



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

**THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND WASHINGTON:
COURTSHIP AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

By Samuel Tadros

Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

Samuel Tadros is a Research Fellow at the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom.

Contrary to early hopes, and instead of giving rise to new, more liberal and democratic forces in Egypt, the Egyptian revolution strengthened and solidified the position of older currents, at the forefront of which is the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Freed from the restraining effect of state repression and benefiting from a more open political sphere, the Muslim Brotherhood has managed to dominate Egypt's new political landscape. With 47 percent of the seats in the lower chamber of parliament, 58 percent in the upper chamber, domination of the constitution writing assembly, and its most recent decision to field a presidential candidate, the movement has emerged as the key player in the formation of the new Egypt, making it all but impossible to ignore.

The Muslim Brotherhood's electoral success has however not come without its costs. Not only is the Brotherhood now required to come up with solutions to Egypt's endemic problems and collapsing economy, but the movement's ascendancy has also placed it squarely in the spotlight, with its every move being scrutinized by a press dominated by unsympathetic non-Islamists. Most importantly, the same elections that brought it to prominence have also given rise to Salafis, who are promising to be the greatest challenge the Brotherhood has ever faced.

Even before the MB's electoral success, the new dynamics of Egyptian politics forced the United States to reconsider its policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood. While in the past, various U.S. officials had met with representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood during Mubarak's last years, starting in 2006; those interactions were limited to meetings with parliamentarians from the movement in their capacity as elected officials. The U.S. had maintained a policy of no contact with the group's leadership. Similarly, given its new position, the Muslim Brotherhood had to decide how it would deal with contacts with the United States and how it would explain such meetings to both its rank and file and to the general Egyptian public.

On the 30th of June 2011, Secretary of State Clinton announced a change in U.S. policy. And while the news came as no surprise to close observers of U.S.-Egyptian relations, Egyptian newspapers provided considerable coverage of the announcement, scrutinizing the reasons behind Washington's decision, the Muslim Brotherhood's response, and other reactions.

The Muslim Brotherhood attempted to find a balance between conflicting interests. First it needed to welcome Washington's decision by sending reassuring public signals on its moderate stances on various issues. This policy was not only driven by an understanding of the importance of U.S.-Egyptian relations, but also by the Brotherhood's long-held fear of its enemies in the form of Washington, the ruling military council, and Egypt's non-Islamists. Simultaneously, the Brotherhood needed to reassure its base of its commitment to its hard-line stances on issues such as Israel. Furthermore, the Brotherhood needed to make sure that it would not be outflanked by its Islamist competitors—the Salafis—or by other anti-American groups such as Arab Nationalists or Leftists. The MB needed to make sure that its internal Egyptian critics could not attack it for being weak in front of Washington. This balancing act resulted in mixed signals and statements that often contradicted one other.

The Muslim Brotherhood's first step was to reassure the general public, in what would turn out later to be a false statement, that the movement preferred the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) to act as its representative in the dialogue with Americans,

denying any intent to include members of the Guidance Council.¹ Mahmoud Ghozlan carried an assurance from top MB leadership that the U.S. would not set the agenda of the dialogue and that they would insist on a balanced U.S. policy towards Israel, which they considered to be a threat to the region and the reason for its lack of stability.² An unnamed MB leader also stressed that the dialogue would begin after the reversal of U.S. hegemony and occupation of several Arab countries.³ The cautious approach and mixed messages sent out was best presented by the two stories dealing with the U.S. that month on the Brotherhood's Arabic website. The first⁴ attempted to separate the American position towards the revolution from the Zionist one and thus portray it in a relatively positive light, while the second article,⁵ copying a Washington Post story, accused the U.S. of funding political groups—read liberals—in Egypt.

The Brotherhood's initial caution was warranted. As soon as the U.S. decision to initiate a dialogue with the MB was announced, critical columns began to appear. Three days after the announcement, Al Shorouk's correspondent in Washington penned an op-ed in which he asked the MB what its interests were in establishing direct relations with Washington.⁶ The article was quite critical of what the author viewed as a separate move by the Muslim Brotherhood, raising the notion that the Brotherhood's interests were different from those of Egypt.

