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READING THE RUNES? THE UNITED STATES AND THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AS SEEN THROUGH THE WIKILEAKS CABLES*

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ABSTRACT. *The aftermath of Hosni Mubarak's forced abdication as president of Egypt in 2011 brought the culmination of a long-running debate over whether Western governments should engage with the Muslim Brotherhood. At the heart of that debate was the question of how to judge the Brothers: as 'moderates' with whom the US might do business, or as part of a movement ultimately hostile to American interests. As this article demonstrates, the idea of engaging in some form of dialogue with the Brotherhood is itself nothing new to United States diplomats. An examination of the Wikileaks cache of documents confirms that contacts of varying kinds have existed since the first half of the 1980s (with dialogue only abandoned for a brief period during the early years of the 'war on terror'). Such contacts were a product of the normal, low-level political intelligence-gathering conducted by all American embassies; at no stage were they allowed to jeopardize America's key strategic alliance with the Mubarak regime. Nevertheless, the cables pertaining to the Muslim Brotherhood do reveal the limits of such diplomacy, with officials often struggling either to understand the character of the Brotherhood, or read the runes of its internal contours. In particular, the question of whether the Muslim Brothers should indeed be seen as 'moderates '– and as suitable partners for the US – is shown to be one of enduring, but unresolved, concern. The history of this relationship thus serves as a crucial backdrop to contemporary debates and developments.*

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I

On 11 February 2011, following eighteen days of popular protests, Hosni Mubarak stood down as president of Egypt after three decades in office. As the United States and other Western countries attempted to deal with the fallout from Mubarak's deposition, the question of how to deal with the main Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood *(al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*, or hereafter simply the Ikhwan) rose to the top of the political agenda.[1] Various commentators had long predicted that the Brotherhood would be the principal beneficiaries of any regime change in Cairo and so it has proved. The parliamentary elections of late 2011–early 2012 saw the movement's Freedom and Justice Party emerge as the largest single party with 47 per cent of the seats (235 out of 503) in the People's Assembly.[2] In July 2012, the Brotherhood's candidate, Muḥammad Mūrsi, then became the first popularly elected president in Egyptian history; and in December of that same year, Mūrsi oversaw the passage of a new Islamist-infused constitution for the country.[3] Western policy-makers have therefore had to adjust to these new realities.

In the aftermath of Mubarak's ouster, British, French, and European Union diplomats all gave notice that they were ready to abandon former injunctions against open dialogue with the Brotherhood and its leaders.[4] Of yet greater significance (given the close strategic relationship between Egypt and the US) was the readiness of senior American officials and politicians to engage publicly with the Brotherhood. In June 2011, the US secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, confirmed that Washington would initiate limited contacts with the group. Though she enumerated certain caveats (emphasizing the enduring commitment of the US to democratic principles, respect for minorities, and full rights

[1] Here, the term Islamist is not used in a pejorative sense, but simply to denote a political movement that seeks to bring about the renewal of Islam throughout society, as an essential step towards instituting an Islamic state. It is taken as the translation of the Arabic term *Islamiyyūn*, used by many members of the disparate Islamic political movements to describe their outlook. For a comprehensive introduction to this subject, see Peter Mandaville, *Global political Islam* (London, 2007); John Calvert, *Islamism: a documentary and reference guide* (Westport, CT, 2008); Frederic Volpi, ed., *Political Islam: a critical reader* (London, 2011).

[2] 'Egypt's new assembly elects Muslim Brotherhood speaker', BBC News Online, 23 Jan. 2012, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16677548.

[3] 'Egypt's constitution passes with 63·8 percent approval rate', Egypt Independent, 25 Dec. 2012, www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-constitution-passes-638-percent-approval-rate.

[4] Al-Sayyed al-Abbadi, 'Foreign office visits MB in Alexandria', Ikhwanweb, 10 Apr. 2011, www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28370; 'UK ambassador downplays concerns of growing MB political role', Ikhwanweb, 29 June 2011, www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28771; 'France signals new openness on Muslim groups abroad', Reuters, 19 Apr. 2011, http://af.reuters.com/article/libyaNews/idAFLDE73I1WG20110419?sp=true; 'Muslim Brotherhood chairman to French delegation: I hope falsehood of Islamophobia ends forever', Ikhwanweb, 1 Feb. 2012, www.ikhwanweb.com/mob/article.php?id=29621; 'MB welcomes dialogue with the West without preconditions', Ikhwanweb, 22 Apr. 2011, www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=28442.

for women), Clinton stressed that it was in America's interest to work with all non-violent political actors in Egypt, including the Brotherhood.[5] In Cairo, Ikhwan spokesman Maḥmūd Ghozlān welcomed the move and declared that the group was itself 'ready for dialogue' with the US – though he too placed caveats, calling on the American government 'to stop supporting the corrupt and tyrannical regimes, backing the Zionist occupation and using double standards'.[6] Whilst such qualifications from each side suggested that relations would not necessarily be harmonious, the comments from both Clinton and Ghozlān seemed to confirm the changed political landscape. The truth of this was made plain by subsequent meetings held in both Cairo and Washington in late 2011–early 2012, between State Department, Senate and White House officials and representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood.[7] More recently, Clinton's successor as secretary of state, John Kerry, made a meeting with President Mūrsi one of his first foreign engagements after taking the post.[8] In this way, the Arab Spring appeared, to many, to have ushered in an entirely new era in terms of the relationship between Western countries – especially the United States – and the most influential Islamist organization in the Middle East.[9]

Yet these recent developments need to be seen against the backdrop of a longer-running debate about how the West should view the Muslim Brotherhood – as 'moderate' or otherwise – and, in particular, whether or not governments should engage with the movement. As Lorenzo Vidino has shown, the events of 11 September 2001, in particular, galvanized deliberations over the Brotherhood, with the latter now seen through the prism of 'violent Islamist extremism'. For many, the key question became

[5] A. Muhammad , 'U. S. shifts to closer contact with Egypt Islamists', Reuters, 30 June 2011, www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/30/us-usa-egypt-brotherhood-idUSTRE75ToGD20110630.

[6] 'Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood will talk to U. S.; demands "mutual respect"', Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Report, 4 July 2011, http://globalmbreport.org/?p=4687. This site is a useful English language resource for tracking the latest developments involving the Muslim Brotherhood in all its forms.

[7] 'U. S. met with Egypt Islamists: U. S. diplomat', Reuters, 2 Oct. 2011, www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/02/us-egypt-usa-brotherhood-idUSTRE7910J420111002; 'US senator John Kerry visits Muslim Brotherhood's FJP headquarters', Ahram Online, 11 Dec. 2011, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/29012/Egypt/Politics-/US-senator-John-Kerry-visits-Muslim-BrotherhoodpercentE2percent80percent99s-.aspx; 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood hails ties with US', AFP, 11 Jan. 2012, www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gzB_15dJoRjpqgycAseGpdM_6IkQ?docId=CNG.d71853b3203bcb50ab5031b956cbc431.191; 'Officials from Egypt's Brotherhood at White House', AFP, 4 Apr. 2012, www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jbfrR4oRc2fWeZsqGW7J3U2IxCcA?docId=CNG.161bdbb3852503f1c67f024541faf828.5f1; 'Obama administration says it talked with Muslim Brotherhood to promote small business', CNS News, 23 Apr. 2012, http://cnsnews.com/news/article/obama-administration-says-it-talked-muslim-brotherhood-promote-small-business.

[8] J. Gulhane, 'Kerry meets Morsi and intelligence chief', Daily News Egypt, 3 Mar. 2013, www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/03/03/kerry-to-meet-morsi-and-intelligence-chief/.

[9] For an example of this interpretation, see D. Kirkpatrick and S. L. Myers, 'Overtures to Egypt's Islamists reverse longtime US policy', *New York Times*, 3 Jan. 2012.

whether the Brotherhood and its offshoots were to be viewed as 'firefighters or arsonists'.[10] On the one side were those who felt the movement could help insulate Muslim communities and countries from the siren call of people like Usāma bin Lādin; the Brothers were seen as a bulwark against extremism because they shared certain ideological reference points with the militants of al-Qaeda (which allowed them to 'speak their language').[11] Ranged against this were others who argued that the Muslim Brotherhood and its message actually served as a gateway – or 'conveyor belt' – to more radical and violent forms of Islamism.[12]

The period since 2006–7 has seen continued discussion of these matters in the public sphere.[13] Discussion over whether or not the US (and its allies) should pursue engagement with the Ikhwan in order to stop violent Islamism has also been bound up with broader concerns, such as how to promote democratic reform across the broader Middle East and North African region.[14] Those advocating dialogue with the Muslim Brothers have tended to portray them as indispensable partners for Western countries – a necessary ingredient in any process of democratization.[15] By contrast, countervailing voices have invariably charged the advocates of these views with being naive and judged the Brotherhood in far less positive light. Inevitably, the events of the 'Arab Spring' served only to stimulate further such arguments about the suitability or otherwise of the Brotherhood as a potential interlocutor and partner.[16]

Clearly, much of this debate has taken place in the public domain; yet it is paralleled by another set of discussions, which have taken place behind closed doors, within government. Until recently, little was known about the views of one important and privileged group that are central to the latter: the US foreign service personnel who served in Egypt and whose job it specifically was to

[10] Lorenzo Vidino, *The new Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (New York, NY, 2010), pp. 199–221. For additional analysis of this debate, see also Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood: the burden and tradition* (London, 2010), pp. 210–29.

[11] See, for example, Juan Cole, *Engaging the Muslim world* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 78–9.

[12] For another view of this debate, see Marc Lynch, 'Islam divided between Salafi-Jihad and the Ikhwan', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 33 (2010), pp. 467–87.

[13] Martin Bright, *When progressives treat with reactionaries: the British state's flirtation with radical Islam* (London, 2006); Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke, 'The moderate Muslim Brotherhood', *Foreign Affairs* (Mar.–Apr. 2007), pp. 107–21; S. Glain, 'Mideast: the new Muslim Brotherhood', *Newsweek*, 30 Apr. 2007; J. Traub, 'Islamic democrats?', *New York Times*, 29 Apr. 2007; Toby Archer and Heidi Huuhtanen, eds., *Islamist opposition parties and the potential for EU engagement* (Helsinki, 2007); Joshua Stacher, *Brothers in arms? Engaging the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt* (London, 2008); J. Esposito, 'Islamists, US policy and Arab democracy', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 22 Aug, 2009, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/961/op41.htm.

