

Introduction to the Special Issue: “Assessing the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after the 2013 coup: Tracing Trajectories of Continuity and Change.”

Lucia Ardovini, Swedish Institute of International Affairs
Erika Biagini, Dublin City University

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The July 2013 *coup d'état* ended the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood (henceforth: Brotherhood) in Egypt prematurely, leaving the movement under heavy repression and leading to the scattering abroad of both its leadership and rank and file members. While this is not the first time that the Brotherhood is forcefully removed from the Egyptian political scene, there are several dimensions of this crackdown that set it apart from the organization's historical experience. First, repression has been indiscriminate, targeting the Brotherhood's leadership and its rank and file members alike.¹ It therefore affected members across the organizational and generational spectrums who were unfamiliar with such levels of regime brutality, making the current wave of repression somewhat “new” to them. Second, the crackdown took place just after the Brotherhood had governed Egypt for the first time, a test which exposed the ineptitude and lack of political vision of its leadership, thus leading many to question their commitment to the Brotherhood's political vision and project.² A third element that characterizes this wave of repression as somehow unique is the role played by the younger generations, and their response to it. Following 2013, the Brotherhood demonstrated to be unable to promote a cohesive strategy, retrenching instead on a traditional isolationist approach. This has, however, been refused by a significant cohort of young Brotherhood members, who took upon themselves the task of advancing initiatives aimed at overcoming the crisis, often refusing to subscribe to the historical leadership's orders, as well as those core principles and values over which the movement has historically rested. Lastly, the emergence of such competing responses to repression, coupled with the reality of forced exile, have considerably weakened the Brotherhood's organizational structures and gave way to internal fragmentation. All together, these factors add important new dimensions to the current repression, setting the 2013 *coup* as a watershed moment in the history of the Brotherhood. Since then, a growing number of members has been questioning the aim and viability of the Islamist project, as well

¹ Nathan Brown and Michelle Dunne, “Unprecedented Pressures, Uncharted Course for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 29, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/07/29/unprecedented-pressures-uncharted-course-for-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-pub-60875> (last accessed 6 February 2020)

² Al-Anani, Khalil “Upended Path: The Rise and Fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood” *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 4 (Autumn 2015): 527-543.

as the effectiveness of the rules and principles over which the Brotherhood historically rested.

The unfamiliar context in which the movement finds itself also calls for a renewed investigation of how the Brotherhood is responding to the challenges it faces since its fall from power. Specifically, two main questions have become urgent. The first is “How is the Brotherhood responding to the challenges presented by its fall from power, particularly in light of the current wave of repression and perceived political failure?” and, second, “What role are individual members playing in shaping the current debates and strategies at the heart of the organization’s restructuring?”. Above all, it is important to assess the extent to which the Brotherhood’s experience of governance shaped internal debates concerning the role of religion in politics, pluralism and its position on women and religious minorities,³ contributing to the evolution of the movement’s ideology and practice from 2013 onwards.⁴ Likewise, a question of central importance is how members’ experiences of personal freedom and agency during the time of political opening now challenge the Brotherhood’s ability to maintain control over the movement, and to sustain a cohesive collective identity. This was key to the ability of the group to endure past cycles of repression,⁵ but it has grown increasingly challenged since 2013. The rationale of this project rests on the recognition that although such internal debates and dynamics were already ongoing within the movement before the 2011 uprisings, the Brotherhood’s experience in government and the consequent repression profoundly affected its strategies, ideological positions and organizational structure, creating the potential for internal change. The extent of such changes, however, is yet to be examined. Despite being an illegal organization once again, the Brotherhood remains an important political actor in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region and internationally. Moreover, the repression in Egypt caused many of its members to seek refuge abroad, leading to the creation of new Brotherhood diaspora communities, the influence of which on Egypt-based members is yet to be assessed. Understanding the effect that the current state of repression has on the movement

³ Nathan Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway, “Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Grey Zones,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* and the Herberth Quandt Stiftung, no. 67 (March 2006), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp_67_grayzones_final.pdf (last accessed 6 February 2020); Mariz Tadros, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt. Democracy Redefined or Confined?* (USA and Canada: Routledge, 2012).

⁴ See for example: Jillian Schwedler and Janine Clark “Who Opened the Window? Women’s Activism in Islamist Parties” *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 4 (April 2003): 293-312; Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation. Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Mona el-Ghobashy, “The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (August 2005): 373-395; Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood. Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁵ Khalil al-Anani, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood. Religion, Identity, Politics.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

and its members is therefore crucial to grasp the evolution of political Islam both in the MENA and globally.

