respects. First, he highlighted some of the contemporary issues affecting the Muslim Brotherhood which scholars have not sufficiently examined, such as the role of social media or simmering sectarian tensions. Second, and most importantly, he stepped into the theoretical debate about Islamic mobilization to argue that researchers must rethink their assumptions in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In his view, today's Islamist movements are the "products" of their immediate political environment—in other words, to understand the decisions made by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, one needs to look primarily at the "external circumstances" surrounding it, such as the Egyptian regime's crackdown on the movement since 2012. He worries that scholars, in formulating their analyses, have not sufficiently taken into account the sheer scale of political change which the region has witnessed since the Arab Spring.

That context deeply matters and impacts political—and, in our case, Islamist—mobilization, was actually a central theme of earlier [Rethinking Political Islam](#) essays and it is, more broadly, a well-established argument in the theoretical literature. But there are major issues with viewing this approach as the only relevant factor that can

¹ Jacob Olidort, "Rethinking how we rethink political Islam," Brookings Institution, March 2016.

possibly explain the “ideological priorities” and “political alignment” of Islamist groups. Indeed, it implicitly denies them agency and a degree of autonomy from their immediate political environment while effectively sidelining complementary theoretical perspectives. What instead appears timely, in a Middle Eastern context marked by repression, civil wars, and state collapse is to look at how national and regional politics impact internal dynamics within these groups. Movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood are characterized by a complex decision-making process, thus making their very ideological platforms and political strategies the result of virulent debates and internal power struggles. They are sophisticated organizations and informal bureaucracies with an agency of their own.

The Brotherhood as a “bureaucracy”

Considering Muslim Brotherhood movements as “bureaucracies” may at first glance seem out of tune with prevailing perceptions about the current state of the Middle East. [Jacob Olidort](#) thus wonders about the relevance of this approach “at a time when their political context is not always bureaucratic, much less local and when the increasing political fragility of local states does not always accommodate the functions of organized bureaucracies.” In reality, however, there is no necessary contradiction between these groups’ organizational sophistication and the unstable political context. First, viewing the Muslim Brotherhood as an informal bureaucracy does not imply that it functions like a Weberian-style centralized and hierarchical public administration. It merely refers to the organization’s seemingly unique capacity, in the Islamist field, to develop its own decision-making model and mobilize resources and staff to achieve its ends. This perspective on the Muslim Brotherhood is not in contradiction with others—in fact, it seeks to offer a more complete picture of the movement by going beyond discourse analysis in order to understand the complex web of factors that shape its decisions on crucial issues.

Second, the currently dire situation faced by the Muslim Brotherhood branches in Syria and Egypt, both in exile due to the considerable repression they face at home, does not diminish the relevance of such an approach—if anything, it heightens it. This may seem counterintuitive. Yet my research into the evolution of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s networks since 1982 (when it was forced out of the country) suggests that as Islamist groups go into exile, their priority shifts to organizational survival—and bureaucracy is the only tool they are left with. They use it to continue thriving abroad by developing a professional cadre of members, socializing sympathizers into party loyalty, mobilizing resources to create social and political opportunities for members, and protecting themselves against major splits. In fact, the Brotherhood’s ability to use its bureaucratic structures and networks is what has allowed it, in the Syrian case and, I suspect, in the

Tunisian and Libyan cases too, to survive against all odds for decades in exile before making surprisingly successful comebacks. They may have lost ground since 2012 but their resilience owes much to their organization.

Setting a new research agenda

While this institutionalist approach points to the Muslim Brotherhood's strengths, it also highlights some of the group's key weaknesses. As a social movement grows older and gains in organizational sophistication, its structures are likely to become more "oligarchized." Members, who often depend on its bureaucracy for social and professional reasons, may become guided more by a desire to preserve the organization than to achieve its stated goals. This has two negative implications for the Muslim Brotherhood which may contribute to our understanding of the lack of popularity it sometimes faces even in the more pious subsections of society. First, the fact that the Brotherhood might be guided by an instinct for organizational maintenance might lead it to make decisions in contradiction with its ideological message. This heightens popular mistrust of the organization's "real" agenda and paves the way for the often more uncompromising Salafis to challenge its authenticity and religious legitimacy. Second, the Brotherhood's "oligarchization" means the emergence of clique structures within the organization that may lead to the concentration of power in the hands of just a select few. The group's branches from Tunisia and Syria to Egypt and Jordan are all directed by figures who have been in control for decades—they are "career Muslim Brothers" and their continued monopoly on power is harming the groups' outside image and leading to generational splits.

This institutionalist approach to the Muslim Brotherhood draws on the conceptual tools developed by sociologists [Roberta Ash](#)², [John Mc Carthy and Mayer Zald](#)³ in relation to their work on "resource mobilization theory" in the context of "social movement organizations." Their theoretical insights are rich, and they offer avenues for the type of multidisciplinary research into the Brotherhood that the literature on Islamist groups is sometimes still lacking. They point to the need of studying these movements' extensive networks, organizational structures, decision-making arrangements, as well as internal politico-ideological debates. Yet they also demonstrate the importance at times of political uncertainty to focus greater attention on the nature and degree of tensions between the base and leadership and older and younger generations. These internal dynamics weigh more heavily than we might expect on Islamist movements' political and ideological choices and, thus, need to be examined more carefully. Being equipped

² Mayer N. Zald and Roberta Ash, "Social movement organizations: growth, decay and change" in *Social Forces* (Vol.44, No.3, 1966)

³ John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource mobilization and social movements: a partial theory" in *American Journal of Sociology* (Vol.82, No.6, 1977)

with some of the conceptual tools mentioned above as well as by the theoretical insights of political science, sociology and even anthropology and ethnography, can help us address some of these under-studied yet crucial themes at a critical point in time.

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.

This is accomplished through four stages:

- **Working papers** for each country, produced by an author who has conducted on-the-ground research and engaged with the relevant Islamist actors.
- **Reaction essays** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.
- **Responses** from Islamist leaders and activists themselves as they engage in debate with project authors and offer their own perspectives on the future of their movements.
- **Final drafts** incorporating the insights gleaned from the months of dialogue and discussion.

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