

# НОРМАЛИЗАЦИЯ РЕЛИГИОЗНОГО ДИСКУРСА «БРАТЬЕВ-МУСУЛЬМАН» В ЕГИПТЕ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНАЯ ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ДО И ПОСЛЕ 2011 ГОДА

**Сара Тонси**  
sartonsy@gmail.com

---

*«Братья-мусульмане» в Египте были известны как одна из наиболее устойчивых исламистских организаций во всем мире на протяжении большей части XX века и до 2013 года. Арабские восстания, захлестнувшие арабский регион, привели к возрождению «Братьев-мусульман» на передовой египетского политического поля. Дискурс организации коренным образом изменился за период ее существования, особенно в течение всего нескольких лет с 2011 года по сегодняшний день. Каким образом он превратился в нормализованную версию ислама в Египте? В статье автор изучает этот процесс на основе собственных полевых исследований с использованием концепций символической власти П. Бурдьё и пост-исламизма О. Руа.*

**Ключевые слова:** «Братья-мусульмане», Египет, иерархия, дискурс, исламизм, пост-исламизм.

---

Университет Лазурного берега,  
Ницца; центры IREMAH и Mesopolhis  
Института политических исследований,  
Экс-ан-Прованс, Франция.  
*Сара Тонси*

# THE NORMALIZATION OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN EGYPT: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE BEFORE AND AFTER 2011

Sara Tonsy

sartonsy@gmail.com

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24848/ismlg.10.2.06>

*The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt has been known for being one of the most resilient Islamist organizations worldwide during most of the twentieth*

---

**Sara Tonsy**

*PhD, Lecturer  
at the Université  
Côte d'Azur, Nice;  
Associate researcher  
at the IREMAM and  
Mesopolbis, Institut  
d'études politiques, Aix-  
en-Provence, France.*

---

*century, and until 2013. The Arab uprisings that swept over the Arab region resulted in the resurrection of the MB at the frontline of the Egyptian political field. The MB's discourse changed drastically over the period of the organization's existence and even further during the few years from 2011 until today. How did the discourse established by the MB develop and transform towards becoming a normalized version of Islam in Egypt? How could this be traced in the recent events the MB witnessed in*

*Egypt, starting in 2011? Applying P. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power and O. Roy's idea about post-Islamism this article will address these questions using field work and relevant literature.*

**Keywords:** *muslim brotherhood, Egypt, hierarchy, discourse, islamism, post-islamism*

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt has been known for being one of the most resilient Islamist organizations worldwide during most of the twentieth century, and until 2013. The Arab uprisings that swept over the Arab region resulted in the resurrection of the MB at the frontline of the Egyptian political field. The MB's discourse changed drastically over the period of the organization's existence and even further during the few years from 2011 until today. How did the discourse established by the MB develop and transform towards becoming a normalized version of Islam in Egypt? How could this be traced in the recent events the MB witnessed in Egypt, starting in 2011?

The MB's discourse, whether internal or external, enabled the movement to fulfill specific aims with regards to diffusion, domination, and mobilization in Egypt. Not only did the organization, *tanzim*, realize that, but it also created the derogatory *ikhwani*, "Brother", identity as distinct from Egyptian society. The mode of recruitment of new MB members is related to the internal hierarchy and obedience between the members and the leadership. It also intersects with the construction of the MB identity. The MB's internal adaptation and interpretation of several teachings from the Islamic religion resulted in the systematic

mutation of the interpretation of religion in Egypt. Ibrahim el-Houdaiby referred to the MB's way of interpreting Islam as the "instrumentalization of Shariah," highlighting that the MB is using Islamic doctrines – Sharia (Islamic law), Quran, and Hadith (the Prophet's sayings) – to pursue its political and social objectives (el-Houdaiby, 2013, p. 1). The cult-like discourse and practices of the MB became intertwined with its various networks.

The MB repeatedly filled in for the government in providing welfare for citizens, especially in distant governorates (Tonsy, 2019). During the thirty-year presidency of Mohamed Hosni Mubarak, the MB witnessed several political, economic, and social transformations. These transformations were mainly based on the integration of the MB by the Mubarak regime on, predominantly, social and economic levels to overcome certain failures of the government. In turn, the cult or religious interpretations of the MB were diffused even further under charitable organizations and the idea of *da'wa* (call towards God or Islam) as an integral objective with their services. As for the political transformation or inclusion of the MB during the Mubarak era, the MB remained an officially prohibited organization (Vannetzel, 2012, pp. 3–7). However, numerous members were able – without official institutional support from the MB – to individually run for parliamentary, syndical, and university Student Unions' elections.

The transformation from an officially and publicly "non-politicized" identity towards a concrete and public political agenda, starting in 2011, resulted in several internal ruptures among MB members, which were further aggravated by the 2013 coup d'état. This was due to a transition towards a "legal" existence (Vannetzel, 2012, pp. 4, 298) and the lack of a concrete "Islamist" political and economic program. The process that took place after 2011 for the MB led many of the members, followers, and Islamist devotees towards a phase of disenchantment.

