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Lost in transition: The Muslim Brotherhood in 2022

Hamstrung by decades of repression, mistrust and a lack of governance experience, Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties were ultimately unable to navigate the post-2011 tensions between the need to deliver on the popular demands of the Arab uprisings and maintain ideological coherence. Similarly, they struggled to retain their revolutionary credentials and at the same time compromise with ruling elites in order to govern. While this was always a tall order, the consequence has been that decline and crisis followed the organisation's initial ascent between 2011 and 2013. The Muslim Brotherhood gradually lost its ideological influence over parties it had inspired following the 2013 military takeover against Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. From this year onwards, growing repression, marginalisation and factionalism accelerated the movement's decline. The arrest and exile of leading Muslim Brotherhood individuals created a leadership void and opened up space for internal strife. Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is a shadow of its former self and in crisis. In parallel to the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood, the legitimacy and relevance of jihadism, political Salafism and Iran's model of religious rule also appear to have weakened, respectively due to the 'defeat' of Islamic State, Saudi modernisation and the poor to mediocre governance provided by Tehran's partners. This raises the question what major religiously inspired sources of political renewal and mobilisation remain across the Middle East and North Africa that are capable of offering credible prospects for better governance.

Introduction

Political Islam is a socio-political ideology that emerged gradually in the Arab world following the end of the decolonisation period (1930–1950s).[1] While encompassing a broad range of ideas, it amounts to the conviction that some, many or all norms and principles of Islam as a religion (e.g. inheritance, family life, crime and relations with non-Muslims) should be reflected in the governance of the state by 'giving Islam an authoritative status in political life'.[2] At one extreme of the spectrum sit those who prefer to see such principles recognised primarily in symbolic terms. For example, in 2012, the Tunisian party Ennahda agreed to support a Constitution that did not make Islamic law (Shari'a) the

1 This brief broadly defines 'political Islam' as a political culture as defined in Cesari, J. 2021, 'What Is Political Islam?', *Journal of Islamic Studies* 32(3), 317–353. It refers to the broad set of politically active ideologies tied together by a set of religiously inspired principles. The term does not refer exclusively to Mainstream Sunni Islamism, but also encompasses those strains of Salafism that are active in parliamentary politics, defined as 'salafi polticos' in Wiktorowicz, Q. 2006, 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement'. *Studies In Conflict on Terrorism*, *29*(3), 207–239. It also includes Shi'a Islamism, which inspired the official ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2 March, A. 2015. 'Political Islam: Theory', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 18: 103–123.

main source of legislation.[3] At the other extreme sit those who want a structure of rule with theocratic elements, demanding a radical transformation of society and politics in the process. For example, the current system of the Iranian republic includes formal republican features, but it also attributes a large share of power to unelected bodies of religious authority (e.g. the Council of Guardians).

This brief uses the term Mainstream Sunni Islamism (MSI) to refer to a sub-set of the broader universe of political Islam (see above), namely the one that takes the view that Sunni majority societies should be based both on Islamic legislation (*Shari'a*) and feature a form of multiparty democracy.[4] Its underlying assumption is that governance based on Islamic values will enable such societies to achieve higher standards of development and navigate modernity in a manner that is more accepted locally.

On paper, it leads to democracy with 'Islamic characteristics' in the sense of political parties being able to compete as long as they respect a certain base of Islamic values. MSI parties, such as The National Congress Party (Zamzam) in Jordan and the National Construction Movement in Algeria, seek to achieve their style of governance mostly by promoting Islamic values in politics and society in a bottom-up manner. Hence, MSI thinking and the parties that promote it matter a great deal to governance and development struggles across the Arab world, especially in the context of the extended Arab uprisings (2011–2019) and deteriorating socioeconomic trends across the Middle East and North Africa.[5]

The Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, is historically the main source of inspiration for MSI parties, even though degrees of ideological proximity vary. The Muslim Brotherhood is essentially a transnational religious organisation espousing the ideology outlined above, with a particularly strong following in Egypt. Much of the ideological roots of MSI originate with the Muslim Brotherhood, but MSI parties nevertheless constantly negotiate their relationships with the movement. As the Muslim Brotherhood tries to increase its ideological influence over MSI parties and relies on these parties to realise its political goals, so MSI parties strive to maintain their own profiles, leadership and agendas.