[14] For a snapshot of this debate, see Jeremy Sharp, *U. S. democracy promotion policy in the Middle East: the Islamist dilemma*, CRS Report for Congress (Washington, DC, 2006).

[15] For the clearest exposition of this view, see Leiken and Brooke, 'The moderate Muslim Brotherhood'.

[16] See, for example, D. Levy, 'Complicating the transition in US–Egyptian relations', *Foreign Policy*, 1 Feb. 2011; E. Husain, 'Feuding Brothers', *Foreign Policy*, 5 Apr. 2011.

scrutinize and assess the Ikhwan. The release of still-classified diplomatic cables by the online group, Wikileaks, has changed this significantly, for they afford us a fascinating insight into precisely this subject.[17]

It is for this reason that the present article will primarily consider those seventy-plus cables that, from the beginning of the 1980s through to 2010, discuss the Ikhwan, in an effort to establish what the documents can tell us about the history and tenor of US governmental contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood. These significantly expand upon the little that was known of that relationship heretofore. Thus, the aim of what follows is, in the first instance, to chart the contours of a connection that existed, for the most part, in the shadows; thereby to track its defining characteristics, at least as viewed from the US perspective. Moving beyond this, an effort will be made to reconstruct American views of the Brotherhood, as revealed by the cables, and to chart what the US 'made' of a movement that has often been characterized by its opacity. As such, this article can be seen as in part building on the work done by Matthew Jacobs in his useful analysis of how American diplomats 'imagined' the Middle East in an earlier period.[18] For the contention here would be that a focus on perceptions of the Brotherhood offers a useful case-study that reflects the evolving political and intellectual environment in which diplomats in Egypt were working, whilst also shedding important historical light on to contemporary events.

To this end, the next section will offer an overview of the limited picture of the historic relationship between the Ikhwan and the United States as provided by the existing literature. Thereafter, examination of the Wikileaks cables themselves will be made. This analysis is divided by chronological period, with each division representing a distinct period both in terms of the depth of the relationship and in how the United States viewed the Muslim Brotherhood. Finally, the conclusion offers some reflections as to what the contacts reveal and their broader significance in terms of understanding US foreign policy.

II

The Society of the Muslim Brothers (better known as the Muslim Brotherhood) was created by an Egyptian schoolteacher, Hasan al-Banna, in 1928.[19] Its

[17] The cables are, it should be recognized at the outset, a far from unproblematic source, with perhaps the most important question marks surrounding issues of authenticity, morality, and selectivity. There is not the space here to explore this subject fully, but suffice to say that none of these reservations are insurmountable. The veracity of the cables has not been gainsaid; to use them is not to endorse the agenda of the organization that published them; and they are no more 'selective' than many surviving historical records.

[18] Matthew F. Jacobs, *Imagining the Middle East: the building of an American foreign policy, 1918–1967* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).

[19] For a fuller account of the Muslim Brotherhood and its history, see Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1993); Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim*

founding mission was dual focused: to achieve national liberation from the British empire (then the occupying power in Egypt); and to tackle the cultural changes to which al-Banna felt his country and the broader Arab and Muslim world was being exposed by the process of Western-led modernization. Of particular concern to al-Banna and his followers was the perceived onset of secularization.[20] The Ikhwan's proposed solution was a return to the 'true path of Islam', conceived as a comprehensive order (*nizām shāmil*) and complete guide to life, applicable in all times and places.[21] To this end, al-Banna placed much emphasis on the need to 'call' the people back to the faith (*da'wah*) and urged educational, religious, and spiritual renewal. He conceived of his movement as containing within it all the elements of a new generation and a revitalized society. It was, as he famously declared in 1935, 'a Salafiyya message, a Sunni way, a Sufi truth, a political organization, an athletic group, a cultural–educational union, an economic company, and a social idea'.[22]

In the decades after its creation, the Brotherhood enjoyed a mixed relationship with successive governments of Egypt. By the late 1930s, it was taking an ever more active political role in the country and increasingly prepared to challenge the ruling authorities (Egypt was governed by a constitutional monarchy between 1923 and 1952). As a result, from that time onwards, periods in which the group was tolerated and allowed to flourish were interspersed with cyclical waves of repression – the latter intensified by concerns that the Brotherhood harboured a militant core, prepared to prosecute revolutionary, or violent, 'jihad' to achieve its goals. The existence of an underground 'Special Apparatus' and the involvement of individual Ikhwani members in acts of violence did little to alleviate such concerns. The group was caught up in the broader destabilization of Egypt that followed the Second World War and al-Banna himself was murdered amidst conflict with Egypt's government (then under King Farouq) in 1949. Nevertheless, by that stage, the Brotherhood was one of the most powerful socio-political forces in the country and played a part in the events that led to the overthrow of the monarchy in July 1952. Thereafter, following a period of uneasy co-existence with the Free Officers' regime that seized power, the group was declared illegal by Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1954 and suppressed.

Brothers in Egypt: the rise of an Islamic movement, 1928–1942 (Reading, 1998); Alison Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood*; Barry Rubin, ed., *The Muslim Brotherhood*.

[20] Egypt, occupied since 1882, had been declared independent by the British in 1922 – yet her sovereignty remained highly qualified by the on-going presence of British troops and political interference.

[21] See, for example, Hasan al-Banna, 'Towards the light', and Hasan al-Banna, 'Our mission', in Charles Wendell, trans. and annotated, *Five tracts of Hasan al-Bannā' (1906–1949): a selection from the Majmūat rasā'il al-Imām al-Shahīd Hasan al-Bannā'* (Berkeley, CA, 1978).

[22] Hasan al-Banna, 'Risālat al-mūtamar al-khāmis', in Hasan al-Banna, *Majmūat rasā'il al-Imām al-Shahīd Hasan al-Bannā'* (Beirut, 1965), pp. 273–5; see also Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, p. 14.

It was not until after the death of Nasser in 1970 and the rule of his successor, Anwar Sadat, that the Brothers were able to reorganize in Egypt (having renounced 'violent jihad' as a means of bringing about change there). They now found themselves given the tacit blessing of Sadat who saw them as useful allies against the vested interests of Nasserites and leftists.[23] Even then, though, relations were far from easy (they officially remained a 'banned' group) particularly after Sadat embarked on his 'pivot' to the West and looked to make peace with Israel from 1975 onwards (which the Ikhwan fiercely opposed). By autumn 1981, just prior to his assassination, Sadat had resolved on a new round of repression against the Brotherhood. Nevertheless, post-Sadat, history effectively repeated itself: the Brotherhood was allowed to re-emerge from the underground and rebuilt once more in semi-open fashion. In particular, as Mubarak set about consolidating his 'controlled democratic' regime, Brotherhood members were allowed to participate (unofficially) in parliamentary elections, either in alliance with other parties (1984 and 1987), or as independents (2000 and 2005). The group also sought to exploit opportunities to gain a foothold within civil society, particularly via involvement in Egypt's various professional associations. At the same time, it was once more forced to navigate periodic bouts of repression from a Mubarak regime that was anxious to prevent any major challenge to its authority. In the mid-1990s and again after 2005, this entailed large-scale arrests of known Brotherhood members. In spite of this, however, in the three decades between 1981 and 2011, the Ikhwan entrenched its status as a permanent feature of Egyptian socio-political life.

The history of Western attempts to reach out to – and understand – the Muslim Brotherhood has been largely neglected within the existing literature on the movement. Of course, as described, Hasan al-Banna in part founded his movement as a response to the presence of British occupying forces within his country. And Brynjar Lia has tracked the way in which the British began to take notice of the Brothers during their formative era.[24] More significantly, Richard P. Mitchell, in his seminal study of the Ikhwan, described brief episodes in which the British did engage in dialogue with the group in the 1940s and 1950s, as they sought to preserve their position within Egypt.[25] Indeed, it was the accusation that the Muslim Brotherhood were conspiring with the British – against the Free Officers – that helped provide the pretext for Nasser's first moves against the organization in 1954. The subsequent

[23] Here, it should be noted that the Brotherhood had, from the 1930s, organized 'sister' branches abroad and these had helped the movement to survive during the years of repression in Egypt. Chapters, or offshoots, of the Brotherhood exist in most countries of the Middle East and North Africa and the character of each one and the methods they employ is determined by the local conditions they face; though they share certain ideological principles and positions, there is no over-arching Brotherhood 'Comintern'. This article focuses solely on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, rather than other forms of the movement.

[24] Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt*, pp. 81, 95, 181, 246.

[25] Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, pp. 28, 112–14.

suppression of the Brothers seemed to reduce the salience of the issue; and by the time of their re-emergence, the United States had replaced the British as the dominant power in the Middle East.

Hitherto, there has been relatively scant scholarly consideration of US assessments of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a subject in its own right. To some extent, this neglect of US attitudes towards the Brotherhood is far from surprising given that the latter appeared to be of only marginal importance to the post-1945 construction of US foreign policy in the broader Middle East. Amongst the key American objectives there, as traditionally understood, were: the safeguarding of access to energy supplies (principally oil); the prevention of Soviet incursions into the region; the preservation of stability through the upholding of key alliances; and the effort to secure Israel.[26] With regard to each of these, at least at a *prima facie* level, the part that could be played by the Brotherhood – a non-state actor of limited power, enduring bouts of repression – was far from immediately clear. Instead, the United States relied – for understandable reasons – on various key allied states: Saudi Arabia; Israel; the shah's Iran; and Egypt under first Sadat and later Mubarak. Indeed, with regard to Egypt specifically, Sadat's signature of the Camp David Accords in 1978 and the peace treaty with Israel in 1979 cemented that country's position as an indispensable regional ally to the United States. Thereafter, it became a major recipient of US economic and military aid, with the close strategic relationship symbolized by the biennial Operation Bright Star joint-military exercises (begun in the 1980s), as well as joint naval co-operation and Egypt's accession to 'Major non-NATO Ally' status in 1989.[27] Measured against such close state-to-state relations, the significance of any relationship with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood appeared to many to be, at best, moot.

