



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

The Muslim Brotherhood and the West

July 19, 2021

Table of Contents

1. "Introduction: The Muslim Brotherhood and the West," by Ryan Evans
2. "The Foundations of the West's Misunderstanding of the Muslim Brotherhood" by Courtney Freer
3. "In the Shadow of Egypt," by Stephen Tankel
4. "The Ambivalence of U.S. Policy Toward Political Islam," by Peter Mandaville

1. Introduction: The Muslim Brotherhood and the West — The Antagonism that Defines a Movement

Ryan Evans

It's impossible to discuss the influence of political Islam without discussing the Muslim Brotherhood. As Martyn Frampton makes clear in his 2018 comprehensive history of the organization, it's similarly impossible to discuss the Muslim Brotherhood without discussing its engagement with the West. Western powers — principally the United States and Great Britain — have seen the Brotherhood throughout its history through the lens of their own defining struggles: first, through the strife of anti-colonialism and the struggle to maintain empire; second, through the ideological lens of the Cold War; third, after the Cold War, through the lens of political Islam; and, most recently, in the context of struggles for democratization in the Middle East, coupled with the fight against a new wave of political Islam, embodied by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Throughout the decades, the Brotherhood has adapted to find its place in these global struggles.

But, if the new wave of radical political Islam is defined by groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, why should scholars and policymakers still care about the Muslim Brotherhood? And why should we care about a lengthy and ambitious book about the West's engagement with the Egyptian Brotherhood? Simply put, the story of the West and the Muslim Brotherhood is the perfect sub-plot to understand the tragedy of 20th and 21st century Western involvement in the Middle East — especially the recurrent failure of liberalization through various forms of engagement. More immediately, as the Biden administration takes the helm and reconsiders America's relationship with the two governments most implacably opposed to the Brotherhood, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the world might witness a different approach to Islamism at the ballot box. But whichever approach is adopted, it will not be new, as Frampton's history, which takes this story up to 2010, reveals.

It wasn't that long ago that the Muslim Brotherhood terrified Western policymakers. These days, it's easy to forget about the Muslim Brotherhood, even for someone who studies the Middle East. Across most of the Arab world, this Sunni political movement is suffering the consequences of major defeat. This defeat is best understood both symbolically and actually through the overthrow of Egyptian President and Brotherhood leader Mohammed

Book Review Roundtable: The Muslim Brotherhood and the West

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-the-west/>

Morsi in 2013. But the movement has also faced disasters in Syria and Jordan, as well as in Saudi Arabia, once the movement's greatest benefactor and now perhaps its most determined enemy. The movement that once threatened to swallow the Arab Middle East whole was tamed by autocracy and civil war. In the one Arab country that has since seen enduring Islamist governance — Tunisia — Islamism took a decidedly non-theological turn. The support of Qatar and Turkey notwithstanding, Sunni Islamist dreams for power have turned into nightmares.

But, it would be a mistake to discount the influence or resilience of the Brotherhood. Frampton, who began his academic career as a scholar of conflict and extremism in Northern Ireland, knows a thing or two about the importance and characteristics of generational movements. Generational movements draw inspiration from an idealized, constructed vision of the past. Thus, in addition to understanding the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the West as a case study in the frustrated beliefs of Western policymakers, it is worth understanding the history of this relationship because it is unlikely that the Muslim Brotherhood is a spent force that is consigned to the history books. Indeed, as Frampton's encyclopedic account makes clear, the most enduring characteristic of the Brotherhood may be its adaptability and resilience.

Frampton's work is not a history of the Muslim Brotherhood, nor a biography of its leaders. It is instead a history of a relationship. Like the story of a romantic affair, the vicissitudes of the relationship reveal aspects of those involved that they may not fully understand themselves. Frampton makes extensive use of documents available through the American and British National Archives, as well as Egyptian sources (though his access to Egyptian government archives was denied by the Egyptian government). The resulting image that he paints tells us much about what each side saw in the other, sought to gain from the other, and desired from the other.

Why focus on the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the West, rather than focusing on the institution in its own right? As Frampton argues in his introduction, the West has always been a critical reference point for the Brotherhood. The West has been a necessary foil for the organization, even as the Brotherhood has always seemed to offer some promise of "moderation" or "reform" — a promise that enticed Western diplomats with the hope that the "extremism" of the Brotherhood could be altered to better suit Western goals and aspirations

This review roundtable brings together outstanding scholars and practitioners on Islamism: Courtney Freer, Peter Mandaville, and Stephen Tankel. As Freer notes, Frampton's book shines in placing the Egyptian Brotherhood in its historical and local context, identifying enduring dilemmas in Western policies toward Middle East states and political Islam, the ways in which the movement balances pragmatism with ideology, and the extent to which the movement operates and coheres on the transnational level. Freer is a formidable scholar on the topic in her own right, and I recommend her book, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies*.¹ In a conversation I had with Frampton on his book for the *War on the Rocks* podcast, he explained his view of the relationship between ideology and pragmatism, noting that "you can have a movement that is intensely ideological, committed to achieving certain ideological goals, and yet follows a mode of politics that is deeply flexible and pragmatic and able to frame itself according to a local context, according to the audience to which it is engaging."²

In 2011, as a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, Mandaville played a role during the early months of the Arab uprisings in figuring out whether and how the United States should engage with Islamist groups. He has therefore struggled with Western policy choices toward the Brotherhood not just as a scholar but as a practitioner.³ These experiences and his reading of Frampton's book lead him to argue that "Washington's approach to the Brotherhood (and to political Islam more broadly) has been governed chiefly by political and geopolitical exigency rather than by assumptions about the exceptional nature of Islamism."

Tankel, too, approaches the Brotherhood as both a policymaker and a scholar.⁴ Having worked for the Defense Department and, more recently, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, he is no stranger to the dilemmas posed by engaging Islamists. In reading

¹ Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies*.

² Martyn Frampton and Ryan Evans, "WOTR Podcast, The Muslim Brotherhood's Convolved Relationship with the West," *War on the Rocks*, June 14, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/wotr-podcast-the-muslim-brotherhoods-convoluted-relationship-with-the-west/>.

³ See Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam* (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁴ Stephen Tankel, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

Frampton's book, he argues that Western policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood ought to be understood in the context of more pressing policy imperatives, "most notably Communism during the Cold War and jihadism since 9/11." He also argues that one cannot separate the U.S. approach to the Brotherhood and America's policies toward the Egyptian state.

As the the new U.S. administration struggles with defining policy choices in the Middle East, it would be well advised to consult Frampton's work. In part, it is a valuable history that illuminates previous mis-steps and missed opportunities. In part, it is yet another cautionary tale about seeking out and supporting seemingly pragmatic partners in the service of a perceived broader struggle — partners who may have goals that are ultimately incompatible with those of the United States. And in part, it is a valuable insight into a movement whose influence in the region is far from spent.

