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Political Islam can be expressed peacefully. Denying that will create a self-fulfilling prophecy of radicalism



As fears and concerns get expressed about less salubrious directions the political turmoil in Egypt might take, a frequent theme is, “Watch out for the Islamists!” More specifically, the theme is to watch out for the Muslim Brotherhood. A common scale for worry among many Americans (and Israelis) about Egypt's political future is how much influence the Brotherhood may have in whatever new political order emerges from the current unrest. [Columnists](#) [nervously cite](#) the connections between the Muslim Brotherhood and the ideologist Sayyid Qutb and raise the specter of the Brotherhood becoming the vehicle for the installation of a radical regime that will abrogate the peace treaty with Israel and destroy human rights.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a formidable force. It is not to be dismissed as weaker than it appears [on grounds](#) that alternative groups in opposition to the incumbent regime have been outlawed and repressed. The Brotherhood has also been outlawed, although tolerated by the regime to varying degrees. In the semi-legal way it has endeavored to participate in electoral politics—in which the Brotherhood's parliamentary candidates ran as independents or under the label of another party—it performed remarkably well. In past elections it has done so well that it limited the number of seats it contested so as not to win too many seats and trigger a fresh crackdown by the regime. The Brotherhood is in some ways the best organized opposition group in Egypt. There is good reason to expect it to play a significant role in a future political order.

Before the alarmism over Islamism gets us searching for ways to head off that eventuality, we need to reflect on a couple of basic facts. One is that in Egypt, as in many other Muslim countries and especially Arab countries, political Islam represents a significant current of opinion in present-day politics and society. It is here to stay. It will find new outlets for expression if it is denied other outlets. The Brotherhood's belief that “Islam is the solution” for political and social problems is certainly foreign to our concept of separation of church and state, although given the [compromises of that separation in practice in our own nation](#) the

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actual difference is probably less than it first appears. Political Islam as embodied in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is a major, intrinsic part of Egyptian politics, not a thing apart from those politics.



The second fact is that given the inevitable presence of political Islam in Egyptian politics and the necessary organizational manifestation of that strain of opinion, the Muslim Brotherhood is about as benign a manifestation as we probably can hope to find in Egypt. The organization became the most adept opposition practitioner of parliamentary politics, despite the handicaps under which it has operated. It shows a strong pragmatic streak in other respects. Most important, its renunciation of violence is clear and long-standing. If this is not enough to make it a legitimate representative of a significant strain of opinion in Egyptian politics, then its adherents are entitled to ask what, if anything, would ever make it so. If the answer is that nothing would make it so and that the organization is to be distrusted simply because it is Islamist, this is a posture that is indistinguishable from simple Islamophobia.

As the United States further develops its posture toward an emerging new order in Egypt, we ought to contemplate one more fact about the Muslim Brotherhood—one pertaining to the forms it has taken in different countries. Where it has been given the opportunity to compete peacefully as one of several players in the political arena—as in Jordan and, in limited ways, in Egypt—it has done exactly that. Where that opportunity has been denied it, as it has been in Palestine, where the local Brotherhood is known as Hamas—and was denied the opportunity even after it won an election—it has resorted to whatever other means are available to it, including violence.

One of the biggest mistakes that the United States and other outsiders could make in crafting their posture toward Egypt and Egyptian Islamists would be to create a self-fulfilling prophecy of radicalism by denying the legitimacy of peaceful expressions of political Islam.

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