THE CARNEGIE PAPERS

STRUGGLING TO ADAPT

The Muslim Brotherhood in a New Syria

Aron Lund

MIDDLE EAST | MAY 2013

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FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE
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Summary

The Muslim Brotherhood was Syria's strongest opposition faction when the uprising against Bashar al-Assad erupted in March 2011, but it was entirely based in exile. Its aging, exiled leadership is now struggling to influence Syria's youthful revolt. Its efforts to exercise control are buoyed by the disorganized state of the opposition both abroad and in Syria, but the rise of militant Salafism has complicated its attempts to co-opt fighters on the ground.

Key Themes

- The Brotherhood remains the most important Syrian opposition faction in exile, but it has largely failed to root itself in the insurgency in Syria.
- The organization exerts influence inside Syria through a network of informal alliances with Islamist figures and rebel commanders, working through family connections and "independent" charitable organizations.
- Internal divisions between the so-called Hama and Aleppo branches hobble the group and contributed to a split in early 2011.
- The Brotherhood is threatened by the rise of militant Salafi groups that question its relatively moderate ideology and undercut its attempts to recruit disaffected Sunni youth.

Findings

The Syrian Brotherhood is not as strong as commonly believed. The incessant focus on the Brotherhood by the Assad regime, Western nations, and rival opposition groups has helped it build a fearsome reputation. Its actual political and organizational capability appears to be far more modest.

The failures of others have benefited the Brotherhood. The real reason for the group's success in the exile community is the extreme disorganization of the rest of the opposition. As long as rival actors cannot get their act together, the Brotherhood will win by default.

The Brotherhood tries to distance itself from extremism. Despite its theocratic ambitions and a past history of sectarian violence, the Brotherhood now promotes a moderate Islamist approach and seeks to accommodate concerns about its ideology. Since 2011, it has consistently cooperated with secular groups, spoken in favor of multiparty democracy, and worked through

mainstream opposition frameworks such as the Syrian National Council, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and the Free Syrian Army.

Several armed groups linked to the Brotherhood fight in Syria. The leadership refuses to admit to having an armed branch, but Brotherhood exiles have been funding armed groups since late 2011. The organization now controls or sponsors dozens of small paramilitary units inside Syria.

Influence From Exile

Since the start of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, no opposition group has received more attention than the Syrian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet, little is known about this secretive movement.

In the early 1980s, the Brotherhood was almost entirely purged from Syria. It remained the country's most important dissident faction throughout its thirty-year exile, but it was often preoccupied with internal conflicts along personal and regional lines. During this period, it failed to replenish its ranks with a new generation of members or reestablish itself inside Syria, and its internal conflicts have never been entirely resolved. The group's current leader, Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh, seems unable to fully control the adherents of his predecessor, Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni.

The Brotherhood has acted as a kingmaker of the exile opposition throughout the Syrian uprising. It has made its influence felt through the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was established in October 2011 in Istanbul. The SNC remained the most significant exile opposition group until November 2012, when it joined the broader National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Inside Syria, however, the group is much weaker. Its aging leadership and urban-middle-class origins have hampered attempts to connect with young activists and fighters in poor and rural areas of Syria, where the revolution is strongest. Religious conservatives in the countryside have instead drifted toward newly created Salafi militant groups, which have emerged as powerful actors in the conflict. While the Brotherhood's exiled leadership has attempted to rebuild a presence inside Syria by reconnecting with relatives and using financial support to co-opt revolutionary Islamist groups, this strategy has so far had limited success. The Brotherhood is struggling to keep pace with the shifts and lurches of the conflict on the ground and adapt to the rapid rise of Salafism in the country.

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The Muslim Brotherhood is ultimately only one faction among many in the Syrian revolutionary movement. It is a disciplined and effective political player, but it is short on manpower and muscle inside Syria. While it remains a powerful force in the diaspora community, the relevance of the Syrian exile opposition relies on the goodwill of the uprising's state backers. If alliances such as the SNC and the National Coalition are abandoned by the international

community, the Brotherhood's investment in these exile leaderships will have been for nothing.

The Brotherhood is far from the dominant force so often imagined by rebels, regime supporters, and foreign analysts alike—but given its proven political skills and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, it is almost certain to remain an actor in Syrian politics for many years to come.

The Brotherhood's Evolution

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is surrounded by rumors and speculation. Some have portrayed it as the driving force within the Syrian opposition, while others completely dismiss its significance. Ideologically, some depict the Brotherhood as full of fanatical and intolerant Islamists, while others see it as a reformist and moderate conservative group.

In fact, the Muslim Brotherhood has been all of these things at different points in its history. Since its creation in 1946, it has gone through a number of metamorphoses. It was first founded by Mustafa al-Sibai to act as a Syrian wing of the pan-Islamic Muslim Brotherhood—or Ikhwan—movement created by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in 1928. This early incarnation of the Brotherhood combined anticolonial activism with conservative parliamentary politics.

In the 1960s, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed by the ruling Baath Party and began to radicalize. Hafez al-Assad's 1970 coup d'état provoked a series of internal splits within the Brotherhood. Syria's Islamists, including the Brotherhood, increasingly turned to sectarian agitation against Assad's Alawite co-religionists and other non-Sunni Muslim minorities. In the late 1970s, the Brotherhood became embroiled in a disastrous armed uprising against the regime. After the insurgency's defeat in 1982, the Brotherhood leadership splintered even further, and surviving members escaped abroad. Repressive measures—such as Law 49, which was passed in 1980 to make membership in the Muslim Brotherhood a capital offense—prevented the group from reorganizing inside Syria.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, most of the exiled leadership factions reconciled, but the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood remained polarized between two rival wings, popularly described as the Aleppo and Hama factions.

During Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni's tenure as head of the Brotherhood from 1996 until 2010, the leadership was dominated by members from his home city, Aleppo. This Aleppo faction included the Brotherhood spokesperson, Zuhair Salem, as well as al-Bayanouni's adviser, Obeida Nahas, a prominent figure within the Ikhwani young guard.

