

Regional Implications of a US Muslim Brotherhood Ban

Courtney Freer

Abstract: Several members of the Donald Trump administration have voiced their concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood and its alleged links to violent jihadi organizations. For a period at the beginning of the Trump presidency, in January 2017, speculation abounded about the impending introduction of either a congressional bill or an executive order proclaiming the Brotherhood a terrorist organization. While neither of these was enacted, with renewed concern about the Muslim Brotherhood in light of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis and the resulting realignment of regional allies, as well as a new National Security Advisor, the Trump administration may change its approach in order to strengthen its alliances with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Such a move would have effects on domestic politics, as well as a considerable impact on regional relationships.

What is the Muslim Brotherhood?

The Muslim Brotherhood was initially founded in 1928 in Egypt by schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna and was conceived of as a social movement meant to encourage the Islamization of Egyptian society. In fact, it was so focused on social work and the reform of social policies that the group's bylaws prohibited direct political action until 1934. This history is not to suggest that al-Banna's ideas were apolitical; rather, he believed that the Brotherhood should come to power politically only after society had been re-Islamized; in a sense, then, the idea of 'slow Islamization' made the Brotherhood's ideology compatible with democracy.

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As other scholars have noted, because the Brotherhood's ideology is not prescriptive, Brotherhood branches in different areas of the world have adopted different agendas. Indeed, the very nature of the Muslim Brotherhood as a disparate set of organizations is why "banning" it is so nonsensical and, as Will McCants and Benjamin Wittes point out, akin

to banning an ideology.¹ Even this ideology, however, is by no means universally applied across various national contexts, and the movement's presumed transnational structure has largely been replaced by autonomous local country-specific branches.

Few institutional connections exist among the various Muslim Brotherhood branches, calling into question allegations about the group's transnational nature. Personal links logically persist, but internationally the group is very disparate. Indeed, looking at agendas of various Brotherhood groups we see the extent to which their political priorities differ, though their broad-based ideology may be similar. In short, “[p]olitical Islam is [...] effectively nationalized in the contemporary era.”² As Leiken and Brooke put it succinctly,

The Brotherhood’s dreaded International Organization is in fact a loose and feeble coalition scarcely able to convene its own members. Indeed, the Brotherhood’s international debility is a product of its local successes: national autonomy and adjustability to domestic conditions. The ideological affiliations that link Brotherhood organizations internationally are subject to the national priorities that shape each individually.³

What does exist of this international organization has become even more disparate in recent years, particularly since the overthrow of the first elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Cairo in 2013. Since that time, the Brotherhood as a group has been so maligned and so widely associated with international terrorism that affiliates in Morocco and Tunisia, along with Hamas and Yemen, have publicly disavowed ties from the transnational movement, using in the case of Tunisia the term “Muslim democrat” to describe themselves instead.

Trump’s Muslim Brotherhood Ban: How Likely is it?

President Donald Trump has periodically raised the possibility of declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, a move that would be supported by many within his

party. Indeed, in January 2017, Senator Ted Cruz, alongside Congressman Michael McCaul and Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart, tabled legislation in the House of Representatives and Senate entitled the Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act to either designate the Brotherhood a terrorist organization within 60 days or explain why it would not do so.⁴ Cruz’s website dubs the Brotherhood a group that “espouse[s] a violent Islamist ideology with a mission of destroying the West.”⁵ The Republican-led House Judiciary Committee voted in favor of similar legislation introduced again by Diaz-Balart, yet it was never signed into law; it has also been suggested that the Trump Administration could bypass Congress and issue an executive order banning the organization, yet neither decisive executive nor legislative action has been taken.⁶ Indeed, a January 2017 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Memorandum reflected that:

“A U.S. designation would probably weaken [Brotherhood] leaders’ arguments against violence and provide ISIS and al-Qa’ida additional grist for propaganda to win followers and support, particularly for attacks against U.S. interests.”⁷

