

The Muslim Brotherhood

On April 11, 2011, the Center for the National Interest hosted a panel discussion on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its future in Egyptian politics. The panel consisted of Nathan Brown, Director of the Institute for Middle East Studies at The George Washington University; Hillel Fradkin of the Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World at the Hudson Institute; and H.A. Hellyer, a Fellow at the University of Warwick and former Visiting Professor at the American University in Cairo. Robert Leiken, Director of Immigration and National Security Programs at the Center for the National Interest, moderated the discussion.

The Muslim Brotherhood [MB] was slow to join the revolutionary movement in part because of its internal divisions— between its pragmatist, reformist, fundamentalist and youth wings. These divergences have become even more pronounced in recent days as several leaders have resigned over political differences and younger members have formed a separate political party. These differences seem to belie the notion of a totalitarian MB pursuing a radical Islamist agenda.

Indeed, none of the panelists thought it likely that the Muslim Brotherhood would push for the abrogation of the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel. The Egyptian army does not want war with Israel and the Brotherhood does not wish to alienate the army. At most it would advocate renegotiation of some aspects of the treaty. However, while most Egyptians support that stance they understand, as does the MB, a re-negotiation would require Israeli compliance, making this stance a matter of form, not substance. The panelists found no differences between the views of the Muslim Brotherhood toward Israel and those held by the secular parties and likewise agreed that, while individual members express the anti-Semitic views held widely in the region, the Brotherhood was “not itself an anti-Semitic organization.” With regard to Iran, they agreed again that while some members were sympathetic to the Islamic republic, it was not at all a model for the Brotherhood. Though two of the panelists viewed the MB’s seeming moderation as result of its own evolution toward democratic politics, Hillel Fradkin regarded it a product of the organization’s historic pragmatic caution.

Two panelists disagreed with the assertion by a third panelist that the MB had become “a partner of the army.” They all agreed that the MB’s support was not the reason for the overwhelming

“yes” vote for the army’s constitutional reforms. The panelists agreed with the assessment that the organization is unlikely to win more than fifteen or twenty percent in September’s parliamentary elections. The Salafist movement, far more conservative and radical than the MB, is unlikely to win more than a tiny fraction of that number.

The panelists argued that the Brotherhood pursued partisan interests above national interests. At the same time, Nathan Brown pointed out that the Brotherhood is firmly inward-looking, an Egyptian movement that pays only lip service to its international brothers and their agendas.