

Comrades and Brothers, leftists and islamists

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Emad Mubarak is a busy man. Director of the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, and a lawyer with the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, the leftist Mubarak cannot hold a meeting without being interrupted by the ring of his cell phone. The calls these days come from student members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the officially outlawed Islamist group that is Egypt’s largest political movement. The students call to report security service abuses against them on campuses, or to request his legal counsel while they undergo interrogation by university administrators.

“Each time I receive a call, I can’t help but remember the old days and what it was like being on campus with the Brothers,” Mubarak giggles. In March 1999, he spent 22 days in Tura prison south of Cairo after Muslim Brotherhood students assaulted him and eight of his fellow socialists on campus, turning them over to the police. “Today, things are different. Leftists and Islamists can sit down and talk. Most of my clients are Muslim Brothers,” Mubarak said. “I tell them, ‘I’m a communist,’ and they are fine with that.”

From campus fistfights in the 1990s to joint demonstrations in 2005–2006, relations between the Muslim Brothers and the radical left in Egypt have come a long way. In settings where the two tendencies operate side by side, like student unions and professional syndicates, overt hostility has vanished, and there is even a small amount of coordination around tactics. Still, the cooperation remains symbolic, and leftists and Islamists have yet to join forces to undertake sustained mass actions against their common foe, the regime of President Hosni Mubarak.

A New Kind of Leftist

The improvement of leftist-Islamist relations can largely be traced to two factors. First is the evolution of a new left in Egypt whose two main pillars are the Revolutionary Socialist Organization and a growing left-leaning human rights community. This new left has different attitudes toward Islamism than those held by the previous “communist waves.”[1] Second is the generational change within both the left and the Brotherhood cadres spurred by the revival of Egyptian street politics, thanks to the second Palestinian intifada.

Bad blood between the Egyptian left and the Brothers has a long history, from the Islamists’ coordination with King Farouq in breaking strikes in the 1940s to President Anwar al-Sadat’s encouragement of violent Islamist assaults on leftist university students in the 1970s. Most independent leftist organizations in the 1980s and 1990s hewed to a line on political Islam similar to that of the Egyptian Communist Party—the dominant faction inside the “legal left” Tagammu’ Party—equating Islamist organizations, reformist or radical, with fascism. The only modest exception was Ahmad Nabil al-Hilali’s People’s Socialist Party, which briefly flirted in the late 1980s with

the idea that militant Islam was a “movement for the poor” deserving of support. The majority attitude on the traditional Stalinist left translated into an alliance, sometimes overt and occasionally tacit, with the Egyptian secular intelligentsia—and with Mubarak’s regime. Needless to say, joint political action with the Brothers was never on the table. A few independent leftist lawyers like al-Hilali and Hisham Mubarak were involved in defending Islamist detainees, but these were individual initiatives. As might be expected, the Muslim Brothers did not appreciate the “fascist” label, and they regarded the left with great distrust.

Starting in the late 1980s, small circles of Egyptian students, influenced by Trotskyism, gathered to study, eventually evolving in April 1995 into an organization named the Revolutionary Socialists’ Tendency. In contradistinction to the Stalinist left, these activists put forward the slogan “Sometimes with the Islamists, never with the state” in the literature they distributed on university campuses and elsewhere.[2] In practice, this slogan translated into taking up the cause of Muslim Brotherhood students on campus when it came to “democratic” issues, as when state security banned Islamist candidates from running in student union elections or expelled Islamist students from school. The “galleries” (ma’arid)—impromptu broadsheets written on cloth or cardboard and laid out in campus squares—of Revolutionary Socialist students at Cairo and ‘Ayn Shams Universities regularly carried denunciations of military tribunals’ sentences handed down to Muslim Brothers. At the same time, the Trotskyist students confronted the Muslim Brothers on issues such as freedom of expression and the rights of women and Coptic Christians. Whenever they felt the Brothers wanted to impose sex segregation in the classroom, or clamp down on campus theater and art, or whenever the Brotherhood’s Supreme Guide made sectarian comments about the Copts, the socialists’ “galleries” would carry vehement denunciations.