Al-Bayanouni, supported by the Aleppo faction, moderated the group's politics and rhetoric considerably, seeking to shed the reputation for sectarian extremism and violence that it had acquired during the armed uprising of the early 1980s. This process culminated in the Brotherhood's 2004 adoption of

a political program endorsing multiparty democracy and religious tolerance. Many Syrians questioned the sincerity of this ideological shift, but al-Bayanouni also faced internal criticism from hardliners who accused him of selling out to secularism.

The Aleppines were challenged by a rival faction headed by three leading Brotherhood members from Hama: Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh, Mohammad Farouk Tayfour, and Mohammad Hatem al-Tabshi. This Hama faction was generally seen as advocating a more conservative line, focusing its criticism on al-Bayanouni's attempts to appease the regime and ingratiate himself with the secular opposition. Several leaders of the Hama bloc were former paramilitary commanders during the 1980s uprising, lending even more of a hawkish air to their opposition.

However, neither ideological nor regional affiliations were very consistent. For example, the Hama faction included many members from other cities, like Homs and Idlib.

Al-Bayanouni, having successfully moved back into the opposition mainstream, brought the Brotherhood into two non-Islamist opposition coalitions, the Damascus Declaration (formed in 2005) and the National Salvation Front (2006). But both groups split, leaving the Brotherhood isolated. In 2009, the Brotherhood decided to suspend its opposition activity, apparently expecting that President Bashar al-Assad's government would be open to a negotiated solution that would allow the group back into Syria. The Assad regime did not respond to the Brotherhood's peace gesture, embarrassing al-Bayanouni and further weakening his position. He stepped down a year later, at the end of his mandate, and his Aleppo faction was trounced in internal elections in July 2010.

The 2010 election caused a serious upheaval within the Brotherhood. Al-Bayanouni and some of his Aleppine allies pursued an independent line for much of 2011, and several younger members of the Aleppo faction broke away to found their own organization, possibly with al-Bayanouni's blessing. It was only in March 2012 that an internal power-sharing agreement was reached to bring the estranged Aleppo leaders back into the fold.

The new leadership was drawn largely from the Brotherhood's Hama wing. This Hama "takeover" within the Brotherhood appeared to signal a shift back toward more hawkish positions. However, there were no immediate changes in Brotherhood policy.

How the Brotherhood Works

In theory, the Brotherhood has a semi-democratic albeit highly centralized organization with defined institutions and elections. But, in practice, factional infighting and political repression have often distorted the proper functioning of the system. The group is highly secretive and routinely works through front

organizations and uses informal means, drawing on support from the broader Ikhwani religious community outside Syria.

The International Ikhwani Framework

Theoretically, national Ikhwani groups function as local chapters of the larger, pan-Islamic Muslim Brotherhood centered in Egypt. In practice, each group tends to act with little international oversight. The Egyptian mother organization has made repeated attempts to establish its primacy through strong international institutions, but with limited success.

In 1963, at a time when the Egyptian Brotherhood's leadership was weakened by repression at home, the group set up an Executive Office for the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab Countries. It was headed by the Syrian Brotherhood leader at that time, Issam al-Attar. However, internal conflicts split the Executive Office in 1970, in conjunction with internal splits within the Syrian Brotherhood, and the pan-Islamic coordination soon ceased to function.

The Ikhwani movement adopted a statute in 1982 (and later updated it in 1994) that created a new set of multinational institutions. These included a General Shura Council and a General Guidance Bureau, which is led by the group's supreme leader, the general guide. While it could theoretically fall to anyone, the office of the general guide has so far always been reserved for a member of the Egyptian Brotherhood. It is currently held by Mohammed Badie, who was elected by the Egyptian branch in 2010.

The national branches are required to contribute funds to these central institutions and consult with them before making major policy decisions. Theoretically, the international leadership can overturn decisions taken by the national chapters, but historically, most attempts to intervene in local affairs have ended in splits and defections. The international leadership therefore remains weak and seems to serve mostly as a discussion forum and coordinating body for national groups, whatever its constitutional prerogatives.

Membership and Funding in the Syrian Brotherhood

Before the Syrian uprising, the Muslim Brotherhood was generally considered to be the largest and best-financed Syrian opposition group.

It had an active membership of at least several thousand, although virtually all were in exile. (A member of the Brotherhood leadership, Mulham al-Droubi, claims that the number of members is in the "five-digit range," but this is impossible to confirm.[1]) The Brotherhood has a branch for female members, some of whom even serve on leadership bodies, but the overall influence of women on the organization is negligible.

The Brotherhood considers itself a vanguard organization and relies on a selectively admitted cadre rather than broad popular membership. Applicants are subjected to a lengthy admissions process in which they must first be

nominated by two members and then endorsed by their local Brotherhood chapter to graduate to trial membership. Based on their performance, the central leadership will then accept or reject them as full members.

There are three types of membership, from the lowest trial rank (*nasir*) to active membership (*amel*) to the top level (*naqib*).[2] Members are organized into close-knit cells that act on orders passed down from above.

Thousands of activists pay an annual membership fee, and donations provide further support. Members of the organization have links to many wealthy Syrian Sunni business families in the Persian Gulf and can also rely on contributions from religious charities and mosque networks, which collect money for Brotherhood-linked aid organizations and projects.

Certain governments also seem to support the Brotherhood. Turkey's ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party hosts some of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's exiled leaders and has discreetly helped it organize conferences. The Brotherhood also seems to enjoy backing from the government of Qatar, which has emerged as an important patron of the international Ikhwani movement. Since 2011, sympathetic political parties have won power in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, but to what extent they may aid the Syrian Brotherhood remains to be seen.

In a January 2013 interview, al-Shaqfeh denied that the Brotherhood enjoys state support: "I will swear on the Quran that we have not received a single dollar from any Arab or European country. We're paying for the revolution from out of our own pockets, and from certain sympathizers among the Arab and Islamic peoples."[3] However, it is often difficult to distinguish between private "sympathizers" and official support in, for example, the Gulf monarchies, where many businesspeople and religious institutions enjoy state patronage and act as government proxies.