The view from the other side, meanwhile, has received scarcely more attention, save for the work of Walid Mahmoud Abdelnasser. This does examine the question of how the Ikhwan viewed the West and emphasizes that three factors proved decisive: the Brothers' opposition to colonialism; their enmity towards Zionism; and their commitment to ideas of Islamic liberation and unity.[28] On this basis, Abdelnasser describes how initial Brotherhood equivocality on the US gave way, particularly from 1967 onwards, to increasing hostility. The United States came to be seen as both the key backer of Israel

[26] Henry W. Brands, *Into the labyrinth: the United States and the Middle East, 1945–1993* (New York, NY, 1994); Avi Shlaim and Yezid Sayigh, eds., *The Cold War and the Middle East* (Oxford, 1997); Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in international relations: power, politics and ideology* (Cambridge, 2005); Peter L. Hahn, *Crisis and crossfire: the United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Dulles, VA, 2005).

[27] William J. Burns, *Economic aid and American policy toward Egypt, 1955–1981* (Albany, NY, 1985); William B. Quandt, *The United States and Egypt* (Cairo, 1990); Mark R. Clyde, *Egypt–United States Relations*, Issue Brief for Congress, IB93087, Apr. 2003.

[28] Walid M. Abdelnasser, *The Islamic movement in Egypt: perceptions of international relations, 1967–1981* (London, 1994), pp. 44–5.

and the heart of a Western civilization that sought the intellectual, cultural, and economic penetration of the Islamic world, as part of a vast anti-Muslim conspiracy. Abdelnasser does also point out that this ideological stance did, on occasion, sit (uneasily) alongside moments of pragmatism where the Brotherhood was prepared to countenance liaisons with the US; but overall he describes the movement as being fundamentally anti-Western in its foreign policy outlook.[29]

As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that few academic analyses have imagined that there would be much to say, for either party, about a relationship between the United States and the Muslim Brotherhood. Beneath the surface, though, it is clear that there were times when each side had cause, at the least, to reassess the other. The former American ambassador to Egypt, Hermann Eilts, for instance, told the journalist Robert Dreyfuss that he had met Hasan al-Banna in 1948, while stationed in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the encounter was said to be in keeping with the practice of the US embassy in Cairo, which held 'regular meetings' with al-Banna and found him to be 'perfectly empathetic'.[30]

Elsewhere, it is possible to discern the outlines of a potential relationship from the (not unproblematic) memoirs of intelligence operative Miles Copeland.[31] Though, taken as a whole, those memoirs support the view that the United States was focused on Nasser, the Egyptian state and the wider strategic picture, the Ikhwan are mentioned; so too are discussions about using Islam more broadly as a force to counter the appeal of communism. With regard to the latter, Copeland notes that there were those who argued in the 1950s for the recruitment of a 'Moslem Billy Graham' to mobilize Islamic fervour against atheistic communism; the candidate selected, however, was not from the ranks of the Brotherhood and, in any case, the idea was soon dropped.[32] Nevertheless, Copeland does describe how, prior to the 1952 revolution, when he and his CIA colleagues were searching for a 'charismatic leader' who might deliver US objectives in Egypt, he encountered the 'dread *ikhwan el-muslimin* [sic, italics in original]'; he also suggests that al-Banna's successor as 'general guide' (leader) of the Brotherhood, Hasan al-Huḍaybi, may well have been a CIA 'asset'. In addition, while Copeland was clearly cognizant of the Brotherhood's anti-American rhetoric, he claims to have at

[29] Ibid., pp. 46–7, 146–65.

[30] Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's game: how the United States helped unleash fundamentalist Islam* (New York, NY, 2005).

[31] Miles Copeland, *The game of nations: the amorality of power politics* (London, 1969); Miles Copeland, *The game player: confessions of the CIA's original political operative* (London, 1989).

[32] Copeland, *The game of nations*, p. 48; for discussion over the possible use of Islam as a bulwark against communism, see also pp. 153–4. For a different perspective, which emphasizes the centrality of Nasser (and is deeply critical of the CIA), see Wilbur C. Eveland, *Ropes of sand: America's failure in the Middle East* (London, 1980).

one stage favoured a coup to overthrow the monarchy that would have involved a 'combination of the army and the ikhwan'.[33]

In the end, having established contact with the group of army officers around Nasser who seized power in July 1952, the CIA appears to have settled on efforts to cultivate the new military regime, rather than remaining wedded to any alliance with the Ikhwan.[34] Ultimately, it seems clear that Copeland was far from persuaded by the Brotherhood, describing it as having been both close to the Nazis during the Second World War and then penetrated by the Soviet (and British and French) intelligence services.[35] And after its suppression by Nasser in 1954, he appears to have viewed the Ikhwan as being of little further import – certainly compared to Nasser, by whom he *was* deeply impressed. (In all of this, it should be stated, the nature of the sources – the recollections of an intelligence officer – is suggestive of a significant problem: the fact that those responsible for conducting such liaisons tended to belong to branches of the intelligence, or security services, especially the CIA. Consequently, there is much that is undocumented, remains closed to researchers, or is largely unverifiable.)

Nevertheless, it would seem that there remained some readiness to co-operate with Islam, or Islamist movements of the Brotherhood's ilk, during the Cold War. Though perhaps never dominant, it was one definable strand of thinking among those tasked with safeguarding US interests abroad.[36] And few doubt that the apotheosis of this outlook came after 1979, with the decision of the United States to work covertly with both the Islamist-influenced Pakistani intelligence services and the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Union, in the wake of the latter's invasion of Afghanistan. The course of what followed is now well known (and is a story invariably told to emphasize the dangers of short-sighted policy expediency and its potential for 'blowback').[37] Western policy towards Afghanistan during the 1980s seemed emblematic of efforts to promote militant forms of Islam as an alternative to communism.

On the basis of this and other, often hidden, episodes, writers such as Ian Johnson, Robert Dreyfuss and Mark Curtis have charted the extent to which speculation over whether the bearers of conservative Islamic ideals (including the Muslim Brotherhood) might be converted into allies of the West, not only dates back to the late nineteenth century, but also grew more prominent during

[33] Copeland, *The game player*, pp. 149–52.

[34] Ibid., pp. 152–71.

[35] Ibid., pp. 154–6.

[36] Hugh Wilford, 'America's great game: the CIA and the Middle East, 1947–1967', in Bevan, Sewell and Scott Lucas, eds., *Challenging US foreign policy: America and the world in the long twentieth century* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. 99–112.

[37] Mark Curtis, *Secret affairs: Britain's collusion with radical Islam* (London, 2010), pp. 131–49; Dreyfuss, *Devil's game*, pp. 256–91; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: the story of Afghan warlords* (London, 2001); Chalmers Johnson, 'American militarism and blowback: the costs of letting the Pentagon dominate foreign policy', *New Political Science*, 24 (2002), pp. 21–38; Steve Coll, *Ghost wars: the secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001* (London, 2004).

the years of the Cold War.[38] Johnson, in particular, has demonstrated the extent to which the United States, under Eisenhower, flirted with the idea of trying to empower the Brotherhood as an antidote to both Nasser and communism.[39] And although the premises that underpin the work of both Curtis and Dreyfuss (as to an overarching grand strategic conspiracy on the part of the West to harness the power of Islamism against the dangers of Arab nationalism and communism) assume far too much, their work (and that of Johnson) does show that an impulse for engaging a group such as the Brotherhood has a long prehistory. Such endeavours were intertwined with efforts to secure Western influence amidst, first, Great Power competition, and then decolonization and the Cold War. On this reading, either the United States believed that the religious devotion of the Islamists made them a perfect antidote to atheistic communism in the battle for the allegiance of the Third World; or, alternatively, it simply ignored the 'reactionary'/'immoderate' character of the Brotherhood and its ideology, because it believed 'an enemy of my enemy (the Soviets) is a friend'. Either way, they are held to have played, in the epithet of Dreyfuss, a 'devil's game'.[40]

Adopting a less sensational view, however, it might have been expected that US diplomatic staff would seek contact with a group like the Muslim Brotherhood, given its enduring presence within Egyptian society. After all, such activity, involving embassy officers effectively acting as low-level intelligence-gathering operatives, is part of the purpose of a diplomatic mission. Seen from this perspective, communication with the Ikhwan should not necessarily be seen as a segue into some kind of 'dance with the devil' (as described by Dreyfuss or Curtis), but simply a natural corollary of the (often bureaucratic) decision-making process, as regularly practised in all foreign service departments.[41] This is particularly so for the later period under examination here. To a significant extent, once successive Egyptian governments seemed ready to tolerate the Brotherhood post-1970, diplomats needed to make some kind of contact with the Ikhwan if they wanted to do their jobs properly. The question therefore becomes less about whether there was contact, but rather about the kind of contact that occurred and the conclusions that US diplomats drew from it. These are the questions that the Wikileaks cables illuminate in fascinating detail, allowing us to expand on the small glimpses of the relationship that

[38] Ian Johnson, *A mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Boston, MA, 2010); Dreyfus, *Devil's game*; Curtis, *Secret affairs*.

[39] Johnson, *A mosque in Munich*, pp. 69–70, 116–19, 127–8.

[40] Dreyfuss, *Devil's game*.

[41] J. Garry Clifford, 'Bureaucratic politics and policy outcomes', in Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Major problems in American foreign relations: volume II: since 1914* (6th edn, Boston, MA, 2005), pp. 20–5; see also Graham T. Allison, *Essence of decision: explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, MA, 1971); Thomas G. Paterson, 'Defining and doing the history of American foreign relations: a primer', in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the history of American foreign relations* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 36–54.

have made it into the public domain, for the period from the early 1980s through to 2010; it is to them that this article now turns.

III

It is clear that US access to the Ikhwan in this era was fundamentally dependent on the course of the group's relationship with the Mubarak government. The Wikileaks cables thus confirm that the American embassy in Cairo established contact with the Muslim Brotherhood (often referred to as just 'the MB' in the documents), in the context of its post-1981 rehabilitation under President Mubarak. A cable from September 1986, for example, reporting on the death earlier that year of the Brotherhood's third general guide, 'Umar al-Tilmisāni,[42] stated that 'Embassy Officers ... had periodic talks with Talmasani [sic] in the two years preceding his death.'[43] Assuming this to be an accurate summary of the timeframe involved, it would mean that some form of dialogue was under way, at least from the first months of 1984 and that this included meetings with the most senior members of the Ikhwan.

