



Pro-Muslim Brotherhood Egyptians protesting the military coup that removed President Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Photo by Hamada Elrasam for VOA, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2utKEbe>

Note on this Case Study:

No religion is inherently violent or peaceful. However, religions are powerful forces. They can inspire horrific violence. They can also inspire nearly unfathomable acts of love and peacebuilding. The Muslims described here span a wide range of values regarding the intersection of their religion and violence. Some are the perpetrators of violence, some are working to end violence and promote peace, many more are bystanders, who may build up cultural violence, cultural peace, or even both.

As always, when thinking about religion and conflict, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and always embedded in specific cultures.

The Religious Literacy Project is directed by Diane L. Moore and all content is constructed under her editorial direction.

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood

The people of the north African nation of Egypt are largely Muslim today (nearly 90%) but a significant minority (about 8%) are Coptic Christians.¹ Egypt was colonized by the British from 1882 until a military revolution in 1952. Military dictatorships then ruled until 2011, when peaceful mass demonstrations—part of the regional “Arab Spring” movement—briefly made Egypt a democracy until the military reestablished rule in 2013.² Still, as different regimes rose and fell, one group was a constant presence: the Islamic group called the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The MB has a complex history in Egypt, sometimes advocating violence, sometimes peace. Egyptians and international observers are thus often split in their views of the group; some claim the MB are democratic peace builders, while others believe them to be terrorists. Regardless, the MB is diverse and complex.

The MB was founded in 1928 by Sunni Muslim Hassan al-Banna. Al-Banna saw British colonial rule harming Egyptians, and advocated that they turn to Islam to resist Western domination. It began as a peaceful social movement, with members building schools, mosques, and social centers for local communities hit hard by colonial policies, particularly the poor. About ten years later, however, some members turned to violence to overthrow colonial powers, including bombings and assassinations. The British quickly banned the group, but it continued in secret. In 1948, a member of the MB assassinated the Prime Minister; al-Banna denounced the violence but was killed in

retaliation soon after. As opposition to the British grew, the MB supported the military coup which overthrew the colonists in 1952. However, they opposed the secular regime that was formed, believing a government based in Islamic beliefs would better serve Egyptians.³

Under the new secular government of dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Muslim Brotherhood broke with the military. In 1954, the Brotherhood was blamed for an assassination attempt on Nasser, who used it to quash his remaining rivals. The MB was outlawed again, and thousands of members were rounded up, tortured, and imprisoned. Underground again, some Brothers advocated further violence, inspired by the writings of Sayid Qutb, who wrote from prison that

¹ World Religion Database, ed. Todd M. Johnson and Brian A. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2015).

² Zachary Laub, “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, January, 15, 2014. <http://on.cfr.org/2hOJPb0>

³ “Profile: Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood,” *BBC News*, Dec. 25, 2013. <http://bbc.in/2vrRD5C>

Islamic society had lost its religious character and must be restored by any means necessary. Qutb convinced some Muslims—who soon split from the MB—but his more violent views were rejected by MB leadership. In 1970, the MB officially renounced violence, deciding to push for Islamic society by peaceful means, returning to their social service roots, and pledging to support democracy in the repressive dictatorship. Concerned by this opposition, presidents Sadat and Mubarak kept the MB illegal. At times the dictators allowed the MB some freedom, but times of respite were always short lived. In 2005, for example, Mubarak arrested hundreds of Brothers and banned all political activity of religiously based groups. Still, the MB continued to grow, as Egyptians appreciated the social services they provided to struggling communities.⁴

By the Arab Spring in 2011, the MB had been cruelly suppressed for over sixty years, but had become the largest Muslim group in Egypt. The Arab Spring did not begin with the MB, but fulfilling their promise to support democratic principles in Egypt, they eventually threw their considerable support behind the movement. After Mubarak was overthrown, the Brotherhood became legal for the first time in decades. Able to run candidates openly again, the MB won almost half of the seats in Egypt's assembly in 2011, and in 2012 the MB candidate, Mohamed Morsi, won a close race in Egypt's first democratic election for president. However, the MB's political power was short lived. The MB and other Islamist parties drafted a new Constitution which many Egyptians—including many Muslims—felt was too conservative and discriminated against women, secular Egyptians, and the country's Coptic Christian minority. When Morsi granted himself far-reaching powers and the Islamist parties approved the new Constitution while the opposition was boycotting the vote, millions took to the streets to demand Morsi's resignation. Morsi and the MB refused as pro-Morsi demonstrators began rival rallies.⁵

