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A flirtation that wasn't

Posted By Samer Shehata ■ Thursday, April 8, 2010 - 11:43 AM ■ [+](#) Share



Ilan Berman's [article "The Islamist Flirtation"](#) argued, ominously, that Mohamed ElBaradei's "growing ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood call into question his commitment to liberal reform." The former IAEA director "is now flirting with joining Egypt's main Islamist party," he warns (the sentence was later modified on the website to read "joining *forces with*"). This complicates his demonstrated ability to "wake up the lethargic Egyptian street." Close observers of Egyptian politics would find it difficult to identify a single part of this essay which is factually or analytically correct. ElBaradei is an independent, and has met with a wide range of opposition groups, including the Brotherhood. There is no evidence that he favors the Brotherhood over other groups, parties, and movements in the National Coalition for Change, and certainly none that this secularist international figure has plans to join the Brotherhood. Even if he did, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is far from the radical threat portrayed by Berman. And finally, the Egyptian "street" -- which has for years been



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rocked by a dizzying array of protests and strikes -- hardly needs awakening. Berman's ill-informed article profoundly sets back our understanding of the stakes and the possibilities in Egyptian politics.

What is the basis for Berman's provocative claim that ElBaradei "has begun a dangerous flirtation with Egypt's main Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood"? His primary evidence is that Mohamed Saad el-Katatni, the chairman of the Brotherhood's parliamentary bloc, attended a meeting hosted by ElBaradei in late February which led to the formation of the "National Coalition for Change." The movement is spearheading ElBaradei's demand for free and fair elections and the lifting of Egypt's decades-old and **highly repressive Emergency Law**. El-Katatni also stated that "ElBaradei's and the Brotherhood's call for political and social change converge" and other Brotherhood leaders have also endorsed the former IAEA director.

This hardly indicates that ElBaradei is "flirting" with the Muslim Brotherhood, let alone considering joining the organization. Baradei has been systematically meeting with opposition forces across the Egyptian political spectre. Several dozen other prominent political leaders also **attended the meeting that Berman references**, in addition to the Brotherhood's El-Katatni. Among those present were Ayman Nour (the Ghad Party founder and 2005 presidential candidate who was later jailed), George Ishak of the "Kifaya" movement (the group established to oppose Mubarak's reelection and Gamal Mubarak's "inheritance" of power), Osama Ghazali Harb (liberal National Front party leader), Hamdeen Sabahi (founder of the Karama Party), Alaa Al Aswany (best-selling author of "The Yacoubian Building"), and many other well-known figures who represent a broad spectrum of political views. Since then, many other organizations and prominent individuals have also publicly endorsed ElBaradei. It is therefore deeply misleading to claim that Katatni's participation in that meeting means that ElBaradei is "joining forces with" the Brotherhood or even that there are "growing ties" between him and the organization, at least not more so than between ElBaradei and other Egyptian opposition groups.

It is also not the case that ElBaradei has gone out of his way to court, or even associate with, Brotherhood leaders. There have been no reports that he has met the group's new general guide or even visited the group's national headquarters. (ElBaradei has met privately with El-Katatni, a fact not mentioned in Berman's article, but he has also met privately with other political leaders and groups). The Brotherhood does endorse ElBaradei's basic call for political reform, like the majority of secular opposition groups in Egypt. Based on his **statements during media interviews**, his family and personal background, the National Coalition for Change's program, and the prominent role of the liberal Cairo University professor Hassan Nafaa as the coalition's coordinator, it is obvious that ElBaradei's outlook differs significantly from the Brotherhood's.

But this is not what really troubles Berman. For him, the mere association between the Brotherhood (which he ominously describes as "the world's most influential font of radical Islam") and ElBaradei, calls into question the latter's "commitment to liberal reform." This sweeping verdict badly misunderstands the Muslim Brotherhood's position in contemporary Egyptian politics. Its ideology does contain troubling illiberal elements. But for over three decades the group has consistently demonstrated its commitment to peaceful political participation, despite overwhelming regime repression. The 88 current Brotherhood parliamentarians focus more on bread and butter issues (e.g., political reform, freedom, rule of law, anti-corruption, employment, and health care) than on "religious" **questions (e.g., implementing the shari'a)**.

