Islamism within a civil war: The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's struggle for survival

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SUMMARY: After 30 years in exile outside of Syria, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has become an important component of the western-backed Syrian opposition. Despite its influence, the expansion and radicalization of the Islamist scene in Syria challenges the legitimacy of the Brotherhood's gradualist approach and constrains its presence on the ground.

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BROOKINGS

The Syrian conflict offers a unique opportunity for the Muslim Brotherhood to make their comeback on the political stage thirty years after Hafez al-Assad forced them out of the country. Indeed, the local Brotherhood chapter boasts major strengths. The group, created by Syrian clerics inspired by the ideas of Hassan al-Banna, entered parliament in the 1950s and 1960s before taking the helm of the Islamist opposition to the Baath regime between 1979 and 1982. This provides it with historical and revolutionary legitimacy. It also gives its leaders the political experience needed to navigate the complex politics of the Syrian opposition.

However, despite these advantages, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's influence on the ground remains insignificant. Its long exile increased the suspicion of many corners of Syrian society. In addition, its leadership is still dominated by a team of elderly figures, something which does not contribute to making the group attractive to many young Syrians. For its part, the unprecedented violence of the Syrian conflict has resulted in the rapid expansion and radicalization of the Islamist field. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood now represents merely one faction competing amongst many others for Islamic legitimacy.

In this context, the growing strength of extremist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and the Nusra Front provides the Brotherhood with both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the political pragmatism and the 'centrist' ideological discourse of the leadership has contributed to making the moderate Islamist group a dominant force in the Western-backed Syrian opposition. On the other hand, the rise of the extremists in Syria is endangering the Brotherhood's attempts to seek a foothold inside the country, and presents the group with an unprecedented ideological challenge.

A pragmatic leadership

The Muslim Brotherhood has routinely been accused of "controlling"[1] the exiled opposition since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. However, in actual fact, the group's sway over opposition bodies has had its ebbs and flows. Most often, the Brotherhood has exerted its influence indirectly. For instance, when the Syrian National Council (SNC) was created in September 2011, its leaders tried neither to 'Islamize' its political program nor to claim leadership. Instead, they worked with other activists to build broad alliances. They backed opposition figures with socio-political backgrounds very distinct from theirs to become head of the SNC. They included Burhan Ghalioun, a secular Sunni activist, Abdelbasset Sieda, a Kurdish academic, and George Sabra, a Christian Marxist. In addition to forging these pragmatic partnerships, the Muslim Brotherhood showcased their influence by acting as a bloc during SNC voting sessions – and this sometimes turned them into the opposition's kingmakers. Indeed, their internal cohesion and political organization stands in stark contrast to the fragmentation and shifting alliances which characterize the rest of the Syrian opposition to date.

Muslim Brotherhood politicians again demonstrated their skills in December 2012 after the Obama administration pushed the SNC to integrate the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, a new platform which was at the time deemed more

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[1] See for instance Ayman Sharrouf, "The destructive ascendancy of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood," *Now Lebanon*, February 12, 2014, https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/564483-the-destructive-ascendancy-of-syrias-muslim-brotherhood.

representative of the diversity of the Syrian mosaic. The Brotherhood, at first reluctant to enter a larger institution in which their influence would be diluted, finally endorsed the move after nominating their strongman, Faruk Tayfur, as the new body's Vice-President. They also penetrated the Coalition's decision-making circles through alliances with some of their own networks, including the National Action Group for Syria, a grouping of ex-Brotherhood members from Aleppo, the Committee to Protect Civilians, a humanitarian and military platform active in Homs, and the League of the Syrian Ulema, a lobby group gathering religious scholars and headed by Mohammed Ali Sabouni, a figure close to the Brotherhood. Yet while this complex cocktail of mutual interests and Islamist sympathies, sometimes disguised, helped the Brotherhood secure political influence, it further alienated those who accused it of controlling the opposition. These criticisms reached their apex following the March 2013 election of Ghassan Hitto, an ally of Qatar seen by many as the "Brotherhood's man"[2], as head of the Syrian opposition's 'transitional government'[3].

