Western media portrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring

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Research question: What are Western views of the Muslim Brotherhood based on Western media in the aftermath of the Arab Spring of 2011?

In recent years Western media has been presenting a negative image of Islam and Muslims, only reporting on extremist or terrorist actions and ways of "promoting" Islam. However, as of the 2011 Arab Spring, revolutions have revealed to Westerners that there are Muslims that want democracy, many of which do not want to impose Sharia law, many can be pacific and make reasonable demands without resorting to acts of terrorism. As of the 25th of January 2011, the start of the Egyptian revolution, Western media has been constantly reporting, commenting or analysing the Muslim Brotherhood, the major opposition party. Looking through the media between January 25 and May 31 of the year 2011, it appears that Western views of the Muslim Brotherhood are quite varied. However, they tend towards negative views and are inconsistent, varying with events in Egypt.

On Feb. 3, Benny Morris wrote that “the Brotherhood's aim is to take over the state through the democratic process, and is likely, as one of its first acts, to annul Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel.” Morris gives the impression that the Brotherhood is a power hungry organization that does not want peace as they will definitely break the peace treaty with Israel. He makes the Muslim Brotherhood appear violent imagining that “once the campaigning for these elections gets under way, we will see the country awash with Muslim Brotherhood activists and placards, broadcasts and sermons; perhaps even a measure of intimidation and violence”
(Morris). However, this contradicts what Londono and Fadel have to say about the Muslim Brotherhood. They think that “unlike other Islamist political groups in the region, such as Iraq's Sadr movement and Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Brotherhood in recent decades has rejected taking up arms to further its objectives” (Londono & Fadel).

It was reported by CBS on Feb. 1, that on that day Alexandria had been

“the stronghold of Egypt's extremist Muslim Brotherhood and scene of some of the largest -- and most violent -- demonstrations over the past week. But even here, this revolution belongs to the people -- not to the Muslim Brotherhood.”

(Live Blog: Egypt in Crisis, Day 8)

Note they call the Brotherhood extremist, and despite not calling the Brotherhood violent, but like Morris, insinuate that they are violent by saying that the most violent protest took place there, at the “stronghold”. That same day, a reporter interviewed the deputy head of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose statement object’s Morris’s belief that the peace treaty with Israel will be annulled: “We will respect the peace treaty with Israel as long as Israel shows real progress on improving the lot of the Palestinians” (Live Blog: Egypt in Crisis, Day 8).

Morris also believes “the Brotherhood will follow the model of Iran and the Gaza Hamas” and that the Muslim Brotherhood’s political activeness “is not a movement for which democracy has any appeal, worth or value. Its leaders see democratic processes merely as means to an end, an end that includes an end to democracy.” Comments to his article agreed with this particular last point. The user Certifiable replied with a supporting comment, saying that “organised religion is fascism” (Morris). Certifiable’s comment reveals that he believes that the Brotherhood is incapable of democracy.
It is interesting to see how the Brotherhood is compared by Morris to extremist Iran, and violent Hamas. It should also be noted that Vidino, who wrote “Five Myths About the Muslim Brotherhood” in its defence, states that in the past,

“attempts [by the Muslim Brotherhood] to create a more formal global structure have failed, and the movement instead has taken on various forms. Where it is tolerated, as in Jordan, it functions as a political party; where persecuted, as in Syria, it survives underground; and in the Palestinian territories, it took a peculiar turn and became Hamas.” (Vidino)

Vidino’s statement counteracts that of Morris, because if the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt were like Hamas, they would be the same, and not similar, as the origins of Hamas lay in the Brotherhood. On the other hand, others go as far as saying that with the turmoil in Egypt “Muslim fundamentalists will try their hardest to get hold of power with a dictator removed, and will likely succeed, - similar to what happened in Iraq” (Egypt Protesters Call for Muslim Governor).

