IRAN AND THE EGYPTIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD: HEADING TOWARDS DEVELOPMENT OR SIMPLY REPAIR?

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Tamer Badawi and Osama Al-Sayyad

منتدى الشرق
ALSHARQ FORUM

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Executive Summary

■ The expansion of Iranian influence following the eruption of the Arab Spring revolutions transformed the image of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in Arab communities, especially in Sunni ones. The auxiliary role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the suppression of the 2011 Syrian revolt against President Bashar al-Assad and attempting to create parallel security-military apparatuses in the Mashriq sub-region, has created a negative image. Having capitalized on its geopolitical gains, Iran is attempting to build up networks with local Arab Sunni communities in order to improve its image and create a broad constituency of Arab Sunni partners.

■ The Muslim Brotherhood networks, known as the *Ikhwan*, are a key target of Iran's non-state actors' diplomacy. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is attempting to woo the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, the historical leader of the global *Ikhwan* network, as part of a wider effort to improve relations with Arab grassroots organizations. On one hand, the successful rejuvenation of historical ties with the *Ikhwan* in Egypt and the rest of the region will boost Tehran's public diplomacy, and on the other hand, may help facilitate mediation with hostile actors. Therefore, the Arab Spring Revolutions, especially the Egyptian revolution, were turning points in re-defining relations with vital Arab Sunni actors.

■ For the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, the Egyptian Revolution in January 2011 represented a turning point in the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s perception of regional political configurations and itself as a main actor. Concerning Iran, there was a mutual interest, between the *Ikhwan* in power in Egypt and the Islamic Republic, to re-shape relations to commensurate with the reconfiguration of regional political dynamics during the Arab Spring period. A legacy of cross-sectarian relations between the organization and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was an important factor.

■ Considering the *Ikhwan*'s hesitancy to make major shifts in Egypt's foreign policy in the region, unwilling to further raise concern among key actors in the Gulf region, namely the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), about a rising Islamist regional axis, Iran was unsatisfied, and its expectations were not fulfilled by the Egyptian side.

■ The more Egyptian *Ikhwan* were closer to power in Egypt, the more the organization was careful with handling the 'Iranian dossier', with internal and external pressures mounting. While keeping the door open for communication in an unprecedented fashion, compared to his predecessor President Hosni Mubarak, the *Ikhwan*-affiliated President Mohammad Morsi refrained from making an Egyptian rapprochement with Iran. Rather, Cairo opted to de-escalate rising concerns of actors in the Gulf region.

■ Following the military coup against the *Ikhwan*-led government in Cairo, the organization sought solitude to reduce the crackdown in Egypt and in the region driven by the Gulf allies of the new Egyptian military-led government. In the initial stages, the post-coup Iranian media discourse ostensibly showed that Tehran was unenthusiastic to resume communication with the *Ikhwan*. On the other hand, later, the *Ikhwan* were justifying their reluctance to receive Iranian offers for support with their state of vulnerability which makes it difficult for them to engage with the Iranian side.

■ With internal fragmentation in the Egyptian *Ikhwan* developing, Iran commenced upon opening lines of communication with the evolving factions (old guards, new leadership front, and the confrontationists). Each of these factions has a different approach towards the organization's foreign relations, and how to engage with Tehran. The old guards are more conservative in their approach towards Iran, and the confrontationist faction is the most open, with the new leadership front taking a middle-ground position.

■ With major high-ranking Egyptian *Ikhwan* members based in Turkey and Qatar, their respected factions are being influenced by the orientations of their hosting countries vis-a-vis Iran, even if this influence entails discouragement to maintaining a favourable approach towards Iran. The outlook of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s relations with Iran will be influenced, to a certain extent, by the positioning of their host countries in the changing regional dynamics of the Middle East.

Introduction

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, the mother organization of the global *Ikhwan*, or Muslim Brotherhood network, have been in a state of flux since the IRI's founding. The Arab Spring revolutions and their aftermath have served as a testing ground for relations between both sides and a prelude to new patterns of cooperation and conflict between Sunni and Shia political Islamic movements (PIMs) in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). The IRI is perceived as the sole patron and sponsor of a string of militant Shia PIMs operating in line with its regional agenda, while the Egyptian *Ikhwan* has long been perceived as one of the most powerful Sunni PIMs in the region, having relative influence over other regional Sunni PIMs. Both are pivotal forces capable of influencing political Islamic trends both in the region and beyond. Moreover, the quite exceptional geostrategic, religious, and historical importance of both countries, Iran and Egypt, in the MENA region, adds to the importance of the inquiry into relations between these two sides. Given that Egypt is home to *Al-Azhar*, one of Sunni Muslims' most historically influential religious institutions, the IRI sees Egypt as the historical vanguard of Arab countries, and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* see Iran as a proactive and influential regional actor capable of mobilizing considerable segments of Shia Muslims around the world.

Links between the Qom-based Shia clergy and the highest echelons of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* date back to the late 1940s, when the "Society for Rapprochement among Islamic Legal Schools" was established in Cairo in 1947.[1] The society was a joint effort between Egyptian Azhar-based scholars and Iranian Qom-based scholars to establish a dialogue platform between Sunni and Shia figures (notably religious scholars). The head of the society, Muhammad Ali Alluba, an Egyptian diplomat and the founder of the pro-Palestinian Inter-Parliamentary Congress, enjoyed strong connections with Hasan al-Bana, the founder of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, and Mohamed Salih Harb, the founder of the Society of Muslim Youth.[2] Egyptian participants incorporated a number of political Islamic movements and associations that would add a

grassroots dimension to these inter-doctrinal dialogues.[3] However, the establishment of the platform was one of the outcomes of warming up relations between Iran and Egypt in light of the royal marriage between Mohammad Reza Shah and Queen Fawzia.

In the following year, Hasan al-Bana and Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem Kashani, a senior Shia scholarly figure with influence over Ayatollah Khomeini, held a long meeting during the Hajj rituals in Mecca.[4] In 1954, Navvab Safavi, the head of the Fada'iyan-e Islam armed opposition group, visited Cairo and met with Egyptian *Ikhwan* members.[5] These brief meetings reflect how pan-Islamism (despite the fundamental differences in their approaches) and cross-sectarianism were central features of both the Egyptian *Ikhwan* and proto-revolutionary Iranian groups and figures that would later have influence on a powerful constituency in the Iranian revolution in 1979. In this context, Iranian pan-Islamist revolutionaries drew on the writings of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, notably those of Syed Qutb, one of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s key ideologues who produced diverse literature on the politics of governance in Islam and critiques on Western ideologies.

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The 1979 Iranian revolution received the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s backing, with a delegation sent to congratulate Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamist revolutionaries. According to Youssef Nada, a senior Egyptian figure operating within the global *Ikhwan* network, prior to the triumph of the revolution, the Egyptian *Ikhwan* had links with exiled opposition figures in Paris, notably Abolhasan Banisadr, the first president to take power after the Iranian revolution.[6] Following the revolution, the Egyptian *Ikhwan* were brought in to play mediatory roles by both the Iranian side and the American side, respectively.[7] The 1980s Iran–Iraq war on the one hand and the purging of Iranian Islamist revolutionaries that had friendly relations with the *Ikhwan* on the other hand, had repercussions for IRI-Egyptian *Ikhwan* relations, preventing them

from continuing to improve. However, despite tensions, both sides maintained an open line of communication via various pan-Islamist platforms over the course of the following decades up until the Arab revolutions in late 2010. Since the Egyptian revolution in 2011 and the subsequent military coup in mid-2013, relations between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* have swung between brief periods of improvement and abrupt deterioration.

Ideologically, the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* converge and diverge across a variety of different areas, especially with regard to the political governance and Islamic paradigm each side aspires to implement. There are seven main areas of divergence and convergence:

- The relationship between Islam and politics;
- Islamic governance paradigms;
- Political parties;
- Islamic legislation;
- Methods of change;
- The Palestinian cause; and
- Relations with the West.

Fundamentally, the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* broadly converge on the strong association they believe should be between Islam and politics, and both believe in enacting Sharia law, in spite of the differences between the Sunni and Shia versions of Islamic jurisprudence (for the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, implementing Sharia law has been of less prominence since the late 1990s according to some observers).[8] They also converge on the idea that an Islamic government's legitimacy must be derived from the people, via parliaments inter alia, and have either introduced or taken part in establishing political parties despite their former negative attitudes against political parties.[9]

Other convergences include the Palestinian cause, with both sides agreeing, at least ideologically and rhetorically, on the necessity of combating Israel to liberate Palestine.[10] Moreover, the IRI and the

Egyptian *Ikhwan* take a similar stance on the degree to which Western countries could be emulated. Both sides accept Western technological imports but reject the West's values and culture.[11] However, since neither the IRI nor the Egyptian *Ikhwan* are monolithic in terms of their ideological disposition, it is important to note that there are some variations in how the groups stand on major political causes in the region, where they may converge thanks to certain internal factions, despite overall ideological differences.

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In terms of divergences, the two groups' Islamic governance paradigms draw from different Islamic theologies. The IRI's ideologues (notably Ayatollah Khomeini) believed in a new Shia paradigm that necessitated the appointment of a religious political deputy in the absence of the last Shia Imam (guide), Imam Mahdi, who Shias believe is in a state of occultation and the only legitimate guide for Muslims.[12] On the other hand, the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, as orthodox Sunni Muslims, advocated, at least in rhetorical terms, the traditional Sunni system of the Caliphate as a means to unify Muslims around the globe under one symbolic, political umbrella.[13] On methods of political change, they radically diverge as well. While the IRI's ideologues believe in revolutionary or radical change, the Egyptian *Ikhwan* believe more in reform or gradual change.[14]

The developing relations between two main backers of the Egyptian Ikhwan (Turkey and Qatar) and Iran, are assumed to set the stage for closer ties between Tehran and the Egyptian Ikhwan. Paradoxically, Ankara's distrustful approach towards Tehran, will probably make the former more interested in a rapprochement between the Tehran and the Egyptian Ikhwan, specifically Turkey-based factions, that is under its oversight

This report delves into the study of the state of relations between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* during the Arab Spring and post-Arab Spring periods. Although literature, while limited, is available on the historical relations between both sides with a focus on the 1940s, '50s, and early '80s, little attention has been paid to this relationship

since the 2010–2011 Arab Spring revolutions and the post-Arab Spring revolutions period marked by the 2013 military coup in Egypt. For this reason, this time period will be the focus of this report. The swift ups and downs of the Arab revolutions came to integrate/exclude political forces and disempower/empower state structures as well as non-state actors in a way that left a lasting impact on the sectarian identity and relations between Sunni and Shia PIMs in aftermath of the revolutions, including the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*. However, the importance of inquiring into relations between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* goes even further given the current geopolitical re-posturing of three key players in the region: Turkey, IRI, and Qatar. With Turkey seeking a regional arrangement with Iran to resolve the Syrian conflict, and Qatar getting closer to the IRI in the context of the Gulf embargo, the developing relations between two main backers of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* (Turkey and Qatar) and Iran, are assumed to set the stage for closer ties between Tehran and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*. Paradoxically, Ankara's distrustful approach towards Tehran, will probably make the former more interested in a rapprochement between the Tehran and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, specifically Turkey-based factions, that is under its oversight.

This report mainly focuses on relations between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* in the context of the MENA region's changing geopolitics through two lenses: that of the IRI and that of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*. Tehran has scored extensive geopolitical gains in the geographical area from Iraq to the eastern Mediterranean in light of its intervention in the Syrian conflict and against the Islamic State (IS). The Iranian administration is seeking to capitalize on these gains by improving its image in local Arab Sunni communities, not only in the geographic areas mentioned above, but also in the wider Arab arena. Due to ideological but also practical imperatives, specific political factions in the IRI might see Sunni PIMs in the region, mainly the *Ikhwan* network, as one of the keys to gradually improving its image and utilizing the Ikhwan's ability to mediate in regional conflicts that the IRI has a stake in.