The brief traces the rise, decline and crisis of the Muslim Brotherhood between 2011 and 2021 in the context of the broader universe of MSI parties to assess its contemporary relevance as a source of ideological[6] inspiration for political renewal across the Arab world.[7] It notes that MSI parties increasingly distance themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood as a transnational regional network and source of inspiration. This points to a reduction in the ideological influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. It also suggests the fading of an important pan-Sunni movement whose calls for political renewal could have brought about a limited democratic approach to religious principles.

3 Reuters 2012. 'Tunisia's Ennahda to oppose sharia in constitution': https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-constitution-idUSBRE82P0E820120326.

4 The term 'Mainstream Sunni Islamism' is derived from *Rethinking Political Islam* (2017) by Hamid, S. and McCants, W. The concept is used to indicate: 'those [groups] that operate within the confines of institutional politics and are willing to work within existing state structures, even ostensibly secular ones. They have, with few exceptions, embraced parliamentary politics, electoral competition, and mass politics more broadly.' (267).

5 Van Veen, E. et al., 2022. *Cassandra calling? Development, governance and conflict trends in the Middle East*, The Clingendael Institute.

6 Ideology is defined by the capacity to (re-)produce a collective identity (here: Islamic) in terms of 'an ongoing process of creating meanings, norms, images, and values for social agents'. See: Al-Anani, K. 2016. *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood, Religion, Identity, and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 48.

7 The brief is based on a literature review and four expert interviews. These took place between January and March 2022. I would like to thank Lucia Ardovini (Lancaster University), Mustafa Elmenshawi (Lancaster University) and Khalil al-Anani (Arab Center) for their thoughts and time, as well as a confidential source. For critical review, my thanks go to Simon Mabon (Lancaster University) and Erwin van Veen (Clingendael). The contents of the brief naturally remain my own responsibility.

Box 1 Historical evolution of relationships between MSI parties and the Muslim Brotherhood

The ideological roots of most MSI parties in the Arab world can be traced back to the emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928. In fact, the most influential parties that promoted MSI ideology in the Arab world were affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or, at least symbolically, recognised its leadership between 1928 and 2011. Their connections with the Muslim Brotherhood granted MSI parties political legitimation and provided them with a platform for regional coordination, as well as a network of support for their members. Despite maintaining formal or informal links with the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood leadership, MSI parties have typically enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and remained capable of adapting their political strategy to their national political context. MSI parties tend to operate pragmatically. For example, Saudi support for the crackdown on the Freedom and Justice Party of former president Mohamed Morsi in Egypt did not prevent Yemen's Islah party (MSI, Muslim Brotherhood-founded) and its members supporting the Saudi-led intervention in 2014. Moreover, MSI parties are no strangers to criticising one another. For example, the normalisation of relations between Israel and Morocco – endorsed by the Moroccan Justice and Development Party (also MSI) – was met with both mild condemnation and harsh criticism from other MSI parties.

Sources: Wickham, C. R., 2015. *The Muslim Brotherhood Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press: 24; Al-Anani, K., 2016. *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood, Religion, Identity, and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; France 24. 2020. 'Saudis give Egypt 'blank cheque' to fight Brotherhood'; Al-Sofari, M. 2013. 'An Exceptional Case: Saudi Relations with Yemen's Islah Party', Fikra Forum; Yildirim, A. K. 2021. 'Islamist Responses to Arab Normalization Agreements with Israel', Rice University Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Rise, decline and crisis of the Muslim Brotherhood

The fortunes of the Muslim Brotherhood over the past decade can be divided broadly into three straightforward phases: rise, decline and crisis. The phases are broadly defined by the capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood to influence the political dynamics of the Arab countries in which MSI parties operated, which looked to the Muslim Brotherhood as their main source of ideological inspiration.