The row over Hitto's election, his subsequent resignation, and the almost simultaneous nomination of Saudi-backed Ahmed al-Jarba as new head of the opposition, also reflected the Brotherhood's entanglement in regional power struggles. The group had initially supported the Qatari camp in the Syrian opposition in exchange for increased media exposure and political support. This, unsurprisingly, alienated Saudi Arabia. And when Riyadh ultimately seized the 'Syrian file' from Doha in 2013, the new strategic landscape naturally translated into a decrease of the Brotherhood's influence in the exiled opposition. This pushed some of its leaders to think of pragmatic ways to better navigate these shifting geopolitical sands. From then on, Faruk Tayfur did his utmost to fix the group's relationship with the Kingdom – sparing none of his own political capital to court Riyadh and to support the Saudi agenda in the Coalition. His first steps in this direction were met with unease by the rest of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's leadership[4]. Indeed, at precisely the same time, Saudi Arabia was encouraging the Egyptian army to conduct a crackdown on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo. Yet Faruk Tayfur's realist approach eventually won over the rest of the organization. In January 2014 most of the Brotherhood members voted in favour of Saudi-backed Ahmed al-Jarba when he ran for a second time as head of the opposition. "We all realized that we don't stand to gain anything from confronting Saudi Arabia"[5], summed up a source in the leadership.

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

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[2] See, for instance, Ayman Mohyeldin and Alastair Jamieson, "From Dallas to Damascus: the Texas 'straight shooter' who could replace Syria's Assad," *NBC News*, March 30, 2013, http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/03/30/17500980-from-dallas-to-damascus-the-texas-straight-shooter-who-could-replace-syrias-assad.

[3] For a detailed and balanced account of the Muslim Brotherhood's role in the Syrian opposition, see Aron Lund, *Struggling to adapt: the Muslim Brotherhood in a new Syria* (Washington DC: Carnegie Paper, May 2013).

[4] Raphaël Lefèvre , "Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Brotherhood," *Middle East Institute*, September 27, 2013, http://www.mei.edu/content/saudi-arabia-and-syrian-brotherhood.

[5] Unless stated otherwise, this paper draws from a series of interviews conducted by the author from December 2012 until March 2015 in various locations including Istanbul, Beirut, Tripoli, Tunis, London and Paris.

and work in the Kingdom where many took refuge after Hafez al-Assad's repression in the early 1980s. And in November 2014, when the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood designated as its new leader Mohammed Walid, a Syrian surgeon practising in Jeddah, the Saudi rulers did not raise any objections[6]. In turn, the group's new head would have warm words for the Kingdom. After his election, he thanked Saudi Arabia for "protecting" the Syrian Brotherhood in their exile and for "supporting" the Syrian revolution[7]. Perhaps more significantly, he equated the Kingdom to a "strategic powerhouse for all Muslims in the world"[8], supported its standoff against Iran, and gave his blessing early on to the Saudi military intervention in Yemen.

A centrist ideology?

The accommodation with Saudi Arabia has also made long-standing political differences between the leaderships of the Brotherhood's Syrian and Egyptian branches much starker. The divergence of views between the two groups has its roots in history. But it emerged forcefully during the Arab Spring after high ranking Syrian figures expressed their bewilderment at the way their counterparts dealt with Egyptian politics and, in particular, with the opposition. A few months before the 2013 coup, Zuheir Salem, a spokesman and chief ideologue for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, bluntly argued that it had been a "mistake" for the Egyptian Brotherhood to have run for the presidential elections. "Egypt was a sinking boat and you cannot come and change it the way you are doing; I believe that we have to work within a coalition"[9], he asserted while addressing the Egyptian Brotherhood's leadership. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had also grown more critical of Mohammed Morsi and his handling of the conflict in Syria. In May 2013, an official Syrian Brotherhood publication used particularly harsh words to describe the Egyptian President's courting of Iran and Russia – two allies of Bashar al-Assad's regime. "It was painful for our people to hear President Mohammed Morsi's remarks in Moscow […]. The Syrian people, including members of our [organization], are waiting for an explanation and wonder bitterly: where is President Morsi's attitude taking him?"[10] Even the Egyptian President's last-minute policy shift on Syria and his call for a worldwide 'jihad' against the Assad regime were met with widespread skepticism in the Syrian organization. "The Syrian people know best what is needed for their future. Syrians don't need foreign fighters"[11], asserted Ali al-Bayanouni, a top Syrian Brotherhood figure. The Egyptian army's July 2013 coup naturally pushed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's leadership to express solidarity with its Egyptian sister and to tone down its criticisms of Mohammed Morsi, but unease between the two branches persists.