Internal Institutions

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is ruled by a set of elected institutions with a Shura Council making internal legislation, a general inspector heading the executive branch, and a Supreme Court upholding the internal statutes. "You must realize that ever since our creation, we have been the most democratic party of all," says Brotherhood spokesperson Zuhair Salem. "Every person and institution is elected, they hand in reports and are held accountable. It is a sort of mini-state, with its own court of law, and so on. Our three institutions have all remained, with some changes, despite the fact that we have been refugees since the 1980s."[4]

The Shura Council is the highest authority. Its members are drawn from the main membership, and the body is headed by a respected Islamic scholar. It meets infrequently and has the role of an internal parliament, tasked with approving budgets, political programs, and plans. It also elects some officials.

The 2010 internal elections saw Mohammad Hatem al-Tabshi replace Munir al-Ghadban as leader of the Shura Council.

The general inspector (*al-muraqib al-'amm*) is the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's leader. He is elected by the Shura Council for a four-year period, twice renewable (until 2002, the mandate ran for five years). In the 2010 elections, although Aleppo-born members kept about a quarter of the seats in the Shura Council, the Hama faction and its allies captured a majority, and Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni was succeeded by Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh as leader of the Syrian Brotherhood. Al-Shaqfeh currently has five deputies, including al-Bayanouni and Hama native Mohammad Farouk Tayfour. Many, in fact, point to Tayfour as the real strongman of the current leadership.

The Brotherhood maintains an impressive level of external discipline when compared with other Syrian opposition factions.

After his election, the head of the Brotherhood nominates the Leadership, to be approved by the Shura Council. The Leadership is headed by the general inspector himself, and it functions as the group's executive body. It is subdivided into a Political Bureau, an Administrative Bureau, and an Educational Bureau. In 2012, the Leadership had seventeen members, two of whom were women.

The Shura Council also elects the Supreme Court, which is empowered to take disciplinary action against members, including the general inspector and the Leadership.

To what extent the Brotherhood has been able to preserve its internal structure during its exile is difficult to tell, but the organization maintains an impressive level of external discipline when compared with other Syrian opposition factions.

A Web of Informal Alliances

The Brotherhood's culture of secrecy and absolute loyalty to the leadership has helped it survive six decades of Syrian politics. In many ways, it is more similar to a secret society than a political party. Adherents will generally go to great lengths to conceal their membership, and the Brotherhood has been known to infiltrate other movements and create front groups. It has perfected the art of informal politics and will routinely seek to mobilize nonmembers for its causes through mosque networks, family connections, and charitable organizations while remaining an unseen force in the background.

Supporters of the Brotherhood will often form hidden factions within larger organizations, which they dominate by voting as a bloc while rival groups and independents scatter their efforts. "When there is a project, they are always on message," says one Syrian exile who has encountered the Brotherhood while working with the armed resistance. "You hear the same message from all of these individuals even when they say they are not in the Muslim Brotherhood. At times, you can tell someone is in the Brotherhood only because you recognize what he's saying from what you've heard their members say earlier."[5]

Some Ikhwani front groups are well known. The Syrian Human Rights Committee has, under different names, monitored the Assad regime's abuses since 1986. Walid Saffour, who was recently appointed ambassador to the United Kingdom by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, has led the group since 2004.[6]

The League of Syrian Scholars (*rabitat al-ulama al-souriyin*) is headed by Sheikh Muhammad Ali Sabouni, an internationally known Quran expert, and gathers pro-Ikhwani religious scholars (*ulama*). Some are well-known Brotherhood figures, but the organization is no mere tool of the Brotherhood. According to Thomas Pierret, a specialist on Syrian Islamism at Edinburgh University, the association made few pronouncements on political matters before the revolution but has since taken on a more political role.[7]

The relatively new UK-registered organization Watan, or "homeland," is suspected of being another Brotherhood front group. It acts as an umbrella for several nongovernmental organizations, each specializing in a particular field, such as humanitarian aid, finance, and media. Watan is allegedly engaged in recruiting Syrian expats, particularly from families historically connected to the Brotherhood. "It's a patronage thing;" says Malik al-Abdeh, a British Syrian journalist with good insights into Islamist politics, "What they're doing is that they're rebuilding their organization to get hold of people, young people, whom they will be able to put in the army, in the ministries and on the streets after the regime falls."[8] Watan, however, claims to be an entirely nonpolitical organization.

Groups such as these all serve specific purposes independent of the Muslim Brotherhood, but their common ideology and membership allow them to share resources and support each other in larger forums. For example, when 24 Syrian Islamist groups met to form an alliance in Cairo in autumn 2012, both the Brotherhood and the League of Syrian Scholars sent delegations. A member of the latter group was elected head of the new alliance's Shura Council.

By cloaking itself in this web of informal alliances, the Brotherhood paradoxically exposes its own decisionmaking to outside influences. Support based on personal acquaintance, non-Ikhwani organizational links, or family ties will not empower all members equally, and the resources it brings may be leveraged in internal power struggles. For example, Sabouni and the other founders of the League of Syrian Scholars were connected to the so-called Aleppo faction inside the Brotherhood.[9]

During the current conflict, the Brotherhood has followed a similar pattern and sought to extend its influence through informal ties and backroom activities, but it has been struggling to keep up with events on the ground.

The March 2011 Uprising

The eruption of the Syrian revolution created a whole new set of challenges and opportunities for the Brotherhood, which had very few members on the ground inside Syria but was a strong force on the exiled opposition scene. Since then, its strategy has been mostly reactive, reflecting the fact that the Brotherhood lacks any capacity to control events on the ground. The group seems to be hedging its bets by working with many different opposition groups, trying to co-opt as many as possible, while also courting Western and Arab policymakers.

At the start of the uprising, the Brotherhood appeared hesitant to become involved in the conflict. This probably reflected doubts about the uprising's chances of success, an awareness of the Brotherhood's own weakness inside Syria, and a deliberate choice to maintain a low profile while the regime was trying to portray the revolution as led by Islamists.