Rise: The Muslim Brotherhood steps out of the shadows

The Muslim Brotherhood gained political prominence in January 2011 when successive protests erupted across parts of North Africa and the Middle East. The movement was well-positioned to compete in elections that followed initial concessions by, or even the departure of, regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan, due to its long track record of social engagement and constituency building. The Muslim Brotherhood had, after all, operated as a charity since the late 1930s, a role it later complemented by strong activism in professional organisations and, where possible, the formation of political parties (running as 'independents' where parties were not feasible). Its long exclusion from power, justified with a persistent 'state of exception',[8] enabled Muslim Brotherhood-linked MSI parties to present themselves as uncorrupted and principled.

It was a unique opportunity that MSI parties could not – and did not – miss. In 2011 and 2012, MSI parties with strong links to the Muslim Brotherhood obtained sufficient

8 Ardovini, L. and Mabon, S., 2020. 'Egypt's Unbreakable Curse: Tracing the State of Exception from Mubarak to Al Sisi'. *Mediterranean Politics*, 25 (4). 456–475.

votes to join ruling coalitions in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, even securing the election of one of its members as president in Egypt. In this chaotic context, Muslim Brotherhood-linked MSI parties struck various compromises with ruling elites and 'deep state' brokers to secure their newly acquired power. Generally, they accepted existing parameters of power, at least implicitly. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood first pursued a controversial deal with Egypt's Supreme Military Council[9] and subsequently went all-out to elect Mohamed Morsi to the presidency. The Muslim Brotherhood's Moroccan affiliate, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), in contrast, worked with and accommodated the king and his palace-based governance structures while Tunisia-based Ennahda accepted power-sharing with secular competitors from the beginning. Yet, as will be discussed in the next section, such accommodation was not cost-free and would backfire.

During this phase, the governments of Qatar and Turkey were also supportive of MSI parties, while Jordan and Kuwait continued their traditional tolerance within clearly defined political boundaries. However, despite the freer political environment, some countries continued to oppose MSI parties tooth and nail. In particular, the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) considered the Muslim Brotherhood an existential threat to the political viability and religious legitimacy of their own structures of rule. The reason is that the Muslim Brotherhood promotes a more republican and religiously inspired political model that offers a viable alternative to the autocratic monarchical/tribal systems prevalent in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The conservative-religious audience that might be receptive to either model encompasses both countries. The Syrian government was also openly hostile for similar reasons. Nevertheless, the Muslim Brotherhood substantially increased its ideological influence among MSI parties in the period 2011–2012. The election of Mohamed Morsi, one of the prominent leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice party (FJD), as president of Egypt in June 2012 marked the height of alignment between the Muslim Brotherhood and MSI parties across the Arab world.

Decline: An increasingly hostile environment

Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's military takeover in Egypt in July 2013 was the first reversal MSI parties faced. The unofficial reset of Egyptian-Turkish relations in 2021 is the most recent. Egypt in 2013 proved to be a critical point in determining the Muslim Brotherhood's prospects at two levels. First, it caused similar Islamist movements to put greater distance between themselves and the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and network to avoid the same fate as the Egyptian FJD. Second, it encouraged Saudi Arabia and the UAE to step up their anti-Muslim Brotherhood policies by not only repressing activities linked to the organisation domestically but also in the rest of the Arab world. The two countries cooperated with authoritarian forces across the region to ban or limit the Muslim Brotherhood, which they consider to be their main challenger in terms of religious and political legitimacy. For example, they supported general Haftar in Libya to counter Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamists who were part of the ruling coalition in Tripoli. The anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance of the Saudis and Emiratis became one of the watersheds in setting regional alliances. Those countries aligned with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi (e.g. Jordan and Kuwait) started to limit the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in their domestic political arenas by regulatory and other means to maintain positive diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. For example, Jordan introduced new laws to regulate political party organisations, which happened to result in the Muslim Brotherhood branch losing its official registration in 2014.[10]

9 The New York Times 2012. 'In Egypt, signs of accord between military council and Islamists'. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/23/world/middleeast/signs-of-accord-between-egyptian-military-and-muslim-brotherhood-on-new-charter.html.