Ideologically, the Syrian Brotherhood also sought to distance itself from the Egyptian branch.

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[6] Raphaël Lefèvre, "New leaders for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 11, 2014, http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/12/11/new-leaders-for-syrian-muslim-brotherhood.
[7] Zaman al-Wasl, "Interview: Muslim Brotherhood leader Walid," *The Syrian Observer*, February 17, 2015, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28642/Interview_Muslim_Brotherhood_Leader_Walid.
[8] "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood leader highlights reforms, future plans," *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 20, 2015, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/9402.html.
[9] Tam Hussein, "The Brotherhood's man in London," *The Majalla*, April 23, 2013, http://eng.majalla.com/2013/04/article55240699.
[10] "Statement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria on current developments," *Syrian Observer*, May 7, 2013, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Resources/24756/Statement+of+the+Muslim+Brotherhood+in+Syria+on+current+Developments.
[11] Tam Hussein, "A Brotherhood vision for Syria: in conversation with the former leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," *The Majalla,* November, 29, 2013, http://eng.majalla.com/2013/11/article55247035.

This trend was already visible a decade ago when the Syrian group published a 'National Honor Charter' and a 'Political Project', content that was reiterated in a 'National Covenant' published in 2012. The documents stressed the need to respect the religious, cultural and political diversity of the Syrian people while calling for the establishment of a parliamentary regime free from religious oversight. Practically, this meant that leaders of the Syrian Brotherhood were highly critical of the Egyptian branch's stipulation that neither a Coptic Christian nor a woman should be chosen as President of Egypt. They also clearly rejected Egyptian calls for the establishment of an elected council of clerics who would determine whether legal rulings conform to Islamic law. "We don't want to enter the realm of theocracy"[12], summed up ideologue Zuheir Salem. To make its 'centrist' (*wasatiya*) approach more concrete to the public, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood spearheaded the creation of the Waad party in July 2013. This "national party with an Islamic framework" intended to demonstrate that Syrians can "work together"[13] by gathering on a single platform a number of Muslim Brotherhood members, independent Islamists, and 'national figures' including secular Sunnis and even some Christians and Alawites. These moves helped place the leaders of the Syrian Brotherhood in the orbit of Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party. Mostly based in Istanbul and with a field office in Gaziantep on the Syrian-Turkish border, Waad figures enjoy close ties to the Turkish government and they constantly speak of their admiration for the "Turkish miracle".

Internally, the birth of Waad had the potential to mark a clear break between the Brotherhood's religious and social activities, on the one hand, and its political activism on the other. Inside the new party, a decision-making process involving an equal number of Brotherhood members and non-members was specifically designed so as to ensure a degree of independence from the Islamist organization. This initially contrasted with Egypt's Justice and Freedom Party, often seen as nothing more than a puppet in the hands of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Enshrining the stark distinction between a socio-religious movement (*haraka*) and a party (*hizb*) had been a long-standing demand of a number of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members. "This new party is the product of the lobbying efforts undertaken by the most moderate Brotherhood members and some of the youth a decade ago", explained a high ranking Waad figure. "It finally allows Muslim Brothers to work, free from organizational constraints, with whoever agrees with their vision of a post-Assad Syria – including secular Syrians and minorities". The rise of this new party also seemed to offer appealing career prospects to young Islamists frustrated by the older generation's monopoly on the Brotherhood's leadership. A figure close to the Brotherhood cynically observed that "the creation of Waad was a way to give positions to ambitious politicians frustrated by the lack of opportunities in the Brotherhood – many youth begged to join the party to gain in visibility and importance".

Yet it remains to be seen whether Waad retains its self-professed "political independence"[14] for much longer. The party was badly hit by the November 2014 election of its own head, Mohammed Walid, as the new leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Walid immediately

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[12] Zuheir Salem quoted in Tam Hussein's, "A Brotherhood vision for Syria: in conversation with the former leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," *The Majalla,* November, 29, 2013, http://eng.majalla.com/2013/11/article55247035.
[13] Zaman al-Wasl, "Interview: Muslim Brotherhood leader Walid," *The Syrian Observer*, February 17, 2015, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28642/Interview_Muslim_Brotherhood_Leader_Walid.
[14] "Waad party is not Muslim Brotherhood affiliate: deputy," *Zaman al-Wasl*, March, 18, 2014, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/4152.html.

resigned from his post but suspicion now lingers that the party was always merely acting as the Brotherhood's political arm. "The whole idea behind the party was to show independence from the Brotherhood's leadership", an activist close to Waad bitterly argued. "Walid's election destroyed everything". The Syrian Brotherhood's new leader acknowledged as much when he stated in early 2015 that Waad had "not grown and developed as planned"[15]. Indeed, to date, the Muslim Brotherhood still funds most of the party's activities and they have yet to relinquish their seats to Waad members in the Coalition. The debate is now likely to intensify between those partisans of a more radical separation between *hizb* and *haraka* and those who argue that it is an ill-timed, costly and mostly cosmetic initiative.