Behind the scenes, the Brotherhood took a more activist attitude, giving free rein to its sympathizers and affiliates to get involved in the growing revolutionary movement. It supported some of the exile opposition's conferences in spring and summer 2011. Brotherhood-linked activists also played a leading role in creating influential media networks, such as the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page, which helped set the tone for the uprising's early days. Started in February 2011, it remains among the most widely read revolutionary websites and is responsible for selecting the slogans of Syria's Friday demonstrations. Although the page is formally independent, the network running the page includes several supporters of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.[10]

Ideologically, the Brotherhood has so far stuck to a moderate Islamist message, despite the increasingly sectarian and radical tone of Syria's revolutionary discourse. Throughout the uprising, it has consistently tried to underline its own moderation, tolerance, and pragmatism in order to reassure opposition allies, foreign governments, and Syria's religious minorities. It has done so even at the expense of some hardline Islamist support, clearly distinguishing itself from the Salafi factions that proliferate within the armed insurgent movement.

The Brotherhood refrained from calling for Bashar al-Assad's resignation until it had become overwhelmingly clear that the Sunni revolutionary street demanded nothing less than root-and-branch regime change. Instead of calling for an Islamic theocracy, it has promoted the fuzzy concept of a "civil state." This formula has been embraced as a working compromise by both secularists and mainstream Islamists in Syria and other countries, like Egypt.

In March 2012, the Brotherhood issued a political program supporting minority rights and pluralist democracy.[11] It was well received by the opposition and in Western capitals, although it was not, strictly speaking, news. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has held similar positions for years, many of which were clearly stated in its 2004 political program.

But behind this monolithic front are many divisions. The rifts stretch beyond ideology and include generational differences and a divide between the external and internal opposition, which weaken the organization's appeal to the masses in Syria.

Most leading members of the Brotherhood were in their sixties or seventies when the revolution began and had not set foot in Syria for more than thirty years. The seventy-three-year-old al-Bayanouni was first appointed deputy leader of the Brotherhood in 1977 and went into exile two years later. His successor, al-Shaqfeh, is sixty-nine years old and left Syria in 1980. In a country where two in three people are under the age of thirty, this is a serious age gap.

"They've become too old," says one young Syrian activist who is broadly sympathetic to the Brotherhood. His family is closely associated with the group, but he has opted not to join it. "Frankly, the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is a pensioners' club. . . . I myself could be considered part of the second, or even third, generation of Brotherhood families, but I grew up outside of Syria, so I don't have the same attachment to the group. And I'm not alone, there are thousands of us."

This generation gap has led many young Islamist Syrians to feel excluded from the Brotherhood as an organization. "We may know more than they do about a great many things, but it's very hard to become one of them," the activist complains. And in turn, the older generation has become disconnected from realities on the ground. "When they talk about Syria, they think of Syria thirty years ago. I think they're finally beginning to realize this now. . . . But I haven't seen any real steps to address the problem."

Drawing on his experience of the Brotherhood community in exile, the young activist describes a looming generational divide: "People who grew up in Syria . . . haven't heard a thing about the Brotherhood in all this time—and if they have, it's been very negative, since it's been government propaganda. In five or ten years, this will become a massive problem. It's not like in Egypt, where the Brotherhood was always present on the ground despite the repression, and could keep recruiting new members."[12]

Exercising Influence in Exile

Despite internal divisions and splits, the Muslim Brotherhood has managed to leverage its strong presence in the Syrian refugee community, and its connections to pro-opposition states, such as Turkey and Qatar, to acquire a central role in the exile opposition's leading alliances, including the SNC and the National Coalition. Its successes stem both from the Brotherhood's own political flexibility and from the weak and disorganized nature of rival secular and Islamist groups in the diaspora.

The National Action Group for Syria

In early 2011, a group of young Brotherhood members connected to the Aleppo faction created a political movement called the National Action Group for Syria. It was led by Ahmad Ramadan, a little-known businessman and pro-Palestinan activist. Founding members also included al-Bayanouni's close ally Obeida Nahas.

While the official Brotherhood leadership dithered early on in the revolution, the National Action Group immediately went to work building alliances. It played a pioneering role in the creation of the SNC in September 2011, and Ahmad Ramadan was elected a member of the body's Executive Bureau. He quickly came to be considered one of its most influential members.

Opposition activists were at first baffled by the swift rise of Ramadan, although many eventually came to assume that he acted as a proxy for al-Bayanouni. Some saw his drive to organize the exiled opposition in the context of internal Brotherhood politics, viewing it as a way for the Aleppines to upstage their Hama rivals. Some suspected that Ramadan's bloc of independents was simply a Trojan horse for the Ikhwan in the SNC.

Others find that view too conspiratorial. "I disagree with those who say [Ahmad Ramadan] represents al-Bayanouni and the rest of the Aleppo faction," says Raphaël Lefèvre, author of *Ashes of Hama*, a book on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. "Ramadan is an ambitious man who has a strong following of his own," explains Lefèvre, who notes that there is "a huge deal of resentment" within the Brotherhood over Ramadan's meteoric rise within the opposition. The creation of the National Action Group was "just the split of young politicians who are ambitious, bitter at the organization for not having provided them with enough visibility during al-Bayanouni's tenure and the takeover of Hama in July 2010." According to Lefèvre, "personal relationships remain with some parts of the Muslim Brotherhood but ideologically and organizationally it's something different."[13]

Abdulrahman Alhaj, an SNC member and expert on Syrian Islamism, more or less agrees: "These were young people in a very old organization. If they wanted to be leaders in this organization, it would take a very long time. They didn't want to wait, so they decided to create a new organization and take their chances at this historical moment for Syria."[14]

Ramadan's group clearly enjoyed good relations with al-Bayanouni, but any remaining organizational links to the Brotherhood are hard to find. Some sources claim that the founders of the National Action Group were even expelled from the Brotherhood in May 2011, but Obeida Nahas denies this, saying he is still a member of the Brotherhood while acknowledging that he has had differences with the current leadership.[15]

At the beginning of 2013, Ramadan's once startlingly effective exile faction appeared to have lost some of its momentum. It still retains influence in the SNC but does not enjoy the same level of representation inside the successor

opposition umbrella framework, the National Coalition. It is generally seen as having failed to gain a foothold among revolutionaries inside Syria.[16]

The Syrian National Council

In September 2011, the Brotherhood leadership called a rare expanded Shura Council meeting to decide whether the organization would enter the SNC or join a rival unity project alongside secular-leftist opposition groups in Qatar. The Brotherhood chose the SNC, which held a news conference on October 8, 2011, to announce its final structure and leadership.