Further missives make clear that communication was indeed on-going from around that point. The oldest available cable to refer directly to such contacts dates from March 1985 and confirms that al-Tilmisāni had, by then, held discussions with embassy staff; the manner of its reportage also suggests this was not a new occurrence. Alongside this, an additional dispatch sent soon after refers to private diplomatic contacts that existed with Brotherhood members.[44] Evidently, therefore, by 1984–5, multiple lines of communication had been established. Hitherto, the existence of such dialogue had been acknowledged only in passing. In 2007, for example, the then US ambassador to Egypt, Francis Riccardione, had told *The Washington Times* that he had made 'occasional visits' to the Brotherhood's headquarters when still a low-level official during the 1980s.[45] There was no indication, however, as to the extent and level of the contact that took place.

Why were American diplomatic staff interested in talking to the general guide of the Ikhwan? There is little hint as to any broader purpose within the Wikileaks documents, beyond a desire to engage in routine political monitoring. However, Abdelnasser's account of the Brotherhood's

[42] Al-Tilmisani was the third occupant of the post after al-Banna and Hasan al-Hudhaybi; he succeeded the latter in 1973.

[43] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood: eager for U. S. contacts, fearful of GOE', Cairo to Washington, 16 Sept. 1986. NB All cables cited hereafter can be accessed at the Wikileaks Cables database, http://wikileaks.org/cablegate.html. The cables from 1985 to 2001 are rendered here into normal type-case for ease of reading – though they appear within the Wikileaks Cache entirely in capitals.

[44] Precht, 'Growing debate on Sharia law', Cairo to Washington, 8 Mar. 1985; Veliotes, 'Islamic Sharia debate – words followed by another stall', Cairo to Washington, 11 Apr. 1985.

[45] 'U. S. engages Muslim Brotherhood despite Rice; relations with Mubarak's government could be strained', *Washington Times*, 15 Nov. 2007.

international relations does refer to an approach made by emissaries of US President Jimmy Carter, who asked 'Umar al-Tilmisāni to mediate with Iran over the Tehran hostage crisis that began in late 1979; al-Tilmisāni was said to have accepted the request, only to have then discovered that the Iranians were not amenable and, indeed, viewed anyone interceding on the Americans' behalf as an agent of imperialism.[46] This episode is also discussed in the recently published memoirs of Youssef Nada, who describes himself as having been the 'de facto foreign minister' of the Brotherhood in this era, as well as a key financial strategist.[47] According to Nada, al-Tilmisāni actually came to see him at his home in Campione (the Italian enclave in Switzerland) to oversee the dialogue. However, the Brotherhood wanted assurances from the US that Carter himself had directly authorized contacts with Tehran; Nada claims these never came and, consequently, the initiative fell apart.[48] In spite of this, it may be that the hostage crisis was the catalyst for a relationship that endured in the years that followed.

The death of al-Tilmisāni did not bring these contacts to an end. Rather, the embassy officer *in situ* was careful to make an introductory call on the new (and fourth) general guide, Muḥammad Hāmid Abu al-Naṣr, after his elevation to the post. Moreover, on that occasion the impression garnered from the cables is of American eagerness to smooth the path for further talks – in the face of the more cautious Ikhwan. Thus, it was reported that the embassy was keen to avoid setting the precedent of requesting permission for the meeting from the Egyptian government. By contrast, it was the Muslim Brothers who were anxious to emphasize the importance of gaining precisely such written consent and, whilst the group was judged 'keen to establish a dialogue with the U. S. Embassy' (on the basis that it would 'add to the MB's legitimacy'), it was also thought to be 'very worried about avoiding problems with the Ministry of the Interior'.[49] In this way, the episode provides a window into both the dynamics of the US–Ikhwan relationship and the Muslim Brothers' own acute sense of their vulnerability at that time. Indeed, the Brotherhood's leaders were described as lacking in 'self confidence and cohesion'.[50] Such a description would

[46] Abdelnasser, *The Islamic movement in Egypt*, pp. 68–71.

[47] Youssef Nada with Douglas Thompson, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood: the truth about the world's most powerful political movement* (London, 2012), p. xiv.

[48] Ibid., pp. 56–7. The incident is also touched upon in Khalil al-Anani's book, which claims that Tilmisāni had sent a letter to Iran requesting permission to visit, which was granted, albeit with the proviso that that they would not discuss the American hostage crisis with him. See Khalīl al-'Anāni, *Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn fi Miṣr: Shaykhūkha Tusāri'u al-Zaman?* (The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: gerontocracy fighting against time?) (Cairo, 2007), p. 184. In his memoirs, meanwhile, Tilmisāni does not mention contacts with the US, but does note that the Iranians at one point accused the Brotherhood of being agents for the United States. See 'Umar Tilmisāni, *Dhikrayāt, la mudhakarāt* (Memories not memoirs) (Cairo, 1985), p. 228.

[49] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood: eager for U. S. contacts, fearful of GOE', Cairo to Washington, 16 Sept. 1986.

[50] Ibid.

seem entirely in keeping with a movement anxious not to jeopardize the limited space afforded to it, at that stage, by Mubarak.

By contrast, it was the diplomats who sought to preserve channels to the Brotherhood. The September 1986 cable thus ended with the assertion that, whilst the embassy was keen to avoid being caught in the middle of a conflict between the Brotherhood and the government, it would 'continue to pursue contacts with the MB'.[51] Thereafter, there is a hiatus within the sources, but a cable from almost two years later indicates that some form of communication was maintained. A dispatch from Ambassador Frank Wisner in the Cairo embassy in August 1988, for instance, recounted discussions with a 'spokesman' from the group. Again, the Brotherhood was said to remain 'wary of any official contacts or involvement with the USG [US Government]'.[52] Still, this caution evidently did not prevent informal talks.[53]

Again, though, it would be a mistake to view such communications as resulting from any conspiracy, or attempt to build a secret alliance (à la Curtis, or Dreyfuss); rather, it would seem likely that this was simply a function of diplomatic routine. Part of the job of the Cairo embassy (as indeed any diplomatic mission), was to provide Washington with a full read-out of the Egyptian political scene – and, as has been described, from the 1980s, this necessarily included analysis of the Brotherhood. In this respect, it can be assumed that officials felt themselves simply to be doing what was required of them. Furthermore, the opacity and mystique surrounding the Ikhwan generated an inevitable desire to try and understand it better. And as a result, it is striking that US contacts with the Brotherhood were often accompanied by attempts to explain the inner dynamics of the organization – and to locate it alongside developments within Egypt and the broader region. Indeed, it is this effort to try and read the runes of the Brotherhood's internal structures and ideological character that is by far the most interesting aspect of the Wikileaks communiqués.

From the outset, for instance, there was an effort to determine where true authority within the Ikhwan lay. After the accession of Abu al-Naṣr to the post of general guide, one cable suggested that he was 'more a figurehead than the real power'.[54] The latter was thought to reside with his deputy, Muṣtafa Mashhūr (who would later succeed him as the fifth general guide between 1986 and 1996), a perception that accords with scholarly accounts of the Brotherhood in this period.[55]

[51] Ibid.

[52] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood developments and personalities', Cairo to Washington, 18 Aug. 1988.

[53] See, for example, Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood – jihad "frictions"', Cairo to Washington, 6 Sept. 1988.

[54] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood: eager for U.S. contacts, fearful of GOE', Cairo to Washington, 16 Sept. 1986.

[55] Pargeter, *The Muslim Brotherhood*, pp. 46–50.

Another common theme for the diplomats was the question of how moderate or otherwise was the Brotherhood. On the one hand, it is possible to find cables that recognize that many senior Muslim Brothers could be described as 'extremely anti-American'.[56] At the same time, they posited the existence of a clear distinction between the Brotherhood and more radical Islamist groups such as the Gamā'a Islamiyya. According to the US embassy, tensions existed between these movements, based on 'mutually hostile perceptions: the MB regard the "jihadists" as errant and ignorant youth at best, while the latter charge the MB with cowardice and "forbidden" collaboration with the secular state'.[57]

By July 1989, the diplomats' view was that the Brotherhood, though rehabilitated, had also been co-opted by the state and made more 'manageable'. Further, the threat posed by 'revolutionary Islam in general' was said to have diminished – a striking mis-analysis, given that Egypt would shortly thereafter be faced with an extensive Islamist insurgency. The Brotherhood, for its part, was said to be targeting the Egyptian 'political centre', through moderate sounding policies and an improved image. The programme produced by its candidates for the elections to the Egyptian Shura Council (the Upper House of parliament) in 1989 was described as being 'notably short on Islamic cant and long on ... everyday, liberal, centrist bromides'. It was even said to be, 'by Egyptian standards ... a model of both rhetorical and substantive moderation'. Consequently, it was accepted that the Ikhwan had returned to the 'mainstream political arena [whilst] forswearing underground activity'.[58] The group was, according to one cable, 'defanged but rehabilitated'; it was seen as posing little threat to the Mubarak government (a 'far more influential force'), but judged to be the 'largest ... and certainly the most cohesive bloc of opposition deputies in the [People's] Assembly' and therefore 'likely to endure'.[59]

Again, much of this is in accord with established accounts of the Brotherhood's evolution during the 1980s. During that decade, the group had indeed returned to public life, enjoying quasi-tolerated status. Though still officially a proscribed organization, the Brotherhood was permitted by the regime to operate openly within certain parameters. As mentioned, the group exploited this to send some of its members into parliament (albeit as part of a tiny opposition minority, compared to the dominant ruling National Democratic Party of Mubarak, the NDP). The Ikhwan also established a significant presence in the professional syndicates (white-collar trade unions),

[56] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood developments and personalities', Cairo to Washington, 18 Aug. 1988.

[57] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood – jihad "frictions"', Cairo to Washington, 6 Sept. 1988. For a lower-level view of the two groups see, Hambley, 'Islamic trilogy, part I: an overview of the Islamic right in Alexandria', Alexandria to Cairo, 25 Feb. 1987.