The risk of factionalism

Tension between the Syrian Brotherhood's youth and the older generation of the Muslim Brotherhood largely pre-dates the current debate over the Waad party. Cracks in the foundation started appearing after the 2010 election of Riyadh al-Shuqfa as the head of the Syrian Brotherhood. His election came to symbolize the victory inside the Brotherhood of a power bloc made up mainly of conservative figures from Hama and Idlib who mostly belong to the older generation in charge in the early 1980s. Disappointment at the election results prompted a group of reform-minded Islamists from Aleppo in their thirties and early forties to defect from the Brotherhood and to set up a parallel structure called the National Action Group for Syria[16]. "We were frustrated by the older generation's monopoly of power and we wanted to clearly separate politics from *da'wa* by having our own political platform", recounted a member of the splinter group. "Our vision was very much neo-Ikhwan", he added. At first, the National Action Group gained traction by multiplying political initiatives aimed at gathering the exiled opposition under one umbrella. It would become a founding member of the SNC and its leader, Ahmed Ramadan, would rapidly emerge as one of the opposition's most influential figures.

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

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[15] Zaman al-Wasl, "Interview: Muslim Brotherhood leader Walid," *The Syrian Observer*, February 17, 2015, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28642/Interview_Muslim_Brotherhood_Leader_Walid.
[16] For more on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's internal dynamics see Raphaël Lefèvre, *The Muslim Brotherhood prepares for a comeback in Syria* (Washington DC: Carnegie Paper, May 2013).

develops an original political project and appears as a truly independent force.

Concurrent with the birth of the National Action Group, the Brotherhood took steps to prevent yet another generational split from its ranks. "Our youth has been very active at the level of the base – now we want to give them more opportunities to organize, launch initiatives and reach leadership positions", explained a Muslim Brother who belongs to the older generation. The crisis in Syria indeed seems to have fired up the youth which, until then, was not particularly involved in the affairs of the exiled organization. After 2011, young Syrians affiliated with the Brotherhood flocked to Istanbul, where the group's headquarters is located, to take part in initiatives such as raising the Syrian revolution's profile on social media and setting up charities which provide aid to the refugees. Others are the driving force behind the production and publication of the group's weekly newspaper and, more generally, behind its public relations and outreach exercises. Recent figures even suggest that, nowadays, as much as half of the Syrian Brotherhood's staff is a junior member of the group[17].

It is in this context that the new generation began to play an important internal political role. The creation of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's youth office in 2012 provided the framework in which young Muslim Brotherhood members could organize as an internal lobby group and voice in a more effective way their grievances to the leadership. This initially seemed to yield results. The youth office obtained funds from the Brotherhood's leadership to organize a large conference in December 2012. The event gathered in Istanbul hundreds of youth who, because of the exile, had until then been scattered throughout the world – it thus had an important socializing role. The conference also witnessed the rise of young and charismatic conservative politicians, a few of whom were subsequently asked by the older generation to join them in the Brotherhood's top leadership[18].

Yet the specter of further generational tensions still lingers over the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Politically, the youth contingent is dominated by idealist and revolutionary figures who do not see eye-to-eye with the older generation's attempt to seek an accommodation at all costs with Saudi Arabia and to strike pragmatic deals in the Syrian opposition. In January 2014, a statement by a "group of sons of the Muslim Brotherhood" criticized the leadership for tending to "ally with personalities and groups that seek a political settlement with the regime and that have strong ties to regional and international powers while it reduces its interaction with those revolutionary forces working to overthrow the regime using all means"[19]. Organizationally, the youth are highly critical of the murky power struggle within the leadership which pits a bloc of Muslim Brotherhood from Hama and Idlib against those from Aleppo. In February 2014, it attempted to introduce greater transparency in the decision-making process, but its initiative was thwarted by the Consultative Council (the *Majlis al-Shura* which acts as an internal parliament). In addition, the election of seventy year-old Mohammed Walid as new head of the Syrian Brotherhood came as a bitter disappointment to many younger members. In an attempt