The Brotherhood tried to maintain the low profile it had kept throughout the revolution even after joining the SNC. Rather than launching a candidate of its own, it supported a succession of secular leftists for the post of SNC president: Burhan Ghalioun (October 2011 to May 2012), Abdul Basit Sida (May to November 2012), and George Sabra (since November 2012).

The Brotherhood made no obvious effort to "Islamize" the SNC's rudimentary political program, and it allowed secularists to draw most of the media attention. It never failed to point out that it was but a small minority faction, with a representation far below its numbers in the exile community. "We are not the biggest group inside the SNC," argued Tarif al-Sayed Issa, a Brotherhood and SNC member, in September 2012. "We have only twenty seats in the SNC [General Assembly], a single seat on its Executive Bureau, and six or seven in the General Secretariat."[17] Even when Ahmad Ramadan's followers, various closeted Ikhwanis, and other Islamists were added to the Brotherhood total, the group could not claim a majority among the more than 300 members of the SNC's General Assembly.

But the General Assembly rarely convened. Real power in fact rested with the 35- to 50-member SNC General Secretariat and, particularly, its Executive Bureau with around ten members. In these key organs, the Brotherhood was much stronger than official figures indicated. It benefited from Brotherhood-connected independents and other sympathetic Islamists as well as secular allies who had been brought in on votes from the Ikhwani bloc. The Brotherhood could not count on every vote going its way, even in the Executive Bureau, but it was clearly the most influential faction within the council. It rapidly seized control over the SNC offices for military affairs and humanitarian aid, which received most of the funds provided to the opposition.

The Brotherhood also utilized its own networks to strengthen the SNC. Among other things, it helped arrange religious conferences and fatwas in favor of the council and promoted the group through its media channels and front organizations.

The Brotherhood's global network proved useful as well. Ikhwani influence was evident in the strong pro-SNC position taken by Qatar. In recent years, Qatar has emerged as a main patron of the international Brotherhood movement, and it is the home of Youssef al-Qaradawi, an Islamist theologian who

is considered the most influential living proponent of Ikhwani-style Islamism. The Brotherhood may also have facilitated a donation of $20 million by the Libyan government in the autumn of 2012—fully half of the SNC's accumulated cash flow since its creation. The person to sign off on the Libyan decision was Mustafa Abushagur, who at the time happened to be the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood's candidate for prime minister.[18]

In November 2012, the SNC was restructured and expanded to over 400 members. Internal elections held in Doha strengthened the Islamists' dominance in the SNC's General Secretariat and Executive Board. The Christian Marxist George Sabra was elected president, but he holds limited independent power. The Brotherhood's Mohammad Farouk Tayfour was elected his deputy.

The National Coalition

Immediately after the Doha elections, the SNC reluctantly agreed to enter into another alliance, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The National Coalition was established following intense pressure from Qatar and the United States, which had lost faith in the SNC and wanted to restructure the exile leadership to lay the groundwork for a government in exile. Some of the U.S. concerns about the SNC apparently centered on the Brotherhood's outsized influence.

The creation of the National Coalition was not well received by the Brotherhood. In December 2012, al-Shaqfeh condemned Western interference, saying that maneuvers aiming to marginalize the Brotherhood would fail.[19]

The National Coalition has been portrayed as a new deal, but its membership is not fundamentally different from that of the SNC. Indeed, SNC members were allotted 22 of the original 63 seats in the National Coalition (there are now 71 seats). In reality, the number is higher still, because many current or former SNC members are seated in other capacities. Groups affiliated with the council still dominate the coalition's roster.

The Brotherhood is reasonably well represented both within the bloc created by the SNC quota and outside of it. For example, al-Bayanouni—who never held a seat in the SNC—has now entered the National Coalition as an independent. Even so, the Brotherhood has been cut down to size. It has no member in the coalition's leadership (although its ally George Sabra, president of the SNC, is a deputy), and it cannot easily dominate the full assembly.

The creation of the National Coalition initially diminished the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the exile opposition, but the group was far from outmaneuvered.

That is not to say that the role of Islamists has decreased—quite the contrary. National Coalition President Moaz al-Khatib is an Islamic preacher close to the Damascene Ikhwani current, but he is not affiliated with the official Muslim Brotherhood.

The creation of the National Coalition initially diminished the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the exile opposition, but the group was far from outmaneuvered.

The Brotherhood-dominated SNC remains separately active even while part of the National Coalition, thereby undermining the coalition leadership's primacy. When Moaz al-Khatib suggested that he was willing to negotiate with the regime in January 2013, George Sabra, speaking on behalf of the SNC, immediately tried to scuttle the initiative with a counterstatement.

In March 2013, the National Coalition appointed the Texas-based U.S. citizen Ghassan Hitto prime minister of the Syrian opposition's government in exile. Hitto, a moderate Islamist who was on record as opposing negotiations with Assad, is not known to be a member of any opposition party, but he was elected on votes mobilized by the Muslim Brotherhood and their allies. Allegedly, the government of Qatar—a main sponsor of the National Coalition—also pushed members to vote for Hitto, in line with its Ikhwan-friendly foreign policy. The Brotherhood's role in electing Hitto seemed to signal a comeback for the group within the exile community, largely due to the lack of an organized counterforce.

The appointment of Hitto caused a major rift within the National Coalition. Several prominent members resigned or "froze" their membership, including Moaz al-Khatib, who had opposed the creation of a government in exile. The reasons for their discontent varied, but some publicly attacked the Brotherhood and Qatar. Some of these dissidents eventually retracted their resignations, but Hitto failed to secure the support of major rebel leaders inside Syria, and his position remained precarious as of mid-April 2013.