10 Al Naimat, T. 2016. *The Gradual Weakening of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan*, Wilson Center.

In contrast, Turkey and Qatar took on the mantle of becoming the regional sponsors of the Muslim Brotherhood, mostly to advance their own political agenda for greater influence in the Middle East.[11] Under the patronage of Turkish President Erdoğan, the Muslim Brotherhood reorganised its leadership. On the one hand, Turkish protection allowed it to survive and maintain its influence. On the other hand, it resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood relying (too) heavily on the sponsorship of Turkey and Qatar for survival. For example, Turkish and Qatari backing of Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Islamist groups in the Syrian National Council (SNC) resulted in a net loss of independence for those groups.[12]

These developments across the region profoundly affected the Muslim Brotherhood's self-perception, coherence and ability to project itself externally with confidence. As one interviewee summarised: 'The movement has been in a soul-searching mode since 2013 and has faced several problems such as factionalism and divisions'.[13] Another interviewee argued that: 'The organisation sunk into a political, ideological and identity crisis during this period'.[14] The key division within the group revolved around the best strategy to deal with growing political repression: appeasement with current rulers versus working with opposition movements towards regime change. Yet others advocated an even closer partnership with Turkey and Qatar. Such differences of view cost the movement some of its ideological influence as a regional transnational network because it failed to produce a coherent strategy. One interviewee even argued that the Muslim Brotherhood no longer represents an inspiring force to political Islam in the Arab world or beyond but has instead become a liability.[15]

11 Yüksel, E. and Tekineş, H., 2021. *Turkey's love-in with Qatar. A marriage of convenience.* The Clingendael Institute.

12 Ibid.

13 Interview with al-Anani, K. 2022. Senior Fellow, Arab Center, Washington DC.

14 Interview with Ardovini, L. 2022. Lecturer in International Relations, Lancaster University.

15 Interview with al-Anani, K. 2022. Senior Fellow, Arab Center, Washington DC.

As a result, MSI parties increasingly began to set their own political agenda. For example, Tunisia's Ennahda rebranded its ideology from 'political Islam'[16] to 'Muslim democracy' to stress that the party's goal was not to implement a Shari'a-based republican state but rather to advance a political course of action based on Islamic values.[17] Ennahda's new political course caused resentment among more hardline Islamists, who subsequently shifted their votes to the more hardcore al-Karama party.[18] In Jordan, the Islamic Action Front cut its formal link with the Muslim Brotherhood.[19] This led to the formation of a new Islamist organisation (The National Congress Party – Zamzam), which has no link with the Muslim Brotherhood.[20]

The Muslim Brotherhood in existential crisis

The al-Ula agreement of January 2021 ended the Gulf countries' embargo against Qatar[21] and enabled an unofficial restart of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Egypt in March 2021.[22] It soon became clear that Turkey and Qatar were happy to reduce their support for the Muslim Brotherhood in order to restore diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the

16 For reference: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZRRu082yx4.

17 Ghannouchi, R., 2016. 'From Political Islam to Muslim Democracy: The Ennahda Party and the Future of Tunisia', *Foreign Affairs*: 95 (5): https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/tunisia/political-islam-muslim-democracy.

18 Lorch, J. and Chakroun, H., 2020. *Salafism Meets Populism: The Al-Karama Coalition and the Malleability of Political Salafism in Tunisia*, Middle East Institute (MEI).

19 The Arab Weekly 2016. 'Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan cuts ties to parent movement in Egypt' https://thearabweekly.com/muslim-brotherhood-jordan-cuts-ties-parent-movement-egypt.

20 Wagemakers, J. 2021. 'Things Fall Apart: The Disintegration of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood'. *Religions*, 12(12): 1066.

21 El Yaakoubi, A. 2021. 'From embargo to embrace, Saudi Arabia pushes Gulf détente', *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-gulf-summit-idUSKBN29A0K9.

22 Reuters 2021. 'Turkey says it has restarted diplomatic contacts with Egypt'. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-egypt-diplomacy-idUSKBN2B41G9.