While the Egyptian Ikhwan is ideologically inclined toward inter-doctrinal dialogue with Muslim Shias, probably as a means to communicate with the IRI, the Gulf countries, and specifically Saudi Arabia, have always been a consideration in its policy shifts toward the IRI

While the Egyptian *Ikhwan* is ideologically inclined toward inter-doctrinal dialogue with Muslim Shias, probably as a means to communicate with the IRI, the Gulf countries, and specifically Saudi Arabia, have always been a consideration in its policy shifts toward the IRI. This has been true both under Muhammad Morsi's administration and following the military coup that toppled the organization from power in Cairo. Although Saudi Arabia along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) played a considerable role in fomenting the coup against the *Ikhwan* in Egypt, the organization (and specifically its main factions) still sees Riyadh as part of the solution in Egypt, making it an indispensable actor. However, as the region's geopolitical dynamics are changing, the approaches and policy choices of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* are not insulated from these dynamics, but are rather influenced by them.

This report consists of two sections. The first section addresses Iran's policy toward the Egyptian *Ikhwan* in the context of the Arab Spring and post-Arab Spring periods. This section is further divided into two subsections: first, a sub-section addressing the IRI's policy on the Arab Spring revolutions; and second, a sub-section dedicated to the IRI's policy toward the Egyptian *Ikhwan* during the revolutions and their aftermath within the IRI's wider MENA region policy.

The second section of the paper addresses the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s policy (or policies) toward the IRI. This section is further divided into two subsections: first, an analysis of how the Arab Spring period was a turning point in reshaping the organization's foreign policy priorities, and specifically toward the IRI, during the period of Mohamed Morsi's administration; and second, an examination of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s approach vis-a-vis the IRI in the post-Arab Spring period (following the military coup in Egypt), as well as the impact of the *Ikhwan*'s organizational fragmentation in how members see the IRI in the region and future relations between their organization and Tehran.

The authors relied on both open-source data and fieldwork (specifically, interviews). A total of 25 interviews were conducted with figures informed to varying degrees on the subject of relations between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*. From August 2017 to April 2018, the authors conducted nine interviews in Tehran and Qom with establishment-linked senior researchers, analysts, former diplomats, policymakers, and religious scholars. The political and factional backgrounds of the interviewees varied from pragmatic/moderate to those with fundamentalist backgrounds who were close to revolutionary institutions. From August 2017 to July 2018, the authors conducted 15 interviews in Istanbul with current and former members of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* and figures with connections to the global *Ikhwan* network, in addition to one mid-level leadership figure from the Palestinian PIM *Hamas*. The level of administrative seniority of the *Ikhwan* interviewees (both current and former members) vary from mid-level to senior-level (with divergent factional backgrounds), and some of them had played senior roles in the Morsi administration. In January 2018, one long-distance interview was conducted with a London-based senior leader of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*.

Section I: The IRI's *Ikhwan* Policy in the Context of the Arab Spring and Beyond

A. The IRI's Arab Spring policy: gathering fruits and deterring threats

The Arab revolutions (Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain), which commenced in late 2010 and 2011, posed strategic challenges to the IRI but offered advantages as well. Decision-makers in Tehran scrutinized the advantageous and disadvantageous outcomes of each revolution and crafted their stances on each of them in accordance with their interests. For Tehran, the "revolutionary" or "conservative" character of any given Arab revolution did not emanate solely from the magnitude of popular mobilization of the disenchanted populations against the regimes per se, but rather from two intertwined perceptions: first, the extent to which the revolution's vanguards subscribed to values similar to that of the IRI in the context of its long-standing confrontation with the U.S. and Israel; and second, the extent to which an revolution would bolster or undermine the IRI's geopolitical standing in the region.

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For the IRI, in the medium to long-term, the Arab revolutions meant the emergence of a new regional order and new political regimes that drew their legitimacy from the region's predominantly Muslim populations.[15] In Tehran's view, the emergence of such regimes could mean the pursuit of more independent foreign policies vis-à-vis Western capitals, especially Washington. Therefore, the calculation they made was that changing the region's arrangements based on the new foreign policy orientations of the emerging regimes would weaken the IRI's rivals[16] and reverse its exclusion from the region's political and security arrangements since 1979. From an Iranian perspective, after decades of geopolitical insecurity, the rise of populist politics and political participation bolstered the Iranian political model and its legitimacy, and consequently the IRI's national security.[17]

i. Vetted revolutions

Despite the possible geopolitical advantages successful Arab revolutions could have provided to the IRI, the ideological fluidity and coalitional disposition of the Arab revolutions in their early stages also might have posed an ideological threat to the IRI

Despite the possible geopolitical advantages successful Arab revolutions could have provided to the IRI, the ideological fluidity and coalitional disposition of the Arab revolutions in their early stages also might have posed an ideological threat to the IRI. The IRI's choice to re-brand the Arab revolutions as waves of "Islamic Awakening," inspired by the Iranian revolutionary model, could be interpreted in several ways. **First**, Iranian elites may have perceived the role of PIMs in revolutions, especially in Egypt, through their own self-image and the conflicted legacies of its own intra-revolutionary elite conflicts between 1978 and 1979 which ended with the triumph of the pro-Imam Khomeini revolutionary factions. **Second**, Tehran's elites may have decided to exogenously influence the fledgling narratives of the Arab Spring revolutions to neutralize potential ideological threats taking shape from 2010 through 2011. **Third**, as Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party sought to market its model for political and economic governance in Arab countries experiencing revolutions, Iran might have similarly sought to rival Turkey by introducing its model, hoping to secure early gains.

In 2011, Ayatollah Syed Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader (SL) of the IRI, described the Arab revolutions as "a cry of protest against Western domination" and "an introduction to a significant transformation and the rule of Islam".[18] The SL addressed "religious democracy" in a speech, citing it as a model for governance in the countries experiencing revolutionary changes in the region.[19] Principalists/conservatives, a powerful political faction in the IRI, warned of a "disguised return by agents of former dictatorial regimes" in Arab spring countries, which embodied "the grave danger of re-establishing Western-dominated regimes under the guise of democracy and freedom".[20]

Reformist perceptions of the Arab revolutions at the time of their eruption did not seem to significantly differ from that of their

principalist/conservative counterparts. Former reformist President Mohamed Khatami stated, "Egypt is in need of an Islamic regime resembling that of Iran".[21] While Khatami's view does not necessarily represent the entire reform-oriented movement, it may indicate the marginality of differences between reformist and principalist/conservative elites in perceiving and addressing the Arab revolutions in 2011. The IRI's mainstream elite responses to the Arab Spring, especially those of the principalist/conservative faction, reflect how they associate revolutionary ideas with "Islamism" and "anti-imperialism" and how an organic link between non-Islamist actors, namely secularists and the West, are seen by Iranian Islamist elites.

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Given Egypt's geostrategic, historical, and symbolic influence on Arab countries, the revolution there was the most crucial in the region for Iran. Considering the ideological commonalities, Tehran thought that a triumphant *Ikhwan*-dominated revolution in Cairo could change the collective Arab attitude towards the IRI. Moreover, the IRI grasped the importance of the diffusionary nature of the Egyptian revolution, with one Iranian account of the Arab revolutions arguing that revolutionary mobilization in the region would have eroded the Saudi establishment's legitimacy, leaving it unstable in the long-term.[22] Furthermore, in the event of regime change in Riyadh or structural reforms by the authorities, the gradual minimization of Saudi influence in the region would have had been a possible outcome,[23] which in turn would mean greater Iranian influence in Bahrain after the 2011 revolution against the al-Khalifa royal family. Of all the Arab revolutions Tehran supported, the Manama revolution had received the strongest support and media coverage.

One of the IRI's top goals is changing the sub-regional political and security configurations of the Gulf sub-region which has long excluded the IRI and allowed external powers such as Israel and Turkey to gain

influence.[24] The Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel created threats by allowing the latter to indirectly set foot in the sub-region, in turn impacting the IRI's national security.[25] The IRI's approach to the Arab Spring reflects how the regime's elites attempted to take maximum advantage of the region's developments to address the Gulf's security deficiencies.

Because the Arab revolutions were seen as socio-political shake-ups expected to potentially change negative attitudes towards Tehran, the IRI welcomed them

ii. Unvetted revolutions

Because the Arab revolutions were seen as socio-political shake-ups expected to potentially change negative attitudes towards Tehran, the IRI welcomed them. However, the Syrian revolution against the Ba'ath Party in Syria did not pass the IRI's vetting process and was seen as a grave security threat to Tehran's regional geostrategic position and ultimately its existence. Rather than accepting it as a popular uprising, Tehran saw it as a joint Western–Israeli–Saudi attempt to topple a key regional ally and ambush the IRI. The Baathist regime in Damascus had proven to be a crucial ally to the IRI during its eight-year war with neighboring Iraq, imposing economic sanctions, launching diplomatic campaigns, and sheltering useful Iraqi dissidents, which established a strategic partnership between Damascus and Tehran. The IRI chose to confront the Syrian revolution for two key reasons:

- **To preserve the IRI's boundaries:** Iranian strategists argued that losing Syria, which constituted part of a geographical corridor between Iran and the eastern Mediterranean, would not only block the IRI's access to Lebanon, but also tighten up Iraq's western borders, encircling Iran within Iraq.[26] For Iran, deterring the revolution in Syria, which it perceives as an eventual existential threat, would deliver a blow to the Western–Israeli–Saudi "plot" that seeks to topple the IRI by geopolitically encircling it.
- **To preserve logistic routes:** Under the Baath Party, Syria proved to be a vital logistical route for supplying *Hezbollah* in Lebanon and key Palestinian movements, primarily *Hamas* and the Islamic Jihad movements.[27] Syria has been a hub for arms supplies to both

paramilitary offshoots and allied paramilitary forces, making it indispensable for bolstering the IRI's capabilities to strike Israel, which in turn beefed up its credentials as the key defender of the Palestinian cause. In the scenario in which Syria gained a Western-aligned regime, the IRI would not be able to utilize Syria as a logistics route. The IRI's inability to utilize Syria to militarily support affiliated paramilitary forces and allied armed Palestinian movements would contribute to the eroding of its very raison d'être.

Initially, the IRI's intervention on the side of the Syrian regime added a sectarian dimension in the perceptions of Arabs (particularly Sunnis) in the region. This sectarian dimension of the Arab (Sunni) perception of the Iranian intervention was further bolstered by the means that the IRI utilized to counter the Syrian revolution. To crush the Syrian revolution, which morphed into an armed rebellion, and rescue the Baathist regime in Syria from collapsing, the IRI employed two strategies:

- **First**, establishing and training Syrian paramilitary forces organizationally modeled on the IRI's paramilitary formations (e.g. National Defense Forces).[28]
- **Second**, mobilizing and deploying Shia foreign fighters to the Syrian battlefield under the supervision of the Quds elite force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) against Syrian opposition armed rebels, al-Qaeda offshoots and the IS.

In building up paramilitary forces in Syria and Iraq based on the models of its own revolutionary paramilitary formations, Iran gave itself a negative image in Arab communities, especially among disenchanted Arab Sunnis in the Mashriq sub-region. It illustrated the IRI's keenness to mold Arab countries' political and military structures in its own image

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Arab Sunnis in the Mashriq sub-region. It illustrated the IRI's keenness to mold Arab countries' political and military structures in its own image. While quite unsuccessful, the IRI's endeavor to disseminate its revolutionary ideology on a cross-sectarian basis in Syria and Iraq aims, in part, to present Tehran as a unifying force for Muslims in the region.

B. Iran's post-Arab Spring policy: building bridges to preserve gains

Having realized extensive geopolitical gains in the Mashriq by assisting the Syrian regime in pushing back Syrian armed rebels and IS in Syria and Iraq, the IRI is attempting to build bridges with Arab Sunnis in the sub-region and the wider region to fix its image, preserve its gains and even expand its interests and geopolitical influence. Acquiring a near-hegemonic status in the region requires reaching a form of consent among parties disadvantaged by the IRI's power grabs, which may take place if the IRI is able to successfully re-brand its role in the region.