[58] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood: defanged but rehabilitated', Cairo to Washington, 20 July 1989.

[59] Ibid.

which came to constitute important outlets for Egyptian civil society during this era.[60] Did this mean that the group was indeed 'defanged' and a model of 'moderation'? As subsequent years were to show, for its part the Mubarak regime clearly thought otherwise.

IV

The success of the Brotherhood in re-establishing itself as a prominent force in socio-political life was such that the government of Hosni Mubarak appeared increasingly concerned by the esteem in which it was held. Unease over the ambitions of the Ikhwan was fuelled by the 'Salsabil affair' of 1992, when raids by the government's intelligence services on a computer company owned by a senior Muslim Brother, Khayrat al-Shāter, were reported to have uncovered documents that revealed the extent of the movement's organization, as well as its plans to infiltrate various sectors of the state and take over the country.[61] In the wake of the episode, several leading Brotherhood figures (including al-Shāter) were imprisoned.[62] And the regime's anxiety was further exacerbated by the broader wave of radical Islamist militancy that Egypt faced in the early 1990s, which included the waging of a bloody insurgency.[63] Between 1992 and 1997, thousands of lives were lost and governmental repression was expanded into a clampdown on all forms of Islamism, including those represented by the Brotherhood. The year 1995, in particular, brought a wave of arrests, which targeted Ikhwani activists; ensuing military trials saw fifty-four leading members sentenced to prison terms of varying length. Prior to this, the regime had also moved to re-establish total control of parliament and the syndicates, withdrawing the space it had previously afforded the Brotherhood to organize politically.[64]

[60] For cable analysis of the MB role in the syndicates, see Kurtzer, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood at low ebb', Cairo to Washington, 16 Mar. 1999. For broader discussion of the Brotherhood's role in the syndicates, see Ninette Fahmy, 'The performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian syndicates: an alternative formula for reform?', *Middle East Journal*, 52 (1998), pp. 551–62; Carrie R. Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: religion, activism, and political change in Egypt* (New York, NY, 2002).

[61] Hesham al-Awadi, *In pursuit of legitimacy: the Muslim Brothers and Mubarak, 1982–2000* (London, 2004), pp. 161–3.

[62] K. El-Anani, 'A different game for the MB', *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 979, 31 Dec. 2009–6 Jan. 2010; 'Khairat al-Shater on "The Nahda Project"', *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 13 (2012).

[63] Cables reflecting on the militant challenge can be seen at Schell, 'Upturn in fundamentalist activity in the Delta', Alexandria to Washington, 18 Mar. 1993; Fishbein, 'Alexandria: improving the neighborhoods and (by) moving out the fundamentalists', Alexandria to Cairo, 17 May 1993.

[64] For an account of this period, see Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: the trail of political Islam* (London, 2002), pp. 276–98; Mary A. Weaver, *A portrait of Europe: a journey through the world of militant Islam* (New York, NY, 1999).

Unfortunately, the period 1989–96 is one in which few cables are available that refer to the Brotherhood – and none that give an insight into the level of contacts that existed between the group and the US embassy. Given the aforementioned climate of the time, it can perhaps be surmised that interaction proved less easy, involved lower-ranking individuals on both sides and occurred less frequently. Nevertheless, there have been hints from elsewhere that some within US diplomatic circles did not simply follow the lead of the Mubarak government in trying to put the Brotherhood 'beyond the pale'. In 2007, an 'in-depth' investigation by the newspaper, *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* claimed that the United States government had, from the early 1990s onwards, begun considering whether or not to engage on a more active basis with various Islamist movements in the Middle East and North African region, as part of efforts to foster a process of democratization. One group subject to close discussion was said to be the Egyptian Ikhwan. Further, the newspaper cited a 1992 memorandum alleged to have been produced by Edward Djerejian, the then assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, which stated: 'Islamists in the region are not enemies', and called for 'collective engagement'.[65] It also pointed to efforts to make contact with the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1990s, quoting Daniel Kurtzer, who served as US ambassador to Egypt between 1997 and 2001, as having acknowledged that he had met individuals affiliated with the Brotherhood, albeit not in an official Brotherhood capacity.[66] Kurtzer's testimony thus suggests that any hiatus in communication that did occur – in the context of Mubarak's shift towards repression – was neither absolute nor permanent. This accords with the record presented by the Wikileaks cables.

A dispatch from Cairo in late 1997, for example, gives an account of separate meetings that had been held with Muslim Brotherhood figures who were also members of the board of the journalists' syndicate. On that occasion, it was noted that the group had been pushed on to the 'defensive', but equally that it retained roots in all levels of society; in the assessment of the embassy, the Ikhwan was 'down but not out'.[67] A similar analysis was offered two years later, in a cable that described the Brotherhood as having been at a 'low ebb' since 1995, even as it remained 'Egypt's largest and best organized opposition movement'. Moreover, that same memorandum gave confirmation that the embassy was in contact with the Brotherhood via 'influential MB members who are also active in the professional syndicates'. Significantly, though, in an undoubted reflection of the atmosphere of the time, the cable stated clearly: 'We call on them in their capacities as syndicate leaders, not as members of a banned group.'[68]

[65] M. Lutfi, 'The Brotherhood and America: part one', *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 12 Mar. 2007. See also, parts two to six (13 Mar.–27 Mar. 2007).
[66] Ibid.
[67] Battle, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood – down but not out', Cairo to Washington, 12 Nov. 1997.
[68] Kurtzer, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood at low ebb', Cairo to Washington, 16 Mar. 1999.

By the late 1990s, therefore, it is striking that the embassy – as intimated by Kurtzer – no longer felt able to engage openly with Brotherhood members *qua* Muslim Brothers – as they had done a decade earlier. Whereas the 1980s had seen the existence of formal channels for dialogue with senior Ikhwani leaders, up to and including the general guide of the movement, these were effectively now shelved amidst on-going Egyptian government repression. In their place, the embassy was forced to rely on unofficial access to those who were known members of the Brotherhood, meeting them solely in other capacities. Such an arrangement appeared to suit both parties – with neither wishing to antagonize the Mubarak government, which was hostile to international recognition of, and/or engagement with, the Brotherhood. For the US especially, it seems clear that its alliance with the Egyptian government (in place since the late 1970s), naturally trumped other concerns. As the domestic tide turned against the Ikhwan, the United States refused to risk being perceived as violating Egyptian sovereignty by dealing too closely with a group identified as a threat to the country's national security.

In any case, tensions also appear to have developed between the Ikhwan and the US because of the first Gulf War (1990–1991) – as seen in diplomatic reports about the reaction of the Brotherhood's leadership to that conflict. A cable from March 1991, for example, reported that General Guide Abu al-Naṣr had described the war as a 'malicious plot' to destroy Iraq's military capabilities, with the US said to be playing a 'sly, destructive role in our Arab region'.[69]

Perhaps because of such views, diplomats now expressed scepticism over the extent and depth of the Brotherhood's professed moderation. A 1997 cable, for instance, described the group's embrace of the language of pluralism and human rights as 'a tactical maneouver rather than a sincere conversion to democratic practices'.[70] Two years later, the assessment from the Cairo embassy was even more stark: 'We should have no illusions on the last point. In the MB ideology, God's law trumps democracy, and God's law as they interpret it does not favour heretical views, women's participation in government, or equal rights for non-Muslims in an Islamic society.'[71]

Alongside this, various cables again displayed a predilection for what might be called 'kremlinology', of the kind attempted earlier. Efforts were made to identify the most important figures and factions within the movement and the likely significance of their ascendancy, or demotion. Once more, the figure of Muṣtafa Mashhūr loomed large; he was thought to represent that section of the Brotherhood which retained 'at least a theoretical attachment' to militancy, in keeping both with his alleged background as the former head of the Secret

[69] Wisner, 'Muslim Brotherhood calls for withdrawal of foreign forces from the Gulf', Cairo to Washington, 28 Mar. 1991.

[70] Battle, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood – down but not out', Cairo to Washington, 12 Nov. 1997.

[71] Kurtzer, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood at low ebb', Cairo to Washington, 16 Mar. 1999.

Apparatus and his attendance at radical Islamic conferences abroad in Pakistan and Sudan.[72] Conversely, Mamūn al-Hudhaybi – who had served as the head of the Brotherhood's assembly delegation in the 1987–90 parliament (and was the son of the second general guide, Hasan al-Hudhaybi) – was described as the 'chief advocate of participation in Egypt's political game'. Both men were thought to be aspirants to the post of general guide; and in the 1991 assessment of the embassy, 'the battle for leadership will be joined soon'.[73]

Interestingly, the belief in the existence of definable factions within the Brotherhood also served as the prism through which the Mubarak regime's repression of the movement during the 1990s was analysed. The crackdown was thought to have been deliberately targeted against the 'mid-range cadre of the MB', whilst 'leaving the septuagenarians in the leadership untouched'. In so doing, it was judged to have exacerbated inter-generational tensions within the group – both over who should exert control and over the correct way forward.[74]

The situation outlined above – of discreet, low-level contacts with a movement whose internal composition and character seemed increasingly hard to read – was maintained over the turn of the new century. In May 2001, a lengthy two-part assessment of the Brotherhood offered a snap-shot of the status quo. With regard to US–Ikhwan relations, one finds reference to discussions that had been held with Ibrahīm al-Za'afarāni, a veteran Brotherhood figure from Alexandria. In the wake of these, the group was described as being open to dialogue; yet, equally, many Muslim Brothers were still said to be 'hesitant' to speak to embassy officers. The explanation given for this was both 'the MB code of secrecy concerning its deliberations and plans as well as Egyptian government angst with MB electoral activities and recent gains [a reference to the 2000 parliamentary elections, which had seen the Brothers win 17 seats]'.[75] As a result, contacts between the embassy and the Brotherhood, though enduring, remained tentative and overshadowed by disquiet as to the possible reaction of the Mubarak government.