First, I will examine how the MB politicized Islam in public space by creating a form of Islamist Nationalism during the first half of the twentieth century through discourse and the creation of an identity distinct from Egyptian society. Second, the change from Islamist nationalism towards a social, apolitical, and anti-revolutionary discourse during the second half of the century will be demonstrated. The consequences of this change will be highlighted as of the 2011 uprisings and until 2014 in the last section of this article, followed by a brief conclusion.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The distinction between notions and derivatives of political ideologies related to Islam, such as Islamist nationalism, Islamism and post-Islamism, is vital in defining the MB as an initial movement and its workings towards becoming the organization that it had become. First, Islamist nationalism is a form of nationalism that is bound by the assertion of Islam as an element of unity and identity, as opposed to the secular versions of nationalism that are said to have "disrupted" the traditional social structures in the Arab world (Tibi, 1997, p. 221). This includes Egyptian and pan-Arab nationalism (Tibi, 1997).

Second, Islamism is a term used to refer to the use of Islam in politics, which is also referred to as "political Islam" (Dessouki, 1982, p. 4). This idea and conception came in the aftermath of Arab nationalism, or pan-Arabism, which took place around the end of the 1960s, after the 1967 *naksab*.<sup>1</sup> Islamism as an ideology was elaborated and endorsed by numerous figures in various predominantly Muslim countries (Esposito, 2001).

1. The 1967 war between Egypt, Syria and Jordan on one side and Israel on the other, which ended in a humiliating defeat for the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian side and massive losses.

Another idea that needs to be outlined is that of Olivier Roy and Asef Bayat of “post-Islamism” (Roy, 2011; Bayat, 1996). Olivier Roy states: “All these changes gave way to what I called ‘post-Islamism’ (the expression was first used by Asef Bayat) – it does not mean that the Islamists disappeared, but that their Utopia did not block social, political, or even geo-strategic realities” (Roy, 2011). The wave of uprisings that started in 2011 and the changes within Egyptian society in general, and among the MB and its circles, demonstrated the “waning” of the Islamist discourse as a “solution” to all social, economic, and political problems.<sup>2</sup> This provides a link with the MB’s historical slogan “*al-islam howa al-hal*,” (Islam is the solution) (Mahmud, 2005) and the disenchantment of MB members (and ex-members) with this very idea, most explicitly, since 2011.<sup>3</sup> Many of the MB’s supporters and ex-members continue to practice their religion, while asserting that they do not need to have their religious practice interfere in their political activism.<sup>4</sup>

The work of Pierre Bourdieu on *Language and Symbolic Power* is one of the most important frameworks to reference in this context, in that it helps outline the power of discourse, political actors, and symbols that are derived from outside of the political field in explaining power dynamics (Bourdieu & Thompson, 2001). The conflict that developed between the MB and the army – which was revived after 2011 – cannot be ignored when studying the transformation, internal or external, of the MB as either an Islamist social movement or organization (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 5–6). The 1952 coup d’état in Egypt and the violent repression against the MB that followed resulted in the transformation of the MB from Islamist nationalism to political Islam or Islamism.

Furthermore, Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani raise the following question: “How do certain social actors come to develop a sense of commonality and to identify with the same ‘collective we?’” (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 5). This question represents a central point in terms of theoretical base for the study of the MB in Egypt. The MB transformed from a group of men around Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the MB, in Ismailia attending his Tuesday Sermons, *hadeeth el-talat*, to become a political, economic, social, and religious organization. This can be understood using Ibn Khaldun’s ideas, such as *‘asabeya* (cohesion) and *talabom* (fusion), that he defined as important elements within a Muslim society (Ayubi, 1995).

In order to clarify the argument in this article it is important to outline a few key Arabic terms. First is the definition of the MB as an organization, *tanzim*, as opposed to an institution or a movement. Its members and leaders identify it as such because of its internal structure, which is dependent on organization in ranks with a specific hierarchy (*baykal tanzimi*). This hierarchy is not to be breached or altered except by the higher ranks. This leads to another important concept: *ta’u*, meaning obedience. The concept of obedience is derived from Islam and its doctrines but interpreted differently within the ranks of the MB. It is based on the idea of obeying your leaders after the *bay’a* (swearing allegiance), which is exploited within the MB to have the lower ranks obey their superiors. In Khaldun’s terms, “the pledge of allegiance is a vow of obedience” (Ibn Khaldun, 1998, p. 205). The *bay’a* within the MB takes place after the recruit passes the ten stages that qualify him to become a member (Kandil, 2014). An interview candidate, who will be referred to as Samir, in Cairo in 2011 described how the MB leaders go about making decisions and communicating with their members. Samir is an ex-MB member and one of the founders of an Islamist political party, The Egyptian Current (*al-*

2. The term “waning” was used by Bayat to describe the attitude towards Islamist discourse and the “solution” that it offers.