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[17] "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood leader highlights reforms, future plans," *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 20, 2015, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/9402.html.
[18] These generational dynamics are covered in further detail in Raphaël Lefèvre, *The Muslim Brotherhood prepares for a comeback in Syria* (Washington DC: Carnegie Paper, May 2013).
[19] Quoted in Raphaël Lefèvre, "A revolution in Syria's Muslim Brotherhood?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 23, 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54287.

to heal the growing rift, the new leader nominated as his deputy Hussam Ghadban, then head of the Brotherhood's youth office[20]. But youth frustration still simmers. "We wanted to see a radical change in the group's leadership", recounted a young and self-described "revolutionary" Muslim Brother. "What we got instead is a cosmetic change and more of the same – the old generation is still very much in control of the Consultative Council and of the leadership".

The dilemmas of military work

In a further bid to appeal to the new generation, Mohammed Walid promised to "concentrate on the youth" and to allocate 75% of the Brotherhood's financial resources to activities inside Syria – which are overwhelmingly carried out by young Muslim Brotherhood members[21]. This is also part of the group's wider strategy to regain a foothold in the country after three decades abroad. "We may have influence in the exiled opposition but our organization cannot survive for long if it continues to be based outside of Syria", argued a member close to the leadership. Initially, this willingness to reconnect with Syrians and to contribute to the revolution on the ground led the Brotherhood to invest in the humanitarian field. Its charity arm, Ataa Relief, is now one of the most active organizations in the refugee camps on the Syrian-Turkish border. The Brotherhood also opened an office in Aleppo and another in the countryside of Idlib. But in the context of the current conflict in Syria, part of the Brotherhood's strategy has also consisted in courting rebel groups and forming its own brigades.

This military dynamic only really took off in early 2012 when individuals belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood participated in the creation of the Committee to Protect Civilians (*Himayat al-madaniyin*), a platform which distributes humanitarian aid around Homs and also provides rebel groups with "logistical support". A high-ranking Syrian Brother recounted the strategy, which at the time guided the decision of the group's leadership. "Given that the notion of armed struggle was still rather controversial in opposition circles, Brotherhood leaders temporarily decentralized decisions on this matter and left it up to members themselves to engage or not in that type of activity". Yet as the military struggle later became more widespread, and as some rebel brigades began to engage in looting and exactions, rumours spread that the Brotherhood had grown frustrated with the situation and had formed its own rebel groups[22]. The move was formalized in December 2012 when the group's leadership announced the formation of the Shields of the Revolution Commission (*Hay'at duro' al-thawra*) – a military platform gathering dozens of "centrist-minded" rebel brigades which "trust the Brotherhood"[23].

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[20] Raphaël Lefèvre, "New leaders for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December 11, 2014, http://carnegie-mec.org/2014/12/11/new-leaders-for-syrian-muslim-brotherhood.

[21] "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood leader highlights reforms, future plans," *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 20, 2015, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/9402.html.

[22] Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, "Muslim Brotherhood establishes militia inside Syria," *Daily Telegraph*, August 3, 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9450587/Muslim-Brotherhood-establishes-militia-inside-Syria.html.

[23] Riyadh al-Shuqfa quoted in Raphaël Lefèvre, "The Brotherhood starts anew in Syria," *The Majalla*, August, 19 2013, http://www.aawsat.net/2013/08/article55314098/the-brotherhood-starts-anew-in-syria. For a more comprehensive account of the exact relationship between the Shields of the Revolution Commission and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, see: Ali el-Yessir and Raphaël Lefèvre, "Militias for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October, 29 2013, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=53452&solr_hilite.

