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### Syria

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THE SYRIAN CONFLICT HAS offered a unique opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood to make its comeback on the political stage more than 30 years after President Hafez al-Assad forced them out of the country. The local Brotherhood branch, founded by Syrian clerics inspired by the ideas of Hassan al-Banna, entered parliament in the 1950s and 1960s before taking the helm of the Islamist opposition to the Baathist regime in the early 1980s and then seeking refuge abroad. In sociological parlance, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood therefore transformed from an open *social movement* into a *social movement organization*, one characterized by a limited staff and membership base and driven by the “primary goal” of “organizational survival.”<sup>1</sup> Its priorities, in other words, have more to do with survival and adapting to a volatile environment than with any specific political or ideological considerations.

On the one hand, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s development of an informal bureaucracy in exile has allowed it to train skilled politicians who have safeguarded the organization’s core interests by navigating—with considerable pragmatism—Syria’s troubled waters. On the other hand, however, the bureaucratization of the Brotherhood has also meant its “oligarchization”<sup>2</sup>—or the concentration of power within the hands of a few longtime Brotherhood figures. Not only has this dynamic raised the specter of factionalism and constrained the group’s

effectiveness on the ground but it has also alienated other Islamists who increasingly view the group as more interested in organizational preservation than in the actual implementation of its ideological agenda.

#### A PRAGMATIC LEADERSHIP

The Brotherhood's focus on survival and its development of a cadre of skilled politicians explain much of its success in becoming a driving force of exiled Syrian politics. The group has routinely been accused of directly "controlling" the opposition since the start of the conflict in 2011.<sup>3</sup> However, in actual fact, the Brotherhood has tended to exert its influence in indirect ways. For instance, when the Syrian National Council (SNC) was created in September 2011, Brotherhood officials neither tried to "Islamize" its political program nor claim leadership. Instead, they worked with other activists to build broad alliances. They backed opposition figures with backgrounds very distinct from their own to become heads of the SNC, such as Burhan Ghalioun, a secular Sunni activist; Abdelbasset Sieda, a Kurdish academic; and George Sabra, a Christian Marxist. In addition to forging these partnerships, the Muslim Brotherhood showcased its influence by acting as a bloc during SNC voting sessions—and this sometimes turned them into the opposition's kingmakers. Indeed, their internal cohesion and political organization stand in stark contrast to the fragmentation and shifting alliances that characterize the rest of the Syrian opposition to date.

Muslim Brotherhood politicians again demonstrated their political skill in December 2012 after the Obama administration pushed the SNC to integrate the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a new platform that was deemed more diverse and representative of the Syrian spectrum. The Brotherhood, at first reluctant to enter into a larger body in which their influence would be diluted, finally endorsed the move after nominating their strongman, Faruk Tayfur, as the new body's vice president. They also penetrated the National Coalition's decision-making circles through alliances with ideological fellow travelers, including the National Action Group for Syria, a grouping of ex-Brotherhood members from Aleppo; the Committee to Protect Civilians, a humanitarian and military platform

active in Homs; and the League of the Syrian Ulema, a lobby group gathering religious scholars and headed by Mohamed Ali Sabouni, a figure close to the Brotherhood. Yet while this complex cocktail of mutual interests and Islamist sympathies, sometimes disguised, helped the Brotherhood secure political influence, it further alienated those who were already suspicious of its efforts to control the opposition. These criticisms reached their apex following the March 2013 election of Ghassan Hitto, an ally of Qatar seen by many as the "Brotherhood's man,"<sup>4</sup> as head of the Syrian opposition's "transitional government."<sup>5</sup>

