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Lecture Transcript

WHAT EVERY AMERICAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

The 17th Annual Templeton Lecture on Religion and World Affairs

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One of the questions often asked is how is it that an uprising that seemed to feature pro-democratic, secular young people on Facebook and Twitter became one dominated by theocrats of the Muslim Brotherhood? Was the image that you saw on television incorrect? Was this revolution really led by those young people? I'm going to show why that image was not incorrect at all—the revolution truly was led and catalyzed by these young people on Facebook and Twitter—but why eventually the Muslim Brotherhood was able to take control of the revolution.

Two years ago when I was doing my dissertation fieldwork in Cairo, I sought out interviews with leaders from the Muslim Brotherhood, and I was referred to a man named Muhammad Morsi, now the President of Egypt. At the time, President Mubarak was ill and had gone off to Europe for operations amid a lot of mystery surrounding his health. I asked Muhammad Morsi whether the Muslim Brotherhood would run a presidential candidate if Mubarak died tomorrow. Here is what he said:

[From an audio file played by Trager]

Eric Trager: You don't see the Muslim Brotherhood nominating a presidential candidate [if Mubarak dies tomorrow]?

Muhammad Morsi: No... because society is not ready... Our society is not ready yet to really defend its worth. We want a society to carry on its responsibilities, and we are part of this society. Another thing, if we are rushing things, then I don't think that leads to a real stable position.

When he made that statement, I don't think he was lying, and I don't think he was being coy. I think that he didn't expect that he would be faced with this reality in a mere six months. He did not expect that Mubarak would step

down six months later and, to be completely honest with you, neither did I. My dissertation was entitled “Egypt: Durable Authoritarianism”—until the revolution.

What did Morsi mean when he said that the Brotherhood was trying to build a society? Let me give you some background on the Muslim Brotherhood. It was founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, who was a schoolteacher in Ismailia. The Muslim Brotherhood’s goal was then—and remains now—to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. The way it pursues this goal is by trying to Islamize Egyptian society. Through social services, education, and the mosque, it sought to make Egyptians more religious and more Islamic as a grassroots strategy for building an Islamic state. That’s very, very different from a strategy that says, “We’re going to run for president, run for the Parliament, and use that power to transform society.” Rather, the Brotherhood says, in effect, “We’re going to Islamize society to build towards power.” It was a long-term strategy; it took them 84 years before they ran for and won the presidency. So Morsi told me in 2010 that the Muslim Brotherhood was not going to run for the presidency because it was not done Islamizing Egyptian society.

In addition to this grassroots strategy for Islamizing Egyptian society, the Muslim Brotherhood has been deeply hostile toward the West. Some of this hostility stemmed from the anti-imperialism of the 1920s and ’30s, which later became a very virile anti-Zionism. The Muslim Brotherhood participated in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War well beyond the point at which the Egyptian army had stopped fighting Israel. Members are still very proud of that fact and still reference it when discussing their outlook on Israel.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s credo is “Allah is our objective, the Quran is our constitution, the Prophet is our leader, jihad is our way, and death for the sake of Allah is the highest of our aspirations.” Now I should clarify that when they say “jihad,” they do not necessarily mean violent conflict. The way that this credo is interpreted varies considerably among the Brotherhood organizations that now exist in 72 countries. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood does not typically use jihad to refer to violent struggle. It has at various points in history, but not recently. That’s different from, say, Hamas in Gaza, which is a Brotherhood organization that interprets the “jihad” clause of this credo as an endorsement of violence.

Let me take you to Tahrir Square. I was there in June of 2012 when Morsi was announced as Egypt’s next president. It was like being in the Bronx when the Yankees win the World Series.

I was in the Square that day for a couple of hours prior to the announcement (in part because the announcement took such a long time to make). Before the announcement, the Salafists—those are more radical Islamists—were marching around the Square declaring their willingness to die in fights with security forces if Morsi were not named president. The Muslim Brothers who had been camped out in the square for two weeks had been told by their leaders to be prepared to fight if Morsi were not named president. So, it’s true that the Brotherhood participated in elections and won power through elections; but, had those elections gone the other way, they were prepared to fight. Thus they were not willing to abide by democratic rules in the event that the election didn’t go their way.

How did the Muslim Brotherhood go from being an illegal, secretive organization deeply repressed by the regime to capturing Egypt’s revolution and now becoming Egypt’s new ruling party? There are three factors. First, they have a committed membership; the way they recruit and promote members is very different from the way other parties work. Secondly, they have a strong nationwide structure that allows them to move people in a way that’s quite similar to how a militia moves people. Third, they have a controlling centralized leadership that can quickly distribute top leaders across the new bodies of government that the Brotherhood controls.