As instability grew, on July 3, 2013, the military overthrew Morsi and the MB government in a coup. Led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the military cracked down on the democratically elected MB more severely than any previous ruler. The military arrested thousands of MB members, including Morsi and most of the leadership, and killed over a thousand Brotherhood supporters who were protesting in the streets. They shut down MB mosques and schools, and seized their funds. Then, in late 2013, the military declared the MB a terrorist organization by blaming a suicide bombing on them, even though an ISIS-related group claimed responsibility for the attack.⁶ Ironically, like the MB, al-Sisi, who is a devout Muslim, has tried to emphasize an Islamic foundation for his rule. State TV has called him "God's shadow on earth," and he regularly looks for support from Muslim clerics at Egypt's famous Islamic university: Al Azhar.⁷

By 2016, illegal again and threatened with extinction, the MB had split into competing factions who disagreed over the role of violence in the organization. Many, especially older members, continue to advocate for peaceful resistance to the new government. Others, including many younger members, believe that only a violent uprising can topple al-Sisi's military government. Internal disagreements have kept the MB from mounting any significant resistance, and recently some members more inclined to violence have left the MB for more radical groups like ISIS.⁸ Oppressed and disorganized, today's Muslim Brotherhood continues to struggle with disagreements over how to achieve freedom: resistance by violence or resistance by peace.

⁴ "Profile: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," *BBC News*; Laub, "Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood."

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Declan Walsh, "Egypt's President Turns to Religion to Bolster His Authority," *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2016. <http://nyti.ms/2wz31wG>

⁸ Mostafa Hashem, "The Great Brotherhood Divide," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Mar. 2, 2016. <http://ceip.org/1oW3CU9>

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- Muslim Brotherhood’s official spokesman Gehad el-Haddad’s open letter from prison denying any MB ties to violence (2017): <http://nyti.ms/2vT9t4I>

Secondary Sources:

- PBS Frontline documentary on the MB’s role in Egyptian revolutionary politics from 2011 to 2013 (2013): <http://to.pbs.org/1VkMlyk>
- PBS Newshour reporting on the diversity of Islamist positions in Egypt (2011): <http://bit.ly/2vTicmA>
- Al Jazeera English video on history of the MB (2011): <http://bit.ly/2vJSNfy>
- Public Health student Nadine Farag on the lesser-known but incredibly widespread social services of the MB (2009): <http://to.pbs.org/2vU2to9>
- Interview with activist Heba Morayef on how the MB has been both the victims and the perpetrators of violations of human rights (2011): <http://to.pbs.org/2vokk5g>
- NYT on global debates about whether the MB is a “terrorist organization” (2017): <http://nyti.ms/2uu75kB>

Discussion Questions

- What does internal diversity in Islam look like when considering Egyptian Muslim beliefs about their faith, violence, and peace?
- How have the Muslim Brotherhood’s religious beliefs illustrated how religions change over time? Why, in their context, do you think these changes took place?
- How did the individuals and groups in power change the way that Muslims acted in Egypt? What about those who were not in power?
- Read the letter from official MB spokesman Gehad el-Haddad written from prison in 2017. What is at stake here for the MB? How does this member of the MB see religion playing a role in his actions?
- Read the NYT article on nations deciding whether to affirm Egypt’s statement that the MB is a terrorist group. Why do some leaders believe the MB is a terrorist group and some do not? How does religion play a role in these claims? How does Nadine Farag’s article complicate these claims?
- Read Heba Morayef’s interview. How do Egyptians who are not MB members but also do not support the regimes of Egyptian dictators view the MB? How does religion play a role in these views?



Former Egyptian President and Muslim Brotherhood member Mohamed Morsi before his ouster. By Wilson Dias, 2013. Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2vmQTQV>