The row over Hitto's election, his subsequent resignation, and the almost simultaneous nomination of Saudi-backed Ahmed al-Jarba as new head of the opposition also reflected the Brotherhood's entanglement in regional power struggles. The Brotherhood had initially supported the Qatari camp in the Syrian opposition in exchange for increased media exposure and political support. This, unsurprisingly, alienated Saudi Arabia. And when Riyadh ultimately seized the "Syrian file" from Doha in 2013, the new landscape naturally translated into a decrease in the Brotherhood's influence. This pushed some of its leaders to rethink their strategies. From then on, Faruk Tayfur did his utmost to fix the group's relationship with the kingdom—sparing little of his own political capital to court Riyadh and to support the Saudi agenda within the Coalition. His first steps in this direction were met with unease by other Brotherhood leaders.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, at precisely the same time, Saudi Arabia was encouraging the Egyptian army to crack down on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Yet Tayfur's realist approach eventually won over the rest of the organization. In January 2014, most of the Brotherhood members in the Coalition voted in favor of Ahmed al-Jarba when he ran for a second time as head of the opposition. "We all realized that we don't stand to gain anything from confronting Saudi Arabia," summed up a source in the leadership remarked to me.<sup>7</sup>

This pragmatism even enabled the Syrian Brotherhood to emerge unscathed from Saudi Arabia's March 2014 designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. "Saudi policymakers let us know that our organization would be spared from their decision to crack down on all Brotherhood branches in the region," one of the group's leaders explained with tangible relief. Thousands of known

Syrian Brothers now continue to safely work and live in the kingdom, where many took refuge after Hafez al-Assad's repression in the early 1980s. And in November 2014, when the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood designated as its new leader Mohamed Walid, a Syrian surgeon practicing in Jeddah, the Saudi authorities did not raise any objections.<sup>8</sup> In turn, Walid would have warm words for the kingdom. After his election, he thanked Saudi Arabia for "protecting" the Syrian Brothers in their exile and for "supporting" the Syrian revolution.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps more significantly, he called the kingdom a "strategic powerhouse for all Muslims in the world," supported its standoff against Iran, and gave his blessing early on to the Saudi military intervention in Yemen.<sup>10</sup>

#### A CENTRIST IDEOLOGY?

The accommodation with Saudi Arabia has also made long-standing political differences between the leaderships of the Brotherhood's Syrian and Egyptian branches much starker. This divergence is nothing new. But it emerged forcefully during the Arab Spring after high-ranking Syrian Brotherhood figures expressed bewilderment at the way their counterparts dealt with Egyptian politics and, in particular, with the opposition. A few months before the July 2013 coup, Zuheir Salem, a spokesman and chief ideologue for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, bluntly argued that it had been a "mistake" for the Egyptian Brotherhood to contest the presidential elections. "Egypt was a sinking boat and you cannot come and change it the way you are doing; I believe that we have to work within a coalition," he said, referring to the Egyptian Brotherhood's leadership.<sup>11</sup> The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had also become increasingly critical of Mohamed Morsi and his handling of the conflict in Syria. In May 2013, an official Syrian Brotherhood publication used particularly harsh words to describe the Egyptian president's courting of Iran and Russia—two allies of Bashar al-Assad's regime. "It was painful for our people to hear President Mohamed Morsi's remarks in Moscow. . . . The Syrian people, including members of our [organization], are waiting for an explanation and wonder bitterly: where is President Morsi's attitude taking him?"<sup>12</sup> Even the Egyptian president's last-minute policy shift on Syria and his call for a worldwide "jihad" against the Assad regime were met with

widespread skepticism. "The Syrian people know best what is needed for their future. Syrians don't need foreign fighters," asserted Ali al-Bayanouni, a top Syrian Brotherhood figure.<sup>13</sup> The Egyptian army's 2013 coup naturally pushed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's leadership to express solidarity with its Egyptian sister and to tone down its criticisms of Morsi, but unease between the two branches persisted.