In terms of assessing the Ikhwan, meanwhile, the cable did note a renewed 'upsurge in [the] popularity' of the group, which was seen as the 'antithesis of [a] corrupt, wealthy, secular ruling elite'.[76] At the same time, the Brothers were described as being plagued by internal divisions. In terms that were to become recurring features of the diplomatic cables, it was thought that they were divided between 'hawks' and 'doves'. The former were said to be drawn more from the older generation and to include Mashhūr and Mamūn al-Hudhaybi (now re-categorized as compared to the earlier period when he was described in more moderate tones), alongside younger figures such

[72] Egan, 'The great shaykhs: the Muslim Brotherhood and the radical fringe', Cairo to Washington, 11 July 1991. [73] Ibid.

[74] Kurtzer, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood at low ebb', Cairo to Washington, 16 Mar. 1999.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Harnish, 'Egypt's Muslim Brothers – part 2: a popular political force', Cairo to Washington, 21 June 2001.

as 'Abdul Mun'im Abu al-Futūh (who would later depart the Ikhwan to become a leading candidate in Egypt's post-Mubarak presidential elections, backed by the senior Egyptian cleric, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi). Other alleged 'hawks' were Muḥammad Ḥabīb (later deputy general guide who would also resign from the movement in 2011 to join the camp that was close to Abu al-Futūh), and Muḥammad Mahdi 'Akef (a future general guide). Given their subsequent histories, the description of people like al-Futūh, Ḥabib, and even 'Akef as 'hawks' is striking, as many would later come to describe them as leading 'reformists' within the group, rather than hardliners.[77] In 2001, by contrast, key 'doves' were identified as Seif al-Islam al-Banna, 'Iṣām al-'Aryān (better known in English as Essam al-Erian), Ibrahīm al-Za'afarāni, and Salah 'Abd al-Maqṣud – all of whom were said to see themselves as '"politicians" rather than "revolutionaries"'. It was thought too that the 'selection of the next Supreme [General] Guide [to replace the then incumbent Mashhūr], will likely represent a struggle between the hawks and the doves'.[78]

What emerges, then, is the extent to which, despite two decades of observing and attempting to understand the Brotherhood, US diplomats were still struggling to decipher the internal contours and dynamics of an organization that remained, at the end of the twentieth century, of only secondary interest to the formulation of United States foreign policy. Into this situation came the events of 11 September 2001. Not only did these transform the nature of both George W. Bush's presidency and the entire orientation of American foreign policy, but also they ensured that the specific issue of the Brotherhood came to be viewed in new light.[79] The post-9/11 era brought a complete reassessment of political Islam/Islamism and its various manifestations. As described earlier, a key element within this was the question of how to locate groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, in relation to al-Qaeda and violent salafi-jihadism. In addition, the launching of the 'war on terror' – to be followed closely by the pursuit of a 'freedom agenda' – profoundly altered the immediate context in which the Ikhwan operated.

V

Frustratingly, the years 2001–5 comprise another relatively barren period in terms of what Wikileaks can tell us about the debates that were held over

[77] A. Howeidy, 'Brotherhood, divided by five', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1054, 30 June–6 July 2011; 'Brotherhood leader leaves group to join Islamist party', *Egypt Independent*, 13 July 2011, www.egyptindependent.com/news/brotherhood-leader-leaves-group-join-islamist-party; M. Lynch, 'The next supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood', *Foreign Policy*, 26 Mar. 2009.

[78] Kurtzer, 'Egypt's Muslim Brothers – part 1: history and structure', Cairo to Washington, 31 May 2001.

[79] Bush had taken office in Jan. 2001 and initially pursued a quasi-isolationist, quietist foreign policy. See, for example, Ivo H. Daalder and James Lindsay, *America unbound: the Bush revolution in foreign policy* (Washington, DC, 2003).

these issues in embassy Cairo. What does seem clear from later references, however, is the fact that almost all lines of communication between the embassy and the Brotherhood were shut down, either in 2001 itself, or soon after. *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat*, in its aforementioned investigation dated the cut-off point to 2003 and differences over the war in Iraq.[80] The cables are themselves silent on the precise moment of the caesura; however, a dispatch from July 2007 does state that, by that stage, there had been a lack of contact for 'several years'.[81] In addition, a further cable from that same month, described a meeting between a Congressional delegation and members of the Egyptian parliament, as 'the first U. S. Congressional (and U. S. diplomatic) contacts *in six years* with the full range of Parliamentary membership, including the leader of the largest self-claimed "democratic" opposition bloc, the Muslim Brotherhood "independents"' (emphasis added).[82] Given that throughout the preceding period, US diplomats had continued to meet with the other major forces in Egyptian politics, the clear difference here was the presence of Brotherhood representatives – the obvious conclusion being that there had been no such meetings since 2001. Set against the fact, as has been demonstrated, that some form of contact with the Ikhwan had been standard diplomatic practice over the previous twenty years, it seems likely that such a shutdown was the product of presidential edict.

Certainly, it does appear that communication between the US and the Ikhwan became something of a taboo – for both sides – after 9/11 and in the conditions of the early 'war on terror'. For the Bush administration, the enormity of al-Qaeda's assault on the United States encouraged a binary mind-set that viewed the world as divided along two axes: the US and its allies on the one side; their enemies along the other.[83] Such an ethos carried clear implications for non-state groups such as the Brotherhood, whose attitude to the US was ambiguous at best. And for this reason, it does seem highly likely that instructions were given to Cairo embassy officials that they should break off relations with the movement. For their part, meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood was quick to criticize the whole concept of the 'war on terror' and the military-led responses of the United States in first Afghanistan and then Iraq. Such criticism of US foreign policy has remained an enduring theme. To give but one example, the current general guide of the Brotherhood,

[80] Lutfi, 'The Brotherhood and America'.

[81] Ricciardone, 'Contact with Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary leader', Cairo to Washington, 20 Mar. 2007.

[82] Ricciardone, 'Advancing the freedom agenda in Egypt', Cairo to Washington, 17 July 2007.

[83] For an example of this outlook, see speech by President Bush in Nov. 2001, recorded at 'You are either with us or against us', CNN.com, 6 Nov. 2001, http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/. For an account of the 'war on terror', see Richard Clarke, *Against all enemies: inside America's war on terror* (London, 2004); Peter Bergen, *The longest war: the enduring conflict between America and al-Qaeda* (New York, NY, 2011).

Muḥammad Badie', used his weekly message in September 2011 (on the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks) to condemn the 'white lie of Islamic terrorism' and suggested that the myth of al-Qaeda had allowed the 'neo-conservative wing' of US statesmen to implement plans to take control of the Muslim world under the guise of 'the war on terror'.[84]

In staking out such positions, the Brotherhood might be seen as merely reflecting the broader rise of anti-Americanism in the Middle East region in the decade after 9/11, as reflected in successive Pew Research Global Attitudes Project surveys.[85] Whatever the cause, the post-2001 transformation of the international environment clearly brought the curtailment of all contacts between the US and the Brotherhood; the polarization of attitudes in the first years of the 'war on terror' served to create an insuperable barrier to dialogue on both sides. The truth of this can be seen from an episode in April 2005, when the newspaper *Ash-Sharq al-Awsat* produced an exposé of alleged US plans to re-establish a channel of communication with the Ikhwan.[86] As the US embassy reported, the story was 'baseless'. Yet, the reaction of the Brotherhood was striking. Where once, as shown, it had been open to contacts of varying formats, the then general guide, Mahdi 'Akef, appeared to reject the idea *in toto*, pointing to 'fundamental and not just political differences' between the Brothers and the Americans.[87] That he should have felt compelled to adopt so defensive a position perhaps offers an insight into the low regard with which the Brotherhood viewed a possible connection with the US by that point. Indeed, 'Akef would subsequently condemn the United States for its alleged colonialism, claiming that it 'does not wish well' to the Islamic world.[88] Elsewhere, US leaders seemed equally antagonistic; in the aftermath of her landmark Cairo speech in June 2005, at the height of the Bush administration's zeal for its 'freedom agenda', Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated baldly: 'we have not engaged the Muslim Brotherhood and we don't – we won't'.[89] At that stage, prospects for dialogue of any kind seemed slim.

[84] '*Risālat Muḥammad Badie' Al-Murshid Al-'Aam: (fi thikrat 11 september) Akthubat Al-Irhāb Al-Islāmi*', ('Dispatch of Muḥammad Badie', the general guide (on the occasion of commemorating 11 Sept.): 'The white lie of Islamic Terrorism'), 11 Sept. 2011, www.egyptwindow.net/ar_print.aspx?print_ID=14320.

[85] 'Opinion of the United States', Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, www.pewglobal.org/database/?indicator=1&group=6.

[86] 'US State Department calls for the White House to begin direct talks with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt', *Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 3 Apr. 2005.

[87] Gray, 'Egypt: smear puts Muslim Brothers on the defensive', Cairo to Washington, 13 Apr. 2005. See also Gray, 'Bogus USG memo "explained" by Al-Sharq Al-Awsat Cairo bureau chief', Cairo to Washington, 20 Apr. 2005.

[88] See for example, Mahdi 'Akef, '*Al-Wilayāt al-Mutaḥida la turīdu al-khayr li-l-'Ālam al-Islami*' ('The United States does not wish well to the Muslim world'), 12 Feb. 2006, www.ikhwanonline.com/new/Article.aspx?ArtID=17930&SecID=211.

[89] 'Secretary Condoleezza Rice: question and answer at the American University in Cairo', US Department of State, 20 June 2005, http://2001–2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48352.htm.

Nevertheless, the situation began to change in the wake of Egyptian political developments that same year, when, under pressure from the United States to enact reforms – precisely because of the declared 'freedom agenda' – President Mubarak allowed parliamentary elections to take place.[90] The Ikhwan was allowed to participate on a fairer footing than previously and as a result, it saw 88 of its members elected to the People's Assembly as independents – still very much a minority of the 454 members of the house (of whom 311 belonged to the ruling NDP), but an increase in their representation of over 500 per cent.[91] Thereafter, as noted by the US embassy, the confidence of the Brotherhood appeared to grow. It used its newfound position in parliament, for instance, to challenge and scrutinize the government.[92] And it also began to articulate a much clearer, reformist discourse, calling for democratic change in Egypt.