Many are of the opinion that the Muslim Brotherhood is “the forerunner of modern militant Islamism” (Jones). It seems Glenn Beck might agree with this view as he too believes the Muslim Brotherhood to be Hamas (Beck, Feb. 1). Furthermore, he believes that the Muslim Brotherhood will want to create an Islamic Caliphate “you know caliphate is not some crazy conspiracy. It's what the Muslim Brotherhood talks about” (Beck, Feb. 3). Richard Clarke appears to be of a similar mind saying that “they want to caliphate a sort of European Union of Islamic countries spreading from Indonesia to Morocco, and this is a place where they would enforce Sharia law” (Chuchmach). However, as Vidino mentions attempts at having a global structure have failed in the past; as such it is unlikely that they will succeed.
When the former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton was interviewed by Fox News on Jan. 28, the day when the riot police brutally confronted protestors, Bolton commented on the protests:

“I think what's clearly happened today [in Egypt] is that the Muslim Brotherhood, the radical Islamist party in Egypt has called it's supporters into the street… it's important to underline that today is different from the previous days with the Muslim Brotherhood bringing its supporters into the streets, and that's why the stakes are even higher today and in the next few days than they have been.”

(Bolton)

He fails to realise that the 28th being a Friday and a day off in Muslim countries, would attract more people in general. However, his statement gives the impression that the “radical Islamists” are great in number, and that these protests are greatly made up of the Brotherhood’s members and supporters. Ironically he thinks that the “Obama administration should be working behind the scenes and try to understand better what the ground truth is in Cairo and the other major cities” (Bolton), he seems to be one of those that preaches without practice.

“Radical” and “extremist” appear to be the most popular descriptions for the Muslim Brotherhood. However, there are a few that would say it has decreased in radical or extremist views, amongst them is the Guardian’s Feb. 5 editorial (Islam in Egypt: Fear and Fantasy). It acknowledges the importance of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian politics saying that “it is now less a radical organisation than a conservative one, striving to be relevant to modern needs, and divided on how far it can or should trim its policies.” Furthermore, they portray the Brotherhood as being a peaceful organization decided to “abandon violence, both in practice and in theory, at least on Egyptian soil.” It is interesting to note that the editorial staff feels that the
Brotherhood has received “the hatred of al-Qaida,” which has helped them politically. However, it does not deny the values the Western media believes the Brotherhood to stand for stating that: “the Brotherhood's positions on Sharia law, the status of women, censorship, non-Muslim minorities, and on Israel, although modified, must still be worrying, but they will not automatically prevail.”

However, not all Westerners agree with the Guardian’s editorial (Islam in Egypt: Fear and Fantasy), proving that many still think of the Brotherhood as radical. The user lumiere1 commented under the article on the Guardian’s website stating that: “If the Guardian is telling us not to fear the Muslim Brotherhood, then we must certainly fear the Muslim Brotherhood. When it comes to apologists for radical Islam, The Guardian has few equals the Western press” (Islam in Egypt: Fear and Fantasy). On the other hand, it seems that some have mixed feelings neither denying nor applauding comments but rather diverting their preoccupation with issues that concern them more. This would include the user PeteSaman, who responded that he did not fear the Brotherhood as much as others adding that “I'm more fearful of political groups such as the Republican Party or their radical Christian offspring "The Tea Party"” (Islam in Egypt: Fear and Fantasy).

An interesting response to the article (Islam in Egypt: Fear and Fantasy) was that of the user Resistance making it a point that it is ridiculous for Westerners to fear the Muslim Brotherhood as they are not directly affected by it, as they are not under it’s rule. He adds that “the only reason why McCain, the editors at the Guardian, Ashton or Blair all scream "the Muslim brotherhood!" is simply because an Egypt with MB [Muslim Brotherhood] as the government would mean an independent Egypt that does not do the bidding for the US and/or Israel. The fear of Islamism is real, after all, just
imagine for a second a Muslim world ruled by Hamas, MB etc. It could mean more unity among Muslims, more independence, no servitude to the US, more respect for Muslims and no humiliations. And that is the ultimate nightmare scenarios for those in the west for whom Muslims must remain their servants, and are hell-bent on maintaining the master-servant relationship that is threatened by Islamism.” (Islam in Egypt: Fear and Fantasy)

In another comment where Resistance responds to a user who commented on the “stupidity of religion” he says an Egypt ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood “could ironically lead to peace in the middle east. Israel would be under pressure to make peace. [As] at the moment Israel has zero incentive to make peace” (Islam in Egypt: Fear and Fantasy). Resistance’s view coincides with what CBS reported, but contradicts the views of Morris, who believes that an Egypt led by the Muslim Brotherhood will create conflict with Israel (Morris).