Frampton's important history is both deep and broad. If members of the Biden administration's Policy Planning Staff looking at the Middle East don't already have copies of it sitting on their shelves, they should.

Ryan Evans is the publisher of the Texas National Security Review and CEO of War on the Rocks.



2. The Foundations of the West's Misunderstanding of the Muslim Brotherhood

Courtney Freer

Whenever I speak about the Muslim Brotherhood in the United States, I struggle to find an analogous organization in Western domestic politics. The Muslim Brotherhood has, for that reason, become a mysterious “other” to many Western observers and policymakers. There now appears to be a rift emerging even within the Middle East regarding the position of the Brotherhood and allegations that it is, at its core, a violent extremist organization.⁵ When it comes to Western governments, the Muslim Brotherhood has been positioned as an “other” and essentially as a threat to modernization, given its positions in favor of traditional social policies and particularly its view on what it sees as Western encroachment. The policy of “othering” the Brotherhood has long been in place in the United States and United Kingdom and more recently in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Martyn Frampton’s *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West* offers some crucial insight to this fundamental lack of understanding about the Muslim Brotherhood in the West and, increasingly, in the Middle East.

Frampton, in his impressive historical survey of the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the United Kingdom and United States, draws four main conclusions that can inform further study of this topic and that reveal the foundations of the misunderstandings in the West about the Muslim Brotherhood.

Viewing the Brotherhood as “Other”

The first is that Western officials have, since the inception of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s, considered the group

not only as a direct security threat but also as a challenge to their own self-understanding. They could not countenance the idea that the Brotherhood was trying

⁵ Eric Trager, “The Muslim Brotherhood Is The Root of the Qatar Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/muslim-brotherhood-qatar/532380/>.

to postulate an alternative Islamic *modernity* shorn of its Western *accoutrements*. To their minds, ‘the West’ and ‘modernity’ were one and the same, an elision usually encapsulated in the rhetoric of ‘civilization.’⁶

Indeed, it is this view of the Muslim Brotherhood’s essential “otherness” that has made it difficult for Western governments to understand the organization’s function and has led to incorrect assumptions about the degree of hostility that groups like the Brotherhood maintain toward the West.

When it comes to the organization’s position toward the West, Frampton makes clear that the Muslim Brotherhood was fundamentally a product of the time and place in which it was founded, and that the West, or at least the group’s founder, Egyptian schoolteacher Hassan al Banna’s conception of the West, was critical to the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al Banna, who was deeply affected by the fall of the Ottoman caliphate, feared consequent Western encroachment as a fundamental threat to Egyptian — and Muslim — society. But, just as the West’s conception of the Brotherhood is outdated, perhaps so too is the Brotherhood’s conception of the West. Undoubtedly, the influence of the United Kingdom in Egypt, and particularly in Ismailia where the Brotherhood was founded, set the stage for the organization’s emergence, with a large focus on the juxtaposition between the United Kingdom’s secularizing influence and Egypt’s identity as a Muslim country, as perceived by al Banna. In Frampton’s words, “What al-Banna and his movement wished to contest was not modernity per se, but a modernity constructed on a ‘foreign’ basis in which Muslims seemed to be consigned to subordinate status.”⁷ Al Banna, in creating a specifically Egyptian organizational vehicle for Islamists, also created an active vehicle for the expression of Islamist ideas, as this group was “the first to find a ‘practical’ application of what hitherto had been only a scholarly tradition” stemming from reformists like Jamal al Din al Afghani, Rashid Rida, and Muhammad Abduh.⁸ By the mid-1930s, the Brotherhood had become a national organization, largely due to its activism with regard to Palestine,⁹ which also made

⁶ Martyn Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 453-54.

⁷ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 54.

⁸ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 23.

⁹ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 46.

it a threat to British political interests, spurring the Brotherhood's first confrontations with the West.¹⁰

The regional political consequences of the West's misunderstanding of the Muslim Brotherhood's relationship with modernity have become clearest in recent years. Indeed, studies like the "Political Islam Enquiry" in the United Kingdom and debates in Washington about designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization highlight the extent to which there exists a fundamental misunderstanding in the West of the role that the Muslim Brotherhood aims to play in local politics in Egypt.¹¹ Furthermore, rhetoric from, for instance, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman about promoting "moderate Islam"¹² seems to presuppose that Islam is, on its own, immoderate and therefore dangerous, feeding into Western fears about the nature of Islam itself and about the role played by Islamist groups by extension.

Prioritizing Stability

The second important conclusion that Frampton makes is that the United States in particular has prioritized its relationships with what it considers to be stable states and reliable allies in the region rather than with movements, in order to safeguard broader strategic interests.¹³ America is more occupied with external concerns, rather than concerns about, or sometimes even knowledge of, the domestic politics of a given country — and that is what has driven studies into the potential violent or extremist leanings of the various branches of the Muslim

¹⁰ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 52.

¹¹ "Political Islam Inquiry," Foreign Affairs Select Committee, House of Commons, December 2015, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/foreign-affairs-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/political-islam-15-16/>.

¹² James M. Dorsey, "Crown Prince Mohammed's Vow to Moderate Saudi Islam: Easier Said than Done," *Huffington Post*, Oct. 28, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crown-prince-mohammeds-vow-to-moderate-saudi-islam_b_59f44316e4b05foade1b5781; "UAE Promotes 'Moderate Islam' in the Region," *The Economist*, April 30, 2015, <http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=993124683&Country=Egypt&topic=Politics&subtopic=Forecast&subsubtopic=Political+stability&u=1&pid=1431758927&oid=1431758927> .

¹³ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 459.

Brotherhood.¹⁴ The American and British approach to the region does not appear to have changed drastically since the 1950s. Indeed, it was with the emergence of Sayyid Qutb and the evolution of the Muslim Brotherhood toward a paramilitary organization seeking to overthrow Gamal Abdel Nasser¹⁵ that Americans began to consider Nasser as the least bad option: “[F]or all the problems Nasser caused, there were few better alternatives to him. For one thing, they continued to distrust the capacity of any opposition force — Brotherhood or otherwise — to overthrow the regime.”¹⁶ It was also during this period, however, that the United States began cultivating stronger relations with Saudi Arabia and Jordan since the governments of these two countries seemed more aligned with the anti-socialist stance of the U.S. government.