A COMMITTED MEMBERSHIP: WHAT IT TAKES TO BECOME A MUSLIM BROTHER

There is a popular view in the United States that the Brotherhood, however radical it may have been in opposition, will moderate now that they are in power. That view fails to recognize what it takes to become a Muslim Brother. When you became a Democrat or a Republican or a Green Party member, you just sign a form. Joining the Muslim Brotherhood is not just a matter of signing a form; it is a five-to-eight-year process that begins at recruitment. The Muslim Brotherhood has specially designated recruiters in just about every mosque and university around the country, and they look for signs of piety to see whether someone is a good fit for the organization. There’s an assumption that Islamist organizations recruit the losers, the loners, the people who can’t find a job. Not so. The Brotherhood looks for winners. The Brotherhood wants the high school president, the best soccer player. Why?

Because the Brotherhood is trying to create a grassroots network for establishing that Islamic state. It wants people who will grow the organization, and that requires winners—people that others will want to follow.

Once you're recruited, you become a *muhib* (literally, a "fan" or "lover"). This is a six-month to one-year stage in which you're watched. Do you pray five times a day? Do you fast for Ramadan? Do you give charity? Are you a good person? Do you fit in well socially with the organization? Mostly at this stage you're doing social activities—camping events, sporting events, volunteering. If you pass the exam, you become what's called a *muayyad*, a supporter. That lasts from one to three years, and at this stage you start learning the Brotherhood's curriculum. They have a set curriculum. It includes rote memorization. You're taught how to preach at mosques. You're given certain local responsibilities. Throughout this process you are guided by three senior Brotherhood leaders who are watching you. If you pass an exam you become a *muntasib*, which means "affiliated." That lasts for a year. At this stage, you're penciled in as a member. They could still throw you out if they don't think that you're a good fit, if you don't follow orders, if you're not really that committed to the organization's principles. But at this stage you also start giving six to eight percent of your income to the Muslim Brotherhood. I get a lot of questions about how the Brotherhood gets its money. Does it get money from the Gulf? Does it get money from other foreign sources? I don't know, but if every Muslim Brother is giving six to eight percent of their income to the organization and you're talking about some 700,000 people, it's pretty clear they have an independent source of wealth.

If you pass the exam at this stage, you become a *muntazim*, an organizer. This lasts for about another two years. This is the first time you're able to vote in Brotherhood internal elections, and you can have a local leadership position. If you pass this exam, you become an *ach amal*, a "working brother," and you take what's called a *bayah* or an oath to the organization to follow its senior leaders' decisions. Again, this is a five-to-eight-year process, during which they're weeding out anyone who might not be committed to the organization's principles and might not be willing to follow the organization's leaders. This is not at all like a standard political party. It is actually much closer to the way a cult works.

THE BROTHERHOOD'S NATIONWIDE STRUCTURE

At the lowest level of the Brotherhood structure is what's called an *usra*, or "family." You can think of this as a cell. This is a group of five to eight Muslim Brothers. They meet weekly for about three hours. They discuss the Quran, religious texts, the Brotherhood's curriculum, politics. They share their personal lives. The members of this group become a Muslim Brother's best friends. The people that you work most closely with are in your *usra*. The *usra* is a mechanism through which the Brotherhood embeds your social relationships into the organization so that you're less likely to disobey it due to peer pressure and you're less likely to leave it because you'll be leaving your best friends. This becomes an important tool for organizing local activities. There's a chief of every family called *naqib al-usra* whose responsibility is to assign people to recruit, to preach, to run social services, to manage voter kiosks, etc.

Six to twelve families makes up a populace or a *sho'aba*. A number of those make up a *muntaqa* or an area. A number of those make up a governorate, which is like a state or a province in Egypt. You have a number of governorates making up a sector. Then at the very top of this pyramid is the Guidance Office, an executive body composed of twenty Muslim Brothers, and the Shura Committee, a legislative body made up of some 120 Muslim Brothers.

Here's how it works: A decision is discussed and voted on in the Shura Committee and then executed by the Guidance Office, which sends the commands down the chain. By way of illustration, in the days preceding the revolution's first demonstrations on January 25, 2011, the Shura Committee voted and the Guidance Office passed down the ruling that members would not participate in those demonstrations. Why didn't they participate in the revolution when it started? First, because the Brotherhood at that time was an 83-year-old organization; it wasn't going to follow kids—as they called them—who were on Facebook and Twitter into the Square. They are an established organization. They have protocols. They don't just follow any movement willy-nilly.