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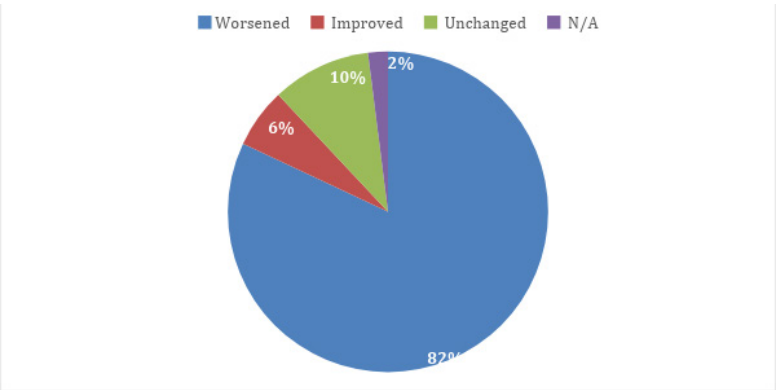
The Al Jazeera Center for Studies' January 2016 opinion poll, which gauged Arab elites' perceptions of Iran, showed a significant shift of Arab elites' perceptions of the IRI pre- and post-Arab Spring. 78 percent of respondents believed that the IRI's stance on the Arab Spring was negative,[29] and 82 percent of respondents expressed that in their view the IRI's image in Arab countries had deteriorated compared to the pre-Arab spring era (see Figure 1).[30] Moreover, 92 percent of respondents did not see the IRI's system of governance as a good model.[31] 89 percent of respondents assessed Arab-Iranian political relations as bad.[32] A little less than a third of respondents thought relations would improve in the next five years, while 21 percent expected relations to remain in their current state. Nearly half foresaw that Arab-Iranian political relations would get worse compared to their current state.[33]

Figure 1

How Arab Elites in 2015 Assessed Iran's Image in Arab Countries after the Eruption of the Arab Srping



Source: Al Jazeera Center for Studies

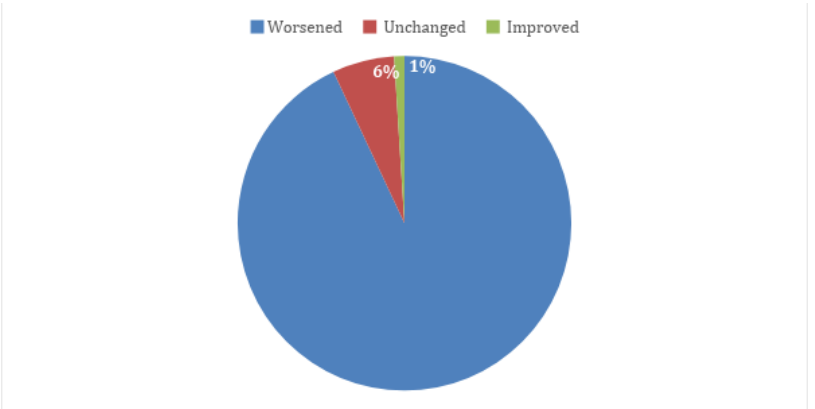
Despite these findings, respondents still perceived there to be common ground with Iran. 89 percent of respondents believed Arabs and Iranian had commonalities that bring them together, and half of respondents said they were two separate nations with commonalities. A third responded that they were a unified Muslim nation.[34] While 81 percent supported strong relations between Arab countries and Iran and 69 percent supported the establishment of a collective regional security body of Gulf Arab countries and Iran,[35] [36] 58 percent of the respondents believed Iran was not serious about building good relations with Arab countries.[37]

Another October 2016 opinion poll on the perceptions of *Ikhwan*-affiliated PIMs (members) in the region clarifies influential Arab actors' views of the IRI post-Arab Spring even further (see figure 2). According to the poll, 90 percent of respondents said that the IRI's stance on the Arab Spring was negative.[38] Almost 95 percent said that the IRI's image in Arab countries had deteriorated compared to the pre-Arab spring era.[39] Nearly 100 percent of respondents in this poll did not see the IRI's

system of governance as a positive example. In this poll, 95 percent of respondents assessed Arab-Iranian political relations as bad.[40]

Figure 2

How Ikhwan-affiliated Arab Elites in 2015 Assessed Iran's Image in Arab Countries after the Eruption of the Arab Spring



Source: Al Jazeera Center for Studies

Only 12 percent were optimistic that Arab–Iranian relations would improve over the next five years, while 17 percent expected that relations would remain in their current state and 71 percent foresaw that Arab-Iranian political relations would get worse compared to their current state. Three-quarters of respondents believed that Islam was a unifying factor in Arab-Iranian relations.[41] Three-quarters also saw geography in the MENA region as a unifying factor, while 71 percent of respondents saw history as common ground. 63 percent of respondents saw external challenges to the region as a unifying force in Arab–Iranian relations.[42]

Comparing the results of these opinion polls shows that negative perceptions towards the IRI exist even among PIM elites, despite the ideological Islamic commonalities between themselves and the IRI. Opinion polls conducted in the MENA region show that religion,

To change the IRI's negative image in the region and within Sunni PIMs, Tehran is currently seeking to widen its outreach to grassroots Sunni PIMs, not only in an attempt to use their significant grassroots influence to change the IRI's negative image, but also because of the IRI's ideological preferences

and specifically Islam, contribute considerably to perceptions of identity there. A January 2016 Zogby poll on attitudes toward religion across several MENA countries reflects how strongly attached respondents are to religion in terms of its constitutive role in identity and the important role it plays in the public sphere.[43] While religiosity does not necessarily correlate with support for political movements with religious agendas in the region (e.g. PIMs), the political appeal of PIMs to considerable segments of Arab societies is quite strong despite waning popular support for many of them after the Arab Spring revolutions, most notably the *Ikhwan*.

To change the IRI's negative image in the region and within Sunni PIMs, Tehran is currently seeking to widen its outreach to grassroots Sunni PIMs, not only in an attempt to use their significant grassroots influence to change the IRI's negative image, but also because of the IRI's ideological preferences. The IRI is willing to influence the vision and strategies of PIMs' leadership, core members, and the perceptions of its popular support base, as an eventual outcome. The IRI has long-standing relations with the Palestinian *Hamas* and Islamic Jihad movements, which it continues to develop. Currently, the IRI is seeking better relations with the Muslim Brotherhood (known as the *Ikhwan*), particularly the mother Egyptian organization which has historically been the vanguard of the *Ikhwan's* global network, despite its considerably weakened global position post-military coup. Tehran might be aiming to address its problematic relations with the Egyptian *Ikhwan* as a prelude to improving ties with regional branches of the *Ikhwan* in other Arab countries. This may also contribute to improving Tehran's shattered image and underpinning the IRI's geopolitical standing in the region. Instead of banking on relations with state actors in the region to advance its regional interests, the IRI is keener on cultivating relationships with local communitiesand non-state actors through a bottom-up approach. According to one source, the IRI is

ready to engage the Egyptian *Ikhwan* to mediate between Yemen's MB (the Islah party) and Ansar Allah (known as the Houthis) to end the conflict in Yemen.[44]

Iranian policymakers and establishment-connected researchers interviewed in mid-2017 expressed guarded enthusiasm toward improving ties with the Egyptian Ikhwan. The basic commonality between the IRI and the Egyptian Ikhwan is the central position which the Muslim nation, or Ummah, takes in their respective worldviews

Iranian policymakers and establishment-connected researchers interviewed in mid-2017 expressed guarded enthusiasm toward improving ties with the Egyptian *Ikhwan*. The basic commonality between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* is the central position which the Muslim nation, or *Ummah*, takes in their respective worldviews.[45] According to one principalist/conservative point of view, the IRI sees the Muslim Brotherhood (not only the Egyptian organization but also the global network) as the best Sunni partner in politically unifying the *Ummah*.[46] Often presented to show the IRI's ideological convergence with the Egyptian *Ikhwan* and the strong commonality shared by the unified *Ummah*, the incumbent SL even translated some of the works of Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s historic ideologue, into Farsi. Despite their ideological commonalities, the Iranian perspective is that partnering with the Muslim Brotherhood should not mean giving up the key principles and values of either side (the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*).[47] While the Iranian side says it is unwilling to see the Egyptian *Ikhwan* compromise their key principles and values in any engagement, it has particular reservations about potential internal ideological transformations within the organization that may undermine the influence of religion on its political agenda. There are specifically reservations about disconnecting Dawah (religious preaching) and Siyasah (politics) from one another, which would

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mean liberalizing the organization on par with what the Muslim Brotherhood movement has done in Tunisia through the *Ennahdha* Party. Nevertheless, the Iranian side does not seem too concerned as long as such changes are tactical.

One of the IRI's probable long-term goals in the region is inducing change within Sunni PIMs through the diffusion of revolutionary ideas. This is one of the reasons the IRI is unwilling to see the Egyptian Ikhwan breaking the Dawah (religious preaching) and Siyasah (politics) binary, which consequently would make it more difficult to adopt a revolutionary ideology similar to that of the IRI, since implicit liberalization would be the outcome. In this context, one Iranian figure said that as long as the Egyptian Ikhwan preserves its key historical principles, namely the Dawah and Siyasah binary, current "organizational differences" between the rivaling Egyptian Ikhwan factions are not significantly menacing to the organization's existence.[48] While the IRI maintains historical channels of communication with Islamist Sunni elites in line with its inclination to a bottom-up strategy, Tehran appears to be more willing to engage with the PIMs' younger generation rather than their elders. While elders control the senior leadership positions, a new generation with relatively new (and more accommodating) perceptions toward Iran will be capable of pushing for changes in their organizations' outlooks if promoted to mid- or senior-level leadership positions in the future.

To efficiently communicate with the Egyptian organization's fragmented groupings, the IRI have reached out to many leaders to discuss how the Egyptian Ikhwan can regain power in Cairo. In this context, the IRI's policy on the Egyptian Ikhwan is reaching out to all factions so as to avoid making the IRI itself a source of contention, because not reaching out to all of them would be perceived as the IRI playing favorites

Following the July 2013 military coup in Cairo, the Egyptian *Ikhwan* went through a process of organizational fragmentation that led to the emergence of two leadership factions, as well as a third small but

radical and growing, quasi-renegade, loosely-connected faction driven by a segment of the organization's disenchanted youth (this will be explained in detail in the second section of this report). To efficiently communicate with the Egyptian organization's fragmented groupings, the IRI have reached out to many leaders to discuss how the Egyptian *Ikhwan* can regain power in Cairo.[49] In this context, the IRI's policy on the Egyptian *Ikhwan* is reaching out to all factions so as to avoid making the IRI itself a source of contention, because not reaching out to all of them would be perceived as the IRI playing favorites.[50] In terms of the IRI's openness towards the third faction, which advocates violent regime change in Egypt, the reality is that this faction, from an Iranian perspective, does not actually benefit the cause of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* in the country.[51] Within this context, and with the spread of radicalism disseminated by Salafi jihadists in the region, one Iranian policymaker believes that IS and other radical groups will one day take the place of the *Ikhwan*. In other words, the *Ikhwan*'s failure in the region would fuel extremism.[52] This approach might not be fully shared by all influential institutions in Iran. According to Iran's official news agency, in a December 2017 seminar on terrorism, extremism, and security in western Asia, held in Tehran, the head of the Iranian Intelligence Ministry, Hujjat al-Islam Mahmoud Alevi, blamed the historical roots of terrorism on the *Ikhwan* in Egypt and Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.[53] While this was likely mentioned in a historical context, the statement made by the incumbent head of Iran's powerful security body may send mixed messages to the Egyptian *Ikhwan* and other Sunni PIMs in the region. However, the statement might also reflect a personal view more than an institutional one.