Arguably, this prioritization of external strategic interests remains in place today. The Trump administration continued to support what it considered to be reliable allies, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, while demonizing the Muslim Brotherhood as well as, to a certain extent, isolating governments that are more tolerant of the organization.¹⁷ Furthermore, as Frampton points out, the Muslim Brotherhood does not have nearly the domestic presence in the United States that it enjoys through proxy or related organizations in the United Kingdom, and therefore U.S. policies regarding the Brotherhood are made solely with regard to foreign policy concerns, rather than any understanding of or concern about the domestic consequences of their foreign policies within the Middle East. This myopia may account for a Western tendency to support governments considered stable, regardless of their position on the Brotherhood.¹⁸ The Biden administration has an

¹⁴ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 466.

¹⁵ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 298.

¹⁶ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 303.

¹⁷ The Trump administration’s policies toward Qatar and Turkey have been explained by many analysts as a part of Trump’s alliance with the Saudi and Emirati leadership. See, for instance, Dexter Filkins, “A Saudi Prince’s Quest to Remake the Middle East,” *New Yorker*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/09/a-saudi-princes-quest-to-remake-the-middle-east>; Courtney Freer, “Regional Implications of a US Muslim Brotherhood Ban,” *AlSharq Forum*, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2018/09/05/regional-implications-of-a-us-muslim-brotherhood-ban/>.

¹⁸ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 428.

opportunity to reverse this inaccurate view of the Brotherhood and seems to be willing to question its allies, namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia, about their human rights records, which could be an important start to viewing the region through a normative rather than transactional lens.

The dynamic of prioritizing the regional power balance over the role played by Islamists within domestic political environments is related to the West's tendency to take a fatalist attitude when it comes to the Muslim Brotherhood (and, in my opinion, other Islamist groups as well). This leads countries like the United Kingdom and United States to privilege relationships with supposedly stable governments or reliable secular allies rather than religiously based movements. It was this historical policy of prioritizing "stable" regional partners that also placed the Obama administration in a difficult position during the Arab Spring. The administration had no choice but to engage with organizations that had previously been viewed as part of the opposition rather than parties that could become part of governments with which it would have to communicate. Under the Trump administration, it appeared that U.S. foreign policy had become even more reliant on allied states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to maintain America's interests abroad (and arguably to maintain the president and his administration's personal ties with these governments), at the expense of the Muslim Brotherhood and other independent movements, which, after the Arab Spring, had come to be seen as threats to political stability in the region. For instance, President Donald Trump's public support for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi's calls for designating the Brotherhood a terrorist organization was a means of reassuring an ally of America's support.

Pragmatism

Third, despite misunderstandings about the organization in the West, the Brotherhood has long exhibited, in its relations with the West, at least some degree of pragmatism over ideological concerns.¹⁹ While this pragmatism may not extend to issues regarding Palestine — much to the chagrin of U.S. leaders — the Brotherhood's general willingness to market itself as a moderate, nonviolent political organization to gain the trust of Western

¹⁹ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 464.

governments is indicative of its priorities: It hopes to make a political impact and is practical in its pursuit of this aim. Frampton makes this dynamic clear in his discussion of the Muslim Brotherhood's evolution and efforts to engage with the West.

Despite this fundamental pragmatism, Frampton matter-of-factly traces the Muslim Brotherhood's history with violence. Although al Banna himself publicly decried acts of violence, Frampton clarifies that, during the late 1940s, the Brotherhood conducted attacks on Jewish properties in Egypt while al Banna was in Saudi Arabia to perform *hajj*.²⁰ During the early 1950s, when tensions were building toward the Suez Crisis, the Muslim Brotherhood, which considered this conflict “‘their’ struggle,” expanded its use of violence.²¹ Despite having a moderate, Hassan al Hudaybi, at the head of the organization, Frampton cites evidence that 1,000 members of the Brotherhood received weapons training during these years.²² As a result, the Brotherhood was of major concern to the British, increasingly becoming associated in the West with violence and extremism.²³ As Nasser's crackdown on the Brotherhood accelerated, internal rifts within the organization became clearer: Al Hudaybi, who pledged his support for the Nasser government, held limited control over the organization, fueling Western fears about a potential turn to violence.²⁴ Indeed, some segments of the Brotherhood, particularly those inspired by Qutb, also attracted followers, causing the West to worry about the potential for political violence. Perhaps as a result, Western officials privileged their relationship with the Nasser government.²⁵

Although a brief *détente* occurred under the Sadat government, the Mubarak regime, which was initially tolerant of the Brotherhood, eventually accused the organization of being illegal and tied to terrorism. It also feared that the U.S. government was in contact with these “terrorists.” The Muslim Brotherhood, seeking to distance itself from the militants within its

²⁰ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 138–39.

²¹ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 170.

²² Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 171.

²³ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 190.

²⁴ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 205.

²⁵ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 254.

ranks, publicly renounced the use of violence in the 1970s and condemned violent attacks.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, America's main concern remained its alliance with the Mubarak regime.²⁷

With the Brotherhood trying to convert itself into an effective political actor and convince the West of its nonviolent nature, however, a debate emerged in Western policy circles about whether the Muslim Brotherhood was a moderate organization, a discussion that highlighted its links to violence in the past. Frampton points out here that the definition of moderate is important, yet rarely specified. He explains, "When people like al-Qaradawi or Mustafa Mashhur denied the brotherhood as 'moderate,' they were saying something quite specific: namely, that it held to a comprehensive vision of Islam without 'exaggeration and embellishment' and without 'neglect and concession.'"²⁸ For Western observers, however, moderation implies liberalness. This is an important distinction and one that has led to disagreement about the organization's nature, as well as to claims that the Brotherhood can support democracy but still not necessarily be a liberal organization.

The Brotherhood's violent past is often discussed in sensationalist terms in order to further policy aims, such as designating the group as a terrorist organization.²⁹ Yet, Frampton manages to engage with both the violent and nonviolent eras of the Muslim Brotherhood's history and discusses the consequences of these two eras for the group's relationship with the United Kingdom and America. It should be noted, as Frampton clarifies, that the violent portion of the Muslim Brotherhood's history remains in the past — a change for which Western foreign policy has often failed to account.

The Muslim Brotherhood as a Transnational Group

The fourth important conclusion that Frampton draws has to do with the rather contentious issue of the unity of the Muslim Brotherhood as a transnational group. He highlights how the

²⁶ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 391–92.

²⁷ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 396.

²⁸ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 445.