Berman also perpetuates the myth of the Muslim Brotherhood as a "radical" organization in more subtle (although equally mistaken) ways. For example, he describes the Brotherhood's new leader, Mohamed Badie as an "ultraconservative cleric" and "the organization's supreme guide." (He also mistakenly implies that elections for the group's Guidance Bureau took place in 2008, when in fact the election occurred in December 2009). The official title of the head of the Brotherhood is actually

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the "general guide" ("al murshid al 'am"), not the "supreme guide," a frequent mistake in much writing about the movement. The term "supreme guide" sounds ominous, connoting an infallible leader of an extremist organization. Second, whatever one thinks of the Brotherhood's new general guide, he is not an "ultraconservative cleric," as Berman describes. Mohamed Badie is not a "cleric" at all, in fact, but a professor of veterinary pathology at a Beni Suef University. It is almost impossible to find a "cleric" in the organization's top leadership. For example, of the 18 members of the Guidance Bureau, more than 14 are doctors of one sort or another, many holding PhD's in the natural sciences.

It is inaccurate, therefore, to describe the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a "radical" group. The Brotherhood is a "moderate" reform-oriented movement primarily made up of middle-class professionals who are organically embedded in Egyptian society; as conventional, ordinary and at times, parochial, as that society maybe. And the Brotherhood is the most popular, powerful, and organized force in Egyptian politics, despite recent internal divisions. It is extremely difficult to imagine an effective, broad-based coalition of societal forces mobilizing for political reform, including democratization, which does not include the Muslim Brotherhood. One of the greatest weaknesses of the Egyptian opposition historically has been its inability to establish a united front to pressure for democracy. Like other authoritarian regimes, the Mubarak government has been effective at "dividing and ruling" the opposition and there are already signs that it is attempting to sow division within the National Coalition for Change. ElBaradei and his movement, including the Brotherhood, have the potential to establish a united front committed to a more democratic Egypt; one governed by institutions (not individuals) and the rule of law (not the arbitrary exercise of state authority). Without the Brotherhood, a serious effort to push for change is far less likely.

Berman writes that in light of the government's recent crackdown on the organization, "the Brotherhood may be joining forces with ElBaradei out of necessity." He concludes that "ElBaradei's political coalition offers the Brotherhood an attractive way to remain relevant without giving in too much to Mubarak." It is true that as a result of an exceptionally harsh wave of arrests preceding the upcoming elections, the Brotherhood is facing tough times. But the "relevance" of the group is not the issue. It has survived over eight decades -- under a monarchy and four Egyptian presidents -- and it will outlast the present regime.

Finally (as if this were not enough), there is this:

ElBaradei's vocal commitment to greater pluralism and better governance already has managed to do what years of politics as usual in Cairo has not: energize the lethargic Egyptian "street" and present a viable alternative to the Mubaraks.

Berman is correct that ElBaradei's presence has energized Egyptian politics and that he represents a viable alternative to the Mubaraks. But to refer to a "lethargic Egyptian 'street'" is both factually incorrect and a distortion of reality. This analysis takes an outcome (i.e., the "lethargic Egyptian street") which is a product of authoritarian politics and presents it as a natural state or initial condition. In fact, the Egyptian government works quite hard to produce this "lethargic Egyptian street." This includes a range of repressive laws that severely curtail basic political freedoms, regular and systematic electoral fraud, and maintaining a security force of over 400,000 men (the Central Security Forces, CSF) whose primary responsibility is to suppress domestic opposition. When CSF forces, along with plain clothes thugs, use clubs and tear gas against peaceful civilian demonstrators, this tends to be a serious disincentive for some to take to the streets to voice their political concerns.

