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The Muslim Brothers Take to the Streets

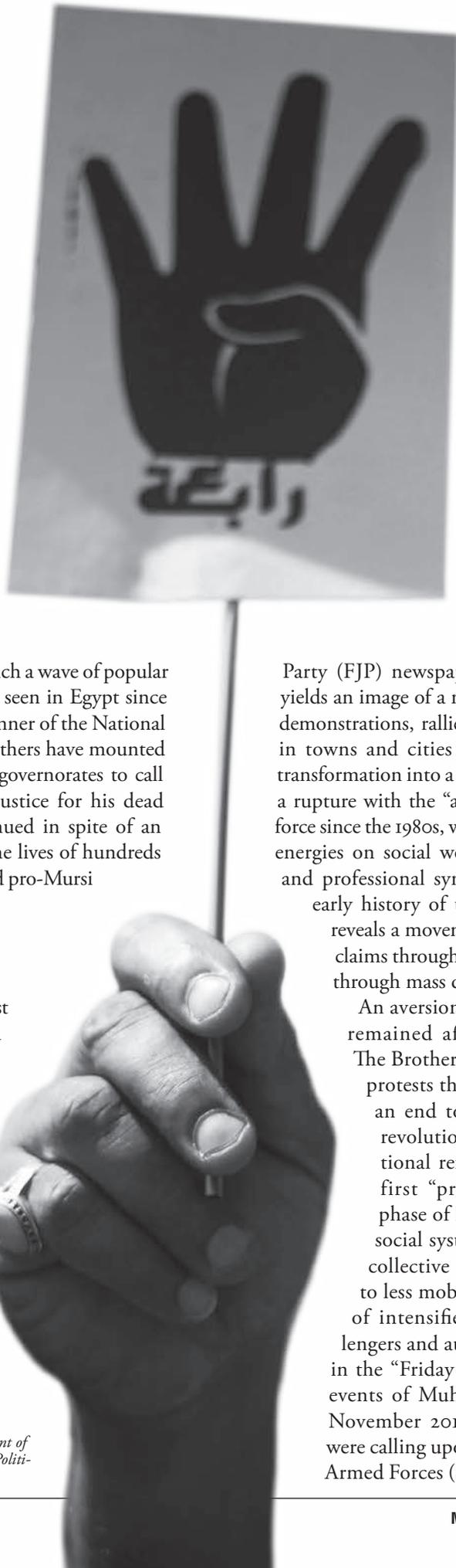
Neil Ketchley

On August 14, 2013, supporters of deposed President Muhammad Mursi were massacred at two protest camps in Cairo and Giza. In the subsequent four months, the Muslim Brothers have regrouped to launch a wave of popular protest the likes of which has not been seen in Egypt since the January 25 revolution. Under the banner of the National Alliance to Support Legitimacy, the Brothers have mounted over 1,800 actions in 26 of Egypt's 27 governorates to call for Mursi's restoration to office and justice for his dead supporters. These protests have continued in spite of an ongoing crackdown that has claimed the lives of hundreds more and seen thousands of Brothers and pro-Mursi supporters detained.

Protest Cycles

In an interview with Reuters on August 15, Muslim Brother spokesman Jihad al-Haddad lamented the loss of central coordination in the organization, claiming that its membership was now "beyond control" with anger after the killing the previous day of more than 1,000 Mursi supporters in Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and al-Nahda Squares. With the political process closed by a new military-backed government seemingly intent on crushing the movement, the country appeared poised for a return to the state of

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insurgency that prevailed in the 1990s, with the fragmented Muslim Brothers pitted against an entrenched security apparatus.