²⁹ See, for instance, Cynthia Farahat, "The Muslim Brotherhood, Fountain of Islamist Political Violence," *Middle East Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2017), <https://www.meforum.org/6562/the-muslim-brotherhood-fountain-of-islamist>.

organization initially attracted domestic and eventually international appeal due to its solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Impressively, he explains that “Already during the Second World War, the Brotherhood had developed its international focus and one could see the evolution of a definable ‘foreign policy.’”³⁰ Under Nasser, an increasing number of local branches emerged throughout the region.³¹ By the early 2000s, however, the organization’s transnational basis had become seriously fractured. In Frampton’s words:

The influence of the Brotherhood’s putative ‘International Organization’ appears to have declined further during the 1990s, before being abandoned altogether in the aftermath of 9/11, when increased US attention to ‘terrorism financing’ rendered its operations ever more difficult and it was split by fresh divisions over how to respond to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.³²

When the international Muslim Brotherhood is discussed, then, it is unclear what is meant by the term, since the transnational structure is largely nonexistent in the present day. Indeed, it is this fundamental lack of unity that makes policies like the proposed Muslim Brotherhood ban in the United States nonsensical and yet another example of the profound misunderstandings that exist about the organization and its nature.³³

By tracing the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the United Kingdom and the United States, Frampton provides valuable insights into the calculus of both the Brotherhood and Western governments and reveals the fundamental lack of understanding that has undermined the formation of a stable relationship between the Brotherhood and the West. Understanding how this relationship has been mismanaged in the past is an important means of avoiding these pitfalls in the future. Furthermore, simply because there is no

³⁰ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 128.

³¹ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 264.

³² Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 411.

³³ Steve Holland and Arshad Mohammed, “Trump Weighs Labeling Muslim Brotherhood a Terrorist Group,” *Reuters*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-muslimbrotherhood/trump-weighs-labeling-muslim-brotherhood-a-terrorist-group-idUSKCN1S6159>.

analogous organization in the West does not mean that suspicion and mistrust are the appropriate policy responses.

*Courtney Freer is a research fellow at the London School of Economics Middle East Centre. Her book *Rentier Islamism: The Role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies*, published in 2018 by Oxford University Press, traces the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.*



3. In the Shadow of Egypt

Stephen Tankel

In summer 2013, Egypt convulsed with violence. President Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was elected in the first free and fair election in Egypt's history, had been in office for roughly a year. Protest movements, some of which were reportedly backed by the military, had returned to the streets in spring 2013.³⁴ On July 3, after deadly clashes between the president's supporters and opponents amid another round of mass demonstrations, the military toppled the government and detained Morsi. Although an interim president was appointed, Gen. Abdel Fatah al Sisi, Egypt's defense minister, held power.

Brotherhood members and supporters staged major protests around the country. Egypt's security forces responded with lethal force, killing hundreds in the weeks and months that followed. 800 Morsi supporters and members of the Muslim Brotherhood were reportedly

³⁴ See for example, David Kirkpatrick, "Recordings Suggest Emirates and Egyptian Military Pushed Ousting of Morsi," *New York Times*, March 1, 2015.

killed in a single day in August.³⁵ The military banned the Brotherhood, arrested most of its top leaders, along with hundreds of others, and sent more into hiding. Egypt was already facing a genuine jihadist insurgency in the Sinai when al Sisi took power. Egyptian military officials and state media organs tried to portray the Brotherhood as a terrorist group in bed with al Qaeda, despite the significant differences between them. Indeed, al Qaeda and other jihadist groups routinely denounced the Muslim Brotherhood for its renunciation of violence and willingness to contest elections.³⁶ The severity of the crackdown suggested that Egypt's generals believed that they could finally rid the country of their *bête noire*, or at least that they preferred to deal with the Brotherhood as a security problem and not as a political actor.

There were vigorous debates inside the U.S. government over how to respond. The United States provides approximately \$1.3 billion annually to Egypt. American officials had to consider whether to try to use this assistance as leverage to promote political reform. The U.S. government attempted to walk a fine line, aiming to hold Egypt accountable without damaging the relationship. Washington temporarily suspended some military aid, but subsequently reinstated it. This approach was informed by the traditional value that some U.S. policymakers placed on the bilateral relationship with Egypt and reinforced by more immediate security concerns in the region. The regional security climate in the Middle East was defined by civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya; anxieties about strains in the relationship with Saudi Arabia; and the rise of the Islamic State. When push came to shove, Washington opted to maintain the status quo in the U.S.-Egyptian relationship rather than attempt to use security assistance as a cudgel to change the al Sisi regime's calculus.

It is unclear whether and how the U.S. relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as Washington's perception of the group, influenced its decision-making. Martyn Frampton

³⁵ *All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt*, Human Rights Watch, Aug. 12, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>.

³⁶ See for example, Ayman al-Zawahiri, *The Bitter Harvest: The Muslim Brotherhood in Sixty Years*, (N.P.: 1991-1992?).

does not take on this issue directly in his history of the Muslim Brotherhood's fraught relationship with the West. The book ends before the Arab Spring began. Nevertheless, it provides important context for understanding Washington's approach to Egypt in the aftermath of the revolutions that roiled the Arab world. Frampton's work is not for the faint of heart. Clocking in at almost 500 pages (not counting endnotes), the book is a deeply granular account that demands a close read. Those willing to commit the time and energy will be rewarded with a thought-provoking account of how the British and Americans on one side, and the Brotherhood on the other, perceived and engaged one another. For me, as a scholar and practitioner focused on U.S. security policy, two observations stand out. First, Western officials have often assessed the Brotherhood in the context of other challenges, most notably communism during the Cold War and jihadism since 9/11. Second, U.S. attitudes toward the Brotherhood have never been bipartite. Rather, they have always been shaped by a tripartite relationship between the Brotherhood, the Egyptian regime, and the West.

The Brotherhood in Context

The United States was more worried about the secular pan-Arab nationalism that Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser promoted than it was about political Islam in the 1950s and 60s. Specifically, American officials worried that Nasser would act as a "stalking horse" to communism. As Frampton deftly demonstrates, the Muslim Brotherhood consciously sought to present itself to America as a counterweight to communism. American assessments of the organization at the time often included references to its potential value in this regard. Yet, although the United States partnered with Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia to counterbalance "godless communism," it never attempted to instrumentalize the Brotherhood directly for this purpose.

The U.S. reluctance to back the Brotherhood directly was partly a result of Washington's perception of the organization as too extreme, and partly a function of the belief held by key U.S. policymakers that Islam was no match for the inevitable advance of modernity. The latter view was incredibly blinkered, but that did not make it any less influential in terms of informing American policy. The critical point, though, is not that the United States discounted the viability of the Brotherhood as a counterweight to communism globally or

to Nasser specifically. Rather, it is that the American view of the group was heavily shaped in relation to these other challenges. In this regard, as Frampton notes repeatedly, the Brotherhood's hardline position regarding Israel acted as a check against the United States pursuing stronger relations with the group. Just as the possibility of positive relations with the Brotherhood was a function of its usefulness against other actors, so too were the limits of this potential usefulness because of its positions on other issues.