In 2017, an initiative to reconcile with the global Ikhwan network was reportedly launched and endorsed by the SL. This effort seems to be led primarily by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, followed by NGOs with connections to the IRGC (and Basij), with both attempting to engage on a broad-basis

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led primarily by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, followed by NGOs with connections to the IRGC (and Basij), with both attempting to engage on a broad-basis, from high profile policy levels to youth platforms. In Iran, the *Ikhwan* dossier is said to be traditionally in the hands of the IRGC,[55] but other institutions might be assigned to engage with the Egyptian *Ikhwan* in specific ways. According to one account, despite the SL's sympathy toward the Egyptian *Ikhwan* after it was toppled from power, some clerical figures/circles close to the SL are said to have a less favorable approach toward the Egyptian *Ikhwan* (and other *Ikhwan*-affiliated PIMs) compared to other principalist/conservative factions operating in other institutional realms.[56] Apart from the SL's personal sympathy, potential attitudes mentioned above in the SL's close circles are thought to have been generated as a reaction to their unmatched expectations toward the Egyptian *Ikhwan* when they were once in power.[57] However, the extensive inter-connections between the policy circles of the SL and IRGC hold sway over changing elite perceptions toward the *Ikhwan*. Due to institutional overlapping (senior political figures often hold more than one governmental position simultaneously), it is difficult to draw clear distinctions between the approaches prevailing in different policy-making institutions on the *Ikhwan* dossier, adding the probability that every institution could incorporate different approaches toward the dossier.[58]

But overall, from one Iranian perspective, the Gulf crisis that erupted in mid-2017 was an opportunity to open up channels of communication with the Egyptian *Ikhwan* and other PIMs in the region that still maintain connections with Qatar, even though a source claimed at the time that no major breakthrough had happened so far between the two sides (up to the time of the authors' interview with this figure).[59] Although there is an apparent Iranian interest in reaching a rapprochement with the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, at least on a pragmatic basis, Iranian policymakers and academics argue that Egypt's cold foreign policy toward the IRI, when the Egyptian *Ikhwan* were once in power in Egypt (2012-2013), created a legacy of mistrust in Iran toward the *Ikhwan*, who had previously had some lines of communication

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with the IRI. Supposing that the Egyptian *Ikhwan* are seriously seeking rapprochement in the post-Arab spring period, one Iranian researcher asked, "Who exactly in the Ikhwan wants rapprochement [referring to the group's internal fragmentation]? What does the Egyptian *Ikhwan* aim for with this rapprochement? The ball is in their court to take a step".[60] Overall, the Iranian side sees two main factors behind the frustrating reluctance of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* to restore Egypt's diplomatic relations with Iran when they were in power:

- First, the Egyptian *Ikhwan* were unable to outmaneuver the deep state (security and military institutions) which seemed generally resistant to resuming ties with Iran, and they were not as bold as their Iranian revolutionary counterparts in uprooting the old regime;[61] [62]
- Second, and most importantly, the IRI's officials see that when the Egyptian *Ikhwan* were in power, they succumbed to Iran's regional arch-rival, Saudi Arabia, and attempted to appease it at Iran's expense.[63] [64]

While the responses of influential figures and media outlets connected to the Iranian establishment toward the military coup against the elected President Mohammad Morsi were shyly vindictive, according to some Arab observers, this discourse was not sustained, because antagonizing the Egyptian *Ikhwan* in the region would not serve the IRI's strategic interests in the short-term. While the Egyptian *Ikhwan* has been weaker than ever since the military coup, the IRI still perceives them as a significant force in terms of both human and economic power.[65] The Iranian side sees the Gulf crisis that erupted in mid-2017 as an opportunity for improving relations between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* at a time when Qatar, Turkey, and Iran are growing closer.

The resolution of the Syrian conflict, which has harmed inter-doctrinal dialogues given its contribution to the rise of sectarian strife in the region between Sunnis and Shias, could breathe life back into relations between the two sides

The IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* maintain regular channels of communication through international inter-doctrinal dialogues that bring together senior figures from Sunni and Shia PIMs. While such events probably serve as platforms where various actors can be exposed to differing approaches, one Iranian point of view is that this is unlikely to change IRI-Egyptian *Ikhwan* relations.[66] The resolution of the Syrian conflict, which has harmed inter-doctrinal dialogues given its contribution to the rise of sectarian strife in the region between Sunnis and Shias, could breathe life back into relations between the two sides.[67] [68] The inner workings of top-level events between influential Sunni and Shia figures show how understanding the changing geopolitics of the region are crucial for comprehending patterns of relations between the IRI and Sunni PIMs in the region, irrespective of ideological and religious similarities or dissimilarities.

Section II: The Egyptian *Ikhwan* and the IRI: Revealed Fragilities and Regressions:

A. The Arab Spring: a new starting point for the Egyptian Ikhwan's foreign policy

The 2011 Arab Spring revolutions are a key factor in understanding the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s foreign policy developments in the context of both the region's traditional and emerging feuds. The organization, which originated in Egypt, has a long history of maintaining regional and international relations since its establishment by its founder, Hasan al-Bana, in 1928. This "inheritance" has taken on many forms, fluctuating between divergences and strong alliances with regional actors. In this millennium, in line with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's foreign policy, the organization has noticeably avoided any policies that could be antagonistic toward the Gulf countries, from where much of their financial backing (which is in large part dependent on remittances) comes from, particularly when it comes to the group's relations with the sanctioned IRI.

Despite the shared aspirations between the Islamic regime built on the ruins of the Shah's regime, and the largest Sunni group in the Islamic world, relations between the two have remained only semi-friendly and are highly responsive to events in the region. That is aside from other mutual reservations that each side has about the other. Internally, the Egyptian *Ikhwan* would prefer not to completely normalize relations with the Iranian side, instead leaving these relations to the global *Ikhwan* network, a *de facto* ceremonial committee for international coordination comprising various *Ikhwan* leaders (its symbolic importance lies in its ability to assemble senior Islamist leaders), particularly when it comes to engaging in the type of inter-doctrinal dialogues that the Iranian side participates in. Each side has waited for the other to implement the theoretical similarities they have discussed in several settings, and to overcome Egyptian and regional barriers that stand in the way of a positive reset, but the *Ikhwan*'s situation in Egypt, which the IRI recognizes, has not allowed for much flexibility.

i. Beyond January: distant relations between the Egyptian Ikhwan and the IRI

The Egyptian *Ikhwan* took advantage of the window of opportunity that presented itself following the revolution to crystallize its foreign policies it had built on alliances with regional forces supportive of the "political Islamic movement" project. The grassroots nature of these movements meant they had the best chance of gaining power compared to other movements in Arab Spring countries. Of course, this had to be done with caution so as to avoid alienating traditional regional forces, particularly in the Gulf region, where the quick rise of political Islamic movements was met with disapproval. This created a situation in which Qatar, Turkey, and Iran were theoretically the closest countries to the Egyptian *Ikhwan* in light of the foreign policy considerations mentioned above.

The IRI was unpleasantly surprised when it was left out of this envisioned quadrant, with the *Ikhwan* ignoring the steps Iran had taken to close the gaps between them. The Egyptian *Ikhwan* wanted to present

The IRI was unpleasantly surprised when it was left out of this envisioned quadrant, with the Ikhwan ignoring the steps Iran had taken to close the gaps between them. The Egyptian Ikhwan wanted to present itself as a moderate regional presence in its new foreign policy, one that was not at odds with the expectant Gulf side

itself as a moderate regional presence in its new foreign policy, one that was not at odds with the expectant Gulf side. Moving towards closing the gap with Iran would have put their already tricky relations with the Gulf Arab countries at risk, meaning that anticipated warmer relations with Iran did not materialize. For the *Ikhwan*, these considerations trumped the IRI's expectations of a partnership with the region's chief Sunni actor. In the IRI, the Egyptian *Ikhwan* was expected to secure the main seat in the Egyptian political scene from which it had been banned for so many years.

The *Ikhwan* took this path until Mohamed Morsi was elected president mid-2012. Then, the IRI saw that there was still an opportunity for a partnership, albeit on a more formal footing. However, the IRI was again disappointed when the group's leadership did not change much in their already conservative approach to relations with Tehran. Rather, the new president's policy centered on continuing to calm tensions with the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Morsi's first official visit as head of state was to Saudi Arabia, but only after several back-channel messages were sent to assure the Gulf countries that the new administration did not seek a revolution in Egypt's foreign policy, particularly when it came to the Gulf region's security.

The Ikhwan also factored in their relationship with the U.S., wanting to avoid any early-onset clashes over the Iranian issue while the group was trying to build the face of its foreign policy, and consolidate its power, all while battling a stormy domestic political environment

The *Ikhwan* also factored in their relationship with the U.S., wanting to avoid any early-onset clashes over the Iranian issue while the group was trying to build the face of its foreign policy, and consolidate its power, all while battling a stormy domestic political environment. With serious reservations, the *Ikhwan* organization in power limited

itself to accepting Tehran's official invitations and exchanging visits as a matter of diplomatic protocol, which all raised the silent ire of the Gulf.

There is no doubt that Iran's attitude towards the Syrian revolution was one reason for the distance between the *Ikhwan* and Iran during Morsi's rule. Following popular support campaigns led by the *Ikhwan* since the start of the Syrian revolution, Morsi's administration publicly announced its support as well. However, it would be remiss not to pinpoint the Syrian revolution as the chief factor in these actors' continued lukewarm relations.

ii. "The quartet that wasn't" under Saudi's watchful gaze

The idea of the "quartet" was introduced by Morsi during the Non-Aligned Movement Summit held in Tehran in late August 2012 and began its official work in Cairo in September 2012. It included Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, with an Egyptian vision for addressing deteriorating conditions in Syria by implementing a political process that would stop the bloodshed.

It was a positive step for Arab actors and Iranians to sit down at the same table, starting with the Syrian issue, and Morsi was very keen on Saudi participation in any regional talks with Iran. Saudi Arabia, however, approached the talks listlessly, even opting out of attending the first meeting.[69] Saudi media covered the talks with veiled criticism that eventually evolved into outright attacks on the very idea and killed the initiative before it went anywhere. Simply put, the criticisms were centered on Iran's participation in the quartet. Saudi Arabia made its displeasure with Iran's participation clear, telling Cairo that Iran's intervention in Syria meant it was impossible for it to be part of the solution. This distance between the *Ikhwan* and the IRI only widened with Egypt adopting stances reflective of Saudi policy on Assad and Morsi cutting all relations with the regime as well as demanding that *Hezbollah* leave Syria.

iii. A gradual shift in the Ikhwan's view of Iran

To answer how the *Ikhwan* viewed the IRI internally, it is helpful to start with the group's idea of individual pedagogy, which did not include scare tactics against Iran, but rather cited events such as the Iranian Revolution as an example of successful radical change, despite subsequent differences in terms of its Shia roots. In addition, Egyptian writers such as Fahmi Huwaidi, who was seen as close to Tehran, were influenced by the *Ikhwan*'s literature. In return, the *Ikhwan* supported *Hezbollah* during Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006 and participated in a major project bringing the "sects" together, with major Shia figures in attendance.[70]

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The reason the *Ikhwan*'s perspective shifted under Morsi is partially the "media blackmail" tactics used both pre- and post-revolution by the Salafist parties, who have generally attacked the *Ikhwan* for their open communication with the Shia. Saudi Arabia is largely responsible for this "coup" in the *Ikhwan*'s attitudes toward Iran after the revolution. The Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s interests in Saudi Arabia go beyond the organization's foreign policy, as Riyadh continued to use the organization's material interests, such as reliance on the financial contributions of its members residing in the kingdom, as a way to put pressure on the organization both before the revolution and following it. In fact, according to the *Ikhwan*'s internal statistics, Saudi Arabia is home to the single largest number of the group's expatriate members. According to one point of view, this has created a similarity in views between Saudi Arabia and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* when it comes to the Shia question, and explains the disconnect between the group's lower-ranking members working the Gulf region and the historic leadership's

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relatively more favorable approach toward Iran, which can be[71] better described as, "the Salafization of the *Ikhwan*".[72]

Gulf-based regional *Ikhwan* and Gulf-based Egyptian *Ikhwan* individuals criticize other regional *Ikhwan* groups who have preserved their ties with the IRI, such as *Hamas*. The displeasure with *Hamas* for maintaining a positive relationship with the IRI has gone so far as a refusal to send donations to the group,[73] and is further confirmation that Salafism, with a focus on sectarian differences between Sunnis and Shias, has impacted the Gulf-based *Ikhwan* narrative and their fixation on the IRI.