The first official U.S. contact with the FJP came in October, when Prem Kumar, director of Israeli and Palestinian Affairs for the U.S. National Security Council, met with Saad El Katatny, who at the time served as the FJP's Secretary General. El Masry Al Youm carried Katatny's assurances to his guest that the FJP believed the new constitution should represent a consensus from everyone and not just the majority, while simultaneously stressing non-interference by the U.S. in MB internal affairs.⁷

It was not until December, however, that the media's interest was sparked. The frequency and high profile nature of the visits—namely, John Kerry, William Burns, Anne Patterson and Michael Posner—and the fact that they coincided with the Islamists' sweeping electoral success increased both the media's coverage and criticism. The Brotherhood's own coverage of the meetings sought to maintain the dual messaging. Reassuring statements on the constitution were presented next to statements critical of America.⁸ Mahmoud Ghozlan went as far as to say that the Brotherhood's position had always been against U.S. administrations and their policies, not the American people, and called on the Administration to stop taking Israel's side.⁹ One day before Kerry's visit, the Brotherhood had reassured¹⁰ its followers that it had not made any commitments regarding the Peace Treaty, which contrasted with Kerry's statements after the meeting that confirmed such commitments.¹¹ The Brotherhood also tried to reaffirm its hard line image in the eyes of Egyptians to allay any fears that its contacts with the Americans were allowing the U.S. to interfere in Egyptian affairs. As such, the MB made a special point to highlight the fact that it raised the issue of Muslim discrimination in the U.S. during its meetings.¹² It also provided the media with quotes made by U.S. officials in order to show that it had not given in to U.S. demands. U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson was quoted as acknowledging U.S. mistakes in the past.¹³ The Brotherhood's ability to control the narrative was, however, limited.

¹ "Brotherhood Leader: Party Will Hold Dialogue with America," *Al Masry Al Youm*, July 2, 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/473682>

² Ibid.

³ "Katatny: We Welcome American Outreach to the Brotherhood but We Reject Intervention," *Al Masry Al Youm*, June 30, 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/473149>

⁴ Abdallah El Ashaal, "Position of Zionists and United States towards the Egyptian Revolution," *Ikhwan Online*, July 2, 2011, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=87012&SecID=0>

⁵ "65 Million Dollars to Fund Political Groups in Egypt," *Ikhwan Online*, July 18, 2011, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=87923&SecID=0>

⁶ Mohamed El Menshawy, "Where is Egypt's Interest in the Brotherhood's Dialogue with Washington?" *Al Shorouk*, July 3, 2011, <http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=03072011&id=6bae696a-051d-435b-8ac8-05d89a3e43cc>

⁷ "Washington Starts its First Dialogue with the Brotherhood with a Meeting between a National Security Official and Katatny," *Al Masry Al Youm*, October 4, 2011, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/501919>

⁸ "Kerry and the American Ambassador Visit the Freedom and Justice Party," *Ikhwan Online*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=96953&SecID=460>

⁹ "Kerry's Visit to the Freedom and Justice Renews the Debate on America's Relationship with the Brotherhood," *Youm 7 Newspaper*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=552410&>

¹⁰ "Brotherhood Denies Existence of Understandings with America or Israel on Camp David," *Al Masry Al Youm*, December 9, 2011, 2012, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/540826>

¹¹ "The American Senator: Freedom and Justice Leaders are Committed to the Peace Treaty with Israel," *Al Tahrir*, December 12, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/6qzjd26>

¹² "Abdel Rahman El Bir Calls on America to Abandon Discrimination against Muslims," *Ikhwan Online*, January 24, 2012, <http://www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=99987&SecID=0>

¹³ "Brotherhood Guide Receives American Ambassador in Moqatam," *Al Wafd*, January 18, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/74ntj62>

News stories that covered those meeting in the Egyptian press were highly negative. Al Tahrir¹⁴ quoted the Egyptian ambassador in Washington as saying that such meetings were not being coordinated with the foreign ministry, implying that something was being hidden. In another story, it quoted a Nour Party official (Salafi) who reported that there were no U.S. attempts to contact the party.¹⁵ This was accompanied by another story that same day highlighting the fact that the U.S. had ignored not only the Salafis, but non-Islamist parties as well.¹⁶ Al Masry Al Youm chose to stress the secrecy of those meetings, highlighting the fact that MB members had prevented the media from entering the party's headquarters during the meeting.¹⁷ Mohamed El Menshawy, Al Shorouk's correspondent in Washington, informed the Brotherhood of the kind of questions it would be asked in Washington, and warned them not to fall into the Ghannouchi trap of speaking at pro-Israeli Think Tanks and saying what the audience wanted to hear.¹⁸