Attempting to Influence Events on the Ground

The Muslim Brotherhood has established a central role for itself in the exile opposition, but it has had greater difficulty exerting influence in Syria itself. The organization's response to the Syrian uprising has been shaped by the fact that it lacked an organized base inside the country. It has continued its secretive ways, working behind the scenes to find new recruits and fund armed groups. The Ikhwanis have relied heavily on their strategy of buying loyalty and trying to empower allies and relatives in Syria through targeted financial and political support. However, the rapid rise of independent Salafi militant factions has undercut the Brotherhood's attempts to rebuild an activist base inside the country.

Engaging the Revolutionaries Inside Syria

Since spring 2011, the Syrian Brotherhood has followed a four-pronged strategy to reactivate the Ikhwani movement inside Syria. First, the Brotherhood liberally supports nonmembers in an attempt to gain allies and contacts across the revolutionary movement. Second, it is resurrecting old networks, using

family ties, and mobilizing ex-Brotherhood families. Third, it is buying the allegiance of key commanders and local leaders. And fourth, the Brotherhood is leveraging its strength in the external opposition to gain control over internal groups.

In a 2009 interview, al-Bayanouni, then at the head of the Brotherhood, identified three types of Brotherhood supporters who remained inside Syria:

> There are those who were imprisoned but who have since been released. They're not that many, no more than 7,000. They're there, but they live under difficult circumstances, and are constantly monitored by the security services. . . . There is also a group that was never discovered, an underground organization. They've remained hidden all this time and were never discovered by the security services. The third group, which is new, describes itself as a part of the [Ikhwan], but we don't have organizational ties to them. That's the largest group.

According to al-Bayanouni, his leadership in exile refrained from trying to reorganize these Ikhwanis to avoid endangering their lives, but it kept track of their names and numbers.[20]

One Brotherhood representative interviewed in early autumn 2012 said, "the Muslim Brotherhood unreservedly supports the Syrian revolution, but we do not have groups of our own inside Syria."[21] This is perhaps true in the narrowest sense, but Brotherhood members are certainly active in many groups and communities, to the point of dominating some of them. However, the organization generally avoids the spotlight, preferring to dwell as a controlling influence in the background.

The Brotherhood quickly identified the families of former members as its most fertile ground for recruitment. It sent envoys and messages to recruit former members and their families, including many who had joined the revolution to avenge the death of fathers who fought for the Brotherhood in the 1980s. While the Brotherhood will at times support civilian groups based only on political agreement, familial ties are preferred when it comes to support for armed movements.[22]

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According to Abdulrahman Alhaj, the Brotherhood's internal problems shaped the way it responded to opportunities in Syria. "The Ikhwan focused only on Hama and Idlib at first, because its leaders come from this area," he says. Not until the summer of 2012, when al-Bayanouni and the Aleppo faction had been brought back into the fold, did the group begin to put any serious effort into the revolutionary networks around Aleppo, which had by then become the most coveted prize of the civil war. "That was very late, and many groups had been created there already. They didn't find the kind of fertile ground they had found in Homs, Idlib and Hama."[23]

To some extent, the Brotherhood has been able to use its strong position in the exile community to parachute members into the internal rebel movement.

A leading secular activist in the Local Coordination Committees notes that the Brotherhood now has several members in the internal local councils appointed by the National Coalition, but he claims that activists on the ground often refuse to work with people appointed from abroad.[24]

Money also plays a major role, both to empower pro-Ikhwan figures in their local context and to bind them closer to the Brotherhood's exile leadership. According to Malik al-Abdeh, "they're trying to build up local *zuama*, leaders, who will be dependent on Brotherhood funds. Once they get involved, they can't leave. They become dependent on the money, but the Brotherhood for its part could always drop them."[25]

Civilian Protection Commission

In June 2011, a Syrian opposition congress was held in Brussels, Belgium. The meeting, which was dominated by Islamists, resulted in the creation of a group called the National Coalition to Support the Syrian Revolution. It was headed by Nazir Hakim, a France-based Islamist. The group went on to join the SNC, and Hakim was eventually seated on the council's Executive Bureau, all the while downplaying his Brotherhood affiliation.

In January 2012, members of the National Coalition to Support the Syrian Revolution set up the Civilian Protection Commission (CPC), led by Dr. Haitham Rahma. The CPC was created to provide material support to revolutionaries inside Syria. By its own admission, the CPC began funding and supplying armed resistance groups inside Syria in late March 2012.[26] Others contend that shipments began as early as autumn 2011, well before the formal establishment of the CPC.[27]

Both the CPC and the Brotherhood have been at pains to deny any link between them. A CPC spokesperson describes his group as "independent and nonpartisan," albeit of a "moderate Islamic-nationalist tendency," and dismisses the idea that the CPC is a Brotherhood proxy as "rumors that do not concern us."[28] Rahma has clearly stated that the CPC has no special relationship to the Brotherhood.[29]

In fact, however, the CPC is an informal funding arm of the Brotherhood. Rahma himself is tightly linked to the Ikhwani movement. He serves as assistant secretary general in the League of Syrian Scholars and was a member of the Brotherhood at least briefly in the 1980s (and some sources claim that he still is). The CPC's establishment may have been encouraged by hardliners within the Muslim Brotherhood, including Tayfour and Hakim, as a way to test a military option while retaining plausible deniability.[30] Tarif al-Sayed Issa, reportedly a close collaborator of Tayfour, acknowledges that the CPC was formed by Ikhwanis but says it was "not through a Muslim Brotherhood decision."[31]

The CPC has spread money far and wide among the Syrian rebels and has managed to draw a number of groups into organized collaboration. "The job of this group is basically to bribe fighters inside Syria, and buy their loyalty in

exchange for cash," says Malik al-Abdeh. "I know of guys who wanted to go to the Muslim Brotherhood to get a slice of the pie, and found out you have to swear an oath of allegiance to them."[32]

The Armed Uprising

As violence started to spread through the Syrian countryside in the summer of 2011, the Brotherhood began to canvass the growing armed movement, promising money and weapons to those who would enter into a pact. Brotherhood envoys apparently contacted military defectors in Turkey in June or July, even before the formation of the opposition's first Free Syrian Army groups.[33] The Ikhwani leadership does not appear to have actively encouraged the militarization of Syria's resistance, but it did not make an effort to prevent it either—anticipating civil war, it simply sought to stay ahead of the curve, even when that required taking actions that fanned the flames. A public decision to support the armed insurgency inside Syria was finally taken in late March 2012.[34]

In early August 2012, leading Syrian Muslim Brotherhood member Mulham al-Droubi said to the *al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper that the Brotherhood had formed its first armed units inside Syria some three months earlier. Al-Shaqfeh quickly intervened with an official statement, clarifying that while the Brotherhood supports the armed opposition, "that does not mean that we have our own Brotherhood units."