Ideologically, the Syrian Brotherhood also sought to distance itself from its Egyptian counterpart. This desire was already visible a decade ago when the Syrian organization published a "National Honour Charter" and a "Political Project," whose content was reiterated in a "National Covenant" published in 2012. These documents stressed the need to respect the religious, cultural, and political diversity of the Syrian people while calling for the establishment of a parliamentary regime free from religious oversight. Practically, this meant that leaders of the Syrian Brotherhood were highly critical of the Egyptian branch's stipulation that neither a Coptic Christian nor a woman should be chosen as president of Egypt. They also rejected Egyptian calls for the establishment of an advisory council of clerics who would determine whether legal rulings conform to Islamic law. "We don't want to enter the realm of theocracy," summed up ideologue Zuheir Salem. To make its "centrist" (*wasatiya*) approach more concrete to the public, the Syrian Brotherhood spearheaded the creation of the Waad party in July 2013. This "national party with an Islamic framework" intended to demonstrate that Syrians can "work together" by gathering within a single grouping a number of Muslim Brothers, independent Islamists, and "national figures" including secular Sunnis and even some Christians and Alawites.<sup>14</sup> These moves helped place the leaders of the Syrian Brotherhood in the orbit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP. Mostly based in Istanbul and with a field office in Gaziantep on the Syrian-Turkish border, Waad figures enjoy close ties to the Turkish government and they have often spoken of their admiration for the "Turkish miracle."

Officially, the birth of Waad was meant to separate the Brotherhood's religious and social activities, on the one hand, and its political activism on the other. Inside the new party, a decision-making process involving an equal number of Brotherhood members and nonmembers was specifically instituted to ensure a degree of independence from the parent

movement. This initially contrasted with Egypt's Justice and Freedom Party, often seen as little more than an arm of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Enshrining a clearer distinction between a religious movement (*haraka*) and a party (*hizb*) had been a long-standing demand of a number of Syrian Muslim Brothers. "This new party is the product of the lobbying efforts undertaken by the most moderate Brotherhood members and some of the youth a decade ago," explained a high-ranking Waad figure. "It finally allows Muslim Brothers to work, free from organizational constraints, with whoever agrees with their vision of a post-Assad Syria—including secular Syrians and minorities." The rise of the new party also seemed to offer appealing career prospects to young Islamists frustrated by the older generation's monopoly on the Brotherhood's leadership. A figure close to the Brotherhood cynically observed that "the creation of Waad was a way to give positions to ambitious politicians frustrated by the lack of opportunities in the Brotherhood."

It remains to be seen whether Waad will retain its self-professed "political independence."<sup>15</sup> The party's independence was undermined by the November 2014 election of its own head, Mohammed Walid, as the new leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Walid immediately resigned from his post, but suspicion now lingers that the party was always merely acting as the Brotherhood's political wing. "The whole idea behind the party was to show independence from the Brotherhood's leadership," an activist close to Waad bitterly complained. "Walid's election destroyed everything." The Syrian Brotherhood's new leader acknowledged as much when he stated in early 2015 that Waad had "not grown and developed as planned."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, to date, the Muslim Brothers still fund most of the party's activities, and they have yet to relinquish any of their seats to Waad members in the opposition Coalition. The debate is likely to intensify between advocates of a more radical separation between party and movement and those who argue that it is an ill-timed, costly, and mostly cosmetic initiative.

#### THE RISK OF FACTIONALISM

Tension between the Syrian Brotherhood's youth and the older generation largely pre-dates the debate over the Waad party. It dates back to

the mid-1980s, when the group's efforts at establishing a "bureaucracy in exile" to ensure organizational survival led to its "oligarchization". Clique structures started to emerge and to compete with each other for internal power. Factionalism thus became a main feature of the Syrian Brotherhood. But additional cracks in the foundation appeared after the 2010 election of Riyadh al-Shuqfa as the group's leader. His election came to symbolize the victory of a powerful bloc made up mainly of conservative figures from Hama and Idlib who belong to the older generation. Disappointment at the election results prompted a group of reform-minded Islamists from Aleppo in their 30s and early 40s to defect from the Brotherhood and to set up a parallel structure called the National Action Group for Syria.<sup>17</sup> "We were frustrated by the older generation's monopoly of power and we wanted to clearly separate politics from *da'wa* [religious activities] by having our own political platform," recounted a member of the splinter group. "Our vision was very much neo-Brotherhood." At first, the National Action Group gained traction by proposing political initiatives aimed at gathering the exiled opposition under one umbrella. It would become a founding member of the SNC, and its leader, Ahmed Ramadan, would rapidly emerge as one of the opposition's most influential figures.