The Saudi-led propaganda campaign has gradually impacted the group's leadership in terms of its perceptions towards Iran. During Morsi's tenure, pressures from the U.S. and other actors were variables in the distant relationship between the IRI and the Egyptian Ikhwan, as was the IRI's stance towards the Syrian revolution, which particularly impacted the perceptions of low-ranking Ikhwan members and the organization's supporters

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After the 25 January revolution and the *Ikhwan*'s formation of its political party in Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party, the party's foreign policy committee tried to maintain an open-door and to moderate the foreign policy platform. At the time, there were no problems between the party and the IRI. The IRI also took steps to develop its relationship with Egypt, offering economic incentives during Morsi's tenure, such as suggesting that 2 million Iranian tourists could visit the country in order to boost Egypt's tourism industry, offering sorely needed oil

shipments to Egypt, and proposing other trade agreements. However, the party still saw that while it was good to maintain relations with the IRI, they wanted cooperation to occur gradually so as to avoid conflicts with other key actors, particularly as the party saw the U.S. as choosing containment over clashes with the IRI.[75]

During Morsi's tenure, he reportedly sent an envoy to Riyadh who revealed all of Iran's offers to the Egyptian administration at the time, requesting that Riyadh provide these offers to Egypt in place of the IRI. This step that aimed at wooing Saudi Arabia backfired on the Ikhwan, particularly when Tehran found out about this and Saudi Arabia did not deliver

Unbeknown to the foreign policy committee's members, certain state institutions were applying pressure for the maintenance of some distance with the IRI. The Salafist movement was the strongest opponent against opening up toward Tehran.[76] The campaigns of the Egyptian Salafists were echoed among the ranks of the Islamists who supported the Freedom and Justice Party and Morsi's presidency. Saudi Arabia has always been obsessed with the *Ikhwan*'s relationship with the IRI, creating an image of secretive coordination between the organization and the IRI. It wasn't clear during Morsi's administration if the Saudi obsession came from a place of real conviction, or whether it was just another way for Saudi Arabia to maintain pressure on the group.[77] Nevertheless, following the revolution, multiple attempts by the organizations to change this obsession apparently failed. An *Ikhwan* leader mentioned a particular incident, via an Iranian source, that served to exacerbate poor relations between the two sides. During Morsi's tenure, he reportedly sent an envoy to Riyadh who revealed all of Iran's offers to the Egyptian administration at the time, requesting that Riyadh provide these offers to Egypt in place of the IRI. This step that aimed at wooing Saudi Arabia backfired on the *Ikhwan*, particularly when Tehran found out about this and Saudi Arabia did not deliver, serving to sour the *Ikhwan*'s goal of a maintaining a balanced relationship with both the IRI and Saudi Arabia.[78]

Through these economic incentives, the IRI insisted on a relationship with the Egyptian *Ikhwan* that could be interpreted as a strategy to shatter the stereotypical image of "Shia Iran". By maintaining a connection with the largest Sunni Arab country via the largest Sunni PIM (the *Ikhwan*), as well as with Palestinian resistance movements such as *Hamas*, Iran could show that it held the same concerns as the rest of the Islamic world. On the side of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, a strain within the organization believed in policies of engagement, allowing the rocky relationship to continue despite differing visions. The direction this stance took was undoubtedly affected by Iranian intervention in the Syrian revolution, which has made cooperation a point of contention and debate. The different constraints on each of the *Ikhwan*'s "branches" across different countries are quite noticeable in the impact it has had on their respective relations with the IRI. This faction of the *Ikhwan* sees that *Hamas*, for example, has space to maneuver and create alliances that will serve their cause, while the Egyptian *Ikhwan* do not need to do this with IRI at the moment, for they have different calculations towards the IRI, compared to *Hamas*.[79]

From a political standpoint, members of the Ikhwan's older generation believe there is no justification for giving up relations with Saudi in favor of relations with the IRI. It is important to note that despite Saudi's sectarian rhetoric in its politics, it views the Ikhwan as a bigger danger to itself than the IRI, something senior Qatari officials have relayed to the Ikhwan

Moreover, the *Ikhwan*'s transformation in terms of their view of the IRI as a political vision rather than a religious one threatening Sunnis can be traced back to before 2006, when backing *Hezbollah* in the Lebanon war was seen as necessary for the sake of those standing up to Israel. Some leaders of the *Ikhwan* now believe that no Sunni PIM relationships with the IRI should be particularly "warm" given what's happening in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, preferring instead that the level of relations be at a bare minimum. At a time when the media could exaggerate the relationship, given that it produces no current political return, and given that building a strategic relationship is impossible, their preference is to limit themselves to a

parcel, or policy-by-policy, approach. In terms of closing the sectarian gap, the overarching feeling is that this is also not realistic at this time, but that there is no harm in doing this so long as the IRI is not marketing this in the media. The expectation is that the benefits of this dialogue will be limited, only serving to slightly lessen the tension between the Shia and Sunni communities in the region.[80]

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Before Morsi's presidency began, an *Ikhwan* youth member who enjoyed a close relationship with the group's senior officials visited the IRI in a personal capacity and noted that the IRI (at that time) was ready for complete normalization of relations with Egypt. In fact, the youth member met with the Iranian official responsible for the Egyptian file in the Arab Spring countries' monitoring center in the Iranian Presidency, who presented to him the IRI's "success" in several areas, including infrastructure and military manufacturing. The youth member believes that these proposals would have been presented to any future president of Egypt, regardless of his party. This figure knew later that these offers were delivered to the Morsi administration.[83]

According to various sources, there are a number of reasons the *Ikhwan* and the Morsi presidency did not accept these proposals:

- Fear of aggravating an already tense relationship with the Gulf following the revolution;
- The structure of the Egyptian state at the time, heavily built on the army and intelligence services, while not regarding the IRI as an "enemy state" and disagreeing with the Gulf's sectarian discourse toward the IRI, did not exactly welcome an open relationship with the IRI;[84]
- The IRI's stance toward the Syrian revolution, although this reason is less important than the others;
- A sectarian factor, that influenced to some degree a faction within the *Ikhwan* who adopted a sectarian discourse against the IRI and the Shia in general, although this faction does not enjoy much influence in the group's political decisions.

The year in which the *Ikhwan* led the Egyptian government was an "exploratory" period for navigating regional relations. The rejection of the IRI's generous offers during the Morsi administration was not supported by everyone in the government, for some officials believed that Riyadh should not be the compass dictating relations with the IRI. And despite the military's official stance on Iran, according to one account, the chief officer responsible for the Iranian file in Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate (at that time), met with one of Morsi's senior officials and told him that Egypt had been greatly delayed in its handling of cooperation with the IRI, further confirmation that the hesitancy primarily came from Saudi pressure.[85] Aside from the influence of the deep state in Cairo, the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s pragmatism could have served them well in relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, but cooperation between the IRI and Egypt was not a focal point for the Morsi administration during its first year. One faction of *Ikhwan* members believes that the group seriously and unrealistically miscalculated its interests when rejecting the

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IRI's economic initiatives. Had the *Ikhwan* exercised pragmatism and refused to cave under media blackmail, Iran's economic initiatives would have been welcomed by Egyptian state institutions, given that Egypt's economy was in the doldrums.[86] Of course, there is also a group within the *Ikhwan* that believes that the president's calculations were correct, but that he didn't have enough time to implement his vision for relations with the IRI, which included the vigorous re-establishment of the relationship but within Egyptian-led conditions.[87]

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iv. Easy but impossible relations: an expensive catch escapes

In describing the year of the Morsi administration in Egypt, particularly with regard to relations with the IRI, a "lost opportunity" is an appropriate term for the Iranian side, and an "easy but impossible relationship" is a prudent term for the *Ikhwan* side. This year also served to educate the *Ikhwan* on how important they were on the IRI's strategic map, particularly given the latter's focus on popular movements during this period. All of the *Ikhwan* have agreed to calculate their interests while avoiding angering Saudi Arabia, and even the factions who might seek to strengthen their relationship with the IRI will work simultaneously to avoid harming their relationship with Saudi Arabia.

B. Post-coup: the Ikhwan retreat while the IRI waits

The IRI's reaction to the coup could be interpreted as a "punishment" given that the *Ikhwan* had ignored its overtures while in power. A few days before the coup in Egypt, the Iranian media launched an attack on Mohamed Morsi, and the culmination of this attack reached its peak when Iranian officials refused to describe the toppling of the *Ikhwan* as a coup. Even after the Rab'aa and an-Nahda incidents, statements from

The IRI's reaction to the coup could be interpreted as a "punishment" given that the Ikhwan had ignored its overtures while in power. A few days before the coup in Egypt, the Iranian media launched an attack on Mohamed Morsi, and the culmination of this attack reached its peak when Iranian officials refused to describe the toppling of the Ikhwan as a coup

the Iranian regime did not explicitly condemn the role of the Egyptian military in overthrowing Morsi. The strategic relationship between Egyptian military institutions and the U.S., however, precluded any rapprochement between the IRI and the ruling military power. Tehran also recognized that it could not continue to ignore the *Ikhwan*'s wounds, given that cooperation with them would likely be much easier now that they were no longer in power.

In the early days after the coup and the subsequent political unrest, relations between the IRI and the *Ikhwan* were far from friendly, with the latter refusing a meeting with Iranian representatives immediately after the coup.[88] In addition, the IRI reportedly requested a meeting with the *Ikhwan*'s domestic and foreign relations negotiations committee headed by Mohamed Ali Bishr (a member of the Guidance Office), and there is no information on the outcome of this meeting, other than confirmation by other members of the *Ikhwan* that the meeting request was rejected.[89]

A leadership source close to the Guidance Office from within the group said that a short while after these incidents,

> *"The Ikhwan asked its Tehran branch to organize shows of solidarity with them against the military coup in Egypt, which they did for a while. In addition, it sought to close the gap between them and the IRI in relation to the coup. However, the group's members in Tehran eventually ceased these activities, telling the Egypt office that they had received threats for their activities because the Iranian regime was trying to preserve its relationship with Sisi's regime. The Ikhwan interpreted this as Iran's desire for them to constantly remain in a weak position".*[90] [91]

This move by the *Ikhwan* could be seen as their strategy to solidify a regional case against the army's governance in Egypt, and this is why they made this request through their Tehran office. This might have evolved with the Gulf's financial and political support to the post-July 3 regime: the *Ikhwan* were emboldened to request support for their opposition movement from other nations.

However, several sources from the Ikhwan said, "The support Iran was offering was not essentially political; but rather more practical, such as support for student activities outside of Egypt or media support". Other sources mentioned offers of student scholarships through the group's new leadership front, which was not met with much enthusiasm

The IRI then decided, given the group's weakness, to meet with them in their countries of exile, Turkey and London. However, several sources from the *Ikhwan* said, "The support Iran was offering was not essentially political; but rather more practical, such as support for student activities outside of Egypt or media support". Other sources mentioned offers of student scholarships through the group's new leadership front, which was not met with much enthusiasm. It seems the IRI's main message was its keenness on continuing the relationship despite the *Ikhwan*'s state of weakness at the time.[92] These symbolic offers also explain why the *Ikhwan* met Tehran's meeting requests with suspicion, claiming they did not believe the invitations were sincere given that the group couldn't really offer anything in return in exile, while some leaders also expressed that the IRI would not be able to help the *Ikhwan* return to power.