As a Revolutionary Socialist member who was active in the 1990s recalls: “We were a kind of leftist the Muslim Brothers hadn’t met before. They couldn’t quite figure us out at the beginning. Anyway, we were still too marginal for them to bother with. We were only a few individuals.” This began to change in 1999. On a few occasions in that year, as one socialist remembers, the Muslim Brotherhood students at Cairo University allowed the Revolutionary Socialist students to speak at rallies held on campus against the US airstrikes on Iraq. The socialist students took this unprecedented opportunity as a sign of the Muslim Brothers’ recognition that they were a force that had to be given a place on the political stage. It was a step in a long, slow process of building trust.

From a handful of members in 1995, the Revolutionary Socialists grew to a couple hundred activists on the eve of the second Palestinian intifada. Their ranks then swelled thanks to their role in the Egyptian movement of solidarity with the Palestinians, at a time when the Muslim Brothers largely abstained from street action. The radicalizing influence of the intifada among youth helped to reawaken the Egyptian tradition of street politics, which had been virtually smothered by the Mubarak regime’s fearsome security services. Cairo and several provinces witnessed their largest and most boisterous demonstrations since the 1977 uprising following President Anwar al-Sadat’s attempt to remove state subsidies for bread and other staples. Despite the opportunities presented by the ferment on the streets, the Muslim Brotherhood pursued the policy of non-confrontation with the regime it had abided by since the 1995 crackdown on its rank and file, culminating in a series of infamous military tribunals. Not only did Brotherhood students refuse to mobilize on the street, but they also sought on several occasions to curb the militancy of demonstrations. [3] In October 2000, for instance, after the socialists clashed with state security and burned police vans at pro-Palestinian demonstrations, the Brothers emerged to denounce “socialist sabotage.” At other times, Islamist students tried to physically restrain students from marching outside campus gates.

The increasingly radicalized political scene created a space for the left to intervene, but also generated pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership from the organization’s cadre. Leftist activists then at universities recall “naming and shaming” campus Brotherhood activists for their

lack of participation in the mass protests. In early April 2002, precisely following the outbreak of the leftist-led, pro-Palestinian riots at Cairo University, members of the Muslim Brothers began turning out for events organized by the Egyptian Popular Committee for the Solidarity with the Palestinian intifada. "Muslim Brotherhood representatives from the syndicates starting showing up to our meetings," says Ahmad Sayf, the director of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center, who has been hosting the committee's meetings. "They didn't have much choice, as they would have lost credibility in their constituencies if they hadn't turned out. Still, they only sent representatives [usually, 'Isam al-'Iryan or 'Abd al-Mun'im Abu al-Futouh, the two most popular party elders with Islamist youth] and avoided mass mobilization." More importantly, Sayf continues, "the Brotherhood was bowing to pressure from its youth, who were not happy with a complacent stand vis-à-vis the authorities." On April 5, 2002, a group of young Muslim Brothers published an open letter to Supreme Guide Mustafa Mashhour in the London-based daily al-Hayat, questioning the group's acquiescence in security crackdowns and demanding more involvement in the Palestinian solidarity movement. Sayf concludes: "The alternative was approaching the radicals in the opposition, as the 'legal' opposition, namely Tagammu', Wafd and the Nasserists, were too hostile. The radicals in the opposition, on the other hand, were happy to get whatever help the Brothers were willing to contribute."

The Muslim Brothers initially approached Revolutionary Socialist members, regarding them as the "least hostile" among the leftist factions, to suggest that Islamists collaborate with the left in the pro-intifada and anti-war movements. The move triggered a debate among leftist circles. Sympathizers of the Egyptian Communist Party, the People's Socialist Party, members of the Tagammu' bureaucracy and a faction from the human rights organizations refused any form of coordination with Islamists, though they made an exception for Magdi Hussein's Labor Party, whose brand of Islamism is regarded as somehow "left-leaning." The usual scene at such demonstrations was that the crowd would split into two circles, one led by leftists and Nasserists chanting leftist slogans, and another led by the Labor Party supporters chanting Islamic slogans. The Revolutionary Socialists, on the other hand, pushed for close coordination, supported by left-wing human rights activists such as members of the Hisham Mubarak Law Center and the Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence.