Yet a series of challenges surfaced that effectively stalled the rise of these ex-Muslim Brothers. Internally, many members grew frustrated with Ahmed Ramadan's central role in the group's decision-making process. "The National Action Group ended up making the same mistake as the Brotherhood," resentfully argued one of its former members. "The platform became heavily centralized around very few key figures—and this felt like an insult in the face of those of us who also had ambitions." Figures close to the group also suggest that this centralization of power eventually stymied debate and prevented the emergence of a clear politico-ideological vision capable of competing with the Brotherhood's. Externally, the tactical alliances forged between the National Action Group and the Syrian Brotherhood—initially meant to increase their mutual influence in the SNC and later in the Coalition—resulted in much confusion within the rest of the opposition. "To me, whether they are Ikhwan [Brotherhood] or neo-Ikhwan is the same—they come from the same background and I oppose their

agenda,” summed up a left-wing member of the Syrian opposition. An official from the National Action Group agreed that it had “made mistakes” and that it would “take time” until the group developed an original political project and became a truly independent force.

Concurrent with the birth of the National Action Group, the Brotherhood took steps to prevent yet another generational split from its ranks. “Our youth have been very active at the level of the base—now we want to give them more opportunities to organize, launch initiatives, and reach leadership positions,” explained a Muslim Brotherhood figure who belongs to the older generation. The crisis in Syria indeed seems to have fired up the youth, who, until then, were not particularly involved in the affairs of the exiled organization. After 2011, young Syrians affiliated with the Brotherhood flocked to Istanbul, where the group’s headquarters is located, to take part in initiatives such as raising the Syrian revolution’s profile on social media and setting up charities that provide aid to the refugees. Others are the driving force behind the publication of the group’s weekly newspaper and, more generally, behind its public relations and outreach initiatives. Recent figures even suggest that as many as half of the Syrian Brotherhood’s staff are junior members of the group.<sup>18</sup>

It is in this context that the new generation began playing a more important political role within the organization. The creation of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood’s youth office in 2012 provided the framework in which young members could organize as an internal lobby group and more effectively voice their grievances to the leadership. This, at least initially, seemed to yield results. The youth office obtained funds from the Brotherhood’s leadership to organize a large conference in December 2012. The event gathered in Istanbul hundreds of youth who, because of exile, had until then been scattered throughout the world—it thus had an important socializing role. The conference also witnessed the rise of young and charismatic conservative politicians, a few of whom were subsequently asked to join the Brotherhood’s top leadership.<sup>19</sup>

Yet the specter of further generational tensions still lingers over the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Politically, the youth contingent is dominated by idealist and revolutionary figures who don’t see eye to eye with the older generation’s attempt to seek an accommodation at all costs

with Saudi Arabia and offer up any number of tactical concessions in the name of pragmatism. In January 2014, a statement by a “group of sons of the Muslim Brotherhood” criticized the leadership for tending to “ally with personalities and groups that seek a political settlement with the regime and that have strong ties to regional and international powers while it reduces its interaction with those revolutionary forces working to overthrow the regime using all means.”<sup>20</sup> Organizationally, the youth are highly critical of the murky power struggle within the leadership that pits a bloc of Muslim Brothers from Hama and Idlib against those from Aleppo. In February 2014, younger members attempted to introduce greater transparency in the decision-making process, but their initiative was thwarted by the Consultative Council (the *Majlis al-Shura*, which acts as the Brotherhood’s internal parliament). As mentioned earlier, the election of 70-year-old Mohamed Walid as the head of the Syrian Brotherhood came as a bitter disappointment. In an attempt to heal the growing rift, the new leader nominated as his deputy Hussam Ghadban, then head of the Brotherhood’s youth office.<sup>21</sup> But youth frustration still simmers. “We wanted to see a radical change in the group’s leadership,” recounted a young and self-described “revolutionary” Muslim Brother. “What we got instead is cosmetic change and more of the same—the old generation is still very much in control of the Consultative Council and of the leadership.”