On Feb 9 the BBC published a profile on the Brotherhood. Although it predominantly focused on the history of the organization, it stated that the “Ikhwan's [Brotherhood’s] leaders are deeply committed to increasing the role of Islam in Egyptian public life; that adhering more to Sharia has widespread popular appeal; and that many of the group's supporters expect it to place Sharia at the centre of its political agenda.” (Profile: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood)

Interestingly enough this was accompanied by a photograph of protesters praying in a large mass at Tahrir which insinuates that all the protesters want to adhere to Sharia.

That same day the New York Times published an op-ed by Essam El-Errian, an Egyptian member of the guidance council in the Brotherhood, though the author is not a Westerner, the New York Times is Western media and as such influences Westerners. El-Errian stated that the
Egyptians “embrace democracy not as a foreign concept that must be reconciled with tradition, but as a set of principles and objectives that are inherently compatible with and reinforce Islamic tenets.” This statement conflicts with those that would argue that the Brotherhood cannot possibly want democracy, even those like the BBC’s Feb. 9 article “Profile: Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood”, which argued that the Brotherhood wants Sharia. This conflicts because according to El-Errian, Sharia is compatible with democracy, and democracy reinforces Sharia.

People still convinced that the Muslim Brotherhood is radical and extreme started using hypothetical examples of this. On Feb. 26, ABC News released an article titled “What Is the Muslim Brotherhood?” (Chuchmach), they state that “according to one former White House security advisor, “wants the same end as al Qaeda.”” They further add a quote by Richard Clarke, their ABC News consultant:

“this is a place where they would enforce Sharia law, not terribly different than what the Taliban enforced in Afghanistan…no rights for women and perhaps, no opportunity through a democratic process to change things once they establish the Islamic state.” (Chuchmach)

Now the Brotherhood is not only compared to Iran, Iraq, al Qaeda and Hamas, but also the Taliban. However, Clarke says that the Brotherhood is split into two camps,

“a nonviolent, political, social movement that just wants Islamic values [and] another camp that says this is a very secret society with cell structures that wants to create the same end state that al Qaeda does, the only difference is al Qaeda says do it through violence and the Muslim Brotherhood says no, do it through social means and maybe even elections.”(Chuchmach)
It seems that the West predominantly neglects the fact that members of the Muslims Brotherhood do not all hold the same ideals. Yes, some are fundamentalists, others Islamists, but as seen there are also moderate members. We find a relatively noticeable split in the Brotherhood, slightly different from that Clarke refers to, where

“the old guard's motto is still "the Koran is our constitution." The second generation speaks of human rights and compares itself to Europe's Christian Democrats - embracing democracy but keeping a religious identity. The third generation, especially in urban areas, seems to endorse this approach, even if skeptics contend that younger militants are simply offering a moderate facade to the West.” (Vidino)

Amongst those that fail to see that values and ideals vary within the group is Robert Spencer, author of anti-Islam books, and director of Jihad Watch. Spencer writes on Sheikh Hazem Abu Ismail’s announcement to run for presidency, who promises “to transform Egypt into an Islamic state and go to war with Israel” (Spencer). Spencer believes that “whether or not Abu Ismail is elected President of Egypt, the opening of the Rafah crossing indicates that Egypt has decided to adopt a belligerent stance toward Israel, and more is certain to come as Egypt marches toward Sharia.” However, Spencer fails to see the group’s diversity, forgetting that Abu Ismail, considered to be extreme by many, even in Egypt, is the second member of the Muslim Brotherhood that has announced his intention to run for presidency. The other candidate, Abdel Moneim Abouel Fotouh, is “considered a moderate leader within the Brotherhood…has come out in favor of a stronger relationship with the West and supports the rights of women and religious minorities” (Egypt: Abdel Moneim Abouel Fotouh, Muslim…).
Joshua Stacher, an Arabic-speaking Muslim Brotherhood scholar, who teaches political science at Kent University, and conducted his field research in Egypt, went further to give his eyewitness observations of how “radical” and “extreme” the Muslim Brotherhood truly is. He reveals how the Muslim Brotherhood serves their community in ways their government would not:

“Muslim Brotherhood candidates always lived in the communities they sought to represent and offered weekly office hours for constituents. "Everybody came through those doors," he says. "Poor laborers. Unemployed people. Women whose husband was in jail. And they had all sorts of demands—from 'the cars are driving too fast on the street and there need to be speed bumps,' to 'my son is a university graduate and needs a job.'" (Bates)

Stacher adds that the “secret to their success [is that] they are connected and do outreach in the communities in which they live—even in the face of routine intimidation and harassment” (Bates). In a way the Brotherhood acts like the organization of Al Hilal, where Amal and Samira helped develop areas, alongside religious teachings (Hafez). However, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which span the whole country, help develop and run their own communities and those where there are no members of the Brotherhood resident.

