

Egypt can bring in the Brotherhood

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Egypt is ablaze. Hundreds of thousands protested in Cairo's Tahrir Square on Tuesday, but for fear of an Islamist regime the US now risks being remembered as a democracy that abandons democrats. After generations in opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood now wants to play a part in Egypt's future, giving a rare chance to strike a deal for their compromises and democratic involvement.

To this day we are paying the price for ignoring ordinary Iranians and siding with the Shah in 1979. Then, secular democrats triggered a revolution only to be brushed aside by fundamentalists. Today, ordinary Egyptians lead demonstrations but the Brotherhood waits in the background; an indispensable force in national life.

With a network running through trade unions, mosques, businesses and universities, the organisation is hugely influential. Opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei has already formed a loose alliance, and for sound reasons. Last September, of the million signatures petitioning for change under Mr ElBaradei's leadership, the Brotherhood collected 800,000.

I know all too well the power the Brotherhood can wield, having spent my student days in London as a member of its global organisation. Disillusioned by their conspiracy theories, distance from spiritual Islam and implausible answers to world problems, I eventually left. And after the 2005 bombings of London's Underground, I wrote a book exposing what I now saw as their bankrupt agenda. I have since spent three years warning Europeans of the destructive influence of Islamist ideologies.

To borrow a phrase from Mao, Islamists provide the sea in which jihadists swim. The Muslim Brotherhood, meanwhile, has often provided the mood music to which al-Qaeda's suicide bombers dance. But it is possible to turn that music off. Despite their reputation, the Brotherhood in Egypt are open to being shaped by partners, critics and political reality. American Muslim organisations – such as the Islamic Society of North America – were once part of the Brotherhood's global reach, but have since evolved to the benefits of Jeffersonian pluralism. The right approach can now help to push the Brotherhood in Egypt in the same direction.

America cannot ignore Egyptian Islamists in opposition today, or hope to confront them in government tomorrow. Such measures lead only to the collective punishment of entire peoples, as we see today in Gaza. Faith still dominates their politics, but the group can be persuaded to reject its confrontational mindset, supremacist tendencies and commitment to a mythological Islamic state.

Instead we must engage them, initially on the role of Islam itself. Islamists and western observers too often agree that sharia equates to state law, rather than a body of legal opinion. The Brotherhood repeats the absurd doctrine that "the Koran is our constitution", but the vast majority of Muslims disagree, seeing the Koran as a divine, not political document. With discussion and political incentives the Brotherhood can be persuaded to follow the lead of mainstream opinion.

There are other encouraging signs. Mohammed Badie, the Brotherhood's leader, comes from its conservative wing. But he recently scoffed at the notion of an Islamic state, saying his aim was to be part of a civilian administration. Another relative hardliner (and my former teacher) Kamal

ElHelbawi, said this weekend: "Islamists would not be able to rule Egypt alone." He argued for co-operation with secularists. Mr ElHelbawi has been a Brotherhood stalwart for half a century. If he and Mr Badie want to talk, we have cause for optimism.

To its credit, the Brotherhood also often calls for improved human rights. Pressing for them to clarify their views – on gender equality, rights for religious minorities and abandonment of killing, stoning and whipping as punishments – could become one condition for its intent to enter government in coalition. Perhaps the most important issue remains the Brotherhood's stance on Israel. Israel remains a regional superpower, with little to fear from Egypt's shabby military. Even Mr ElHelbawi, often an apologist for suicide bombers, does not dismiss existing agreements between Israel and Egypt. Even if a post-Mubarak Egypt turned belligerent, Israel could protect itself. Preventing an unlikely future conflict is no reason to suppress Egyptians' democratic aspirations.

Pluralism, human rights and Israel must therefore be at the heart of talks with Egypt's Islamists in the coming days. This will not be easy, and we must not mistake the Brotherhood for natural democrats in disguise. Nor are they representative of most Egyptians. In Bangladesh, Indonesia, and even Pakistan, Islamist parties do badly at the polls: voters tolerate their grandstanding but do not want to live under their rule. We must avoid the mistake we made with Iran, and seize this moment to support Egypt's democrats and ensure that religious parties moderate. Without this, Egypt could all too easily go the way of Iran, or Gaza. With it, we can have confidence that Egyptians themselves can bring democracy into being, and over the long term, they will be their country's greatest bulwark against Islamists.

by Ed Husain

P.S.

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* Ed Husain is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and author of 'The Islamist'.