That scenario has not come to pass. Notwithstanding several episodes of violence attributed to the movement's supporters in the weeks following the massacres, most notably in Kirdasa in Giza and Dalga in Minya, the Muslim Brothers have successfully consolidated their organization to wage a national campaign of non-violent protest. An "event catalog" drawn from reports published in the Muslim

Brothers' Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) newspaper, *al-Hurriyya wa al-'Adala*, yields an image of a movement that is holding daily demonstrations, rallies, "human chains" and sit-ins in towns and cities across Egypt.¹ The Brothers' transformation into a street protest movement marks a rupture with the "accommodationist" strategy, in force since the 1980s, which focused the organization's energies on social welfare and Egypt's parliament and professional syndicates.² Any reading of the early history of the Muslim Brothers likewise reveals a movement more likely to advance its claims through pamphlets and telegrams than through mass demonstrations and strikes.³

An aversion to contentious street politics remained after the January revolution: The Brothers boycotted the regular Friday protests that called for social justice and an end to military rule, equating the revolution's goals rather with constitutional reform and free elections. That first "protest cycle"—defined as "a phase of heightened conflict across the social system: with a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors...and sequences of intensified interaction between challengers and authorities"—would culminate in the "Friday of the Last Chance" and the events of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in November 2011.⁴ In the streets, Egyptians were calling upon the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) to relinquish executive

MANU BRABO/AP PHOTO

A yellow card bearing four fingers, the sign adopted by the Muslim Brothers and allies to commemorate the victims of the August massacres.

authority to a civilian-led, national salvation government. But the Brothers endorsed the SCAF's rule during that episode, insisting that further protest would destabilize the country and that "elections are the solution."⁵ The Brothers' victories in parliamentary and presidential elections paved the way for the second protest cycle of the post-Mubarak era: On June 30, 2013, the twenty-fifth *milyuniyya* (million-person protest) in eight months brought unprecedented numbers outside the Presidential Palace and to the streets of downtown Cairo demanding early elections to end the presidency of Muhammad Mursi. The military, led by Field Marshal 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, seized the protests as a pretext to move against Mursi on July 3.

Taking to the Streets

The Muslim Brothers endorsed the SCAF's rule during the first year of the transitional period; they then found themselves the subjects of protest after Mursi's election. Yet it is now they who are spearheading the third major protest cycle in as many years, with 1,821 protests recorded between August and November. In terms of the number of protests, this cycle must in fact be considered the largest of the three, but it has received little to no coverage in either Egyptian or international news media, with the notable exception of Al Jazeera Mubashir Misr, the Egypt-focused channel of the Qatar-based satellite network. To test for bias in the FJP paper's reporting, a random sample of stories was checked against videos uploaded to YouTube and the live streams of protests posted daily to the FJP's website and Facebook pages. Talled against the video evidence, reports proved highly accurate, with protest location, size, repertoire, crowd composition and instances of state repression all faithfully relayed. There is, indeed, sufficient evidence of underreporting to conclude that protest frequency is likely to be higher still. FJP journalists acknowledge the underreporting; they attribute it to the challenges of obtaining protest reports when the paper was being clandestinely produced. While there was no apparent geographic bias in report selection, larger actions, or those that came under attack or involved some innovative tactic, were more likely to be reported on days with high numbers of protests.⁶ The newspaper was closed on December 25 by the state-owned

al-Ahram printing press. Protest reports, replete with links to live streams and videos of protests, continue to be posted daily on the FJP's website and social media pages.

The Brothers' senior leadership is languishing in jail and many of its middle-ranking members are in hiding. Protest actions are coordinated at the branch level and through national groups such as Youth Against the Coup, Women Against the Coup, Students Against the Coup, Workers Against the Coup and 'Ulama' Against the Coup. Of these, the most significant are the student and women's movements, whose local offshoots frequently cultivate their own identities and repertoires. The "7 al-Subh" (7 in the Morning) women's movement is perhaps the best known following the detention of 21 of its members: They were given lengthy prison sentences (later suspended) after participating in a peaceful protest in October.⁷ Founded in Alexandria and now with branches in Cairo and the Nile Delta governorates of Buhayra, Sharqiyya, Kafr al-Shaykh and Minufiyya, 7 al-Subh are known for holding sit-ins and forming human chains beside main roads and outside schools during the morning rush hour. Other groups, such as Haqqi (My Right), a female student movement active in Asyout governorate, use social media to publicize their activities, mobilizing in tandem with male members of Students Against the Coup and others to organize marches through residential areas on weekdays. Members of the Ultras Nahdawi also take part in these actions. Formed before the coup, the Brothers' "ultras" mimic the hyper-masculine, high-octane performances of Egypt's soccer fans and are tasked with leading chants and motivating the crowd. The Ultras Nahdawi have since spawned several regional spinoffs, including the Ultras al-Rab'awi, whose members wear specially printed T-shirts, play drums and set off fireworks during protests.