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A Bloomberg piece from January 2018 suggested that efforts to implement a widespread ban on the Muslim Brotherhood had essentially “stalled out” and that the administration may instead try to selectively ban chapters of the Brotherhood considered



to be violent.⁸ National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster explained in December 2017: “We will be evaluating each organization on its own terms. The organization is not monolithic or homogeneous.”⁹ It is uncertain which branches could be considered to be linked to violence, considering that the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole disavowed violence as early as 1969 after imprisoned member Sayyid Qutb advocated for violent jihad against the West. Then-Brotherhood General Guide Hasan al-Hudaybi’s 1969 book *Preachers not Judges* clarified that “Sayyid Qutb represented himself alone and not the Muslim Brethren.”¹⁰ Since that time, the Brotherhood, to the extent it can be considered a single organization, has disavowed the use of violence, even notably in Egypt when violence was perpetrated against it.

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Despite some voices in the Trump administration advocating a nuanced understanding of the Brotherhood, as perpetuated by McMaster, newcomers to the White House seem to take a different stance. John Bolton, a former U.S. Ambassador to the UN who replaced General McMaster in April 2018 as National Security Advisor, was notably the previously chairman of Gatestone Institute, which is widely regarded as anti-Muslim and has published stories that claimed “Muslim mass-rape gangs” were making Britain “an Islamist Colony,”¹¹ in addition to more recent stories on “Qatar and Turkey: Toxic Allies in the Gulf.” His bias, then, may become clear in terms of policy decisions taken against the Muslim Brotherhood.

President Trump also appointed Fred Fleitz in

June 2018 as new chief of staff of the National Security Council. Fleitz was famously one of 16 co-authors of a 2015 book entitled *The Secure Freedom Strategy: A Plan for Victory over the Global Jihadist Movement*, in which a “secret plan of the Muslim Brotherhood to ‘destroy Western civilization from within’ is discussed.”¹² The book goes on to claim that 80 percent of American mosques advocate “violent jihad.”¹³ Though Fleitz said that these statements no longer represent his beliefs, they certainly reflect a lack of nuanced understanding of the various strands of Islamism.

The replacement of Rex Tillerson by Mike Pompeo as director of the CIA in April 2018 could also affect American policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist groups generally. Pompeo as a legislator pushed for designation of the group as a terrorist organization,¹⁴ and he has also made statements that has “Islamic leaders across America [are] potentially complicit in these acts” of terrorism in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing.¹⁵

Aside from changes within the Trump Administration, recent geopolitical developments suggest that the anti-Qatar quartet of Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) may seek to use Qatar’s alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood as a hook for changing American policy and that they would have ready allies in Washington to help them. Former Saudi Ambassador to the United States Nawaf Obaid’s August 2018 article in *Foreign Policy* posited that Qatar’s ties with the Brotherhood were more dangerous than its relationship with Iran;¹⁶ in July 2018, *The Guardian* reported that Trump’s advisors hoped to call a summit of Gulf leaders to Washington this fall, at which the issue of the Brotherhood would undoubtedly be raised.¹⁷ And at a speech in July to British Conservative



Party-linked think-tank Policy Exchange, Emirati Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash dubbed the Brotherhood “the gateway drug to jihadism of all kinds,” once again promoting the conflation of the Muslim Brotherhood with jihadist groups that is advocated by the Emirati, Saudi, and Egyptian governments.¹⁸

Regional Implications of a Ban

Hamas will likely be a target if the Trump Administration decides to ban Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups. This change in policy would effectively ignore a policy document presented by Khaled Meshaal in Doha meant to tone down the group’s image. It states that Hamas is part of the Brotherhood’s “intellectual school” yet remains “an independent Palestinian organisation.”¹⁹ The document also announced acceptance of a Palestinian state along 1967 borders yet defended the right of the organization to continue its armed resistance against Israel and its rejection of the state’s right to exist.