In theory, the Shields of the Revolution Commission had the potential to act as an influential actor on the Syrian rebel scene. Following its creation, it rapidly swallowed many smaller brigades. Its fighters became equipped with high quality anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons. And by clearly rejecting "all calls for *takfeer*, forced displacement, mass murder and sectarian and ethnic discrimination"[24], the rebel platform portrayed itself as moderate in unambiguous terms – thus potentially attracting foreign backing. Yet despite these advantages, the Shields have failed to emerge as a significant force on the ground. While the Muslim Brotherhood's support initially attracted funding, it also accentuated the mistrust of other Islamist rebel groups – be they similarly moderate or more radical. Some still remembered the Brotherhood's own history in the late 1970s when leaders called for 'jihad' against the Assad regime, joined hands with other Islamist militias, only to retract from the alliance soon afterwards and to escape Syria, leaving thousands of fighters behind. "We haven't yet managed to overcome the mistrust of the past", recognized a Brotherhood member tasked with handling relations with rebel groups in Syria. This effectively prevented the Shields from joining major rebel alliances such as the Islamic Front (*Jabhat al-islamiya al-suriya*), the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (*Jabhat thuwar suriya*), or the more recent Army of Victory (*Jaysh al-fatah*). In addition, the Brotherhood's lack of sophisticated understanding of military work sometimes led to confused decisions which weakened the Shields. For instance, an attempt to decentralize the platform's command-and-control structure to allow for local autonomy backfired. It took until October 2013 to witness Shields fighters from Idlib province mounting a coordinated attack with their counterparts in Hama on a regime checkpoint. The lack of tight hierarchy may also have led some brigades to "misbehave" in the words of a source inside the Shields.

These embarrassing failures eventually led the Muslim Brotherhood to reduce their support for the rebel platform. "The Shields have lost the support of many inside the Brotherhood", explained a figure in the leadership. "Some argue that we should not get involved in military activities since we are first and foremost an organization focused on *da'wa* and politics. Others are disappointed by the performance of the fighters on the ground. And most of us find that the whole enterprise costs too much money". The election of Mohammed Walid could put the final nail in the coffin of the Shields. The new leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has made it clear that he intends to essentially focus upon "missionary and educational activities"[25] inside Syria. A source inside the Shields confirmed the Brotherhood's dwindling support. "Nowadays the group's leadership mainly provides us with media support as well as food and clothes – but we need money and weapons to continue training and operating in Syria", explained a member of the platform in 2014.

This growing tension has led a number of rebel groups to defect from the Shields over the past year. Most of the defectors have so far joined other moderately Islamist rebel platforms close to the Brotherhood's ideology including the Sham Legion (*Faylaq al-Sham*) and the Soldiers of

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[24] This is an excerpt of the political platform of the Shields of the Revolution Commission quoted in Raphaël Lefèvre, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: a 'centrist' jihad?," *Turkish Review* 4, no. 2 (2014).
[25] "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood leader highlights reforms, future plans," *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 20, 2015, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/9402.html.

Sham (*Ajnad al-Sham*)[26]. This, however, could well change in the medium and long-term. Indeed, extremist Islamist groups are on the rise precisely in the areas where the Shields have some presence. The Nusra Front now controls vast swathes of Idlib province while ISIS, long confined to its stronghold of Raqqa and to Eastern Syria, is currently emerging as a powerful force in the countryside of Homs and Hama. Given the Brotherhood's dwindling support for the Shields, some brigades could in the future be tempted to join these more radical alternatives – which, in addition to holding vast financial resources, also provide an increasingly appealing ideological model.

The challenge of extremism

The leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood were slow to grasp the ideological challenge stemming from the rise of extreme Islamist groups. At first they even refused to acknowledge their very presence on the ground. In April 2013, the Brotherhood's then-leader, Riyadh al-Shuqfa, insisted that "there is no extremism in Syria"[27]. It would take the meteoric rise of ISIS to push him to recognize their significance and to disassociate the Brotherhood from such radical groups. "We disagree with ISIS, first because of its extremist ideas, and second, because of its violent actions", he stated in September 2014 before advising ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to "refer to the Quran and the Sunna to understand Islam correctly and to improve his approach"[28]. Yet even then he went to great lengths to argue that the Syrian people's inherent "moderation and tolerance" would make ISIS a temporary phenomenon which would quickly fade away after the collapse of the Assad regime. His successor, Mohammed Walid, adopted a more forceful approach against the Islamist extremists. Shortly after his election in November 2014, he criticized ISIS for "deviating from the Syrian revolution's track"[29]. He also threatened the use of "self defence"[30] against ISIS in case the Muslim Brotherhood came under attack inside Syria.