These activities are part of a street-level pushback designed to mobilize anti-coup sentiment and counter the regime's portrayal of the Brothers as terrorist agents of a foreign

Post-August 14 Protests, Arrests and Deaths				
	Number of protests	Protest arrests	Protest deaths	Non-protest arrests
August 15–30	306	706	307	289
September	600	297	7	311
October	410	307	44	140
November	505	211	5	128
Total	1,821	1,521	363	868
Data missing from October 13–18. Source: Author's content analysis of <i>al-Hurriyya wa al-'Adala</i> .				



Student protesters make the four-finger sign.

MOHAMMED ASAD/AP PHOTO

plot to weaken the country. One popular chant captures the protests' message well: "*dihku 'alayku wa qalu irhab, wa ihna giran al-bab fi al-bab*" (they fooled you and called us terrorists, but we are your next-door neighbors). Protesters frequently carry banners and wear clothes branded with the four-fingered salute—a gesture that derives from Rabi'a (fourth), first name of the female saint for whom Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya Square is named, and which has become synonymous with opposition to the military-backed government. So popular has this motif become that both government supporters and Egyptian activists have adopted their own alternative hand gestures in a bid to signal opposition to the Brothers. Meanwhile, displaying the Rabi'a logo has been criminalized. A teenager in Kafr al-Shaykh was detained by police and jailed after his teachers reported him for having the logo stenciled on items of stationery.⁸

In October, the Brothers also launched the Batiel [sic] (Void) petition.⁹ The petition, which is available online as well as being distributed at protests, claims to have gathered

over 4 million signatures as of November, although there is no way to verify the number independently.¹⁰ 'Abd al-Rahman Mansour, the campaign's founder, denies any comparison with the Tamarrud (Rebellion) petition that rallied popular opposition to President Mursi, but the rationale is strikingly similar: The right to govern can be revoked through non-violent contention that claims mass support.¹¹ Non-violent or not, more than 30 members of the Batiel campaign were detained in November for distributing the petition.¹²

Mosque Network

The timing and shape of the Brothers' contention has developed in dynamic relation to a series of blows landed by the security apparatus on the movement's membership and infrastructure. In particular, the arm of State Security tasked with surveying Egypt's Islamist movements—reconstituted after being nominally disbanded following the January 25

revolution—looks to be settling old scores, and both current and former Brothers are caught in the dragnet. The Brothers' offices and party buildings, many established following the January 25 revolution, have largely been abandoned. Mosques are now the staging point for nearly 40 percent of protests, with over a third of all actions launched following the conclusion of prayer. As a result, police have raided mosques associated with the Brothers and prohibited the imams from giving the Friday sermon. In September, the Ministry of Religious Endowments announced that only graduates of al-Azhar would be allowed to deliver sermons, while optimistically pledging to close the tens of thousands of unlicensed mosques that have proliferated in recent decades despite numerous attempts at regulation.¹³

Violent suppression of protest, which peaked in the weeks following the August 14 massacres, has now settled into a fairly predictable rhythm. Rallies held after Friday prayer and symbolic *milyuniyyas*, such as those called to mark the anniversary of the October 1973 war, are the most frequently attacked, especially if they approach a major square or pass government buildings. Attempts to reoccupy a square in central Cairo, the first of which was made at Ramses Square on August 16, have been thwarted by security forces, who use live ammunition to disperse protesters. In several Egyptian cities, major squares and other public spaces have been sealed off by a regime fearful of challenges to its authority. Cairo's Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya Square, in particular, is locked down on Fridays. The government, meanwhile, has sought to paper over the massacre that took place there, installing a pro-army memorial to commemorate those killed.¹⁴ Weekday protests are often held at night to avoid detection, beginning after the nighttime prayer and remaining small and highly mobile, capable of disappearing down residential side streets if confronted by police or regime thugs. In areas where protests have been particularly harshly policed, anti-coup protesters have adopted *farasha* (butterfly) tactics—holding a sit-in or rally that lasts 15 minutes, and then departing to the next location.