“Brotherly Spirit”

In 2003 and 2004, the Muslim Brotherhood stuck to its non-confrontational policy. While the Brothers kept on sending representatives to pro-Palestinian and anti-war demonstrations, the main concern of the organization was charity work, and demonstrating within the boundaries set by the regime, in complete coordination with the security services. The regime used the group as a safety valve for dissent during the early stage of the ongoing war in Iraq, allowing the Brothers to take part in government-sponsored rallies in Cairo Stadium, as well as in the provinces. Meanwhile, the left-leaning Palestine solidarity committee evolved into an anti-war movement, convening small street actions, which exploded into running clashes with the police in downtown Cairo on March 19 and 20, 2003. The next summer, a middle-ranking Muslim Brothers activist spoke of the increasing frustration among the group's cadre at the leadership's "leaving the street empty for the leftists. When Kifaya came onto the scene, some Brotherhood youth wanted to follow suit."

The anti-war movement, successor of the pro-intifada movement, evolved again by the end of 2004 into an anti-Mubarak movement, composed of two organizations. One was Kifaya (the Egyptian Movement for Change), a coalition made up primarily of members of the breakaway Nasserist faction Karama, individuals from the liberal al-Ghad Party, figures from the Egyptian Communist Party and veterans of the 1970s student movement. The other wing was the Popular Campaign for Change, which was more Marxist in composition, and included the Revolutionary Socialists, left-wing

human rights activists and independent leftists. The two organizations more or less fused together in the months to follow. Kifaya's sometimes quixotic and theatrical street actions attracted public attention, and helped to break taboos in Egypt's political life by issuing direct challenges—without euphemisms—to the president and his family.

Shortly after a series of Kifaya demonstrations, a group of Muslim Brotherhood activists, notably 'Ali 'Abd al-Fattah of Alexandria, held talks with Revolutionary Socialists and independent leftists, resulting in the launching of the National Alliance for Change in June 2005. The alliance was tactical, and revolved around an anti-Mubarak platform, with emphasis on vigilance against the prospect of vote rigging in that year's presidential and parliamentary elections. The fruits of this alliance did not radically alter the political scene on the ground. After announcing their intention to hold a joint demonstration with the left in 'Abdin Square in July 2005, the Muslim Brothers failed to show up, citing security pressures. Two more joint demonstrations were organized in front of the Lawyers' Syndicate. The first was chaotic, and the second was better organized, with consensus on slogans and banners. Since the winter 2005 parliamentary elections, the alliance has stayed out of the streets, but it remains in place as a coordination and problem-solving mechanism whenever friction arises in workplaces.

The rapprochement between Islamists and the left continued when students from the Revolutionary Socialists' Tendency, Muslim Brothers and some independents formed the Free Student Union (FSU) in November 2005, with the aim of acting as a parallel organization to the government-dominated student unions. The FSU was centered in Helwan and Cairo Universities, with tiny presences at a few other universities, including 'Ayn Shams. Following the rigging of the October 2006 student union elections, the Brotherhood threw its weight behind the FSU, sanctioning new branches at universities such as al-Azhar, Mansoura and Alexandria. Though the FSU is far from achieving the ambition of its organizers—nothing less than a national grassroots student union—the places where the FSU operates have witnessed another great improvement in relations between the Brothers and the radical left. Mustafa Muhi al-Din, a socialist activist from Helwan University, describes relations with the Brothers on campus as friendly. "They invite us to their events, and they show interest in our activities. Maybe the union here is still not strong, but there's space for activities. We can be active and spread our message, worrying about state security, but not about hassles from the Brotherhood, and sometimes they give us a hand. We do the same. This makes things easier." 'Abd al-'Aziz Mugahid, a Brotherhood activist and president of FSU at Helwan University, speaks enthusiastically of the "brotherly spirit" on campus. "The socialists intervened to help us out in solidarity demonstrations with our sisters who were expelled from the dormitories because they wore the niqab, and they stood by us when the administration expelled more than 400 students for security reasons. These joint activities were not frequent before."