But whilst the Brotherhood's leadership has now realized the security implications behind the rise of extremism, few seem to be aware of the dangers which its thinking and achievements on the ground pose to the wider group. Frustrated by the Brotherhood's organizational rigidity and poor military performance, a small number of members may already have left the group in recent years to join more radical platforms such as Ahrar al-Sham, the Nusra Front and perhaps ISIS too. There is a growing risk that the 'Islamic' governance structures established by these organizations on the ground may soon become an appealing alternative to young Islamists alienated by the pragmatism and seeming political opportunism of the Brotherhood's leaders. "ISIS has succeeded where the Brotherhood has failed", summed up with a hint of admiration a former Muslim Brother who is nowadays closer to radical Islamist groups in Syria. "It restored the Caliphate and took many Muslims back to religion". For its part, this permeability of some

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[26] Raphaël Lefèvre and Ali El Yassir, "The Sham Legion: Syria's moderate Islamists," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 15, 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55344.
[27] Elad Benari, "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood: there's no extremism in Syria," *Arutz Sheva*, April 16, 2013, http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/167163#.VaQBWSFVhHw.
[28] "Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader: we disagree with ISIS in principle, approach," *Ikhwan Web*, September 4, 2014, http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=31783.
[29] Zaman al-Wasl, "Interview: Muslim Brotherhood leader Walid," *The Syrian Observer*, February 17, 2015, http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28642/Interview_Muslim_Brotherhood_Leader_Walid.
[30] Ibid.

members to the ideology of extremist Islamist groups seems to have its roots in the failure of the Brotherhood's educational programme (*tarbiya*).

In fact, the ideological moderation undergone by the Brotherhood's official discourse throughout the 2000s was not free from internal controversy. The strongest resistance it faced originated from clerics responsible for the group's educational program. This consequently meant that aspiring Muslim Brotherhood members continued to be taught a variety of concepts and authors which naturally included Mustafa al-Siba'i, the founder of the Syrian branch and a supporter of democracy, but also comprised radical figures such as Sa'id Hawwa, a native of Hama who supported jihad against the Syrian regime in the 1970s and advocated the restoration of the Caliphate[31]. "Those responsible for the educational program still teach the radical strands of Islamist thinking and, in the context of today's conflict in Syria, this has left a number of Muslim Brothers ideologically confused", explained a former member who himself went through the curricula. "The group's official discourse is one thing. But behind closed doors some clerics still call for the establishment of an Islamic state – without elaborating much further on what they actually mean by that".

The growing gap between the Brotherhood's official discourse and the kind of speech which some members are spreading at the grassroots level has become more evident since the US-led air strikes on ISIS bases in Syria and Iraq. The anti-Western tone of some Brotherhood clerics, something almost entirely absent from the official discourse of the leadership, has in particular reached new heights. In one widely circulated video, a cleric affiliated with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood lambasted the United States with particularly harsh words:

> There is a global alliance led by America, the world's leader in terrorism, whose crimes are more than to be counted and greater than to be looked into. America has gathered its soldiers, troops, weapons, equipment and allies to allegedly destroy ISIS […] O Americans! O allies! Return home for we need you not! You are the cause of the plague and the reason for the ailment. You are the ones who have given these regimes power over us, shedding blood and destroying the crops and the stocks. O Americans! O allies! O Westerners! The Nation needs you not for it is a great time-honoured nation and you are those who installed all these oppressive regimes[32].

In the video, the Syrian Brotherhood cleric also criticized ISIS for originating from "international intelligence agencies" and for declaring an "imaginary caliphate which all [religious] scholars have declared to be null and void". Yet more appealing arguments may be needed to counter effectively the ideology spread by extremist groups. Mohammed Walid seemed to acknowledge this in February 2015 when he stressed that "deep ideological differences exist between the Muslim Brotherhood and [ISIS]"[33]. In a later intervention, he specified that "the imposition of Sharia by force is a mistaken understanding of the texts and a mistaken understanding of Islam

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[31] For more on the thought of Sa'id Hawwa, see Itzchak Weismann, "Sa'id Hawwa: the making of a radical Muslim thinker in modern Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 29, no. 4 (1993): pp.601-623.
[32] The complete video of the speech of sheikh Abu Hafez is available at:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfK0l6YwTsI (September 21, 2014)
[33] Zaman al-Wasl, "Interview: Muslim Brotherhood leader Walid," *The Syrian Observer*, February 17, 2015,
http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28642/Interview_Muslim_Brotherhood_Leader_Walid.

itself"[34]. It will now be up to the group's clerics to embrace the 'centrist' discourse of the Brotherhood's leaders – or risk losing parts of their base to the more extremist Islamist groups.

