



PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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“Between Religion and Politics”
The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
September 29, 2010

An event was held today at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace celebrating the release of the book "Between Religion and Politics", coauthored by **Amr Hamzawy** and **Nathan Brown**. **Marwan Muasher** acted as the moderator for the event, where the authors explained the process they utilized in the researching of the book and explored, in depth, the case studies of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Marwan Muasher noted that the author's research extended to six countries in total. He then posed several questions which set the tone for the event: **How have Islamist groups challenged autocratic regimes and how can these same groups maintain their ideological base, cultivate new constituencies, and expand their reach into new political, cultural, and social realms?**

Nathan Brown divided his initial statements into two sections: First, a look at the framework and approach that they took for the project, and then a case study, specifically Hamas. Brown related that **the project began in 2005-2006, which he called "a very specific moment" in the development of Islamist groups**. Over the previous 15 years, these groups had seen growing influence, both within the region and in the international community. This growth sparked debate, which differed depending on what community you were a part of. The West focused on whether or not to engage with Islamist groups. Regimes in the region had to decide whether to treat these groups as a security matter, dealing with them through repression and violence, or as a political matter, attempting to co-opt or shape them. Non-Islamist reform movements in the region had to decide if they wanted to work with the Islamist groups, with whom they shared some programmatic similarities. **The Islamists themselves were undecided as to what form their participation would take. Some formed political parties, but virtually all of them coalesced into broader movements, of which politics was just one part.** Brown said that Islamist groups generally understood that electoral success was far off, and shared that **many of the groups had a broader set of goals and longer time horizons than he had expected** when beginning his research. He then explained that the conversation would focus on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas, two groups that, while outwardly similar, were inherently different. The Brotherhood seeks peaceful change, while Hamas has an armed wing. The Brotherhood focuses primarily on Egyptian issues, rarely stepping into foreign policy, while Hamas is the center of international attention. Both, however, are indicative of what happens when you have a group that is at once a political party and a broader movement.

Delving into the history of Hamas, Brown explained that the Muslim Brotherhood has had a presence in Palestine since the 1940's. These initial groups were more focused on religion, wanting to make the Palestinians more Islamic, rather than focusing on politics. By the 1980's, something had changed. In Gaza, the West Bank, and the Palestinian Diaspora, **a desire for a different kind of Muslim Brotherhood, one focused on resistance, became prevalent. Hamas was formed in this environment.** The political aspect of the group did not arise until 1991 with the Madrid talks, when

the possibility of meaningful electoral participation started. This began a running internal debate in Hamas about participation. Some members left the group to run in the 1996 parliamentary elections, but many saw that as "legitimizing the Oslo process", a negative to many in Hamas. After 1996, the opportunity to run decreased, with the exception of municipal elections, but those would be canceled or otherwise disrupted by the Israelis if Hamas ran. This began a return to the social/religious foundations of Hamas that ended with the Second Intifada in 2000.

In 2005, Hamas decided to enter negotiations with other Palestinian groups about standing for election; even though members of Hamas, according to Brown, were sure they would lose or not be allowed to win. When the decision to run was made, it was cast as a reaction to the failures of Fatah. They won, much to their own surprise. **Hamas promised a three part plan: Resistance, societal reform, and governance. The question, Brown said, was how to deliver on all three.** Hamas has generally privileged governance over the other two. Brown explained that **this case study shows that the ideology of a given Islamist movement is not necessarily a good predictor of that group's behavior.** They often promise too much, and the hard realities they face will have a great influence on their actions.

Amr Hamzawy began his case study with an anecdote: Last Ramadan in Cairo, two serials were shown on television. One was called "Zahra and Her Five Husbands" and the other was called "The Group", about the origins of the Muslim Brotherhood. This, Hamzawy said, shows how deep the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood is in Egypt. **The Brotherhood is an illegal, controversial group, and yet decades of influence had allowed it to become the topic of a television serial during Ramadan, when television viewership is at its peak in the Muslim world.** Hamzawy then broke his case study into **two time periods that he felt were illustrative of the Brotherhoods evolution: 2005 and 2010.** Beginning with the 2005 period, Hamzawy described 5 features of the Brotherhood at that time. 1.) The Brotherhood signed onto an initiative in 2004 that prioritized democratic reforms, 2.) they entered into a dialogue with non-Islamist opposition groups to see if a consensus could be reached, 3.) they showed "pragmatism" by hinting at a willingness to accept the Camp David Accords, which they had strongly denounced, 4.) the Brotherhood clearly prioritized political participation over religious/social initiative, 5.) they began privileging activists who were more secular and allowing them to be the public face of the group. 2005 was an opportunity to participate, and the Brotherhood took it, winning 88 seats in the parliament.