In the months leading up to December, protest has been concentrated in Greater Cairo and Alexandria. In Alexandria, the districts of Sidi Bishr, al-Raml, Abu Sulayman, al-Muntaza and al-'Asafira have emerged as leading centers of opposition to the coup, in turn witnessing some of the worst repression since the August killings. In

October, Alexandria's iconic Corniche became a focal point for protest, prompting security forces to deploy in large numbers to deny the space to protesters. In Cairo, meanwhile, neighborhoods in Helwan, Nasr City, al-Zaytoun and Maadi host weekly protests. Towns and cities in Giza, al-Sharqiyya and Asyout have also seen hundreds of protests, as have the Delta governorates. What is perhaps most surprising given the historic association between the Brothers and the Suez Canal cities is the relative absence of protest in Ismailiyya (38 protests), where the movement was founded, or in the Suez governorate (18 protests). It was in these areas, it should be noted, that opposition to Mursi's presidency first emerged in early 2013, in the form of attacks against the Brothers and FJP's offices. Lately, the cities of Ismailiyya and Suez have played host to "butterfly" protests, suggesting that while the Brothers maintain a presence in these areas, their ability to operate remains severely restricted.

The Youth Get Involved

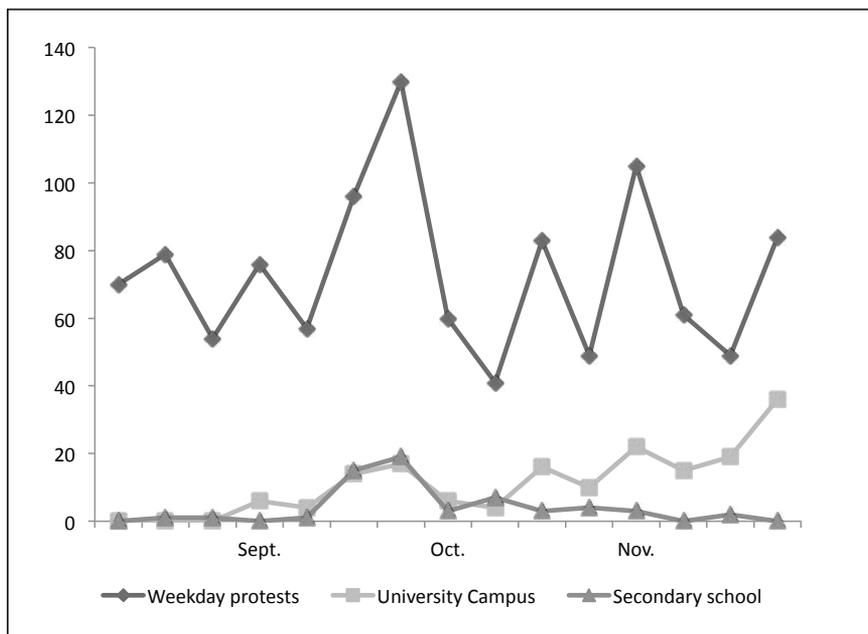
The frequency and distribution of protests staged between August and December suggest that while the Brothers have successfully mobilized their core supporters, they are struggling to open new fronts against the coup. Moreover,

Protest frequency by governorate, August 15–November 30, 2013. Cairo and Alexandria saw the most action.



Source: Author's content analysis of *al-Hurriyya wa al-'Adala*.

Weekday protest frequency and location. Data missing from October 13–18.