A new approach to the Brotherhood?

The dramatic expansion and subsequent radicalization of the Syrian Islamist field in the wake of the 2011 uprisings has led analysts to frequently sound the death knell for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. "The bubble seems ready to burst", wrote one observer in 2014, "and it remains to be seen how the Brotherhood will recover"[35]. It is true that the organization has faced an array of challenges over the past years. Some, like the rise of extreme Islamist groups, coupled with the Assad regime's resilience, have so far prevented it from acting too openly on the ground. Others, like Qatar's dwindling regional clout and the parallel rise of Saudi Arabia, constrained its options and forced it to reconsider previously-held assumptions. Yet, despite routinely facing difficulties, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is still standing on its feet. It is one of the exiled opposition's most important components. And, by 2015, reports suggested that "hundreds"[36] of members may have returned to Syria to ramp up support for the organization after its thirty years of absence.

This paradox illustrates the need to rethink the use of social movement theory, which often focuses on broad structural trends, in the study of Islamic activism. Instead, a renewed focus on the kind of internal dynamics which take place within Islamist groups may help shed light on the factors accounting for their resilience. Drawing on resource mobilization theory, one could thus consider the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood a "social movement organization" mainly animated by an instinct for "organizational survival"[37]. This has led it to develop a sophisticated internal bureaucracy providing political opportunities and continuous employment to its members in exchange for long-term commitment. Its structure is characterized by various levels of organizational involvement: from "professional cadre", the leaders, to "professional staff", the mid-ranking officials, all the way to "workers", the more junior staff, and "constituents"[38], the field activists. Another strength of this structure resides in its ability to generate professional skills (e.g. public relations, ideology production, business management, political activism, charity work…), something which greatly enhanced the Brotherhood's ability to penetrate some of the Syrian opposition's key institutions. In addition, it provided a space conducive to the "socialization"[39] of the Brotherhood's youth into "party loyalty". It was also a main reason behind the National Action Group's failure to gain traction as a possible alternative to the mainstream Islamist organization. The Group may initially have presented a fresh and appealing image yet it always lacked the Brotherhood's sophisticated bureaucracy, access to fundraising networks and

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[34] "Syria's Muslim Brotherhood leader highlights reforms, future plans," *Zaman al-Wasl*, March 20, 2015, https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/9402.html.
[35] Hassan Hassan, "In Syria, the Brotherhood's influence is on the decline," *The National*, April 1, 2014, http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/in-syria-the-brotherhoods-influence-is-on-the-decline.
[36] Dasha Afanasieva, "Banned in Syria, Muslim Brotherhood members trickle home," *Reuters*, May 7, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/07/us-syria-crisis-brotherhood-idUSKBN0NR20Y20150507.
[37] John McCarthy and Mayer Zaid, "Resource Mobilization and social movements: a partial theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6, (1977): 1212-1213.
[38] I draw these concepts and categories from John McCarthy and Mayer Zaid
[39] *Ibid*, p.1214

history of accomplishment. In a way, thus, the "oligarchization"[40] of the Brotherhood significantly helped it weather domestic and regional challenges in the past four years.

In parallel, however, it has heightened levels of popular mistrust against it. Resource mobilization theory suggests that, as a bureaucratic structure emerges, members of an organization start having "a stake" in its survival "regardless of its ability to attain goals"[41]. The Brotherhood's seemingly constant preoccupation with self-preservation may thus explain the lingering suspicion which many inside Syria still hold towards the organization. This trend was perhaps also reinforced by the Brotherhood's 'centrist' turn in the 2000s when it gave up its claim to establish an Islamic system of government. Yet this line could soon be put into question or lead to outright splits from the group. Concern is mounting among the Brotherhood's rank-and-file, composed of figures often deemed more revolutionary than the pragmatic leadership, about sensitive issues such as ideological purity, relations with more extreme groups, and the use of violence. The evolution of the balance of power within the organization is likely to shape to a great extent its political and ideological outlook for the years to come.

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[40] I draw the concept from Mayer Zaid and Roberta Ash. See: Mayer Zaid and Roberta Ash, "Social Movement Organizations: growth, decay and change," *Social Forces* 44, no. 3 (1966): 329-330.
[41] *Ibid,* p.327