There are still others who say they can confirm that lines of communication were opened up between the IRI and the *Ikhwan* despite apprehension on both sides. An academic close to the *Ikhwan* says he was told by the responsible Iranian party that several *Ikhwan* officials accepted invitations to visit Iran in 2014 and 2015.[93] Further evidence that this is likely true is backed by the IRI's closeness to other PIMs, such as the historically *Ikhwan*-linked *Hamas* movement, that might have mediated between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s higher echelons, similar to the role it previously played in mediating between Damascus and the Syrian opposition. A *Hamas* official denied

that they played the role of mediator between the IRI and the *Ikhwan* post-coup, but also said they would be ready to help bridge the gap between the two sides, as long as this benefited the Palestinian cause (from *Hamas*'s perspective).[94] [95]

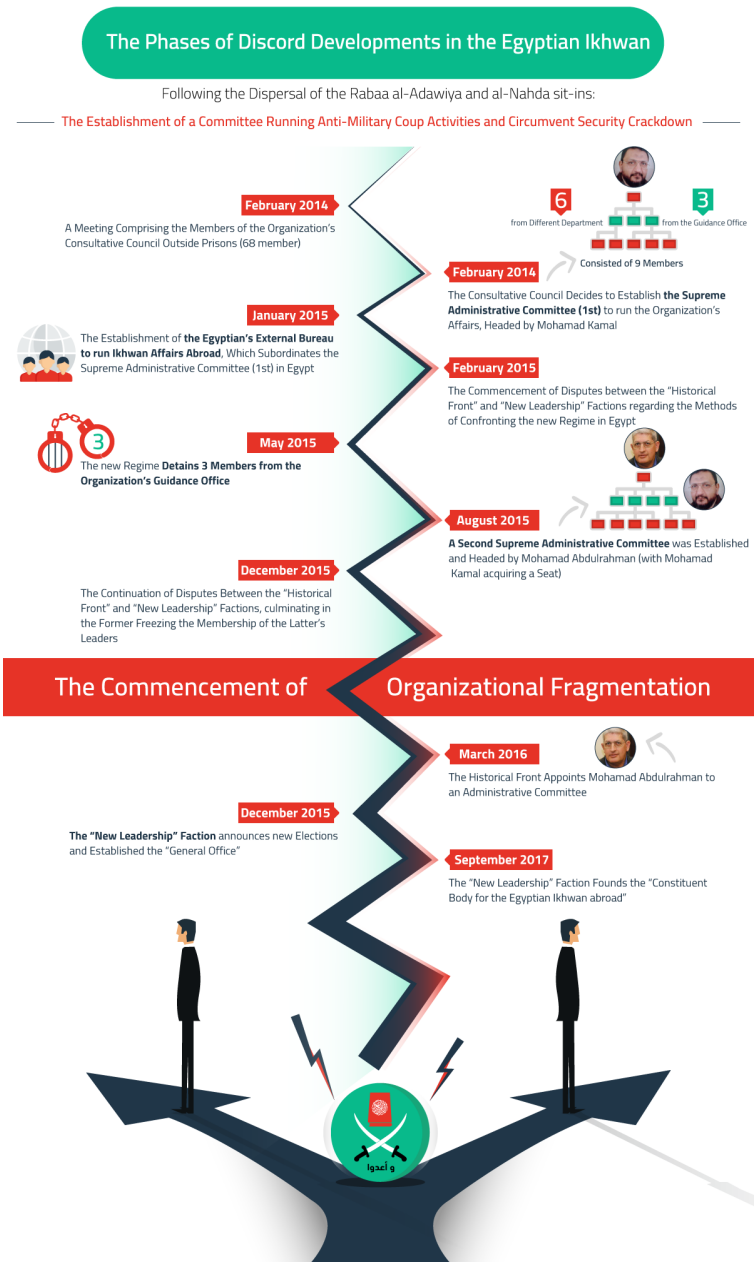
Particularly after several *Ikhwan* leaders and members were exiled, it was necessary for the group to find new regional partners in its battle against the Egyptian regime. According to the previously mentioned academic, there continues to be pressure on the countries in the region to which they have been exiled, with some of these capitals pursuing policies of expulsion against the *Ikhwan*, meaning that finding alternative allies such as Iran is a necessity. Iran is the only nation in the region that can withstand the pressures other nations have been unable to withstand and has presented itself as a safe incubator for the *Ikhwan*; however, so long as Turkey and Qatar continue their support to the group, it is unlikely the *Ikhwan* (both pre- and post-defections), will turn to this alternative.

i. The group splits: multiple lines of communication with Iran

In the first year after the military coup in Egypt, disagreements between the *Ikhwan* began to emerge, despite the leadership's attempts to cover them up. The military regime's detention campaigns netted most of the group's first and second-rank leaders, which further fragmented the group's structure and isolated it from its base.

Two main factions emerged after this, as did a third, smaller faction of marginal groups that formed in the fluid state that resulted from the administrative and political vacuum, critically changing the group's foreign policy, especially regarding the IRI. Over the next three years, these splinter groups found new shape and crystallized, with the emergence of an old guard leadership faction and a newer, younger faction. The other, smaller splinter groups continue to navigate their own paths (see figure 3).

Figure 3



Source: Based on an interview in May 2018 by the authors and open-source data

1. The old guard: capable but lacking the will

This older generation of the group maintains the organizational structure of the *Ikhwan*, as well as holding the purse strings not only financially, but also politically in terms of international relations. The group includes the leaders of the final Guidance Office (prior to the military coup) and coordinates with the larger network of *Ikhwan* members spread across the globe. They believe in the necessity of preserving the group's cohesion and thus believe in avoiding picking uncalculated battles with the Sisi regime, although they do insist on Morsi's legitimacy as president.

That being said, the prevalent perception among this faction is that the IRI's vision is at odds with the Ikhwan's interests. There is also suspicion that any type of relations would be tactical in nature, with some going so far as to speculate that the IRI has an "undeclared" dispute with the Egyptian Ikhwan

The relationship between the IRI and this faction of the *Ikhwan* is incredibly slow, and progress is difficult due to their conservative approach to foreign relations. There remains a thread of the old confidence and consistency between the two sides given their shared history of engagement. That being said, the prevalent perception among this faction is that the IRI's vision is at odds with the *Ikhwan*'s interests. There is also suspicion that any type of relations would be tactical in nature, with some going so far as to speculate that the IRI has an "undeclared" dispute with the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, similar to its differences with the branches of the group in Yemen or Syria. Still others in this group believe that the *Ikhwan*'s weakness in these conflicts is beneficial to the IRI; however, they also admit that the IRI has not intervened in the group's internal fragmentation.[96]

The *Ikhwan* do not see a problem with a minimum level of relations between themselves and the IRI, but they also know their exiled group is in an exhausted state, making them uninfluential actors in building an effective partnership. Perhaps such communications could

be incorporated under an umbrella comprising Turkey and Qatar, and they would be content with that so long as this served the Egyptian cause.[97] This vision is consistent with that of those close to the *Ikhwan*, as well as to those intermediaries close to their Turkish and Qatari counterparts.[98]

Within this faction, some believe that relations with the IRI simply need repair rather than development, because that could be the key to solving several of the region's crises, such as Syria and Yemen. Of course, there are also those who cast suspicion on how serious Iran really is about repairing relations. While the faction's ties with Saudi Arabia aren't great, they also are not something this faction of the *Ikhwan* wish to replace with a subpar relationship with the IRI. The reality is that the IRI also sees the Gulf's animosity towards the organization as a chance to improve relations with the *Ikhwan*. Those who hold this view say that Saudi Arabia's "corrupt" political platform opposes the *Ikhwan* in order to consolidate its own rule, but Saudi Arabia also holds several important keys in the region, keys that the *Ikhwan* do not want to lose by turning toward Iran or accepting its support. The *Ikhwan* want some kind of resolution with the Saudi regional project that is not only at odds with their own, but also uses them as a Sunni token in their "war" against the Iranian project, which also uses the Shia in a similar manner.[99]

This faction does not believe that the continuation of the Saudi–IRI conflict is in the region's interests when a settlement could be reached through dialogue.[100] They also see efforts by the Saudi–UAE axis to isolate the *Ikhwan* as something that will only serve to weaken this axis and complicate any regional resolution with Iran, but the reality is that the *Ikhwan* in their current fragmented state cannot really play a role larger than themselves in this issue. While they do not mind forming an alliance with Riyadh that would resolve the problems of *Ikhwan*-affiliated organizations in the countries of the region, they also feel that the UAE's overarching influence on Saudi Arabia at this point has crippled any Saudi progress in this regard.[101]

During the Gulf reconciliation in 2014, the Qataris made attempts to secure positive nods from Saudi Arabia in resolving the *Ikhwan*'s issues in Egypt and beyond, in exchange for the mobilization of regional PIMs behind Saudi Arabia. This faction of the *Ikhwan* reportedly knew about the defecting ranks' overtures to the IRI at this time, and while the historical leadership (the old guard) did not take issue with this, they did take issue with the use of the *Ikhwan*'s name in these communications. For the old guard of the *Ikhwan*, the global *Ikhwan* network, and the London office in particular, is tasked with international relations that are limited to political necessity, not building alliances.[102] Regional and international pressures meant that the elder generation of *Ikhwan* were more willing to bet on making their Saudi relationship work than they were willing to place their bets on relations with the IRI. This is being emphasized considering that there is fear in some of the ranks of the *Ikhwan* living in Gulf Arab counties that an escalation with Riyadh is likely to lead to a full-scale crackdown on its members residing in the sub-region and a harsher campaign in the West against them. Nevertheless, the *Ikhwan* are still interested in having ties with Tehran. Communication through "back channels" with the IRI was limited to conferences on sectarian convergence, and to this day this has not translated into any formidable political progress.

In general, the Egyptian Ikhwan's situation with Iran will remain hostage to scarecrows, which have created a red line preventing this type of relationship, unless there is an overhaul of the collective attitude in this faction towards the Shia. In the context of Iran's Syrian intervention, many members of this group also feel their rules of conduct cannot justify such a relationship

In general, the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s situation with Iran will remain hostage to scarecrows, which have created a red line preventing this type of relationship, unless there is an overhaul of the collective attitude in this faction towards the Shia. In the context of Iran's Syrian intervention, many members of this group also feel their rules of conduct cannot justify such a relationship. In its current state, this faction of the group is probably unable to open any new lines of communication, and any

relationship with the IRI will remain extremely traditional, limited to semi-regular meetings. In an interview in July 2018, a former senior Egyptian *Ikhwan* sums up the organization's problems with the IRI in the two following points: 1) Its inability to effectively compartmentalize areas of convergence and divergence with Iran. 2) The inefficient bureaucracy (coupled with organizational fragmentation) that might make developing relations relatively difficult.

2. The new leadership faction: forbidden desires

This new leadership faction of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* is comprised of the second-generation political leadership from the group's Freedom and Justice Party, a number of former ministers, former members of parliament and mid-level youth leaders. Their goal is finding an alternative vision for confronting the regime in a legitimate manner. Younger members of the Guidance Office who were charged with administrative affairs of the *Ikhwan* post-coup supported this faction, which emerged after a conflict with the elder generation of leaders. A public defection resulted in a new faction within the larger group, one which formed in isolation of the organizational procedures with which they disagreed. This faction eventually splintered further due to a lack of a clear vision on how to confront the regime after being subjected to successive security assaults.

This new leadership faction believes in different international relations axioms than the old guard, an area the entire group struggles with. It is even more of a problem for the newer faction given that it is still seeking to legitimize itself and build foreign relations independent of the global *Ikhwan* network, whose older generation still controls the group's general foreign affairs.

This new faction has pursued communications with the IRI, and one channel for this communication has been academic engagement with political messages (indirect) and did not result in official relations. It was really more of a first step to establishing trust between them and

the IRI. This was seen as a bold first step, and culminated in the exchange of visits between a think-tank linked to this faction and Iranian think-tanks. Some members of this faction are still apprehensive of any direct political relationship with the IRI, preferring this low-profile research framework, although they perceive that based on these exchanges that the IRI would like more developed relations with the *Ikhwan* and other Egyptian actors in general.[103]

Research exchanges such as this are the second or third track in implementing political relations because research institutions provide a platform for political dialogue

Research exchanges such as this are the second or third track in implementing political relations because research institutions provide a platform for political dialogue. While this faction doesn't deny that communication with the IRI is complicated and come at the cost of *Ikhwan* support at the grassroots level, particularly those affected by the Salafi mindset towards the Shia and the IRI's involvement in Syria, they also believe that given the context of a region in which many countries wish to wipe out the *Ikhwan*, it is reasonable to engage with an effective force such as the IRI.