Following the protests that occurred as a result of the appointment of a Coptic Christian as governor in Upper Egypt, many viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as anti-Christian: “hundreds of hardline Islamists and members of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood have blocked railway lines and roads to protest” (Egypt Protesters Call for Muslim Governor). A user by the name of Sgt.Pepper left an interesting comment which amongst other things, assumed that all Muslims are part of the Brotherhood: “Christians are in their homeland, they should have self
determination. If the Muslims can't handle Christians in government, then they should return to their homelands” (Egypt Protesters Call for Muslim Governor). It is almost humorous how he thinks that the Muslims are a foreign force even in Egypt, a predominantly Muslim country! Another user, Wondur (Egypt Protesters Call for Muslim Governor), defended the protesters quoting a Reuters article that showed that the protests were incited due to the governor’s predecessor’s inability

“to stem sectarian violence and address poverty and unemployment, which grew during his tenure. Witnesses say some Coptic Christians joined the protest as well. "The experience of a Coptic governor has failed. There is no objection to his Coptic identity but the previous governor left a negative impression of Christian officials," Youssef Ragab, a witness in Qena, told Reuters by telephone.” (Zayed & Abdellah)

It seems that the press is quick to jump to conclusions about the religious identity of the protestors based on Coptic identity of the governor, and the fact that the majority of the population is Muslim and hence highly likely that the majority of protesters will also be Muslim.

Another article that reported on the event provided a different view stating that “tens of thousands of protestors massed in a southern Egyptian city yesterday” (Protests Against Egypt Christian Governor). However, they quote Bishop Kirilos who says the protests “are led by Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood, and they are chanting: 'We won't leave until the Christians leave’” (Protests Against Egypt Christian Governor). However, they also report that “a prominent Salafi cleric in Cairo, Abdel Moneim al-Shahat, denied that his sect, which advocates a return to early Muslim practices, was spearheading the protests” (Protests Against Egypt Christian Governor). In this case, the article tackles both sides of the story, which leaves space
for a lot of speculation as one of the individual interviewed must be incorrect. However, they interviewed a Salafi, and not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which leaves them without a statement of defence.

The day following the death of Osama Bin Laden, on May 2, Eric Trager wrote on the Brotherhood saying that “the Islamist political party has made devout moderation a cornerstone of their post-Mubarak strategy, but the group's statement after the death of Osama bin Laden suggests they may not be so moderate” that they “could moderate once in power. This is, after all, precisely how Muslim Brothers describe their creed – “moderate,” as opposed to al-Qaeda, which is radical.” In the Brotherhood’s statement they “condemned Osama bin Laden's killing as an "assassination,"” and that they are “against violence in general, against assassinations and in favor of fair trials” (Osama Bin Laden Dead: World Leaders). Furthermore, they “used the honorific term "sheikh" to refer to the al-Qaeda leader” (Trager). Victor Purinton commented on Trager’s article saying that

“the Muslim Brotherhood is lying to the Egyptian people when they say they support democracy. The support is provisional - they want to use it to take power. But they do not believe it is a valid system for the long run - only Sharia Law (which is explicitly non-democratic) is valid.” (Trager)

On the other hand, others believe the Muslim Brotherhood to be moderate. Such is the case with Ivan Avery Frey, who commented that

“the article above is nothing less than a smear against the Muslim Brotherhood. I mean using an unflattering photograph and weasel phrases such as "may suggest" tips it off right away. I'm not a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, but their
reaction to the downfall of Mubarak, a dictator coddled and supported by the US for almost 30 years was rather moderate.” (Trager)

Walt Thiessen also commented, however, he seemed more rational, not relying on opinions or perceptions: “the real question is this: do the Muslim Brotherhood truly represent the views of the tens of thousands who demonstrated in the streets? My guess is that, on the whole, they do not. But of course none of us in America really know at this point” (Trager).

It appears that despite the Arab Spring that revealed to many that the Muslim Brotherhood is not as extreme as some would make it out to be. Especially as within the Brotherhood, there are those that are extreme, and many more that are liberal-minded and moderate. However, it seems that Western media predominantly oversees this, leaving the Muslim Brotherhood with a ceaselessly image of radicalism and extremism.
Works Cited