Generational Change

The backbone of the solidarity actions with the Palestinian intifada has been students in their late teens or early twenties. As political virgins, they do not carry the baggage of the historical fighting between the leftists and Islamists, and among leftist factions.[4]

Meanwhile, the profile of the average young Muslim Brotherhood activist has undergone its own transformation, rendering a considerable number of the Brotherhood youth open for coordination with secular groups. "The Brotherhood cadre has changed," says Husam Tammam, author of a recent book on the organization.[5] "They have become socially assimilated. They are not necessarily the sons of the poverty belts and the marginalized nowadays." The Brotherhood's decisive entry into electoral politics "came at the expense of their identity, forcing them to be more pragmatic,"

Tammam adds. "So forget about the Islamic state, the caliphate, and so on. The more the Brothers get dragged into the political arena, the more they are integrated, and the more they try to operate according to the rules of the arena." Tammam continues: "The Brothers have changed in their relation to art, society and vision. You can see that well among the [Brothers'] youth. The youth voted for [Ghad candidate] Ayman Nour. This wasn't a central order from the group's leadership. When the youth are left without orders, they don't necessarily follow the group's traditional line. In my view, the last remarkable event held by the Brothers, before they took to the streets, was an event organized by the Brotherhood students called Muhammad Day that took place on Valentine's Day. The Islamist youth thought, 'How can we love, but in a "good" way?' If you compare this to the behavior of the Islamist youth in 1985, it is completely different. Back then all they could think about was how to establish the Islamic state [and] revive the caliphate. They would have looked at Valentine's Day as a waste of time. The youth today, however, do not take the same aggressive approach."

Tammam's observations are echoed by leftists who shared jail cells with young Brothers during the spring 2006 crackdown on the movement in solidarity with Egyptian judges exposing fraud and voter intimidation in the 2005 elections. Blogging about his encounter with Muslim Brotherhood detainees, independent secular leftist 'Ala' Sayf wrote: "They were from this new breed of Islamist that reads blogs, watches al-Jazeera, sings sha'bi (popular) songs, talks about intense love stories and chants 'down with Mubarak.' And being young, most of them did not have any experience with prison before. Waiting to know whether they'll get 15 or 45 days' detention for starters, waiting to know whether they'll be sent to one of the just-horrible prisons or one of the too-horrible prisons, and in the middle of it all we got the news that I would be released the next day." And with the news of his release, "All of a sudden, they transformed from just Brothers into comrades! They hugged me, they clapped, they shook my hand, they laughed and they were genuinely happy for my release.... When you speak of the 22 who were released this week, don't say 22 out of 30 were released, say 22 out of 600...facing the same charges and fighting the same tyrants." The Muslim Brothers' official website invited 'Ala' Sayf to write a message to the Brotherhood youth. On July 24, he wrote them, calling on them to be "more adventurous," and advocating more militant street action.

Today, the majority of factions on the left still stand opposed to (or express caution about) joint actions with the Islamists, most notably the newly evolving Democratic Left (a reformist tendency centered around al-Busla magazine), the Egyptian Communist Party, the People's Socialist Party and a faction of the human rights community. But the Brothers and those comrades who will work with them remain engaged in mutual confidence building. The Muslim Brothers' leadership is staunchly gradualist, and always on the lookout for compromises with the Egyptian regime. That stance will likely impede a further rapprochement with the radical left, unless the Brotherhood's base of youth attains a greater say in when, and how, their powerful organization bestirs itself.

Endnotes

[1] Leftist historians divide the history of Egyptian communism into "waves." The first wave began in 1919 with the founding of the Egyptian Socialist Party, which later became the Egyptian Communist Party, only to be destroyed by the Wafd government's crackdowns in 1924. The second wave started in the late 1930s with the formation of communist study circles that evolved into several organizations and factions, with brief periods of unity; it ended with the dissolution of the Egyptian Communist Party in 1965. The third wave commenced in 1968 with the revival of the student and worker movements, received a crushing defeat in 1977 and officially died with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The (current) fourth wave started in 1995, with the launching of the Revolutionary Socialist Tendency.

[2] The slogan was coined by Chris Harman, an International Socialist Tendency theoretician based in Britain, in his book, *The Prophet and the Proletariat*, accessible online at <http://www.marxists.de/religion/harman/index.htm>. The book was translated into Arabic, and distributed widely by the Revolutionary Socialists in 1997.

[3] See Hossam el-Hamalawy, "Street Politics," *Cairo Times*, September 26, 2002; and Hossam el-Hamalawy, "Post-War Middle East," *Islam Online*, April 30, 2003.

[4] El-Hamalawy, "Street Politics."

[5] 5 Husam Tammam, *Tahawwulat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (Cairo: Madbouli, 2005).

P.S.

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