But al-Droubi was telling the truth. In May 2012, the Brotherhood helped establish a pro-Ikhwani insurgent alliance called the Commission of the Revolution's Shields (CSR). The CSR portrays itself as an independent alliance of moderate Islamists and a responsible actor that seeks to uphold human rights while fighting the Assad regime. It has now emerged as a semiofficial armed wing of the Brotherhood.

According to a propaganda video released in January 2013, the CSR currently includes 43 insurgent factions, all of which use names built around the word "shield." About half are based in the Idlib Governorate, with Hama a distant second. Other Sunni-dominated governorates hold a handful of CSR groups each, although the organization is notably absent from the eastern Deir ez-Zor Governorate.[35] Despite this seemingly impressive roster, the CSR does not appear to be among the larger fighting groups in Syria. It has claimed a relatively small number of operations and rarely features in news reports.

Brotherhood leaders remain circumspect about their relationship to the CSR. Mulham al-Droubi has confirmed that his August 2012 statement about Ikhwani armed groups was in fact a reference to the CSR, but he now describes the organization only as "very close but not totally linked to" the Muslim Brotherhood.[36] In a January 2013 interview with the Saudi newspaper *al-Okaz*, al-Shaqfeh said that "recently, in order to unify the brigades and battalions which have a middle-of-the-road, moderate ideology, which the Brotherhood also believes in, we invited them to a meeting in Istanbul. This resulted in the

creation of what is called the CSR, which is an independent commission with an Islamic ideology close to ours."

However, there are many signs of Brotherhood influence, or control, over the CSR. At least some member factions were created using startup funds from the CPC.[37] The CSR's first conference in December 2012 was organized by the Brotherhood and attended by the top Ikhwani troika of al-Shaqfeh, Tayfour, and al-Bayanouni. Even the CSR's coat of arms seems to be inspired by the Brotherhood's crossed-swords logotype.

Activists on the ground have little doubt about CSR's true affiliation. "If you ask the Muslim Brotherhood, they'll never say that they have links to this group," states one Syrian activist who has interacted with CSR fighters in the Idlib area. "But when you ask the members themselves, they say that that's where they receive their money and arms from."[38]

There are numerous other armed groups that collaborate with the Brotherhood in some way, but it is difficult to pin down what constitutes "official" Brotherhood funding. Resources may be channeled through particular Brotherhood factions or drawn from private funds or family networks. Funds are often directed to particular individuals inside Syria—for example, to a rebel commander known to someone in the Brotherhood rather than to his organization. To complicate matters further, foreign Brotherhood chapters also support the insurgency, although, in theory, all funds are supposed to be channeled through the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

Many of Syria's largest insurgent groups have at some point upheld contacts with the Brotherhood, particularly in their formative phases. One of the groups most frequently mentioned is the Tawhid Brigade, a very large Islamist guerrilla organization in the Aleppo region. But while some of its key leaders have been in contact with the Brotherhood, the Tawhid Brigade as such is not under Brotherhood control. "I've met with [members of the Tawhid Brigade]," says a non-Ikhwani activist involved in funding rebel groups. "At a certain point they took aid from the Muslim Brotherhood, but they also took it from Salafis, they took from everybody. Their motivation was not to create alliances, they just figured that whoever gives aid, we'll take it."[39]

Other battalions that have benefited from Ikhwani support, such as Suqur al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, have proven similarly unwilling to subordinate themselves to Brotherhood dictates. Recurrent claims that the large Farouk Battalions network is affiliated with the Brotherhood are false. There have been instances of open rivalry between the Farouk Battalions and Brotherhood-backed units in Homs,[40] and a media spokesperson for the battalions denies receiving any aid from members of the Brotherhood, whom he calls "hypocrites."[41]

As this rivalry indicates, the Brotherhood's ability to co-opt armed groups inside Syria should not be overestimated. Myriad different funding channels are currently feeding the insurgency, and Brotherhood money represents only

a small portion of the total. In some cases, opportunistic rebel factions seem to have exploited the Brotherhood's eagerness to strike up alliances inside Syria by simply pocketing the cash and walking away.

The Brotherhood and Militant Salafism

Salafi Islamist groups have become increasingly prominent within the Syrian rebel movement since the beginning of the uprising. They are aided by powerful financiers in the Gulf and by Syria's acutely polarized sectarian environment as well as by the weakness of other opposition forces.

A Syrian activist close to the Ikhwani movement points out that while Salafi firebrands have eagerly exploited the rising tide of Sunni resentment, the Brotherhood's elitist and secretive structure prevents it from transforming itself into a revolutionary mass movement. "The Brotherhood elects members into the group, they don't let others come to them. To become a member is a long process which can take several years. . . . The Salafi groups are different. You hang around for a few months, and then you're a member, but the Muslim Brotherhood has higher standards."[42]

For lack of better options, the Brotherhood has opted to work with some of the new Salafi movements inside Syria, attempting to co-opt them or benefit from their growing strength. It has, however, shied away from the most hardline factions, so-called Salafi-jihadis. This particularly concerns Jabhat al-Nusra, which was designated a terrorist entity by the U.S. government in December 2012 and swore allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in April 2013. This is partly because the Brotherhood is anxious to avoid jeopardizing its moderate image or antagonizing the West. But it is also partly because the Brotherhood perceives the members of Jabhat al-Nusra as dangerous rivals and extremists. Salafi-jihadi groups are generally very hostile to the Brotherhood.