Emirates. For example, Turkish authorities 'asked' TV channels affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood that broadcast from its territory to tone down their criticism of the Egyptian government.[23] Prior to this, in August 2020 the Egyptian authorities had captured and imprisoned Mahmoud Ezzat, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood who was in hiding in Cairo, leading to a succession crisis.[24] The Brotherhood's Shura council ultimately elected Ibrahim Mounir, currently living in London, as its supreme guide.[25] He subsequently dissolved the organisation's Secretariat to end a conflict with Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein, who had challenged him for leadership of the group. This resulted in an internal rebellion and standoff between these two leaders that persists today.[26]

Given such a predicament, MSI parties linked to the Muslim Brotherhood had little choice but to distance themselves from it even further to ensure they remained acceptable to ruling elites and regional powers and were able to operate.[27] However, this further reduced their revolutionary and integrity credentials, which had already suffered several blows. A negative spiral ensued. For example, despite its longstanding opposition to Tel Aviv, the PJD in Morocco felt compelled to support the monarchy in normalising relations with Israel in 2020.[28] Even so, the PJD dropped from 125 seats in parliament in 2016 to 12 in 2021.[29] Similarly, in Tunisia there is widespread resentment towards Ennahda because many Tunisians have come to see the party as belonging to the elite that failed to deliver what was expected after the regime change in 2011.[30] As a result, the party lost 37 parliamentary seats, going down from 89 in 2011[31] to 52 in 2019.[32]

One could argue that the Muslim Brotherhood's current troubles – internal division and external repression – merely constitute a return to earlier times.[33] Throughout its history, the organisation learned the hard way to resist repression and marginalisation. In Egypt, it faced arrests and hostility under Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak alike. Its complicated relationships with political establishments across the Arab world are also nothing new and have included large-scale political repression in several countries, such as Syria.[34] However, the movement's present crisis seems more serious, which I discuss below.

23 Reuters 2021. 'Turkey asks Egyptian opposition to tone down criticism: TV channel owner'. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-egypt-idUSKBN2BB228.

24 The Economist 2021. 'The Muslim Brotherhood is tearing itself apart'. https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/12/09/the-muslim-brotherhood-is-tearing-itself-apart.

25 Trends Research and Advisory, Organizational Structure of the Muslim Brotherhood Characteristics, objectives, and future: 170.

26 al-Anani, K. 2021. *Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: Old Problems and New Divisions, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: Old Problems and New Divisions*, Arab Center Washington DC.

27 For further reference, it is useful to read this publication between Sayida Ounissi, a Ennahda member of the Tunisian parliament, and Monkia Marks, leading expert on Ennahda: Monica Marks and Sayida Ounissi, Ennahda from within: Islamists or "Muslim Democrats"? A conversation. *Brookings*.

28 Masbah, M. 2021. *How Morocco's Islamist party fell from grace*, Chatham House: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/how-moroccos-islamist-party-fell-grace.
López García,B., and Kirhlani, S., 2021. *The Moroccan elections of 2021: a new political architecture for a new development model*. Real Institute Elcano.

29 Morocco underwent a change in the electoral law in the period of the analysis, so the percentage are not comparabile

30 Brésillon, T. 2021. Ennahda or the Cost of Recognition, *Arab Reform Initiative*: https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/ennahda-or-the-cost-of-recognition/.

31 Tunisia Republic 2011. *Elections Guide* https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/1608/.

32 Tunisia Republic 2019. *Elections Guide* https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3175/.

33 Ardovini, L. 2022. *Surviving Repression. The Muslim Brotherhood after the 2013 coup.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

34 Rugh, B. 'Syria. The Hama massacre'. *Middle East Policy Network*. https://mepc.org/commentary/syria-hama-massacre.

On democracy and Islam, power and compromise

When the Arab uprisings of 2011 temporarily lifted the blanket of repression across a number of states in the Arab world, it transpired that the Muslim Brotherhood was far from a monolithic organisation. Deep differences in attitude and strategy on how an Islamist agenda should be carried from society into the realm of governance immediately came to the fore. While these differences had existed in various shapes and guises during its entire existence, the Muslim Brotherhood had not really had to confront them since it was marginalised anyway. However, they acquired far greater prominence in 2011 when space opened for the Muslim Brotherhood and MSI parties to acquire a share of ruling power. While internal differences in policy views are normal for any political party, their sudden exposure nevertheless proved problematic in a context that demanded clear alternatives to authoritarianism and in which vast power and responsibility were suddenly bestowed on several MSI parties in the wake of elections.