U.S. perceptions of the Brotherhood evolved during the 1980s. On the one hand, the Iranian revolution and subsequent hostage crisis contributed to growing fears among American officials about political Islam.³⁷ On the other hand, as Frampton recounts, Egypt's alignment with the United States and its peace treaty with Israel changed the national and regional contexts in which the Brotherhood operated. The organization had renounced violence by this time and emphasized its pragmatic approach both domestically and internationally. American assessments of the Brotherhood took note of these characteristics and U.S. contacts with the group increased during the 1980s. The United States cut off these contacts a decade later at the behest of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. However, American officials continued to debate whether to take an accommodationist approach to political Islamist groups like the Brotherhood as it became increasingly clear that they were a growing force in mainstream politics across the region.

Once again, debates over how to approach the Brotherhood were sharpened by other threats, in this case the threat from jihadists. The 9/11 attacks heightened opposition to Islamists specifically in some corners of the U.S. policy community. Yet, as Frampton illustrates, the emerging consensus among national security policymakers and practitioners was that Islamist organizations like the Brotherhood, which had renounced violence and embraced the political process, could serve as an important check against groups like al Qaeda. Encouraging a transition from autocracy to democracy in Arab states such as Egypt was a major component of the Bush administration's effort to address the underlying drivers of jihadism and isolate its adherents. However, as enamored as the United States was with promoting democracy in the early years after 9/11, it was only

³⁷ Fawaz A. Gerges, *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 42.

prepared to push this so far, in part out of concern about the policies that Islamists would put in place if elected, and in part in deference to existing regimes, an arguably more important limitation.

A Tripartite Relationship

Frampton paints the portrait of a tripartite relationship between the Egyptian government, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the United States (or the United Kingdom, whose relationship with the Brotherhood he also explores). Critically, he argues that these three legs of the stool on which the relationship rests are not equal. Egypt's rulers "set the rules of the game" when it came to relations between the Brotherhood and the United States, which he notes has preferred to work with the "grain of state power." During the Cold War, for example, the United States worked with so-called friendly dictators despite the fact that these regimes did not share America's political values. At the time, the United States did not attempt to engineer the internal transformation of their countries.³⁸ After 9/11, however, America began pressing some of its partners to undertake political reforms that would effectively change the way in which these countries were governed in order to address potential risk factors for terrorism. Although American officials increased their emphasis on internal political reforms, they never prioritized these reforms when dealing with Egypt or partner nations run by authoritarian-backed regimes.

President George W. Bush made democratization a key component of his counterterrorism strategy. He proclaimed it was necessary to "shake off decades of failed policy in the Middle East" and to cease tolerating "oppression for the sake of stability."³⁹ Bush singled out Egypt as the place where a peaceful democratic transformation of the Middle East should begin. While encouraging other countries to take the first steps toward democracy, he asserted in

³⁸ Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 249.

³⁹ George W. Bush, "Speech at Whitehall Palace," *Fox News*, Nov. 19, 2003, <https://www.foxnews.com/story/raw-data-bushs-speech-at-whitehall-palace>.

a 2003 speech that “The great and proud nation of Egypt has shown the way toward peace in the Middle East, and now should show the way toward democracy in the Middle East.”⁴⁰

For a brief moment in 2005, when Egypt held multiparty presidential elections for the first time, it appeared that U.S. entreaties had found traction. In reality, the nominating process was so onerous that the outcome of the election was guaranteed well in advance. Just to be safe, the security services attacked opposition supporters, engaged in vote-rigging, and arrested the opposing presidential candidate.⁴¹ In spite of similar attempts at repression during the multiphase parliamentary elections held later that year, Muslim Brotherhood members who ran as independents won 88 out of the 112 opposition seats. Mubarak’s party maintained a majority, but the Brotherhood’s gains sparked a strong response. The regime retreated from promises of political reform, tightened its grip on power, and increased its repression of domestic opponents.⁴² Some analysts believe that, in addition to his domestic political compulsions, Mubarak’s harsh response was meant to send a message to the United States that he would not be pressured into political reforms that could empower the Muslim Brotherhood to threaten his hold on power specifically or the military in general.⁴³

The Muslim Brotherhood’s victory at the polls following the Arab uprisings almost a decade later was not celebrated in Washington, where concerns persisted about Islamists coming to power. In keeping with the longstanding practice of working with the regime in power, the Obama administration nevertheless honored the outcome of the elections and sought to work with the Morsi-led government. This proved more difficult in some areas than others.

⁴⁰ George W. Bush, “Speech at the Twentieth Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy,” Nov. 6, 2003, <https://www.ned.org/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary/>.

⁴¹ Jeremy Sharp, *Egypt: 2005 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2005).

⁴² The state also constitutionalized aspects of the Emergency Law, a step that Amnesty International called the “greatest erosion of human rights” in Egypt since the law was introduced. See, “Egypt: Proposed Constitutional Amendments Greatest Erosion of Human Rights in 26 Years,” Amnesty International, March 18, 2007.

⁴³ Jeremy Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2007).

U.S.-Egyptian counterterrorism cooperation suffered, in part because Morsi and his advisers did not view the jihadists already waging an insurgency in the Sinai as a long-term threat. The Morsi government believed that by establishing a genuinely Islamic government they could remove the *casus belli* motivating al Qaeda and other jihadists interested in targeting Egypt.⁴⁴ The Morsi government was also slow to protect the U.S. embassy when thousands of Egyptians protested outside of it on Sept. 11, 2012. Some demonstrators in Egypt scaled the embassy's walls, a security breach that reportedly led President Barack Obama to question whether Egypt could still be considered a reliable partner.⁴⁵ The tide finally began to turn after some jihadists began targeting Morsi directly.⁴⁶ Then he was overthrown. In June 2014, after taking off his military uniform, Abdel Fatah al Sisi, the de facto leader of Egypt since the coup, was elected president with 96.91 percent of the vote.

In explaining the U.S. decision to release security assistance, which, as mentioned earlier, the United States temporarily suspended after Morsi was ousted, Obama said, "Our approach to Egypt reflects a larger point: The United States will at times work with governments that do not meet, at least in our view, the highest international expectations, but who work with us on our core interests."⁴⁷ This approach was very much in keeping with the longstanding practice of going with the grain of state power.

Egyptian government influence over the U.S. relationship with the Brotherhood increased

⁴⁴ Stephen Tanel, *With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 280.

⁴⁵ The demonstrations coincided with protests in other Muslim-majority countries and the murders of the U.S. ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans in Benghazi, Libya. Christopher M. Blanchard, *Recent Protests in Muslim Countries: Background and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, September 20, 2012); and Helene Cooper and Mark Landler, "Egypt May Be Bigger Concern than Libya for White House," *New York Times*, Sept. 13, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/14/world/middleeast/egypt-not-libya-may-be-bigger-challenge-for-white-house.html>.

⁴⁶ Tanel, *With Us and Against Us*, 280.