Against this backdrop, it would seem that the American government slowly came back round to the view that the group was a reality, with which it would have to deal. Significantly, this shift long pre-dated the end of the Bush administration and was doubtless a function of wider reassessment. By late 2005 – early 2006, the confidence (many would say arrogance) of the administration had begun to dissipate as it faced the morass of Iraq; it was also chastened by the results of its 'freedom agenda' across the Middle East, with legislative elections bringing success for first the Brotherhood and then Hamas. In each case, the US had to confront the reality of liberal weakness, as compared to Islamist strength, which may well have served to undercut the binary 'with us or against us' paradigm that was previously dominant at the political level. (In any case, while there may have been a prohibition on 'official' dialogue with the Brotherhood, it would appear that various international and US-based NGOs, working to promote democratic reform and the growth of civil society in Egypt, had in the meantime, maintained some contact with various branches of the broad Islamist movement.)[93]

In October 2006, the diplomatic mission in Cairo sent a cable to Washington outlining the organizational structure and internal dynamics of

[90] For cable discussion of the effort to secure reform from Mubarak, see Gray, 'Constitutional reform and the outlook for democracy in Egypt', Cairo to Washington, 9 May 2005; Ricciardone, 'Advancing the freedom agenda in Egypt', Cairo to Washington, 17 July 2007.

[91] 'Women and Copts named Egypt MPs', BBC News Online, 12 Dec. 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4521392.stm. See also Jones, 'Brotherhood rising in Alexandria', Cairo to Washington, 26 Dec. 2005.

[92] Ricciardone, 'Increased assertiveness of the Muslim Brotherhood', Cairo to Washington, 19 Nov. 2006; Ricciardone, 'Muslim Brotherhood deputy leader: "I am very optimistic"', Cairo to Washington, 22 Nov. 2006.

[93] 'Alīī, 'Abd al-Rahīm, *Al- Ikhwān al-Muslimūn: min Hasan al-Bannā ilá Mahdī 'Ākif* (The Muslim Brotherhood: from Hasan al-Bana to Mahdi 'Akef) (Cairo, 2007), pp. 275–6. See also Sharp, *U. S. democracy promotion policy in the Middle East*, pp. 20–4.

the Brotherhood. It did so, in response to 'INR queries' (INR being the US Bureau of Intelligence and Research).[94] That such requests were being made suggests that the Brotherhood – as an issue for US foreign policy-makers – was now firmly on the agenda in Washington. This corresponds with the claims made by Ian Johnson that from 2006, sections of the American state (including the CIA), had begun to reappraise the character of the Brotherhood, coming to view it in more positive fashion.[95]

Two months later, in December 2006, it became clear that the Brotherhood itself was also re-evaluating its approach to the United States. Sa'ad al-Katātni, the leader of its parliamentary bloc, issued a statement on the organization's English language website, calling for 'constructive dialogue' with the US, based on 'mutual understanding and the appreciation of diversity'.[96] Al-Katātni then followed this up with a visit to the embassy consular section in March 2007. A subsequent dispatch recounted that a warm and friendly meeting had taken place and that diplomatic officials had stressed that they were 'open to meeting with any parliamentarians', including al-Katātni; similarly, he had 'noted that it was unfortunate that there had been no USG–MB contact for so long', as he regularly met with staff from other embassies.[97]

In the aftermath, a faltering and cautious set of exchanges took place. Late April 2007, for example, saw the aforementioned visit of a congressional delegation to Egypt and their meeting with Brotherhood parliamentarians.[98] And amidst media speculation about a shift in policy, Ambassador Ricciardone publicly confirmed in November of that year that talks had taken place, 'in the full light of day', with those members of the Brotherhood who were also members of parliament.[99]

From this time, it would seem, 'telephone contact' with al-Katātni was maintained. But it did not lead to additional face-to-face meetings until

[94] Jones, 'Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: supreme guide and parliamentary bloc dynamics', Cairo to Washington, 19 Oct. 2006.

[95] I. Johnson, 'Washington's secret history with the Muslim Brotherhood', New York Review of Books Blog, 5 Feb. 2011, www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/feb/05/washingtons-secret-history-muslim-brotherhood/; I. Johnson, 'The CIA's Islamist cover up', New York Review of Books Blog, 30 Aug. 2011, www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/aug/30/cia-islamist-cover-up/. See also E. Lake, 'Bush weighs reaching out to "Brothers"', *New York Sun*, 20 June 2007.

[96] Statement as recorded in Ricciardone, 'Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary bloc leader calls for dialogue with USG', Cairo to Washington, 24 Jan. 2007.

[97] Ricciardone, 'Contact with Muslim Brotherhood parliamentary leader', Cairo to Washington, 20 Mar. 2007.

[98] As referred to in Ricciardone, 17 July 2007. See also ICG Middle East/North Africa Report, No. 76, *Egypt's Muslim Brothers: confrontation or integration?* (18 June 2008), p. 5.

[99] 'U. S. engages Muslim Brotherhood despite Rice; relations with Mubarak's government could be strained', *Washington Times*, 15 Nov. 2007. For an example of the speculation in this period, see E. Lake, 'Bush weighs reaching out to "Brothers"'.

the first half of 2009.[100] The stumbling block throughout this period, it seems clear, was once more the attitude of the Egyptian government – and in particular its fear that the US was perhaps seeking to 'insure' itself with the Muslim Brotherhood in case the regime fell – and thereby strengthening a movement that it had come to view as a major threat. (In light of that perceived threat, after 2005 Mubarak's regime had resumed repression of the Brotherhood.[101])

Notably, the Egyptian government was reported by the US embassy to have reacted particularly 'testily' to foreign governmental outreach to the movement.[102] Doubtless, such sensitivity did not diminish in the years that followed. In the middle of 2009, the regime engineered a further 'ramping up' of pressure on the Brotherhood, arresting various high-profile members and accusing them of belonging to an 'international MB conspiracy', involving revolutionary activity and money laundering.[103] The effect of this, al-Katātni admitted to his US interlocutors, was to create a 'difficult' environment for the Brothers.[104] Indeed, with this in mind, it is perhaps remarkable that contacts of any kind continued to take place – as indeed they did. Yet equally, it is possible to discern the reasons why they made sense for both sides. For the US, as described, they had to accept that pressure for democratization was likely to empower Islamists of the Brotherhood's ilk; this led to a belief in many quarters that they needed to build relations with the Ikhwan. The Brothers, meanwhile, sought links with the US as a means of garnering legitimacy. This can be seen as part of a wider strategy, in which Brotherhood leaders sought to bolster their position within Egypt, by appeal to an international audience.[105]

[100] Scobey, 'Dinner with parliament's foreign relations committee, including two Muslim Brotherhood MPs', Cairo to Washington, 23 Feb. 2009; Scobey, 'MB parliamentary leader on increased GOE pre-election pressure', Cairo to Washington, 3 Aug. 2009.

[101] For examples, see, Gray, 'Arrest of senior Muslim Brotherhood official further escalates "showdown" with GOE', Cairo to Washington, 24 May 2005; Gray, 'Update on the GOE–Muslim Brotherhood stand off', Cairo to Washington, 16 June 2005; Jones, 'More arrests: government–Muslim Brotherhood tensions ratcheted up', Cairo to Washington, 18 Dec. 2006; 'Muslim Brotherhood announces intent to form political party; arrests continue', Cairo to Washington, 18 Jan. 2007; Ricciardone, 'Responding to Egypt's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood', Cairo to Washington, 30 Apr. 2007; Ricciardone, 'Muslim Brotherhood military tribunal issues verdicts', Cairo to Washington, 16 Apr. 2008.

[102] Ricciardone, 'Muslim Brotherhood: government crackdown continues, party platform still in draft', Cairo to Washington, 30 Aug. 2007.

[103] Tueller, 'Ramping up pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: recent arrests', Cairo to Washington, 30 July 2009; Scobey, 'Reports of divisions within the MB following the death of a guidance bureau member; arrests update', Cairo to Washington, 1 Oct. 2009. For more on this case, see extensive coverage in *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (Egypt), 24 Apr. 2010.

[104] Scobey, 'MB parliamentary leader on increased GOE pre-election pressure', Cairo to Washington, 3 Aug. 2009. In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, all charges associated with this case were dropped.

[105] It is this strategy that explains the post-2005 emergence of various efforts by senior Brotherhood figures to court international opinion. See, for example, K. el-Shatir (sic), 'No need to be afraid of us', *Guardian*, 23 Nov. 2005.

By late 2009–early 2010, the reality was, as one former Brotherhood member told the embassy, that 'both the MB and the GOE [government of Egypt] are anxiously awaiting signals from the new U. S. administration on its policy towards dialogue with the group'.[106] Subsequently, it would appear that intermittent communication – of the kind conducted over the previous two years – continued.[107] But there was no fundamental change in US policy. In this regard, the administration of President Barack Obama that took office in 2009 did little to alter the trajectory as established in the last years of the Bush presidency. Obama's much-heralded Cairo speech of June 2009 promised a signature shift in approach, and Muslim Brotherhood leaders did attend the president's address; the reality, though, was more prosaic. The Wikileaks cables suggest that both the US and the Brotherhood continued to be wary of deeper engagement with one another – for fear of the potential reaction from the Mubarak government. It was not until the collapse of that regime two years later, in the first months of 2011, that the situation altered decisively – and, as described at the outset, the US and other Western countries now felt able (and indeed compelled) to approach the Brotherhood in new light. It was only then that what Youssef Nada called a 'historic shift in foreign policy' took place.[108]

Such reticence on the part of the US was maybe a function of the fact that throughout this period, American diplomats appeared far from sure as to the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood's vocal commitment to the causes of democracy and human rights. Its adoption of such rhetoric was described in 2005 as more of a 'tactical shift rather than an indication of evolving ideology', with the movement said to be taking a lead from secular activists. The organization was still assessed to be 'decidedly Islamist in its outlook and agenda', with the rank and file deemed especially unreconstructed.[109] Later, when the Brotherhood produced an extensive document outlining its views, embassy analysis of the text gave a mixed picture. On the one hand, it was described as containing 'unprecedented' detail of the group's positions, with a central emphasis on calls for 'a full range of political and religious freedoms'. At the same time, diplomats observed with a note of concern that the manifesto signalled 'a potentially contradictory commitment to more robustly implementing shari'a' and took a 'hard line on Israel' (which it portrayed as an aggressive, expansionist power, pursuing a

[106] Scobey, 'Egyptian Islamist meets with Staffdel HOGREFE', Cairo to Washington, 3 Sept. 2009.