Source: Author's content analysis of *al-Hurriyya wa al-'Adala*.

in recent months, the numbers participating in protests look to be getting smaller. As late as September, rallies were regularly attracting tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of participants, outraged by the mass killing of pro-Mursi supporters in August. The *masira hashida* (massing rally) was typical: Protesters would depart one mosque after Friday prayer and proceed to several others, picking up the congregants, before moving to the next neighborhood, where they would join up with a second rally and march to a common destination. Inevitably, the marchers in these highly visible protests would clash with security forces. In the days and weeks following a large protest, organizers would also be targeted for arrest. One consequence is that protest has become noticeably more diffuse while remaining localized, with rallies increasingly sticking to one residential area. The security forces encourage this trend, often blocking the main artery leading to the neighboring district in active protest areas. In explaining the concentration of protest in certain neighborhoods, a key factor appears to be the availability of a mosque or some other associational space in which to organize. In Helwan, for example, 28 protest actions had been launched from al-Marghi mosque by the end of November. Since then, however, the security forces have targeted the mosque, deploying at prayer time to intercept any post-prayer rallies. As a result, protest in Helwan has declined, although the Brothers seemingly retain the support of large sections of the community, with local street vendors marketing their wares next to Rabi'a signs and posters of Mursi.

The Brothers appear conscious that for their protests to become truly disruptive, they will have to tap into new, as yet unmobilized sectors of Egyptian society. In October,

a Workers Against the Coup movement was formed in Alexandria, ostensibly with the aim of brokering new relationships with Egypt's trade unions. The results are limited thus far, with the movement holding only a handful of minor actions. It is on university campuses that the Brothers and their National Alliance to Support Legitimacy have made significant inroads. Students Against the Coup, formed by the Brothers' youth section, has brought the movement to the faculties and housing complexes of Egypt's public and private universities. As a result, the Brothers have managed to maintain the protests' momentum during the week in spite of the decline in non-student participation outside of the Friday rallies. They have been helped in this regard by the state's decision

to deploy security forces on campus, which has galvanized student opposition to the regime. Subsequent heavy-handed policing of student protest, beginning with the arrest and wounding of students at al-Azhar University in late October, has provoked a wave of solidarity demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes at al-Azhar's branches across the country, as well as at the universities of Cairo, 'Ayn Shams, Asyout, Zaqaziq, Mansoura and several others. Since November, these protests have bucked the general trend, growing in frequency and size as students coordinate their actions across several faculties. At Asyout University, eight members of the university's teaching committee were fired for organizing protests.¹⁵

Secondary schools also briefly became host to sit-ins and rallies in September, coinciding with the beginning of the new school year. It was often school-age relatives of those arrested and killed who led the way. Ensuing backlash from the state has seen tens of students detained and hundreds suspended, and has triggered a heightened police and army presence on school premises. The national anthem, typically played at the beginning of the school day, was replaced with a pro-military song, "Tislam al-Ayadi" (Bless Those Hands), which was composed in July 2013 to fête the army's role in removing Mursi. The number of protests held at secondary schools dropped off dramatically by the beginning of October, with no explanation from the Brothers. Probably, it is simply easier to intimidate secondary school students than university goers.

One striking commonality of the protests is the limited participation of other political movements besides a narrow band of Islamist fellow travelers, a point indicative of the Brothers' political isolation. The Brothers' invitation to Egypt's activists to put aside their differences and unite

against the military must be read against this backdrop.¹⁶ The invitation was floated following the state's violent dispersal of a protest by a "who's who" of Egyptian activists on the day in November that saw a new anti-demonstration law come into effect. The offer has thus far not been taken up, testimony to the mistrust among many for the Brothers since they effectively sided with the SCAF during the transitional period. There is also the bitter memory of the repression of several protests against Mursi as president, most notably outside the Presidential Palace in early 2013 and in front of the Brothers' headquarters in Muqattam, Cairo. Such episodes were replete with hand-to-hand fighting between anti-Mursi protesters and Brothers bussed in to defend the buildings. The Brothers reply that they inherited a profoundly hostile "deep state" that sought to frustrate efforts at reform and foment unrest. In interviews published after the coup, mid-ranking Brothers have gone further, acknowledging that the movement's endorsement of the SCAF-supervised transition allowed the *fuloul*, the remnants of the Mubarak regime, to regroup in the year prior to Mursi's election, while hastening the breakup of the revolutionary coalition that ousted Mubarak.¹⁷

On the second anniversary of the killing of protesters by soldiers and members of the security apparatus on Muhammad Mahmoud Street on November 19, 2011, the Brothers' youth wing declared their solidarity with the families of the martyrs and the wounded. Anticipating hostility, however, they elected to stay away from the planned protests in Tahrir.¹⁸ Instead, a commemorative protest was called outside Qasr al-Qubba, a popular terminus for the Friday rallies that begin in northeast Cairo. The Brothers' decision proved prescient. Above Muhammad Mahmoud Street a banner was hung that read: "No *fuloul*, no military, no Brothers." It thus remains a distant prospect that the latest protest cycle will produce a broader coalition of political forces capable of weathering repression and overturning the counter-revolutionary gains of the old order.