In light of President Trump’s decision to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in December 2017, which was completed in May 2018, he is hardly a champion of the Palestinian cause. Although it was rumored that Hamas could be a potential partner for Trump’s so-called “deal of the century,” in August, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh dubbed it “clinically dead.”²⁰ Without Hamas support, the group becomes even more expendable for the Trump administration, making moves against it increasingly likely.

There is perhaps more incentive to designate the Brotherhood a terrorist organization now because of the ongoing rift with Turkey, under the control of Islamist leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose AKP is loosely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. President Trump, perhaps in an appeal to evangelical voters ahead of the midterm elections, has increased pressure on the Turkish government to

release from prison American pastor Andrew Brunson, who was jailed in 2015 for ties with the Gülenist movement. Proclaiming the Brotherhood a terrorist organization would understandably complicate this already tense relationship further. It would also draw more firmly the existing lines between the Saudi-Emirati-American axis and the Qatari-Turkish axis.

Ongoing efforts to stabilize Yemen would also be affected by a change in American policy towards the Brotherhood, since segments of Islah, the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate in that state, are actually fighting alongside Saudi Arabia and the United States to restore the government of Abd Rabbu Mansur al-Hadi. This strategy has notably led to disagreements with the Emirati partners who eschew any type of cooperation with Sunni Islamist organizations. In January 2018, Mohammad Al Yadoumi said that Islah has “no organizational or political ties with the Muslim Brotherhood” and “highly appreciates” the Saudi-led coalition’s role in expelling Houthi and Iranian influence in Yemen, reflecting efforts of the coalition to cooperate among themselves and with available Yemeni partners.²¹

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Further, Muslim Brotherhood affiliates or Brotherhood-linked groups contest seats in parliament in Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia, meaning that banning the group there could be politically problematic. As Schwedler points out, banning the group could hurt relationships with allies like



Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, which all host the Brotherhood in their parliaments.²²

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood remains banned in Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Syria, and so banning the Brotherhood could be an important way for the Trump Administration to strengthen ties with these states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Indeed, Trump is looking to those two countries to facilitate his “deal of the century” on Israel-Palestine. The UAE has even gone so far as to designate groups like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and Cordoba Foundation as terrorist entities in 2014.²³ Somewhat awkwardly, Bahrain, one of the four countries isolating Qatar, also houses a politically active branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite statements from the foreign minister that the government “consider[s] the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group and anyone who shows sympathy with them will be tried on this basis.”²⁴ Because the primary opposition movements in that state are derived from Shia movements, it is unlikely that the Sunni Brotherhood will be isolated, yet an American designation of the group as a terrorist organization would be understandably problematic.

Another problematic issue would arise even if solely the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were banned – a possibility since it is the mother organization. In that case, those countries that have in recent years provided refuge for members of that group could come under fire. In particular, Qatar, Sudan, and Turkey could be targeted in campaigns potentially urging the expulsion or extradition of these figures, which could lead to further regional tension.

Conclusions

With midterm elections approaching in the United States, a Trump-backed designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization could give him a boost among Evangelical voters. It would also affirm some suspicions among the far right that Muslims in the United States are necessarily fifth columns, a dangerous mistake to make.²⁵ Donald Trump, prior to his election, had derided President Obama for having granted aid to the Brotherhood-led (and elected) Egyptian government, stating in several tweets that he “loves radical Islam.”²⁶ Trump could rally his far-right base with the Brotherhood ban, while also solidifying his alliance with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which is critical to his goals in the Middle East. The decision, as demonstrated above, would have region-wide impact, as well as the effect of isolating many voters within the United States.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Courtney Freer is a Research Officer at the Kuwait Programme at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work focuses on the domestic politics of the Arab Gulf states, with a particular focus on Islamism and tribalism. Her DPhil thesis at Oxford University revised rentier state theory by examining the socio-political role played by Muslim Brotherhood groups in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. She previously worked as a Research Assistant at the Brookings Doha Center.

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Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6

No:68 Postal Code: 34197

Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey

Telephone: +902126031815

Fax: +902126031665

Email: info@sharqforum.org

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