The second reason is that the Mubarak regime had told the Guidance Office that if they participated in the protests, the whole Guidance Office would be arrested. So the Brotherhood passed down a decision that Muslim Brothers should not participate in the demonstrations and that if they did, they should not identify themselves as Muslim Brothers or carry the Brotherhood flag. Despite not participating, on January 26—day two of the revolution—half of

the Guidance Office was arrested anyway. So the following night the Brotherhood decided in its Shura Committee and then executed through the Guidance Office that it would participate in the revolution. By the night of Thursday, January 27, all cell phone and Internet communications in Egypt had been shut down. For the Brotherhood, however, that didn't matter because its interpersonal networks were able to move people. The following day—the “Friday of Rage” —Egyptians marched from their mosques after Friday prayers to the central squares. Hundreds of thousands of people participated. They overwhelmed the security forces, defeated the police, and attacked police stations, and the Mubarak regime was probably not going to survive after that. The Brotherhood's decision to participate in those demonstrations at that moment was pivotal for the revolution.

Another example: Last year I was in Egypt during the Parliamentary elections, and at every polling station I visited (during the first round) there were Brotherhood voter kiosks. No other party had this. I asked the young people manning the voter kiosks who told them to be there, and they said that they organized it through their *usras*, which had been commanded to set up voter kiosks by the Guidance Office. This structure is important to understanding how the Brotherhood moves people very efficiently.

When it came time to form a political party last year, the Brotherhood took three of its top Guidance Office members—Muhammad Morsi, Essam al-Erian, and Saad al-Katatny—and made them the chairman, vice-chairman, and secretary-general of the party, respectively. When it came time to choose Parliamentary candidates, the Brotherhood essentially used this structure as a vetting mechanism. If you wanted to run for Parliament, you first discussed it with the head of your family, and then if he agreed, it was passed up through five different levels of Brotherhood administrative leadership until the finalists were passed onto the party, which again was headed by three very senior Muslim Brothers, who then signed off on it. If you're sending up files through this process, you're probably not going to get moderates; you're getting people who have been vetted for their commitment to the Brotherhood's cause by multiple tiers of Brotherhood leadership.

Today the Brotherhood will tell you that the Guidance Office, the Freedom and Justice party, and the Morsi presidency are three independent institutions. For example, this summer, I asked a senior Guidance Office leader, “Do you think that President Morsi will meet with Benjamin Netanyahu?” He replied, “Don't ask me. You have to ask President Morsi because I'm not serving the presidency.” But then I said to him, “What if he did meet with Benjamin Netanyahu?” He replied, “Well, very simple. We would launch nationwide labor strikes and every Egyptian would join us.” So perhaps these three entities aren't so separate. The Brotherhood has ways of reining in Morsi if he does something they don't like.

Also, there is substantial overlap between the Guidance Office, Freedom and Justice Party, and the Morsi presidency —all intermixed with the Shura Committee. All of the Guidance Office are members of the Shura Committee. The four most important members are Khairat al-Shater, Mahmoud Ezzat, Mahmoud Ghozlan, and Mahmoud Hussein. Within the Morsi presidency, at least three presidential advisors are members of the Shura Committee. While there's no public list of the Shura Committee, I would estimate that at least two dozen members of the Shura Committee are also members of the Freedom and Justice Party's People's Assembly Delegation. The point here is that decisions reached by that Shura Committee are binding on all Muslim Brothers. If all these people are meeting in the same room reaching key decisions, then this Shura Committee is a key driver of the Brotherhood's actions in the Morsi presidency, in Parliament, in the new ruling party, and, of course, in the Brotherhood itself.

For instance, when the Freedom and Justice Party decided how many seats to run for in Parliament, it didn't reach that decision on its own; it reached it in consultation with the Brotherhood Shura Committee. When it ran a presidential candidate, that was not a decision that the party reached; it was reached in the Brotherhood's Shura Committee. When Morsi chose governors of Egypt as president, he consulted with the Brotherhood's Shura Committee. This secretive body plays an important role in making political decisions for Egypt now that the Brotherhood has a president.

The Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party, and Morsi will coordinate to use the Brotherhood's mobilizing networks on behalf of their own activities. For example, in the week before Morsi was named president, the Brotherhood used that organizational pyramid to get people into Tahrir Square. It wasn't just a matter of telling people to go sit in the Square until Morsi was declared president; people were seated by administrative district, and they were receiving commands directly from the Guidance Office regarding what they should be doing and saying

within the Square. In fact, the leader of a Brotherhood *sho'aba*—the second-tier administrative level of about 75 to 90 Brothers—showed me a communiqué on Brotherhood stationary with orders regarding what time they were supposed to pray, to keep their areas clean, and to raise their “spirit levels.” He received such a memo twice daily from a central figure in the Square who communicated directly with the Guidance Office.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s organizational capability is another factor in why it is unlikely to moderate. If you’re the only organized political force, you’re probably going to win, and if you keep winning, why would you concede anything ideologically? So as long as the Brotherhood is Egypt’s only organized political force, there’s simply no incentive for it to moderate.

If anything, the current state of Egyptian politics will likely pull the Brotherhood to the right, given that their strongest opponents are the Salafists. Whereas the Brotherhood’s approach to *sharia*, the principles of Islamic law, is interpretive, the Salafists are textual literalists. Another key difference between the two is that whereas the Brotherhood is tightly organized, the Salafists are decentralized. They are divided among a host of different parties, movements, and political figures, because being a Salafist does not tie you to a particular organization. Being a Salafist is simply about interpreting the text literally; you’re free to follow any of the thousands of Salafist sheikhs. There’s a lot more independence built into Salafism, which means that they’re a lot harder to mobilize in a coherent way. It’s also much easier to become a Salafist than it is to become a Muslim Brother. Becoming a Brother, as I’ve said before, is a five-to-eight-year process; Salafists become Salafists by declaring themselves a *multazim*, someone who’s committed to living according to the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

This will create substantial pressure on the Brotherhood in the long-run in particular. Think of yourself as a young Islamist. If you have a choice either to join the Muslim Brotherhood, which takes five to eight years and requires that you follow a very senior leadership, or become a Salafist *multazim*, which takes five minutes and you can follow any Salafist sheikh you want, it’s obvious which choice is more attractive.

The fact that the Brotherhood and Salafists will battle over ideas and recruitment, the fact that these are going to be the two primary competing forces in Egyptian politics means that rather than being pulled toward the center, the Brotherhood will probably be pulled more toward the theocratic right. It will have to protect its rightward theocratic flank from the Salafists who will challenge them on recruitment.

What does this all mean for the United States? The key for U.S. policy is the Sinai. If what we have in Egypt now is the emergence of two theocratic organizations, one of which is likely to win reliably for a long time and both of which are quite hostile toward U.S. interests, our goal should be to reduce the likelihood of a crisis. The crisis most likely to arise is in the Sinai Peninsula, an unstable area in which roughly thirty Bedouin tribes are effectively fighting each other for lands and control, some of which have been co-opted by terrorist organizations. The concern is what happens if instability in the Sinai spills over into Israel and creates a crisis between Israel and Egypt.

Imagine a scenario in which terrorists from the Sinai Peninsula strike Israel, and Israel responds, shoots over the border into Egypt, and accidentally kills Egyptians. We saw this play out in August 2011 when the military was still in charge, and it culminated in mass protests and an attack on the Israeli Embassy, which almost sunk the Camp David Accords. The Egyptian attackers and the Israeli diplomats in that embassy were within one door of each other and had any of them died, there is almost no question that relations between the two countries and the peace treaty would have been in deep danger. From the U.S. perspective, we need to prevent a reemergence of that kind of crisis. In the short run, we should promote channels between the Muslim Brotherhood and Israel—quiet channels—that would allow them to defuse a crisis. I’ve asked Muslim Brotherhood leaders, “What happens if this kind of crisis emerged under your watch? When it emerged under the military’s watch, the military dialed things down after a very tricky period. Would you dial things down?” Brothers repeatedly have said to me, “No, we would not.” The Muslim Brotherhood has made it clear to me that their end goal is to do away with this treaty, which they have long opposed, and I suspect they might use this kind of crisis as an excuse to find an out.

Next, we have to link our military and economic aid to performance on key American interests. One of those interests is, of course, the treaty, but we have others: access to the Suez Canal, over-flight rights, cooperation on counter-terrorism, and pluralism. Military aid should be used for the strategic elements that the military will be primarily responsible for handling—counter-terrorism, Suez Canal access, preventing weapons from getting into Gaza. But on the economic side, we should be using not only economic aid but our influence in the IMF, where

Egypt is looking for a \$4.8 billion loan, to make sure that Morsi does and says responsible things. And he hasn't done that. For example, when the U.S. Embassy was attacked in September, Morsi waited two days before saying anything at all. Initially, he even seemed to blame the attack on an offensive video. It was only after President Obama read him the riot act that he denounced it. We need to use our aid to make sure that he understands that that aid is contingent on his being a reliable partner.