As usual, however, there is always the Saudi card, which even affects this newer faction of the *Ikhwan*. On a research and academic level, relations with the IRI is something they do not mind pursuing, but there are many reservations about any political cooperation from many factions within the Egyptian *Ikhwan*.[104] This could be explained by the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s inability to overcome Saudi influence, which aims to limit their ties with the IRI given historical cooperation with Riyadh, and the kingdom's strategic weight in the region, despite its classification of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* as a terrorist organization following the military coup. Ultimately, various factions have different opinions on these historical legacies as well as the geopolitical factor in their relationship with Saudi Arabia, which still considerably affects the different factions of the *Ikhwan*.

The newer generation's steps towards the IRI are not much different than the older generation's dialogue with the IRI which intend to

close sectarian gaps, particularly given that the IRI has clearly made the decision to open lines of communications with all the *Ikhwan*'s factions since it needs them for its larger MENA strategy. However, the new generation insists on differentiating itself from the old generation for a number of reasons, including reinforcing its own position within the *Ikhwan* and increasing the tools at its disposal by developing independent foreign relations. Some mid-level *Ikhwan* members believe that this new generation is waiting for the perfect opportunity to pursue interest-based, more positive political ties with the IRI, but only once conditions are right. The IRI could be waiting for them to take the initiative[105].

The leaders of this new generation might not have a clear or comprehensive vision on relations with the IRI. For Tehran, any steps taken by these opposition leaders would be a big gain. And for the icons of this faction, their flexibility toward relations with the IRI may encourage further positive developments on this track, especially given their view that relations with the Gulf should not solely shape their relationship with the IRI, and that relations should be solely interest-based.[106]

Overall, Iranian sources confirm the maintenance of relations with the biggest two Egyptian *Ikhwan* factions, the old guard and the new leadership, and of their lines of communication with the IRI through scientific events to exchange political messages.[107] The old guard utilizes intra-doctrinal dialogue conferences, which are usually held on an annual basis, to engage in talks with Iranian officials. Senior figures from the new front engage with Iranian think-tanks in scientific cooperation and attend events on a semi-regular basis in Iran.[108] At the beginning of 2018, figures from the new front took part in an event organized by a Qom-based think-tank. Reportedly, on the sidelines of the event, political messages were exchanged with Iranian officials.[109] However, on the side of the *Ikhwan* that reach out to Tehran (of which several might be organizationally dismissed by the dominant faction) it is not clear whether such steps are taken in an individual capacity or coordinated with other actors.

3. The confrontational faction: in need of Iran's help

Certain grassroots and mid-level groups of the *Ikhwan* had to bow to the reality of their security situation in Egypt and abandon regular organizational work. Others, still from the grassroots members and mid-level leadership, supported by senior-level leaders, took it a step further and organized confrontation with the Sisi regime as a means to realize radical change.

Unlike the older and newer factions discussed above, these smaller factions that formed on the "sidelines" in Egypt as a reaction to the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s fragile position propose a confrontational plan towards the Egyptian regime. Thereby, they have diverged from the old guard and segments of the new leadership faction, and also diverged with the aforementioned groupings on the importance of reaching out to the IRI in this critical stage.

Perhaps more significantly, this group wishes to have a positive relationship with Iran, particularly given that most movements that adopt confrontational discourses see the Iranian revolution as a positive example of achieving quick results in a short amount of time (regardless of the ideological convergence which emerged afterwards). For this third faction, Iran is seen as an independent actor with a regional project, and they are impressed with the way the IRI has imposed itself on the region as one of the region's actors by force. Furthermore, they believe it is necessary to find a way to resolve the differences, because there will never be "Sunnification" of the Shia, or vice versa, particularly given that this sectarianism is being used for political ambitions surpassing the current state of jihadist movements.[110]

This faction focuses on the IRI's support to non-state actors, such as *Hezbollah* and *Hamas*, given their predisposition to confront the Egyptian state. Thus, it holds the pragmatic view of the possibility of future positive relations with the IRI and criticizes the larger *Ikhwan* network for not echoing this pragmatism in its

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dealings with the IRI both during and after the Morsi administration. This younger, more radical faction is viewing the region with a more realistic approach than that of their older peers, meaning that continued hostility towards the IRI is perhaps not on the list of their current priorities.[111]

A tactical, conditional partnership may emerge between this faction and the IRI as a result of the region's crises (due to Iran's involvement) and this faction's admiration of Iran's brazen approach in the region as well as its support to other, similar groups

A tactical, conditional partnership may emerge between this faction and the IRI as a result of the region's crises (due to Iran's involvement) and this faction's admiration of Iran's brazen approach in the region as well as its support to other, similar groups. This faction sees that the IRI is more concerned with the most influential actors in the field, even if it also preserves the traditional political lines of dialogue. Because of what they see as a commonality in tactics, they believe the IRI is eager to communicate with them, and IRI officials have requested meetings with influential youth members of this faction, although any progress in this regard will be slow and secretive given the sensitive position of both sides.[112]

Of course, this faction recognizes that changing the Salafi-influenced attitudes of constituencies supportive of PIMs toward Iran also necessitates change in the IRI's behavior in the region. There is an added level of complexity, because any such alliance with the IRI will be very complicated for this faction as it aims to form a balance of international relations, and thereby secrecy is required.[113] This faction's endeavor to forge balanced relations is reflected by the establishment of political bureaus that could be mandated to embark on this.[114] From this perspective, traditional political bodies in the Egyptian *Ikhwan* are unable , to meet their aspirations as they will have to reach out to external actors in order to secure backing.[115] As of yet, according to one source in this faction, there have been no direct communications between this faction's leadership and the IRI, although some of these splinter groups have formed political bureaus, perhaps to pursue this task.[116]

Conclusion

This report has illustrated how IRI–Egyptian *Ikhwan* relations are shaped considerably by the region's changing geopolitical dynamics in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions, especially because Turkey and Qatar currently back the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, albeit to varying degrees. The current rapprochement between the Turkish–Iranian–Qatari trio in light of the Gulf crisis and the Kurdish upsurge adds new dimensions to the prospects for more change in relations between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*. With the erosion of the American role in the region and Russia's rise, Turkey and Iran seem to be slowly moving toward making regional arrangements in Syria and Iraq. Such regional arrangements may involve the regional organizations of the *Ikhwan*, whether as actors with proactively direct roles in the field (e.g. in elections), or as actors who can play mediatory roles between warring factions allied with various regional actors. In other words, higher levels of communication between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* as well as other groups could have considerable consequences.

The continuation of the Gulf crisis and the rise of a prospective Iranian–Turkish regional sub-settlement presents Tehran with a golden opportunity to communicate with Turkey-friendly Sunni PIMs that have relative influence in Arab Sunni communities

The continuation of the Gulf crisis and the rise of a prospective Iranian–Turkish regional sub-settlement presents Tehran with a golden opportunity to communicate with Turkey-friendly Sunni PIMs that have relative influence in Arab Sunni communities. While improved Iranian relations with Sunni PIMs may contribute to improving the IRI's image in their constituencies in special circumstances. For example, a full-blown war between the IRI or *Hezbollah* with Israel (e.g. the 2006 Lebanon war) would be a far greater catalyst and a clear justification for Sunni PIMs to enhance ties with the IRI. The Egyptian *Ikhwan* were supportive of *Hezbollah* in its war with Israel in 2006 to the extent that its former General Guide, Mohamed Mahdi Akef, famously expressed the readiness of the *Ikhwan* to send thousands of mujahideen to fight alongside *Hezbollah* in Lebanon. However, Hezbollah's taking of control of Beirut in 2008 and heavy involvement in the Syrian civil war in 2013, drove a wedge between the *Ikhwan* in the region and the Iran-led regional axis.

One-on-one communication with the Egyptian Ikhwan's factions allows the IRI to build up relations with different figures and even to engage them in projects, while guaranteeing that other factions will be unable to veto the establishment and enhancement of these ties. Therefore, the IRI is capable of gradually creating pockets of support for rapprochement within the Ikhwan

Despite historic ideological commonalities, relations between the two sides did not often reach a warm level, even while channels of communication remained open. But with the unprecedented organizational fragmentation the Egyptian *Ikhwan* have experienced following the military coup in Egypt, relations have moved from bilateral to multilateral between the IRI and its various factions, although the so-called old guard remain in control. However, the reformulation of ties between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan* highlights how the IRI perceives the organization's fragmentation and is acting upon it. While Tehran-based policymakers and researchers have reiterated to the authors that they would like to see the Egyptian *Ikhwan* unified, both fragmentation and unification seem to offer the IRI different advantages and disadvantages in their communications and attempts to work with the organization.

One-on-one communication with the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s factions allows the IRI to build up relations with different figures and even to engage them in projects, while guaranteeing that other factions will be unable to veto the establishment and enhancement of these ties. Therefore, the IRI is capable of gradually creating pockets of support for rapprochement within the *Ikhwan*. In terms of the prospects of institutional unification between the various factions, these members (junior/mid-level) may push for better relations with the IRI in the medium to long-term. However, this scenario is disadvantageous to the IRI in the sense that unification may not take place anytime soon, or anytime at all for that matter. Moreover, if some factions (especially the old guard) see the IRI as maximally attempting to woo members from other factions, Tehran could completely lose access to some factions or at the least will not be able to reach a breakthrough with the more influential factions. Therefore, intra-elite rivalry in the Egyptian *Ikhwan* is an important dimension when looking into the prospects of their relations with the IRI.

On the other hand, the prospect of institutional unification within the Egyptian Ikhwan may allow the IRI to build relations with the organization in its cohesive form and create the opportunity to embark on full-fledged understandings with its leaders. However, in this situation, a veto from the senior leadership of the organization may block any Iranian endeavor from expansively communicating with and engaging in projects with the Ikhwan

On the other hand, the prospect of institutional unification within the Egyptian *Ikhwan* may allow the IRI to build relations with the organization in its cohesive form and create the opportunity to embark on full-fledged understandings with its leaders. However, in this situation, a veto from the senior leadership of the organization may block any Iranian endeavor from expansively communicating with and engaging in projects with the *Ikhwan*. Practically speaking, the IRI probably sees the current fragmentation as an opportunity to build separate connections with different factions in the absence of internal consent within the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, a process that should have a multiplier effect in any future institutional unification. Moreover, should there be any return of *Ikhwan* leaders from exile in the case of political reconciliation with the military-led regime in Egypt or violent regime change, the *Ikhwan* may push in the long-term for better relations between Cairo and Tehran. The IRI's strategic patience is not limited to how it cultivates its influence in its nearby Arab neighborhood with local communities, but also with distant but valuable actors like the Egyptian *Ikhwan* and other similar regional organizations close to the *Ikhwan*'s ideology.

The Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s factions, especially the so-called "new office" (the new leadership faction) in exile, is pragmatic and open to partnerships, including Iran, as long as their current backers, Turkey and Qatar, are open to a regional partnership with Iran that includes the Egyptian *Ikhwan*. However, others in the same office believe that the *Ikhwan*'s relations with Iran should only be based on state-to-state communications (between Egypt and Iran). The third, confrontation-prone faction has a positive perception of the IRI given their ideological preferences making the IRI an appealing revolutionary model; however, the faction remains marginalized within the organization overall even though they ascribe to the *Ikhwan*'s ideology, albeit through a militarized lens.