Such internal differences centring on the core questions of which (or all) Islamic values should take centre-stage in governance, and how much democracy could be tolerated within their parameters, were further magnified by the question of how much MSI parties should be prepared to compromise with remnants of the 'deep state'. On the one hand, the Arab upspring offered several MSI parties a unique opportunity to enter government, especially in Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. On the other hand, running the government required compromises with political and non-political actors such as military forces and secular parties. In a nutshell, this was the twin internal and external dilemma that the Supreme Guide and head of the Egyptian branch of the organisation, Mohammed Badie, faced. One respondent points to the generational and ideological differences that crystallised over this dilemma.[35]

Another respondent stresses that older Muslim Brotherhood members favoured cooperation with the (formerly) ruling elites, while younger Muslim Brotherhood activists advocated clear breaks and the forming of alliances with those challenging existing power structures.[36] In fact, some such activists even advocated for MSI parties to seek power all by themselves in an apparent break with their own ideology. Such calls definitively unbalanced the precarious tension in MSI ideology between maintaining 'universal' Islamic religious premises and tolerating governance variation that inevitably results from multiparty elections.

Despite fierce debates within its ranks, the transnational leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood did not manage to develop a unified position on its principles and practices for dealing with non-Islamist parties or existing ruling elites. Internally, this had the counterproductive effect of making the movement too moderate for its hardliners and too extremist for its moderates, thus satisfying none.[37] Externally, it caused lingering doubts about the true 'democratic potential' of the Muslim Brotherhood. It never truly became clear whether it might settle for promoting Islamic values within a democratic system or whether it wished only for electoral competition within a more theocratic order.

On balance, different Muslim Brotherhood affiliate parties were more inclined towards pragmatism and accommodation than rigidly sticking to their principles or going it alone. However inclusive this may sound, it did the political parties linked to the movement little good (consider the above-mentioned examples of the PJD and Ennahda). In brief, the absence of a clear transnational strategy explaining its choices prevented the Muslim Brotherhood from capitalising on popular support for change to the fullest possible extent and limited its relevance as a regional network that could have more

35 Interview with Elmenshawi, M., Research Associate, Lancaster University.

36 Interview with Ardovini, L., 2022, Lecturer in International Relations, Lancaster University.

37 El Sherif, A. 2014, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the future of political Islam in Egypt*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

powerfully accelerated the Arab uprisings.[38] An interesting side effect of Turkish/Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood was that the internal ideological divide between hardliners and moderates acquired a geopolitical dimension. Some individuals and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties advocated for cooperation with national authorities (e.g. in Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria), while others called for siding with Turkey and Qatar to confront hostile rulers more aggressively. This further reduced the Muslim Brotherhood's relevance as a regional organisation.

Today, the Muslim Brotherhood as a transnational religious organisation is severely damaged – rightly or wrongly – by its poor governance track record in those countries where MSI parties managed to obtain power (Egypt and Tunisia), while it has not managed an exit from the twilight zone of doubt between pragmatic compromise and principled steadfastness. One factor that makes the current crisis run more deeply than those of the past is the erosion of the historically sophisticated organisation and highly hierarchical structure of the Muslim Brotherhood that gave it resilience in the face of repression. Another factor is the increasingly repressive regional political environment supported by the power of the Saudi and Emirate states.[39] For instance, the magnitude of arrests of Brotherhood leaders in Egypt – which long represented the organisation's centre of gravity – has taken an appreciable toll. The task of reorganising the movement's political base and activity has proved to be much harder to undertake in exile, especially as the Muslim Brotherhood remains internally split. The vicious cycle that emerges is that organisational weakness causes MSI parties to maintain their distance from the Muslim Brotherhood and that, in doing so, they deprive it of ideas, experience, access and instruments, which increases its weakness. All of this reduces the movement's appeal in the eyes of citizens who want to see tangible changes.[40]