⁴⁷ "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly," The White House, Sept. 24, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

during the Trump administration. This was partly a function of President Donald Trump himself. In sharp contrast to his predecessors, Trump had no interest in promoting good governance and rule of law abroad. He also appears to have made little distinction between violent jihadists like al Qaeda and non-violent Islamists. Indeed, his administration explored designating the Brotherhood a foreign terrorist organization on two occasions: not long after taking office in 2017, and then in 2019 at the urging of al Sisi as well as the Saudi and Emirati governments.⁴⁸ Neither of these efforts ever came to fruition, but they nevertheless highlighted the degree to which the Egyptian government's influence over the U.S. relationship with the Brotherhood grew during the Trump administration.

Conclusion

Frampton is to be commended for his comprehensive account of this relationship between the United States and the Muslim Brotherhood, and of the wider one between the Brotherhood and the West. At least as far as the United States is concerned, however, this relationship likely will remain captive to the bilateral relationship with whatever government is in power in Egypt.

Although U.S. efforts to promote political reforms in Egypt over the years would have benefited the Brotherhood had they succeeded, these efforts were not a function of America's relationship with the Brotherhood. The United States sought to promote such reforms — often in spite of the fact that the organization might benefit — because it believed they could serve wider U.S. interests. Moreover, just as the Brotherhood was not the main factor behind intermittent U.S. efforts to promote political reform in Egypt, the U.S. relationship with the organization was also rarely the key factor in explaining why these efforts failed. At the risk of stating the obvious: Internal governance was an existential issue for Egypt's leaders, whereas the stakes were lower for the United States.

⁴⁸ Eric Schmitt, et al., "On Muslim Brotherhood, Trump Weighs Siding with Autocrats and Roiling Middle East," *New York Times*, May 7, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/world/middleeast/muslim-brotherhood-trump.html>.

Stephen Tankel is an associate professor at American University, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, and an associate editor at Texas National Security Review. He has served on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy. Tankel is the author most recently of [With Us and Against Us: How America's Partners Help and Hinder the War on Terror](#).



4. The Ambivalence of U.S. Policy Toward Political Islam

Peter Mandaville

As a U.S. State Department policy planner, I was charged in 2011 with devising a new approach to Washington's engagement with Islamists operating in the political mainstream after the Arab Spring. I expected my task to involve an arduous and possibly fruitless effort to reshape and nuance decades of entrenched animosity toward such groups. After all, the conventional wisdom on the issue suggested that American diplomacy could not countenance treating Islamists as "normal" political actors. As I quickly learned, however, a policy orientation I assumed was based on ideological aversion and deeply internalized skepticism toward politicized religion revealed itself to be far more pragmatic. The U.S. approach to political Islam, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, while certainly marked by periods of distinct enmity, seemed thoroughly amenable to *realpolitik*. When it served U.S. interests to work with Islamists or to promote political Islam, Washington seemed perfectly capable of doing so.

Martyn Frampton's *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West: A History of Enmity and Engagement* is the most comprehensive and detailed account to date of British and U.S. policy toward the world's most influential modern Islamist movement. It moreover provides the historical context necessary for understanding the evolution of Washington's

Book Review Roundtable: The Muslim Brotherhood and the West

<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-the-west/>

complex relationship with political Islam. Through exhaustive archival work, Frampton has produced a fascinating record of the diverse and sometimes contradictory thinking in London and Washington about how to approach the Muslim Brotherhood amid the geopolitical exigencies associated with World War II, the Cold War, and the post-9/11 period. The fact that the book's chronology ends in 2010, on the eve of the dramatic Arab uprisings and revolutions of 2011, almost begs for reflection on how U.S. policy toward the Brotherhood has evolved in the years following those momentous events.

Drawing both on my academic study of the Muslim Brotherhood over the past quarter century, as well as my experience in U.S. government service during and after the Arab Spring, I use Frampton's historical account to argue that Washington's approach to the Brotherhood (and to political Islam more broadly) has been governed chiefly by political and geopolitical exigency rather than by assumptions about the exceptional nature of Islamism.

A History of (Mostly) Skepticism

According to Frampton's account, Washington's approach to the Muslim Brotherhood has taken shape across three distinct — and often competing — levels of analysis: the Egyptian domestic realm, the regional context of the Middle East, and global Cold War geopolitics. The Brotherhood first became a factor in America's calculations in Egypt in the late 1940s during the decline of the country's monarchy. Later, the group emerged as a possible alternative to Gamal Abdel Nasser once he became unhelpful to the advancement of U.S. interests in the region. Indeed, the U.S. government first took serious notice of the Brotherhood when, toward the end of World War II, the group bombarded the U.S. Legation in Cairo with a large-scale letter-writing campaign and thereby signaled a capacity for organized action rare among Egyptian political groups at the time — a fact that did not escape the attention of the Office of Strategic Services (the precursor to the CIA), suggesting that Washington was starting to view the Brotherhood as a significant player.

The focus of this advocacy campaign — opposition to British activities in Palestine — points to the second dimension of U.S. policy toward the Brotherhood: the regional context of the broader Middle East, and the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular. Frampton shows

how time and time again U.S. prevarications regarding the Brotherhood's utility in advancing other aspects of American policy ran headlong into a persistent concern that the group's staunch opposition to the Zionist movement and, later, to the state of Israel signaled an inherent anti-Western disposition.

This perception of a fundamentally anti-U.S. orientation on the part of the movement is, in turn, at odds with the third and perhaps most fascinating aspect of the U.S.-Muslim Brotherhood relationship during the second half of the 20th century: U.S. analyses of the group — as well as in the movement's own public relations vis-à-vis America — suggested that perhaps the Brotherhood could serve as a counterbalance to global communism. Frampton recounts CIA operative Miles Copeland's search for a "Moslem Billy Graham," who could wield Islam as a tool capable of thwarting the spread of godless socialism in the Third World.⁴⁹ Copeland, it seems, wondered (if only momentarily) whether the Brotherhood might be a good candidate to take on this role.

However, U.S. dealings with the group never quite managed to transcend rumination, supposition, and, ultimately, suspicion. Already by the 1940s, we see in U.S. reporting on the Brotherhood shades of what many observers would later term the "double discourse" of the Brotherhood — that is, a tendency to emphasize moderation and even potential partnership in discussions with Western interlocutors while simultaneously adopting hardline positions when speaking to other audiences. While Frampton makes clear that U.S. diplomats were aware of tensions between more moderate and conservative factions within the Brotherhood as early as the 1950s, Washington essentially looked the other way when Nasser cracked down heavily on the group starting in the mid-1950s. The Free Officers' movement struck American diplomats as a better long-term bet at that point, not least of all, Frampton argues, because a distinct bias toward secularism and modernization theory had many Western analysts — not to mention social scientists — convinced that religion was a dying force around the world.