#### THE DILEMMAS OF MILITARY WORK

In a further bid to appeal to the new generation, Mohamed Walid promised to “concentrate on the youth” and to allocate 75 percent of the Brotherhood’s financial resources to activities inside Syria—which are overwhelmingly carried out by young Muslim Brotherhood members.<sup>22</sup> This is also part of the group’s wider strategy to regain a foothold in the country after three decades abroad. “We may have influence in the exiled opposition but our organization cannot survive for long if it continues to be based outside of Syria,” argued a member close to the leadership. Initially, this willingness to reconnect with Syrians and to contribute to the revolution on the ground led the Brotherhood to invest in humanitarian efforts. Its charity arm, Ataa Relief, has been one of the most active organizations in the refugee camps on the Syrian–Turkish

border. The Brotherhood also opened an office in Aleppo and another in the countryside of Idlib. But in the context of the current conflict in Syria, part of the Brotherhood's strategy has also consisted of courting rebel groups and forming its own brigades—with mixed results.

These efforts only really took off in early 2012 when individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood participated in the creation of the Committee to Protect Civilians (*Himayat al-Madaniyin*), a platform that distributes humanitarian aid around Homs and also provides rebel groups with “logistical support.” A high-ranking Syrian Brotherhood figure recounted the strategy: “Given that the notion of armed struggle was still rather controversial in opposition circles, Brotherhood leaders temporarily decentralized decisions on this matter and left it up to members themselves to engage, or not engage, in that type of activity.” Yet as the military struggle later came to dominate—and as some rebel brigades began to engage in looting and executions—rumors spread that the Brotherhood had grown frustrated and had formed its own rebel groups.<sup>23</sup> The move was formalized in December 2012 when the group's leadership announced the formation of the Shields of the Revolution Commission (*Hay'at Duro' al-Thawra*), a military platform gathering dozens of “centrist-minded” rebel brigades that “trust the Brotherhood.”<sup>24</sup>

In theory, the Shields had the potential to be an influential actor on the Syrian rebel scene. Following its creation, it rapidly swallowed many smaller brigades. Its fighters became equipped with high-quality anti-tank weapons. And by clearly rejecting “all calls for *takfeer*, forced displacement, mass murder and sectarian and ethnic discrimination,” the rebel platform portrayed itself as moderate in unambiguous terms—thus potentially attracting foreign backing.<sup>25</sup> Yet despite these advantages, the Shields failed to emerge as a significant force on the ground. While the Muslim Brotherhood's support initially attracted funding, it also accentuated the mistrust of other Islamist rebel groups—be they similarly centrist or more radical. Some viewed the Brotherhood as self-interested and still remembered the group's own history in the late 1970s when leaders called for “jihad” against the Assad regime and joined hands with other Islamist militias, only to retract from the alliance soon afterward and to escape Syria, leaving thousands of fighters behind. “We haven't yet

managed to overcome the mistrust of the past,” acknowledged a Brotherhood member tasked with handling relations with rebel groups in Syria. This effectively prevented the Shields from joining major rebel alliances such as the Islamic Front, the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, or the Army of Victory (*Jaysh al-Fatah*). In addition, the Brotherhood's lack of sophisticated understanding of military action led to confused decisions that weakened the Shields. For instance, an attempt to decentralize the platform's command-and-control structure to allow for local autonomy backfired. It took until October 2013 for Shields fighters from Idlib province to mount a coordinated attack with their counterparts in Hama on a regime checkpoint. The lack of tight hierarchy may also have led some brigades to “misbehave,” in the words of a source inside the Shields.