Future supply vs. demand of MSI parties

In recent years, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties achieved their greatest electoral successes when they could credibly present themselves as an anti-elite movement. When elected, they had to compromise with both other political parties and key centres of power (e.g. monarchy, army and state bureaucracy). Not being able to convince its constituency of the rationale for doing so resulted in many voters quickly perceiving Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated MSI parties as members of the *ancient régime*. Apart from this relational problem with their constituencies, MSI parties also faced a governance performance problem. Muslim Brotherhood-linked parties rose on the back of promises of better governance by fighting immorality, corruption, and nepotism. But when they acquired power, ran into problems and did not deliver what was expected of them, their voters rapidly shifted to other parties.[41]

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's present crisis, conservative religious-inspired Islamic values have always resonated among large sections of Arab populations and are likely to continue to do so,[42] as one interviewee pointed out.[43] Moreover, problems that increased the appeal of Muslim Brotherhood

38 Interview with Elmenshawi, M. 2022. Research Associate, Lancaster University.

39 Zollner B. 2019. *Surviving Repression: How Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Has Carried On.* Carnegie Middle East Center. https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552.

40 Lynch, M. 2022. 'The Future of Islamism through the Lens of the Past'. *Religions. 13(2): 113.*

41 Wegner, E and Cavatorta, F. 2021. 'Revisiting the Islamist–Secular divide: Parties and voters in the Arab world'.

42 Despite analysis such as: The Economist, 2019. 'Arabs are losing faith in religious parties and leaders': https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/12/05/arabs-are-losing-faith-in-religious-parties-and-leaders.

43 Interview with a confidential source; see also: Lynch, M. 2022. 'The Future of Islamism through the Lens of the Past'. *Religions. 13(2): 113.*

ideology due to the organisation's presumed superior ability to resolve them have not disappeared. Economic opportunities across the region remain limited and highly informal, political authoritarianism is rampant, and dissatisfaction with government performance runs deep.[44] One could say that there is a crisis in the supply of – rather than in demand for – MSI parties. New Islamist parties might emerge beyond the familiar shadows of the Muslim Brotherhood that do not have to make amends for their past cooperation with existing rulers or foreign powers. These new parties can present themselves as an uncompromised anti-systemic force once more, and with renewed vigour.

Concluding reflections

The period 2011-2021 proved to be a turbulent decade of mobilisation and protest against authoritarianism, indignity and deteriorating standards of living across the Middle East. In the pursuit of change and renewal, mobilisation took on various socio-religious forms. On the religious side of the spectrum one can consider jihadism (Islamic State), political Salafism, the axis of resistance (Iran-linked), and the Muslim Brotherhood (MSI).

At one extreme, jihadism advocated for the creation of an authoritarian and theocratic Islamic state. It marked both democratic practices and unbelievers as contrary to Islam.[45] Islamic State pursued a radically different ordering of the Muslim world (to begin with) through a blend of publicised violence and Salafi-derived religious dogma. It was neither trans- nor sub-state but rather supranational in aspiration. Discredited by its brutality and territorially defeated in the streets of Raqqa and Mosul, it no longer serves as an open rallying call for uncompromising religion-based political renewal, even though its remnants linger.

Socially and politically active strands of Salafism (as opposed to quietist Salafis)[46] also mobilised to provide an alternative to the Muslim Brotherhood. The most successful examples were the formation of the al-Nour party in Egypt and the spread of Salafi Makdalism[47] as a socio-political force in Libya. However, political Salafism remains a limited phenomenon with modest popular recognition and constituencies. Moreover, these groups struggle to maintain their independence because they rely heavily on Saudi Arabia and the Emirates for legitimacy and support. Such support links also mean they cannot counter authoritarian governments backed by Riyadh or Abu Dhabi, such as al-Sisi in Egypt. It follows that they are only partially able to voice popular sentiment across the Arab region.

While it may seem an odd-one-out in a brief on Sunni MSI, the Islamic Republic of Iran also needs consideration from the perspective of post-2011 ideational mobilisation against ruling elites across the Middle East. While subject to significant popular discontent of its own, Tehran also substantially strengthened and extended its 'axis of resistance' across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen over the past decade.[48] This network shares and spreads Iran's theocratic model of rule in a way that is adapted to local circumstances. Even though the expansion of the axis of resistance was not a direct response to the extended Arab uprisings – in cases it actually repressed protests (e.g. Baghdad in 2019/2020) – Iran nevertheless offers an alternative governance

44 Lynch, M. 2022. Ibid.

45 Jihadism differentiates from political Islam because it views pluralism and democracy as innovations (Bida'a) and as false idols (Taghout) that smear the purity of Islam.