Over seven years since the 2013 *coup*, a rigorous analysis into how the Brotherhood is reacting to its perceived political failure and subsequent repression is still largely absent. Much of the literature addressing the post 2013 context focuses on the assessment of the Brotherhood's political behavior while in power and on the structural factors that contributed to its downfall.⁶ Conversely, only a limited number of works have focused on the repercussions that repression has had, and continues to have, on the movement and its members. These existing studies are only beginning to address Brotherhood's mobilization strategies and, to a limited extent, members' ideological re-assessments in response to the historical leadership's management of the post-2011 Egyptian transition.⁷ Therefore, a primary objective of this Special Issue is to identify the main internal and external challenges that the Brotherhood faces in the aftermath of 2013, in order to analyse the different ways in which the movement is responding to them.

This Special Issue assesses the Brotherhood's trajectories of continuity and change in the aftermath of the 2013 *coup* from the perspective of the individual members. While this approach in itself is not new, it has seldom been applied to the study of the Brotherhood. However, doing so has become necessary, as the strong and cohesive organizational structure that kept the Brotherhood movement united has grown increasingly challenged since 2013. Individual members are playing a key role in reshaping the Brotherhood and its future trajectories, and focusing on individual responses is therefore a necessary move to overcome past dominant visions of the Brotherhood as a monolithic organization. Thus, this Special Issue places the attention on how members themselves engage with identity and ideological questions, develop strategies to move forward, and on their role in driving processes of change within the movement. This last aspect is particularly relevant, as much of the literature on the Brotherhood before the uprisings had already identified leadership as a main issue of contention between the organization and its members,

⁶ Ashraf el-Sherif, "The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood Failures" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 1, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/01/egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-s-failures-pub-56046> (last accessed 6 February 2020); Marie Vannetzel, "The Party, the Gama'a and the Tanzim: the Organizational Dynamics of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's post-2011 Failure," *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 2 (February 2017): 211-226.

⁷ Khalil al-Anani "Rethinking the Repression-Dissent Nexus: Assessing Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood's Response to Repression Since the Coup of 2013" *Democratization* 26, no. 8 (June 2019): 1329-1341; Doha Samir, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Generational Gap: Politics in the Post-Revolutionary Era" *AlMuntaqa* 1, no. 2 (August 2018): 32-52; Erika Biagini "Islamist Women's Feminist Subjectivities in (R)evolution: the Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood in the Aftermath of the Arab Uprisings" *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, (December 2019), ahead of print, DOI: [10.1080/14616742.2019.1680304](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2019.1680304)

who demanded greater inclusion in setting decisions, strategies and goals.⁸ The brief period of political opening that followed Hosni Mubarak's removal increased members' opportunities to undertake independent initiatives. It also allowed them to interact with Egyptian social and political groups holding different worldviews and ideological inclinations to a greater extent, thus providing members with aspirations for greater political leadership and change. In addition, the post 2013 repression significantly weakened the Brotherhood's organizational structure and the leadership's tools of control over its members, therefore creating additional spaces for individuals to act independently and implement their own decisions. In light of the Brotherhood's perceived political failure and of the current challenges facing the organization, these members are availing of this newly found space of autonomy to rethink the old tenets over which the movement was established and ran, and to articulate new discourses, practices and values. Focusing the attention of the relationship between the movement and its members, especially taking into account the individual level, also reveals the extent to which many have begun to disengage from the organization altogether, whose structures they see as an impediment to the achievement of meaningful change.

Overall, this Special Issue identifies and analyses central themes and questions that have been driving the Brotherhood's internal debates after 2013, along the lines of ideology, strategy, organizational structure and identity. The contributions to this Special Issue address the ways in which the movement is reacting to the internal competition for leadership, the fragmentation of its organizational structure, emerging mobilization strategies, the role of women in resisting old models of activism, rules and principles, Salafi influences and processes of members' disengagement from the movement. Together, these contributions locate the roots of the Brotherhood's current evolution - or lack thereof - within an organizational crisis preceding the 2011 revolutionary period. This illustrates how demands for greater collective and individual agency intensified during the political opening that followed the removal of Hosni Mubarak, creating opportunities for change in the post 2013 era. In so doing, the Special Issue fills an important gap in the literature on the movement, tracing key aspects of the Brotherhood's continuity and change in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the 2013 repression. Further, a conclusive note provides reflection on the future of the Brotherhood as a movement, also discussing what the contributions of the Special Issue tell us about the role of Islamism both in and beyond Egypt.

⁸ Mark Lynch, "Young Brothers in Cyberspace" *Middle East Report*, no. 245 (Winter 2007): 26-33.