These embarrassing failures eventually led the Muslim Brotherhood to reduce its support for the rebel platform. “The Shields have lost the support of many inside the Brotherhood,” explained a figure in the leadership. “Some argue that we should not get involved in military activities since we are first and foremost an organization focused on *da'wa* and politics. Others are disappointed by the performance of the fighters on the ground. And most of us find that the whole enterprise cost too much money.” The election of Mohamed Walid may have put the final nail in the coffin of the Shields. The new leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood made it clear that he intends to essentially focus on “missionary and educational activities” inside Syria.<sup>26</sup> A source inside the Shields confirmed the Brotherhood's dwindling support: “Nowadays the group's leadership mainly provides us with media support as well as food and clothes—but we need money and weapons to continue training and operating in Syria.” This growing tension has led a number of rebel groups to defect from the Shields over the past year. Most of the defectors have so far joined other mainstream Islamist rebel platforms close to the Brotherhood's ideology, including the Sham Legion (*Faylaq al-Sham*) and the Soldiers of Sham (*Ajnad al-Sham*).<sup>27</sup> This, however, could well change in the medium and long term. Indeed, extremist Islamist groups are on the rise precisely in the areas where the Shields have some presence. The al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, now rebranded as Jabhat Fath al-Sham, controls vast swathes of Idlib province, while the Islamic State, for long confined to its stronghold of Raqqa and to Eastern Syria, emerged as a

powerful force in the countryside of Homs and Hama. Given the Brotherhood's decreased support for the Shields, some brigades could in the future be tempted to join these more radical alternatives—which, in addition to holding vast financial resources, also provide an increasingly appealing ideological model.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF EXTREMISM

The leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood were slow to grasp the ideological challenge stemming from the rise of extremist groups. At first they even refused to acknowledge their very presence on the ground. In April 2013, the Brotherhood's then-leader, Riyadh al-Shuqfa, insisted that "there is no extremism in Syria."<sup>28</sup> It would take the meteoric rise of the Islamic State for him to recognize their significance and to disassociate the Brotherhood from such radical groups. "We disagree with ISIS, first because of its extremist ideas, and second, because of its violent actions," he stated in September 2014 before advising Islamic State chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to "refer to the Quran and the Sunna to understand Islam correctly and to improve his approach."<sup>29</sup> Yet even then he went to great lengths to argue that the Syrian people's inherent "moderation and tolerance" would make the Islamic State a temporary phenomenon that would quickly fade after the collapse of the Assad regime. His successor, Mohammed Walid, adopted a more forceful approach against Islamist extremists. Shortly after his election in November 2014, he criticized the Islamic State for "deviating from the Syrian revolution's track."<sup>30</sup> He also threatened the use of "self defense" against the Islamic State in the event Muslim Brothers came under attack inside Syria.<sup>31</sup>

But while the Brotherhood's leaders came to realize the security implications behind the rise of extremism, few seem to be aware of the dangers that the Islamic State's ideological orientation and achievements on the ground pose to the wider group. Frustrated by the Brotherhood's organizational rigidity and poor military performance, a small number of members may already have left the group in recent years to join more radical platforms such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and perhaps the Islamic State too. There is a growing risk that the "Islamic" governance structures established by these organizations on the ground may become an increasingly appealing alternative to young Islamists alienated by the

pragmatism and seeming political opportunism of the Brotherhood's leaders. "ISIS has succeeded where the Brotherhood has failed," summed up (with a hint of admiration) a former Muslim Brother who is now closer to radical Islamist groups in Syria. "It restored the Caliphate and took many Muslims back to religion." This vulnerability of some members to the ideology of radical groups seems to have its roots in the failure of the Brotherhood's educational program and curriculum (*tarbiya*).

Interestingly, the ideological moderation undergone by the Brotherhood throughout the 2000s was not free from internal controversy. The strongest resistance it faced came from the very clerics responsible for the group's educational program. This consequently meant that aspiring Muslim Brothers continued to be taught a variety of ideas and authors that naturally included Mustafa al-Sibai, the founder of the Syrian Brotherhood and a supporter of democracy, but also included radical figures such as Said Hawwa, who supported jihad against the Syrian regime in the 1970s and advocated the restoration of the caliphate.<sup>32</sup> "Those responsible for the educational program still teach the radical strands of Islamist thinking and, in the context of today's conflict in Syria, this has left a number of Muslim Brothers ideologically confused," explained a former member who himself went through the curricula. "The group's official discourse is one thing. But behind closed doors some clerics still call for the establishment of an Islamic state—without elaborating much further on what they actually mean by that."

