

## Hear out Muslim Brotherhood - Joshua Stacher and Samer Shehata

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ON A QUIET, one-way street in Cairo's middle-class Manial district, two bored security guards sit idly sipping tea. The building behind them houses a small apartment that serves as the main offices of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest Islamist group in the Middle East. In Egypt, the Brotherhood is the country's largest opposition group and its best-organized political force. No one would know it from the headquarters' modest appearance, but the Brotherhood is likely to be the dominant force in Egyptian politics in the future. Yet the United States stubbornly refuses to deal with the Brotherhood, taking its cue from the sclerotic and hopelessly corrupt regime of Hosni Mubarak.

According to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the United States does not deal with the group because it is illegal under Egyptian law. But basing policy on an authoritarian government's legal manipulations is not in America's interests. If American policy is to be effective or credible in Egypt and the wider region, the United States should engage with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the most popular and organized political movement in Egypt. Rice is scheduled to be in Egypt this weekend to meet with Mubarak, so now is an ideal time for talks with the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood is a mainstream nonviolent organization that has operated responsibly and predictably within Egypt for decades. Founded in 1928, it has survived British colonialism, Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab nationalism and intense repression, and Anwar Sadat's rapprochement with the West. It is likely to outlive the Mubarak regime and its ruling National Democratic Party. In Egypt's partially open 2005 legislative elections, the Brotherhood won 20 percent of the assembly's seats, making it the largest opposition bloc in parliament. So it makes sense for US officials to sit across the table from Brotherhood representatives, just as the the United States does with other political forces and opposition parties in the country.

Islamist political groups are incredibly popular in the Middle East, and will remain so for some time. As the oldest of these groups, the Brotherhood has continuing ties to other regional Islamist parties and movements. The United States currently lacks access to some of these Islamist organizations. Engaging with the Brotherhood, therefore, would open up new channels of communication with Islamist groups. It would also signal that the United States is open to talking with all groups that are committed to peaceful political participation.

The Brotherhood has consistently demonstrated a long-term commitment to working peacefully within Egypt's legal framework - despite years of repression against the group's members. The organization has offices across the country, and its members regularly compete in all types of elections. Unlike other Islamist organizations, such as Hamas or Hezbollah, the Brotherhood has no armed wing, and neither the US Department of State nor the European Union considers it a terrorist group.

Indeed, despite its illegality under Egyptian law, the regime tolerates many of its activities, including a wide network of social welfare services, religious activities, and professional and civic organizations.

Opening a relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood would signal to ruling regimes and opposition groups in the region that the United States is committed to promoting democracy - not just to supporting those who are friendly to US interests. Democracy requires a broader commitment to political participation, inclusion, reform, moderation, transparency, accountability, and better governance.

Furthering contacts with the Brotherhood would not constitute a drastic departure for American foreign policy. Despite the lack of a relationship now, American officials have had occasional contact with the Brotherhood in the past. American government officials last held talks with the organization in late 2001, under the current Bush presidency. Although the Egyptian government has occasionally expressed displeasure at such meetings, the American-Egyptian relationship has not suffered as a consequence.

Egypt receives billions of dollars a year in aid from the United States, and Washington has a responsibility to meet with all of Egypt's relevant political organizations. After the Brotherhood's success in the 2005 parliamentary elections and the increasing popularity of other Islamist groups in the region, the United States needs to consider an open and frank dialogue with moderate, nonviolent Islamist groups. And there is no more important moderate Islamist group in the region than Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

**Caption:** Boston Globe

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