This is why the Brotherhood, like much of the rest of the Egyptian opposition, embraces the seven stated goals of the National Coalition for Change: Ending the State of Emergency; Complete judicial

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supervision of elections; Domestic and international election monitoring by civil society groups; Guarantees that all candidates, particularly in presidential elections, will have sufficient access to the media; Enabling Egyptians abroad to participate in elections at Egyptian embassies and consulates; The right of individuals to nominate themselves in presidential elections without arbitrary restrictions in line with Egypt's commitment to the International Convention for Political and Civil Rights, and limiting the presidential term to two terms; Voting on the basis of the National Identification Card (number), in addition amending articles 76, 77, and 88 of the constitution). The Brotherhood believes it would benefit from these measures - as do many other Egyptians.

But Berman's statement about the "lethargic" Egyptian street is also flat wrong. Anyone with a passing familiarity with Egypt over the last decade is well aware that the country has witnessed significant political contestation, including street protests and demonstrations, during this period. Beginning in 2002 and 2003 (well before ElBaradie's return), there has been a revival of political activism. The second Intifada, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, U.S. pressure on the Mubarak regime, a constitutional referendum and two elections in 2005 (one of which was highly contested), a looming presidential succession, and skyrocketing inflation and declining real wages have all contributed to producing new protest movements, hundreds (if not thousands) of demonstrations, and heightened levels of political contestation. Egypt today experiences regular labor strikes and protests which have lacked an overarching political movement. The "Egyptian street" has hardly been lethargic - but if its restless action is to produce real change, then new political alliances, including with the Muslim Brotherhood, will likely have to be part of the formula.

Samer Shehata is assistant professor of Arab Politics at Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. He is the author of "Shop Floor Culture and Politics in Egypt" in addition to numerous articles about Egyptian politics.

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PATINN

5:11 PM ET

April 8, 2010

whichever guide

I just wanted to point out, Professor Shehata, that you also make the "common mistake" of using the term "supreme guide" rather than "general guide" in your Middle East Report 240 piece that you link to. But you're correct, it's ???.

PATINN

5:13 PM ET

April 8, 2010

???

The three question marks are the Arabic word for general ('aam) in Arabic... I guess Arabic isn't supported in the comments section.

AHMAD ALI

7:23 AM ET

April 9, 2010

Thank you Samer

I could detect all of the fallacies and implicit misinformation in Ilan's article the other day, and Samer beautifully deconstructed every piece of it. Samer actually knows the history and politics of Egypt. He doesn't come at it from a neocon Zionist perspective that does away with liberal ideals of democracy and human rights whenever the humans are not us. Ilan would rather support the dictatorships in the Arab region, those that they call "moderate", because those dictators are "serving our interests". Ilan, admitting that the brotherhood are very popular in Egypt, demands ElBaradei to exclude those large segments of society because they have the word "Muslim" in their name, and would rather change names from a dictator to another rather than change the politics. For him, "Muslim" or "Islamic" is but one monolith that is by definition "radical" (the Glenn Beck's "radical") and hostile to us. He makes a living from scaring everyone from "the Islamist threat" and is unable to make any distinctions in his imagination and his writing about Muslim politics the world over. It is the same old colonial imperative of the white man's burden of civilizing the uncivilized. It's the imperative that strips societies of agency, autonomy and independence because they don't think like us. Little he knows that this way of thinking in particular is the best recruiter of radicalism in the Muslim world, but that doesn't matter as long as the oil continues to pump and Israel continues to ethnically cleanse and his income continues to grow.