Nevertheless, Jabhat al-Nusra's skilled fighters are increasingly popular among the Islamist rank and file. This fact has not gone unnoticed by the Brotherhood. Like most of the Syrian opposition, including many secularists, the Brotherhood sprang to the jihadis' defense against the U.S. terrorism designation. In a December 11, 2012, statement, Brotherhood spokesperson Zuhair Salem called for a review of the American decision.[43] The following day, Tayfour made similar comments, describing Jabhat al-Nusra as "a group on which it is possible to rely for the defense of the country and for protection of civilians against the regime army."[44] Al-Shaqfeh would later refer to the jihadis as "brothers in arms."[45]

Members of the Syrian Brotherhood have been involved in funding the Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya Movement (formerly the Ahrar al-Sham Battalions), a slightly less extreme Salafi group that dominates the Syrian Islamic Front, a major Islamist coalition.[46] Many Brotherhood-connected families were reportedly recruited into Ahrar al-Sham early in the uprising. This created a web of personal links between the exiled Ikhwani cadre and Ahrar al-Sham fighters

inside Syria, though relations between the groups seem to have deteriorated in late 2012. Ahrar al-Sham and the Syrian Islamic Front now clearly distinguish themselves from the Brotherhood and follow a different political and ideological course.[47]

In June 2012, SNC Executive Bureau member and founder of the National Action Group for Syria Ahmad Ramadan helped launch a coalition called the Syria Revolutionaries' Front, which included Ahrar al-Sham and several small Islamist factions. However, the SNC Executive Bureau soon forced Ramadan to back away from the project, and the front in turn distanced itself from both the SNC and the Free Syrian Army under pressure from Ahrar al-Sham. When asked to clarify his view of the Syria Revolutionaries' Front and Ahrar al-Sham in August 2012, Ramadan insisted that "the groups who joined the . . . [front] are Islamists, but not extremists. They work against the growing extremism."[48] The Brotherhood made no official comment on the matter, and the Syria Revolutionaries' Front eventually faded into obscurity.

Overreaching or Underfunded?

According to a Syrian expat involved in channeling funds to rebels, the Ikhwani strategy of buying loyalty has backfired. In the early stages of the armed uprising, the Brotherhood was able to co-opt groups desperate for cash. But with time, resentment began to mount among activists on the ground. He explains that the Brotherhood "sent money and weapons to some, while others who had refused their conditions received no aid . . . even when they were in the same area and faced the same bombardment." In the end, the Muslim Brotherhood and the CPC "came to be seen as acting on behalf of a party interest rather than in the interest of the revolution. They've now lost most of their alliances."[49]

One sign of such displeasure was a video statement released by Ahmed Issa al-Sheikh, the leader of the powerful Idlib-based Salafi militia Suqur al-Sham. In the statement, he denounces the Muslim Brotherhood for seizing hegemonic control over the CPC, with which he had previously cooperated.[50]

Other groups have similar complaints, saying that the Brotherhood cares only about its own long-term influence. A spokesperson for the Farouk Battalions recounts a story about a small armed group in the Homs area that was ordered to hide the guns delivered to it by the Brotherhood and the CPC despite the fact that other rebels in the area were suffering from a shortage of weapons. He disparages the CPC as "a media soap opera for ulterior political gains."[51]

Thomas Pierret agrees that the Brotherhood has had limited success in attracting armed factions, but he offers another explanation: "The situation of some armed groups is so desperate that I'm sure they would be happy to raise the flag of the Muslim Brotherhood if they could get funding, but we're still not seeing a lot of that. I really doubt their financial capacities."[52]

Conclusion

Since its creation, the Muslim Brotherhood has proven its ability to continually adapt to new circumstances, exploiting both parliamentary politics and guerrilla warfare, surviving three decades of exile, and mutating ideologically from a reformist social movement to militant jihadism and back to moderate Islamist politics. This pragmatic adaptability still applies today.

But in many ways it is struggling. Years of exile left it at a disadvantage on the ground inside Syria. The organization's elitist character and social background have complicated the process of finding new members and leaders that are in touch with the majority of Syrian revolutionaries. It also lacks a strong and dedicated military arm in the ongoing conflict.

Still, the Brotherhood remains a key player in the Syrian drama. Although it cannot control the opposition's alliances on its own due to the fractious nature of Syrian dissident politics and the heavy-handed interference of foreign powers, it remains the single strongest component of the exile community. The Brotherhood cannot realistically be shut out of any government in exile and will therefore retain a role in any U.S., UN, or other international strategy toward Syria.

Inside Syria, the Brotherhood is working hard to rebuild its networks, though the sheer scale of the revolutionary upheaval militates against these efforts. Social, religious, and economic factors complicate the Brotherhood's attempts to keep pace with the growth of militant Salafism among the internal Syrian opposition.

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Only time will tell how the sectarian and religious radicalization of Syria's armed conflict will break for the Brotherhood. As the most cohesive and experienced force on the Sunni Islamist side, the organization's relatively moderate attitude could eventually win favor among war-weary Syrians and international actors as a reasonable alternative to the Salafi surge. However, without a negotiated ceasefire, the real outcome of the Syrian conflict is likely to be determined on the battlefield, where the Brotherhood's failure to establish a strong presence could significantly weaken its hand.

Persons Mentioned in the Text

(Place and Year of Birth)

Mustafa al-Sibai (Homs, 1915–1964)

Issam al-Attar (Damascus, 1927)

Muhammad Ali Sabouni (Aleppo, 1930)

Ali Sadreddine al-Bayanouni (Aleppo, 1938)

Munir al-Ghadban (al-Tell/Rif Dimashq, 1942)

Mohammad Hatem al-Tabshi (Hama, 1942)

Mohammad Riad al-Shaqfeh (Hama, 1944)

Mohammad Farouk Tayfour (Hama, mid-1940s)

Zuhair Salem (Aleppo, 1947)

Nazir Hakim (Mumbij/Aleppo, 1950)

Walid Saffour (Homs, 1959)

Moaz al-Khatib (Damascus, 1960)

Haitham Rahma (Quseir/Homs, 1960)

Ghassan Hitto (Damascus, 1963)

Ahmad Ramadan (Aleppo, 1963)

Mulham al-Droubi (Homs, 1964)

Obeida Nahas (Aleppo, 1972)

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