Opinion columns were even harsher in their treatment of the meetings. Emad Sayed Ahmed in Al Masry Al Youm made fun of the slogan that Brotherhood members chanted in their demonstrations in the past "Khaibar Khaibar oh Jews, the army of Mohamed will return," accusing the Brotherhood of changing its colors.¹⁹ The same sentiment was expressed by Mohamed Seif El Dawla in Al Shorouk as he accused the Brotherhood of changing its position on the Peace Treaty and warned that this was equivalent to recreating the Mubarak regime and selling out Palestine.²⁰

Naturally some opinion columns developed elaborate theories on what was taking place. Emad El Din Hussein in Al Shorouk informed his readers that Washington had learned its lesson after the Iranian revolution and was now willing to deal with Islamists as long as they protected its interests and Israel.²¹ Samy El Behiry, writing in Elaph, took the theory further, stating that the U.S. had failed to defeat terrorism and thus decided to adopt the slogan, "If you can't beat them, join them."²² Al Tahrir argued that Washington was involved in secret deal making between Egypt's ruling military council and the Brotherhood.²³ And finally, according to Samir Karam at Al Shorouk, the U.S. had agreed to replace civil states in the region with religious states.²⁴

The Brotherhood's newly acquired power has therefore not been without its problems. Its attempts to balance its contradictory goals in its relationships with the West, its followers, and the general Egyptian public have not been totally successful. While there has always been criticism in Washington on the Brotherhood's double talk, in which it so excels, the new open media environment in Egypt has led to increased scrutiny of the MB's positions both internally in Arabic and abroad in English. This has translated into providing ammunition to its internal critics.

This fear of losing ground has put the Brotherhood in some awkward positions. Nothing exemplifies this better than the FJP delegation's recent visit to Washington's to charm its policymakers and scholars. Notably, the delegation's visit received no coverage on the Brotherhood's Arabic website.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.

¹⁴ "The Egyptian Ambassador in Washington: The Brotherhood's Dialogue with the American Administration is not Coordinated by the Embassy or the Egyptian Foreign Ministry," *Al Tahrir*, December 13, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/d657lu8>

¹⁵ "The American Administration Flirting with the Brotherhood as Representatives of the Majority," *Al Tahrir*, January 13, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/78ujtuv>

¹⁶ Burns Met with Representatives of the Brotherhood and Ignored the Rest of the Parties; Civil and Religious," *Al Tahrir*, January 13, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/6pa64qd>

¹⁷ "State Department Visits the Brotherhood Party under the Protection of the Interior," *Al Masry Al Youm*, January 11, 2012, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/596796>

¹⁸ Mohamed El Menshawy, "When will Brotherhood Leaders visit Washington?" *Al Shorouk*, December 11, 2011, <http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=11122011&id=d911d0e1-039b-4b14-bf75-6e163882fa22>

¹⁹ Emad Sayed Ahmed, "Khaibar Khaibar oh Jews, the Army of Mohamed will not Return," *Al Masry Al Youm*, December 22, 2012, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/561536>

²⁰ Mohamed Seif El Dawla, "The Brotherhood in the White House," *Al Shorouk*, April 8, 2012, <http://shorouknews.com/menbar/view.aspx?cdate=08042012&id=18c15e8d-f51a-432c-ab45-4cf050c3f76a>

²¹ Emad El Din Hussein, "America from Mubarak to the Brotherhood," *Al Shorouk*, January 13, 2012,

<http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=13012012&id=04912f7a-34cb-48bc-935b-7d56e52ed603>

²² Samy El Behiry, "Why America doesn't Mind the Muslim Brotherhood ruling Egypt and the Arabs," *Elaph*, January 13, 2012, <http://www.elaph.com/Web/opinion/2012/1/708893.html>

²³ "Washington Waiting for the Brotherhood and Burns' Visit Revealed the Focus on the Brotherhood and not the Salafis," *Al Tahrir*, January 19, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/7dj5q3h>

²⁴ Samir Karam, "The Muslim Brotherhood between the Inside and the Outside," *Al Shorouk*, April 11, 2012, <http://www.shorouknews.com/columns/view.aspx?cdate=11042012&id=598c9e77-e3e6-48fe-bce2-1cd483bd8d39>