3. This slogan was referred to briefly in most interviews but it was discussed in a symposium by the MB in 2005 with the presence of Essam el-Erian, MB spokesperson and member of the organization’s Shura Council at the time.

4. These members and ex-members were interviewed during 2011–2016; and only ex-members, online in 2020.

*tayyar al-masry*). The Egyptian Current party was founded in 2011 after the initial uprising, predominantly by ex-MB members. He described a top-down approach, given that he was a regular member and that he had sworn an oath to obey the leaders.

There are some terms that have become common over the years in designating an individual or a group who are part of the MB or its supporters, *ikhwani*. Thus, creating an identity relative to the organization as part of the “process through which individual and/or collective actors, in interaction with other social actors, attribute a specific meaning to their traits, their life occurrences, and the systems of social relations in which they are embedded” (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 92–3).

Last but not least is the aspect of referring to the MB as among *al-tayar al-islami*, the Islamist forces, and other non-Islamist political or social forces as *al-tayar al-madani*, civil forces. In another recent interview with an ex-MB member and prominent leader of the Strong Egypt political party (*masr al-qaweya*), Mostafa, explained that secular parties insist on referring to themselves as civil forces to escape the debate around their secular or non-religiously affiliated identification. The Strong Egypt Party was founded after the 2012 presidential elections in Egypt. Its most prominent founding member is currently-imprisoned ex-MB member Abdel Moneim Aboul-Fotouh. Aboul-Fotouh was also a member of the Center Political Party (*al-wasat*).<sup>5</sup> This further affirms Bayat’s argument regarding the continued interweaving of religion and the political field or the importance given to religion, although he is also in agreement that “post-Islamism” is already taking place among specific Islamist circles.

## THE MB’S ISLAMIST NATIONALISM (1928–1952): THE CREATION OF AN IDENTITY

The MB was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna in Ismailiya. It first started out as an underground movement against the British occupation and the mainstreaming of westernized or secular behavior among Egyptian society. The Tuesday Sermons by al-Banna that started with a few followers expanded and formed into an organization that became the MB. In his memoirs, Khalid Muhyi el-Din, a socialist member of the Free Officers and close friend of Gamal Abdel Nasser for a period of time, recounted how he was invited by al-Banna to visit the MB’s training camp with Nasser. Muhyi el-Din explained how al-Banna spoke of religion vaguely and added that the Free Officers movement – a group of officers who were politicized, and organized towards the overthrow of King Farouk in the late 1940s – should ally with the MB, who predated them in politics (Muhyi al-Din, 1992). Nasser disapproved of the idea, but this exchange proves that the MB had political nationalist ambitions beyond that of Islam.

However, the rituals and rites of passage that formed the “brother,” *akh*, consisted of various aspects. In what Hazem Kandil refers to as “cultivating the brother,” there are a series of steps that lead to becoming a member of the organization, and until the person succeeds in finishing the ten steps, he is referred to as a *moheb*, meaning affiliate (in a non-literal translation).<sup>6</sup> As explained in an interview by former member of the Guidance Bureau (*maktab al-irshad*), Kamal el-Helbawi, “the steps towards becoming a member were less rigorous

5. Al-Wasat was founded by two MB members, ‘Essam Sultan and Abu al-‘Ela Madi, who had gone against the wishes of the MB’s murshid and Guidance Bureau. Both members were dismissed from the movement after the founding of al-Wasat (Kandil, 2014, p. 147).

6. Hazem Kandil is a scholar who has carried out several studies on Egypt and notably wrote the book *Inside the Brotherhood*, cited in this article.

back then,” referring to the 1940s (K. El Helbawi, Interview, July 2015). Becoming a member includes a *bay'a*, taking an oath, which promises loyalty to the organization and its goals, the goals of Islam. After the declaration of the oath, the person becomes a member and is required to pay a monthly percentage of his salary towards the maintenance of the organization. As early as 1938, MB members were required to “invest in ... Brotherhood-run companies” from a fifth to a tenth of their income (Kandil, 2014). This economic aspect helped integrate the members and create further solidarity among them, while contributing to the organization’s allegedly comprehensive approach.<sup>7</sup>

Tariq el-Bishri, Egyptian judge, historian, and member of the committee for writing the 2012 constitution, outlined how al-Banna’s aspirations were political and highly centralized under his one-man leadership (el-Bishri 2002). In Ahmed Abu Shady’s book about his “journey with the resilient association (MB),” he states that al-Banna’s eloquence and response to political, social, and religious questions were a source of fascination for him (Abu Shady, 1998). According to el-Bishri, al-Banna’s religious discourse and image helped him gain popularity in many circles, including nationalist circles in society because of their refusal of the “westernization of society” at the time.