⁴⁹ Martyn Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West: A History of Enmity and Engagement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 199.

After two decades — between approximately 1955 and 1975 — of highly limited engagement due largely to the Egyptian government’s proscription of the movement, routine U.S. diplomatic contact with the Muslim Brotherhood resumed once Anwar Sadat rehabilitated the group in the mid-1970s. The 1970s and ‘80s, Frampton demonstrates, witness something of a shift in the tenor of many U.S. assessments of the Brotherhood. With Egypt firmly aligned with the United States and the Camp David agreements in place, America’s concerns about the group in terms of Egypt’s domestic politics and the Middle East more broadly became less pronounced. Diplomatic and intelligence analyses of the Brotherhood at this time began to emphasize the movement’s gradualist (as opposed to revolutionary) and accommodationist tendencies — the latter on full display in 1986, when, according to Frampton, Brotherhood functionaries were seemingly reluctant to meet with U.S. diplomats without clear permission from Hosni Mubarak’s government. Nonetheless, despite this relative entente and even a few intriguing episodes of near cooperation — such as a back-channel request to the Brotherhood from the Carter administration for assistance in mediating the Iranian hostage crisis — levels of trust never reached a point that permitted meaningful cooperation between the United States and the Islamist organization.

By the 1990s, the U.S. government had, once again, broken off communications with the Muslim Brotherhood at the request of Mubarak’s government, a policy that continued until the mid-2000s when independents aligned with the Brotherhood won seats in Egypt’s parliament, thus making it possible to meet with American officials in their capacity as elected lawmakers. Throughout this period of non-contact, however, debate raged in Washington about the merits of engaging with Islamists. On one side, figures such as Daniel Pipes and Martin Kramer, and organizations like the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the conservative Heritage Foundation, and the neoconservative Hudson Institute, argued that, by its very nature, Islamism tended toward radicalism and violence and that claims by the Brotherhood and groups like it that it supports moderation and democracy were merely tactical.⁵⁰ On the other side of the debate were academics such as John Esposito and myself, who argued for more nuance in differentiating between different

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Daniel Pipes *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (Piscataway NJ: Transaction 1983); also the general editorial thrust of the Hudson Institute journal *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*.

strains of political Islam. The conventional wisdom of the U.S. diplomatic establishment seemed to be lining up with the latter position throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. Intriguingly and somewhat counterintuitively, Frampton argues that even former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Edward Djerejian — someone usually portrayed as being skeptical toward Islamism due to his famous 1992 warning that when such groups support democracy it is a case of “one man, one vote, one time” — was ultimately a pragmatist who recognized that Islam did not pose an ideological or existential threat to the United States.⁵¹

Debate about whether U.S. national security policy should countenance nonviolent Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood variety gathered renewed steam in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The more alarmist voices argued that liberal academic perspectives had blinded the American national security establishment to the dangers inherent in any form of Islamism. It is nonetheless possible to detect, as Frampton argues, a gradual shift toward the normalization of mainstream Islamism in the assessment of U.S. intelligence and national security professionals as we move into the mid-2000s. Not only were such groups successfully participating in electoral politics across much of the Middle East and other Muslim-majority countries, some observers also argued that moderate Islamists could help to pull potential recruits away from radical and militant groups such as al-Qaeda and its various offshoots.⁵²

The Forcing Events

By and large, this was the state of the debate about U.S. engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood just before a tide of popular protests swept through the Middle East in 2010 and 2011, toppling governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, and causing significant unrest and even civil war in other places like Syria and Bahrain. Islamists competing at the

⁵¹ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 383–85.

⁵² See, Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, “The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2007-03-01/moderate-muslim-brotherhood>; Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, “The Unraveling: The jihadist revolt against bin Laden,” *New Republic*, June 10, 2008, <https://newrepublic.com/article/64819/the-unraveling>.

ballot box proved to be the early winners of this upheaval, with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and Tunisia's Ennahdha claiming big wins in 2011 and 2012. While it is fair to say that the rapid shift in U.S. policy toward a willingness to work with the Brotherhood and groups like it was primarily a function of new political realities on the ground that forced the United States to do business with Islamists — rather than the outcome of a deliberate and considered policy shift — there is a broader policy context worth considering.

In 2010, the White House undertook an analytical exercise in the form of a Presidential Study Directive.⁵³ Its aim was to assess constraints to reform in the Middle East and likely implications of America placing greater emphasis on the importance of democracy in the region. One part of this analysis focused on the question of whether and how Islamists could be part of a political reform process. Separately, the U.S. State Department had already begun to systematically take stock of its engagement with Islamist groups around the world with a view to formulating a new policy that could recognize the growing relevance of mainstream Islamist parties and movements.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, Washington was still largely caught flat-footed by the dramatic events of early 2011. It did not take long for the question of U.S. engagement with Islamists to come up in the policy debate about how to respond to the Arab Spring. Rather than putting in place a new policy on Islamist engagement and initiating contact with the Brotherhood, however, the State Department opted for a broader approach. Senior career diplomats, while open to engagement with Islamists, warned that a sudden flurry of U.S. outreach to the Brotherhood could be interpreted to mean that Washington had already decided that the Islamists were the most relevant political actors even before elections had taken place in Egypt and Tunisia.

⁵³ Mark Landler, "Secret Report Ordered by Obama Identified Potential Uprisings," *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/world/middleeast/17diplomacy.html>.

⁵⁴ Steven Brooke, "U.S. Policy and the Muslim Brotherhood" in, *The West and the Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Spring*, ed. Lorenzo Vidino (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2013).

The State Department's Policy Planning Staff developed guidance for U.S. diplomatic posts that would cover engagement with *all* groups in the newly emerging political landscape of the Middle East.⁵⁵ Thus, although the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic groups such as the emerging Salafi parties were certainly prominent in the minds of State Department officials, there was recognition that American diplomats in a country such as Egypt also needed to develop relationships with social democrats, leftist parties, and workers' movements, among others. In essence, the new guidelines indicated that U.S. diplomats should engage with all groups that expressed a commitment to democracy, rejected violence, and respected the full citizenship rights of all groups in society, including women and minorities. This final caveat — including women and minorities — is the one element of the new guidance that most clearly reflected ongoing concerns about Islamists: that the Muslim Brotherhood's conception of, for example, gender equality may not be fully consistent with the standards of international human rights. Moreover, while some in U.S. national security circles continued to harbor concerns that a Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Egypt might stop cooperating with the Camp David agreements, reassurances on this issue were mainly sought (and, it seems, largely received) in private, especially through military and intelligence channels.