Postscript

On December 25, the Brothers were declared a terrorist organization, with stiff penalties imposed against supporters of the movement and those found participating in pro-Mursi protests. In the days immediately following the designation, protest was particularly harshly policed, with hundreds of arrests made and several protesters killed. Over a thousand of the Brothers' charitable organizations have since been closed and members, both former and current, have had their assets frozen. This measure followed a series of bombings in Cairo and the Nile Delta that have been attributed to the Brothers, claims that have yet to be substantiated and should be treated with skepticism. The Muslim Brothers have achieved much in the last four months through non-violent means, despite an onslaught

of state repression. There is no discernible advantage in adopting violent methods now.

On January 14–15, Egyptians approved a new constitution to replace the 2012 constitution that the Muslim Brothers had a large hand in drafting. The Brothers insisted that the 2012 constitution should remain in force and called on supporters to boycott the vote. Protesters took this message to the streets as part of the daily protests, chanting "*al-Sisi qatil wa dusturu batil*" (al-Sisi is a killer and his constitution is void). While the military-backed government urged a "yes" vote, the Brothers launched the "Your Voice Is Wasted" campaign, while calling on Egyptian expatriates to hold demonstrations outside of Egyptian embassies. They also formed the "3 at Night" movement to deface the ubiquitous "yes to the constitution" posters. Long-simmering tensions between the Brothers and the *salafi* Nour Party came to the surface in the run-up to voting, with the latter openly campaigning for a "yes" vote, prompting anti-Nour chants and denunciations from members of the National Coalition to Support Legitimacy. The protests themselves have otherwise continued, although university campuses have calmed somewhat as students sit for their end-of-term exams amidst a heavy security presence. Any dialogue between the Brothers and the military—rumored since the July coup—appears to be dead. The government now seems intent on boxing in the Brothers to an ever smaller social space while it consolidates its own position, a reflection of its inability to date to land a knockout blow against what remains of Egypt's largest and best organized political movement. ■

Endnotes

- 1 See Charles Tilly, "Event Catalogs as Theories," *Sociological Theory* 20/2 (July 2002).
- 2 Sana Abed-Kotob, "The Accommodationists Speak: Goals and Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27/3 (August 1995); Carrie Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37/2 (May 2005).
- 3 Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement, 1928–1942* (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1998); Abd al-Fattah Muhammad El-Awaisi, *The Muslim Brothers and the Palestine Question, 1927–1947* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998); Jum'a Amin 'Abd al-'Aziz, *Awraq min Tarikh al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, vols. 1–4 (Cairo: Dar al-Tawzi' wa al-Nashr al-Islamiyya, 2003).
- 4 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 142.
- 5 *Al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala*, November 22, 2011.
- 6 Personal correspondence with Mostafa al-Khateeb, November 28, 2013.
- 7 *Guardian*, December 9, 2013.
- 8 *Guardian*, December 10, 2013.
- 9 Available at: <http://batiel.com/xindex.php> and <https://www.facebook.com/Batiel>.
- 10 *Al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala*, November 16, 2013.
- 11 *Al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala*, October 25, 2013.
- 12 *Al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala*, November 27, 2013.
- 13 See Patrick D. Gaffney, "The Changing Voices of Islam: The Emergence of Professional Preachers in Contemporary Egypt," *The Muslim World* 81/1 (January 1991).
- 14 *New York Times*, November 13, 2013.
- 15 *Al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala*, November 28, 2013.
- 16 *Al-Shorouq*, November 27, 2013.
- 17 *Jadaliyya*, August 15, 2013; *Mada Masr*, September 8, 2013; *al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala*, November 19, 2013.
- 18 *Al-Hurriyya wa al-Adala*, November 15, 2013.