This version of Islamist nationalism, that led to a slight collaboration in 1950 between the Free Officers and MB, did not last until the 1952 coup d’état. In 1951, before the coup, the MB and Free Officers disagreed on who should be responsible for which sector of the government (el-Helbawi, July 2015). This disagreement led to a final rupture in the negotiations between the two “nationalist” currents. Nasser was shot at in 1954, in el-Mansheya Square, Alexandria, while giving a speech, which was read as an assassination attempt by two MB members. This incident became the public reason behind the persecution, repression, and execution of thousands of members and affiliates of the MB from 1954 onwards and until Nasser’s death.<sup>8</sup>

The organization of the MB, and its ability to recruit members and followers towards serving its political and economic goals, did not cease simultaneously underground and publicly. The MB was a public political organization until the Prime Minister, Mahmoud el-Nokrashy declared it a terrorist organization and some of its members were prosecuted, starting in 1948.<sup>9</sup> Al-Banna was assassinated in 1949, leaving behind Hassan el-Hodaiby as Supreme Guide, *murshid*.

Al-Banna wrote to other MB leaders: “If (people) complain that you are vague, tell them ... O people! We are Islam” (as cited in Kandil, 2014, p. 86). This statement provides an insight into how al-Banna had presented to MB members and followers the idea that the MB represented Islam and not a political program or organization. The explicit use of “we are Islam” is enough evidence to maintain the argument how the MB’s doctrine and teachings ultimately became the predominant interpretation of Islam in Egypt later on as the organization grew.

Al-Banna was praised for his *da’wa*, call towards Islam, and his brilliance in founding the MB: its hierarchical “foundation” (Sayyid Qutb in Abu Shady, 1998, p. 319).<sup>10</sup> “Sayyid Qutb

7. Worthy of note is that the MB members who were displaced after the 1950s still contributed financially to the organization.

8. Worthy of note is that in the official state narrative, in the daily newspapers like al-Ahram, the MB was referred to as a terrorist organization after the Mansheya incident.

9. El-Nokrashy was assassinated by the MB, as per el-Helbawi’s account in the interview. Ahmed Abu Shady.

10. Ahmed Abu Shady, an MB member who was imprisoned during the Nasser era and left for Kuwait after his release in the 1970s. He is known mostly for his book: *riblati ma’ al-gama’a al-samedda (My Journey With the Resilient Association)*.

was a sort of honorary member ... he didn't pass through the stages (like other members)" (el-Helbawi, July 2015). Qutb was a literary critic who became an Islamist ideologue, and a prominent member of the MB and Islamism worldwide (Esposito, 2001, p. 42–44). His writings influenced militant Islamism, such as his *Milestones* (*ma'ālim fi al-tariq*), smuggled out of prison after Qutb was imprisoned by Nasser and executed in 1966 (Esposito, 2001, p. 72). Sayyid Qutb explains how the organization's hierarchy is only one part of its strength; the other is in the bonding between the different vertical levels based on a unique "doctrine" (Sayyid Qutb in Abu Shady, 1998, p. 320). The power based in the organization and its doctrine is what enables its members to work within the boundaries of the group. Using Della Porta and Diani's work, the transition of the MB from sermons and small gatherings to a constructed organization is largely based on an identification of a collective "we" that lies between defining values and collective action (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 87).

In Abu Shady's account of his years with the MB, it is worthy of note that the reference to the use of Quranic verses in specific contexts by leaders had an emotional and mobilizational effect (Abu Shady, 1998, p. 52–4). He refers to verses he himself uttered on specific ceremonial occasions but also outlines how el-Hodaiby lacked charisma as compared to al-Banna in his speech on becoming *mursbid*, which was disappointing except for a verse that was interpreted as "God knows where he places his message" (Abu Shady, 1998, p. 56). Abu Shady's explanation makes sense in relation to what Della Porta and Diani refer to as "frame alignment" (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 87). "Frame alignment" [is] the convergence of models of interpretation of reality adopted by movement activists and those of the population which they intend to mobilize" (Della Porta & Diani, 1999, p. 87). In following a mode of interpretation of events using the MB members' guide from gatherings and teachings, the reality of having an "uncharismatic" Supreme Guide is accounted for. Abu Shady was specifically related to the canceling of the application of the 1936 Treaty by Mostafa el-Nahas, Prime Minister, followed by the coup d'état for which the *mursbid* only reacted by saying "I advise you to fear Allah ... and prepare yourselves for the circumstances this country is about to face" (Abu Shady, 1998, p. 54).<sup>11</sup>

Before his account of the army's rise to power in 1952 and the prosecution of MB members, Abu Shady referred less often to an "Islamist movement." However, after announcing the coup in his writing he started differentiating between nationalists and Islamists, among others. The importance of this is that it outlines how Bayat's idea of post-Islamism had not yet commenced at the time. There remained an infatuation with the possibility of an "Islamic" rule or rule by Muslims. The Free Officers were referred to in Abu Shady's book as "Muslim nationalists" (Abu Shady, 1998, p. 56).