46 Cf. Wiktorovicz, C. 'Anatomy of the Salafi Movement, 2019'. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29: 207–239.

47 Makhdalism is a strand of the movement based on the teaching of Rabee al-Madkhal. It is particularly active in Libya and supports general Haftar (and secular governments in general). See: Salah Ali, A., 2017. 'Haftar and Salafism: A Dangerous Game', *Atlantic Council*: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/haftar-and-salafism-a-dangerous-game/.

48 Azizi, H. 2021. '*The Concept of 'Forward Defence': How Has the Syrian Crisis Shaped the Evolution of Iran's Military Strategy?*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP); Steinberg, G. 2021. *Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

model as a functional example of 'stable autocracy' or 'limited democracy' based on religious principle. In their basic outlook on governance and religion, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran's Supreme Leader may not in the end differ that much. Yet, Iran's model has limited attraction beyond impoverished Shi'a populations in the Levant and its foundation of theocratic rule has not found any takers elsewhere since the Islamic revolution of 1979.

Finally, the transnational movement of the Muslim Brotherhood has lost much of its lustre and promise as a kind of (Sunni) Islamic third way by failing to run an efficient form of 'limited Islamic democracy' in the span of the few years given to it. While this is not necessarily a fault of its own making due to the constraints within which it had to operate – consider decades of authoritarianism, mistrust and a lack of governing experience – it has nevertheless been co-opted (e.g. Morocco), marginalised (e.g. Tunisia) or repressed (e.g. Egypt) by ruling elites. It was first discredited and then side-lined.

Instead, state-supported and even state-directed models of religion enjoy renewed popularity, not in the least because of their proven ability to promote loyalty to existing rulers. Rulers use religion to maintain and consolidate power. Support for official religious institutions, for example the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, serves in part to nudge clerics to adjust their religious interpretations to suit the ruling elite, discourage activism, or even to justify controversial government decisions. High officials participating in official religious ceremonies – especially of minorities – may seek to boost their standing among such communities. Consider, for example, al-Sisi's first-ever attendance of the annual Coptic Christmas mass in 2015[49]. Yet, such state-supported religious institutions are unlikely to act as siren calls for political renewal beyond the boundaries set by their political sponsors, which are generally happy to sacrifice the social liberties of their constituents on the altar of religious dogma.

From a policy perspective, the preceding analysis allows for three short and tentative conclusions:

- It is no longer useful to use the Muslim Brotherhood as an organisational or ideological lens for understanding the universe of MSI parties. Where such parties still exist or may thrive, they should be assessed on their own merits and not on former, perceived or imagined affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood.

- The downward trajectory of the Muslim Brotherhood since 2013 is best understood by a mix of two factors. First, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their 'client states' mobilised against the movement across the region based on principle, while Turkish and Qatari support was more pragmatic and ultimately proved to be less sustainable. Second, the rapid changes in domestic context in places like Tunisia, Libya, Jordan and Morocco necessitated Muslim Brotherhood-linked MSI parties to distance themselves from the movement in order to remain able to compete locally in the political realm.

- Finally, the Muslim Brotherhood's current crisis is in some regards illustrative of a broader crisis of religion as a source of inspiration for political renewal in the Middle East. This broader crisis includes the defeat and partial delegitimation of the extreme interpretations of Salafism after Islamic State, as well as the struggle of Iran's theocratic model to deliver on matters of good governance and socio-economic priorities. While these three religious strands stand far apart in their principles and teachings, they share a loss of relevance over the past few years in terms of their perceived popular (in)ability to deliver on the original demands of the Arab uprisings for 'bread, freedom and social justice'.

49 Al-Arabiya News 2015. 'Sisi makes surprise Coptic Christmas visit': https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/01/07/Sisi-becomes-Egypt-s-first-president-to-attend-Coptic-Christmas.

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