The Brotherhood in 2010 was an exact reversal of these actions. There was **an attempt to "re-balance"**, or to bring back the emphasis on religion, in the 2007 platform. The outreach to other groups largely ended, and was replaced with internal debates. Conservative members were on the rise, while the political wing of the party withdrew. Hamzawy admitted that these were generalizations, but insisted that they were representative of the changes happening at the time. The question, he asked, was why? In short, the domestic Egyptian political environment. **In 2005, there was hope that political spaces were becoming more open and that change could be effected democratically, by 2010, that hope was largely gone.** It was, as Hamzawy put it, **"a move from a moment of inclusion into a cycle of repression."** The Brotherhood, and the public at large, saw how ineffective parliament was at changing the system. The government, after watching the Brotherhood win 88 seats in 2005, acted swiftly to change the constitution, constraining the Brotherhoods ability to win seats. The Brotherhood failed to stop these amendments, hurting them on both a practical and reputational level. The internal debates since 2007 have also affected the Brotherhood, Hamzawy said, breaking the once unified front. The turn back towards a religious platform has alienated the non-Islamist groups, weakening what had been a promising collaboration. Hamzawy asked how they were to maintain a

constituency when they had, demonstratively, so little influence. He ended by noting that the **tensions between the political and religious factions (or participatory and non-participatory factions) are, and will continue to be, the major debate within the Brotherhood.**

Muasher began the question and answer session by asking Brown and Hamzawy what the situation will be for Islamist groups in 20 years: in control, losing, or static?

Brown answered that it depended on the environment as much as the groups themselves. He went on to say that **the last decade was a "high" point in participation** and that it pays to bet on stability or stagnation. Hamzawy responded that there are contradictory signs about whether these groups can maintain their popularity. He pointed to Jordan and Morocco as two examples where Islamist groups did poorly at the polls.

The next questioner challenged Hamzawy's claim that the Brotherhood was turning inward, pointing to their support for ElBaradei.

Brown agreed that the Brotherhood had been more active so far than he might have predicted, but said that he thought they were in a "defensive and reactive mode" wondering "what's going to happen to us next?" He went on to point out that the Egyptian Brotherhood's influence is waning in the Arab world, relating how **groups in Kuwait and Jordan told him Egypt was "hopeless."** Hamzawy disagreed with the questioner, and pointed to the disagreement over an electoral boycott in the upcoming elections as proof. The Brotherhood, he explained, is fielding 200 candidates, while ElBaradei's coalition, the NAC, is pushing for the boycott. He said that, on a personal note, he was disappointed that the Brotherhood was participating, believing their abstention would have "changed the conversation" about the election.

The last questions were taken as a group, with three being answered by the Hamzawy and Brown. 1.) Will Sharia continue to be a major part of the Brotherhoods platform or will it be marginalized? 2.) What are the authors take on Hamas's current political ambitions? 3.) In Morocco, the PJD is currently seen as a tool of the regime, is this true/fair, and if so, is it the result of the participatory/non-participatory divide?

Hamzawy responded to the Morocco question by saying that the PJD is not directly controlled by the monarchy, and that it has a real constituency, has contested elections, has a real platform, and runs organizations. He went on to explain that **when you participate as an Islamist party is a system where you know your influence is going to be limited and you will still be actively repressed, any participation is seen as grounds for accusations of legitimizing a corrupt process.** With regard to the Sharia question, Hamzawy said that the Brotherhood's draft platform of 2007 makes it clear that Sharia is central to their politics, and that Sharia has been used to keep Coptic Christians out of high office in Egypt.

Brown specified that Sharia can mean two things in the political sphere, a set of generalized mores about behavior or a set of very specific Islamic jurisprudence or rule based discourse. Of late, he explained, pressure from Salafist groups and limited efficacy in the political realm has caused Islamist groups to emphasize the "credentials", leading to a focus on the rule based discourse aspect. In regards to the Hamas question, Brown said that they try to insinuate themselves as much as possible into Palestinian society. They want to be seen as a real governing alternative.