The creation of the *akb*, brother, as an identity is the conclusion of this part and of this period in the MB. The brothers, *ikhwani*, became defined through a process of rituals, symbols, and regular practices. The importance of these processes is the essence of the MB's survival and resilience as a political organization whether legitimate or underground. It is about a formulated identity and collective action, around which the members' lives revolve. The self-sufficiency, the emotional, religious discourse, and solidarity based first on religious homogeneity and second on shared interests – and during some periods, grievances – make the MB socially, politically, and economically able to sustain and maintain its image.

11. This treaty dictated the withdrawal of all British troops from Egypt except those in the Suez Canal area, to keep it operating in the same manner.

## THE MB, THE “SOCIAL MOVEMENT”: BECOMING ISLAM

After being rebuilt and re-gathered from the fragmentation brought about by repression and persecution under the Nasser regime, the MB remained a prohibited and underground association and organization. During the period under third president, Anwar el-Sadat's rule, the MB was mainly used to coerce leftist currents within society. Zeinab el-Ghazali, originally the founder of the Muslim Sisters' organization during the 1940s, along with other Islamist women and wives of MB members, was one of the main factors that helped put the MB back together after Nasser's death (al-Ghazali, 1999).<sup>12</sup>

The rise of the MB under Sadat's regime had various consequences. First, and as mentioned before, the remnants left from Nasser's era were put to rest largely by an Islamist counter-discourse. Second, the diffusion of MB members and their “doctrine” in many areas of social life in Egypt, which includes the creation of charity organizations, businesses, low-grade government positions, and penetrating al-Azhar University, also a state institution. Al-Azhar is the oldest Islamic university worldwide, where people come to study Islam from around the world. It is also the institution that is responsible for issuing Islamic rulings or legal pronouncements (*fatwa*). Publishing *fatwa* is among al-Azhar's most important tasks as an institution, since *fatwa* involves social, political, economic, and other concerns of the Muslim population.

“God will speak (through you),” said senior MB members to ‘Umar el-Telmesani on the eve of his debate with Sadat, to reassure him that God will come to his aid if his words fail him (Kandil, 2014, p. 87). The MB became Islam, and the leaders became those who transmit the words of the divine through themselves. This belief spread to the lower-ranking members and their followers who had religious tendencies or curiosities (Kandil, 2014, p. 87). The recurrence of this discourse from al-Banna and down the generations that followed of leaders and members alike spread even further with Youssef el-Qaradawi's declaration that *da'wa* and spreading the word of God is an obligation, *fard*, that has to be performed by Muslim men and women of all age groups to help better society and heal it from its evils (al-Qaradawi, 2004).

However, after Sadat's decade in power and the coming of Hosni Mubarak, the MB's initial rise was complemented by further infiltration of other social and political milieux. This infiltration helped the MB establish many businesses and even a political party, Al-Wasat, which was never officially recognized by the MB's leaders as it was only found by a faction, who represented an ideological and organization rupture with the Guidance Bureau (Kandil, 2014, p. 147). Mubarak's government's outsourcing of social and health welfare to the MB allowed for further diffusion of their version of Islam and their own teachings.

The immersion of religion in more social, political and economic aspects became a norm as more preachers and brothers who spoke about religion in common life emerged. The concept of *shumuliya*, comprehensiveness, of Islam – initially evoked by Qutb – became a main element in the elaboration and diffusion of the MB's discourse (Kandil, 2014, pp. 85–7). The MB's presence on university campuses, in student unions, and its activities among other Islamist currents allowed for further diffusion of its discourse and

12. El-Ghazali and Qutb originally worked on a thirteen-year cultivation program for MB members “after which they could contend for political power,” which took place after the death of al-Banna (Kandil, 2014, p. 89). El-Ghazali wrote in detail about the mehma, hardship, that the MB witnessed under Nasser's regime after 1954 in her book.



teachings. This discourse appealed to many students who migrated from rural Egypt to urban Cairo, who found a home under the MB's umbrella.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the successful re-gathering of the MB since Sadat's era, there are two concepts or ideas within their discourse that are important to highlight. The first is that the MB was never a revolutionary organization. Since the 1970s, they have not advocated for a revolution, or going against the *hakem*, ruler, and even bid it haram, forbidden, to go against the ruler in a manner like the events of the 1979 revolution in Iran. Many MB members in their books about the MB or al-Banna referred to this aspect. The repeated discourse that "we are not like the Shiites," resonated within the MB for decades while the MB continued to try to maintain a common dialogue with Iran after 1979 (al-Kharbaoui, 2012).

It is important to explain the political economic sector under the MB in order to portray how it failed to provide a "solution" after 2011 in the coming section. The economic or financial aspect of the MB is important as a complementary part of their internal discourse, their interpretation of Islam, and the internal solidarity or cohesion of the members as a collective. The 1990s saw the rise of MB leaders like Khairat el-Shatter – member of the MB Guidance Bureau, potential presidential candidate in 2012, and member of el-tanzim el-khass (Special Organization), the armed segment of the MB – among others as economic tycoons belonging to the MB. Al-Banna's economic policy was meant to reduce income inequality (Kandil, 2014, p. 112).<sup>14</sup> Al-Bishri affirmed al-Banna's ideas by explaining how the economy is formed by social "virtues" (al-Bishri, 2008).