We also need to change the way we talk about Egypt. Too frequently the administration has referred to the Brotherhood as democratic. The Brotherhood is not democratic; it's theocratic and wants to establish a religious state in Egypt. Not only that, had the presidential election gone another way, I'm convinced from having been in the Square that the Brotherhood would have used violence to reject the outcome. Moreover, when we call the Brotherhood democratic, we signal to non-Islamist forces in Egypt that we have thrown our support behind the Brotherhood. Frankly, I don't think we have, but the suspicion in Egypt is that we are trying to replace a strong dictator with a strong organization, and we have to do everything we can to make sure that the Egyptian people know that we are neutral within the sphere of domestic Egyptian politics.

Washington needs to speak up more for minority rights. Christians in Egypt feel neglected. There have been a series of church attacks since last year's revolution. There was a military assault on a Coptic protest last year in which about twenty-five people were run over by tanks, and the administration didn't say anything. When we fail to speak out, that's taken as another sign that we've thrown our weight behind the Islamists. And that's why when Hillary Clinton went to Egypt in July she was met by protests – not by Islamists, but by Christians and secularists who felt that the United States had sold them out. These are our friends in a country in which we unfortunately have very few. We need to do what we can to protect that friendship.

Finally, we need to talk about Camp David not as an exclusively American interest, but as an Egyptian interest, as well. I want to share a story that illustrates how we might do this. Last year, I met with a senior Brotherhood leader, and at the time the Brotherhood was saying it was going to put the Camp David Accords to referendum. I told him this was dangerous. He said, no, this is democracy. I said, no, democracy is electing you—what you decide to do with that power is another thing. Will you put your tax policy to a referendum, I asked him. He said, no, this is different. I said, why's it different? People pay a big portion of their income to taxes. You think they care more about the peace treaty with Israel than taxes? He proceeded to rant about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and I stopped him and said, "Listen, you and I can agree to disagree about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but we should not disagree about the importance of keeping a treaty that has prevented war between you and a much stronger country to your northeast for the past thirty years. And let me ask you something, do you want Egyptians to die?" He said no. I said, "Then you'll keep the treaty. And let me tell you something else: if you don't keep the treaty, I'll be very sad because I have many friends in Egypt. But I'll be 6000 miles away. This will be on you." That's the message that needs to come out of Washington: that maintaining peace is on them, that power means responsibility, and that ultimately the peace treaty is beneficial for Egypt.

I'm going to close with what I like to call "fun facts" that I unearthed during my summer trip to Egypt. But, to be honest with you, these are not fun.

- 1) *Rifaat Mohamed Tahtawi was rumored to be Egypt's next foreign minister.* This is the former Egyptian ambassador to Iran and Libya. He's a strong proponent of strengthened Iranian-Egyptian ties and a strong opponent of the peace treaty with Israel. The fact that he was rumored to be the next foreign minister -- which is something I heard from multiple governments, by the way, including Egypt's, of course -- shows where the Brotherhood intends to take Egypt. I suspect the military prevented his appointment, and he's now Morsi's chief of staff. Not too shabby.
- 2) *Three top Muslim Brothers were recruited to the Muslim Brotherhood in the United States, including Morsi himself.* Morsi, of course, is now president of Egypt, Mohammad Ali Bishr is a Guidance Office member as well as the new governor of Menoufiya, and Mahmoud Hussein – the one who told me this -- is the Muslim Brotherhood's current secretary-general. Hussein, studied for his Ph.D. in Iowa, and during that time he was the president of MAYA, the Muslim American Youth Association. And while he was getting to know Morsi and Ali Bishr in the United States, Hussein was also very friendly with Hamas's number two, Musa Abu Marzouk, who was also based in the United States and involved in these Brotherhood networks.

3) *Hamas's point of contact in the Muslim Brotherhood prior to his becoming president was Muhammad Morsi.*

So what we have here is an organization that is well organized; and that vets its members for their commitment to the cause, as well as an Egyptian president who has a long-standing relationship institutionally and personally with Hamas. The assumption was that the "Arab Spring" would lead to democracy and liberalism but in fact that Arab Spring has been overtaken by Islamists who do not hold the same ideals, the same values, or the same optimism as the young people who I think inspired many of us two years ago.

Thanks for listening.

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