It is important to take into consideration how the *Ikhwan*'s fragmentation

and their geographically dispersed presence in Sudan, Malaysia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere might be leading Egyptian *Ikhwan* members to construct different approaches to the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s foreign policy. The historical leadership is not resistant to improved ties with the IRI, with its figures sharing the view of some of the new leadership faction's figures who are open to cooperation. However, the old guard is more likely to consider the backlash from traditional actors in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, in these situations. However, the Saudi-UAE-led regional axis is vigorously increasing its crackdown on the *Ikhwan* in the region and seeking to drain their financial capabilities. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is continuously purging institutions of *Ikhwan*-affiliated expatriates, which have for decades been contributing to the organization's vast fiscal capabilities. The changing political economy of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* is likely impacting how *Ikhwan* members see the position of Saudi Arabia in the region.

While both are likely unopposed to such contacts, as long as they do not conflict with their interests, they highly likely prefer this to continue under their oversight, or at least to integrate these lines of communication to form part of a multilateral regional understanding, especially if involved factions are based in their countries

Turkey and Qatar are likely aware of current and prospective meetings between the IRI and the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, as well as other *Ikhwan*-affiliated groups in the region. While both are likely unopposed to such contacts, as long as they do not conflict with their interests, they highly likely prefer this to continue under their oversight, or at least to integrate these lines of communication to form part of a multilateral regional understanding, especially if involved factions are based in their countries. Wide disunity in the *Ikhwan*'s ranks under duress, coupled with the region's shifting geopolitics, have turned the organization from a cohesive and politically integrated force in Egypt to a fragmented entity with its political future largely shaped by regional reconfigurations. Under the crackdown of the American administration of Donald Trump on the IRI and PIMs, the question remains primarily focused on whether the Egyptian *Ikhwan* (whether organizationally unified or fragmented) and other regional groups are willing to engage with the IRI on a higher level or not. Another important question is whether the organization, in an engagement

scenario, would deal with the IRI independent of any multilateral regional understandings as an autonomous actor, or engage with the IRI in the context of a grand regional settlement. The Egyptian *Ikhwan* is likely handling this case carefully due to its far-reaching dimensions, whether internally, on the level of its constituencies, or on the level of its foreign relations.

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54- Interview with a writer with connections to the global *Ikhwan* network, Istanbul, April 2018
55- Interview with a professor at Tehran University with expertise on Sunni political Islamic movements, Tehran, August 2017.
56- Interview with two Iranian scholars, Istanbul, March 2018.
57- Ibid.
58- In a discussion with the head of an influential Iranian conservative-oriented think-tank in Tehran, the figure argues that differences on the *Ikhwan* exist in the Iranian establishment but that the overall stance of the IRI toward the *Ikhwan* is positive and open to engagement. However, criticisms in Tehran in regard to the organization's behavior exist (while the figure did not clarify what is being criticized specifically, it is likely to be the *Ikhwan*'s foreign policy when they were in power in Cairo), Tehran, April 2018.
59- Op. cit., 56
60- Interview with a researcher with expertise on Middle Eastern affairs, Tehran, August 2017.
61- Multiple discussions with academics, policymakers, and former diplomats, Tehran, August

2017.
62- In a discussion with an Iranian Shia cleric with connections to reformist circles argues the opposite of what conservatives/principalists often argue, that radical change was needed in Egypt. In his opinion, the *Ikhwan* in Egypt failed to rule, in part, because they sought to '*Ikhwan*ize' the Egyptian state, Qom, April 2018.
63- Ibid.
64- A Tehran-based journalist says that when Mohamad Morsi refused an invitation to meet Iran's SL during his visit to Tehran to attend the non-alignment summit (2012), followed by his meeting with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah on his way from Tehran, probably generated a perception of Mohamed Morsi's ingratitude (and the *Ikhwan*) in return for Tehran's goodwill gesture, Tehran, April 2018.
65- Op. cit., note 44
66- Interview with an Iranian Shia Cleric and head of a university, Tehran, August 2017.
67- Ibid.
68- In a discussion with an Iranian Shia Cleric with experience in Islamic intra-faith dialogues, he argues that the involvement of the Egyptian *Ikhwan* in the dialogues that Iranian Shia figures take part in is positive, but could potentially harm them at this stage if publicized. He is in favor of engagement, but says that patience is needed, where a positive outcome might come after numerous sessions, Qom, April 2018.
69- A Tehran-based journalist told the authors that Saudi Arabia was probably uncomfortable seeing an Islamist organization like the *Ikhwan* having leverage over the Red Sea, on its Western flank, with the Islamic Republic of Iran, at the same time having leverage in the Gulf, on its Eastern flank (an emerging belt encircling Saudi Arabia), Tehran, April 2018.
70- Interview with a former leader of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s student affairs division (pre-revolution), who later moved to the group's political bureau after being exiled post-Morsi, and then resigned from organization work with the "old leadership", Istanbul, December 2017.
71- Ibid.
72- A term borrowed from Husam Tamam's study, "Tasalluf al-*Ikhwan*: Ta-akul al-Utrooha al-*Ikhwan*iya wa Su'ood al-Salafiyya fee Jama'at al-*Ikhwan* al-Muslimeen," which appeared in a series published by Biblioteca Alexandrina, 2010.
73- Interview with *Ikhwan* youth member close to the now-deposed Mohamed Morsi presidency with knowledge of the Iran communications file, Istanbul, November 2017.
74- Op. cit., 70
75- Interview with a former member of the *Ikhwan*'s Freedom and Justice Party's foreign relations committee (formed post-revolution) and a defector from the elder echelon's leadership, Istanbul, November 2017.
76- Salafists heavily criticized the *Ikhwan* and the Egyptian presidency during Morsi's tenure for what they deemed "openness" toward Iranians and Shias.
77- Ibid.
78- Ibid.
79- Interview with *Ikhwan* senior figure close to the group's elder echelon of leadership, Istanbul, January 2018.
80- Ibid.
81- Ibid.
82- Interview with *Ikhwan* leader close to the group's elder echelon of leadership and a former official of the group's foreign relations committee, London, January 2018.
83- Op. cit., 73
84- Op. cit., 73

85- Interview with former senior Egyptian official in Morsi's administration, Istanbul, January 2018.
86- Interview with dissident former *Ikhwan* youth leader who now holds the view that the current Egyptian regime should be confronted by force, Istanbul, December 2017.
87- Op. cit., 82
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90- Op. cit., 79
91- Op. cit., 70 - Op. cit., 73
92- Op. cit., 79
93- Interview with an academic close to the new *Ikhwan* leadership that defected from the older generation of the group, Istanbul, January 2018.
94- Interview with a mid-level *Hamas* leadership figure, Istanbul, August 2017.
95- In an interview with a Sunni cleric with connections to the Egyptian *Ikhwan*, the figure argued that despite criticisms toward Iran's regional policy, the *Ikhwan* should enhance ties with Tehran in order to help it maneuver against Riyadh. He said: "if communication and engagement with Iran is based on a clear agenda and plan, the consequences can be positive for the *Ikhwan*". In this context, he says: "*Hamas*, with its long-term experience with Iran, can advise the Egyptians on the matter", Istanbul, April 2018.
96- Op. cit., 79
97- Op. cit., 79
98- Interview with a senior figure close to the *Ikhwan* and the Turkish government, Istanbul, January 2018.
99- Op. cit., 79
100- Op. cit., 82
101- Op. cit., 79. Clarification: The global *Ikhwan* network's London office plays a *de facto* ceremonial role in the management of the international relations of regional *Ikhwan* movements. The office also coordinates between different *Ikhwan* movements. The office is headed by Ibrahim Mounir, a member of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s guidance office, Vice President of the Egyptian *Ikhwan*'s General Guide, the General Secretary of the global *Ikhwan* network, and the spokesman for the *Ikhwan* in Europe. Observers usually underestimate the influence of this office over policy-making in the *Ikhwan* movements and their international affairs.
102- Op. cit., 79
103- Op. cit., 75
104- Op. cit., 93
105- Op. cit., 70
106- Op. cit., 85
107- Op. cit., 56
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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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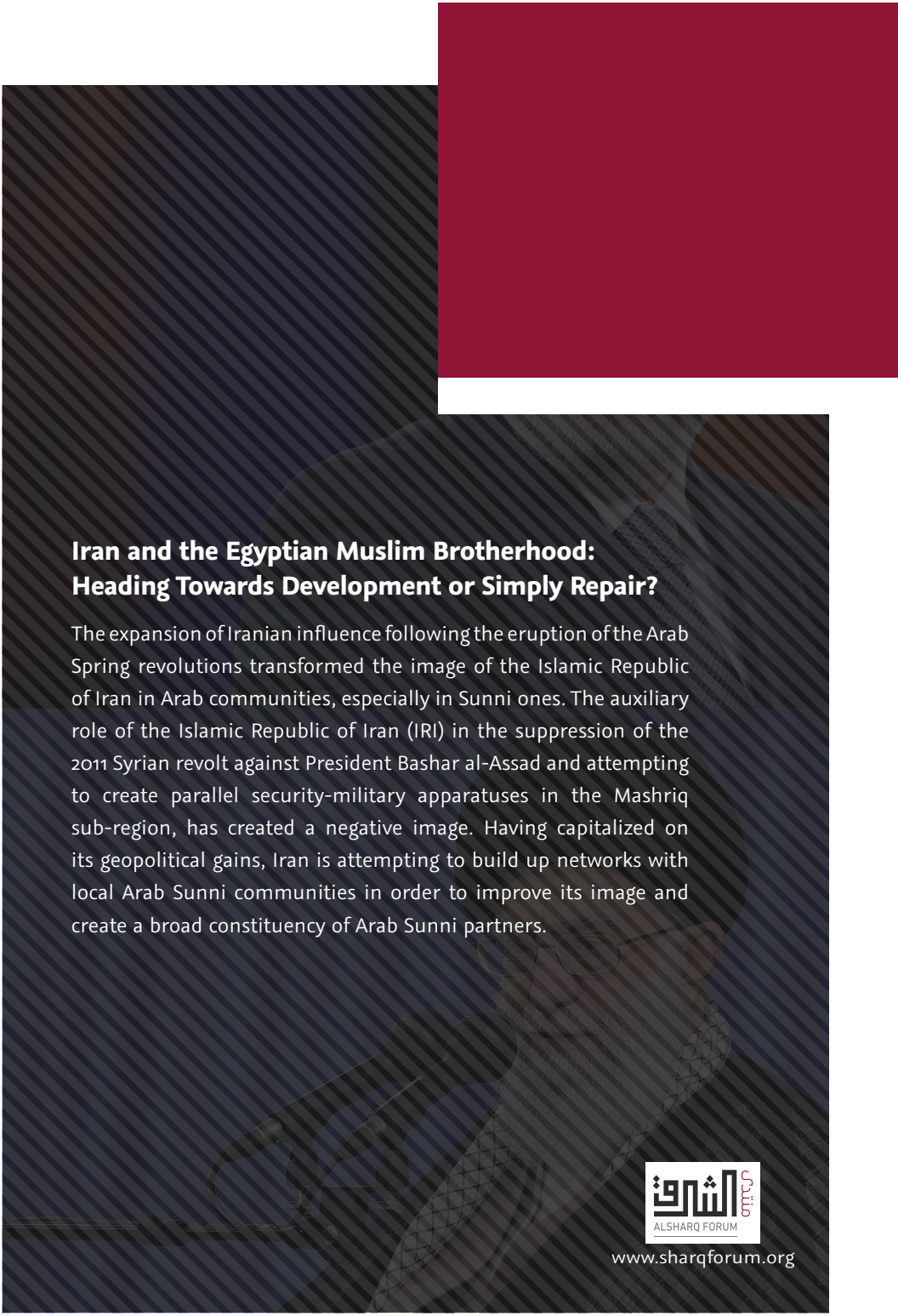

Iran and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Heading Towards Development or Simply Repair?

The expansion of Iranian influence following the eruption of the Arab Spring revolutions transformed the image of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Arab communities, especially in Sunni ones. The auxiliary role of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in the suppression of the 2011 Syrian revolt against President Bashar al-Assad and attempting to create parallel security-military apparatuses in the Mashriq sub-region, has created a negative image. Having capitalized on its geopolitical gains, Iran is attempting to build up networks with local Arab Sunni communities in order to improve its image and create a broad constituency of Arab Sunni partners.

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