To complement the MB's non-revolutionary stance, they were comfortable taking the mantle of the organized political opposition during the Mubarak era without creating massive disruption to the regime's political hegemony. As a "social" organization, they condemned and pushed away brothers who decided to take part in the political field like Abu el-'Ela Madi, 'Essam Sultan, and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, members of the Guidance Bureau of the MB (Steuer, 2016). Accordingly, their internal discourse rested on *da'wa* and social reform in a bottom-up approach (ex-MB member, interview, November 2011).

The second is the slogan: "*al-islam howa al-hal*," meaning "Islam is the solution." This slogan was used during the late 1980s under Mubarak's rule, showing continuity in demonstrating and publicizing the MB's comprehensive social, economic, and political program. Graffiti with this slogan remained well into the beginning of the 1990s on walls in different districts. In 2005, the MB used this slogan in their campaign, which was defended by MB spokesman, Essam el-Erian (Mahmmud, October 2005). This slogan is pertinent in analyzing the events since 2011 in the coming section of this paper.

## 2011: SYMBOLIC POWER FAILURE AND AN MB IDENTITY CRISIS

This section will demonstrate mainly two points: first, that "Islam is the solution" turned out to not be the solution after all after 2011, which put MB low- and high-ranking members in a post-Islamist mindset. The disengagement on the part of many members of the younger generation of the MB, interviewed after the 2011 uprising, represents only one aspect of the loss of faith in the long-awaited and advocated Islamic solution. This

13. This was referred to briefly by el-Helbawi, and it applied to him given that he was originally from el-Monofeya governorate.

14. These ideas regarding the economy included the prohibition of what is considered prohibited or haram by the Islamic religion, including usury, gambling, unfair trading, and the sale of prohibited goods (alcohol, among others).

included but is not limited to an attempt to merely replace the Mubarak regime with the same neoliberal and business clan strategy. Second, the MB as an organization failed internally and externally. The organization lost symbolic power and capital on several occasions. The characteristics of the political process initiated in 2011 in Egypt resulted in the unveiling of the MB as a social, political, economic, and welfare organization.

Throughout Kandil's book, *Inside the Brotherhood*, there is a repeated demonstration of frustration among the interviewed members and ex-members (Kandil, 2014). In a note on social networks, an ex-MB preacher wrote about the reasons behind his leaving the organization after 2011 (Saïd, March 2012). The reasons were largely based on social disagreement between the MB members' and leaders' teachings and practices. This is not to overlook the creation of three main political parties after 2011 by ex-MB members: Egyptian Current, Construction and Development, and Strong Egypt.

In an interview with one of the founding members of the Egyptian Current Party, he referred to his disappointment in the reaction of the Guidance Bureau on the eve of the 25 January 2011 demonstrations. "They told us you could join on your own as individuals but not as *ikhwan*,"<sup>15</sup> he said, which was repeated by other interviewees contacted up until today. The stripping of *ikhwani* status from those who wanted to demonstrate on the eve of the uprising created an identity crisis for some. Their inability to express themselves and their views on the revolutionary opening and context within the framework of the MB resulted in a backlash against the MB leadership and the disengagement of many of its members.

The alignment between identity, values, and collective action developed into a weak link between the MB's leadership and a large part of its member and followers' base. The MB were regarded as latecomers to the 2011 uprising because of the leadership's hesitance in taking a stance against the Mubarak regime at the time. However, the symbolic power and agency of its leadership was lost to a large extent among its members. Their symbolic power continued to fluctuate as events unraveled following 28 January 2011. On that day, they declared their official participation in the demonstrations and remained in Tahrir Square to witness the events of one of the bloodiest days in terms of police brutality against protesters, which ended with the police's retreat for months from the streets.

The MB members and leaders helped organize patrols in neighborhoods to keep the streets safe and counter the police's retreat and their release of thugs and prisoners, among whom were MB political prisoners like Mohamed Morsi, who became president in 2012–13.<sup>16</sup> The symbolic power of the MB further declined, as they were the first ones to negotiate with Omar Suleiman, Chief of Intelligence Bureau under Mubarak and vice president since February 2011, and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), on 29 January 2011.

The disengagement of many members took place over various stages. It started with the refusal to join protesters officially, followed by the negotiations with the SCAF and Mubarak, and the Supreme Guide, *murshid*, Mohamed Badie, declaring that the MB would not participate in politics and would not put forward a presidential candidate in 2011. This declaration was followed by mass defection from the MB, especially on the part of youth members who wanted to take a political course in their participation and come out of the underground shell of the MB. There was an MB youth symposium held at a hotel in Giza in

---

15. Interview with ex-MB member and founding member of the Egyptian Current party in November 2011.

16. Mohamed Morsi, ex-president, died in prison in 2019. He was imprisoned following the coup d'état of 2013 by acting president, at the time General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

March 2011 in order to discuss the youths' demands and put them forward to the MB leaders.