Even with this new policy in place, U.S. outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood, as has been documented in David Kirkpatrick's 2018 book *Into the Hands of the Soldiers*, was slow and cautious throughout most of 2011.⁵⁶ It was only after the Brotherhood's stunning political success at the end of that year that Washington began to engage in earnest. It soon found itself dealing with the Brotherhood as an incumbent and democratically elected executive (and legislative) authority — a far cry from the cautious and rather timid opposition group Washington had known from previous encounters. Mohammed Morsi's brief and disastrous tenure as Egypt's president embodied the insurmountable challenges faced by the Brotherhood in trying to convert itself from a sloganeering opposition force to a responsible governing entity capable of bringing together diverse groups in Egyptian society and tackling the country's deep socioeconomic problems. The group's insular and

⁵⁵ Peter Mandaville, "Islamism and U.S. Foreign Policy" in, *Rethinking Political Islam*, ed. Shadi Hamid & William McCants (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁵⁶ David Kirkpatrick, *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

non-transparent nature meant that it was not quick to embrace or trust other groups, sometimes with good cause. Many remnants of the previous regime still lurking within the judiciary and various security agencies sought to undermine the new president at every opportunity.

The United States urged Morsi and his advisers to pull back from the damaging course they were on in late 2012 into 2013. However, Washington ultimately demurred in the face of the military coup that deposed the Brotherhood. Similar to the U.S. calculus at the time of Nasser's crackdown in the 1950s and '60s, the American national security establishment decided at the time of the 2013 coup that the stability it assumed would accrue from a regime aligned with the Egyptian military was more conducive to U.S. strategic interests — particularly at a time when conflicts were raging in Syria and Libya, soon to be further complicated by the rise of the Islamic State and the war in Yemen. Washington was also increasingly aware of growing limitations on its ability to shape outcomes in Egypt caused by the rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. In such circumstances, wholly legitimate concerns expressed by human rights groups about the intense violence deployed by the Egyptian security services against the Brotherhood in August 2013 and the ensuing draconian closure of all civic space in Egypt fell largely on deaf (or at least heavily distracted) ears in Washington.

From Obama's Cautious Engagement to Trumpian Enmity

Since 2013, engagement with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has essentially been absent from Washington's agenda. The group is largely unreachable, with most of its leadership jailed or living in exile in cities such as Istanbul, Doha, London, and Kuala Lumpur. In addition, meetings between U.S. officials and Brotherhood figures have seemed to hold little diplomatic value and tended to generate strong protests from the Egyptian government. With support from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, both of which sought to erase Islamism from Arab society after the revolutions of 2011, Egypt declared the Muslim Brotherhood to be a terrorist organization and sought to frame its actions against the movement as part of its commitment to global counter-terrorism and "countering violent extremism" — a policy paradigm developed and promoted in London and Washington.

With the election of Donald Trump, the U.S. approach to the Muslim Brotherhood completed a pendulum swing. Trump signaled early on that he would take a hard line against the Brotherhood, a position long advocated by a number of his advisers and supported by segments of his political base. They saw a broad conspiracy to Islamize American society in what they often call the “Global Muslim Brotherhood.”⁵⁷

The Trump administration looked into designating the Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization twice: first, in 2017, at the urging of domestic opponents of Islamism, and then again in 2019 following pressure from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi.⁵⁸ Both attempts foundered for three reasons. First, the foreign terrorist organization process requires that a specific and narrowly defined entity be the focus of the designation. The administration was never clear about whom or what it wanted to target: just the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood? Or all parties or movements inspired by Muslim Brotherhood ideology? Frampton’s treatment of the movement’s early internationalization efforts shows why the Trumpian idea that the Brotherhood has grown into something like an Islamist “comintern” does not stand up to scrutiny.⁵⁹ Second, there needed to be a credible case that the group in question had engaged in terrorism. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood renounced violence in the 1970s and has consistently held to that position. Individuals and groups connected to the Brotherhood that *have* engaged in terrorism, such as Hamas and its financiers, have already been designated as foreign

⁵⁷ See, Erick Stakelbeck, *The Brotherhood: America’s Next Great Enemy* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2013); and also various postings on the website, “Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Watch,” www.globalmbwatch.com. For an analysis of the “Global Muslim Brotherhood” discourse, see, Farid Hafez, “The Global Muslim Brotherhood Conspiracy Theory,” *The Bridge Initiative*, Sept 19, 2017 at <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/the-global-muslim-brotherhood-conspiracy-theory/>.

⁵⁸ Eric Schmitt, Helene Cooper, Edward Wong, and Charlie Savage, “On Muslim Brotherhood, Trump Weighs Siding with Autocrats and Roiling Middle East,” *New York Times*, May 7, 2019, p. A8, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/world/middleeast/muslim-brotherhood-trump.html>.

⁵⁹ Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West*, 125–34. The term “comintern” refers to the Communist International, a transnational organization that operated from 1919 to 1943 to advocate for world communism.

terrorist organizations, or subject to other sanctions. Third, the Muslim Brotherhood ideology is so pervasive across the Muslim world and, to varying degrees, touches so many mainstream organizations and governments that a broad-brush effort to proscribe the movement would make it very difficult for U.S. diplomats to do their jobs.

With the toppling of the Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013, significant losses at the ballot box by Tunisian Islamist party Ennahdha the following year, and the ongoing campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood across the Middle East led by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, it has been tempting for U.S. policymakers to view Islamism as down for the count. This is a mistake. Islamist groups continue to play an important role in the governments and parliaments of countries such as Morocco, Jordan, and Kuwait. Social movements inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood still enjoy significant, if not overwhelming, support in societies across the Arab world. As Islamist leaders like Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi of Tunisia's Ennahdha — which once again became the largest party in parliament after the 2019 election — seek to define a new synthesis of religion and democracy, as branches of the Brotherhood in settings such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria look positioned to reassert themselves in various post-conflict scenarios, and with the 2019 events in Algeria and Sudan demonstrating that the business of the Arab Spring is still very much unfinished, it seems clear that the question of how U.S. foreign policy should contend with the Muslim Brotherhood and groups like it will come around again.

While President Joe Biden's foreign policy team may in principle be more open to engaging with the Brotherhood — indeed, many of them worked on the Arab Spring for President Barack Obama — they will be reluctant to strain even further their already fraught relations with trenchantly anti-Islamist allies like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. At the present juncture, there is also very little diplomatic utility to be gained by reaching out to the Brotherhood. But the political landscape of the Middle East remains in flux, and the lessons of history recounted in Frampton's *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West* suggest that American policymakers will continue to struggle over how to engage with this vast and complex movement whose disposition vis-à-vis U.S. interests and equities remains ambivalent.

***Peter Mandaville** is professor of international affairs in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He served as a member of the U.S. Department of State's Policy Planning Staff from 2011 to 2012.*