[107] For reference to discussions with al-Katātni, see, for example, Scobey, 'Update on reports of divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood', Cairo to Washington, 21 Oct. 2009; or Scobey, 'Egypt: new round of MB arrests', Cairo to Washington, 11 Feb. 2010.

[108] Nada, *Inside the Muslim Brotherhood*, p. 153

[109] Gray, 'The GOE and the Muslim Brotherhood: anatomy of a showdown', Cairo, 17 May 2005.

'Greater Israel from the Nile to the Euphrates' in line with 'Zionist-American interests').[110]

It is perhaps this confused picture that explains why significant attempts continued to be made to understand internal Brotherhood dynamics. In 2005, for instance, diplomats reported on rumours that General Guide Mahdi 'Akef had been side-lined by those who judged him 'excessively pragmatic'. This had been accompanied, it was said, by the 'temporary suspension' from the organization's Guidance Bureau of 'Abdul Mon'eim Abu al-Futūh – now, unlike earlier it should be noted, described as a 'reformer' and 'liberal'. 'More rigid' members of the group, such as Muḥammad Ḥabib and Khayrat al-Shāter (a key financier, known by some as the Muslim Brotherhood's 'iron man', and later candidate for the post-Mubarak presidency, until his expulsion by the Egyptian electoral commission), were thought to have taken over from a leader who was 'unpopular' among grass-roots members.[111] Leaving aside the accuracy or otherwise of such reports, their significance for present purposes lies in the extent to which they were symptomatic of on-going US efforts to uncover and interpret the 'real' politics of the Ikhwan.

Similar in character was the embassy's assessment of a draft political party platform, which was released by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2007, and was said to have 'highlighted internal tensions'.[112] By the start of the following year, diplomatic officials were referring to the 'schizophrenia' of the Brotherhood, depicting the organization as divided between a 'religiously-oriented conservative wing' and a 'politically-oriented moderate wing'. Significantly, the former were estimated to be stronger numerically, comprising around 55–60 per cent of the group and said to be bolstered by a 'worrisome Salafi tendency among some younger MB members', as compared to the 30–35 per cent of Brothers who were moderates.[113] (Here, it is worth noting too that the embassy *was* aware of the growing Salafi phenomenon – as demonstrated in numerous cables dating back to the 1980s – which appeared to catch many other observers of the post-Mubarak Egyptian scene by surprise).[114] Throughout 2009, the embassy

[110] Ricciardone, 'Election platform of the Muslim Brotherhood: political crisis', Cairo to Washington, 11 July 2007.

[111] Corbin, 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: internal coup reports, key leader disciplined and, strange alliance formed', Cairo to Washington, 10 July 2005.

[112] Ricciardone, 'Muslim Brotherhood: draft party platform highlights internal fissures', Cairo to Washington, 24 Oct. 2007. For more on the platform, see '*Munaqashat al-qiraa al-ula li-barnamaj hizb al-Ikhwan fi London*' ('Debate in London over the first reading of the Brotherhood party's platform'), 30 Oct. 2007, www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=31766&SecID=211.

[113] Ricciardone, 'The schizophrenia of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood', Cairo to Washington, 20 Mar. 2008. For more on this 'organizational schizophrenia' and the attendant 'power struggles', see Scobey, 'Muslim Brotherhood elections: some internal reshuffling', Cairo to Washington, 24 June 2008.

[114] See, for example, Hambley, 'Islamic trilogy: part three', Alexandria to Washington, 25 Feb. 1987; Scobey, 'Salafism on the rise in Egypt', Cairo to Washington, 2 Apr. 2009.

portrayed the Ikhwan as experiencing 'an inter-generational and ideological battle' along these lines.[115]

In trying to read the runes of the Brotherhood's 'internal clashes' during this era, a key focus was the subject of who would succeed Mahdi 'Akef as general guide. The prospect that he might be overthrown has already been noted. Later, in 2008, it was assumed that his successor would be drawn from the conservative wing of the group.[116] Towards the end of the following year, it was being suggested that the Ikhwan's next leader would be Muḥammad Ḥabib – 'Akef's deputy (and the man around whom there had been speculation of an internal coup in 2005).[117] As it was, however, Muḥammad Badie' was elected as the group's new general guide in January 2010. A subsequent cable from the American embassy in Cairo admitted that Badie' was an 'administrative insider and relative unknown'; and while one of their contacts allegedly described him as a 'moderate', others viewed him variously as a compromise candidate, or indeed a 'conservative'. (The latter verdict was the one favoured by most commentators, with Badie' said to belong to the 'Qutbiyyūn' faction within the Ikhwan.)[118] In the end, the dispatch concluded somewhat plaintively: 'The verdict is still out on what recent internal elections mean.'[119]

Once again, then, the impression conveyed by such 'kremlinology' was actually the ambiguous and undetermined character of the Brotherhood and its trajectory. Could it be viewed as an ally in any effort to spread democracy? Or was it merely a dangerous radical force that would exploit democratic openings to pursue an illiberal and anti-Western agenda that would be harmful to American interests? Clearly, foreign service officials remained far from sure.

Indeed, what the foregoing suggests is the extent to which embassy officials continued to struggle to decode undercurrents within the Brotherhood. The failure to anticipate the emergence of Badie' is but one example. Elsewhere, it is arresting to note that someone such as 'Abdul Mon'eim Abu al-Futūh could at one stage be classified as a 'hawk', while later being portrayed (perhaps more accurately) as a 'reformer'; the same had been true in an earlier period of Mamūn al-Hudhaybi. Others such as Muḥammad Ḥabib seemed to defy repeated attempts at categorization. None of which is to criticize the diplomats

[115] See, for example, Scobey, 'Muslim Brotherhood's party platform indefinitely on hold', Cairo to Washington, 17 Feb. 2009; Scobey, 'Reports of divisions within the MB following the death of a guidance bureau member; arrests update', Cairo to Washington, 1 Oct. 2009; and Scobey, 'Update on reports of divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood', Cairo to Washington, 21 Oct. 2009.

[116] Ricciardone, 'The schizophrenia of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood', Cairo to Washington, 20 Mar. 2008.

[117] See, for example, Scobey, 'MB internal clashes continue', Cairo to Washington, 15 Dec. 2009.

[118] M. Hamida, '*Ta'yīn Muḥammad Badie' Murshidan lil-Ikhwān Al-Muslimīn fi Miṣr*' ('Muḥammad Badie' nominated general guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt'), *Elaph*, 16 Jan. 2010, www.elaph.com/Web/news/2010/1/524249.html.

[119] Scobey, 'Egypt: new MB supreme guide named', Cairo to Washington, 21 Jan. 2010.

involved; rather, it is simply to recognize the problematic and somewhat artificial nature of what they were trying to do. As Ambassador Margaret Scobey later noted, labels such as '"Conservative" and "reformer" are shorthand terms used by outside observers to describe MB members in Arabic, but not necessarily used by MB actors to describe themselves'.[120] In attempting to ascertain the true nature of the Ikhwan, embassy officials were, to some extent, projecting a framework of their own creation on to the organization. There were always going to be limits to what such an approach could yield.

VI

Have United States diplomats traditionally seen the Muslim Brotherhood as a 'moderate' movement with which the US should engage? As the Wikileaks cables reveal, between the early 1980s and 2010, there was no straightforward answer to this question. The foregoing has demonstrated that there were contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood, both as a movement and on an individual basis, to a degree never clearly acknowledged before. Nevertheless, such dialogue was always over-shadowed by the wider strategic picture. Egypt's status as a major regional ally under President Hosni Mubarak ensured that the US remained, for the most part, within the parameters set by his regime.

As a conclusion, there is little here that is surprising; the Wikileaks cables merely confirm a picture that might have been predicted (they do, though, disprove wilder conspiracy theories about 'dangerous liaisons' between the US and the Muslim Brotherhood). What are of interest, however, are the on-going attempts of American diplomats, throughout this era, to read the runes of the Brotherhood – to identify different trends and factions within an otherwise secretive organization. On the one hand, it is possible to observe here the transformation in US attitudes and priorities: from a worldview in which Cold War matters loomed large (and debates about Egypt and political Islam were somewhat secondary), to one in which questions about Islamism came to take on new importance.

Of even greater significance is what the cables reveal about the enduring uncertainty over how best to characterize the Ikhwan. The group's pro-democratic credentials were repeatedly judged by the diplomats to be less than persuasive. Often, officials sought to extrapolate putative divisions between 'moderates' and 'conservatives', or 'hawks' and 'doves' – yet they did not always seem sure as to which camp any given individual belonged. 'Abdul Mon'eim Abu al-Futūh, for example, was first ascribed the former label, only to be subsequently re-classified into the latter camp; while the current general guide, Muḥammad Badie', has been given each moniker as well as none.

More fundamentally, the recurrent discussions about whether or not the Brothers – as individuals or as a collective – could be described as 'moderate',

[120] Scobey, 'MB internal clashes continue', Cairo to Washington, 15 Dec. 2009.

are highly instructive; for as some diplomats themselves even acknowledged, the attribution of such labels was more the product of external assumptions and their projection on to the Brotherhood, than a reflection as to the existence of such discrete and definable categories in reality. For this reason, it might be said that these assessments reveal as much about the mind-set of US diplomats as they do about the development of the Ikhwan over this period.

The discussions within the cables also mirror the broader public debates about the Muslim Brotherhood and, indeed, Islamism more broadly, which were in train throughout this era. At the moment that revolution came to Egypt in 2011, such debates were – like those of the American diplomats examined here – still without decisive resolution, which is why so much uncertainty surrounds Egypt's future. What will the Muslim Brotherhood be like in power? Will its actions benefit or endanger US national interests in the region? Will it be a force for 'moderation'? As with any exercise in crystal-ball gazing, only time will tell; but after three decades (and more) of looking at the Ikhwan, it is clear that for the diplomats, as for many others, the Muslim Brotherhood remained an unknown quantity. Perhaps that is the most startling conclusion of all.