Several of the candidates interviewed were founding members in "Islamist" parties, although they did not declare belonging to an Islamist ideology, particularly the Egyptian Current and Strong Egypt political parties (Two founding members of the Strong Egypt Party, Interviewed online, August 2020). These two parties eventually joined forces. The MB's leadership had misled the members and the public – like other political actors as well since 2011 – into believing in their apolitical approach at the beginning, which changed as they created the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and drastically changed their stance.

The disenchantment with the MB and its rhetoric that "Islam is the solution" was explicitly revealed as the MB – newly-founded as a political party but almost a century old as an organization – failed to put forward a comprehensive program that reflected the demands put forward in 2011. The discourse given by the organization and its representatives (including presidential candidates Khairat el-Shatter and Mohamed Morsi) was based on moving the emotions of those who regarded the MB as the embodiment of the Islamic religion and ultimate representatives of Islam. However, there is an important dichotomy when examining the dependence on "being Islam," as al-Banna said, as also identified against an "other."

Having been at the center stage of the opposition in Egypt for at least three decades, the MB became not only the embodiment of Islam but also of an organized opposition: "The only organized opposition," as they often referred to themselves. After 2011, the MB still kept on embodying Islamism within a more legal framework by establishing a political party that officially belonged to the organization. The MB did not present a proper political or economic program, but they were still on the side of the uprising when running against members from the incumbent Mubarak government like Ahmed Shafik, ex-army member and the last Prime Minister under Mubarak.

After winning the presidential elections in June 2012 by four percent, newly-elected President Mohamed Morsi gave a speech at Tahrir Square, which was meant to address Egyptian society (and not only MB members). However, the discourse was in the form of an oath and a promise to the people to be a good leader while affirming that the legitimacy given to him comes from the people and their vote. Religious discourse about unity and specific reference to MB Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, detained in the United Kingdom, followed.<sup>17</sup>

After Morsi came to power, the only economic change that took place was the rise of el-Shatter, among other members, to the center stage of Egypt's economic platform. The appearance of MB members to defend the legitimacy of President Morsi increased. Hassan Malek, MB member and businessman, founded the Egyptian Business Development Association (EBDA) in March 2012 in an attempt – by himself and by the movement – to establish hegemony over the economic sphere. It is also an attempt to "follow the Turkish example" that Tayyip Erdogan represented for the MB as an Islamist in power. Malek quickly developed ties with Turkish counterparts and developed his external business connections. The element of solidarity resurfaces continuously, as when seeking examples and allies the MB members turned first towards majority Muslim countries: for example, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia.

The MB during its year in power attempted to replace Mubarak while battling the army over the state apparatus using solely its legitimacy as the organization of the elected president. This included Morsi, in his 2012 speech in Tahrir Square and on other occasions, arguing that his

17. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/world/middleeast/selected-excerpts-of-president-mohamed-morsis-speech.html>

leadership was “civilian” as opposed to the previous decades of military rule from one president to another until Mubarak. However, the line between the MB and its members’ or ex-members’ political parties and that of other “civilian” parties was drawn differently. The latter insisted on differentiating themselves from political parties like Egyptian Current or Strong Egypt based on Islamism rather than secularism (ex-MB member and founding member at the Strong Egypt Party, Interview online, August 2020). In order to escape the secular-Islamic debate among Egyptian society and followers of political parties like el-Dostor (the Constitution Party), el-Masrieen el-Ahrrar (Free Egyptians Party) and el-Masry el-Democraty (Egyptian Democratic Party), they labeled the MB “affiliated” parties as Islamist as opposed to civilian.

After the coup d’état that took place against Morsi in 2013 the internal discourse of the MB changed creating two camps. The first wanted to resort to violence in order to avenge against the coup and the Rab’a Massacre, a massacre of MB members and supporters in Rab’a Square in August 2013, whose death count is between 500 and 5000. The second camp wanted the organization to go back to its *da’wa* and social movement stance, away from the political field in order to negotiate later on for less repression against its members.

The normalized discourse of the MB that was consolidated during the Sadat and Mubarak eras through various economic, political, and social means in Egypt could not withstand the challenges brought about by the 2011 uprising. The current division within the MB only validates the absence of a divine “solution” towards a more democratic and just society in Egypt through Islam. The MB’s authoritarian and neoliberal practices, illustrated above, explain the shortcomings of Islamism.

## CONCLUSION

The MB had been one of the most significant Islamist organizations for almost a century, not only in Egypt but also worldwide. After 2011, it became clear that the MB had relied on being the opposition and working in the shadows under the Mubarak and Sadat regimes as a prohibited organization. Being at the forefront and leadership of the political field in 2012–13 affirmed that all the MB possessed was a discourse, or interpretation of Islam that could not provide a “solution” to the political, social, and economic problems in Egypt.