ROZBAT

8:27 AM ET

April 12, 2010

Husnu Mubarek one of the

Husnu Mubarek one of the most important Arabic leaders of this region. im 38 years old im Turkish too. since my childhood he is ruling Egypt . in my childhood(in early 80's) our economy's (Turkey's economic capacity) with the same with Egypt. but today when i was looked both states's economy's i can see differencies.. now Turkey one of the fastest growing economy of middle east region. every year our economy are growing. yes we are different our Egyptian friends(we have a lot of agricultural reserves and have global business leaders). but we doesn't have oil (we provide oil than the other countries and we are paying money for that) what is the Egypt economy's problem? i was thinking that issue. could be the mr. Mubarek's wrong economy policy? ony Tourism not enough i think.

ILANBERMAN

9:37 AM ET

April 15, 2010

Responding to Samer (and others)

Apparently, my April 2nd Foreign Policy article on Mohamed ElBaradei's Islamist flirtation generated quite a bit of criticism, including the lengthy response above from Georgetown University's Samer Shehata. These critiques are useful for a number of reasons, not least that they highlight some common tropes about radical Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, and how we in the West see both. Herewith, my attempt at a reasoned response:

With regards to referencing Mohammed Badie as an "ultraconservative cleric," I stand corrected – at least partially. Badie is not a "cleric" per se, since his doctorate is actually in veterinary medicine from the University of Zagazig. But an ultraconservative he undoubtedly is. To be sure, Badie has mouthed a commitment to "nonviolence" and political participation. Most Brotherhood officials have, since doing otherwise can be hazardous to your health in Mubarak's Egypt. But Badie hails from a conservative segment of the movement that – at a certain level – still sees an existential conflict with the West (hence Badie's somewhat tiresome reference, in his acceptance speech, to the need for "continuous jihad to liberate the nation from any foreign dominance or intellectual, spiritual, cultural hegemony and economic, political or military colonialism.") This isn't just my opinion, incidentally. Even Al Jazeera has depicted Badie's election to the Brotherhood's top post as a clear victory for the organization's "conservative" wing. To sell it as anything but is simply dishonest.

This, of course, doesn't mean that Badie is an unreconstructed throwback. Quite the contrary; he appears to be a sometime blogger, and is even rumored to boast a Facebook profile. But he was also an associate of Sayyid Qutb, the Brotherhood's most famous (and radical) son, in the 1960s, and continues to adhere to Qutb's views about Islam and the West. Not making note of this fact is a glaring omission.

Samer also made much of my use of the word lethargic. Methinks he doth protest too much. While it is certainly true that opposition groups in Egypt have seen spurts of dynamism, they have also – as he himself admits – exhibited periods of passivity as a result of (quite justified) political fatigue. My perhaps unartfully phrased point is that movement toward a meaningful, unified opposition has thus far been lethargic – which is precisely the reason why ElBaradei's notional candidacy is so invigorating.

Finally, I stand behind my reference to the Muslim Brotherhood as "the world's most influential font of radical Islamic ideas." After all, the group's seminal thinkers, especially Sayyid Qutb, continue to cast an exceedingly long intellectual shadow over the global jihadi movement, a point to which anyone who has read the writings of modern-day ideologues like al-Suri and Muhammad Khalil al-Hakaymah can attest. This is perhaps an inconvenient truth for Brotherhood supporters who would like the organization to toe a more moderate line. I do too, for the record. But wishing does not make it so, and recent signs (chief among them the organization's controversial 2007 political platform) suggest that, despite the desires of many, the Brothers still have a long way to travel in this regard.

Which gets to a larger point. There is now a struggle underway within the Muslim Brotherhood – a tug-of-war between a conservative old guard with exclusionary ideas and a new, more pluralistic generation that seeks to meld Islam and contemporary politics. The Arab world, and the United States, has a stake in the outcome of that intellectual contest. Simply arguing that the Muslim Brotherhood is a fact of Egyptian politics, and must be accepted as it is, shortchanges the organization's potential for evolution. Indeed, everyone – Egyptians most of all – should have a stake in prompting such a transformation. That they have abdicated this responsibility in favor of denigrating those who highlight the organization's faults is perhaps the saddest commentary of all.

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