The growing gap between the Brotherhood's official discourse and the kind of speech that some members are spreading at the grassroots level has become more evident since the U.S.-led air strikes on Islamic State strongholds in Syria and Iraq. The anti-Western tone of some Brotherhood clerics—something almost entirely absent from the official discourse of the leadership—reached new heights. A video featuring one such cleric was widely circulated on social media platforms affiliated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In it, he lambasted the United States in particularly harsh terms:

There is a global alliance led by America, the world's leader in terrorism, whose crimes are more than to be counted and greater than

to be looked into. America has gathered its soldiers, troops, weapons, equipment and allies to allegedly destroy ISIS. . . . O Americans! O allies! Return home for we need you not! You are the cause of the plague and the reason for the ailment. You are the ones who have given these regimes power over us, shedding blood and destroying the crops and the stocks. O Americans! O allies! O Westerners! The Nation needs you not for it is a great time-honoured nation and you are those who installed all these oppressive regimes.<sup>33</sup>

In the video, the Syrian Brotherhood cleric also criticized the Islamic State for originating from “international intelligence agencies” and for declaring an “imaginary caliphate which all [religious] scholars have declared to be null and void.” More appealing arguments may be needed to effectively counter the ideology spread by extremist groups. Mohamed Walid seemed to acknowledge as much in February 2015 when he stressed that “deep ideological differences exist between the Muslim Brotherhood and [the Islamic State].”<sup>34</sup> In a later intervention, he specified that “the imposition of sharia by force is a mistaken understanding of the texts and a mistaken understanding of Islam itself.”<sup>35</sup> It will now be up to the group’s clerics to embrace the “centrist” discourse of the Brotherhood’s leaders—or risk losing parts of their base to more radical Islamist groups.

#### A NEW APPROACH TO THE BROTHERHOOD

The ways in which the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has attempted to regain a foothold inside the country after decades of absence, and the type of challenges it has faced, illustrate the relevance of what is known as resource mobilization theory for the study of Islamic activism. Over the past decade, Brotherhood branches throughout the Middle East have mainly been analyzed as social movements. Researchers focused on the ways broad political structures affected grassroots support for the Brotherhood, and this approach may still be valid in relatively stable countries like Morocco or Tunisia. Yet in a regional political context marked by the return of state authoritarianism and an intensifying crackdown against Brotherhood branches, new theoretical lines of enquiry have emerged. One particularly interesting approach is to better

understand the factors behind the Brotherhood’s resilience despite all the challenges mentioned in this chapter.

What distinguishes Brotherhood branches from the countless other Islamist groups in the Middle East is the emphasis they place on the development of an informal “bureaucracy.” And when they undergo repression and have to seek refuge abroad, their “bureaucracy” is one of the last tools they are left with. The case of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood demonstrates the key role these internal structures can play in helping to raise a professional cadre of politicians, socialize the youth into party loyalty, and unite members with the ultimate purpose of preserving the organization under dire circumstances. It comes at a high cost, however, as the group may ultimately become more interested in “organizational maintenance” than in the actual pursuit of the political goals it was originally created for, something that may spur internal disagreement and dissent.

Resource mobilization theory, with the focus it puts on the need to study the internal and organizational nature of social movements, offers theoretical insights that are relevant beyond the case of the Syrian Brotherhood. It allows researchers to delve deeply into current internal debates within virtually all Brotherhood branches and to evaluate the importance of splinter groups emerging out of the organization on ideological, generational, or regional lines. This “neo-institutionalist approach” also encourages scholars to consider the changing nature of these groups’ decision-making structures and internal struggles. Such avenues for research are crucial not only to better understand the groups themselves but also because, as this chapter shows, internal considerations, rather than ideological ones, often dictate key political decisions.