The Strong Egypt Party attempted to provide a non-Islamist but conservative alternative to the MB’s Islamism but failed. This failure was mainly due to the founders’ history of Islamism and the repression that followed the 2013 coup in Egypt.<sup>18</sup> The Strong Egypt Party members provide the embodiment of Bayat’s “post-Islamism” in their continued assertion of separation between their political activity and religious practices.<sup>19</sup>

“Islamism, like any other ideology, owes more to the historical conditions in which it was conceived than its advocates would like to admit” (Kandil, 2014, p. 177). This is why it was important to highlight in this article how the MB developed and transformed over the years. The events that have taken place since 2011 provided enough evidence that the interpretation of Islam adopted by the MB, however normalized among Egyptian society, does not correlate with the political climate. “What happened in Egypt was a sudden disruption in the public view of the Muslim Brotherhood” (Kandil, 2014, p. 178).

18. In November 2020, two of the founding members of the Strong Egypt Party, among other activists, were included on the list of terrorists in Egypt, guaranteeing the extension of their imprisonment for at least five more years.

19. This political party is currently frozen after the arrest of Aboul Fotouh and Vice-President of the party, Mohamed al-Qassas.

## REFERENCES

- Abu Shady, A. (1998). *Riblati ma' al-gama'a al-samedda*. Cairo: Dar el-tawzi' wal nashr al-islameya.
- al-Banna, H. (1992). *Majmū' at rasā' il al-Īmām al-shabīd Ḥasan al-bannā*. Cairo: Dār al-Shihāb.
- Ayubi, Nazih N. M. (1995). *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Bayat, A. (1996). The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 5(9): 43–52.
- al-Bishri, T. (2002). *al-Harakah al-siyasya fi misr*, Cairo: Dar el-Shorouk.
- Bourdieu, P., & Thompson, J. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Oxford: Polity.
- Dessouki, H. (1982). The New Arab Political Order: implications for the 1980s. In M. Kerr & S. Yassin (Eds.), *Rich and Poor States in the Middle East: Egypt and the New Arab Order*. Boulder: Westview.
- Della Porta, D., & Mario, D. (1999). *Social Movements: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Esposito, J., & John Voll. (2001). *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- al-Ghazali, Z. el. (1999). *Ayam mn Hayati*. Cairo: Dar al-tawzi' wal nashr el-islameya.
- Ḥabīb, M. (2013). *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn bayna al-ṣu'ūd wa-al-ri 'āsab wa-ta 'ākul al-shar'īyah*. Cairo: Samā lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī'.
- el-Houdaiby, I. (2013). From Prison to Palace: the Muslim Brotherhood's challenges and responses in post-revolutionary Egypt. *FRIDE and HIVOS*, Netherlands, Working paper no. 117.
- Ibn Khaldun, A.R. (1998). *Al-moqadema*. Beirut: Dar el-fekr.
- Joya, A. (2018). Is Islamism Accommodating Neo-liberalism? The Case of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. In H. Kraetzschmar & P. Rivetti (Eds.), *Islamists and the politics of the Arab Uprisings: governance, pluralisation and contention*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kandil, H. (2014). *Inside the Brotherhood*. Polity Press: Cambridge.
- el-Kharbaoui, T. (2012). *a'aemat el-sharr*. Cairo: Nahdet Masr Publishing.
- Mahmmud, Hussam. (Oct. 2005). A Symposium Discussed (Islam is the Solution) Slogan, *Ikhwanweb*.
- Muḥyī al-Dīn, Kh. (1992). *Wa-al-ān atakallam*, Cairo, Markaz al-Ahrām lil-Tarjamah wa-al-Nashr, Mu'assasat al-Ahrām.
- Roy, O. (2011). The Paradoxes of Re-Islamization of Muslim Societies. *Social Science Research Council*, essay forum.
- Saïd, M. (8 March 2012). "istiqalati al-mosababa mn gama'at al-ikhwan al-muslimin," (My Causative Resignation from the Muslim Brotherhood Organization), *Facebook*.
- Steuer, C. (2016). The Role of Elections: The Recomposition of the Party System and the Hierarchization of Political Issues. In B. Rougier & S. Lacroix (Eds.), *Egypt's Revolutions: Politics, Religion, and Social Movements*. New York City: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tibi, B. (1997). The Revival of Political Islam: Between Islam and Arab Nationalism. *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 218–233.
- Tonsy, S. (2019, 5 February). The Political Economy of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: From Mubarak to 2011 and After. Journée doctorale *Economie alternative: Religiosité, Ruralité, Migrations*. Paris.
- Vannetzel, M. (2012). *La clandestinité ouverte: réseaux et registres de la mobilisation des Frères musulmans en Égypte (2005–2010)*. Diss. Paris, Institut d'études politiques.